CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

The Athletic

Ranking every NHL team's salary-cap situation, from best to worst

By Sean Gentille and Harman Dayal

The NHL offseason is here. Let's do some math!

We've put together this list for the last several years. Our methodology is cut-and-pasted as follows:

Take a team's signed players, project what they'll need to pay the RFAs that will make the lineup, subtract those going on LTIR and you have a solid estimate of what they can spend in unrestricted free agency to fill out their rosters.

Now, this is not an exact science. Some teams may play hardball with their restricted players and give them all cheap one-year deals; other clubs may go long, long term and that would cost more. We tried to be as reasonable as possible in coming up with projections, but we're talking about 120-plus contract forecasts calculated in a compressed window. They're not all going to hit the mark.

No, they won't — but we're trying to come as close as possible, with invaluable assists from the soon-to-be-departed CapFriendly, the Evolving Hockey contract predictions, The Athletic's staff of beat writers and elsewhere.

Remember that this isn't a ranking of how strong these teams are or are set up to become; we're simply ranking how much cap space they will likely have to improve their rosters beyond players who are already under team control.

1. Utah Hockey Club

2024-25 salaries: $45,435,476

RFAs estimate: $17.3 million

LTIR candidates: Shea Weber ($7.857 million)

Dead money deals: Patrik Nemeth buyout ($1.16 million), Zack Kassian buyout ($766,667), Oliver Ekman-Larsson retention ($320,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Travis Dermott, Travis Boyd, Josh Brown

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $33.12 million

With a new owner who'll be willing to spend, Utah can flex its salary cap space and make noise this offseason. The team has a few notable RFAs to re-sign, including three on the back end headlined by Sean Durzi, but even after accounting for generous raises, GM Bill Armstrong has tons of cash to spend.

Utah isn't in its competitive window to hand out expensive long-term contracts to top free agents yet, but it should be involved for younger players who emerge on the trade market and mid-range veteran free agents who it can overpay in salary while keeping the term down. Utah will only have three defenders under contract once the RFAs sign so landing blue-line help should be a focus.

2. Nashville Predators

2024-25 salaries: $61,654,199

RFAs estimate: $847,100

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Matt Duchene buyout ($5.55 million), Ryan Johansen retained salary ($4 million), Kyle Turris buyout ($2 million), Mattias Ekholm retention ($250,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jason Zucker, Alexandre Carrier, Kevin Lankinen, Tyson Barrie, Anthony Beauvillier, Kiefer Sherwood

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $25.5 million

Nashville has the most cap space of any team that made the playoffs in 2023-24. It's a bit surprising considering the club is carrying $11.8 million of dead cap from various buyouts and salary retention in trades, but sending Ryan McDonagh and his $6.75 million cap hit back to Tampa Bay carved out a lot of flexibility.

The Preds also boast a surplus of draft picks, so they can kick tires on any top forward who hits the trade or free-agent market, whether it's Mitch Marner, Martin Necas or Jake Guentzel. It'll also be important to replenish the back end with a defensive-minded top-four player to replace McDonagh's impact.

This could be an exciting, aggressive offseason for Barry Trotz's franchise.

3. Anaheim Ducks

2024-25 salaries: $54,694,167

RFAs estimate: $9.11 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Ben Meyers, William Lagesson

Problem contract: Cam Fowler ($6.5 million AAV for two seasons)

Projected cap space: $24.2 million

Anaheim has ample cap flexibility and enough trade chips (seven picks in the first three rounds of the draft) to go after big names. GM Pat Verbeek was active last year signing Alex Killorn and Radko Gudas and you'd expect him to be aggressive again in helping the Ducks gradually work their way up from the basement of the NHL standings.

Verbeek has specifically talked about targeting a top-six winger and right-shot top-four defender — he can find those pieces and still have plenty of cap room left over.

4. Chicago Blackhawks

2024-25 salaries: $59,097,500

RFAs estimate: $5.44 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Jake McCabe retention ($2 million), Josh Bailey buyout ($1.16 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Colin Blackwell, Sam Lafferty, Tyler Johnson, Jaycob Megna, Nikita Zaitsev, Jarred Tinordi

Problem contract: Seth Jones ($9.5 million AAV for six seasons)

Projected cap space: $23.5 million

The Blackhawks have the cap space to do anything they want within reason, even after acquiring Ilya Mikheyev. It's time to slowly build the roster up, but they also have to be mindful not to add any risky medium- to long-term contracts that could hinder them when they're ready to be playoff-competitive again.

Finding a running mate for Connor Bedard should be priority No. 1 this summer. After that, it would be useful to add a solid veteran defender, too. Chicago can afford to overpay on the cap hit that it offers players so long as the term is short.

5. San Jose Sharks

2024-25 salaries: $58,670,834

RFAs estimate: $7.8 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Brent Burns retention ($2.72 million), Martin Jones buyout ($1.66 million), Erik Karlsson retention ($1.5 million), Tomas Hertl retention ($1.3875 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Alexander Barabanov, Mike Hoffman, Justin Bailey, Kevin Labanc, Ryan Carpenter, Jacob MacDonald

Problem contract: Marc-Edouard Vlasic ($7 million AAV for two seasons), Logan Couture ($8 million AAV for three seasons)

Projected cap space: $21.54 million

The Sharks have already made moves to absorb salary and fill out their depth with the Barclay Goodrow waiver claim, Ty Dellandrea acquisition and the Jake Walman trade where they also received a second-round pick.

San Jose has tons of cash left but it'll also be getting a massive jolt from the arrival of 2023 No. 4 pick Will Smith and presumed 2024 No. 1 pick Macklin Celebrini if he decides to leave college.

Logan Couture only played six games in 2023-24. He's aiming to return next season, but if he can't get healthy, his $8 million cap hit may end up on LTIR.

Jonathan Huberdeau has seven years left on his $10.5 million AAV deal. (Sergei Belski / USA Today)

6. Calgary Flames

2024-25 salaries: $64,800,833

RFAs estimate: $1.96 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals:

Notable unsigned UFAs: Oliver Kylington, A.J. Greer, Dennis Gilbert

Problem contract: Jonathan Huberdeau ($10.5 million AAV for seven seasons)

Projected cap space: $21.24 million

Calgary has more than $20 million available to spend, with 18 skaters already under contract for next season. It'll be very interesting to see how the Flames weaponize this cap room. GM Craig Conroy could leverage this space and the eight picks he has over the first four rounds of the 2024 draft to acquire young players who can help now and fit the club's core long-term.

Alternatively, if the club is entering more of a traditional rebuild — which seems like the more prudent path — it can search for opportunities to get paid to take on inefficient contracts. San Jose's move to absorb Jake Walman's contract and receive a second-round pick from Detroit in the process would be an example of that.

7. Vancouver Canucks

2024-25 salaries: $68,759,167

RFAs estimate: $776,400

LTIR candidates: Tucker Poolman ($2.5 million)

Dead money deals: Oliver Ekman-Larsson buyout ($2.36 million), Ilya Mikheyev retention ($712,500)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Elias Lindholm, Dakota Joshua, Nikita Zadorov, Tyler Myers, Ian Cole, Casey DeSmith

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $20.96 million

The extra $4 million or so gained from offloading Ilya Mikheyev at 15 percent retained to Chicago will be very valuable for the Canucks. Vancouver has significant cap flexibility but also several roster holes that need to be filled because of six pending UFAs

The Canucks' top priority will be landing a top-six winger for Elias Pettersson's line. It's expected they'll take an aggressive run at Jake Guentzel if he hits the July 1 market. Beyond that, they'll need to find an additional top-nine forward to either replace Lindholm at third-line center or fill Pius Suter's wing spot if he shifts to the middle to play 3C. On the blue line, they need to sign two No. 4/5 type defenders — which could mean extending re-Nikita Zadorov and Tyler Myers — and perhaps another No. 6/7 to replace Ian Cole.

8. Buffalo Sabres

2024-25 salaries: $56,925,515

RFAs estimate: $12.1 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Jeff Skinner buyout ($1.44 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Zemgus Girgensons, Tyson Jost, Victor Olofsson, Eric Robinson

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $18.98 million

As of this writing, the Sabres haven't officially bought out Jeff Skinner, but every bit of available information suggests they will. That'll net them $7.55 million in cap savings, which we've already included in our calculations (for 2024-25, at least. That number will decrease by $3 million in '25-26, then $2 million more in '26-27). He's still a capable second-line scorer and power-play element, and he's a prime candidate to take a Matt Duchene-esque below-market deal to play on a contender. Buffalo gets added flexibility to improve the mix around core pieces like Tage Thompson, Owen Power and Rasmus Dahlin in the immediate future.

Another main order of business is figuring out a contract with RFA goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who emerged last season as a viable long-term option in net alongside Devon Levi. With their foundation locked up, the Sabres are in solid long-term shape — they could also use another top-four defenseman, but really, who couldn't?

9. Montreal Canadiens

2024-25 salaries: $78,586,250

RFAs estimate: $2.44 million

LTIR candidates: Carey Price ($10.5 million)

Dead money deals: Jeff Petry retention ($2.344 million), Jake Allen ($1.925 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Tanner Pearson, Colin White, Chris Wideman

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $17.47 million

The Canadiens have enough cap space to do basically whatever they want — and that's before factoring in the space created by Carey Price's long-term injury exception. Montreal's rebuild is progressing, but it needs a bit more time to bake before any big free-agency splashes are warranted.

The best use of that cap space is probably on a young, long-term piece via the trade market. Trevor Zegras has been connected with Montreal for a while now, and whether that comes to fruition or not, he's a player profile that makes perfect sense.

Pending UFA Sam Reinhart should be getting a big raise on his next contract. (Bruce Bennett / Getty Images)

10. Florida Panthers

2024-25 salaries: $68,483,334

RFAs estimate: $4.55 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Keith Yandle buyout ($1.24 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Sam Reinhart, Brandon Montour, Oliver Ekman-Larsson, Dmitry Kulikov, Vladimir Tarasenko, Nick Cousins, Ryan Lomberg, Steven Lorentz, Kevin Stenlund, Kyle Okposo

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $15.02 million

One of the underlying stories of Florida's Cup run was the pending UFA status of Sam Reinhart and Brandon Montour, two of their high-profile contributors. It's tough to imagine the Panthers extending both, given the raises they've earned — and it's even tougher to imagine them letting Reinhart walk.

He scored 57 goals in the regular season, then the Cup-clincher. His deal will eat up a huge chunk of that $15 million, likely leaving them $5 million or so to add a No. 4/5 defenseman and reshuffle the bottom six. Looking down the road a bit, Sergei Bobrovsky is down to two years remaining on his $10 million AAV megadeal. Some added flexibility is on the way.

11. Boston Bruins

2024-25 salaries: $66,400,834

RFAs estimate: $7.92 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Mike Reilly ($870,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jake DeBrusk, Danton Heinen, James van Riemsdyk, Pat Maroon, Matt Grzelcyk, Derek Forbort, Kevin Shattenkirk

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $13.68 million

At last, Don Sweeney is starting an offseason with real salary-cap space. A solid chunk of it is earmarked for new full-time starter Jeremy Swayman; Evolving Hockey has the RFA signing a four-year deal worth $6.25 million annually.

Still, nearly $14 million is enough to make some real additions, especially if Jake DeBrusk indeed signs elsewhere. Boston's need for a top-six center is well-documented, and it's led to them being linked with basically every player on the market who remotely fits the bill. If they want to reel in one of the big names — Elias Lindholm, Steven Stamkos — they'll have the money necessary to get it done.

12. St. Louis Blues

2024-25 salaries: $73,207,262

RFAs estimate: $847,300

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Sammy Blais, Kasperi Kapanen, Marco Scandella

Problem contract: Torey Krug ($6.5 million AAV for three seasons), Brayden Schenn ($6.5 million AAV for four seasons), Justin Faulk ($6.5 million AAV for three seasons)

Projected cap space: $13.94 million

With 10 forwards, six defenders and two goalies already signed, St. Louis has nearly $14 million that can be invested in legitimate roster upgrades. The big question, though, is how the Blues will spend this cash given the retool they're mired in.

Will they be active in free agency to be playoff-competitive? Will they only pursue younger players on the trade market who can be a long-term fit with the core? Will they take low-risk fliers on high-salaried reclamation project players on short-term deals, similar to what they did with Jakub Vrana and Kasperi Kapanen?

Acquiring a No. 2 center could be a priority since Brayden Schenn looked far more effective on the wing this season.

13. Detroit Red Wings

2024-25 salaries: $55,232,640

RFAs estimate: $19.4 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Justin Abdelkader buyout ($1.056 million), Kailer Yamamoto buyout ($533,334)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Patrick Kane, David Perron, Daniel Sprong, Shayne Gostisbehere, Christian Fischer

Problem contract: Justin Holl ($3.4 million AAV for two seasons)

Projected cap space: $13.37 million

The Red Wings have oodles of cap space for the time being, but a huge chunk of that is earmarked for extensions for RFAs Moritz Seider and Lucas Raymond, plus a few others. Their RFA estimate assumes that both of their young stars sign long-term deals.

We're also not assuming that they buy out defenseman Justin Holl (two remaining years at $3.4 million), though that remains a possibility. The end result is a reasonable chunk of change to spend on improving a roster that's still thin in several spots, especially on the wing and defense; Tuesday's trade of Jake Walman to San Jose made a bad group worse.

14. Seattle Kraken

2024-25 salaries: $64,575,833

RFAs estimate: $12.77 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Tomas Tatar, Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, Justin Schultz

Problem contract: Philipp Grubauer ($5.9 million AAV for three seasons), Andre Burakovsky ($5.5 million AAV for three seasons)

Projected cap space: $10.66 million

Seattle was the only team that missed the playoffs despite ranking top 10 in preventing goals against. All of the Kraken's attention should be on adding dynamic scoring ability to a forward lineup that didn't have a single 65-point or higher producer in 2023-24.

With the blue line already set (Ryker Evans will likely step into an everyday role with Schultz's expected departure), Seattle has sufficient cap space to make one or two splashy top-six additions. Perhaps it'll shop the final year of Brandon Tanev's $3.5 million AAV to manufacture even more wiggle room.

15. Los Angeles Kings

2024-25 salaries: $64,550,000

RFAs estimate: $12.84 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Ivan Provorov retention ($2.025 million), Mike Richards termination penalty ($700,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Matt Roy, Viktor Arvidsson, Cam Talbot, Trevor Lewis

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $10.6 million

Rob Blake's one-for-one trade to send Pierre-Luc Dubois to Washington for Darcy Kuemper helped the Kings get rid of an anchor contract and address the starting goalie position in one fell swoop. Now, L.A. enters the offseason with enough money to upgrade the skater group, especially up front.

Losing pending UFA Matt Roy would be a significant blow but with prospect Brandt Clarke coming on the right side, those cap dollars could be better spent on adding scoring pop. The Kings can also open up a bit more cap room than we've projected if they bridge Quinton Byfield this summer instead of extending him to a long-term deal.

16. New Jersey Devils

2024-25 salaries: $72,726,397

RFAs estimate: $4.73 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Ilya Kovalchuk cap recapture ($250,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Brendan Smith, Kaapo Kähkönen

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $10.55 million

The Devils had one major task entering the offseason, and they've already accomplished it. Jacob Markstrom, after months of prelude, is their new starting goaltender. His presence solves a years-old problem and raises expectations even higher.

The Flames retaining salary was a nice bit of added value for Tom Fitzgerald, giving him even more space to figure out a plan for RFA Dawson Mercer and add some reinforcements on the wing and the bottom defensive pair. New Jersey's time to win is now, and it has the salary structure in place to make that happen.

17. Colorado Avalanche

2024-25 salaries: $77,533,750

RFAs estimate: None

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jonathan Drouin, Sean Walker, Brandon Duhaime, Joel Kiviranta, Yakov Trenin, Jack Johnson, Caleb Jones

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $10.47 million

Colorado's cap picture is quite uncertain.

There still isn't any clarity on whether Gabriel Landeskog will become healthy enough to play for next season – he's not on LTIR for now to account for the possibility of his return. Valeri Nichushkin doesn't count against the cap right now because of his suspension. But he's eligible to be reinstated around November, and if he clears the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program, his $6.125 million will automatically land back on the Avalanche's books. That would, of course, eat up a majority of the $10.55 million of space Colorado currently projects to have.

With only seven forwards and four defenders signed, the Avs will likely have to move money out to re-sign Jonathan Drouin.

Will a Mitch Marner trade impact the Maple Leafs' salary-cap outlook? (James Carey Lauder / USA Today)

18. Toronto Maple Leafs

2024-25 salaries: $69,169,667

RFAs estimate: $8.57 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Tyler Bertuzzi, Max Domi, T.J. Brodie, Mark Giordano, Joel Edmundson, Ilya Lyubushkin, Ilya Samsonov, Matt Murray, John Klingberg

Problem contract: Morgan Rielly ($7.5 million AAV for six seasons)

Projected cap space: $10.26 million

The elephant in the room — not just for the Maple Leafs, either — is Mitch Marner. Moving on from him would fundamentally change Toronto's outlook on and off the ice. With him still in the fold, the task will be to stretch about $10 million into two relevant wingers, a No. 4/5 defenseman and perhaps a middle-six center. Good luck with that. The Leafs are a good team with tons of holes and not enough space on hand to fill them all. Will they pick and choose, or will they do something drastic?

A note: We're penciling defenseman Timothy Liljegren in for an extension worth a bit more than $4 million annually.

19. Dallas Stars

2024-25 salaries: $71,753,741

RFAs estimate: $7 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Joe Pavelski performance bonus ($2 million), Thomas Harley ELC bonus ($637,500)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Matt Duchene, Chris Tanev, Joe Pavelski, Craig Smith, Jani Hakanpää, Scott Wedgewood

Problem contract: Tyler Seguin ($9.85 million AAV for three seasons), Jamie Benn ($9.5 million AAV for one season)

Projected cap space: $9.25 million

After a huge breakout season, will the Stars re-sign RFA defender Thomas Harley to a long-term extension or will they bridge him on a shorter deal to keep his AAV lower? For now, we've assumed the latter since Dallas has a few key needs and not a whole lot of cap space to go around.

Extending Chris Tanev, or finding a comparable right-handed shutdown defender, will be a top priority. That will immediately eat a big chunk of the club's cap space. It'd be nice to land an impact top-nine forward to help replace Duchene and the retiring Pavelski, but the Stars also need to sign a backup and fill out a couple of depth roster spots, so they may have to go bargain shopping.

20. Washington Capitals

2024-25 salaries: $84,265,000

RFAs estimate: $3.78 million

LTIR candidates: Nicklas Backstrom ($9.2 million)

Dead money deals: Evgeny Kuznetsov retention ($3.9 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Max Pacioretty, Nicolas Aube-Kubel

Problem contract: Tom Wilson ($6.5 million AAV for six seasons)

Projected cap space: $9.16 million

Clearly GM Brian MacLellan has prioritized improving his roster in meaningful ways for next season. Trading for Pierre-Luc Dubois and his mammoth contract is a gamble, but a sensible one given the context.

If the goal is still winning as many games as possible on the final leg of Alex Ovechkin's record chase, placing Backstrom on LTIR will help. There could be more room on the way, too, depending on the next step for T.J. Oshie. Beyond that, adding some serious help on the wings and a second-pair defenseman would go a long way. Another center wouldn't hurt, either.

21. Edmonton Oilers

2024-25 salaries: $77,966,667

RFAs estimate: $2.03 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Connor Brown performance bonus ($3.225 million), James Neal buyout ($1.91 million, Corey Perry performance bonus ($325,00)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Adam Henrique, Warren Foegele, Connor Brown, Mattias Janmark, Corey Perry, Sam Carrick, Sam Gagner, Vincent Desharnais, Troy Stecher, Calvin Pickard

Problem contract: Darnell Nurse ($9.25 million AAV for six seasons), Jack Campbell ($5 million AAV for three seasons)

Projected cap space: $8 million

The Oilers need to make moves to open up more cap space because $8 million isn't enough to build Stanley Cup-caliber depth when you've only got seven forwards and five defenders signed for next season.

Buying Jack Campbell out and shipping Cody Ceci out seem like logical decisions to free up an additional $7.15 million. From there, Edmonton will need to rebuild its bottom six because Adam Henrique, Mattias Janmark, Connor Brown, Corey Perry and Warren Foegele are all pending UFAs. Landing a top-four right-handed defenseman also needs to be a priority.

What can the Penguins do this summer to ice a competitive team around Sidney Crosby? (Mitchell Leff / Getty Images)

22. Pittsburgh Penguins

2024-25 salaries: $77,254,342

RFAs estimate: $4 million

LTIR candidates: Matt Nieto ($900,000)

Dead money deals: Jeff Petry retention ($1.56 million), Jack Johnson buyout ($916,667)

Notable unsigned UFAs: None

Problem contract: Ryan Graves ($4.5 million AAV for five seasons)

Projected cap space: $7.65 million

Cap space doesn't seem to be as much of an issue for Pittsburgh as no-movement clauses; Rickard Rakell and Reilly Smith — two aging, underperforming middle-six wingers — both have $5 million cap hits and partial NMCs. That adds a degree of difficulty to Kyle Dubas' attempt to make one last push during Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin's productive years.

There are no glaring holes in the lineup; the issue is that it's a lineup that failed to make the postseason two years running. The bright side for Dubas is that even if Smith and Rakell stick around, he has enough space to add another relevant winger or two. If he does that, the roster will make a lot more sense. Either way, something needs to change.

23. Columbus Blue Jackets

2024-25 salaries: $66,325,000

RFAs estimate: $14.96 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Alex Wennberg buyout ($891,667)

Notable unsigned UFAs: None

Problem contract: Elvis Merzlikins ($5.4 million AAV for three seasons)

Projected cap space: $6.71 million

New Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has plenty of RFAs to worry about, including leading goal scorer Kirill Marchenko. The bigger problem for Waddell, though, is that Marchenko only scored 23 times. Columbus has some talented young pieces, but none of them (outside Adam Fantilli) are slam-dunk foundational guys, and the overall lineup is a mess.

Waddell has also already ruled out the possibility of trading Elvis Merzlikins due to a lack of interest from other teams.

It's an intriguing amount of space, though, and that's with Patrik Laine still on the books. Laine ($8.7 million cap hit) has requested a trade, and Columbus can retain enough salary to create some options.

24. Carolina Hurricanes

2024-25 salaries: $64,125,833

RFAs estimate: $17.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jake Guentzel, Teuvo Teravainen, Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei, Jordan Martinook, Stefan Noesen, Tony DeAngelo

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $6.4 million

As of this moment, Carolina hasn't traded pending RFA Martin Necas. That may well come to pass, but for the sake of this exercise, we're assuming he signs a long-term extension for about $7.5 million annually (along with a similar deal for fellow RFA Seth Jarvis).

If Necas is moved, as expected, Carolina will free up more (currently theoretical) space to either retain some of its own free agents or pursue new ones for the bottom two defensive pairs and top nine. The Canes could use it. Adding goal-scoring, as often has been the case for Carolina, needs to be a priority.

25. Philadelphia Flyers

2024-25 salaries: $87,196,428

RFAs estimate: $1.7 million

LTIR candidates: Ryan Ellis ($6.25 million)

Dead money deals: Kevin Hayes retention ($3.57 million for two seasons)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Erik Johnson, Marc Staal, Denis Gurianov

Problem contract: Sean Couturier ($7.75 million AAV for six seasons)

Projected cap space: $5.35 million

In terms of importance, nothing Philadelphia does on the open market will approach adding impact forward prospect Matvei Michkov a bit earlier than expected. Either way, there's not much of a reason for Daniel Briere to dip his toe in the pool. The Flyers seem to be more focused on figuring out which of their higher-profile players will stick on the roster as the retool enters its next phase.

It's worth watching Ryan Johansen here as well. He currently counts $4 million against the Flyers' cap, but certainly doesn't seem to be in their plans. A buyout seems less likely than LTIR and would save Philly an extra $2.66 million.

26. New York Rangers

2024-25 salaries: $75,151,524

RFAs estimate: $7.67 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Blake Wheeler, Alex Wennberg, Jack Roslovic, Erik Gustafsson, Chad Ruhwedel

Problem contract: Jacob Trouba ($8 million AAV for two seasons)

Projected cap space: $5.18 million

The Rangers aren't quite bumped up against the cap, but they don't have enough free money at the moment to make a splash, either — and if we take Chris Drury at his word, that seems to be the goal.

That said, $5 million or so after dealing with RFA D-men Ryan Lindgren and Braden Schneider isn't enough to reel in, say, Jake Guentzel. It's probably not enough to add two lower-profile, still-decent wingers, either. Moving Kaapo Kakko ($2.4 million AAV) would get them closer, but some more creativity is probably necessary to create the space for a true shake-up.

27. Minnesota Wild

2024-25 salaries: $81,743,588

RFAs estimate: $1.63 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Zach Parise buyout ($7.371 million), Ryan Suter buyout ($7.371 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Alex Goligoski, Dakota Mermis, Jake Lucchini

Problem contract: Filip Gustavsson ($3.75 million AAV for two seasons), Frederick Gaudreau ($2.1 million AAV for four seasons)

Projected cap space: $4.63 million

This is the final summer where Zach Parise and Ryan Suter's buyouts combine for a crippling $14.7 million dead cap charge on Minnesota's books. Relief is on the way, but Bill Guerin faces one more offseason where things are tight.

The Wild have enough room to target a middle-six forward upgrade, but that's about it. Anything more than that will require shipping out a contract like Filip Gustavsson's.

28. Tampa Bay Lighting

2024-25 salaries: $82,665,000

RFAs estimate: $862,900LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Steven Stamkos, Anthony Duclair, Tyler Motte, Calvin de Haan, Matt Dumba, Haydn Fleury, Austin Watson

Problem contract: Erik Cernak ($5.2 million AAV for seven seasons)

Projected cap space: $4.6 million

If the Lightning want to use every cent of currently available cap space on Steven Stamkos, they'll be able to pay him $5.335 million annually. It's almost impossible to imagine a world in which that happens, even considering Julien BriseBois' record of cap sorcery. Factor in an RFA deal or two (as we did with Gage Goncalves here) and the margin gets even smaller.

The obvious choice here is between 1) sending out a contract and hoping Stamkos (still) takes less than market value and 2) letting a franchise icon walk while trying to spend that money on two middle-six options since the Lightning have nearly none of them in the fold.

29. Vegas Golden Knights

2024-25 salaries: $77,966,667

RFAs estimate: $1.74 million

LTIR candidates: Robin Lehner ($5 million)

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jonathan Marchessault, Chandler Stephenson, Anthony Mantha, Michael Amadio, William Carrier, Alec Martinez

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $4.46 million

Once again, the Golden Knights are walking a tightrope with their cap situation. They're already close to the ceiling and have several impact forwards hitting the market, led by Jonathan Marchessault, who scored 42 goals this year. Vegas probably can't extend him without making a cap-clearing trade.

Zach Whitecloud, who makes $2.75 million on the bottom pair, could be a trade candidate if the Golden Knights go down that route. Shea Theodore is entering the final year of his bargain $5.25 million AAV contract. If Vegas doesn't think it can afford Theodore's massive upcoming UFA contract, it may be worthwhile to trade him for value now rather than risk losing him for nothing later, especially now that Noah Hanifin is in the fold.

Matching seven-year, $59.5 million contracts for Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck kick in next season. (James Carey Lauder / USA Today)

30. Winnipeg Jets

2024-25 salaries: $79,247,024

RFAs estimate: $4.95 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Blake Wheeler buyout ($2.75 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Tyler Toffoli, Sean Monahan, Brenden Dillon, Laurent Brossoit, Colin Miller

Problem contract: Nate Schmidt ($5.95 million AAV for one season), Neal Pionk ($5.875 million AAV for one season)

Projected cap space: $3.8 million

With Connor Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele's lucrative new extensions kicking in, the Jets' cap situation is crunchier than you might expect. Winnipeg needs to re-sign Monahan or find a second-line center replacement, re-sign Brenden Dillon or find a top-four replacement and sign a backup

goalie. That doesn't even include the impact of Tyler Toffoli's expected departure.

Nikolaj Ehlers is reportedly being shopped – trading him would potentially open up $6 million, but it'd also leave a significant top-six hole in the lineup. Buying Nate Schmidt out could be a way to carve out some much-needed flexibility.

31. Ottawa Senators

2024-25 salaries: $76,699,047

RFAs estimate: $7.8 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Joonas Korpisalo retention ($1 million), Colin White buyout (minus-$625,00 in '24-25)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Dominik Kubalik

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: $3.5 million

The Sens could sit on their hands for the rest of the offseason and still come out as one of the biggest winners. Acquiring Linus Ullmark and dumping most of Joonas Korpisalo's contract in one fell swoop was a thing of beauty. With their single biggest issue freshly resolved, they can figure out what to do with trade candidate defenseman Jakob Chychrun (one year remaining at $4.6 million).

After that, it'll be about improving around the margins and, once again, figuring out a longer-term deal with Shane Pinto, whose gambling suspension derailed last year's attempt.

32. New York Islanders

2024-25 salaries: $82,187,500

RFAs estimate: $2.85 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Cal Clutterbuck, Matt Martin, Sebastian Aho, Robert Bortuzzo, Mike Reilly

Problem contract: Jean-Gabriel Pageau ($5 million AAV for two seasons)

Projected cap space: $2.96 million

There's no particularly easy route to improvement on the Island, which is why buyout speculation has coalesced around Jean-Gabriel Pageau. We didn't incorporate that in our calculations for the Isles, because it's foolish to assume anything with Lou Lamoriello, but the move would save them an additional $2.75 million for 2024-25.

Pageau is overpaid but still an OK third-liner, so it's fair to wonder whether the juice would be worth the squeeze. Anders Lee, on the other hand, has more trade value and makes $6 million. That's not an irrelevant amount of money — and while sending out a captain is always an odd thought, there aren't a ton of alternatives.

NHL trade big board: Expanding the list to 25 top targets ahead of the draft

By Chris Johnston

LAS VEGAS — The only thing hotter than the "dry heat" the hockey world is being treated to this week here in Vegas is the increasing amount of trade chatter with NHL front offices gearing up for the draft and free agency.

This is a prime time to both move and acquire players, with picks at a premium heading into the Friday and Saturday draft at Sphere, and teams looking to clear out cap space in order to make a splash when the free-agent market opens Monday.

That was the apparent motivation for the Detroit Red Wings' decision to attach a second-round pick to Jake Walman in Tuesday's deal with the San Jose Sharks — clearing $3.4 million off the Red Wings' books for next season and the year after.

The trade market has already been unusually active, with four goaltenders changing teams this month: Jacob Markstrom to the New Jersey Devils, Linus Ullmark to the Ottawa Senators, Joonas Korpisalo to the Boston Bruins and Darcy Kuemper to the Los Angeles Kings.

Expect the carousel to continue to spin, too.

We've got five more goaltenders featured on the latest edition of the Big Board of top targets to watch. Enjoy.

1. Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs

2023-24 stats: 26 goals, 85 points, 21:17 average time on ice, plus-21

Age: 27

Contract: $10.903 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 1

The possibility of a Marner trade is the talk of the town in Toronto. With it being an offseason where "everything is on the table," according to the team's senior leadership, and with Marner eligible to sign a contract extension on July 1, there are multiple potential outcomes here. But the mere fact that the Leafs are willing to take calls on the one-time Selke Trophy finalist and perennial 90-plus-point man is a significant development. Marner holds the hammer with a no-movement clause and may need some cajoling or convincing to green-light a move out of his hometown. That makes it a delicate situation for all involved.

2. Martin Necas, Carolina Hurricanes

2023-24 stats: 24 goals, 53 points, 17:21 ATOI, minus-9

Age: 25

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: 3

It's no secret that the talented forward would welcome a change of scenery. Necas took a step back production-wise last season — going from 71 points to 53 — and he wasn't too happy about how he was deployed. Now two years out from unrestricted free agency and needing a new contract this summer, he's been made available on the trade market. The Hurricanes are working through concrete offers and hoping to get another roster player back in return, instead of a package built only around future assets. Necas has an enticing blend of size, speed and skill, and he showed extremely well while helping Czechia win gold at the IIHF World Hockey Championship in May.

LeBrun rumblings: Tulsky on Necas trade market, offer sheets and Guentzel — plus latest on Tanev, Kane, more

3. Nikolaj Ehlers, Winnipeg Jets

2023-24 stats: 25 goals, 61 points, 15:52 ATOI, Plus-27

Age: 28

Contract: $6 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 4

A skilled offensive play-driver who consistently produces 20-plus goals and 60-ish points, Ehlers remains a polarizing figure among the Winnipeg hockey discourse. What's not up for debate is that he's now one year out from potential unrestricted free agency and there are only so many cap dollars to go around. Plus teammate Kyle Connor is up for an extension of his own two years down the road. As a result, the Jets are listening to interest in Ehlers to see if there's something out there that makes sense for them to act on.

4. Jakob Chychrun, Ottawa Senators

2023-24 stats: 14 goals, 41 points, 22:23 ATOI, minus-30

Age: 26

Contract: $4.6 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 5

Something has to give on the left side of the Senators blue line, where Jake Sanderson and Thomas Chabot are already signed to significant long-term contracts and Chychrun is one year away from being in line for one. Not only is he coming off the first 82-game campaign of his career — notable given his lengthy injury history — but the fit has actually been pretty seamless since he was acquired from the Arizona Coyotes. His pending UFA status in 2025 complicates the picture, though.

5. Patrik Laine, Columbus Blue Jackets

2023-24 stats: 6 goals, 9 points, 15:13 ATOI, minus-10

Age: 26

Contract: $8.7 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 6

The former 44-goal man has endured a tough couple of seasons in Columbus and would like a fresh start. Laine is currently under the care of the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program, which he entered in late January, and recently underwent a minor procedure on his left shoulder. While there is obviously uncertainty about where his game will be at, there's also the possibility of a big payoff if a team can put Laine in the right position to succeed. Despite the ups and downs with the Blue Jackets, he still produced 0.79 points per game during his tenure with the team.

Patrik Laine trade destinations: 8 teams that could (or should) be interested

6. Rutger McGroarty, Winnipeg Jets

2023-24 stats: 16 goals, 52 points for University of Michigan

Age: 20

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: Not ranked

The 14th pick from 2022 has yet to start his professional career and isn't on the same page as the Jets about the best path for his development, which is why his name has started to circulate on the trade market. The University of Michigan forward is known for having strong puck skills and won a gold medal with Team USA at the world junior championship. At 20, he isn't too far from being NHL-ready.

Rutger McGroarty trade destinations: What could the Jets get back?

