



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 9, 2024

The News & Observer

With Hurricane Milton aimed at Florida, NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning head to Triangle early

By Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes and Tampa Bay Lightning will open the 2024-25 NHL hockey season Friday at the Lenovo Center. That much we know.

And beyond that? Who can say?

The Hurricanes and Lightning are scheduled to play again Saturday night at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida. But with Hurricane Milton set to slam into western Florida, with evacuation orders in place, there is much uncertainty about such things as hockey games.

The Lightning left Florida on Monday to come to the Triangle, canceling a final preseason game against Nashville. The team is staying in Chapel Hill after some hastily made reservations and practiced Tuesday at Invisalign Arena in Morrisville.

The players were allowed to bring their families and pets with them to North Carolina, Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois said Tuesday. All of the staffers also made the extended trip, he said.

For now, no one can say if the game Saturday in Tampa can or will be played. Or what will happen if it's not played..

"This is not ideal," BriseBois said.

N.C. State has a football game against Syracuse on Saturday night at Carter-Finley Stadium, which could create logistical problems with holding a game at the Lenovo Center.

Playing Sunday at Lenovo Center might be an option. But BriseBois noted that should Hurricane Milton preclude a return to Florida because of extensive storm damage, the team likely would not be in the proper mindset to play Sunday.

"It's unfortunate what's going on, right, but what I see out of the guys is it's a burden being disrupted in what we're doing but we have the ability to bring our families and loved ones and pets with us," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said Tuesday. "There is a bigger picture, as I told our guys. We got to get away. There are a lot of people at home who haven't been able to get away, so a lot of our thoughts are that hopefully everybody is going to be OK and what can we do when we get back to help everybody out."

For now, so much remains in flux.

"I've heard they might not be going back after our game, so whether that means we'll be playing here, I'm not quite sure how it will unfold," Canes captain Jordan Staal said Tuesday. "It's part of the gig when things like this happen, and you battle through big things and small things and how schedules work. We'll play the game (Friday) and figure it out as we go.

"It's not just our team but their team, too. Obviously they're displaced from their homes and going through a lot more stuff than we are."

Oct 4, 2024; Raleigh, North Carolina, USA; Carolina Hurricanes center Jordan Staal (11) and Tampa Bay Lightning left wing Nicholas Paul (20) skate after the puck during the third period at PNC Arena.

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First there was Hurricane Helene, which worked its way north and into Western North Carolina, leaving behind much destruction and loss of life. Now, Hurricane Milton, which rapidly became a Category 5 storm in the Gulf of Mexico and was growing in intensity at an explosive rate.

The storm was expected to make landfall on Florida's Gulf Coast on Wednesday, the projected path taking it near Tampa, an area that has not had a direct hit from a major hurricane since 1921.

"At the end of the day as long as your family is safe that's the most important thing," Tampa Bay forward Luke Glendening said Tuesday.

The Lightning took the ice at noon for its practice. Missing was forward Jake Guentzel, who played for the Canes last season before being traded to Tampa Bay and then signed, but Cooper said he expected Guentzel to be ready for the opener.

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"We planned it this way," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Tuesday. "Obviously you don't want to practice four days in a row going into a game. We'll get in a couple of practices, then drop the puck.

"I think everybody has been ready and itching for a while to play a real game, so I think we'll be ready to roll."

Many NHL teams will have played their season openers before Friday, leaving the Canes somewhat antsy about getting on the ice, getting started.

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"For me, going there was important just to show our appreciation for what those guys do for us," Brind'Amour said. "It's very understated, in my opinion. It's nice to kind of be in their area and hang out with those guys a little bit. To get our guys around that environment is always good."



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Canes host Lightning early as Hurricane Milton bears down on Tampa

By albhoo

NHL: Preseason-Nashville Predators at Tampa Bay Lightning

Nathan Ray Seebeck-Imagn Images

There was an odd sight on the ice of Invisalign Arena Tuesday—a Tampa Bay Lightning practice.

The hockey team is set to play Carolina in the season opener for both on Friday, and the first of a back-to-back where the teams were to trade off home games. Normally, a team would travel to the city they are playing in after a practice the day before but current events have changed things up, and put what happens after Friday up in the air.

Hurricane Milton is currently churning in the Gulf of Mexico, having reached Category Five strength. It is forecast to hit the Tampa area early Thursday morning, and the strength is such that everyone in its path is being told to get out of the way. This includes the hockey team, who decided to not complicate evacuation efforts by going on ahead and flying up to Raleigh on Monday Night.

It wasn't just the players, though.

Taking a second to realize why they are there, it's got to bring a smile to your face to picture members of the Tampa Bay Lightning strolling down Franklin Street near the UNC campus with dogs in tow. It's hard to imagine the players will just stay shut in their room for the nights before the game, so it'll be interesting to see if there are any player sightings before the game on Friday.

The other part of this equation is the game Saturday. It had been brought up that the Canes and Tampa could just play

this weekend in Raleigh to give the city time if things weren't good enough in the city to host an event, but it doesn't sound like that's something the Lightning aren't thrilled about.

Why Sunday? N.C. State is hosting Syracuse across the street at Carter-Finley for an 8 PM Saturday Night matchup. Scheduling rules state that the earliest the Canes and Tampa could start their game Saturday would still run right into the start time of the football game, not to mention both teams share parking. The logistics of hosting both at the same time would be impossible. So, if the game is moved to Raleigh it would have to happen on Sunday. The good news for both squads is that after this weekend, both don't have to play again until Tuesday, which gives them time to figure it out.

The teams are scheduled to play three times this season, and the third meeting isn't until March 11th, scheduled for Raleigh. The easiest solution may be to just switch who is hosting who, as both squads have the dates around the 11th open. For Tampa, the Canes game was to be the first of a three game road trip, so it just adds a game to their home stand. For the Canes, it would split up their four game home stand. This may turn out to be more convenient than trying to find another open date for both squads to mutually play that wouldn't disrupt the rest of the schedule too much.

Either way, an answer likely won't be known until Friday morning. Time will be needed to let the storm come through and then an assessment of the damage to determine if it's even possible for what is needed to host a hockey game. It's something to keep an eye on as we tick closer to Opening Night.



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The Hockey News

'Our roster might change a little': Rod Brind'Amour Noncommittal on Opening Night Roster

By Ryan Henkel

The Hurricanes submitted a roster for Monday's deadline, but that doesn't mean they can't make any moves before their first game on Friday.

When the Carolina Hurricanes submitted their opening roster yesterday afternoon, there were a few things that raised some eyebrows

For one, Bryce Montgomery, who was freshly signed to a three-year ELC was one of the 22-players on the roster.

However, Montgomery's addition can strictly be seen as a salary cap move as his cap hit, which was not a normal value, put Carolina within \$3 of the cap, allowing for a maximum potential utilization of LTIR relief.

"There's a lot of cap stuff going on," said Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour.

The second thing was that Jackson Blake was not one of the players listed on the roster.

Many thought Blake would potentially be on the opening roster given his strong camp and by the fact that he wasn't a

part of the Hurricanes' initial mass cut, but that was not the case.

However, that doesn't mean he can't still find his way onto the team's roster.

Monday was simply the deadline for team's to submit their rule compliant rosters to the league, but that doesn't mean that teams can't make moves following that submittal.

Brind'Amour, when asked, didn't commit to the idea of Blake being with the team.

"I think our roster might change a little, but I don't anticipate it to too much," Brind'Amour said. "I don't know if I can say, 'Yeah, he may be coming back up here.' We're going to have another conversation here tomorrow and see where it goes."

Perhaps a reason to believe he won't be gone long is that Blake now has a stall within the Canes' locker room at their practice rink in Morrisville.

Back during training camp, Blake was in a separate locker room entirely with the other prospects.

The team is scheduled for practice on Wednesday, so we'll be able to see then whether or not he's around.

Carolina Hurricanes Rookie Makes Team

By Ryan Henkel

The Canes have recalled Jackson Blake as they prepare for their season opener.

It seems that Jackson Blake has indeed made the Carolina Hurricanes' starting roster.

Despite not being on the 22-man opening roster that the Canes submitted on Monday, the rookie forward was recalled today, signaling that he more than likely will be a part of the team's roster going forward.

"There's always room for guys that earn their spot," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour had said and that's clearly the case here.

Blake, 21, had a strong preseason showing and was standing out almost daily.

"He's been maybe one of the better players, if you're being honest about it," Brind'Amour said. "He's very noticeable every shift. It's not just shifts here and there."

While Blake may not necessarily be in the starting lineup on Friday, he'll still be around the team and a legitimate option in case of injuries or poor play from someone else.

Or he just might play.

We don't know yet, and isn't that just part of the fun?

The Hobey Baker finalist is a playdriving forward who can create with very little time and space.

A strong stickhandler, Blake is able to find teammates with his vision or he can finish on his own from in close or at distance.

The Canes have had a strong history of impressive rookie seasons such as Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis in recent memory, so hopefully Blake can make his mark with the Hurricanes too.



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10 NHL Prospects Who Impressed In Training Camp And Were Cut Anyway

By Tony Ferrari

Carter Yakemchuk

As much as we'd all like to think that NHL teams put the 12 best forwards, six best defenders and two best goalies onto their roster at the end of training camp, it's just not the truth.

Almost every team has a player, usually one of their best prospects, that outperforms a few veterans or works their tail off to secure a roster spot but finds themselves on the outside looking in.

This year is no different, with a number of very good players putting together incredibly strong training camps and not starting the season on the NHL team. There are various reasons for this, such as wanting the player to continue to develop their skills or having too many NHL contracts given out to veterans.

Let's look at some top performers and notable standouts from the pre-season and training camps who likely could have been on their NHL rosters but were sent down.

Carter Yakemchuk, D, Ottawa Senators

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 2 goals, 5 assists, 7 points

If you guessed Yakemchuk would be the top-scoring player of the pre-season who didn't make an NHL roster, you'd have been called crazy.

The Senators' seventh-overall pick from this past draft had a great training camp and looked dynamic and skilled throughout the pre-season. His defensive flaws and occasionally questionable decisions did stand out at times as well, though.

Sending Yakemchuk back to the WHL was the right decision, but he made it far more difficult than expected. If Yakemchuk was going to be the difference between the Sens being a contender or not, they may have opted to keep him, but they are more than an 18-year-old defenseman away from contender status.

Marco Kasper, C, Detroit Red Wings

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 2 goals, 1 assist, 3 points

The Red Wings seem insistent that their young players should force their way onto a roster past NHL veterans. Kasper could have made this team, but with a log jam of NHL talent up front, a boatload of NHL contracts and a salary cap situation tighter than a non-playoff team should have to deal with, Kasper was sent to the AHL.

While he wasn't going to be an offensive difference-maker immediately, Kasper showed plenty of poise and promise throughout training camp. He easily could have slotted in as the third-line center or a winger in the middle six. We will likely see the two-way forward in the NHL at some point this season, but it just won't be opening night unless something drastic changes between now and then.

Denton Mateychuk, D, Columbus Blue Jackets

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 2 goals, 1 assist, 3 points

It seemed like an uphill battle from the get-go for Mateychuk, but he had an impressive camp for the Blue Jackets, and he'll get further development in the AHL. The decision also came down to a log jam, a lack of urgency to get the top prospects in the NHL and Mateychuk being exempt from waivers. Columbus isn't a Cup contender, so giving Mateychuk and left winger James Malatesta some AHL time to build their games is a good choice.

As things stand, the Jackets will go with their veterans on opening night on the back end. Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson will likely play over David Jiricek and Jordan Harris, who made the NHL rosters but aren't slated to be in the opening night lineup. Having Mateychuk sitting on the sidelines is the last thing they want.

Tanner Molendyk, D, Nashville Predators

Pre-season stats: 3 games played, 0 points

With the Predators loading up in the summer, Molendyk was unlikely even to have an outside shot at making the NHL roster in camp, but the way he played had fans and media in Nashville buzzing. His mobility and fluidity were impressive, and the Predators kept him in camp for much longer than anticipated.

Nashville's hope is Molendyk will tear up the WHL and show dominance at both ends of the ice. He asserted himself as one of the top prospects in camp, and he will look to build on that in the WHL.

Brad Lambert, C/RW, Winnipeg Jets

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 1 goal, 2 assists, 3 points

At the end of last season, Lambert looked solid in his one NHL game after being an offensive force in the AHL. He recorded a point in his first NHL game, and from that moment on, he felt as if he belonged. In the off-season, he repeatedly mentioned his goal was to make the NHL club in training camp.

By all reports, Lambert was great in camp. His speed and skill would have been major assets for the Jets. They may very well still be at some point this season. Lambert has more than impressed over the two seasons since being drafted 30th overall. Seeing the young Finn in the NHL by Christmas wouldn't be shocking.

Scott Morrow, D, Carolina Hurricanes

Pre-season stats: 2 games played, 0 goals, 2 assists, 2 points

After a promising NCAA career, Morrow joined the Hurricanes to end last season. His smooth skating, excellent transition game and physical skill set all played right into what the Hurricanes generally look for in defensemen. The 21-year-old was injured early in training camp but returned hoping to make the team.

Unfortunately, the time away from the team was too much for him to make the NHL squad. The Hurricanes already have a very solid top six forwards, but Morrow brings the difference-making edge that could help put the team over the top. If he



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gets off to a hot start in the AHL with the Chicago Wolves, it may not be too long before we see Morrow back in Raleigh.

Felix Unger Sorum, RW/C, Carolina Hurricanes

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 1 goal, 3 assists, 4 points

After challenging for a spot with the Hurricanes in last year's camp, Unger Sorum came into this year's training camp with high confidence. His intensity and willingness to outwork his opponents initially attracted Carolina to him, but the surprising amount of skill and playmaking sold the Canes.

Although there wasn't as much noise around him this year, Unger Sorum continued to showcase his two-way, high-effort game in training camp. He was tasked with playing center in camp, which was fairly new to the young Swede. Coach Rod Brind'Amour was very happy with his progress. Sending Unger Sorum down to the AHL will allow him to work on playing the new position and setting himself up for long-term success.

Brandon Bussi, G, Boston Bruins

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 1-2-0, 2.60 goals-against average, .900 save percentage

Now that Jeremy Swayman's contract situation is solved and Joonas Korpisalo's contract will keep him in the NHL, Brandon Bussi is once again destined for the AHL. Bussi has been fantastic as AHL Providence's netminder, and he was poised to take on the backup role in the NHL when it was first expected the team would part with Ullmark this off-season. Unfortunately for Bussi, the Bruins brought Korpisalo back in the Ullmark trade, and it all but sealed his fate.

Having passed through waivers, Bussi is poised to hold down most of the starts in net for Providence, but his play over the last few years has warranted a promotion to the big

leagues. Bussi may have to wait for an injury or a change of scenery for that opportunity, though.

Noah Ostlund, C/LW, Buffalo Sabres

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 1 goal, 3 assists, 4 points

Ostlund came to North America at the end of his Swedish League campaign last year and looked good in a handful of AHL games between the regular season and playoffs. Ostlund always seemed destined for the AHL this year, and while he was sent down, he put together an impressive first training camp in North America.

Ostlund plays with speed and skill while processing the game at a high level. He's always been at his best when playing above his age group because of his intelligence and skill. Now, in his first season in North America, Ostlund could find himself pushing for NHL time thanks to an excellent first impression on the Sabres' coaching staff.

Andrew Cristall, LW, Washington Capitals

Pre-season stats: 4 games played, 2 goals, 1 assist, 3 points

Despite proving all he can at the WHL level, Cristall heads back there because the NHL may be too high-paced for the 19-year-old. Unfortunately, because of the CHL-NHL agreement, there is no opportunity for Cristall to play full-time in the AHL this season.

Cristall was one of the last two players the Capitals cut, along with Ivan Miroshnichenko. The Russian right winger can play in the AHL, but Cristall is forced to return to a league he's already dominated. He can work on getting bigger and stronger or refining his defensive game, but those will never be traits he relies on at the NHL level. Cristall is an offensive dynamo, and the AHL is likely the place that would be best for him, but he'll get a farewell tour in the WHL instead.

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1323032 Carolina Hurricanes

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Chip Alexander6-8 minutes 08/10/2024

Morrisville

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This story was originally

Published October 8, 2024, 1:27 PM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

In more than 40 years at The N&O, Chip Alexander has covered the N.C. State, UNC, Duke and East Carolina beats, and now is in his 15th season on the Carolina Hurricanes beat. Alexander, who has won numerous writing awards at the state and national level, covered the Hurricanes' move to North Carolina in 1997 and was a part of The N&O's coverage of the Canes' 2006 Stanley Cup run.

News Observer LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323157 Tampa Bay Lightning

Time to close the history books, focus on a new era of Lightning hockey

John Romano Times staff

TAMPA — Makeovers aren't just for losers. Turns out, even mini dynasties need some freshening up.

So it is for the Lightning. Across the past 10 seasons, there's not a team in the NHL with more victories than Tampa Bay. No franchise has won more conference titles, and only the Penguins have won as many Stanley Cups. This is what passes for dominance in the salary-cap era.



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And yet, while they have been the envy of the league, the Lightning also have been a team in decline. They have not been so bold as to admit that out loud, but their maneuvers in the offseason seem to confirm it.

This was not the typical hand-wringing over trying to keep the gang together in the face of rising salaries. This was a purposeful departure from the formula that had worked so well since this run began with a Stanley Cup final loss to Chicago 10 years ago.

"It's the reality of our industry," general manager Julien BriseBois said. "There's turnover."

That has been evident for several years. Because of salary-cap restraints, the Lightning had already waved goodbye to a half-dozen or more key contributors to the back-to-back Stanley Cup winners in 2020 and 2021. The core group was the same, but the depth and the identity wavered.

Rather than continue down that slope, the Lightning have adjusted.

Instead of being a diminished team, they have chosen to be a different team.

Steven Stamkos, the face of the franchise and one of the greatest athletes that Tampa Bay has known, is gone. Mikhail Sergachev, the one-time heir apparent to Victor Hedman on the Lightning blue line, is gone. Anthony Duclair, Tanner Jeannot, Alex Barre-Boulet, Matt Dumba, Calvin de Haan, Tyler Motte, Haydn Fleury, Austin Watson. All gone. Of the 24 skaters with the most ice time last season, nearly half are no longer around.

"The last two years, we've had two first-round exits. That's not where we want to be," said forward Anthony Cirelli. "We're a team that's always been in the fight, always had a chance to win since I've been here. Sometimes, change is good. Bringing in new voices and personalities."

There is a cost to winning in the NHL today and it goes beyond payroll expenditures. Prior to the Lightning, only three franchises had won multiple Stanley Cups in the salary-cap era. The subsequent falloffs were all dramatic:

- Chicago won Cups in 2010, 2013 and 2015. They have not won a playoff series since and have missed the postseason six of the last seven years.
- The Kings won Cups in 2012 and 2014. They have not won a playoff series since.
- The Penguins won Cups in 2009, 2016 and 2017. They have not won a playoff series in the last six years.

That's the legacy the Lightning are trying to avoid, and it won't be easy. Teams that win multiple Stanley Cups are obviously loaded with talent and when contracts expire, you can either overpay to keep players or contemplate a different type of roster.

The Blackhawks held on to Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Corey Crawford, Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook until they were in their mid-30s, and the team slid into obscurity. Ditto for the Penguins with Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang.

"Teams that have success, their players price themselves out ... (and) tend to go to teams that are on the way up," BriseBois said. "It kind of recalibrates the league a little bit, the strengths of each team, the balance of power, if you will, within the league."

The Lightning were threatening to go down a similar road of hopelessly clinging to the past. After four consecutive seasons with a top-10 defense, they slipped to No. 14 in 2022-23 and lost in the first round to Toronto. They fell to No. 22 last season, and lost to Florida in the first round.

They needed to get better at keeping pucks out of their own net, and being a harder team to play in 5-on-5 situations. Sergachev is clearly a skilled player, but part of his appeal is the offensive production he brings as a defenseman. By trading him to Utah, the Lightning got a defense-first player in J.J. Moser and cleared enough money from the salary cap to be able to afford shutdown defenseman Ryan McDonagh, too.

Parting ways with Stamkos was more difficult, but acquiring Jake Guentzel for that spot gives the Lightning a younger skater with a greater capacity to play effectively on both ends of the ice.

None of this guarantees the Lightning can stave off further decline, but it's a smarter play than hoping to recapture old glories with a team that is older and a roster that is thinner than the past.

"It's a fine line. You've got to have some belief in your core and the things you've been preaching and whatnot," said McDonagh. "But at the same time, there's ways to tweak things. It's like anything else in life. If it's not working, you need to make some changes.

"We've had a few big changes here, and now it's our job as players to change the result and change the ending."

John Romano can be reached at Instagram. Follow @romano_tbtimes.

Diminishing returns?

o paraphrase Lightning GM Julien BriseBois, the NHL's salary cap is the great equalizer. Teams that have enormous success eventually have enormous payrolls. If you hang on to your stars, you end up robbing your depth. And if you trade too many draft picks in the buildup to a Cup run, you have little support from the minors. In an attempt to keep their window of opportunity open longer, the Lightning parted ways with Steven Stamkos and Mikhail Sergachev in the offseason. Time will tell if they fare better than the other teams that have won multiple titles during the salary-cap era.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

The golden age: Pittsburgh won back-to-back Stanley Cup titles in 2015-16 and 2016-17 while going 32-17 in the postseason.

The reckoning: Penguins won in the first round in 2018-19 and have since lost five consecutive playoff series. Their postseason record since 2019 is 12-21, and they missed the playoffs each of the last two seasons.

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

The golden age: From 2008-09 to 2014-15, Chicago reached the conference finals five times and won three Stanley Cups. The Blackhawks were 73-44 in the postseason.

The reckoning: Over the past nine seasons, the Blackhawks have failed to get past the first round. They are 7-13 in the playoffs and have missed the postseason six times.

LOS ANGELES KINGS

The golden age: In a three-year span from 2011-12 to 2013-14, the Kings reached the conference finals every season and won two Stanley Cups. They were 41-23 in the postseason.

The reckoning: Los Angeles has not won a playoff series in the last 10 years. The Kings have missed the postseason five times and lost in the first round five times. They are 7-20 in the playoffs.

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

The golden age: Between 2014-15 and 2021-22, the Lightning won four Eastern Conference titles and two Stanley Cups. They went 70-42 in six postseasons.

The reckoning: Tampa Bay has been bounced out of the playoffs in the first round in consecutive seasons. The Lightning are 3-8 in that span.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323158 Tampa Bay Lightning

In Lightning's future: Arena upgrades, new ownership, outdoor game?

Eduardo A. Encina Times staff

Published Yesterday|Updated Yesterday

TAMPA — Chief executive officer Steve Griggs has been a key figure in making the Lightning one of the NHL's model franchises under owner Jeff Vinik.



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Aside from the Lightning's success on the ice — the team has a 375-game home sellout streak — Amalie Arena has been established as an attractive venue for concerts, NCAA events and more. Griggs was recognized by The Hockey News as the No. 1 team executive in the NHL in the publication's 2022 "Money and Power" issue.

During this time of transition for the Lightning, we spoke to Griggs on a variety of topics, including a revamping of the ownership, the departure of star Steven Stamkos, reinventing the fan experience at Amalie Arena and the potential of hosting an outdoor game in Tampa. (Answers have been edited for length and clarity.)

One of the big storylines this summer was that Jeff Vinik was working to sell his majority share of the team. The prospect of a new ownership group, or the idea of Vinik being less involved might make some fans uneasy. What can we expect moving forward?

Editor's note: Since this interview, the NHL's board of governors approved the sale of 54% of the team to Blue Owl Capital Co-CEOs Doug Ostrover and Marc Lipschultz at a \$1.8 billion valuation, one of the final steps before the deal becomes official.

Jeff is still in control for several years. We will be very excited to roll out the new partners in due time. But that being said, I think 1 plus 2 is going to equal 5 here in that they want to learn from Jeff. They want to be great partners. They want to be great community stewards of our brand. They want to be philanthropic, and they're excited to continue working with Jeff to have championship teams here.

I think we're all excited that Jeff's not going anywhere, and we're going to be adding even more resources and more horsepower to continue to do what we've been doing and hopefully win more Stanley Cups.

Stamkos was the face of the franchise for 16 years. He made a tremendous impact on fans with his play, leadership and active role in the community. Months later, fans are still stung by the fact that he's gone. What would you tell them?

I've been around this business for 30 years and have seen Wayne Gretzky, you know, Michael Jordan (play elsewhere). You're talking about someone who was iconic here, a Stanley Cup champion, a great captain, a great human being. Unfortunately, it's the business we live in and we work in. But I think everyone's going to have that opportunity on Oct. 28 to thank him (when the Predators come to Tampa). We'll all thank him for everything that he's done, not only for our hockey team, but for this community, for this organization.

Our team is really poised to have a wide window here for a number of years to come with the great acquisition of Jake Guentzel. You bring back Ryan McDonagh. You're going to have your goalie (Andrei Vasilevskiy) who's going to be in great shape now coming off (the back injury) last year. We have four great defensemen. You've got a great core up front in the forwards. And so we have this huge opportunity to continue to move forward. And I think that's what fans should be excited about.

The team remains with Bally Sports Sun through at least this season, while many teams in the NHL are trying new methods to broadcast games to their fans. Any plans to try and expand the broadcast reach?

I think we always want to have the widest distribution we can have. At the same time, too, you have consumers who are deciding which cords they want to cut or which cords they want to add. So that becomes a part of the landscape of how you pull the Rubik's Cube together of the best distribution you can have. Some people don't have the Disney ESPN Plus package, some people don't have Bally's package, some people don't have cable anymore. And so you have to find that balance of the largest distribution you can have within where it's being produced and distributed.

What I'm really proud about this organization is we're always strategic. We're always forward thinking. We're always looking to see what is around the corner. Obviously, you're seeing it even at the national level. If you look at the NBA deal, the NHL, the national deals are in the next three or four years. So you never know what's going to happen.

And you add in the Netflix and the Amazons of the world, and there's obviously direct-to-consumer and over-the-air. So making sure that we have our plan in place, should, you know, the sand shift. But for now, Bally's our partner. They're good people. They're good friends of ours, and we're excited about this year with them.

Hosting an outdoor game in Tampa is something you have been trying to do for years, and there are obvious obstacles given the weather here. Do you feel like you're close to making that a reality?

Jeff and I have been pushing since about 2015, 2016 and I'm very optimistic that day will come. It's something we work on daily to try and get done for our fans, because the reason we want to do it is because it's for our fans. It's sort of like the All-Star Game. It's a celebration of the game.

And I think having it at Raymond James Stadium and having 65,000 hockey fans in there for a hockey game is a celebration of hockey and a testament to what a great hockey market this is. It really comes down to, what's the covering system? And how are you keeping it shielded from not only humidity, sunshine, wind, rain, those elements that we just need to make sure we're protecting the ice in order to pull it off. So we're working hard with the league to get to that place.

For the first time players will be wearing jersey patches, and you've used that to create the first purpose-driven jersey patches with \$1 million donations to the Tampa Metro YMCA and AdventHealth. This organization's contributions to the community are well known. How is this the next layer of that?

I think the ethos of Jeff Vinik is that we're a community-based team, and when we looked at who we're going to put on our jersey, it had to be best in brands, best in community. And I think we couldn't have found two better partners in the YMCA and in AdventHealth, and both of them are great community partners who continue to do great things in this community to help others, and we're just proud to be partners with them. There's a great program with Patch with a Purpose. It was important to have the right people. We took our time.

The area around Amalie Arena has changed as Water Street has grown, and you're constantly working to re-invent the fan experience. Among the additions this season is transitioning the Firestick Grill restaurant to a food hall featuring local vendors like King of the Coop, Malio's and Bavaro's that will be open to all fans.

That's a \$2.5 million project alone. You're installing a video board to the arena that will be the largest outdoor marquee in the state. You've announced that concession prices won't go up this season. Why are all those things important?

Part of the strategy, and when you look at this food hall — you know, the Market on Four strategy was we really didn't need a sit-down restaurant anymore — but how do we create something that's going to be really cool for the fans and have a different experience? That's one. Two is everything in the plaza. How do we create the right pricing so people want to hang out in front of our building? I think there's so many options now, so it keeps us on our toes to make sure we're doing the right thing and having the right experience for our fans, because they have lots of options. Before, you parked the car and maybe went over to Newk's or Ferg's. Now, there's a lot more.

For us, it's to always keep elevating and transforming this building in order to make sure it keeps up with a \$2.5 billion district that's going to become a \$5 billion district at some point in time. So we need to make sure we're always enhancing this building. It's in a world-class place, not just for hockey, but for all the other events that come in, especially NCAA. As other cities start to want to have NCAA events and have Women's Final Four or Frozen Four or Volleyball Final Four, which are huge events for the city, we need to make sure that this building is at a very high level.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323159 Tampa Bay Lightning

Hurricane Milton's impact on sports: Memphis-South Florida CFB game pushed to Saturday

Alex Andrejev, Matt Baker

5-7 minutes 08/10/2024



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 9, 2024

Sports are secondary when it comes to natural disasters.

Logistics and scheduling for college sports, the NFL, NHL and NBA have already been impacted in the Southeast as the threat of Hurricane Milton looms. The storm is expected to hit Florida as a major hurricane Wednesday or Thursday.

Milton was considered a powerful Category 4 hurricane Tuesday morning and is projected to return to Category 5 status, per the National Hurricane Center. The hurricane is the strongest storm in the Gulf of Mexico since 2005 and is expected to make landfall in Tampa on Wednesday, according to the New York Times, which is tracking the storm. It looms as the largest hurricane threat the Tampa area has faced in more than a century.

"Let's prepare for the worst, and let's pray that we get a weakening," Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said Tuesday morning. "But we must be prepared for a major, major impact to the west coast of Florida."

