CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

The News&Observer

Road relief: Kochetkov backstops Carolina Hurricanes to road win over New York Rangers

By Chip Alexander

It's hard playing in the NHL not knowing where your offense is coming from, game to game.

So it has been for Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour this season.

Against the New York Rangers on Sunday, the Canes got an even-strength goal from William Carrier, and a power-play score from Jack Roslovic. They hit a few posts. They came close to a few more goals before Sebastian Aho's empty-netter.

When you're having trouble scoring, a team needs the goaltender to stand tall at times. That's what Pyotr Kochetkov did Sunday as the Canes took a 3-1 victory at Madison Square Garden.

Kochetkov, protecting a 2-1 lead in the third period, made some sharp, hustling pad saves early, denying Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad, among others. He was quick from post to post, using the pokecheck when he needed it in making 22 saves.

In the other net was Igor Shesterkin, fresh off a road win over the Dallas Stars. Kochetkov relishes playing against other Russian goalies and few are better than the Rangers' Shesterkin.

The Rangers scored 17 seconds into the game — a quick gut check for Kochetkov, the loser Friday against the Washington Capitals.

The Hurricanes (21-11-1), after that slap in the face, were able to squeeze just enough offense out from there. They even got two assists from Kochetkov.

"He was our leading scorer," Roslovic quipped.

Roslovic wound up with two chipped front teeth after taking a stick in the mouth from Alexis Lafreniere midway through the second period. He left the ice and angrily headed to the locker room for treatment.

"I thought I was going to need some work," Roslovic said. "But luckily, no work."

Roslovic returned late in the double minor and scored with two seconds left in the power play off a Dmitry Orlov pass for the 2-1 lead.

"We just stuck with the game," Roslovic said. "I think it was a great effort at just keeping consistent, not giving up a lot of chances, not stepping off the gas."

The Canes have had some trouble stepping on the gas during a recent 4-5-0 dip that had them winless in their last five road games (0-4-1) before Sunday.

Martin Necas had his torrid start to the season and now has cooled off. Aho has heated up after a cool stretch. Andrei Svechnikov can't score five on five. Roslovic had been in a scoring mini-slump of late.

The power play? The Canes have been consistently good and were ranked third in the league in power-play percentage despite going 1-for-13 on the power play in the past five games before Sunday -- they were 1-5 against the Rangers.

"That's the NHL nowadays," Brind'Amour said Sunday morning. "If your power play doesn't get on the (score) sheet. … It's not easy to consistently score five on five, so your power play has to connect.'

The Canes had their chances in the loss to the Caps. Brind'Amour said, but that wasn't the biggest problem.

"To me, we've been giving up some untimely goals," Brind'Amour said. "When we lose, it's like, 'Man, it's a couple of plays here or there, a couple of minutes here or there in the game.' It's not a 60-minute, 'Oh my God what am I watching?' thing. It's never really been that."

For the Canes, one of those untimely goals allowed came very early Sunday. The Rangers (16-16-1) floated into the Carolina zone and Jimmy Vesey flashed in front of the net tipped in a Chad Ruhwedel pass for a 1-0 lead

Just like that, caught flat-footed early, the Canes were chasing the game.

They caught up. And took the lead in the second period.

Carolina tied it 1-1 after Brind'Amour moved Carrier back on Jordan Staal's line with Jordan Martinook. Carrier, a hard-charger, crashed the net and would not be denied, getting the puck past Shesterkin as he went sprawling.

"That's what you've got to do if you're going to score goals," Brind'Amour said.

Kochetkov was the loser Friday against the Caps after a brilliant 32-save shutout at home against the New York Islanders.. He refused to let the early goal Sunday shake him or distract him.

"I just think about next shot, that I need focus," he said. "It was a tough start., the first shot a goal. After that, I came back and we came back in the second period. We controlled the game..

The Canes' penalty-killing came up big early in the third and then in the final five minutes of regulation. The Rangers, who have tormented Carolina on the power play in the past, were 0-4 Sunday with four total shots.

Finally, Kochetkov found the puck on his stick and an open net at the far end. Could it be? A goal for the goalie

"I think about it for two seconds," Kochetkov said, smiling.

Instead, the puck went to Svechnikov and then to Aho for the goal.

"He was solid," Brind'Amour said. "He made, I don't know how many but a lot of backdoor plays, especially on the power play for them. He was great for us."

CAROLINA HURRICANES
NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

The Athletic

Which NHL goalies are best at stopping high-danger shots — and why are they so good?

By Jesse Granger

Several factors determine the statistical likelihood of a given shot finding the back of the net. Whether or not there was a pass leading to the shot plays a big factor, as does the goalie's view of the shot release. Over large samples, the biggest determining factor of a shot's chances of scoring is its distance from the net.

From a goaltending perspective, saves on shots closer to the net are more difficult, and therefore more valuable. League-average save percentages drop dramatically as shots get closer, so the goalies who excel at those saves give their teams a big advantage.

Thanks to the NHL's player- and puck-tracking technology, we now have the exact locations of every shot taken since the start of the 2021-22 season. We went back and compiled all of that data to reveal which goalies are making the most difficult saves at the highest rates.

The NHL separates shots into three main distance ranges: high-danger, mid-range and long-range.

High-danger shots come from the area within 29 feet of the center of the goal and inside imaginary lines drawn from the faceoff dot to two feet outside each goalpost. Mid-range shots follow those same imaginary lines, but are between 29 and 43 feet from the center of the goal, and long-range shots are more than 43 feet from the center of the goal while still inside the offensive zone. Here's what the zones look like on the ice:

These stats only account for shots taken inside this cone, and exclude any from sharp angles along the walls. The league-average save percentages from each range vary.

Range Save %

High-danger

.820

Mid-range

.899

Long-range

.973

So, which goalies were the best at stopping the most difficult shots? Here are the top six in high-danger save percentage, among the 40 goalies who made at least 100 starts over the last four seasons.

There aren't many surprises on this list. These are six of the most talented — and athletic — netminders in the league, so it makes sense they have stopped the most high-danger shots. The one who may stand out to some is Carolina's Frederik Andersen, who isn't often ranked among the elite due to the myriad injury problems he's faced.

When Andersen is on the ice, he's an outstanding goalie. His overall save percentage of .919 since 2021 is third in the league behind only Linus Ullmark and Igor Shesterkin. The difference is that during that span Andersen has faced only 848 high-danger shots in his 104 starts, while Shesterkin has faced 1,626 in 188 starts and Ullmark has faced 1,136 in 147 starts.

Since returning from a lengthy layoff in March, Andersen is 12-2-0 in his last 14 starts (dating to last season) with an incredible .949 save percentage and 21.41 goals saved above expected. He's currently out of the lineup for Carolina after undergoing a knee procedure in November, but if he can remain healthy for any extended stretch, he should be considered amongst the elite. He's particularly good on shots from in close because of his size, athleticism and calm demeanor.

What else makes these other goalies so well-equipped to stop the most difficult shots? Athleticism certainly plays a large role, and these goalies have plenty of that. Look no further than this acrobatic save by Thatcher Demko on Dec. 10 against St. Louis.

This was Demko's first game back from a lower-body injury that held him out of the first two months of the season, and yet he went full-splits to rob Dylan Holloway with ease. That level of flexibility from a 6-foot-4 goalie with Demko's range is almost not fair, but these goalies aren't relying on pure athleticism. There are details to their games that allow that ability to shine.

Patience is key. Playing a guessing game with shooters can leave goalies out of position, but these elite netminders wait out shooters, forcing them to make the first move. This breakaway save by Shesterkin on Chicago's Ryan Donato on Dec. 9 is a perfect example.

The closer the puck gets to the net — especially in a one-on-one situation — the more difficult it is to remain patient. Goalies get antsy, worried that a low-shot can beat them five-hole, and bite on fakes and dekes. Donato tried baiting Shesterkin with several fakes on this play, but Shesterkin stayed completely still through all of the misdirection, keeping his edges and his nose on top of the puck until Donato's final deke to his forehand. Shesterkin then exploded to snuff the shot with his pad.

A big reason Shesterkin is able to remain so patient in these situations is because he is so strong on his edges with a wide stance, so he has less fear of getting beat by a low shot. The wider a goalie's skates get, the closer their pads are to the ice, making them less susceptible to a five-hole shot. The tradeoff is most goalies lose mobility in a wide

stance, with less leverage to explode laterally, but not Shesterkin (or his elite counterparts).

Shesterkin made an impressive glove save on Dec. 6 against Pittsburgh star Evgeni Malkin that showed off this specific skill.

First, Shesterkin squared up to Penguins forward Philip Tomasino (No. 53) in his relaxed stance, with his skates shoulder-width apart. As Tomasino cut in and became more of a shooting threat, Shesterkin entered an aggressive, ready stance with his skates much wider.

Some coaches might dissuade a goalie from entering this wide of a stance with a dangerous passing option on the back side of the play, but Shesterkin is still able to get an explosive push across to snare Malkin's one-timer even from that wide, shot-ready position. The rare ability to get into the most optimal position to make a save on a shot, while still maintaining that mobility, is part of what makes Shesterkin special.

If there's a single trait that equips a goalie to make high-danger saves, it's probably lateral explosion. One of the best at it is Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin. The 29-year-old has stopped high-danger shots at the third-highest rate since 2021, many of which were backdoor one-timers like this backhand attempt by Los Angeles forward Quinton Byfield on Dec. 10.

Not only does Sorokin have the quickness to get his left pad across, he also maintains good structure, with his glove hand extended along the top of his pad to maximize net coverage. Goalies obviously don't have the time to react to a shot from this close, so getting as much of their body in front of the puck is crucial.

Demko provided a good example of this on a game-saving stop in the final minute of Vancouver's game against Utah on Dec. 18. The initial shot from the point was blocked by Canucks defenseman Vincent Desharnais and bounced straight to Utah's Michael Carcone, who unleashed a slap shot from close range.

Demko tracked the puck through the traffic and saw Carcone winding up for a shot. Rather than reaching with his limbs, Demko held his structure, planted his right skate and pushed his entire body across. By the time Carcone shot, Demko had nearly the entire net covered — which was the only way to make this save. The angle from behind the net really highlights Demko's poise.

Because high-danger shots come from too close for a goalie to have much reaction time, play-reading ability is crucial to stopping them. It's probably the biggest reason Ottawa's Ullmark finds himself near the top of this list. Over the last four years, Ullmark leads all goalies with a .923 overall save percentage, and he has never posted a high-danger save percentage below the league average.

There's plenty of athleticism on display on this lunging blocker save he made Dec. 14 on Sidney Crosby, but it's Ullmark's play-reading intuition that put him in position to make it.

During every rush chance, the goalie plays a game of depth management. The further out of the crease he ventures, the better chance he has of making a stop on a shot, but it also gives him more distance to cover in the event of a pass. It's an art, and it's different for every goalie depending on their size, lateral speed and reaction time.

Ullmark played this situation perfectly, identifying Crosby as a passing threat on the back side of the play, and retreating into his crease to give himself a chance to get across for the save. From inside his crease, he only needed to move a couple feet to make the stop.

Notice the difference in how he plays this rush chance against Nashville a week earlier. This time, Ullmark realizes there's no passing threat and telescopes well outside of his crease to give Predators forward Cole Smith nothing to shoot at.

Combine all of these traits, and you get the best goalies on the planet. It's no wonder they're the best at stopping the most difficult shots. Out of curiosity, we did look to see which goalies have the worst save percentage against high-danger shots, with San Jose's Vítek Vaněček and Seattle's Philipp Grubauer "topping" the list (among goalies with at least 100 starts).

If you were wondering which goalies stop the highest rate of shots from mid-range, it's many of the same names from the high-danger list, with the addition of two more star goalies: Connor Hellebuyck and Juuse Saros.

Hellebuyck, Ullmark and Shesterkin also find themselves on the list of top long-range shot-stoppers, but two new goalies top that list.

Jeremy Swayman and Adin Hill have been incredibly efficient at stopping shots from long range. Swayman has yet to allow a goal from that distance this season, stopping all 147. Last year, Hill stopped 199 of 200.

It's interesting because they're not similar stylistically, but they do have a common trait that could be leading to this. Hill and Swayman patrol the top of their crease with aggression. Neither is afraid to join their defensemen in the physical nature of protecting the net-front, often shoving potential screeners with a swift blocker to the back.

This does two things that could be leading to success on long-range shots. First, it leads to less screens that they have to look through. Not only are they more active in getting around screens, the way they play those situations could dissuade players from screening them in the first place. Nearly all of the goals scored from this distance are a result of a screen. Second, their aggressive nature on these plays draws them further out from their net, cutting off the already limited shooting angles from the point.

Overall, these findings aren't groundbreaking. It's no surprise that the league's elite goalies are atop these lists. Shesterkin and Ullmark were the only two to make the top five from all three shooting ranges, but the overall lists are littered with the best goalies in the NHL. It does highlight the importance of large sample sizes when it comes to evaluating goalie stats. While it's easy for the best to have a rough stretch — or even a rough season — statistically, over time the talent bears out.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

Recap: Canes Storm Past Rangers On Sunday

By Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Carolina tallies twice in 5:18 to knock off New York

NEW YORK - After giving up a goal 17 seconds in, the Carolina Hurricanes settled in and climbed from behind to take a 3-1 victory over the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden on Sunday.

New York's Jimmy Vesey finished off a rush chance on his team's first shift of the game to put the Canes on the back foot through 20 minutes, but a dominant second stanza saw the visitors tally twice for a 2-1 lead.

William Carrier potted the first of those, putting in the hard work around the crease to poke home a loose puck midway through the frame. Five minutes later, Jack Roslovic drew a high-sticking penalty, left the game for some repairs and returned just in time to score the go-ahead goal, finishing a perfect pass from Dmitry Orlov at the back door on the ensuing power play.

A dedicated defensive effort from Carolina protected the lead in the third, and Sebastian Aho put away an empty-netter to clinch the two points.

Pyotr Kochetkov made 22 saves in a sterling showing between the pipes and led the Canes in scoring with two assists.

Stats & Standouts

In a battle between two of the game's best Russian netminders, Pyotr Kochetkov shone brightest. Per Natural Stat Trick, Kochetkov stopped eight out of nine high-danger opportunities amidst his 22-save showing, and his season-long .855 HDSV% (high-danger save percentage) ranks second among goalies with 1000+ minutes played behind Connor Hellebuyck.