7. Ilya Mikheyev, Vancouver Canucks

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 31 points, 14:16 ATOI, plus-1

Age: 29

Contract: $4.75 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 9

After watching Mikheyev put up an ugly playoff stat line — no points in 11 games — the Canucks can certainly find better ways to use the $4.75 million in cap space they've dedicated to him. He hasn't lived up to expectations since signing in free agency two years ago and wasn't helped by a knee injury during his first season in Vancouver. Add it all together and Mikheyev is a distressed asset, but he's a distressed asset they'd like to move.

8. Filip Gustavsson, Minnesota Wild

2023-24 stats: 20-18-4, 3.06 GAA, .899 save percentage

Age: 25

Contract: $3.75 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 7

What's that line about goalie being the hardest position to predict? After helping push the Wild into the playoffs in 2022-23, Gustavsson fell back to earth in a big way this season. Now he's on the trade market. The Wild are operating with an extremely tight cap sheet and have Jesper Wallstedt waiting in the wings for NHL starts alongside veteran Marc-Andre Fleury. Those circumstances have made the Swede available.

Wild mailbag: What we're hearing about Rossi, Gustavsson, free-agent targets and more ahead of the draft

9. Kaapo Kakko, New York Rangers

2023-24 stats: 13 goals, 19 points, 13:17 ATOI, plus-6

Age: 23

Contract: $2.4 million through 2025 (RFA)

Previous: 11

When the playoffs ended, the 2019 No. 2 pick expressed a desire to remain in New York and quickly signed a one-year contract at the amount he would have been due on his qualifying offer — $2.4 million — rather than pushing for more money and term. That provided cost certainty for the Rangers, but it won't guarantee him a future roster spot as the team enters an important summer for retooling.

Kaapo Kakko fell to 19 points in 2023-24 after having 40 a season earlier. (Dustin Satloff / Getty Images)

10. Tanner Jeannot, Tampa Bay Lightning

2023-24 stats: 7 goals, 14 points, 12:01 ATOI, minus-10

Age: 27

Contract: $2.665 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 8

At the outset of yet another summer with tight cap dollars, the Lightning are looking for ways to create space. Enter Jeannot, the hard-hitting winger who hasn't ever been close to duplicating the 24-goal, 41-point season had in Nashville in 2021-22. It's safe to say he's one of the few big swings made by Tampa Bay general manager Julien BriseBois that didn't pay off, and he also happens to be one year out from unrestricted free agency. BriseBois has never shied away from a tough decision, and if he can find a way to get Jeannot's cap hit off the books, it might not even be that tough for him to pull the trigger on the deal.

11. John Gibson, Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 stats: 13-27-2, 3.54 GAA, .888 save percentage

Age: 30

Contract: $6.4 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 15

Gibson has been a workhorse for a Ducks team that hasn't qualified for the playoffs in six years and is likely still facing growing pains. With 23-year-old Lukas Dostal starting to bloom behind him, Anaheim is willing to clear some room in the crease by finding Gibson another opportunity. His numbers make that much easier said than done — Gibson's yearly save percentage is going in the wrong direction, and he's signed for three more seasons at a pricey cap hit — but there are also a lot of teams looking for goaltenders right now.

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

12. Tristan Jarry, Pittsburgh Penguins

2023-24 stats: 19-25-5, 2.91 GAA, .903 save percentage

Age: 29

Contract: $5.375 million through 2028 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

Alex Nedeljkovic usurped his net down the stretch this past season and recently signed a two-year extension in Pittsburgh, which could signal a shift in the Penguins crease. Jarry has been hampered by injuries in recent years and has gone through some highs and lows — with his high end being very good. His contract includes a 12-team no-trade list.

Penguins re-sign Nedeljkovic: What does it mean for Jarry?

13. Mike Matheson, Montreal Canadiens

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 62 points, 25:33 ATOI, minus-24

Age: 30

Contract: $4.875 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 19

With two years left on the contract of the left-shot defenseman, the Canadiens are in position to gauge the marketplace and see if anything out there makes sense. Matheson is a strong skater coming off a 62-point season, so they'd be selling high if they chose to do so. Montreal has several prospects in the pipeline who are defensemen and may not be on the same timeline as an organization with a player who is due to hit free agency at age 32 in 2026.

How the Canadiens fit in the trade market and the impact of a rising cap on negotiations

14. Jacob Trouba, New York Rangers

2023-24 stats: 3 goals, 22 points, 21:15 ATOI, minus-4

Age: 30

Contract: $8 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

With his no-movement clause set to convert to a 15-team no-trade clause on July 1 and the Rangers believed to be looking at moving a defenseman, Trouba could be the odd man out. The right-shot defender plays a strong, physical game and is known for laying out opponents with punishing bodychecks. He's coming off a difficult playoffs but would represent an upgrade for most teams. In New York, where they also have Adam Fox and Braden Schneider on the right side, Trouba may be a luxury at his cap hit.

What we're hearing about the Rangers: Guentzel interest, Kane reunion and Shesterkin's next deal

15. Pavel Buchnevich, St. Louis Blues

2023-24 stats: 27 goals, 63 points, 19:49 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 29

Contract: $5.8 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

Nearly a point-per-game player across the past three years with the Blues, Buchnevich is a big, strong winger who skates well and possesses a high-end shot. Better still is the fact he's signed to an efficient contract where he's delivered excess value. However, as a pending UFA in 2025, he'll be due for a raise soon, so that needs to be factored into the cost of prying him out of St. Louis. Buchnevich's current deal includes a 12-team no-trade list.

16. Alexander Holtz, New Jersey Devils

2023-24 stats: 16 goals, 28 points, 11:38 ATOI, minus-15

Age: 22

Contract: $894,167 through 2025 (RFA)

Previous: Not ranked

A right-shot forward with a good release and knack for getting around the ice, Holtz is still looking to make good on the promise that surrounded his No. 7 selection in 2020. Playing his first full NHL season last in 2023-24 was a start, albeit one that saw him occasionally draw former coach Lindy Ruff's ire for missed defensive assignments. Holtz still has considerable upside but may need a fresh start to blossom.

17. Torey Krug, St. Louis Blues

2023-24 stats: 4 goals, 39 points, 21:58 ATOI, minus-31

Age: 33

Contract: $6.5 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 10

The veteran puck-moving defenseman would have been a member of the Philadelphia Flyers last summer had he not exercised his right to block the potential deal with a no-trade clause. Now another year on, the dynamics behind those discussions are unchanged and Krug is down to three seasons remaining on his $6.5 million annual contract. He also loses the full no-trade clause beyond this year. There may be slightly more room to maneuver a second time around.

What a perfect week looks like for the Blues at the NHL Draft and in free agency

18. Mathieu Joseph, Ottawa Senators

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 35 points, 16:28 ATOI, minus-4

Age: 27

Contract: $2.95 million through 2026 (RFA)

Previous: 12

His second full season in Ottawa went much better than the first, but he remains expendable on a roster stocked with young forwards. In fact, with an affordable cap hit for the next two years, Joseph may be able to bring back some value. His speed remains an asset, and there were teams that inquired about his availability during the season.

19. Arthur Kaliyev, Los Angeles Kings

2023-24 stats: 7 goals, 15 points, 11:48 ATOI, minus-3

Age: 22

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: 13

Kaliyev didn't play much more hockey than he watched this past season as a regular healthy scratch or fourth-line winger for the Kings. That represented regression for a player in his fourth professional season. An elite shooter who carried considerable promise after being a second-round pick by Los Angeles in 2019, Kaliyev is at the stage of his career where he needs to draw more results out of his attributes. He may need a fresh start to accomplish that.

20. Juuse Saros, Nashville Predators

2023-24 stats: 35-24-5, 2.86 GAA, .906 save percentage

Age: 29

Contract: $5 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 14

There's optimism that the Predators will be in position to extend Saros to a new contract once the CBA rules allow it to happen in July, but it's no secret that they've shopped him before. That's significant because of the current state of the goaltending market and the possibility that Nashville pivots in the event contract talks aren't as fruitful as hoped. Saros is an incredibly athletic goaltender who has averaged 65 starts across his past three seasons, and he never seems to stray too far from the Vezina Trophy conversation.

21. Trevor Zegras, Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 stats: 6 goals, 15 points, 17:05 ATOI, minus-1

Age: 23

Contract: $5.75 million through 2026 (RFA)

Previous: 16

The 23-year-old forward oozes offensive talent and is coming off a season he'd just as soon forget. Zegras played only 31 games because of time missed due to a groin injury and surgery on a broken ankle, while also dealing with trade rumors in the months before the deadline. He even saw roommate Jamie Drysdale dealt away to the Philadelphia Flyers. There's work to be done on repairing and building up the relationship between the team and Zegras if he isn't traded this offseason. He's piqued the curiosity of a couple of teams.

Trevor Zegras oozes offensive talent but is coming off a forgettable season. (Sean M. Haffey / Getty Images)

22. Reilly Smith, Pittsburgh Penguins

2023-24 stats: 13 goals, 40 points, 16:08 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 33

Contract: $5 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 17

Smith arrived in a trade last summer just days after winning the Stanley Cup in Vegas and the fit never seemed right. He finished with his lowest per-game goal, assist and point totals since 2016-17 and heard his name in speculation leading up to the trade deadline. The veteran brings plenty of experience and a strong two-way game, and he is one year out from unrestricted free agency.

23. Jeff Skinner, Buffalo Sabres

2023-24 stats: 24 goals, 46 points, 16:00 ATOI, minus-2

Age: 32

Contract: $9 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 18

A prime candidate for a buyout if a trade doesn't materialize (or Skinner elects not to waive his no-movement clause), the 32-year-old appears headed for a fresh start. He's seen a sharp decline in production, going from an 82-point campaign two years ago to 46 this past season, but he remains a good shooter and skater. The devil will be in the details of how the money gets moved around and what cap figure is attached to the player on the other side of a potential move.

24. Timothy Liljegren

2023-24 stats: 3 goals, 23 points, 19:40 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 25

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: Not ranked

With the Leafs looking to revamp their blue line and Liljegren entering a summer where he's likely going to have a strong arbitration case, the team is willing to listen on interest in its right-shot defenseman. Consistency has been an issue at times for Liljegren, who was a scratch for a game in the playoffs this spring. He's a good skater and puck-mover and tracks as a solid top-four option if he can take the next step.

25. Jack Campbell, Edmonton Oilers

2023-24 stats: 1-4-0, 4.50 GAA, .873 save percentage

Age: 32

Contract: $5 million through 2027

Previous: 20

Campbell quietly joined the Oilers' ride to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final — skating with the extras and keeping himself in playing shape just in case he was needed. The organization will explore options to move the veteran goaltender following a season where he went from opening-night starter to making 34 appearances for AHL Bakersfield. While a buyout is possible, a trade of his $5 million annual cap hit would be more palatable.

Note: This board is based on what we're hearing from NHL sources and will be adjusted as new names enter the conversation or gain prominence, so check back.

Others we're watching who don't quite crack the top 25 at this point: Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers; Mario Ferraro, San Jose Sharks; Andrew Mangiapane, Calgary Flames; Jean-Gabriel Pageau, New York Islanders.

LeBrun rumblings: Tulsky on Necas trade market, offer sheets and Guentzel — plus latest on Tanev, Kane, more

By Pierre LeBrun

LAS VEGAS — A year ago, Brad Treliving met media at the draft in Nashville after being on the job as Toronto Maple Leafs general manager for less than a month and joked that he was drinking out of a firehose.

Currently holding that firehose is Eric Tulsky, who has taken over as full-time GM for the Carolina Hurricanes and has about a million things going on right now.

And he might be the GM who is the biggest wild card as far as producing fireworks this week in Vegas.

"There's a lot to do," a calm-sounding Tulsky told The Athletic during a sitdown interview Wednesday. "I've had a month to sort through all of our player contracts, getting to know all of the other teams and getting to know what they want, finding out what's on the trade market, it's been busy.

"I've set an all-time record for calls made and received. But you know, that's the job."

One thing hasn't changed, with the first-time GM replacing Don Waddell: The Hurricanes are in the middle of nearly everything draft week and ahead of July 1.

Not that they had a choice to be front and center, with a number of pending free agents, plus a player who wants out and teams calling.

"You're right: We always try to be in the middle of everything," Tulsky said. "We never want to see an opportunity get missed, right? So we want to consider every possibility there is and evaluate everything and look for every chance to make the club better.

"This year, with all the free agents and everything, we certainly have more that we have to do. There's a lot to work out — a lot to get done, trying to figure out what our team is going to look like next year."

The hottest potato right now involves pending restricted free agent Martin Necas, who wants a change of scenery. The Canes have heard from nearly every single team in the NHL on him — I believe the Buffalo Sabres have very serious interest — but it's getting to be crunch time if a trade is going to happen that involves a first-round pick Friday as part of the package

"Teams are calling. We've been working hard on it," Tulsky said. "I would say that's been one of my biggest focuses, trying to figure out where that's going to go. We've had a lot of interest. We've had a few offers that I would consider very serious.

"Whether or not any of them get across the line remains to be seen."

Martin Necas trade destinations: 11 teams that could (or should) be interested

While Tulsky wouldn't say, other league sources say that there is one team in particular that is pretty close with Carolina on the framework of a deal and that if that trade goes through, it would involve a first-round pick Friday night. So if that particular team decides to go ahead with Carolina, we will know within 48 hours here.

In the meantime, there seems to be frustration from other teams involved in talks with Carolina over the high asking price, which has led to some clubs chatting internally about the possibility of an offer sheet.

“I don’t see how an offer sheet makes any sense for the player,” Tulsky said. “If he wants to leave, he’s giving us control … He’s lowering the return to where we wouldn’t let him go.”

What Tulsky means is that an offer sheet paying $9 million a year, for example, would require compensation of a first-, second- and third-round pick. Carolina’s looking for a bigger package than that. It would match that all day long.

“Correct,” Tulsky said. “So I don’t see how that’s a direction that makes sense.”

And there’s also a world in which if a trade doesn’t materialize, the Canes just keep Necas, at least for another year. It’s not what the player wants, but short of not showing up to work in the fall, Necas is limited in his options.

And again, Carolina plans to match any offer sheet.

“Yeah I mean, if someone offer sheets him at $16 million a year, we won’t match,” Tulsky said smiling. “But if teams are drawing the line on a trade at less than what we’re asking for, then they’re going to be doing an offer sheet at a place where we would match it easily without a second thought.”

The Canes, meanwhile, continue to try hard to find a way to re-sign Jake Guentzel, the No. 1 unrestricted free agent if he goes to market Monday. The piece of candy that Carolina has that no other club can offer is the eighth year on a contract.

“We’re trying very hard on that one,” Tulsky said. “We are not that far apart. I’m still optimistic it’s going to get done. But it’s not done yet and we’re running out of time.”

There are serious rumblings about the Vancouver Canucks making a pitch (would they be willing to go seven years, $9 million?) and, of course, other teams would get in there Monday. So Guentzel and his agent, Ben Hankinson, have a big decision to make soon enough: Take Carolina’s best offer or go to market while leaving the door open to the Canes?

In the meantime, Carolina has two top-four blueliners who are pending UFAs in Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce. I think it’s 99 percent sure Pesce is headed to market, and likely 60-40 Skjei is too, but Tulsky hasn’t given up hope.

“We’re still talking to both of them,” Tulsky said. “I just talked to Pesce’s agent yesterday. Look, they’re both really good players. We’d like to have them both back. It’s just a question of what we can fit, and how to make it work.

“I think they both want to be in Carolina, too,” he added. “So hopefully we can get something done. The salary cap makes it that you can’t have everything you want, and we’re trying to sort it out.”

One team to keep an eye on if Skjei and/or Pesce go to market is the Nashville Predators. They need to replace Ryan McDonagh, and I believe they would inquire and try to sign one of those two Carolina D if they go to market.

In the meantime, because he has no choice, Tulsky is closely investigating both the UFA market and the trade market for blue-line replacements.

“Yeah, for sure,” he said. “We always have a Plan B. We always have a Plan C. We usually have a Plan D. We try to make sure we’re prepared for all the possible outcomes. We want to make sure we’re in position to keep taking steps forward and be in a position to compete for the Stanley Cup.”

Another pending UFA is forward Teuvo Teravainen.

“Again, it’s another player who has a great time with us, loves playing for Rod (Brind’Amour), loves the way we play, loves our feel and our fit,” Tulsky said. “It’s just we can’t have back everybody who wants to be here. So we’re trying to work through it. We’ve talked to the agent a couple of times. I don’t have any clarity for you on it.”

So yeah, so much to get to for Tulsky, and we didn’t even cover it all in our interview.

He doesn’t take lightly the fact that owner Tom Dundon entrusted him with the full-time GM job.

“It’s an honor,” Tulsky said. “This is an incredible team and a great organization and it’s an honor to be entrusted as its steward.”

Rumblings from elsewhere:

• The Dallas Stars are grinding away, trying to find a way to re-sign pending UFA defenseman Chris Tanev. If he goes to market Monday, the Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators would both be among the several teams making serious pitches.

• Pending UFA defenseman Tyler Myers and the Canucks remain in talks, but the sense I get is that things have not progressed on that front despite several weeks of discussions. They’ll chat again this week at the draft, so the door remains open, but there’s just as good of a chance he goes to market Monday at this point.

• The Predators also want to find some offensive pop up front. I believe they have interest in the likes of Steven Stamkos and Chandler Stephenson, if those pending UFAs hit the market, among several other forward targets.

• Patrick Kane’s camp, led by agent Pat Brisson, remains in talks with the Detroit Red Wings. The door isn’t closed on a return. But with Monday so close, obviously there’s a strong possibility he goes to market, and I think the focus for Kane would be on Eastern Conference contenders.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

Hurricanes lease, development agreement expected to get final approval from PNC Arena owner

By Brian Murphy

The Centennial Authority, owner of PNC Arena, is expected Thursday to give final approval to a 20-year lease with the Carolina Hurricanes and an agreement for the organization to develop land around the arena.

The 21-member Centennial Authority board called a special meeting for 10 a.m.

The board will spend part of the meeting in a closed session to consult with attorneys "to review matters pertaining to the location or expansion of businesses in the area."

The Hurricanes and the Authority announced non-binding agreements on the lease extension and development plan in August. They were tied to another deal announced around the same time: $300 million in funding from the Raleigh and Wake County for a renovation of PNC Arena.

It's taken nearly a year to get finalized contracts completed. The city and county gave final approval to the renovation funding plan in May.

"Papering this is always the hard part and making sure it's right and making sure we thought through all these other issues from next year to 15 years from now," Centennial Authority chairman Philip Isley said at a May meeting.

"We hope those will be done as soon as possible. This month, next month, we want it as early as we can get it."

Earlier this month, Isley told the board that they could have "documentation to vote on" at a meeting in late June.

Potential enhancement projects for the arena could be made public in July or August. Renovations are set to begin in the summer of 2025 and the entire project may not be completed until 2027 or 2028.

Under the lease term sheet, the Hurricanes' lease is extended by 20 years after the 2023-24 season, which ended with a playoff loss to the New York Rangers. After the 2038-39 season, the Hurricanes and the Authority will meet to discuss the future of the arena or a replacement arena.

The team can't relocate from PNC Arena or terminate the lease, except after the 2038-39 season if the Authority doesn't make agreed-upon improvements at that point.

The Hurricanes will make annual payments, beginning at $4.5 million, to the Centennial Authority starting in 2029. The Hurricanes will also invest $10 million to furnish certain areas of the arena after the renovation. The organization committed to develop a 3,000- to 5,000-seat music venue adjacent to PNC Arena at an estimated cost of $40 million.

Under the redevelopment term sheet, the franchise will get ground leases on property around the arena through 2096 with the opportunity to develop 20 acres at a time. The first phase must contain office space, retail, food and beverage options, and at least 200 multi-family residential rental units.

PNC Arena, which is also home to NC State's men's basketball team, opened in 1999. The Hurricanes have sold out 61 consecutive games at PNC Arena.

Carolina re-signed coach and franchise icon Rod Brind'Amour, but team president and general manager Don Wadell and chief marketing officer Mike Forman left the organization. The Hurricanes promoted Eric Tulsky to general manager. The team has several notable free agents this off-season.

The Centennial Authority board members are appointed by state lawmakers, Wake County, Raleigh and Wake County mayors. The chancellor of NC State is also a member.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

NHL Announces Current Order of Selection For 2024 Draft

By Walt Ruff

RALEIGH, NC. - The National Hockey League announced the current order of selection for the 2024 Draft on Wednesday, with the Carolina Hurricanes holding nine picks.

Round 1, #27 Overall

Round 2, #60 Overall

Round 3, #92 Overall

Round 4, #124 Overall

Round 5, #156 Overall

Round 6, #168 Overall (acquired from Ottawa)

Round 6, #184 Overall (acquired from Toronto)

Round 6, #188 Overall

Round 7, #220 Overall

Seven of the nine choices are Carolina's own, with two being acquired via trade.

In February, the team received a sixth round pick in a three-team trade with Anaheim and Toronto for retaining some of Ilya Lyubushkin's salary.

In March, the organization received another sixth round pick for the rights to then-prospect Cade Webber.

Round 1 of the draft will be on Friday, June 28 beginning at 7 p.m. ET, while Rounds 2-7 will be on Saturday, June 29 starting at 11:30 a.m. ET. In the United States, Friday will be broadcast on ESPN and Saturday will be on ESPN+.

Last year's first round pick, Bradly Nadeau, went from a largely unknown player in the British Columbia Hockey League to making his NHL debut in under a year, furthering the excitement to see what the Canes do with their opening pick again this year.

To view other recent notable picks by the team in recent years, click here.

Notable Canes Draft Selections In Recent Years

By Walt Ruff

RALEIGH, NC. - In a matter of days the Carolina Hurricanes will add more prospects to their pool, with the 2024 NHL Draft set to take place on Friday and Saturday at Sphere in Las Vegas.

While this is the first event with Eric Tulsky as general manager, the draft process for the team largely runs through Assistant General Manager Darren Yorke, who will head things for a sixth consecutive year.

Since 2019, six players drafted by the Canes have already made their NHL debut, including last year's first round pick, Bradly Nadeau.

Here are some other notable players selected in the Tulsky-Yorke era:

Pyotr Kochetkov

After making the pick at the 2019 draft, Yorke said, "[Pyotr] is a big, athletic goalie that can really steal games." Five years later, we've already seen that translate to the NHL level.

Still only 25 years young, it feels like the best remains ahead for Kochetkov and he's already one of the most electric goalies in the league.

Quickly becoming known for his diving poke checks, the second goalie taken in the 2019 draft class is 38-20-9 with a .910 SV% through the first 69 games of his career and is poised to be a full-time NHLer next season.

No goalie taken at the 2019 event has more games played than Kochetkov and with eight shutouts already, he's produced a perfect game in 12.3% of regular season starts for the Canes.

Seth Jarvis

Obtaining the #13 overall selection from the Toronto Maple Leafs for taking on Patrick Marleau's contract, Yorke and crew stepped up to the plate and hit a home run with the opportunity.

Already 231 games into his NHL career, some redrafts have the former Portland Winterhawk as high as a top five pick and his production has done everything to justify that. Only Tim Stutzle (247), Lucas Raymond (174), and Alexis Lafreniere (148), all taken inside the top four, have more points than Jarvis (146).

Displaying growth in just about every area of his game, the 22-year-old could be next in line for a big contract with the club, joining Sebastian Aho, Jesperi Kotkaniemi, and Andrei Svechnikov as the fabric of the team for years to come.

Alexander Nikishin

How can someone who has yet to play an NHL game be on this list?

Well, when you're a third round pick that has gone on to play for Russia's Olympic team as a 20-year-old, are named a KHL All-Star (twice in two seasons), lead all KHL defensemen in scoring (twice), have earned captaincy from of one of the most historic clubs in the league, and are widely regarded as one of the best players on the planet not playing in North America, it feels warranted.

Standing at 6-foot-4, 216 lbs., the feeling is that when he arrives in North America, he'll be an impact player right away.

Contractual obligations with SKA currently prohibit that until at least the end of the 2024-25 season, but Nikishin has provided plenty to be excited about leading up to then.

Jackson Blake

The 2024 Hobey Baker Winner, Macklin Celebrini, is expected to go first overall to the San Jose Sharks this weekend.

One of the runner-ups, Cutter Gauthier, went fifth overall in 2022.

The other runner-up? A player picked by the Canes in the fourth round in 2021 whose stock continues to do nothing but rise - Jackson Blake.

Following his over-a-point-per-game freshman season with a wildly impressive 60-point campaign, the 20-year-old found himself making University of North Dakota history alongside names like Brock Boeser and Zach Parise. Good company.

Turning pro at season's end, Blake made his NHL debut on April 16 in Columbus, getting a taste of the pro game before his first full pro season begins in the fall.

Regarded as an "explosive playmaker", like Nikishin, Blake is already viewed as a player taken in the middle rounds who has first-round potential.

Bradly Nadeau

Within a span of 293 days, the sharpshooter from St-Francois-de-Madawaska, New Brunswick went from being largely unknown to being an NHL player.

Landing on the radar of the Canes amid his British Columbia Hockey League-best 113-point season, the then-University of Maine commit was described by Yorke as "someone who just scores goals."

Turning out to be spot on, only three freshmen in all of NCAA hockey had more goals than Nadeau, who impressed mightily and had no struggles adapting to the college game.

With little there left to prove after just one season, Nadeau was signed to an entry-level contract in early April and made his NHL debut two weeks later.

Now, at just 19, he'll have no shortage of eyes on him in the fall as he begins his first full pro season.

Need To Know: Canes at the 2024 NHL Draft

By Walt Ruff

We've got you covered.

Click here to view the team's comprehensive Draft Guide.

When Is It?

Round 1 will begin at 7 p.m. ET on Friday, June 28.

Rounds 2-7 will take place on Saturday, June 29, starting at 11:30 a.m. ET.

How Can I Watch?

Round 1 of the draft will be on Friday, June 28 beginning at 7 p.m. ET, while Rounds 2-7 will be on Saturday, June 29 starting at 11:30 a.m. ET.

In the United States, Friday will be broadcast on ESPN and Saturday will be on ESPN+ and NHL Network.

What Picks Do The Canes Have?

The Canes currently hold nine selections in this year's draft.

- Round 1, #27 Overall
- Round 2, #60 Overall
- Round 3, #92 Overall
- Round 4, #124 Overall
- Round 5, #156 Overall
- Round 6, #168 Overall (acquired from Ottawa)
- Round 6, #184 Overall (acquired from Toronto)
- Round 6, #188 Overall
- Round 7, #220 Overall

Seven of the nine choices are Carolina's own, with two being acquired via trade.

In February, the team received a sixth round pick in a three-team trade with Anaheim and Toronto for retaining some of Ilya Lyubushkin's salary.

In March, the organization received another sixth round pick for the rights to then-prospect Cade Webber.

Who Can Be Chosen?

All North American players who are 18 years old by September 15 the year of their draft and under 20 years of age by December 15 of that same year can be selected. Players who are not from North America are eligible to be chosen under the same guidelines until they are 21 years of age.

Players born between September 16, 2005, and September 15, 2006, are in their first year of eligibility.

What's Next For The Kids That Are Picked?

Some players will go the route of NCAA hockey, some will remain in North American junior hockey and some will stay overseas.

There may be some who are able to jump to the NHL right away, although that would likely only be a player or two from the very top of this year's draft. Canada's three major junior leagues, all under the umbrella of the CHL (Canadian Hockey League), allow players to play until they are 21 years of age.

For those going the collegiate route, the prospect could play anywhere from one to five seasons.

2024 Development Camp

A few of the players, if not all, selected by Carolina on Friday and Saturday will make their way to North Carolina in July for the organization's development camp.

The event brings players selected this year, prospects selected in the previous years, and other invitees in for an assessment of their skills and to learn what it's like to be a part of the Canes' organization.

More information on this year's camp is expected to be announced soon.

Who Goes First?

After winning the luck of the draw on May 7, the San Jose Sharks are expected to select Macklin Celebrini from Boston University first overall.

To view a complete listing of Central Scouting's final rankings, click here.

Can I Follow Along Online?

A link to the NHL's live Draft Tracker can be found on the front page of NHL.com starting on Friday.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

Final Mock 2024 NHL Draft: Intrigue after 1st 3 picks

By NHL.com

The 2024 Upper Deck NHL Draft will be held June 28-29 at Sphere in Las Vegas. The first round will be June 28 (7 p.m. ET; ESPN, ESPN+, SN, TVAS) and rounds 2-7 are June 29 (11:30 a.m. ET; ESPN+, NHLN, SN, SN1). NHL.com is counting down to the draft with in-depth profiles on top prospects, podcasts and other features. Today, NHL.com deputy managing editor Adam Kimelman and senior draft writer Mike G. Morreale submit their final mock draft of the first round. NHL.com's full draft coverage can be found here.

The most intriguing moment of the 2024 NHL Draft could come when the Columbus Blue Jackets go on the clock with the No. 4 pick.

NHL.com writers Adam Kimelman and Mike G. Morreale are in agreement on how the first three selections will go, starting with the San Jose Sharks selecting Boston University center Macklin Celebrini with the No. 1 pick, Michigan State defenseman Artyom Levshunov going No. 2 to the Chicago Blackhawks and Nizhny Novgorad defenseman Anton Silayev going to the Anaheim Ducks at No. 3.

But starting with the No. 4 selection, their opinions vary widely.

The 16 teams that missed the Stanley Cup Playoffs took part in the NHL Draft Lottery on May 7, with the Sharks winning the No. 1 pick and the Blackhawks No. 2. The remaining teams were ordered based on the regular-season NHL standings.

The 12 teams that lost in the first two rounds of the playoffs were slotted into picks 17-28. Teams that did not win their division were placed in inverse order of regular-season standings points, followed by the one division winner that lost, the Vancouver Canucks.

The No. 29 pick went to the Dallas Stars, the team that lost in the conference finals with the fewest regular-season points, and No. 30 went to the New York Rangers, the other team that lost in the conference finals.

No. 31 goes to the team that lost in the Stanley Cup Final, but the Edmonton Oilers traded the pick to the Ducks for forwards Adam Henrique and Sam Carrick on March 6.

The Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers receive No. 32, but that selection belongs to the Philadelphia Flyers from the trade for forward Claude Giroux on March 19, 2022.

1. San Jose Sharks

Kimelman -- Macklin Celebrini, C, Boston University (NCAA): The unquestioned best player available in the draft, Celebrini (6-foot, 197 pounds) also is one of its hardest workers. Sharks general manager Mike Grier already has raved about Celebrini's work ethic from watching him in practices and games. The youngest player in NCAA hockey, Celebrini didn't turn 18 until June 13 but still dominated the competition with 64 points (32 goals, 32 assists) in 38 games.

Morreale -- Macklin Celebrini: He was flawless in his draft-eligible season and is a franchise talent in the making. Celebrini was the youngest player in NCAA Division I men's hockey this season and the youngest ever to win the Hobey Baker Award, presented annually to recognize the top NCAA men's hockey player. Celebrini will be a major building block for a team in need of high-end, two-way talent, especially at the center position.

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Kimelman -- Artyom Levshunov, D, Michigan State (NCAA): After selecting a franchise-altering center in Connor Bedard with the No. 1 pick of the 2023 NHL Draft, the Blackhawks can focus on finding a game-changer on defense. After Celebrini, Levshunov might be the most NHL-ready player in this year's draft with the size (6-2, 205) and skill set that helped him have 35 points (nine goals, 26 assists) in 38 games as an 18-year-old college freshman.

Morreale -- Artyom Levshunov: The Belarus-born right-handed shot was the third-youngest player in men's college hockey. He was second among NCAA freshman defensemen and tied for 10th among all defensemen in scoring. The Blackhawks need a future pillar on defense, and Levshunov fits that bill.

3. Anaheim Ducks

Kimelman -- Anton Silayev, D, Nizhny Novgorod (RUS): The left-shot defenseman is one of the most intriguing players in this year's draft because of his size (6-7, 211) and developing offensive side of his game. The Ducks have stockpiled young offensive-minded defensemen, among them Tristan Luneau, Olen Zellweger and Pavel Mintyukov. Silayev has the potential to be a tremendous complementary piece on a top defense pair.

Morreale -- Anton Silayev: He had 11 points (three goals, eight assists), 74 blocked shots and was second on his team with 98 hits in 63 Kontinental Hockey League games. Silayev, who turned 18 on April 11, more than a month after his final game (March 9), had the most points by an under-18 player in Kontinental Hockey League history, topping Vladimir Tarasenko's 10 points (seven goals, three assists) in 38 games for Novosibirsk in 2008-09.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets

Kimelman -- Cayden Lindstrom, C, Medicine Hat (WHL): It was a bit of a lost season for Lindstrom because of back and hand injuries that sidelined him for the second half of the regular season, but he still scored 27 goals in 32 games. The 18-year-old already is back on the ice training for next season after returning to play four games during the Western Hockey League playoffs, and the belief is the back problem he dealt with will not be a lingering issue. After taking Adam Fantilli (6-2, 194) with the No. 3 pick of the 2023 draft, the addition of Lindstrom (6-3, 213) would create a physically imposing 1-2 punch at center in the near future.

Morreale -- Ivan Demidov, RW, SKA St. Petersburg Jr. (RUS-JR): The 18-year-old left-handed shot (6-0, 192) is one of the most naturally skilled players in this draft class. He possesses smarts and adapts well in stride. He had 60 points (23 goals, 37 assists) in 30 regular-season games and 28 points (11 goals, 17 assists) in 17 playoff games in Russia's junior league.

5. Montreal Canadiens

Kimelman -- Ivan Demidov: Demidov dominated Russia's junior league, showcasing his dynamic offensive skill set and outstanding skating, and he'll likely get the chance next season to test those skills in the KHL. Demidov is under contract with SKA St. Petersburg through the 2024-25 season, so a little patience could be met with a great reward for the Canadiens.

Morreale -- Cayden Lindstrom: He remains a top forward option in this draft despite missing 36 regular-season games because of injuries to his back and hand. Lindstrom is a pure shooter but will need to prove he can distribute the puck effectively as a center at the next level. He had 46 points prior to getting injured and had two points (one goal, one assist) and 17 shots on goal in four WHL playoff games.

6. Utah Hockey Club

Kimelman -- Sam Dickinson, D, London (OHL): Dickinson's high hockey IQ helps him pick his spots for when to jump into the play in the offensive zone or use his great puck-moving ability to find an open teammate to spark the rush. The 18-year-old is poised and controlled even when the game gets charged up. Utah has done a good job building a plus-size defense corps with Dmitry Simashev (6-4, 198), the No. 6 pick of the 2023 draft, and Maveric Lamoureux (6-6, 196), the No. 29 pick of the 2022 NHL Draft. Dickinson (6-3, 203) would fit nicely with that group.