In college football, the Memphis at South Florida game was postponed a day because of Milton's impending threat. It was rescheduled for 3:30 p.m. ET on Saturday at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla. It was initially scheduled for Friday night, but the schools and the American Athletic Conference determined that wasn't feasible.

South Florida planned to move its players and staff from Tampa to Orlando on Tuesday afternoon. The Bulls were expecting the hour-and-a-half bus ride to take twice as long because of evacuation traffic on Interstate 4.

Coach Alex Golesh said there's no playbook for the situation his program is facing. South Florida counts 31 players from what it considers the Tampa Bay area on its roster with at least 23 others from areas that could be impacted. Some have asked to bring water home to their families because the grocery stores are out. Others are trying to figure out how to take care of their dogs. Staffers have families. Many have young children. A few have pregnant wives.

"Things that are real-life situations that you're pushing through," Golesh said during a virtual media availability Tuesday.

Memphis, South Florida and the conference will reevaluate the game Thursday after the storm passes. The two teams don't share an upcoming open date.

Golesh said everyone wants to play this weekend, but it might not be possible.

"I'd be lying to you if I told you, 'Man, I feel like this football game's going to be really important Saturday after what happens here Thursday,'" Golesh said. "What happens here Thursday could be as bad as anything this part of the country's ever seen."

Elsewhere around college sports

Other college football games in Florida, such as Cincinnati at UCF in Orlando, and North Texas at FAU in Boca Raton, could also be impacted, but scheduling changes were not announced as of Tuesday morning.

"We are actively tracking Hurricane Milton and its possible effects on this weekend's matchup," UCF Football posted on X on Monday night. "Stay safe, everyone!"

That game is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. ET on Saturday at FBC Mortgage Stadium in Orange County. UCF Athletics said Tuesday the football game would remain as scheduled but announced adjustments for volleyball, women's and men's soccer and men's tennis.

North Texas-FAU is scheduled for 7 p.m. ET Saturday at FAU Stadium, located about half an hour north of Fort Lauderdale.

NFL

The NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers left the Tampa area early, departing Tuesday morning, ahead of Sunday's game against the Saints in New Orleans. The team said it would relocate its operations to the New Orleans area for the rest of the week due to Hurricane Milton's threat. The team typically practices at its training facility in Tampa.

The Week 6 game is scheduled for 1 p.m. ET on Sunday.

NHL

The NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning canceled a preseason game against the Nashville Predators on Monday. That game was originally rescheduled from Sep. 27 due to the effects of Hurricane Helene, which caused significant damage in the area.

The Lightning face the Carolina Hurricanes in their regular-season opener in Raleigh, N.C., on Friday. The Lightning evacuated early to Raleigh in preparation for the storm, according to the Tampa Bay Times.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323102 New Jersey Devils

How to buy last-minute tickets for the Devils' home opener vs. Toronto Maple Leafs | Prices, best deals, more for NHL game

By Gabriel Trevino

The New Jersey Devils face the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday, Oct. 10, 2024 (10/10/24) at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, in the Devils' first home game of the regular season.

How to get tickets to the Devils vs. Maple Leafs game: Fans who want to attend the game can buy tickets at SeatGeek. The cheapest tickets are for \$56 each. The best tickets available by deal score are lower bowl seats at the middle of the ice for \$364 each, as of Tuesday morning.

You can also look for tickets on Stubhub, Ticketmaster, Ticketsmaster or Vivid Seats.

Here's what you need to know:

What: Devils home opener

Who: New Jersey Devils vs. Toronto Maple Leafs

When: Oct. 10, 2024

Time: 7 p.m. CT

Where: Prudential Center

TV: MSG

Here's a recent Devils story from NJ.com:

To Devils fans' delight, the Prudential Center continues to expand its menu for the upcoming NHL season.

The Prudential Center launched "Eastback Kitchen" for the 2024-25 Devils season to provide an upgraded menu with 11 new items for concession stands and the premium clubs and suites all across the arena.

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323188 Websites

The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Rangers up their offer to Shesterkin, plus latest on Oettinger-Stars and Tavares-Maple Leafs

By Pierre LeBrun



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The puck drops on the New York Rangers' season Wednesday night, and with that, an unofficial deadline will pass.

We'll see now just how strongly Igor Shesterkin feels about shelving talks on an extension once his team's regular season begins. That's a sentiment that was expressed to the team, but is it ironclad?

There's no reason to doubt that Shesterkin's preference is to focus on the season and nothing else, but one would imagine there is some wiggle room. If the Rangers in mid-November offer an extension that hits the sweet spot for Shesterkin's camp, are his reps really not going to bring it to him?

It's their job to do so, so of course they would. If the superstar goalie says at that point that he doesn't want to deal with it in-season, then so be it. There will still be time after the season to get it done before July 1. But I think you have to leave the door open about the possibility that an extension is still doable in-season, no matter what's been expressed.

In the meantime, we had a tweet from Kevin Weekes on Tuesday saying Shesterkin has declined an eight-year, \$88-million offer from the Rangers.

Rick Komarow, who represents Shesterkin along with Max Moliver, declined comment Tuesday when asked about the report. I suspect the timing of it wasn't terribly well appreciated by them.

It had already been reported last month that the Rangers were willing to pay Shesterkin more than Carey Price's \$10.5 million AAV, the highest cap hit on the NHL books for a goaltender. League sources confirmed that the Rangers have indeed made that offer to Shesterkin.

But wherever that latest offer is, it's obviously still not at the number that's going to close the deal.

Shesterkin's camp believes he is the best goalie in the world, and I think the Rangers agree. But within that agreed context, there's the reality that the salary cap keeps climbing, and this is about the percentage of the cap for the top players in the game.

If Edmonton Oilers center Leon Draisaitl is worth \$14 million per year on his extension that kicks in next season — a contract very much influenced by the growing salary cap — how much is the best goalie in the world worth? I don't believe for a second that Shesterkin's camp is asking for Draisaitl money, but it's obviously above \$11 million. So I ask again, as I did a few weeks ago, is it \$12 million or \$13 million that gets it done?

And for the Rangers, what number makes it too difficult to assemble a team around him? That's a legitimate concern.

The modern NHL philosophy is to push back on paying goalies the same as top skaters. But we just saw Jeremy Swayman in a restricted-free-agent negotiation go against that philosophy and win. Against the Boston Bruins, no less.

Shesterkin, with the leverage of unrestricted free agency and the reputation of being the best goalie in the world, can justifiably argue he's worth more than \$11 million per year based on the growing salary cap.

The final piece of this puzzle is the eighth year that only the Rangers can offer. My sense is that Shesterkin's camp doesn't view that as a be-all and end-all. If they go to market July 1, the average annual value on a seven-year deal will be massive. And if he's still playing reasonably well when that seven years is up, even at the age of 37, one would imagine someone will be willing to pay him on a one-year contract. Maybe not at top dollar by that age, but there's still a salary there.

So, here we are, with the Rangers' season about to begin. It's the most interesting negotiation in the NHL this season when you consider the financial landscape for goalies and the bar it will set.

Whether that's with the Rangers or elsewhere.

Swayman impact on Oettinger

There's a goalie in Dallas who no doubt was paying close attention to what was going on with his Team USA pal in Boston.

Jake Oettinger is an RFA after the season and the same age, 25, as Swayman. The impact of Swayman's \$8.25 million AAV-per-season deal

could be felt across the goalie market but especially for such a close comparable as Oettinger.

The Dallas Stars and Oettinger's camp, led by agent Ben Hankinson, had only a brief conversation this summer. So far, no meaningful extension talks have commenced. All things being equal, my sense is the Oettinger camp would probably want to wait and tack on a big year this season as leverage before engaging meaningfully. But that doesn't stop the Stars from trying to negotiate during the season, which I think they will.

I think Oettinger absolutely loves it in Dallas, so there's every expectation that this gets done once the sides dive in for real. But the Swayman contract has made things harder for the Stars.

The really challenging part for the Cup-contending Stars is that young star forward Wyatt Johnston is also an RFA after the season, and that's going to be a big-time contract, as well.

Leafs and Tavares extension talks

The Toronto Maple Leafs and John Tavares' camp, led by veteran agent Pat Brisson, have had contract discussions.

Obviously, the delicate dance here is finding a sweet spot on what a pay cut looks like from Tavares' current \$11 million AAV.

They're not there yet, but the dialogue will continue. There's mutual interest in continuing the relationship. Tavares is raising his family in his hometown and doesn't want to go anywhere. But I don't think there's any rush to get something done, either, especially from the team's perspective. Obviously, the Leafs have other important files, led by pending UFA Mitch Marner.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323189 Websites

The Athletic / The 10 youngest NHL players to start 2024-25, from Celebrini and Bedard to Honzek and Ritchie

By Chris Johnston

As NHL teams worked to finalize their opening-night rosters in recent days, a number of teenagers had their dreams delayed by a call into the general manager's office.

The Ottawa Senators assigned Carter Yakemchuk to WHL Calgary. The Pittsburgh Penguins sent Harrison Brunicke to WHL Kamloops. The Nashville Predators returned Tanner Molendyk to WHL Saskatoon. The Toronto Maple Leafs assigned Easton Cowan to OHL London.

The odds of making an NHL team before celebrating your 20th birthday are heavily stacked against even the most talented teens.

Consider that at any given moment there are 400-plus teenagers whose rights belong to NHL clubs, and yet to start the 2024-25 season only 10 of those players are active members of an NHL roster. That's just 1.4 percent of the league.

As the puck drops on a new season, here's an introduction — or reintroduction — to the NHL's youngest players.

Jett Luchanko, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 18

Birthdate: Aug. 21, 2006

Position: C

Scoop: Luchanko is arguably the most surprising player to break camp with an NHL team given the Flyers didn't even expect the 2024 No. 13 pick to seriously challenge for a job when it began. But he skates well and fits a positional need, as colleague Kevin Kurz detailed nicely here, so Luchanko is on the precipice of becoming the youngest player in Flyers history. He's not even two full months beyond his 18th birthday. Still, his "tryout" will continue for the foreseeable future as management closely tracks his progress and gathers additional insight into whether his



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development is best served in Philadelphia or with the OHL's Guelph Storm.

Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Age: 18

Birthdate: June 13, 2006

Position: C

Scoop: The No. 1 pick in June's draft endured a grueling summer of travel and obligations and ended up being sidelined for a portion of training camp by a nagging lower-body injury. Fortunately, it didn't prove to be serious and Celebrini looks poised to enter the season as San Jose's top-line center. While that speaks to his tantalizing all-around ability, it also tells the story of a Sharks organization in transition and hints at the likelihood Celebrini won't be eased into the world's top hockey league. Tough matchups and a tough schedule lay ahead for a guy taking the big step up from Boston University.

Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks

Age: 19

Birthdate: July 17, 2005

Position: C

Scoop: So, yeah, you might have heard of this guy. Once or twice. It really underscores how unique Bedard's situation is, though, when you consider the immense expectations he's already shouldering while still among the youngest players in the NHL. It's being treated as almost a foregone conclusion that the Blackhawks center will eclipse the lofty 0.90 points per game mark he hit as a rookie, with some even starting to ask him about the possibility of matching Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid by winning the Hart Trophy in his second season. The sky is clearly the limit for Bedard, who should benefit from the fact Blackhawks management spent the summer making sure he'd be surrounded by more NHL-caliber talent. No pressure, kid.

Zach Benson, Buffalo Sabres

Age: 19

Birthdate: May 12, 2005

Position: LW

Scoop: Benson has just come through a second straight training camp where he earned rave reviews in Buffalo. A competitive player who doesn't shy away from puck battles, he's a candidate to get an increased role under new head coach Lindy Ruff after producing 11 goals and 30 points in 71 games as a rookie. The No. 13 pick from 2023 profiles as a pest who will give opponents fits. He was injured in Buffalo's season-opening game in Czechia last week, but it isn't believed to be a serious ailment.

Will Smith, San Jose Sharks

Age: 19

Birthdate: March 17, 2005

Position: C

Scoop: Fresh off a monster season at Boston College where he had 71 points in 41 games, Smith will slot behind Celebrini down the middle of the ice for San Jose. He's another much-needed beacon of hope for the organization. A strong playmaker with excellent puck skills, the fourth overall pick from 2023 has put up big offensive numbers everywhere he's played and is expected to develop into a top-line NHL talent. The best-case scenario for San Jose would be seeing Smith and Celebrini push each other through their shared rookie campaigns.

Calum Ritchie, Colorado Avalanche

Age: 19

Birthdate: Jan. 21, 2005

Position: RW

Scoop: With the Avalanche down three of their top-six forwards to start the year in Artturi Lehkonen, Gabriel Landeskog and Valeri Nichushkin,

opportunity came knocking for Ritchie. So far, so good for the No. 27 pick from 2023. Ritchie demonstrated enticing offensive flair during the preseason — scoring a goal against Utah coach Jared Bednar called “insane” — but will need to prove he has the defensive details needed to back up his pure skill in order to make his stay in Denver long-term. Ritchie falls under the category of needing to play for OHL Oshawa if he doesn't stick with the Avalanche, so reaching the 10-game mark that burns a year off his entry-level contract represents the next NHL hurdle for him to clear.

Leo Carlsson, Anaheim Ducks

Age: 19

Birthdate: Dec. 26, 2004

Position: C

Scoop: It speaks to Anaheim's hopes for turning the Swede into a dominant all-situations center that he is due to be a regular penalty killer in his second NHL season. That's in addition to holding a spot on the top power play and lining up down the middle of the Ducks' first line at five-on-five. The No. 2 pick from 2023 was eased into the lineup as a rookie — seeing a form of load management where he was intermittently scratched in the early stages of the season — but the restrictor plates are off now. Carlsson is the biggest source of hope for a Ducks franchise still in the middle stages of a rebuild.

Matvei Michkov, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 19

Birthdate: Dec. 9, 2004

Position: LW/RW

Scoop: A Calder Trophy favorite for some and a strong candidate to end up in John Tortorella's doghouse for others, Michkov is one of the more intriguing players you'll find in the NHL. He's had an air of mystery surrounding him dating back to his draft year, when teams had difficulty getting live viewings of his games or the opportunity to speak directly with him. The Flyers took Michkov at No. 7 in 2023 and convinced him to come to North America one year later. An elusive offensive player with quick hands and elite vision, he is a lock to land on the highlight reel this season. How much he'll test the coach's patience while doing so remains to be seen.

Samuel Honzek, Calgary Flames

Age: 19

Birthdate: Nov. 12, 2004

Position: LW

Scoop: A strong training camp performance didn't just earn Honzek an opening-night job with the Flames — it landed him a spot on the top line alongside Nazem Kadri and Andrei Kuzmenko. What a difference a year makes. External expectations were low for the No. 16 pick from 2023 following an injury-plagued season that appeared to hinder his development, but he wound up finishing preseason as the team's leading scorer with seven points. It's worth noting Honzek is eligible for an AHL assignment to the Wranglers without needing to pass through waivers. That was a simple option the organization could have taken to ease his development. But the 6-foot-4 winger left them with no choice but to give him NHL games right away.

Adam Fantilli, Columbus Blue Jackets

Age: 19

Birthdate: Oct. 12, 2004

Position: C

Scoop: Just days away from his 20th birthday and making this list one entry shorter, Fantilli returns for Year 2 with the Blue Jackets focused on taking the reins as the top-line center. His rookie season ended in late January with a lacerated left calf, an injury Fantilli told colleague Aaron Portzline severely tested his patience. The first spin around the NHL was a challenging one. But the No. 3 pick in 2023 now has a solid summer of training under his belt and should get plenty of opportunity on a Blue Jackets team desperate for growth from homegrown talent. A healthy Fantilli is a strong candidate for a bounce-back season.



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The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers every day. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

Tuesday, Oct. 8

Mark Friedman, RHD, Vancouver Canucks

Friedman is a high quality No.7/8 defender. The 28-year-old is gritty, physical and defensively reliable despite his 5-foot-11 frame. He can slot in on both the right and left side of the blue line and is also quick enough to make simple plays on the breakout. Friedman lost the No.7 job to Noah Juulsen because the latter is an excellent penalty killer. Friedman is an excellent teammate and locker room presence, regardless of how often he gets into the lineup.

Other players on waivers: Chris Driedger (Panthers), MacKenzie Entwistle (Panthers), Raphael Lavoie (Golden Knights)

Monday, Oct. 7

Austin Watson was placed on waivers by the Detroit Red Wings after signing a one-year, two-way contract.

Update: Watson cleared waivers.

Sunday, Oct. 6

All players on waivers: Patrick Brown (Bruins), Brandon Bussi (Bruins), Jiri Patera (Bruins), Billy Sweezey (Bruins), Jeffrey Viel (Bruins), Kale Clague (Sabres), James Reimer (Sabres), Lukas Rousek (Sabres), Devin Cooley (Flames), Jakob Pelletier (Flames), Cole Schwindt (Flames), Josiah Slavin (Hurricanes), Ty Smith (Hurricanes), Ryan Suzuki (Hurricanes), Isaak Phillips (Blackhawks), Sheldon Dries (Red Wings), Justin Holl (Red Wings), William Lagesson (Red Wings), Brogan Rafferty (Red Wings), Joe Snively (Red Wings), Josh Brown (Oilers), Drake Caggiola (Oilers), Raphael Lavoie (Oilers), Olivier Rodrigue (Oilers), Pheonix Copley (Kings), Samuel Fagemo (Kings), Jack Studnicka (Kings), Marc Del Gaizo (Predators), Shane Bowers (Devils), Nick DeSimone (Devils), Nolan Foote (Devils), Colton White (Devils), Samuel Bolduc (Islanders), Pierre Engvall (Islanders), Hudson Fasching (Islanders), Liam Foudy (Islanders), Marcus Hogberg (Islanders), Grant Hutton (Islanders), Frederik Karlstrom (Islanders), Jakub Skarek (Islanders), Matthew Robertson (Rangers), Adam Gaudette (Senators), Jan Jenik (Senators), Sebastian Aho (Penguins), Boko Imama (PIT), Corey Schuenemann (Blues), Tyler Tucker (Blues), Gage Goncalves (Lightning), Steven Santini (Lightning), Jesse Ylonen (Lightning), Matt Murray (Maple Leafs), Marshall Rifai (Maple Leafs), Matt Villalta (Utah), Erik Brannstrom (Canucks), Zach Aston-Reese (Golden Knights), Tanner Laczynski (Golden Knights), Jonas Rondbjerg (Golden Knights), Hunter Shepard (Capitals), Jaret Anderson-Dolan (Jets)

Update: Center Zach Aston-Reese was claimed by Columbus; goalie James Reimer was claimed by Anaheim; goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Vancouver; winger Cole Schwindt was claimed by Vegas; winger Raphael Lavoie was claimed by Vegas. The rest of the players cleared waivers.

Saturday, Oct. 5

Kole Lind, RW, Dallas Stars

It took Lind a while to adjust to the leap from junior hockey to the AHL when he began his journey as a Canucks prospect (drafted No. 33 in 2017). Over the last handful of years, he's significantly improved his foot speed and developed into an elite AHL player while part of the Kraken organization. Lind scored at just shy of the point-per-game mark during

the last two seasons, in addition to owning a projectable 6-foot-1 frame. However, he never really got an extended opportunity in the NHL because Seattle has had an excess of depth forwards. The 25-year-old signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Stars this summer. Dallas is also really deep up front, though, which leaves Lind on the outside looking in despite a solid training camp and preseason. Lind may just be a classic tweener player who excels in the AHL but can't stick in the NHL, but there's a possibility that he can provide some secondary offense at the bottom of an NHL lineup if given an extended opportunity.—Dayal

Josh Mahura, LHD, Seattle Kraken

Mahura is an excellent skater, which is why teams have continued to take chances on him. He can make a decent enough first pass, but I wouldn't call him a natural offensive type. He's average sized and not overly physical too, which has made him a tweener at the NHL level.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Oscar Dansk (Ducks), T.J. Tynan (Avalanche), Chris Wagner (Avalanche), Kyle Capobianco (Stars), Magnus Hellberg (Stars), Cameron Hughes (Stars), Alexander Petrovic (Stars), Jacob Pettersson (Stars), Matt Kiersted (Panthers), Hunter Jones (Wild), Connor Mackey (Rangers), John Hayden (Kraken)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Oct. 4

Ethan Bear, RHD, Washington Capitals

Bear is a smooth-skating puck-mover. The 27-year-old right-shot defender was a competent No. 4/5 defender for the Canucks in 2022-23, which included some time on the top pair with Quinn Hughes. Vancouver was interested in re-signing him but he was forced to have shoulder surgery after getting hurt playing for Team Canada in the 2023 IIHF World Championship. Bear wasn't going to be ready for the start of last season so the Canucks pivoted and Washington swooped in and signed Bear to a two-year contract. Bear appeared in 24 games with the Capitals last season — he struggled at times, with his underlying two-way numbers cratering. In late March, he entered the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program and was cleared to return approximately a month later.

The Caps are deep on the right side of the blue line with John Carlson, Matt Roy and Trevor van Riemsdyk, which left Bear as the odd man out. Bear can be suspect defensively at times, but he unquestionably has the mobility and puck skills to provide legitimate NHL value. The biggest risk for teams thinking about claiming Bear would be his \$2.062 million cap hit, with his contract expiring at the end of the season.—Dayal

Samuel Poulin, LW, Pittsburgh Penguins

Poulin, drafted No. 21 in 2019, has some heavy, hard skill to his game. He hasn't had the smoothest transition to pro hockey, largely because his footspeed is a concern. He also missed a large chunk of the 2022-23 season as he stepped away to take care of his mental health. Last season, he started to find his groove in the AHL, producing 31 points in 41 games. Poulin has projectable NHL tools if he can improve his skating.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Jansen Harkins (Ducks), Michael DiPietro (Bruins), Vinni Lettieri (Bruins), Jordan Oesterle (Bruins), William Lockwood (Panthers), Taylor Ward (Kings), Justin Dowling (Devils), Mike Hardman (Devils), Samuel Laberge (Devils), Nathan Legare (Devils), Max Willman (Devils), Olle Lycksell (Flyers), Anthony Richard (Flyers), Emil Bemstrom (Penguins), Nathan Clurman (Penguins), Jonathan Gruen (Penguins), Joona Koppanen (Penguins), Filip Kral (Penguins), John Ludvig (Penguins), Matt Tomkins (Lightning), Alex Steeves (Maple Leafs), Luke Philp (Capitals), Michael Sgarbossa (Capitals)

Update: Defenseman John Ludvig was claimed by Colorado; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

Ludvig is a highly competitive defenseman with decent enough hockey sense. He's likeable without the puck in his D-zone when he's killing penalties or breaking up plays. His skating and skill are both just OK, though. He's not a natural puck-mover by any means and lacks the pure talent to play at an NHL pace. He could be a useful depth defenseman in an organization.—Pronman

Thursday, Oct. 3



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Simon Lundmark, RHD, Winnipeg Jets

Lundmark was a 2019 second-round pick by the Jets. He was picked that high because he's a big right-shot defenseman who skates well. At the time I'm sure Winnipeg was hoping for some more offense or meanness to develop in his game, but he's struggled to find a clear, definable NHL role for himself. He has tools that someone may be willing to take a chance on if they feel he can make a first pass at the top level.—Pronman

Nick Blankenburg, RHD, Nashville Predators

Blankenburg could be a genuinely intriguing project. The 26-year-old right defender is a thunderous body checker despite being listed at just 5-foot-9. He pairs that physicality with good skating ability and decent puck skills. Blankenburg looked like a legitimate NHL player whenever he suited up for the Blue Jackets. Blankenburg's biggest problem is durability — he hasn't played more than 40 games in a season since turning pro in 2021-22. It's fair to wonder if he can sustain his aggressive, max-energy playing style at such a small size in the NHL.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jarred Tinordi (Flames), Dryden Hunt (Flames), Walker Duehr (Flames), Rasmus Asplund (Panthers), Jaycob Megna (Panthers), Zac Dalpe (Panthers), Tobias Bjornfot (Panthers), Cale Fleury (Kraken), Nick Abruzzese (Maple Leafs), Patrik Koch (Utah), Ben McCartney (Utah), Andrew Agozzino (Utah), Axel Jonsson-Fjallby (Jets), Mason Shaw (Jets), Dominic Toninato (Jets)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Wednesday, Oct. 2

Calle Rosen, LHD, Colorado Avalanche

Rosen, a 6-foot-1 left-shot defender, was solid in 49 games for the Blues in 2022-23. He drove decent underlying numbers in a sheltered third-pair role and chipped in with 18 points. He played well enough to deserve another NHL crack as a depth defender, but he became a victim of the numbers game. Last fall, as colleague Jeremy Rutherford explained, the Blues didn't want to risk losing Scott Perunovich or Tyler Tucker on waivers. Perunovich and Tucker were younger, higher potential defenders. Because of his older age and lack of upside, Rosen was waived and spent most of the year in the AHL. Now, on a loaded Colorado blue line, he couldn't crack an NHL roster again.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Spencer Martin (Hurricanes), Trey Fix-Wolansky (Blue Jackets), Calle Rosen (Avalanche), Matthew Phillips (Avalanche), Jack Ahcan (Avalanche), Cal Petersen (Flyers), Jimmy Huntington (Penguins), Marc Johnstone (Penguins), Mac Hollowell (Penguins), Bo Groulx (Rangers), Andrew Poturalski (Sharks), Scott Sabourin (Sharks)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Tuesday, Oct. 1

Phil Di Giuseppe, LW, Vancouver Canucks

What a difference a year can make. Last fall, Di Giuseppe not only made the Canucks out of training camp but earned a top-six role alongside J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. The 30-year-old left winger made a strong impression on Rick Tocchet because of his disruptive forecheck and reliable defensive play. Di Giuseppe was relegated to a fourth-line role as the season progressed but stuck in the NHL as a full-time contributor for the first time in his career. Now, he's been cut after an offseason where the Canucks significantly upgraded their winger depth. Di Giuseppe could be a decent 12th/13th forward — he's trustworthy without the puck and a solid forechecker.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Carson Meyer (Ducks), Josh Dunne (Sabres), Felix Sandstrom (Sabres), Jack Rathbone (Sabres), Brett Murray (Sabres), Mason Jobst (Sabres), Colton Poolman (Sabres), Ilya Solovoyov (Flames), Lane Pederson (Oilers), Ben Gleason (Oilers), Phil Kemp (Oilers), Collin Delia (Oilers), Jacob Moverare (Kings), Reese Johnson (Wild), Louis Domingue (Rangers), Anton Blidh (Rangers), Brandon Scanlin (Rangers), Casey Fitzgerald (Rangers), Gustav Olofsson (Kraken), Ales Stezka (Kraken), Ben Meyers (Kraken), Max McCormick (Kraken), Brandon Biro (Kraken), Jiri Patera (Canucks), Nate Smith (Canucks), Christian Wolanin (Canucks)

Update: Goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Boston; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

With Jeremy Swayman still unsigned, the Bruins have landed extra goaltending insurance by claiming Patera from the Canucks. Patera posted a .903 save percentage in 25 AHL games last season, which seems underwhelming, but the Henderson Silver Knights weren't a good team. He has a .902 save percentage in eight career NHL games with Vegas. Patera struggled during Canucks training camp. He was getting beat during rush drills very often and didn't look comfortable. That may have provided extra impetus for Vancouver to sign Kevin Lankinen. However, Patera was very good during the preseason start he got a week ago against Calgary. Patera doesn't look very big in the crease despite being listed at 6-foot-3 but has intriguing potential because of his powerful legs and movement.—Dayal

Monday, Sept. 30

Nikita Alexandrov, C, St. Louis Blues

Alexandrov has intrigued scouts at points due to his high skill level combined with a solid work ethic and ability to help at both ends of the ice. He makes and finishes plays well, and is quite effective inside the offensive zone. He's average-sized with below-average skating, though, and while he's played 51 games with the Blues, there are questions on how well his game translates to the NHL with his pace.—Pronman

Travis Boyd, C, Minnesota Wild

Boyd is a veteran right-shot center with nearly 300 games of NHL experience. During the Coyotes' lean rebuilding years, Boyd was a decent middle-six stopgap, scoring in the 35-point range in back-to-back years. He was relegated to a fourth-line role last year, contributing eight points in 16 games before an injury ended his season. Boyd struggles in the faceoff circle and his two-way metrics aren't great, but he's demonstrated a long track record of contributing reliable secondary offence in a bottom-six NHL role.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jacob MacDonald (Avalanche), Cam Dineen (Oilers), Connor Carrick (Oilers), Jeff Malott (Kings), Devin Shore (Wild), Brendan Gaunce (Wild), Jimmy Schults (Sharks), Justin Bailey (Sharks), Kevin Connauton (Utah), Travis Barron (Utah)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Sunday, Sept. 29

Vinnie Hinostroza, RW, Nashville Predators

Hinostroza is a plug-and-play option for depth offense. The speedy, undersized winger has scored five-on-five points at a bona fide middle-six clip over nearly 400 career NHL games. He's a bit of a tweener, though; he isn't dynamic enough to contribute on the power play and his lack of size and strength mean he's not an ideal stylistic fit for many teams' bottom six.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Marc McLaughlin (Bruins), Justin Kirkland (Flames), Martin Frk (Flames), Zach Sanford (Blackhawks), Brett Seney (Blackhawks), Reilly Walsh (Kings), Tyler Madden (Kings), Joe Hicketts (Kings), Glenn Gawdin (Kings), Joseph Cecconi (Wild), Cameron Crotty (Wild), Adam Raska (Wild), Lucas Condotta (Canadiens), Brandon Gignac (Canadiens), Matt Murray (Predators), Kieffer Bellows (Predators), Hunter Skinner (Blues), Hugh McGing (Blues), MacKenzie MacEachern (Blues), Mathias Laferriere (Blues), Derrick Pouliot (Lightning), Tobie Paquette-Bisson (Lightning)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Saturday, Sept. 28

Grigori Denisenko, LW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 15 by Florida in 2018, Denisenko's initial transition to North American pro hockey was bumpy. The skilled but slightly undersized winger produced at a solid but unspectacular clip in the AHL through three seasons between 2020-21 and 2022-23 and struggled during his brief opportunities with the Panthers in the NHL. Vegas claimed him off waivers last fall.