With two assists, Kochetkov also became the second goalie in franchise history with a multi-point game, joining Hartford's Kay Whitmore in the 1988-89 season. He now leads the league in scoring among goaltenders this season and is the only NHL netminder with a multi-point performance in 2024-25.

The Hurricanes fired 16 shots on Igor Shesterkin as they took control during the second period - just three shy of their season-high of 19 shots in a single period.

That's now nine straight games without allowing a power-play goal for the Canes' PK units, holding a potent New York club off the scoreboard in four chances on Sunday.

Jordan Staal earned his 400th NHL assist on William Carrier's second-period strike. He joins Brent Burns as the only active Hurricanes to reach the 400-helper milestone.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour touching on the game-opening goal and what followed...

"It wasn't even a bad shift. We got in there, we're on it, and we just missed the puck. They made a nice play. You have to tip your hat. Their D activated, we didn't pick him up, and they put it in the net. It was a good play by them. After that, the rest of the game and especially the second period, we were pretty dialed in."

Jack Roslovic on what allowed the team to get back into the contest after the tough start...

"I think we just stuck to the game. It was a great effort, just keeping it consistent, keeping to our forecheck and not giving them any chances. [We didn't] step off the gas. It was just a good effort all the way through, minus the first 17 seconds."

Rod Brind'Amour on Kochetkov's afternoon...

"He was good. It was a tough start, we gave up a weird one right off the bat. They made a nice play. But then after that, he was solid. He made I don't know how many, a lot of good backdoor plays. Especially on the power play for them. They had a few good looks. He was great for us."

Pyotr Kochetkov following the win...

"Playing against the Rangers is always tough. I'm happy we won today. It was good teamwork, and good penalty killing - they were unbelievable today. A lot of blocked shots. What the guys did today was very good. As for the two assists, I was just lucky."

What's Next?

The Canes are right back in action on Monday night in the Music City, taking on Brady Skjei and the Nashville Predators.

Next Game: Monday, Dec. 23 at Nashville Predators | 8:00 pm

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

Preview: December 23 at Nashville

By Walt Ruff

Canes close out their pre-holiday break schedule in the Music City

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The Carolina Hurricanes will try for a second win in as many days on Monday when they take on the Nashville Predators.

When: Monday, December 23

Puck Drop: 8:00 p.m. ET

Watch: FanDuel Sports Network South, FanDuel Sports Network App | Learn More

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Odds at Time of Publishing, via Fanatics Sportsbook: Canes -140

Canes Record: 21-11-1 (43 Points, 3rd - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 3-1 Win over the New York Rangers on Sunday, December 22

Predators Record: 10-17-7 (27 Points, 7th - Central Division)

Predators Last Game: 3-2 Win (OT) over the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday, December 21

Last Game...

The Canes gave up a goal just 17 seconds after the opening puck drop yesterday in New York but surged from behind to take a 3-1 victory.

Pyotr Kochetkov settled in and made 22 consecutive saves to end the game and also added a pair of assists, becoming the first goalie in Canes history (since relocation) to have a multi-point game.

Jack Roslovic scored the game-winning goal against his former team.

It was Carolina's first win on the road since Nov. 20, snapping a five-game skid away from Lenovo Center.

Rod (Is The) Wave...

Rod Brind'Amour has a chance to earn his 300th win as an NHL coach on Monday. In his 486th game as head coach of the team, he would become the fastest coach in NHL history to reach the mark. Bruce Boudreau currently holds the record, doing so in 496 games.

Since taking over ahead of the 2018-19 season, the Canes rank second in points percentage (.663), third in wins (299) and have the league's best penalty kill (85.1%).

Special Special Teams...

Carolina's penalty kill has not allowed a goal since November 30, going nine consecutive games without allowing a goal. Going 24-for-24 this month, the team now ranks third among all NHL teams with their 86.1% kill rate.

On the other side of the coin, the Canes' power play is to 7-for-27 (25.9%) this month - 9th in the NHL in that span.

In Net...

Rod Brind'Amour said pre-game yesterday that the team would "probably" go with Dustin Tokarski (1-0-0 | 1.00 GAA | .961 SV%) as the team completes the back-to-back. If that is indeed the game, it would be "Ticker's" second appearance with the team after being signed to an NHL contract earlier this month. Tokarski stopped 27 out of 28 shots faced in a win over Columbus on Sunday, Dec. 15.

If the team elects to go the other way and play Pyotr Kochetkov for the second time in two days, #52 would be trying for his 15th win of the campaign. In eight appearances this month, Kochetkov has alternated wins and losses in each outing.

On The Other Side...

The Predators were expected to be a powerhouse in the Western Conference going into this season, but thus far, it has not been the season they've hoped.

Despite adding some big names this summer, the Predators have had trouble scoring, averaging a league-low 2.32 goals per game. Part of that problem is that the team is a measly 4.8% on the power play during the month of December, almost 5% lower than the next closest team.

Filip Forsberg and Jonathan Marchessault are getting warmed up though, with nine and eight points, respectively, over the team's last six games.

Injury Updates

Forward Jack Drury is out for "at least four weeks" after sustaining a broken bone in his hand on Tuesday, Dec. 10, and undergoing surgery as a result.

Goaltender Frederik Andersen suffered a knee injury in the team's win over Seattle on Saturday, Oct. 26. The Canes announced on Friday, Nov. 21 that the goaltender would undergo surgery and be out of action for 8-12 weeks.

Forward Jesper Fast was ruled out for the 2024-25 season in August after having neck surgery.

What Are We Wearing?

The team will be wearing their white uniforms. To view the team's full 2024-25 uniform schedule, click here.

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are off for the league-mandated holiday break until Friday morning. Friday the team will morning skate in Raleigh before flying to Newark to start a back-to-back set against the Devils.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

Kochetkov makes 22 saves, has 2 assists for Hurricanes in win against Rangers

By Dan Rosen

Carolina scores twice in 2nd to overcome early deficit; New York drops 4th straight at home

Hurricanes at Rangers | Recap

NEW YORK – Pyotr Kochetkov made 22 saves and had two assists, and the Carolina Hurricanes came back from down early in the first period to defeat the New York Rangers 3-1 at Madison Square Garden on Sunday.

Kochetkov said it was his first two-point game at any level. He also had an assist in a 4-2 win at the Calgary Flames on Oct. 24.

“We needed some offense,” Hurricanes coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “We’ll get it from anybody."

William Carrier, Jack Roslovic and Sebastian Aho scored, and the Hurricanes went 4-for-4 on the penalty kill, allowing four shots on goal. Roslovic’s goal came on the power play, ending New York’s streak of 20 consecutive successful penalty kills.

Carolina (21-11-1) ended a five-game road losing streak (0-4-1).

“Tough start, first shot, first goal, and after I think we had a couple good blocked shots and a couple saves,” Kochetkov said. “In the second period, I think no chances for Rangers. We controlled the game, controlled the puck, a lot of shots. Last period, just a good PK and teamwork.”

CAR@NYR: Roslovic finishes Orlov's feed for PPG and 2-1 lead

Jimmy Vesey scored 17 seconds into the game, but the Rangers went silent after that.

Igor Shesterkin made 28 saves.

New York (16-16-1) defeated the Dallas Stars 3-1 on Friday but has not won consecutive games since a three-game winning streak from Nov. 14-19. It has lost four in a row at home.

“It was a good start and then it just slowly slipped away from us,” Rangers defenseman Adam Fox said. “We couldn’t get it back after that.”

Vesey gave the Rangers a 1-0 lead 17 seconds into the first period. He led the rush, moved the puck across to Chad Ruhwedel and went to the net. Ruhwedel got the puck back to Vesey, who redirected it into the net past Kochetkov.

“Well, it wasn’t even a bad shift,” Brind’Amour said. “We got in there, we were on it, we just missed the puck and they made a nice play. You’ve got to tip your hat. The ‘D’ activated, we didn’t pick him up and they put it in the net. It was a good play by them, but I thought after that, the rest of the game, especially the second period, we were pretty dialed in.”

Carrier tied it 1-1 at 9:14 of the second period, scoring nine seconds after Carolina’s power play expired. Jaccob Slavin, shooting from the right face-off circle, hit the post. Carrier had inside position on Braden Schneider and put in the rebound.

“It was the end of a power play so it’s kind of still a power-play goal because their guy hadn’t gotten into the play yet,” Brind’Amour said. “But he was at the net and that’s what you’ve got to do if you want to score goals.”

The Rangers were two seconds away from killing Alexis Lafreniere’s four-minute double minor for high-sticking Roslovic and causing his two front teeth to chip.

But it was Roslovic, who had to leave the game briefly after the high stick, making it 2-1 Carolina on the power play at 14:32, scoring on a backdoor redirect at the right post off a pass from Dmitry Orlov off the left-wing half-wall.

“‘Orly’, it was just a great pass,” Roslovic said. “I think I was thinking about my teeth.”

Said Brind’Amour, “It’s funny how that happens, over the years you get guys something bad happens and they’re the guys that make the difference in the game. It’s hockey. He looks like a hockey player now, that’s for sure.”

Carolina outshot the Rangers 16-8 in the second period.

“We didn’t get the puck to the next level in the second period,” Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said. “I thought the battles went their way. One goal on the power play, one with a guy coming out of the box, and that’s the difference in the game. I thought they were better than us in the second period.”

Kochetkov preserved the lead in the third period by stopping Artemi Panarin’s open shot from the left circle at 3:43 and Vincent Trocheck's tap-in attempt from the front at 4:11.

CAR@NYR: Kochetkov protects 2-1 lead with a remarkable save

He came across the crease to stop Reilly Smith on a backdoor one-timer at 4:31.

Aho scored into the empty net at 18:18 for the 3-1 final.

“Well, he was good,” Brind’Amour said of Kochetkov. “I mean, it’s a tough start, right. We give up a weird one right off the bat where they made a nice play, but then after that

he was solid. A lot of good backdoor plays, especially on the power play for them, they had a few good looks and he was great for us."

Notes: The Hurricanes are 23-for-23 on the penalty kill in nine games in December. … New York is 0-for-12 on the power play in its past five games. … Rangers defenseman K'Andre Miller missed his fifth consecutive game with an upper-body injury. He is day to day. … Rangers forward Matt Rempe did not play. He received an eight-game suspension Sunday for boarding/elbowing Stars defenseman Miro Heiskanen on Friday. … Mika Zibanejad played his 600th game with the Rangers.

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pyotr Kochetkov assists on 2 goals, stops 22 shots to lead the Hurricanes to a 3-1 win over Rangers

By Allan Kreda

NEW YORK (AP) — Pyotr Kochetkov stopped 22 shots and assisted on two goals as the Carolina Hurricanes beat the New York Rangers 3-1 on Sunday.

William Carrier, Jack Roslovic and Sebastian Aho scored for the Hurricanes, who won for the fourth time in six games and improved to 10-3-1 against Metropolitan Division opponents this season.

Jimmy Vesey scored for New York 17 seconds into the game, converting a pass from defenseman Chad Ruhwedel past Kochetkov. The Rangers are 4-12-0 in their last 16 games and lost their fourth-straight home game.

Carrier tied it with his fourth goal at 9:14 of the second, sliding a loose puck in the crease past Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin (28 saves).

Roslovic, who played 19 games and 16 more in the playoffs for the Rangers last season, put Carolina ahead with a power-play goal at 14:32 of the second period, two seconds before Alexis Lafreniere's double-minor for high-sticking Roslovic was about to expire.

Aho scored into an empty net at 18:18 of the third.

Takeaways

Rangers: New York has lost five of its last six games at home, falling to 7-9-1. The Rangers lost 11 of 41 games at Madison Square Garden last season.

Hurricanes: Captain Jordan Staal picked up the 400th point of his career when he assisted on Carrier's tying goal.

Key moment

Kochetkov stopped an initial shot by Rangers forward Adam Edstrom, then a rebound with 2:05 left in the second to keep it a one-goal game. The 25-year-old Russian netminder also made a pad stop on Reilly Smith at 4:33 of the third during a Rangers power-play.

Key stats

Kochetkov improved to 14-6-0, while Shesterkin fell to 11-13-1.

Up next

Rangers visit the New Jersey Devils on Monday, while the Hurricanes are at Nashville against the Predators on Monday night.

Predators take on the Hurricanes following overtime win

By The Associated Press

Carolina Hurricanes (21-11-1, in the Metropolitan Division) vs. Nashville Predators (10-17-7, in the Central Division)

BETMGM SPORTSBOOK LINE: Hurricanes -138, Predators +117; over/under is 6

BOTTOM LINE: The Nashville Predators host the Carolina Hurricanes after the Predators took down the Los Angeles Kings 3-2 in overtime.

Nashville has gone 7-7-3 at home and 10-17-7 overall. The Predators have gone 3-4-7 in games decided by a goal.

Carolina is 21-11-1 overall and 8-7-1 in road games. The Hurricanes are 10-3-0 in games they have fewer penalties than their opponent.

The matchup Monday is the first meeting of the season between the two clubs.

TOP PERFORMERS: Jonathan Marchessault has 10 goals and 11 assists for the Predators. Ryan O'Reilly has three goals and three assists over the past 10 games.

Martin Necas has 14 goals and 30 assists for the Hurricanes. Andrei Svechnikov has scored four goals and added four assists over the last 10 games.

LAST 10 GAMES: Predators: 3-5-2, averaging 2.3 goals, 4.2 assists, three penalties and 6.9 penalty minutes while giving up 2.6 goals per game.

Hurricanes: 5-5-0, averaging 2.5 goals, 4.5 assists, 3.5 penalties and 7.2 penalty minutes while giving up 2.6 goals per game.

INJURIES: Predators: None listed.

Hurricanes: None listed.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

SB NATION CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes 3, Rangers 1

By Bob Wage

The good news is that the Carolina Hurricanes did not allow a goal late in a period against the Rangers like they have done the past couple of games. The bad news is that they allowed one just 17 seconds into the game.

The Canes were able to overcome the early deficit though and defeated the New York Rangers, 3-1 on Sunday afternoon at Madison Square Garden.

Pyotr Kochetkov had an exceptional game between the pipes and made 22 saves on 23 shots. The goalie also picked up two assists which tied the most in a game for a goalie in franchise history.

He also leads the NHL in scoring for goaltenders so far this season.

The Hurricanes tied the game midway through the second period after a hardworking play by William Carrier. The winger battled his way to the front of the net and poked in a rebound for his fourth of the season.

