CAROLINA HURRICANES
NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 1, 2025

The Athletic

How Mikko Rantanen, Taylor Hall can fix long-standing concerns about Hurricanes

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — One statement from Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour stood out among the many he has made since Carolina turned the NHL on its ear and acquired Mikko Rantanen and Taylor Hall last Friday in a blockbuster three-team trade.

"There's a little transition going on here," he said after the Hurricanes' 4-0 win over the New York Rangers on Tuesday at Madison Square Garden.

The comment was about the play Rantanen made on Andrei Svechnikov's second goal.

> Mikko Rantanen's first point as a Hurricane is an assist to Andrei Svechnikov 🧡 pic.twitter.com/gI3DYgirtj
>
> — Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) January 29, 2025

The power-play assist was Rantanen's first point since joining the Hurricanes — he scored his first goal Thursday night in a win over the Chicago Blackhawks — and made observers wonder about the possibility of adding one of the game's top players to Carolina's lineup.

It clearly had the coach thinking, too.

Despite the Hurricanes' overall success since Brind'Amour took over as coach, they have faced criticism for being unable to reach a Stanley Cup Final or win a title. A handful of usual suspects are mentioned as the reason: questionable goaltending, disappearing special teams, lack of a star player, a shortage of physicality and a system that isn't conducive to winning in the postseason.

Carolina might have solved four of those issues with one move.

Special teams

The Hurricanes' penalty kill remains the NHL's best at 86.2 percent entering Saturday's visit from the Los Angeles Kings. Since Brind'Amour took over as coach before the 2018-19 season, Carolina is head-and-shoulders better than the rest of the league while short-handed. The Hurricanes have killed 85.1 percent of penalties during those six-plus seasons, which is 2.5 percent better than the second-place Boston Bruins.

To put that gap in perspective, the Bruins' 82.6 percent kill rate is 2.5 percent better than the Colorado Avalanche's 80.1 percent since 2018 — and the Avalanche rank 12th in the NHL during that time.

Carolina's PK hasn't been as good in the postseason (76 percent), but much of that is due to having played the Bruins, Rangers and Tampa Bay Lightning multiple times in the playoffs. Those three teams rank second, fourth and fifth since the 2019 postseason in power-play success.

The Hurricanes power play, however, has been a cause for concern in the regular season and during the playoffs. Carolina has never been better than 19.4 percent (last season) in a playoff run and has a cumulative postseason power play of 14.9 percent since Brind'Amour took over — 24th of 28 teams that have reached the playoffs.

Comparatively, the Avalanche have converted on more than a quarter of their power plays since the start of the 2019 playoffs, scoring on 26.4 percent of their chances.

A big reason for that was Rantanen.

Rantanen has 38 power-play points in 75 playoff games since 2019, tied with former linemate Nathan MacKinnon for the fourth most in the NHL in the past six seasons. His 29 primary points (goals plus primary assists) match the Edmonton Oilers' Leon Draisaitl and trail only Boston's Brad Marchand (36), Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov (35) and Edmonton's Connor McDavid (31).

The Hurricanes' top power-play producer over the past six postseasons was Sebastian Aho, whose 15 points in 74 games rank tied for 35th with two defensemen (John Carlson, 27 games with the Washington Capitals; Shea Theodore, 74 games with the Vegas Golden Knights), Chris Kreider (46 games with the Rangers) and two second-tier forwards (David Perron, 47 games with the St. Louis Blues; Jordan Eberle, 63 games with the New York Islanders and Seattle Kraken).

Andrei Svechnikov is next with 12 power-play points, meaning Rantanen has 1 more point than Aho and Svechnikov combined on the man advantage over the past six playoffs.

Carolina will have the rest of the regular season to acclimate Rantanen to its top unit. After a red-hot start to the season — triggered by Martin Necas' equally impressive first two months — the Hurricanes' power play has dipped to 20th in the league at 20.5 percent, coincidentally just in front of the Avalanche's 20.3 percent.

Furthermore, Hall adds some needed punch to the second unit. Though the 2010 No. 1 NHL Draft pick had just three power-play points in 46 games with Chicago, he also had limited minutes (76 seconds per game) on a team with a severe dearth of talent.

In his final two seasons with Boston, Hall had a respectable 11 goals and 23 points on the power play in 2:34 per game.

Taylor Hall adds some needed punch to the Hurricanes' second power-play unit. (Brad Penner / Imagn Images)

Star power

Critics have often said the Hurricanes lack someone who could elevate their game in the playoffs and be the dominant player in a series.

Not anymore.

On top of Rantanen's success on the power play, he is third in the NHL in playoff even-strength goals (23) and points (59) in the last six postseasons. Overall, his 97 points in all situations are behind only Kucherov (108), McDavid (108) and MacKinnon (98) since the 2019 playoffs.

By comparison, Aho ranks sixth in even-strength points with 52 in 74 games. So, though Rantanen will no longer have MacKinnon as his running mate, having Aho as his expected center isn't much of a downgrade.

Rantanen has been overshadowed by MacKinnon and Cale Makar in Colorado, but he has been a superstar in his own right.

Since the start of the 2018-19 season, Rantanen has 213 goals (eighth), 282 assists (18th) and 495 points (ninth). He is tied for eighth in game-winning goals (36) and points per game (1.22). He has three seasons with at least 90 points — something only nine other players in the league have done in the past six seasons.

Coming to Carolina is a chance for Rantanen to show he is a star in his own right, and it also has the potential to rise all boats — success for Rantanen likely means more points for Aho and others who get to play with him frequently.

Size matters

"Huge." "Gigantic." "Massive."

Those were just a few of the words used by Rantanen's new teammates to describe the 6-foot-4, 215-pound Finn.

The Hurricanes' toughness has been questioned in recent years as heavy teams like Vegas and the Florida Panthers have won Stanley Cups. Rantanen is by no means a rock 'em, sock 'em throwback, but he is certainly a lot to handle.

"When you can get heavy, that's playoff hockey, too," Hurricanes forward Jordan Martinook said. "I feel like you've noticed it in the past with us; maybe we were missing a little bit of that. Obviously, when Svech was out that year in the (2023) playoffs, you noticed it. It's always nice to have a little more meat around."

In Rantanen's first few games with Carolina, he has already demonstrated his ability to win board battles and hold on to pucks below the goal line, which matches the Hurricanes' offensive-zone strategy.

"His ability to play below the dots with the puck and protect it and hold on to it and make plays at the net front is going to fit really well with the way we play," Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said last Saturday before Rantanen made his debut with the team. "And I think the way Jordan (Staal) can do that is a core part of our team identity, and the more players we have who can do that, the more we can play to that identity."

In the three games since the trade, Brind'Amour put Staal (6-4, 200 pounds), Svechnikov (6-3, 199 pounds) and Rantanen on three different lines, giving them plenty of size to complement some of the team's smaller players like Seth Jarvis, Jackson Blake and Aho.

"We're obviously a little bigger with having this guy," Staal said of Rantanen. "Probably a little more balance, a little more grit, and so those are good things come playoff time."

Change in mentality

The Hurricanes aren't going to overhaul what they do to accommodate their new players — as Tulsky said, the trade made sense because Rantanen is a star player who already fits the team's mentality.

Still, as Brind'Amour said, a "transition" is happening, a belief that the additions of Rantanen and Hall take to another level what Carolina can do on the ice each night.

"I think the game is always grounded in what we do, and the new guys will learn that because the game works," Staal said. "But when you add players like that, you add more capabilities of game-breaking and the abilities of winning games (in) different ways."

Hall, in his small sample with Carolina, has also shown an ability to use his speed to get in on the forecheck and disrupt defenders. He pairs that with the high-end skill that made him a former Hart Trophy winner.

"They are two players that are very skilled and very capable of putting the puck in the back of the net or helping that situation," Staal said. "But the game stays the same, and it doesn't work if you don't all stay on the same page and (are) doing the things we do."

Meshing the talents Rantanen and Hall possess with the structure of Carolina's system offers the possibility of the Hurricanes elevating their play — and perhaps finally getting over the hump.

"They'll have to buy in and find ways to do what we do," Staal said, "and then contribute with the skill set that they have."

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CBS SPORTS

NHL trade tracker 2024-2025: Rangers acquire JT Miller, Hurricanes trade for Mikko Rantanen

By: Austin Nivison

The wait for a JT Miller trade is finally over. The Vancouver Canucks have dealt the veteran forward to the New York Rangers in exchange for Filip Chytil and a conditional first-round pick. Defenseman Erik Brannstrom and prospect Jack Dorrington also went to New York while defenseman Victor Mancini went to Vancouver.

This will be Miller's second stint with the Rangers after spending the first six seasons of his NHL career with the franchise. Since the start of the 2021-22 season, only 12 players have tallied more than Miller's 312 points. The 30-year-old forward will bring playmaking and scoring to the Rangers' lineup, and the team needs a spark as it sits five point outside the final playoff spot in the East.

Miller is in the middle of a down year, notching just nine goals and 26 assists in 40 games. Perhaps a change of scenery can get him back to the 103-point heights we saw from him just last season.

By shedding Miller's entire $8 million salary cap hit, which continues for the next five seasons, the Canucks will give themselves space to make another move. Vancouver also got some speed and skill for their middle-six in the form of Chytil, who has 164 points in 378 career games.

Keep track of the most notable trades throughout the 2024-25 NHL season right here.

Rangers acquire JT Miller from Canucks

The JT Miller soap opera in Vancouver has finally reached its end. The Canucks sent Miller, along with defenseman Erik Brannstrom and prospect Jack Dorrington, to the New York Rangers. Forward Filip Chytil, defenseman Victor Mancini and a conditional first-round pick went back to Vancouver.

Miller was a 100-point player just last season, and the Rangers have been missing some dynamic playmaking at the top of their lineup this year. Miller can bring that, but the big question is whether his disappointing start in 2024-25 was due to the drama between himself and Elias Pettersson. Either way, New York did get notably better with this deal.

The Canucks were able to free up a few million dollars in salary cap space while acquiring Chytil, who will bring some speed and skill in a depth forward role.

Flyers, Flames swap multiple players

This deal won't get many headlines because there were no marquee names involved, but this is a very interesting player swap. Farabee, a two-time 20-goal scorer, has shown the ability to contribute offensively but seems to have hit a ceiling in Philadelphia. The same can be said for Frost, a former first-round pick who has 112 points in the last three seasons.

On the other side, Andrei Kuzmenko has a penchant for going on goal-scoring tears, but he has been rather inconsistent in that department. He will at least be able to give the Flyers more of a scoring touch. Pelletier, a first-round pick in his own right, has been unable to break through for a full-time role in Calgary.

Isles add D Scott Perunovich from Blues

The Islanders added some offensive skill to their depleted blue line by acquiring Scott Perunovich from the Blues. New York sent a conditional 2025 fifth-round pick back to St. Louis.

Hurricanes, Avalanche pull off blockbuster deal

The Avalanche were at a crossroads with Mikko Rantanen, a pending free agent, and they decided to ship him out and replace him with the cheaper Necas. Colorado does crate salary cap space with this deal, so Joe Sakic may have something else up his sleeve.

Carolina, already a Stanley Cup contender, only got that much better by acquiring one of the most prolific scorers in the game today. Combining Rantanen with the current Hurricanes roster and their dominant five-on-five game should be a winning combination.

In order to make the deal work, the Blackhawks will retain 50% of Rantanen's salary, and they get a 2025 third-round pick from the Canes for that and Hall.

Avalanche add forward depth with Juuso Parssinen

The Avalanche, in need of some depth up front, have added Juuso Parssinen and a 2026 seventh-round pick from the Predators in exchange for prospect Ondrej Pavel and a 2027 third-round pick. Parssinen has 44 points in 116 career NHL games.

Predators, Canadiens exchange defensemen

The Montreal Canadiens have acquired defenseman Alex Carrier, a Quebec native, from the Nashville Predators. Defenseman Justin Barron was sent to Nashville in return. Carrier, 28, will give the young Canadiens roster some stability on the back end, and the 23-year-old Barron will allow the Predators to get younger and cheaper, if not a little more volatile, on defense.

Kraken acquire Kaapo Kakko from Rangers

The Rangers sent forward Kaapo Kakko to the Kraken in exchange for defenseman Will Borgen and third-round and

sixth-round picks in the 2025 NHL Draft. Kakko, the No. 2 overall pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, has struggled to reach that potential at the NHL level. He had 61 goals and 70 assists in 330 carer games with the Rangers.

Ducks send veteran defenseman Cam Fowler to Blues

The Blues needed some reinforcements on the blue line, which is dealing with injuries to Torey Krug and Nick Leddy, so they added Cam Fowler from the Ducks. Fowler, now in his 16th NHL season, will bring experience and offense to the St. Louis.

The Ducks also send a 2027 fourth-round pick to the Blues in exchange for defenseman Jeremie Biakabutuka and a 2027 second-round pick.

Avalanche land Blackwood from Sharks in goalie swap

The Colorado Avalanche decided that it was time to make a change at goaltender. The team acquired Mackenzie Blackwood, forward Givani Smith and a 2027 fifth-round pick from the Sharks in exchange for goaltender Alexandar Georgiev, forward Nikolai Kovalenko, a 2025 second-round pick and a 2026 fifth-round pick.

Georgiev had been the Avalanche's starting netminder since the 2022 offseason when the team acquired his services from the Rangers. In 18 games this season, the veteran put together an 8-7-0 record to go along with a 3.38 goals-against average and a .874 save percentage.

Meanwhile, Blackwood has racked up a 6-9-3 record, a 3.00 goals-against average, and a .910 save percentage in 19 games this season. However, Blackwood has been playing much better hockey as of late with a 2.66 goals-against average over his last three games.

Rangers deal Trouba to Ducks for prospect, pick

After months of trade rumors surrounding Trouba, the Rangers finally traded him to the Anaheim Ducks for Urho Vaakanainen and a 2025 fourth-round pick. Trouba had been struggling this season, posting poor five-on-five numbers in the midst of an ugly losing streak.

The Ducks will get a veteran leader on their blue line, and the Rangers shed Trouba's $8 million cap hit while getting a young prospect in Vaakanainen and some extra draft capital.

Wild acquire David Jiricek from Blue Jackets

David Jiricek, the No. 6 overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft, failed to really carve out a role for himself in Columbus. When the Blue Jackets put him on the trade block, the Minnesota Wild ponied up with a big offer.

The Wild sent defenseman Daemon Hunt, a 2025 first-round pick, 2026 third-round pick, 2026 fourth-round pick, and 2027 second-round pick to the Jackets as compensation. That's a big price to pay for an unproven defenseman, but it could be a worthwhile gamble, given Jiricek's pedigree and AHL performance.

Predators deal Phil Tomasino to Penguins

Tomasino was a first-round pick by Nashville in 2019, but he struggled to remain in the lineup on a nightly basis. The Penguins chose to take a shot on the young winger, hoping he could reach his potential and help the team remain in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

The Predators received a fourth-round pick in return for Tomasino, who had 23 goals and 71 points in 159 games with the franchise.

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The Hockey News

'All These Guys Are Questionable': Carolina Hurricanes Lineup Up In The Air Against LA Kings

By: Ryan Henkel

A bug has swept through the Carolina Hurricanes' locker room.

The Carolina Hurricanes are in the midst of a battle right now and it's not just the one for a playoff spot.

No, the much more immediate problem for the Canes is that some sort of illness has run through the locker room.

The Hurricanes have already had three players in the last week miss games due to sickness (Jack Roslovic against NYR, Sebastian Aho and Taylor Hall against CHI) and it seems like the problem is only getting worse as captain Jordan Staal is the latest absence.

Following the team's morning skate before their Saturday night game against the LA Kings, coach Rod Brind'Amour declared that the whole team was essentially a game-time decision.

"All these guys are questionable, so I don't know," Brind'Amour said. "We sent [Staal] home but he's on the fence whether or not he's going to play. I don't know any lineups so don't even ask me. I'll know at 5:30."

It's a tough blow for Carolina, but one the team is just going to have to try and push through. Since the outbreak, the team is 2-0-0, even with having to play down a man against the Blackhawks on Thursday.

"It is what it is," Brind'Amour said. "It's unfortuante, but that's what we're dealing with. Got a game to play. Prepare whoever is ready to go the best we can and then we have to go after it."

We'll find out tonight during warmups who all will be able to play for Carolina.

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1338134 Carolina Hurricanes

What we learned about the NHL in January: Impact of the Mikko Rantanen trade and more

Shayna Goldman

14-18 minutes 31/01/2025

There is always a lot to analyze around an NHL trade — the cost of acquisition on both sides of the deal, the fit and the ripples throughout the trade market. But maybe one of the most interesting elements to consider is the timing of a deal, especially for in-season trades.

The timing of a trade can affect the cost in some cases. A middle-six center can be worth one thing in late January and a lot more in early March, depending on how other teams set the market and the demand for that position around the league. When elite talent is involved, though, the bar starts high and stays high no matter the timing. Trading for Mikko Rantanen in late January versus the deadline likely wouldn't have

drastically changed the cost unless there was a dramatic market shift over the next few weeks or an outright bidding war. And by making this deal weeks out from the deadline, Carolina gets more bang for its buck — up to 14 extra games of action with Rantanen (and Taylor Hall) in the fold.

Not only does this make the deal more cost-effective, it also gives everyone a chance to assess the situation before the rapidly approaching deadline. Players have more time to adjust and gel in their surroundings, which can help the decision-making process on both sides of the equation. In Rantanen's case, he has more time to decide whether or not he likes playing with the Hurricanes. Management has an opportunity to evaluate the team with Rantanen and Hall in the fold, which should help shape the team's direction in the weeks leading up to March 7. The same goes for the Avalanche, who brought in Martin Necas and Jack Drury and now have a bit more cap space to work with before the deadline.

The advantages of that timing need to be front of mind for the rest of the league, especially in the days leading up to the 4 Nations Face-Off break.

Special teams impact of Colorado's additions

Despite rolling out a top unit of Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Rantanen this season, the Avalanche's power-play attack has been far from lethal. From the season start to Dec. 31, Colorado's expected goal generation of 8.31 per 60 was just below league average, but its scoring rate (9.01 goals per 60) brought the team up to ninth place.

That production dried up in January, with Colorado falling to 28th in expected goal generation (6.71 per 60) and second-to-last in scoring with just 2.77 goals per 60 in its 11 games before the trade.

Rantanen was far from the problem in Colorado, but adding Necas should infuse a new element into an area of play that needs it. There is only so much to draw from three games and less than 11 minutes of power-play time, but the early returns are positive for Necas on the advantage.

Just take their 2:22 minutes of power-play time against the Rangers last Sunday. Necas earned a secondary assist on Makar's power-play goal in the first.

Then, on the Avalanche's second opportunity of the game, the Rangers managed one early clear. After that, Colorado's top unit pinned them in their own zone for the remaining 1:27 of the advantage. Necas helped cycle the puck in the zone, set up his new teammates and generated two dangerous chances that hit the post. If that's a sign of what's to come, it could breathe some life into a unit that surprisingly struggled through much of January.

On the other end of the ice, Drury could add some support to a short-handed unit that needs it.

Colorado's penalty kill also trended down in January to allow the fourth-highest rate of expected goals against, at 10.9 per 60. Those short-handed lapses haven't always been as glaring because goaltending has held a lot off the scoresheet. Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood have saved a league-high 5.4 goals above expected in January while short-handed.

Drury wasn't a leading penalty killer with the Hurricanes, but he still played about 26 percent of the available short-handed time before the trade. And that should help fill a void left by Valeri Nichushkin's absence, and even last year's trade deadline addition Yakov Trenin, who departed as a free agent.

Rantanen and Hall's influence on the middle of the ice

The Corsi Canes have stayed true to their name, with the most shot volume at five-on-five and the highest expected goal rate. But one area of the ice could use more emphasis: the middle. The heat map below visualizes that, with the Hurricanes' heaviest areas of offensive creation pictured in red.

One of Rantanen's biggest strengths is generating scoring chances. He's a dynamic winger who can win puck battles and drive his shots right to the middle of the ice at five-on-five. Rantanen's scoring ability draws defenders in, which can open up his teammates for a high-danger pass.

That was already on display in Rantanen's first two games with his new team. The Canes had a 16-10 shot attempt advantage and a 79 percent expected goal rate in his minutes against the Islanders last Saturday.

The numbers weren't as tilted against the Rangers, but the winger still affected the scoresheet.

It's only been a few games, so the question is how well he will fit there in the long run, especially without Nathan MacKinnon. Rantanen hasn't always had to be the play driver on his line, and he isn't much of a puck transporter at five-on-five. He never had to be, with a zone-entry machine at his side. And one of the Canes' best carriers, Necas, went the other way in this deal.

So the complexion of Carolina's offense will change, and so will Rantanen's approach because as good as Sebastian Aho is in transition, he isn't in the same stratosphere as MacKinnon. But if the early returns are a glimpse of what is to come, Rantanen should help his new team kick their offense up a level.

Hall should also help, just in a different capacity in the middle six. His five-on-five scoring rate plummeted in Chicago over the last year, but it wasn't for a lack of trying. Hall ranked highly not just relative to the Blackhawks but across the league in controlled entries and primary shot assists this year, according to All Three Zones.

Against the Rangers on Tuesday night, his puck movement shined with setups to Andrei Svechnikov and Eric Robinson.

With Svechnikov in particular, this is something to watch. His shot volume and quality are up this year at five-on-five, but he has struggled to convert on those chances. Maybe Hall's passing can help change that, giving the Hurricanes more reliable goal scoring from the middle.

Thompson earns himself an extension in Washington

Despite Charlie Lindgren's emergence as the Capitals' starter down the stretch last season, management still looked for reinforcements in the offseason. And now Logan Thompson is shaping up to be one of their most savvy deals of 2024.

While the workload distribution has been perfectly even through most of the season, with the two rotating every other game, Thompson has shined the most. Through his first 21 games, he saved 16.5 goals above expected and earned a 0.919 save percentage. But his most impressive stretch of the season came after that when Thompson took a true starting role while Lindgren was injured. He gave the Capitals a chance to win with quality starts in all five of his consecutive starts and saved 11 goals above expected along the way.

The Capitals have since returned to their even split in net now that Lindgren is back, but that stretch of play was encouraging for when (or if) this team needs Thompson to take over the starter's net. Based on past precedent for teams with a shared crease, that could be the plan for the playoffs.

Thompson's first half in Washington (plus his time in Vegas) was enough for Washington to bet on him for another six years at $5.85 million a year on average. Since he doesn't have an extensive track record as a true starting goalie, or even a 1A, there is some risk associated with the signing. However, it aligns with the goalie market reset earlier this year after some key signings, such as Jeremy Swayman in Boston and Joey Daccord in Seattle.

Extreme special teams in Vegas

The Golden Knights' power play has truly become an advantage. Vegas came into the season hot on the power play before slowing down in mid-November and December. But the team got back on track in January. The Golden Knights have notched at least one power-play goal in 10 of their last 12 games before Thursday's tilt against the Blue Jackets.

Most of that success comes from a top unit led by Jack Eichel, Mark Stone, Tomas Hertl and Shea Theodore. Pavel Dorofeyev rounds out that group as a shooting presence on the wing.

Heading into Thursday night, the team converted on 28.3 percent of its opportunities through 50 games, which landed them third in the league behind the Devils and Jets. And their play below the surface backs that up. The team does a lot of damage from the high-danger areas in the net-front area, up the middle of the ice and from the circles. That adds up to about 10.1 expected goals per 60, which ranks behind only the Devils. Vegas' scoring efficiency and expected goal creation this season are the best of its eight-year existence.

But not all special teams are an advantage for Vegas. Surprisingly, its penalty kill has been somewhat of a weakness. In January, the team slipped into the bottom 10 in expected and actual goal suppression even while matching up to lesser teams like the Sharks and Blackhawks.

The Golden Knights went six-for-six while short-handed against the Stars and Panthers earlier this week, which is at least a step in the right direction after some concerning trends throughout the month.

The Panthers' declining rush game

Once upon a time, the Panthers were one of the best rush-based teams in the league. In 2021-22, that was Florida's signature style. The big question then was whether that style would be crushed in a playoff environment or if the Panthers needed more diversity in their attack.

Paul Maurice was hired in the 2022 offseason, and the rest is history. The Panthers built up a strong, grinding forecheck that has worn down opponents, helping them win their first Stanley Cup last June.

The team is elite at recovering dump-ins, wearing down its opponent along the boards, cycling the puck in the offensive zone and generating second-chance opportunities. But even as the Panthers evolved into more of a forechecking force, they still had some balance in their attack thanks to their play off the rush. It's just faded over the last couple of seasons — and that's especially obvious this year.

The Panthers' change in strategy is evident on a team-wide and individual basis through tracking from All Three Zones. One of the biggest downticks is from Carter Verhaeghe, who tends to be one of the more reliable threats in transition around the league. He has only generated 5.67 shots per 60 off the rush this year, compared to last year's 10.7. Evan Rodrigues and Matthew Tkachuk have also taken noticeable steps back, along with Sam Bennett. That may be a contributing factor behind the dips in each of their five-on-five scoring rates from last year.

Howling for Wolf in the Calder Trophy race

High-scoring first-year players tend to draw more attention in the rookie race. Macklin Celebrini, Lane Hutson and Matvei Michkov are bound to earn many votes this spring. But Dustin Wolf is also making a strong case to finish in the top three.

Similar to the Hart Trophy race, the challenge of the Calder is measuring players of each position against each other. Comparing forwards and defensemen is challenging enough, but a goaltender? That's all the more complicated.

With Wolf, it's easier to measure him up against the top goalies in the league. And so far this season, he stacks up to some of the league's best. Heading into Thursday night, Wolf ranked sixth in the league with 18.7 goals saved above expected, behind only Daccord, Lukas Dostal, Igor Shesterkin, Thompson and Connor Hellebuyck. With 20 quality starts in 28 appearances, he has given the Flames a chance to win most nights, which is a major reason why Calgary is in the playoff picture. That seems more than worthy of top honors as a rookie of the year.

January Stars

Leon Draisaitl is doing everything and more this season in Edmonton. He is scoring goals at a career-high rate to lead the league, driving the Oilers' second line, winning puck battles to generate dangerous chances and has been a shutdown presence defensively. Draisaitl shined in a star-studded matchup against the Avalanche in January and stepped up against the Capitals and Canucks while Connor McDavid was suspended. All together this month, he scored nine goals and 20 points in 14 games while earning a 62 percent expected goal rate.

Speaking of team MVPs, there is Dylan Larkin. His impact is felt all over the ice. The Red Wings count on him to retrieve pucks and transition the puck up the ice. In the offensive zone, he is a skilled playmaker and a clutch goal-scorer. That scoring has helped the Red Wings earn pivotal points in a tight playoff race. Just take his performance against Montreal, when he scored two points and outright dominated his five-on-five minutes to earn a season-high 4.15 Game Score against a team competing for the same playoff seed. He capped off January with a strong game against Edmonton, where he scored the tying goal and the game-winner in the shootout.

Filip Forsberg made a strong case for the third star. So did Thompson, Wolf, Darcy Kuemper and Spencer Knight, who put up sparkling numbers over the last month. But Barzal, who has helped fuel the Islanders' 9-3 record in January, earned the honors.

Barzal's 11 points over his last 12 games may not stack up to the rest of the league, thanks to the Islanders' putrid power play. But he is excelling at five-on-five. Barzal is one of the best in the league at creating scoring chances in transition, which has helped the Islanders control play with a 58 percent expected goal rate in January and a 16-3 scoring edge with their star forward on the ice.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338169 Los Angeles Kings

Kings trade rumors swirl amid anemic offense and winless road trip

By Andrew Knoll

UPDATED: January 31, 2025

On the precipice of a winless road trip, the Kings limped into Raleigh for Saturday's finale of a five-game trek, in which they'll be opposed by the Carolina Hurricanes.

For the 'Canes, the big story remained their recent acquisition of a copious scorer, former Colorado winger Mikko Rantanen, who has accumulated more points than all but three other players over the past five seasons. He has a goal, an assist and 13 shots on net in three games since the swap (2-0-1). Carolina boasts the Eastern Conference's second-best points percentage and a fierce 20-5-1 record at the Lenovo Center, tying the Winnipeg Jets for the most home wins in the NHL.

For the Kings, there is only the complete and utter absence of offense, as they close in on the longest scoreless streak in the NHL this season. They've gone 162:55 without a goal, and even that last one was an own goal by their opponent. Per Kings broadcaster Nick Nickson, they are in a position to surpass the Seattle Kraken's season-long goalless drought in the first period at Carolina.

Could the Kings – they've languished offensively over the past 14 months and particularly so in light of back-to-back games with no goals, just four scores in their past four outings and a stretch with 11 of 12 contests in which they squeezed out two or fewer goals – also be looking at a trade?

Coach Jim Hiller and captain Anže Kopitar eschewed the notion of needing outside help to right the ship and fortify an offense that's ranked 28th of 32 teams (and could very soon fall to 29th) in goals since Nov. 1, 2023.

"I wouldn't say the confidence is sky-high right now," Kopitar told reporters. "But sometimes all it takes is a little bounce or a little something to spark the group. We're still confident that it's within this room."

Compounding their woes, the Kings have had three goals disallowed during this journey, routine bad breaks that have been magnified enormously by the fact that they have "dried up," in the words of Hiller.

Between misfortune and self-inflicted wounds, fans could be forgiven for having flashbacks to last season, when the Kings opened the year gliding gleefully before slipping into darkness in January. Hiller harkened back to that gloom when he said that the same group that had been blanked for eight consecutive periods and owned the NHL's most feeble attack this month was once more successful, albeit with a less-than-reassuring caveat.