Denisenko, 24, took a significant step in the AHL last year, producing 56 points in 65 games, although he still couldn't stick in the NHL, as he went pointless in six games for the Golden Knights. Denisenko is a crafty, slick offensive creator and the step forward he took last season could be a sign that he still has some untapped upside.—Dayal



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Other players on waivers: Jonathan Aspirot (Flames), Clark Bishop (Flames), Keaton Middleton (Avalanche), Wyatt Aamodt (Avalanche), Kevin Mandolese (Avalanche), Maxime Lajoie (Kraken), Anthony Angello (Predators), Kevin Gravel (Predators), Jake Lucchini (Predators), Tyce Thompson (Islanders), Egor Sokolov (Utah), Callahan Burke (Golden Knights), Mason Geertsen (Golden Knights), Dysin Mayo (Golden Knights), Gage Quinney (Golden Knights), Robert Hagg (Golden Knights), Mason Morelli (Golden Knights), Ethen Frank (Capitals), Riley Sutter (Capitals), Alex Limoges (Capitals), Chase Priskie (Capitals), Hardy Häman Aktell (Capitals)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Sept. 27

Ronnie Attard, RHD, Philadelphia Flyers

Attard has played games in each of the last three NHL seasons but hasn't broken through yet as a full-time player. He's a big right-shot with good offensive skills and can play both ways due to his frame and compete. He isn't an amazing skater, though, and his decision making has given him issues over the years.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Louie Belpedio (Flyers), Rhett Gardner (Flyers), Hayden Hodgson (Senators), Cole Reinhardt (Senators), Jamieson Rees (Senators), Garrett Pilon (Senators), Nikolas Matinpalo (Senators), Maxence Guenette (Senators), Jeremy Davies (Senators), Luke Henman (Kraken), Nikolas Brouillard (Kraken), Zach Sawchenko (Blue Jackets), Jake Leschyshyn (Rangers), Ben Harpur (Rangers), Alex Belzile (Rangers)

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The Athletic / Diamonds, palm trees and a rat: Panthers receive Stanley Cup rings

By Sarah Jean Maher

The Florida Panthers received their Stanley Cup championship rings Monday night.

The 15.6-carat ring, designed by Jostens, includes 554 diamonds, 17 rubies, nine blue sapphires and 37 yellow sapphires.

The club opted to hold a private ceremony at War Memorial Auditorium instead of their planned 2024 public event in front of fans at Amerant Bank Arena amid concerns over Hurricane Milton as it bears down on the state.

They're here and they're perfect 🥰 pic.twitter.com/6YOOokuzTx

— Florida Panthers (@FlaPanthers) October 7, 2024

The top of the ring features the Panthers logo set with diamonds and blue and yellow sapphires. 'STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS,' written in diamonds, accents the top and bottom of the ring. The left side features the recipient's name with 'PANTHERS' or the recipient's title, i.e. 'CAPTAIN,' featured below. On the right side is 'FLORIDA' written in diamonds above a set of diamonds depicting the Stanley Cup surrounded by palm trees.

The ring's interior features depictions of the state of Florida, the NHL's first-ever WWE Stanley Cup Championship Belt and a rat — a nod to one of the organization's longest-standing traditions in which rubber rats are thrown on the ice after a Panthers win.

"The incredible achievement of this team was the inspiration for the Viola family when crafting the franchise's first Championship ring," said Panthers president and CEO Matt Caldwell. "This ring represents the culture, hard work and leadership of this winning team, our home in Broward County, the vibrant South Florida lifestyle and shows the immense pride we all hold in our hearts for this historic team."

The Panthers defeated the Edmonton Oilers in Game 7 to capture their first-ever Cup last June. They plan to raise their Stanley Cup banner

Tuesday night when they open their regular season against the Boston Bruins.

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The Athletic / Juraj Slafkovský and the weight of a nation

Arpon Basu

When the Montreal Canadiens were considering whether they should use the No. 1 pick in the 2022 NHL Draft on Slovak winger Juraj Slafkovský, we were given a glimpse at their draft meetings through the team's annual behind-the-scenes draft video.

In one of those meetings, Canadiens co-director of amateur scouting Nick Bobrov made his pitch for the hulking winger who was a late riser on draft lists that year.

The first of the two most important points made by Bobrov was about Slafkovský's personality.

"He just has that personality to want to take the bull by the horns," Bobrov said. "He wants to own the moment, the situation. ... He's doing it with that drive, desire, owning the moment, and it's a personality trait. It's more than just a skill, a hockey skill. He just has that personality trait to want to own the stage."

The second point was about the pressure Slafkovský had already been living under in his native Slovakia, a country that saw him as the next great hockey hope to follow in the footsteps of Peter Bondra, Zigmund Pálffy, Marián Hossa, Marián Gáborík, Zdeno Chára and many others, and how that environment would prepare him well for the pressure-cooker that is the Montreal hockey market.

"Lastly, a country of five million has been talking about this kid for, what, three years now? Four years now? The pressure on him is a country, and so far he's handled it unbelievably well," Bobrov said. "So to gauge how this kid can handle pressure, I think, there's evidence, and the proof is in the pudding — not only through the tournaments but through a period of time of maybe two and half years to three years where he's been the next one — and he kept getting better while under the pressure of that five-million population."

Two years later, Slafkovský is sitting on the verge of NHL stardom, and his second half of last season gave hope the Canadiens were correct in banking on his personality and his ability to handle pressure to take the risk of making the unpopular decision to draft him at No. 1.

But what is that personality? Where does it come from? And what is that Slovak fishbowl Slafkovský has lived in since he was 14? How did it prepare him for what he is now experiencing in Montreal?

We went to the source in search of answers, spending 40 minutes talking to Slafkovský last week to get to the bottom of these two questions. Because those questions are, in many ways, the origin story of why Slafkovský is poised to become a central part of the Canadiens rebuild.

And it begins in Slovakia.

The fishbowl

Slafkovský was not the only Slovak player to be drafted in the first round of the 2022 draft. Šimon Nemeč went No. 2 to the New Jersey Devils and Filip Mešár went at No. 26 to the Canadiens. Adam Sýkora went in the second round to the New York Rangers, and two more Slovaks followed in the sixth and seventh rounds that year.

Having four players from Slovakia go in the first two rounds in 2022 matched the country's total of drafted players from the previous three drafts combined.

But despite having so much company that year, being drafted No. 1 — something no Slovak player had ever done — put Slafkovský into another stratosphere in terms of his celebrity status at home.



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"Slovakia is not a big country, so everyone knows him since the day he got drafted first overall," Mešár said of his good friend. "Obviously everywhere he goes, everything he does, it's already on the internet every day. Like, the next day. So he has to be smart with the things he does off the ice. I would say everyone's watching him. He's the biggest superstar there. So, it's not easy for him, but he can handle it."

The highest-drafted Slovak player before Slafkovský was Marián Gáborík, who went No. 3 to the Minnesota Wild in 2000, a draft spot Nemeč also surpassed when he was picked second. When Nemeč goes home, he too feels the glare of that fishbowl.

But not like Slafkovský.

"I have a little bit of trouble, and he's got really big trouble," Nemeč said. "That's the difference."

It is the type of celebrity status that is difficult to understand, even in Montreal where Canadiens players are treated like gods. But it's not the same.

"I can't remember (seeing) that popular of a guy in Slovakia," Nemeč said. "I think he has a good mind and he's doing really good now. I think he doesn't feel the pressure of the Slovak people. ... The pressure is hard, but I think he can do it."

For Slafkovský, however, it is not as easy as he makes it seem to his good friends Mešár and Nemeč. It is a constant grind. When he goes out to eat with his friends, he visits restaurants owned by his friends' parents, comes in through the back door and dines in a private room. He will not go to a bar and grab a drink with friends. He avoids doing groceries or shopping with his little sister because the excursion turns into an extended photo shoot. Photos of his home get

Published in the media. Photos of his mother's gym get

Published in the local media. Any morsel of information on him, no matter how banal, is fodder for a story.

And so when Slafkovský goes home, he hides. He doesn't have to hide in Montreal.

"No, Montreal is way better. I do everything. Montreal, I can go shopping. Like, if I go grocery shopping back home, I probably take 25 pictures. Here it's more diverse, different types of people from different parts of the world, so not everyone knows you. In Slovakia, everyone knows you. In a store, the girl that sells you stuff knows you, if you go clean a suit they know you there, if you go buy a book, she knows you. It's not like that here," Slafkovský said.

"I never had this happen here. Everyone is always saying, oh, the Montreal media. I never had anything like this happening here. You focus on hockey, and if I made 17 bad passes, you're probably going to say 23, but I get that. That's completely fine with me. But don't take pictures of my house. I have kids ringing my bell every day (in Slovakia). I don't live in downtown Košice, I live outside the city, but now everyone knows where I live because it was in the media.

"I've learned how to live with it, but it just pisses me off inside. I'll say it. But there's nothing I can do about it."

Slafkovský has refused to give interviews with several Slovak journalists. One of them is Štefan Bugan, of the media outlet Denník N, whose life has been turned upside down trying to report on Slafkovský.

The history of Slovak hockey is important to understand when trying to make sense of the infatuation people there have with Slafkovský, the context of what creates this hysteria that surrounds him at all times.

It goes back to the dissolution of the former Czechoslovakia, Bugan says. When Slovakia became its own country, the hockey program was dropped into the third tier of international hockey. It was slowly built up to the point where Slovakia won the silver medal at the 2000 world championships and two years later, won the gold medal. It was a watershed moment in the country, contributing to a sense of identity the country was seeking ever since the dissolution in 1993.

"It's one of the biggest things that ever happened in this country," Bugan said of the world championships gold. "Not sports things, but overall. It was kind of a unifying moment for the country."

That was a golden era of Slovak hockey, but then a lull hit, and Slafkovský is seen as the face of the end of that lull. Which explains the media coverage he gets at home.

This is why Bugan spent the last two seasons, as long as Slafkovský was healthy, living a bizarre life in Slovakia.

"When you wake up in Slovakia you have a lot of articles about how Slovak players played. Not just Juraj, other players too, but he's the main story when he's playing," Bugan said. "The usual coverage is the journalist wakes up at maybe 5 a.m., which in Montreal is about 11 p.m. after the game, and he just watches the highlights and reads some tweets and he writes a story. When he has no points, it's that Slafkovský played terrible, something negative. I don't like it because it's not the real thing. So last season, I watched every shift of Slafkovský. Every one.

"I was living in Slovakia on Canadian time."

But Slafkovský does not see it the same way, even if he understands the source of that media coverage is how much his country loves him. He sees it as toxic — something that affects not only his quality of life, but that of his family as well.

Still, his status as Slovakia's next big star is something Slafkovský fully embraces.

"Oh, I love it," he said. "Like I said, I want to be the best and I always wanted to be the best. So obviously I want to be the best Slovakian player. I'm fine with that. I just hate what comes with it because I see other countries and I see other players that don't have this, even though they're better players than me."

And that line — how he's always wanted to be the best — is where the personality comes in.

The personality

When asked what he means by wanting to be the best, whether he means the best in the world or the best version of himself, Slafkovský pauses briefly to think.

"I would say the best version of myself," he said. "But I think if I'm the best version of myself, I can be one of the best in the world. Obviously you have special players in this world, and I don't know if I can be on the level of a (Connor) McDavid or a (Nathan) MacKinnon or a (Auston) Matthews, but I can bring something. And to me, the answer to this is how many rings you have at the end of your career."

Then he pauses again, to look at his hand, with no rings on it.

"If you can look at your hand like this and you have at least two," he continues, "then you can say you were pretty good."

Slafkovský has lived with that level of scrutiny in Slovakia since he was roughly 14 years old, and the Canadiens assumed this scrutiny shaped his personality. But it dates back much further than that. So much so that Slafkovský doesn't remember a time he wasn't this way.

"I think it's just that I always wanted to be the best, in everything I did, even outside hockey. Any competition, I wanted to be the best," he said. "And I never cared. I don't think I ever cared. I only cared what my coach said, but I never really cared what people had to say. It probably was bad when I was a kid in school and stuff, but I think I was the same way. Someone would tell me something, and I would be like, 'Nah.' I would have my own truth in my head. It's kind of bad when you're a kid, but then when you grow up, I feel like that kind of helps me."

There's more to it than that. When he took some time to think about it, Slafkovský was able to figure out where this comes from.

His mother, Gabriela.

She is headstrong. She doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

"My mom never had that many friends because she was always honest with everyone and she always said what she thought. If it was bad or good, she would say it. If she was thinking something bad about someone, tell them right away," Slafkovský said. "I'm the same way... So I think it's because of my mom and the way she is. I'm pretty much just like her.

"I think it was always there because of her. Because of what I saw."



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And to understand just how headstrong Slafkovský is at age 20, you only need to get him back talking about Slovakia and the state of the game in his home country.

"I can say so much s--t about Slovakia right now that I want to change," he began. "But I won't."

And then he did. Because Slafkovský doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

"The Slovak hockey federation, a couple of things have to change there for us to be successful again," he said. "Because I feel we got the Olympic (bronze) medal (in 2022), and people get satisfied by these things, but that was lucky because there was no NHL players. Let's be honest, we wouldn't have won that medal if everyone had their full squad. But we get satisfied by these little things. ... We think we're doing things the right way, but we're not. We're just pretending. And we are trying to sell it to the people that we're doing things the right way by pushing these fake results.

"Obviously it's the greatest thing that ever happened to me that I won the Olympic medal, but be honest about it."

Slafkovský said he thinks hockey in Slovakia needs wholesale changes, that there are not enough quality coaches and that decisions are too often made for the wrong reasons, because of who a player's father is or whom he knows instead of how well he can play. When he was 12, Slafkovský's father got together with a group of other parents and formed an elite select team that traveled to the Québec City peewee tournament and other North American events. Eight players who participated in that program were drafted in 2022 or 2023, and another was signed as an undrafted free agent.

There was one player drafted out of Slovakia in 2024.

"Let's just say all these players that got drafted went through that team," Slafkovský said. "So that shows something, no?"

The reason the fathers put that select team together, Slafkovský said, was to get their kids out of the hockey system and the nepotism that defines it. One example he cited is the U16 and U17 national programs that run camps in the summer refuse to invite players who are playing overseas in North America because, he said, "the people running it are scared that their own kid won't play, or he knows this guy's father and his kid needs to play."

"It's all about connections in Slovakia," he said. "I see it, and everyone is scared to talk about it."

So, what were Slafkovský's connections?

"Me? Yeah, I could play hockey, that was my connection," he said. "There was no option for them because I knew how to play, actually."

The solution, Slafkovský believes, is to "freshen up" the Slovak hockey federation.

"Probably we need more people to work for the federation, but no one wants to work for that," he said. "You think Hossa wants to work for the federation? No. Gáborík? No. It's because of some people that are already there, they do it their own way, so they benefit from it, and not Slovak hockey.

"That's my opinion."

This is a lot for a 20-year-old to have on his plate: the state of hockey in his home country, the constant media attention in his home country and managing those two realities of his life at home.

In the middle of all that, being a vital part of the Canadiens rebuild seems relatively minor. But it's not.

As Slafkovský said, he will measure his career based on the number of rings on his fingers, and in order to achieve that, this rebuild will need to be successful. He has always measured his success through team success because he has evidence of that being true. Many felt he was stifled playing in Finland for TPS Turku, but he disagrees because he played in the Liiga finals in his draft year. The fact Slovakia won that Olympic bronze medal, regardless of the level of competition, allowed Slafkovský to play more games and eventually be named MVP of the tournament.

And now, with everything his life at home has taught him and his inherently independent convictions, Slafkovský is ready to use all his baggage to take that same step with the Canadiens.

"People always want to have winners on their teams," he said. "I'd rather have a winner that scores five less goals than some loser that just focuses on scoring 40 goals."

It's safe to say the Canadiens share his opinion on that.

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The Athletic / Patrick Roy, then and now: How he's evolved as a coach, from the Remparts to the Avs to the Islanders

By Arthur Staple

EAST MEADOW, N.Y. — Anthony Duclair had his future planned out. As a rising teenage hockey talent in Montreal, he had an eye toward attending college in the U.S. The University of Michigan was his choice, even at 15.

Patrick Roy had other ideas. The retired Hall of Fame goalie was already six years into his do-everything role with the Québec Remparts — owner, general manager and head coach — and took Duclair in the third round of the 2011 QMJHL draft.

Then Roy and Duclair sat down to talk.

"I had told two other (QMJHL) teams I was going to college, but he still drafted me," Duclair remembers. "We went over there to have a meeting with them and make a decision. I was 15, turning 16. It's tough. How do you say no to Patrick Roy?"

So Duclair chucked his college dreams and made the three-hour journey to Québec City. "Obviously, it was a great decision," he says.

Not everyone who played for Roy during his first stint coaching in the Canadian junior ranks has the same warm feelings. Even those players who enjoyed playing for Roy, like Duclair and Adam Erne, who came up from Connecticut as a heralded young player and stayed with the Roys for his first few months in Québec, will tell you Roy was tough. He was demanding.

He was, and always will be, Patrick Roy. Playing for one of the greatest to ever come out of Québec and Canada, especially in the early 2010s, just a decade removed from his last Stanley Cup championship and Conn Smythe Trophy with the Colorado Avalanche, was already a bit of a burden for those teenagers. Add in Roy's fiery temperament and intense approach to coaching those kids, and some of the feelings still linger.

"I think the best way I can put it is that the past is in the past for me," says Louis Domingue, who played for Roy from 2009 to 2012. "He was very, very hard on me."

The biggest change for Roy from his first stint coaching Québec, from 2005 to '13, to now, in his second go-round as an NHL coach, is a simple one, he says.

"Different role," Roy says. "I was there to help them achieve their dream — not only as a hockey player but whatever they wanted to do. We had guys that became doctors, some became lawyers, dentists, agents, whatever. My role was to push them and really make them understand what is the journey of a professional — not just professional hockey player but a professional in the world. I said to them, 'A lot of times, you might not like me today, but you might like me, love me, along the way.' That's what I was there for."

There weren't many NHLers who came up through the Remparts in those years. The biggest success story is Jonathan Marchessault, who had his number retired by the junior organization last week. Marchessault went undrafted in his four junior seasons, then bounced around the AHL for another four years before willing his way into the NHL.

Marchessault aged out of Québec following the 2010-11 season. The next year, Duclair and Erne came in as 16-year-olds, part of a top-six forward group that included former NHLer Mikhail Grigorenko and Frédéric Roy, Patrick's younger son.

"I grew up a Habs fan, so you already have a lot of respect for him before you even play a game there," Duclair says. "Anything he says, you want to take that and apply it to your life or to the game. I think where he helped me a lot was in the preparation side of the game, the practice side. Just how you prepare. He coaches the same way he played — with passion, with intensity. And he expects that of everyone. So you learn to expect it of yourself."

Erne was a rare American in the midst of all those Québécois, something Roy recognized in having Erne live with his family when he began his junior career. It made Erne's experience much less daunting than teammates who'd grown up with their families idolizing Roy the legendary goalie. At least the non-hockey side of things.

"I loved it, but let me follow up by saying he's a really tough coach," Erne says. "Fair, honest, demanding. Aside from the X's and O's, what he asked most of all of us was that you had to be at your best every single day. That's the transition from minor hockey to juniors. It becomes kind of your job even though we're all still pretty young. He did a really good job of making us understand the mindset that this is your job and it's every day — no days off — and there's a lot of hard work involved."

"Living with him and his family was amazing. I became really close with (Frédéric). He was my linemate too and we just had a blast."

The demanding side of Roy wasn't for everyone, especially considering there were only a small number of future pros on the roster. Not every Remparts player lasted for his entire junior career with Roy.

"There were some guys that didn't get the message," Duclair says. "It was about being strong physically because he wanted you to work hard, but also you had to be strong mentally. If you can take what Patty was saying and asking you to do, you can take that anywhere you go. It wasn't for everybody."

At least one of Roy's success stories has mixed feelings about his time in Québec. Domingue is the only goaltender Roy coached at the QMJHL level to make NHL starts. He played for three seasons for Roy and felt the coach's wrath often.

Maybe it came from one goalie recognizing the potential in his younger player and pushing too hard. Playing goal under a legend of the position can't have been easy, and Roy didn't make it any easier.

"Me and him were going at it a lot," Domingue says. "I was a naive and immature young man, like most of us are at 17, 18, 19 years old — just trying to chase a dream. Sometimes there are days where I wish he would have understood that he was that guy once as well."

With a dozen years gone, there is some reflection on Roy's part.

"I was tough on Louis," he says. "I would have to admit sometimes maybe a little too much. But you go with what you think you know, and sometimes you realize that you maybe push a little too hard. You mean well. I wanted to help them, to be there for them, to support them. Everything I did, I was passionate. I love the game."

That passion still is fully in evidence, though perhaps channeled better. Roy marked himself as a rookie NHL coach with the Avalanche in 2013 by getting into a shouting match after his first game behind the bench to open the season, firing away at Anaheim Ducks coach Bruce Boudreau. Roy won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the year but was out of the league two years later and back coaching the Remparts by 2018.

For his second NHL opportunity, the 59-year-old Roy has shed his ambitions to be in charge of everything, as he was with Québec and as he wanted to be in Colorado a decade ago. He is still demanding, as anyone who watched a day of his first Islanders training camp could see. The Islanders did their usual gassers as they would in any training camp, but they were more frequent and sometimes came after grueling practices.

There were also demands to be quick to the bench for water breaks and to the whiteboard for instructional sessions. And the only voice heard booming around the rinks at Northwell Health Ice Center this September was Roy's. There is no delegation to assistants for drills and no messages that are delivered through anyone but the man himself.

"Times change and you have to adapt to the times," Roy says. "I'm not a lot different than I was, but the relationship between player and coach are different than they were when I was playing or even when I first started coaching. Everybody adapts."

Plenty of hockey fans saw an Instagram post from Roy's daughter, Jana, go viral this summer. In it, Roy is strapping on street-hockey goalie pads and getting ready to play some ball hockey with his grandsons. One of them asks his grandfather if he was a better goalie than Kelly Hrudey. "Yes, I was," Roy says.

"Who's better than you?"



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"You are."

Domingue saw that video too.

"I'm sure he's a different coach, a different human being. He's a grandfather now," Domingue says. "I think that changes you, changes your mentality. I have three kids of my own, and I'm learning every day how to be a better father, a better teacher, a better coach to my kids, better teammate. I know it's changed for him. He's Patrick Roy. He had a lot on his plate back when I played for him. I think you always grow and get better, and I'm sure he feels the same way now."

He coaches men instead of teenagers now and the goals are not life goals but tangible things like wins and that Stanley Cup trophy Roy hoisted twice with the Montreal Canadiens and twice with the Avalanche. But once you've had a go at making lasting impressions on young men, on finding that success with at least a few of them who've gone on to success in life and in hockey, it never leaves you.

Duclair was a wide-eyed 15-year-old when Roy changed his life, convincing him to stay in his home province to chase his hockey dream. Thirteen years later, coach and player talked again, this time ahead of Duclair's free-agency decision this past July 1. Duclair has played for eight teams in his 10-year career and his first coach had a message Duclair needed to hear.

"He knows what I think of him as a person and as a player," Roy says. "So he knows where I'm coming from and that he could trust me in what I said. I told him, 'Enough moving around. Establish yourself somewhere and become the player you're supposed to become. That's what I want from you.'"

And again, 13 years later, Duclair was faced with a simple question.

How do you say no to Patrick Roy?

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

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The Athletic / A long journey prepared Kraken coach Jessica Campbell to make NHL history: 'It's monumental'

Hailey Salvian

In the spring of 2020, with the NHL season suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Damon Severson was looking for somewhere to skate in preparation for the league's return to play in August.

As it happened, a childhood friend had access to ice time. Jessica Campbell, who grew up with Severson in Melville, Sask., was running small group skills sessions for her power skating business in Kelowna, B.C., and Severson started coming out with a few teammates and friends.

"The first time we got off the ice after one of her sessions, the boys were like, 'That was a really good skate. She knows what she's doing,'" said Severson, who is now a defenseman for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Campbell's business, JC Power Skating, was still fairly new — launched in 2019, a few years after she officially retired from her international playing career with Team Canada — but it took off that spring. Her skills sessions were high-tempo, with drills that simulated real game-like situations and pace. Word spread, and soon enough, the group of NHL players showing up to those sessions started to grow. Everyone from Luke Schenn and Tyson Jost, to Brent Seabrook and Shea Weber took part.

Until that point in her career, Campbell had mostly thought about becoming an NHL skate coach. She had never envisioned herself as an NHL coach. But as more NHL players started coming to her skates that spring, and she worked more closely with Seabrook — who was working to get back to playing after multiple surgeries in 2019-20 — the vision started to take shape.

"It definitely catapulted me into this space," she said. "Brent and the guys in Kelowna, they showed up for me and almost gave me permission to believe in this dream."

Propelled by that experience in Kelowna, Campbell made stops in the Swedish Hockey League as a skating coach and in Germany with the Nürnberg Ice Tigers. In May 2022, she became the first woman to coach at the men's world championships, working as an assistant coach for the German national team. Two months later, she became the first woman to coach in the AHL with the Coachella Valley Firebirds, the minor-league affiliate of the Seattle Kraken.

Now Campbell is on the verge of more history. When the Kraken make their regular season debut on Tuesday against the St. Louis Blues, she will be behind the bench as an assistant coach. While women have held coaching positions in the NBA, MLB and NFL for years, no woman has ever coached full-time in the NHL — until now.

For Campbell, it will be the culmination of a long bet-on-herself journey that has taken her thousands of miles from the Okanagan, to Europe, the desert and the Pacific Northwest. Over the years, Campbell has established herself as a coach with a unique skill set, a wealth of knowledge and the ability to help players reach another level of their game.

"We're going to see a woman behind the bench for the first time in the National Hockey League and it's monumental," Dan Bylsma, the new Seattle Kraken head coach, told The Athletic. "But the (goal) was to get the best coach — and it happened to be Jessica Campbell."

Campbell first drew Bylsma's attention when he saw her on the bench at the 2022 men's world championships.

He was looking for up-and-coming young coaches to add to his bench for the startup Coachella Valley Firebirds. Campbell was a new face in the small world of coaching, and she jumped onto the shortlist.

She had been hired to coach at the tournament by coach Toni Söderholm, who was similarly looking for a fresh voice to add to the bench after a disappointing 2022 Olympics for the German national team. Söderholm had seen Campbell's work in Nürnberg — how she helped fix their lifeless power play — and was impressed by her penalty kill presentation during the interview process.

Campbell joined the German team as an assistant coach, working on the penalty kill and leading skill sessions with players, including the Ottawa Senators' Tim Stütze and Detroit Red Wings' Moritz Seider.

"She will make every player better that is willing to put the time in," said Tom Rowe, the former NHL executive who worked with Campbell in Nürnberg and the German national team.

Rowe played and coached with Kraken general manager Ron Francis; he also knows Bylsma well. When they came calling, Rowe made his recommendation: Hire Jessica Campbell.

As Bylsma continued to do his research on Campbell, he heard about her work with NHL players during the COVID-19 stoppage and her playing and skills development background, and it "quickly became evident that she was the best coach for the situation that we were going to have in CV," he said.

A month after the tournament, Campbell was in Las Vegas working a development camp for the USHL's Tri-City Storm when she got a submission through the JC Power Skating online contact form.

The message was from Bylsma, who was hoping to talk to her about a potential coaching opportunity. Campbell said she initially wondered if it was spam — Bylsma won a Stanley Cup and 320 games as an NHL coach, so surely he could get a phone number — but she replied anyway, just in case the opportunity was real.

A month later, Campbell officially joined his staff. She was tasked with helping develop the next generation of Kraken players, and for two years in Coachella Valley, Bylsma saw firsthand what would make Campbell a good NHL coach.

She ran the Firebirds' power play and focused on player development with the team's forward group that included first-round pick Shane Wright, Ryker Evans and Tye Kartye, an undrafted free agent who, in Campbell's first season, was named AHL Rookie of the Year and earned a call-up to Seattle.

"Tye did the work on his own, that's all on Tye, but it's with Jess' guidance," Bylsma said during a press conference in June. "She's



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demonstrated that over the last few years and it makes me eager for her to do it at the NHL level.”

Campbell is known as an excellent communicator and works to understand each player as a person and how they want to be coached. Some players need an extra pat on the back, or extra reps, or a tough love approach. And Campbell is in tune with who needs what and takes pride in putting in the work with them.

If players want to do extra video work, she is game. If they want to stay on the ice after practice, she is there with them. Her background as a skills coach means she can work with players on their skating or to improve various aspects of their game. She also sees the game well from a micro level — the little details that happen in a sequence in the offensive zone, or the power play, and even down to a players' skating stride. Campbell watches a ton of video and can isolate those moments and show players, if they make a little adjustment here, it could lead to this.

“She has something to provide to players, and they immediately recognize what she has to offer to them and their careers and their growth and development,” Bylsma said. “She’s all-in with them and you immediately get that sense and feel from her when she’s coaching you.”

That all-in attitude is something that has translated from her playing days into coaching. Campbell played at Cornell and spent three seasons in the now-defunct Canadian Women’s Hockey League; she also captained Canada’s U18 team to a gold medal at world championships and represented Team Canada at women’s worlds. Campbell was a relentless power forward who played the game with speed and tenacity — Canada and PWHL Toronto forward Blayre Turnbull said Campbell is the fastest skater she’s ever played with. She embraced whatever role she was given as a player and Campbell said she is no different as a coach.