Morreale -- Zeev Buium, D, Denver (NCAA): The second-youngest player in men's college hockey, Buium (6-foot, 186) led NCAA defensemen and was fifth among all freshmen with 50 points (11 goals, 39 assists) in 42 games and helped Denver win the NCAA championship. The 18-year-old had five points (three goals, two assists) and was a tournament-best plus-11 in seven games to help the United States win the gold medal at the 2024 IIHF World Junior Championship.

7. Ottawa Senators

Kimelman -- Zeev Buium: With their first pick in the first round since 2021, the Senators could opt for Buium, who has a smooth, poised approach to go with his maturity, outstanding skill set and high-end athleticism. The left-handed shot is a fantastic skater who showed no panic in his game against older competition or on big stages in the NCAA Tournament or at the 2024 WJC.

Morreale -- Sam Dickinson: A powerful and elusive skater capable of playing big minutes and producing offensively, Dickinson was the quarterback on London's power play and had 28 points (11 goals, 17 assists) with the man-advantage. He finished second in on-ice testing at the CHL/NHL Top Prospects Game on Jan. 23, placing first in 30-meter forward skate with puck and 30-meter backwards skate with puck, and second in transition ability.

8. Seattle Kraken

Kimelman -- Zayne Parekh, D, Saginaw (OHL): Parekh (6-foot, 178) is an offensive force that led Ontario Hockey League defensemen with 96 points (33 goals, 63 assists) in 66 games and was voted the top defenseman in the Canadian Hockey League. The 18-year-old has earned comparisons to Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Erik Karlsson. Questions surround his defensive play, but Parekh is driven to get stronger and improve; for someone graduated high school at 16, there's no question he knows how to put in the work.

Morreale -- Zayne Parekh: He set Saginaw records for goals and points by a defenseman this season and helped it win the Memorial Cup. The right-handed shot also had 34 power-play points (10 goals, 24 assists) and scored two short-handed goals. Parekh scored 21 goals as a rookie last season, the most by a 16-year-old defenseman in OHL history.

9. Calgary Flames

Kimelman -- Tij Iginla, C, Kelowna (WHL): Iginla has elite offensive skills which allowed him to score 47 goals in 64 WHL games, and helped Canada win the gold medal at the 2024 IIHF World Under-18 Championship with 12 points (six goals, six assists) in seven games. The 17-year-old (6-foot, 191) is versatile enough to play center or on the wing and has the elite hockey sense that comes from being the son of Hockey Hall of Famer Jarome Iginla. There could be pressure skating under the retired jersey of his father 41 nights a season, but Iginla's upside is just too high for the Flames to pass on.

Morreale -- Tij Iginla: Iginla is a dynamic offensive talent with speed, quickness and natural instincts you can't teach. He tied for sixth in the WHL in goals, was second for Kelowna with 84 points and 11 power-play goals. He also showed he could raise his game in a big spot as a key piece of Canada's run to the gold medal at the Under-18 Worlds.

10. New Jersey Devils

Kimelman -- Konsta Helenius, C, Jukurit (FIN): Helenius blends his high-end offensive skills with a strength on the puck that you might not expect from a player his size (5-11, 189). The 18-year-old profiles as a good mix of Jack Hughes' offensive ability with Nico Hischier's determination and competitiveness. And he's already shown he can make an impact playing with and against older competition, finishing with 36 points (14 goals, 22 assists) in 51 games in Liiga, the top professional league in Finland. He also became the first player from Finland, and fifth ever, to play in the World Under-18s, World Juniors and the IIHF World Championship in the same season.

Morreale -- Beckett Sennecke RW, Oshawa (OHL): If Sennecke is still on the board, he'd make an excellent choice to ride shotgun alongside Hughes or Hischier at some point in the future. He has a nice combination of size (6-3, 182) and strength, delivers a heavy shot, plays a 200-foot game and has a solid work ethic. The 18-year-old had 68 points (27 goals, 41 assists), seven power-play goals and was tied for eighth in the OHL with seven game-winning goals in 63 regular-season games. He tied for fourth with 10 goals in 16 games during the OHL playoffs.

11. Buffalo Sabres

Kimelman -- Carter Yakemchuk, D, Calgary (WHL): Yakemchuk led WHL defensemen with 30 goals this season and his poise with the puck and skating allow him to find holes to create plays in the offensive zone. And at 6-3, 202 pounds, the 18-year-old right-handed shot has NHL-ready size. The Sabres have done well finding young forward prospects that could be future building blocks; adding Yakemchuk would give them a big one on the back end who eventually could play alongside an already solid defense corps of Owen Power, Rasmus Dahlin and Bowen Byram.

Morreale -- Berkly Catton C, Spokane (WHL): Catton (5-10, 175) plays a hard-driving game, is relentless in puck pursuit and has a compete level too good to ignore. Catton was fourth in the WHL with 116 points (54 goals, 62 assists) in 68 games; he's the third NHL draft-eligible WHL player since 2000 with at least 115 points in a season, joining Bedard (143 points in 2022-23) and Nic Petan (120 in 2012-13). Catton also won 53.4 percent of his face-offs, led the WHL with seven short-handed goals and was third for Spokane with 30 power-play points (13 goals, 17 assists).

12. Philadelphia Flyers

Kimelman -- Berkley Catton: The Flyers need more top-end skill, especially at center, after trading forward Cutter Gauthier, the No. 5 pick of the 2022 draft, to the Ducks for defenseman Jamie Drysdale on Jan. 8. Catton checks all the boxes. The 18-year-old has pull-away speed with a top-end offensive skill set and could develop into the set-up man for right wing Matvei Michkov, their first-round pick (No. 7) in the 2023 draft.

Morreale -- Carter Yakemchuk D, Calgary (WHL): Yakemchuk is positionally sound, knows where to go to make himself available, has an advantageous reach and is good in battles along the boards. He was fifth among WHL defensemen with 71 points (30 goals, 41 assists) in 66 regular-season games and was a finalist for 2024 WHL defenseman of the year.

13. Minnesota Wild

Kimelman -- Stian Solberg, D, Valerenga (NOR): Getting younger on defense is something the Wild need to consider, and Solberg (6-1, 205) opened eyes with his top-end skating, poise and willingness to play physical in Norway's top league. He was also a standout at the 2024 IIHF World Championship, where the 18-year-old had three points (two goals, one assist) while leading Norway with an average ice time of 22:44 in seven games. He would be the first player born in Norway to be selected in the first round of the NHL Draft

Morreale -- Konsta Helenius: Helenius is skilled, quick and offers a high compete level. The right-handed shot scored five power-play goals, won 50.2 percent of his face-offs and averaged 16:57 of ice time in 51 games for Jukurit in Liiga, Finland's top professional men's league. He's been compared by some scouts to Tampa Bay Lightning forward Brayden Point. He was the youngest player (17 years old) at the World Championship and centered Finland's top line with Mikael Granlund (San Jose Sharks) and Valtteri Puustinen (Pittsburgh Penguins).

14. San Jose Sharks (from Pittsburgh Penguins)

Kimelman -- Cole Eiserman, LW, USA U-18 (USHL): The Sharks can reunite Eiserman, who has the best shot in this year's draft class, with his Shattuck-St. Mary's Prep school roommate, Celebrini. Eiserman scored 58 goals in 57 games this season, and his 127 goals are the most by any player in USA Hockey National Team Development Program history. But can he round out his game to be more than just that dynamic shot? Scouts seem to be torn on that issue, but a growing number believe he can become more of a threat as a playmaker and reliable defensively. The 17-year-old will spend at least one season at Boston University trying to expand his game; if he can, he has the chance to be one of the top players in this year's draft class.

Morreale -- Cole Eiserman: Eiserman possesses one of the best shots of any player in the draft class and can utilize that big asset every shift from anywhere in the offensive end. In addition to his standout season with the NTDP, which included a team-leading 25 power-play goals, he helped the U.S. take home the silver medal at the U-18 Worlds with 11 points (nine goals, two assists) in seven games.

15. Detroit Red Wings

Kimelman -- Beckett Sennecke: The Red Wings have used their first pick the previous two years at the draft on centers Marco Kasper (2022, No. 8) and Nate Danielson (2023, No. 9). Now would be a good time to find them some talented scorers on the wing. Sennecke is a strong skater and knows how to pull pucks out of traffic and make plays in tight. It will take time for him to fill out his frame, but the Red Wings philosophy always has been to allow their prospects as much time as needed to maximize their potential.

Morreale -- Michael Brandsegg-Nygard, RW, Mora (SWE-2): Born in Norway, Brandsegg-Nygard (6-1, 207) plays in Allsvenskan, Sweden's second division, and is a hard-working two-way player with good first-step quickness, decision-making and vision. The 18-year-old had 18 points (eight goals, 10 assists) in 41 regular-season games and 10 points (four goals, six assists) in 12 playoff games. He also had five points (three goals, two assists), and averaged 17:22 of ice time in five games for Norway at the 2024 WJC.

16. St. Louis Blues

Kimelman -- Michael Brandsegg-Nygard: The Blues go back to Sweden after using their three first-round picks at the 2023 draft on players from the country, forwards Dalibor Dvorsky (No. 10) and Otto Stenberg (No. 25) and defenseman Theo Lindstein (No. 29). Brandsegg-Nygard is a very good skater who is strong on the forecheck and can produce offensive chances from between the dots low in the offensive zone. He led Norway with three goals in seven games at the World Championship.

Morreale -- Adam Jiricek, D, Plzen (CZREP): Jiricek (6-2, 167) sustained a season-ending injury to his right knee while playing for Czechia in the first game of the 2024 WJC on Dec. 26. The right-handed shot, who turns 18 on Friday, had one assist in 19 games in Czech Extraliga, the nation's top professional league, and is the younger brother of Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman David Jiricek. A two-way defenseman with good vision and competitiveness on every shift, Jiricek has been compared to Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Brett Pesce.

17. Washington Capitals

Kimelman -- Michael Hage, C, Chicago (USHL): Hage (6-1, 188) plays with a physical edge and impressed with his ability to take over games late in the season. The 18-year-old was fourth in the United States Hockey League with 75 points (33 goals, 42 assists) in 54 games, including 27 points (10 goals, 17 assists) in his final 14. Hage would be the best player available at this spot and fill a need for centers in the prospect pipeline. He'll continue his development at the University of Michigan in the fall.

Morreale -- Stian Solberg: Solberg had a strong second half to his season and finished with 15 points (five goals, 10 assists) in 42 regular-season games and nine points (two goals, seven assists) in 17 playoff games in the top men's league in Norway. He is expected to play for Farjestad in the Swedish Hockey League next season.

18. Chicago Blackhawks (from New York Islanders)

Kimelman -- Sacha Boisvert, C, Muskegon (USHL): Scouts like the way the 18-year-old improved his skating as the season went on, further improving his 200-foot game. With Bedard, Oliver Moore (2023, No. 19) and Frank Nazar (2022, No. 13) the Blackhawks have stockpiled high-skill centers; Boisvert (6-2, 183) brings a bit more size and a 200-foot game to go along with the skill that saw him total 68 points (36 goals, 32 assists) in 61 games this season.

Morreale -- Michael Hage: Hage is considered a two-way player with a lot of creativity. He led Chicago in scoring during the regular season and had four points (two goals, two assists) in two USHL playoff games. It was a big return for Hage, who played 13 games last season after missing six months recovering from a shoulder injury sustained on his first day of training camp. He's the type of player that can take over a game.

19. Vegas Golden Knights

Kimelman -- Trevor Connelly, LW, Tri-City (USHL): Connelly was second in the USHL with 78 points (31 goals, 47 assists) in 52 games, and also had nine points (four goals, five assists) in seven games to help the United States take home the silver medal at the Under-18 Worlds. Connelly (6-1, 160) has game-breaking talent, but there are questions about his on- and off-ice maturity that need to be answered by whatever team selects him; that includes a game misconduct for an illegal check to the head in the third period of the gold-medal game at the U-18s that led to three Canada power-play goals, and a 3-2 U.S. lead becoming a 6-4 loss. The 18-year-old is committed to Providence College.

Morreale -- Jett Luchanko C, Guelph (OHL): The 17-year-old right-handed shot is smart and tenacious on pucks and had 33 power-play points (30 assists) in 68 games. Luchanko (5-11, 187) can play center or wing and finished among the top five in six of 10 on-ice categories at the CHL/NHL Top Prospects Game in January, placing first in reaction with puck and second in transition ability with puck.

20. New York Islanders (from Tampa Bay Lightning via Chicago Blackhawks)

Kimelman -- Jett Luchanko: Luchanko is an explosive skater who can contribute on the power play and penalty kill. When injuries and graduations to pro hockey forced him into a larger role this season, Luchanko responded with a team-high 74 points (20 goals, 54 assists) in 68 games; he had 14 points (five goals, nine assists) in 46 games last season. With Bo Horvat (29), Brock Nelson (32) and Jean-Gabriel Pageau (31) expected to be the Islanders' top three centers next season, finding youth and athleticism at the position could be the best direction here for the Islanders.

Morreale -- Liam Greentree, RW, Windsor (OHL): Greentree (6-2, 215), Windsor's captain, led the Spitfires in goals (36), assists (54), points (90) and power-play goals (11) in 64 games. The 18-year-old left-handed shot can protect the puck, goes hard to the net and is very nimble and creative for a player his size. He had four points (two goals, two assists) in seven games to help Canada win the gold medal at the Under-18 Worlds.

21. Los Angeles Kings

Kimelman -- Terik Parascak, RW, Prince George (WHL): Parascak's hockey sense is his best attribute, and a big reason he was able to lead WHL rookies with 105 points in 68 games despite not having overwhelming size (6-foot, 179) or speed. He's fearless in traffic and was able to produce from the slot with a quick release on a deceptive shot. All the elements of his game that are good now will only get better as the 18-year-old continues to develop physically.

Morreale -- Terik Parascak: He really opened eyes this season to become a blue-chip prospect, contributing on the power play and penalty kill because of his speed, vision, and intelligence on the ice. He led WHL rookies with 43 goals and four short-handed goals and tied for the lead with 12 power-play goals. He maintained a high level of play all season and proved he deserved to be in the conversation among other top-end talent this season.

22. Nashville Predators

Kimelman -- Adam Jiricek: The Predators have made no secrets about size on defense being a need, and Jiricek supplies that to go along with a high skill set and a right-handed shot. Jiricek only played 19 games in the top league in the Czech Republic because of a knee injury, but is expected to be healthy for the start of next season, when he should be able to again show his strong skating and an offensive game that projects to get better as he adjusts to playing a full season in the top men's league.

Morreale -- Igor Chernyshov, LW, Dynamo Moscow (RUS): Chernyshov (6-3, 204) had four points (three goals, one assist) in 34 KHL games, and 28 points (13 goals, 15 assists) in 22 games with Dynamo in Russia's junior league. The 18-year-old right-handed shot, who thrives on his off wing, has the look of a playmaking wing or center with power-forward potential at the next level.

23. Toronto Maple Leafs

Kimelman -- Charlie Elick, D, Brandon (WHL): Elick is the kind of defenseman the Maple Leafs could be looking for: a big (6-3, 202), physical right-handed shot who is considered an excellent skater with a good shot he was able to consistently get on net from the blue line. The Maple Leafs haven't drafted a defenseman in the first round since Rasmus Sandin in 2018, but Elick could be the player to change that.

Morreale -- Sacha Boisvert: Big, strong, and ultra-competitive, Boisvert was born in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, and is expected to further his development at the University of North Dakota next season, where he would become the first Quebec-born player with the program. He takes pride in his two-way game and success on face-offs and was fifth in the USHL with 36 goals in 61 games.

24. Colorado Avalanche

Kimelman -- Igor Chernyshov: The Avalanche will have to be patient to get Chernyshov to North America, but the reward could be worth it for a big, skilled forward who already has shown an ability to use his body to attack the net and produce as an 18-year-old in the KHL.

Morreale -- Trevor Connelly: His game is predicated on speed, skill, vision and compete, and he's too good to pass up at this point in the draft. He averaged 1.50 points in 52 games, first in the USHL among players with at least 30 games.

25. Boston Bruins (via Detroit Red Wings and Ottawa Senators)

Kimelman -- Egor Surin, C, Yaroslavl Jr. (RUS-JR): Center was an issue for the Bruins this season, and it also goes to the prospect level. That could make Surin (6-1, 197) an appealing option. The 17-year-old is well-regarded for his skating, work ethic and compete level, and was third in scoring in Russia's junior league during the playoffs with 23 points (five goals, 18 assists) in 19 games.

Morreale -- Cole Beaudoin, C, Barrie (OHL): The left-handed shot (6-2, 210), a well-conditioned athlete with fantastic compete and hockey sense, and often is compared to Blue Jackets forward Boone Jenner. The Bruins need depth at forward, and Beaudoin can offer just that. He's a responsible 200-foot player who had 62 points (28 goals, 34 assists) in 67 regular-season games, five points (two goals, three assists) in six OHL playoff games, and four points (two goals, two assists) in seven games for gold medal-winning Canada at the U-18 Worlds.

26. Montreal Canadiens (from Winnipeg Jets)

Kimelman -- Liam Greentree: Greentree has NHL-ready size and showed a high level of maturity as captain and leading scorer on a Windsor team that finished 19th among 20 teams in the OHL. As one NHL scout said, "I think he's a beast right now. Imagine him in two years."

Morreale -- Eric Emery, D, USA U-18 (USHL): Emery (6-3, 183), committed to the University of North Dakota in 2024-25, had 16 assists in 61 games with the NTDP Under-18 team this season and six assists in seven games for the U.S. at the U-18 Worlds. He has high pace to his game, likes to defend and covers a lot of area with his length and his speed.

27. Carolina Hurricanes

Kimelman -- Leo Sahlin Wallenius, D, Vaxjo Jr. (SWE-JR): The Hurricanes haven't drafted a defenseman earlier than the fourth round the past two years and haven't selected one in the first round since Jake Bean in 2016. But without a defenseman currently on the roster signed beyond the 2025-26 season, there's a need build prospect depth at the position. Sahlin Wallenius (6-0, 180) is a very good skater with great vision and puck movement skills. The 18-year-old had 42 points (11 goals, 31 assists) in 43 games in Sweden's junior league.

Morreale -- Leo Sahlin Wallenius: Sahlin Wallenius could turn out to be the best Sweden-born player in this draft class. He's a smooth skater with high hockey IQ, can transition the puck well and handles a lot of ice time. His playing style compares to Red Wings defenseman prospect Axel Sandin-Pellikka, the No. 17 pick of the 2023 draft, according to NHL director of European Scouting Jukka-Pekka Vuorinen.

28. Calgary Flames (from Vancouver Canucks)

Kimelman -- Aron Kiviharju, D, HIFK (FIN): Kiviharju began the season as a potential top-10 pick, but a dislocated left kneecap in October sidelined him until U-18 Worlds in April. When healthy, Kiviharju (5-9, 184) is a strong skater who is poised and confident with the puck even as an 18-year-old playing in Liiga. The Flames could get a potential steal if Kiviharju is available at this spot.

Morreale -- Charlie Elick: Born in Austria, he moved with his family to Calgary when he was 6 years old. Elick has good size and is a right-handed shot who competes and battles with consistency, makes good decisions and can transition effectively from his end. He had 27 points (four goals, 23 assists) in 65 WHL games this season, and had three assists and averaged 18:40 in ice time in seven games to help Canada win gold at the U-18 Worlds.

29. Dallas Stars

Kimelman -- Julius Miettinen: Miettinen flew up Central Scouting's rankings, from No. 49 in the midterm in January to No. 18 in the final release in April. The 18-year-old improved his skating as he adjusted to the pace of play in his first season in the WHL and was able to show a mean streak that allowed him to create space for himself around the net in the offensive zone. The Stars have done well adding talented offensive players like forwards Wyatt Johnston, Logan Stankoven and Mavrik Bourque; Miettinen projects to be a Wayne Simmonds-type who can use his size (6-3, 201) and strength to bang in loose pucks around the net.

Morreale -- Marek Vanacker, LW, Brantford (OHL): Vanacker (6-0, 178) is a 200-foot left-handed shot who is a strong skater and can dig in on the forecheck or backcheck. He had 82 points (36 goals, 46 assists), 22 power-play points (four goals, 18 assists) and five short-handed goals in 68 regular-season games, and had seven points (three goals, four assists) in six OHL playoff games. He did it while playing with a torn labrum in his left shoulder, an injury sustained in November. He had surgery in June and is expected to need 4-6 months to recover.

30. New York Rangers

Kimelman -- Cole Beaudoin: New York's top two centers, Mika Zibanejad (31) and Vincent Trocheck (30), remain

productive players, but finding a center who could play on the top two lines in the near future could be a focus here. Beaudoin is a fantastic athlete with a high-end compete level with. "He just has an unmatched work ethic; nobody's outworking that kid, and he does the elite things well," said one NHL scout.

Morreale -- Ryder Ritchie, RW, Prince Albert (WHL): The right-handed shot (6-0, 177) is reminiscent of Penguins forward Bryan Rust. The 17-year-old is a high-end skater with good puck skills, creativity, patience and grittiness. He had 44 points (19 goals, 25 assists) in 47 regular-season games, and led Prince Albert with seven points (three goals, four assists) and 20 shots on goal in five WHL playoff games.

31. Anaheim Ducks (from Edmonton Oilers)

Kimelman -- Sam O'Reilly, RW, London (OHL): O'Reilly (6-1, 184) is a very good skater who plays a competitive, 200-foot game and seemed to earn more ice time on a very talented London team as the season went on. The 18-year-old led OHL rookies during the playoffs with 12 points (five goals, seven assists) in 16 games.

Morreale -- Andrew Basha, LW, Medicine Hat (WHL): Basha (5-11, 187) has an unbelievable compete level with high-end puck skills, impressive skating and an ability to shake off and beat defenders. He's great on the forecheck, something the Ducks covet in their players (see Mason McTavish, Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier). The Calgary native, who speaks fluent French, had 85 points (30 goals, 55 assists), and scored 10 power-play goals and two short-handed goals in 63 games.

32. Philadelphia Flyers (from Florida Panthers)

Kimelman -- Eric Emery: Emery impressed with his high-end athleticism during the NHL Scouting Combine, after already standing out with his smarts, skating and defensive ability during the season. He likely won't be a big offensive contributor but should develop into a very good complement to a high-end offensive-minded defenseman.

Morreale -- Egor Surin: After targeting their future pillar on defense with the No. 12 pick, how about another incredibly talented forward prospect to one day play alongside countryman Matvei Michkov? Surin is a skilled, hard-nosed, two-way forward with good offensive instincts and a strong work ethic. He's played wing much of this season but has the size and playmaking ability to one day serve as a middle-six center.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

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1316042 Carolina Hurricanes

What could new Carolina Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsky do in the NHL Draft in Las Vegas?

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JUNE 26, 2024 5:00 AM

RALEIGH

If you're an NHL fan and enjoy trade speculation, free agency scuttlebutt and contract chatter, this is your week.

If you're a Carolina Hurricanes fan, you're in the middle of all of it, with free agents galore and players to be signed and possibly one or two — yes, winger Martin Necas is the name everyone is mentioning the most — to be traded.

A week from today, the Canes might have a new look. They already have a new general manager, Eric Tulsky, who likely has his idea of how he wants the team to look.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour also has an idea of how he wants it to look — pretty much the same. He's also wise enough to know that won't be the case, noting everyone "understands the other side of it."

That is, players looking to get paid what they're worth and willing to change teams to get it as the NHL salary cap rises to $88 million for 2024-25.

Tulsky's academic background is in physics and chemistry and his hockey background started with a heavy dose of analytics. That's how he first latched on to the Hurricanes and proved his worth, but he was quick to quip last week that the team "didn't hire ChatGPT" to be the new general manager.

It's safe to say this already has been one of the busiest weeks of Tulsky's hockey life. When his introductory press conference ended at PNC Arena, he was jokingly told being the GM and having to talk to the media in that kind of sterile setting might be one of the toughest, thankless parts of his new job.

His reply: Try dealing with agents every day.

"We're trying to do everything at once," he said. "We're trying figure out what we can do. We will try every angle to get get better."

That's been his job this week leading up to leaving for Las Vegas for the NHL board of governors meeting and the NHL draft on Friday and Saturday at the Sphere in Las Vegas. Two days later, on July 1, NHL free agency begins.

The Hurricanes have the No. 27 pick in the first round of the 2024 draft and nine selections overall in the seven rounds, including three in the sixth round.

Eric Tulsky is the new general manager of the Carolina Hurricanes, replacing Don Waddell, the team's former president and general manager.

Eric Tulsky is the new general manager of the Carolina Hurricanes, replacing Don Waddell, the team's former president and general manager. Chip Alexander

Tulsky, who heads up the team's pro scouting, has Darren Yorke to continue to handle the amateur scouting and draft. Tulsky and Yorke have worked closed together for years as assistant general managers under former president and GM Don Waddell, and Yorke has Tulsky's confidence in putting together the draft list.

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

The mock drafts are all over the board on possible Canes picks for Friday night in Vegas and the first round. NHL.com mentioned center Cole Beaudoin of Barrie in the Ontario Hockey League as a possibility. The Hockey News mock draft has another OHL center, Jett Luchanko of Guelph.

The New York Times mock draft has the Canes possibly eyeing another Russian, center Egor Surin of Lokomotiv Yaroslavl. So it goes.

It should also be noted Carolina traded away its first-round pick, No. 27, to Nashville in 2021 for a pair of second-round selections. With one pick, they took defenseman Scott Morrow.

The Canes made Bradly Nadeau their first-rounder a year ago — 30th overall — and the 5-10 forward, who played well on the college level last season at Maine, might have a chance to crack the Canes roster in a year or two.

Alexander Nikishin, a third-round pick by Carolina in 2020, has been in Russia's KHL and at age 22 is generally considered one of the best defensemen not in the NHL.

Such players as winger Seth Jarvis and goalie Pyotr Kochetkov recently have been drafted by Carolina and developed into proven NHL players who should be an important part of the team's future success. They followed forwards Andrei Svechnikov and Necas, the team's first-round pick in 2017.

Necas, 25, has played the wing for the Canes and Brind'Amour. He'd like to play center. He might like to play center for another team and might soon get the opportunity to do it.

"Center is still open to me," Necas said last season. "I know how to play there. But we have a lot of centermen. You never know what's going to happen."

There are several trade scenarios being bandied about in social media banter: Necas to Winnipeg for forward Nikolaj Ehlers; to Nashville in a deal that would include goalie Juuse Saros; or to Montreal for defenseman Mike Matheson.

There also has been talk of the potential of an offer sheet for Necas, a restricted free agent with arbitration rights. Necas would have to sign it to put it in play, agreeing to the contract terms. The team tendering the offer sheet would need to be able to provide the required compensation if Carolina did not match the offer and let Necas leave.

Before the NHL trade deadline last season, and his name in play, Necas said he tried not to pay attention to any social-media guesstimates about his future. He's likely taking the same approach now.

News Observer LOADED: 06.27.2024

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The Athletic / NHL trade big board: Expanding the list to 25 top targets ahead of the draft

Chris Johnston

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

LAS VEGAS — The only thing hotter than the “dry heat” the hockey world is being treated to this week here in Vegas is the increasing amount of trade chatter with NHL front offices gearing up for the draft and free agency.

This is a prime time to both move and acquire players, with picks at a premium heading into the Friday and Saturday draft at Sphere, and teams looking to clear out cap space in order to make a splash when the free-agent market opens Monday.

That was the apparent motivation for the Detroit Red Wings’ decision to attach a second-round pick to Jake Walman in Tuesday’s deal with the San Jose Sharks — clearing $3.4 million off the Red Wings’ books for next season and the year after.

The trade market has already been unusually active, with four goaltenders changing teams this month: Jacob Markstrom to the New Jersey Devils, Linus Ullmark to the Ottawa Senators, Joonas Korpisalo to the Boston Bruins and Darcy Kuemper to the Los Angeles Kings.

Expect the carousel to continue to spin, too.

We’ve got five more goaltenders featured on the latest edition of the Big Board of top targets to watch. Enjoy.

1. Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs

2023-24 stats: 26 goals, 85 points, 21:17 average time on ice, plus-21

Age: 27

Contract: $10.903 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 1

The possibility of a Marner trade is the talk of the town in Toronto. With it being an offseason where “everything is on the table,” according to the team’s senior leadership, and with Marner eligible to sign a contract extension on July 1, there are multiple potential outcomes here. But the mere fact that the Leafs are willing to take calls on the one-time Selke Trophy finalist and perennial 90-plus-point man is a significant development. Marner holds the hammer with a no-movement clause and may need some cajoling or convincing to green-light a move out of his hometown. That makes it a delicate situation for all involved.

2. Martin Necas, Carolina Hurricanes

2023-24 stats: 24 goals, 53 points, 17:21 ATOI, minus-9

Age: 25

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: 3

It’s no secret that the talented forward would welcome a change of scenery. Necas took a step back production-wise last season — going from 71 points to 53 — and he wasn’t too happy about how he was deployed. Now two years out from unrestricted free agency and needing a new contract this summer, he’s been made available on the trade market. The Hurricanes are working through concrete offers and hoping to get another roster player back in return, instead of a package built only around future assets. Necas has an enticing blend of size, speed and skill, and he showed extremely well while helping Czechia win gold at the IIHF World Hockey Championship in May.

3. Nikolaj Ehlers, Winnipeg Jets

2023-24 stats: 25 goals, 61 points, 15:52 ATOI, Plus-27

Age: 28

Contract: $6 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 4

A skilled offensive play-driver who consistently produces 20-plus goals and 60-ish points, Ehlers remains a polarizing figure among the Winnipeg hockey discourse. What’s not up for debate is that he’s now one year out from potential unrestricted free agency and there are only so many cap dollars to go around. Plus teammate Kyle Connor is up for an extension of his own two years down the road. As a result, the Jets are listening to interest in Ehlers to see if there’s something out there that makes sense for them to act on.

4. Jakob Chychrun, Ottawa Senators

2023-24 stats: 14 goals, 41 points, 22:23 ATOI, minus-30

Age: 26

Contract: $4.6 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 5

Something has to give on the left side of the Senators blue line, where Jake Sanderson and Thomas Chabot are already signed to significant long-term contracts and Chychrun is one year away from being in line for one. Not only is he coming off the first 82-game campaign of his career — notable given his lengthy injury history — but the fit has actually been pretty seamless since he was acquired from the Arizona Coyotes. His pending UFA status in 2025 complicates the picture, though.

5. Patrik Laine, Columbus Blue Jackets

2023-24 stats: 6 goals, 9 points, 15:13 ATOI, minus-10

Age: 26

Contract: $8.7 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 6

The former 44-goal man has endured a tough couple of seasons in Columbus and would like a fresh start. Laine is currently under the care of the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program, which he entered in late January, and recently underwent a minor procedure on his left shoulder. While there is obviously uncertainty about where his game will be at, there’s also the possibility of a big payoff if a team can put Laine in the right position to succeed. Despite the ups and downs with the Blue Jackets, he still produced 0.79 points per game during his tenure with the team.

6. Rutger McGroarty, Winnipeg Jets

2023-24 stats: 16 goals, 52 points for University of Michigan

Age: 20

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: Not ranked

The 14th pick from 2022 has yet to start his professional career and isn’t on the same page as the Jets about the best path for his development, which is why his name has started to circulate on the trade market. The University of Michigan forward is known for having strong puck skills and won a gold medal with Team USA at the world junior championship. At 20, he isn’t too far from being NHL-ready.

7. Ilya Mikheyev, Vancouver Canucks

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 31 points, 14:16 ATOI, plus-1

Age: 29

Contract: $4.75 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 9

After watching Mikheyev put up an ugly playoff stat line — no points in 11 games — the Canucks can certainly find better ways to use the $4.75 million in cap space they’ve dedicated to him. He hasn’t lived up to expectations since signing in free agency two years ago and wasn’t helped by a knee injury during his first season in Vancouver. Add it all together and Mikheyev is a distressed asset, but he’s a distressed asset they’d like to move.

8. Filip Gustavsson, Minnesota Wild

2023-24 stats: 20-18-4, 3.06 GAA, .899 save percentage

Age: 25

Contract: $3.75 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 7

What's that line about goalie being the hardest position to predict? After helping push the Wild into the playoffs in 2022-23, Gustavsson fell back to earth in a big way this season. Now he's on the trade market. The Wild are operating with an extremely tight cap sheet and have Jesper Wallstedt waiting in the wings for NHL starts alongside veteran Marc-Andre Fleury. Those circumstances have made the Swede available.

9. Kaapo Kakko, New York Rangers

2023-24 stats: 13 goals, 19 points, 13:17 ATOI, plus-6

Age: 23

Contract: $2.4 million through 2025 (RFA)

Previous: 11

When the playoffs ended, the 2019 No. 2 pick expressed a desire to remain in New York and quickly signed a one-year contract at the amount he would have been due on his qualifying offer — $2.4 million — rather than pushing for more money and term. That provided cost certainty for the Rangers, but it won't guarantee him a future roster spot as the team enters an important summer for retooling.

10. Tanner Jeannot, Tampa Bay Lightning

2023-24 stats: 7 goals, 14 points, 12:01 ATOI, minus-10

Age: 27

Contract: $2.665 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 8

At the outset of yet another summer with tight cap dollars, the Lightning are looking for ways to create space. Enter Jeannot, the hard-hitting winger who hasn't ever been close to duplicating the 24-goal, 41-point season had in Nashville in 2021-22. It's safe to say he's one of the few big swings made by Tampa Bay general manager Julien BriseBois that didn't pay off, and he also happens to be one year out from unrestricted free agency. BriseBois has never shied away from a tough decision, and if he can find a way to get Jeannot's cap hit off the books, it might not even be that tough for him to pull the trigger on the deal.

11. John Gibson, Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 stats: 13-27-2, 3.54 GAA, .888 save percentage

Age: 30

Contract: $6.4 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 15

Gibson has been a workhorse for a Ducks team that hasn't qualified for the playoffs in six years and is likely still facing growing pains. With 23-year-old Lukas Dostal starting to bloom behind him, Anaheim is willing to clear some room in the crease by finding Gibson another opportunity. His numbers make that much easier said than done — Gibson's yearly save percentage is going in the wrong direction, and he's signed for three more seasons at a pricey cap hit — but there are also a lot of teams looking for goaltenders right now.