"This is the same group of guys who played extremely well and won a lot of games," Hiller told reporters. "The puck was going in for them then. I

don't think it's ever going to go in at a really high rate for us, that's clear, but it's going to go in more than it is."

Yet this wasn't quite the same group as earlier in the year, and a post from former NHL goalie and uber-connected insider Kevin Weekes suggested that recent lineup changes might have been a harbinger of a deal on the horizon.

Wednesday, Drew Doughty (broken ankle) returned and played more than 23 minutes in his season debut, then dove headlong into a second game in two nights, in which Hiller admitted Doughty "didn't have as much gas" across almost 28 minutes of ice time.

Watching both games from the pressbox was another right defenseman and former lottery pick, Brandt Clarke, and if the results from the early or even the not-so-early season have changed, his absence might have had something to do with it.

When the Kings met the Florida Panthers on Wednesday – the Panthers, like the Tampa Bay Lightning a night later, won, 3-0, against the Kings – it was a rematch of Jan. 22's clash at Crypto.com Arena.

There, Clarke "made the big play," said Hiller, breaking down the defending champions' structure and spoon-feeding Adrian Kempe for the game-winning one-timer. It was a rare moment of brilliant improvisation for a safety-obsessed, paint-by-numbers attack.

Yet the Kings sat Clarke in Florida under the hazy aegis of rest. They prioritized some unspecific constancy over game-breaking plays, which might offer the best explanation yet as to why scoring a goal now requires a rain dance and a sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli.

"He's done great to get to this point," Hiller told reporters, before steering his commentary into a puzzling direction. "He finally got to be a healthy scratch."

What a magnificent privilege.

"But he's played really well," Hiller continued. "This league will wear you down as a young player, and this will give himself a reset. We'll see where it goes from here."

Where it went from there was holding Clarke out again a night later. Hiller offered no rationale as to why Clarke, 21, needed another evening off when it was Doughty, 35, who had returned from a nearly four-month layoff just 24 hours earlier, when his welcome-back party was foiled by a goal and two assists from his nemesis Matthew Tkachuk.

The Kings had employed the 11-7 configuration liberally, including using considerably less prominent players than either Doughty or Clarke as the seventh defenseman. In the back-to-back set, they opted to dress 12 forwards, despite having optioned center Samuel Helenius to the minors to make room for Doughty and leaving nine defenseman on their roster. Even in a six-rearguard alignment, inserting Clarke for a left shot would have balanced out the pairings.

More broadly, Clarke leads all Kings defensemen in scoring and power-play points by a sizable margin, despite his minutes dwindling and his power-play time evaporating over the past 10 weeks.

Clarke has been no stranger to disappointment at the junior and pro levels, perhaps most notably when a dominant campaign in the minors and a clear-cut impact on the parent club still relegated him to the AHL during last year's playoffs while the Kings meandered impotently through yet another flogging by the Edmonton Oilers.

Weekes suggested Clarke might have been scratched this week because he was involved in a pending trade, and few if any other notions reasonably justify the decision.

The Fourth Period's David Pagnotta later said he canvassed some Kings personnel and got no indication of any deal involving Clarke. Pagnotta did say the Kings were in search of a right-handed forward with scoring punch. On "32 Thoughts," Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman noted that the scratches would invite calls from other teams and that Clarke's play appeared "constrained" as a possible stylistic mismatch for the Kings.

Whether or not there was any fire behind the smoke, the Kings are now in a predicament because on a night when they might have dressed seven defensemen, they had to play with only five after Mikey Anderson injured his hand blocking Tampa center Anthony Cirelli's shot in the first period on Thursday.

The Kings suddenly had preoccupations about a defense corps that was toiling behind the NHL's iciest group of forwards, a lot that had hoped to win the franchise's first playoff series since 2014.

They have changed their coaches, changed their defensive system, changed their personnel, changed their streaming service and changed their underwear, all with static results in this their eighth season under the stewardship of Luc Robitaille and Rob Blake.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338170 Los Angeles Kings

REIGN FINAL – Reign 2, Roadrunners 1 – Copley, Krygier, Sturm

By Jared Shafran

Back-to-back goals in a span of 39 seconds during the second period was enough offense for the Ontario Reign (25-15-1-1) to defeat the Tucson Roadrunners (19-19-2-0) on Friday night at Tucson Arena by a score of 2-1.

Jack Studnicka and Charles Hudon had the goals for the Reign, while goaltender Pheonix Copley stopped all but one of Tucson's 22 shots on goal to record his third consecutive win in between the pipes.

Ontario began the game by piling up 17 shots on goal during the first period, but Roadrunners' netminder Matt Villalta stopped everything that came his way in the opening 20, as did Copley in the Reign crease who made nine saves.

The scoreless first period also saw Luke Rowe drop the gloves with Tucson's Hunter Drew.

Studnicka made it 1-0 in favor of Ontario at 5:32 of the second, scoring for the third consecutive game off a rush into the Tucson zone. The 12th goal of the season for Studnicka came with a primary helper from Cole Krygier and a secondary assist by Andre Lee.

Less than a minute later, Hudon extended the lead to 2-0 with his 15th of the year, also off an odd-man attack. Caleb Jones sent the puck on Hudon's stick for a strike that beat Villalta up high at 6:11, which also included a second assist for Samuel Helenius.

After the two tallies, the referees' whistle took over, producing a combined eight power play chances during the remainder of the game. Tucson scored its only goal of the contest on one of those opportunities at 4:07 of the third on a shot by Egor Sokolov, but they weren't able to get any closer in the final minutes.

The Roadrunners finished 1-for-5 on the power play, while Ontario ended at 0-for-3.

Villalta suffered the loss despite turning out 29 of the Reign's 31 shots on goal, holding a 31-22 edge in the game's shot count.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 02.01.2025

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 1, 2025

1338171 Los Angeles Kings

Kings Impact From NHL, NHLPA Agreeing on Salary Cap Structure

By Zach Dooley

Sharing some leaguewide news from this morning, with a natural impact on the longer-term – and potentially shorter-term – outlook of the Kings.

As first shared today by several around the hockey community, later confirmed by the NHL and NHLPA, were projections for the salary cap over the next three seasons.

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said back in December that the cap was set to rise by a minimum of $4.4 million to 92.4 million, the maximum five percent negotiated in the CBA, but there were negotiations and talks ongoing to raise the cap by more than that, considering the growth of hockey related revenues to an all-time high. Bettman added that those changes could be mutually agreed upon and would not require a newly negotiated CBA to enact. Based on today's reports, the sides were able to come to an agreement that provides a bit more "predictability", per NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly, via TSN's Pierre LeBrun.

"Both Clubs and Players have sought a certain level of predictability with respect to Payroll ranges from year to year and over time for advance planning capabilities. In reviewing our numbers with the Players' Association as part of our collective bargaining, we finally felt like we were in a position to give them that. It's not `absolute certainty,' but maybe it's the next best thing."

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly on today's salary cap news:

"Both Clubs and Players have sought a certain level of predictability with respect to Payroll ranges from year to year and over time for advance planning capabilities. In reviewing our numbers with the Players'…

As per the league's release, here are the projections going forward for the 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28 seasons –

The number for next season is an increase of $7.5 million over the 2024-25 figure and an additional $3.1 million over the five-percent increase. That is followed by increases of $8.5 million and $9.5 million over the following two seasons. The numbers for next season are firm, though the totals for the 2026-27 and 2027-28 seasons could be "subject to minor adjustments (up or down)."

Frank Seravalli of Daily Faceoff added that these numbers aren't just a projection, but rather an agreement between the NHL and NHLPA regarding both the upper and lower limits. The salary-cap floor shouldn't be a huge concern here for the Kings, but the lower-limit by the 2027-28 season will be nearly what the cap ceiling is here in 2024-25. This was confirmed by the overall release

Here's how this impacts the Kings.

First off, what does the cap increase truly mean? I'll use Mikey Anderson as an example, because he is the longest contracted member of the organization, through 2031. He is also the team's NHLPA rep. This season, Anderson's cap hit of $4.125 accounts for 4.7 percent of the salary cap. By the 2027-28 season, that number will be just 3.6 percent. Feels small, but here's the equivalent.

A 4.7 percent hit on the cap in 2027-28 will be a $5.3 million dollar cap hit. A 3.6 percent hit during the 2024-25 season would be a $3.2 million dollar cap hit. Pretty big difference. Longer term deals like Anderson's will only get better with age, while players like say Adrian Kempe, who is on a team-friendly contract right now, would be in line for probably a larger contract in the summer of 2026 because of the increases. There's give and take.

As of this writing, the Kings could have more than $25 million in salary-cap space to work with in advance of next season and more than $50 million going into the 2026-27 season. The team is very tight against the cap right now, as just about every team around the NHL is, but getting this type of predictability going forward could lead to a more active trade market, with teams fully understanding what they're working with next season as it pertains to trading for players with term left on their contracts.

Those 16 players, per Puck Pedia, amount to a total of $70,438,334 in projected cap hits. Not included in that total is forward Samuel Heleinus, who could be projected to fill a fourth-line role at a cap hit of $805,833, which would allot more space elsewhere. Also not accounted for is forward Liam Greentree, who has been arguably the top offensive player in the OHL this season. Not sure he's in that mix just yet, but he would also come in at a six-figure hit before bonuses if the Kings see him as ready to compete for a spot. That's down the road, though.

The most important contract, for me, is forward Alex Turcotte. Turcotte has played almost the entire season in the top nine at a league minimum cap hit. If he is able to continue to take strides forward, that's among the best contracts in the NHL. It will also allow the Kings to add higher-priced players elsewhere, either via trade or free agency, to fill other holes in their lineup while they are getting a ton of value from players like Turcotte.

Key financial decisions going forward include defenseman Vladislav Gavrikov, who is unrestricted at the end of the season, and forward Alex Laferriere, who is restricted this summer. Forwards Trevor Lewis and Tanner Jeannot, along with defenseman Andreas Englund and goaltender David Rittich are also unrestricted free agents as of July 1, as are defenseman Caleb Jones and goaltender Pheonix Copley, who played games earlier this season.

The biggest two numbers are certainly Gavrikov and Laferriere.

Gavrikov is 29 and is likely in line for his big-ticket contract. He and the Kings settled on a two-year deal as a UFA back in the summer of 2023. The AAV was higher than it likely would have been on a longer-term deal, in exchange for the two-year term and a full no-movement clause. Haven't heard a ton on Gavrikov one way or the other at this point. Still ample time between now and then. The last deal Gavrikov and the Kings negotiated came in May, just over a month before unrestricted free agency hit. Will update there as we hear more.

On Laferriere, there is obviously a lot more flexibility and the restricted nature means there is no July 1 deadline. Looking at last summer, wonder if a player like Kirill Marchenko is a comparable. He signed a bridge deal for three years at just under a cap hit of $4 million. Similar offensive totals between Laferriere's pace this season and Marchenko's last season, with Marchenko obviously greatly out-performing his contract this season. The difference, though, is the knowledge of what future cap ceilings could be to come and the Kings have that while teams last summer did not.

The other way this impacts the Kings is if they look to make a trade this season, taking on a contract that has term is an option. They know what their cap space is for next season and they know how many spots on the roster they have to fill. If you include Helenius, which I would for now, that leaves a goaltender and 3-4 skaters to fill with what would be just under $25 million. While challenging to fit a player into the cap this season, taking on term, knowing these figures is not a problem for the Kings right now. Whether they look to do that or not is a different story.

Jim Hiller was asked last night if he's at a point where he's going to management and asking for help anywhere. He said he is not, adding that doesn't believe that external help is needed.

"This is the same group of guys who played extremely well and won a lot of games if you go back the 6, 7, 8 games we've struggled. It's the same group of guys. The puck was going in for them then, I don't think it's ever

going to go in at a really high rate for us, that's clear, but it's going to go in more than it is. We'll get ourselves through it and we'll talk about it, I'm sure it's frustrating for us, but I don't think we gain anything by doing that, as a team."

Ultimately, it won't just be Hiller's call. Rob Blake and his staff are responsible there, though there is obviously a dialogue between General Manager and Coach that is ongoing. To give up assets to acquire a player, everyone has to be in lockstep on usage. Today's news, though, should give the team more options at the deadline, knowing that the Kings can accommodate a player with term next season and beyond, or they could have the space to retain a player on a new contract who is a free agent at season's end.

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1338172 Los Angeles Kings

REIGN PREVIEW 1/31 – Ontario at Tucson

By Jared Shafran

January 31, 2025

WHO: Ontario Reign (24-14-1-1) at Tucson Roadrunners (19-18-2-0)

WHAT: AHL REGULAR-SEASON GAME #41

WHEN: Friday, January 31 @ 6:00 PM Pacific

WHERE: Tucson Convention Center – Tucson, AZ

HOW TO FOLLOW: VIDEO: FloHockey – AUDIO: ESPN LA App / Reign Radio – TWITTER: @ShafReign & @OntarioReign

TODAY'S MATCHUP: The Ontario Reign are in Arizona for the first time during the 2024-25 season and set for a two-game series with the Tucson Roadrunners that begins Friday night at the Tucson Convention Center. The Reign and Roadrunners have only met once this season, with Ontario claiming a 4-1 victory Nov. 13 at Toyota Arena.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR: While Ontario suffered a loss in their most recent contest on Wednesday against Colorado, they still remain tied for second place in the Pacific Division standings alongside Coachella Valley with 50 points apiece. Tucson, on the other hand, is on the outside looking in at the division's playoff picture after six consecutive losses and holds eighth place with 40 points, two back of Bakersfield for the seventh and final postseason spot. Anytime the Reign have scored first this year, they've had the upper hand, posting a 12-2-0-1 mark in the 15 games where they've taken an initial lead. Tucson is 13-5-1 from the 19 games this season where they've netted the opening goal. Ontario ranks eighth in the league on the offensive end with 134 tallies in 40 outings for an average of 3.35 per game, while ranking 11th on the defensive side of the puck by allowing 2.90 goals per contest. The Reign also average the third-most shots on goal per contest in the league (32.05), while the Roadrunners are 10-5-0 when they out-shoot their opponent.

LAST TIME OUT: The Colorado Eagles jumped out to a lead by scoring three times during the second period and controlled the rest of the game on Wednesday night at Toyota Arena, defeating the Ontario Reign by a 4-2 score. Jack Studnicka had a goal and an assist for Ontario in a losing effort, while Taylor Ward was on the scoresheet for the fourth time in the past five games with an assist and Martin Chromiak found the back of the net for his seventh strike of the season.

HEAD-TO-HEAD: Although Ontario came away with a win from their only previous meeting this season, the Reign and Roadrunners were evenly matched last year, with each team winning four of the eight matchups during the regular season. Ontario fared better offensively in the series, outscoring Tucson 30-19. The Reign were also excellent on special teams with a 25.7% power play conversion rate (9-for-35) and a 90% effectiveness on the penalty kill (19-for-21). Charles Hudon totaled 11 points against the Roadrunners last year on two goals and nine assists, while Akil Thomas led Ontario with six goals in the series.

WATCH OUT FOR WARD: Reign forward Taylor Ward has helped move the needle on the offensive end in the last two weeks for the Reign, posting five points from his last five games while helping the club to wins in three of their last four contests. Ward scored a goal and an assist on Jan. 19 in an overtime loss to Calgary before finding the back of the net two days later in a 6-1 win over the Wranglers. Last weekend, he netted his third goal from the last four outings and sixth tally of the year Saturday night during a 3-0 victory over Coachella Valley. He then had the primary assist on Jack Studnicka's goal 26 seconds into Wednesday's game vs. Colorado. The Kelowna, B.C. native has 15 points overall this season along with a plus-9 rating while playing in 36 contests. He is six games away from his 200th career professional contest, all of which have come with Ontario, the seventh-most in the team's AHL history.

SCOUTING THE ROADRUNNERS: Tucson finished in second place in the Pacific Division standings last season but bowed out in the opening round of the Calder Cup Playoffs, dropping a best-of-3 series to the Calgary Wranglers. Head Coach Steve Potvin is back behind the bench for a third season and his eighth year overall as a coach with the Roadrunners. Forward Kailer Yamamoto leads the team in scoring with 32 points in 31 games this season on 13 goals and 19 assists. Veteran forward Andrew Agozzino has also made a big impact with 25 points on 10 goals and 15 assists, while Cameron Hebig has a team-high 14 goals along with 14 assists for 28 points in 34 games and will represent the Pacific Division at the upcoming AHL All-Star Classic this week. Defenders Robbie Russo and Artem Duda lead the blueliners with 16 points apiece. In net, Jaxson Stauber has split time with incumbent Matt Villalta, with Stauber holding a 6-5-0 record from 11 appearances while also seeing four games of NHL action with Utah. Villalta is 10-13-2 from 25 contests with a 2.98 goals-against average and a 0.903 save percentage.

MILLAR MAKES IT HAPPEN: Rookie defenseman Jack Millar has been a bright spot for the team on the blueline this season, appearing in 35 of the club's 40 games and recording a team-high plus-18 rating. That number is fourth among all AHL skaters and the right-shot defender has played in less games than anyone above him on the list. Millar has been in Ontario's lineup in each of the team's last 29 games dating back to Nov. 15 after starting the campaign by appearing in just six of the first 11 contests. Prior to Wednesday night against the team from his home state, the native of Westminster, Colorado had earned assists in three straight games, all wins for Ontario, while totaling a combined rating of plus-5 in the victories. Millar signed with Ontario after finishing his collegiate career at Colorado College where he appeared in 134 games over four seasons and made his AHL debut on Apr. 21 of last season in his home state against the Eagles in Loveland.

SAVING THE BEST FOR LAST: The third period has been Ontario's best frame this season. The Reign have outscored opponents a combined 50-28 in the final period this year, netting more goals from the final frame than their totals from the first (37) and the second (42). They've backed up that year-long success in their latest five outings against four Pacific Division opponents. First, they erased a 4-3 deficit with the lone goal of the frame last Sunday against Calgary to force overtime while holding a 13-4 shot-on-goal advantage, then held the Wranglers quiet two nights later with just five shots allowed. Last Friday, Ontario out-shot Bakersfield 12-8 in the third and Tyler Madden scored the only goal to force overtime in an eventual shootout win and Saturday's shutout victory over the Firebirds featured just seven shots on goal for the visitors. Even in a losing effort Wednesday, the Reign scored the only goal of the third period against Colorado.

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1338173 Minnesota Wild

Wild's secret to success might have less to do with travel and more to do with good conversation

Sarah McLellan

The Minnesota Star Tribune

January 31, 2025

MONTREAL — The transformation was drastic but not the least bit surprising.

"Maybe start playing in white at home," center Joel Eriksson Ek said, referencing the team's away jerseys in which the Wild are an NHL-best 20-5-3; that's the fourth-fewest games in NHL history to get to 20 victories.

But a change in attire and address might not be the only explanations for the Wild's bounce-back.

"We're just rolling right now," alternate captain Marcus Foligno said, "and it's fun to see."

This wasn't the first heart-to-heart the Wild have had in recent days.

They also chatted before they faced Calgary last Saturday in St. Paul on the heels of a lackluster 4-0 romp by Utah Hockey Club, and the talk was about playing that game like they were on the road.

"Don't need to make anything fancy or cute," Fleury said. "Just play hard hockey."

But that didn't happen: They were dumped 5-4 by the Flames, and coach John Hynes mentioned how he would have liked to see more "pushback" from the Wild after Fleury was punched by Calgary's Rasmus Andersson, who had a staredown for a celebration when he scored soon after the dust-up in the Wild crease.

"That situation with Fleury was indicative of the overall mindset," said Hynes, who brought up the Wild's "hardness and competitiveness."

Cue another get-together.

"A few things were said," goalie Filip Gustavsson said. "We had a little bit of a meeting, and we had a meeting before the Calgary game, and we said some things. We just did a completely different thing, and we got called out for it.

"The players, we take it to heart when we get called out, and we just went back into the Chicago game to show the coaching staff that we're willing to do it."

The Wild's most convincing arguments that they'd rediscovered their rhythm came vs. the Maple Leafs and Canadiens. They stymied a skilled Toronto lineup Wednesday in another solid start from Gustavsson, who also played in Chicago and has shed a five-game funk by stopping 50 of 53 shots in those back-to-back wins.

"You know when it's a bad goal and when it's just NHL players doing NHL things," said Gustavsson, whose .914 save percentage is still in the top 10 in the league. "Sometimes bounces are not with you, and sometimes you make that extra save and that gives you confidence for the team to keep pushing and maybe find the equalizer or the go-ahead goal. So, that's what we didn't have, and some games ran away from us."

Then, to really hammer home their point, the Wild locked their zone and threw away the key, with Fleury's 19 saves blanking Montreal for a most fitting farewell in front of his family and friends in his home province.

"Nothing mattered honestly in this game other than the win," center Frederick Gaudreau said. "That's all we wanted. Guys were willing to block any shots they had to block to keep the puck as far as possible from the net. That's all that mattered."

But both efforts also included goals from all over the depth chart.

After fourth-liner Marat Khusnutdinov got things rolling against the Maple Leafs, rookie Liam Ohgren took the handoff vs. the Canadiens before callup-turned-mainstay Devin Shore buried his first with the team. Veteran Yakov Trenin had two assists after getting benched Sunday, while Foligno, Gaudreau and captain Jared Spurgeon each extended their point streaks to four games — a stretch in which they've combined to score eight times. Spurgeon's 401 career points are now third all-time in franchise history.

"When we went through our dry spell, we weren't really getting secondary scoring, and that's on us," Foligno said. "That's on guys like me and Trenny. [Jakub] Lauko comes back, and he's really a game or two from his injury. I think he's playing unbelievable the past two games. He adds another dimension to our game. Khusnutdinov is flying right now. He adds now the puck protection.

"Guys are gaining confidence."

The proof is in the results, and not only has this reset the Wild, but it's given them a blueprint for how to succeed while leading scorer Kirill Kaprizov is out for surgery on his lower-body injury.

"We've gotten really strong performances throughout the lineup," Hynes said. "We've been a four-line team. Six defensemen have played really well. I think both goaltenders have played excellent.

"So that's a good recipe for us."

Whether it holds up at home is TBD, but Eriksson Ek might be on to something with his suggestion.

Star Tribune LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338174 Minnesota Wild

Wild's Marc-Andre Fleury gets hometown hero treatment — and a shutout — in Montreal

Sarah McLellan

The Minnesota Star Tribune

January 31, 2025

MONTREAL – Marc-Andre Fleury kept preparing for a puck, raising his glove and lifting his stick, but it was all in vain.

The Wild were blocking shots left and right, sweeping pressure away before it reached their crease. When the Canadiens finally had an opening, their wind-up crashed wide into the boards or they pulled themselves off-side.

So, Fleury folded himself back under the crossbar over and over again, looking very much like the kid on the playground waiting to get picked. Nobody would play ball, forcing the guest of honor to arrive late to his own celebration.

"That's the most tired I've felt without having a shot," Fleury said. "Just like the stress, the emotions, anticipation, it takes energy out of you."

But in time, Fleury earned the salute the crowd of split loyalty gave him.

In what was likely the Quebec native's last game at Bell Centre during the goaltender's farewell season, Fleury shut out Montreal 4-0 in front of family and friends for an emotional sendoff that culminated with a handshake line from the Canadiens and curtain call as the game's first star while a bouquet of flowers hit the ice.

"I was just hoping to not let in six," Fleury said. "Little stressed, but so many people watching I wanted to put on a good show so they could remember me playing well.

"I'm happy it went well."

Fleury's 19 saves during his 572nd win included goals from rookie Liam Ohgren, Marco Rossi, Devin Shore and Frederick Gaudreau — the Wild showing no lack of focus after a 3-1 win at Toronto the previous night ahead of Fleury's homecoming, which his wife, Veronique, their three

children, Estelle, Scarlett and James, his mom, France, and sister Marylene attended.

“Guys would have blocked shots with their face if they had to honestly,” Gaudreau said. “That’s how everybody felt about this game.”

The Wild defended meticulously from the start, with Fleury not facing his first shot until six minutes elapsed, the save appropriately getting announced with a loud thud when Montreal’s Lane Hutson sent the puck into Fleury’s pad.

When they had the puck, the Wild got up ice with speed and support and their cohesiveness was rewarded 3:41 into the second period when a determined Ohgren scooped up his own rebound and wired the puck over goalie Jakub Dobes after Dobes had lost his stick during Ohgren’s earlier chance.

This was Ohgren’s first goal of the season in his seventh game with the Wild since the team promoted him from the minors after Marcus Johansson suffered a concussion vs. Edmonton.

“I’m happy with my game,” Ohgren said, “and just have to continue.”

Aside from giving Fleury a mostly quiet night — he had a mere eight stops after two periods — the stingy defending by the Wild also led to offense: After Jon Merrill was stung by a Josh Anderson shot, one of 19 blocks the Wild made, Marcus Foligno set up a wide-open Rossi for a blocker-side look at 5:47 of the second.

Then after his most Fleury-like save, Fleury stretching out windmill style in the third to deny Anderson after poke-checking him a period earlier, Shore won a 50-50 puck before draining his first goal with the Wild at 5:56.

Later during the Canadiens’ first and only power play, Fleury backed up the stop with a series of pad saves for his busiest sequence. The Wild also went 0-for-1 on the power play.

Gaudreau added an empty-netter with 1:27 to go, as the Wild tied for the fourth-fewest games to 20 road victories in NHL history. They’re 20-5-3, with two games left on this trip, and are on a three-game win streak.

Dobes, who was on a career-opening six-game point streak (5-0-1), had 23 saves in his first regulation loss.

But this matchup was more about longevity and legacy.

Fleury, who will retire after the season, is now just one appearance away from tying Roberto Luongo for second all-time in games (1,043), and after three more starts he’ll match Luongo for second in that category, too, at 1,014, looming milestones that’ll join the others: The 40-year-old is already the second-winningest goaltender in NHL history with the second-most time on ice and most shootout victories (66) during a Hall of Fame career that also includes three Stanley Cups with Pittsburgh and a Vezina Trophy with Vegas as the league’s top goalie after getting drafted first overall in 2003.

“As usual, I think the bigger the stage, the more emotional the stage, it seems like the better he gets,” coach John Hynes said.

Fleury’s first shutout of the season and 76th overall moved him into a tie for 10th with Ed Belfour and Tony Esposito; Luongo is ninth with 77. He became the first to post a shutout as a teenager and at 40 years or older and now has a shutout in all 21 of his seasons, a league record.

“This couldn’t have been a better au revoir to Montreal,” Foligno said.

Despite the dud from the Canadiens in front of 21,105, the fans were still cheering, giving Fleury a standing ovation and chanting his name late in the third period.

“Couple blurry eyes,” said Fleury, who improved to 11-5-1 on the season. “Geez, getting soft getting older. An honor.

“It was an honor to be part of it.”

Players from both teams also acknowledged Fleury, tapping their sticks, and the ensuing puck drop was delayed.

“We had chills,” Foligno said.

Gaudreau, who’s also from Quebec, watched from the bench.

“It took me a lot not to cry,” he said. “I love this guy. He’s been so much for me since he arrived. You just realize the legend that he is and his last game at home in front of all the people he loves and all the people that love him and all the fans that love him.

After the “Fleury” chants paused and as time was running out, Montreal pulled Dobes and Fleury thought about attempting an empty-netter.

As accomplished as he is, he still hasn’t scored a goal.

“But I was more focused on keeping it zero,” he said.

“You had 20-some guys stressed out because we have a shutout on the line, and we’re like, ‘This is great,’ ” Foligno said. “But we can’t let this go to waste here.”

They didn’t and after the final horn sounded, the “Fleury” chants resumed.

He finished 28-13-8 in his career vs. the Canadiens and 13-6-5 in Montreal.

“I don’t know what it’s like to be in that guy’s shoes,” Foligno said. “I wish sometimes I was, but I don’t know. It’s insane. You get a whole city, Quebec, country behind you, it’s amazing. You see people that aren’t even supposed to be cheering for you applauding you.

“I think if you can do that at the end of your career, that says something about who you are as a player and as a person.”

Star Tribune LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338175 Minnesota Wild

Hynes’ sit-downs get Wild’s fourth line fires burning anew

Jess Myers

3-4 minutes 31/01/2025

While it is unknown whether he ever donned a pair of hockey skates, legendary basketball coach Bobby Knight once delivered some truth about sports of all kinds. Knight’s wisdom is still being utilized by coaches everywhere — including Minnesota Wild skipper John Hynes — to their teams’ benefit nearly two years after the notoriously harsh, profane and successful Knight died at age 83.

“The greatest motivator in the world is your (butt) on the bench,” Knight once said.

After a “not as close as the score indicated” 5-4 loss to Calgary in his team’s most recent game at home — a place where they have lost more games than they have won in this otherwise successful season — Hynes was unhappy, and said so. In his postgame remarks, he talked about his team being unwilling to consistently do some of the hard things needed to win games.

The next day, Hynes sat two of his regulars, defenseman Declan Chisholm and forward Yakov Trenin. Not on the bench, but in the pressbox, where healthy scratches go. The coach made it clear that the demotions could be temporary and due to unmet expectations. While two players got the night off in a win versus a relatively unthreatening Chicago team, Hynes’ message was aimed at everyone putting on a red and green sweater.

In the two games since then, dominant wins in Toronto and Montreal, Hynes has seen some results from the receipt of his message, most notably in the hard-nosed play of bottom six forwards.

“I think we are really playing connected, and it starts with our work ethic and our competitiveness, and then it comes in our attention to detail and guys playing as a strong five-man unit,” Hynes said following the 4-0 win over the Canadiens on Thursday. “I think the last couple nights in particular we’ve gotten really strong performances throughout the lineup. We’ve been a four-line team, six defensemen have played really well.”