“When you have a coach that has passion for the game and passion for teaching and a passion for helping all of their players and athletes get better, I find that’s when you’re able to make a lot of strides and move forward in your game,” said Turnbull, who also trained with Campbell in Kelowna. “Because you have someone that believes in you and someone that can show you things that you might not have thought you could add to your game.”

In two years with Campbell on the bench, no team in the AHL scored more goals than the Firebirds (509), while the power play operated around 20 percent. The team went to the Calder Cup Finals in back-to-back seasons, losing to the Hershey Bears both times. During the 2023-24 run to the finals, Bylsma was named the head coach of the Kraken, replacing Dave Hakstol.

According to Bylsma, Campbell was in the conversation to join the NHL bench, should there be changes to the assistants, from the start. He began asking Campbell more about her aspirations to coach in the NHL, if she would be ready to take on a first of that magnitude, and her ideas about the Kraken’s power play. Francis even sat in on some of Campbell’s power play meetings to get a sense of how she was doing. The takeaway?

“She’s got a real good knowledge of the game,” he said after Campbell was hired by the Kraken.

When the Firebirds season ended on June 24 — a 5-4 overtime loss in Game 6 of the Finals — the staff flew to Las Vegas for the 2024 NHL Draft, then went right to Seattle to run development camp. When they got to Seattle, Bylsma and his wife, Mary Beth, took Campbell out for dinner. At the end of the meal, Mary Beth excused herself. “Dan has to talk to you now,” she said.

Bylsma cut right to the chase, asking Campbell: “Do you want to coach in the NHL?”

Campbell doesn’t take the magnitude of becoming the first woman to coach in the NHL lightly, but in the weeks leading up to Seattle’s season opener, the milestone wasn’t her primary focus.

“I have to continue to do what I’ve always done, and that’s to do my job to the best of my ability,” she said. “I wake up every day, I put my shoes on, and my skates on, and my track suit in the same way as my counterparts.”

The ultimate goal is to be a good coach and help the Kraken succeed. And if she can do that, Campbell is hopeful it will have a positive impact

on the future of women coaching in the NHL. “It’s about keeping my mind fixed on the job ... And hopefully only good will come of it,” she said.

There’s growing infrastructure in place to ensure their future doesn’t land completely on Campbell’s shoulders. In 2020, the NHL Coaches Association launched a female coaches program to help support the development of women who coach hockey through networking opportunities, coaching clinics and visibility — to normalize the idea that women can coach men.

“I envision a world where it’s not newsworthy that Jess is hired because she’s a woman,” said Lindsay Pennal, the executive director of the NHL Coaches’ Association. “It’s just newsworthy because a team hired a new coach, period.”

Several members of the program have had opportunities to guest coach at NHL camps or be on the bench for preseason games. Last season, Kori Cheverie — the first woman to coach men’s Canadian university hockey and is now the head coach of the PWHL’s Montreal Victoire — was a guest coach with the Pittsburgh Penguins and became the first female coach on the bench in an NHL preseason game. Kim Weiss — the first woman to coach NCAA Division III men’s hockey — was a guest coach for the Colorado Avalanche. This season, Christine Bumstead — an assistant coach with the University of Saskatchewan women’s hockey team and a development coach with the WHL’s Saskatoon Blades — was on the bench for a Florida Panthers preseason game.

Hockey has lagged behind other professional sports when it comes to diversity throughout organizations, and not just when it comes to gender. In recent years more women have joined NHL front offices, led by assistant general managers Kate Madigan (New Jersey), Alexandra Mandrycky (Seattle), Hayley Wickenheiser (Toronto) and Émilie Castonguay and Cammi Granato in Vancouver. The NHL still has a long way to go when it comes to women on the bench, but Campbell’s resume shows there is a path for women who aspire to coach at the men’s pro level.

“I’ve always tried to take my experiences and that work and use it as confidence and as a way to reassure myself what I’m capable of,” Campbell said. “I think that the beauty in getting good experiences in life is using them as you continue on.”

Her experience running drills back in Kelowna paid off during her first camp with the Kraken in 2022-23. Justin Schultz was at those skates, and a member of the Kraken for the last two seasons. Goalie Philipp Grubauer was on the German national team when Campbell was working with the team. Bylsma said it was clear that when Campbell stepped on the ice at camp, she’d already earned the players’ respect.

“She had already proven what kind of coach she was capable of being,” he said.

With the Kraken, Campbell’s role will be similar to her position in Coachella — working with the forwards and on the power play, this time with assistant coach Bob Woods. On Tuesday, the franchise is beginning its fourth season and looking to get back on track after last season’s 19-point drop from 2022-23. The team made some big swings in free agency — signing Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson — but will also rely on internal improvement from players, particularly younger players like Evans, Wright, Kartye and Matty Beniers, and the overall offense, which took a step back last year. The hope is Campbell can contribute to maximizing the talent on the roster the same way she did in Coachella.

“I’m just trying to continue to have a strong impact on every player that I’ve got the opportunity to work with and not take that lightly,” Campbell said. “I’m here and now I’m just going to own the moment and enjoy the opportunity to be doing what I love on the biggest stage in the world.”

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

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The Athletic / Oddly specific NHL predictions for all 32 teams’ 2024-25 seasons

By Sean McIndoe



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 9, 2024

Every year, I write two annual prediction columns. In one, I try to predict where each team in the league will finish and which ones are legitimate Cup contenders.

That column ran last week, and I don't like it.

Not this year's version in particular. I just don't like making those basic meat-and-potato type of calls, because the risk/reward just doesn't work for me. If I'm right, big deal — oh wow, you had Edmonton as Cup contenders, way to go out on a limb. And of course, if I'm wrong about anyone (which I will be), I have to hear about it from the fan base all year long. Where's the fun in that?

Then you have the second prediction column. This one. The fun one.

This is the annual column in which I get way too specific on my predictions for each team. It's not enough to think something might happen; I'll give you an exact date. Oh, some player is going to post nice numbers — good for them, but what specific numbers will those be? Anyone can predict the basic stats. How about the weird ones you're not even thinking of?

And the best part of all: All of these predictions are so oddly specific there's no chance any of them will be right. Unless they are, in which case you will never hear the end of it.

I can't lose. So let's dive in, as we drill down on one call for every team.

Winnipeg Jets

My favorite thing about the 2023-24 Jets: They went to a shootout against the Habs in October, went 0-for-3 and lost, and then apparently said "That sucked, let's not do any shootouts for the rest of the year." And they didn't. The hockey gods were pleased. Not pleased enough to help them in the playoffs, but still pleased.

The only other two teams to go the full season without scoring in the shootout were the Canucks and Devils, so let's say the Jets win a shootout against one of those teams this year — and they even score multiple goals to do it.

Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks finally get to play in an outdoor game this year, as they host the Blues in the Winter Classic in a matchup that could only exist because the NHL is praying Connor Bedard will score the winner. Their prayers will be answered, because that's exactly what's happening.

Los Angeles Kings

The schedule-maker certainly didn't do the Kings any early favors, as their first seven games of the season feature exactly zero home games. Speaking of zeroes, during that initial road trip the Kings will both record a shutout and have one recorded against them.

Pittsburgh Penguins

We all know Sidney Crosby has a fascination bordering on obsession with the number 87, so I've got great news for him: That's how many points the Penguins finish with this year. Huh, wait, maybe that's not good news after all.

Montreal Canadiens

Newly acquired Patrik Laine dodged a bullet in the preseason when an injury that looked like it could end his season turned out to not require surgery. He'll still miss a few months, but Habs fans will apparently get to see him in action this season. And once he does heal up, it won't take long for him to make a good impression, as he scores in his very first period as a Canadien.

San Jose Sharks

Last year, the Sharks' schedule started off with an absolute murderer's row of contending teams, and they kicked off the season with 11 straight losses. This year's October schedule is ... well, it's not great, but it at least features the Ducks and Hawks twice each. Let's say the Sharks shock the world by getting out of the first month at .500, and not talk about how the season goes after that.

Colorado Avalanche

Last year was the second straight season there were no six-on-three goals scored in the entire league. That streak ends this year, and it will happen in a game featuring the Avalanche.

Edmonton Oilers

Leon Draisaitl isn't the highest-paid player in the league quite yet — he'll have to wait for his extension to kick in next year for that. But he will be the highest-scoring, as he captures the first Rocket Richard of his career.

New York Rangers

Three teams have repeated as Presidents' Trophy winners in the cap era. Can the Rangers join the club? Absolutely they can. But they won't, because they're going to finish sixth.

Florida Panthers

Now that he's added a Stanley Cup to his multi-Vezina resume, Sergei Bobrovsky has done everything a goalie could dream of doing. Except for one thing: score a goalie goal, which he does this year.

Minnesota Wild

We tried this last year with the Islanders and it almost hit, so let's take another swing. The Wild were the only team to go through all of last year without ever finishing a game with the same number of shots as their opponent. This year, it happens in one of their first three games.

Dallas Stars

The good news is Miro Heiskanen is a Norris finalist for the first time in his career, and it's the first time for a Stars blueliner since Sergei Zubov in 2006. The slightly less good news is that, like Zubov, Heiskanen finishes third.

Buffalo Sabres

My prediction was going to be that the Sabres were the first team to get absolutely mercilessly dunked on by a team they're not even rivals with, but that already happened, so ... yeah.

I get that spirits aren't super high in Buffalo right now, but might we point out the last time a Lindy Ruff team started 0-2-0, they went on to win 16 of their next 17 on their way to 112 points? The Sabres won't match those 2022-23 Devils, but the point is the season isn't over. Well, unless they lose both games on this mini-homestand. Which they will, although they'll get a single point in the process.

New Jersey Devils

Well well well, look who's the new goalie in town. That would be oddly specific prediction legend Jacob Markström, whose shutout prowess has been a fixture around these parts ever since the incident.

We obviously have to predict a shutout here, and we'll do it against his former team. No, not the Flames — we need to aim higher. Not the Canucks either. At some point this year, Markström gets a shutout against the defending champs he started his career with, blanking the Panthers.

Calgary Flames

You might assume that trading Markström led to the Flames being in our doghouse. But don't forget, they still have first-ballot oddly specific Hall of Famer Joel Hanley as a depth defenseman. So yeah, you know we're predicting the night of his one and only goal for the season. It will happen in the 23rd game he plays.

Anaheim Ducks

A player who scores an overtime goal for the Ducks during the regular season will also score an overtime goal in the playoffs — but for a different team.

Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes have a low-key tough schedule to start the season; their 10 October games include only three at home, and those come against the Lightning, Devils and Bruins. Slow start? Not completely, but they'll be 5-4-1 at the end of the month.

Toronto Maple Leafs



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The fans have turned on him, he needs a new contract, and he might just walk for nothing as a UFA at the end of the season, so Mitch Marnier having a monster season and winning the Art Ross might somehow be a negative for the Leafs. I won't go that far, but he is going to finish the season 20 points ahead of William Nylander.

Vegas Golden Knights

An oddity of last year's Knights season: They went a league-worst 0-5-0 in games where they had exactly three days rest. The first time that happens this year looks ugly, as they have to go into Edmonton to face the reigning conference champions on Nov. 6. It goes without saying they'll win in regulation.

Detroit Red Wings

It's an annual oddly specific prediction tradition, so let's make the Wings this year's team that some people think will be a lot better, some people think will be a lot worse, but that actually finishes the year with exactly the same number of points they had in 2023-24 (91).

New York Islanders

Patrick Roy never got to face the Avalanche last year, arriving a few weeks too late for the last meeting on the schedule. He won't have to wait long this year, though, as his Islanders are in Colorado next Monday. And the game will remind us of Roy in his prime, because it will feature a goalie fight 40-save performance in an Islanders win.

St. Louis Blues

The Penguins and Blues were the only two teams to make it through all of last year without scoring a single goal at four-on-four. They play each other twice this year, and one of those games will indeed feature a four-on-four goal.

Philadelphia Flyers

Matvei Michkov arrives with almost as much hype as fellow Russian winger Alexander Ovechkin. Ovechkin debuted with a 52-goal, 106-point season, and it's completely unfair to Michkov to compare him to someone like that. So instead, we'll be much more reasonable and say he's the next Pavel Bure, debuting with 34 goals and 60 points.

Vancouver Canucks

Sorry Canucks fans, I have no idea when Thatcher Demko will be back this year. But when he does return, it will be with a shutout.

Boston Bruins

Since we're doing goalie return predictions, let's work in one for Jeremy Swayman too, now that he's signed. No shutout this time, though — he's getting pulled in his first start.

Tampa Bay Lightning

The big question is who'll have more goals, shiny new toy Jake Guentzel or the discarded Steven Stamkos? Unfortunately for the narratives, they'll finish tied.

Nashville Predators

Speaking of Stamkos, his return to Tampa Bay is scheduled for Oct. 28. He'll get a big ovation before the game when he's introduced, and a somewhat smaller one at the end when he scores the overtime winner.

Seattle Kraken

Here's a weird one: According to the NHL's stats keepers, the Kraken went all of last year without scoring a single wraparound goal, mainly because they only tried five all season long. They'll get one this year, and just to get completely ridiculous, we'll say it comes against the Jets, the team with the second-fewest attempts.

Utah Hockey Club

New city, new team, new franchise (kind of), so we need a first goal prediction. Let's go with Lawson Crouse, and we hope he scores it into the right net.

Washington Capitals

I was going to write something about a Pierre-Luc Dubois revenge game against his former team, but then I realized that's literally a tenth of the

Caps' schedule — they play eight games combined against the Blue Jackets, Jets and Kings. Will Dubois run wild against his exes? Not really, but he will have four points in those games. A goal and three assists, if you want to be oddly specific.

Ottawa Senators

This may be the unlikeliest entry I've ever dropped, and if it hits I'll have no choice but to retire from the prediction game, but here goes. At some point this year, Linus Ullmark and BFF Jeremy Swayman will end up paired off during a line brawl. It will be goalie hugs, only with haymakers. Or at least love taps.

Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets' start the season with a nasty schedule that includes playoff teams in eight of their first 11 and no opponents who finished under .500. The good news: In one of those games, the Blue Jackets will earn a win against the 2025 Stanley Cup champions.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

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The Athletic / Every NHL team's defense ranked from best to worst: Golden Knights and Avalanche top the list

Harman Dayal and James Mirtle

The NHL's best blue lines have gotten worse, and many of last year's below-average defensive units have significantly improved. That was the key takeaway when we analyzed every club's back end for our second-annual NHL blue line tiers project.

There's a surprising shortage of teams with truly high-end blue lines, with only a handful of them able to flex a robust, deep defense that lacks major holes. Even the teams that rank high in this project often look like they're missing a piece. The middle class is extremely crowded — there's very little difference between a team with the eighth-best blue line in the NHL and the 18th-best blue line. There are a ton of blue lines that deserve to be in the mushy middle.

That made it more difficult than last year to separate each team's blue lines into distinct tiers. Still, we tried our best by leaning on a combination of statistics and the eye test. We sent an initial draft of our tiers list around to several NHL executives and coaches. Based on their feedback, we made final tweaks. Keep in mind that blue lines are sorted into tiers strictly based on their projection for 2024-25 — we're not factoring for future potential at all.

(Note: A player's name will have an asterisk if they are currently injured but expected back in the lineup relatively soon.)

Tier 1: High-end

Vegas Golden Knights

Shea Theodore—Alex Pietrangelo

Noah Hanifin—Nicolas Hague

Brayden McNabb—Zach Whitecloud

Extra defense options: Kaedan Korczak, Ben Hutton

The Golden Knights blue line is built to do everything: They have puck-movers, big, heavy shutdown types and offensive drivers. Vegas doesn't have a single defender shorter than 6 feet 2 inches — we all saw how that size and two-way savvy allowed them to clog the middle of the ice defensively during the club's 2023 Stanley Cup victory.

Between Shea Theodore, Noah Hanifin and Alex Pietrangelo, Vegas boasts three top-pair caliber players who can skate well, move the puck and drive offense. Brayden McNabb, Nicolas Hague and Zach Whitecloud complement that by bringing a heavy defensive presence.

A full season of Hanifin coupled with better health for Theodore and Pietrangelo (both missed significant time with injuries last year) should see Vegas rebound as one of the elite defense cores in the NHL.



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Colorado Avalanche

Devon Toews—Cale Makar

Samuel Girard—Josh Manson

Calvin de Haan—Sam Malinski

Extra defense options: Oliver Kyllington, John Ludvig

Cale Makar is still widely considered the best defenseman on the planet. He didn't look like his usually dominant two-way self last year, but it could have easily been health-related (he missed a game on Dec. 3 with a lower-body injury and didn't look quite right upon returning). We're banking that he and Devon Toews will rebound as one of the best first pairs in the NHL.

The strength of Colorado's second pair comes down to one's belief in Samuel Girard. Girard can be a polarizing player: He's an excellent skater and has flashed top-pair caliber potential at earlier points in his career, but Dom Luszczyszyn's model grades him harshly and there are always question marks about his undersized frame. We believe in Girard's skill set, especially because he looked much better after he returned from the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program.

The Avs also have some intriguing depth options between Calvin de Haan, Oliver Kyllington and Sam Malinski, with the latter two possibly having some upside.

Boston Bruins

Nikita Zadorov—Charlie McAvoy

Hampus Lindholm—Brandon Carlo

Mason Lohrei—Andrew Peeke

Extra defense options: Parker Wotherspoon

The big man Nikita Zadorov headlines the Bruins' changes on D this year, and he's an incredibly interesting puzzle piece given his skill set and career to date.

Is he a really talented depth defender who brings size and a deceptive amount of skill? Or, with a high-end partner like Charlie McAvoy, can he be something more?

There were signs in Vancouver, in particular, that it's the latter. So we like this bet, especially given his company in Boston's top four remains high-end, with McAvoy and Hampus Lindholm one of the better 1-2 combos leaguewide.

And, with apologies to Kevin Shattenkirk, Matt Grzelcyk and Derek Forbort, the Bruins didn't lose anything more than depth pieces to free agency. Plus, prospect Mason Lohrei could surprise here, too.

Carolina Hurricanes

Jacob Slavin—Brent Burns

Dmitry Orlov—Jalen Chatfield

Shayne Gostisbehere—Sean Walker

Extra defense options: Scott Morrow

Losing Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce, their No. 2 and No. 4 from last year, would cripple a lot of blue lines, but many of the experts we surveyed still believe in the Hurricanes as a top team on the back end.

Ageless wonder Brent Burns, who turns 40 (!) in March, is a big part of that, as he somehow remains an elite contributor at both ends of the ice. Having Jacob Slavin, perhaps the best defensive defenseman in the league, sure helps, too. Jalen Chatfield is also very underrated and could be ready to thrive in a bigger role.

The other thing working in Carolina's favor is its third pair was stacked a year ago, so much so that using it as the second duo could work just fine. And the Hurricanes made a couple of nice bargain buys in free agency to round out what is possibly still the best six-man unit in the East.

Tier 2: Elite top-end but lacking depth

Nashville Predators

Roman Josi—Dante Fabbro

Brady Skjei—Luke Schenn

Jeremy Lauzon—Alex Carrier

Extra defense options: Spencer Stastney

Roman Josi remains a Norris-contending defenseman, which, coupled with Skjei's arrival, should make for one of the most electric No. 1/2 punches in the NHL. Alex Carrier is also an underrated, top-four quality shutdown defender, but it does get a little thin after that.

Fabbro is an OK player but he's prone to highs and lows and ideally wouldn't slot this high up the lineup (the Preds initially experimented with a Skjei-Josi top pair but that looks unlikely now that Tanner Molendyk is expected to go back to junior). Luke Schenn struggled on the third pair during his first year in Nashville, and Jeremy Lauzon, while a handy depth player, isn't suited for top-four minutes if his pair ever got elevated (which would happen if Josi and Skjei do get put together).

Spencer Stastney's status is worth tracking, too. The 24-year-old left-shot deserves to be part of Nashville's top-six and has intriguing upside, but he's been absent from camp and preseason for personal reasons.

Dallas Stars

Miro Heiskanen—Matt Dumba

Thomas Harley—Ilya Lyubushkin

Esa Lindell—Nils Lundkvist

Extra defense options: Brendan Smith, Lian Bichsel

Dallas being this high is a reminder of what we said in the intro about the league's lack of truly high-end blue lines. The Stars have an above-average defense compared to other teams, yet this group still feels incomplete for a deep playoff run.

Miro Heiskanen, Thomas Harley and Esa Lindell are an excellent top three. Heiskanen is one of the best all-around defensemen on the planet, Harley is a burgeoning star and Lindell is a big, sturdy defensive stopper.

Having both Matt Dumba and Ilya Lyubushkin penciled in for top-four jobs, though? That seems problematic. Adding a bona fide top-four righty, similar to the Chris Tanev acquisition last year, would go a long way in cementing a group with arguably the best left-side defense in the NHL.

Vancouver Canucks

Quinn Hughes—Filip Hronek

Carson Soucy—Tyler Myers

Derek Forbort—Vincent Desharnais

Extra defense options: Noah Juulsen, Mark Friedman, Erik Brannstrom

Quinn Hughes and Filip Hronek were one of the best top pairs in the NHL last season. Hughes ended up taking home the Norris Trophy, while Hronek's emergence as a true top-pair defender in his own right was rewarded with a lucrative eight-year, \$58 million contract. This pair — and Hughes especially — is the most important play-driving engine for the team as a whole.

Carson Soucy has also blossomed into an underrated second-pair shutdown presence. The 6-5 left-shot is easily Vancouver's third-best defenseman — he makes a ton of defensive stops with his reach, skates really well for a big man and improved his puck skills last season.

After that, it gets a little dicey, though.

Tyler Myers bounced back last year, but at 34, he shouldn't be counted on in a top-four role. The Canucks struggled mightily to generate offense when the Hughes pair was on the bench in the playoffs, and that's where the club could use a top-four puck-mover to slot in next to Soucy. That would provide a nice balance to a giant bottom four (all of Soucy, Myers, Derek Forbort and Vincent Desharnais are between 6-4 and 6-7) that is physical and defends well, but may struggle to move the puck.

Tier 3: Above average

Florida Panthers

Gustav Forsling—Aaron Ekblad



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Niko Mikkola—Dmitry Kulikov

Nate Schmidt—Adam Boqvist

Extra defense options: Uvis Balinskis

The Panthers were one of the teams we received pushback on having them high up this list from executives around the league.

The reason?

Both Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson left in free agency, and they played some integral minutes as part of Florida's Cup run. Montour especially given he led the way all season in ice time before Gustav Forsling was bumped up in the playoffs.

We like the reclamation bets GM Bill Zito is making on Nate Schmidt and Adam Boqvist, who is currently expected to land the PP1 QB role. But they are bets — and if they don't pay off, there's no question Florida takes a step back on defense.

New Jersey Devils

Brenden Dillon—Doug Hamilton

Jonas Siegenthaler—*Brett Pesce*

Seamus Casey—Simon Nemeč

Injured reserve: Luke Hughes (5-7 weeks away)

Extra defense options: Johnathan Kovacevic

The Devils' back end was a mess last year, thanks in part to a season-ending injury in November to No. 1 Doug Hamilton, who does a lot of heavy lifting for this group.

The additions of three more defensive-minded veterans in Brett Pesce, Brenden Dillon and Johnathan Kovacevic, combined with a healthy Hamilton and more progress from youngsters Luke Hughes and Simon Nemeč are all big positives for this group.

Strong additions behind the bench and in goal should help make life easier on them, too, which is important given this blue line isn't really built to lock games down like some of the others high on this list.

New York Islanders

Alex Romanov—Noah Dobson

Adam Pelech—Ryan Pulock

Mike Reilly—Scott Mayfield

Extra defense options: Dennis Cholowski, Sam Bolduc

This is a team built on strong defense and goaltending, and that identity was tested at times last year with so many injuries on the blue line.

The Isles are returning basically the same group as a year ago, but better health from Adam Pelech, Ryan Pulock and Scott Mayfield will go a long way to resolidifying this as a formidable defensive foundation.

And Noah Dobson's emergence as one of the best offensive threats on D in the NHL certainly spices things up for them, too.

New York Rangers

Ryan Lindgren—Adam Fox

K'Andre Miller—Jacob Trouba

Zac Jones—Braden Schneider

Extra defense options: Chad Ruhwedel, Victor Mancini, Matthew Robertson

The Rangers obviously boast a massive needle mover in Adam Fox, who remains a Norris contender every year and one of the most dynamic players in the East. But with Jacob Trouba's falloff, there's a ton on Fox's shoulders — so much so that even with him playing nearly half of every game it drops New York into the crowded upper-middle-class group.

Can Trouba and Ryan Lindgren rebound? Do K'Andre Miller and Braden Schneider take the next step as they start to enter their primes?

There's certainly potential for a step forward here, but with everything relying so much on Fox, it's hard to push them up this ranking at the moment.

Tier 4: Middle of the pack

Edmonton Oilers

Mattias Ekholm—Evan Bouchard

Darnell Nurse—Ty Emberson

Brett Kulak—Troy Stecher

Extra defense options: Travis Dermott

Dom's model rates the Oilers' blue line highly, but the executives and coaches we talked to weren't nearly as fond.

The good news is that Mattias Ekholm and Evan Bouchard are one of the most dominant pairs in the NHL. Edmonton has two bona fide No. 1 defenders at the top of the lineup, and this isn't just the Connor McDavid effect — Ekholm/Bouchard controlled a dominant 58 percent of shot attempts and nearly 61 percent of actual goals in nearly 500 five-on-five minutes without No. 97 on the ice. The advantage of having two elite defensemen on a top pair can't be overlooked.

The bad news is that Edmonton's right side is problematic beyond Bouchard. Ty Emberson, who has only played 30 career NHL games (it's worth noting his underlying numbers were promising in that small sample), is currently penciled in on the second pair. Nurse is also a wild card — he can play at a top-four level in the regular season but he consistently struggles in the playoffs.

Brett Kulak is an above-average third-pair contributor (he's driven excellent underlying numbers) and Troy Stecher is a totally capable No. 6.

If Edmonton can address that second-pair RD slot at the trade deadline, the Oilers will easily have a top-10 blue line. If not, the right-side depth could cost them when it comes to a Stanley Cup run.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Morgan Rielly—Chris Tanev

Oliver Ekman-Larsson—Jake McCabe

Simon Benoit—Conor Timmins

Extra defense options: Timothy Liljegren, Jani Hakanpää

GM Brad Treliving finally got the blue line makeover he's desired since coming to Toronto in the summer of 2023. It's heavy on veteran experience and, well, heaviness, and some of the deals signed may age poorly, but for now, Chris Tanev brings exactly what this group needs given his elite shutdown game.

But how Oliver Ekman-Larsson will fare in a top-four role all season remains to be seen, as he proved most effective in depth minutes for Florida last year. And Jani Hakanpää's health is another key factor, given his knee issues kept him out of all of preseason.

It also remains to be seen if Timothy Liljegren sticks around after a tough offseason negotiation and so-so training camp. Toronto's depth will be tested if they decide to move him, especially if this Big Old Guy brigade runs into injuries.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Victor Hedman—J.J. Moser

Ryan McDonagh—Erik Cernak

Emil Lilleberg—Nick Perbix

Extra defense options: Darren Raddysh

We did get a little pushback from the executives we surveyed about having the Lightning this low. On reputation, the fact they can still roll Victor Hedman out 25 minutes per game is a big equalizer. Whether it's enough to escape the middle of the pack is up for debate.

The homecoming for Ryan McDonagh is probably the biggest storyline here. He's 35 now, and not the player he was, but that's a second pair



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with Erik Cernak that will be difficult to score on, which should help Tampa Bay's ballooning goals against and give Hedman some easier minutes to chew up.

Everything else, however, is a pretty big question mark. Who plays with Hedman, who turns 34 in a couple of months and can't carry a partner the way he used to? Who fills in case of injuries? Is there more there from the likes of J.J. Moser, Nick Perbix and Darren Raddysh, or are they who we think they are? Execs from other teams were mixed on that trio, but they'll need a surprise or two there to deserve a higher placing than this.

Winnipeg Jets

Josh Morrissey–Dylan DeMelo

Dylan Samberg–Neal Pionk

Haydn Fleury–Colin Miller

Extra defense options: Ville Heinola, Logan Stanley

Josh Morrissey deserves more fanfare for emerging as a true No. 1 star. He and underrated defensive defender Dylan DeMelo have quietly driven a plus-49 goal differential at five-on-five over the last two seasons. It obviously helps to have Connor Hellebuyck backstopping them, but they've won their matchups from a play-driving perspective, too.

Winnipeg's second pair could get a bit wobbly with the loss of Brenden Dillon. Dylan Samberg, 25, played well in a sheltered role for the Jets last season he's unproven this high up the lineup. Neal Pionk is accustomed to eating big minutes and can score 30-35 points, but he's struggled quite a bit defensively.

The Jets' third pair looks solid but unspectacular.

Seattle Kraken

Vince Dunn–Adam Larsson

Jamie Oleksiak–Brandon Montour

Ryker Evans–Will Borgen

Extra defense options: Josh Mahura, Cale Fleury

Seattle may not be led by a Norris-quality star, but this is a deep, underrated blue line that has the upside to be even better than what we've projected.

Brandon Montour is the big X-factor here. We know he's a talented offensive driver and blossomed into an excellent player during the last three years, but how will he look now that he's away from the Panthers' system? Florida has turned the careers around of several reclamation project defensemen in recent times, and Montour was an inconsistent player before he arrived in the Sunshine State. Montour should be a good addition, but the exact extent of his impact will swing the second pair for better or worse.

The Kraken's third pair is decisively above average. Ryker Evans, 22, is an exciting young talent worth monitoring, and Will Borgen, who was competent in a second-pair role, now slides down into an easier assignment.