12. Tristan Jarry, Pittsburgh Penguins

2023-24 stats: 19-25-5, 2.91 GAA, .903 save percentage

Age: 29

Contract: $5.375 million through 2028 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

Alex Nedeljkovic usurped his net down the stretch this past season and recently signed a two-year extension in Pittsburgh, which could signal a shift in the Penguins crease. Jarry has been hampered by injuries in recent years and has gone through some highs and lows — with his high end being very good. His contract includes a 12-team no-trade list.

13. Mike Matheson, Montreal Canadiens

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 62 points, 25:33 ATOI, minus-24

Age: 30

Contract: $4.875 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: 19

With two years left on the contract of the left-shot defenseman, the Canadiens are in position to gauge the marketplace and see if anything out there makes sense. Matheson is a strong skater coming off a 62-point season, so they'd be selling high if they chose to do so. Montreal has several prospects in the pipeline who are defensemen and may not be on the same timeline as an organization with a player who is due to hit free agency at age 32 in 2026.

14. Jacob Trouba, New York Rangers

2023-24 stats: 3 goals, 22 points, 21:15 ATOI, minus-4

Age: 30

Contract: $8 million through 2026 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

With his no-movement clause set to convert to a 15-team no-trade clause on July 1 and the Rangers believed to be looking at moving a defenseman, Trouba could be the odd man out. The right-shot defender plays a strong, physical game and is known for laying out opponents with punishing bodychecks. He's coming off a difficult playoffs but would represent an upgrade for most teams. In New York, where they also have Adam Fox and Braden Schneider on the right side, Trouba may be a luxury at his cap hit.

15. Pavel Buchnevich, St. Louis Blues

2023-24 stats: 27 goals, 63 points, 19:49 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 29

Contract: $5.8 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: Not ranked

Nearly a point-per-game player across the past three years with the Blues, Buchnevich is a big, strong winger who skates well and possesses a high-end shot. Better still is the fact he's signed to an efficient contract where he's delivered excess value. However, as a pending UFA in 2025, he'll be due for a raise soon, so that needs to be factored into the cost of prying him out of St. Louis. Buchnevich's current deal includes a 12-team no-trade list.

16. Alexander Holtz, New Jersey Devils

2023-24 stats: 16 goals, 28 points, 11:38 ATOI, minus-15

Age: 22

Contract: $894,167 through 2025 (RFA)

Previous: Not ranked

A right-shot forward with a good release and knack for getting around the ice, Holtz is still looking to make good on the promise that surrounded his No. 7 selection in 2020. Playing his first full NHL season last in 2023-24 was a start, albeit one that saw him occasionally draw former coach Lindy Ruff's ire for missed defensive assignments. Holtz still has considerable upside but may need a fresh start to blossom.

17. Torey Krug, St. Louis Blues

2023-24 stats: 4 goals, 39 points, 21:58 ATOI, minus-31

Age: 33

Contract: $6.5 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 10

The veteran puck-moving defenseman would have been a member of the Philadelphia Flyers last summer had he not exercised his right to block the potential deal with a no-trade clause. Now another year on, the dynamics behind those discussions are unchanged and Krug is down to three seasons remaining on his $6.5 million annual contract. He also loses the full no-trade clause beyond this year. There may be slightly more room to maneuver a second time around.

18. Mathieu Joseph, Ottawa Senators

2023-24 stats: 11 goals, 35 points, 16:28 ATOI, minus-4

Age: 27

Contract: $2.95 million through 2026 (RFA)

Previous: 12

His second full season in Ottawa went much better than the first, but he remains expendable on a roster stocked with young forwards. In fact, with an affordable cap hit for the next two years, Joseph may be able to bring back some value. His speed remains an asset, and there were teams that inquired about his availability during the season.

19. Arthur Kaliyev, Los Angeles Kings

2023-24 stats: 7 goals, 15 points, 11:48 ATOI, minus-3

Age: 22

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: 13

Kaliyev didn't play much more hockey than he watched this past season as a regular healthy scratch or fourth-line winger for the Kings. That represented regression for a player in his fourth professional season. An elite shooter who carried considerable promise after being a second-round pick by Los Angeles in 2019, Kaliyev is at the stage of his career where he needs to draw more results out of his attributes. He may need a fresh start to accomplish that.

20. Juuse Saros, Nashville Predators

2023-24 stats: 35-24-5, 2.86 GAA, .906 save percentage

Age: 29

Contract: $5 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 14

There's optimism that the Predators will be in position to extend Saros to a new contract once the CBA rules allow it to happen in July, but it's no secret that they've shopped him before. That's significant because of the current state of the goaltending market and the possibility that Nashville pivots in the event contract talks aren't as fruitful as hoped. Saros is an incredibly athletic goaltender who has averaged 65 starts across his past three seasons, and he never seems to stray too far from the Vezina Trophy conversation.

21. Trevor Zegras, Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 stats: 6 goals, 15 points, 17:05 ATOI, minus-1

Age: 23

Contract: $5.75 million through 2026 (RFA)

Previous: 16

The 23-year-old forward oozes offensive talent and is coming off a season he'd just as soon forget. Zegras played only 31 games because of time missed due to a groin injury and surgery on a broken ankle, while also dealing with trade rumors in the months before the deadline. He even saw roommate Jamie Drysdale dealt away to the Philadelphia Flyers. There's work to be done on repairing and building up the relationship between the team and Zegras if he isn't traded this offseason. He's piqued the curiosity of a couple of teams.

22. Reilly Smith, Pittsburgh Penguins

2023-24 stats: 13 goals, 40 points, 16:08 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 33

Contract: $5 million through 2025 (UFA)

Previous: 17

Smith arrived in a trade last summer just days after winning the Stanley Cup in Vegas and the fit never seemed right. He finished with his lowest per-game goal, assist and point totals since 2016-17 and heard his name in speculation leading up to the trade deadline. The veteran brings plenty of experience and a strong two-way game, and he is one year out from unrestricted free agency.

23. Jeff Skinner, Buffalo Sabres

2023-24 stats: 24 goals, 46 points, 16:00 ATOI, minus-2

Age: 32

Contract: $9 million through 2027 (UFA)

Previous: 18

A prime candidate for a buyout if a trade doesn't materialize (or Skinner elects not to waive his no-movement clause), the 32-year-old appears headed for a fresh start. He's seen a sharp decline in production, going from an 82-point campaign two years ago to 46 this past season, but he remains a good shooter and skater. The devil will be in the details of how the money gets moved around and what cap figure is attached to the player on the other side of a potential move.

24. Timothy Liljegren

2023-24 stats: 3 goals, 23 points, 19:40 ATOI, plus-3

Age: 25

Contract: 2024 RFA

Previous: Not ranked

With the Leafs looking to revamp their blue line and Liljegren entering a summer where he's likely going to have a strong arbitration case, the team is willing to listen on interest in its right-shot defenseman. Consistency has been an issue at times for Liljegren, who was a scratch for a game in the playoffs this spring. He's a good skater and puck-mover and tracks as a solid top-four option if he can take the next step.

25. Jack Campbell, Edmonton Oilers

2023-24 stats: 1-4-0, 4.50 GAA, .873 save percentage

Age: 32

Contract: $5 million through 2027

Previous: 20

Campbell quietly joined the Oilers' ride to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final — skating with the extras and keeping himself in playing shape just in case he was needed. The organization will explore options to move the veteran goaltender following a season where he went from opening-night starter to making 34 appearances for AHL Bakersfield. While a buyout is possible, a trade of his $5 million annual cap hit would be more palatable.

Note: This board is based on what we're hearing from NHL sources and will be adjusted as new names enter the conversation or gain prominence, so check back.

Others we're watching who don't quite crack the top 25 at this point: Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers; Mario Ferraro, San Jose Sharks; Andrew Mangiapane, Calgary Flames; Jean-Gabriel Pageau, New York Islanders.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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The Athletic / LeBrun rumblings: Tulsky on Necas trade market, offer sheets and Guentzel — plus latest on Tanev, Kane, more

By Pierre LeBrun

LAS VEGAS — A year ago, Brad Treliving met media at the draft in Nashville after being on the job as Toronto Maple Leafs general manager for less than a month and joked that he was drinking out of a firehose.

Currently holding that firehose is Eric Tulsky, who has taken over as full-time GM for the Carolina Hurricanes and has about a million things going on right now.

And he might be the GM who is the biggest wild card as far as producing fireworks this week in Vegas.

"There's a lot to do," a calm-sounding Tulsky told The Athletic during a sitdown interview Wednesday. "I've had a month to sort through all of our player contracts, getting to know all of the other teams and getting to know what they want, finding out what's on the trade market, it's been busy.

"I've set an all-time record for calls made and received. But you know, that's the job."

One thing hasn't changed, with the first-time GM replacing Don Waddell: The Hurricanes are in the middle of nearly everything draft week and ahead of July 1.

Not that they had a choice to be front and center, with a number of pending free agents, plus a player who wants out and teams calling.

"You're right: We always try to be in the middle of everything," Tulsky said. "We never want to see an opportunity get missed, right? So we want to consider every possibility there is and evaluate everything and look for every chance to make the club better.

"This year, with all the free agents and everything, we certainly have more that we have to do. There's a lot to work out — a lot to get done, trying to figure out what our team is going to look like next year."

The hottest potato right now involves pending restricted free agent Martin Necas, who wants a change of scenery. The Canes have heard from nearly every single team in the NHL on him — I believe the Buffalo Sabres have very serious interest — but it's getting to be crunch time if a trade is going to happen that involves a first-round pick Friday as part of the package.

"Teams are calling. We've been working hard on it," Tulsky said. "I would say that's been one of my biggest focuses, trying to figure out where that's going to go. We've had a lot of interest. We've had a few offers that I would consider very serious.

"Whether or not any of them get across the line remains to be seen."

While Tulsky wouldn't say, other league sources say that there is one team in particular that is pretty close with Carolina on the framework of a deal and that if that trade goes through, it would involve a first-round pick Friday night. So if that particular team decides to go ahead with Carolina, we will know within 48 hours here.

In the meantime, there seems to be frustration from other teams involved in talks with Carolina over the high asking price, which has led to some clubs chatting internally about the possibility of an offer sheet.

"I don't see how an offer sheet makes any sense for the player," Tulsky said. "If he wants to leave, he's giving us control … He's lowering the return to where we wouldn't let him go."

What Tulsky means is that an offer sheet paying $9 million a year, for example, would require compensation of a first-, second- and third-round pick. Carolina's looking for a bigger package than that. It would match that all day long.

"Correct," Tulsky said. "So I don't see how that's a direction that makes sense."

And there's also a world in which if a trade doesn't materialize, the Canes just keep Necas, at least for another year. It's not what the player wants, but short of not showing up to work in the fall, Necas is limited in his options.

And again, Carolina plans to match any offer sheet.

"Yeah I mean, if someone offer sheets him at $16 million a year, we won't match," Tulsky said smiling. "But if teams are drawing the line on a trade at less than what we're asking for, then they're going to be doing an offer sheet at a place where we would match it easily without a second thought."

The Canes, meanwhile, continue to try hard to find a way to re-sign Jake Guentzel, the No. 1 unrestricted free agent if he goes to market Monday. The piece of candy that Carolina has that no other club can offer is the eighth year on a contract.

"We're trying very hard on that one," Tulsky said. "We are not that far apart. I'm still optimistic it's going to get done. But it's not done yet and we're running out of time."

There are serious rumblings about the Vancouver Canucks making a pitch (would they be willing to go seven years, $9 million?) and, of course, other teams would get in there Monday. So Guentzel and his agent, Ben Hankinson, have a big decision to make soon enough: Take Carolina's best offer or go to market while leaving the door open to the Canes?

In the meantime, Carolina has two top-four blueliners who are pending UFAs in Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce. I think it's 99 percent sure Pesce is headed to market, and likely 60-40 Skjei is too, but Tulsky hasn't given up hope.

"We're still talking to both of them," Tulsky said. "I just talked to Pesce's agent yesterday. Look, they're both really good players. We'd like to have them both back. It's just a question of what we can fit, and how to make it work.

"I think they both want to be in Carolina, too," he added. "So hopefully we can get something done. The salary cap makes it that you can't have everything you want, and we're trying to sort it out."

One team to keep an eye on if Skjei and/or Pesce go to market is the Nashville Predators. They need to replace Ryan McDonagh, and I believe they would inquire and try to sign one of those two Carolina D if they go to market.

In the meantime, because he has no choice, Tulsky is closely investigating both the UFA market and the trade market for blue-line replacements.

"Yeah, for sure," he said. "We always have a Plan B. We always have a Plan C. We usually have a Plan D. We try to make sure we're prepared for all the possible outcomes. We want to make sure we're in position to keep taking steps forward and be in a position to compete for the Stanley Cup."

Another pending UFA is forward Teuvo Teravainen.

"Again, it's another player who has a great time with us, loves playing for Rod (Brind'Amour), loves the way we play, loves our feel and our fit," Tulsky said. "It's just we can't have back everybody who wants to be here. So we're trying to work through it. We've talked to the agent a couple of times. I don't have any clarity for you on it."

So yeah, so much to get to for Tulsky, and we didn't even cover it all in our interview.

He doesn't take lightly the fact that owner Tom Dundon entrusted him with the full-time GM job.

"It's an honor," Tulsky said. "This is an incredible team and a great organization and it's an honor to be entrusted as its steward."

Rumblings from elsewhere:

• The Dallas Stars are grinding away, trying to find a way to re-sign pending UFA defenseman Chris Tanev. If he goes to market Monday, the Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators would both be among the several teams making serious pitches.

• Pending UFA defenseman Tyler Myers and the Canucks remain in talks, but the sense I get is that things have not progressed on that front despite several weeks of discussions. They'll chat again this week at the draft, so the door remains open, but there's just as good of a chance he goes to market Monday at this point.

• The Predators also want to find some offensive pop up front. I believe they have interest in the likes of Steven Stamkos and Chandler Stephenson, if those pending UFAs hit the market, among several other forward targets.

• Patrick Kane's camp, led by agent Pat Brisson, remains in talks with the Detroit Red Wings. The door isn't closed on a return. But with Monday so close, obviously there's a strong possibility he goes to market, and I think the focus for Kane would be on Eastern Conference contenders.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316153 Websites

The Athletic / Stanley Cup Final Game 7 draws largest U.S. NHL audience since 2019

By Alex Andrejev

The two sweetest words in sports — Game 7 — led to a huge viewership night for the NHL.

The Florida Panthers' 2-1 win over the Edmonton Oilers on Monday averaged 7.66 million viewers in the United States, the largest U.S. NHL audience since the St. Louis Blues beat the Boston Bruins in the 2019 Stanley Cup Final Game 7, which averaged 8.72 million viewers on NBC. The number more than doubled the viewership for the Vegas Golden Knights' clinching win in Game 5 of last year's final (2.72 million).

Additionally, Game 7 delivered an average audience of 16.3 million viewers across North America, the NHL said. The game — carried on ABC, ESPN+, CBC, SportsNet and TVA Sports in the U.S. and Canada — was the second most-watched NHL game across the continent since 2004, behind the Stanley Cup Final Game 7 between the Bruins and Vancouver Canucks in 2011. The North America metric is not one all major professional sports leagues publish, as most viewership numbers only include the U.S., making it difficult to compare between sports.

Comparing the U.S. number (7.66 million), the Boston Celtics' clinching win over the Dallas Mavericks in the NBA Finals earlier this month drew 12.224 million viewers on ABC, and the 2023 World Series Game 5 between the Texas Rangers and Arizona Diamondbacks drew 11.48 million viewers on Fox.

Seventh Heaven: 16.3 Million Viewers Watched Game 7 of the 2024 Stanley Cup Final Across North America pic.twitter.com/amaY9BNcRf

— NHL Public Relations (@PR_NHL) June 25, 2024

This year's Stanley Cup Final averaged 8.8 million viewers across North America, up 85 percent year-over-year, and was the most-watched Stanley Cup Final across the continent since 2013, per the NHL.

The Panthers won in seven games over the Edmonton Oilers to clinch the franchise's first Stanley Cup. They opened as the betting favorites to win next year's title.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316154 Websites

The Athletic / CHL, USA Hockey announce new CHL / USA Prospects Challenge for top NHL Draft prospects

By Scott Wheeler

The Canadian Hockey League (CHL) and USA Hockey announced Wednesday the creation of the CHL / USA Prospects Challenge, a new annual two-game series which will see the top first-year NHL draft-eligible prospects in the CHL face off against the USA Hockey National Team Development Program (NTDP).

Signed initially as a three-year partnership, the CHL's three member leagues — the Ontario Hockey League (OHL), the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League (QMJHL), and the Western Hockey League (WHL) — will take turns hosting the series to start.

On a phone call on Tuesday afternoon in advance of the announcement, USA Hockey's assistant executive director of hockey operations John Vanbiesbrouck told The Athletic that USA Hockey could potentially host a game at USA Hockey Arena in Plymouth, Mich., in the fourth year of the event.

"One game in each country is potentially what we're looking at (long term) but we want them to have a tremendous amount of success with the games to start," Vanbiesbrouck said.

On a separate phone call Tuesday evening with The Athletic, CHL president Dan MacKenzie confirmed that the deal is structured as a "three plus one" that would allow USA Hockey to trigger a fourth year where they host at least one of the two games. In that scenario, MacKenzie said a second game could potentially be hosted in one of the CHL's nine American markets as well.

"Coming off the Memorial Cup in Saginaw, US markets can do a really good job. In Year 4, we did talk about that. We want to see how it goes but that is a possibility for sure," MacKenzie said.

The first edition of the series is slated for November 2024 and will feature the top prospects in the 2025 NHL Draft class.

Vanbiesbrouck said the plan is for the American team to be "primarily NTDP" because the event is in November "and it's short on the evaluation side of it."

The CHL / USA Prospects Challenge is not replacing the Chipotle All-American Game, which is typically played in January on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and showcases the top draft-eligible prospects playing in both the USHL and with the NTDP.

"We're going to have the (All-American) game, that's for sure," Vanbiesbrouck reiterated. "The more times we can have these types of events that celebrate our players, the better it is. This is a celebration of the players. You always want to do things for players that helps them and I think this is a mutual benefit there."

Vanbiesbrouck hopes the new series will serve as an entrance into the Canada-USA rivalry for many of the players in a time when best-on-best hockey between the two countries is entering a revival. (Rena Laverty / U.S. NTDP)

The series will, however, replace the CHL / NHL Top Prospects Game for now. Though MacKenzie said the new event could potentially someday return to its old top prospect game's slot in late-January, hosting the first edition of the series in November made more sense in the calendar, re-slotting the new event where the now-cancelled Canada-Russia Series once landed.

"We wanted to keep thinking about the rivalries that fans want to see. And it's really Canada-USA, the biggest rivalry in hockey," MacKenzie said. "And given the fact that from a prospects perspective, that's an age group that a lot of folks want to see, whether it be fans, whether it be scouts, we really felt that this was going to be an opportunity to create an event that would generate a fair amount of interest from fans and everybody else. So we're pretty excited about it."

The CHL also felt the event could fill a void at the U18 level.

"When you think about the prospects level age at under-18, it's an age group where the current situation is that the best never play the best," MacKenzie said. "At the world championships the US sends their best but Canada doesn't because our playoffs are going on and then in the summer, Canada sends their best to the Hlinka Gretzky but the US doesn't because they're out of cycle. So this really sort of meets the need of really seeing best-on-best."

Though the roster size is still to be determined, MacKenzie said he expects the number to be around 22 from the CHL. The CHL roster will be "selected by the NHL's 32 clubs," according to MacKenzie, similar to how the CHL / NHL Top Prospects Game teams were decided. Though NHL Central Scouting will continue to provide an "administrative function" as part of the process, MacKenzie insisted that NHL teams will actually pick the players themselves.

The CHL roster, however, will not be exclusive to Canadians, MacKenzie clarified. Though the league expects that "the vast majority of the players will be Canadian," the selection process "won't be based on nationality," according to MacKenzie.

"It'll be the best players in the Canadian Hockey League," he said, leaving the door open for import players from Europe to make the CHL roster, as well as the potential for Americans to play on both sides of the game.

The CHL roster for the new CHL / USA Prospects Challenge will not be exclusively Canadian. (Daniel St. Louis / CHL)

According to MacKenzie, the CHL is also already having conversations about a potential third marquee event for their calendar (along with the CHL / USA Prospects Challenge and the Memorial Cup).

Some of their three member leagues may also decide to look into other exposure opportunities for their players within the new calendar, MacKenzie said.

Vanbiesbrouck hopes the new series will serve as an entrance into the Canada-USA rivalry for many of the players in a time when best-on-best hockey between the two countries is entering a revival.

“It’s being heightened at the highest level. We’re seeing Olympics, we’re seeing 4 Nations,” Vanbiesbrouck said. “Canada-USA has been a great rivalry and a healthy one. Even though we can compete hard against each other we still root for each other.”

The first two host cities and game dates will be announced later this summer. MacKenzie expects that as part of the annual rotation from one league to the next (similar to the Memorial Cup’s rotation), the two host cities will be “fairly close to each other” each year, a cost-saving departure from the Canada-Russia format that often saw the teams fly from one market to another.

“The game will have a very different vibe than a traditional prospects game so I think that’s a positive,” MacKenzie said.

What do scouts think?

One amateur scouting director with an NHL club surveyed earlier this week about the forthcoming announcement said via text: “I actually don’t like either (format).”

“Players end up being overvalued or undervalued based on that game, especially if GMs are in there and it’s their only viewings,” he said.

Another scouting director said he felt there was a way for the CHL to keep its own game and still create this new Canada-USA series. That director still likes the new format, though.

“I love the idea, although the CHL Top Prospects Game was well run,” the second director said. “USA has struggled to create the same environment despite the collection of talent. These games should be highly contested which will allow players to truly showcase their individual skill sets. No one wants to watch the free wheeling, non-check All-Star games.”

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316155 Websites

The Athletic / Panthers’ Stanley Cup championship should put an end to NHL GMs’ lazy roster-building excuses

By Sean McIndoe

It’s over.

No, not the Stanley Cup Final, although that’s over, too. Congratulations to the Florida Panthers, who narrowly held off Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers, avoiding a historic collapse and capturing the franchise’s first championship. It caps off a three-year stretch that saw the Panthers win the 2022 Presidents’ Trophy and follow it up with back-to-back Eastern Conference championships. With a Stanley Cup banner now set to fly in Florida, it’s been a truly dominant stretch, one that’s worthy of all the praise that will be thrown its way in the days and weeks ahead.

No, what’s over is the narrative. You know the one, about how winning NHL teams have to be built. You’re familiar with all the beats. Let’s recite them together.

The salary cap makes trading too hard.

Free agency is a fool’s game.

This is a draft-and-develop league.

You don’t make a change just for the sake of making a change.

You can’t do anything during the season, because it’s too complicated.

You bottom out, you hope for a few lottery wins and you draft your core. Then you stick with it, with maybe a few small moves around the margins, because that’s all you can do in the modern NHL, and anyone who tries to tell you differently just doesn’t get it.

And most importantly: Your favorite team’s GM has a hard job. Don’t expect too much. Go easy on him. He’s doing his best, even if his best looks an awful lot like always taking the path of least resistance.

We’ve heard some variation of that story for years, from all around the league. We got it from the GMs themselves, obviously. But we also got it from the broadcasters and the insiders and the beat writers, who’ve always been a little too eager to accept it. And these days we even hear it from the fans, many of whom have internalized this idea so thoroughly that they’ll get legitimately angry at any suggestions that their team should do … well, anything.

It’s too hard, guys. Be reasonable.

And then along came the Florida Panthers to call B.S. on the whole charade.

Let’s start with the core. Yes, they bottomed out and drafted Aaron Ekblad with the No. 1 pick in 2014. In hindsight, he wasn’t the best player in that draft, or even all that close, but he’s been a reliable top-pair guy ever since. And they hit a moonshot home run with Sasha Barkov, picked No. 2 in 2013.

But as far as the draft goes, that’s pretty much it. The only other regular on the playoff roster who was acquired through the draft was Anton Lundell. (They also drafted Dmitry Kulikov back in 2009, but he had stops with seven NHL teams before returning to Florida this season.) The rest of the roster was pieced together in all those ways that are supposed to be impossible, or at least unreasonable.

Big-ticket free agents? That would be Sergei Bobrovsky, the veteran who got the second-biggest salary of the cap era among goalies, a contract that seemed like an overpay until he re-emerged as a Vezina candidate over the last two years.

Midseason trades? They weren’t “too complicated” for Bill Zito in 2021 when he acquired Brandon Montour and Sam Bennett, two deadline rentals who became part of the long-term plan.

A few months after those two moves, Zito landed Sam Reinhart from the Buffalo Sabres for a first and a top prospect. It was a risky win-now move, with no guarantees they’d keep Reinhart for more than one season; a timid GM could have talked themselves into a more patient approach. Zito wasn’t timid, and he got a 57-goal scorer because of it.

And then there’s the big one: The Matthew Tkachuk trade, a true blockbuster from the 2022 offseason. Remember the context there — with Tkachuk making clear that he wanted out of Calgary, a handful of teams lined up to hem and haw about just how much they could reasonably give up for a potential franchise player. Then Zito elbowed his way to the front of the line with a monster offer, one that felt too good to be true for the Flames. It cost him a 100-point forward and one of his best defensemen along with a first-round pick that still hasn’t even come due yet. The hockey world was shocked by how much the Panthers gave up. Anyone think they’d like a do-over right now?

Zito’s also had a knack for finding prime value around the edges, like signing Carter Verhaeghe as a free agent and plucking Gustav Forsling off waivers. Those moves matter, obviously. But the story of this Panthers championship is the story of a team that’s been willing to make big, gutsy moves. The exact sort of moves that most teams don’t seem to have the stomach for.

And yes, there are a million other excuses you could offer about why your team couldn’t be expected to conduct business this way. The weather is warmer. The taxes are lower. Players like Tkachuk are never available, except when they are. What if those moves hadn’t worked? What then?

It’s the sort of pushback we’re used to hearing. Believe me, your favorite team’s front office knows it well, and they’re really hoping you’re lining up to recite it in their defense.

The alternative is that you, or the media, or (heaven forbid) the owner might look at everything the Panthers have spent the last few years doing and wonder if the GM who’s making millions really does have such a tough job; that the easy way is the only way.

To be clear, none of this means the long view can't lead to success, or even championships. A three-year plan can work. A five-year plan can work. A Steve Yzerman in Detroit plan can work. Maybe this time next year, we're talking about a Cup champion who did the patient draft-and-develop thing, stayed laser-focused on the long-term plan, didn't take any chances, and saw it all pay off in a parade.

It could happen. There's more than one way to win a championship.

But that's the point the Panthers have just proven: There's more than one way. Timid, conservative and patient is one way. It's not the only one, no matter how many times you've been scolded about it.

That's worth keeping in mind, especially right now, as the NHL embarks on a ridiculously condensed offseason that will see most of the action play out over the next week or so. If you're a fan of one of the many teams that fell short of expectations this year, this is what you've been waiting for. This is the time for your team to get to work and make the sort of big, bold moves that can change a franchise's trajectory.

Some of them will. And some of them won't, sticking instead to a more basic approach. A minor deal here, some careful spending there, draft a few we-can't-believe-they-were-still-there-when-we-picked prospects and call it a summer. See you in September, everyone, don't forget to renew those season tickets.

And then, when anyone dares to question that approach, they'll roll their eyes and start in on the lectures. What do you think this is, fantasy hockey? Do you want them to make a move just for the sake of it? Don't you know that there's a salary cap? We were in on some names, we were kicking tires, we were listening but not shopping, and it just didn't work out. What do you want the front office to do, you fools? Their job?

Don't buy it. Or at least, don't buy that it's the only option. It never has been, unless you were a GM more concerned with his own job security than in winning anything.

Bill Zito and the Panthers have proven it, and now they're busy frolicking in the ocean with the Stanley Cup because of it. That's what can happen when a team decides that the path of least resistance won't lead them to where they say they want to go.

You're not being unreasonable, or some sort of bad fan, to ask your favorite team what they're doing to keep up.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316156 Websites

The Athletic / Inside Fanatics' response to Nike's MLB debacle and what it means for new NHL jerseys

By Mark Lazerus

NEW YORK — As the tweets and aggregated stories started popping up the morning after the Super Bowl, the Images pouring in from spring training sites across Florida and Arizona, Fanatics CEO Michael Rubin had the same thought everyone else did. He saw the pictures of jerseys that were a different shade of gray than pants. He saw comically small lettering on the name plates. He saw pants so thin you could clearly see the tails of the tucked-in jerseys through them. He saw massive sweat stains spreading across pitchers' jerseys as they long-tossed in the sun. He saw pants with cartoonish blowouts, massive tears caused by simple slides.

Nike's new Major League Baseball uniforms were an unmitigated debacle right from the start. And Rubin's first reaction was the same as almost everybody's:

"My immediate reaction was, 'We f—ed this up," Rubin told The Athletic.

It quickly became clear that Fanatics hadn't. Not exactly, at least. A series of frantic phone calls and emergency meetings over the next couple of hours assured everyone at Fanatics what it already knew: Fanatics had made the uniforms to Nike's exact specifications, in the same Pennsylvania factory in which Fanatics had produced the previous MLB jerseys since buying Majestic in 2017. It was Nike that decided to scale back the lettering by a third, rendering them impossible to read from any sort of distance. It was Nike that wanted to cut back stitching by 25 percent, leading to the blowouts. It was Nike that wanted to switch to a fabric it had used in track and soccer uniforms, leading to the amorphous sweat stains creeping across players' torsos. It was Nike that decided to switch the gray dye in the pants, deeming it "within a level of tolerance" in comparison with the dye used in the jerseys, said an industry source who was granted anonymity so they could speak freely. It was Nike that felt it couldn't simply keep producing the Majestic jersey and slapping a swoosh on it, because, well, how is that a Nike jersey?

But it was Fanatics that took all the heat. From fans. From players. From reporters. From seemingly every corner of social media. Fox Sports pointed its finger at Fanatics in a story. So did Forbes. So did Barstool. So did countless other outlets and aggregators.

It was nothing new. As the behemoth of sports merchandise, with 22,000 employees moving more than 100 million units of jerseys, hats, shirts and other gear every year, Fanatics has become a punching bag for disgruntled sports consumers. Search its brand online and you'll find a seemingly never-ending stream of mismatched logos and misspelled names and misshapen graphics — some of them Fanatics' doing, some of them from third parties which Fanatics simply sells, some of them from other companies entirely. Doesn't matter. You get sports gear these days, you assume it's Fanatics, for better or worse.

With market domination comes marked aggravation. That's life in the big leagues.

But in the actual big leagues, Rubin saw his company getting massacred for something that, truly, wasn't its fault. Fanatics had its doubts about the changes Nike was making, but in the end, it was Nike's product. If there's blame to be shared, it's that Fanatics didn't push back hard enough. Once the story blew up, Nike's PR strategy, according to an industry source, was to lay low and wait for it all to blow over. So Rubin — a boisterous and combative sort who's not the sit-on-his-hands type — had to simply bite his lip and take it. And feel it. And agonize over it.

"Any time we have any part in letting a player or a fan down, we feel like we're losing, right?" Rubin said. "So whether we designed a product or not, I'd say it's still extremely painful. If someone tells you, 'Hey, jump off a cliff,' and you jump off a cliff and die — you still jumped off a cliff and died. So I'd say yes, it was extremely painful."

Rubin briefly pushed back and put the onus on Nike at the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference in early March, but otherwise kept his mouth shut. No easy task for Rubin, who equates his business success to being a "star athlete" in the public eye, and who's never at a loss for words.

"If you're a well-known business person, if you're successful, taking some abuse is part of the territory," Rubin said. "But the noise around baseball might have been 100 times more than all the noise cumulatively we've had in the history of our company."

And as if those meetings inside the spacious Fanatics office suite in New York's West Village weren't tense enough during those first few weeks of what the company internally deemed "Jerseygate," they were just months away from one of the biggest moments in company history — the release of the first pro jersey designed by Fanatics itself, with the Fanatics logo sewn in.

And let's just say, after witnessing the baseball disaster, the NHL had some concerns.

The first thing you notice about the new Fanatics NHL jerseys is how heavy they are. Not in a burdensome way, but in a material way. They're substantial. They're significant. The way every vein in every lobe of the Maple Leafs crest is ridged, the way the captain's "C" on Connor McDavid's Oilers jersey carries literal weight, the way the lettering on the back of Connor Bedard's Blackhawks jersey is stitched. There's an attention to detail that comes with a seven-year rightsholder contract that costs tens of millions of dollars.

The only difference between this jersey and the Adidas jerseys worn in the NHL for the past seven seasons is the removal of the Adidas shoulder dimples ("debossing" in industry parlance) for a more traditional look, an upgraded NHL shield with a hologram finish, and a reinforcement of the lower forearm to address players' concerns about "board burn," wear and tear caused by collisions along the wall and standard board-battles. Well, that and the Fanatics logo sewn in above the name plate, replacing the Adidas logo. Only the Los Angeles Kings

and Anaheim Ducks, who were granted exemptions because they had rebrands in the works for years, will have a truly new look in the fall of 2024. Any other drastic changes won't happen for at least two more seasons.

The Toronto Maple Leafs' Fanatics NHL jersey. (Courtesy of Fanatics)

The jerseys are still made by SP Apparels in the same hallowed Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, factory that has been making NHL jerseys for half a century. The quality is evident. There'll be no hockey version of Jerseygate.

But the league wanted to be sure. The NHL Players' Association wanted to be sure. And Fanatics needed to be sure. The jerseys had been completed long before the baseball nightmare and had been taken to all 32 NHL locker rooms to be seen and felt and approved by all 32 head equipment managers and hundreds of players.

After baseball, though, all parties knew they had to do it all over again, to assuage any fears and prevent a similar catastrophe in hockey. They had to do it in a hurry, too, because the season already was nearing its end. The league and Fanatics started by making a presentation at the general managers meetings in Florida in mid-March. Prototypes of the jerseys were sent out to all 32 team presidents. Rich Villani, the NHL's head of consumer products, crisscrossed the continent with Fanatics to make sure as many people saw the jerseys as possible.

"Fanatics was great, they met the moment, they mobilized," said Brian Jennings, the NHL's vice president of marketing and chief branding officer, who said the league strongly encouraged Fanatics to make a second tour of the league's locker rooms. "It debunks and demystifies the process. You see the jersey, the fabric, the fit and all those things. The game on the ice and our players' performance is sacrosanct, that's where it all begins."

In the end, Fanatics and Villani went back to all 32 locker rooms in a two-month span this spring, meeting with every equipment manager and as many players as each team desired. They even met with special "jersey aficionados," influencers from beyond the NHL world, to solicit feedback and ease concerns.