In those back-to-back games in eastern Canada, the emergence of some third- and fourth-liners has been notable. Trenin had a pair of assists in

Montreal. Liam Ohgren and Devin Shore both recorded their first goals of the season. In Toronto, Shore had an assist, as did Jakub Lauko. Marat Khusnutdinov scored for just the second time this season in Toronto, and has played an aggressive brand of hockey over the last 120 minutes that has been fleeting since his arrival from the KHL.

“It’s nice that Lauko, Khusnutdinov and Shore have been factors in the game. Just the energy, the competitiveness, the depth scoring that we’re getting. Liam Ohgren scoring tonight, that’s what we need,” Hynes said.

It went without saying, but with star forward Kirill Kaprizov undergoing surgery this week and not expected back for a month, the “all hands on deck” approach to offense is going to be vital for the Wild in the interim.

“Those guys are really good players, but the fact that they’re playing to the identity that they’re playing with right now, that’s truly what our team needs, right now and down the stretch,” Hynes said.

If Hynes’ message with the Chicago sit-downs served to light a few fires, mission accomplished.

Pioneer Press LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338176 Minnesota Wild

Wild about to receive a salary cap windfall of roughly $22 million

John Shipley

4-5 minutes 31/01/2025

Wild fans were given a peek Friday into how much money the Wild will have to spend on free agents next season, and how they might manage to sign Kirill Kaprizov to a long-term contract extension.

The NHL and NHL Players Association announced what amount to early agreements on how much the salary cap — set at $88 million before this season — will rise for each of the next three seasons. Generally, the increases are set season to season.

According to statements from the league and the union, next year’s cap will rise $7.5 million.

After that — “Subject to the Collective Bargaining Agreement being in effect beyond the 2025-26 season,” the release said — it will be raised an additional $8.5 million for 2026-27 and $9.5 million for 2027-28.

That would set the upper limit on NHL player payrolls at $113.5 million for 2027-28, although the sides said in their statement that “will be subject to potential minor adjustments (up or down).”

The projections beyond next season are subject to further negotiations between the NHL and players union.

“The parties still intend to meet to discuss other elements of the Collective Bargaining Agreement that might need modification and/or improvement beyond the 2025-26 season,” the release said.

In shorthand, with Marcus Johansson’s $2 million also coming off the books, the Wild will have more than roughly $22 million in available cap space when free agency begins July 1, a mammoth increase from what general manager Bill Guerin has had at his disposal for the past two offseasons.

That’s because the Wild have been spending a combined $14.7 million of their team salary on Zach Parise and Ryan Suter as part of the team’s decision to buy out the remainder of their identical, 13-year, $98 million contracts in 2021. Next year, that falls to a combined $1.6 million a year through 2028-29.

Neither Guerin nor team owner Craig Leipold returned requests for comment Friday.

According to the numbers, NHL team payrolls will be capped at $104 million in 2026-27, which will be the first season of Kaprizov’s new contract, wherever he plays. That’s significant as the 27-year-old left wing is in line for a major raise on his $9 million salary.

That’s what he’ll make next year, as well, in the final year of his deal, but after this season, the Wild will have exclusive bargaining rights on an extension for Kaprizov, already the best player in the franchise’s 25-year history.

Despite missing the past month with a lower-body injury — which the team said this week will sideline him at least another month following surgery — Kaprizov still leads the team with 23 goals and 52 points. His 2021-22 season set franchise highs with 47 goals and 108 points, and his 183 goals in 4½ seasons are just 36 behind the 2019 that Marian Gaborik scored in eight seasons in Minnesota.

Toronto’s Auston Matthews is the NHL’s highest-paid player in annual salary, making $13.25 million a year. Nathan MacKinnon, last year’s Hart Trophy winner, is making $12.6 million in Colorado, and Edmonton star center Connor McDavid is making $12.5 million.

Before he was hurt, Kaprizov was a serious candidate to become the first Wild player to win the Hart Trophy. During a preseason game this fall at Xcel Energy Center, Leipold said signing Kaprizov — a fifth-round pick out of Russia in 2015 — to an extension is the team’s top offseason priority.

“I will tell you nobody will offer more money than us, or (for) longer,” he said Oct. 1. “So, all we have to do is prove to him that we want to win.”

The Wild have largely defied expectations this season despite having, essentially, zero salary cap space, sitting fourth in the Western Conference on Friday after winning a pair of games in Toronto and Montreal. Their 20-5-3 road record is the NHL’s best.

The agreement between the NHL and its players union is aimed at providing “increased predictability on core Salary Cap economics,” the sides said in their statement.

Pioneer Press LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338250 Utah Hockey Club

Alex Kerfoot shows versatility in another Utah Hockey Club loss

By Belle Fraser | Feb. 1, 2025, 5:56 a.m.5-6 minutes

Utah Hockey Club fell 3-2 in overtime to the Columbus Blue Jackets Friday night at Delta Center.

Alex Kerfoot sat at his locker on Wednesday morning and said he expected more of himself.

“I feel like I have more to bring to the table. I haven’t been playing as well as I’d like to the last little bit,” the Utah Hockey Club forward said. “I’ve really got to build and find my way as we come down the stretch and help this team.”

Kerfoot’s responsibility heightened in Utah’s 3-2 overtime loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets Friday at Delta Center. With Logan Cooley out indefinitely with a lower-body injury, Kerfoot was placed at center on the first line between Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz.

When reflecting on his game earlier in the week, Kerfoot had a clear mission for elevating his play.

“I just want to be a little bit more decisive with the puck,” Kerfoot said. “When I get into the O-zone, make sure that I’m attacking the net, getting more pucks to the net, getting around the net.”

That came to fruition against Columbus.

Kerfoot worked his way in front of the Blue Jackets’ crease, earned inside ice and was there to knock in the rebound of John Marino’s initial shot from the point to give Utah a 2-0 lead 29 seconds into the third period. The play marked Kerfoot’s first point since Jan. 4 and first goal since Dec. 30.

He has now played on every line for Utah this season, further displaying the depth he provides for the forward group.

“Kerfoot is a great player. Super easy to play with,” Keller said. “He can kind of do it all anywhere in the lineup. It was good to play with him there and get our confidence going and chemistry.”

The 30-year-old is a penalty-kill stalwart for the Club and was a big part of Utah eliminating any high-danger chances from Columbus in the first period when it had a four-minute power play; Ian Cole was dealt a double-minor for high-sticking.

“I think he did a great job,” head coach André Tourigny said. “He played with pace, energy.”

None of it ultimately mattered, though, as Utah dropped its fourth straight game and second consecutive on home ice after holding third-period leads.

“You’re not going to win every game. Right now we’ve got to fight through it,” Kerfoot said. “We’ve got to find ways. We’re doing some good things. It’s not going our way.”

After a scoreless first period, Schmaltz got Utah on the board 41 seconds into the middle frame while his team skated on the power play. Barrett Hayton got the puck from Keller on the left side before driving the net and dishing a cross-crease pass for Schmaltz to tip past Columbus goaltender Danil Tarasov.

Kerfoot’s ensuing tally made it 2-0. And then came the Blue Jackets.

Kirill Marchenko made it 2-1 at 6:25 as Utah let Columbus waltz into the zone and could not get control of the loose puck in the slot. Kent Johnson followed it up with a snapshot from the left side that trickled past Karel Vejmelka for the 2-2 equalizer at 11:42 and forced overtime.

A Utah turnover in the O-zone during overtime led to the Blue Jackets’ game-winning goal. Zach Werenski stripped Hayton of the puck and dashed the other way on a 2-on-0 with Cole Sillinger and buried it off the rush at 1:01 for the final 3-2 scoreline.

“Kind of let them back in the game. In 60 minutes they’re going to have a push. I thought they pushed hard in the third and they made it harder on us. It’s frustrating for sure,” Keller said. “Just got to keep going, learn from it. Having confidence, believing you can make the play in the third. I think that’s the next step.”

The team did not think it had a particularly poor third period. Utah had the advantage in scoring chances and sustained zone time. Columbus got some bounces that shifted the momentum. Unfortunately, though, the scoreboard dictates the points in the standings and Utah finished the night with just one.

“We need to find a solution,” Tourigny said. “We’re in solution mode.”

SALT LAKE TRIBUNE LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338251 Utah Hockey Club

Utah Hockey Club loses another star forward to injury

By Belle Fraser | Jan. 31, 2025, 5:58 p.m. | Updated: 7:26 p.m.4-5 minutes

Logan Cooley is out indefinitely with a lower-body injury.

Utah Hockey Club is without another one of its stars.

The team announced Friday that forward Logan Cooley is out indefinitely with a lower-body injury and will be reevaluated after the 4 Nations Face-Off break which concludes on Feb. 20.

Head coach André Tourigny said Cooley got hurt during Wednesday’s game against the Pittsburgh Penguins at Delta Center.

“He finished the game, he was a warrior. He battled through pain but now he will be out indefinitely,” Tourigny said. “You cannot feel sorry for yourself. This league will jump right at your throat if you think you can feel sorry for yourself.”

Cooley is second on the team in points with 43 (15 goals, 28 assists) while he centered the first line between captain Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz. The 20-year-old logged 10 points in the month of January and was a key piece of the team’s first power play unit and penalty kill.

“It’s tough, he’s been playing really well. I think he’s a big reason our team has taken a step this year — [because of] his personal growth," Michael Kesselring said. “It’s tough to see him go down but other guys have to be excited, there’s a lot of opportunity, he plays a lot of minutes for us. Guys have to step up and we have to find a way to win some games while he’s out.”

With Cooley out, Alex Kerfoot will center the first line between Keller and Schmaltz. Matias Maccelli will reenter the lineup and skate with Barrett Hayton and Josh Doan. The third line of Michael Carcone, Jack McBain and Lawson Crouse as well as the fourth line of Liam O’Brien, Kevin Stenlund and Nick Bjugstad will remain the same.

Hayton was moved to the first power play unit to fill in Cooley’s spot, too.

“We talked early in the season about our depth,” Tourigny said. “It’s time now for us up front to show we have depth and we trust the guys who will have the opportunity. And we do trust them. It’s time to not talk but do it.”

Cooley joins Dylan Guenther on the list of injured forwards. Guenther is also dealing with a lower-body injury and is now skating with the team in a non-contact jersey. Head coach André Tourigny said Guenther is day-to-day but the team does not have a specific date for his return.

“It’s part of the NHL. Injuries happen, teams go through that every year. It’s definitely big pieces of our team and it’s tough missing those guys,” Hayton said. “But everyone in the room has to step up and give a little more. It’s a fight. These are massive games for us and we’ve got to find a way.”

Doan was recalled from the Tucson Roadrunners when Guenther got hurt. The team, as of Friday morning, has not brought anyone up from its AHL affiliate team in the wake of Cooley’s injury.

“He’s one of those guys I think that can really step up and help us,” Kesselring said of Doan. “He’s been really good on the forecheck for us, good energy guy so far. I think he’s been real close to scoring some goals and getting some points.”

This will be the first time in Cooley’s two-year NHL career that he will miss a game.

SALT LAKE TRIBUNE LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338252 Utah Hockey Club

Utah HC has lost another top scorer to injury

Brogan Houston2-3 minutes 31/01/2025

Brogan Houston is an intern for the Deseret News. He covers the Utah Hockey Club and trending news.

The Utah Hockey Club announced Friday that center Logan Cooley will be out “indefinitely” with a lower-body injury.

He will be reevaluated after the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Ahead of Utah HC’s game against the Florida Panthers on Jan. 16, Cooley sat out of line rushes at morning skate in case a lower-body injury prevented him from playing. He spoke to the media after morning skate, with bandages covering the upper portion of his leg.

He ended up playing that night.

Head coach André Tourigny told the media Friday morning that Cooley got hurt in Wednesday’s game against the Pittsburgh Penguins. He rejected the notion that it could have been a nagging injury, but did say Cooley had been “a little bit sore.”

Alexander Kerfoot took Cooley’s place on Utah’s top line at morning skate on Friday. Barrett Hayton took Cooley’s spot on the top power play unit.

Kerfoot will now have played on all four lines for Utah this season.

Today's lines:

Keller - Kerfoot - Schmaltz

Maccelli - Hayton - Doan

Crouse - McBain - Carcone

O'Brien - Stenlund - Bjugstad

Sergachev - Marino

Cole - Kesselring

Määttä - DeSimone

Välimäki - Bortuzzo

Vejmelka

Ingram#UtahHC #CBJ

— Brogan Houston (@houston_brogan) January 31, 2025

Tourigny also mentioned that Dylan Guenther, who suffered an injury on Jan. 16 against the Panthers, is now considered day-to-day. He has participated in every practice and morning skate since Wednesday, but has sported a yellow non-contact jersey every time.

Cooley, 20, is in his second NHL season. He has never missed a game, meaning Friday's contest against the Columbus Blue Jackets will be his first time sitting out.

In 50 games this season, Cooley has scored 15 goals and 43 points. He's second in team scoring, trailing team captain Clayton Keller by 11 points.

Deseret News LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338279 Websites

The Athletic / LeBrun: Will skyrocketing NHL salary cap lead to a new era of haves and have-nots?

By Pierre LeBrun

A recent conversation with an NHL team executive gave me pause.

We were chatting about the rising salary cap and how the NHL landscape might change because of it.

And he asked me this question: How many NHL teams will actually have the financial budget to max out at a salary cap over $100 million?

He didn't know the answer. I didn't know the answer.

But we're about to find out in the next three years.

As announced Friday, the NHL and NHL Players' Association have negotiated cap numbers through the 2027-28 season — the upper limit of the cap going from $88 million this season to $95.5 million next season, $104 million the season after that and $113.5 million in 2027-28.

It is unprecedented in the history of the cap era to have this kind of multiyear certainty on the cap. It's normally a year-by-year exercise, although it's something both sides have contemplated doing for a few years.

Why did they finally do it?

"Both clubs and players have sought a certain level of predictability with respect to payroll ranges from year to year and over time for advance planning capabilities," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic on Friday. "In reviewing our numbers with the Players' Association as part of our collective bargaining, we finally felt like we were in a position to give them that. It's not 'absolute certainty,' but maybe it's the next best thing."

The league and NHLPA have been working on this for the past six weeks, Daly added. And I think it was a smart thing to do for everyone involved.

As an aside, see how Daly dropped in there the confirmation that there has indeed been some advanced collective bargaining going on at the highest levels in advance of the full-fledged, official bargaining with the larger negotiating groups still scheduled to get going sometime over the next couple months?

The current CBA doesn't expire until September 2026, but both groups, as shown by this very announcement, are eager to get going early on it.

The announcement itself is also further proof neither side wants a labor war.

As for the salary cap news, there's an appreciation from both the clubs and agents in knowing what they're dealing with moving forward. It will have a major impact on contract negotiations as far as dealing with specific cap numbers and not each side arguing over where they "believe" the cap is headed.

"It is nice to know, for sure, but I don't think there's any big surprise here," one NHL GM, who requested anonymity because the league frowns on teams commenting on CBA matters, told The Athletic. "From 2013 to 2020, the cap grew an average of 4.5 percent per year. If that had continued, we would be at $101.5 million this year and going to $106, $111 and $116 the next three years. The cap growth paused when there was a huge revenue hit in 2020, but this was where we always expected it to be once we got that behind us."

Yes, 2020 being the pandemic put NHL revenues and the cap into chaos for a bit. So things are back on track for the most part.

"The ability to know the cap and the available space going forward will bring more stability to the cap planning process and to individual negotiations," said veteran agent J.P Barry of CAA Sports. "Both sides will have a clearer picture of the next three years. I hope it will work well enough that we can try to consistently project out two to three years going forward.

"I do expect they will make some revisions to the numbers in the final two years, and hopefully based on recent growth that will be upward."

From the official NHL/NHLPA release, there was indeed this caveat:

"The projected Team Payroll Ranges for the 2026-27 and 2027-28 seasons will be subject to potential minor adjustments (up or down)," it read.

"While today's release of salary cap projections are welcome news for the players going forward, it also reveals that the upper limit for 2024-25 was artificially suppressed by the league last summer," veteran player agent Allan Walsh of Octagon told The Athletic. "The two-year lag formula for calculating the upper limit negotiated during the 2020 pandemic pause created an enormous revenue slack within the system as (hockey-related revenue) exploded upwards with a relatively flat cap. I compare it to a reverse escrow debt of revenues that the league will now need to pay out to players each year until the upper limit reaches the appropriate level to reflect a true 50 percent share of HRR.

"The 'projections' released today still don't get us there and will likely lead to shortfalls forcing teams to top up several percentages of HRR each of the next three years. That's why I'm predicting the upper limit numbers released today will ultimately be revised higher once HRR for this season and next is further calculated."

Remember the most basic truth about this system: It's a 50-50 split of HRR, and that governs the calculation of the salary cap.

The reality, as always, is nobody knows 100 percent what the revenues will be that far out, or whether the Canadian dollar (the top four to five Canadian teams have a huge impact on league-wide HRR) will get hammered even more by political decisions in the U.S., or how U.S. regional NHL broadcast deals look like in the aftermath of the Bally Sports fallout. All the league and NHLPA can do is give their best estimate.

Andy Scott, also an agent for Octagon, represents the likes of pending unrestricted free agents Mikko Rantanen and Jakob Chychrun and pending restricted free agent Wyatt Johnston, so Friday's salary cap announcement has a direct impact on his negotiations.

"We believe these estimates will assist teams to properly plan over the next few seasons but should be viewed as minimum projections for the cap," Scott said. "There is no dispute that if the cap were reset to the full value of the lag formula as set out in the CBA, based on 2023-24 HRR, it would have increased to over $100 million for next season (with projected escrow under 5 percent). Instead, the NHL and NHLPA opted to smooth out the increase in the salary cap over time, and we believe this will result in 'shortfall payments' for this season, next year and beyond (as opposed to escrow) to meet the 50 percent players share of revenue."

Again, players either pay escrow or owners pay shortfalls in order to thread the needle on the 50-50 HHR split.

"I feel that the cap should be at $105 million today, but this is huge and will definitely help players and teams," said Darren Ferris, agent for pending UFA Mitch Marner.

Imagine if Walsh is right and we're actually going to get revised cap numbers that are even higher for 2026-27 and 2027-28 than what was announced Friday?

Great for the high-end players needing new contracts, especially. (Hello, Connor McDavid.)

Great for the bigger-market teams that want to find that edge.

But I go back to the first question asked — one without a firm answer. In a league that normally has two-thirds of teams at or close to the max on the salary cap, are we headed for a bigger separation between the haves and have-nots?

The league has never had greater competitive balance. The number of teams spending similarly on payrolls has truly spread the talent around.

Will these cap increases loosen that up and lead to bigger-market teams gaining more of a financial advantage? It's very possible.

I mean, we already saw last week that the Colorado Avalanche, as part of their reasoning in trading away Rantanen, were looking down the road at Cale Makar's next contract in two years and what they're already paying Nathan MacKinnon and making the calculation that having three stars eat up so much of their cap didn't make sense.

"I don't know if we can say we couldn't sign him," Avalanche general manager Chris MacFarland said. "I think it was going to be … obviously it was a challenging contract to do. Any time you have a player of that stature, and you have a player of Nathan MacKinnon and his stature and Cale Makar and his stature and (his next contract) on the horizon …"

What MacFarland didn't say — but I truly wonder if he was thinking it — was that even if the cap went well above $100 million in two years … does that necessarily mean the Avs will spend to it?

There are lots of teams we'll be asking that question about.

Another team executive told me Friday, again anonymously because of the league policy of speaking on CBA matters, that he wasn't sure yet where his team would fall but figured way more clubs would no longer be cap teams in two or three years.

All of which also invites renewed discussion of enhanced revenue sharing. We heard a bit of that chatter at the NHL's Board of Governors meeting in December, but I would suspect some owners will want NHL commissioner Gary Bettman to commit to more meaningful revenue sharing as part of the new CBA in order to help counter the potential widening of the gap between have and have not franchises based on the rocketing salary cap.

Regardless of where all this goes, we are about to enter a new era in the NHL. Friday's salary cap announcement guarantees that.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338280 Websites

The Athletic / NHL salary cap to jump from $88 million to $113.5 million over next 3 seasons

By Chris Johnston

The upper limit of the NHL's salary cap is due to take significant jumps in each of the next three seasons after the league reached an agreement with the NHL Players' Association on where those numbers would be set.

The NHL circulated a memo to teams Friday informing them that the current $88 million cap ceiling will jump to $95.5 million in 2025-26, followed by $104 million in 2026-27 and $113.5 million in 2027-28.

Those numbers are essentially fixed — although the sides can agree to make minor adjustments up or down if circumstances warrant.

"Both clubs and players have sought a certain level of predictability with respect to payroll ranges from year to year and over time for advance planning capabilities," deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic. "In reviewing our numbers with the Players' Association as part of our collective bargaining, we finally felt like we were in a position to give them that. It's not 'absolute certainty,' but maybe it's the next best thing."

The increased cap numbers represent a massive shift for a league that has only recently dug itself out of the financial hole caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The year-over-year jump next season will be $1 million more than the total increase seen across the previous six seasons — with the NHL's 2019-20 cap at $81.5 million only having grown to $88 million for 2024-25.

NHL salary cap rising

2025-26

Upper limit: $95.5 million

Lower limit: $70.6 million

2026-27

Upper limit: $104 million

Lower limit: $76.9 million

2027-28

Upper limit: $113.5 million

Lower limit: $83.9 million

Growing league revenues are driving the conditions for this level of increase on the other side of the pandemic and arrive with a new set of national Canadian TV rights deals due to take effect starting in 2026-27.

What Friday's announcement will do is bring clarity for teams and player agents as they make decisions on contact and trades.

It stands to be a great time for top players to be approaching free agency. Mikko Rantanen of the Carolina Hurricanes and Mitch Marner of the Toronto Maple Leafs are among the top players eligible to hit the open market on July 1, with Edmonton Oilers superstar Connor McDavid, Jack Eichel of the Vegas Golden Knights and Minnesota Wild forward Kirill Kaprizov among the NHL's top free agents in 2026.

The NHL and NHLPA are due to start negotiations on other elements of the next collective bargaining agreement in February. The current deal expires in September 2026.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

1338281 Websites

The Athletic / NHL trade board 5.0: Where the market stands after the Rantanen blockbuster

Chris Johnston

Jan 31, 2025

The tremors from the Mikko Rantanen blockbuster were still echoing around the league when another bomb dropped in Vancouver this week, with Canucks president Jim Rutherford publicly declaring that he felt the relationship between J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson had reached a point where it's beyond repair.

Cue more trade winds!

While we are unlikely to see another deal that matches Carolina's all-in play on Rantanen in terms of its overall scope, plenty of big names are still cycling through the rumor mill with five weeks to go before the NHL's March 7 trade deadline.

Vancouver remains at the epicenter of activity.

Here's our latest Big Board. Players are listed by how closely they demand watching, based on their potential impact and the current amount of buzz around them.

Note: Net Ratings and market values are via Dom Luszczyszyn's model and are projected for the full season based on statistics through Jan. 29. Goals saved above expected (GSAx) are via Evolving-Hockey, also through Jan. 29. Contract info is via PuckPedia.

Position

Search

1

J.T. Miller

F

2

Brock Nelson

F

3

Yanni Gourde

F

4

Marcus Pettersson

D

5

Rasmus Ristolainen

D

6

John Gibson

G

7

Trent Frederic

F

8

Ryan Donato

F

9

Ivan Provorov

D

10

Elias Pettersson

F

11

Dylan Cozens

F

12

Kyle Palmieri

F

13

Mathieu Olivier

F

14

Brandon Tanev

F

15

David Savard

D

16

Cody Ceci

D

17

Drew O'Connor

F

18

Jordan Greenway

F

19

Jake Evans

F

20

Seth Jones

D

21

Bowen Byram

D

22

Ryan O'Reilly

F

23

Scott Laughton

F

24

Nick Bjugstad

F

25

Mikael Granlund

F

26

Brian Dumoulin

D

27

Michael McCarron

F

28

Justin Brazeau

F

29

Ryan Lindgren

D

30

Mario Ferraro

D

31

Nicholas Robertson

F

32

Gustav Nyquist

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The Athletic / What are NHL players looking for in upcoming CBA talks? What we're hearing after Marty Walsh's fall tour

By Joe Smith

Jan 31, 2025

TORONTO — Marty Walsh has always had an open-door policy for players since taking over as executive director of the NHL Players' Association.

And lately, it's literal.

Take a peek at Walsh's office at the NHLPA headquarters, and it's what you might call "open concept" due to recent renovations. A few walls were knocked down, with the plans to add a couple of offices, a players' lounge and a swag room.

Walsh, in his second full season on the job, enjoys his partial view of the water, but a little redecorating was in order.

"We've still got some work to do," Walsh said, smiling.

The most important work, however, is looming soon as the NHLPA and NHL will start getting into more serious negotiations over the next collective bargaining agreement in the next month or so. Walsh wrapped up his fall tour of the league last week, having met with players from every team for the second straight season.

The current CBA — negotiated during difficult conditions in the 2020 COVID-19 shutdown — doesn't expire until September 2026, so there's plenty of time. But there's a sense that both sides are ready to get rolling in talks. There's not nearly the acrimony the sport has seen in the past — leading to three lockouts over 30 years.

"I think the relationship is as constructive as it's ever been," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said last week.

What is there to fight about? The league's revenues hit a record $6.2 billion last year, with a new record in attendance. Franchise values are booming, with Sportico's recent valuations having the average club worth $1.79 billion (a 37 percent bump in just one year).

In a couple of weeks, the league will open up the first 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, a much-anticipated reintroduction of international play featuring NHLers with the United States, Canada, Finland and Sweden competing. The NHL recently canceled player escrow payments for the rest of the season.

Walsh, 57, the former Boston mayor and U.S. secretary of labor, isn't going to put a timetable on how long talks might take. He declined to get into specifics of CBA topics publicly, noting the negotiating committee still has to meet and go over its list and their plans. But there's optimism on both sides.

"When I got interviewed by the players, I told them my approach is collaborative," Walsh told The Athletic. "Not to be taken advantage of, but collaborative. Any time you go into a contract negotiation with the idea of being less than constructive, it's not the way you want to go into it. You want to go into it positive. We've worked with the league and had great success with the 4 Nations, the Olympic agreement, working on escrow, working toward a salary cap (number).

"A lot of good things are moving in the right direction. Revenues are good, that's exciting as well. You want to capitalize on the positive."

So, good vibes all around — but there's still plenty both sides will want to tackle.

To get a better sense of what's most important to the players, The Athletic chatted with around 20 of them in the past month, offering them anonymity to speak openly about union priorities.

"I don't think there are many big issues right now," said one 15-year-NHL veteran player. "I think the NHL got a lot of what they wanted the last 10 years to give them an extremely advantageous position. You see that manifest itself by the explosion of franchise values and the revenue growing substantially. That being said, I don't think they'd want to stop the league for any reason, so I can see little things here and there (tweaked), but I don't think there's anything significantly major.

"I think there has been more working together — call it 'pulling the rope' together. Realistically, right, there's a 50-50 revenue split and escrow is essentially zero. We hope the cap is growing significantly, that's a reality where both parts can be happy."

Growing the game (and cap)

The dominant issue among players continues to be increasing the salary cap, which would involve boosting hockey-related revenues in any way possible.

"We've got to get the salary cap to compete with other leagues," said a 16-year-veteran. "It's criminal how some guys in other leagues are making the money they are and guys in our league haven't jumped. A big part was COVID, but we've got to get that up."

The NHL is not going to match other leagues like the NBA ($140 million salary cap) for the obvious difference in revenue and TV rights deals. But there is a sense from players that a significant increase from the current $88 million is in order.

The tricky part is when that is decided. Teams — and agents — would love to have more clarity so they can make decisions with as much information as possible. Like the Minnesota Wild knowing how much they can afford to pay Kirill Kaprizov, who becomes a UFA in the summer of 2026, and the Oilers with Connor McDavid.

There is a chance the upper limits for next year and the year after are announced this season, according to a league source, which would be unusual considering there's not a new CBA yet for past the 2026 season.

That would create some questions on what escrow is estimated to be and how much that could change if revenue estimates end up being lower.

Bettman explained the balance recently in terms of advance notice on the cap.

"We know the players don't want escrow to the extent they can have it reduced," Bettman said. "So the higher you make the cap, the more likely you'll have an escrow. If you nail it just right — which is hard to do with precision because you're projecting revenues — ideally you find a place where the escrow is as little as possible and/or the clubs aren't writing a check to make up the 50/50 (split). It's a little science, but it's a lot of work."

A new Canadian TV deal will be coming for the 2026-27 season, which should provide a revenue boost. Events like the 4 Nations and 2026 Olympics should also boost the league's international profile, as do series like Amazon's "Faceoff: Inside the NHL."

"We've got to somehow keep our traditional hockey culture but also do more things to showcase the people in the game," another veteran player said. "I'm a big fan (of the Amazon series). I said if I was ever asked to do it, I'd be fully obligated to do it because it helps grow the game. I wouldn't really want to. I wouldn't want to expose my family to it. But I'd do it if it'd help."

Some players wondered if there was a way they could get a piece of future expansion fees. One thought it'd be great if the NHL took a page from the NBA's Larry Bird exception and let teams exceed the salary cap to re-sign free agents. That'd make a big difference for teams like the Avalanche, who recently traded homegrown superstar Mikko Rantanen because they didn't think they'd be able to re-sign him as an unrestricted free agent this summer.

Any exception like that would have to be collectively bargained.