Washington Capitals

Jakob Chychrun–John Carlson

Martin Fehervary–Matt Roy

Rasmus Sandin–Trevor van Riemsdyk

Extra defense options: Alex Alexeyev, Ethan Bear

The Capitals certainly didn't sit back after a surprising showing in the standings last season. And their blue line makeover will be one of the bigger things to watch when it comes to these rankings this season.

One significant positive? Rasmus Sandin isn't going to finish second in minutes played this time around, not with the solid additions of both Jakob Chychrun and Matt Roy boosting Washington's depth considerably.

If there's a concern, it's that longtime No. 1 D John Carlson turns 35 in January, and it's going to get harder to give him the most minutes (25:54

per game last season) of any player in the league much longer. Washington doesn't really have an answer for that in-house, although having more capable vets in the top four should help.

Minnesota Wild

Jonas Brodin–Brock Faber

Jake Middleton–Jared Spurgeon

Declan Chisholm–Zach Bogosian

Extra defense options: Jon Merrill

Jonas Brodin and Brock Faber should perform well at the top of the lineup, but the rest of Minnesota's blue line was a disaster at times last year. Jared Spurgeon is the glue that will either hold the rest of the defense together or the reason it underperforms for a second consecutive season.

Minnesota's captain missed all but 16 games last year because of injuries. If Spurgeon rebounds as a minute-munching workhorse, it will lift Jake Middleton who otherwise doesn't belong in most teams' top-four rotation, and it'll keep Faber, who was often forced to log more than 25 minutes per game, fresher and likely more productive. Spurgeon's return should also be a massive boost for Minnesota's penalty kill, which fell from 10th place in 2022-23 to 30th place last season in his absence.

It isn't as simple as Spurgeon simply being healthy, though. He has to prove he's still the same player after all this time off, especially since he turns 35 in November.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Marcus Pettersson–Erik Karlsson

Matt Grzelcyk–Kris Letang

Ryan Graves–Jack St. Ivany

Extra defense options: Ryan Shea

The model still loves the Penguins' back end. We (and the executives and coaches we surveyed for this ranking) ... are less convinced.

Erik Karlsson is 34. Kris Letang is 37. How much you believe they still have in the tank as elite contributors will basically correlate exactly to where they'll fall on this list, as the Penguins don't have a lot else to get excited about.

Marcus Pettersson is an excellent all-around player, but beyond that, this is a back end with a lot of question marks and not much room for upside.

Utah Hockey Club

Mikhail Sergachev–Sean Durzi

Juuso Valimaki–*John Marino*

Ian Cole–Michael Kesselring

Extra defense options: Vladislav Kolyachonok, Robert Bortuzzo

Utah has one of the most improved blue lines this season, headlined by the Mikhail Sergachev acquisition. The 26-year-old missed most of last season because of a leg injury but in 2022-23 he broke out with 64 points in 78 games while finishing 16th in Norris Trophy voting. He instantly becomes the team's clear-cut No. 1. It'll be fascinating to see how quickly he can return to peak form after missing so many games last year.

This blue line has an abundance of puck-moving talent and offensive skill between Sergachev, Sean Durzi and John Marino, but does it have enough defensive stoppers at the top of the lineup? Durzi is prone to defensive inconsistencies, and Marino mightily struggled in his own end in New Jersey last year. Ian Cole will add some of that veteran defensive IQ, but that will only be in a third-pair capacity.

A lot will also hinge on what version of Marino they get when he returns. Marino was really good in a second pair role with New Jersey in 2022-23, but he was a huge disappointment last year.

Overall, Utah has a solid, deep blue line with plenty of puck-moving/offensive potential but some defensive question marks.

Tier 5: Decent young talent but volatile and prone to injury risk



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Buffalo Sabres

Rasmus Dahlin–Henri Jokiharju

Bowen Byram–Owen Power

Mattias Samuelsson–Connor Clifton

Extra defense options: Jacob Bryson

There was definitely some support for the Sabres to be higher on this list, but most of it rests with their potential. At some point, Owen Power — who is somehow still only 21 — is going to put things all together, and that'll give Buffalo one of the better 1-2 punches in the league given Rasmus Dahlin's emergence as one of the best defenders in the league. (And he's only 24.)

Mattias Samuelsson, son of Kjell, is also already a dependable option down the lineup and better health for him will help. But Bowen Byram remains a big-time wild card, and their other pieces really shouldn't be more than "meh" depth at this point.

But if Dahlin can carry a weak-link partner and Power takes a big step, they're going to climb up this ranking.

Ottawa Senators

Jake Sanderson–Artem Zub

Thomas Chabot–Nick Jensen

Tyler Kleven–Travis Hamonic

Extra defense options: Jacob Bernard-Docker

Jakob Chychrun out and Nick Jensen in shouldn't change things too dramatically for the Senators, who should benefit from some more stability in goal.

The bigger question for this group: How much more growth do they get from within, with Jake Sanderson entering his third NHL season at just 22? And can Thomas Chabot rebound from injury to make more of an impact? It'd be huge if Zub could find a way to finally stay healthy, too. Both Zub and Chabot have failed to reach the 70-games played mark in each of the last two years because of injuries.

Ottawa will also need some progress from one of Kleven or Bernard-Docker to solidify the depth too because Hamonic struggled mightily last year.

Los Angeles Kings

Mikey Anderson–Jordan Spence

Vladislav Gavrikov–Kyle Burroughs

Joel Edmundson–Brandt Clarke

Injured long-term: Drew Doughty

Extra defense options: Andreas Englund, Caleb Jones

Drew Doughty's devastating ankle injury (out month-to-month) leaves the Kings vulnerable on the right-side defense, especially after Matt Roy's departure. None of Jordan Spence, Kyle Burroughs or Brandt Clarke have experience playing top-four NHL minutes. In rating L.A.'s blue line, we're assuming that Doughty will miss significant time but that he will eventually return this season.

These next several weeks will tell us a lot about Clarke and Spence. Both are talented, exciting players who could break out and seize all of the extra minutes available. Clarke, especially, has elite offensive potential and should seamlessly take on first-unit power-play responsibilities. It's a lot of pressure on them to perform right away, though. Mikey Anderson, Vladislav Gavrikov and Joel Edmundson at least have the experience and defensive IQ to be the stabilizers for each of their pairs.

When Doughty's healthy this profiles a solid, deep defensive unit. However, who knows how long it will be until we see the group healthy.

Montreal Canadiens

Mike Matheson–Kaiden Guhle

Lane Hutson–David Savard

Arber Xhekaj–Justin Barron

Extra defense options: Jayden Struble

All eyes on Lane Hutson?

The undersized 20-year-old who spent the last two years at Boston University drew rave reviews throughout preseason and that has him penciled in for a top-four role despite just two games of NHL experience. How that experiment goes will have a big bearing on how Montreal's blue line holds up this season, as the Canadiens didn't make any splashy additions on the back end.

But Kaiden Guhle and Justin Barron should take steps as 22-year-olds as well, so there's room for optimism either way from this group. And Mike Matheson remains underrated around the league given the heavy minutes he's been able to absorb.

Tier 6: Below average

Philadelphia Flyers

Cam York–Travis Sanheim

Nick Seeler–Jamie Drysdale

Egor Zamula–Rasmus Ristolainen

Extra defense options: Erik Johnson

The most intriguing name to keep an eye on here is Cam York, who quietly logged nearly 23 minutes per game last season as a 22-year-old and showed some real signs he could develop into a No. 1 at some point.

Combine that with steady veterans Travis Sanheim and Nick Seeler, and there's the makings of an underdog group here that could surprise. At the very least, they're a group that competes well defensively, punching above their weight and individual reputations around the league.

But they'll need a lot more from Jamie Drysdale to take a jump up these rankings, and it's still unclear whether or not he'll be up to the challenge of a regular top-four role on a playoff-competitive team.

Detroit Red Wings

Ben Chiarot–Moritz Seider

Simon Edvinsson–Jeff Petry

Olli Maatta–Erik Gustafsson

Extra defense options: Albert Johansson, Justin Holl

On paper, this group looks like it will be the biggest impediment to the Red Wings finally returning to the postseason.

Jeff Petry is 37 in December and shouldn't be playing higher than third-pair minutes at this point. Ben Chiarot doesn't belong on a playoff team's top pair. And there's a reason Olli Maatta and Erik Gustafsson have bounced around as much as they have.

The big caveat to all of that is Moritz Seider is a stud and Simon Edvinsson has very high-end potential. Edvinsson, in particular, could level up into a top-pair defender as early as this season. If he's ready, the Red Wings will climb this ranking quickly — and possibly even grab a wild-card spot.

St. Louis Blues

Nick Leddy–Colton Parayko

Philip Broberg–Justin Faulk

Ryan Suter–Matt Kessel

Extra defense options: P.O. Joseph, Scott Perunovich

Colton Parayko is an excellent shutdown defender and enjoyed a brilliant bounce-back year in 2023-24 but he's asked to do way too much for this blue line. He needs more help, both in terms of a true top-pair caliber partner and more support behind him.

St. Louis' second pair will be an interesting wild card. Justin Faulk was injury-riddled and struggled last year but he's shown premier top-four ability in the past. We're expecting him to rebound to some extent, but how big of a step forward is realistic?



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Philip Broberg is an X-factor here, too. The 2019 No. 8 pick has tantalizing size and skating ability, but his development has been up-and-down over the past few years and he couldn't consistently crack the Oilers' defense during the regular season. He showed some potential late during Edmonton's playoff run when he played on his off-side, but it's difficult to predict how he'll fare in a top-four NHL role given that he only played 12 regular-season games last year.

The Blues' defense should be better this season (Torey Krug's injury could be considered addition by subtraction), but there's still a lack of sure bets when it comes to high-end top-four defensemen.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Zach Werenski-Ivan Provorov

Jake Christiansen-Damon Severson

Jack Johnson-Erik Gudbranson

Extra defense options: David Jiricek, Jordan Harris, Denton Mateychuk

The Blue Jackets back end doesn't lack talent. Zach Werenski remains a weapon, with a 0.81 points per game that ranked 10th among all blueliners last year. Damon Severson and Ivan Provorov, meanwhile, are both capable second-pairing types who struggled at times in their first season in Columbus but could rebound given their track record.

The biggest thing this group needs is some kids to push those top three for minutes and ensure Erik Gudbranson and Jack Johnson aren't the default options for important roles.

David Jiricek has had his frustrations with the organization, but he has the pedigree and showcased enough talent in the AHL last season to indicate a breakout is possible. He started camp in a top-four role but he struggled in preseason and appeared to be outside the top six during Monday's practice. Jordan Harris, Denton Mateychuk and Jake Christiansen are possibilities, too, although a higher impact youth movement on this blue line feels another year or two away.

Calgary Flames

Mackenzie Weegar-Daniil Miromanov

Kevin Bahl-Rasmus Andersson

Jake Bean-Tyson Barrie

Extra defense options: Brayden Pachal, Joel Hanley

Dismantling last year's back end (traded Noah Hanifin, Chris Tanev and Nikita Zadorov) was a key part of initiating the Flames' rebuild. Mackenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson are still marquee top-four players and quality veteran leaders, but the rest of the group isn't very established.

Daniil Miromanov and Kevin Bahl are interesting projects. They're both inexperienced and have flaws, but they also have intriguing tools and some upside. Miromanov, who was a throw-in from Vegas as part of the Hanifin trade, is an offensive blueliner with some defensive warts. He flashed some decent underlying numbers in 20 games for the Flames down the stretch. Bahl, a giant defensive defenseman, was acquired as part of the Jacob Markstrom trade.

Jake Bean is a run-of-the-mill reclamation project, and Tyson Barrie is a standard No. 6/7 at this stage in his career.

Tier 7: Rebuilding/Needs improvement

Anaheim Ducks

Cam Fowler-Olen Zellweger

Pavel Mintyukov-Radko Gudas

Brian Dumoulin-Jackson LaCombe

Extra defense options: Tristan Luneau, Urho Vaakanainen

Anaheim's blue-line fate comes down to how quickly the youth can take massive steps.

Pavel Mintyukov showed incredible promise in his rookie campaign, but he's still 20, and development for young defensemen isn't always linear. Olen Zellweger has top-four potential, but he only has played 26 career

NHL games. Jackson LaCombe, 23, is entering his sophomore season, too. Tristan Luneau, 20, is another one of the Ducks' talented defense prospects, and worth keeping an eye on.

Radko Gudas and Cam Fowler are dependable veterans but neither is equipped to be a true top-pair caliber leader.

Anaheim has a bright long-term future on the back end, but there will likely be growing pains for its young defenders this season as they gain experience.

Chicago Blackhawks

Alec Martinez-Seth Jones

Alex Vlasic-T.J. Brodie

Wyatt Kaiser-Connor Murphy

Extra defense options: Nolan Allan, Kevin Korhinski, Louis Crevier

Chicago's blue line is significantly better than last year's tire fire group which left teenage rookie Kevin Korhinski overexposed in a top-four role, for example. The Blackhawks have some respectable defensemen and could outperform this bottom-tier projection, even though they still aren't likely to be very good.

Alex Vlasic has blossomed into a quality shutdown player. Seth Jones is on a bloated contract but he's still a solid top-four defenseman.

T.J. Brodie, 34, saw his game fall off a cliff in Toronto last season. Can he rebound and give Chicago more? How much does 37-year-old Alec Martinez have left in the tank? Will Connor Murphy rebound after a challenging, injury-plagued season?

San Jose Sharks

Mario Ferraro-Jan Rutta

Jake Walman-Cody Ceci

Henry Thrun-Matt Benning

Extra defense options: Shakir Mukhamadullin, Marc-Edouard Vlasic (currently injured)

The Sharks have by far the worst blue line in the NHL. You could reasonably argue their blue line deserved its own tier below Anaheim and Chicago, but it would have felt unnecessarily cruel to create a Tier 8 just for the Sharks. But make no mistake, they're not particularly close to either of those other rebuilding teams who at least have some intriguing players.

Jake Walman was a savvy pickup, and Mario Ferraro's not a bad player, but there isn't a whole lot to like beyond that. This defense will struggle in a lot of ways but transitioning the puck up ice feels like it will be a particular challenge for them.

Perhaps Shakir Mukhamadullin, a top prospect acquired in the Timo Meier trade, can break out as a 22-year-old rookie. He missed most of camp and preseason with an injury and only has three games of NHL experience.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.09.2024

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The Athletic / NHL Hope-O-Meter results: Ranking fans' optimism for all 32 teams

By Sean Gentile

Welcome to the triumphant return of the Hope-O-Meter, where we take the preseason temperature of every NHL fanbase and turn it into a nice little list.

The methodology is simple as ever, and it will stay as such. That is the Hope-O-Meter promise. One question: Are you optimistic about your team ... or are you not?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 9, 2024

A couple quick notes before we get to business:

- Last time we did this, at the start of 2022-23, the breakdown was 74 percent hopeful, 26 not. This year, it's 72/28.
- There are 29 teams over the 50/50 threshold, the most we've ever had. In 2022-23, seven teams were at 26 percent optimism or lower; this time, there are none.
- The biggest riser over the last two years is the Nashville Predators, who are up about 75 percent since Barry Trotz took the helm and decided to start scoring goals.
- The biggest faller: the Kings, who are down about 47 percent. Tough to blame them, given the Connor McDavid-sized roadblock between them and the second round.
- About 6,000 of you voted here, which is amazing. Thank you.
- We picked one optimistic response and one pessimistic response per franchise, except in a few special cases.
- Turns out people are excited about Stanley Cup winners and new teams.

chart visualization

1. (tie) Florida Panthers — 100 percent optimism

Optimist Justin: After being the doormat of the league forever, I still can't actually believe the Panthers won. Let's get another!

Optimist Henry: Although I've generally been pessimistic about this team my whole life, up to and including the final minutes of Game 7 last year, it does seem like they have turned a page with Bill Zito. My instinct is to prepare for the gutter, but FL seems pretty good.

1. (tie) Utah HC — 100

Optimist Sean: Here in Utah, we are just excited to have a team. Regardless of how they finish, this first season will be a success just because the UHC took the ice.

Optimist Leighton: The least exciting thing about this team is that they no longer wear the best jersey in the league. However, I'm optimistic about the rebuild and the team's direction. As long as Armstrong avoids making a move like Chayka did — where he handicaps the team at the deadline, like with the Taylor Hall trade — I'll be satisfied.

3. Edmonton Oilers — 97.4

Optimist Alex: About as hopeful as hopeful gets. All they need to do is win one more game than last season.

Pessimist Sachia: Our defence is worse, I don't trust our goaltending, and for some reason we re-signed Corey Perry (which contributed to the offer sheets from St. Louis). I'm expecting another wasted year of McDavid's prime.

4. Nashville Predators — 95.7

Optimist Matt: I am optimistic not only for the players who were added but that the organization realized that the scorched-earth, tear-it-to-the-studs approach is not the only way to build a winner. Life is too short to worry so much about setting up the future when you don't even know what that future might look like.

Pessimist Will: The Predators made a splash in headlines with their high profile free agent signings but these high cost players are bandaids and not true solutions. Sure Stamkos and Marchessault should help with scoring, but Nashville still lacks any sort of punch in the center position. Could they make the playoffs? I think so. Are they a serious contender? Not right now.

5. Dallas Stars — 95.2

Optimist Mark: There is no reason they can't win it all this year; except for the other half-dozen teams that's also true for.

Pessimist Robyn: I don't think they are going to be bad. But defense was the big issue last year and I feel they have taken a step back there in the offseason. So I think they will make the playoffs easily, but I don't see them winning the Cup, which should be their aspiration given where they are at with the development curves of many of their players.

6. Vancouver Canucks — 94.9

Optimist Natalie: Optimistic because I need to believe things are OK for this damn team. I cannot live through any more depressing Canucks seasons (see Benning, Jim).

Pessimist Todd: Being a Canucks fan means being wrong about their chances in the most painful way possible. Seriously, the best way to predict their future is to determine what would hurt the most. So, Demko, Miller, Hughes all get hurt. Petey disappears. Miss the playoffs in the last game of the season.

7. New Jersey Devils — 92.0

Optimist Sean: If I were to tell you what was wrong with this team last May, it was goaltending, lack of toughness and lack of vibes. No one can guarantee health, so leave that aside. Tom Fitzgerald had already gotten Jake Allen, but added a legit starter in Jacob Markstrom, shook up the D and added in guys that bring in big grit at forward. Vibes are on the rise and look to keep going up.

Pessimist Bagey: It seems like everyone is hyped up about the Devils, but they need to prove that '22-23 wasn't a fluke. Still a ton of questions with the roster, and they have yet to prove that they can win games with key players hurt (every team goes through injuries). I see them as middle of the pack, not top 5.

8. New York Rangers — 89.3

Optimist John: I get why some Ranger fans are disappointed there weren't bigger changes, but I still see a team that won the Presidents' Trophy here and has no real reason to take a major step back. In fact, if young guys like Laf and Miller can keep progressing, I see no real reason why they won't be a serious Cup contender again.

Pessimist Josh: This team as it stands has made multiple playoff runs: in each of those runs, it has fallen short. Our squad is only getting older, the front office hasn't made any big changes, and unless we have some sort of breakout player, there's nothing that suggests this season won't end like the last three.

9. Carolina Hurricanes — 84.1

Optimist Corey: Losing Jake Guentzel and our most reliable defensive pairing wasn't the most confidence-inspiring way to start the offseason, but locking up Slavin, Aho, and Jarvis long-term gives a lot more confidence in the future. As for this season, if Necas and the bargain bin defensive replacements can step up, I think the Canes will play like they never lost a step.

Pessimist Oren: I'm hopeful in the long term and felt the team made smart decisions in free agency, but I think that for this season a lot of folks are underestimating how much heavy lifting the shutdown pair of Skjei and Pesce did, plus Brent Burns and Jordan Staal are one year older and the team still doesn't have a real 2C.

10. Ottawa Senators — 83.4

Optimist Rob: It finally feels like the team is run by competent people and not just taking massive swings to keep their jobs. Yes I obviously want them to make the playoffs, but it feels like a normal hockey team.

Pessimist Alex: Feels like the Sens have been standing still for the past few years. There are some bright spots on the roster (Stützle, Brady, Sanderson), but I'm not bought into much of the rest. Norris is often injured, Batherson doesn't seem to drive much play, Chabot makes too many mistakes.

11. Colorado Avalanche — 81.8

Optimist Anna: Every other night, I get to watch two of the best players in the world play the best sport in the world. With Makar and MacKinnon on the ice, what Avs fan wouldn't be optimistic about the upcoming season?

Pessimist Kathleen: With the uncertainty around Landeskog's ability to play and Nichushkin's availability and, um, reliability, the Avs are a real question mark for me this season. So much money is tied up in those two guys, which severely handicaps McFarland's ability to plug two huge holes in the lineup. And while there are one or two standouts in training camp, the rest of the additions have been underwhelming.

12. Tampa Bay Lightning — 80.9



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Optimist Mason: I really think the Lightning had an underrated offseason. Yes, losing Stamkos is gonna get all of the headlines, but bringing in Jake Guentzel is an upgrade. I also think that Ryan McDonagh and J.J. Moser are a collective upgrade on Mikhail Sergachev and Matt Dumba.

Pessimist Shaun: The "Stamkos not on the Lightning" universe is not the one I signed up for. But this organization's default mode (thanks in part to the cap) is "win." We'll be good for a bit.

13. Vegas Golden Knights — 77.8

Optimist T: Many Knights fans are skeptical about the upcoming season. We all love Jonathan Marchessault. But letting him go was the right decision for the future. The Knights will still be in the mix for the Cup at the end of the year.

Pessimist Jon: Too much offense to replace, too much injury risk. This could be the year it all catches up to VGK.

14. Washington Capitals — 76.6

Optimist Rico: It's not that I don't see the glaring holes in the lineup, or the difficulty of trying to "retool rather than rebuild." And I certainly don't expect the Caps to be battling the Hurricanes, Bruins, and Panthers for the top seed. But there are several good players on this team, and a good coach. They need a lot of the 50/50 propositions on the roster to break the right way, but I feel better about them than I did this time last season, and another playoff spot is certainly in reach.

Pessimist Adam: We're kicking the can down the road. Definitely more talented than last year, but our ceiling is still a first-round exit. We do have some good young pieces, and I'm more optimistic about the long term future than I was, but the short and medium term aren't looking too bright.

15. Philadelphia Flyers — 75.5

Optimist Joe: Matvei Michkov is here two years earlier than expected, and has looked great in preseason. Hard not to be hopeful when you see him play!

Pessimist Ringo: Mediocre, mediocre, mediocre. Gonna be a decent year if Michkov is as advertised, but lack of goaltending and D will sink us.

16. Montreal Canadiens — 75.1

Optimist Mark: Based purely on the assumption that prospects develop as expected and they all excel and don't take a backward step. Patrik Laine built on that optimism and has now been dashed. Slight sense of doom on the horizon that injuries could bring it all crashing down again!

Pessimist Paul: Preseason power play performance has drained the optimism I had for this season. Deja Vu all over again.

17. Buffalo Sabres — 74.5

Optimist Justin: I'm ready to get hurt again.

Pessimist Brian: They've basically run it back with slightly better defensive capabilities and clearly less scoring capabilities. Lindy is a damn good NHL coach, but they're banking on an awful lot of players to improve. The core ain't that young anymore.

18. San Jose Sharks — 74.4

Optimist Ali: Celebrini looks transcendent, we're loaded with prospects, but mostly there's almost no possible way to be better than historically wretched.

Pessimist Andrew: I mean, we all know what kind of season it's going to be for the Sharks, right? I'm hoping it'll be a little more fun than last year, and I'm looking forward to seeing the new rookies get their reps.

19. Boston Bruins — 72.6

Optimist Jonny: The roster is remarkably unexciting and they significantly shortened the Pastrnak/McAvoy window this summer. Despite this, they're rolling out a very solid roster that, in the current context of the NHL, is going to be in the upper echelon of teams.

Pessimist Ben: Sweeney and Neeley coasted on generational contracts with Bergeron, Marchand, and Pasta and couldn't build a Cup winner even with that huge head start. Management mediocrity will start to tell.

20. Seattle Kraken — 72.5

Optimist Erik: 2023-2024 was a down year for a few key players. Hopeful we'll see some bounce back from them and further growth by Daccord, keeping us in contention.

Pessimist Michael: No reason to be hopeful until we have a star break through. A (relative) strong bottom-6 is great, but we need consistent production at the top. Otherwise we'll be stuck in the purgatory of the middle.

21. Anaheim Ducks — 71.8

Optimist Chris: This has to be a relative thing. I don't think any of us define hope in terms of wins still. I'm still fully in "watch the kids" mode. There are a bunch of guys coming into their early 20s who need to make a leap and I'm optimistic about it.

Pessimist David: Same players, same coach, same problems, same excuses, same "Be patient, someday the young players will ... yada, yada, yada."

22. Winnipeg Jets — 70.5

Optimist Zac: Best goalie in the world, an elite defenseman, and sneaky forward depth. A renewed focus on special teams should address one glaring area of concern from last year, and there's hope a new coaching staff may finally learn to love and use Nikolaj Ehlers.

Pessimist Josh: Not much happened in the offseason other than players leaving and the team losing depth. Hopefully Perfetti, Lambert and Heinola can take a big step up this season, but realistically this team won't be as good as last year.

23. Detroit Red Wings — 70.2

Optimist Tim: It feels weird to be optimistic about a team that mostly overachieved last season, and I know "the model" says otherwise, but I really do think this Red Wings team got better. Edvinsson's a top 4 upgrade over Walman. Tarasenko's a slight upgrade over Perron. A full offseason of training for Kane. Continued growth for Raymond. Enough decent goalies to ride at least one of them at a time. The roster is still flawed, but this year I think we earn our playoff bubble slot instead of lucking into it.

Pessimist Kris: All I've heard for years is how great our prospect pool is, and yet we keep signing aged and overpaid vets that end up blocking them vs. just biting the bullet a little and letting the kids learn by doing.

24. St. Louis Blues — 70.0

Optimist Derek: As a fan, I don't want to see a fire sale or an AHL team on the ice for the sake of losing. I like the tools of the CBA utilized by GM Doug Armstrong and pushing the kids in their development. While ending in the mushy middle is not great, meaningful games into April is not nothing.

Pessimist Dylan: This team is probably better than last year, but still not good enough to compete with the best. The worst part is that I don't know what path they have to get back to the Cup.

25. Toronto Maple Leafs — 62.4

Optimist Justin: It's the Leafs. Fans go through the same cycle each year of hoping it finally works and praying that it will come the playoffs. Berube is the big component of why this might happen this year.

Pessimist Cameron: I watched their '67 Cup win in black and white at my uncle and aunt's place. They were playing cards in the kitchen with my parents in the kitchen. My uncle heard me cheer, and called out, "They'll never win again, you know." It's Uncle Sammy's curse.

26. Chicago Blackhawks — 60.8

Optimist Jay: The Blackhawks aren't a playoff contender, that's a fact. But this year's roster is leaps and bounds better than last year's. ... This season should be much less painful to watch.

Pessimist Alex: It's still too soon.

27. New York Islanders — 59.8



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Optimist Stella: Optimistic they'll win the Cup? No. Optimistic they'll make a playoff run? Not really. Optimistic they'll be good enough to keep me watching and help fill the long, dark winter nights? Absolutely.

Pessimist Chris: Lou seems to be compiling a team of players who are almost as old as he is. Not sure that is a recipe for success.

28. Minnesota Wild — 53.0

Optimist Paul: I choose optimism with the Wild, as they are healthy. I reserve the right to crush my optimism, as Wild fans are not allowed to have good things.

Pessimist Aaron: It's déjà vu, all over again. Everyone knew the dead cap money would handcuff the Wild thru this coming season, but (general manager Bill Guerin) handing out questionable extensions with no-trade/move clauses all but assured another year without a realistic chance of contending for a Cup.

29. Pittsburgh Penguins — 51.3

Optimist Dan: I get it – we're the guys approaching their 40s trying to relive their glory days just one final time before we call it quits. But are you going to be the one to tell Sidney Crosby that he doesn't have at least an outside shot of making the playoffs and going on a run?

Pessimist Gigi: Retirement home, rebuilding, washed, etc. All things that are being said about Pittsburgh. I'm not optimistic about this season, and not even that optimistic about seasons beyond this one. Oh well!

30. Los Angeles Kings — 42.7

Optimist Troy: Something has to give eventually, right?

Pessimist Henry: After three long years getting my hopes shattered against the Oilers, the Kings seem to have regressed further. We got bigger and slower, and the future looks bleak.

31. Columbus Blue Jackets — 39.3

Optimist Cody: Things can only get better.

32. Calgary Flames — 27.6

Optimist Zach: This is the first time in a long time the only expectations are to stink, and I think that is something that the Flames can readily achieve. Looking forward to seeing what some of the young dudes can do!

Pessimist Jason: If I could trust the Flames to actually rebuild I'd feel a lot better. I just can't shake the feeling that we will get off to a good start and ownership/management will abandon any sense of a rebuild to chase some playoff revenue.

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ESPN / Predicting where every NHL team finishes in 2024-25 - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

The Dallas Stars are going to win the 2025 Stanley Cup.

That breaks a two-year streak of my picking their Western Conference rivals, the Edmonton Oilers, to finally deliver a Stanley Cup to Connor McDavid (and, in turn, Canada for the first time since 1993). Missing that Oilers Cup prediction last season by just one victory disappointed us both. OK, probably McDavid slightly more than me.

In breaking down the 2024-25 NHL season, I've decided that rather than last season's Stanley Cup runner-up, it'll be the two-time Western Conference runner-up that lifts the chalice at the end of the season. The Stars lost to the Golden Knights in 2023 and the Oilers in 2024, both in six games. The third time's the charm for Peter DeBoer's team, an ideal mix of impact veterans, players in their prime and invigorating young talents.

