CAROLINA HURRICANES
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What's penalty box life like in NHL playoffs? Inside hockey's worst two minutes

By: Luke DeCock

Panthers' A.J. Greer (10) heads to the penalty box after being called for tripping during the Florida PanthersÕ 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Panthers' A.J. Greer (10) heads to the penalty box after being called for tripping during the Florida PanthersÕ 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

Raleigh

The door slams behind you. The bench is hard, even through the heavy pads of hockey pants. The game goes on without you. You view it through battle-scarred Plexiglas, the same as any fan wearing your replica sweater in an $1,100 front-row seat, helpless, resigned to your fate.

Every hockey player knows that specific pit of suffering, the exile of punishment, some more than others. While the world outside focuses on the power play on the ice, the penalized player sits in his small cell and considers his crimes, guilty or innocent, until his two-minute sentence is served or the opposition scores and the damage is done.

TOP VIDEOS

"It just sucks to go in there," Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho said. "There's nothing you can do about it."

"You can't change anything," Hurricanes defenseman Dmitry Orlov said. "You just pray."

NHL Rule 3.2 specifies only that a "penalty bench" for each team, on the opposite side from the team benches, must be able to accommodate 10 people including the off-ice official responsible for opening the door, with protective glass at the same height as around the rink. It's hard to believe any in an NHL rink is actually that big, although players certainly feel smaller while sitting inside.

The penalty box is a world of its own, especially in the playoffs, when every penalty is a controversy and a single power play can change the course of a series or even a season. Occasionally, it gets crowded when the officials lose patience after some fracas like exhausted parents. Sometimes there's the opportunity to continue an argument with an opponent across the timer's box that separates the offenders.

Most of the time, it is a lonely penitence, served in solitude.

And, on longer penalties, a frigid one.

Panthers' Sam Bennett (9) heads into the penalty box after being called for hooking in the first period of Florida's game against the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

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"It's freezing out there and you get kind of stiff sitting there," Hurricanes center Jesperi Kotkaniemi said. "It's bad. Two, you're fine. Five, you get cold. Then you get one of those commercial breaks and it turns into 15 minutes? It's a long time."

Then again, even 120 seconds can stretch out into hours. When it turns out to be the final play of a season, as it was for Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal in the final seconds of Game 4 of the Eastern Conference Final against the Florida Panthers in 2023, watching from the box as Matthew Tkachuk scored the series-winning goal, it lasts weeks, months, forever.

"That sticks with you all summer," Staal said. "Not enjoyable."

Earlier this month, Winnipeg Jets center Mark Scheifele went through the same experience, watching his season end from inside the penalty box, and somehow even worse: It was only hours after his father died. Jets captain Adam Lowry had to step into the box and help Scheifele out.

In those extreme times, the penalty box really does feel like some kind of purgatory, some liminal space between hockey and hell.

"Time feels pretty long, sitting there alone, watching the boys kill the penalty," Kotkaniemi said. "I kind of hope for the best. Our guys have done a pretty good job this year on the kill. It's not as big of a panic as you would think. Lot of trust in these guys."

The existential nature of the penalty box was best expressed by the French-Canadian philosopher Denis Lemieux, better known as the goalie for the Charlestown Chiefs in the movie "Slap Shot," unforgettably played by Yvon Barrette: "Two minutes by yourself, and you feel shame, you know. And then you get free."

But shame is only one of many emotions that can overwhelm a player in the penalty box: Helplessness, frustration, indignation, anger, self-pity. Sometimes, it's just pure, unfiltered, uncut fear and anxiety.

When Orlov was penalized late in Game 4 of the second round to give the Washington Capitals a two-man advantage, with the Hurricanes up 3-1 in the game and 2-1 in the series,

he was, in his own words, concerned about his immediate personal hygiene.

“I almost (expletive) myself,” Orlov said afterward.

“That’s probably not far from the truth,” Kotkaniemi said, especially when Alex Ovechkin scored 17 seconds later.

Panthers’ Gustav Forsling (42) heads to the penalty box after being called for cross-checking in the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

Panthers’ Gustav Forsling (42) heads to the penalty box after being called for cross-checking in the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, May 20, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

“In that moment, it can still change the game, because they still have a power play, five on four, after they score,” Orlov said. “And this could change the game, and that can change the series, and your season could be over. So, yeah, you’re just nervous. You word. You blame yourself. Everybody should be like that when you make a mistake in the game or take a bad penalty when you didn’t need to take it.”

The Hurricanes killed off the rest of Orlov’s penalty, got a Sean Walker goal to extend the lead and an Andrei Svechnikov empty-netter to put the game on ice, bailing out Orlov. And his drawers.

Certainly, the mood in the box can depend on whether it was a penalty that had to be taken or a terrible call that’s a historic miscarriage of justice. For some, it’s always two minutes of righteous anger and simmering fury, regardless of circumstances.

“‘This is (expletive).’ That’s what I think every time, you know,” said Svechnikov, who over the course of his career has spent more time in the box than the Hurricanes would prefer. “So, yeah. That’s the way it is. As soon as they call it, you’re like, ‘Oh my God, it’s so soft.’ Hockey is so soft these days. Sometimes you’re wrong. Sometimes you’re right. I think I’ve had so many of those ones I just touch someone and they give me a penalty. But every time it feels like that. ‘This is (expletive).’”

Among the Hurricanes, no one has spent less time in the penalty box over the course of his career than Jaccob Slavin, a two-time Lady Byng Trophy winner for sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct — “I don’t hook people, come on. It’s always puck over glass” — who has averaged seven penalty seconds per game over his 10-season career.

When he’s in the box, it’s not only newsworthy, it’s a crisis for the Hurricanes considering he’s the defensive linchpin on the league’s best penalty-killing unit.

“I’m just watching the game, watching the penalty-kill,” Slavin said. “But really just hoping that we don’t get scored on. I’m not in there much and so when I am in there and they score a goal, it doesn’t feel good.”

Having a penalty-kill that good tends to help the seconds tick by. There are various other ways to pass the time, which moves at different paces depending on what is happening on the other side of the glass. An efficient kill, zinging the puck back the other way at every opportunity, makes time fly. A power play set up and comfortable, whipping it around, blasting shots, can make two minutes feel like two hours.

Carolina’s Sebastian Aho (20) can’t believe he was called for a penalty in the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, May 20, 2025.

Carolina’s Sebastian Aho (20) can’t believe he was called for a penalty in the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Finals at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, May 20, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

Some players talk to themselves, critiquing, excoriating. Some glare at the officials, secure in their righteousness. Some tap the blade of their stick on the glass to celebrate a clear or blocked shot. Some chat with the attendant, making small talk, asking if the coach is glaring at them.