Later that period, Jack Roslovic got high-sticked to the mouth. He drew a four minute powerplay for Carolina.

Ironically enough, Roslovic was able to return to action and scored late during that same powerplay to make the score, 2-1. The goal was his 14th of the season.

The Canes outshot the Rangers that period 16-8.

The score remained 2-1 until Sebastian Aho scored an empty-netter late, to close it out.

The win broke up Carolina's five game road losing streak (0-4-1).

The Canes will travel to Nashville for a game Monday night.

TODAY'S LINKS

https://www.newsobserver.com/sports/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/article297263419.html
https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6013458/2024/12/23/nhl-goalies-high-danger-shots/
https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/recap-canes-storm-past-rangers-on-sunday
https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-december-23-at-nashville
https://apnews.com/article/hurricanes-rangers-score-a6d467659d547e4174a1822d476d4124
https://www.nhl.com/news/carolina-hurricanes-new-york-rangers-game-recap-december-22
https://apnews.com/carolina-hurricanes-nashville-predators-los-angeles-kings-jonathan-audy-marchessault-martin-necas-fbdfc93d78164864aae6a4610ea1afb7
https://www.canescountry.com/2024/12/22/24327721/hurricanes-3-rangers-1

SportScan

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

1333044 Carolina Hurricanes

Road relief: Kochetkov backstops Carolina Hurricanes to road win over New York Rangers

Chip Alexander

8-10 minutes 22/12/2024

New York

It's hard playing in the NHL not knowing where your offense is coming from, game to game.

So it has been for Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour this season.

Against the New York Rangers on Sunday, the Canes got an even-strength goal from William Carrier, and a power-play score from Jack Roslovic. They hit a few posts. They came close to a few more goals before Sebastian Aho's empty-netter.

When you're having trouble scoring, a team needs the goaltender to stand tall at times. That's what Pyotr Kochetkov did Sunday as the Canes took a 3-1 victory at Madison Square Garden.

Kochetkov, protecting a 2-1 lead in the third period, made some sharp, hustling pad saves early, denying Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad, among others. He was quick from post to post, using the pokecheck when he needed it in making 22 saves.

In the other net was Igor Shesterkin, fresh off a road win over the Dallas Stars. Kochetkov relishes playing against other Russian goalies and few are better than the Rangers' Shesterkin.

The Rangers scored 17 seconds into the game — a quick gut check for Kochetkov, the loser Friday against the Washington Capitals.

The Hurricanes (21-11-1), after that slap in the face, were able to squeeze just enough offense out from there. They even got two assists from Kochetkov.

"He was our leading scorer," Roslovic quipped.

Roslovic wound up with two chipped front teeth after taking a stick in the mouth from Alexis Lafreniere midway through the second period. He left the ice and angrily headed to the locker room for treatment.

"I thought I was going to need some work," Roslovic said. "But luckily, no work."

Roslovic returned late in the double minor and scored with two seconds left in the power play off a Dmitry Orlov pass for the 2-1 lead.

"We just stuck with the game," Roslovic said. "I think it was a great effort at just keeping consistent, not giving up a lot of chances, not stepping off the gas."

The Canes have had some trouble stepping on the gas during a recent 4-5-0 dip that had them winless in their last five road games (0-4-1) before Sunday.

Martin Necas had his torrid start to the season and now has cooled off. Aho has heated up after a cool stretch. Andrei Svechnikov can't score five on five. Roslovic had been in a scoring mini-slump of late.

The power play? The Canes have been consistently good and were ranked third in the league in power-play percentage despite going 1-for-13 on the power play in the past five games before Sunday -- they were 1-5 against the Rangers.

"That's the NHL nowadays," Brind'Amour said Sunday morning. "If your power play doesn't get on the (score) sheet. … It's not easy to consistently score five on five, so your power play has to connect.'

The Canes had their chances in the loss to the Caps. Brind'Amour said, but that wasn't the biggest problem.

"To me, we've been giving up some untimely goals," Brind'Amour said. "When we lose, it's like, 'Man, it's a couple of plays here or there, a couple of minutes here or there in the game.' It's not a 60-minute, 'Oh my God what am I watching?' thing. It's never really been that."

For the Canes, one of those untimely goals allowed came very early Sunday. The Rangers (16-16-1) floated into the Carolina zone and Jimmy Vesey flashed in front of the net tipped in a Chad Ruhwedel pass for a 1-0 lead.

Just like that, caught flat-footed early, the Canes were chasing the game.

They caught up. And took the lead in the second period.

Carolina tied it 1-1 after Brind'Amour moved Carrier back on Jordan Staal's line with Jordan Martinook. Carrier, a hard-charger, crashed the net and would not be denied, getting the puck past Shesterkin as he went sprawling.

"That's what you've got to do if you're going to score goals," Brind'Amour said.

Kochetkov was the loser Friday against the Caps after a brilliant 32-save shutout at home against the New York Islanders.. He refused to let the early goal Sunday shake him or distract him.

"I just think about next shot, that I need focus," he said. "It was a tough start., the first shot a goal. After that, I came back and we came back in the second period. We controlled the game.."

The Canes' penalty-killing came up big early in the third and then in the final five minutes of regulation. The Rangers, who have tormented Carolina on the power play in the past, were 0-4 Sunday with four total shots.

Finally, Kochetkov found the puck on his stick and an open net at the far end. Could it be? A goal for the goalie?

"I think about it for two seconds," Kochetkov said, smiling.

Instead, the puck went to Svechnikov and then to Aho for the goal.

"He was solid," Brind'Amour said. "He made, I don't know how many but a lot of backdoor plays, especially on the power play for them. He was great for us."

News Observer LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333077 New Jersey Devils

Devils' Luke Hughes' game is soaring, and he's just getting started: 'I'm definitely a different player'

By Gabriel Trevino

Luke Hughes left the rink, changed into street clothes with seven-and-a-half hours between the end of Saturday's morning skate and the Devils game, and walked back to his locker to speak to the media.

On his head was a gray beanie with a faint, white New York Yankees logo. Why the Yankees? It wasn't just for fashion. Despite his family spending time in Florida, Canada and Michigan growing up, Hughes is a Yankees fan.

"I can't say I'm a die-hard," the 21-year-old defenseman said. "A little (Detroit) Tigers."

He was shocked just like any sports fan when outfielder Juan Soto left the Yankees for the Mets on a 15-year, $765 million contract.

"A lot of money," he said.

Hughes, a restricted free agent after this season, could line himself up to land a big payday like his brothers in the next few seasons (or this offseason) should he continue to perform the way he's had the past month, even if it won't get close to Soto's dollars.

Following a slow start coming off a shoulder injury that forced him to miss the first nine games, Hughes is in the best stretch of his young career. He has 11 of his 13 points in his last 14 games and is playing All-Star-level defense for the top team in the Eastern Conference, which improved to 22-11-3 with Saturday's win.

In the 3-0 shutout of the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Devils allowed just 12 shots on goal — the sixth game in a row they have not allowed at least 20 shots. Hughes played 19:27, and at even-strength, he was on the ice for 10 scoring chances for compared to two against, per Natural Stat Trick.

"I'm definitely a different player, my game has grown in a lot of different facets," Hughes told NJ Advance Media. "It's about getting better every year, and I think from Year 1 to Year 2, I've been able to get better as a player. From Year 2 to Year 6 , I can't imagine where I'll be."

His growth is no surprise to himself or the team. Hughes is a confident young player — he was the No. 4 overall pick in 2021, after all — who has the work ethic to match.

He of course has help from his family. Big brother Quinn Hughes won the Norris Trophy last season with 92 points — the third most by a defenseman in 30 years — with high-level defense.

Luke Hughes naturally models his game after Quinn Hughes and childhood hero Duncan Keith, who was a two-time Norris Trophy and three-time Stanley Cup winner with the Chicago Blackhawks.

The Hughes brothers train together in the offseason, and Luke Hughes watches film of his older brother frequently during the season. Luke

Hughes also lives with brother and Devils center Jack Hughes in New Jersey.

That familiar comfort is something Penguins captain Sidney Crosby can relate to. Crosby lived with Pittsburgh legend Mario Lemieux during his rookie season on the way to being one of the best players of the generation.

“It’s something that helps fast-track the learning curve,” Crosby said before Saturday’s game. “(Luke Hughes) is gonna learn to get better through experience. If you have somebody that’s been through it who can relate to a lot of things that you’re going through, on and off the ice, that’s that sort of thing that makes a huge difference. It definitely did with me. It could be the smallest things that nobody thinks about, but that’s something you appreciate as you get older.”

The biggest strides in Hughes’ game have come defensively this season.

Case in point, the first period of Saturday’s game when he stared down Pittsburgh legend Evgeni Malkin on a rush and with the poise of a veteran and used his stick to steal the puck from the future Hall of Famer.

Even if it’s an imperfect stat, Hughes' defensive improvement can be noticed through his plus/minus. After a minus-25 rating last season, this year it is plus-one as he’s started more in the defensive zone (43.3% compared to 30.8%) and less in the offensive zone (56.7% compared to 69.2%).

He attributes much of his success to another of his mentors — veteran defenseman and partner Brett Pesce. Luke Hughes and Pesce rehabbed their offseason injuries together, which allowed Pesce to pass on his defensive knowledge.

“His stick is so good,” Hughes said. “He puts me in really good positions, gives me the puck in really good areas of the ice and can break out the puck. He’s been great for me.”

Hughes put up 47 points last season in his rookie year, but he started with only one in 10 games. Coach Sheldon Keefe attributed his slow offensive start to getting back to NHL speed. Hughes didn’t get a training camp, while his opponents got 10 games under their belt by the time he came back.

“(Conditioning is) both in the on-ice stuff, but also the off-ice stuff,” Keefe said. “The travel and the schedule, and all those sorts of things. But I thought he was excellent the other night. Obviously had a number of great chances. Those are all really encouraging things that we want to make sure he continues to do without sacrificing on the defensive side, which has found that nice balance of.”

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.23.2024

s1333078 New Jersey Devils

Devils Locker Room: Dillon Addresses Bunting Cheap Shots; Noesen 'Saw Red'

James Nichols

NEWARK—The New Jersey Devils are in a groove. In the month of December, they’re 6-2-1, and although they’re not a perfect team, they’re certainly proving to be among the NHLs best. On Saturday night against the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Devils continued to prove their worth. It was another game in which they figured out a way to win and take two points off the table, even if they weren’t at their best. And after a physical, in-division rivalry tilt, the Devils recognized some high emotions in the first of four meetings with the Penguins this season.

READ: 3 Thoughts: Devils Smother Penguins; Ground & Pound; Greasy Goals

Sidney Crosby had plenty of second-hand praise from the Devils heading into his first game against them this season. Leading up to puck drop, the future Hall of Famer explained he hadn’t gotten a first-hand look at the Devils yet. However, from what he can see, they have all the makings of a top team in the NHL, one that could go deep in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Then, Crosby had to actually play against the Devils, and get this. 10/21 in the faceoff dot? That’s a 47.6% win rate, which is well below his career 53.3% average. One shot on goal? And zero points to boot? We’re talking about a hockey Mount Rushmore type player here.

The Devils absolutely smothered the Penguins defensively. It's kind of their new thing this year under the new tutelage of head coach Sheldon Keefe.

Jacob Markstrom is certainly enjoying it, needing to just make 12 saves in his second shutout of the year on Saturday.

However, another new component for the Devils this season is their physicality. General manager Tom Fitzgerald went into this summer with a few goals in mind, one of them bringing in players who can play with an edge. Enter Brenden Dillon, Stefan Noesen, Paul Cotter, among others, and suddenly the Devils aren’t a team to be trifled with.

Amid their 3-0 victory over the Penguins on Saturday, Michael Bunting was certainly playing instigator all night. When push came to shove, Dillon was in the mix with the Penguins forward every time.

Brenden Dillon

Michael Bunting is an agitator, and he got his cheap shots in on Saturday early and often.

Certainly, there was an instance or two when Bunting ignored Dillon’s request to drop the mitts.

In the first period, Bunting became tied up with Dillon along the boards, and the Penguins forward took it upon himself to give the Devils defenseman an extra dig and skate off to the Pittsburgh bench. Dillon tried to get Bunting’s attention with his stick to settle the score. However, Bunting made it abundantly clear he was purposely ignoring Dillon’s attempt at retaliation.

That was until Dillon and Bunting met again in the second period. Once again, the Penguins forward was playing agitator, taking liberties between whistles. This time, Bunting found himself in a vulnerable position, laying with his back on the ice and looking to the ceiling.

Dillon didn’t hesitate to step over him and attempted to lure him into dropping the gloves. Bunting, again, denied the Devils defenseman and skated away.

Certainly, Bunting was trying to play coy, which Dillon recognized was the case. In the same breath, the Devils’ defenseman also knew he couldn’t leave his team shorthanded.

“I was just trying to be physical on him. I think that’s his kind of game, right? He wants to get in, kind of create something, stir the pot a little bit,” Dillon explained to New Jersey Hockey Now. “I thought we did a great job without taking a dumb penalty or doing something like that to put them on the power play. And you know, that’s how myself, that’s how our team, we just got to play those guys hard and physical and hopefully get results like that.”

Bunting wound up mixing it up by the end of Saturday night’s game. However, it wasn’t with Dillon. Instead, he and Jonas Siegenthaler got into a shoving match that led to the Devils’ defenseman taking Bunting down to the ice.

Dillon chuckled about the exchange and explained, “I haven’t talked to him about it yet, but we’ll watch the tape back.”

Stefan Noesen

Dillon wasn’t the only Devil mixing it up with the Penguins on Saturday.

This is the kind of environment Stefan Noesen thrives in. Again, it’s part of the reason Fitzgerald brought him back to New Jersey. The Devils want to be a tougher team to play against, and Noesen brings all the elements.

One of the things Noesen does best is create havoc at the top of the oppositions crease. He did that when he scored the opening goal in Saturday night’s game, as well as on Nico Hischier’s goal when he battled with Penguins defenseman Ryan Shea for net-front presence.

Except, it wasn’t just a regular, “box out the body for position,” type of physicality. This was physicality with intent to inflict pain.

Well, as Noesen and Shea battled at the top of Tristan Jarry's crease, Hischier cashed in on the distraction, to which Noesen screamed in Shea's face.