As is tradition, I reached out to the general manager of my Stanley Cup champion-in-waiting to let him know what's coming.

Me: I'm picking you to win the Stanley Cup.

Jim Nill, general manager of the Dallas Stars: I don't know if that's good or bad, but thank you. I appreciate it.

Me: Usually, I feel bad about picking teams like this because that's placing extra expectations on them. But I don't feel bad about picking you guys because I feel like you've got expectations anyway, because you've been the bridesmaid twice in a row.

Nill: No, we do. Our guys are hungry. They know what it takes. People don't realize what a tough road it was last year. We had to go through Vegas and Colorado. Those are tough. And then he hit Edmonton, so it wasn't an easy, you know, walk through the playoffs for us. Stanley Cup champion, Stanley Cup champion and then Edmonton who went to the finals. But that's good, though. To win it all, you've got to beat them all. That's our mentality.

My Stanley Cup Final is a Y2K throwback series: The Dallas Stars against the New Jersey Devils, who go from last season's embarrassing flop to Eastern Conference champions thanks to an offseason of smart moves and a regular season of good health and great goaltending.

This time, it's the Stars on top, hoisting the Cup for the first time since 1999.

What about the rest of the NHL? Here's my division-by-division breakdown of the projected standings. Playoff teams are bolded. Good luck to all 32 teams. Hope everyone has fun out there.

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Toronto Maple Leafs

Florida Panthers

Tampa Bay Lightning

Boston Bruins

Buffalo Sabres

Ottawa Senators

Detroit Red Wings

Montreal Canadiens

Since 2020-21, the Maple Leafs have the fourth-best points percentage (.671) of any team in the NHL. The only divisional team ranked ahead of them in that span was Boston (first, at .702). The Bruins were seven points better than Toronto in the standings last season, which is what happens when one team had the third-best goaltending in the NHL and the other team ranked 23rd in team save percentage.

Toronto has once again made wholesale changes to their crease, handing the reins to 26-year-old Joseph Woll and importing Anthony Stolarz from the Stanley Cup champion Panthers. He's one of three Florida players the Leafs signed, along with defenseman Oliver Ekman-Larsson and forward Steven Lorentz, who enter a locker room that has fewer rings than an Olympic logo.

This could be a solid tandem. Stolarz (first) and Woll (eighth) were in the top 10 for goals saved above expected (minimum 20 games) last season. The "could" here is more related to their stability than their play, as Woll and Stolarz haven't exactly been models of health.

But if the goaltending improves, the Leafs should take the Atlantic. The Core Four knows how to rack up 100-plus point seasons in their sleep, and competent goaltending should get them to 110-plus points. Auston Matthews will score 50-plus goals. Mitch Marner will have a contract year season. The inherent concerns about this team – the impact of coach Craig Berube, the leveling up of players like Matthew Knies, the specious construction of their bottom six and the ghosts of previous failures haunting them – won't manifest until the playoffs. That's basically tradition now in Toronto.

The Panthers enter the season like they just woke up after an all-nighter at the Elbo Room in Fort Lauderdale: bleary-eyed, missing a few things, but with a wide satisfied grin as they remember the party.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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As with most Stanley Cup winners, repeating the feat comes down to how well GM Bill Zito has plugged his lineup holes. Out are Ekman-Larsson, Lorentz, Stolarz, Ryan Lomberg, Kevin Stenlund, Kyle Okposo and most notably Brandon Montour, the best offensive defenseman. That's a lot of quality depth out the door. In are Adam Boqvist, Nate Schmidt, Chris Driedger, A.J. Greer and Jesper Boqvist.

We shall see. Zito forever gets the benefit of the doubt based on how many swings he's connected on, from Gustav Forsling to Sam Bennett -- and, you know, that whole "winning the Stanley Cup" thing.

Florida is going to regress, but it's a manageable regression. It would be absolutely shocking if Sam Reinhart hit 57 goals again, but his regression could end up being 40 tallies instead. It would be surprising to see the Panthers lead the NHL in goals-against average again because of changes in their lineup, but probably not to the point where they're 21st in the NHL like they were in Paul Maurice's first season in Sunrise.

The Panthers have two dominant lines led by impactful stars in Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk. Forsling probably has his "Jacob Slavin hipster Norris Trophy candidate" moment this season. I don't think they reach the heights of 110 points again, but I also don't think regular-season success is at all meaningful for a team that thinks it can win the Stanley Cup either as a division champion or as the last wild-card team. They've earned that swagger.

There are probably many around the NHL who would love the schadenfreude of watching the Lightning miss the playoffs after letting captain Steven Stamkos walk for a younger model in Jake Guentzel. But the Lightning have some spark left -- if Andrei Vasilevskiy is Andrei Vasilevskiy again.

Please recall that Vasilevskiy underwent back surgery before last season that kept him out until Nov. 24. He never really found his game after that, going from 10.4 goals saved above expected in 2022-23 to minus-11 in 2023-24. That's an unfathomable drop in quality for a goalie considered to be the best in the world until recently. I expect a massive rebound season for Vasilevskiy, and for a team that finished 29th in 5-on-5 save percentage last season.

But the actual challenge for the Lightning isn't keeping the puck out of the net but finding ways to fill the opposite one. We know what we're getting out of Guentzel, Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov: a line that posted a 59.7% expected goals with Stamkos probably gets even more dominant with Guentzel. We don't know what we're getting from the rest of the lineup.

Can Cam Atkinson find his game again playing with Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli? Can they get any production from the bottom six by anyone not named Nick Paul or (potentially) Conor Geekie? Can Ryan McDonagh supplant the offense from the back end that left with Mikhail Sergachev for Utah?

The Lightning were 25th in expected goals at 5-on-5 last season. I'm not sure they've done enough to dramatically change that. But when the top line cooks like a Michelin-starred restaurant, maybe that doesn't matter as much. It certainly didn't last season, when the top line accounted for 45% of their total team goals.

The final week of the Bruins' contract tango with Jeremy Swayman is truly one of the funniest things I've seen play out in that arena. You had team president Cam Neely letting his snark get the best of him by throwing out that "64 million reasons" remark, which allowed Swayman's camp to act aggrieved about the public negotiating and ominously reference what its next steps would be. Then you had Swayman saying on that Amazon Prime NHL show he'd do everything in his power to remain with the Bruins, and so those next steps became obvious: He wanted to stay in Boston, full stop.

A few days later, the drama ended with an eight-year contract and an \$8.25 million average annual value.

OK, not all the drama. Now we get to see what Swayman looks like as the anointed starter and we get to see what a Boston goaltending tandem looks like when it's Joonas Korpisalo instead of Linus Ullmark. Maybe coach Jim Montgomery's system is so sturdy that they can plug-and-play a downgrade like Korpisalo. Or maybe we see a little wobble in the Bruins' defense acumen without the best goalie tandem in the NHL as its foundation.

I still like the Bruins as a playoff team in part because I really like the signing of Elias Lindholm. He thrived as the glue guy for high-end offensive stars in Calgary. Now he gets to ride shotgun with David Pastrnak, the best goal-scoring winger in the league. Just having him reset their center depth is meaningful.

But let's be real: The vibes are off in Boston, and not just because there might be fewer exaggerated goalie hugs. Coach Jim Montgomery enters the season on an expiring contract. He was praised by Neely and GM Don Sweeney before the season, with the latter saying extension talks were ongoing. But talks are not a contract. A contract is a contract. And Montgomery doesn't have one after this season -- and probably doesn't get one after another playoff failure or, worse, a failure to qualify for them. Neither fate is all that outlandish.

In full disclosure, I locked in these predictions before the NHL's opening games in Prague, so of course I have instant buyer's remorse on the Sabres, who had a score-adjusted 43.7% expected goals rate in two games. I've decided to go with "the Devils are just that good" for my own sanity, because the Sabres didn't look like a playoff team in either of those Global Series games.

The reason I have Buffalo breaking through a playoff team is simple: I believe that new coach Lindy Ruff is going to find a way to get them to play to their identity without sacrificing offense for defense.

The Sabres dropped from 3.02 expected goals at even strength in 2022-23 to 2.77 last season, while their defense improved slightly. Some of that can be attributed to Tage Thompson not being himself due to a wrist injury and some other offensive regressions, but I think there was also a fundamental shift away from attacking offensively to insulating defensively.

The proof of concept for Ruff is the way the Devils played two years ago: first in expected goals, sixth in expected goals against at even strength. I see this Sabres roster as a hunk of clay he can shape into that kind of team -- especially with the pop Buffalo offers on the blue line with Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power and others. Lindy loves him some offense from the defense.

Of course, that Devils team also got a save or 10 from its goaltenders that season, too. Buffalo's playoff contention completely relies on whether Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is the goalie they saw and Devon Levi becomes the goalie they hoped they'd see last season. Both were well into the plus side on goals saved above expected, which is promising.

But in the end, the Sabres are going to have to score their way into breaking the longest playoff drought in the NHL (2010-11, when their coach was ... Lindy Ruff). With Thompson, Dylan Cozens, JJ Peterka, Jack Quinn, Zach Benson and others, this team is stacked with talent. Ruff just needs to find a way to unlock it while getting those players to play 200-foot games. And I think he's shown he can. Ask Jack Hughes and Jesper Bratt.

I had the Senators as a playoff team last season because I severely overrated the goaltending tandem of Korpisalo and Anton Forsberg. I might now be underrating the tandem of Ullmark and Forsberg, because I do think there's a chance that new coach Travis Green's team breaks through this season if that goaltending coalesces.

It'll need to, because Ottawa has a classic problem in the NHL: Some of its best players are not all that good defensively. Brady Tkachuk, Tim Stutzle, Thomas Chabot and Josh Norris are all drags defensively. That stings less when these players hit their marks offensively, which they didn't last season. Tkachuk set a career high in goals (37) but dropped nine points. Stutzle's production dropped steeply: 21 goals and 20 points down, year over year.

Good health and great goaltending could result in a surprising season for Ottawa, but I can't trust it. I'm prepared for another Senators season outside of the playoffs, which means another offseason of hockey fans trying to encourage SEAL Team Six to extract Tkachuk from the last years of his contract in Ottawa.

At this point, it's not so much that I don't have faith in the "Yzerplan" in Detroit than it's that I couldn't describe it to you.

The Red Wings have missed the playoffs in every year of Steve Yzerman's tenure as general manager since he was hired in 2019. Their NHL roster skews older, and not just because Patrick Kane is back. The prospect pool has a collection of solid potential NHL contributors and a



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few standouts, but nothing resembling a franchise player, despite their time spent in the draft lottery. Is the plan to break the playoff drought, give the kids some seasoning and the use that sweet pizza money to lure big-name free agents to augment them? I don't know. Right now, the plan seems like it's produced a bubble team with little hope of upward mobility.

Stevie Y. must be thinking how much easier this was with Steven Stamkos, Victor Hedman, Nikita Kucherov and Andrei Vasilevskiy as your pillars ...

Still, there are people who see Detroit, rather than Buffalo or Ottawa, as the breakthrough team in the Atlantic. A lot would have to break right for that to happen, from the instant impact of Simon Edvinsson, to giant leaps forward from big-contract earners Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider, to Cam Talbot helping to settle down a goaltending spot that had a cast of thousands auditioning in training camp. The NHL is a better place when the Red Wings are contending. I hope to visit that place again one day.

Can one line carry a team in the NHL? Absolutely. We see it every season. Can the trio of Cole Caufield, Nick Suzuki and Juraj Slafkovsky carry the Canadiens to respectability? That's probably too heavy a lift, but that trio is going to cook this season if given the chance after having shown so much pop last season.

Montreal is headed in the right direction. The Canadiens are a team you're going to search out on ESPN+, if not to watch the top line but to see what highlight machine Lane Hutson is going to do on the back end as a rookie. An occasional fight from Arber Xhekaj, aka "WiFi," doesn't hurt the entertainment value either. Sam Montembeault might be one of the most underrated goalies in the NHL, even if a Montreal goaltender ever being "underrated" is rather difficult concept to grasp.

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

New Jersey Devils

New York Rangers

New York Islanders

Carolina Hurricanes

Washington Capitals

Pittsburgh Penguins

Philadelphia Flyers

Columbus Blue Jackets

Roughly 70% of the time last season, the Devils did not score the first goal of the game. That's going to happen when your injury-depleted defense is too young and your goaltending is near the bottom of the NHL (30th). New Jersey's epic faceplant in 2023-24, dropping 31 points in the standings year over year, was a byproduct of that "here we go again" dejection when they'd fall down 1-0. For every step forward, it was a pratfall backward.

GM Tom Fitzgerald did a remarkable, aggressive job in the offseason of plugging his team's holes and turning the Devils back into the confident group that look poised to make a leap back into Stanley Cup contention. At least, in theory.

The goaltending is stabilized with Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen, who was acquired late last season. Brett Pesce and Brenden Dillon solidify their defense and add veteran voices to a dressing room that needed more of them. The forward depth was extended with Stefan Noesen, Paul Cotter and Tomas Tatar. And Sheldon Keefe was hired not only as a coach with some defensive bona fides, but as someone who has managed a young core of star players before in Toronto.

Ultimately, getting kicked in the gut last season was the best thing that could happen to this team. One season's good fortune promises nothing for the future. Effort matters. Details matter. Leadership matters. Fitzgerald has put the Devils in a position to challenge for the Cup if they're healthy, mentally and physically. It's on the Devils to see that potential through. I'm confident they will.

Rangers defenseman Jacob Trouba believes this is the last run for their veteran core, which is something you'd expect to hear from a player who won't be part of that core for much longer -- and wouldn't be now were it not for his trade protection.

But his point stands: Artemi Panarin (32), Chris Kreider (33), Mika Zibanejad (31), Vincent Trocheck (31) and Trouba (30) are all on the wrong side of 30, and the clock is ticking.

The group made the conference finals in two of the past three seasons, and it'll keep contending so long as Igor Shesterkin is among the league's best goaltenders, Adam Fox remains in the Norris Trophy conversation and Alexis Lafrenière is that point-per-game guy befitting his status as a first overall pick.

But for a team that should have some urgency about winning with this core, the Rangers didn't do nearly enough to bolster this roster in the offseason. Reilly Smith is a fine complementary player, but he's not the winger that Zibanejad and Kreider need. The Rangers couldn't move Trouba and hence have his diminishing returns on a blue line that's asking a lot of K'Andre Miller and Braden Schneider -- especially since depending on a healthy Ryan Lindgren is like depending on the subway to run on time.

But they do have Matt Rempe back. Which is good for content.

Many folks are sleeping on the Islanders. Patrick Roy had this team humming at a .608 points percentage clip in 37 games after taking over for Lane Lambert last season. That's due in large part to the fact that he dramatically improved their defensive zone play, which in turn led to fewer chances against Ilya Sorokin and Semyon Varlamov. Those goalies remain the bedrock for this incarnation of the Isles, along with their top four defensively -- Alexander Romanov, Noah Dobson, Adam Pelech and Ryan Pulock. That's as solid a back end as you'll find in the East.

They have the personnel to play the kind of man-to-man defense that Roy prefers. A little defense goes a long way, especially for a team that saw 32% of its games end in overtime or a shootout last season, with 16 losses in extra time. What they need most however are offensive improvements.

The Islanders were 24th in even-strength scoring last season (2.65 goals per 60 minutes). Only the Capitals made the playoffs with a worse goals per 60 average (2.36). Adding free agent Anthony Duclair to the top line with Bo Horvat and Mathew Barzal give that trio a strong finisher. Brock Nelson is good for 30-plus goals, which is where Kyle Palmieri ended up as well last season. The two biggest questions for me on the Islanders' offense: What do they have in Maxim Tsyplov, a KHL import who worked his way up the lineup this preseason; and whether captain Anders Lee can get back to being the 50-point forward he was before last season.

The Islanders are a playoff team whether or not Sorokin dominates again, after an unexpected regression in 2023-24. But it sure would help the cause if he did.

Those are the three playoff teams from the Metro Division, which means that the Hurricanes are not one this season. Which is, admittedly, extremely contrarian and deserves an explanation.

For context: ESPN BET gives the Hurricanes the third best chance of winning the East and sets their point total at 100.5. They've made the playoffs in each of coach Rod Brind'Amour's six seasons behind the bench, playing to a points percentage of .677 or better in each of the last four campaigns. They won the Metro for three straight seasons and were three points away from making it four in a row last season.

But attrition comes for every roster. Carolina lost Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei and Teuvo Teravainen during the offseason. That's a lot of talent and a lot of institutional knowledge. They lost Stefan Noesen. They watched Jake Guentzel choose a conference rival, despite their overtures for him to stay.

New GM Eric Tulsky leads a brilliant front office that did what it could to fill those holes or prevent new ones from opening up, like getting Martin Necas on a two-year bridge contract. I like William Carrier as a part of the Jordan Staal line. I'm less convinced that Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere make up for what they lost on the blue line.

There are also lingering questions about their returning lineup, from Jesperi Kotkaniemi's viability as a second-line center; to Frederik Andersen's health and Pyotr Kochetkov's readiness to be "the guy"; to whether we're finally seeing the decline of Brent Burns as an offensive force.



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I say they miss the playoffs by a hair. A brief step back before a leap forward with the next wave of Hurricanes, in players like defenseman Alexander Nikishin and Scott Morrow and forwards like Brady Nadeau. I'm probably very wrong on this one. I'd actually like to be wrong on this one, because watching playoff hockey in Raleigh is a true perk of this gig. But the prediction is made.

Entering last season, the Capitals and Penguins both seemed like teams in a state of stasis until their franchise icons finally moved on. Then Washington, under first-year coach Spencer Carbery, snagged a wildcard spot last season (then was swept by the Rangers in the first round).

What was assumed to be a middling vessel that existed so Alex Ovechkin could break Wayne Gretzky's goals record ended up being ... a middling vessel that was goalied to the playoffs by an outstanding Charlie Lindgren, playing behind a porous defensive and offensively challenged team.

Lindgren returns with a new tandem partner in ex-Golden Knights goalie Logan Thompson, who was one of several familiar faces to join Washington. Winger Andrew Mangiapane should bolster Ovechkin's line, with T.J. Oshie on long-term injured reserve. Matt Roy is a stout defensive defenseman imported from the Kings. Then came the two really bold moves: Trading for Ottawa defenseman Jakob Chychrun, in the walk year of his contract; and assuming the next seven seasons of center Pierre-Luc Dubois' contract in a desperate attempt to reload at center after the Nicklas Backstrom/Evgeny Kuznetsov era ended.

On paper, the numbers say this is a better team than the one that made the playoffs last season. But there are really only two numbers that Capitals fans care about this season: No. 50, as in the anniversary season for this franchise; and No. 42, as in the number of goals Ovechkin needs to pass Gretzky. (I predict he does it this season.) Everything else, at least for now, is gravy.

The Penguins will improve by several points season-over-season on the strength of their power play alone. How this assemblage of talent clicked at just a 15.3% clip last season is confounding. Special teams are cyclical, and the Penguins are a season removed from hitting at a 21.7% rate. The scored 23 more goals on the power play in 2022-23 than last season. When you consider the Penguins had the 31st worst points percentage in the NHL in one-goal games (.353) in 2023-24 ... yeah, those goals matter. Hopefully new assistant coach -- and Mike Sullivan doppelgänger -- David Quinn can reverse their power-play fortunes.

Sullivan is in the first season of a contract extension that carries him through the 2026-27 season, signed before GM Kyle Dubas arrived. The majority of fans assume he won't see the end of that contract in Pittsburgh, given the current trajectory of the team. This season projects to be the third straight outside of the playoffs, for a franchise that hasn't won a playoff round since 2018, all of it under Sullivan.

The Penguins still have Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang. They still have Bryan Rust and Rickard Rakell riding with Crosby and Malkin, respectively. Squint hard enough at the depth on this team, and you could almost convince yourself that Crosby could drag them to the playoffs and himself to a Hart Trophy nomination in the process.

And then you remember the goaltending battery is Tristan Jarry, who can't be trusted in performance nor stability; and Alex Nedeljkovic, who was analytically worse than Jarry last season despite an 18-7-7 record.

Another season outside the postseason. Another season that squanders our chances of seeing Crosby and Malkin play meaningful games -- at least in Pittsburgh.

The Flyers are a team I struggled to place this season, because I actually think they have some palpable upside.

John Tortorella's team was 10th in expected goals against last season at even strength, which sets things up well for Samuel Ersson and Ivan Fedotov as their full-season goalie tandem. They problem last season was that the Flyers couldn't score (27th in goals per game), and that's where Matvei Michkov comes in.

The dynamic 19-year-old rookie has loads of offensive creativity and goal-scoring ability. He's going to have a steep learning curve against NHL defenders. But there's no denying that he has the potential to have a transformative effect on the Flyers' offense and the franchise's psyche, in much the same way that Kirill Kaprizov did for the Wild. As I reported

recently, the assumed friction between flashy young rookie and curmudgeonly coach might be overstated. Remember that when Torts scratches him by Game 15.

I'm also intrigued to see if Jamie Drysdale can take a leap with Nick Seeler as his partner -- and stay in the lineup, which is usually the concern with Drysdale.

Whatever happens with the Blue Jackets this season seems so inconsequential in the context of their grief. The shocking death of star winger Johnny Gaudreau in August has impacted the franchise in every way, on and off the ice, and will continue to do so throughout this season.

I look forward to those moments of joy found during what projects to be another long season in Columbus. Like the continued maturation of players such as Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Kirill Marchenko and David Jiricek. Like the massive gathering of Jackets fans at the Horseshoe for that Stadium Series game against Detroit. This sport should be joyful, as Johnny Hockey would remind us with every stride, shot and smile.

CENTRAL DIVISION

Dallas Stars

Colorado Avalanche

Nashville Predators

Utah Hockey Club

Winnipeg Jets

Minnesota Wild

St. Louis Blues

Chicago Blackhawks

I remember what Tyler Seguin said after the Stars lost to Edmonton in the Western Conference finals, the second straight season that Dallas was ousted one round before the Stanley Cup Final:

"We went through a gauntlet and beat some really good teams and knew we had something special. We lost to a team that we thought we could beat and sometimes, that's playoffs. Sometimes, it's that one bounce, that one goal, that one save. That's why we all love it. That's why it's the hardest damn trophy in the world to win."

No lies told. The Stars were a 113-point team last season that fought through the Golden Knights and the Avalanche to get to Connor McDavid and the Oilers, who dropped them in six games. Dallas is beyond battle tested by now, and that includes a wave of young reinforcements that gained essential experience over these last two runs, like Wyatt Johnston, Logan Stankoven and Thomas Harley.

Johnston's a key to this season. He likely replaces Joe Pavelski on the top line between Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz, and that's an upgrade: As much as we love Pavs, the guy absolutely hit the wall in the Western Conference finals, with zero points in the series, his last before retirement. Johnston is going to bring some of the things that Pavelski did to that line, while also bringing more speed and puck possession.

The fact is that veterans like Pavelski and Ryan Suter were probably too "veteran" for the Stars in this moment. Now the age ceiling is captain Jamie Benn (35), forward Matt Duchene (34) and Seguin (33). Right behind them are players in their prime: Hintz (28), goalie Jake Oettinger (26), star defenseman Miro Heiskanen (25) and Robertson (25). Right behind them are the next wave, with Johnston, Stankoven & Co.

I have a concept called the "Hockey Parfait" in which every successful team has to have different layers of experience, all pushing each other to succeed, every flavor in balance to form a delicacy. I think GM Jim Nill, while not a pastry chef by trade, has constructed a delicious one this season.

This is a very, very good hockey team, and the moment is now to become a great one.

The Avalanche absolutely confound me. I spent many hours this preseason meditating on how good I think this team can be, and always come back to a series of questions for which I don't have the answers.

When does Gabriel Landeskog return, and in what capacity? Can they rely on Valeri Nichushkin? When does Artturi Lehkonen return? Is the



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defense deep enough? Does Justus Annunen push out Alexandar Georgiev as the starter, or do they keep running it back with a guy who posted a .894 save percentage in the playoffs last season? Who do they add to their top six at the trade deadline? When is Mikko Rantanen getting paid, exactly?

The frustrating thing about all of this uncertainty is that the Avalanche are two seasons removed from a Stanley Cup championship and frequently have four of the best hockey players alive on the ice at the same time: Nathan MacKinnon, the reigning league MVP; Rantanen, one of the top five scoring wingers in the NHL; Cale Makar, a generational talent on defense; and Devon Toews, who is basically the Pippen to Makar's Jordan on that blue line.

I should feel "Dallas-and-Edmonton" confident about the Avalanche as a Stanley Cup contender in the West, and I don't. Not without clarity for all the questions above. And not without a few more championship-quality players in the mix -- either internal candidates that elevate their games or trade deadline additions. Which is to say that due respect to Casey Mittelstadt and Ross Colton, I'm still waiting for them to replace what Nazem Kadri gave them.

The best thing about Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault signing with the Predators -- besides having a chance to wear their Canadian tuxedos around town with no shame -- is that they both fit the historic dogma of this franchise.

Nashville has always had a defiant streak, what with being a "nontraditional market" and all. It has also provided a landing spot for other teams' high-profile castaways: Think P.K. Subban or Filip Forsberg or Steve Sullivan. And it has also been a little starstruck, too: Remember signing Paul Kariya as a free agent and trading for Peter Forsberg?

Stamkos and Marchessault add some offensive wizardry to a lineup that had a higher expected goals (3.04) than actual goals (2.94) at even strength; and to a power play (21.6%) that ranked 16th overall in the NHL last season. They're expected to flank spunky scoring center Tommy Novak, establishing a second scoring line opponents have to sweat out behind the Forsberg-Ryan O'Reilly-Gustav Nyquist group.

But the Predators made two other moves that cement them as a playoff team and potential Cup contender for me. I love the Brady Skjei addition on defense, as an upgrade over Ryan McDonagh. He's not a Norris Trophy-caliber defenseman like Roman Josi -- who I think wins it again this season -- but he brings a similar balance of offense and defense. Obviously, securing goalie Juuse Saros on an eight-year deal worth \$7.74 million annually is essential to their success -- and cheaper than Jeremy Swayman's new deal, too.

I loved what GM Barry Trotz and coach Andrew Brunette started last year in Nashville. I've really excited to see what Phase 2 looks like this season.

The Utah Hockey Club might not have a nickname yet, but it will have a playoff berth this season.

I had one NHL general manager tell me that he thought the Arizona Coyotes (RIP) would have made the playoff cut last season had their campaign not been derailed by the relocation news leaking. It's hard to argue with that: They were 23-19-3 in late January and then spun out into a 14-game winless streak, picking up just two loser points in that span. After that, their playoff hopes were scuttled like an Alex Meruelo arena bid.

The relocation to Salt Lake City brings a fresh start, a wave of fan enthusiasm and ownership willing to take on actual NHL players making actual NHL salaries. Augmenting what was already a solid young team with defensemen Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino and Ian Cole, while adding former Panther Kevin Stenlund as a depth forward. All of them help make them a sounder defensive team in front of Connor Ingram and Karel Vejmelka, which could be one of the best tandems in the NHL if Vejmelka can play like he did two seasons ago.

They're not the deepest team, especially at center, but they have the potential for two strong scoring lines: one anchored by captain Clayton Keller and one anchored by a dynamic duo of Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther. If Utah is close to the playoffs, it has a war chest of draft picks it could use to augment this lineup -- and owners in Ryan and Ashley Smith who have shown no hesitancy in taking on salary, unlike the team's previous incarnation.

But mostly, I'm picking Utah to make the playoffs because this new fan base is going to put wind in its sales, enthusiastically supporting a new team in town. Sure, some of them won't be able to see the entire rink, but they players will hear them, darn it. Provided they don't eat too many of those \$3 hot dogs and need a nap by the third period.

With Utah in, someone had to be out, and that someone is the Jets.

The Jets were a 110-point team last season by outscoring their analytics and having Connor Hellebuyck turn the 11th-best team in expected goals against per 60 minutes (2.65) into the second best team in actual goals against (2.05) at even strength. Head coach Rick Bowness retired, associate coach Scott Arniel was hired and the Jets enter this season looking to erase the memory of their first-round collapse to the Avalanche.

The term "mushy middle" describes that area of the standings where teams are neither great nor terrible, and I'd apply the same term to the Jets' roster -- and not just because the center spot is their weakest area, led by Mark Scheifele, a No. 2 center in top-line clothing. Although they do have an elite defensive center in Adam Lowry, this is a team that doesn't always defend consistently.

There's offensive pop in the forward group with players such as Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers, and Cole Perfetti, but not enough of it. I've got confidence in Josh Morrissey and Dylan DeMelo as a top pairing. I lack it for the other two defensive tandems -- I think this team will miss the truculence of Dillon, for example. Going from Laurent Brossoit to Kaapo Kahkonen or Eric Comrie backing up Hellebuyck is a downgrade.

Again, they outkicked their coverage on offense last season, and were carried by Hellebuyck in a season that saw him win the Vezina Trophy and finish sixth for the Hart. I think an improved division means they take a step back in the standings, playing closer to their underlying numbers, and finish just out of the money.

I think the Wild are about a year away from doing something really interesting in his division.

A year from now, they won't have the \$14.8 million salary cap albatross of the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts, which will allow GM Bill Guerin to address some of the scoring needs on this roster. A year from now, Marco Rossi and Brock Faber will have had another season of experience as vital parts of this roster. A year from now, Marc-Andre Fleury will be a guest analyst on a French-language hockey broadcast and Jesper Wallstedt will have a regular spot in an NHL tandem.

There's always a chance that Minnesota plays beyond expectations this season if their scoring levels up. The Wild were the best team in the NHL last season in even-strength expected goals against under both Dean Evason and John Hynes. They'll need offensive contributions that go beyond Kirill Kaprizov, Joel Eriksson Ek and Matt Boldy, who accounted for over 42% of their goals last season.