Health benefits

Another issue brought up by many players was wanting to have full benefits in retirement.

In the current CBA, eligible players can enroll in the NHL Health and Benefits and get a subsidy that will help with costs. This program has been improved since the 2012 CBA, with three tiers instead of one singular policy.

"I'd love to see more medical coverage for life for guys," said a 12-year-veteran. "I'd like to help guys struggling, whether it's physically or mentally. The league should step up and protect guys. We give so much to the league. We give you everything of us — physically and mentally. It's probably in their best interest to protect us for life."

The problem, of course, is cost. Where does the money come from?

There has been encouraging participation, meanwhile, in the CTE committee, approved in an NHLPA board meeting over the summer. The idea of the initiative is to help players understand chronic traumatic encephalopathy and the damage concussions can cause. While concussions aren't a topic players typically talk about publicly, privately it's definitely on the radar.

Schedule and playoff format

The schedule is a hot topic, with players saying they'd like to see tweaks to the number of back-to-backs and also start times.

"For us, we play 9 o'clock every playoff game," one Western Conference player said. "That's unfair for us, and that's my biggest thing."

There are arguments on both sides on whether the 82-game season is too long. Some players mentioned the idea of cutting some preseason games.

"I think the latest Game 7 of the Cup Final should be is June 1," said one player.

The wrinkle with the NHL schedule is working with TV broadcasts and rights holders. There's an emphasis on aligning the season to capitalize on moments where the league can jump to the forefront versus competing with other sports. The Stanley Cup Final ending in late June last season wasn't ideal, but the NHL also got to go every other night with the NBA Final, giving it more exposure.

As much as some players would love for the league to return to the 1-8 playoff seeding format, Bettman has maintained that the league has no appetite to change the current division-based bracket.

If the playoffs started on Thursday, there would be some new matchups in the Eastern Conference, at least, with Tampa Bay Lightning–Washington Capitals, Toronto Maple Leafs–Ottawa Senators and New Jersey Devils–Carolina Hurricanes.

"I think what we have works extraordinarily well," Bettman said. "Look at our regular season: Every game matters."

Other ideas

Players had smaller tweaks they'd like to see as well, from one saying teams should be able to carry three goalies on the road — avoiding the EBUG situation — to a couple wanting changes to offside review.

"Just a time limit on it," one veteran player said. "If (the offsides) doesn't directly result in a goal, like there's only a certain amount of passes or time in the zone, like 15-20 seconds, before it's unchallengeable."

As much as there might be some interest by some to make some alterations to the NHL Department of Player Safety and the appeal process, it's a tough situation as the NHLPA is there to protect all players — the ones who commit the infractions on dangerous hits as well as the injured players.

A number of topics didn't come up in the player tour for Walsh as often as last seaason, when the tenuous situation in Arizona, the Mike Babcock saga and Pride nights were being discussed widely.

"It's a good relationship right now," Walsh said. "There's good things happening. Revenues are up. The game is in a strong place. Escrow for players is zero. Hopefully the salary cap can be another positive. 4 Nations is coming up. We have an Olympic agreement. Utah moving (from Arizona) has been a benefit to the players.

"There's some good things happening. There's obviously different types of bumps in the road. But, for the most part, things are heading in the right direction."

Walsh has made a good impression on players during his tours and conversations.

"He made it pretty clear he's working for the players," one Eastern Conference player said. "Which is great. He just wants to help us."

"We'll see," another player said. "There's a lot of talking now and no action yet. But there's a reason he got the job."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

The Athletic / Former host Julie Stewart-Binks sues Fox, says FS1 executive sexually assaulted her

By Katie Strang

Jan 31, 2025

Former Fox Sports anchor and reporter Julie Stewart-Binks filed a lawsuit Friday in Los Angeles County Superior Court in which she alleges that Fox Sports executive vice president Charlie Dixon sexually assaulted her in 2016 while she was working at the network.

According to the complaint, Dixon pushed her against a wall, pinned her arms and forcibly kissed Stewart-Binks in January 2016 following a meeting to discuss an upcoming Super Bowl assignment. Stewart-Binks alleges she later reported his conduct to a Fox human resources representative but that the network "egregiously made the deliberate decision to protect Dixon and allow a sexual predator to remain an executive at Fox for nearly a decade."

The lawsuit against Fox and Dixon follows a separate lawsuit filed earlier this month by Noushin Faraji, a former hairstylist at the network. In that complaint, Faraji alleges that Dixon groped her at a co-worker's birthday party by "rubbing her body and groping her buttocks" in January 2017.

Dixon did not respond to multiple messages seeking comment. Fox Sports said in a statement: "These allegations are from over eight years ago. At the time, we promptly hired a third-party firm to investigate and addressed the matter based on their findings."

Stewart-Binks worked full-time at FS1 from the network's launch in 2013 until 2016. According to the lawsuit, she had been assigned to work as a host on Jason Whitlock's pop-up show for the 2016 Super Bowl when Dixon invited her to a hotel bar in Marina Del Rey, Calif., to discuss that assignment.

At that meeting, "instead of discussing logistics or his vision for the show, Dixon began berating Stewart-Binks, telling her: 'You're not funny, interesting or talented,'" according to the complaint. After telling Stewart-Binks she was "not capable of handling big moments on TV," Dixon allegedly gestured toward the bar and said: "The only way someone would watch you is if you got on top of this bar and took your top off." He also allegedly told her: "You're not hot enough to be a hot girl on TV."

Dixon later asked Stewart-Binks to come to his hotel room for a beer and to see the view from his balcony. This set off "alerts" in Stewart-Binks' mind, according to the complaint, but she felt she could not refuse him because he was her boss.

Once in the room, Dixon asked her to come out on the balcony and "swiftly pushed her against the wall and pinned her arms to her side," according to the complaint. "With her arms forcefully held down and his body pressed against hers, Dixon tried to force his tongue into her mouth." Stewart-Binks said her mouth remained shut but that Dixon "ignored her, continuing to press against her body and lick her closed mouth. While keeping one of her arms pinned, he moved his other arm from pressing her upper elbow against the wall to her body and towards her chest."

She fled the room and, after getting in her car, called a friend to disclose what happened. The complaint does not identify that person, referring to her only as "Anonymous Friend."

Stewart-Binks asserts in the litigation that she worried about what her rejection of Dixon's advances would mean for her future at FS1. She decided against disclosing what allegedly happened at the hotel because she feared losing her job, particularly given that her contract was up for renewal.

Days later, Stewart-Binks was in San Francisco working as a host on Whitlock's Super Bowl show. At a production meeting on Feb. 4, 2016, a producer told the show crew that New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski had revealed recently that he had once been a stripper in college. According to the complaint, that producer and others encouraged Stewart-Binks to coax Gronkowski into doing some "Magic Mike moves" for her (a reference to a 2012 movie about male exotic dancers). The hope was to create "a viral moment." One producer even handed her dollar bills as a prop.

Stewart-Binks was widely criticized for her role in the stunt, during which Gronkowski straddled her and gyrated his hips while she sat on a couch.

"Ordinarily, Ms. Stewart-Binks would have considered the implications of such a performance. However, fresh off Dixon's assault, both physical and verbal, Ms. Stewart-Binks was determined to prove that she was fun and belonged in FS1's new regime," the complaint states. "She had to show Dixon and Fox that she had what it took to be a fun, interesting personality capable of handling big moments on TV."

Dixon's sexual and verbal assault and the vitriol directed at her in the wake of the Gronkowski incident "took a profound emotional toll," according to the complaint.

Stewart-Binks was told the next month – March 2016 – that her contract would not be renewed.

According to the complaint, Stewart-Binks was contacted by a Fox human resources official in June 2017 as that official was probing allegations made against Jamie Horowitz, another FS1 executive. She told that HR representative she had nothing substantive to share about Horowitz but conveyed what allegedly happened with Dixon. Stewart-Binks states in the complaint that she provided the HR official with the names of two Fox employees with whom she disclosed her experience with Dixon. Those two employees told Stewart-Binks they corroborated her account with Fox's HR official, according to the complaint.

In July 2017, Horowitz was fired by Fox Sports, but Dixon remained at the network. Then-Fox Sports president Eric Shanks wrote to staffers when announcing Horowitz's exit: "Everyone at Fox Sports, no matter what role we play, or what business, function or show we contribute to—should act with respect and adhere to professional conduct at all times. These values are non-negotiable."

Stewart-Binks went on to work in smaller roles for ESPN, CBC and other outlets. She currently hosts a podcast with former NHL player Nate Thompson, works as a reporter for SNY and the PWHL and is a brand ambassador and host for the BetRivers Sportsbook Network.

According to the complaint: "Stewart-Binks tried to put everything about Fox behind her and move forward with her new positions within the sports industry, but each time she saw a former colleague from Fox thriving on the national stage while she remained covering smaller markets, a pang of frustration lingered. This wasn't the life she had envisioned for herself. Intrusive thoughts would enter her mind on how different her life could have been if she had just had sex with Dixon, but she would shut them down. To cope with the severe emotional toll of what Dixon had done to her, Ms. Stewart-Binks sought professional help."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

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The Athletic / Julie Stewart-Binks on a career derailed by alleged sexual assault: 'What could my life have been?'

Katie Strang

Jan 31, 2025

Last week, Julie Stewart-Binks sat in an empty lounge on the rooftop of a hotel near her apartment in New York City. She is about to watch a clip from her time as a Fox Sports host and reporter. It is a moment that she thinks about often, but one that she has never wanted to relive in full. She hits play on the video, then her hands jerk back toward her chest, as if bracing for a blow.

In the clip, Stewart-Binks, then a 28-year-old Fox Sports 1 on-air personality, is on the set of a pop-up show – "Jason Whitlock's House Party By the Bay" – for the 2016 Super Bowl in San Francisco. The set is meant to evoke a Super Bowl party. Red Solo cups. Beers chilling in an ice bucket on the coffee table. Whitlock and the day's guest – New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski – are behind a desk; Stewart-Binks is on a gray couch flanking them.

The group is discussing Gronkowski's disclosure that he moonlighted as a stripper in college. Stewart-Binks then says: "If you have a chance to make some more money, using maybe me as an example, do you want to show us a little 'Magic Mike?'" (A reference to the 2012 movie about male exotic dancers.) Gronkowski, a little surprised, asks Stewart-Binks if she wants a lap dance, to which she replies: "Yeah." Gronkowski seems to be stalling. He asks about music and remarks: "Where are your friends? I would need, like, a bachelorette party?" Stewart-Binks keeps urging him on, as does Whitlock, and Gronkowski eventually moves from behind the desk, over to the couch. He dances briefly in front of Stewart-Binks, then straddles her and thrusts his hips toward her, grinding on her as the cameras roll. Stewart-Binks, laughing, takes out some crumpled dollar bills and hands them to Gronkowski. The dancing lasts about six seconds.

As she watches the clip, Stewart-Binks' face reddens and her chest breaks out in hives. She begins to cry. "I will spend my entire life trying to make up for this," she says, wiping away tears with a shaking hand. "I will die trying to make up for this moment that's clearly not who I am."

The Gronkowski segment was the defining moment in Stewart-Binks' four years at FS1 (2013-16). As the clip spread across the internet, FS1 was derided as a "circus act," but Stewart-Binks took the brunt of the criticism. She was accused of setting back the efforts of women working in sports journalism and betraying feminism entirely. Some of the criticism came from friends and colleagues.

Now, she wants those critics to know why she participated in the segment, and providing that context requires sharing what she says happened to her in the days beforehand.

On Friday, Stewart-Binks, 37, filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court against Fox and Charlie Dixon, an executive vice president and head of content at Fox Sports and FS1, the company's sports network. In that lawsuit, she alleges that about a week before the Gronkowski segment she was sexually assaulted by Dixon during a meeting at a hotel that he organized under the auspices of talking about her Super Bowl week duties. Dixon is also a defendant in a lawsuit filed earlier this month by former FS1 hairstylist Noushin Faraji. In Faraji's complaint, she claimed that "executives and talent were allowed to physically and verbally abuse workers with impunity," and she alleged that Dixon groped her at a co-worker's birthday party in January 2017, among other allegations.

Dixon did not respond to text, voice and email messages seeking comment. Fox Sports said in a statement: "These allegations are from over eight years ago. At the time, we promptly hired a third-party firm to investigate and addressed the matter based on their findings."

Days after the alleged assault, when producers in San Francisco told her that FS1 wanted a viral moment out of Gronkowski, she said she never considered the implications of the stunt, only what would happen if she refused with Dixon watching from the set. "I was in a really f—ed-up place that I could not tell people about," she said.

In her complaint, Stewart-Binks said she detailed the allegations against Dixon to a Fox human resources official in 2017 but that Fox "egregiously made the deliberate decision to protect Dixon and allow a sexual predator to remain an executive at Fox for nearly a decade."

"They knew and didn't do anything about it," Stewart-Binks said in an interview earlier this month. "It meant they didn't care about the damage done to me and how it affected others." She then added: "This has been accepted for so long. I'm sitting here wanting it to be different."

Stewart-Binks grew up in Toronto, and her mother was a broadcast reporter and her father worked in the medical device industry. She played right wing on a boys' house league hockey team and also trained as a figure skater and a cellist.

She attended Queen's University and obtained degrees in both drama and physical and health education but developed a passion for broadcasting and later got a master's degree in international broadcast journalism from what is now known as City St George's, University of London.

Her entry into sports journalism in Canada was scrappy and unglamorous. She covered Ontario Hockey League games on a volunteer basis, staying at a friend's house in Kingston, then taking a bus to Niagara, where she'd bunk with her grandmother in a retirement community. Later, as a reporter and anchor for CTV in Regina, Saskatchewan, she drove across the Canadian prairies shooting and editing sports television packages on curling and anchoring the nightly newscasts. To save money, she lived out of a friend's basement.

In 2013, she was plucked out of relative obscurity by an agent at Octagon (the late John Ferriter) and flown to Los Angeles to meet with Fox Sports executives and screen test for the launch of FS1. She was hired by the fledgling network as an update anchor and went on to host "Fox Soccer Daily." She also worked as a sideline reporter for Major League Soccer, hosted FS1's coverage of the 2014 Winter Olympics and covered the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. She spent 65 days on the road that summer and was tabbed as one of Awful Announcing's "Rising Stars."

But, according to her complaint, by early 2016, her allies within FS1 — executives like Scott Ackerson and Rick Jaffe — had departed and a new regime — Dixon and fellow executive Jamie Horowitz — were in place with a new vision for the network.

Stewart-Binks still liked her job. She got to cover soccer and hockey – sports she loved – and work as an anchor and a host. She was part of a tight-knit group that helped launch FS1. But her future was uncertain. The network had until April 1, 2016, to pick up a one-year option in her contract. If it did not, she would lose a high-profile job. She felt she needed to show the Dixon-Horowitz regime that she was a versatile and dynamic talent.

When Whitlock requested her to be a part of his show during the 2016 Super Bowl week, she felt she had an opening to do that. And then Dixon asked her to come to his hotel, writing that he wanted to "go over expectation(s)" before a group meeting the next day, according to her complaint. After receiving that text, Stewart-Binks shared her excitement with a friend about getting face time with her boss and curated her outfit for the meeting – a suede jacket and designer heels – hoping to convey style and professionalism.

The lawsuit sets out in detail how they met at the bar at a hotel in Marina del Rey, Calif. She ordered a single glass of white wine. Dixon asked what she had been told about her role on Whitlock's show during Super Bowl week. He then told her he didn't think she should be going to the Super Bowl at all and that she was ill-suited to host and wasn't funny or interesting or talented enough to draw in viewers.

In an interview, Stewart-Binks said she was shocked and confused by Dixon's remarks. Why was he denigrating her so strongly, and, just before she went on an important assignment for the network? She tried to stay calm, even when he remarked, according to the complaint, that the only way anyone would be willing to watch her was if she "got up on this bar and took your top off" and then added: "You're not hot enough to be a hot girl on TV." She said in her interview with The Athletic that she responded to Dixon: "I didn't get my master's degree in 'hot girl.'"

Stewart-Binks said Dixon's tone then changed. He stopped criticizing her and asked about her professional aspirations. The complaint states that Dixon then ordered two beers from the bar and urged her to come to his room and drink them, adding that he had a great view from his balcony. She didn't think it was a good idea, she said in her interview and in the complaint, but she felt she couldn't say no to her boss.

"You have autonomy over yourself to say 'no' and leave. But you don't, and you say 'yes' because he held the power to everything," Stewart-Binks told The Athletic.

The legal complaint describes Dixon's shirts – colorful tees with slogans and pictures – laid out on one of the beds in his room. Dixon suggested they step out on the balcony. Once outside, Dixon, according to the complaint, "swiftly pushed her against the wall of the hotel and pinned her arms to her side. With her arms forcefully held down and his body pressed against hers, Dixon tried to force his tongue into her mouth." Stewart-Binks' mouth remained shut but Dixon "ignored her, continuing to press against her body and lick her closed mouth. While keeping one of her arms pinned, he moved his other arm from pressing her upper elbow against the wall to her body and towards her chest. Stewart-Binks seized the moment of partial freedom to push him away, say 'get off of me' and rapidly leave the hotel room."

Once in her car, she called the same friend with whom she had earlier shared her excitement about meeting with Dixon. "I remember getting a very upset phone call," the friend told The Athletic. "It was the overall disappointment of 'I can't believe an executive did this.'" Stewart-Binks later called her mother, according to the complaint, and the two women concluded that it would imperil her career if she spoke out about what Dixon had allegedly done.

Stewart-Binks went back to work frightened about the implications of fending off Dixon and also what his remarks about her lack of talent meant for her career going forward. At a meeting the day after the alleged assault, she said Dixon ignored her. She believed her future was "very much hanging in the balance" as she arrived in San Francisco for Super Bowl week. Her anxiety was ramped up by producers there who were hell-bent to "make a moment" that would garner attention, she said.

"I was told … that I was not capable of being able to do a moment like this on television. And that I was not interesting, funny, talented, smart. And so I felt the need to prove that I was all in, and that I was not scared to do something like (the Gronkowski stunt). Had I not (done it), I would have felt like I failed and that I would have confirmed what (Dixon) told me."

The reaction to her role in the Gronkowski segment surprised and stung her, she said in an interview. People she knew in the industry, some whom she considered friends, were among those voicing their disappointment with her choice to participate. Her co-worker and friend, Katie Nolan, told GQ that she disapproved of the bit. (Nolan later apologized to Stewart-Binks in a podcast and clarified her remarks.) Stewart-Binks recalled receiving a text message from Grant Wahl, the late Sports Illustrated soccer writer she admired, that read: "That's not who you are."

Fox promoted the Gronkowski segment on social media and elsewhere. The network got its viral moment. But when the backlash grew strong enough, Fox stopped, and the same men in the production meeting eager to "make a moment" went largely silent. Stewart-Binks' bosses didn't address the incident at length until six weeks later; Horowitz said at that time that he was supportive of Stewart-Binks for doing a "fun bit" and thought Gronkowski "maybe … took it a half step too far."

In her lawsuit, Stewart-Binks said the network instructed her not to comment on the incident, and her agency, CAA, advised her to ride it out. Less than two months after the Super Bowl, Stewart-Binks was informed that Fox would not pick up her contract option with one executive telling her that there was "nothing for her to do here," according to the complaint.

According to the complaint, Stewart-Binks was contacted by a Fox human resources official in June 2017 and asked about Horowitz's behavior when Stewart-Binks worked at Fox Sports. Stewart-Binks didn't have anything substantive to share about Horowitz, but the complaint states that she disclosed to the HR official what Dixon allegedly said to her in their January 2016 meeting and what allegedly happened in his hotel room afterward.

Horowitz was fired following the probe, but Dixon remained at the company.

After Fox, Stewart-Binks worked as a part-time soccer reporter for ESPN, a rinkside reporter for NHL on TNT, a host for BetRivers Sportsbook Network, did stand-up comedy, was a host for the CBC's 2024 Olympic coverage, among other jobs. She's continued to scrap to find work but believes the Gronkowski segment has impacted her ability to get other jobs.

When the Faraji lawsuit against Fox and Dixon was filed, Stewart-Binks received text messages from people she had told about her interactions with Dixon. On page eight of the 42-page complaint, there is a reference to a host who reported Dixon to the company. She believed that Faraji, with whom she worked at FS1, was referencing her. Reading about what Faraji allegedly endured was a "tipping point," Stewart-Binks said. "I didn't want to hold onto it anymore."

Stewart-Binks said she has experienced bouts of self-doubt since leaving Fox Sports, Dixon's criticism of her abilities still ringing in her ears. "I had a different view of what my life would be like than what it is. And I'm very grateful for everything I have. But sometimes I think … well, what could my life have been had this not happened?"

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1338285 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: The race at the top gets tighter, Senators make a charge

Sean Gentille

Jan 31, 2025

For the first time ever — and possibly last, given how long it took — the NHL Power Rankings are a one-person endeavor.

Indeed, Dom Luszczyszyn has the week off due to good behavior. Direct your related complaints and compliments to the appropriate party.

1. Washington Capitals, 34-11-6

Last week: 1

Last week, we wondered whether the Capitals' declining success at five-on-five could start to bite them. Naturally, they went out and took care of business, posting a plus-3 goal differential and controlling about 70 percent of the expected goals, best in the league this week. Sure, they went 1-1-1, but whatever. They did enough to hang on to the big prize.

On the Alex Ovechkin front, a goal against Ottawa on Thursday puts him 19 away from breaking Wayne Gretzky's record. Dom currently gives him a 12 percent chance to do it this season, but one big game would make that number jump quite a bit.

2. Edmonton Oilers, 36-14-3

Last week: 2

The last time the Oilers lost three games in a row was the first three games of the season. That's not to say they don't have off nights — Thursday against Detroit was one of them — but they're good at squeezing out points with their B-game, and there's too much talent for them to stay in the tank all that long.

3. Winnipeg Jets, 36-14-3

Last week: 3

On and off over the course of the season, we've wondered whether the Jets rely too much on their power play. Lately, that hasn't been the case; the Jets are 8-2-0 in their last 10 and scoring more five-on-five goals per 60 than all but two teams — the Oilers and, of course, the Kraken.

4. Carolina Hurricanes, 32-16-4

Last week: 5

In Mikko Rantanen's first three games with the Hurricanes, they've won his five-on-five minutes 3-0 — he scored against the Blackhawks on Thursday — and generated tons of chances. The reviews are in, and they are positive.

We're reaching "Rantanen does something good every shift" territory

— Cory Lavalette (@corylav) January 31, 2025

While we're sharing posts about the Canes, this blew my mind. I double-checked, and it's true.

The Carolina Hurricanes are 62-5-5 in regular season games when Seth Jarvis scores a goal. https://t.co/eq3iPg1kUk

— The Canes Stats Brand™ (@CanesStats) January 31, 2025

5. Dallas Stars, 29-17-1

Last week: 6

If you kept your seat on the Wyatt Johnston hype train, congratulations. His start was ugly, but since Nov. 20, he's 21st in the league in points (35) and 25th in points per 60 (3.25). The latter is a little worse than Sidney Crosby and a little better than Jack Eichel and Sebastian Aho. All is well, Stars fans! Stop watching replays of Mark Stone going yard-sale into Miro Heiskanen's knee ligaments!

Regarding that, by the way, coach Pete DeBoer told Dallas' 96.7 KTCK that he didn't believe Heiskanen's injury was "year-ending," that he believes "there is gonna be a surgery" and that he hopes Heiskanen is back in 8-to-12 weeks. Definitely could be worse, definitely could be better.

6. Vegas Golden Knights, 31-15-6

Last week: 4

Vegas has hit the skids a bit, banking just nine of 24 possible points in its last 12 games. In that stretch, the Golden Knights have been outscored 26-17 at five-on-five for a minus-11 goal differential, third-worst in the NHL. Of those 17 goals, Tomas Hertl and Jack Eichel have combined for eight. Doesn't leave much for the rest of the team.

7. Minnesota Wild, 31-17-4

Last week: 9

It wasn't the most memorable Wild goaltending performance of the week — that honor goes to Marc-Andre Fleury — but Filip Gustavsson's 32-save win over the Maple Leafs might have been the most important. He'd been shaky, basically, since shutting out Carolina on Jan. 4. It'll be a whole lot easier for the Wild to tread water without Kirill Kaprizov if Gutavsson gives them more of the same.

8. Florida Panthers, 30-19-3

Last week: 10

We keep waiting for the Panthers to truly lock back in, and it hasn't happened — they spent another week alternating wins and losses. Good stuff is happening under the hood, though. They're fifth in the NHL in both actual and expected goals percentage since Jan. 1, and they've got a soft stretch of their schedule on the way.

9. Toronto Maple Leafs, 30-19-2

Last week: 7

Five straight wins, three straight losses, three straight wins, three straight losses — when the Leafs do something, they do it for a while. Mirtle called their recent stretch "ugly hockey," and I'm not inclined to disagree. That's life without quality forward depth.

10. Columbus Blue Jackets, 25-19-7

Last week: 15

Amazing stat from Porty after Columbus' overtime win against the Golden Knights on Thursday night.

#CBJ earn their 25th win of the season tonight, Jan. 30.

They won their 25th game last season on April 1.

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) January 31, 2025

Part of the reason that's true: Elvis Merzlikins has stabilized a bit over the last month. Since Dec. 19, he's ninth in the league in goals saved above expected (9.03) with a .910 save percentage, and he was outstanding against the Golden Knights.

11. Los Angeles Kings, 26-17-6

Last week: 8

The Kings are leaking oil. They've lost four straight (with a minus-10 goal differential) and eight of 10. Not quite as bad as last January, when they went 3-7-5, but a bad sign all the same. Getting Drew Doughty is nice, but he's not driving much offense at this point in his career, and they've scored more than two goals exactly once since New Year's Day.

12. Colorado Avalanche, 29-21-2

Last week: 11

Martin Necas has four points in his first three games with Colorado, and he's looked good riding shotgun for Nathan MacKinnon; those two, along with Jonathan Drouin, have already created plenty of chances together. If nothing else, there will be mixtape goals.

Necas is going to be such a strong fit in Colorado. Already looks like he is adjusting & clicking with his new team. pic.twitter.com/VqmpazFW6f

— Shayna (@shaynagoldman_) January 29, 2025

That said, the Avs are 5-6-2 in their last 13 and haven't won consecutive games since Jan. 2, and Necas doesn't help their depth issues down the middle. Playoff team, yes. Actual contender, not right now.

13. Ottawa Senators, 27-20-4

Last week: 20

Senators owner Michael Andlauer explained his rationale for floating the idea that his team could play regular-season games in Quebec City. It made sense, as did the fan base's initial freak-out. Time to move on and focus on the fact that, after a 7-2-1 stretch and an OT win over the Capitals, Ottawa is inching up on the top two teams in the Atlantic Division. Let Spartacat enjoy himself.

14. New Jersey Devils, 29-18-6

Last week: 13

Against Philadelphia on Wednesday, the Devils' centers were Jack Hughes, Dawson Mercer, Justin Dowling and Curtis Lazar. There were extenuating circumstances — Nico Hischier is week to week with an upper-body injury and Erik Haula (ankle) hasn't played since Jan. 4 — but still, that gets real ugly in a real hurry. A legit NHL bottom-sixer would go a long way.

15. Tampa Bay Lightning, 27-20-3

Last week: 12

The Lightning beat the Kings 3-0 on Thursday. It was a necessary bit of good news because they'd been heinous in their previous five games, beating only the Blackhawks on a four-game road trip, then losing to the Blackhawks on Tuesday. Some of that was bad luck — they're too good to shoot 7 percent as a team for all that long — but they needed to get the car back on the road.

16. Vancouver Canucks, 23-17-10

Last week: 23

Two options regarding the Canucks; you can either talk about the staggeringly great work we're seeing from Quinn Hughes, or you can talk

about everything else. We're going with Option A. He's a defenseman who leads his team in points … by 23; he's either scored or assisted on 16 of the Canucks' last 27 goals; he's on pace to out-produce his brother. Give him the Norris. Give him the Hart, maybe.

17. Detroit Red Wings, 25-21-5

Last week: 22

Marco Kasper's breakout (12 points in his last 10 games) makes the Red Wings a whole lot more interesting. They needed production from someone on the left wing other than Alex DeBrincat, and Kasper has given them that. He's a natural center, and Detroit is thin there, too, but they should take what they can get. Kasper sprang Dylan Larkin for a crucial goal in a comeback win over the Oilers on Thursday night.

18. Calgary Flames, 25-18-7

Last week: 16

Thursday's trade with the Flyers wasn't all that interesting, but Calgary did improve a bit — Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee are middle-six upgrades at a low cost. Now, would they be upgrades for other teams? Nope. The Flames are 29th in goals per 60 at five-on-five; they're also in a playoff spot. Might as well try to make it stick.

19. New York Islanders, 23-20-7

Last week: 25

The Islanders spent January forcing everyone to take them seriously, going 9-3-0 and finishing the month on a six-game winning streak. By Friday morning, they were four points out of a wild-card spot with games in hand on the teams they were chasing.

Ilya Sorokin, as you'd assume, has been a big part of that, putting up a .938 save percentage in January and saving nearly 10 goals above expected. That has wallpapered over some still-shaky play at five-on-five. We'll see how the next eight days go, with games against Tampa Bay, Florida, Vegas, Winnipeg and Minnesota.

20. New York Rangers, 24-22-4

Last week: 14

Igor Shesterkin dragged the Rangers back into the wild-card race, and now they're asking him to keep them in it. In two losses this week, a close one to Colorado and a blowout against Carolina, he's allowed about four goals more than expected and put up an .813 save percentage. On one hand, expecting his A-game every night is unfair; on the other, their margin for error is too slim to handle much else.