"I saw red, I don't know what happened. We were just going toe to toe there," Noesen said. "And I actually thought I was about to fight. Whatever, the goal went in. I was a little surprised. I don't know… if you saw some choice words out of my mouth, yeah, that was directed at one person in particular."

Sheldon Keefe

As the former head coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs, physicality wasn't prioritized in Sheldon Keefe's previous coaching job.

However, the Devils' GM ensured New Jersey would be tougher this season, and it's worked thus far.

36 games into the regular season, Keefe explained his team is happy to match that style of play when necessary, and he's not putting the handcuffs on anyone.

"I don't question our team when it comes to [physicality]. Our guys have a lot of competitiveness and are comfortable in that situation," Keefe explained. "[Tom Fitzgerald] has given our group and given me lots of different guys that can handle different situations as we just went through. And also, we're ready and able to compete in any environment."

newjerseyhockeynow.com LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333079 New Jersey Devils

NJHN Daily: Devils Trade Target in Anaheim; Crosby Dishes on Hughes; Canucks Drama

James Nichols

There are many who would justifiably put Sidney Crosby on their NHL Mount Rushmore. Therefore, it's gotta be a surreal feeling as an opposing play when he speaks so highly of you. That's exactly what Crosby did when talking to New Jersey Hockey Now about Jack Hughes and the Devils. More on that in the links below.

Elsewhere, it looks like Matt Rempe is in trouble, again. A certain forward in Anaheim could look good in red and black, and some drama between star players in Vancouver.

Let's do that hockey.

Devils News

New Jersey Hockey Now: NJHN sat down for a few minutes with future Hall of Famer and three-time Stanley Cup Champion, Sidney Crosby, and picked his brain on what he thinks about Jack Hughes and the Devils. (+)

Even More: The Devils smother the Pittsburgh Penguins, limiting them to just 12 shots and finding an alternative way to win.

newjerseyhockeynow.com LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333052 Columbus Blue Jackets

Werenski injury a concern after Columbus Blue Jackets' OT meltdown: 5 takeaways

Brian Hedger

Columbus Dispatch

Three blown leads in the third period of a game that ended up a loss in overtime should've been the main storyline for the Blue Jackets on Saturday night.

Instead, their stinging 5-4 OT loss to the Flyers in Philadelphia takes a back seat to the health of star defenseman Zach Werenski, who was injured early in the third period and gutted through it while slowed by limited mobility in his left leg.

Elvis Merzlikins was also torched for five goals after going 16 for 16 in the first 40 minutes, Owen Tippett was a one-man wrecking ball when it mattered most, the Blue Jackets continued to struggle with puck possession and the Flyers memorialized Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau with a pregame ceremony that included their family.

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets hoping for the best with Zach Werenski's knee

Less than two minutes into the third, Werenski got tangled up hitting Tippett and crashed hard into the boards. His left knee slammed directly into the plastic kick plate, leaving him down in pain and barely able to stand on his own.

Somehow, he returned 4:26 later with limited mobility and finished the game, still skating 27:27 that included three overtime shifts. Werenski was also defending during the Flyers' four goals in the third, all scored after his injury. The question now is how his knee will react before a home game Monday against the Montreal Canadiens.

"I'm hoping he doesn't seize up now, because he was at the end and in overtime," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said during a televised postgame press conference. "He's obviously a massive part of our hockey club, and to have him (come) back, I mean, we were down to four (defensemen) there for a little bit. Hopefully he can go."

Werenski is the Blue Jackets' second highest scorer with 32 points in 34 games on 11 goals and 21 assists, which ranks third among all NHL defensemen in scoring.

Columbus Blue Jackets had no answer for Philadelphia Flyers forward Owen Tippett

Tippett is a swift skating forward with a great shot, but his playmaking skills incinerated Merzlikins and the Blue Jackets in the third and OT. He assisted Morgan Frost's two goals, picked up another assist on Tyson Foerster's 6-on-5 equalizer to force overtime and then dragged the puck around Merzlikins' right pad in overtime.

Finding a way to slow Tippett and his line during even one of the Flyers' goals could have made the difference, but the Blue Jackets couldn't do it.

Dream sequence for Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins becomes nightmare in loss to Philadelphia Flyers

Elvis Merzlikins' razor-sharp focus from an outstanding performance Thursday against the New Jersey Devils carried into this game. The Blue Jackets' netminder stopped every shot he faced in the first two periods, including multiple sprawling denials against odd-man rushes, but his night became nightmarish in the third.

Tippett's incredible reverse pass to Frost got it started in the third, igniting an avalanche of goals that snowballed on Merzlikins and the Blue Jackets down the stretch. After the smoke cleared, Merzlikins sprawled out face down in his crease. He symbolized the frustrations of his team and its fans, who've all dealt with too many losses like this one the past few years.

"We have a couple glorious chances in overtime, too, right?" Evason said. "It could've been a completely different chat right now. Listen, do we want the extra point? A hundred percent. We didn't get it. We got one. We'll move forward."

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets' possession struggle continues in OT loss to Philadelphia Flyers

It's been almost two weeks since the Blue Jackets have dictated play by keeping the puck inside the opposing blue line. Their ability to do that has completely disappeared since an impressive win Dec. 8 in Winnipeg, which felt like a key win that might kickstart a hot streak.

Instead, the Blue Jackets since have become one of the NHL's worst teams at generating attempts, shots, scoring chances and goals amid a frustrating 1-3-3 stretch that continued in Philadelphia. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Flyers finished with 61% of the game's attempted shots, 55% of its shots, 58% of scoring chances, 55% of high-danger chances and 58% of the expected goals in all situations.

Even worse news is that things could get worse if Werenski has to miss time.

Columbus Blue Jackets, Philadelphia Flyers honor Gaudreaus

Prior to the game, the Gaudreau family gathered on the ice for a ceremonial puck-drop wearing Gloucester Catholic jerseys representing the school where Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau played in nearby South Jersey during high school. Flyers players also arrived wearing Gloucester Catholic jerseys to honor the Gaudreau brothers, who were killed in late August when struck by a vehicle while biking near their hometown in South Jersey.

The ceremony was the third of its kind for Blue Jackets, who previously participated in one before their Oct. 15 home-opener at Nationwide Arena and another Dec. 3 in Calgary — where Johnny Gaudreau became an NHL star while playing the first 10 years of his professional career.

There aren't any remaining Gaudreau ties with other teams left on the Blue Jackets' schedule, but it wouldn't be a surprise if the brothers and the Gaudreau family are somehow honored March 1 prior to an outdoor game at Ohio Stadium against the Detroit Red Wings.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333053 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Dmitri Voronkov's impressive skill, missing menace

Aaron Portzline

11-14 minutes 22/12/2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: Where's the menace?

Dmitri Voronkov has become quite a goal scorer for the Blue Jackets. He's shown soft hands and high-end vision that belie his 6-foot-5 frame. The big man sets one heck of a screen in front of opposing goaltenders, too. Yes, his list of attributes is longer than his in-seam.

But the Voronkov that has emerged is different than the menacing, malevolent power forward he was projected to be when he left Russia for the NHL two seasons ago.

Who can forget Kirill Marchenko's stellar scouting report the spring before Voronkov made the leap: "I am a happy Russian boy," Marchenko said. "(Yegor) Chinakhov is a cute Russian boy. But (Voronkov) … he is like tough Russian boy."

Nobody questions Voronkov's toughness. But in 25 games this season, Voronkov has just 16 hits. His hits per 60 minutes (2.38) is 18th among Blue Jackets players and 368th among NHL forwards. That's staggering.

Asked if he's been surprised by Voronkov's lack of combativeness, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was blunt.

"Yes," he said. "And to be honest with you, we've talked to him about it several times, and we'll continue to do that.

"I'll be honest with you: He has to get into even better shape than he is to arrive (on time for hits). That, to us, is the biggest issue, and he's committed to doing that. He's doing extra work after practice. It's not a desire thing."

Former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent said many times last season that Voronkov's energy would fade toward the end of a normal shift, that he was wearing down as the season moved along and the games piled up.

When Voronkov returned this fall for camp, he was noticeably trimmer, dropping from 240 pounds to his current 227. The Blue Jackets were pleased with his progress, but it might take another summer, or another couple of seasons, before he's trim and fit enough to play at his highest level.

"We've asked him to do that, to get going so that you can be that physical presence," Evason said. "You can see it when he's down low in a battle, a confrontation, a one-on-one … he's really hard to handle, physically. We want him to get in on the forecheck and start bumping and grinding."

Voronkov has eight goals, nine assists and 17 points in 25 games. He has a plus-4 rating and is playing 16:04 per game, up from 13:27 last season. And two plays in recent games have highlighted his impressive offensive touch.

In a 5-3 loss to Tampa Bay last Tuesday, Voronkov made a brilliant touch pass back to Cole Sillinger for a power-play goal in the third period. On Saturday, his pass across the "Royal Road" to Marchenko for a go-ahead third-period goal showed a vision few power forwards possess.

Now, imagine if Voronkov can add a physical edge to his other attributes. That's a rare player, indeed.

"To put that whole package together," Evason said, "it could be dominating."

Item No. 2: 'Brutal couple of days'

One week ago today, Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson was stuck in the face by an inadvertent high stick. The stick blade found its way behind Johnson's visor, striking his face and his right eye. It was a scary scene in Raleigh, N.C., as Johnson rushed off the ice and went straight to the dressing room.

"I couldn't open my eye," Johnson said. "The first person I thought about was Chris Pronger."

Pronger, one of the best defensemen of his generation, retired in 2011 after a series of concussions and an eye injury suffered when he, too, was struck in the eye with a stick blade.

Johnson was able to return to last Sunday's game vs. Carolina — he was back later in the first period, actually — but after two shifts he pulled himself from the game.

"It was pretty clear I wasn't doing anybody any good," he said.

Johnson missed a game two days later in Tampa Bay but has been in the lineup the past two games. For three days he had to wear a protective contact lens on his right eye to help protect a scratched cornea, but the injury has begun to heal quickly.

There's still a pool of blood on the edge of his sclera.

“It’s definitely weird,” Johnson said. “It’s like half of my eye sees in high-def and the other half is VHS.”

Still, Johnson was feeling fortunate.

“It’s unlucky that it even happened,” he said. “I mean, the stick went up under the visor and it still got me. That’s why I wear a visor, and it still happened. But I also know I’m lucky it wasn’t worse. It could have been way worse, right?

“The rest of your life flashes in front of you, really. It was a brutal couple of days, the first time I’ve been through something like this. I asked Nates (Blue Jackets trainer Naoto Goto) to call my wife. I put everybody else on the backburner cause it was painful just to read a text right after it happened.”

Item No. 3: Take 5, Mathieu Olivier

Take 5 is a quick, breezy sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach or front-office staffer. This week’s features Mathieu Olivier:

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

We’re up in Dublin. We thought the location was just right, the area was just right … but especially for my son, Liam, who is on the spectrum. They had a really good preschool program for kids like him, so that was a big reason.

2. Favorite restaurant in Columbus.

Local Cantina is our casual place. The Nashville chicken tacos. As far as a high-end place, there’s a place near us that just opened this summer called Butcher & Rose. We’ve been there twice. It was fantastic.

3. How do you spend an off day Sunday?

Kids, kids, kids. Whatever they want to do. They’re starting to skate and do a bunch of different sports, and they’re showing an interest in all kinds of things. So we’re trying to keep them active. If I get a little time by myself, I’ll hop on the PlayStation 5, but that doesn’t happen very often.

4. Favorite CBJ memory.

Hmm. A lot of stuff already from this year comes to mind, personally. I’d say ‘Z’ (Zach Werenski) breaking the record (for points by a Columbus defenseman) last year vs. Carolina in the last game of the season was pretty cool. There will definitely be more.

5. Which teammate should have a podcast?

I’ve heard about this (question). Everybody’s telling me I’ve been the answer. Or (Erik) Gudbranson. Or Jack Johnson. JJ would have a good “What’s grinding my gears?” podcast. But I’d say Guddy. He’s pretty knowledgeable on a lot of topics and he loves to talk. He can do it all.

Item No. 4: Snacks

• Defensemen Zach Werenski returned to Saturday’s game after suffering a left leg injury when he slammed into the boards early in the third period. He returned to play but was clearly hobbled. The Philadelphia Flyers scored all five goals with him on the ice. Evason had an alarming quote after the game, saying Werenski’s injury “seized up” in the third period and overtime. As of Sunday morning, the Blue Jackets did not have an update on Werenski. They aren’t scheduled to practice, either.

• If goaltender Elvis Merzlikins starts, as expected, on Monday vs. Montreal, it’ll mark the 10th straight game Daniil Tarasov has watched either from the bench or the press box. The most obvious target for his return is the back-to-back, home-and-home vs. Boston on the Friday-Saturday following Christmas, but Evason said that wasn’t etched in stone. “We’re trying to get him to a place where he can have success with the team,” Evason said. “And that means watching video, taking extra practice, trying to find where he’s most comfortable to play and help us win. There’s no question about his desire, his drive, his attention to detail … his work ethic is fantastic. He’ll get back in there and he’ll find his way.”

• One might think that Tarasov, with one start since Nov. 16 and an .857 save percentage, would be on the verge of hitting the waiver wire. Not so, said Waddell. “There’s too much there, too much talent. He’s shown some good signs in the past, obviously. It hasn’t started well for him this year. He’s gotta work his way back. He’s working his ass off in practice, and he’s gotta keep doing that. Eventually, he’s going to play a game and we’ll see where he’s at.”

• If anybody can empathize with Johnson and his eye scare, it’s Waddell. In the summer of 1984, Waddell was injured in a pickup game in Ann Arbor, Mich., when a disgruntled opponent slammed the butt end of his stick into Waddell’s face. “I spent 28 days in the hospital,” Waddell said. “They call it a blowout fracture of the orbital bone.” Waddell, who still has a “plastic plate” around his eye, said he had an eye patch over both eyes for 15 days — effectively blinding him — so that the eye with a detached retina could remain still and allow it to reattach and heal. “It was a long process for sure,” Waddell said. “I’d hear people come in the room and I’d have no idea who it was until they spoke.” Waddell was planning to return to Switzerland to resume a career in Europe, but he didn’t get cleared to play until October, after the season in Europe had started. He spent that season split between Flint and Toledo in the now-defunct International Hockey League. “I still have blind spots in that eye,” Waddell said.