But most likely, they'll just wait for next year.

I think it's in the Blues' best interests to have the best draft lottery odds possible at this point, but GM Doug Armstrong's teams have a stubborn way of always competing. It's sort of in the franchise's DNA, having had only one season with a points percentage of less than .500 since 2008-09.

The Blues are in that purgatory of having great players in their prime -- Robert Thomas, Jordan Kyrou, Pavel Buchnevich -- but not enough of them; a middling blue line with five players well north of 30 years old, four of them with trade protection and one of them (Torey Krug) out for the season; and a goaltender in Jordan Binnington who is good enough to keep a team from ever being as bad as the Blues should want to be at this point. Even as a Binnington skeptic, his posting of a 14.9 goals saved above expected last season is absolutely stellar.

The successful offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway are an indication that Armstrong knows this team needs to get younger and, especially in the latter case, faster. But those opportunities are few and far between in the offseason. The most direct path to that end is the draft. I fear the Blues will be just good enough not to maximize their chances there.

One NHL general manager recently told me he was high on the Blackhawks. "Not playoffs high. Just 'no more freebie points' high," he said.



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That checks. I think the Blackhawks could easily have a 20-point improvement year over year if Connor Bedard is healthy.

Their top six was bolstered by a trio of imports: winger Tyler Bertuzzi, a great passer and a pain to play against; speedy Ilya Mikheyev, who can clear 20 goals; and Teuvo Teravainen, a quintessential glue guy. We know what we have in Bedard after he tallied 22 goals in 68 games as an 18-year-old last season. They sky's the limit. What makes the Blackhawks better is a second line anchored by Taylor Hall and Philipp Kurashov, who quietly broke out with 54 points last season; and a third line of Nick Foligno, Jason Dickinson and Joey Anderson that way outplayed its underlying numbers last season.

Adding Alec Martinez and TJ Brodie to the blue line is a leap in quality, even at their advanced ages. (In fairness, Brodie is only 34 but there are some miles on those tires.) Petr Mrazek remains a goalie who looks like he can win the Vezina for about three weeks every few months, before regressing to the mean.

PACIFIC DIVISION

Edmonton Oilers

Vancouver Canucks

Vegas Golden Knights

Los Angeles Kings

Seattle Kraken

Anaheim Ducks

Calgary Flames

San Jose Sharks

After watching that Amazon Prime NHL show, I'm not soon going to forget that image of Oilers star Connor McDavid openly weeping in the locker room after Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final. Not just for the novelty of seeing an elite athlete succumb to their emotions in a losing effort -- and, we should note, signing off on having the world see it too -- but in understanding how much this all meant to McDavid.

It's one thing to proclaim "Cup or bust." It's another to understand how it impacts a superstar when the ultimate option was "bust."

It's not difficult to glean why the Oilers are the Cup favorite this season. The Panthers lost in the Final and returned to win the Cup the following season, so why not the Oilers? Especially when McDavid and Leon Draisaitl were that gutted after losing. Especially when this is probably the best team they've played on, with the additions of Jeff Skinner and Viktor Arvidsson to an already loaded roster. Especially when they appear to have found the right head coach (Kris Knoblauch), the right goaltender (Stuart Skinner) and a No. 1 defenseman (Evan Bouchard) after so many years of searching.

I think they win the Pacific with ease, return to the playoffs ... and wait until next year, failing to get out of the conference. But hey, with Draisaitl signing his extension with the assumption that McDavid will do the same, at least there isn't that same apocalyptic urgency that the Oilers had last postseason about their window to win closing.

Rick Tocchet had an airtight case for the Jack Adams last season, what with the Canucks going from a goals-against average of 3.61 in 2022-23 to sixth in the league at 2.70 last season, his first full term as head coach. He turned them into a division champion and a team that came perilously close to saving McDavid's Stanley Cup Final tears by eliminating the Oilers in the second round, only to lose to Edmonton in Game 7.

There's naturally going to be some regression from a team that hit so many high notes last season, but how much of it, really? Does J.T. Miller dip to 99 points again? Is Quinn Hughes only a point per game defenseman? Maybe Brock Boeser falls off his 40-goal pace, but the Canucks would probably just be happy if he hits 81 games again.

One guy that will top his performance last season is Elias Pettersson. I'm not the biggest Jake DeBrusk fan due to his streakiness, but I love the fit with him and Petey. I don't think the star center flirting with 100 points this season isn't out of the question.

But due respect to Arturs Silovs, the Canucks' championship aspirations rest on the health of goalie Thatcher Demko. He'll probably miss the first

month of the season after finishing second for the Vezina last season. If he can stay healthy and play to his ability ... boy, there's a lot to like with this Canucks team. But it's a very tough division.

"Where are their wingers?" asked one NHL executive when we were chatting about the Golden Knights before the season. It's a fair question for those of us unfamiliar with Pavel Dorofeyev, unconvinced Alexander Holtz can put it all together or unaware that Victor Olofsson was still a first-liner in the NHL. (Chemistry with Jack Eichel trumps all preconceptions.)

This isn't the first or last time that depth has seemingly been drained from a Golden Knights team. But they're still dealing from a stacked deck: Eichel, Mark Stone, Tomas Hertl, William Karlsson, Ivan Barbashev. They'll miss Marchessault, of course, and especially in the postseason. But they'll generate enough offense.

In between a thinner forward group and a decent goaltending battery of Adin Hill and Ilya Samsonov stands the reason the Golden Knights are going to make the playoffs and probably win a round: Shea Theodore and Alex Pietrangolo, Noah Hanifin and Nicolas Hague, Brayden McNabb and Zach Whitecloud. As solid a sextet of defensemen as there are in the NHL, and a steadying presence for a typically tumultuous team.

I was very tempted to jettison the Kings from my playoff picture after Drew Doughty's injury, which could sideline him for half the season. I'm hoping it's much less time than that; but even if it isn't, I think the Kings have enough here to stay in a playoff spot in the Pacific.

Anze Kopitar, Quinton Byfield and Phillip Danault are the primary reason why. Most teams in the NHL would kill for that kind of center depth. A fading superstar with gas left in the tank; a budding superstar who's only scratched the surface; and one of the best defensive centers in the game. That's a stabilizing force for the Kings, in a season full of other question marks.

Byfield's the real key here. He found his game on the wing last season. After the Pierre-Luc Dubois debacle, it was time for the natural center to shift to the middle. They've flanked him with Kevin Fiala and Warren Foegele in the preseason, a duo that sets Byfield up for success. They need him to thrive in this spot to have a prayer for the playoffs.

Los Angeles has a new coach in Jim Hiller, who was their interim bench boss last season after Todd McLellan was fired. They went 21-12-1 with Hiller, who maintained that defense-first was still the right path for this team. That's probably wise considering their diminished blue line, and having to play in front of a specious goaltending tandem of Darcy Kuemper and David Rittich.

It's fantastic they got anything of NHL quality back for dumping the last seven years of Dubois' contract, but Kuemper was one of the worst goalies in the league last season analytically: minus-15.6 goals saved above expected. Woof.

The Kraken are another team on which I struggled to get a read. I really liked their offseason. Assuming he bounces back from a down season, Chandler Stephenson strengthens their center spot and buys time for both Matty Beniers and Shane Wright to mature. In covering both of the Panthers' Stanley Cup Final runs, I've learned to love Brandon Montour as a player and a personality. He brings a great puck-moving presence to a defense that needed someone like that beyond Vince Dunn.

They join a team that's stunningly average. Solid but not spectacular. In the hunt but not a true contender. They're frustratingly reminiscent of Ron Francis' teams as general manager of the Carolina Hurricanes: Middling at everything, offensively challenged and -- critically -- constantly falling short of the playoff cut.

New head coach Dan Bylsma needs to find ways to activate this team's even-strength scoring. I think we all expected some level of regression after their ridiculous performance at even strength in Year 2: 3.39 goals per 60 minutes and an 11.2% shooting percentage. But last season's drop (2.25, 8.0%) was so severe it probably gave a few players the bends. Can he turn around some of those down offensive years, particularly that of Beniers?

As you can tell, I'm a little on the fence about this Kraken team. It has the potential to jump up to the fourth spot in the division if things trend in the right direction and someone like Wright has a breakthrough. But that would also depend on Joey Daccord repeating his 50-game dazzler from



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last season (.916 save percentage!) and Philipp Grubauer being something better than his minus-9.4 goals saved above average. And I'm skeptical that happens in both goaltenders' cases.

The difference between Anaheim and the two teams that will finish in back of it is that the Ducks are no longer actively trying to lose. It's just that they're so disappointing in some areas that they won't be able to help it.

Coach Greg Cronin managed to squeeze out a respectable defensive season from a team that seems so disinterested by the concept. The Ducks were 23rd in the NHL in expected goals against at even strength (2.85), which marks a remarkable turnaround from the previous season when they were last in the league, at 3.52. Veteran Radko Gudas, named Ducks captain in the offseason, helped stabilize things on the blue line and balance out the indifferent defense from young players like Mason McTavish.

There's a ton of talent in the pond for the Ducks. They're another team you fire up the ESPN+ to watch, and not just because of their sweet new sweaters. Cutter Gauthier and Leo Carlsson? Yes please. Watching Olen Zellweger become a legit NHL defenseman after his "soft launch" last season? Sure. The continuing adventure of Trevor Zegras before his inevitable trade? Absolutely.

It's all about progress and promise for the Ducks this season. They might quack a bit louder in the standings if John Gibson (when healthy) and Lukas Dostal steal a game here and there, but mostly we're here to watch for which ducklings are ready to fly.

The Flames aren't dummies. They can see what happened in Edmonton after several lean years and some draft lottery luck. They know from their own recent history that their best seasons were the product of homegrown talents becoming stars ... before deciding to move elsewhere. There's one clear path for GM Craig Conroy to take with this franchise, and it's the one where they trip and fall down the standings in the Pacific Division.

To that end: The Flames said goodbye to Hanifin, Elias Lindholm, Andrew Mangiapane, Jacob Markstrom, Chris Tanev, Tyler Toffoli and Nikita Zadorov over the last two seasons. They've done minimal work to replace them: Bringing in free agents like Anthony Mantha and Ryan Lomberg this summer and handing the crease over to Dustin Wolf and Dan Vladar? The Flames are, in fact, a team.

They still have some legit game-altering players. After a nightmarish December (one point in 13 games), Jonathan Huberdeau actually finished the season strong. MacKenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson are better than average on defense. Nazem Kadri and Mikael Backlund would be ideal two-way centers on any number of contenders. One wonders where some of them will be playing in the near future if this all goes according to plan in Calgary.

The Sharks are going to be terrible, but I think they'll be "fun bad" and not just "bad bad."

At least that's my hope. It really all depends on whether first-year coach Ryan Warsofsky allows Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith to let their scoring freak flags fly as rookies or if he's going to, like, make them backcheck. Celebrini has a Calder Trophy in him if the Sharks allow him to just blossom offensively, especially with having an old scoring hand like Toffoli in the mix to help create and bury those chances. The Blackhawks weren't looking for Bedard to be Patrice Bergeron in Year 1. The same courtesy should be extended to Macklin.

This fan base needs the visceral jolt of carefree phenom scoring while the losses mount. Another year in the tank at The Tank, and everything's coming up teal in 2025-26.

ESPN LOADED: 10.09.2024

1323199 Websites

ESPN / 2024-25 NHL picks: Stanley Cup, division winners, awards - ESPN

Doug Greenberg, ESPNOct 7, 2024, 12:00 PM

Reactions

The puck dropped on the 2024-25 NHL season thousands of miles away on Friday, when the New Jersey Devils defeated the Buffalo Sabres 4-1 in Czechia, but back in North America, the focus is squarely on the best player in the world, wondering whether this season will finally be the one when he breaks through and wins the Stanley Cup.

After their run to the Stanley Cup Final last season, the Edmonton Oilers are the consensus betting favorites to win it all in 2025, showing anywhere between +700 and +850 odds across the sportsbook marketplace. Oilers phenom Connor McDavid shows odds around +150 to win the Hart Memorial Trophy, pacing the field by a wide margin.

Despite the short odds for the championship this season, the Oilers are seeing action across the board.

"I think people just feel that maybe the McDavid story can finally have that Stanley Cup ending," BetMGM senior sports trader Matthew Rasp told ESPN. "The money's been coming in on the Oilers ever since the season ended last year."

There are 31 other teams out there vying for the Cup and anything can happen once the chaotic playoffs start in April, but history and conventional wisdom generally say that many of the usual suspects will be the competitors over the next few months, starting with the final two teams that competed for the trophy last season.

"I think the NHL sometimes gets the reputation that it's got a lot of parity and that's just kind of not true, at least in the last 10 years or so," said Caesars Sportsbook head of hockey Karry Shreeve. "Twelve out of 16 teams that were in the last postseason get into the next postseason. Obviously, the trick is nailing those 12 teams, but we're gonna see a lot of the same stuff."

Oilers, Panthers lead the way again

Getting back to the Stanley Cup Final isn't easy, but if there's one team that knows something about it, it's the reigning champions.

After sneaking into the playoffs as an 8-seed and fighting their way to a Final appearance in 2023, the Florida Panthers dominated the NHL last season, recording a straight-up favorite record of 46-18-2 (a profit of 5.23 units) and overperforming on their preseason points total by 11.5 points, according to ESPN Research. It ended with the Panthers hoisting the first Stanley Cup in franchise history.

Florida will seek to be the first repeat champion since their in-state rival, the Tampa Bay Lightning, did it in 2022. That year, the Bolts outperformed their preseason points total by just 1.5 points. For the 2024-25 campaign, the Panthers' regular-season point total stands at 102.5 points and their odds to win the Cup are +1000.

The team getting the most attention from sportsbooks and bettors alike is the 2023-24 runner-up Oilers, who show a league-leading preseason point total of 108.5, as well as the leading odds to capture the President's Trophy (+550) and, of course, the Stanley Cup.

"The Oilers are best for the customers right now if they do come through this season. They've been bet the most in terms of stake, not necessarily ticket count, but they have been the highest bet team," Shreeve said. "The Panthers may have been the more complete team [in the 2024 Final], but the Oilers have the superstar and that really does play large for somebody that wants to place a bet over the summer as, 'Let me just simply bet the best player.'"

BetMGM, DraftKings, ESPN BET and FanDuel all show Edmonton as their most-backed team to win the Cup by both bets and handle, taking around a quarter of the money market-wide.

Florida is seeing comparatively very little interest from bettors. ESPN BET says that, of the top six favorites, the Panthers have the lowest ticket and handle count, while BetMGM says that the team has just 4.2% of the bets and money, ninth in the league for both.

"A lot of times, just because they won last year doesn't mean they'll win the following year, but it has happened," DraftKings sportsbook director Johnny Avello told ESPN. "There are teams that go back-to-back, but it's difficult to do."

An open field



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In all likelihood, there won't be a repeat Stanley Cup Final matchup and there could be a new champion. A few are standing out among sportsbooks and bettors ahead of the new campaign.

The first is the New York Rangers, who are perennially one of the biggest wagers both for futures and game-to-game. They stand at +1400 to win the Cup at ESPN BET, and are a top-three pick by bets and handle at several sportsbooks, with BetMGM and Caesars reporting the Blueshirts as one of their biggest liabilities for futures.

"The Rangers are just staples for taking money every year in the future book," said Avello. "We know that the Rangers are gonna be a liability every game."

Another popular team this season is the Colorado Avalanche, who will look to return to the sport's pinnacle after winning it all in 2022, showing +1100 odds to do so. BetMGM and DraftKings both report the Avs as a top-five selection for bettors, though other books say the action on them is a bit cooler.

The Nashville Predators, who made the high-profile acquisitions of Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei, among others, are +1600 to win the Stanley Cup (ninth on the odds board) and have been one of the most popular "dark horse" picks, according to ESPN BET.

BetMGM, Caesars and FanDuel all report significant action on the Preds, with Rasp saying, "they've naturally been a favorite for everybody" given the splashes they made. However, DraftKings hasn't seen the same levels of fervor for Nashville, as they've gotten just 3% of the bets and 6% of the handle to win the Cup.

"The Predators are getting action because they, out of all teams, probably won the offseason," Shreeve said. "But I don't know if that always translates to next July when it matters most."

Other teams receiving a fair amount of action include the Devils (+1000) and Toronto Maple Leafs (+1200), while previous darlings like the Dallas Stars (+1000) and Carolina Hurricanes (+1400) are not drawing as much bettor attention.

A new day in Utah

The 2024-25 season will also see an NHL team call Salt Lake City home for the first time, as the Utah Hockey Club will begin operations after moving from Arizona.

Relocation hasn't been kind to modern teams, according to ESPN Research, as the previous two franchises to move, the 2011-12 Winnipeg Jets and 1997-98 Carolina Hurricanes, both missed the playoffs after beginning the campaigns with at least the sixth-longest championship odds in the league.

However, there is precedent for relocating teams performing well. The 1996-97 Phoenix Coyotes were +2500 to win the Stanley Cup and made the playoffs, while the 1993-94 Dallas Stars did even better, losing in the conference semifinals after beginning the season with +6000 odds to win it all, eighth-longest in the league.

Then there's the 1995-96 Colorado Avalanche, who had built up momentum the season prior as the Quebec Nordiques and came into the campaign with the third-shortest odds to win the Cup at +800. They ultimately cashed those tickets, winning the championship that season.

While Utah won't have nearly as high expectations going into this campaign, given their 100-1 title odds, bettors are backing the newly minted team in other ways.

BetMGM reports that Utah has taken 17.2% of handle to win the Western Conference, third-most of any team and their biggest liability in that market. DraftKings says that the Hockey Club is its most-bet team to make the playoffs, currently at +140 odds.

The books will also be aware of adjusting the team's power ranking as the season goes on so that it doesn't continue to get beat by bettors on a future and game-to-game basis.

"What I wanted to do this summer was to find who the next Vancouver was going to be. Vancouver last year took the league by storm at the beginning, and us as a book, we kind of got beat up for it, the customers were on top of that faster than we were," said Shreeve. "Utah kind of fits that bill and they fit it because these last couple years, teams that finish

the last 25% of their regular season significantly higher than their full regular season, then that has tended to drift into the next season."

Awards season

Given the immense betting expectations and popularity for the Oilers, it should come as little surprise that Connor McDavid is dominating the odds and action to win the Hart Trophy as well.

The 27-year-old is the +140 favorite to take home his fourth MVP award and third in five seasons. Big money bettors don't seem keen to bet against him doing so, as he has upwards of 60% of the handle at BetMGM, DraftKings and FanDuel.

Auston Matthews (+850) and reigning winner Nathan MacKinnon (+500) are attracting a respectable amount of smaller wagers market-wide, but sportsbooks aren't anticipating the market to heat up until the season actually begins.

"The season needs to be going on and you need to have these moments with the players," Rasp said, alluding to Matthews' four-goal game and highlight reel goals from Jack Hughes (+1200) last season. "When stuff starts happening like that, that's when we'll start to take the money on those players."

A much more interesting market this preseason has been for the Jack Adams Award, given to the coach of the year. The consensus leader across sportsbooks is Sheldon Keefe, who will be in his first season with the Devils and shows anywhere from +400 to +700 odds. While the former Maple Leafs boss is seeing some decent ticket write, the most intriguing action has been on the coach he faced in Czechia.

Lindy Ruff, the former longtime Sabres head coach who returns to the team this year, is seeing relatively long odds ranging anywhere from +1400 to +2500. Many bettors believe his return could spark the Sabres to break the longest playoff drought in NHL history, which would surely make him the Adams winner.

To that end, Ruff has taken an astounding 78.9% of the handle at BetMGM. Rasp says that the huge money number was the result of a few big wagers at the sportsbook and that he was "fine" with accepting them.

"It's a team that is expected to be better than they were last year. People just look for that big price on a guy who has a better chance of winning the award than what maybe they're being priced at," he said. "I don't see it happening, but I think it was a good educated wager to say the least. Like, it's not impossible for that to happen."

The Great 895?

There are fun specialty markets at sportsbooks this season, but perhaps none more enticing than for Alex Ovechkin to finally break Wayne Gretzky's career goals record, which currently sits at 894.

Ovechkin needs just 42 more goals to stand alone as the NHL's all-time leading scorer, but his ability to do so this season is dubious: The 39-year-old achieved this goal total as recently as 2022-23, but last season saw his production drop off significantly to "just" 31 goals.

The odds reflect his goalscoring ability dropping off with age, as he's seeing a consensus +1000 to break the record this season. Still, many fans are taking a flier on him to achieve the feat, particularly in the Washington, D.C. area.

"We're certainly getting action on it," said Avello. "That's the kind of bet that our users like to play. Something where you get some pretty good odds, something to root for the whole year."

ESPN LOADED: 10.09.2024

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Sportsnet.ca / THE 25 PEOPLE WHO WILL DEFINE THE NHL SEASON
By Luke Fox

At the core of every good (and bad and ugly) sporting story, you'll find people. Here are the 25 newsmakers and game-breakers set to define the NHL in 2024-25.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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R ecord-snappers and legacy chasers. Contract hunters and barrier-breakers. Crafty negotiators and billionaire influencers.

As the curtain rises on the 2024-25 NHL season, fans will be glued to the drama on and off the ice. They'll get hyped over the new faces in the new places and will (finally!) be treated to some international best-on-best hockey.

Like pens scratching paper, skates scratching ice will write this season's stories.

And at the core of every good (and bad and ugly) sporting story, you'll find people. Supreme on-ice talents and front-office giants. Combustible coaches and groundbreaking overachievers. The National Hockey League will lean on all the above to keep our attention throughout the winter and deep into spring.

Here, in alphabetical order, are the 25 newsmakers and game-breakers set to define NHL 2024-25.

Sneaky. Creative. And totally within the rules. Armstrong's predatory — and successful — double offer sheets to Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg allowed the savvy executive to swipe two young talents from the conference champs. It also ratcheted up the temperature for the Blues-Oilers in-season series and, hopefully, expedited the 2019 Cup winner's roster reset. "Quite honestly, I'd do it to my mother if she was managing the Oilers," Armstrong proclaimed. The Code has been broken, and with the cap on the rise, Armstrong might have started a trend. Moreover, Armstrong has been named Canada's GM for the 2026 Olympics, and he'll be keeping one eye on scouting for the nation. (No doubt, he'll snatch a couple more Oilers for that team, too.)

The commissioner's plate runneth over. Regional TV contracts are in flux, and the national Canadian package will be up for grabs soon. Hungry would-be expansion team owners are knocking down his door (U.S. applicants only?). The Olympics still need an official signoff. And a new CBA, to be bargained with the engaged union chief Marty Walsh, lies just around the corner. Bettman will continue to highlight hockey's progress. The Coyotes' move, Amazon Prime's increased interest, and the 4 Nations Face-Off are all wins. Still, financially, the NBA has left the NHL in its dust, and hockey faces competition for viewership from soccer, golf, tennis, UFC, and F1.

"To the young girls who need to hear it... you can and you will." That's the caption Campbell posted on Instagram — appropriately punctuated with an ice-blue heart emoji — after getting the call up from the minors. The Saskatchewan native will smash barriers this fall as she joins Dan Bylsma on the Seattle Kraken staff, the first woman to coach full-time on an NHL bench. An incredible accomplishment, to be sure. But it comes parceled with the immediate challenge of rallying the Kraken back into the postseason.

Fans of the other 31 clubs are wondering why their MVP can't be a top-10 hockey player at age 37, and why he won't skate for a ridiculously team-friendly \$8.7 million? Crosby's commitment reinforces the Pittsburgh captain's desire for team success — to snuff the Penguins' playoff drought at two years — but it also piles even more pressure onto Kyle Dubas's front office. The Metropolitan is hardly a division of world-beaters and Crosby has helped free up some spending money to turn this aging outfit into a playoff team again. Regardless, we'll finally be treated to Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon on the same squad at the 4 Nations tourney. Meaningful hockey awaits the selfless Kid.

Mystery shrouds the Vezina Trophy finalist's health for this critical campaign, as questions over the particulars of his injury (injuries?) and the remedies taken have lingered since he bowed out of the playoffs banged up. (That backup Arturs Silvos was also less than 100 per cent this summer increases concern.) Demko, 28, is one of the best at his position when ready to go. Yet he has never stayed healthy for a full 82. And he now reveals that his injury is so unique, no other hockey player has dealt with it. Demko's (avail)ability is imperative if Rick Tocchet's encouraged bunch are to prove that 2023-24's 50-win eruption was no fluke — and could well earn him a nod for Team USA.

Demko's health is a question mark as opening night looms, and his (avail)ability is imperative for the Canucks.

The life and legacy of Gaudreau — the little player that could — has impacted the cities of Calgary and Columbus, while tributes for Johnny Hockey and brother Matthew keep flowing like the brothers' joy for the sport. "Johnny didn't crave the spotlight, but with that big smile and those

fast hands, he couldn't outrun his fate. He was a hero," Lanny McDonald said. "He carried this big hockey town on his small frame." This season, the wonderful memory and senseless death of the Gaudreau will be carried by all those around the league touched by their passion and rocked by their passing.

The projected first-overall pick of the 2025 draft broke some guy named Nikita Kucherov's points record (22) at this summer's IIHF U-18 World Championship, ramping up his hype as the NHL Draft Lottery's grand prize. Hagens, 17, is off to Boston College, where the centreman will be one of the youngest players in the NCAA and aspire to raise his game above that of top-rated Canadian prospect Porter Martone. As per tradition, rebuilding clubs — Columbus, Anaheim, San Jose, Chicago, Calgary, who else? — will sell at the deadline and embrace the race for hopefuls like this playmaking stud from Long Island. Saggin' for Hagens?

Since making the transition from agent of the Oilers' superstar to the club's CEO, all Jackson has done is oversee an impactful mid-season coaching change and a trip to Game 7 of the Cup Final; hire, amid criticism, Stan Bowman to replace Ken Holland as general manager; execute a much-lauded free agency without a GM in place; get hit with the rare double offer sheet; and sign off on the most expensive contract extension in the cap era. Now, Jackson's organization — Canada's best bet to end a 32-year curse — must clear that one final hurdle on the ice while accommodating hefty raises for arguably the most valuable pending RFA (Evan Bouchard) and for Connor McDavid, eligible to ink the NHL's richest contract extension come July 1.

Tom Fitzgerald was all over Keefe once the man with the sparkling 349-212-79 record and perfect post-season attendance was handed his walking papers in Toronto. Following a disappointing 2023-24 in New Jersey — hindered by injuries, inexperienced defence, and an absence of saves — many are circling the Devils as the team most poised for a resurgence in 2024-25, thanks to a healed Dougie Hamilton and Jack Hughes, plus the legit goalie tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen. Bounce-back teams generate Jack Adams candidates. If Keefe, who moves a half-step out of the spotlight, can guide the Devils to the dance, he'll reap rave reviews.

If Laine can rediscover his love for the game and rebound from a crushing preseason knee sprain, he could provide the Habs with some much-needed scoring and power-play swagger.

Now seven seasons removed from his stellar 44-goal, 70-point showing as a sophomore in Winnipeg, 2016's second-overall draft pick finds himself rehabbing another injury before debuting with his third team. If the affable sniper can rediscover his love for the game and rebound from a crushing preseason knee sprain, he could provide the Montreal Canadiens with some much-needed scoring and power-play swagger. The team and the player need each other. "I want him to be excited to play hockey. I want him to have that passion," coach Martin St. Louis says. "I want him to be excited to come to the rink. No matter what I do, if he doesn't have that passion, nothing else will stick." Mercifully, Laine doesn't need surgery, but will the Habs still be playing relevant games by the time their big off-season swing returns?

We can see the emotional Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy acceptance speech already. Should the Colorado Avalanche captain return to game action for the first time since accepting the 2022 Stanley Cup — which remains a big if — Landeskog will easily be this winter's greatest comeback story. "He's trying to make a return here sometime near the start of the season, and if that goes well, it would be a really big boost for us," said coach Jared Bednar, whose club must start without suspended Valeri Nichushkin. "So, that's something we're all a little anxious about, but really excited about as well. He hasn't played for us in two years." Landeskog, 31, has kept the faith after a series of surgeries and setbacks. "Still a lot to be done, but I'm excited," he told the Denver Post. "I feel like a hockey player again."

For those having just now awakened from a coma: Marner is entering a contract year, and it's a topic of discussion in Toronto. Despite no public profession from management that re-signing Marner is a high priority, the all-star right wing is back for what should be another all-star regular season. Agent Darren Ferris generally prefers his stud pending UFAs to play out 82 games and maximize their bargaining power, and it will be stunning if the two-way talent accepted a contract extension with a lower AAV than teammate William Nylander's \$11.5 million. So, what is Brad Treliving's move here? The Maple Leafs GM could try to finagle a trade even though Marner holds full protection (unlikely), keep betting big



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bucks on elite talent (possibly), or simply wait and see if Marner & Co. can deliver come playoff time, putting the decision off until June.

All the world's greatest hockey player did in 2023-24 was throw down 100 assists, turn the All-Star Skills Competition into a personal showcase, capture the Conn Smythe, push his Oilers within a couple goals of the most dramatic comeback in Stanley Cup Final history, and become a breakout reality-TV star. What could McDavid possibly cook up for an encore? Well, the man himself cares not for individual accomplishments at this stage — though Leon Draisaitl is on record saying McDavid could return to 60-goal form. McDavid's eyes are fixed on the big prize, not the record-setting contract extension that presumably will follow next summer. Edmonton is a Cup favourite, again. Draisaitl is staying put. Support players are signing up and taking less. And McDavid is the top reason why.

GM Danny Briere's big swing at the 2023 draft takes his talents to North America after tearing up the KHL for nearly a point per game as a teenager. The Calder Trophy frontrunner represents hope for the rebuilding Philadelphia Flyers and quite the philosophical foil for John Tortorella hockey. You all caught the clip of the rookie attempting a Michigan goal right in front of his old-school coach, right? "There's going to be some fireworks," Briere says of the player-coach relationship. "But he's going to teach him to be a pro. He's going to teach him to be the best player he can be."