“Last time I was asking him if he thinks I’ll get a breakaway out of the box and score, and I got a three-on-two out of the box and I had ‘Jordo’ open on a one-timer,” Hurricanes forward Seth Jarvis said. “But I promised the guy I would score, so I shot it and it hit a stick and went out of play.”

That is the moment every player hopes for when the time is up, one way or another. The attendant stands up and grabs the handle of the door. The player stands ready. There is, in that moment, the small possibility that circumstances will align so the door opens and the player puts skate to ice at the same moment a teammate is looking up the ice with the puck.

If it happens, it’s happenstance, but a lovely one.

“I’m not looking at the door,” Slavin said, but he also acknowledged some players (specifically, Aho) will start yelling for the puck before they’re even out of the box.

If the attendant isn’t paying attention, that can be a moment of extreme danger. In Chicago in 2001, Hurricanes defenseman Glen Wesley’s jaw was broken and his face ripped open when he was checked into the doorway as it opened to release Blackhawks defenseman Steve Poapst.

Attendants are supposed to wait to open the door when there are players nearby, which means two minutes can become a few seconds longer, for the right reasons, as opposed to shorter, for all the wrong reasons.

Then again, spend enough time in there, and those plastic walls become funny. First you hate them. Then you get used to them.

“I’ve been so many times in the box, it doesn’t feel so long,” Svechnikov said.

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Luke DeCock’s Latest: Never miss a column on the Canes, ACC or other Triangle sports

Profile Image of Luke DeCock

Sports columnist Luke DeCock joined The News & Observer in 2000 and has covered seven Final Fours, the Summer Olympics, the Super Bowl and the Carolina Hurricanes' Stanley Cup. He is a past president of the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, was the 2020 winner of the National Headliner Award as the country's top sports columnist and has twice been named North Carolina Sportswriter of the Year.

Outplayed and outclassed, Hurricanes have come too far to play this poorly

By: Luke DeCock

Hear what the News & Observer's Luke DeCock had to say about the Carolina Hurricanes' 5-0 loss to the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the NHL Eastern Conference Final Thursday, May 22, 2025. By Ethan Hyman

Raleigh

Forget winning the series, let alone any thought of the Stanley Cup. Just try to avoid another sweep. Or at least win a period, for God's sake. Maybe score a goal. Try walking away from an altercation for once.

Things are so bad for the Carolina Hurricanes they need to set their sights lower, as low as they get. How about: Stop embarrassing themselves. Might be a good place to start.

By the end of the second period, fans were even chanting "shoot the puck" at the home team, right before the Florida Panthers scored their fourth goal in a 5-0 win.

TOP VIDEOS

Carolina's Shayne Gostisbehere (4), Brent Burns (8) and Jaccob Slavin (74) react after the Panthers scored during the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Carolina's Shayne Gostisbehere (4), Brent Burns (8) and Jaccob Slavin (74) react after the Panthers scored during the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

You endure the whole season, through 82 long games, through two rounds of the playoffs, for the right — the privilege – to be here, on this stage, playing for these stakes. And sometimes the better team does win, even wins six games in a row, but you have to at least show a little more fight than this.

It's too hard to get this far to go down this easy once you're here.

"Obviously, we just have to figure out how to win a period," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

The total margin of victory in this series is already twice as large as it was in 2023, and we're only halfway to another sweep, which may not be inevitable, but certainly feels that way.

Panthers' Sam Bennett (9) celebrates with Matthew Tkachuk (19) after he scored during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Panthers' Sam Bennett (9) celebrates with Matthew Tkachuk (19) after he scored during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

Not only can the Hurricanes not impose their will the way they did in the first two rounds, they can't play their game at all. The team that was questioned for its "shot volume approach" had all of seven shots through two periods and basically abandoned the aggressive forecheck that is the Hurricanes' trademark.

That wasn't boring hockey. This actually is.

"They're just doing it better, no question," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "They've been the better team, especially tonight."

Panthers' Niko Mikkola (77) checks Carolina's Logan Stankoven (22) during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Panthers' Niko Mikkola (77) checks Carolina's Logan Stankoven (22) during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

If getting mocked by your own fans in your own building en route to a 14th straight conference-finals loss isn't bad enough — "We didn't have enough shots tonight, so there's probably something to that," Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said — Game 2 started badly for the Hurricanes and got worse.

Andrei Svechnikov kicked it off by throwing a blind pass up the boards against the Florida forecheck. In a flash it was on Gustav Forsling's stick in the slot and the Hurricanes were playing from behind after only 77 seconds.

Svechnikov was on the ice for three goals against and watched the third Florida goal from the penalty box after punching Matthew Tkachuk in the back of the head for no reason, a power-play goal seconds after Sergei Bobrovsky stopped Jordan Martinook on a short-handed breakaway and Jordan Staal couldn't get to the rebound.

"I made the couple of turnovers in our (defensive) zone and they scored," Svechnikov said. "So my mistake, my mistake totally. And, you know, I can't do anything right now, so got to move on and think positively."

Carolina's Sebastian Aho (20) can't get to the puck during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

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When the Hurricanes did dent Bobrovsky, Sebastian Aho shooting it off his right pad and in, it didn't count. What looked like Tkachuk playing the puck back into his own zone actually came off Brent Burns. The Panthers are soundly beating the Hurricanes even in the offside-challenge department.

And then there are the depth issues on defense, which certainly raise the question of how the Hurricanes expected to manage an injury on the blue line if one came up at any point. Jalen Chatfield took warmups but wasn't ready to go, which left Scott Morrow in the lineup after his painful playoff debut in Game 1 over Alexander Nikishin, who had a rough debut of his own in Game 5 of the second round — a series of cascading and critical failures.

Morrow didn't play in the first 12 minutes and the Hurricanes were essentially down to four defensemen for a bit after Sean Walker took a hard hit from A.J. Green coming across the middle. If Riley Stillman and Ty Smith aren't up to the task when the other options are rookies who are clearly not ready, why are they even here? What was the plan if a defenseman got hurt, anyway? Hope for the best? Pray?

Panthers' Niko Mikkola (77) hits Carolina's Eric Robinson (50) as they scuffle during the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Panthers' Niko Mikkola (77) hits Carolina's Eric Robinson (50) as they scuffle during the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

If the Hurricanes want to stop being asked about why they can't beat the Panthers, they're going to have to not only beat the Panthers at some point, but play at their level once in a while. That wasn't an issue in 2023, when three of the games were decided on the final play, but neither game this year has even been close. The Panthers are faster, stronger, more opportunistic and more determined. Other than that, it's pretty even.

"They're not a perfect hockey team," Hall said. "We just have to play our game, and we haven't really."