• Sunday Gathering trivia question: Adam Fantilli played in his 82nd game with the Blue Jackets on Thursday, the equivalent of a full NHL season. He had 18-23-41 in that span, only four points fewer than franchise icon Rick Nash (22-23-45) in his first 82 games with Columbus. Which player has had the most goals and which player has had the most points in their first 82 games with the Jackets at the start of their NHL career?

• Over the last two games, there have been even more signs of Olivier’s growing influence. On Thursday, in a 4-2 win over New Jersey, he played a career-high 20:23, more than any other Blue Jackets forward. On Saturday, in the loss to Philadelphia, he was on the ice with Fantilli and Ivan Provorov during three-on-three overtime.

• Marchenko had two assists on Thursday vs. New Jersey, giving him 100 career points (55-45-100) in what was his 170th NHL game. That made him the fourth-fastest player in Columbus franchise history to reach the century mark. Pierre-Luc Dubois (142 games) reached 100 points the fastest, followed by Nikolay Zherdev (150) and Nash (164).

• Word around Nationwide Arena this week was that Blue Jackets players had a chance to look at the sweaters they’ll wear on March 1 in the NHL’s Stadium Series game against the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium.

• The Blue Jackets will have two prospects competing in the World Junior Championship beginning Dec. 26 in Ottawa. Forward Luca Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, will play for Team Canada, while goaltender Melvin Strahl, a fifth-round pick (No. 156) in that same draft, will represent Team Sweden. Strahl currently plays for Youngstown of the USHL.

• Trivia answer: Marchenko scored 28 goals in his first 82 games with the Blue Jackets at the start of his NHL career, more than Nash (22), Cam Atkinson (21) and Dubois and Voronkov (20). Werenski had 50 points in his first 82 games, leading a list that includes Dubois (48), Oliver Bjorkstrand (47) and Nash, Zherdev and Derick Brassard (45).

• The Blue Jackets announced plans this week to simulcast five of FanDuel Sports Network’s broadcasts on local channels ABC 6 and CW Columbus (Ch. 53). That makes the games available via antenna, but also on some streaming networks that don’t currently carry FanDuel Sports Network, formerly known as Bally’s. The games are Jan. 2 vs.

Detroit (CW), Jan. 11 at St. Louis (ABC 6), Jan. 23 at Carolina (CW), Feb. 27 at Detroit (CW) and March 17 vs. New Jersey (CW).

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333130 Websites

The Athletic / Which NHL goalies are best at stopping high-danger shots — and why are they so good?

By Jesse Granger

Several factors determine the statistical likelihood of a given shot finding the back of the net. Whether or not there was a pass leading to the shot plays a big factor, as does the goalie's view of the shot release. Over large samples, the biggest determining factor of a shot's chances of scoring is its distance from the net.

From a goaltending perspective, saves on shots closer to the net are more difficult, and therefore more valuable. League-average save percentages drop dramatically as shots get closer, so the goalies who excel at those saves give their teams a big advantage.

Thanks to the NHL's player- and puck-tracking technology, we now have the exact locations of every shot taken since the start of the 2021-22 season. We went back and compiled all of that data to reveal which goalies are making the most difficult saves at the highest rates.

The NHL separates shots into three main distance ranges: high-danger, mid-range and long-range.

High-danger shots come from the area within 29 feet of the center of the goal and inside imaginary lines drawn from the faceoff dot to two feet outside each goalpost. Mid-range shots follow those same imaginary lines, but are between 29 and 43 feet from the center of the goal, and long-range shots are more than 43 feet from the center of the goal while still inside the offensive zone. Here's what the zones look like on the ice:

These stats only account for shots taken inside this cone, and exclude any from sharp angles along the walls. The league-average save percentages from each range vary.

There aren't many surprises on this list. These are six of the most talented — and athletic — netminders in the league, so it makes sense they have stopped the most high-danger shots. The one who may stand out to some is Carolina's Frederik Andersen, who isn't often ranked among the elite due to the myriad injury problems he's faced.

When Andersen is on the ice, he's an outstanding goalie. His overall save percentage of .919 since 2021 is third in the league behind only Linus Ullmark and Igor Shesterkin. The difference is that during that span Andersen has faced only 848 high-danger shots in his 104 starts, while Shesterkin has faced 1,626 in 188 starts and Ullmark has faced 1,136 in 147 starts.

Since returning from a lengthy layoff in March, Andersen is 12-2-0 in his last 14 starts (dating to last season) with an incredible .949 save percentage and 21.41 goals saved above expected. He's currently out of the lineup for Carolina after undergoing a knee procedure in November, but if he can remain healthy for any extended stretch, he should be considered amongst the elite. He's particularly good on shots from in close because of his size, athleticism and calm demeanor.

What else makes these other goalies so well-equipped to stop the most difficult shots? Athleticism certainly plays a large role, and these goalies have plenty of that. Look no further than this acrobatic save by Thatcher Demko on Dec. 10 against St. Louis.

This was Demko's first game back from a lower-body injury that held him out of the first two months of the season, and yet he went full-splits to rob Dylan Holloway with ease. That level of flexibility from a 6-foot-4 goalie with Demko's range is almost not fair, but these goalies aren't relying on pure athleticism. There are details to their games that allow that ability to shine.

Patience is key. Playing a guessing game with shooters can leave goalies out of position, but these elite netminders wait out shooters, forcing them to make the first move. This breakaway save by Shesterkin on Chicago's Ryan Donato on Dec. 9 is a perfect example.

The closer the puck gets to the net — especially in a one-on-one situation — the more difficult it is to remain patient. Goalies get antsy, worried that a low-shot can beat them five-hole, and bite on fakes and dekes. Donato tried baiting Shesterkin with several fakes on this play, but Shesterkin stayed completely still through all of the misdirection, keeping his edges and his nose on top of the puck until Donato's final deke to his forehand. Shesterkin then exploded to snuff the shot with his pad.

A big reason Shesterkin is able to remain so patient in these situations is because he is so strong on his edges with a wide stance, so he has less fear of getting beat by a low shot. The wider a goalie's skates get, the closer their pads are to the ice, making them less susceptible to a five-hole shot. The tradeoff is most goalies lose mobility in a wide stance, with less leverage to explode laterally, but not Shesterkin (or his elite counterparts).

Shesterkin made an impressive glove save on Dec. 6 against Pittsburgh star Evgeni Malkin that showed off this specific skill.

First, Shesterkin squared up to Penguins forward Philip Tomasino (No. 53) in his relaxed stance, with his skates shoulder-width apart. As Tomasino cut in and became more of a shooting threat, Shesterkin entered an aggressive, ready stance with his skates much wider.

Some coaches might dissuade a goalie from entering this wide of a stance with a dangerous passing option on the back side of the play, but Shesterkin is still able to get an explosive push across to snare Malkin's one-timer even from that wide, shot-ready position. The rare ability to get into the most optimal position to make a save on a shot, while still maintaining that mobility, is part of what makes Shesterkin special.

If there's a single trait that equips a goalie to make high-danger saves, it's probably lateral explosion. One of the best at it is Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin. The 29-year-old has stopped high-danger shots at the third-highest rate since 2021, many of which were backdoor one-timers like this backhand attempt by Los Angeles forward Quinton Byfield on Dec. 10.

Not only does Sorokin have the quickness to get his left pad across, he also maintains good structure, with his glove hand extended along the top of his pad to maximize net coverage. Goalies obviously don't have the time to react to a shot from this close, so getting as much of their body in front of the puck is crucial.

Demko provided a good example of this on a game-saving stop in the final minute of Vancouver's game against Utah on Dec. 18. The initial shot from the point was blocked by Canucks defenseman Vincent Desharnais and bounced straight to Utah's Michael Carcone, who unleashed a slap shot from close range.

Demko tracked the puck through the traffic and saw Carcone winding up for a shot. Rather than reaching with his limbs, Demko held his structure, planted his right skate and pushed his entire body across. By the time Carcone shot, Demko had nearly the entire net covered — which was the only way to make this save. The angle from behind the net really highlights Demko's poise.

Because high-danger shots come from too close for a goalie to have much reaction time, play-reading ability is crucial to stopping them. It's probably the biggest reason Ottawa's Ullmark finds himself near the top of this list. Over the last four years, Ullmark leads all goalies with a .923 overall save percentage, and he has never posted a high-danger save percentage below the league average.

There's plenty of athleticism on display on this lunging blocker save he made Dec. 14 on Sidney Crosby, but it's Ullmark's play-reading intuition that put him in position to make it.

During every rush chance, the goalie plays a game of depth management. The further out of the crease he ventures, the better chance he has of making a stop on a shot, but it also gives him more distance to cover in the event of a pass. It's an art, and it's different for every goalie depending on their size, lateral speed and reaction time.

Ullmark played this situation perfectly, identifying Crosby as a passing threat on the back side of the play, and retreating into his crease to give

himself a chance to get across for the save. From inside his crease, he only needed to move a couple feet to make the stop.

Notice the difference in how he plays this rush chance against Nashville a week earlier. This time, Ullmark realizes there's no passing threat and telescopes well outside of his crease to give Predators forward Cole Smith nothing to shoot at.

Combine all of these traits, and you get the best goalies on the planet. It's no wonder they're the best at stopping the most difficult shots. Out of curiosity, we did look to see which goalies have the worst save percentage against high-danger shots, with San Jose's Vítek Vaněček and Seattle's Philipp Grubauer "topping" the list (among goalies with at least 100 starts).

Jeremy Swayman and Adin Hill have been incredibly efficient at stopping shots from long range. Swayman has yet to allow a goal from that distance this season, stopping all 147. Last year, Hill stopped 199 of 200.

It's interesting because they're not similar stylistically, but they do have a common trait that could be leading to this. Hill and Swayman patrol the top of their crease with aggression. Neither is afraid to join their defensemen in the physical nature of protecting the net-front, often shoving potential screeners with a swift blocker to the back.

This does two things that could be leading to success on long-range shots. First, it leads to less screens that they have to look through. Not only are they more active in getting around screens, the way they play those situations could dissuade players from screening them in the first place. Nearly all of the goals scored from this distance are a result of a screen. Second, their aggressive nature on these plays draws them further out from their net, cutting off the already limited shooting angles from the point.

Overall, these findings aren't groundbreaking. It's no surprise that the league's elite goalies are atop these lists. Shesterkin and Ullmark were the only two to make the top five from all three shooting ranges, but the overall lists are littered with the best goalies in the NHL. It does highlight the importance of large sample sizes when it comes to evaluating goalie stats. While it's easy for the best to have a rough stretch — or even a rough season — statistically, over time the talent bears out.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333131 Websites

The Athletic / Utah's NHL future looks bright after 'frustrating' years in Arizona: 'No excuses anymore'

By Michael Russo

SALT LAKE CITY — Nick Bjugstad walked out of a meeting with the Utah coaching staff following Friday's morning skate still in full uniform when somebody yelled, "Five minutes 'til the first bus!"

"I can do it," Bjugstad, in his 13th season, yelled back while laughing as he began to strip out of his gear.

But when he realized a Utah TV reporter wanted to grab him for an interview in advance of the club's game against the Wild and he had also committed to doing a quick radio hit with the local Minnesota sports station, Bjugstad — the epitome of 'Minnesota nice' — said, "I'll take the second bus."

That's when the director of team services approached and told Bjugstad he could Uber back to the team's hotel. Just give him the receipt and he'd make sure Bjugstad was reimbursed.

As more than one person in the locker room joked, "There's something that wouldn't fly last year."

In every conversation with a former Arizona Coyotes player, you can sense how refreshing it is to be playing for an owner — Ryan and Ashley Smith and the Smith Entertainment Group — so committed to treating them right after an accelerated $1.2 billion purchase to move an entire franchise virtually overnight.

"There's no excuses anymore," said Utah general manager Bill Armstrong, who has brought most of his staff to Utah after three seasons running the Coyotes' hockey operations. "We'll stay in the best hotel in the city, we'll make sure we have the best food on the road, the best of everything.

"So we've taken the excuse factor out of it. That's all gone for us. We're provided with the best so there's no excuses in our organization. We're still young, we're still growing, we're still getting better, but there's no excuses as far as the way that we're treated and all the assets we have to use to be the best."

From the moment the players touched down in Salt Lake City last spring and were greeted by thousands in an airport hangar and an overstuffed Delta Center to welcome the new NHL franchise, Utah Hockey Club players have felt right at home.

"We walked in and basically we're looking around like, 'What is going on?'" Bjugstad said, smiling. "I couldn't believe it. So that was how it started and then from there, it was just top-notch. Like seriously, treated like kings. Completely first class.

"This is nothing against Arizona. They have die-hard fans. But it became frustrating as players. We wanted news of what was going to happen and there was a lot of limbo for a long period there. So that was probably the most frustrating part. Players and staff, everyone got through it together and then we come here and it's just a whole other world for us. And it's fun for the guys that haven't seen organizations like this and guys that have been in Arizona for so long or have only played for Arizona to come here, get treated so well and realize this is how it is other places. The amenities are great, the interactions with the Smiths have been huge and the fans are so excited.

"This is proof we just had to move on."

In a single offseason, the Smith Entertainment Group renovated the bowels of Delta Center to give not just the home team a first-class locker room experience that includes a shared coaches room, weight room and trainer's room with the Utah Jazz, but also the visiting team. NHLers experiencing a road game at Delta Center for the first time have been blown away by the size of the visitors room and the fact they have access to a full gym, hot tub, cold tub and a medical room that's bigger than many in their home rinks.

They figured out a way to build a temporary practice facility at the Olympic Oval in Kearns, Utah that was used for speed skating at the 2002 Winter Olympics. They built a practice rink on an island right in the middle of the Oval, buying time for the permanent facility to be built by the fall of 2025 in nearby Sandy. The club quickly scooped up 111 acres of a shopping mall and is essentially gutting a Macy's that will be transformed into a state-of-the-art facility to house the hockey club's offices.

The Smiths are also leading a downtown revitalization proposal to reimagine a sports and entertainment district just east of Delta Center.

And over the next two or three offseasons for the Jazz and Utah Hockey Club, Delta Center will be renovated to create a better hockey viewing experience ahead of the 2034 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

Currently, there are 11,131 unobstructed seats in the arena and another 5,000 where portions of the ice can't be seen. Luckily, the building has an enormous, picture-perfect center-ice scoreboard that fans can look at if they can't see part of the game. Yet despite only counting the 11,131 unobstructed seats as capacity, well more than that have been attending games.