"Our team ran a playbook that we have from when we bought Majestic; it's an incredibly detailed and incredibly rigorous process that involves feedback from players and equipment managers and everyone else," said Andrew Low Ah Kee, who was hired in September as CEO of Fanatics Commerce to reimagine the company's oft-derided consumer division and repair the company's poor reputation among fans. "When we had the baseball experience, we actually asked the teams to go back and do it again. We said, 'This is what we heard, this is what's coming. Is everyone bought in and aligned on this?' And everyone said yes. It was validation of the process and the experience."

With baseball, it was ultimately Tony Clark and the MLB Players Association who spoke up and threw Nike under the bus, forcing Nike's hand to address the new uniforms' shortfalls. That moment was somewhat redemptive for Fanatics, but the way it usually goes with stories like this, the original news is always above the fold on A1, and the correction or clarification is buried on Page 16. But it still was instructive to be reminded how important the relationship with the PA is.

An NHLPA source said that the players are "pleased" that Fanatics made player input a priority on the new jerseys and are "very confident" in how they'll turn out, adding that "Michael Rubin and his team have done a fantastic job throughout the process."

With the league's blessing, Fanatics decided to move up the jersey reveal to draft week, three months ahead of schedule, to stem any doomsaying from fans and pundits who saw what happened with baseball. The jerseys won't officially launch until September, when, for the first time in a decade, fans will be able to buy the actual jerseys worn by the actual players made in the actual Saint-Hyacinthe factory. For those not looking to take out a second mortgage just to buy a hockey jersey, there'll be three other tiers of jersey — the same one that Adidas had made its top-tier jersey, the more affordable Fanatics replica "breakaway" jersey (which Fanatics said makes up about 80 percent of jersey sales and isn't changing at all), and, for the first time, NHL practice jerseys.

Low Ah Kee termed the three regular jerseys "good, better and best."

"And 'good' still has to be good," he said.

So the pros are going to get a high-quality product. No surprise there. The baseball fiasco was the exception, not the rule, when it comes to these provider changes. But what about fans? We've all seen the social media posts. A Nashville Predators hat that says "New York Rangers" on the back. A logo that peels off on the first wash. A French "LNH" logo reserved for Montreal Canadiens jerseys on a Florida Panthers sweater. Misspelled names, shoddy materials, poor printing jobs. Everyone seems to have a tale of woe. Heck, The Athletic's Sean Gentille is a four-letter word among Fanatics employees for a column he wrote in the wake of the company becoming the NHL's new jersey provider.

There's a Twitter account called "@FanaticsSucks" with more than 25,000 followers, retweeting individual fans' purchasing misadventures to the world. Sure, some of the mistakes have nothing to do with Fanatics, but the company has become a catch-all for all sports merchandise, the way "Kleenex" is a synonym for "tissue."

And make no mistake, plenty of the mistakes are made by Fanatics.

Low Ah Kee said Fanatics got 99.7 percent of its holiday-season gear delivered on time, which he said was the best in the history of the company. But that still means thousands of unhappy fans.

"If you do the math on 100 million units, if you have a 0.3 error rate, that's still 300,000 errors," Rubin said. "And a subset of those people go to social and they're noisy. Sports fans are passionate. And the passion that drove them to buy the merchandise is the passion that made them noisy. You can look at that and say that's not fair because we got 99.7 percent right. Or you can look at that like we do and say we failed the 0.3 percent. We have an incredibly high overall satisfaction rate, but it's still not high enough."

When a fan bought a Jack Hughes Stadium Series jersey earlier this season, he received a jersey with a name plate that read, "JACK HUGHES." First and last name. Fanatics didn't make it, but the third-party vendor sold it through Fanatics. Low Ah Kee said Fanatics moved quickly to give the fan a refund and a credit for another, equally expensive product. Late last summer, some Eagles fans received a Jalen Hurts shirt from Fanatics with a crooked No. 1. Some of them took to Twitter, and the local CBS affiliate did an entire story on it. Rubin said the company sold 4 million units of Eagles merchandise, and 36 of them were crooked Hurts shirts. That would be a 0.0009 error rate.

"Fans were killing us," he said.

Low Ah Kee was hired shortly after that episode, and he quickly added consumer ratings — a standard for almost every online seller out there, but a new concept for Fanatics — to the website. He said any product, regardless of whether it's actually manufactured by Fanatics or not, is yanked from the site if its rating falls below a 4.0 out of 5. Vendors who repeatedly produce inferior merchandise are, in Low Ah Kee's terms, "fired." Social-media complaints are supposed to be responded to in 20 minutes or less and never more than an hour. It's a start.

(Eventual) vindication in the baseball disaster helped the company's reputation. A smooth rollout of the new NHL jerseys will, too. Fanatics already has won the sports merchandise marketplace. But it's the lessons learned in these frantic, sweaty and oftentimes excruciating last few months that could determine whether Fanatics ever wins over its critics.

"Historically, we might have thought getting 99 percent right, or 99.9 percent right, was good enough — it's not," Rubin said. "We're not perfect, but we want it to be perfect. We're so much better than we were six or nine months ago. And every month, we're going to keep getting better. So you can look at baseball and say, hey, that really stung. Or you can look at it and say how do we use that to be better? … In the end, when you look back at Fanatics in five years, I think you're going to say the very difficult experience we went through with baseball made us a much better company."

That's the positive public spin, the sanitized soundbite. There's a blunter version spoken within the company, a hard lesson learned over the past few months about ownership, about accountability, about perception in the Internet age.

"Next time we see something we don't like," one Fanatics executive said, "we ain't f—ing doing it."

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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The Athletic / Final 2024 NHL Draft thoughts: What I'm hearing, comparables, late rankings tweaks

By Scott Wheeler

The 2024 NHL Draft is finally (almost) here. I'm off to Las Vegas today, and to put a bow on this year's pre-draft coverage (plenty more to come post-draft), here are some last-minute thoughts and tidbits I've gathered, player comparables for my top 17 prospects in the class, and final-hours ranking tweaks I've been thinking about.

Player comparables

I hate doing these, so let's just get them out of the way off the top. Consider this my gift to you, the obsessed reader, on the eve of the draft.

Note: Try to keep in mind these comps are meant to be more stylistic than projection. They're meant to give you a better visual image of what they look like, not how good they'll be.

Macklin Celebrini: I see a little of each of Sidney Crosby, Jonathan Toews and Patrick Marleau.

Ivan Demidov: I see some David Pastrnak and Artemi Panarin, frankly.

Artyom Levshunov: Noah Dobson without the maturity (yet). There's some Thomas Harley in him, too (though with a frame and disposition closer to Aaron Ekblad).

Zeev Buium: Somewhere between Josh Morrissey, John Carlson and Kris Letang.

Zayne Parekh: Very limited comps but Erik Karlsson has some of the same look/style on offense and defense.

Sam Dickinson: A little Noah Hanifin, a little Moritz Seider. I've heard Jake Sanderson and Cam Fowler but don't love those.

Cole Eiserman: Phil Kessel with more jam. Have heard names like Owen Tippett and Cole Caufield, but don't like either of those.

Berkly Catton: What people thought Jonathan Drouin was going to be.

Anton Silayev: Zdeno Chara feels like the easy one, but I think he might be closer to Colton Parayko. I don't like the Victor Hedman comp that I've heard.

Cayden Lindstrom: Roope Hintz with more jam.

Konsta Helenius: I've thought about each of Thomas Vanek, Marco Rossi and Nick Suzuki when watching him.

Tij Iginla: A cross between Kyle Connor and Tyler Toffoli with more pace.

Carter Yakemchuk: Brent Burns (I've had some people use Evan Bouchard, too, but Yakemchuk plays meaner and beats more guys one-on-one, even though there are some other parallels).

Michael Brandsegg-Nygard: He'll be a Gabe Landeskog, T.J. Oshie, Justin Williams type.

Michael Hage: Jordan Kyrou.

Beckett Sennecke: Martin Necas, or Marian Gaborik without the strength (yet).

Trevor Connelly: If Nazem Kadri had speed? Alexander Semin if he got after it more?

Last-minute draft ranking tweaks?

Every year, in the days between the release of my final draft board and the draft itself, continued conversations and video work (normally prompted by those conversations) always seem to lead me to some flip-flopping and hair-pulling about my list.

Here are some rankings I've been ruminating on in the wee hours before the draft:

• The big one I've been rethinking is Aron Kiviharju's (25th) slotting. I think I'd slide him down about 10 behind Marek Vanacker (35th).

• I might move Beckett Sennecke (16th) up one or two, as much as I love both Michael Brandsegg-Nygard (14th) and Michael Hage (15th).

• I think I'd leapfrog Stian Solberg (21st) up two past Emil Hemming (19th) and Terik Parascak (20th).

• I'd definitely swap Charlie Elick (43rd) and Dominik Badinka (44th).

• I'd also move John Mustard (51st) and Sam O'Reilly (52nd) past Luke Misa (50th).

• I'd add Kevin He and A.J. Spellacy to my honorable mentions list.

A nugget on the Ducks and the No. 3 pick

The Ducks have been the hardest team to get a read on in this process. I heard Anton Silayev and Cayden Lindstrom early on, but as time has passed and I've continued to gather more info around them, I'm not convinced they'll take either (I'd wager Silayev is more likely than Lindstrom based on what I've heard in the last couple of weeks). Pat Verbeek has a type, and both of those guys would fit it. So would Sam Dickinson.

But the one name I've had tossed around twice now in the final hours with the Ducks is Beckett Sennecke. I believe Sennecke's firmly in the mix starting there and I think the Ducks are considering him. That would shake things up.

A note on Macklin Celebrini

It sounds like Celebrini is leaning toward signing (there were real rumblings, earlier in the year, about a willingness and maybe even desire to go back and chase a national title with BU and a gold medal with Canada at the world juniors, both of which evaded him this year) but that he'll wait until after free agency before finalizing anything in order to see which veteran players the Sharks surround him with. The Sharks aren't going to be competitive again next year, but that roster can't look as barebones as it did this season and I think everyone involved recognizes he needs to be surrounded with players who can help him have a successful rookie campaign.

Adam Jiricek vs. Stian Solberg?

There were no surprises for me in Bob McKenzie's final draft ranking (which polls 10 NHL scouts) other than Jiricek at No. 16 and Solberg at No. 20. In the conversations I've had with NHL clubs over the last few weeks, Solberg emerged as the top-ranked D after the big six for the majority of those I surveyed. I still think he's going to be the first of the two to get picked, but that did make me pause and it's noteworthy that Jiricek has held strong in that range despite the knee injury. I wonder if ranking him there and actually taking him there are two different things, though, given the lost time. Will teams get gun-shy on draft day with him? People really liked him last summer at the Hlinka and that seems to be persisting, even after he didn't play to the same standard both professionally in Czechia and in November with the U20 national team. I'll be fascinated to see where he goes and what he looks like coming back next season.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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The Athletic / 2024 NHL Draft consensus big board: Celebrini leads crowded field of prospects

Max Bultman

No draft ranking can properly account for the chaos that is the NHL Draft.

Each year, we see that vividly when the picks start flying and the shock and awe follow. Last year, for example, Arizona selected Russian defenseman Dmitriy Simashev at sixth overall. That was much earlier than the public consensus had expected — Simashev was 24th on last year's consensus big board — but well within the range of his highest

individual ranking in that survey: Corey Pronman's list, which had him at No. 10.

And while Simashev's case shows how an apparent consensus can sometimes be misleading, it's also an example of the value of putting different draft lists side-by-side. The wisdom of the crowd matters — but it only takes one team to make a pick, so the variance in lists is just as notable as agreement.

That's why we're once again compiling a composite big-board of five high-profile draft rankings, in an attempt to find both consensus and dissent.

We started with rankings from The Athletic's own prospect writers, Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler, as well as FloHockey's Chris Peters, who contributes regularly to The Athletic Hockey Show podcast. To give some outside flavor to the consensus, we also surveyed the lists of former NHL GM Craig Button, who is currently the director of scouting for TSN, and his TSN colleague Bob McKenzie, whose list is itself a composite survey of 10 NHL scouts, and is therefore a highly useful insight into the league's thinking.

Each list is of course worth reading on its own. But the goal in combining them into a composite here is to find some form of consensus, as well as to highlight where there are major differences.

So, let's dig into the findings of this year's list, starting at the position that could define the 2024 Draft.

Top defensemen

3

Artyom Levshunov

RHD

2

3

2

8

3

4

Zeev Buium

LHD

5

4

6

4

7

5

Anton Silayev

LHD

4

9

4

12

4

6

Zayne Parekh

RHD

9

5

8

7

8

8

Sam Dickinson

LHD

11

6

9

10

6

12

Carter Yakemchuk

RHD

3

13

10

15

13

16

Adam Jiricek

RHD

15

22

16

19

16

17

Stian Solberg

LHD

12

21

25

20

20

25

EJ Emery

RHD

36

32

23

16

27

27

Leo Sahlin Wallenius

LHD

21

27

34

29

42

The first thing you may note is that five defensemen ranked in the top eight overall. That's a big number considering just two defensemen were picked in the top eight last year, and three in 2022. In fact, the last time five 'D' went in the first picks was 2012, when six defensemen went in the top eight, and eight in the top 10: Ryan Murray, Griffin Reinhart, Morgan Rielly, Hampus Lindholm, Matt Dumba, Derrick Pouliot, Jacob Trouba and Slater Koekkoek.

We'll see how many ultimately go in that range this year, especially with forwards locking down the top two spots on the consensus board (Ivan Demidov edged out Artyom Levshunov by just one point for the second overall spot), but there's no doubt that the 'D' will be a key story early on.

Levshunov ranked second or third on four of the five lists we surveyed, a testament to the value of a right-shot 'D' with size (6-foot-2) who put up excellent numbers as an NCAA freshman. His 35 points in 38 games for Michigan State dwarf the draft-year numbers of 2021 first-overall pick Owen Power, who had 16 points in 26 games in the same conference. Power's size at 6-foot-6 is a notable difference, but the production from Levshunov is impressive.

Even more impressive? There was another NCAA freshman defenseman who topped it this season. That would be Denver's Zeev Buium, who comes in at fourth overall on the composite after ranking in the top seven on all five lists. Buium's staggering 50 points in 42 NCAA games are among the most ever by a U19 defenseman, and while his number of games played helps that, they also speak to a selling point for Buium: He played that big role on the NCAA champion. In fact, Buium won both the NCAA title and the world juniors last season, giving his production a winning backing.

Towering Russian Anton Silayev is up next at No. 5, bolstered by three different lists having him at No. 4 — Pronman, Peters and McKenzie's scout poll. Silayev's size at six-foot-seven certainly stands out first, but his production in the KHL is even more eye-catching: Silayev's 11 points in 63 games are the most ever points by a U18 player — not just a defenseman — in that league. There are players who scored at better rates in the KHL at that age, including Vladimir Tarasenko, Kirill Kaprizov, and Evgeny Kuznetsov, but playing in so many KHL games as a 17-year-old defenseman speaks to Silayev's rare profile.

After that, three CHL defensemen slot into the top 12: Saginaw (OHL) dynamo Zayne Parekh slots in at sixth overall, London's (OHL) Sam Dickinson is at No. 8, and Calgary (WHL) dynamo Carter Yakemchuk is at No. 12. All three had big-time years in Canada's top junior circuit, and Parekh and Dickinson squared off in the Memorial Cup Final earlier this month. And while Yakemchuk may be the lowest of the three on the consensus board, he had the highest individual-list ranking of any of the three, finishing at No. 3 on Pronman's list.

While we're showing the top 10 here, there is some separation after those six, with Czech defender Adam Jiricek (brother of Blue Jackets prospect David Jiricek) and late-rising Norwegian Stian Solberg clustered together in the teens, followed by EJ Emery of the USA Hockey National Team Development Program and Sweden's Leo Sahlin Wallenius more in the mid 20s.

That speaks to one potential shape this year's first round could take on: a run on the top defenders early, shifting into a more forward-heavy crop in the teens.

Top forwards

1

Macklin Celebrini

C

1

1

1

1

1

2

Ivan Demidov

RW

8

2

3

2

2

7

Cayden Lindstrom

C

10

10

7

9

5

9

Berkly Catton

C

6

8

5

14

12

10

Tij Iginla

C/W

13

12

12

3

10

11

Konsta Helenius

C

14

11

13

6

9

T13

Beckett Sennecke

RW

7

16

11

11

11

T13

Cole Eiserman

LW

16

7

14

5

14

15

Michael Brandsegg-Nygard

RW

17

14

15

17

17

18

Michael Hage

C

25

15

17

21

24

19

Trevor Connelly

LW

24

17

20

27

15

T20

Igor Chernyshov

LW

18

23

19

24

21

T20

Jett Luchanko

C

19

31

18

18

19

22

Liam Greentree

RW

23

18

31

23

18

23

Sacha Boisvert

C

27

24

22

25

22

Celebrini is of course the headliner of this draft, with no real doubt that he will be the Sharks' choice at first overall. Behind him is where it gets interesting. Demidov took the second spot overall on the composite list behind three second-place rankings (Peters ranked him third, Pronman eighth), but will he actually be the second forward off the board?

The Russian winger has dynamic skill and could go as high as No. 2 to Chicago, but if he were to slip a bit — perhaps based on difficulty with in-person scouting in Russia in recent years — it's entirely feasible the consensus No. 3 forward, WHL center Cayden Lindstrom, could go ahead of him. Lindstrom ranked in the top five of only one list we surveyed (McKenzie's), but his rare combination of size, skating and skill could be enough to land him there on draft day, especially if teams are content with his medicals after he missed time with a back injury.

Two more WHL wingers are next up, with Spokane's Berkly Catton and Kelowna's Tij Iginla finishing ninth and 10th on the composite list. Both are relatively small (NHL Central Scouting lists Catton at 5-foot-10 and Iginla at 6-foot) but both finished in the top seven of all WHL goal scorers this season, and Catton (who plays center) finished fourth in total points.

Three more names who did not finish in the consensus top 10 received at least one top-10 ranking, though: Finnish center Konsta Helenius finished at 11th but landed at ninth for McKenzie and all the way up at No. 6 for Button. OHL winger Beckett Sennecke and U.S. NTDP sniper Cole Eiserman tied for the 13th spot on the composite, but Sennecke ranked seventh for Pronman, and Eiserman ranked seventh for Wheeler and fifth for Button.

There is still some substantial forward depth beyond those names that should carry into the 20s, but those top eight forwards — and how early they can break into the run on defensemen — could determine just how long that depth lasts on draft day.

Biggest variance in top-25

24

Terik Parascak

RW

24
37
20
28
13
25
25
EJ Emery
RHD
20
36
32
23
16
27
17
Stian Solberg
LHD
13
12
21
25
20
20
T20
Jett Luchanko
C
13
19
31
18
18
19
22
Liam Greentree
RW
13
23
18
31
23
18
12
Carter Yakemchuk
RHD
12
3
13
10
15
13
19
Trevor Connelly
LW
12
24
17
20
27
15
T13
Cole Eiserman
LW
11
16
7
14
5
14
10
Tij Iginla
C/W
10
13
12
12
3
10
18
Michael Hage
C
10
25
15
17
21
24

This, to me, is the most interesting part of the composite board: seeing how wide the range is on different players, and what it means for their overall placement on a list. Parascak, for instance, had a ranking as low as 37 from Pronman, but ends up in the No. 24 spot largely on the strength of his place on the lists of Button (13) and Wheeler (20). While that's certainly a wide gap for a player this high on the overall list, it speaks to his potential range of outcomes.

Behind Parascak on the list of players with wide ranges are a pair of defense-first defensemen in Solberg and Emery. That profile may not be as sexy or have the gaudy stat lines, but we see year after year that general managers value it significantly, so high rankings of 12 for Solberg (Pronman) and 16 for Emery (Button) could well prove accurate come draft day.

Other players ended up here more on the pull of one low ranking. That's certainly true of Guelph center Jett Luchanko, who was top-19 for four lists surveyed, but down at No. 31 for Wheeler. And it's true to a lesser extent of Greentree, who was in the top 23 for everyone but Peters, who ranked him 31st.

You can read the complete top 65 here:

2024 NHL Draft consensus ranking

1

Macklin Celebrini

C

1

1

1

1

1

2

Ivan Demidov

RW

8

2

3

2

2

3

Artyom Levshunov

RHD

2

3

2

8

3

4

Zeev Buium

LHD

5

4

6

4

7

5

Anton Silayev

LHD

4

9

4

12

4

6

Zayne Parekh

RHD

9

5

8

7

8

7

Cayden Lindstrom

C

10

10

7

9

5

8

Sam Dickinson

LHD

11

6

9

10

6

9

Berkly Catton

C

6

8

5

14

12

10

Tij Iginla

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Konsta Helenius

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Michael Brandsegg-Nygard
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Stian Solberg
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Michael Hage
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Trevor Connelly
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Jett Luchanko
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Terik Parascak
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EJ Emery
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Nikita Artamonov
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Charlie Elick
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Matvei Gridin
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Ryder Ritchie
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Dominik Badinka
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Marek Vanacker
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Andrew Basha
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Dean Letourneau
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Lucas Pettersson
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Jesse Pulkkinen
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Tanner Howe
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Luca Marrelli
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Adam Jecho
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Matvei Shuravin
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Ben Danford
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John Mustard
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Leon Muggli
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Harrison Brunicke
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Will Skahan
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Justin Poirier
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Marcus Gidlof
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Carson Wetsch
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The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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

By Sean Gentille and Dom Luszczyszyn

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 and 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 goaltending depth, from best to worst, as the offseason kicks off and the window to improve begins.

1. Winnipeg Jets

Current quality: 98th percentile

Looking for: Backup goalie

No single goalie is more valuable than Connor Hellebuyck. He brings quality and quantity to the equation, enough to singlehandedly put the

Jets in first place. This spot belonged to the Bruins before they shipped Linus Ullmark to Ottawa, since two fantastic goaltenders are better than one. Ullmark's exit, though, swung things in Winnipeg's favor.

A potential issue for the Jets, though, is their lack of a backup — great as Hellebuyck is, someone else will need to start 20 games or so.

2. New York Rangers

Current quality: 84th percentile

Looking for: None

There's a strong argument to be made that if you needed one goalie to start a Game 7, the best choice is on the Rangers roster. Igor Shesterkin is one of the absolute best goalies in the world and without a doubt the best playoff performer at the position.

We're giving a slight edge to Hellebuyck, the likely Vezina Trophy winner from the 2023-24 season, especially after a subpar-by-his-standards regular season from Shesterkin. But his postseason run was good enough to almost completely close the gap.

3. New York Islanders

Current quality: 95th percentile

Looking for: None

We're still high on Ilya Sorokin as a franchise-caliber starter despite a slip in his performance last season, and Semyon Varlamov remains one of the very best backups in the league. Both are signed long-term, and both are huge reasons the Islanders have persisted as a playoff team.

4. Nashville Predators

Current quality: 89th percentile

Looking for: None

There are very few goalies who can be consistently counted on to deliver consistently high-end performances year after year. Juuse Saros is one of them, even after a down year.

Saros was better once he and the rest of the Predators settled into Andrew Brunette's system, and the model still views him as a franchise goalie.

The trump card for the Predators is his backup, Yaroslav Askarov. The 22-year-old was picked 11th in 2020 and is widely regarded as one of the best goalie prospects in the world. He gives the Predators serious depth — and an interesting conundrum between the pipes with Saros' contract up at season's end.

5. Boston Bruins

Current quality: 84th percentile

Looking for: None

You can only start one goalie at a time and that fact finally came to a head in Boston. That the Bruins land in the top five and the Senators aren't far behind speaks to how fruitful the Jeremy Swayman and Ullmark combination has been for Boston. Together, the duo would've ranked first here and the Bruins parlayed that strength into a first-round pick.

This is Swayman's net now and he looks like the real deal, a true franchise guy. It remains to be seen how he fares with a full starter's workload, but his resume to date suggests he has what it takes. He looked like a special breed in the playoffs and is just entering his prime.

Behind him now is Joonas Korpisalo, one of the worst-rated goalies in the league. He had one flash-in-the-pan season in 2022-23 and could bounce back to that level behind a structured Bruins defense. But it's a risky bet given his body of work.

6. Vancouver Canucks

Current quality: 72nd percentile

Looking for: None

The biggest reason to believe in the Canucks as a Cup-caliber team is the elite talent they have at the top of each positional group, and Thatcher Demko is a big part of that. He returned to franchise-goalie form in 2023-24 and Vancouver reaped the benefits.

When an injury knocked Demko out of the postseason, Arturs Silovs filled in admirably, looking very much like a long-term backup with the potential for more.

7. Ottawa Senators

Current quality: 83rd percentile

Looking for: None

The Senators ranked relatively high at center, wing and defense; goaltending is their Achilles' heel. All that has changed with their big-time acquisition of Ullmark, one of the league's best goalies. With Ullmark in and Korpisalo out, the Senators took a massive leap from 31st into the top 10.

Trading for Ullmark likely solves a lot of Ottawa's problems, but it doesn't come without risk. Few goalies have delivered more value than Ullmark over the last two seasons, but his subpar body of work before that can't be ignored. He's also never played more than 50 games and may struggle to live up to the hype on a less structured team.

The model loves Ullmark; he was the best bet out there. His track record looks far better than Matt Murray's or Korpisalo's did at the time and the Senators have clearly learned from those blunders. He didn't come at a high cost either.

But goalies are always tricky and those red flags are still worth mentioning. Ottawa should finally have stability between the pipes next season, but it's never a guarantee with goalies.

8. Dallas Stars

Current quality: 67th percentile

Looking for: None

Let's be honest: This was a trying season for Jake Oettinger. Among starters, he ranked 24th in goals saved above expected thanks to a .905 save percentage. We expect a lot better from him.

We hold Oettinger in high regard, and though he bounced back in the playoffs, he needs to return to form next season. Dallas' place in the top 10 and his next contract depend on it.

9. Edmonton Oilers

Current quality: 71st percentile

Looking for: Backup goalie

A few rocky patches in the postseason may have obscured just how good Stuart Skinner played during the regular season. That, combined with his bounce-back performance during the playoffs, should quell some doubt. He's a legit starter on an elite team. Edmonton should still look into adding a quality backup, though; Jack Campbell, for a variety of reasons, doesn't seem like a feasible option.

10. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current quality: 46th percentile

Looking for: None

Reputation goes a long way in goaltending circles, and it's the only thing keeping Tampa Bay in the top 10.

Andrei Vasilevskiy had a tough time after returning from injury, finishing with an .899 save percentage. It was his first season since 2015-16 in which he finished with a below-average save percentage. Some of that was on the team in front of him, but his goals saved above expected was negative, too.

We expect a bounce-back, but Vasilevskiy's season is proof that even the best goalies can be mortal. Add a shaky backup behind him and Tampa Bay slides to the back of the top 10 from its usual spot near the top.

11. St. Louis Blues

Current quality: 64th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Jordan Binnington bounced back from the two worst seasons of his career with a run that should've put him on Vezina ballots. He was the single biggest reason the Blues hung around on the playoff periphery.

His relative lack of track record over the past few years stops him from landing in the franchise tier, but he's far from a problem in St. Louis — and the same goes for quality backup Joel Hofer.

12. New Jersey Devils

Current quality: 52nd percentile

Looking for: None

The Devils' glaring weakness has finally been solved. It would've been nice if they traded for Jacob Markstrom last December, January, February or March — but June is fine. It means the Devils are all in on returning to the top of the Metro.

Markstrom is a solid starter, but he is on the older side which creates some risk. The Devils are set with him and Jake Allen as a tandem and while it may be an above-average one, it's probably not elite. If the rest of the roster can play up to the level of the 2022-23 group, that's more than enough.

13. Carolina Hurricanes

Current quality: 68th percentile

Looking for: None

Both of Carolina's goaltenders qualify as solid time-share options — and neither as a true starting-caliber guy. Injuries have been an issue for Frederik Andersen (50 appearances over the last two seasons), enough for Pyotr Kochetkov to beat him on projected value.

Kochetkov is also 24, which helps his projection, and put up a .911 save percentage in 42 appearances. It's easy to imagine him taking over as Carolina's primary starter permanently.

14. Buffalo Sabres

Current quality: 60th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player

If we had done this exercise last season, Buffalo's position would've been much weaker. The Sabres had a lot of uncertainty in net and a lot riding on Devon Levi being the answer.

Levi wasn't that in his first season, but he showed promise while the Sabres found answers elsewhere. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen took the starting job and never looked back, saving 22 goals above expected — one of the highest marks in the league.

That took some pressure off Levi and now gives Buffalo a lot of stability in a very exciting package. Luukkonen, who's still young himself at 25, can comfortably be the team's starter while Levi develops. He gives Buffalo two blue chips, and in a position as volatile as goaltending, that's a big win.

We still expect Levi to be the top dog one day, but Luukkonen has made things a lot more interesting. His surge toward looking like a capable starter gives Buffalo one of the stronger positions in the league.

15. Florida Panthers

Current quality: 29th percentile

Looking for: None

If this seems low for Sergei Bobrovsky, know that his recent playoff track record actually earned him a few bumps up the ladder. In the regular season, he's been solid but not spectacular. Anthony Stolarz, a pending UFA, outplayed him last season in plenty of ways.

If Stolarz leaves, Spencer Knight is on track to return to the Panthers' roster after a strong finish to his season with AHL Charlotte. Formerly a top prospect, he's still just 23 years old.

16. Vegas Golden Knights

Current quality: 48th percentile

Looking for: None

The Golden Knights are so strong defensively that they don't need a world-beater between the pipes. They proved it with their 2023 Stanley Cup and it remains true today. They have one of the best goaltending duos in the league in Adin Hill and Logan Thompson, with both capable of getting hot at a moment's notice. While neither looks like an elite starter by any means, this system is good enough for Vegas.

17. Colorado Avalanche

Current quality: 51st percentile

Looking for: None

The middle of the rankings seems like the right place for the home of Alexandar Georgiev, who followed up a solid first season in net for the Avs with a below-average one. He brings an element of volatility to Colorado's overall situation.

Justus Annunen, meanwhile, is an interesting backup. He's 24, put up a .928 save percentage in 14 appearances last season and could be a half-decent Plan B if Georgiev hits some dry spells in 2024-25.

18. Montreal Canadiens

Current quality: 69th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Don't let Sam Montembeault's .902 save percentage over the last two seasons fool you — he's been a lot better than that for the Canadiens. Behind a porous blue line, he's managed to save 33.5 goals above expected, which ranks seventh in the league between Swayman and Skinner.

He comes out looking great per the model, but we're a little more hesitant to anoint him an above-average starter. It would help his case if he was able to play an actual starter's workload, but for now, we're comfortable putting him right around average.

19. Utah HC

Current quality: 59th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Connor Ingram solidified his standing as a legit starting goaltender in 2023-24, at times looking capable of dragging his team into the playoff race. He tailed off at the end, as did the Arizona Coyotes, but he's certainly earned a second look at the big job. Behind him is Karel Vejmelka, who's had some strong runs of his own over the last few years. Still, Ingram is the more intriguing option.

20. Los Angeles Kings

Current quality: 39th percentile

Looking for: None

Turning Pierre-Luc Dubois — and everything the Kings traded to acquire him — into the husk of Darcy Kuemper doesn't feel ideal.

Kuemper is the latest answer for Los Angeles' goalie woes, but he doesn't inspire a lot of confidence. The Kings' defensive ability means they don't need an elite option and Kuemper should be serviceable along with David Rittich. That doesn't make him an inspiring option, though.

21. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: 1B goalie

Toronto seems to be committing to Joseph Woll, with reports of a three-year extension being imminent. The AAV could prove to be a bit rich for Woll, but he was also Toronto's most consistent goaltender in 2023-24 (.907 save percentage in 25 starts) and seems to be a better fit than pending UFA Ilya Samsonov.

Woll's track record is short, though, and the Leafs should invest in a quality option to either play behind him or split time.

22. Pittsburgh Penguins

Current quality: 26th percentile

Looking for: None

As far as starting goalies go, Tristan Jarry does not inspire confidence. His numbers aren't great, he's often injured and he struggles to rise to the occasion. The model has him in the 20-25 range which is not ideal for a team with playoff aspirations.

The Penguins needed a legitimate 1B who could push Jarry. Instead, they settled for Alex Nedeljkovic, a familiar face who momentarily stole the starting job last season — mostly as a result of stronger goal support than anything he actually did. They make for a low-upside duo that will cost almost $8 million next year. Yuck.

23. Minnesota Wild

Current quality: 20th percentile

Looking for: None

We've got an interesting situation in Minnesota, where Filip Gustavsson still profiles as a solid starter despite a disappointing 2023-24 and Marc-Andre Fleury drags down their projections significantly. That shouldn't be a surprise — Fleury turns 40 in November and is coming off the worst regular-season save percentage (.895) of his career.

If Gustavsson regains his form from 2022-23, Minnesota will be set. The possibility that he doesn't, combined with Fleury's apparent decline, should be a concern.

24. Seattle Kraken

Current quality: 42nd percentile

Looking for: Franchise player

A midseason injury to Philipp Grubauer thrust Joey Daccord into the Kraken's starter slot and he never looked back. The question is whether he's up for a repeat performance.

Goalies can be tricky and without a track record for Daccord, it's difficult to have a lot of faith in him as a legitimate starter. What hurts more here is Grubauer, who looks washed at 32.

Seattle's duo could work fine, but it's a scary duo to go into a season with. With the team in desperate need of franchise talent, it would be nice to see Daccord build on last season and prove he's the guy to fill that void for Seattle.

25. Washington Capitals

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, backup goalie

The Capitals wouldn't have sniffed the playoffs without Charlie Lindgren, who put up a career-high .911 save percentage and the ninth-most goals saved above expected in the league, winning a score of one-goal games along the way.

On one hand, given his career backup status before 2023-24, there's very real flash-in-the-pan potential here. On the other, he projects to provide starter value. Either way, he's as easy to root for as they come.

26. Anaheim Ducks

Current quality: 15th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

John Gibson seems to have lost whatever goodwill he's earned off a reputation that was built over half a decade ago. It's been a long time since he's shown he can be a playoff-caliber starter. Lukas Dostal took up a bigger chunk of the game share last season and may be the future after outperforming Gibson for the second straight season.

The present is still murky, though, because "outperforming Gibson" is not a high bar in 2024. The Ducks are where they are due to a lack of high-end talent. A miraculous return to form from Gibson or a breakthrough from Dostal is desperately needed.

27. Calgary Flames

Current quality: 14th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Flames fans love 23-year-old Dustin Wolf for good reason — all he's done is play well and win hockey games, from juniors to the AHL. Success in the NHL, though, hasn't yet followed (.893 in 17 appearances). He's about to get an extended shot at holding the starter's net in the wake of Markstrom's departure. In the meantime, Calgary could probably use better insurance than Dan Vladar.