21. Montreal Canadiens, 24-22-4

Last week: 17

The Canadiens played their way into the wild-card discussion, but that's not a season-long pass. All of a sudden, they've managed one point in four games, their coach is wondering about their lack of "juice" and "swagger," and they're about to play three West Coast games, followed by two against Eastern Conference contenders. Time to figure out just how serious they are.

22. Boston Bruins, 25-22-6

Last week: 21

Brutal week for the Bruins. Losing 7-2 to the Sabres was bad, and Thursday's 6-2 meltdown against the Jets might have been worse; the game was tied 2-2 at the second intermission. They're a point out of a wild-card spot, but it doesn't feel that way.

23. Utah HC, 21-21-8

Last week: 18

Hey Utah hockey fans! We listened to your feedback and dug into all the Qualtrics data from last night's survey. For the team name, it's clear that Outlaws should be in the mix instead of Wasatch, so we're swapping it out.

Surveys will continue at the arena Friday, Sunday and…

— Utah Hockey Club (@utahhockeyclub) January 30, 2025

Have we considered naming them the Qualtrics? They've won five of their last 18, by the way.

24. St. Louis Blues, 23-24-4

Last week: 19

There's plenty to be said about Brandon Saad's choice to terminate the last one and a half seasons of his contract with the Blues — ultimately, though, it's his life, his money and his business. He's in demand, of course, because he still can bring something to the right lineup under the right circumstances. A big part of that: His shooting percentage is 9.3, which is unsustainably low for a guy who's lived in the 15-18 percent range for the last five seasons. If that ticks up, he'll help in easy minutes on a bottom six.

25. Philadelphia Flyers, 23-24-6

Last week: 24

On Thursday night, ESPN's cameras caught John Tortorella and Matvei Michkov discussing Philly's trade for Andrei Kuzmenko. Both of them were very excited.

Here's the heated exchange between John Tortorella and Matvei Michkov after the first Islanders goal. #Flyers pic.twitter.com/lDOFXC4WSc

— Flyers Nation (@FlyersNation) January 31, 2025

The exchange actually came right after Michkov failed to cover a shot from the slot that put the Islanders up 1-0 with 9:58 left in the second. He didn't take another shift. "We're going to do it the right way with this kid because we think he's that special," Tortorella said after the game. "So it's my job to do that. No matter what happens." Fair enough.

26. Seattle Kraken, 23-27-3

Last week: 28

Each week, there's a team or two that briefly looks interested in joining the Western Conference wild-card race. This time, it's the Kraken, who've won six of 11 and outscored opponents 39-34 in the process. Not bad — but five of those wins have come against Pittsburgh, Buffalo and San Jose. Seattle's remaining opponents also have the fourth-highest points percentage in the league. Do not buy.

27. Anaheim Ducks, 21-24-6

Last week: 29

We'll believe that John Gibson actually gets traded when the paperwork is filed. Either way, it's been a while since he's looked this good; he's 10th in the league in goals saved above expected per 60 with a .912 save percentage.

28. Pittsburgh Penguins, 21-24-8

Last week: 27

In his last six games, Sidney Crosby has seven points (four goals, three assists) and a five-on-five goal share of nearly 60 percent. Have the Penguins lost four of those games? Of course they have! They're bad! In that same span, nobody else on the roster has scored more than once. It's the sort of stretch that makes you understand why people continue to pretend he could be traded.

29. Nashville Predators, 18-24-7

Last week: 26

Credit the Predators for that five-game win streak. It ended, though, before they forced us to contemplate their place in the wild-card race all that seriously. Now, poof — they've lost their last two, thanks to some tough luck at five-on-five and a crummy power play (0-for-6). Easy come, easy go.

30. Buffalo Sabres, 19-26-5

Last week: 30

Matt Fairburn wrote about this a few days back, but the Sabres might have something in 20-year-old Jiri Kulich. He's been centering Tage Thompson and JJ Peterka recently and looked good in the process; in about 50 minutes together, they're outscoring opponents 7-2.

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 16-30-5

Last week: 31

Connor Bedard has points in 16 of his last 18 games. Very good. The Blackhawks have also been outscored 19-14 with him on the ice at five-on-five with an expected goals percentage to match. Very not good.

32. San Jose Sharks, 15-33-6

Last week: 32

It's been a volatile first 13 starts for Yaroslav Askarov. Six times, he's put up a .929 save percentage or better; six times, he's put up an .871 or worse. This week, he stacked a game where he was the best player on the ice (Pittsburgh) and one where he got pulled after allowing four goals on 11 shots (Seattle). He's clearly talented, and the team in front of him is awful, but more time in the AHL seems like a no-brainer.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.01.2025

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ESPN / NHL trade grades: Report cards for the Flyers-Flames swap – ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Greg Wyshynski

The NHL trade deadline for the 2024-25 season is not until March 7, but teams have not waited until the last minute to make major moves.

Read on for grades from Ryan S. Clark and Greg Wyshynski, and check back the next time a big deal breaks.

The NHL. Where apparently Friday nights are the prime time for blockbuster trades?

Let's look at how each GM did and what the impact could be going forward.

The Rangers might be many things this season. Boring sure isn't one of them.

They traded their captain Jacob Trouba. They moved on from the one-time No. 2 pick in the draft (Kaapo Kakko) who was thought to be one of the future faces of the franchise. Now they have acquired one of the most coveted players more than a month ahead of the NHL trade deadline.

Can getting Miller be the move that helps the Rangers go from being five points out of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference in late January to landing a playoff spot by the end of regular season?

Miller provides the Rangers with another dimension they were lacking within their top nine. He probably could find a place in the top six either as a winger or somewhere down the middle. Either way, he creates possibilities that they just didn't have before.

Miller gives them another two-way forward they could pair with Vincent Trocheck on the first line. Or he could be paired on the wing with Mika Zibanejad on the second line. But those aren't the only options. There's also the possibility the Rangers could play Miller down the middle to create a dynamic that has him, Trocheck and Zibanejad anchoring their top three lines.

That's one dimension. What he offers from an offensive consistency standpoint is another. Miller sat out games earlier this season but is still projected to finish with 57 points in 66 games. That's an average of 0.86 points per game.

Artemi Panarin is the only Ranger who's averaging more points per game this season. Miller is a candidate to play on the first-team power-play unit considering he has 14 power-play points, which would be third on the Rangers behind Panarin and Adam Fox.

Getting Miller goes well beyond what he could do for the Rangers this season. He's in the second year of a seven-year contract that provides the Rangers with cost certainty ahead of an offseason where they face looming decisions.

Having cost certainty probably played a role in why they were comfortable moving on from Mancini after signing Will Borgen, who arrived in the Kakko trade, to a five-year deal worth $4.1 million a season.

The money the Rangers committed to Borgen plus what they've added from Miller's contract means they're going to have what PuckPedia projects is $18.69 million available ahead of what should be a busy offseason. The Rangers have a six-player restricted free agent class led by Will Cuylle and K'Andre Miller, while Ryan Lindgren is a pending UFA after signing a one-year deal worth $4.5 million.

NHL front offices are not a monolith. But they all value secrecy. So, when Canucks president of hockey operations Jim Rutherford confirmed there was a rift between Elias Pettersson and Miller it made the possibility of a trade even more probable.

Of the two, Miller appeared to be the one who was going to leave. He's older by five years and his $8 million annual cap hit was going to be easier to move than Pettersson's $11.6 million.

Miller has finished with more than 80 points in the past three seasons and is averaging 0.88 points per game this season. Pettersson has had two seasons in the past three in which he has finished with more than 80 points and is averaging 0.72 points per game this season.

Miller's departure should hypothetically bring a resolution to the tension that was building within the Canucks' organization. Figuring out if his departure can lead to Pettersson regaining offensive consistency while also trying to make the playoffs is another matter.

The situation facing the Canucks meant there was always a possibility they wouldn't receive someone who could be a like-for-like replacement for Miller.

Now, the Canucks are in a position to trust Chytil with the demands that come with being a top-six center.

Promise has followed Chytil since he was drafted by the Rangers in the first round in 2017. There have been seasons when his potential surfaced such as when he had 22 goals and 45 points in 74 games in the 2022-23 season. But there have also been injuries that have made it hard for him to find consistency, including multiple documented concussions, one of which led to him sitting out 72 regular-season games last season.

The most ice time Chytil's received through a full season came in his second year when he was averaging 14 minutes, 50 seconds. Miller was averaging close to 18 minutes this season but has averaged more than 19 minutes in every season he has played for the Canucks since arriving in 2019-20.

Miller was an important part of the Canucks penalty kill having logged more than 93 minutes of short-handed ice time per season over the past four seasons. Chytil has logged less than 15 minutes of short-handed ice time through his career, according to Natural Stat Trick.

But the Canucks have also shown that newcomers can find success in a short time. They've seen it the past few seasons with Filip Hronek, Andrei Kuzmenko and with Jake DeBrusk, who is on pace for a career-high 28 goals this season.

What Chytil does provide the Canucks is additional cap space. He's making $4.44 million annually, a savings of more than $3.5 million that

could prove useful before the trade deadline. Chytil has two more years left on his contract and would be eligible for free agency after the 2026-27 season.

It's also the type of savings that could aid the Canucks in the offseason given Brock Boeser is in the final season of a contract that pays him $6.6 million annually.

As for everything else in the trade? The Canucks picking up a protected-top 13 pick means they'll have two picks in 2025. It's possible they could use one of those along with what PuckPedia projects to be $12.198 million in deadline cap space to facilitate a deal.

Mancini, a fifth-round pick in 2022, provides the Canucks with another young defenseman in a system that already has Sawyer Mynio, Elias Pettersson and Tom Willander. Mancini had five points in 15 games for the Rangers before returning to the AHL where he has three goals and 10 points in 23 games. -- Clark

Here's a look at how each GM operated and what it all means.

Even after this trade, the Flames still have more than $17.5 million in cap space (per PuckPedia), which is the second most in the NHL behind the Columbus Blue Jackets ($18.75 million).

Plus, the Flames still have two first-round picks for 2025 along with two first-round picks in 2026.

It's a level of asset management and financial flexibility that could prove vital in their bid to reach the playoffs. At some point, they'll have to weigh whether it's worth parting with a first-round pick to land another player who would help their quest to secure a playoff spot; currently, they hold the second wild-card position in the West.

The question of what to do next will be determined over the next few weeks. For now, they have more pressing concerns. The main one being: What kind of production can they get immediately from Farabee and Frost?

Losing three-time 20-goal scorer Anthony Mantha to season-ending knee surgery in November meant the Flames needed additional scoring help. The promise Kuzmenko showed after he was traded to the Flames last season -- with 14 goals and 25 points in 29 games -- withered away, as he's mustered only four goals and 15 points in 37 games this season.

Placing Connor Zary on injured reserve earlier this month only reinforced that need to find top-nine help. The scoring totals just don't add up if this team is fighting for the playoffs.

Farabee and Frost could potentially help the Flames address their offensive concerns. Farabee is a two-time 20-goal scorer who scored 50 points last season, while Frost could notch his third consecutive 40-point campaign.

Thus far, Farabee has scored eight goals, averaging 0.39 points per game, which has him on pace to finish with 12 goals and 29 points in 77 games. If he continues at that projection, it will result in his poorest offensive season since his rookie season in 2019-20 when he scored 21 points in 52 games.

Frost, on the other hand, has an opportunity to get back on track after spending the last two seasons coming under fire from Flyers coach John Tortorella. He's on pace for 17 goals, which would be the second most of his career, while his 39-point projection over 76 games would just fall short of the 41 points he accrued in 71 games last season.

Making the playoffs for the first time since the 2021-22 season appears to be a priority for this franchise. Another is the need to find stability, considering the Flames' many trades over the last three seasons.

Any role Farabee and Frost can play in that playoff pursuit could further justify whatever plans the Flames may have for them down the road.

Kuzmenko was in the final season of a two-year deal ($5.5 million average annual value), while Pelletier was a pending restricted free agent. Swapping them for Farabee and Frost provides the Flames with more certainty.

Farabee has three years left on his contract carrying a $5 million AAV. Frost is a restricted free agent who is coming off a two-year bridge deal that saw him earn $2.1 million. The Flames would have one more year of control after this season before Frost becomes an unrestricted free agent at the end of the 2025-26 campaign.

They were able to add two players that could help them now and possibly in the future while holding only losing a minimal amount of cap space and keeping those first-round picks.

Those are the circumstances that gives Flames GM Craig Conroy the sort of options ahead of the trade deadline most in his role would covet.

Philadelphia Flyers

Grade: B+

Moving on from Farabee could play a significant role in whatever path the Flyers opt to take in the offseason.

Initially, the Flyers were slated to have $12.88 million in available cap space heading into the summer. But the only money coming off their books was the combined $3.4 million between Rodrigo Abols and Erik Johnson on expiring contracts, along with the Tony DeAngelo buyout at $1.67 million.

Shedding Farabee's salary (and with Kuzmenko on an expiring deal) means they are projected to have $17.88 million in cap space entering the offseason, according to PuckPedia.

In addition, the second-round pick they received in this deal gives them seven in the first two rounds, including three in the first.

But just how the Flyers choose to spend their money in the summer could hinge upon how Kuzmenko performs.

Part of Kuzmenko's appeal is that he has found ways to have instant success in new places. His first season with the Canucks was a breakout, with 39 goals and 74 points. His second season was a step back, with just eight goals and 21 points in 45 games before he was traded to the Flames; he got off to a hot start again, with 14 goals and 25 points in 29 games.

That trend is what makes him a possibility on the second line where he could play alongside Sean Couturier and former SKA St. Petersburg teammate Matvei Michkov. The "high-scoring newcomer" version of Kuzmenko would be highly useful, as the Flyers are five points out of the second wild-card spot.

The scoring will help, but Kuzmenko's play in the defensive zone will dictate quite a bit. Especially with the Flyers in the top five in the fewest shots allowed per 60 and ranked 12th in the fewest scoring chances allowed per 60, according to Natural Stat Trick.

As for Pelletier, the Flyers hope he can continue to build upon what has been his strongest professional season to date. He began the campaign in the AHL, where he had 19 points in 20 games, before he was called up to the Flames in early December.

He has gradually made a case for more playing time. Pelletier went from averaging a little more than 11 minutes per game in December to just under 15 minutes per game in January. It resulted in an offensive return of four goals and 11 points in 24 games, while also logging more than 33 minutes of short-handed ice time.

Like Frost, he's a pending RFA. But Pelletier's $800,000 cap hit means that he could become a more cost-effective option compared to what Philly would have had to pay Frost. --Clark

Jan. 24: Rantanen to the Hurricanes, Necas to the Avalanche

Quiet. Quiet. Quiet. Then the NHL got loud Friday with the first blockbuster trade in recent memory.

The Colorado Avalanche traded winger Mikko Rantanen in a three-team deal involving the Carolina Hurricanes and Chicago Blackhawks. Both Taylor Hall and Rantanen went to the Hurricanes, with Jack Drury and Martin Necas going to the Avs. The Avs also received a 2025 second-

round pick and a 2026 fourth-round pick from the Hurricanes. The Blackhawks reacquired their 2025 third-round pick while retaining 50% of Rantanen's salary. Prospect Nils Juntorp went from Chicago to Colorado then to Carolina.

How did each GM perform on a landscape-altering trade? Let's find out.

Carolina Hurricanes

Grade: A+

Quite simply, the Hurricanes are coming for everyone.

The franchise that built its success from drafting and developing has now added an aggressive edge to be active in free agency, while pursuing the sort of trades that make them an even stronger Stanley Cup contender.

Already one of the NHL's more legitimate championship front-runners, the Canes getting Rantanen and Hall only heightens the expectations that they have a roster capable of winning it all this season.

Rantanen provides a level of goal scoring and playmaking ability that could make a potential first line featuring Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov one of the most dangerous in the NHL. Rantanen's ability to facilitate play while using his powerful 6-foot-4 frame to fend off defenders could be the detail that allows Aho and Svechnikov the needed time to find the type of space that puts opponents in a difficult spot.

Trading Necas takes away one of the Canes' most consistent two-way players. But it hypothetically moves Jackson Blake to the second line while Hall is part of a middle-six winger pool that also features Seth Jarvis, Jordan Martinook, Jack Roslovic and Eric Robinson.

Suddenly, a team that was averaging the fifth-most goals per game in the NHL this season has added more options in the form of Rantanen -- one of the game's most consistently prolific players -- while Hall, a one-time Hart Trophy winner, could potentially finish the season with 20 goals. Those additions could also jump-start a power play that came into Friday ranked 17th.

And this is being done with the Blackhawks retaining half of Rantanen's $9.25 million cap hit while Hall, who is also a pending UFA, carries a $6 million cap hit.

First-year Canes GM Eric Tulsky, who was previously one of their assistant GMs, has set a tone that the priority is to win this season. But this is also the sort of trade that is going to provide Tulsky with another test.

Can he re-sign Rantanen?

Rantanen is a pending unrestricted free agent who can land one of the NHL's richest contracts over the coming months. It's possible the Hurricanes could strike a deal for him. But it will take some work.

They have nine contracts coming off the books this offseason, with the most notable being Frederik Andersen ($3.40 million), Brent Burns ($5.28 million) and Dmitry Orlov ($7.75 million). PuckPedia projects the Canes will have $22.98 million available in cap space, which could be used to re-sign Rantanen while leaving enough left over to strengthen the rest of the roster.

But for now, Tulsky and his team get the highest marks.

Check out some numbers behind Jacob Trouba's time with the Rangers as he is traded to the Anaheim Ducks.

Colorado Avalanche

Grade: B+

Practically any conversation about what has made the Avs one of the NHL's most successful teams over the past six seasons has included Rantanen's name.

His ability to create for himself, create for others, and do it in a way that could either complement Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar -- but wasn't reliant on MacKinnon and/or Makar -- is what made Rantanen quite valuable. He is a five-time 30-goal scorer and also hit the 50-assist mark five times.

And maybe all of that was the problem for the Avs and Rantanen when it came finalizing any sort of deal.

Rantanen was a pending unrestricted free agent in the final season of a six-year deal that saw him earn $9.25 million per year. At the time he signed the contract, he was the Avs' highest-paid player. Entering this season, he was second behind MacKinnon, who is in the first year of a deal that sees him earn $12.6 million annually.

Each month that passed without both sides agreeing to a deal led to talk that maybe the Avs could move on from Rantanen. But it initially appeared that the talk was, well, just that.

Until it wasn't.

It appears the impasse the Avs were facing with Rantanen was the premium that comes with having a third superstar. Even though the salary cap will continue its rise in the coming years, there were still financial considerations the Avs' front office had to ponder.

They have three more years of Valeri Nichushkin ($6.31 million per year) and Devon Toews ($7.25 million). Ross Colton ($4 million), Samuel Girard ($5.75 million), Arturri Lehkonen ($4.5 million) and Casey Mittelstadt ($5.75 million) are part of a group that has two years left on their deals.

Then there's the money they didn't expect to take on this season when their original goaltending tandem of Justus Annunen and Alexander Georgiev began to struggle and cost the team wins.

Annunen's and Georgiev's deals cost a combined $4.237 million cap hit that brought an extra layer of financial flexibility. Annunen is a pending restricted free agent and Georgiev was going to be a pending UFA.

But then, the Avs replaced them with Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood. While it strengthened the weakest area of the team, it came with a cost. Blackwood signed a three-year deal less than a month after they acquired him, which saw his salary go from $2.35 million annually to $5.25 million annually next season.

Now the Avalanche have $6.75 million committed to their goalies through 2025-26.

Having that much money wrapped up in those players -- along with the Gabriel Landeskog uncertainty, and the fact he has three more years left at $7 million on his contract -- comes against the backdrop of what the Avs must contend with after the 2026-27 season when Makar will need a very large new contract.

It's possible Makar could command the biggest contract in the NHL. And if so, it would leave the Avs needing as much financial flexibility as possible in an offseason that also sees Colton, Girard, Lehkonen and Mittlestadt reach free agency.

That's one of the hypotheticals facing the Avalanche. Another was why take the risk in losing one of the NHL's premier wingers for nothing?

Although Necas is not a prolific producer like Rantanen, he does provide the Avs with a consistent two-way center who can anchor their second line in a way in which others have struggled since Nazem Kadri left in free agency after winning the Stanley Cup in 2022.

Necas is averaging a career-best 1.12 points per game this season, with the belief those figures could either sustain or increase given the Avs have a history of seeing new players succeed in their system.

There's also the financial implication in that Necas has one more year left on his deal at $6.5 million before he hits free agency. Should the Avs look to re-sign him, the expectation is it would hypothetically come at a cost that is much cheaper compared to whatever Rantanen would have commanded.

While the chances of finding a like-for-like trade might have proved difficult, the Avs still received a two-way top-six center in Necas, with Drury giving them another bottom-six option.

Chicago Blackhawks

Grade: C-

Asset management is everything for rebuilding teams. The Blackhawks know this, which is what makes their return in this trade rather puzzling.

Hall was expected to be moved ahead of the trade deadline. The Blackhawks were perceived to be looking to receive draft capital in return for a player who could either be a top-six or at least top-nine option for a contender.

Getting a third-round pick for Hall whether the Blackhawks retained any of his salary? OK, bet. Getting a third-round pick for retaining 50% of a salary to facilitate a deal as a third-party broker? Sure, that's the price of doing business.

But to receive only a single draft pick while giving up Hall and retaining 50% of Rantanen's salary? That raises quite a few questions about why the Hawks couldn't attract more in this deal, particularly upon the realization that the Avs received a 2025 second-round pick and a 2026 fourth-round pick in addition to getting two NHL players in Drury and Necas.

The Blackhawks are not struggling for draft capital. They entered Friday with eight picks for 2025, nine picks for 2026 and seven picks in 2027. They'll have four picks in the first two rounds this summer, including two first-rounders. But no franchise in a rebuild has ever openly complained about having too many draft picks.

They couldn't get more than a single pick here?

There was always the hypothetical that Hall's $6 million cap hit meant they would have had to retain salary. But retaining 50% of Rantanen's salary costs more than it would have to retain the same percentage of Hall's.

Moving on from Hall now means the Blackhawks have other pending UFAs who could be used to attain more draft capital. It's a group that includes Ryan Donato, Pat Maroon and Alec Martinez among others, as the franchise is in line for its fourth consecutive top-10 pick and its third straight top-three pick.

Donato carries a $2 million cap hit and Maroon is at $1.3 million, which makes their salaries more affordable for an interested team. Martinez has a $4 million cap hit. -- Clark

Dec. 18: Kakko to the Kraken, Borgen to the Rangers

Another member of what was once considered the New York Rangers' future is now gone, with the club trading Kaapo Kakko to the Seattle Kraken.

The Kraken received Kakko in exchange for defenseman Will Borgen, a 2025 third-round pick and a 2025 sixth-round pick.

Here's a look at how both front offices performed with this trade and what it all means.

New York Rangers

Grade: C-

Shortly after the trade was announced, it was reported that Kakko's quote to reporters before the team's 2-0 loss Tuesday against the Nashville Predators did not play a role in the trade.

The 23-year-old forward was a healthy scratch in a 3-2 loss Sunday to the St. Louis Blues, which led to him saying, "I know you've got to do something as a coach when you're losing games, but I think it's just easy to pick a young guy and boot him out. That's how I feel to be honest."

Kakko had four goals and 14 points in 30 games. He was on pace for 11 goals and 37 points, entering the final season of his contract as a player who had yet to reach the heights of what was expected when he was the No. 2 pick of the 2019 draft.

Now Kakko is gone, and he becomes the latest personnel move in a season that has led to questions about where the Rangers go next -- and if it could still somehow result in the club reaching the Eastern Conference finals for the third time in four years.

The Rangers had lost five in a row and six of their past seven games around the time GM Chris Drury sent a memo to the rest of the league to inform them the Rangers were open for business. It led to them trading captain and defenseman Jacob Trouba to the Anaheim Ducks on Dec. 6, a move that added salary cap space with Trouba still having another year left on his contract worth $8 million.

Moving on from Trouba meant Braden Schneider and Victor Mancini would receive more opportunities. Those plans changed with K'Andre Miller going on injured reserve Friday, which put a strain on a Rangers team that is 2-6 since Trouba was traded.

It's why Schneider was partnered with rookie Zac Jones on the second pairing, with Urho Vaakanainen, who was acquired in the Trouba trade, on the third pairing with veteran journeyman Chad Ruhwedel.

Losing on Tuesday to the last-place Predators gave the Rangers a third straight defeat, during which time they were outscored 10-3.

Then came the trade that saw them get Borgen, send Mancini to the AHL and recall forward Matt Rempe.

Adding Borgen gives the Rangers another right-handed defenseman who has shown he can play top-four minutes while logging heavy minutes on the penalty kill -- something the Rangers needed with Trouba still leading them in short-handed ice time as of Wednesday.

It's also a move that provides them additional financial flexibility going forward. One of the challenges facing Drury and his front office staff was figuring out their cap situation ahead of next offseason. And that was before they signed superstar goaltender Igor Shesterkin to a long-term extension worth $11.5 million annually.

Jones, Kakko, Miller and Will Cuylle were all pending restricted free agents, while top-pairing defenseman Ryan Lindgren is a pending unrestricted free agent.

By flipping Kakko for Borgen, a pending UFA, it allows the Rangers another outlet to get money off their books with Borgen earning $2.7 million this season. It now leaves the Rangers with a six-player UFA class that also includes Jonathan Quick and Reilly Smith, among others.

This allows Drury & Co. more money to play with as the Rangers seek to keep their coveted core together. A core that no longer features a player who was once thought to be one of the faces of the future. And that's the bottom line here; while Borgen is useful to fill the Trouba-sized hole, Kakko might have some runway left in his development, which will now be revealed in a Kraken sweater.

Seattle Kraken

Grade: B

Kraken GM Ron Francis was able to take Borgen, who was the team's pick from the Buffalo Sabres in the expansion draft, eventually turn him into a top-four defenseman, and trade him (with Day 2 draft picks) for a potential top-six forward in Kakko.

The key word being potential.

Development is one of the items that makes the NHL distinctive -- and also makes it complicated. A 23-year-old in another professional sport would be met with the understanding that they're not a finished product at such a young age.

That's what the Kraken are banking on. It's what the Rangers were also banking on, before pulling the rip cord on a forward who has played the second-most games of his draft class yet is sixth in points; for context, his fellow Finland countryman, Matias Maccelli, was taken 96 picks later and is separated by nine points despite playing 131 fewer games.

Kakko's best season came in 2022-23 when he had 18 goals and 40 points in 82 games, averaging 15 minutes,18 seconds in ice time. Since then, he has scored 17 goals and 31 points in 91 games, while averaging 13:16 in ice time.

Coming to Seattle should lead to Kakko receiving opportunities that were much harder to come by in New York. Whether it be with Matty Beniers, Tye Kartye, Ryker Evans and now Shane Wright, the Kraken have shown they are willing to give young players a chance to earn minutes. Especially with captain Jordan Eberle being on long-term injured reserve, while Yanni Gourde has been day-to-day since last playing on Dec. 10.

Getting the most out of young players is one of the reasons why the Kraken hired coach Dan Bylsma and assistant Jessica Campbell. The work they did developing and winning with quite a few of the Kraken's prospects at the AHL level could potentially lead to Kakko finding more continuity in Seattle.

Again, the key word here being, potentially.

Playing time isn't the only thing that's at stake. Kakko is a pending RFA who has one more year of team control before his UFA years start kicking in before the 2026-27 season.

How he performs this season could at least lead to a one-year deal, with the idea that the Kraken might also be tempted to give him more than that if he becomes a key player for them.

Entering Wednesday, the Kraken were four points out of the final Western Conference wild-card playoff spot. They played an extra game more than the team holding the last spot -- the Calgary Flames -- while the Utah Hockey Club is three points behind but has played three fewer games.

The Kraken were expected to be part of a grouping of teams that could potentially challenge for a wild card, with the notion they might have to decide their path (and role) ahead of the trade deadline.

Spending big money in the offseason to sign Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson signaled their intent about what they could do this season and beyond. Adding Kakko only adds to the belief of what this season could potentially mean for the Kraken. -- Clark

Dec. 14: Fowler traded to St. Louis

After 991 games wearing an Anaheim Ducks uniform, Cam Fowler will now wear a St. Louis Blues sweater.

The Blues acquired Fowler and a 2027 fourth-round pick from the Ducks in exchange for a 2027 second-round pick and prospect defenseman Jeremie Biakabutuka. The Ducks will also retain 38.4615385% of Fowler's salary.

Here's a look at how both front offices did with the trade.

St. Louis Blues

Grade: B+

There are two versions of the Blues in 2024-25: The first version was struggling under Drew Bannister; the second version is under the guidance of Jim Montgomery, who was hired to replace Bannister less than a week after his own dismissal by the Boston Bruins.

In Montgomery's eight games, the Blues have found a defensive cohesion that's been missing. That problem has been one of the largest challenges facing GM Doug Armstrong in his bid to get the Blues back into the playoffs.

Having four defensemen with no-trade clauses was also a massive hurdle when it came to making changes. What opened the door was when one of those defensemen, Torey Krug, sustained an ankle injury that required season-ending surgery in September.

That played a role in them adding Philip Broberg via offer sheet, with the idea that they could be tempted to potentially add more should a deal that fits within their parameters become available.

Enter Fowler, who now represents another potential change in a season that has already seen quite a few.

His future with the Ducks was already in question following the Jacob Trouba trade. To have another top-four option available at a price that could fit within their salary cap structure made Fowler an attractive option for St. Louis.