"We're going to renovate the arena as quickly as we can," said Chris Armstrong, Utah's president of hockey operations and not related to Bill. "You start making major changes in the lower bowl and pushing the building out and doing things, we're going to discover things along the way. Anybody who's been through a house renovation knows about that.

"But we're going to try and do it as expeditiously as we can, but we also want to get it right for the fans and during that process make it as minimally disruptive as we can for fans. We will focus on making as many unobstructed seats as we possibly can. We've had great demand for the limited view, the single goal view seats this year. People are hungry to get in the building and experience NHL hockey and the environment here at Delta Center. That's exciting because people are still getting hooked on hockey while they wait for the renovations."

One idea being played with is a section of seats from the glass to the top of one of the end zones, creating a continuous wall of fans. If that can be achieved, the suites and hospitality areas currently in that end zone would be moved to the other end zone.

Last Wednesday, a few hours before the game, Ryan Smith announced on X that he was giving away tickets for that night's game against Vancouver, including eight seats in his suite. There was so much demand, Smith quickly got together with SeatGeek and gave away an additional 2,000 single-goal view seats for free. They disappeared in less than an hour.

Pretty neat from an owner who never watches games from inside his snazzy corner suite. Instead, in a tracksuit, he sits along the glass with guests that have included NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, several Jazz players such as former hockey player Lauri Markkanen, former NBA star Dwyane Wade, golfer Tony Finau and music stars Post Malone and Benson Boone.

That game against the Canucks? Utah rallied from a 2-0 deficit in the third period on goals fittingly by captain Clayton Keller and budding young star Dylan Guenther before Bill Armstrong's big offseason acquisition, Mikhail Sergachev, won it in overtime.

To see and hear Delta Center erupt was another stark reminder these players are no longer playing in a 4,000-seat college rink as they did the previous two years in Tempe, Ariz.

"Listen, when you're us and you haven't had that luxury over the last few years to play out in front of a crowd that big and sold out, it's a beautiful thing," Bill Armstrong said. "And it gives you that little extra boost. Down 2-nothing in the third, I think the crowd was what put us over the edge."

Things haven't just been special off the ice for the Utah Hockey Club.

They are rolling on the ice, too.

Andre Tourigny's club has won seven games in a row on the road and is 6-0-2 in its past eight, 8-1-3 in its past 12 and pulled within a point of a playoff spot in the Western Conference Sunday with a shootout loss to Anaheim.

This is no longer the Coyotes, where Armstrong's edict was simply to meet the cap floor, acquire dead-money contracts for essentially retired players to help him do that and gobble up as many draft picks and prospects as possible.

Yet because of the latter, the future in Utah is bright with a core that includes Keller, Guenther, Logan Cooley, Lawson Crouse, Nick Schmaltz and Michael Kesselring (who has soared in the wake of injuries to Sean Durzi and John Marino) and prospects on the horizon such as Maveric Lamoureux, Tij Iginla, Dmitriy Simashev and Daniil But.

"A lot of people start a rebuild, not many people finish it," Armstrong said. "You don't want to change the plan depending on what's going on day-to-day. But this summer, we were able to get some players like Sergachev to help push the process along. You're getting some pieces that allow you that opportunity to become better and take that next step.

"It's interesting — you got all the cap space, but that cap space goes quick with a couple of bad decisions. We just try to stay to the timelines and stay to the rebuild to be true to the sense that we want everybody roughly the same ages to some degree, to kind of grow together. The Sergachevs of the world joining the Kellers, the Crouses, and now the Cooleys and Guenthers and that. We added Cup winners — Sergachev, (Kevin) Stenlund, (Ian) Cole, (Robert) Bortuzzo. When we're going through the rough times and we're beat up physically and we have some injuries, those guys keep that ship going pretty straight for us."

Armstrong laughed when asked what he considers the timeline for Utah's rebuild.

"I was in Montreal last year and I pointed to the banner when somebody asked me the same question," Armstrong said. "I pointed to their last Cup banner and I go, 'Thirty years ago you won a Stanley Cup.' There's a patience aspect that has to go into this where you have to look at the numbers and you've got to do the research. The research is that the quickest team ever to come out of the rebuild was the Penguins and they did it with Sidney Crosby, Marc-Andre Fleury, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang and they did it within a five-year period. Most rebuilds are somewhere between five to 16 years sometimes to get it done.

"We're in Year 4 and we've been able to, because of COVID and the bad contracts, we were able to accelerate that in the sense of we were able to get a lot more quantity of really good prospects early on. They're going to filter in the next three to four years. But the good news is the team on the ice right now is a good team and then we're going to look to add one or two of our prospects to come in over the next few years and you'll see the team kind of grow and get better."

But as Armstrong quickly reiterated, the excuse factor of the Coyotes' yesteryear and their old ownership is gone.

"When you talk about the bull—-, you're dealing with the negative," Armstrong said. "Constant stories of negativity. After a while, that gets to players. They want to go to the rink and concentrate on hockey and whether you play bad or well or good, you're just dealing with hockey. So that makes it easier for the players instead of all the negativity that they couldn't control that surrounded them.

"So on this end, it's been really a positive thing and I think our players finally feel like they're a top-notch NHL franchise. The Smiths have gone above and beyond. The NHL has taken something that was bad and made it good. (Bettman) deserves a lot of credit along with Ryan and Ashley and Chris Armstrong on how they've been able to transform it."

Utah's eventual nickname and logo are in the final stages and will be announced soon, Chris Armstrong said. On Nov. 15, Utah jerseys went on sale and sold out in 24 hours.

Fans lined up at the team store, and Utah set a Delta Center single-day sports event sales record. It beat the previous record — set at its inaugural game against the Chicago Blackhawks on Oct. 8 when other merchandise was available — by 48 percent.

In fact, only one game in NHL regular-season and playoff history had a higher single-game net merchandise sales total: the Golden Knights' clinching win in Game 5 of the 2023 Stanley Cup Final at T-Mobile Arena on June 23, 2023.

Utah's closing in on a playoff spot, but you also won't catch Bill Armstrong jumping for joy and getting ahead of himself just yet.

"It's been nice for the guys to be rewarded with this win streak," Armstrong said. "But there's no nights off in the NHL. I mean, the greatest thing that you can say about our league is the parity. Every night's a battle. So just when you think you got it mastered, you don't. Success in the NHL is rented, and rent's due every day."

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333132 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Draft stock WATCH: How is the 2025 top 5 shaping up ahead of World Juniors?

By Corey Pronman

With the World Juniors around the corner, let's take a look at how the top of the 2025 NHL Draft is shaping up and what the tournament could mean for that conversation.

Depending on which NHL scout you talk to, you could get a different answer on who the best prospect is in the draft. As it stands now from my conversations, I would say 50 percent favor Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer, 20 percent of scouts favor preseason favorite and Boston College center James Hagens and 20 percent like Brampton Steelheads winger Porter Martone. Some outliers lean toward Saginaw Spirit center Michael Misa, Brandon Wheat Kings center Roger McQueen (who is currently injured) or Djurgarden forward Anton Frondell.

Today we'll highlight the front-runners who will be facing off against each other on New Year's Eve and their case for the top position. There is currently a lack of clarity at the top of the draft as to what order these players will be selected. I expect by Jan. 6 we will have more clarity, especially since neither Hagens nor Martone will be at the World U18s.

Who could go No. 1?

Matthew Schaefer, LHD, Canada (Erie)

The scouts who favor Schaefer see a defenseman with the potential to be the next Miro Heiskanen. He's been excellent in big moments this season. He was arguably the best player at the Hlinka Gretzky this summer and at the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge in November. Given how good he's looked internationally, I could see him playing a big role for Team Canada at the World Juniors even though he's 17 years old.

Schaefer is a player without any notable flaws. He's an excellent skater with size, a high compete level and very good offensive touch who is expected to run a power-play unit for Canada. His offense may not be elite, but that wasn't the case with players like Heiskanen or Jake Sanderson at Schaefer's age, either. Schaefer is also miles better than the next-best defenseman in this draft class. If this ends up being a draft in which the team picking first thinks it's close among the candidates but has a more pressing need for a stud young defenseman, position could become a significant variable. Quite a few scouts view him not just as the best prospect in the draft, but as the clear best. If the draft was today, I believe Schaefer would be the top pick.

James Hagens, C, USA (Boston College)

Hagens entered the season as the favorite for the No. 1 spot after an outstanding two years with the U.S. NTDP. His season has been very good as a leading member of a top team at Boston College. He's lost his clear claim to the top spot partly because he's been playing at a high-but-not-elite level, but also because the OHL players are having tremendous seasons. Hagens' biggest argument for the top spot in NHL circles is his position. He has the potential to be a first-line center in the NHL. He's a great skater and playmaker with dynamic qualities, but he's undersized. It would be easy to compare him to Jack Hughes, but he's not perceived to have quite that level of offensive talent. He's expected to be USA's first-line center and put in a position to make an impact in the tournament.

Porter Martone, RW, Canada (Brampton)

Martone has started this season on a tear in the OHL, scoring at a two-points-per-game pace for Brampton. He is a player with a ton of skill, size and compete. His projection as a big winger who can win a lot of puck battles and score at major levels is highly attractive for NHL clubs. The question with Martone for NHL teams is his pace. I don't think his skating is that big of an issue for his size, but he plays slowly, which could be a concern for higher levels. NHL teams will be highly curious to see how he fares in the tough World Junior games where the pace will be at its highest. If he shows he can play at those tempos, it would bolster his case for the No. 1 spot. He is expected to be a middle-six forward for Canada to start the tournament.

The other candidates

McQueen would have been in the mix for several NHL scouts before the season started. He's a huge center who can move quite well for a big man and is very skilled. He's been working through a back injury for months, though, and it's unclear when he will return to action.

I mentioned Schaefer and Martone above, but some OHL observers have argued Misa is at the same level as those two. Statistically, he is; he's dominating the OHL this season, displaying similar production to Martone but as a center and a better skater. I don't have his pure offensive talent or compete level graded quite as high as Martone's, though.

Finally, there is Frondell. He's gotten off to a slow start this season after missing time due to injury, but NHL teams still love this player. He has a ton of skill, has a great motor, can skate well and can score. His pure production hasn't jumped off the page like the other candidates, which is why I don't think he's in the 1A mix currently, but some scouts still see a player who can work his way back into that conversation in the second half.

I wouldn't rule out Moncton center Caleb Desnoyers going ahead of several of the names mentioned above either.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333133 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers play with maturity and patience, grab last win before Christmas break

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — A Christmas break about to begin, a string of wicked opponents in the rearview mirror, and two points rescued only the day before in a game the Edmonton Oilers were 18 seconds away from losing in regulation.

This Sunday nighter against Ottawa could have gone in any direction for the Oilers, with all those distractions and excuses at the ready, right?

Yeah, no…

"We're professionals," explained goalie Stuart Skinner, beaten only once as the Oilers threw a defensive gem at the Senators in a 3-1 win. "It's our job to do that no matter what time of year it is. The way we played just shows the maturity level."

Maturity was the buzzword in an uber-confident Oilers room these days, as they dispatch league leaders, bottom feeders and teams like Ottawa, who are trying to move from the latter to the former.

Other than a night by Evan Bouchard where the puck was a ticking bomb on the end of his stick, Edmonton simply rolled out a consistent, four-line game that forced the Senators to raise their level, likely beyond what they were able, on the final game of a four-game road trip with six straight wins under their belt.

This was the old bull versus the young bull. A team that's been through a lot in recent seasons against one that hopes that same experience awaits them, starting this playoff season.

"Maturity, resilience," began head coach Kris Knoblauch, who got as good a game from his bottom-six forwards as any coach could ask for. "You know, they went through a lot … last year, and they're able to handle the ups and downs. Whether it's the referee making a bad call, the other team making a strong push, getting a timely goal…

"You look at how these last three games have gone — they've gone completely different," he said. "Our team just shows so much maturity and patience to our game."

On Thursday, Edmonton trailed Boston 2-0 before grinding out a game that was tied up by Connor McDavid in the 57th minute, then won in OT. Two days later, San Jose goalie Yaroslav Askarov put on a three-ring circus in the Sharks' crease, but Mattias Ekholm tied the game with the goalie pulled and just 17.3 seconds to play. Leon Draisaitl won the game in OT.

Then, in the back-to-back against a tired Senators team, Edmonton simply grinded out win No. 3 in four days. It was there for Ottawa, but they would have had to push that much harder and find that much more juice.

The experienced team won this game — their 11th in 13 games — because they know how to win on nights like this.

"We learned a lot from last year," Knoblauch said, "but even prior to that, the playoffs runs they had, heartbreaking losses, winning streaks, whatever it is. We've got a lot of games played in that room, so they've got a lot of experience, and all that experience helps. Mostly in handling adversity."

Ottawa lost goalie Linus Ullmark after 20 minutes to an upper-body injury, while Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (ill) did not play for Edmonton. Ironically, it was the Oilers' power play that looked sick without Nugent-Hopkins, who is one of those players you don't truly appreciate until you see what your team looks like without him in the lineup.

Viktor Arvidsson stepped into RNH's spot and scored on a handsome feed from McDavid, while Adam Henrique scored the all-important 3-1 goal from linemates Mattias Janmark and Connor Brown just 1:38 into the third period.

Darnell Nurse played a near-perfect 24:17, giving up almost nothing, while Zach Hyman scored in his sixth straight game. He has 10 goals in nine games since returning from injury.

“I like our resilience,” Hyman said post-game. “The past couple of games, we were down going into the third and in this one, we were up and playing with the lead, and I thought we did a really good job defending the lead and not giving them much. I think we’re pretty confident in kind of giving up a little bit of offence to take away their offence and taking whatever is given.”

It’s the season for giving, sure. But stingy was better.

OIL SPILLS — Edmonton is now 14-2-1 in its last 17 against the Sens, while McDavid and Draisaitl each carry nine-game points streaks into Christmas.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333134 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Focused on team success, Canucks need both Miller and Pettersson

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — It is difficult to be the voice of reason around the Vancouver Canucks when so little about the team makes sense.

Their impassioned market can be riotously reactional even when times are good. And when the team has two wins in eight games and their two alpha forwards, who cost the Canucks nearly $20 million annually, have combined for no goals and four assists in the last six games, well, you'll find more civility at the start of The Hunger Games.

At least Katniss Everdeen killed quickly.

Of the many people purporting to know the relationship between struggling centres Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller, extremely few do.