28. San Jose Sharks

Current quality: 24th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Two New Jersey expats don't make for a serious duo. It's worth noting, though, that both Mackenzie Blackwood and Vitek Vanecek have shown some promise at points over the last two seasons. As bad as the Sharks were last year, Blackwood held the fort. As bad as Vanecek was last year, he was legitimately good the year prior.

It's ugly, but it's not as bad as what some other bottom-feeders have going for them.

29. Chicago Blackhawks

Current quality: 10th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent

Credit to Petr Mrazek, who still manages to grade out as a decent time-split option despite spending two seasons behind an absolutely atrocious team. That's less true for Arvid Soderblom, but on balance, goaltending is pretty low on Chicago's list of issues.

30. Detroit Red Wings

Current quality: 16th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player, starting goalie

Over the last two seasons, Alex Lyon and Ville Husso have shown stretches of high-level hockey. They've also shown exactly why they can't be depended on in a bigger role — they buckle under a heavy workload.

That's the dilemma here for the Red Wings: They've got two 1Bs, if that, but no alpha.

31. Philadelphia Flyers

Current quality: 27th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, starting goalie

Samuel Ersson, 24, took over as the Flyers' starting goalie in January when Carter Hart was granted a leave of absence after being charged with sexual assault in connection to an alleged incident that occurred in 2018 in London, Ont. In his first full NHL season, Ersson started 51 games and ran out of gas down the stretch, finishing with an .890 save percentage. He was replaced by KHL import Ivan Fedotov, who didn't fare any better. The Flyers eventually faceplanted their way out of the postseason.

The hope should be that Ersson performs better with more regular rest and that Fedotov adequately adjusts to facing NHL shooters. It'll be quite the challenge.

32. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current quality: 2nd percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, starting goalie

New GM Don Waddell wasn't mincing words about Elvis Merzlikins. "Let's be honest, nobody is going to trade for that contract. Nobody," Waddell told The Athletic's Aaron Portzline last week. "People say, 'Well, why don't you buy out the contract?' It's a six-year buyout, and there are years three, four, five and six, when you might need that cap space."

Waddell's only real option? To hope Merzlikins plays well enough to rehab his reputation. He's put up .876 and .895 save percentages the last two seasons, so … nowhere to go but up. Backup Daniil Tarasov is coming off a .908 save percentage in 2023-24, so things could be worse. Not much worse, but worse.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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The Athletic / Has Sergei Bobrovsky earned a spot in the Hockey Hall of Fame?

By Jesse Granger

Following the Florida Panthers' Game 7 win on Monday to claim the Stanley Cup, captain Aleksander Barkov took his lap around the ice hoisting the trophy high above his head.

When he returned to his teammates at center ice, there were plenty of suitable options to pass the Cup to next. Kyle Okposo was the newest member of the team, but the 17-year NHL veteran had finally reached the pinnacle after years of struggling on poor teams. Defenseman Aaron Ekblad is a cornerstone of the franchise, with the second-most games played in a Florida sweater behind Barkov. Sam Reinhart was fresh off a 57-goal season, and scored the Cup-clinching goal.

All were good options, but every player on the team knew who was getting the Cup next. They scrambled out of the way as Matthew Tkachuk playfully shoved Sergei Bobrovsky forward.

The 35-year-old goalie gave the Cup a quick kiss before lifting it above his head, the sweat still dripping from his hair. Unlike many of his teammates, he didn't let out much of a celebratory scream. Instead, he closed his eyes for a moment, then calmly skated around with a giant smile that signaled joy and relief.

With the Cup finally in hand, it begs the question: Is Sergei Bobrovsky a Hockey Hall of Famer?

There are 44 goalies in the Hockey Hall of Fame. It's notoriously difficult to get in as a netminder, with several eligible deserving goalies still knocking on the door.

In the moment, with Bobrovsky moments removed from chucking his glove and blocker into the air as the final second ticked off the clock, it's easy to say he's a lock to get in. We're often prisoners of the moment, and our most recent memories are of Bobrovsky's last two exemplary playoff runs. He carried Florida to the Cup Final in back-to-back years — and despite a couple rough games after going up 3-0 — Bobrovsky capped it off with a brilliant effort in Game 7. He stopped 23 of the 24 shots he faced on Monday, including a beauty of a pad save on Evan Bouchard's one-timer in the waning minutes.

Let's take a step back and look at Bobrovsky's Hall of Fame resume by the numbers. He's certainly not done, with two years still remaining on the seven-year, $70 million contract that he signed in 2019, but his career resume already stands up well.

We'll start with wins. They aren't the best statistic to analyze individual performance, but rightly or wrongly, goalies are constantly judged by wins and losses. Bobrovsky is 14th all-time with 396 regular-season wins, and needs only 27 more to climb into the top 10. He recorded 36 wins this past season, so he could reasonably be there by this time next year.

Here's how Bobrovsky's career win numbers match up against the goalies already in the Hall of Fame. There are 44 total goalies inducted, but several didn't play in the NHL and others played very few games, so for statistical comparison purposes they aren't relevant — only the 34 goalies with at least 100 NHL games played. Scroll over the bars (or click them if you're reading on the app) to see which Hall of Famer each represents.

Bobrovsky clearly belongs with this group. There are only three goalies with more NHL wins than Bobrovsky who aren't currently in the Hall of Fame: Marc-Andre Fleury, Curtis Joseph and Chris Osgood.

Fleury is a certain Hall of Famer upon retirement. Many believe Joseph's induction is long overdue, and Osgood's case is a closer debate, mainly because he played behind such talented teams. That certainly isn't the case for Bobrovsky, who spent much of his career on a middling Columbus Blue Jackets team that asked him to carry the team on many nights. Still, Bobrovsky already has more wins (396) than Dominik Hasek (389), and last year's inductees Mike Vernon (385) and Tom Barrasso (369).

Prorating for the shortened 2020-21 season, Bobrovsky has averaged 30 wins per season in his five years in Florida. If he continued that for the final two years of his deal, it would take him to sixth all-time, just behind Henrik Lundqvist (459).

Bobrovsky is also tied for 37th all-time with 44 regular-season shutouts. Here's how he stacks up to the other Hall of Fame goalies:

One of the biggest knocks on Bobrovsky's career — especially during his earlier days in Philadelphia and Columbus — was that he didn't perform well enough in the postseason. He went 13-23 as a starter in the first eight years of his career, but over the last several years, he has completely flipped that script. Not only has he piled up 28 playoff wins in the last two seasons alone, but Bobrovsky has put together some of the most memorable postseason performances in recent memory.

Along with this year's miraculous run to the Cup, Bobrovsky was also in net for two of the biggest upsets in NHL history. He backstopped the Blue Jackets squad that took out the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2018-19, following the 62-win regular season. Bobrovsky stopped 109 of 117 shots (.932 save percentage) in four straight wins to end Tampa Bay's season.

Only four years later, he and the Panthers upset the Boston Bruins in the first round after their record-breaking 65-win season. Bobrovsky took over the Florida crease mid-series, and helped the Panthers dig out of a 3-1 series deficit to eliminate the winningest team in regular season history. On paper, these series were major mismatches, but nothing levels the playing field like a hot goalie.

Bobrovsky would already rank 17th amongst the 44 goalies already in the Hall of Fame. Considering that the Panthers are the current betting favorites to win the 2024-24 Stanley Cup, he's in a good position to add to that figure before he hangs up the skates.

Now, let's dig into some individual numbers. These aren't always the easiest to compare across eras — where goal-scoring and save percentage vary dramatically — but will give more context to Bobrovsky's career.

Since he entered the league in 2010-11, Bobrovsky's .914 save percentage doesn't exactly stand out. It ranks 15th in the league among the 41 goalies with at least 300 games over that span. That rather unimpressive figure is mostly due to a couple of really poor statistical years in Florida (2019-20 and 2022-23). Still, his numbers stack up well against other Hall of Fame goalies (this is admittedly not the best way to compare these goalies, but it's one of the most-used stats to grade the position so it's worth mentioning).

Many Hall of Famers are defined by consistency throughout their career. Lundqvist is a perfect example. He put up eight separate seasons with at least 20 goals saved above expected, earned Vezina Trophy votes for 10 straight years, and was a finalist for the award five times. He leads all goalies with 277.94 GSAx since the stat was recorded in 2007-08.

Bobrovsky's career isn't that, and there's nothing wrong with that. His athletic, explosive style leads to higher highs, and lower lows. That's reflected in his statistics and his accolades. Bobrovsky has 76.12 GSAx over his career (good enough for sixth place, but well below Lundqvist's numbers). That's because his incredible years — such as 2016-17, when he stopped 45.1 GSAx — are partially canceled out by slumps like in 2019-2021, when he stopped 23.4 goals below expected.

This season is only Bobrovsky's third time as a Vezina finalist. The differentiator is that when Bobrovsky shines, he shines brighter than most — even compared to other greats. Despite having a four-year stretch without receiving a single vote for the Vezina, he still stacks up well with the all-time greats in terms of total Vezina votes — thanks to his gaudy first-place vote tally. This chart is a compilation of every Vezina vote since the award criteria changed in 1981.

Vezina votes since 1982

1

Martin Brodeur

839

96

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 27, 2024

100
60
2
Dominik Hasek
739
113
51
22
3
Patrick Roy
716
91
66
62
4
Ed Belfour
387
55
27
30
5
Pekka Rinne
330
33
45
27
6
Andrei Vasilevskiy
320
43
24
32
7
Tom Barrasso
307
28
45
32
8
Henrik Lundqvist
300
30
36
41
9
Grant Fuhr
286
35
26
34
10
Sergei Bobrovsky
267
43
13
9
11
Braden Holtby
261
31
32
10
12
Roberto Luongo
258
26
33
29
13
Connor Hellebuyck
257
31
29
18
14
Tim Thomas
241
40
10
8
15
John Vanbiesbrouck
238
28
22
30
16
Tuukka Rask
232
27
28
14

17

Miikka Kiprusoff

222

32

16

16

18

Carey Price

217

31

10

31

19

Evgeni Nabokov

190

19

27

17

20

Pete Peeters

158

31

0

3

Bobrovsky will add to that total during Thursday night's NHL Awards show in Las Vegas. The only question is, how much? Over the last four years, the third-place goalie has received between 31 and 36 points, which would move Bobrovsky ahead of Grant Fuhr for ninth all-time. He should approach Lundqvist's 300-point mark, and if he gets even a single first-place vote, he would break a tie with Andrei Vasilevskiy for the fifth-most ever.

Bobrovsky also has two Vezina wins already, something that has been done by only five other goalies since 1981 — all of whom except Boston's Tim Thomas are in the Hall of Fame.

Multiple Vezina winners since 1981

Dominik Hasek

6

Martin Brodeur

4

Patrick Roy

3

Ed Belfour

2

Tim Thomas

2

Sergei Bobrovsky

2

Monday night's Cup win gave Bobrovsky the one thing Lundqvist never won, though. He joined the incredibly small list of goalies with multiple Vezina trophies and a Stanley Cup, and likely cemented his eventual place in the Hall of Fame.

The numbers suggest he is certainly deserving of an enshrinement. Yes, he's had more poor seasons than you'd like from a Hall of Famer, but he also hasn't had the benefit of playing most of his career on talent-rich teams, like many already in the Hall.

Outside of the numbers, Bobrovsky's case only strengthens. A player's Hall of Fame worthiness also includes their impact on the sport — however arbitrarily that is determined — and Bobrovsky has made plenty of impact.

He is the winningest Russian goalie in NHL history. His international play is limited, but he did lead Russia to a gold medal in the 2014 World Championships in Belarus, and a silver medal the following year in Czechia.

More importantly, he helped to inspire the current generation of Russian netminders that have recently taken over the NHL. Vasilevskiy, Igor Shesterkin and Ilya Sorokin all play an athletic, explosive style of goaltending very similar to Bobrovsky's. That wasn't always the case for Russian goalies who preceded him. Greats such as Evgeni Nabokov and Nikolai Khabibulin played a stand-up style that's tough to compare to today's game, but both relied more on positioning and less on sheer athleticism.

Bobrovsky's legacy is notable, and he still has time to add to it. He was the sixth-oldest goalie in the NHL this season and will turn 36 in September, but has shown no signs of slowing down. His legendary work ethic and exceptional flexibility may allow him to play well into his late 30s, but even as it currently stands, Monday night's win could be enough to make him a Hall of Famer.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316161 Websites

The Athletic / Fifty years ago, the Sabres drafted a player who didn't exist: The legend of Taro Tsujimoto

Ian Mendes and Matthew Fairburn

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story stated all members of the Sabres front office at the time are deceased. Former coach Floyd Smith is still alive. We regret the error.

Josh Tsujimoto usually wears a No. 74 Sabres jersey sporting his last name if he attends a Buffalo home game at KeyBank Center.

It was a gift from his father, Paul, a few years ago and meant to serve as a tangible souvenir of a family legend that spans five decades. But there are nights when Josh isn't the only one wearing a No. 74 sweater at a Sabres game. From time to time, you'll see the odd Tsujimoto jersey sprinkled amongst the crowd in Buffalo.

"You go to a Sabres game and you're bound to see a couple of Taro jerseys," says John Boutet, chairman of the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame. "Some people have the correct number, which is 13. He was given 13. Some people have 74 because that's the year it was."

The jersey is a cult classic because the legend of Taro Tsujimoto isn't just a family story shared by the father and son.

Instead, it's an inside joke that has been kept alive by Sabres fans for 50 years.

"Some people recognize it," Josh says when asked about his jersey. "A lot of out-of-town people will come to a game and they don't know the backstory. So I'll tell them, 'He's not real. But he's got a Wikipedia page.'"

Taro Tsujimoto was drafted by the Buffalo Sabres in the 11th round of the 1974 draft.

The team's official media guide still lists Tsujimoto alongside the other draft picks from 1974. He's noted as the 183rd overall selection in the draft, a centerman taken from the Tokyo Katanas.

But the NHL's official guide and record book does not recognize Tsujimoto. His name has been stricken from historical draft records for a very simple reason: Taro Tsujimoto never existed.

The 1974 NHL draft was unlike any other in league history.

The NHL was in the midst of trying to fend off the rival World Hockey Association, which had already poached several of their notable stars. NHL officials were wary that WHA teams would use the results of their draft to try to lure players to their league. So the NHL hatched a unique plan: They would hold the 1974 draft completely veiled in secrecy.

Over a three-day window — starting on May 28, 1974 — teams would select players via a private telephone call, with the 18 general managers phoning in to NHL president Clarence Campbell at the league headquarters in Montreal to record their pick.

Each team had no clue what other clubs were doing, forcing Campbell to re-read the selections each time a team was drafting a player. The first day alone took eight hours, and the draft was scheduled to go as many rounds as general managers chose to draft.

The process became so meticulous and tedious that several teams started skipping picks altogether.

The Kansas City Scouts — despite being a brand new expansion team — opted to skip their eighth-round selection.

The California Golden Seals punted on their ninth-round pick.

Josh Tsujimoto wears his No. 74 Tsujimoto jersey whenever he attends Sabres home games at KeyBank Center. (Photo courtesy of Josh Tsujimoto)

Both Vancouver and Detroit passed on choosing a player in the 10th round.

But the Buffalo Sabres didn't want to just skip their pick in the 11th round. Instead, they wanted to send a message to league officials that the draft process was needlessly drawn out and exhausting.

The Sabres had four people handling the draft: General manager Punch Imlach, coach Floyd Smith, scouting director John Andersen and public relations director Paul Wieland. Wieland explained in his 2019 book, "Taro Lives! Confessions of the Sabres Hoaxer" that he was there to gather information on the players drafted but he also had eyes on getting into hockey management. Imlach wanted to help him get there.

Imlach walked into the Sabres' draft suite on the second day of the draft already fed up with the process. As Wieland recalled in his book, Imlach said, "What the hell can we do to piss off Campbell?"

Andersen suggested drafting a player nobody knew about so teams had to comb through their lists to find him. Then Wieland jumped in and said, "We should draft someone who doesn't even exist … just make up a name from some place that no one would expect. Like Japan for example."

Imlach thought about it and said, "Japanese? What the hell. Why not?"

In the spring of 1974, Paul Tsujimoto was a 21-year-old college student back in his family home in Elma, N.Y.

He distinctly recalls being called downstairs from his bedroom for dinner one night when his father relayed the story of a mysterious phone call he had received earlier in the day.

"He said someone with the Buffalo Sabres called him on the phone and asked him a couple of questions," says Paul. "They wanted to know a common name for a boy in Japan. And they wanted to know what the Japanese word for a sabre was."

Paul's father — Joshua Tsujimoto — answered the questions.

He told the caller that Taro was a common name for a boy in Japan. And that the Japanese equivalent of a sabre was called a katana.

The idea to phone the Tsujimoto household was the brainchild of Wieland. When traveling back and forth as a college student, Wieland would drive by Tsujimoto Garden and Gifts, the family's general store. That's how he came up with the fictitious last name for the draft pick.

Wieland used the answers from Joshua to help fill out an elaborate backstory that included fake stats in a press release. According to the Sabres, Tsujimoto had a modest 15 goals and 10 assists for the Tokyo Katanas in his draft year.

The Tsujimotos and the four people in the Sabres' draft room were the only ones aware of the gag.

"We had no idea what they were doing until we found out about the draft a couple of days later," says Paul. "Then we said, 'Ahhh. That's why they called.'"

Wieland and Imlach decided to see how far they could take it. When the team went to training camp in St. Catherines, Wieland roped in team trainer Rip Simonick, who built a locker stall complete with equipment and a Tsujimoto jersey with No. 13 on the back.

Danny Gare, the Sabres' second-round pick in the 1974 draft, remembers being at rookie camp and everyone wondering who Tsujimoto was and when he might show up. The closer the Sabres got to main camp, the more the intrigue intensified.

"They were making cuts and getting ready for main camp and we hadn't seen him," Gare says. "There were a lot of discussion like, 'Where is this guy?' There were rumors he had trouble getting his immigration papers and all of that. It was a good prank, man. It was quite a thing."

Even the owners, Seymour and Northrup Knox, weren't in on the joke. They were asking Imlach and Wieland every day at training camp if Tsujimoto had arrived. Wieland explained in his book that Imlach would just say he "wasn't sure if the kid would make it this year, but remember we have his rights in case he decides to turn pro in the future."

"You had to think this guy was real," Boutet says. "Who would go through that length to play a practical joke? Well, I guess Paul would."

It probably helped that the Sabres had a strong draft that year. Gare and Lee Fogolin, the team's top two picks, played more than 800 NHL games. Gare once led the NHL in goals. Even Derek Smith, taken one round before the Sabres drafted Tsujimoto, ended up playing 335 games and collecting 194 points.

"I remember later playing on a line with Derek Smith and Tony McKegney," Gare says. "We had a great line. I scored 56 the one year and we were going out afterward to celebrate the season. Derek Smith said to me, 'Yeah, Tickets, you'll be remembered for leading the league in goals. I'll be remembered for being the draft pick before Taro Tsujimoto.'"

The whole Sabres organization ended up becoming quite fond of Wieland's pranks. Each April 1, Wieland would come up with a fake story to send out in a press release. One year, he typed an entire release to announce that the Sabres would be switching to plastic ice in their arena. A local television news reporter fell for the story and ran it on air. He didn't talk to Wieland for years after the fact.

Gare still laughs at that one, because he's now a partner at Can-Ice, a synthetic ice company in Canada. Wieland was ahead of his time without even realizing it.

"He had a likable spirit about him," Gare says. "He always had a comedic side talking to him."

"Paul Wieland was such a character. I got to know him a bit over the years. A completely creative, zany guy who was so colorful," adds Paul. "And he always had some out-of-the-box ideas."

Wieland's pranks were only part of his charm. He was innovative on the team's broadcast, came up with the team's mascot, Sabretooth, who is still around today and is the reason the Sabres sing the Canadian and United States National anthems before games. His impact on the franchise was enough for Boutet to push for Wieland's induction into the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame this fall.

The NHL wasn't as enamored with Wieland's jokes. Then-NHL president Clarence Campbell fell for the plastic ice joke when, according to Wieland's book, he was quoted by the Canadian Press supporting the Sabres' attempt to keep the league on the cutting edge of technology. So it's no surprise Campbell didn't have a lot of patience for the Taro Tsujimoto joke once the league caught wind of it. The Tsujimoto pick was eventually removed from the official record and the pick entry is now just invalid.

But that didn't stop the legend from living on in Buffalo. There were bumper stickers and trading cards. Some fans would show up to The Buffalo Memorial Auditorium with big signs that said, "Taro says …" with different endings for each game.

"I used to read them all the time because they were clever," Gare says.

Wieland used to say that his quirky jokes were a way to put a small market team on the map and show off the city and franchise's sense of humor. In a bigger market like Toronto, New York or Montreal, Boutet doesn't think something like the Tsujimoto prank would have taken off in the same way.

"Buffalo people are different," Boutet says. "We get it. We're OK to laugh at each other. This was the perfect town to do it in."

Paul Tsujimoto says he first told his son Josh — who is named after his grandfather — about the legend of Taro when he was about 8 years old.

"It was an inside joke with the family for as long as I can remember," says Josh. "I remember my dad bringing it up when I was little. I didn't realize how many people knew about this until I got older."

Paul owns one Taro Tsujimoto rookie card that was gifted to him by a former employer who was able to track one down.

The legend of Taro Tsujimoto isn't just a family story shared by the Tsujimoto family. It's an inside joke that has been kept alive by Sabres fans for 50 years. (Photo courtesy of Josh Tsujimoto)

In 2011, the Panini trading card company decided to print a small run of Taro Tsujimoto rookie cards as part of their 2010-11 rookie set. The card lists Tsujimoto's alleged birthdate — March 15, 1953 — and posts his height (5 feet 9) and weight (165 pounds).

The back of the card featured a short biography that leaned into Tsujimoto's curious backstory:

"In Buffalo, it's not Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio? It's Where Have You Been, Taro Tsujimoto? The first Japanese player ever selected in the NHL Draft, the Sabres tabbed the mysterious prospect in the 11th round back in 1974. The Canadiens, who had hoped to steal him later in the draft, were rumored to have worked out a deal for the diminutive center that would have sent Jacques Lemaire to Buffalo. Instead, the Sabres held on to his rights and continue to anticipate his arrival. To this day, whispers of his exploits with the Tokyo Katanas stir up the fans at the HSBC Arena, where the faithful often are heard to chant 'We Want Taro!'"

Panini received the approval of both the NHL and NHL Players' Association to produce that Tsujimoto card. An NHLPA staffer even assisted Panini in tracking down an era-appropriate photo to use on the front of the card. But as for the identity of the man posing as Taro Tsujimoto on that trading card, nobody seems to know exactly who it is.

"I have no idea who that guy is on the card," says Paul with a laugh.

One Tsujimoto card was placed in every 20 boxes of that run, making it an elusive card to obtain. The rarity of that card is the perfect reflection of the mystery around Taro Tsujimoto that has endured for 50 years. And it was all courtesy of the creative mind of Wieland.

"He created a folk hero is what he did," says Gare. "It's crazy that it still has legs 50 years later."

"It's pretty neat. As time goes on, the younger fans don't know about it, but the story persists," adds Josh. "And I like that the story continues on. It's a fun way to remember my grandpa and Mr. Wieland."

The Athletic LOADED: 06.27.2024

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ESPN / NHL free agency 2024: How all 32 teams can earn an A+ grade - ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

The NHL free agent signing period begins Monday at noon ET, and general managers around the league have already begun the process of reshaping their rosters for 2024-25.

That included the trades in the past week, with Jacob Markstrom headed to the New Jersey Devils and the Los Angeles Kings and Washington Capitals swapping Pierre-Luc Dubois for Darcy Kuemper, followed by goalie Linus Ullmark being traded by the Boston Bruins to the Ottawa Senators.

Every front office is trying to maximize its chances at reaching the Stanley Cup playoffs and lifting the most famous trophy in sports next spring. Here's how each of them can nail this offseason and the cap space that each team has, as well as a look at key players hitting restricted and unrestricted free agency.

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 Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space as of June 26, per Cap Friendly.

Jump to a team:

ANA | 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 | UTA

VAN | VGK | WSH | WPG

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Boston Bruins

2023-24 result: Lost in the second round

Key players hitting UFA: F Jake DeBrusk, F Danton Heinen, D Derek Forbort, D Matt Grzelcyk

Key players hitting RFA: F Jesper Boqvist, G Jeremy Swayman

Cap space: $21,599,166

What they should do: The Bruins' first priority is signing Swayman to a long-term deal and solidifying his position as their No. 1 goaltender. Getting that done required trading Linus Ullmark first, though. Boston took care of that by sending Ullmark to Ottawa this week for a package including goaltender Joonas Korpisalo. Removing Ullmark's $5 million cap hit for next season -- and replacing it with just 75% of Korpisalo's $4 million salary -- provides GM Don Sweeney space to give Swayman the raise he deserves. And Boston should benefit from Korpisalo in a backup spot, where he has been more comfortable in his career than as a starter.

Now, the Bruins can focus on boosting their forward depth, particularly at center. Steven Stamkos, Elias Lindholm and Alex Wennberg are all potential targets who could fill that role well in Boston. Re-signing DeBrusk is a great in-house option for Sweeney to get over the line quickly, and then Boston can fill in around the edges with veteran skaters such as Tyler Toffoli or Viktor Arvidsson. If there's cash left on the books, expect Sweeney to spy some blue-line help from third-pairing possibilities such as Shayne Gostisbehere or Brenden Dillon.

Buffalo Sabres

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Zemgus Girgensons, F Victor Olofsson, G Eric Comrie

Key players hitting RFA: F Peyton Krebs, D Jacob Bryson, G Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen

Cap space: $23,518,930

What they should do: Buffalo has a new (old?) coach in Lindy Ruff, and he'll be working closely with GM Kevyn Adams to figure out how the Sabres can finally return to the playoffs in 2024-25. An easy win would be re-signing Luukkonen to establish him as Buffalo's starter; when Devon Levi faltered last season, Luukkonen took his opportunity to shine, and he deserves to be rewarded with a solid raise. Levi could still be a viable backup option for Buffalo, which would close the door on a return for Comrie.

The Sabres could use depth on the wing as well, especially if Olofsson and/or Girgensons are out the door in free agency. Adams should be looking to replace not just the on-ice skills, but also some of the leadership the Sabres lost when Kyle Okposo was traded in March. Arvidsson, Jonathan Marchessault and Tanner Pearson can fill spots in the lineup and provide a strong veteran presence in Buffalo's room. Plus, there's playoff (and championship) pedigree there to inspire the Sabres. One center option for Buffalo to target might be Wennberg; he was excellent as a third-liner for the New York Rangers this season and could serve in a similar role in Buffalo.

Detroit Red Wings

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Christian Fischer, F Patrick Kane, F David Perron, F Daniel Sprong, D Shayne Gostisbehere, G James Reimer

Key players hitting RFA: F Lucas Raymond, F Joe Veleno, D Moritz Seider

Cap space: $32,767,360

What they should do: Detroit won't truly be able to assess its free agent/trade options until Raymond and Seider are locked into new contracts. They are cornerstone players for the Red Wings, and coming to terms with both burgeoning stars will eat into Detroit's available cap space.

Once Raymond and Seider are done, the Red Wings will want to round out their top-six forward depth by either re-signing Kane and/or Perron or focusing on the free agent market, where Jonathan Marchessault would be an ideal replacement. Detroit might also be aggressively chasing a trade for Martin Necas' rights or the recently extended Kaapo Kakko.

The Red Wings' defense has been a problem in recent years, so adding some punch there is another priority. Depending on how GM Steve Yzerman wants to invest, the Red Wings could go more low-key (and potentially more physical) with a player such as Joel Edmundson or Matt Dumba. Detroit would be swinging for the fences, though, if it went after Brett Pesce or even Chris Tanev.

If Yzerman believes his group is only one or two players away from being a contender, then pursuing those latter options makes sense. The Red Wings are fortunate to have decent draft capital, and those assets come in handy when Yzerman starts really working the phones.

Florida Panthers

2023-24 result: Won the Stanley Cup

Key players hitting UFA: F Nick Cousins, F Sam Reinhart, F Vladimir Tarasenko, D Oliver Ekman-Larsson, D Brandon Montour

Key players hitting RFA: F Anton Lundell

Cap space: $19,516,666

What they should do: Florida's core is basically intact save for two important players: Reinhart and Montour. Both are pending UFAs and will be looking for paydays reflective of their being part of back-to-back Stanley Cup Final runs. Can GM Bill Zito find a way to make that work on the Panthers' books while knowing Lundell needs a new deal? It'll be tough. Expect Zito to make a hard decision there and prioritize Reinhart over Montour. Florida could target other (potentially cheaper) free agent blueliners such as Nikita Zadorov, Tyson Barrie or Derek Forbort.

The Panthers' success will make them a desirable landing spot for most free agents. If Reinhart remains, Florida will have retained the majority of its top-tier scoring, leaving room for depth additions such as Patrick Kane, Matt Duchene or Chandler Stephenson. The key, though, is whether Reinhart is sticking around, and at what number. It's not likely Florida would find a more valuable top-six forward via trade anyway, so working with Reinhart ASAP on an extension is in the Panthers' best interest.

Montreal Canadiens

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Tanner Pearson

Key players hitting RFA: D Arber Xhekaj

Cap space: $9,413,750

What they should do: Montreal has stayed committed to a slow and steady rebuilding process centered on players within the system, and that doesn't project to be changing anytime soon. Therefore, getting Xhekaj signed to a new deal is atop GM Kent Hughes' itinerary. The Canadiens have two other RFAs -- Jesse Ylonen and Justin Barron -- who will require consideration, but neither has mirrored Xhekaj in showing they're ready to be full-time NHLers.

Montreal will also be adding defenseman Lane Hutson into their lineup this season after the Boston University product signed an entry-level contract in April. The Canadiens are deep with left-shot blueliners, so Hughes would be wise to target some right-side help in free agency. Alexandre Carrier and Henri Jokiharju are mid-20s skaters who could be relatively inexpensive additions.

Again, it hasn't been Hughes' MO to go wild making big trades or supplementing the Canadiens' strong young core with flashy signings. Montreal's build will continue to be gradual.

Ottawa Senators

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Dominik Kubalik

Key players hitting RFA: F Boris Katchouk, F Shane Pinto, D Erik Brannstrom

Cap space: $11,300,953

What they should do: Ottawa captain Brady Tkachuk said it best in April when he lamented how the Senators "[hadn't] done a thing" in the six years he has been with the team. That has to change -- immediately. Ottawa has done the steady rebuild thing. It didn't pan out. There's a new coach and front office in place to get the needle moving this season, so credit to Ottawa for not wasting time.

The Senators' goaltending had been in flux until Ottawa shipped underperforming Joonas Korpisalo to Boston for bona fide No. 1 Linus Ullmark. That's a significant boost for the Senators' crease, and they would be wise to also address another key area: their defense.

Ottawa must upgrade its blue line, and the Senators were reportedly interested in doing that before the last deadline with Chris Tanev. Ottawa cannot expect Thomas Chabot and Jakob Chychrun to be vastly improved (and the Senators are open to offers on either player too). Regardless of how, the Senators' back end needs outside help. Beyond that, Ottawa will undoubtedly re-sign Shane Pinto and could look at free agents like Warren Foegele or Daniel Sprong to fill in some gaps.

Tampa Bay Lightning

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Anthony Duclair, F Tyler Motte, F Steven Stamkos, D Haydn Fleury

Key players hitting RFA: F Logan Brown

Cap space: $5,335,000

What they should do: Does Tampa Bay bring back Stamkos? That's the starting point here. Stamkos is the Lightning's captain and a top-line skater; he will leave a void in both the lineup and the leadership realm if he departs as a free agent.

GM Julien BriseBois might have no choice but to let it happen given limited cap resources. BriseBois could try making room by trading Conor Sheary (and his $2 million cap hit) after an unproductive season, but even that might not be enough to keep Stamkos and make the other upgrades needed to be competitive.

The Lightning would benefit from an upgrade at backup goaltender so the load doesn't fall so heavily on Andrei Vasilevskiy. Anthony Stolarz excelled in that role for Florida this past season, and he could be a cheap option for Tampa Bay in free agency. The Lightning would also ideally want to keep Duclair and have some cash to add a depth defenseman (such as TJ Brodie or Nikita Zaitsev). The Lightning's future hinges greatly on whether they can free up some space by trading current players (but what else is new?) Expect BriseBois to use every tool available to keep Tampa Bay in position to contend.

Toronto Maple Leafs

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Tyler Bertuzzi, F Max Domi, D TJ Brodie, D Joel Edmundson, D John Klingberg, D Ilya Lyubushkin, G Ilya Samsonov

Key players hitting RFA: F Noah Gregor, F Nicholas Robertson, D Timothy Liljegren

Cap space: $18,830,333

What they should do: Toronto needs a No. 1 goaltender. Is that Joseph Woll? Given Woll's relative inexperience and disappointing injury history -- coupled with the Leafs being in win-now mode -- he's likely not Toronto's best option. Neither is Samsonov, so don't expect a return.

The goalie free agent class is sparse -- there's Laurent Brossoit or maybe Cam Talbot for the Leafs to potentially pursue. GM Brad Treliving would have more options on the trade front, though. Juuse Saros could be ideal if Nashville doesn't extend him post-July 1, and perhaps Filip Gustavsson could benefit from a fresh start.

Beyond goaltending, the Leafs will be in on the likes of Chris Tanev and Brett Pesce to aid a blue line that failed Toronto in its biggest moments last season. Liljegren is another factor on the back end; he has had an inconsistent career with the Leafs, and Treliving might decide it's time to move on and make way for other skaters to take on bigger roles.

Re-signing Bertuzzi and Domi should be among the easiest decisions for Treliving. They both want to return and project to fit in seamlessly with new coach Craig Berube's style of play. Oh, and don't anticipate fireworks in the Mitch Marner situation -- Treliving would rather keep Marner than trade him, and there's another year left for the two sides to figure something out.

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

Carolina Hurricanes

2023-24 result: Lost in the second round

Key players hitting UFA: F Jake Guentzel, F Jordan Martinook, F Teuvo Teravainen, D Brett Pesce, D Brady Skjei

Key players hitting RFA: F Jack Drury, F Seth Jarvis, F Martin Necas, D Dylan Coghlan

Cap space: $23,874,167

What they should do: Carolina's offseason program hinges on one contract getting done, and it's for Jarvis. The pending RFA has vastly outperformed his expiring entry-level deal and will be in line for a well-deserved pay raise. New GM Eric Tulsky should be zeroed in on how to keep Jarvis happy with the Hurricanes for years to come. Until Tulsky knows what Jarvis' number is, it'll be difficult for Carolina to tap into the free agent market.