In the ongoing absence of that, the Hurricanes are getting absolutely rolled, in a way that hasn't happened in a playoff series since they were swept by the Boston Bruins at this stage in 2019. That was at the beginning of this run of playoff appearances and playoff series wins, when nothing was expected and everything was a surprise.

The only surprise here is how noncompetitive the Hurricanes have been. Outplayed and outclassed. The Panthers aren't only beating them at their own game; they're playing a completely different one. They can change all that on the road, and bring the series back here even, but they'll have to start somewhere after going nowhere.

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Luke DeCock's Latest: Never miss a column on the Canes, ACC or other Triangle sports

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Profile Image of Luke DeCock

Sports columnist Luke DeCock joined The News & Observer in 2000 and has covered seven Final Fours, the Summer Olympics, the Super Bowl and the Carolina Hurricanes' Stanley Cup. He is a past president of the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, was the 2020 winner of the National Headliner Award as the country's top sports columnist and has twice been named North Carolina Sportswriter of the Year.

Panthers throttle Hurricanes in Game 2, Carolina in 0-2 series hole to Florida

By: Chip Alexander, Luke DeCock

Hear what the News & Observer's Luke DeCock had to say about the Carolina Hurricanes' 5-0 loss to the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the NHL Eastern Conference Final Thursday, May 22, 2025. By Ethan Hyman

Raleigh

The Florida Panthers have a big, tough, experienced team that won a Stanley Cup last season, and is after another.

For the second straight game, the Panthers also looked like a team that doesn't plan to let the Carolina Hurricanes stand in their way.

The Panthers rolled into Lenovo Center, scored three times in the first period, stifled the Canes and came away with a 5-0 victory Thursday, and a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference Final.

TOP VIDEOS

While goalie Sergei Bobrovsky notched his third shutout of the playoffs, the Panthers got two goals and an assist from Sam Bennett and three assists from Carter Verhaeghe in pounding out the decisive victory.

"That was pretty much a (butt) kicking," Canes captain Jordan Staal said, summing up the loss succinctly.

Carolina's Pyotr Kochetkov (52) and Dmitry Orlov (7) react after Panthers' Aleksander Barkov (16) scored in the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Carolina's Pyotr Kochetkov (52) and Dmitry Orlov (7) react after Panthers' Aleksander Barkov (16) scored in the third period of the Florida Panthers' 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

The best-of-seven series now moves to Florida for a pair of games, with the Panthers looking to close it out in a four-

game sweep and the Hurricanes looking for answers to what might be some unsolvable problems.

“But there’s no quit on this team,” Staal said. “You’ve seen that all season. We’ll focus on this next game and go from there. We’ve got to believe in our group and what we’ve done all year and go steal one.”

Both teams play similar aggressive, in-your-face styles. The Panthers are better at it than the Canes, who again played without injured defenseman Jalen Chatfield, who took the pregame warmup Thursday but could not go.

The Canes had three shots in the opening period and seven through the first 40 minutes as the Panthers had tight gaps defensively, checked hard and well along the boards and allowed few Hurricanes forays near Bobrovsky’s crease.

In the second period, after Canes winger Seth Jarvis decided to pass off the rush rather than shoot, a new chant broke out loudly at Lenovo Center: “Shoot the puck! Shoot the puck!”

“What did we have, seven shots at that point? I don’t blame them,” Staal said. “Our M.O. has always been ‘shoot first and ask questions later’ but we weren’t doing that tonight.”

Carolina’s Seth Jarvis (24) loses control of the puck as Panthers’ Gustav Forsling (42) defends during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Carolina’s Seth Jarvis (24) loses control of the puck as Panthers’ Gustav Forsling (42) defends during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

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Canes center Sebastian Aho did get a puck past Bobrovsky in the opening minute of the second period after a bad Florida turnover. But the Panthers won a coach’s challenge, claiming the puck left the Florida zone and then knocked back in by Canes defenseman Brent Burns, making Aho offside, and the score was overturned.

It was the kind of play the Hurricanes badly needed, and they continued to try and push the pace in the second with some juggled lines, only to have Bennett score his second goal with 39 seconds left in the period – a final dagger for the Canes.

By the third, Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour had lifted goalie Frederik Andersen and inserted Pyotr Kochetkov in net. Kochetkov did make a few early saves to earn some cheers.

The Panthers did beat Kochetkov on a third-period power play as Aleksander Barkov scored.

Carolina’s Frederik Andersen (31) keeps his eyes on the puck as Panthers’ Anton Lundell (15) can’t score during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

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The first period, which proved to be decisive, was total misery for the Canes and a display of total domination by the Panthers, who scored their three goals on five shots.

Of the Hurricanes’ three shots in the period, two by defenseman Dmitry Orlov. They spent a lot of time in their own zone, chasing, watching the Panthers control the puck with a precise forechecking game.

Canes forward Andrei Svechnikov, discombobulated on the ice much of the period, turned the puck over and defenseman Gustav Forsling scored on the Panthers’ first shot of the game.

Svechnikov turned it over a second time and Florida’s Matthew Tkachuk scored off the bounce of a Verhaeghe shot.

Svechnikov took a penalty for roughing after a tussle with Tkachuk and Bennett scored his first of the game on the power play.

Carolina’s William Carrier (28) battles for position with Panthers’ Aaron Ekblad (5) during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Carolina’s William Carrier (28) battles for position with Panthers’ Aaron Ekblad (5) during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes’ game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

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The Canes had their first power play late in the first period, only to have Jarvis whiff on a shot from the left circle. So it went for Carolina, which was 5-0 in the playoffs at home before facing the Panthers.

Both teams had players leave the game. The Panthers’ Sam Reinhart left with a lower-body injury and Canes defenseman Sean Walker took an open-ice hit and went to the locker room in the second.

With Chatfield out, Brind’Amour gave rookie defenseman Scott Morrow a second straight start, then did not play him in the first 12 minutes of the game. Morrow had two first-period shifts.

Svechnikov begs off blame for Bob bang

A clip of Svechnikov making contact with Bobrovsky’s head as he skated through the crease during the second period of Game 1 ended up going semi-viral on social media, although neither team brought it up after the game Tuesday or on Wednesday.

Svechnikov, on Thursday morning, said he didn’t even know about it until afterward.

“After the game, actually, my brother and a couple friends asked me, ‘Did you see your hit on Bob?’” Svechnikov said. “I’m like, ‘What you are you guys talking about?’ It looks like I hit him on purpose, but I didn’t mean it at all.”

Injured official OK

Referee Kelly Sutherland, who left Game 1 before the third period after getting hit in the arm by a puck, is the alternate official for Game 2. Eric Furlatt, who worked the first two periods Tuesday alongside Sutherland, and Dan O'Rourke are the referees.