There was a time when the Washington Capitals were focused on breaking through and winning a Stanley Cup. These days, the club's narrative revolves around the singular aim of one indestructible individual's pursuit of the all-time goal-scoring record. Wayne Gretzky's 894 was once believed to be untouchable, but a 39-year-old Ovechkin enters the franchise's 50th season just 42 red lamps away from the unthinkable. Sure, Washington is hoping a refreshed Pierre-Luc Dubois and Jakob Chychrun can return them to the post-season, but in D.C., it's all about The Gr8 Chase™. With Ovi signed through 2025-26, his record-breaking goal now feels like a when, not an if. Says John Carlson: "One thing I've learned is not to doubt him."

When his (and Stan Bowman's) employment ban was lifted by the NHL over the summer, Coach Q instantly became the most intriguing, accomplished, and controversial free agent on the open market. Clearly, the three-time Cup-winner wants back in the game after being banished in wake of the Kyle Beach investigation. ("By not asking more questions, I take ownership on that. Had I known more, I would've handled it completely different," Quenneville says.) Considering the recent success of in-season replacement coaches such as Kris Knoblauch, expect Q's name to pop up as soon as a team with lofty expectations hits the skids.

Hi-ri! Lin-dy! With Kevyn Adams' back slammed against a wall and his face staring at the threat of a 14th consecutive playoff miss (barf), the Sabres GM is bringing back Ruff to coach after an 11-year hiatus from the team. Can another fresh (if familiar) voice be the solution to Buffalo's never-ending rebuild? Or will the Pegulas turn their focus to Adams if the promising core he has constructed, and compensated, cannot skate its way to meaningful hockey in March?

Sorely underpaid at \$5.66 million, the New York Rangers' No. 1 goalie strolls into his walk year as both the most valuable member of the defending Presidents' Trophy champs and the goalie union. Will Shesterkin push hard to become the highest-paid netminder since GMs got squeamish after the massive contracts signed by Carey Price and Sergei Bobrovsky? Or will the locked-in Russian do Chris Drury a solid and leave some dough on the table (see: Hellebuyck, Connor) to accommodate raises for pending RFAs Alexis Lafreniere and K'Andre Miller, and help extend New York's window of contention?

The savvy 46-year-old entrepreneur rushes into the NHL with deep pockets and grand ideas. As proud owner of the Utah Hockey Club, Smith has injected money and, more importantly, hope into a franchise that felt deserted in Arizona. Armed with picks, prospects, plenty of cap space, a sold-out NBA arena, plus a revamped top four (Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino), Salt Lake City is poised to soar as it rises from the ashes of Phoenix. "(Smith) just sat us down and said, 'You know, I want to know what you guys need to feel comfortable,'" Clayton Keller says. "Everything has come true. He's really made us feel at home."

General manager of both the Boston Bruins and Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off squad, Sweeney's roster decisions will arguably be the winter's most scrutinized. Rankled by back-to-back playoff defeats to Florida, the Atlantic Division's undisputed king, Sweeney splashed the pot in free

agency — adding Elias Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov — before engaging in a stubborn, testy, and unusually public RFA contract negotiation with stud goalie Jeremy Swayman. Swayman, an American, could well be the one standing between Sweeney's other roster (mercifully uncapped) and a 4 Nations championship come February... in Boston. (P.S. Did we mention cap-friendly captain Brad Marchand is stepping into a contract year?)

Nashville's second-ever GM started rebuilding on the fly and now he's ready for the good ship Predators to soar. Showing the stomach for the bold move, Trotz was the first star of free agency, landing not one but two 40-goal forwards (chip-on-their-shoulder Cup-winners Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault) as well as coveted top-four defenceman Brady Skjei. He recommitted to Juuse Saros and traded the hottest goalie prospect around. Sure, the tax breaks are in Trotz's favour, but he's swiftly cultivated a contender in Music City. And now the team that has long relied on defence might have the scoring punch to make noise in the crowded Central.

Another big swing in the Senators' crease, Ullmark joins an Ottawa club looking to take an overdue step toward playoff-race relevancy.

After six straight post-seasons in which they've won at least one round but failed to reach the Stanley Cup Final, the Carolina Hurricanes are earning a rep as a good team that's never good enough. Long-serving and influential assistant Tulsy steps up for departed GM Don Waddell (now with Columbus) and must not only keep the boat afloat but push it to a new horizon. Not an easy task considering the talent lost in free agency and the demands of managing up (owner Tom Dundon wants his say) and down. A Harvard grad with a PhD in chemistry from Berkeley, young Tulsy is hardly a member of The Old Boys Club. His success (or lack thereof) could well influence more outside-the-box hires.

Another off-season, another big swing in the Senators' crease. Remember Matt Murray? Cam Talbot? Joonas Korpisalo? If you do, you'll also recall that none of those veteran starters could muster so much as a .900 save percentage behind Ottawa's inexperienced skaters. Enter good-vibes Ullmark, only one season removed from winning the Vezina, William Jennings and Presidents' Trophies (and scoring a sick goalie goal). With arena relocation desires, a new head coach, and an ambitious owner, it's no secret that a step toward playoff-race relevancy is overdue in Canada's capital. The lads could use a few saves. "We all play to win. We don't play for fun," Ullmark says.

The union chief made strides in Year 1, working with the league to establish an international calendar, diving into Babcockgate, and seeing a happy conclusion to the disgruntled Arizona chapter of the PA's membership. He also helped sell the players on Amazon's all-access docuseries, Faceoff. Walsh already has had some contentious individual cases cross his desk in the pre-season — Robin Lehner in Vegas and Ryan Johansen in Philadelphia, and the cap floor in Columbus. He has managed them quietly. Work on those must be balanced with big-picture items such as how to best escalate the cap and keep peace during preliminary CBA talks with Bettman.

How long would patience last in Detroit if the Red Wings were not being run by an on-ice icon and the architect of a championship in Tampa Bay? Yzerman enters his sixth year at the helm in Hockeytown as both the longest-tenured active GM yet to make the playoffs and overseer of the NHL's second-longest active post-season drought — the longest in franchise history at eight seasons and counting. The Red Wings have a shiny new barn but attendance issues. They locked in two young stars in the nick of time (Lucas Raymond, Moritz Seider), and they're banking on some fading ones (Patrick Kane, Vladimir Tarasenko). The man in charge can't lace 'em up to save the day. Stevie Y needs a W.

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Sportsnet.ca / How past late-signing RFAs fared in their next season

Ryan Dixon

This Jeremy Swayman saga was the contract negotiation version of the Boston Marathon.



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Although it's common to see two sides take an entire summer and then some to hammer out a deal, remember, this was the second consecutive off-season Swayman and the Bruins found themselves at odds following a 2023 arbitration hearing that resulted in a one-year contract.

If you've seen the new splashy hockey doc on Amazon Prime Video Faceoff: Inside the NHL, you know that what went down in that arbitration hearing stuck with Swayman.

"You don't forget what was said," Swayman says in Episode 3 of the series, referring to the unpleasant experience of being in a room while your employer basically runs you down. "I wrote them down and I looked at them the other day, and I had a couple checkmarks. My biggest knock was how I wasn't trustworthy in playoffs. Check."

If you were a Bruins fan who just happened to hear the headstrong Swayman talking like that on camera last week, you had to be at least a bit concerned. However, things obviously resolved in fantastic fashion for the player and team, with Swayman inking an eight-year, \$66-million pact on the weekend.

Now, all Swayman must do is go out and perform like the guy who clearly belonged in the "best goalie in the game" conversation during the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs, without the benefit of having a training camp for the 2024-25 season.

How will being late to the preparation party impact Swayman? It's hard to say, and, obviously, Boston will give him all the time he needs to get up to speed. He's certainly not the first guy to miss camp time — or even regular-season games — while banging out a new deal. With that in mind, we wanted to look back at other high-end RFAs who didn't sign deals until the 11th hour — on the eve of camp, during camp or after the regular season began — and see how their season went.

Every situation is a bit different, but it's worth examining how things played out for other guys who were in Swayman's position. Sportsnet's NHL editor, Rory Boylen, did an awesome deep dive on this topic a few years ago, so if you want to see how things played out with guys from about 2013 to 2020, take a peek at this.

We'll pick up where Rory left off and go back to 2021, when there just happened to be three monster RFA contract situations in two Canadian cities.

Signed just as training camp was opening

Player Robert Thomas

Backstory Thomas was coming out of his three-year entry-level deal in the summer of 2021. He hadn't produced much at the NHL level to that point and also had trouble staying healthy through his first few seasons. That said, the 2017 first-rounder did have the experience of playing 21 post-season games for the Blues during their run to the 2019 Cup.

The Contract Just a couple days before camp officially opened, Thomas and St. Louis came together on a two-year bridge deal worth \$5.6 million.

Result Thomas took off during 2021-22, netting 77 points in 72 games. The following summer he inked an eight-year extension worth \$65 million. Today, he's the Blues' No. 1 centre and is rounding into an incredibly valuable two-way pivot at the age of 25.

Player Kirill Kaprizov

Backstory This is a bit crazy. After years of putting up great numbers in the KHL, Kaprizov — a fifth-rounder by the Wild in 2015 — finally made the jump to North America by inking a two-year entry-level deal at age 23 in July 2020. However, he still wasn't allowed to spend that first year in the NHL — which was preparing to emerge from a COVID hiatus that summer — so Year 1 of his ELC was actually burned while he played in Russia. Then, he came over for the pandemic-shortened 2020-21 campaign, notched 51 points in 55 games and won rookie of the year. And, just like that, a 24-year-old who won the Calder Trophy by receiving 99 of 100 first-place votes was an RFA in need of a new deal.

The Contract On Sept. 21, 2021 — the same day his Central Division rival, Thomas, signed — Kaprizov inked a five-year, \$45-million deal on the eve of camp.

Result Kaprizov blew the doors off in Year 2, netting 108 points in 81 games and finishing seventh in MVP balloting. Since the start of 2021-22, he ranks 10th in the NHL with 1.25 points per game. Now, the

conversation is beginning to shift back to his contract status again because Kaprizov is eligible for an extension in the summer of 2025. If that deal doesn't get inked, he could be a whale of a UFA in 2026.

Best hits, scraps and scrums from 2023-24 NHL season: Part 2

Player Rasmus Dahlin

Backstory Dahlin, the first-overall pick in 2018, was coming off his three-year entry-level deal in 2021. He'd finished third in Calder Trophy voting as a rookie, played at 56-point pace in the COVID-shortened 2019-20 season, but saw his production fall to 23 points in 56 games during the wonky pandemic-impacted 2020-21 season.

The Contract Dahlin and the Sabres put pen to paper just as camp opened, coming together on a three-year deal worth \$18 million on Sept. 22, 2021.

Result Dahlin had his best year to date in 2021-22. His 13 goals were more than all but eight defencemen in the NHL and his ice time jumped to over 24 minutes per night. While Buffalo has not had the team success everybody in Western New York is dying for, things have obviously gone swimmingly for Dahlin. He inked an eight-year, \$88-million extension almost exactly one year ago and, this fall, he was named captain of the Sabres.

Who opens season on Canucks' top line with Pettersson and DeBrusk?

Missed a portion of training camp

Player Elias Pettersson

Backstory Pettersson arrived from Sweden with all kinds of hype and lived up to it, basically producing a point per game in his sophomore season. However, he played less than half the pandemic-shortened 2020-21 campaign thanks to a wrist injury.

The Contract About a week into camp, on Oct. 1, 2021, Pettersson and Vancouver agreed to a three-year deal worth a hair over \$22 million.

Result Pettersson struggled mightily early in the 2021-22 campaign. Through 28 contests, the Swede registered just four goals. He did, however, turn it on in the back half of the year, netting 51 points in the final 43 games. There definitely seems to be a bit of a pattern here, as Pettersson also struggled last season after inking his huge \$92-million extension on March 2. Maybe the good news for Canucks fans is, after he works out the post-signing cobwebs, he goes back to being one of the best point producers in the world.

Player Quinn Hughes

Backstory Hughes had played two full years in the NHL by the summer of 2021 and was firmly established as one of the best young D-men in the game. He recorded 94 points in those two seasons, more than all but three blueliners in the game in that span.

The Contract On the exact same day Pettersson inked a bridge deal, Quinn signed a six-year pact with Vancouver worth just over \$47 million.

Result Fantastic from the start. Hughes registered 12 points in his first dozen games in 2021-22 en route to a 68-point season. Today, the reigning Norris Trophy winner offers some of the best bang for the buck you'll find thanks to the \$7.85 million cap hit he has through 2026-27.

Player Jason Robertson

Backstory Robertson exploded on the scene in 2020-21 to finish second in Calder voting behind Kirill Kaprizov. He followed that up with a 41-goal performance in the final year of his ELC.

The Contract About a week before the regular season began, on Oct. 5, 2022, Robertson and the Stars agreed to four-year deal worth \$31 million.

Result Robertson went out and tore up the league, netting 109 points in 2022-23. He shot out of the gate with an incredible 23 goals in 25 games. Despite a step-back year last season (80 points), Robertson is poised to cash in next summer when, at age 26, he'll be eligible to ink an extension in Dallas.

Player Trevor Zegras

Backstory Zegras finished second to Moritz Seider in Calder Trophy voting in 2021-22, then came back with a respectable 65-point



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sophomore season. But from the jump, negotiations between Zegras and Ducks GM Pat Verbeek seemed strained in the summer of 2023.

The Contract On Oct. 2, 2023 — less than two weeks from the start of the regular season for the Ducks — Zegras inked a three-year, \$17.25-million deal with Anaheim.

Result Let's just say things are, uh, not great. Zegras had a miserable, injury-ravaged season last year. He wound up with a paltry 15 points in just 31 games. Moreover, he's basically been the subject of trade rumours for 16 months now. It feels like the only two resolutions here are either the long-anticipated trade or Zegras coming out with a points-filled first six weeks to re-establish himself as part of the Ducks core.

Player Jamie Drysdale

Backstory Injuries undercut Drysdale's clear potential. The sixth-overall pick in 2020 registered 32 points as a 19-year-old defenceman in 2021-22, his only full NHL season. The next year, though, he was limited to just eight games thanks to a torn labrum in his left shoulder as his entry-level contract expired.

The Contract Three days after Zegras signed, Drysdale and the Ducks also hammered out a three-year deal on Oct. 5, 2023, worth \$6.9 million.

Result More of the same, unfortunately. The left turn, though, was that Drysdale was dealt to Philadelphia in one of the more surprising moves last season when Flyers draft pick Cutter Gauthier indicated he was not interested in signing a deal with the team. Drysdale was again slowed by injuries, playing just 10 games for the Ducks and 24 in Philly. He had more surgery in April — this time to repair a sports hernia he played through with the Flyers — and might begin penning a new chapter to his career in Pennsylvania now that he's healthy.

Best of the Tkachuk Brothers from the 2023-24 NHL season

Missed regular-season games

Player Brady Tkachuk

Backstory Brady Tkachuk jumped right into the NHL after being taken fourth overall by the Ottawa Senators in 2018 and basically scored at a 25-goal pace in each of his first three seasons.

The Contract Tkachuk signed a seven-year, \$57.56-million deal on Oct. 14, 2021, the same day Ottawa opened the 2021-22 season at home versus the Toronto Maple Leafs

Result Tkachuk missed three games before rejoining the Sens. He picked up an assist in his first game, but his return dovetailed with a miserable stretch for Ottawa as the team went 2-14-1 in Tkachuk's first 17 games in the lineup. However, less than a month after inking his new deal, Tkachuk was made the youngest captain in team history. Tkachuk did record his first 30-goal season in 2021-22 and has produced more goals (35 and 37) in each subsequent season.

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TSN.CA / Mark Masters: Leafs confident in goaltending duo ahead of new season | TSN

Mark Masters SPORTSCENTRE ReporterFollowArchive

The Maple Leafs practiced at Ford Performance Centre on Tuesday before flying to Montreal.

—

The Atlantic Division features some of the best goalies in hockey including Tampa Bay's Andrei Vasilevskiy, Florida's Sergei Bobrovsky, Ottawa's Linus Ullmark and Boston's Jeremy Swayman. Those names were listed off to Brad Treliving on Tuesday.

"Okay, I'll leave now," the Leafs general manager said with a smile as he pretended to walk away from a group of reporters.

Vasilevskiy, Bobrovsky and Ullmark have all won the Vezina Trophy while Swayman just signed a \$66-million contract after backstopping the Bruins past the Leafs in last year's playoffs.

Toronto, meanwhile, does not have a proven No. 1 goalie. Joseph Woll started a career high 23 games last season with the Leafs, which was his first full year in the NHL. Anthony Stolarz started a career high 24 games with the Florida Panthers last season and made one relief appearance during their Stanley Cup run.

"I'm confident that our goaltenders are going to give us good goaltending," Treliving stressed. "They may not have the name recognition at this point, but I think they're both real good."

Woll, who left the ice first at Tuesday's practice, appears set to get the opening-night start on Wednesday.

"Can't really get much better than playing Montreal in the Bell Centre," the 26-year-old said with a big smile. "It's a fresh start and clean slate so I'm excited to get going."

Woll has never played a game in Montreal, although he is familiar with the atmosphere. Woll was the back-up for Team USA when they won the gold medal over Canada in a shootout at the 2017 World Juniors.

"Some cool memories," said Woll, who grew up idolizing Montreal's Carey Price, "so it's exciting to get this experience."

Although head coach Craig Berube wasn't willing to confirm his starter during his media session.

"Did I give it to somebody?" he shot back when your humble correspondent asked about Woll starting. "I never mentioned nothing."

So, will it be Woll?

"We'll see tomorrow," Berube said. "I'm not jumping to conclusions or anything. We'll see tomorrow. That's tomorrow. Today's today."

Woll posted an .884 save percentage in two pre-season appearances. Stolarz registered a sparkling .964 save percentage in three appearances, including a shutout in his final exhibition outing.

While Berube didn't reveal the plan, the coach did acknowledge the Leafs have a schedule in place for their goalies.

"It is always mapped out, but subject to change," he said. "Things happen."

The Leafs will start the season with 11 games over 23 days in October.

"It is a feel thing," Berube said. "You have to go off of workload, back-to-back-games, and so on. Some scenarios come up, but if you're winning, there is a good chance you'll stay in."

Woll anticipates Bell Centre debut, but Berube plays coy

Woll anticipates Bell Centre debut, but Berube plays coy Joseph Woll enters the season as the expected starter for the Maple Leafs. We say expected because head coach Craig Berube refused to reveal who will be between the pipes in Montreal for Wednesday's season opener. Excited at the chance to play, Woll spoke about the significance of playing in Montreal.

Woll took over the No. 1 job for the Leafs last season after Ilya Samsonov got off to a poor start, but a high ankle sprain in December slowed his momentum and kept him out until late February. By that time Samsonov was back in form and getting most of the starts. Woll eventually reclaimed the net in the playoff series against the Bruins but, again, an injury forced him to the sidelines ahead of Game 7.

Woll focused on body stability in the off-season in an attempt to prevent future injuries and prepare for a heavier workload.

"He's really fit," said Treliving. "We looked at some different things in terms of his mechanics and all those types of things and core. But he's always been dialled in with that. So, yeah, he's put in all the work. We're hopeful he can stay healthy. Stuff happens, but he's looked real good."

There was an injury scare at Tuesday's practice when a William Nylander shot rang off Woll's mask. Woll laughed it off.



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"Maybe I'll bug him for a dinner," he said with a grin. "It's all good. Unfortunately it's what you sign up for."

Berube was asked a couple questions about Woll's injury-plagued past.

"I am not going to focus on that," he said. "I am going to focus on the future."

Woll has only started 34 NHL games in the regular season, but he has a .933 save percentage in seven playoff appearances. He's 3-1 in games in which the Leafs faced elimination.

"He has come in and played pretty well in big games for the Leafs," Berube noted.

The Leafs have a lot of belief in the Missouri native and rewarded him in the summer with a three-year contract extension, which doesn't start until the 2025-26 season.

"Definitely feel more comfortable coming in than last year," said Woll, who finished last year with a .907 save percentage. "To have a full year under your belt and that experience gives you the knowledge that you belong and you can do it and I'm excited to take that step."

Woll considers Bobrovsky, who is one inch shorter at 6-foot-2, to be among his current NHL role models. Stolarz has already noticed one similarity between his old tandem-mate and his new one.

"The biggest thing is probably work ethic," Stolarz observed. "He kind of does the same thing Bob does with the skating and that edge work. He's always in the gym and Bobby was the same way. He was always in there doing his lifts even after pre-game skate when he was starting that night. Bobby was always one of the first guys there, last one to leave, and I see a lot of similarities between him and Woll."

How will the Leafs split the goaltending workload this season?

How will the Leafs split the goaltending workload this season? TSN Maple Leafs reporter Mark Masters joins SportsCentre to share how he sees Toronto splitting the goaltending workload this season, and his sense of where Mitch Marner is at as he enters the final year of his contract.

What allowed Stolarz to hit the ground running with his new team?

"Just hard work in the summer and training," said Stolarz, who inked a two-year pact with the Leafs in July. "I didn't really take any time off when I got back so I was continuously sharp."

Stolarz did not have a heavy workload last season, but he still posted a very impressive .925 save percentage before soaking up the Stanley Cup run.

"Stolarz has won a Cup and been around," Berube said. "He was the back-up, but he has been in the league for a while and has pretty good experience in that role."

At 6-foot-6, Stolarz is three inches taller than Woll and his size has made a big impression in Toronto.

"He definitely takes up a lot of the net," said centre Auston Matthews. "It's pretty noticeable coming down and shooting on him. He's pretty good at reading the play, I find. When you think you have the opening he's kind of baiting you to shoot it there. I think he's a really smart goalie."

"I remember the first time I saw him in London," said winger Mitch Marner, who played with Stolarz in the Ontario Hockey League. "I was with my dad and we were walking out. We walked by him and we both looked up and said, 'Holy s--t that is a behemoth of a man.' Now you're happy you can shoot on him in practice not in games."

Size isn't the only reason Stolarz stands out on the ice. Woll goes with mostly white pads while Stolarz likes more colour.

"I just like the way it feels," he explained. "I don't like the puck marks being able to be shown and it's just a little different. You just feel a little different. You feel a little swaggy-er out there. As a kid, you're on the goalie pad websites making the mock-ups and no one went with the whole whites. You kind of wanted some colours so it's just the childhood me going back and doing that."

Stolarz is from New Jersey, which is where the Leafs will play on Thursday night.

"It's always exciting to go back home," the 30-year-old said. "I always try and put out my best effort there."

Stolarz is 1-1-1 in four appearances in the Garden State. He expects to have 50 friends and family in the crowd at the Prudential Center where he once skated in a Mites showcase during the intermission of a Devils game.

Of course, Stolarz looked up to Devils legend Martin Brodeur.

"When I was a little kid I would skate out into the corners and go play the puck," Stolarz recalled with a smile. "He was the reasoning behind that."

Stolarz still enjoys playing the puck and is grateful to have generated some instant chemistry with the Leafs defence core.

"It's a new group and just being able to talk to them, they were great with me playing the puck," he said. "The way they made my job a lot easier was really nice and it allowed me to settle in and find my game."

'Behemoth of a man': Stolarz makes big impression on Leafs

'Behemoth of a man': Stolarz makes big impression on Leafs New Leafs goaltender Anthony Stolarz comes to the team at a towering 6'6". Already making a good impression off the ice, Stolarz has been showing his Toronto teammates what he can do on the ice as well. Former London Knights teammate Mitch Marner also recalls seeing Stolarz for the first time in the OHL, joking about how big a man he is.

The Leafs placed defenceman Jani Hakanpää on long term injured reserve on Monday.

"Touch wood, there's been no setbacks," said Treliving. "He's been practicing, but it hasn't been full, full, full contact. We'll hopefully have a game plan here in the next couple of weeks."

It's possible that Hakanpää, who has been sidelined by a knee injury since March, gets into some games in the American Hockey League on a conditioning stint.

"We'll have a better read probably in the next couple of weeks," Treliving said.

The Leafs appeared set to sign the 32-year-old Finn to a two-year contract in July when free agency opened, but no deal got registered, which led to questions about his health. When a contract finally got done in September, it ended up being a one-year deal.

"I think he's going to have an impact," Treliving stressed on Tuesday.

Treliving on Hakanpää: 'He's going to have an impact'

Treliving on Hakanpää: 'He's going to have an impact' Maple Leafs Brad Treliving said that he expects defenceman Jani Hakanpää to ramp up towards a return early in the season. Standing tall at 6'7", Hakanpää is just one of the new Leafs defencemen who stand over six feet. Treliving shared why he likes tall rearguards who have a long reach.

The Leafs sent top prospect Easton Cowan back to the London Knights of the OHL on Monday. Marner, who led the Knights to a Memorial Cup title in 2016, wanted to say goodbye, but couldn't find Cowan before the 19-year-old left.

He plans to give Cowan a call.

"My message is going to be, 'Go and have fun. Do your thing. Be the leader that you can be and keep trying to achieve great things in London.'"

Cowan was named the OHL's most outstanding player last year before winning the OHL's playoff MVP award. His season ended in heartbreak, though, when the Knights fell to the host Saginaw Spirit in the Memorial Cup final.

"I was talking to him a little bit about falling a little short and how disappointed he was and stuff like that," Marner said. "Another great opportunity to go back there and try to do it again. You can only get better and learn more things, especially under the Hunters."

Mark Hunter is the GM in London while Dale Hunter is the head coach.



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"You can always get better and learn more things under those two," Mamer said. "I'm excited to watch him, excited to see the great things he does this year, and excited to see him grow up and be the leader that he can be."

Learning how to be a pro pic.twitter.com/tJu81cUErC

— London Knights (@LondonKnights) October 8, 2024

Mamer's message to Cowan: 'Be the leader that you can be'

Mamer's message to Cowan: 'Be the leader that you can be' The Maple Leafs have loaned first-round pick Easton Cowan back to the OHL's London Knights. Cowan is ineligible to play in the AHL, so Toronto had to keep him in the NHL or return him to junior. London alumn Mitch Mamer said he didn't have the chance to speak to Cowan before he left, but will call him to give him some advice.

Lines at Tuesday's practice:

Knies - Matthews - Mamer

Domi - Tavares - Nylander

Pacioretty - Holmberg - Robertson

Lorentz - Kampf - Reaves

McMann, Dewar

Rielly - Tanev

Ekman-Larsson - McCabe

Benoit - Timmins

Liljegren - Myers

Hakanpää

Woll

Stolarz

— Mark Masters (@markmasters) October 8, 2024

Power play units at Tuesday's practice:

Rielly, Matthews, Mamer, Nylander, Tavares

Ekman-Larsson, Robertson, Domi, Pacioretty, Knies

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TSN.CA / Pospisil to start season centering Huberdeau, Mantha

Salim Valji

After playing last season with a rotating cast of centres, including Nazem Kadri, Elias Lindholm and Connor Zary, Jonathan Huberdeau will have yet another new pivot to start the 2024-25 campaign.

Martin Pospisil will skate between Huberdeau and free-agent signing Anthony Mantha. Pospisil established himself a season ago, starting in the American Hockey League before a mid-season call-up. He signed a two-year contract extension part way through the campaign.

Pospisil played his rookie season on the wing alongside Kadri and developed a reputation as an agitator who had offensive skill. He ended with 24 points and 109 penalty minutes in 63 games.

The Flames organization feels the 24-year-old Pospisil can excel at centre, which he played for Slovakia during their Olympic qualifying games over the summer. The team is hoping his north-south, power-forward style, can complement Huberdeau, who is still trying to find his offensive game after two disappointing campaigns in Calgary.

"I feel like the third period of the last [preseason] game they played together was the best they've played together, so hopefully that's a sign of them starting to get a bit of chemistry together," said head coach Ryan Huska after Tuesday's skate.

Calgary opens its season on Wednesday in Vancouver. Huska said that Pospisil needs to remember what made him such an effective winger while learning how to play centre at this level.

"The challenge with him in the middle is to make sure he plays the same way that made him a good NHL player," Huska said. "Sometimes, when you're in the middle of the ice, you have a few more responsibilities. So, we have to find a way to free him up and allow him to use his speed...when we do see that, that's going to create some room for Jonathan."

Huberdeau said that Pospisil is a unique player. He's hopeful that the trio can build chemistry and become a dependable offensive line.

"Pospy is one of his own," Huberdeau said with a grin. "He's a guy that creates room for his linemates...it's good for him to get that centreman aspect into his game. I think he's been working really hard all training camp. I like playing with him."

Given Pospisil's tendency to antagonize opponents, Huberdeau joked that he'll likely be in some more scrums after whistles.

"That's part of his game," he said. "He gets out there. He works hard, and obviously when you play physical, that's what's going to happen."

Kadri said Tuesday that he believes the Flames have a "sneaky amount of talent" and can surprise the hockey world. The veteran centre will once again be counted on to mentor and guide rookies, like he did last season with Pospisil and Zary.

He also alluded to the lack of noise around the club this season.

"I think there's a little more certainty in this dressing room, right?" he said.

Kadri was asked about his future in Calgary at the start of training camp and told the media to "pump the brakes." On Thursday, he had a similar tone.

"You guys don't have to bug me about all the trade rumor questions and trade deadline stuff," he said. "So, it's nice to be left alone in that regard."

Flames projected lineup on Wednesday against Vancouver

Honzek-Kadri-Kuzmenko

Zary-Backlund-Coleman

Huberdeau-Pospisil-Mantha

Lomborg-Rooney-Klapka

Weegar-Miromanov

Bahl-Andersson

Bean-Pachal

Vladar

Wolf

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