One move Tulsky can make sooner than later is moving Martin Necas (either with a sign-and-trade or simply swapping his rights). Necas had a down season and is arbitration-eligible, but that wouldn't totally limit the Hurricanes' possibilities in orchestrating something for the versatile forward. Tulsky has to be cognizant of hoarding cap space for the current extensions, particularly Martinook's or Teravainen's, as well as future ones, because Carolina's blue line and goaltending is aging and will need reinforcements.

Expect Tulsky to spy some inexpensive depth on the wing, perhaps in a Jack Roslovic or Luke Kunin.

Columbus Blue Jackets

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: None

Key players hitting RFA: F Yegor Chinakhov, F Kirill Marchenko, F Cole Sillinger, F Alexandre Texier, D Jack Bean

Cap space: $21,675,000

What they should do: Columbus has already undergone seismic change in the past month with the insertion of new GM Don Waddell and the firing of head coach Pascal Vincent (with no successor yet named). It wouldn't make sense for Waddell to start tinkering too much with the Blue Jackets' roster until a bench boss is in place to be part of the process. However, there are decisions those parties will eventually have to make.

First is what to do with Elvis Merzlikins. He and Daniil Tarasov limped through last season, and Merzlikins could absolutely benefit from a fresh start elsewhere. Columbus might look for a veteran netminder such as Cam Talbot to come in and give them a good season or two while they figure out the future. But something must be done to upgrade Columbus' battery in the crease.

The Blue Jackets will then parse through a landslide of pending RFAs to figure out what help they might require from the outside. Marchenko and Sillinger in particular are key members of Columbus' future, and locking them in would be a good start for Waddell. Bean is another burgeoning young talent whom the Blue Jackets can build around.

Columbus can then explore some defensive changes, perhaps through trading Adam Boqvist and targeting a free agent with more experience (Matt Roy or Tyson Barrie could add leadership and contribute in third-pairing slots). And what of a Patrik Laine trade? That's on the radar as well. It could be difficult to execute given Laine's inconsistent performances the past few seasons, but Waddell will try to find him a fresh start.

New Jersey Devils

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Tomas Nosek, G Kaapo Kahkonen

Key players hitting RFA: F Dawson Mercer

Cap space: $15,273,603

What they should do: New Jersey settled its first offseason task in naming Sheldon Keefe as the team's new head coach. Now, what will the Devils look like under Keefe's reign?

New Jersey absolutely had to solidify its goaltending and did so by acquiring Jacob Markstrom from Calgary last week. That's a significant upgrade for the Devils over Jake Allen -- who was serviceable last season taking over from Vitek Vanecek -- and he'll be a fine backup now for Markstrom. New Jersey's goalie woes have been a serious issue over the past two seasons, and having a bona fide, experienced No. 1 in Markstrom should put the Devils in good position to get back into the playoff picture.

However, there is more work to do. GM Tom Fitzgerald has said being "tougher to play against" is a priority for New Jersey, and that should play into his personnel decisions. The Devils are reportedly working hard to reel in Brett Pesce, and Brendan Dillon would fit that bill on the back end too. Middle-six skaters such as William Carrier or Jordan Martinook are winners with some edge who can elevate the Devils' attack by supplementing their excellent young core.

Speaking of which, Fitzgerald will also be grappling with a possible extension for Mercer. The 22-year-old has produced consecutive 20-plus-goal seasons and should at least be in the mix for a bridge deal. New Jersey doesn't need a major overhaul (other than the one they already made in net). Fitzgerald can be scrupulous in how he improves the Devils' depth.

New York Islanders

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Cal Clutterbuck, D Sebastian Aho, D Mike Reilly

Key players hitting RFA: F Oliver Wahlstrom

Cap space: $5,812,500

What they should do: New York has two key players on its wish list: a top-six forward, and a top-four defenseman. What the Islanders don't have is much cap space to acquire either. That puts New York firmly on the trade path. If it could leverage Jean-Gabriel Pageau (along with his $5 million cap hit), it would allow the team to free up some space to sign Anthony Duclair (who has a history with head coach Patrick Roy) or even Jake DeBrusk. Identifying targets for the Islanders does hinge on whether they can clear space; GM Lou Lamoriello will need to be active.

The Isles also need to better the blue-line group. Brady Skjei or Nikita Zadorov would be ideal additions to the back end (although they're potentially pricey options). Would Lamoriello reunite with Nikita Zaitsev (a steady stay-at-home defender when on his game) or go for a low-key veteran like Matt Dumba? Again, the dollars and cents will play a significant role. Lamoriello will also be looking at the Islanders' own. Wahlstrom has struggled in recent seasons and could be shopped, while Aho might be a cheap(er) choice to keep for blue-line depth.

New York Rangers

2023-24 result: Lost in the conference finals

Key players hitting UFA: F Jack Roslovic, F Alex Wennberg

Key players hitting RFA: D Ryan Lindgren, D Braden Schneider

Cap space: $12,848,476

What they should do: New York's short-term decision-making is tied to a long-term extension for goaltender Igor Shesterkin. The Rangers' starter has one year left on his deal, but knowing Shesterkin will take up a significant chunk of cap space will influence how GM Chris Drury moves through the offseason. Drury already got to work last week, placing forward Barclay Goodrow on waivers, a sign Drury won't be standing pat when it comes to restructuring the Rangers for this coming year. Drury also inked Kaapo Kakko to a one-year extension and could use him as a trade chip.

What New York really needs is the top-flight winger it was lacking down the stretch. Coach Peter Laviolette tried a number of right-wing options with Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider that didn't pan out. Depending on how Drury views the Rangers' own impending free agents -- specifically Wennberg, a key third-line center -- would New York go big trying to land Sam Reinhart or Jake Guentzel? Jake DeBrusk could be a match, too, and the Rangers are interested in signing Patrick Kane.

If New York believes its window is wide open, every possibility should be on the table. Drury has time to clear cap space as required and prioritize adding (or re-signing) players who can get New York to the Stanley Cup Final.

Philadelphia Flyers

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Denis Gurianov

Key players hitting RFA: D Egor Zamula

Cap space: $803,572

What they should do: Philadelphia knows there's a looming contract negotiation with Travis Konecny before his current deal expires next season. If the Flyers want to get Konecny locked in soon, it will dictate how much they do in the coming weeks. Philadelphia's defensive depth is weak -- especially with veterans Marc Staal and Erik Johnson hitting the open market -- so GM Danny Briere will be spying for replacements. Ilya Lyubushkin, Tyson Barrie or Calvin de Haan would suffice as second- or third-pairing choices with some special teams potential.

There's been buzz around the Flyers possibly trading one of Morgan Frost, Scott Laughton or Rasmus Ristolainen. Philadelphia would in that case target reinforcements (depending on what they receive back in various deals). Bottom-six skaters such as Sean Monahan or Daniel Sprong could slide in nicely to a lineup spot. Philadelphia also has its own wild card in the mix now that Matvei Michkov -- whom the Flyers selected seventh overall in the 2023 draft -- has officially left the KHL and is heading to North America. How will he transition into the NHL game and a potential top-six role for the Flyers? We'll be watching to find out.

Pittsburgh Penguins

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: None

Key players hitting RFA: F Emil Bemstrom, D Pierre-Olivier Joseph

Cap space: $10,745,658

What they should do: Pittsburgh was too top-heavy, too slow and too old when it bowed out of postseason contention for the second straight year. Now is the time to pivot. The Penguins have to get younger, especially with their scoring depth (which is lacking, to put it mildly). Jake DeBrusk, Anthony Duclair or Jack Roslovic could help there and wouldn't break the bank. Chandler Stephenson is a veteran option down the middle with a winning pedigree.

The Penguins' goaltending is (still) in a precarious position. Tristan Jarry is the clear No. 1 given his contract status and Pittsburgh re-upped Alex Nedeljkovic on a two-year deal to keep him from hitting free agency. That tandem wasn't the Penguins' answer in 2023-24, though. Will upstart Joel Blomqvist get in some reps? Will GM Kyle Dubas make other goaltending-related moves?

Pittsburgh might want to allocate resources to its blue line, too. And open extension talks with Sidney Crosby, or even Marcus Pettersson. One way or another, there will be a busy summer ahead.

Washington Capitals

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Max Pacioretty

Key players hitting RFA: F Connor McMichael

Cap space: $3,735,000

What they should do: Washington wanted to become more dynamic, particularly up front. And the Capitals had cap space to make it happen. Even so, Washington sent jaws dropping when it traded for Pierre-Luc Dubois last week, adding the big forward from L.A. with seven years remaining (at $8.5 million per season) on an eight-year pact he inked last summer. The move made sense for Washington on several levels -- the Capitals got younger overall, and it provided needed center depth (Nicklas Backstrom's future is still in flux, after all). The trade also allowed Washington to dump underperforming goaltender Darcy Kuemper (and his $5.25 million cap hit) on the Kings. Onward to other business.

It's likely Washington will work to re-sign McMichael after he approached the 20-goal mark a season ago. Then the Capitals should consider some other forwards for their top-nine mix, including Anthony Duclair (who might be a nice fit after his solid season in Tampa Bay).

Head coach Spencer Carbery also spoke at season's end about adding size and speed to the Capitals' blue line. Brady Skjei, Brandon Montour and Alexander Carrier could all fill the void in Washington. The Capitals have prioritized staying competitive even while rebuilding, and they were rewarded with a playoff berth last season. It was a swift first-round exit, but it provided invaluable experience for the younger group of Capitals. Now they have have to factor in elevated scoring punch -- especially if T.J. Oshie can't return immediately because of his ongoing back issues -- to start making some progress.

CENTRAL DIVISION

Chicago Blackhawks

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Colin Blackwell, F Tyler Johnson, D Jaycob Megna, D Jarred Tinordi, D Nikita Zaitsev

Key players hitting RFA: F Joey Anderson, F MacKenzie Entwistle, F Taylor Raddysh

Cap space: $32,940,000

What they should do: Continue concentrating on the future. Finishing with the second-fewest points in the NHL while being 46 points away from the final Western Conference wild-card spot are examples of how the Blackhawks are in a rebuild. At some point, they'll make the transition from a lottery team to one that could challenge for a playoff spot. For now, it appears they could use this offseason to strengthen their roster.

It's what Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson did last offseason. He went out and acquired veterans such as Nick Foligno and Taylor Hall to help

insulate the franchise's young core led by Connor Bedard and Kevin Korchinski. They could opt to use that strategy again, with the premise that whomever they sign could be potentially moved ahead of the NHL trade deadline which would allow the Blackhawks to obtain even more draft capital.

Colorado Avalanche

2023-24 result: Lost in the second round

Key players hitting UFA: F Jonathan Drouin, F Brandon Duhaime, D Jack Johnson, D Sean Walker

Key players hitting RFA: None

Cap space: $10,466,250

What they should do: Whatever it takes to win another Stanley Cup. The offseason gives the Avalanche another chance to restructure the roster around their star-studded core in hopes of winning what would be a second Stanley Cup since 2022. Doing that, however, means they could be faced with quite a few difficult decisions.

They already took care of one of those decisions prior to July 1 when they re-signed Casey Mittelstadt to a three-year contract worth $5.75 million annually. Getting a new deal done for Mittelstadt allowed the Avalanche's front office to focus on the additional areas they'll need to address to challenge an already crowded field in the Western Conference.

Dallas Stars

2023-24 result: Lost in the conference finals

Key players hitting UFA: F Matt Duchene, F Craig Smith, D Chris Tanev

Key players hitting RFA: D Thomas Harley, F Sam Steel

Cap space: $16,246,259

What they should do: Whatever it takes to win a Stanley Cup. The Stars made their third Western Conference finals appearance in five years and lost the conference final in six games for a second straight year. These are signs that show how tantalizingly close the Stars are to reaching a Stanley Cup Final. Even though coming up short raised questions, it strengthened the belief that the Stars' championship window is open and could be for some time.

They have a decision to make when it comes to players such as Duchene and Tanev, while figuring out a number that works for Harley, the latest to come off the Stars' assembly line.

Arguably the biggest question facing the Stars this offseason is whether they will revamp their defense. They have only three defensemen under contract for next season as two are RFAs while three are UFAs.

Minnesota Wild

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: D Alex Goligoski, D Dakota Mermis

Key players hitting RFA: F Mason Shaw

Cap space: $6,256,412

What they should do: Get creative with their cap space as they try to find a way back to the playoffs. Missing the final wild-card spot by just 11 points when their team had so many injuries places the Wild in an interesting spot. Especially when they were in the bottom-third of goals per game and goals allowed per game.

But this also comes with the understanding that they have a little more than $6 million in cap space to make those improvements, which could prove difficult. Much of that stems from the combined Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts costing the franchise a collective $14.743 million in cap space before that figure shrinks to $1.66 million for the next four years.

Could the Wild look at possibly moving some money around to create more space? Or do they believe they can add around the edges and field a roster that can compete for what would be a fifth playoff berth in six seasons?

Nashville Predators

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: D Tyson Barrie, F Anthony Beauvillier, D Alexandre Carrier, F Jason Zucker

Key players hitting RFA: None

Cap space: $26,345,801

What they should do: Be strategic in Year 2 of their project. Trading Ryan McDonagh back to the Lightning was the latest example of how Predators GM Barry Trotz is more than fine making the necessary deal if he feels there's a benefit. Moving on from McDonagh and his $6.75 million cap figure gave the Predators even more space to strengthen their roster.

But what moves make the most sense for them? Especially when Trotz has been up front about wanting to continue to use their farm system, which is why they've made a point to get several draft picks. They've had success with recent homegrown talents such as Luke Evangelista and Tommy Novak, and goaltender Yaroslav Askarov could be next.

It's possible the Preds could strike a balance somewhere in the middle by getting the help they need while also having potential opportunities for the next wave led by Egor Afanasyev, Joakim Kemell, Zachary L'Heureux and Fedor Svechkov.

St. Louis Blues

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Samuel Blais, F Kasperi Kapanen, D Marco Scandella

Key players hitting RFA: F Nikita Alexandrov, D Scott Perunovich

Cap space: $14,792,738

What they should do: Spend now or risk paying for it later. Being six points out of a playoff spot is another reminder of how the Blues are close but still need a bit more help. Where it does get a little complicated is determining how the Blues should spend that money. They went from being 27th in goals allowed per game in 2022-23 to being 15th with the premise they were eighth in team save percentage in 5-on-5 play.

So while it's possible they could use some of their cap space to address their defensive issues, they could also use some scoring help. They were in the bottom five in terms of scoring chances per game and high-danger scoring chances per game, while being in the bottom 10 of goals per game and the power play. Even though there could be available options in free agency, the Blues will have to be strategic about their choices given they have less than $16 million in cap space unless they can find a way to move more money.

Utah Hockey Club

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: D Joshua Brown, D Travis Dermott

Key players hitting RFA: D Sean Durzi, F Barrett Hayton, D J.J. Moser, D Juuso Valimaki

Cap space: $43,564,524

What they should do: Go throw the bag(s) and become one of the most attractive options in free agency. There's a growing belief that a new city and new ownership means the artist formerly known as the Coyotes could be inclined to spend money. For years, the Coyotes were known for doing what they could to reach the cap floor and being conservative with how they used their cap space.

Could this be the year they change philosophies? And if so, what does that look like? They were 21 points out of the wild card at season's end, but were certainly in the playoff race until a 15-game losing streak saw them go from being above .500 to essentially out of the playoff picture. Getting new deals done for Durzi, Hayton, Moser and Valimaki are expected to be a priority, as they are part of the club's young core.

But to use free agency to bolster that core and challenge for a playoff spot in Year 1 could be the sort of statement that hasn't always been possible. Do they swing for the big names like Guentzel, Reinhart or Montour?

Winnipeg Jets

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: D Brenden Dillon, D Colin Miller, F Sean Monahan, F Tyler Toffoli

Key players hitting RFA: F David Gustafsson, F Cole Perfetti, D Logan Stanley

Cap space: $8,752,976

What they should do: Be selective with their free agency decisions. The Jets have a chance to revamp their defensive personnel. They have a chance to add new forwards. They also have a chance to potentially move money. This all amounts to the Jets having options and trying to sort through which set of options will allow them to reach the second round for the first time since the 2020-21 season.

They initially began with less than $14 million in cap space but saw that number change upon re-signing defenseman Dylan DeMelo. Even before DeMelo signed, it appeared that the Jets might be in a position to move money to create more flexibility.

That's what makes the situation around Nikolaj Ehlers one to watch. He has a year left on his deal and moving on from him could allow the Jets to save $6 million they could apply elsewhere. It all amounts to the Jets trying to figure out their next flight plan now that Scott Arniel is at the controls of a team that's trying to chart its course in the Western Conference.

PACIFIC DIVISION

Anaheim Ducks

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: D William Lagesson, F Ben Meyers

Key players hitting RFA: D Jackson LaCombe, F Brett Leason, D Gustav Lindstrom, D Urho Vaakanainen

Cap space: $33,305,833

What they should do: Continue concentrating on the future. Last offseason saw the Coyotes emerge with what was considered to be one of the strongest offseason hauls. They added veterans to their young core and took another step forward in their project. It's possible that the Ducks could be the team to follow that model this summer.

They've insulated their young core of Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier, Mason McTavish, Pavel Mintyukov and Troy Terry with veterans such as Alex Killorn, Ryan Strome and Frank Vatrano over the past few years. That's in addition to what they already had with Cam Fowler and John Gibson.

It's time to find out if this group can challenge for the playoffs, and if not, any of the veteran signings from this summer can be flipped at the deadline for additional draft capital.

Calgary Flames

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F A.J. Greer, D Oliver Kylington

Key players hitting RFA: None

Cap space: $23,199,167

What they should do: Continue to reshape their team. It appears there could be a clearer direction with the Flames which was not the case last offseason. They were in something of a holding pattern because of the uncertainty surrounding the collective futures of Noah Hanifin, Elias Lindholm, Chris Tanev and Nikita Zadorov. All four of them were traded prior to the deadline, which provided some insight into the Flames' direction.

Even more insight was gained June 19 when they traded goaltender Jacob Markstrom to the Devils in a deal that saw them receive defenseman Kevin Bahl and a protected 2025 first-round pick. After the trade, the Flames have a little more than $23 million in cap space. It could provide them with a level of flexibility to address their needs and get out of that middle ground of being a team that was 17 points out of the final wild-card spot while being 34 points clear of the worst record in the conference.

Edmonton Oilers

2023-24 result: Lost in the Cup Final

Key players hitting UFA: F Connor Brown, D Vincent Desharnais, F Warren Foegele, F Adam Henrique, G Calvin Pickard

Key players hitting RFA: D Philip Broberg, F Dylan Holloway

Cap space: $10,033,333

What they should do: Whatever it takes to win the Stanley Cup. This offseason has a chance to be one of the most important in recent franchise history.

It was the first time they reached the Stanley Cup Final in the Leon Draisaitl-Connor McDavid era. There's a strong chance they could get there again in 2024-25. Doing that, however, likely means strengthening areas that were a problem at times throughout their postseason run.

Namely, they need consistent secondary and tertiary scoring help. It's been a longstanding need with the Oilers. There were moments when that presence was visible and times when it wasn't. The Oilers having eight unrestricted free agent forwards, which gives them a chance to revamp that part of the roster with the aim of keeping their two-way prowess intact.

The same goes for their defensemen. They'll need to move money around or get creative. They have a little more than $10 million in available cap space to bolster a roster that's trying to win a Stanley Cup as Draisaitl enters the final year of his contract.

Los Angeles Kings

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Viktor Arvidsson, G Pheonix Copley, F Trevor Lewis, D Matt Roy, G Cam Talbot

Key players hitting RFA: F Quinton Byfield, F Carl Grundstrom, F Arthur Kaliyev, F Blake Lizotte, D Jordan Spence

Cap space: $23,450,000

What they should do: Whatever it takes to get out of the first round. Every franchise that has struggled reaches a point when they become a playoff team. Eventually, making the playoffs will not be enough. It's about winning at least one round with the promise that they can win even more. This is the reality facing the Kings as they seek to make the transition from simply being a playoff team to one that can live up to its potential as a legitimate contender.

Those struggles were amplified with the decision to trade Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Capitals in exchange for Darcy Kuemper. Moving on from a top-six center less than a year after trading three players and a draft pick (and signing him to an eight-year deal worth $8.5 million annually) is a mea culpa of sorts.

Now the work begins to get over the hump -- with no shortage of pressure after three straight early postseason exits.

San Jose Sharks

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Justin Bailey, F Alexander Barabanov, F Ryan Carpenter, G Devin Cooley, F Mike Hoffman, F Kevin Labanc

Key players hitting RFA: D Calen Addison, F Luke Kunin, F Filip Zadina

Cap space: $29,329,166

What they should do: Continue building for the future. An argument could be had that the Sharks have already had one of the best offseasons before free agency even starts. It started with them winning the draft lottery, and the chance to draft the consensus No. 1 pick in Boston University center Macklin Celebrini. From there, they signed Boston College freshman center Will Smith, the fourth pick of the 2023 draft, to his entry-level contract.

Just like that, the Sharks added two players who project as top-six centers. Celebrini and Smith are the latest to join what the Sharks believe

can be a rather promising future that already includes homegrown talents such as Thomas Bordeleau, William Eklund and Mario Ferraro. Claiming Barclay Goodrow off waivers and trading for Ty Dellandrea gives the team some depth options to help make them a tougher out on a nightly basis (as opposed to what we saw in 2023-24).

Even with that much potential, the Sharks are still coming off having the NHL's worst record and are expected to need more time under first-year head coach Ryan Warsofsky. Sharks GM Mike Grier could use this offseason to add veterans who they could then potentially trade ahead of the deadline in order to gain more draft capital.

Seattle Kraken

2023-24 result: Missed the playoffs

Key players hitting UFA: F Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, D Justin Schultz

Key players hitting RFA: F Matty Beniers, F Tye Kartye

Cap space: $23,424,167

What they should do: Use this offseason to establish an identity. Going from a lottery team in Year 1 to a playoff team in Year 2 created the belief the Kraken could be the sort of franchise that challenges for the playoffs every season going forward. Those plans were scuppered by a third season which witnessed various inconsistencies as their biggest consistency.

They've since brought in new head coach Dan Bylsma and have a chance to be one of the more aggressive teams in free agency. While they still need to sort out new deals for Beniers and Kartye, the Kraken should still have the sort of cap space that could allow them to address their needs and improve a team that finished in the bottom five of shooting percentage last season. Do they take a swing at landing the biggest free agent targets? Or hope for improvements internally while adding around the edges?

Vancouver Canucks

2023-24 result: Lost in the second round

Key players hitting UFA: F Elias Lindholm, F Dakota Joshua, D Ian Cole, D Tyler Myers, D Nikita Zadorov

Key players hitting RFA: None

Cap space: $16,053,333

What they should do: Avoid regression at all costs. They have recently drafted a franchise forward (Elias Pettersson), a franchise defenseman (Quinn Hughes) and a franchise goaltender (Thatcher Demko) while making other moves that appeared to have set them up for the future. Finding a way to connect that promise with tangible results has been the issue in Vancouver. Until this season, that is, when the Canucks came within a win of the Western Conference finals.

That outcome has created an expectation, but also a major question: Are the Canucks for real, and can they do it again? Part of the reason the Canucks emerged as one of the season's biggest surprises was the front office's ability to retool the lineup on the fly. It's something Canucks GM Patrik Allvin and his front office staff will have to do again next season, as they have three defensemen who are pending UFAs. It helps that they re-signed Filip Hronek to an eight-year deal worth $7.25 million annually.

And once they are done with that, they'll have to figure out the next steps when it comes to re-signing Lindholm -- or figuring out how to replace him.

Vegas Golden Knights

2023-24 result: Lost in the first round

Key players hitting UFA: F Michael Amadio, F William Carrier, F Jonathan Marchessault, D Alec Martinez, F Chandler Stephenson

Key players hitting RFA: F Pavel Dorofeyev

Cap space: $1,197,516

What they should do: Whatever it takes to win another Stanley Cup. Winning at all costs comes with a price, and this year it appears the cost could be losing both Marchessault and Stephenson. Being forced to move on from a pair of top-nine forwards could prove catastrophic for the Golden Knights. Especially when they are going to have $1.197 million in cap space while trying to address other needs such as filling out their bottom six.

Then again, they are the Golden Knights -- finding solutions when none seem feasible has become an essential part of how they operate. Somewhere in suburban Las Vegas, there's a chance GM Kelly McCrimmon has a dry-erase board filled with hypotheticals the club could explore that involve moving money, making a few savvy additions and still fielding a team that could win a second Cup in three seasons.

ESPN LOADED: 06.27.2024

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ESPN / Inside the Quebec factory where NHL jerseys are created - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

When Steve Berard heard there would be a new designer for NHL jerseys, he did not expect that it would be Fanatics.

"It was a surprise, but a good surprise, I would say," Berard said.

Berard is the owner and CEO of SP Apparel, the Canadian company that has manufactured the NHL's on-ice uniforms for nearly 50 years in Quebec. It will continue to manufacture those jerseys now that Fanatics will be the official outfitter of the NHL's on-ice uniforms for the next 10 years, beginning next season.

Those jerseys were revealed Wednesday ahead of Friday's NHL draft, where prospects will be among the first players to wear their teams' new sweaters.

If the jerseys look the same as the ones in previous seasons, that's literally by design. The goal for Fanatics and the NHL was consistency, giving players the comfort that while the designer was different, nothing had fundamentally changed about their uniforms -- at least for now.

"It's going to be the same way as before. The fabrics, the concepts, everything," Berard said. "There's no reason to risk trying new stuff in the first year. We just want to make sure that the NHL will shine and nobody will complain about the jerseys because they're exactly what the NHL has known for so many years and the way we were on those products."

The NHL is confident that players will be pleased with the changeover in designers since the manufacturer will remain the same.

"The actual game-worn jerseys are going to be manufactured by the same place that manufactured them for Adidas," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said. "They're the best in the world at it."

WHEN NIKE PURCHASED BAUER in 1995, two Bauer employees -- Serge Berard and Phil Chiarella -- were inspired to buy Bauer's jersey business in Granby, Quebec, and renamed it SP Apparel in 1999. Chiarella passed away in 2008. Serge Berard retired. Steve Berard became executive VP and co-owner in June 2016, and was elevated to owner and CEO in 2018.

The company had two decades-old factories: One in Granby and one in Saint-Hyacinthe.

"I like to say that when you turn on a TV and you are watching a hockey game, all those jerseys are made here at the factory," he said. "Bricks. No windows. Over the last 10-15 years, hiring people and attracting new people was difficult. That's why we wanted to have one nicer factory."

Berard remembers speaking with one of the seamstresses in the factory when she was about 24 years old. One day she asked, "Am I going to do this all my life?" regarding the dark, somewhat depressing environs of the older plant.

So SP Apparel opened a new, state-of-the-art facility in Saint-Hyacinthe last year.

"Now the factory is all-white, very bright. We have windows all around the factory," he said. "All the washrooms are super clean, like when you go to the hotels. I just wanted to have a better place for my employees."

While the aesthetics have changed, the process of creating a jersey has not. The factory is currently working on NHL, IIHF tournament, AHL, CHL and 2026 Olympic national team jerseys, partnering with Nike, CCM, Bauer and Adidas as well as Fanatics.

It begins with an idea from a designer at a partner such as Fanatics. Then SP Apparel's eight-person development team, which has worked together "forever," in Berard's terms, takes the concept and fleshes it out, including how it could be executed.

"An NHL jersey needs to be perfect. Nice looking and incorporating new technologies," Berard said. "It's a fast-action game. There will be abrasions on the jersey. And there are fights, of course, and we have to make sure that the collar isn't going to open up after one."

Once all parties have signed off on the jerseys, it's on to a manufacturing process where SP Apparel "controls everything from A to Z." They buy the yarn, they sublimate the jerseys, they knit and cut the fabric, it's all done internally.

"When everything goes well, it's our fault. When there's a problem, it's also our fault," he said.

The plant has automated some processes, like using a laser cutter, but an NHL jersey remains a handcrafted product. There are rows of tables with spools of yard above them. Whirling sewing machines stitch crests on the front and "fighting straps" on the back of jerseys, while the letters on nameplates are all individually threaded on.

"I don't see how or when we could automate the chain of production. We need hands. All the jerseys have so many pieces to fit together and we need people to do that," Berard said, adding that there are 200 people working throughout the year on the creation of NHL jerseys.

"I would say we have about 10% real hockey fans in the factory. The others are very proud to work on NHL jerseys and seeing their product that they're working on TV about two months after it went through their hands."

Brian Jennings, NHL senior executive VP for marketing and chief branding officer, has known the Berards for years. He has toured the factory in Saint-Hyacinthe and remains in awe of their process.

"There is something about the humility of the province, the pride that they take," he said. "If you went to the factory and you walk around, you see the seamstresses, some of whom have been working there for their entire lives."

ADIDAS BEGAN ITS DESIGN deal with the NHL in 2017. Its run included some bold designs and innovations -- like the colorful Reverse Retro jerseys. But by the end of the deal, the league and Adidas were no longer aligned, Jennings said. While Adidas started off making shirts, hats and locker room apparel, the company gradually shifted to a focus on authentic jerseys.

Fanatics had been creating that kind of gear for the NHL over the last few seasons. "It was a natural evolution of our business with them," Jennings said.

Berard said any concerns about Fanatics taking over NHL jersey design for the first time were calmed when he met their team and saw familiar names and faces in the industry.

"We knew we'd be working with a team that knew the NHL. We never had any concern at that point. We weren't saying, 'Oh, are they going to reduce the quality or make decisions we aren't aware of?'" he said. "It was actually very good news for us when we met the team and we knew that they wanted to continue the same quality jersey that we've been making for almost 50 years now."

It's a team that includes Keith Leach, previously with CCM, Reebok and Adidas, who has been hired as Fanatics Brands' NHL VP/GM to spearhead the project.

Leach said the first thing Fanatics did was build a strong uniform team that included Dom Filano, who was the head designer at Adidas and helped spearhead the Vegas Golden Knights' identity development.

"We're keeping close to the standard of the jersey on ice so that players feel a seamless transition," Leach said. "We talked to players and teams and equipment managers to find out what was working and wasn't working."

One thing Leach's team kept hearing: The Adidas jerseys were having durability issues around the arm, breaking down from abrasions. He said the team believed it was from the shift of regular fabric to recycled fabric. So the team built in some pattern reinforcement in the arm, brought it back to the players and the equipment managers, and got the thumbs-up from them.

Among the other Year 1 changes for the uniforms:

New shoulder fabrics replacing the debossed pattern fabric used on the shoulders of the prior NHL jersey.

A new NHL Shield execution on the front neck of the jersey which includes a special hologram finish.

Fanatics branding embroidered on the back neck of jerseys.

A redesigned on-ice player practice jersey, which now features an embroidered lightweight crest.

While discussions with players was informative, it was also a bit of public relations. Fanatics had been in NHL dressing rooms since 2018, making apparel and headwear. It needed to inform players that SP Apparel was still in the picture.

"We felt like we were already kind of building that strong trust, but it was critical for us to go and say that we're teaming up with the industry leader in uniform production and fabrication," Leach said. "Our No. 1 consumer is the athlete. We have to build this product to work for the athlete. It was extremely important."

Of course, there were more public relations to be done regarding Fanatics.

MONTHS AFTER THE NHL announced its deal with the company, Fanatics received public criticism after Major League Baseball players complained about their new uniforms in spring training.

The players cited smaller lettering on player nameplates, see-through fabric and rips in their pants. While the uniforms carried a Nike logo, they were manufactured by Fanatics.

Eventually, Fanatics was absolved of blame by the MLB Players Association, as it was essentially a sub-contractor producing uniforms based on Nike's designs. The union said Fanatics "recognizes the vital importance of soliciting Player feedback, obtaining Player buy-in and not being afraid to have difficult conversations about jerseys or trading cards."

Jennings said the NHL took "shrapnel" during the Nike baseball uniform controversy.

"Unfortunately, for us, we were getting drawn into it because we had made the announcement that Fanatics was coming onto our ice surface," he said.

Jennings said that teams were reaching out to the NHL as they heard about the baseball uniform situation. So he reached out to Fanatics to ask if the league should be concerned.

"The good news is that ultimately the truth did come out on it, and we feel like we are in good hands," Jennings said.

The entire baseball uniform dust-up was essentially Berard's worst fear. "It is kind of a nightmare where everybody's taking pictures of something that doesn't work and it's all public everywhere," he said.

Berard is bracing himself for a negative reaction, whether it's warranted or not.

"It's going to be fun at the beginning of the season just to see what the fans and the people are going to say, because it's the same jersey. So people are going to probably complain about something that doesn't exist," he said.

Fanatics' design capabilities will be seen during the 2025 NHL Winter Classic and the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament scheduled for next February.

The bigger innovations in the jerseys and the design process won't happen until 2025-26, according to Jennings.

Two teams were allowed to be "grandfathered" in with new designs next season: The Anaheim Ducks and Los Angeles Kings, who both will have new logos and jerseys in 2024-25. They both came to the NHL before the deal with Fanatics had been struck.

While the NHL and Fanatics intended there to be a moratorium on new designs this season, there was an unexpected wrinkle: The relocation of the former Arizona Coyotes franchise to Utah, where the temporarily named Utah Hockey Club will begin play next season.

"Here we had these compressed timelines that were beyond anything that we've dealt with before," Jennings said. "A couple of sleepless nights, but I think they'll have a nice jersey to have at the draft."

Jennings said it won't be their official jersey, but that the Utah players will receive them sometime in August. One thing the NHL and Fanatics are both excited about: Fans will be able to own the jerseys that the Saint-Hyacinthe factory makes.

For the first time in a decade, fans will be able to purchase the authentic on-ice jersey called the "Authentic Pro" jersey.

"Everybody was focused on more of that replica jersey but there's an appetite for it, from fans to collectors," Jennings said. "I think the industry underestimated the demand for having a product that is exactly what they wear on the ice."

Stitched together by those who have made these jerseys for decades.

ESPN LOADED: 06.27.2024

1316164 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers expected to allow GM Ken Holland's contract to expire

Elliotte Friedman

Official clarity on Ken Holland’s future is expected on Thursday, but multiple sources indicate the Edmonton Oilers will allow his contract to expire on June 30.

That would make Holland a free agent, and several teams are expected to ask him about roles he’d consider for next season. That would also leave the Oilers without a GM. It’s possible the organization goes without one in the short-term, as the run to Stanley Cup Game 7 forced them to consider this outcome. A search for any potential replacement risked distracting stories and/or rumours.