Marchand not commenting

Panthers forward Brad Marchand was asked Thursday what he thought of Canes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere shooting a puck at him before the two dropped the gloves to fight in Game 1.

"I'm not much of a thinker," Marchand said, grinning. "I don't have much thought on that."

Gostisbehere's comment after the game: "He tried to take a run at me and I shot a puck at him. It is what it is."

Marchand was given a 10-minute misconduct penalty. Panthers coach Paul Maurice also has declined to comment on the incident.

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Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

CAROLINA HURRICANES
NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

The Athletic

Panthers' Sam Bennett-led top line shreds Hurricanes with dominant Game 2

By: Michael Russo

RALEIGH, N.C. — As one-sided as the 5-2 final score was in Game 1, the reality was Paul Maurice wasn't overjoyed by the play of the Sam Bennett line. The trio, which includes clutch playoff performers Carter Verhaeghe and Matthew Tkachuk, got on the wrong side of the puck too often against the high-end Sebastian Aho line and a lot of what the Florida Panthers gave up off the rush came with them on the ice.

It stemmed from too much aggressiveness and "trying almost too hard," Maurice felt.

Well, that wasn't the case in Game 2.

As solid as they were on the forecheck in a good old-fashioned "ass-whooping," as Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal called the 5-0 pounding his team took from the Panthers on Thursday, Maurice felt they played a more relaxed, patient game as they pressured the Hurricanes into the ice.

Bennett scored two goals and an assist and is now tied with Mikko Rantanen for the playoff lead with nine goals. Verhaeghe, known mostly for his clutch scoring, reminded he can make plays with the best of them and assisted on three goals. Tkachuk forced a turnover to assist on Gustav Forsling's game-opening goal 77 seconds in and scored his first goal in 11 games dating back to April 26 — a factoid that surprised everyone from captain Aleksander Barkov to Maurice.

"Oh, I didn't even notice," Barkov said. "He always plays well. He's a one-of-a-kind player."

And the Panthers are turning into a one-of-a-kind team, as the defending champs are two wins from their third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final and have to have the Hurricanes questioning just about everything right now.

The shot-happy Hurricanes had three shots through 20 minutes, five through 32, seven through 40 and 17 through 60, and saw Frederik Andersen's night end early after allowing three goals on five shots and four on 16. A quiet Lenovo Center got loud only when disgruntled fans decided to let the team they love have it with mocking cheers similar to what the road-warrior Panthers caused a round earlier in Toronto.

The Panthers have outscored the Maple Leafs and Hurricanes 22-4 in the past four road games. Jerseys and plastic cups of expensive beer weren't hurled onto the ice like games 5 and 7 of the Leafs series, but the Panthers, led by the hard-nosed Bennett line, made a statement anyway as the series heads to the edge of the Everglades.

"When you go from a Game 7 into a Game 1, those are two pretty high-intense games. Those are as riled up as you know you're going to get," Tkachuk said. "And it might have been natural for us to take a little bit to get going tonight. And it was the exact opposite. It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets, and that's just a hell of a road trip."

True, but the three goals are what made it a great first period. None was more emphatic than the first one when the Bennett line caused defenseman Dmitry Orlov to hurry an exit, then a relentless attack by Bennett and Tkachuk and impressive puck support forced one final turnover from Andrei Svechnikov, leading to Forsling's goal.

"I thought you saw a really veteran game out of those guys," Maurice said.

Tkachuk's goal came after a series of solid plays behind the net led to Verhaeghe wrapping himself to the front, taking a big hit and still setting up Tkachuk at the other side of the net for a backdoor tap-in.

"Tried to put it on his stick and he did the rest like he does," Verhaeghe said.

Four minutes later, on a power play, after Sergei Bobrovsky denied the Hurricanes short-handed, Verhaeghe assisted on another Bennett goal.

"He is a playoff performer," Maurice said of Verhaeghe, who has scored 31 goals and 68 points in 83 career playoff games.

The Verhaeghe-Bennett-Tkachuk line, according to Natural Stat Trick, had a 13-9 edge on shot attempts, a 77 percent expected goal rate and was 3-0 in actual goals at five-on-five, plus the Verhaeghe-to-Bennett power-play goal. Bennett's primary matchup was Aho's line. In 7:48 of five-on-five ice time against each other, Carolina had a 9-7 shot attempt edge but Florida won the quality battle with a 63 percent expected goals share and 1-0 goal edge.

Overall, the Panthers had a 39-25 five-on-five shot attempt advantage through two periods before the Canes pushed in the third with a 21-5 edge. In fact, Florida had a 73 percent expected goal rate through two periods, but the Canes had a

93 percent expected goal rate in the third once the game was a lost cause for them.

“I think that’s our strong suit, especially our line,” Bennett said of the Panthers’ forecheck. “That’s what we do. That’s what we’re best at, and when we’re on with our relentless pressure, just one after another, we know it makes it difficult on them. We try to do that every night. Sometimes it’s more difficult than others, but tonight we were able to get on them.”

How?

“I don’t know. Don’t think?” Tkachuk said. “Skate and hit when it’s there. Be above your guys after you do it, and make sure there’s a third guy in a good, responsible position to either get back first and just be above them. Don’t give them anything off the rush. We’ve talked about that for years here.

“Our line, we’re good-size guys. Try to be physical. And it doesn’t just have to be one person. Could be any one of us. Thought it was a good job by all three of us to get in on the forecheck tonight.”

Tkachuk continues to be a thorn in the Canes’ side.

In the Panthers’ 2023 Eastern Conference final sweep of Carolina, Tkachuk scored a quadruple overtime winner in Game 1, scored the overtime winner in Game 2, had the primary assist on Sam Reinhart’s power-play goal in a 1-0 win in Game 3 and scored twice in Game 4, including a buzzer-beating, tiebreaking winner in the third period.

Tkachuk extended his postseason point streak against the Hurricanes to six games Thursday.

The fact his Game 2 goal was his first since Game 3 of the Tampa Bay series doesn’t bother Tkachuk.

“We’re up two games to zero,” he said. “I don’t care how we get there. If it goes in, it goes in. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t. I’ve never cared. … I’m not (Alex) Ovechkin. They’re not always going to go in.”

And the thing about Tkachuk is he finds a way to make an impact even when he’s not scoring, whether it’s being responsible defensively, setting up goals, talking smack or playing physically, like taking out Jordan Martinook like a bowling ball in the first period and goading Svechnikov into a penalty that turned a 2-0 lead to 3-0 lead.