Now it's a matter of determining what sort of role Fowler, who has one more season after the 2024-25 campaign left on his contract, can play on a roster that's allowing the sixth-fewest goals per game since the Blues hired Montgomery on Nov. 25.

Part of what has helped the Blues is they now have a team save percentage that's fourth in the league in Montgomery's eight games in charge; they have risen to 14th for the whole season. They are allowing the eighth-fewest high-danger chances, while sitting 13th in fewest scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes, and are around league average in shots allowed per 60.

That's one area where Fowler could play a role. Another could be a power play that has struggled before and after they hired Montgomery. They are 20th since Montgomery took over and are 25th on the season.

This could be a win-win deal. Fowler gives the Ducks someone with experience operating a power play. The Blues provide Fowler with the ice time he wasn't receiving on the man advantage, as he had just 10:07 in power-play ice time this season after reaching the 100-minute mark in all but one season since making his debut in 2010-11.

Fowler could pair with Colton Parayko, a duo that could be the latest building block Montgomery could use to find more consistency.

The Blues entered Saturday four points out of the final Western Conference wild-card spot, and this is a move made with erasing that gap in mind.

Anaheim Ducks

Grade: B

Ducks GM Pat Verbeek knew what this season's climate was like for teams needing a top-four defenseman, having just acquired Trouba for Urho Vaakanainen and a 2025 fourth-round pick.

But the Ducks were facing a different situation with trying to move on from Fowler than what the Rangers were going through before they sent Trouba to Anaheim.

What helped Verbeek is that he had the necessary time to find what he felt was the strongest possible trade. And he made a deal that attained more draft capital for a franchise that's believed to have one of the NHL's brightest and strongest farm futures.

There's that word. Future.

The future is one of the major reasons the Ducks moved on from Fowler, who was less than 10 games from playing No. 1,000 for the club. Drafting and developing young defensemen has become a hallmark of what the Ducks have done over the past few years.

It's why they've brought up Jackson LaCombe, Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger. And while Drew Helleson was acquired in a trade, he's a 2019 second-round pick with promise and size.

The improvement by the young defensive core is why Fowler's power-play minutes significantly diminished this season. And once the Ducks got Trouba, it meant that playing Fowler came at the expense of not playing one of those younger defensemen like Helleson or Zellweger, given LaCombe and Mintyukov have already established themselves as nightly fixtures.

And for a franchise that has shown it is beyond comfortable giving young players a chance to play? Building that young core ultimately led the Ducks down the path to where Fowler was expendable. Getting Trouba, who has one more year left on his deal after this season, was essentially the final push that allowed the Ducks to feel comfortable moving on. -- Clark

Dec. 9: Blackwood to Colorado, Georgiev to San Jose

With goaltending being a major problem for the Colorado Avalanche, could Mackenzie Blackwood be the solution?

The Avalanche acquired Blackwood and forward Givani Smith in a trade with the San Jose Sharks that sees goalie Alexandar Georgiev, forward Nikolai Kovalenko, a 2025 fifth-round pick and a 2026 second-round pick head to the Bay Area. The Avs also retained 14% of Georgiev's salary.

How did both GMs fare in the trade? Let's find out.

Colorado Avalanche

Grade: B

The Avalanche's defensive structure ranks in the top 10 of fewest scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes and shots allowed per 60. Unfortunately, their save percentage as a team is second worst in the NHL.

That defensive zone disconnect is why changes needed to be made for an Avs team that's fighting for a wild-card spot as mid-December draws closer -- despite its status as a preseason Stanley Cup favorite.

But it's also symptomatic of a larger problem with the Avs in that they've had issues building a consistently strong supporting cast around their core led by Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Mikko Rantanen.

Having that supporting cast is what helped them win a title in 2022. Lacking that cast is why they were knocked out of the first round a year later and lost in the second round last season.

Georgiev averaged 39 wins per season in his first two with the team. But that came with questions: Was Georgiev the sole reason he won so many games in Denver? Or was it the structure around him that led to his success?

All Avs GM Chris MacFarland needed was 18 games this season to answer those questions.

It started when Colorado traded Justus Annunen to the Nashville Predators to get Scott Wedgewood. But it became even clearer when Wedgewood's first win came in relief of Georgiev on Dec. 3 -- when the latter allowed four goals on eight shots in the Avs' 5-4 win over the Buffalo Sabres.

Now the Avalanche are turning to Blackwood and hope he can steady the ship. His .911 save percentage is 12th among goalies with more than 10 games played, while his goals saved versus average is in the top 20.

Blackwood is not perfect, and there are questions about the newest Av:

Is he the answer for a team that has Stanley Cup aspirations? Is he different from the goalie who forced the New Jersey Devils to find alternatives when they made the playoffs in 2023? And while the Avs needed to make a move, was the price they paid to add Blackwood too much given he has never played in the postseason?

We'll find out the answers to all of these in the coming weeks and months.

San Jose Sharks

Grade: B+

Every move Sharks GM Mike Grier makes for the foreseeable future is about building a better tomorrow for the Sharks. The return package for Blackwood will play a role in those plans.

Go back to when Grier acquired Blackwood in 2023. The Sharks parted with a 2023 sixth-round pick to get him from the Devils. Now fast-forward to Monday, and the return Grier received goes well beyond the sixth-round pick he sent to the Devils.

And he still has two pending unrestricted free agent goalies on the roster.

Georgiev's arrival will impact the Sharks at the NHL level and beyond. He will join a tandem with Vitek Vanecek for a team that came into Monday seven points behind the Avs for the final wild-card spot and seven points ahead of the Chicago Blackhawks for the NHL's worst record.

Adding Georgiev gives the Sharks seven pending unrestricted free agents. It's possible that the Sharks could attain additional draft capital ahead of the trade deadline if there's a team seeking goaltending depth.

That's another reason getting the Avs to retain 14% of his salary was crucial.

All three of the Sharks' retained salary slots are filled because of previous trades involving Brent Burns, Tomas Hertl and Erik Karlsson. It's what makes the need for the Sharks to present their pending UFAs as affordable to playoff hopefuls even more crucial.

But where it gets more captivating is how the Sharks now have two experienced options in net, meaning they can take their time with developing top goalie prospect Yaroslav Askarov, who had a 1.96 goals-against average and a .927 save percentage in two games before he was returned to the AHL.

Kovalenko is another player who could also help the Sharks this season and possibly beyond. He gives the Sharks a ninth player younger than 25 on the roster, in a group that includes Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund, Mario Ferraro and Will Smith, among others. Kovalenko, who has four goals and eight points in 28 games, could possibly challenge for a top-nine role. He's also a pending restricted free agent, which means the Sharks could look to sign him to a new deal or move on from him via another trade.

All in all, another tidy piece of business for Grier. -- Clark

Dec. 6: Trouba to the Ducks

The New York Rangers traded defenseman Jacob Trouba to the Anaheim Ducks, ending a tense few months of speculation about their captain's future.

The Ducks sent defenseman Urho Vaakanainen and a conditional 2025 fourth-round pick to the Rangers for Trouba. Anaheim takes on all of Trouba's contract, which carries an $8 million average annual value against the salary cap through the 2025-26 season.

The Rangers will receive either the Ducks' or the Detroit Red Wings' fourth-round pick, depending on which one is lower in the draft order.

New York Rangers

Grade: A

The marking period for this trade began on July 19, 2019. That's when then-Rangers general manager Jeff Gorton signed defenseman Jacob Trouba to a seven-year, $56 million contract to avoid salary arbitration.

Despite being one of the league's most effective defensemen at that point -- which is why the Rangers acquired him from the Winnipeg Jets in the first place -- many thought that Trouba's $8 million annual cap hit was overcompensation, considering the bell curve of a physical defenseman's effectiveness in the NHL. The Rangers certainly took that into account: That overcompensation bought them flexibility in the final two years of Trouba's contract, which carried a no-movement clause from 2020-24 before switching to a 15-team no-trade clause.

That no-trade clause still gave Trouba some agency over his future, as the Rangers discovered last summer when his refusal to submit a list of approved teams early reportedly torpedoed a potential trade with the Detroit Red Wings. But it couldn't protect him from the Rangers using their nuclear option, which is what ultimately led to Trouba's trade to Anaheim.

Please recall when the Rangers placed forward Barclay Goodrow on waivers in June, clearing the last three years of his contract off their books when the San Jose Sharks claimed him in a prearranged move. There's no question that GM Chris Drury pointed to that example and told Trouba, "This could happen to you."

You could be on a rebuilding Chicago Blackhawks team that just fired their coach. Or the San Jose Sharks. Or the Red Wings, with whom you didn't want to play last summer. Or shuffle back up to Canada, not as a Winnipeg Jet but as a Montreal Canadien. Such was the waiver wire.

Or Trouba could select from the potential trade destinations placed in front of him, waiving his no-trade clause for one of them.

With that, the captain of the New York Rangers is now a member of the Anaheim Ducks.

Part of this grade goes to the Rangers' front office in 2019, when Drury was an assistant GM, for having the foresight to create this pressure point. And part of it goes to Drury, who exerted that pressure to move Trouba's cap hit off the books, remove an ineffective defenseman from his blue line and send a shock to the system of a struggling team.

The Rangers are 13-10-1 this season. They're in a wild card. But they've lost six games in regulation out of their past seven. Drury was so displeased with what he saw that he put out a memo to 31 other NHL teams telling them he was open for business and mentioning Trouba by name.

Trouba has been a liability all season. He's in the negatives across the board analytically relative to his teammates, including a 47.5% expected goals percentage. He has just six assists in 24 games, skating to a minus-3. Even the one thing the Rangers used to depend on from Trouba -- physicality -- was down, as he averaged 4.87 hits per 60 minutes after averaging 7.81 last season.

Of course, it should be said that Drury basically made him a lame duck, and that has to impact his performance.

In the immediate term, the trade opens up ice time for Braden Schneider and Victor Mancini, two players the Rangers are eager to see develop.

(Vaakanainen, whom they received from Anaheim, is a spare at this point, and was a healthy scratch for the Ducks this season.)

But taking the long view, we've now seen the other shoe drop for the Rangers: Clearing Trouba's salary allowed them to finally sign goalie Igor Shesterkin to his new contract worth $11.5 million against the salary cap -- a record for NHL goalies. Which certainly alleviates one point of long-term planning stress for Drury and only increases this grade

Whether or not the roster shake-up goes beyond Trouba remains to be seen. Don't forget, Chris Kreider's name was in that Drury memo, too.

But getting Trouba off the books and off the ice was something the Rangers had been attempting for months. With more than a gentle nudge, he has sailed to the Pacific.

Nothing like trading your captain through pitiless means to get a locker room's attention.

Anaheim Ducks

Grade: B

I don't hate this from the Ducks' perspective.

Trouba is a better defenseman than the majority of the blueliners on the Anaheim roster. That's assuming some of his poor play was due to the Rangers basically standing in the doorway with his bags packed for six months, which will certainty weigh on a guy.

At least now he's with a team that he begrudgingly picked, with a couple of former teammates (Ryan Strome and Frank Vatrano) and a general manager in Pat Verbeek who says kind things such as "on the ice, he competes every shift, leads by example and is a presence on the blue line every night."

Verbeek also called him "a big part of our future success," and hopefully that means as a mentor to young defensemen rather than signing Trouba until he's 37 when his contract runs out after the 2025-26 season. The Ducks have up-and-comers such as Pavel Mintyukov, Olen Zellweger, Drew Helleson and Jackson LaCombe on the roster, with players such as Stian Solberg and Tristan Luneau in the pipeline. Trouba can be a "lead by example" type, having excelled offensively and defensively during his career. After six seasons in Winnipeg and six more in New York, he has seen some things.

It's safe to say that Trouba is in decline at 30 years old. He might have been a liability with the Rangers, but the bar is set rather lower in Anaheim. This is an atrocious defensive team. The Ducks are giving up 3.14 expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, last in the league and the only NHL team over three expected goals against on average this season. They earn only 45% of the shot attempts in a game, 31st in the NHL. No one gives up more high-danger shot attempts (13.5 per 60 minutes) than Anaheim -- although please note that the Rangers were right behind them (13.1).

The Ducks have prioritized physicality, and Trouba can bring that. The idea that Anaheim can roll out Radko Gudas and Trouba on the same defense should have Western Conference opponents already reaching for the Advil.

They didn't give up anything for him. Even if Vaakanainen was playing, which he wasn't, the Ducks were dealing from a position of depth. The fourth-rounder is expendable, given they had two. The $8 million salary cap hit shouldn't impact them much next season: While Mason McTavish will need a new deal this summer, Leo Carlsson's big-ticket second contract won't be until after Trouba's expires.

Plus, if he finds his game in Anaheim and the Ducks aren't in the playoff mix next season, they could always retain salary and flip Trouba at the 2026 trade deadline. He's exactly the kind of defenseman who has value for contenders at the right price.

Verbeek said, "It's rare you are able to acquire a player with Jacob's experience, stature and ability."

Despite this decline and the growing flaws in his game, that's undoubtedly true, and especially for this compensation. The Ducks need more adults in the room. They landed themselves an NHL captain, who can hopefully find more effectiveness in a place where he's wanted. -- Wyshynski

Nov. 30: Jiricek traded to the Wild

In need of a change, defenseman David Jiricek found one Saturday when the Columbus Blue Jackets traded the former No. 6 pick to the Minnesota Wild.

The Wild received Jiricek and a 2025 fifth-round pick, with the Blue Jackets receiving a top-five protected 2025 first-round pick, a 2027 second-round pick, a 2026 third-round pick, a 2026 fourth-round pick and defenseman Daemon Hunt.

Minnesota Wild

Grade: B+

Last season allowed the Wild to draw two conclusions about the state of their defense.

The first was that they appear to have a legitimate franchise cornerstone in Brock Faber, who finished second in Calder Trophy voting. The second was that the team needed to figure out how to continue to get younger on the back end, especially with injuries ravaging a unit that had quite a few players -- Zach Bogosian, Jonas Brodin, Jon Merrill and captain Jared Spurgeon -- all older than 30.

That process began in 2021 when they used one of their two first-round picks to select Winnipeg Ice defenseman Carson Lambos. They acquired Faber in 2022 in the Kevin Fiala trade with the Los Angeles Kings. In June, they used their first-round pick (No. 12) to draft University of Denver defenseman Zeev Buium. Now, they have added Jiricek, the sixth pick in the 2022 draft.

As for what this all means for this season?

Much of that could depend upon Jiricek. Part of what made him available in the first place was the belief that he was unhappy with his role in Columbus. He was averaging 11:11 in six games while logging less than 10 minutes over what became his final three contests before he was sent to the AHL.

Jiricek will remain in the AHL, where he will use his time with the Wild's affiliate to push for a role at the NHL level. Jiricek is a 6-foot-4 puck mover, and those traits have come through in the AHL, where he's scored 15 goals and 60 points in 88 games. This season, he has two goals and three points in four games.

Whether he can find a way to translate his AHL production to the NHL is the looming question. If he can, he'll give the Wild another facilitator with size who could be trusted to play key minutes. Beyond that, he could give the Wild those minutes on his entry-level contract, which is important for a franchise that's had to become adept at spending cap space because of the combined Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts that currently cost $14.7 million but will fall to $1.66 million next season.

The Wild (15-4-4) were two points behind the Winnipeg Jets for the best record in the NHL and the Western Conference entering Saturday. They're allowing the fewest goals per game in the NHL this season, the fewest high-danger scoring chances per 60 and rank in the top 10 in the fewest scoring chances allowed per 60.

Not only have they established consistency, but the Wild also have the depth to go with that continuity. Faber is one of three defensemen who have played in every game, while four of their defenseman have appeared in more than 16 games this season.

Maintaining that level means the Wild don't have to be in a rush to call up Jiricek and can let him settle into their system. And if the Wild can remain in the hunt for a top seed, they've essentially added a one-time top-six pick for what will ultimately become a first-round selection that's toward the bottom of the draft.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Grade: B+

Moving on from a one-time top-10 pick such as Jiricek comes with the question about if a franchise has received or has come close to receiving a return of equal value.

It appears that Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell was able to achieve that by getting a sizable haul along with a defenseman who can play right now with Hunt.

At the time of the trade, the Blue Jackets (10-9-3) look as if they could go in a few directions this season. On Saturday, they were two points out of the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot while also being within five points of having the NHL's worst record.

The fact Jiricek struggled to get minutes and was sent to the AHL before being traded shows that the Blue Jackets were comfortable with their dynamic in the interim. But how this could work out for them in the future is where it gets interesting.

Waddell's time in charge of the Carolina Hurricanes saw the club rely upon the draft to build a roster that has since become one of the NHL's perennial favorites to win the Stanley Cup. One of the ways the Hurricanes reached that destination was to have as many draft picks as possible.

With this trade, the Blue Jackets now have 27 draft picks over the next three seasons.

Another detail that could factor into the decision to move on from Jiricek is the defensive youth the Blue Jackets have on their NHL roster and in their farm system. Five of the seven defensemen on the Blue Jackets' active roster are younger than 27. That does not include Hunt.

They also have youth in their system. They used one of their three first-round picks in 2021 to draft Corson Ceulemans. A year later, they used one of their two first-rounders to take Denton Mateychuk. Of course, the other player they drafted in the first round that year was Jiricek. They also used four of their six picks to draft defensemen in 2024, with the most notable being Charlie Elick, who went in the second round. -- Clark

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ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, January trends for each team – ESPN

ESPN staff

Friday marks the final night of games for the month of January in the 2024-25 NHL season. In addition to our latest updated Power Rankings, let's check in on how all 32 teams performed this month.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday, which generates our master list.

Note: Previous ranking for each team refers to the previous edition,

Published Jan. 24. Points percentages, paces and January stats are through Thursday's games.

1. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 72.55%

Alex Ovechkin or no Alex Ovechkin, this team just keeps winning, and January was no different; the Caps racked up 22 points in 14 games, extending their lead atop the Metropolitan Division.

Next eight days: vs. WPG (Feb. 1), vs. FLA (Feb. 4), @ PHI (Feb. 6)

2. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 70.75%

No, this isn't the dominant team that was setting records in the season's first weeks. But they'll take an 9-3-2 record any month, given the sizable lead they built in October and November.

Next eight days: @ WSH (Feb. 1), vs. CAR (Feb. 4)

3. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 66.67%

Some teams that lose in the Stanley Cup Final swoon in the following season. That hasn't been the case for Edmonton, and a 10-3-1 January has them atop the Pacific Division.

Next eight days: vs. TOR (Feb. 1), @ STL (Feb. 4), @ CHI (Feb. 5)

4. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 65.38%

Carolina's point percentage was the fifth highest in the league in January -- and most of those games were played without Mikko Rantanen and Taylor Hall. Are those two additions enough to finally get the Canes back to the Stanley Cup Final?

Next eight days: vs. LA (Feb. 1), @ WPG (Feb. 4), @ MIN (Feb. 6)

5. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 65.38%

Just as some other teams quietly crept up the standings in the month of January, the Knights stumbled a bit (at least in a relative sense); a 6-6-3 record isn't in line with what we've come to expect out of one of the NHL's elite contenders.

Next eight days: @ NYR (Feb. 2), @ NYI (Feb. 4), @ NJ (Feb. 6)

6. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 65.00%

An injury this week to Miro Heiskanen puts his participation in the 4 Nations Face-Off in jeopardy. What's not in jeopardy is the Stars' playoff positioning, particularly as they have gone 10-4-0 in January.

Next eight days: vs. VAN (Jan. 31), vs. CBJ (Feb. 2), @ ANA (Feb. 4)

7. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 60.58%

The Panthers started strong this season, which was good because January wasn't their best month ever: the Cats had a 7-6-1 record, despite a plus-6 goal differential.

Next eight days: vs. CHI (Feb. 1), vs. NYI (Feb. 2), @ WSH (Feb. 4), @ STL (Feb. 6)

8. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 60.78%

If the Maple Leafs are playing the long game, dropping to second in the Atlantic might make sense -- they'll likely avoid the Bruins in the first round of the playoffs. In that regard, a 7-6-0 January gets a thumbs-up?

Next eight days: @ EDM (Feb. 1), @ CGY (Feb. 4), @ SEA (Feb. 6)

9. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 63.46%

Given their negative goal differential in January, the Wild are lucky to escape with a record north of .500. And thanks to their early success, there remains a gap between Minnesota and the teams behind it.

Next eight days: @ OTT (Feb. 1), @ BOS (Feb. 4), vs. CAR (Feb. 6)

10. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 60.38%

Some nights, the Devils look as strong as any team in the league; other nights, not so much. (Just look at the two different results against the Flyers this week.) Accordingly, they'll finish January with a 5-5-3 record.

Next eight days: @ BUF (Feb. 2), @ PIT (Feb. 4), vs. VGK (Feb. 6)

11. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 59.18%

The Kings are looking up at the Oilers and Golden Knights in the Pacific Division, as those two clubs appear to be on another tier at this point. A 5-7-1 January didn't help the cause, and they are teetering close to being caught from behind (though they have games in hand on all the teams chasing them).

Next eight days: @ CAR (Feb. 1), vs. MTL (Feb. 5)

12. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 57.69%

The Avalanche remain in the driver's seat for a wild-card spot (if not a higher position in the Central Division), although their January results leave a bit to be desired, with a 6-6-2 record.

Next eight days: vs. STL (Jan. 31), vs. PHI (Feb. 2), @ VAN (Feb. 4), @ CGY (Feb. 6)

13. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 56.86%

Is this the season the Senators make it back to the playoffs? An 8-5-2 January -- despite a minus-10 goal differential -- has kept them right in the mix.

Next eight days: vs. MIN (Feb. 1), @ NSH (Feb. 3), @ TB (Feb. 4), @ TB (Feb. 6)

14. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 57.00%

The good news for the Lightning: Racking up a bunch of points earlier this season meant they had some wiggle room. The bad news: a month of 46.90 points percentage hockey has reduced that space to the smallest of wiggles.

Next eight days: vs. NYI (Feb. 1), vs. OTT (Feb. 4), vs. OTT (Feb. 6)

15. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 57.00%

The Flames have more or less held serve in January, with a 7-6-0 record. Thanks in large part to rookie goaltender Dustin Wolf, they remain on the wild-card bubble.

Next eight days: vs. DET (Feb. 1), @ SEA (Feb. 2), vs. TOR (Feb. 4), vs. COL (Feb. 6)

16. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 57.00%

It's unquestionable that the Blue Jackets are the best "story" of the 2024-25 season, and their quest for a playoff return was greatly aided in January: a record of 9-3-1 generated the sixth-best points percentage for the month.

Next eight days: @ UTA (Jan. 31), @ DAL (Feb. 2), @ BUF (Feb. 4), vs. UTA (Feb. 6)

17. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 56.00%

The well-reported locker room strife between Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller was confirmed by general manager Jim Rutherford this week, lending more credence to the idea that one of the two stars will be traded. Hopefully that will spur the team to earn more wins, as a month of .500 hockey isn't a great sign looking ahead.

Next eight days: @ DAL (Jan. 31), vs. DET (Feb. 2), vs. COL (Feb. 4), @ SJ (Feb. 6)

18. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 52.83%

The Bruins have gone 5-7-2 this month and appear more in need of the 4 Nations Face-Off break than many other teams. Is there a trade in the works to shake things up?

Next eight days: vs. NYR (Feb. 1), vs. MIN (Feb. 4), @ NYR (Feb. 5)

19. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 52.00%

As the Rangers collapsed earlier this season, there was no shortage of fan frustration along with takes on how to properly fix them. Quietly, they've charged back up the standings, due in part to an 8-3-3 January.

Next eight days: @ BOS (Feb. 1), vs. VGK (Feb. 2), vs. BOS (Feb. 5)

20. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 53.92%

Detroit's 2024-25 season has been a bit of a roller coaster, including the dismissal of coach Derek Lalonde and hiring of Todd McLellan. This month has been a high point, with a 10-3-1 record that has the Red Wings back on the wild-card bubble.

Next eight days: @ CGY (Feb. 1), @ VAN (Feb. 2), @ SEA (Feb. 4)

21. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 51.96%

The fact that the Canadiens remain on the fringes of the playoff race into February is remarkable, and their 7-5-2 record in January is a big part of that. Does the front office add to the roster before the trade deadline, or keep the slow build process going?

Next eight days: @ ANA (Feb. 2), @ SJ (Feb. 4), @ LA (Feb. 5)

22. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 53.00%

Are we all sleeping on the Islanders? Patrick Roy has his team pointed back in the right direction after a rough start, going 9-3-0 in January.

Next eight days: @ TB (Feb. 1), @ FLA (Feb. 2), vs. VGK (Feb. 4)

23. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 49.06%

The Flyers' build back into a contender continues apace, though their minus-8 goal differential for the month would surely be helped if they had better goaltending on a consistent basis.

Next eight days: @ COL (Feb. 2), @ UTA (Feb. 4), vs. WSH (Feb. 6)

24. Utah Hockey Club

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 50.00%

The Hockey Club remains mathematically alive for a playoff berth but will have to reverse trends from a month in which it had fewer standings points (12) than games played (13).

Next eight days: vs. CBJ (Jan. 31), vs. STL (Feb. 2), vs. PHI (Feb. 4), @ CBJ (Feb. 6)

25. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 49.02%

Does this week's Brandon Saad contract termination mean that an addition is on the way? Something must be done if the Blues are going to make a move back into the playoff mix during a 5-7-0 January.

Next eight days: @ COL (Jan. 31), @ UTA (Feb. 2), vs. EDM (Feb. 4), vs. FLA (Feb. 6)

26. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 47.17%

How much of the Penguins' current roster will be on the team after March 7? The club's 4-7-3 record in January was better than only the "fun bad" Sharks; Pittsburgh's results seem way less fun, and simply bad.

Next eight days: vs. NSH (Feb. 1), vs. NJ (Feb. 4)

27. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 43.88%

The Predators are no strangers to wild turnarounds within the same season -- they pulled one off last season. It's not entirely out of the realm of mathematical possibility that they make the playoffs, and a 7-4-0 mark since the calendar turned to 2025 is a strong start.

Next eight days: @ BUF (Jan. 31), @ PIT (Feb. 1), vs. OTT (Feb. 3)

28. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 47.06%

Although it hasn't made a huge dent in the overall standings, the Ducks have been a middle-of-the-flock team in January -- with a 6-7-2 record despite a minus-8 goal differential. In which direction will they fly from here?

Next eight days: vs. MTL (Feb. 2), vs. DAL (Feb. 4)

29. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 46.23%

Goaltender Philipp Grubauer -- one of the Kraken's early, big free agent signings -- was put on waivers recently, and it wouldn't be shocking if the club made additional moves ahead of the trade deadline. A 6-8-1 January record has kept them well below expectations.

Next eight days: vs. CGY (Feb. 2), vs. DET (Feb. 4), vs. TOR (Feb. 6)

30. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 43.00%

A 45.83 points percentage in January has actually raised the Sabres' seasonlong mark, but it's still not good enough to get them out of the Atlantic Division basement.

Next eight days: vs. NSH (Jan. 31), vs. NJ (Feb. 2), vs. CBJ (Feb. 4)

31. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 36.27%

This hasn't been the best season in Blackhawks history. But at least for the month of January, they haven't been dead last. (Chicago's points percentage is 29th for the month.)

Next eight days: @ FLA (Feb. 1), vs. EDM (Feb. 5)

32. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 33.33%

The Sharks began the month among the NHL's basement dwellers in the standings, and that trend will continue into February.

Next eight days: vs. MTL (Feb. 4), vs. VAN (Feb. 6)

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ESPN / NHL 4 Nations Face-Off uniforms -- and what each represents – ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

When the USA faces Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off on Feb. 15, it will be the long-awaited first NHL clash between a generation of stars representing their nations.

Connor McDavid vs. Auston Matthews. Cale Makar and Nathan MacKinnon vs. Jack and Quinn Hughes. It's an incredible moment for hockey -- and it's going to look incredible, too.

The jerseys for the 4 Nations Face-Off were officially released on Friday, giving fans their best look at the sweaters yet. That included the blue USA jerseys and the red Canadians sweaters that will fill the Bell Centre with vibrant colors for their highly anticipated "best-on-best" showdown.

"We wanted to make sure that for a 10-day tournament, the machinations of the colors would work against each other because we were only going to do one set of uniforms for each nation," said Brian Jennings, NHL chief branding officer and senior executive vice president.

The 4 Nations Face-Off jerseys, which went on sale to the public on Friday, are a collaboration between the NHL, NHLPA and Fanatics, the official outfitter of the NHL's on-ice uniforms.

"The guys had the opportunity to see some prototypes before we went to mass production. The feedback that we've received after they've had a chance to put them on for various marketing promotional activities has been extraordinarily positive," said Rob Zepp, NHLPA senior director for international strategy & growth. "Obviously they're excited to put these jerseys on, some of them for the first time on this grand of a stage."

The 4 Nations Face-Off is a round-robin tournament scheduled for Feb. 12-20 in Montreal and Boston. It's the first "best-on-best" tournament for NHL players since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey and a tune-up for their return to the men's Winter Olympic tournament in 2026.

Here's a look at some of the details and inspirations for the U.S., Canada, Finland and Sweden.

Team USA

The primary color is navy blue, with red and white striping on the sleeves and the base of the jersey. Rather than harken back to the past for a crest, the designers went with a modern "USA" block wordmark.

"What we wanted to do is really create this elegant aesthetic that was celebrating the American flag," said Dom Fillion, creative director for Fanatics.

But there is a bit of hockey nostalgia on the jersey: Each shoulder features a single white star patch, a nod to the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team that won America's last Olympic men's hockey gold.