Holland, voted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2020, just missed his fifth Stanley Cup as an executive due to the Florida Panthers’ 2-1 victory on Monday night.

Something else to WATCH: Vancouver created an additional $4M of cap space by trading Ilya Mikheyev to Chicago. Dakota Joshua remains an important target after a career-high 18-goal, 32-point season, and it is believed the Canucks re-engaged attempts to sign him as the trade occurred. We will see where that takes us.

Chicago apparently is very interested in signing the other player acquired in the trade, Sam Lafferty. He played 97 games for the Blackhawks from 2021-23.

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1316165 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Treliving identifies top priority as Mitch Marner rumours swirl

Luke Fox

LAS VEGAS — The Toronto Maple Leafs' actions will speak much louder than their words.

General manager Brad Treliving politely and calmly held court with reporters for 12 minutes Wednesday afternoon at a Las Vegas hotel and said nothing surprising or particularly enlightening.

The man was an unlit firework, keeping any combustibility tucked tight.

So, with the NHL Draft set for Friday and free agency opening Monday and meaningful trades already popping off here and there, fans and pundits sit and wait patiently for substantial Maple Leafs roster news to explode.

Because, sooner or later, that lit fuse will erupt.

"We've got a lot of work to do," Treliving understated, addressing the gathered media. "We do have some cap space. But you look at the holes we have to fill, and it goes quickly."

With the cap ceiling (finally) making a significant leap to $88 million, Treliving has roughly $18.8 million in wiggle room to compensate his pending RFAs (Timothy Liljegren and Nick Robertson), make decisions on his own UFAs (Tyler Bertuzzi, Max Domi, Joel Edmundson, Ilya Lyubushkin, Mark Giordano, Martin Jones, Matt Murray, John Klingberg), then round out the roster on the open market and via trade.

The executive's main priority should tell you all you need to know about where the elephant in the room stands, though.

At Treliving's pre-draft availabilities last June, he spoke at length about how critical it was for the organization to lock up all-star forwards Auston Matthews and William Nylander to long-term extensions. (Mission accomplished.)

This time around, Treliving emphasized a much different priority — despite 99-point right wing Mitch Marner sitting in the same contractual position as his peers were a year ago.

"I don't think it's a secret: Our defence is an area we'd like to see if we can improve. Easier said than done," Treliving stated.

"The right side of our defence, we'd like to help it. Now, at what cost?"

In terms of reliable, everyday defencemen, the Maple Leafs have just three under contract: Morgan Rielly, Jake McCabe, and Simon Benoit. (Seventh man Conor Timmins is in the fold, too.)

Treliving has been scouring a dry trade landscape and rich (but not top-heavy) free agency market for blueliner, particularly those who can play the right side.

Chris Tanev, Brandon Montour, Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei, Matt Roy, Matt Dumba... name a UFA who can patrol the right side, and we'll guarantee Treliving has inquired. (Floated our way recently: The GM might even consider bringing back Klingberg at a reduced rate, after investing heavily in his hip rehabilitation.)

The suitors for defenceman who can log top-four minutes are just as plentiful, though, which should drive prices. The risk of overpaying for an unknown commodity is real. It's why a club like Winnipeg surveyed the market and simply reupped Dylan DeMelo, who would've been a fine partner for Morgan Rielly.

Defence is not the only hole, though. Far from it.

Someone up front must pick up the production Bertuzzi and Domi provided if they get their cheques elsewhere.

And while we're high on the potential of prospect Easton Cowan making a big-league impact and sophomore Matthew Knies taking another step, we're not convinced that'll be enough in 2025.

Which is why you hear the Leafs poking around on second-tier wingers like David Perron (who won a Cup with new head coach Craig Berube) and Dakota Joshua.

Then there is the question of goaltending, which the Florida Panthers just proved doesn't always hurt to pay for.

Treliving swung and missed on trade target Jacob Markstrom (now increasing the likelihood of Sheldon Keefe's playoff streak in New

Jersey), and Linus Ullmark (Ottawa) and Darcy Kuemper (Los Angeles) also have new homes.

The UFA market is razor thin — peaking with capable backups and 1Bs like Laurent Brossoit, Anthony Stolarz, and Cam Talbot — which partially explains Kevin Weekes' report that Treliving is interested in fast-tracking a three-year extension for Joseph Woll in the $3.5- to $4-million AAV range after a mere 39 games of big-league experience.

"We feel like we got a real good goalie," Treliving said of Woll, excellent when not injured. "You study that: Is there a pattern?"

The GM conceded that Denis Hildeby is still on a developmental path. He needs to look outside for Woll's partner.

As for Toronto's first-round draft pick Friday, Treliving is "not opposed" to dealing the 23rd-overall choice for immediate roster help (the pick was considered on the table in the failed Markstrom deal) or to acquire multiple picks. But he is "more than likely" going to make a pick when the Leafs are on the clock.

Toronto is undoubtedly on the clock with Marner, whom Treliving has never publicly expressed a desire to re-sign.

Whether that clock winds past July 1, when Marner's juicy signing bonus kicks in; or past training camp, when the questions escalate; or past trade deadline, when playoff rosters get set; or Canada Day 2025, when Marner is free to sign anywhere for — what? — $12.5 million a year is anybody's guess.

The player holds a full no-move clause and has a major say in charting his own future, in case you haven't heard.

Ever the diplomat, Treliving's feet may be kicking like mad under the surface as he tries to find a solution that frees up the necessary cap space to fulfill his other roster needs, but the GM is projecting calm above it.

He has yet to exert any public pressure on the player, and we'd be surprised if he does.

No matter how many rumours fly or how antsy Leaf Nation gets to see a resolution here.

"Mitch is a superstar in the league," Treliving said. "I'd caution us to not pay too much attention to some of the noise. We can't react to all of this.

"You can't control the rumours that are out there."

What you can control are the signings you make and the trades you pull off.

And that is where Treliving will be judged over the coming days and through the first Toronto off-season he's had fair time to prepare for.

Not by how he handles a press conference about nothing.

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1316166 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Mikheyev trade gives Canucks' Allvin flexibility in free-agent negotiations

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER – It's not true that the Vancouver Canucks did not get a player back in the amazing Ilya Mikheyev salary dump on Wednesday night.

It's just too early to say which of their own free agents – or someone else's – they can now afford after general manager Patrik Allvin added more than $4 million to Vancouver's cap space by trading a 2027 second-round pick and the rights to impending unrestricted free agent Sam Lafferty to the Chicago Blackhawks as enticement for taking Mikheyev and the final two years of his contract off the Canucks.

With six other Canucks still speeding towards unrestricted free agency and the team already linked in reports to Carolina Hurricanes free agent Jake Guentzel, Mikheyev's dead-weight salary of $4.75 million had become a major impediment for Allvin.

But Wednesday's trade and the Canucks' 15-per cent salary retention on Mikheyev reduced the winger's cap hit to just $712,500. Allvin suddenly has more options and cap flexibility as he grinds through negotiations with UFA-eligible Canucks like Dakota Joshua and Nikita Zadorov ahead of the opening of free agency on Monday.

The GM stated a month ago at the end of Vancouver's season that an off-season priority is to add a top-six winger (like Guentzel, although Allvin couldn't say that Wednesday night when he spoke with Sportsnet.ca).

"It's always tough to give up assets to get out of contracts, but that's just the reality in today's NHL," Allvin said from Las Vegas, where the trade was finalized during a Canucks hockey-operations dinner ahead of the entry draft there Friday and Saturday. "But it does give us more flexibility on July 1 and leading up to Monday with our own free agents. From that standpoint, I was very pleased to get this trade done."

Even with last week's $58-million, eight-year contract extension for No. 2 Canuck defenceman Filip Hronek and the smart re-signing earlier Wednesday of depth centre Teddy Blueger, who agreed to two more seasons at $1.8 million, capfriendly.com shows Allvin with a whopping $20.8 million of available cap space after offloading Mikheyev.

Lafferty, another speedy winger who went pointless in the playoffs before getting healthy-scratched, was unlikely to be re-signed for Vancouver's fourth line. And even the Canucks' surrender of their second-round pick three years from now is softened by the inclusion in the trade of the Blackhawks' fourth-rounder in 2027.

Asked if the sudden in-flow of cash could loosen his negotiations with other Canuck free agents, Allvin said: "It's hard to say until you get to the finish line because there are so many moving parts. We'll see what happens next but hopefully we can get more done.

"There's ongoing conversations with guys. At the moment, it's a tussle and we obviously have to be careful how we spend our dollars. At the end of the day, we want to make sure we have a good team. I think that's important to all of our players."

Clearly, Allvin is not afraid to take risks – or find an exit strategy when he is wrong.

Mikheyev was the Canucks' marquee acquisition two summers ago when Allvin, then less than six months on the job in Vancouver, signed the winger to a four-year, $19-million contract as a free agent from the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The speedy Russian, however, tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his knee during his first pre-season game for Vancouver. After playing injured for four months, Mikheyev finally underwent surgery but struggled mightily this past season upon his return.

After a hot start that saw him score six times in his first 11 games back from surgery, Mikheyev managed only one goal in the final 50 regular-season games before going pointless in 11 playoff contests. The 29-year-old was twice a healthy scratch for coach Rick Tocchet during the Canucks' seven-game loss to the Edmonton Oilers in the second round of the Stanley Cup tournament.

Mikheyev owned his struggles. His inability to score or find and maintain for the Canucks the high-speed, high-pressure game he played in Toronto clearly bothered Mikheyev and eroded his confidence. This was a player who so badly wanted to impress the Canucks that he was in tears when the team finally shut him down two seasons ago to get his knee repaired.

"I truly believe Ilya Mikheyev will bounce back and be a good player for Chicago," Allvin said. "He's a great person and a good player. And he was extremely professional through all of this. He was thankful for his time in Vancouver. He said he and his wife loved the city and the fans and how he was treated. I can't say enough about Ilya Mikheyev and I wish him the best."

Shedding $4 million of his salary will give the Canucks a better chance to be their best next season.

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1316167 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How should the Oilers approach Draisaitl's extension, upcoming UFAs?

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — For many, many years, Edmonton was like Winnipeg, Calgary or Ottawa. Teams in cities that a free agent could always find an excuse — the facilities, the weather, the prospects of winning a Stanley Cup — to choose some other team with which to sign.

Today, Edmonton has the best player in the world, another in the Top 3 or 4, and one of the top two arena facilities (with Detroit) in the National Hockey League. After nine playoff series in three years and a Game 7 loss on Monday, bookmakers will slot the Oilers at either No. 1 or 2 when the odds come out for the 2025 Stanley Cup.

It doesn't mean Edmonton is destined to win it all next spring. It does mean, however, that outside of cap-strapped Florida, there isn't a single team that a free agent can look at and definitively say, "I have a better shot at winning a Cup in City X than I would in Edmonton."

As exit interviews take place, and the pall of losing Game 7 of the Final slowly lifts, Edmonton has seven unrestricted free agents to deal with. And one pending UFA — Leon Draisaitl — who has a year left on his contract but is bigger than all the rest.

Here's our take on what lies ahead:

Leon Draisaitl

Draisaitl will get $13 million or more wherever he goes. What he wants more than anything else is to win a Cup.

He can't find a closer friend or better hockey player to chase that down with than Connor McDavid, and as we stated above, there isn't a team out there with markedly better prospects of winning. We can't think of a reason why Draisaitl wouldn't re-sign in Edmonton.

Can he?

"I guess not. If you phrase it that way," he said.

Draisaitl wouldn't come out and tell us what he's thinking, so we'll speculate.

If I'm his agent Andrew Scott, and I've decided that Draisaitl is worth, say, 13 or 14 percent of the cap, don't I need to know what the cap is going to be set at in 2025-26 before we sign? If the plan is for McDavid and Draisaitl to each take a little less to stay together for three or four more years, do I not require a promise from the McDavid camp that they'll sign one year later in the same spirit that I'm signing in today?

My prediction: Draisaitl signs a four-year, $55 million deal with Edmonton. Announcement comes before Christmas.

Adam Henrique

Henrique is the third-line centre the Oilers haven't had since Mike Peca. He's made nearly $50 million in his career, and now he's 34 years old. He has never won a Cup in 912 games played.

His AAV was $5.8 million last year. That goes down wherever he signs, but likely the least money he'll make is in Edmonton.

Will he take $3.5 million to stay? That's an honest number for a top third-line centre.

"I don't think money is the number one thing for me at this point in my career," he said.

Prediction: This one is tough. We'll say he stays.

Warren Foegele

Foegele had his first 20-goal season, and at 28 becomes a UFA for the first time in his career. He's big, he's fast, and he's been in the playoffs every year of his NHL career.

Prediction: The offers elsewhere will be too good to remain an Oiler.

Mattias Janmark

As great as Janmark was in the playoffs, he is a 31-year-old coming off a four-goal, 12-point season.

He's signed nothing but one-year deals in his career — seven of them — and made $1 million last season.

Prediction: Janmark re-signs. Two years, with a $1.15 million AAV.

Connor Brown

Brown became a valued penalty killer and third-line winger — not what he was supposed to be when he arrived, but really valuable nonetheless.

No chance he recreates the $4 million AAV he had this season, but of all the players here, Brown will be most tempted by outside offers that are higher than Edmonton can afford.

Prediction: Brown signs elsewhere.

Vincent Desharnais

This guy was never supposed to even play in the NHL. He is 28, and his career earnings are $513,243.

Edmonton will attempt to trade Cody Ceci, who has one more year left at $3.25 million, to free space for Desharnais. Philip Broberg (RFA) will step into the lineup full-time next season.

Desharnais will stay in Edmonton for the same money being offered elsewhere, but he'd be crazy to take less, with his age and prior earnings.

Prediction: Ceci gets moved, Desharnais signs a three-year, $5.25 million deal.

Corey Perry and Sam Carrick

Both are $900,000 players. So the question becomes, do you have two better fourth-liners to sign instead?

Carrick is tough and wins draws. But with 37-year-old Derek Ryan signed, do you need someone younger?

Perry is too slow for playoffs, but we don't know if the captain doesn't tell his GM that he'd love to have Perry back.

Prediction: Only one signs. Take your pick.

Cal Pickard

I sign him all day at $1 million, especially once the Oilers buy out Jack Campbell. Will Pickard go home to Winnipeg, where the Jets are about to lose Laurent Brossoit?

Prediction: Pickard stays. Two years, $2.25 million.

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1316168 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / For several reasons, the Oilers aren't done contending yet

Justin Bourne

If the Florida Panthers had lost Game 7 and let the 2024 Stanley Cup go north of the border, they may have been remembered similarly to the Sedin-era Vancouver Canucks, or the Thornton/Marleau-era San Jose Sharks. They would've been among the great teams that won a pile of games and competed like hell in the playoffs, yet got tossed on top of the heap of those that ultimately couldn't get it done.

I say that because it's hard to see Florida getting back into the same position – the Stanley Cup Final — for a third straight year without some very good fortune. It's tough for myriad reasons, but one of those is that they've got some top-end players who are now unrestricted free agents this summer. Fitting them all under the cap or outright losing them is going to result in something their counterpart in Tampa Bay has

experienced several times over — if you're good enough for long enough, you're forced to siphon off some talent. And frankly, a team like Florida that succeeds with depth and team play needs every bit of talent more than those with multiple elite stars. It seems likely they'll take a small step back in a league where the margins are thin.

With the Edmonton Oilers, though, you can't make a claim that their push to become champions is even close to over, as they continue their forward progress in the post-season. In 2022 they went to the conference final before losing to the eventual Cup champs, last year they went two rounds before again losing to the eventual Cup champs, and this season they took it the distance before, again, losing to the Cup champs.

There's plenty of talk about how losing teaches teams to win, and there's evidence that old maxim holds some truth. In the five years prior to Vegas' Cup they went to the Stanley Cup Final once and the conference final twice more. Tampa Bay did the same over their five year pre-Cup span, one Cup Final and two conference finals. Colorado played seven playoff rounds over their three pre-Cup years, including a conference final.

It feels like that's the part of the journey the Oilers are at — over their past three seasons they've played nine rounds of playoff hockey, paid their post-season dues, and learned some lessons the hard way. They've lost the nail-biters to the champions, most recently escaping to the dressing room as red-and-gold confetti chased their blue shoulders.

There's only confetti when you're close, though, and it's not so challenging to see the Oilers as the best in the West in 2024-25.

Hockey is a team sport where the "team" with the most elite guys finds their way through. It's been said before, but I'll say it again: the greats tend to find their way to a Stanley Cup save for a few exceptions. And nobody, potentially ever, is as great as Connor McDavid, and he's just 27. Leon Draisaitl is one of the five best players in the NHL, one of the best playoff performers of this generation, and yet he failed to score in a Cup Final where his team fell a goal short. He is just 28, and who would bet against him coming back and being the unstoppable playoff performer we've almost always seen?

The Oilers have all of those players who drove them here locked up. Zach Hyman, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Evan Bouchard, Mattias Ekholm, Stuart Skinner, and most of the next layer of the supporting cast. They'll have work to do to replicate the depth that became a strength, but every team faces some turnover, the cap is going up, and there's no reason Edmonton shouldn't be able to capably fill the bottom of the roster.

They learned a lot about themselves, including a few massive takeaways:

1. When the chips are down, they can, in fact, trust Stu Skinner. From Game 4 on in every series he was lights out, which should give the big 25-year-old immense confidence whenever anything doesn't go perfectly in the future.

2. Evan Bouchard can be trusted defensively. Not only is he an absolute force offensively, but he could also handle the big pressure moments and still be an asset. He came close to scoring multiple times in Game 7, and while he wasn't necessarily perfect on the defensive side, he was as good as anyone else who plays minutes against top guys.

3. The whole team can lock it down and defend. They are not one dimensional, as Florida had a hell of a time scoring the past four games, in large part because they couldn't get to the net.

And,

4. They can hang physically. Maybe a healthy Evander Kane helps out here next year, but generally the Oilers are not the group that gets intimidated and shies away when the going gets rough.

In sum, they have shown they can handle the rigors of real playoff hockey. They have numerous tools aside from their otherworldly offence creation and special teams, and none of those strengths appear to be going away any time soon. They look less like a team that had one last gasp before it all falls apart, and more like a team poised to win a Presidents' Trophy and be the one to beat.

Of course, there's always a ton of uncertainty when you head into a summer, and of course, the Oilers do have numerous UFAs. Nothing is guaranteed, nothing is promised.

But the framework of a team that can take another run is well in place, and so more than ever, the pressure is on the front office, which will undergo some change this off-season as Ken Holland hands off the reins to Jeff Jackson.

As low of a point as today may be for the franchise, the stars, and their fans, this isn't the end. It's OK to feel the hurt and disappointment today, but this group will play in confetti games again. There will be a next time. And when it comes, don't be surprised if it's the blue-and-orange chasing some other colours down a hallway towards these feelings of darkness.

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1316169 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Ullmark to bring winning attitude to Sens, but leave the goalie hug in Boston

Wayne Scanlan

If first impressions are any indication, the Ottawa Senators and their fans are in for a treat with new goaltender Linus Ullmark.

About 20 minutes into his introductory Zoom call with Ottawa media Wednesday — 20 minutes of thoughtful, engaging dialogue — Ullmark was told by host Chris Moore of the Senators that the "last call" was upcoming.

"Are we already done, Chris?" Ullmark said. Only to be told that there was another question or two in the queue.

"Line them up," Ullmark said. "I've still got coffee in my mug, so I'm ready!"

On we went for another four or five minutes, the quickest 24-minute Zoom call ever.

The Senators should prosper from this calm and confident presence they just acquired in a No. 1 goaltender via trade with the Boston Bruins.

Ullmark, 30, is looking forward to meeting his new teammates and already knows backup goalie Anton Forsberg from their shared youth hockey experience in Sweden, including sharing a net with the Modo team as Swedish juniors.

The newest goalie saviour will lean on franchise icon (and returning assistant coach) Daniel Alfredsson and others to help settle his young family in Ottawa — wife Moa Wikman and children Harry and Lily.

Already, Ullmark has had conversations with Alfredsson and Forsberg, but also with key Senators players like Brady Tkachuk, Claude Giroux and Drake Batherson — talks that made Ullmark and his wife feel very welcomed.

Interestingly, Ullmark says that the Senators were NEVER on his no-trade list and so he did not have to remove them from consideration when the trade went down Monday night.

The trade didn't surprise him. He's been around long enough to know.

"I mean, it's part of the job," he said. "There's always a time in your life or in your career when you're on the trade market. And this is just purely business. Once you start something (e.g. his run with the Bruins), you always want to finish it.

"But at the same time, new opportunities present themselves. So, I would have liked to have won in Boston, but at the same time now I'm looking forward to having the same opportunity — but in Ottawa and with the fellas here."

Ullmark vows to import a little of that winning culture from Boston, as represented so well over the years by leaders like Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand. The newest Senator says he will bring effort, a good attitude "and a smile on my face" to the rink every day. But he's quick to add that he's here to win, as hockey is a "job" and not fun and games.

Ullmark likes what he has seen from the Senators in past games with their Atlantic Division rival, referring to the Sens as a “dangerous, quick team, very good at transitions.”

With Tkachuk leading the way for Ottawa’s young core, Ullmark believes the Senators can play a heavy style as well.

“It’s all about consistency in my mind,” Ullmark said. “And hopefully, going into the season with some new coaching staff and all that, we can get the ball rolling. Once we do that, it’s going to be a very dangerous team going forward.”

No extension talk

Ullmark noted that the trade is still very fresh, and the focus now is on getting his family settled in Ottawa, including school options for his children. There have been no talks to this point about a possible contract extension, and he won’t get involved until his agent tells him there is something to discuss. Ullmark is entering the final year of a contract paying him $5 million.

“I try not to look too far ahead,” Ullmark said. “I try to stay in the moment.”

Bring on the workload

Without question, Ullmark is going to start camp as the Ottawa starter, with Forsberg behind him. This will represent a change for Ullmark, who shared the crease with Jeremy Swayman for much of his time with the Bruins.

“For me, it’s something I’ve dreamt about, being a clear No. 1 and playing a lot of games.”

If he stays healthy, Ullmark should blow past his career high in games played (49), achieved in 2022-23.

Asked about the challenge of starting 55 or 60 games next season with Ottawa, Ullmark’s eyes lit up.

“It’s a lot of fun,” he said. “Exciting times ahead.”

Rather dryly, Ullmark poked a little fun at talk that he hasn’t yet played more than 49 regular season games, and rarely played more than half the games.

“I played one year at more than 50 per cent (of the starts) and I guess it kind of goes to show what happened at that point.”

The reference, of course, was to Ullmark’s Vezina Trophy season of ‘22-23, when he fired up a 40-6-1 record with a .938 save percentage and 1.89 goals-against.

Stunning numbers.

“Jokes aside, it’s harder the less you play, and also easier when you get on a roll and play a couple of games in a row,” Ullmark said. “You have that flow. Things are happening automatically.”

Ullmark says that goalies who sit out three or four games in a row have to “rev up the engine” when they finally get back in.

“I think I speak for every single goaltender in the whole wide world, that it’s a lot more fun playing most of the games than it is playing fewer of the games.”

Post-game hug stays behind in Boston

Ullmark was famous in Boston, and world viral, for his post-game bear hugs with tandem partner Swayman following a Bruins win.

In answer to a question from Sportsnet.ca, Ullmark said that the hugs will stay behind as part of his legacy with the Bruins.

“I haven’t thought about it, but I’m not going to bring it to Ottawa,” Ullmark said. “That patented goalie hug we had in Boston, that’s for me and Sway only and that’s out of respect for what we had and built through our years together, and the respect, love and admiration that I have for him.

“There’s always celebrations after winning games, so we’ll see what happens. Maybe there will be a dab or something. But I’m not going to try too hard to come up with a theme or something like that. I’m just going to let it play out naturally.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Fanatics unveils new player-approved NHL sweaters

Luke Fox

LAS VEGAS — When Macklin Celebrini gets summoned to the stage inside the Las Vegas Sphere on Friday night, the sweater the presumptive first-overall draft pick pulls over his head will have a new logo stamped on the back collar.

Fanatics, which kicks off its 10-season uniform partnership with the NHL this week, has taken over from Adidas as the league's official outfitter.

And the subtle but thoughtful alterations Fanatics made to 2024-25's sweaters were made with player input — and to give diehard fans a chance to purchase the authentic thing for the first time in more than a decade.

“Fanatics did a great job designing these jerseys," Auston Matthews said. "They feel comfortable and look breathable, which is important during games. Any little detail that can help us perform at our best makes a difference.”

From a functional standpoint, the greatest difference sprung from the advice given to Fanatics by NHL trainers, who noticed the previous versions wearing down around the elbows due to "board burn." A cigarette-like burn hole would develop in the lower arm due to battles along the board, and the sweater would need to be replaced.

Fanatics reinforced that area without impeding fit and encouraged stars such as Connor McDavid, Nikita Kucherov and Aleksander Barkov to test-drive its protypes in summer skates before heading to mass production.

“I love the jerseys," Quinn Hughes said. "The Canucks logo really pops on them, and the fabric feels airy and breathable. They’re really just beautiful jerseys.”

The brand also removed the embossed dimpling on the shoulders and updated the NHL shield on the front neck with a hologram finish.

Other than that, it's essentially the same sweater as last season's — produced by the same manufacturer, respected Quebec-based SP Apparel, which has crafted NHL unis for nearly 50 years.

The players' unanimous feedback?

"We don't feel anything different," said Keith Leach, vice-president and GM of the NHL business at Fanatics.

"The reaction has been strong. Quite honestly, it's almost a reaction of relief. And the fact that they're seeing something that's not a major departure from the basis of what they've been in, but also the fact that some of the things we did came from insights of areas that they would have liked to see improved."

Pro athletes can be picky about their gear, so the "relief" sprung from Fanatics' willingness to work with the players on the fit and feel so they didn't simply show up at training camp with a surprise hanging in their stall.

Fanatics, of course, was dealt a public-relations nightmare when its logo adorned 2024's much-criticized see-through MLB uniforms, later revealed to be the fault of a Nike and MLB design flaw.

Makes sense, then, that the brand wants to begin its NHL deal by winning over the players first, then the fans.

(This reporter has already seen and felt them. They're slick. Sadly, no free samples.)

"We want to defy expectations," Leach said. "A lot of our strategy is, we want to make a product that works for the player, because that's where it starts. We want to make a product that is of the highest quality of the craftsmanship."

Then, beginning September, offer that quality to the fan in the marketplace.

Fanatics will bring three tiers of sweater to stores: the top-of-the-line Authentic Pro sweater is the exact one McDavid & Co. uses, fight strap and all; the Premium is tighter fitting, without the added room for pads; and the more affordable Breakaway model is made from softer fabrics.

Adidas didn't make the Authentic Pro available to consumers, but Fanatics wants to fill the demand of hardcore collectors who aren't afraid to shell out $400 for the real deal.

The brand had already been supplying training apparel, such as zip-ups, hats and T-shirts, to the NHL clubs since 2018. The jersey deal is a major step in expanding its connection to hockey.

"You're gonna get the best of the best. We're giving you the opportunity to buy a high-quality product," Leach assured. "Because to date, they've seen Fanatics as more of a fan brand, and we want to make sure that they're seeing us in the lens of an athlete premium performance brand."

Fanatics is already working behind the scenes on its 2025 Winter Classic and Stadium series sweaters, and news of the 4 Nations Face-Off uniforms is around the corner.

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TSN.CA / Hage transformed by tragedy during NHL draft season

Mark Masters

The inside of the suit jacket that Michael Hage will wear to the NHL Draft on Friday night features pictures of his family and hockey life to this point. It also has the words, 'Don't move on, just move forward,' embroidered on it.

"That's something my mom [Rania] has told me over the past year," the Chicago Steel centre said. "Just something she says a lot."

Hage's father, Alain, passed away suddenly last July in a freak swimming pool accident.

"It means to move forward as if he's watching and do what he always wanted me to do and what he believed I could do," Hage said of his mom's message. "When someone so meaningful in your life, and someone who's been there all along, passes away, it's not something I'm ever going to move on from."

The 18-year-old from Mississauga, Ont. dedicated his draft season to his father.

"He was everything to me as a kid," said Hage, who produced 33 goals and 75 points in 54 games in the USHL. "Growing up, he pushed me really hard, and he was my toughest critic but, at the same time, he was my biggest fan. I wouldn't be where I am today without him."

Hage, who will be heading to the University of Michigan this fall, is projected to be picked in Friday's first round at the Sphere in Las Vegas. The 6-foot-1, 188-pound pivot came in No. 24 in TSN Hockey insider Bob McKenzie's final rankings, which is based on a poll of scouts.

TSN director of scouting Craig Button has Hage going at No. 17 to the Washington Capitals in his final mock draft.

"He can play centre, he can play right wing," Button said. "His offensive play is sometimes subtle, but really effective. You cannot sleep on him in a game because if you do, that's when he strikes."

Hage's stock has been rising after a strong finish to the season. He piled up 51 points in his final 30 games and was only held off the scoresheet four times in that stretch since Dec. 29.

"I think he would be really proud," Hage said of his dad. "I know how much confidence he had in me. He pushed me so hard because he really did believe in me. I wish he could be there, but you just got to hope he's watching."

In a conversation with TSN, Hage reflected on the adversity he has faced and explained how it has changed him.

The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TSN: How have you changed in the last year?

Hage: I think maturity wise and just the perspective on life that I have. You look at things a little bit different when something like that happens in your life. I think now, as a person, I don't really let little things bother me and kind of understand a little bit more that bumps in the road are going to happen. I think I deal with that a lot better and handle adversity a lot better than I used to ... A lot of the times you got it pretty good and so many worse things can be happening. I feel like when you have that mentality it keeps you in a much better mental space and gives you a good attitude going into everything.

TSN: When teams asked why they should pick you, what did you say?

Hage: The impact I'm able to make on the ice with all the tools I have. But, not only that, I think it's an investment in a person. I think the person they're getting is someone who is really passionate, really cares about this, and someone who has a why. I know why I do this.

TSN: How would you describe your 'why' in hockey?

Hage: First of all, how passionate I am and what I'm willing to do to get there but, at the same time, my dad. How much he put into this for me. He gave me every resource I needed as a kid. I try to do everything to make him proud. I know I'm not going to let him down, and I'm going to do everything I can to get there and be the best player I can be.

TSN: You missed most of the 2022-23 season after sustaining a shoulder injury (torn labrum) in your first practice with the Steel. What did you learn from that experience?

Hage: It makes you so much more appreciative of the opportunity you have. It just made me so grateful to be able to show up to the rink every day and just play the game you love. When you're taken away from something for so long, and that was a long rehab process, like six months, it does really make you appreciate things. It just had me really excited for the opportunity to come back and play a full year healthy. I really wanted to make the most out of it. It just makes you really grateful.

TSN: What clicked for you in the second half of the season?

Hage: Just took some time to figure out what worked and what didn't. It was a mix of finding two linemates that I clicked with a lot and, at the same time, just trying to feel more confident. I felt like I got better every single day, starting from practice, as the year went on. It started to show more in that second half, which I was really happy about. At the same time, as a group, we started playing so much better and that helps.

Chicago Steel Head Coach and General Manager Mike Garman on Michael Hage👇#StarsRise | #2024NHLDraft pic.twitter.com/Mvpe7dsf41

— USHL (@USHL) June 21, 2024

TSN: Where did you improve the most?

Hage: My play away from the puck was an area of my game that my coaches were hard on me about. I felt it got better as the year went on and it helped me get more touches. It's something I'll continue to work on. It really did help me to get more touches and allowed me to make so many more plays down the stretch.

TSN: What was your best game of the season?

Hage: It's tough to choose one, but I think against Sioux Falls, not too long after Christmas, I felt like I had a pretty good weekend [three goals and four points in two games Jan. 5-6]. I felt like I was creating a lot and, at the same time, being a good leader. I just felt really confident about my game and felt like I was creating a lot of plays. It's obviously nice when you get the results, and everything clicks. I felt like that was the start of the second half and it was a really good weekend for me.

TSN: You interviewed with 31 teams at the NHL scouting combine. What was the toughest question you faced?

Hage: I got a tough one from Montreal. It was, If your teammate comes back to the room at 3 a.m. and [head coach] Marty St. Louis asks you the next day, 'Did he come back at 3 a.m.?' What do you say? I said, 'No.' They came back at me with, 'Oh, so you want guys like that on your

team?' I just said, 'That's my teammate and someone I care about, and I'll try to help him out first and get him back on the right track. If that doesn't happen over a number of occasions maybe the answer is different.'

TSN: Who is your NHL role model?

Hage I really like Jack Eichel. I like the way he plays the game. He's got size, and he's skilled and a really good skater. He's just someone I can take a lot of things from, and I really enjoy watching.

Chicago Steel center Michael Hage — who was just ranked as the 10th-best North American skater by NHL Central Scouting — is one of my favorite dark horse prospects this draft. Oodles of skill and upside, but has flown under the radar a bit so far

Here are some of his highlights: pic.twitter.com/ToZ7Z0xToR

— Derek Neumeier (@Derek_N_NHL) April 17, 2024

TSN: Craig Button, in his penultimate mock draft, had you going to the Toronto Maple Leafs. When you think about that possibility, what goes through your mind?

Hage: It would be really cool, I think. Obviously an extremely passionate fan base. They really do care. An Original Six team, it would be really special. Wherever I land I'll be extremely happy.

TSN: What stood out about the interview with the Leafs?

Hage It was good. It was one of the easier meetings. No odd questions. It was pretty standard. It went well. They're all really good people.

TSN: Were you a Leafs fan growing up?

Hage No. My parents are both from Montreal, so I grew up a Habs fan in Toronto.

TSN: What was your most memorable fan moment?

Hage: Coming back from 3-1 down against the Leafs [in 2021] was one of the more special ones. I remember watching with my mom, dad, brother, and I was pretty ecstatic when they did that. That whole run was a pretty cool memory for me.

TSN: How many friends and family will you have with you in Vegas for the draft?

Hage: Maybe 30-ish with extended family, cousins, things like that, and old coaches that have been there throughout the whole jointed, plus a couple teammates.

TSN: What will Friday night be like for you and your family?

Hage: Really, really hard to describe. It will be a really special moment. It's hard to put into words how meaningful it will be until it happens. It's something you look forward to as a kid. Watching the NHL growing up, you don't know how much of a possibility it really is. Any time you do anything for your whole life and dream of something, and the fact that it's becoming a reality, it's really special. No one really gets here alone. That's not possible. So, I think it will be a really special moment for everyone.

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