“He’s a guy that he doesn’t need to score to be effective,” Bennett said. “He’s doing everything on the ice for this team. When he scores, it’s just an added bonus for our group.”

The Panthers became the sixth team in playoff history to score five or more goals in four consecutive road games. They have already scored 43 goals in nine road games — six from tying the Wayne Gretzky-led L.A. Kings record of 49 set in 1993.

They once again sucked all the energy out of an opposing building.

“It’s fun when you’re on the road and it goes quiet and feels like we’re doing our job,” Verhaeghe said. “I think we’ve had a good couple starts, and that’s had a lot to do with it.”

In NHL history, when a road team has started a conference final 2-0, it has won the series 20 of 21 times. When a road team has started any best-of-seven series 2-0, it has won the series 89 of 111 times (80.1 percent).

The Panthers are once again in the driver’s seat, yet they made clear after Thursday’s win that they must remain humble and not take a solid team like Carolina for granted.

“We got what we wanted, but still, obviously lots of work to do,” Bennett said. “We’re not gonna relax or sit back now. We know it’s gonna get more difficult, for sure.”

Not if Bennett and his linemates take their performance to South Florida with them.

(Photo: James Guillory / Imagn Images)

Michael Russo is a senior writer covering the Minnesota Wild and the National Hockey League for The Athletic. He has covered the NHL since 1995 (Florida Panthers) and the Wild since 2005, previously for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel and Minneapolis Star Tribune. Michael is a five-time Minnesota Sportswriter of the Year and in 2017 was named the inaugural Red Fisher Award winner as best beat writer in the NHL. Michael can be seen on NHL Network; and heard on KFAN (100.3 FM) and the Worst Seats in the House podcast (talknorth.com). He can be found on Instagram and X at @russohockey. Follow Michael on Twitter @RussoHockey

Hurricanes are on the brink of an identity crisis: ‘I didn’t know what I was watching’

By: Sean Gentille

RALEIGH, N.C. — Three days ago, way back at the start of the Eastern Conference final, the Carolina Hurricanes followed the script after another loss to the Florida Panthers.

They focused on the positives: plenty of five-on-five chances, a power-play that improved as the game progressed and a result that was born primarily, they seemed to think, of isolated mistakes that were all their own. We lost, they were saying, but we played well.

They weren’t wrong, either. Not necessarily. Results are binary, but process is not.

To believe that, though, by definition, is to believe something else. The flip side of “we played well but lost” tends to be “they played badly and still beat us.” That can be a scary proposition. And on Thursday night, the Hurricanes watched it come to life.

Florida won 5-0. The Hurricanes are down 2-0 in the series. And the panic button — unavoidably, necessarily and belatedly — may have been triggered.

Beyond that, if Tuesday was them falling back on their priors and saying, loss aside, they largely played like themselves, Thursday was closer to the inverse. It felt like a hockey team looking in a mirror and not recognizing the reflection. It felt, nearly from the moment the puck dropped, like an identity crisis.

“I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much,” Hurricanes coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “And then we’re not doing the things that we do as a team

that normally help us. We were just … I didn't know what I was watching in the first period.

"I said the other day, the margin here is tight. We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. And tonight, for whatever reason — like I said, the intentions were good, everyone's trying, 'OK, I'm gonna do this' — but that's not how we do it. And it just backfired."

That was a bad hockey game, and a dull one. Somehow, though, in all its badness and dullness, there were surreal moments. For one, the crowd at Lenovo Center chanted "shoot the puck" several times throughout the second period. The Lenovo Center, home of the "Corsi Canes," who've led the NHL in shots on net since time immemorial — the team that almost hung 100 attempts on the Washington Capitals in 63:06 of playoff hockey a couple of weeks ago.

This wasn't an instance of a home crowd that lost its barometer on what constitutes a normal amount of shots, either. They were mad, and they were right to be. The Hurricanes did need to shoot the puck. They had seven shots through 40 minutes of play and were down 4-0 in a playoff game. That's when hockey fans return to factory settings, regardless of what they've seen over the last seven seasons.

Taylor Hall, added via trade in January, is new to the mix. He's 33 now, pretty firmly in the seasoned, thoughtful veteran phase of his career, and he's seen plenty. He's been part of good teams and terrible ones. He's won a Hart Trophy and gotten benched by the 2024-25 Chicago Blackhawks. This is a man who's seen the pendulum swing.

After the game, he was asked about the chants and whether hesitancy had entered the picture.

"A little bit," he said. "I mean, you can always point to times on the ice where you need to shoot it, but you need to also have some freedom to make plays and whatnot. But yeah, when we look up at the shot clock and see that, that's just not our game, right? That's just not how we play. We generate offense by shooting pucks and getting them back. And then we draw a penalty, we get a rebound, we generate momentum and O-zone faceoffs by doing that, and we just weren't able to do it. We had chances to shoot and we didn't.

"So yeah, I think we're all a little bit at a loss."

Taylor Hall gets pinned to the boards by Florida's Dmitry Kulikov during Game 2. (James Guillory / Imagn Images)

Jordan Staal, captain of the Hurricanes since 2017 and a foundational piece since 2011, is an avatar for Brind'Amour. The two share a playing style — Brind'Amour won two Selkes and Staal has come close — and a philosophy.

"He's really been the most, probably, important player that we've had here. Just solid," Brind'Amour said before the series. "(Someone) you can build around. Consistent. All those words that you use to describe people that you love. That's Jordan Staal."

After Game 1, nobody threaded the needle better. Staal wasn't thrilled with his team's performance. He wasn't excusing it. He also wasn't willing to toss the whole thing, tip to tail, in the trash can.

That day, he was asked whether Carolina's struggles with the Panthers, after five straight conference final losses across two series, were as mental as they are physical, and whether they wondered whether they could actually win.

"Yeah, this game is mental," he said. "I mean, it's all about the brain and your focus and the thoughts that can creep in. And it's got to be the thoughts we've been thinking all year. And that's playing our game and focusing on our shifts and our battles and doing what we do. When you let those little thoughts like that come in, it never looks good."

This time, he didn't bother bringing up near-misses or individual mistakes or specific, fixable issues with the penalty kill. This time, he didn't say they were close.

"Tonight was just not good," he said. "There wasn't really much to hang your hat on at all."

And that brings us back to Brind'Amour, memorably defiant in 2023 in saying that his team's process and effort stopped a sweep from being a sweep, a coach that believes that his team wins hockey games in one particular way and plays hockey games at one nonnegotiable level, whether in October or May.

He started to echo Staal, but stopped short.

"We gotta just … not throw this game away, but we gotta learn from it — what doesn't work — and give yourself a chance," he said. "That's what we didn't do. I thought we did the other night. Obviously, same result. But clearly, you go off the script and it's not going to go well. So that's the lesson learned there."