Embossed on the sleeves of the jersey are the words "E Pluribus Unum," which appear on the Great Seal of the United States.

"We thought [it] was such a powerful statement when we talk about sports and a nation and people coming together as one," Fillion said.

Team Canada

Quite a history moment here for a Team Canada jersey: Someone finally found a way to incorporate maple into the design. "White maple," to be exact, which is used for colored accents around the sweater.

"It started with the maple leaf on the front. We wanted to build a narrative around the jersey, around the maple leaf, and then maple became the focus," Fillion said. "We talked about the maple water running through Canadians' veins, that kind of idea. Ultimately, [it] became a color narrative."

The front crest is a 13-point maple leaf with an arced "Canada" wordmark inside of it that's a reference to their gold medal team from 1924. The sleeves feature debossed maple leaf vines.

"Some historic nods to the past, but always done in this more modern progressive look," Fillion said.

Team Finland

The Finns are wearing white for the 4 Nations Face-Off, which Fillion said is meant to evoke "the vast winter landscape" of the country. The front crest features a contemporary take on the national coat of arms with its iconic crowned lion set against the backdrop of the Finnish sky. It also features the wordmark that reads "Suomi," the Finnish word for Finland.

Embossed on the sleeves are Convallaria Majalis, commonly known as lily-of-the-valley, the country's national flower.

"It's tough to land a white jersey in a powerful way and make a statement, but I think we really did that with Finland," Fillion said.

Team Sweden

The starting point for every Sweden jersey is the "Tre Kronor," or three crowns, and the nation's yellow and blue color scheme. There's not too much tinkering to be done here. "Sweden always have this really minimal approach and it fits within the design aesthetic of the country and their overall kind of design aesthetic," Fillion said.

But there is one big change for Sweden on these sweaters: Opting for a navy blue than the lighter blue the team has worn in the past. "Using that deeper blue was a big shift," Fillion said.

An even bigger shift: the Swedish flag being featured on the sleeve of the jersey, one of the most memorable Easter eggs among the four jerseys.

"To be able to put the Swedish flag on the forefront like this as a design element within the jersey is something that's pretty progressive and frankly something I haven't seen or done in the past," Fillion said.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks need Pettersson to help fill hole created by Miller trade

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — In a quiet conversation last season, when J.T. Miller was on his way to 103 points, the emotional power forward said his dream ending with the Vancouver Canucks would be to win the franchise's first Stanley Cup, and then retire.

As he was just starting a seven-year, $56-million contract, it was difficult to know if he was serious. But Miller seemed earnest.

For all the oxygen he took up in the dressing room, amid all those emotions that could spill negatively and well as positively from Miller, you generally knew where he stood on things. Just ask Elias Pettersson.

But almost nobody gets their dream ending, and a nightmare season for Miller took a dramatic turn Friday night when the Canucks traded their No. 1 centre back to the New York Rangers, with whom his National Hockey League career began, for third-line centre Filip Chytil, solid defence prospect Victor Mancini and a conditional first-round draft pick.

Canucks general manager Patrik Allvin then transferred the Rangers pick to the Pittsburgh Penguins to acquire defenceman Marcus Pettersson as the centrepiece in a five-player trade.

The return for Miller is remarkably similar to the components Allvin acquired from the New York Islanders in the Bo Horvat trade almost two years ago to the day.

Chytil is a centre and a slightly better player than former Islander Anthony Beauvilier, but Mancini is probably not quite the prospect that Aatu Raty was when he came to Vancouver. But the key to grading this trade, like the one two years ago, will be Pettersson as a payoff for the draft pick. The 28-year-old top-four defenceman is eligible for unrestricted free agency after this season.

But if Pettersson can be re-signed and turns into another Filip Hronek, the defenceman Allvin grabbed from the Detroit Red Wings in exchange for the Islanders' pick in 2023, then Vancouver can win the Miller trade, too.

As the Canucks played the Dallas Stars on Friday night, the loss of Miller left a massive hole in the Vancouver lineup. Of course, everyone is waiting to see if Elias Pettersson steps up his game to help fill it.

Allvin and team president Jim Rutherford, who this week confirmed for the world the debilitating discord between Miller and Pettersson and promised changes, decided that the Canucks were a town too small to accommodate both stars.

Trading Miller at a discount was the easiest fix to the problem, although Allvin deserves credit for outwaiting the Rangers and not retaining any salary on that $56-million contract that has five more seasons on it.

Miller will be 32 years old in March and his play may already be in decline. Pettersson, on whom the Canucks have also been soliciting trade offers, is only 26.

But for the Canucks, the more complicated and serious problem is getting Elias Pettersson — if he stays — to elevate his training and his game and fully invest in making himself a legitimate NHL superstar instead of simply carrying the salary of one from that eight-year, $92.8-million contract management pressed him into signing 11 months ago.

Everyone in the organization understands this challenge.

Allvin told Sportsnet in a year-end interview a month ago: "It comes back to expectations and preparation, how you prepare yourself. I don't believe that (Pettersson) was aware of just how hard it was going to be. Just because you achieve one thing to get a long-term extension... life just gets harder. You haven't really accomplished anything. You're not even halfway there (to winning a Stanley Cup). And then obviously the mental part comes in there, too, and suddenly you feel the pressure."

To understand how a strained relationship between the polar-opposite players became untenable after Miller and Pettersson thrived as teammates the last five years, start with training camp in September when Miller reported as one of the best-conditioned Canucks and Pettersson did not.

There was a physical spat during practice in the opening week of the season that widened the divide, which team captain Quinn Hughes tried to bridge in a meeting with Miller and Pettersson during an early road trip. The mediation did not work.

Without explaining details, captain Hughes told us just last Saturday that he blames himself for some of what has happened to the Canucks after last season's 109-point breakthrough.

"I feel responsible that we've had the turmoil that we've had," he said. "And I want to, you know, be the reason that we can get out of this and be successful."

Hughes is having another major-award kind of season. Miller and Elias Pettersson certainly are not, although both are going to the 4 Nations Face-Off and will make Sweden-USA must-see television.

In November, Miller took a personal leave of absence for mental health reasons that lasted 10 games. Naturally, Pettersson played his best hockey of the year while Miller was away, amassing nearly half of the centre's 32 points (in 44 games) he had before the Dallas game.

Miller had 35 points in 40 games, while still being leaned on by coach Rick Tocchet for most of the toughest matchups.

It would be naïve to think that whatever personal issues Miller was grappling with last fall were solved in three weeks off, and it is an uneasy aspect of Friday's moves that the Canucks may have traded away a franchise player still working his way back to health. And now the Rangers will reap the benefits if and when that occurs.

Only last spring, when Miller put together a formidable playoff run and helped the Canucks win their first non-pandemic playoff series since 2011, Friday's trade would have been unimaginable.

"Not any part of me ever wanted to go somewhere else," Miller said in that euphoric visitors' dressing room in Nashville last May. "You don't have Pettersen and Hughes and (Thatcher) Demko everywhere, and you don't have Jim Rutherford and Patrik Allvin and Rick Tocchet and Adam Foote. Why would I want to leave something that I've always been looking for?"

Eight months later, both sides are now looking for something else.

For Miller, exiting Vancouver is probably a good thing. We'll see how it turns out for the Canucks. And for Elias Pettersson.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' loss to Stars an afterthought due to Miller trade, Hughes injury

Iain MacIntyre

The Vancouver Canucks have had so much practice surviving things this season that they have a chance to survive the J.T. Miller trade, too.

But they can not survive the loss of superstar defenceman Quinn Hughes, which is why his obvious physical discomfort Friday in Dallas has the potential short-term to trump in impact even the blockbuster trade of Miller.

Hughes, the Canucks captain and holder of the Norris Trophy, finished the 5-3 loss to the Dallas Stars and was able to walk out into the hallway post game to do an interview with Sportsnet's Dan Murphy.

But the dynamo missed six minutes early in the third period, went to the Canucks dressing room, then laboured through three shifts in the final 10 minutes without the usual explosiveness and edgework in his skating. On the ice and at the Canucks' bench, Hughes appeared to be in significant pain.

"Yeah, we'll see," Hughes said when asked about his condition. "I have 48 hours to figure it out, so we'll see how that goes."

The Canucks have ice time scheduled in Dallas for Saturday morning before they fly home to face the Detroit Red Wings at Rogers Arena at 5 p.m. PT on Sunday.

The Canucks could have a handful of new players in their lineup.

Centre Filip Chytil and defence prospect Victor Mancini were acquired from the New York Rangers in the pre-game trade of Miller. And late Friday night, Canuck general manager Patrik Allvin packaged the conditional first-round pick Vancouver received from New York to acquire top-four defenceman Marcus Pettersson from the Pittsburgh Penguins.

To make the money work, Allvin also sent winger Danton Heinen and defenceman Vincent Desharnais to Pittsburgh, while taking back Penguins depth winger Drew O'Connor. Both Pettersson and O'Connor are eligible for unrestricted free agency after this season.

Hughes missed the first four games after Christmas with a hand injury, but since then has performed at a world-class level even with a heavy

brace on his hand. But his lower-body problem on Friday appeared to be unconnected to his earlier injury.

The 25-year-old leads all NHL defencemen in scoring with 59 points in 47 games and is expected to be a key player for Team USA at the Four Nations tournament in February.

If he's healthy, at least Hughes will be reunited with Miller.

"Obviously, a lot of noise the last couple weeks and months," Hughes said of the drama surrounding the team and especially the strained relationship between Miller and Elias Pettersson. "But, you know, to see him go, he's a heckuva hockey player, and I enjoyed playing with him for the six years that I had. Right now, it doesn't even really seem real. But the next couple weeks, I'm sure it will sink in a little bit.

"For everyone in the organization, I think it's just been a lot of noise. And for Millsy, too, it's been a lot on him. I think he's looking forward to, you know, a fresh start. But we're obviously going to miss him here. He had a lot of competing (and) played some really good hockey for us. But in saying that now, we've got to refocus on the guys that we do have here."

Elias Pettersson told reporters in Dallas post-game that losing Miller was "a big blow."

Asked by Murphy about moving on from his relationship with Miller, Pettersson said: "I don't want to get into that. I mean, all we can do is look forward. I don't know what to say. All we can do is look forward."

Between Miller's trade and Hughes' injury, the Canucks' game felt like an afterthought.

The team actually played well. They outshot the Stars 29-16 but lost partly on special teams. Dallas went 1-for-2 on the power play while the Canucks were 1-for-5, but didn't generate their goal by Jake DeBrusk until the score was 4-1 and there was only 2:09 remaining.

Carson Soucy and Conor Garland, on a beautiful setup by Nils Hoglander, had the other Vancouver goals. Struggling Canuck goalie Thatcher Demko got his second straight start and allowed three goals on 14 shots.

Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz each scored twice for the Stars, who scored twice into empty nets.

Canuck coach Rick Tocchet said he liked how his team played. But the post-game focus was on Miller.

"Anything like that happens, it's always tough, especially Millsy," veteran defenceman Tyler Myers said. "He has been such a big part of the room. You know, it's always a weird feeling. I know he's emotional. He's been such a big part of the city (and) team. In a lot of ways, I'm happy for him for a fresh start."

Myers said Miller held more "weight" in the Canucks room, among teammates, than anyone else Myers has played with during his 16-year NHL career.

Even Tocchet seemed emotional post game when asked about Miller, whom he described as a "heart-and-soul" player.

"It's a business, you know, the way it is," he said. "When you're in this business long enough, there's going to be things like that. I thought the guys handled it well. Millsy was a big part of the team. I'm sure he's emotional and stuff. Like, it was a kind of emotional thing. But, you know, it's a business, right? Things happen."

Asked about Elias Pettersson getting a fresh start, Tocchet said: "Obviously, you know, we need him to play. I mean, we need him to come up with some big moments for us. He knows that he's an important part of our team, and he's got to get going."

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Sportsnet.ca / Frost, Farabee seek fresh start with Flames: 'Hopefully we can give them a boost'

Eric Francis

"They suck to play against, to be honest," laughed the 25-year-old centre, who is the principal figure in the six-piece swap with the Philadelphia Flyers that had him on his way to Calgary Friday evening.

"We played them (Game 2) this year (a 6-3 loss). Not fun.

"They're proving a lot of people wrong this year. Hopefully, it's a situation where Joel and I can give them a boost."

That's Joel, as in Farabee, who just happens to be a longtime linemate and best friend, making him the perfect teammate to join him out west.

Neither saw Thursday night's six-player trade coming, nor were they aware at first that they were being traded together.

But now that they've said their goodbyes in a city in which both had higher expectations as first-round draft picks, they're pretty pumped for a new adventure.

While the shock of their first NHL trade is something they're still trying to get a grasp of, both believe a fresh start was needed.

"Ya, I had a tough start to the year and I've been building my game of late, but I think it can only benefit me," said Frost in a phone interview.

"It's exciting to be coming to a team in the hunt. Joel and I want to play in the playoffs so bad."

Neither know much about Calgary or the Flames, gleaning a bit of a scouting report from Travis Konecny, who raved about the city he and his Calgary-born wife summer in.

"He said there's a lot of sunlight," chuckled Farabee, 24, while he waited with Frost to board their westbound plane.

"I don't know much about the team other than playing against them, but I know how hard it is to play in the Dome. I don't think I ever won a game there in my time in Philly."

In fact, the last time Farabee was spotted in the Dome, he was angrily chasing Martin Pospisil all over the ice.

"Ya, I played against him at worlds too and I think I was doing the same thing there," laughed the six-foot, 186-pound Farabee, who comes with a bit of edge to his game.

"Glad we're on the same side now, so we don't have to do that anymore."

Both touted as legit 20-goal scorers moving forward, the duo is being counted on to give one of the lowest-scoring teams a boost offensively.

Now, and down the road.

The two represent a more proven commodity than the wildly popular Jakob Pelletier and slumping Andrei Kuzmenko, who were sent to the rebuilding Flyers with a second-round (2025) and seventh-round (2028) pick. (Craig Conroy confirmed the second-rounder was Calgary's pick, not the one acquired from Washington in the trade for Andrew Mangiapane.)

Frost and Farabee played plenty together over the years and will almost certainly make their debut on a third line together with Yegor Sharangovich Saturday. Expect both to be part of the second power-play unit.

Both spoke briefly with Conroy and coach Ryan Huska, who will reveal his new line combinations in Saturday morning's skate, ahead of a home game against Detroit.

"We didn't get into detail in terms of how he'd like to use me, but he was really kind and welcoming," said Frost of his chat with a coach he'll likely find a tad, um, different than John Tortorella.

“He seemed excited, and it made me feel good about it. I appreciate him keeping it quick because my phone has been blowing up.”

A restricted free agent this summer, the six-foot, 193-pound native of Aurora, Ont. said he is open-minded about the possibility of extending his contract in Calgary.

Given how long the Flames have searched for an “age-appropriate” centre with whom they can continue rebuilding, coming to terms shouldn’t take long.

Farabee was a bit of a salary dump for the Flyers, who still had three years left on a six-year deal paying the two-time 20-goal man $5 million annually.

Both seemed to clash at times with Tortorella, who moved them all around the lineup.

“I’m a two-way forward and I think I can play up and down the lineup,” said the U.S.-born Farabee, who is a left-shot winger who has played plenty on both sides.

“I pride myself on penalty killing, and little things away from the puck.”

Asked if he expected there to be a considerable difference between Huska and Tortorella, he laughed.

“I don’t think there are many guys like Torts, so it’s hard to compare him,” he said.

Frost said he left the game at Wells Fargo Center early Thursday “not for trade reasons” and found out later via phone he had played his last game as a Flyer.

“It was a weird, crazy night, but I got to meet up with a bunch of my teammates last night, and some more this morning with some staff, so it was nice to say goodbye,” said Frost, a playmaking centre whose faceoff prowess and zone entries are expected to play key roles for the Flames.

He’s already had a chance to say hello to several of his new teammates via text, none of whom he’s ever met before.

His only connection with the club is via prospect Rory Kerins, with whom he played junior in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

“I see him in the summer – great dude and great player,” said Frost, a two-time 100-point player with the Greyhounds.

“I know lots of guys who know guys in Calgary, and I’ve only heard great things.”

Farabee’s only connection comes via a world junior summer showcase he attended with Dustin Wolf.

“Looking forward to getting to Calgary,” started Frost, "and showing what we can do.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Healing Maple Leafs set for double offensive jolt in Edmonton

Luke Fox

EDMONTON — The Edmonton Oilers are loading up, and the Toronto Maple Leafs are healing up.

Looking to snuff their latest three-game losing skid and awaken a sleepy offence, the Maple Leafs are expected to welcome back not one but two top-six forwards to their lineup Saturday.

A fine way to kick off the club’s four-game western swing before the players break for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Centre John Tavares (absent 17 days with a lower-body injury) and left wing Matthew Knies (out 10 days with a bad shoulder) practised in full Friday at Rogers Place and should both see plenty of the Oilers’ best players Saturday.

“Not playing sucks,” says Tavares, whose leg accidentally got clipped and dragged awkwardly by Chris Tanev’s foot in practice a couple weeks ago.

“I really just tried to narrow my focus to just getting a little better every day. Obviously, it’s led to being part of practice today and being able to push myself pretty good. So, it was very positive.”

Coach Craig Berube says Tavares’s rehabilitation is ahead of schedule.

And considering the dismal state of the Leafs’ production — three straight losses in which they scored just once per game — getting a 20-goal man in Tavares and an 18-goal net-front horse like Knies back is a source of optimism.

William Nylander, in particular, should benefit from having another offensive talent on his line.

Tavares seldom misses time due to injury, but Knies has already bounced back well once from an upper-body injury this season.

“That gives me confidence, that I came back strong from the last one,” Knies says.

“Hockey Night in Canada. Saturday. Here. It’ll be pretty electric. And I’m just happy to get back in the lineup and help these guys win.”

Well, Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl — whose Oilers have won 11 of their past 15 — might have something to say about that. McDavid should also have a bone to pick after going a rare minus-3 in his team’s November road loss in Toronto.

For the rematch, Edmonton coach Kris Knoblauch is stacking his MVPs on the top line, alongside the ageless Corey Perry.

“They’re both incredible players. When they play together, they have great chemistry, they move the puck well, they’re dynamic,” Auston Matthews says. “They’re tough to contain, so you just gotta try to keep them in front of you as much as possible. Defend hard. Takes a five-man unit out there to defend those guys.”

To that point, Berube is reverting to his most trusted shutdown pairing of Chris Tanev and Jake McCabe. (He had lefty McCabe playing the right side with the struggling Morgan Rielly for a four-game stretch in hopes of giving Rielly more stability.)

“When they load them up, they’re hard to handle, for sure. And it’s a hard workload for the line and for the D pair. They make you work for everything,” Berube said. “So, I think you’ve got to have two lines and four D, probably, to play against them when they load them up like that.

“I had Caber on the right for a bit. And coming off the (head) injury, I didn’t feel like he was the same over there. And OEL and Mo played together quite a bit this year. And we need those top four to be really good tomorrow.”

February 2, 2025

Maple Leafs

VS

Oilers

February 2, 2025

Maple Leafs

VS

Oilers

With Matthews sidelined, Tavares and Mitch Marner, you may recall, had a banner night head-to-head versus McDavid’s group in November’s 4-3 OT win.

The veteran is cautious not to give away any secrets to limiting the world's best, only to say that it requires layers of defence and a full team buy-in.

"Everyone's going to see bits and parts of them at different times of the game," Tavares says.

If midseason malaise or injury woes could be used as an excuse for the Maple Leafs earlier this week, they have no business on a Saturday night against their coach's favourite boyhood team.

"Anytime you play the Oilers, you've got to be fired up," Berube says. "You know they're going to be fired up and they'll be ready to go, like always. So, the emotional part of the game is huge. And we've got to have that investment, for sure. Right from the start of the game."

Berube says it once more, with emphasis: "Right from the start."

One-Timers: Here's a tongue-in-cheek Connor McDavid on catering to an eastern audience: "Guys are excited. We get the five o'clock start time, which is always nice. They come into our building, and we have to change our schedule around."… Ryan Reaves appears to be a healthy scratch, which should negate any Darnell Nurse revenge narratives… Conor Timmins projects to draw in for the first time in 10 days… Jacob Quillan flew with the Leafs to Edmonton only to learn that, with Knies healthy, he was being returned to the Marlies… Team Finland's Jani Hakanpää did not travel west with the Leafs and will continue rehabbing his knee in Toronto.

Maple Leafs projected lineup Saturday in Edmonton:

Knies – Matthews – Marner

Pacioretty – Tavares – Nylander

McMann – Domi – Robertson

Holmberg – Kampf – Lorentz

McCabe – Tanev

Rielly – Ekman-Larsson

Benoit – Timmins

Woll starts

Stolarz

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Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: What Flames, Flyers get in four-player trade

Rory Boylen

Earlier this season, when expectations were low, there was some question if the Calgary Flames would sell off one or two of their better veteran players to regroup and look to better days ahead.

Nazem Kadri, under contract for another four seasons, was one of them. Still a solid complementary player, did the 34-year-old centre still figure into Calgary plans? And what about Rasmus Andersson, a terrific defender in his prime at 28 years old, but one year away from free agency. Would the Flames look at trading him out early to maximize the return rather than looking at trading him as a rental a year from now?

All those questions seemed to wash away as the Flames have remained in the playoff hunt at the 50-game mark. In fact, they hold the Western Conference's second wild card spot Friday morning and are just three points behind Colorado, with two games in hand.

So, rather than sell off, this team turned into a buyer. Though still with an eye to the future.

In a late Thursday night swap the Flames acquired 24-year-old winger Joel Farabee, a two-time 20-goal scorer in the midst of a down season and making more money ($5 million) than his production would indicate he's worth. Calgary also attained Morgan Frost, bringing in the centre they were rumoured to be seeking. Frost, son of former Maple Leafs arena announcer Andy, has been in trade rumours for a couple seasons now and never found a fit with the Flyers, which also hampered his ability to reach his scoring potential.

Both Frost and Farabee were first-round picks — the former 27th overall in 2017, the latter 14th overall in 2018. Betting on mid-20s players with that kind of pedigree is a good way for Calgary to straddle the line — trying to be competitive in the present and improving the outlook in the future.

The other way goes Andrei Kuzmenko, who scored 39 goals in his first NHL season with the Canucks, a 27.3 per cent shooting mirage. A UFA at season's end, it's quite possible the Flyers could walk away from the player and have an eye on freeing up cap space.

The more interesting player going back to the Flyers is Jakob Pelletier, the 26th overall pick in 2019 who began this season going unclaimed on waivers. After beginning at nearly a point-per-game pace over a quarter season's worth of AHL games, he was recalled back up and played his way into Calgary's lineup, including carving out a space on the penalty kill. The youngest player in this deal, Pelletier is the X-Factor here — can the Flyers and John Tortorella tap his full potential?

The Flyers also picked up a 2025 second-rounder and a 2028 seventh-rounder. They now have 13 picks in the upcoming draft.

SCOUT'S ANALYSIS

I recently went on record stating the Calgary Flames should stand pat with their group as they battle for a playoff spot down the stretch. The reason I took that position was because I felt the Flames had a tight knit dressing room that wanted to work hard for each other every night. The group is building up scar tissue as they work towards a spot in the Stanley Cup playoffs. They are learning something about each other in high leverage, meaningful games.

When you're a young-ish team like the Flames, a trade can upset the mood of the group and potentially have an effect on their motivation. The only way a trade would have made sense for Calgary, I thought, is if they went out and acquired a player (or players) that fit the mold of their group.

Well, on Thursday night, Flames GM Craig Conroy went out and improved his group both now and in the future by acquiring Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee from the Philadelphia Flyers.

Here's my scouting breakdown of the deal between the Flames and Flyers:

To Calgary: Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee

Frost is a skilled forward who should, in time, slot into the Flames' top-six forward group and land on the top power play unit. He averaged only 15 minutes of ice time with the Flyers, all of which came at even strength and the power play. Frost is capable of skating closer to 20 minutes per game and I expect his offence to go to another level as a result.

Frost is average defensively, but his combination of speed and skill is an upgrade for Calgary compared to what Kuzmenko and Pelletier were providing. He wins over 50 per cent of his face-offs, can play the bumper on the power play, and lead zone entries off the breakout. Frost has fantastic puck touch. He's produced 11 goals and 14 assists so far this season, but I believe he has more playmaking ability on the horizon. I like his vision and ability to move pucks accurately to his linemates when they are in motion. It wouldn't surprise me to see Frost contribute over 60 points next season.

Frost is a pending RFA at the end of the year and is currently making $2.1 million. His qualifying offer is set for $2.4 million in the off-season. If

things go well down the stretch, I expect the Flames will attempt to sign Frost to a long-term extension beyond next season.

Farabee's offensive contribution is down this year compared to his last two seasons in Philadelphia, but I believe he has the upside to contribute a secondary layer of scoring for the Flames. Farabee is a middle-six forward who can play fast and extend plays in the hard areas. When he isn't scoring, he pushes back physically and plays with an edge. He's even willing to drop the mitts and fight on occasion.

Farabee is signed through the 2027-28 season at a $5 million cap hit. Philadelphia must have projected Farabee as a top-six forward when they extended him in the fall of 2021, but then he went on to score 32 goals and 41 assists combined in the two seasons after he signed his extension. In order for his contract to age the way it was projected to, I'm anticipating more than the eight goals and 11 assists he's produced so far this year. He definitely has the potential to contribute closer to 50 points per season (a total he reached last season), in addition to his competitive overall game.

To Philadelphia: Andrei Kuzmenko, Jakob Pelletier

Kuzmenko is a pending UFA currently making $5.5 million against the cap. His numbers have fallen off dramatically since he first arrived in the NHL in the fall of 2022 and proceeded to contribute 39 goals and 35 assists with the Vancouver Canucks. He ended up playing 66 games for the Flames over two seasons and posting 18 goals and 22 assists.

Kuzmenko is barely adequate defensively. His attention to detail in his zone, or off the puck on the back check, has never been his strong suit. I'm not sure Philadelphia sees a fit for him beyond this season, but I know for certain Tortorella will be pulling out his hair attempting to get Kuzmenko to play with more all-round detail — especially when he isn't scoring.

I'm pulling for Pelletier to kickstart the rest of his career after this trade. I have always appreciated his approach to the game. Pelletier plays with energy, enthusiasm, sound defensive detail and has potential to contribute secondary offence at the NHL level. He isn't elite in any one category, and he isn't a big player, but he's quick to space and a very likeable teammate.

Pelletier is a pending RFA at the end of the season and currently makes $800,000 against the cap. His qualifying offer this summer is set at $840,000.

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Sportsnet.ca / What to expect from the Maple Leafs by the 2025 trade deadline

Justin Bourne

Mikko Rantanen's trade from Colorado to Carolina unofficially kicked off the NHL's trade deadline season. Over the past few years teams seem to be pushing back their moves from deadline day to deadline week, and now to whatever this is. Welcome to the NHL's Trade Deadline Six Weeks, I guess.

This season's unique schedule has created a new deadline, as many GMs are viewing the 4 Nations break as a great opportunity to get a player in and acclimated. There's also a growing understanding that if you're going to rent a player, you may as well rent them for 30 games and not 20.

The Toronto Maple Leafs have lost six of their last nine games in regulation, and have had something that was teased early in the season become a clear and obvious problem: their turn to simple, north/south hockey starves them of offence, which was already a post-season problem. I should note, injuries haven't helped on the scoring front either.

And so, here's what we have: A team with a clear need (an offensively capable centre), and is a legitimate threat to win the division and make noise in the playoffs. They're also a team whose salary cap picture looks a lot brighter in future years with the release of the new upper limits.

Of course, we also have a fanbase starved for post-season success.

So, much like we speculated with the Flames (and got a win), let's speculate on the Leafs. What should we expect from their trade deadline efforts?

Morgan Rielly isn't going anywhere

Yes, he's been good, and yes, we spent some time on Real Kyper and Bourne playing around with "Rielly for J.T. Miller," but that was more fun podcast banter than "this could happen."

Good defencemen are hard to come by so at the deadline what you get are a lot of teams squinting at bad defencemen and convincing themselves they're average. You usually don't give up on defencemen who have legitimate ability. The best predictor of future behaviour is what we've seen in the past, and for long stretches of very recent play, Rielly has been a great Leaf, particularly in the post-season.

Yup, he's not been great so far this year. But he's got more to give, and he's going to be a part of the club, so let's move on from that option.

Nick Robertson probably gets traded

I believe Robertson is not just an NHL player, but that he still has the potential to be a 20-to-25 goal scorer in the league. I also believe it won't happen with the Leafs, because there's no room in the top-six, and no room on the power play. He's a great option with upside for a selling team to acquire in a deal where's he's probably a secondary piece. He's a legitimate plus-value asset, at a time when the Leafs don't have many, and are shopping.

When Toronto gets healthy, it gets very hard to get into their lineup (as I'll lay out at the bottom of this), and they'll literally only use Robertson on the third line, if at all (he isn't cut out for any fourth line and they won't try him top-six). Maybe he's on such a cheap salary that he comes out of the press box as needed, but if someone is going to head out, he makes the most sense.

One of Fraser Minten or Easton Cowan gets traded

The Leafs don't need a deadline where they add a couple bottom-six grinders and a seventh defenceman. It's a Weird Year, without any clear favourites, and the Leafs have as good a chance as any other team. They need to separate themselves with a bigger move.

Again, they don't have a ton of assets, but to acquire a real player they'll have to give someone up. Minten is a guy who would get another team excited (he can play in the NHL today and is, at worst, a very high IQ two-way third line centre). Cowan is the higher upside, higher risk on the downside play, so you have a prospect who would suit just about any selling team's fancy.