But the whole salacious discussion about the closeness or distance between Miller and Pettersson — and why them not being best friends should shock or alarm anyone — misses a bigger point about the team.

Miller, himself, told Sportsnet two years ago that his relationship with Pettersson was an ongoing project.

“Petey and my relationship has come a long way,” Miller told us before a game in Nashville. “We're still working at it. We're completely different people, you know what I mean? You're not going to be BFFs with everybody, but at the same time you come to work together. I think we're putting in the time to at least try to get to know each other a little better. We are polar opposite in a lot of ways, but we're working at it. We've come a long way.”

His candid assessment was sparked by Pettersson’s defence of Miller, then only a month removed from his nadir with the Vancouver fan base, against criticism during the After Hours segment of Hockey Night in Canada.

“He’s a guy that wants to do everything to win and he’s a great teammate,” Pettersson said then. “I know, obviously, there’s people who want to. . . I don’t know if s--- on a player is the right (term). He’s passionate and all he cares about is winning. And yeah, he plays with a lot of emotion and so does the rest of the group.”

That was the season, by the way, that Pettersson had 102 points. Last year, Miller had 103. And knowing who their core teammates would be, both Miller and Pettersson signed lucrative contract extensions to remain with the Canucks because they believe the team can win a Stanley Cup.

That team goal trumps all individual relationships.

You think Trevor Linden and Pavel Bure were friends when the Canucks went to the Stanley Cup Final in 1994? And on the 2011 Vancouver team that lost to the Boston Bruins, you couldn’t find teammates more different than Ryan Kesler and the Sedins, Henrik and Daniel.

But all those players knew they needed the others to have their best chance to win.

“It's not about any individual player,” Canuck coach Rick Tocchet reiterated after Sunday’s practice. “It's always about the crest. Always.”

He added later that he sees no signs that any of the Canucks, obviously referring to Pettersson and Miller, are putting themselves or their problems ahead of the team.

“It's my job, the organization's job, to pinpoint when a player is not about the crest,” Tocchet said. “There'll be signs, and you look for them. With this, I saw a large sample size last year of success (including Pettersson and Miller). I think it's just been a really weird year, a roller coaster ride. So it's really hard to pinpoint anything right now, other than the fact that we're an inconsistent group.”

After Tocchet chided the media before Saturday’s 5-4 overtime loss to the Ottawa Senators for not requesting to speak to either of the parties in the alleged dressing-room rift, reporters briefly questioned Pettersson post-game.

“I don't know why people still try and make s--- up, excuse my language,” Pettersson said. “That's my response.”

On Sunday, it was Miller’s turn.

“You guys, in a sense of that outer world, have created this thing,” he told reporters in the hallway outside the Canucks dressing room. “Like, this isn't a thing. So am I bothered? No, but you guys are just wasting your time. I don't care. You guys want to talk about it? You want to ask me? Ask me all you want. I can bring up Petey, we can do the interview together if that would make you guys happy.”

Then, nearly 3 ½ minutes into his four-minute media availability, Miller said this: “Listen, I have a lot of stuff to worry about right now for myself. I'm not worried about any (outside) noise. The noise is between my ears, and I'm trying to figure out how to play a good 200-foot game for the team.”

The noise between his ears is worth remembering because it was only six games ago that Miller ended an extraordinary 10-game leave of absence for personal reasons.

It is naïve to think that whatever issues the 31-year-old was navigating suddenly vanished with his re-appearance in the Canucks lineup.

Clearly, the Canucks need Miller and Pettersson to be better. The team has managed to tread water through a rolodex of first-half challenges, but obviously requires both players in order to win. Just like Miller needs Pettersson, and Pettersson needs Miller. Not for dinner or PlayStation, as Tocchet said Saturday, but on the ice.

“A lot of players have. . . a lot of things on their plate,” the coach said Sunday. “You always try to coach the way that you want the player to leave the rink mind-free (as far as hockey). I think when you leave cloudy all the time, it affects your play. So each player deals with a lot of different things, and it's our job to create a safe environment for everybody.”

Famously volcanic as a player, Tocchet has managed to project calmness — and, usually, clarity — during the upheaval of the Canucks’ first 33 games, and especially the last two weeks.

“When you're in this business, you've got to let these things not bother you,” he told Sportsnet. “I mean, it's hard. You walk into a market like this and there's fireballs everywhere. If I listen to this stuff, how am I supposed to coach? So, I don't listen to this stuff, and that's my suggestion to players.”

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333135 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Sharks' Celebrini returns to hometown Vancouver in 'surreal' full-circle moment

Courtney Jacobsen

VANCOUVER — The last time we saw Macklin Celebrini inside Rogers Arena, he was amidst the hoards of Vancouver Canucks fans cheering on the home squad during last May's Game 7.

The next time we see him, he won't be in the stands — he'll be on the ice as a member of the San Jose Sharks, skating opposite the team he once cheered for. ("Sharks now," the youngster quipped when asked about his viral jumbotron moment, shutting down any implications he still holds a soft spot for his hometown team.)

It's a full-circle moment for Celebrini, who at eight years old would tear up the ice and hang out in the arena's family room between periods with his brother when his father — now with the NBA's Golden State Warriors — worked for the Canucks.

Monday's game will mark the first time he skates on the ice as an NHL player.

So, how does it feel to be back?

"Pretty surreal," the 2024 first-overall pick admitted following Sunday's practice. "Skating here when I was younger, trying to put myself in like an NHL player situation and pretend to be them, and now [I] get to practice here and get ready for the game tomorrow.

"I think every time I was here, I'd want to skate and kind of get on that ice, just because the NHL has always been a dream of mine. To do that as a kid was pretty cool, and tomorrow's going to be pretty cool as well."

Celebrini returns to his hometown now having gone through a whirlwind eight months. Following his first year at Boston University, Celebrini joined Adam Fantilli (2023) and Jack Eichel (2015) as the only freshmen to have won the Hobey Baker since Paul Kariya in 1993. Just over two months later, he was selected first overall by the Sharks and has since cemented himself as one of the team's most exciting players of the 2020s.

The 18-year-old might be third in rookie scoring with 11 goals and 12 assists in 24 games, but he leads the league's newbies in points-per-game (.958) while centring the Sharks' second line between Nikolai Kovalenko and one-time Canuck Tyler Toffoli.

Just over two months into his first NHL season, he's already making an impact.

The first time the Canucks played the Sharks this season, Celebrini was injured. Now, the home team will be faced with containing the smooth-skating forward for the first time.

"I watched him last night against Edmonton, I've watched him this year. I mean, he's 18," Canucks head coach Rick Tocchet told reporters following their practice at Rogers Arena. "I mean, the kid's a player. He's got a bright future ahead of him."

An offensive phenom, to be sure, but Celebrini is still human and has faced an, albeit small, learning curve in trying to manage the strenuous, 82-game schedule in his first NHL season.

"It's been good. I mean I've had a lot of vets, we have an amazing group of leaders in that room," Celebrini, who has been living with Sharks great Joe Thornton during his rookie season, said. "We have an awesome staff that helps us with that, but it is tough to get up every day and perform."

Even though the Sharks have lost 14 more games than they've won, there's a bit more fun, and a sense of hope, around this franchise that hasn't necessarily been there in years past. The squad took a powerhouse Oilers team to the brink on Saturday night, carrying a lead until they ultimately lost in overtime.

"We haven't won too many in the past couple games, but we've been there," Celebrini admitted. "We've been close enough where I think we should have won a couple of those games, but that's the nature of it. You're not going to win every game. We're just going to keep trying to learn how to close out games, especially when we have the lead, how to protect it and how to shut some of those games out."

The Sharks have an opportunity to build off their loss to the Oilers, even though they're considered underdogs for Monday's tilt. The Canucks have been slugging through December and have been uninspired, to say the least, at Rogers Arena and have won just six of 12 games on home ice.

Snapping a four-game skid is front of mind for Celebrini, though it helps that he will have a significant contingent in his corner amid an otherwise hostile crowd. Unfortunately for his wallet — and all too common when an NHL player returns home — this will be a pay-to-play game for Celebrini, forking out the cash to ensure his friends and family have the chance to watch him play an NHL game for the first time.

Included in that is his older brother and Canucks prospect, Aiden, who currently plays for Boston University. Is he going to ask the elder Celebrini to sport Sharks colours?

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Celebrini joked, adding he’d rather not see his brother in Canucks colours either. “Just keep it neutral.”

Even though he's sporting a shark instead of an orca, Celebrini still has much love for the city and the memories he made here.

"I remember I saw Sid [Sidney Crosby] in the hallway, and me and my brother were kind of freaking out. We saw the scenes walking by and stuff. I mean, those are the memories that kind of stick with you," Celebrini said.

"This is my hometown. So, [it means] a lot."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333136 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Goaltending will be key to Canada's success at WJC

Jason Bukala

With world junior rosters now set for all competing countries, prognosticators are lining up with their predictions for each team’s potential for success.

The host Canadians, along with Team Sweden and defending champion Team USA, seem to be garnering the largest number of votes as favourites to medal. My experience, from attending 13 previous world juniors, tells me to never rule out the pesky teams from Finland and Czechia. Both countries are never an easy out in world championship events.

One thing that is certain is the fact any team hoping to walk away with a gold medal draped around their necks after the final whistle on Jan. 5 in Ottawa will rely on heavily on elite goaltending.

Team Canada has three goalies rostered for the tournament. Carter George (Owen Sound Attack) and Jack Ivankovic (Brampton Steelheads) stop pucks in the OHL while Carson Bjarnason tends net for the Brandon Wheat Kings in the WHL.

Here's a closer look at the three Team Canada netminders and what their roles could be.

CARTER GEORGE

Height: Six-foot-one

Weight: 190 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Owen Sound Attack (OHL)

NHL Draft: Los Angeles Kings, second round, 57th overall (2024)

George was the second-rated goalie for the entry draft last summer. He ended up the third netminder off the board when the Kings selected him with the 57th pick overall.

His athletic ability and crease quickness provide him the ability to track the play moving side to side and make saves that some goaltenders aren’t programmed to make. He fronts shooters very well, making him as big as possible between the posts. He also possesses a fantastic glove hand and the ability to fight through screens to find pucks in traffic.

An additional element that George provides is his ability to play the puck. He can step outside his crease to outlet pucks long-range and launch the attack offensively for the group.

George led Team Canada to gold medals at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup and World U18 Championship in 2023-24. He was named the top goaltender at the worlds and was also named to the OHL all-rookie team. As impressive as he is on the ice, George excels in the classroom as well. He was awarded the top scholastic player in the OHL last season.

George is well-rounded and uber-focused. He has a history of success with Team Canada and appears to have the inside track for the starting job. He's up for the challenge, but Canada boasts a couple of additional options if George falters.

CARSON BJARNASON

Height: Six-foot-four

Weight: 207 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)

NHL Draft: Philadelphia Flyers, second round, 51st overall (2023)

Bjarnason gives opponents a different look between the posts. He's by far the biggest of Canada's three netminders. Bjarnason plays a hybrid style. Like all goalies, he's at his best when he maintains composure and doesn't wander outside his posts. The good news is he has the length to make pad save, laterally, with his stature. Bjarnason is having a solid season in Brandon, posting a 2.90 GAA and .913 save percentage in 16 games.

Here's an example of Bjarnason using his size to his advantage and keeping his composure between his posts. He squares up very well to make the first save and positions himself responsibly to make a second stop if required. His head is on a swivel surveying how the play develops in front of him:

Bjarnason has won a Hlinka Gretzky Cup gold and a World U18 Championship bronze medal representing Canada in the past. He too is up for the task if called upon in Ottawa.

JACK IVANKOVIC

Height: Five-foot-11

Weight: 178 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

NHL Draft: 2025 Eligible

Ivankovic is the youngest of the three Team Canada goaltenders. He's eligible for the draft next June and is one of the top-ranked goaltenders in the world. Ivankovic was fantastic for Team Canada at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup in Edmonton this past August. He led the Canadians to gold, posting an incredible 0.75 GAA and .967 save percentage in his four starts.

Ivankovic makes up for his current lack of size with his athleticism and read/react quickness around his crease. Similar to Dustin Wolf from the Calgary Flames, Ivankovic closes on opponents when they are locked and loaded around his net. His aggressive style, and overall low net coverage, takes away shooting options for his opponent.

Here's a sequence that displays what I'm describing:

I'm not sure Canada will have to go to Ivankovic in this tournament, but I have confidence in his ability if his number is called.

It's more realistic to think he will gain very valuable experience from this experience and look forward to future starting assignments for Team Canada at the world juniors.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.23.2024

1333137 Websites

TSN.CA / 'Dominant everywhere': McKenna on brink of breaking out for Canada

Mark Masters

Team Canada practised at TD Place in Ottawa on Sunday.

How close is Gavin McKenna to breaking out for Team Canada?

"I thought he honestly did last night, really," said Spokane Chiefs centre Berkly Catton. "He was, I thought, the best player on the ice. He was just dominant everywhere. Every time he has the puck he makes a difference."

The Medicine Hat Tigers phenom has not hit the scoresheet in two pre-tournament games, but is looking more and more dangerous ahead of the World Juniors. In Thursday's exhibition opener against Switzerland, McKenna started as the 13th forward and admitted to dealing with nerves as he adjusted to a new role. On Saturday, he started on a regular line with Catton and Ottawa 67s forward Luca Pinelli.

"He responded well," said Team Canada head coach Dave Cameron. "Gavin had a real good game. I really liked that line. They were in the O-zone. All three of them played really smart."

"I had a better night," McKenna said. "The more puck touches you get the more confident you are, so I think I had quite a few more puck touches. I was making more plays, feeling really confident out there, and it was lots of fun to play with those two guys."

The chances haven't fallen yet for McKenna, but no one around Team Canada is worried. Porter Martone has seen this before.

"It's going to come," the Brampton Steelheads winger assured. "I played with him at the u18 Worlds and I remember the first two pre-tournament games the pucks just weren't going in and as soon as the tournament started he just went off. I'm expecting big things from him this tournament. I think all of Canada is too."

McKenna is Canada's youngest player. He's not eligible to be picked until the 2026 NHL draft. And yet that feels like a fair expectation.

McKenna, who is 6-foot, 165 pounds, has proven consistently he can elevate against older and bigger competition. He's leading the Western Hockey League with 60 points in 30 games. At the 2024 under-18 World Championship, he piled up 20 points in seven games, including a hat trick in the gold medal game.