The process, it seems, was off. Before he was done with his postgame media session, he landed another lesson. Maybe a more important one.

"Sometimes it's easier to recover from a game like that because there's nothing good (that comes) out of it," he said. "If you're close, a play here or there makes a difference. There was nothing good in this game for us."

He might have been correct in his assessment in Game 1. He certainly was after Game 2.

(Top photo: James Guillory / Imagn Images)

Sean Gentille is a senior writer for The Athletic covering the NHL. He previously covered Pittsburgh sports with the The Athletic and Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the NHL for Sporting News, and he's a graduate of the University of Maryland. Follow Sean on Twitter @seangentille

Panthers hand Hurricanes 14th straight conference finals loss with Game 2 rout: Takeaways

By: Michael Russo, Sean Gentille

RALEIGH, N.C. — Well, unlike their previous five Eastern Conference final games against the Florida Panthers, the Carolina Hurricanes can't claim they deserved better this time.

From the opening puck drop, the Panthers dominated Thursday, beating the Canes into submission with constant

pressure and scoring three goals in the opening 20 minutes of a one-sided 5-0 victory in Game 2 of the series at Lenovo Center.

The Hurricanes registered only five shots through 32 minutes, seven through 40 and 17 through 60, leading to restless fans chanting, “Shoot the puck!!!” throughout the second period.

“Our fans are amazing. The support they give us is incredible. We didn’t have enough shots tonight, so there’s probably something to it,” Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said.

The defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers are now two wins away from making a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final as the series shifts to Florida with Games 3 and 4 on Saturday and Monday.

“It was a great game,” said Sergei Bobrovsky, who made 17 saves for his franchise-record third shutout of the playoffs. “But we have to reset, refocus, be humble and get ready for home. It’s a new game. The score is 0-0. We’re going to prepare ourselves for the fight.”

The Carter Verhaeghe-Sam Bennett-Matthew Tkachuk line factored in on three even-strength goals — by Gustav Forsling, Tkachuk and Bennett — with Bennett and Aleksander Barkov also adding power-play goals. Bennett tied Dallas’ Mikko Rantanen for the league lead with nine playoff goals and notched Florida’s first multi-goal game since Nate Schmidt and Tkachuk scored twice apiece in their first game of the postseason back in the first round on April 22 against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

That’s how deep this team is.

Verhaeghe finished with three assists. The Panthers now have four power-play goals in two games after Carolina entered the series 28-for-30 on the penalty kill.

“It was an unreal start from us,” Tkachuk said.

The loss extended Carolina’s losing streak in Eastern Conference final games with Rod Brind’Amour as captain or coach to 14 games after the Canes were swept in 2009, 2019 and 2023.

The Panthers, on the other hand, have gone 14 consecutive Eastern Conference final games without losing in regulation. They have 12 wins in that stretch. Their last conference-final regulation loss was on May 28, 1996 in Game 5 against the Pittsburgh Penguins. They then won the final two games of that series to advance to the Stanley Cup Final against the Colorado Avalanche in only their third year of existence.

Florida, which swept Carolina in 2023, also became the first team to earn six consecutive wins against a single opponent in the round before the Stanley Cup Final since the Detroit Red Wings did it against the Chicago Blackhawks from Game 4 of the 1966 semifinal to Game 3 of 1995 conference final.

The Panthers are now 28-0 under Paul Maurice when holding a lead at the end of the first or second period in the playoffs.

The news wasn’t all good for the Panthers, who lost regular-season scoring leader Sam Reinhart late in the first period with a lower-body injury. Coach Paul Maurice said he’ll be examined Friday and he hopes to have an update Saturday.

Carolina right wing Seth Jarvis was hurt late in the second period when he was checked by Niko Mikkola. He played four shifts in the third period but not the final eight minutes. Similarly, defenseman Sean Walker was on the bench throughout the third period after being checked by A.J. Greer early in the second, but he didn’t play a shift after the second intermission.

The Panthers improved to 7-2 on the road in the playoffs with a plus-25 goal differential (43-18). They’ve outscored their opponents 22-4 over the past four road games. What’s behind it?

“If I knew that — I think we were a game over .500 on the road this year (20-19-2) — I would have used it way earlier,” Maurice said. “I wouldn’t have waited for the playoffs. I’d have fired that out in December.”

Here are four takeaways.

Pressure breaks Canes

If you’ve paid attention to this series, or any other involving either of these teams for the past several years, you’ve heard plenty about their forechecks.

Florida, in the opening minute of the game, gave Carolina a costly reminder on it. The Panthers’ first goal was a prime example of what sustained pressure can do, regardless of the opponent.

First, it was Tkachuk harassing Dmitry Orlov along the back boards. Orlov was almost certainly trying to rim the puck along the glass and out on his backhand, but he didn’t come close to completing the play. Walker picked up the loose puck and shuffled it along to Andrei Svechnikov along the boards.

Svechnikov skated toward his own net before looping back up ice and attempting a pass to Jack Roslovic. Tkachuk picked off the puck and passed it to Forsling in the slot. Forsling’s shot deflected off Orlov and past Freddie Andersen.

To go down by a goal 77 seconds into the game was a nightmarish start that Carolina couldn’t afford — and it was a textbook goal for one of the league’s elite pressure teams.

Then on Tkachuk’s goal just inside 12 minutes into the period, the Verhaeghe-Bennett-Tkachuk line forechecked the heck out of the Canes again.

“First period, they were in their zone the whole period,” Barkov said of the Bennett line.

“I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much,” Brind’Amour said. “And then we’re not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us. We were just — I didn’t know what I was watching in the first period.”

Tough start for Svechnikov

Svechnikov said before the series that during the 2023 playoffs, he used to drive to games and sit in his car for a while before being able to stomach entering the arena because he was “depressed.” His season was lost with a torn ACL just after the trade deadline.

So after scoring eight goals in the first two rounds, Svechnikov could not wait to play the Panthers for the first time in this series.

Well, two games in, Svechnikov has one assist in two games, only one shot and Thursday night was minus-3 and took an undisciplined penalty that led to Florida's third goal of the first period.

Svechnikov was goaded into it by Tkachuk, who hit him with a reverse hit in the corner, then jabbed at his lower back with a cross-check in the neutral zone after Svechnikov took a run at him. Later in the shift, Svechnikov took another run at Tkachuk, then punched him in the back of the head at Carolina's bench.

On the ensuing power play, after Bobrovsky denied Jordan Martinook on a three-on-two shorthanded rush, Verhaeghe assisted on the first of Bennett's two goals.

"He had a tough night," Brind'Amour said. "He's trying, but we gotta do it within the way we need to (and) be on the same page. And he was on his own page tonight a little bit. Didn't work."