So what comes back? Let's start with the obvious.

A top-six centre, top-nine at worst

Is it Brock Nelson, is it Yanni Gourde, is it Scott Laughton? Is it a long-shot like Dylan Cozens or an even longer shot like Miller?

Whatever the case, the Leafs have been exposed at centre of late. The Auston Matthews line has been controlling its minutes, but past that they're rolling out what feels like three fourth line centres. They can't get anything going when their top line is off the ice.

This is where the previously mentioned prospect is going – as the return for the best available centre.

Depth Defenceman

It's an annual thing, and every team with Cup aspirations does it, but you really do need to be seven or eight defencemen deep. For the Leafs to start the post-season with all of Conor Timmins, Simon Benoit, Philippe Myers and Jani Hakanpaa just feels like they've got too many 6/7 slot

guys. It will be interesting who becomes available as numerous mediocre teams have convinced themselves they're still in it, but I'd expect at least one new name that's about a No. 4 or a No. 5 to be among Toronto's pairs when the puck drops on Game 1 of the playoffs. (Mario Ferraro? David Savard? The return of Cody Ceci? Brian Dumoulin?)

And then it comes down to…

Hows the team's health?

Potential additional pick-ups

Earlier this season I wrote about how the Leafs are strangely injury prone, and injury prone at fairly crucial spots, no less.

If they continue to struggle with health over the next month, it isn't out of the question for them to add a winger. Brandon Saad, currently a UFA, was certainly an interesting name before he signed with the Golden Knights.

What it'll look like after the deadline, when healthy

Since Nelson is the most common name I hear brought up in connection with the Leafs, and very attainable (unless the Islanders continue to win every night), let's take a look at the Maple Leafs' forward group with him it:

Knies – Matthews – Marner

McMann – Tavares – Nylander

Pacioretty – Nelson – Jarnkrok

Lorentz – Kampf – Dewar

Domi – Holmberg – Reaves

I realize having Domi on the outside looking in to start the playoffs might seem jarring, but it's a fit thing. Maybe some people prefer him to Jarnkrok on the third line here, but I think Pacioretty-Nelson-Jarnkrok is a line with a conscience you could play against anyone and they still might shoot it in the net.

Domi's lack of a defensive bent changes that for me. You could put him on the fourth line, but I'm not sure he's what you're looking for out of that group.

And of course, there's the matter of dealing with the salary cap. You might need some retention on Nelson to make all this work, and you might have to send down a body to the American League. You would need Brandon Pridham to do his thing.

But in a salary cap world, with the league seeing unprecedented levels of parity, a forward corps like the above is pretty darn good, and awfully likely. You'd have a third line that can at least occasionally score, and a fourth line that would defend like hell. There's always question marks, but with a good trade or two, that Leafs lineup would be one heck of a tough out.

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Klingberg could be Oilers' missing piece on blue line

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — We all know the question. It's been hanging around the Edmonton Oilers like that 45-year-old autograph seeker outside the team hotel.

Who is going to partner with Darnell Nurse when the stakes go up this spring? The Oilers are light a Top 4 defenceman, have been all season long, and everyone knows it.

With the Toronto Maple Leafs in town for a rare 5 p.m. local start on Hockey Night in Canada — "It's always nice. They come in our building, and we got to change our schedule around," said Connor McDavid, only half-joking — both Swedish defencemen Mattias Ekholm and newcomer John Klingberg missed Friday's practice due to illness.

Still, with one game under his belt, Klingberg has already worked his way into head coach Kris Knoblauch's Top 4 long-term. Or so it sounded on Friday.

How did Klingberg look in his debut against Detroit on Thursday?

"Better than what we expected. You know, he hasn't played for 14, 15, months," Knoblauch said of Klingberg's 16:39 of work against the Red Wings. "We're looking for a guy that can move the puck. The best defence is a good offence. Spending time on the offensive zone, I think he helps tremendously in that."

Is Klingberg the answer to the Nurse dilemma? Despite the fact they paired him more often with Ekholm in the Detroit game, has Nurse's partner finally arrived?

It sounds like perhaps he has.

"I don't know that," the coach said. "Looking at him right now, I'd say it's either going to be Klingberg or Bouch (on the right side). I think we've got our Top 4 defencemen that we like, and I think it's important to have a lefty and righty (on each pair)."

If you watched any of the 14 games that Klingberg spent as a Maple Leaf last season, you may not believe what you're reading. Or the year before that in Anaheim, where he wasn't much better through 50 games with the Ducks.

However, he was playing with hips that were so chronically sore, they would require a third surgery. It turns out that Maple Leafs Klingberg was OK when he had the puck and knew which way the next stride was heading, but he struggled terribly when defending. When he was unsure of what direction the game would take him.

So Klingberg found himself cheating defensively to cover for mobility he just didn't have. His gaps were too big, requiring more room to turn his body and defend.

On Thursday, in his first game back since Nov. 11, 2023, he was an inconspicuous defender. Klingberg, 32, was not noticed for all the right reasons, as the long journey back finally found a sheet of NHL ice and an actual game.

"I went into this open-minded," said the Gothenburg native, who had double hip surgery at age 18, again at 21, and then one more time last year. "I know I've been skating for a while but it's always different when you come in and play a game. I feel like with the puck I made some clean breakouts and took care of the puck (against Detroit). But without the puck I need to put a little more timing into it with gaps and reading off the team and stuff like that. It was an OK first game."

If Klingberg assuages the Oilers' No. 1 need coming out of training camp — a right-handed Top 4 defenceman — then Edmonton's trade capital can be spent elsewhere at the March 7 trade deadline. Quite likely on a left winger to play next to Leon Draisaitl, one with superior offensive capabilities to what Vasily Podkolzin provides.

And perhaps in this season of Evan Bouchard uncertainty, where the 25-year-old has been unable to seize the solid, mistake-free game that he rode to a record-setting playoff performance last spring, the pairings won't unfold in Edmonton the way we've just assumed they would.

Maybe Knoblauch and assistant coach Paul Coffey will assign Bouchard to Nurse and pair the two Swedes together, a Top 4 with above-average size and skating ability throughout.

Who would Klingberg prefer as a partner?

"I play wherever Paul is putting me," he said. "I've been playing with (Ekholm) before. I think they wanted me to feel comfortable coming in and playing with our best D. I think it was a little bit of that. I played some

shifts with (Kulak) and (Nurse) too. It's something that he was telling me before, that he was playing everyone with everyone."

If it turns out they have enough NHL defencemen here in Edmonton, the problem of who plays with whom will be a minor one indeed.

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TSN.CA / Tavares, Knies trend toward return as Leafs prep for 'one of the toughest tests'

Mark Masters

The Toronto Maple Leafs and Edmonton Oilers practised at Rogers Place in Edmonton on Friday.

Help is on the way as the Leafs look to avoid their longest losing streak of the season. John Tavares and Matthew Knies returned to practice on Friday as the team prepared for Saturday's showdown with the Edmonton Oilers.

"I felt I got all my strength back," said Knies, who reunited with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner on the top line. "I think I should be in tomorrow."

Tavares was less certain, but also seemed optimistic.

"I keep progressing really, really well," said Tavares, who practised as the second-line centre with Max Pacioretty and William Nylander on his wings. "I really just try to narrow my focus to getting a little better every day. Obviously, it's led to being part of practice today and being able to push myself pretty good. It was very positive."

— Mark Masters (@markhmasters) January 31, 2025

Head coach Craig Berube feels there's a "good chance" both forwards will be back in the lineup on Saturday. The development comes as welcome news for a Leafs team that has dropped three straight games while scoring just three goals.

This is the third time this season that Toronto has dropped three straight games and only the second time that all the losses have come in regulation. The Leafs haven't lost four straight in regulation since the final days of the Mike Babcock era in November 2019.

Tavares, who is tied for second on the team with 20 goals, has been sidelined since sustaining a lower-body injury via a practice collision with Chris Tanev on Jan. 15.

"He's skating the one way and his foot just kind of clips me, but it kind of drags me at the same time," Tavares recalled. "It kind of hooked my leg and stretching me out pretty good. I was a little nervous with how my leg was stretching out, my left one, and then kind of shifted all my weight to my right, and my foot just got stuck in the ice, and with all my weight there. Obviously wasn't a great result, but it is what it is."

Berube revealed that Tavares is considered ahead of schedule in his recovery.

— Mark Masters (@markhmasters) January 15, 2025

'Ahead of schedule': Tavares keeps progressing towards returnCraig Berube says John Tavares is ahead of schedule for a potential return, the Maple Leafs assistant captain said he pushed himself at practice and is progressing, but will check in with medical staff before making a decision on whether he'd play against the Oilers.

Knies, who is second on the team with 15 goals in 5-on-5 play, has missed the last two games after getting hurt while throwing a hit on Columbus Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko on Jan. 22.

"It was kind of a fluky play," Knies said. "Just tried to get body position on him. I fell kind of awkwardly there. Yeah, it just didn't feel comfortable with my shoulder, and that's kind of the reason I wanted to take some time, heal it up, and make sure I was 100 per cent to go for the next game."

— Omar (@TicTacTOmar) January 23, 2025

If they do indeed play, Tavares and Knies will not be able to ease back in. The division-leading Oilers went 10-3-1 in January. Leon Draisaitl leads the league with 36 goals and came in No. 1 on TSN's list of the top 25 players this season. Teammate Connor McDavid came in No. 3.

"It'll be a challenge, that's for sure," Tavares said with a smile. "It's always unbelievable to play against the best and what they can do and certainly what they accomplished last year ... It's always a lot of fun, but one of the toughest tests you get. So, yeah, if that's the case, looking forward to it."

The Oilers blew a 2-0 lead in a 3-2 shootout loss to the Detroit Red Wings on Thursday.

"I don't think they love their game right now either," McDavid said. "They're looking to score some goals and we're looking to stop giving up chances so it will be a good test for both sides."

Knies ready to return vs. Oilers: 'Should be in'

Knies ready to return vs. Oilers: 'Should be in'Matthew Knies says he has all his strength back and will be ready to return against the Oilers. He describes the play he was injured on and what it will be like jumping back into game action.

Draisaitl and McDavid practised on the same line at Oilers practice on Friday. The Leafs countered that move by reuniting their shutdown defence pair of Jake McCabe and Chris Tanev.

"We're going [to face] a pretty good line here tomorrow," Berube said. "We all know that, and we're going to need those two guys to do a good job for us. I had Caber on the right for a bit and, coming off the injury, I didn't feel like he was the same over there."

McCabe, a lefty, played the last four games on the right side of Morgan Rielly. He was minus-three in that stretch. At Friday's practice, lefty Oliver Ekman-Larsson moved to the right side with Rielly.

"OEL and Mo played together quite a bit this year," Berube said. "We need those top four to be really good tomorrow."

The Oilers have the last-change advantage and usually lean on their top players quite a bit. McDavid is averaging just over 22 minutes of ice time a night while Draisaitl is at 21 minutes and 35 seconds.

"That's a lot of minutes," Berube said. "Those guys are very good and used to it and they can handle it. I think we've got to be prepared to have two lines to work against those guys in different situations. And maybe two D pairs too, you know, depending on the situations ... When they load them up, they're hard to handle for sure."

"Their ability to maintain high level of play through endurance is exceptional," Tavares said. "Everyone's going to see bits and parts of them at different times of the game ... It takes everyone just to defend them as a group, not just one or two guys, but creating layers."

Leafs preparing for Oilers' loaded up top line: 'It's a hard workload'

Leafs preparing for Oilers' loaded up top line: 'It's a hard workload'With the Oilers teaming up Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl on their top line, Craig Berube says it won't just be on one line and one defensive pairing to help keep them in check.

Corey Perry, who is averaging 11 minutes and 31 seconds of ice time this season, moved up to skate on Edmonton's top line at practice.

"Leon and Connor are probably going to play 22 to 24 minutes tomorrow night," said Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch. "Corey will not be playing 22, 24 minutes so it will be more of a job by committee. There's certain guys that will be up in that spot. There will be certain situations where we lean on [Corey] more and other guys in other situations."

Perry is scoring 0.94 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, per NaturalStatTrick.com, which ranks behind only Draisaitl and Zach Hyman among Oiler regulars.

"He's been great all year," McDavid said. "When he gets a chance, he continues to show that he's got elite skill, you know, elite, elite skill. He's shown that his whole career. So good around the net. Good hands. Crafty, smart. Yeah, you just got to get him the puck in a good area and usually good things happen."

When these teams faced off on Nov. 16, Ryan Reaves was given a game misconduct for an illegal hit to the head of Darnell Nurse. The Leafs winger was suspended five games while the Oilers defenceman missed three games due to injury. But revenge is not on Nurse's mind heading into the rematch.

"My job is to go out there and play against some of the best and I don't want to take myself out of that situation and hurt our team," Nurse said.

If Tavares and Knies dress, Reaves is set to be a healthy scratch on Saturday. He skated as the 13th forward at practice.

Regardless of who plays, these Leafs and Oilers games tend to be emotional. There's a healthy rivalry between the two markets.

"Always feels like a lot of Leafs fans in the building, too much media in the room," Nurse said with a grin. "Just a combination of a lot of things. These games are a lot of fun, especially in the last few years when both teams have been fairly good so expect a hard-fought game tomorrow."

"Guys are excited," McDavid said. "You know, we get the 5 o'clock start time. It's always nice, they come into our building and we got to change our schedule around, but it is what it is. So, it's exciting. Always fun to play the Leafs and their big names. They got some special players over there."

Oilers home games on Saturday usually start at 10 pm ET / 8 pm MT so they can be the second game of the Hockey Night in Canada double header. But when the Leafs come to town, the game shifts to the earlier 7 pm ET / 5 pm MT window.

"We get finished up a little bit earlier," McDavid said. "I like it a little bit better than the 8 o'clock [start] so I guess that's not a bad thing."

Oilers forced to cater to Leafs for game time but that's where the hosting courtesy ends

Oilers forced to cater to Leafs for game time but that's where the hosting courtesy endsWith the Maple Leafs and Oilers both finding success this season, their matchup on Saturday elevates the stakes. Despite being the home team, Edmonton will have to adjust by playing an earlier game to cater to its opponent.

After Friday's game, Rielly admitted "it's a battle right now" when it comes to generating offence. Toronto's top offensive-minded defenceman has produced just 22 points and is on pace for 35, which would be a sharp decline from last season's 58. Rielly also lost his spot on the top power-play unit earlier this season as the Leafs opted to go with a five-forward alignment.

Berube had a meeting with Rielly on Friday. The coach urged the 30-year-old to be more aggressive.

"Just not being tentative and just get up in the play like he normally does and do his thing offensively," Berube said. "Mistakes happen in the game for everybody and you can't be focused on mistakes. Use your abilities. He's a good skater, sees the ice well, gets up the ice. We talked today. Had a good talk. Just pushing a little bit more. Getting up in the play. Shooting pucks more. Being more aggressive in that area of the ice."

Rielly has landed only one shot on net in the last five games.

"I'm doing everything I can to contribute more offensively," Rielly said on Wednesday night, "be up in the play, drive that without taking risk on the defensive side of things."

Rielly has spoken consistently about trying to minimize the risk in his game this season as he adapts to Berube's system, which features less of an emphasis on rush offence.

"We asked everybody to minimize risk with how we want to play the game," Berube said. "We don't want to be a risky team. We want to be a smart hockey team with the puck. But, at the same time, he can't pull too far back. He's got to play his game. We got to let him play his game. And, like I said, stuff happens, mistakes happen, but be aggressive and use your abilities ... It's finding the sweet spot, as they say."

Berube has 'good talk' with Rielly, wants him to be more aggressive

Berube has 'good talk' with Rielly, wants him to be more aggressive Craig Berube says he had a 'good talk' with struggling defenceman Morgan Rielly and wants him to get up in the play more and get a little more aggressive.

Matthews missed the first game of the season against McDavid and the Oilers so this will be the first meeting of the year between the pair of superstars. Although Matthews and McDavid did spend some time together in the offseason.

"It's been a growing relationship for sure," McDavid said. "We have the same agent [Judd Moldaver] now so there's a connection that way. We did those commercials together. It was a long couple days together, but it was fun to spend some time with him. It's been a relationship that's built over the years, but it's a good one for sure."

The commercials were for McDonald's and featured McDavid and Matthews attempting to outdo each other with some trick shots. The fast food chain first used that commercial concept in 1993 in a spot starring basketball legends Michael Jordan and Larry Bird, which was followed in 1997 by one featuring Wayne Gretzky and former Leafs captain Mats Sundin.

"Definitely some long days, but it made it a little bit easier to have someone there with you and going through it all," Matthews said of the shoot. "But it was fun to look back on and kind of seeing them come out with the commercials and stuff, and just the history of that particular one. I mean, it's pretty cool."

The advertisement ends with both players eating a burger inspired by their game. How much has Matthews indulged in the "The Smoky Quarter Papi"?

"I tried it once," he said with a smile. "That's it. Got to stay on point during the season."

Matthews discusses relationship with McDavid, commercial shootAuston Matthews says he'd take Connor McDavid's skating ability if he was able to take one thing from his game. He also touches on the McDonald's commercial they did together and the 'long days' in front of the camera.

McDavid will play with Draisaitl on Saturday night, but when he gets to the 4 Nations Face-Off he may end up on a line with Marner.

"Mitch is a guy that I've never played with before at any level so I'm excited about that," McDavid said. "Such a smart player. He's having a terrific year. Such a great playmaker. He reminds me a little bit of Leon [in] that he can slow the game down when he has to and I like playing with guys like that. So, yeah, I'm excited about that."

McDavid, who will serve as an alternate captain, is also excited about the chance to learn from Team Canada captain Sidney Crosby.

"It's going to be a room where guys are learning from each other all over from practice, from preparation, from just habits," the 28-year-old said. "Guys will be trying to pick stuff, you know, take stuff from each other all over. Certainly Sid will be a guy that I'll be watching and trying to learn whatever I can from."

McDavid on playing with Crosby, Marner at 4 Nations, relationship with MatthewsAfter years of being asked how he would feel about playing alongside Sidney Crosby at the international level, Connor McDavid gave the obvious answer when asked once again. The Oilers captain also spoke about playing alongside Mitch Marner and touched on his personal relationship with Auston Matthews.

Defenceman Jani Hakanpää did not accompany the Leafs on this road trip.

"He's back in Toronto skating and doing things there," Berube said. "Really, I don't have a timeline for him. I really, I don't."

The 32-year-old, who was named to Finland's 4 Nations Face-Off roster, hasn't played since Nov. 16 due to a nagging knee issue.

Goalie Antony Stolarz took part in his second full practice as he works his way back from knee surgery. He had his own net during Friday's workout.

"Physically I feel really good," he said. "Just trying to get back and get the nuances of being a goalie again back, and getting my timing and rhythm back. I think I made some strides here the last couple practices, so try to get a few more in me and see where we're at."

The Leafs will have plenty of practice time during this trip, because the games are spaced out. After Saturday's game, Toronto doesn't play again until Tuesday in Calgary.

Stolarz started the season strong with a .927 save percentage in 17 games.

"I'm kind of a perfectionist," he said. "I want to make sure that you're dialled in and you come back right where I left off."

Stolarz hasn't played since Dec. 12.

"The biggest thing is angles," he explained. "Just kind of knowing where you are. You kind of get lost out there in the first couple practices. You think you're on and you're two, three inches off and that makes all the difference. [Goalie coach] Curtis [Sanford] has been working on a lot of different things and he's been pushing me a little bit here, so it's been a nice last couple days."

Leafs lines in Friday's practice:

Knies - Matthews - Marner

Pacioretty - Tavares - Nylander

McMann - Domi - Robertson

Holmberg - Kampf - Lorentz

Reaves

McCabe - Tanev

Rielly - Ekman-Larsson

Benoit - Timmins

Myers

Woll

Stolarz

Power play units at Friday's practice:

QB: Marner

Flanks: Matthews, Nylander

Bumper: Tavares

Net front: Knies

QB: Rielly

Flanks: Domi, Robertson

Bumper: McMann

Net front: Pacioretty

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TSN.CA / Salim Valji: Calgary Flames believe Morgan Frost, Joel Farabee bring offensive boost | TSN

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It turns out Craig Conroy's phone was working the whole time.

The Calgary Flames' general manager joked on Thursday night that fans in the city had been playfully teasing him recently for not yet upgrading a playoff-contending roster that has surprised many in the hockey world who thought they'd be destined for the draft lottery.

On Thursday, he pulled off a significant in-season move, shipping out forwards Jakob Pelletier and Andrei Kuzmenko, plus the club's 2025 second-round draft pick and 2028 seventh-round draft pick to Philadelphia in exchange for winger Joel Farabee and centre Morgan Frost.

"People like to chirp me when I'm walking around," Conroy said after the deal was made official following the Flames' 4-1 win over Anaheim. "…You don't know when it's going to happen or when it's the right time, but today felt like the right time."

Kuzmenko, a pending free agent who makes $5.8 million this season, was a late scratch on Thursday, while Pelletier, a Flames first-round pick in 2019 who cleared waivers earlier this season, was pulled from the game after the first period.

Both Conroy and head coach Ryan Huska emphasized that the Flames' play this season dictated the roster upgrade. Calgary has outperformed most projections and sits in a playoff spot well past the halfway mark of the season. They have a defined team identity, play hard most nights, and have gotten outstanding goaltending from Dustin Wolf.

Conroy felt he should do right by his team and try to upgrade the club's goal scoring.

"I definitely wanted to give the team something," Conroy said. "They deserved it. They've earned it, and to give them a boost, a shot in the arm, or whatever it is, we felt like these two players could do that. And they're at the right age."

The Flames are 28th in goals per game, an area that should be upgraded both now and in seasons to come with the 24-year-old left winger Farabee and 25-year-old centre Frost, both of whom are under team control beyond this season. The two have a combined 19 goals this season, while Kuzmenko and Pelletier have a combined eight.

Conroy said that the deal came together Thursday morning, but the Flames had talked about both players dating back years. Farabee and Frost are both former first-round draft picks. Frost is a pending restricted free agent while Farabee carries a cap hit of $5 million through 2028.

"I watched [Frost] tonight on the power play, he made some real nice plays," Conroy said. "Quick one-touches, he gets the puck in. He can

transport the puck up and get it in. We've had some problems at times this year getting the puck in. And Joel, he's got some jam and he can score."

Frost has 25 points in 49 games, while Farabee has 19 points in 50 games.

Conroy compared Farabee to a current Flame.

"When you watch him, he's maybe a younger Blake Coleman-type player where he chips in offensively, he can score, he can put up points but he's got some grit and you feel very comfortable when he's on the ice in all situations," Conroy said.

This is not just a move to get the Flames into the playoffs in three months. Conroy has said several times that he's not in the market for rentals or quick fixes. Farabee and Frost join a burgeoning group of young players wearing red and white, including Calder Trophy candidate Dustin Wolf (23), Connor Zary (23), and Matt Coronato (22), who scored twice on Thursday.

"These players coming in, we feel like they're going to help us this year, for one, but they also fit the wheelhouse for what we're trying to do," Huska said. "These aren't just guys that are going to kind of get us there now. We want to grow with these players."

The Flames locker room after the win was understandably subdued. It's a tight-knit group that's loud and gets along. Pelletier and Kuzmenko were often the most vocal players during pregame skates, keeping the mood light and loose.

Veteran Nazem Kadri used the phrase "it sucks" more than once on Thursday night.

"When it happens to younger kids that this typically might be the first time they're in a situation like this, you feel for them," he said. "It sucks, man. It's hard to stay focused. It obviously caught everybody's attention, but at the end of the day, we got the job done."

It was a hard day at the Saddledome, but one with potentially positive returns that could be realized when the team plays in its new rink two years from now.

"[Pelletier] was giving the guys kisses and rubbing heads and all that," Conroy said. "That's the tough part, but you're trying to build something here. You're trying to bring in the right people, but it's that room that's doing it. It's that veteran leadership group."

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TSN.CA / Draisaitl vaults to No. 1 in TSN's Top 25 NHL Players this season

Steve Dryden

Leon Draisaitl is not yet the highest-paid player in the NHL, but he is the highest ranked.

That's the headline from our annual Mid-Season Top 25 NHL Player Ranking, based on performance in 2024-25 and voted on by a panel of 12 TSN hockey experts.

Draisaitl earned No. 1 status on the strength of an outstanding first four months of the season after signing an eight-year, $14-million AAV extension that will almost certainly make him the highest-paid player in 2025-26.

With 36 goals in 51 games, the superstar Edmonton centre is the only player on pace for 50 this season – 58 to be precise.

His 76 points are second to No. 2-ranked Nathan MacKinnon's 78. If you don't include empty-net points (three for Draisaitl and 12 for MacKinnon), Draisaitl is first in points with 73 compared to MacKinnon's 66.

MacKinnon was first in balloting at this time last year.

Perennial pre-season No. 1 Connor McDavid has had an injury- and suspension-interrupted season but still has 67 points in 45 games and stands No. 3 at mid-season.

Arguably, McDavid hasn't been the best Connor. That distinction probably belongs to Winnipeg goalie Connor Hellebuyck.

The Jets' franchise goalie is No. 4 on TSN's list – but No. 1 in every significant NHL goalie statistical category: starts (41), wins (32), goals-against average (2.00), save percentage (.927) and Evolving Hockey's goals saved above expected (37).

He belongs at the heart of any Hart Trophy conversation.

Completing the top five is Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov, who leads the league in points per game with 75 in 48 games (1.56).

Blue-chip blueliners, Vancouver's Quinn Hughes (No. 6) and Colorado's Cale Makar (No. 7), are up next.

The two will go head-to-head in the 4 Nations Face-Off in February and, no doubt, again in Norris Trophy voting.

Hughes has a defenceman-high 58 points, a shocking 23 more than any other Canuck, and Makar has 18 goals, most among NHL blueliners.

There is virtually no daylight between Hughes and Makar according to our experts – a mere one voting point separated them.

Rounding out the top 10 are No. 8 and new Carolina Hurricane Mikko Rantanen, the rare superstar traded in-season, No. 9 Mitch Marner, tied for second in first assists (35), and No. 10 Kyle Connor, who rises from No. 47 in the pre-season ranking.

Conspicuously absent from the Top 25 are Alex Ovechkin and Sidney Crosby:

- At age 39, Ovechkin's 23 goals in 35 games place him second to Draisaitl in goals per game (0.66 to 0.71). And with 876 career regular season goals, Ovechkin stands only 19 away from surpassing Wayne Gretzky's all-time high 894. The Washington captain is on pace to hit 895 in 29 games, on April 13 vs. Columbus, two contests before the end of the regular season.

- At age 37, Pittsburgh icon and newly named Team Canada captain Sidney Crosby is on pace for a record 20th straight point-per-game season.

Two members of the Top 25 have legitimate beefs with Team Canada management. Both were snubbed when the 4 Nations roster was announced in early December.

- No. 14: Washington's Logan Thompson is tied with Hellebuyck for best save percentage (.927, albeit in 14 fewer starts); Adin Hill's .901 save percentage is the best of Canada's three goalies.

- No. 17: Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele has 31 goals, tops among all Canadian NHLers.

The Jets lead the way in our Top 25 with four players: Hellebuyck, Connor, Scheifele and No. 25 Josh Morrissey. Toronto has three representatives: Marner, No. 20 William Nylander and No. 23 Auston Matthews. Colorado also has three players: MacKinnon, Makar and No. 21 Martin Necas.

Matthews, aka Captain America as of Thursday's 4 Nations leadership announcements, has played 36 games this season – one more than Ovechkin and one fewer than No. 12-ranked Kirill Kaprizov (37), the Minnesota forward who is fifth in points per game (1.41) and sidelined for at least a month with a lower-body injury.

In terms of national representation, Canada leads with 10 players in the Top 25, three more than second-place USA (7).

CAROLINA HURRICANES

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See the full Top 25 list below, which includes each player's pre-season ranking from our Top 50 list compiled last September.

Player	Pre-season PTS	Pos	GP	G	A
1. Leon Draisaitl, Edm	40 76	4	C	51	36
2. Nathan MacKinnon, Col	59 78	2	C	52	19
3. Connor McDavid, Edm	46 67	1	C	45	21
4. Connor Hellebuyck, Wpg	.927 6	22	G	41	2.00
5. Nikita Kucherov, TB	52 75	5	RW	48	23
6. Quinn Hughes, Van	44 58	8	LD	46	14
7. Cale Makar, Col	6 56	RD	52	18	38
8. Mikko Rantanen, Car	40 66	10	RW	52	26
9. Mitch Marner, Tor	23 68	RW	51	15	53
10. Kyle Connor, Wpg	36 66	47	LW	53	30
11. Zach Werenski, CBJ	39 55	-	LD	51	16
12. Kirill Kaprizov, Min	29 52	15	LW	37	23
13. Jack Eichel, VGK	48 64	32	C	51	16
14. Logan Thompson, Wsh	.927 2	-	G	28	2.05
15. Sam Reinhart, Fla	25 54	26	RW	52	29
16. David Pastrnak, Bos	37 61	7	RW	53	24
17. Mark Scheifele, Wpg	28 59	-	C	53	31
18. Travis Konecny, Phi	37 58	-	RW	52	21
19. Jack Hughes, NJ	12 60	C	53	20	40
20. William Nylander, Tor	22 51	20	LW	51	29
21. Martin Necas, Col	43 59	-	C	52	16
22. Brayden Point, TB	24 52	18	C	45	28
23. Auston Matthews, Tor	18 38	3	C	36	20
24. Kirill Marchenko, CBJ	33 53	-	RW	51	20
25. Josh Morrissey, Wpg	39 45	44	LD	53	6