"There were a couple cutbacks there where he almost picked a spot the size of a puck," London Knights winger Easton Cowan said. "It's going to come soon. He's a positive guy, so I'm sure it will come any time now."

'He was dominant everywhere': McKenna's teammates think he's close to breaking outGavin McKenna played on a regular line in Canada's win over Sweden in pre-tournament action Saturday night, and he got some scoring chances throughout. He talks about the game and playing on a regular line, while his teammates discuss how close they think he is to breaking out.

McKenna confirmed he is a "distant" cousin of Connor Bedard through marriage and the Chicago Blackhawk sophomore offered up some advice ahead of the World Juniors.

"He told me to be confident," McKenna said. "Obviously as a young guy you might not play a lot early on, but make sure you're playing both sides of the puck. He worked his way up the lineup when he was here at a young age. For me to hopefully do the same and follow in his footsteps that's kind of what I want to do."

Bedard exploded out of the gates in his World Junior debut in Edmonton with a four-goal game before the 2022 event was postponed due to the COVID pandemic. Bedard picked up eight points in seven games to help Canada win gold when the full tournament was played in the summer. Cameron was also Canada's coach back then.

Bedard and McKenna don't talk regularly, but the Whitehorse native appreciates that he has a sounding board whenever he needs one.

"I think we go through some pretty similar stuff," McKenna noted. "I kind of have him to lean on."

Most of their conversations have focused on all the attention top prospects receive. McKenna is almost always requested to do interviews after games and practices.

"It's something I've learned to deal with the past few years," McKenna said. "I'm starting to get used to it. I kind of knew it was coming here, being one of the young guys, and having the spotlight on you a little bit. I was kind of expected it and I prepared for it so I'm OK with it."

McKenna turned 17 on Friday and the team sang him 'Happy Birthday' and brought out a chocolate cake at the end of dinner.

Are his current teammates offering any advice?

"Here and there," said Cowan. "But he gives me advice too."

Like what?

"What to do with the puck sometimes," said Cowan, who leads Canada with four goals in pre-tournament play. "Sometimes he protects the puck extremely well and it's in his hip pocket, so I like to know what he's thinking, so just little things like that. Everyone in the room just chats with each other about stuff like that to get better."

Cowan, one of four returning players on Team Canada, sees similarities between McKenna and San Jose Sharks rookie sensation Macklin Celebrini, who led Canada in scoring last year at age 17.

"Both win puck battles," the Toronto Maple Leafs prospect noted. "Both can turn on a dime, both can make great plays, and both great people off the ice too."

'He told me to be confident as a young guy': McKenna on getting advice from Bedard 17-year-old Gavin McKenna spoke about his relationship with Connor Bedard, the advice he's given him, and handling life in the spotlight, while Easton Cowan compares his game to Macklin Celebrini.

Catton was named Canada's player of the game on Saturday despite not picking up a point.

"It was pretty cool," the 18-year-old said. "As you could see, I didn't really expect it, but it was awesome. Our line had a really good game last night. We seemed to generate lots from the start of the game right to the end so that was a lot of fun last night."

Pinelli, who was a healthy scratch on Thursday, scored Canada's opening goal by deflecting in a shot by Soo Greyhounds defenceman Andrew Gibson shot. At 5-foot-9, Pinelli is the shortest forward on the team, but he never shies away from physical play.

The goal was all the more special, because Pinelli is the Ottawa 67s captain and was playing in his Ontario Hockey League rink.

"Obviously this building's like home so I'm very used to it," he said. "Yeah, it felt really special to be in here."

Cameron has coached Pinelli the last three seasons. He saw the Columbus Blue Jackets fourth round pick pot 48 goals in 68 games last season. Pinelli already has 21 goals in 26 games this year, which is tied for most on Team Canada with Martone.

"He played a typical Pinelli game," Cameron said. "He's a scorer, but he also brings energy. He's tenacious. He brings energy to the team. He brings energy on the bench and can play any spot you want to put him. I was really excited for Luca."

Pinelli remained on the line with McKenna and Catton at Sunday's practice.

"Pins just knows how to score," Catton said. "That's what everyone says around here. He's always in the right spots. He put that one home last night and that's all because he was in the right spot. Credit to him."

WJC: Sweden 2, Canada 4Calum Ritchie scored the go-ahead goal with less than four minutes remaining and Easton Cowan added the insurance marker two minutes later as Canada rallied back with three goals in the third period to down Sweden in WJC pre-tournament action.

Pinelli scored from the front of the net, but it took time for the rest of the team to follow his lead.

"The big thing about the third period is we had some net presence," said Cameron. "We had some good zone time, but we had net presence and we were more engaged and we won more 1-on-1 battles."

Canada trailed Sweden 2-1 heading to the third period. All three members of the top line – Cal Ritchie, Bradly Nadeau and Cowan – scored during the final frame.

"It's looking like one of the best lines I've ever seen, probably," said Knights defenceman Oliver Bonk. "They just have natural chemistry. Like, every guy plays at such a quick speed and with such hockey IQ. They just read off each other so well."

Nadeau deflected home Bonk's shot to tie the game midway through the third period.

"Just net-front presence," Ritchie observed. "That's a pro-hockey kind of goal."

The goal was initially credited to Bonk.

Nadeau, who was loaned to Hockey Canada by the Carolina Hurricanes, has spent this season with the Chicago Wolves in the American Hockey League.

"I love playing with those guys," said Ritchie, who suited up in seven games with the Colorado Avalanche at the start of the season. "They work so hard. We're trying to click. Our chemistry is getting there."

"We put them together thinking they would dominate, knowing that it's going to take a little while to mesh," said Cameron. "They've gotten better each game."

Cowan produced a hat trick, the first of his junior career, in Thursday's game against Switzerland.

Despite the early success, Canada's top-line trio is far satisfied.

"I think we have another level," Ritchie said. "It will be interesting once we get a few more games under our belt. It will be awesome."

What does the next level look like for them?

"Probably just finishing all of our chances," Cowan said. "We probably had around like eight solid chances, so if we can bury them it will help our team out even more."

Canada wraps up their pre-tournament schedule on Monday against Czechia at the Canadian Tire Centre.

Canada's top line thinks they have another level for the World Juniors Canada's top line at the World Juniors continues to show it's lethal nature during the pre-tournament action generating a lot of chemistry and goals early, however they believe there's another level to the line. Speaking to media following the game Calum Ritchie and Easton Cowan discuss the next levels they feel they can get to.

After missing Friday's practice and Saturday's game, Martone was a full participant in Sunday's workout.

"In the first pre-tournament game there I tweaked something early in the game," Martone said. "I finished the game so that was a good sign. We wanted to be precautionary."

Martone skated on a line with Catton and Brampton Steelheads forward Carson Rehkopf on Thursday. At Sunday's practice, he was with Lethbridge Hurricanes centre Brayden Yager and Calgary Hitmen winger Tanner Howe.

"Two very high-skilled players, but also play a hard game," Martone said. "If we really get rolling and find some chemistry, we can be a really hard line to stop in the tournament."

Canada's top line thinks they have another level for the World Juniors Canada's top line at the World Juniors continues to show it's lethal nature during the pre-tournament action generating a lot of chemistry and goals early, however they believe there's another level to the line. Speaking to media following the game Calum Ritchie and Easton Cowan discuss the next levels they feel they can get to.

Canada's three goalies have all been in for 40 minutes of pre-tournament play.

Carter George stopped all 11 shots he faced in the first two periods of Thursday's game against the Swiss.

Jack Ivankovic turned aside 16 of the 18 shots in the opening two periods of Saturday's game against the Swedes.

Carson Bjarnason played the third period in both games, stopping nine of 10 shots.

"They're making it really hard," Cameron said of the decisions moving forward. "Goaltending was huge. Early on, Jack held us in there, made some saves and then Barny came in in the third and made some big saves when it was still 2-1. Huge. We're going to need it."

During an interview with Postmedia, Hockey Canada management group lead Peter Anholt said George is emerging in the race to be the starter. The Owen Sound Attack goalie backstopped Canada to a gold medal at the recent under-18 World Championship.

"That gold medal game in Finland, we were getting outshot 30-6 against the US," Martone recalled. "He's the reason we had a chance to come back and walk away with a gold medal."

George ran the table – 6-0-0 – with a .915 save percentage at that tournament.

"It's just staying calm in the big moment," he said. "Me being calm in those pressure situations allowed my team to play their game with confidence."

How does George, who also has a Hlinka Gretzky Cup gold medal on his resume, remain calm? Well, the 18-year-old sings during games.

"That's been my whole life," he said. "I always sing in my net. I'm always singing a song ... Usually it's whatever's stuck in my head."

On Thursday it was Great Big Sea's 'Ordinary Day' which is being used as Canada's goal song in pre-tournament play. (It was Canada's goal song at last year's event in Sweden.)

"We've scored a couple times so it's been stuck in my head," he said with a smile. "So that's what I've been singing a lot."

In January, George started working with goalie mindset consultant Peter Fry.

"I didn't really want a mental coach," the Los Angeles Kings second rounder said. "I thought I was pretty strong mentally and then, once I got with him, it was kind of eye-opening and it definitely helped my game out a lot."

Fry has helped him choose the best songs to sing during games so as to avoid negative words. But that's not the biggest change he's made.

"The No. 1 thing was probably just not being so focused," George said. "I felt like I'd be focused when I got to the rink at 4, and I'd be focused 'til 10 and it would just drain me out so much. Through a 68-game [OHL] season you can't really do that. So, for me, it was learning how to go into focus and then going out of it. We have little tricks and stuff that he's taught me and it's definitely really helped me out a lot."

It's been a tough year in the standings for the young Attack team, but George has posted an impressive .905 save percentage. Some of his calmness is just in the genes. His mom, Tara George, was a professional curler.

"The best thing I got from her is just to stay stay calm no matter what happens," the Thunder Bay, Ont. native said. "Stuff isn't always going to go your way and you just got to stay calm through thick and thin."

Tara won bronze with the Krista McCarville rink at the 2010 Scott Tournament of Hearts. Carter never felt any pressure to follow mom onto the pebbled ice.

"I've actually never touched the ice," he said. "It's kind of crazy. I wish I could. Once I kind of grew up I always wanted to, but I never got the chance too."

'It was eye opening': George on positives of working with mental coachCarter George spoke to the media on Sunday about his positive experiences from working with a mental coach, how he stays calm in the net during the game by singing whatever song is currently stuck in his head and his teammates spoke on how composed he is in the net and the confidence it gives them on the ice.

Ivankovic is the youngest goalie in the mix at age 17.

"I'm coming in here the same way if I was playing my own age," he said. "I want to be the No. 1 guy so I'm going to keep playing my game."

Ivankovic, who is eligible to be picked in the next NHL draft, stood on his head for Canada at the summer Hlinka Gretzky Cup. He was named player of the game in the semifinal and final en route to a gold medal.

"I don't really get too nervous," he said. "I like to stay calm in anything I do ... Any time you play with the leaf on your chest you want to do well and I've got lucky enough to wear it a bunch, so I'm coming here with the same mindset as any [other] tournament."

Ivankovic isn't intimidated by anything in the crease despite standing just 5-foot-11. He even dropped the gloves and fought 20-year-old Niagara IceDogs goalie Owen Flores, who stands 6-foot-2, back in October.

"He kind of came down, and I don't back down from anyone so I just did it," the Mississauga, Ont. native said. "It's not what I like to do. If you know me, I'm an easygoing kind of guy. It's whatever."

Not everyone is built this way.

"I've got asked a few times but I've never fought," George said. "I've backed down a couple times from them."

Bjarnason was shocked when he learned Ivankovic dropped the blocker and glove this season.

"He fought? Oh my God," the 19-year-old from Carbery, Man. said. "I'm going to go talk to him about that, see how it went. I've never been close. I feel like I keep my emotions in check and that's something I take pride in."

'I don't back down from anyone': Ivankovic on his fight in OHLMembers of Team Canada spoke to the media on Sunday about Jack Ivankovic fighting in the OHL and if the other goalies on the team have fought or will fight if the opportunity ever presents itself.

Bjarnason's role model is Carey Price.

"I try to emulate that as much as I can," the Philadelphia Flyers prospect said. "It's just his efficiency in his movements and the poise he carries. It's something I try and reenact."

Like George, he's worked with Fry.

"I've chatted just kind of on and off with him for two years now," Bjarnason said. "Somebody I just reach out to every once in a while if I need it. He's definitely a great resource."

But not the only one. Bjarnason also works with sport psychologist John Stevenson, who is the founder of Champions Mindset.

"I try to stay cool, calm, and collected out there," Bjarnason. "I try and act like nothing fazes me and be pretty emotionless. I feel like that's always something I've had is that poise and stoicism. I just try to carry that through my carer."

Bjarnason, who led the WHL in save percentage (.913 in 16 games) when he left for Canada's camp, showed off that poise on Saturday when he entered the game with Canada trailing.

"Going in in the third, it's never easy," he said. "Just trying to gauge myself on footwork and how I see the ice. I'm feeling pretty good."

Bjarnason hasn't had a relief performance in the WHL since his 16-year-old season.

"It's just a matter of keeping your focus throughout the game," he said. "Doing little things to keep you in it."

Bjarnason discusses 'friendly competition' among goalies battling for starting jobCarson Bjarnason came in the third period to finish the game for Jack Ivankovic and made six saves as Canada came back to beat Sweden 4-2. He joins TSN's Mark Masters to share what his mindset was heading into the third, and what it's like coming in for relief.

Team Canada held a shootout game near the end of practice. Who stood out?

"Tough to choose," Bjarnason. "Actually Berkly Catton is very smooth."

"I would have to say Cowan," George said. "I think he's got a perfect record against me in shootouts. He has a go-to move, but he just has so many options off it and so unpredictable. He's pretty good at hiding what he wants to do."

Cowan's Team Red came out on top with Carson Rehkopf also potting a couple goals.

"I was watching Rehkopf go and he seemed to score every time," Catton said "His shot is so powerful that goalies get a little scared and then he makes a little chip play or something, which I saw a couple times today. I would say he was probably the best today."

Team Canada players discuss the shootout stand outs at practiceMembers of Team Canada spoke to the media today about who they believe has the best shootout moves on the team and how difficult it can be for the goalies to stop such talented players in a 1-on-1 battle.

TSN.CA LOADED: 12.23.2024