Freddie looks fried

For the second game in a row, the Hurricanes had problems extending beyond Freddie Andersen. For the second game in a row, he didn't come close to bailing them out and instead added to the pile.

Carolina's starting goaltender allowed three goals on the first five shots he faced and four on 16 overall in two periods of work before being replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov for the third.

Whether it was to spark the rest of the Hurricanes, to give Andersen a rest or to give Kochetkov a look at Florida before Game 3 may remain to be seen, but Brind'Amour certainly sounded uninterested in blaming Andersen for all that much.

"It wouldn't have mattered who we had in net tonight," he said.

Kochetkov replaced Andersen in Game 4 of Carolina's first-round series against the Devils and played competently enough, stopping 45 of 50 shots in two wins.

If Andersen does get the start Saturday, it'll be due to his play in the first two rounds, when he was deservedly showing up on Conn Smythe shortlists. It certainly won't be because he's been any good against the Panthers; Andersen has allowed nine goals on 31 shots in the series for a cool .710 save percentage. Two of Florida's goals (Tkachuk's and Bennett's second) started on wrap-around attempts by Verhaeghe.

Carolina's blue-line mess

On a few different occasions this week, Brind'Amour brought up defenseman Jalen Chatfield's absence as playing a major factor in the Game 1 result. It was understandable enough. Chatfield is a good, important player who helps the Hurricanes' defensive pairs fall into place.

Ahead of the game, it seemed like Carolina was going to get him back. Chatfield took line rushes and generally looked the part of a player who was preparing for a hockey game. When the scratch list came out, though, his name was on it. Scott Morrow, who struggled mightily in Game 1, was in his place. Alexander Nikishin, who replaced Chatfield in Game 5, was not.

Brind'Amour has not seemed enamored with either.

Lo and behold, Morrow played just 1:42 on two shifts in the first period. In the second, he was on the ice for 4:04 — and that was with Walker missing a chunk of the period after Greer's hit. It's tough to imagine Chatfield missing Game 3, especially if the alternative is Carolina basically playing a man down. The Hurricanes played most of the season with the same three defensive pairings, too, so they're particularly ill-equipped to handle this.

(Photo: Jaylynn Nash / Getty Images)

Panthers star Sam Reinhart leaves Game 2 after Sebastian Aho hit, won't return

By: Michael Russo

TORONTO, CANADA - MAY 18: Sam Reinhart #13 of the Florida Panthers skates against the Toronto Maple Leafs during the first period in Game Seven of the Second Round of the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs at Scotiabank Arena on May 18, 2025 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. (Photo by Claus Andersen/Getty Images)

May 22, 2025Updated 9:47 pm EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — Sam Reinhart, the Florida Panthers' first-line right wing and regular-season scoring leader, was knocked out of Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final Thursday night with a lower-body injury sustained late in the first period.

With the Panthers leading 3-0, Reinhart was nailed by a hip check from Carolina Hurricanes star forward Sebastian Aho as he crossed the blue line into Carolina's end. Reinhart's left leg took the brunt of the force. Reinhart was seen grimacing on the bench after the check. Reinhart played one more 12-second shift before period's end, then went to dressing room and didn't come out for the second period.

Reinhart, 29, scored 39 goals and 81 points in the regular season to become the first skater in club history to post four consecutive 30-goal seasons. He has led the Panthers in goals and points the past two regular seasons, scoring 57 and 94 in 2023-24. The 57 goals ranked second in the NHL that season, and his 96 over the past two seasons combined also rank second.

Reinhart also led all Panthers skaters with six points (two goals) in a first-round win over the Tampa Bay Lightning and has four goals and 11 points in 14 playoff games. He signed an eight-year, $69 million contract to forgo free agency after winning the Stanley Cup last season.

(Photo: Claus Andersen / Getty Images)

Michael Russo is a senior writer covering the Minnesota Wild and the National Hockey League for The Athletic. He has covered the NHL since 1995 (Florida Panthers) and the Wild since 2005, previously for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel and Minneapolis Star Tribune. Michael is a five-time Minnesota Sportswriter of the Year and in 2017 was named the inaugural Red Fisher Award winner as best beat writer in the NHL. Michael can be seen on NHL Network; and heard

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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NORTH STATE JOURNAL

Hurricanes listless in 5-0 Game 2 loss to Panthers | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin skates by as the Panthers celebrate a goal during Florida's 5-0 win in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final Thursday in Raleigh. (Karl DeBlaker / AP Photo)

RALEIGH — A disastrous opening 20 minutes sank the Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final. The question is whether they can recover after losing the opening two games at home to the Panthers with the next two set for South Florida.

Florida scored off an Andrei Svechnikov turnover in the opening minutes into the game, converted on another miscue by the Carolina winger just past the midway point of the opening period and then closed the frame with a power play goal while he was in the penalty box en route to a 5-0 win Thursday at Lenovo Center.

"That was pretty much an ass-whooping all the way through the lineup," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said.

It was a disastrous turn for the Hurricanes, who have shrugged and laughed off questions about the team's futility in the third round of the playoffs yet lost their 14th straight conference final game since 2009.

"We've got to just — it's not throwing this game away, but we've got to learn from it, what doesn't work, and give yourself a chance," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

Things started bad and got worse for the home team.

Svechnikov's blind backhand up the left boards in the defensive zone was stolen by Panthers winger Matthew Tkachuk, who found Gustav Forsling at the top of the left circle. The Florida defenseman curled to the slot and fired a shot past Frederik Andersen (12 saves) to give the defending champions a 1-0 lead just 77 seconds into the game.

After Niko Mikkola held Svechnikov's clearing attempt at the right boards, and the Florida defenseman worked the puck behind the Carolina net to Carter Verhaeghe. Verhaeghe circled to Andersen's left and threw the puck in front, and Tkachuk banged it in to make it 2-0 at 11:41.

"I made the couple turnovers in our D zone, and they scored," Svechnikov said. "So my mistake, my mistake totally. And, you know, I can't do anything right now, so I've got to move on and think positively."

Then, with Svechnikov in the box for roughing Tkachuk, Sam Bennett redirected a Verhaeghe point shot at 15:50 to give the Panthers a 3-0 lead heading into the first intermission.

"He had a tough night," Brind'Amour said of Svechnikov. "We know he's always trying, but you've got to be within the way we need to, be on the same page. He was on his own page tonight a little bit, and it didn't work."

Florida's three-goal lead drained the energy of the Lenovo Center crowd and had the Hurricanes' players and coaches befuddled at the team's unrecognizable effort.

"I think we came out with the right intentions, but they were trying to do too much, and then we're not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us," Brind'Amour said. "I didn't know what I was watching in the first period, and that didn't go well."

Sebastian Aho appeared to score in the opening minute of the second period to give Carolina life, but Florida challenged for offside. It was determined that Hurricanes defenseman Brent Burns' stick check at the blue line led to Tkachuk losing control to Aho in the slot of the Florida zone, and the goal was overturned.

Not that it would have mattered much. Bennett scored his second of the game in the final minute of the second period to extend the lead to 4-0, and the Hurricanes had just seven shots on goal in the game's first 40 minutes.

"I think our M.O. has always been shoot first, ask questions later, and we weren't doing that tonight," Staal said. "We didn't create enough chaos — or really anything."

That was also when Andersen — who allowed four goals on 16 shots and has a .750 save percentage in the series — saw his night end. Pyotr Kochetkov (4 saves), playing for the first time since Game 5 of the first round series against New Jersey on April 29, came on in relief.

"It wouldn't have mattered who we had in net tonight. It wasn't on him," Brind'Amour said of Andersen.

The Panthers added one more goal for good measure, again victimizing Carolina's league-best penalty kill.

Aleksander Barkov's redirection goal in the third period extended the lead to 5-0, making the Panthers 2 for 2 on the night with the man advantage and 4 for 5 in the series' first two games.

"We've got to find a way to kill them," Staal said. "Maybe getting in lanes, change it up, I'm not sure. But it's got to be an important thing that we focus on here, and we'll look it over and try to make some changes and get some more kills."

There's plenty more for the Hurricanes to figure out before Game 3 on Saturday in Sunrise.

"It takes a little greasy road win to get us going," Staal said. "It's just going to have to start next game."

Notes: Hurricanes defenseman Jalen Chatfield took warmups but missed his third consecutive game with an undisclosed injury. … Florida forward Sam Reinhart left the game in the first period after a hit by Aho and did not return. Panthers coach Paul Maurice said he would be checked out Friday. … Carolina's Sean Walker and Seth Jarvis both left the game briefly after taking hits but later returned. … Carolina center Jesperi Kotkaniemi was scratched in favor of Mark Jankowski.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

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'Nothing good': Panthers quiet Hurricanes, crowd in dominant Game 2 victory

Brian Murphy, Louis Fernandez Jr.

By Brian Murphy, WRAL News

Florida Panthers 5

Carolina Hurricanes 0

Final

Raleigh, N.C. — The loudest house in the NHL was silenced and turned against its own Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday, and the team now faces a difficult task two games into the Eastern Conference Final.

The series is fast becoming a coronation of the Florida Panthers, winners of the last two conference finals, at the expense of the Hurricanes. Florida dominated the Hurricanes 5-0 in Raleigh in Game 2, taking a 2-0 lead in the best-of-seven series and sapping all of the energy from the Lenovo Center crowd.

Carolina has not led for one second of the series, and it feels worse than that. A "whooping" is how captain Jordan Staal described it.

"There was nothing good on this game for us," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said after the loss. "We're going to have to learn from it, but everybody has to be better."

Florida took the lead less than 80 seconds into Game 2 and the Canes never really came close to scoring. The offensive effort was so poor that fans began chanting “shoot the puck, shoot the puck” at times in the second period. They booed the home team at times.

Carolina, known for its volume of shots, had just seven shots on goal through two periods and 17 in the game. It is the fewest shots for the Hurricanes in any game since 2014 and the fewest for them in a playoff game since the 2006 Stanley Cup Final.

"That's just not our game, right?" Carolina forward Taylor Hall said. "That's just not how we play. We generate offense by shooting pucks and getting them back, and then we draw a penalty, we get a rebound, we generate momentum and [offensive] zone face-offs by doing that. We just weren't able to do it. We had chances to shoot and we didn't. I think we're all a little bit at a loss."

The Hurricanes led the NHL with 31 home victories this season and were 5-0 at home through two rounds of these playoffs. But the Panthers, reigning Stanley Cup champs, outclassed Carolina in Game 2. Florida has outscored the Hurricanes 10-2 through two games, and Carolina pulled goaltender Frederik Anderson after two periods.

Andersen had been spectacular through two rounds, but he has allowed nine goals in five periods against Florida. Andersen entered the series with a 1.36 goals against average in the postseason. Florida scored three goals on five shots on goal in the first period. The Hurricanes pulled Andersen for the third period and replaced him with backup Pyotr Kochetkov.

"It wouldn't have mattered who we had in the net tonight," Brind'Amour said. "It wasn't on him."

Early in the first, Andrei Svechnikov turned the puck over in the Hurricanes' zone, leading to a goal by Gustav Forsling off a pass from Matthew Tkachuk. It was Forsling's first goal of the playoffs, and a poor start for Carolina.

Later in the period, the Panthers kept the puck in the Carolina zone, ending up with a 2-on-1 in front of the net. Tkachuk got enough of Carter Verhaeghe's pass across the crease to score past Carolina goaltender Frederik Andersen for a 2-0 lead.

Florida scored on the game's first power play in the final minutes of the first period. Svechnikov was called for roughing on Tkachuk to give Florida the man advantage. Carolina had its best chance of the game shorthanded, but Florida goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky stopped Jordan Martinook. Later in the power play, Sam Bennett deflected a Verhaeghe shot past Andersen.

"He had a tough night," Brind'Amour said of Svechnikov. "We know he's trying but you got to it within the way we need to, be on the same page. He was on his own page tonight a little bit. Didn't work."

Said Svechnikov: "Tough. No question about it. It happens sometimes. Just got to stay controlled and stay positive. Unfortunately, first period I didn't do it."

The Panthers added a fourth goal late in the second period when Bennett jammed another one home, and a fifth on the power play by Aleksander Barkov in the third period.

"We didn't play up to our capabilities in those first two games," Hall said. "And, obviously, the start of the games were what put us in holes. They're a very good team. They

play hard, they play together. They do a lot of things well, all around the ice, so it's going to be difficult for us, but we can't really evaluate much until we stay that we played close to our best."

Carolina has now lost 14 straight Eastern Conference Final games, dating back four series. The Hurricanes have lost six straight ECF games to the Panthers, including a sweep in 2023.

Injuries may become a factor as well for Carolina.

Defenseman Sean Walker missed about 11 minutes in the second period and didn't play at all in the final period. Forward Seth Jarvis had just one shift in the final in the final 16 minutes of the game.

Brind'Amour said he didn't have an update on either player.

The Hurricanes were also without defenseman Jalen Chatfield for the third consecutive game, a big loss. Chatfield was a last-minute scratch after participating in warm-ups. Mark Jankowski replaced Jesperi Kotkaniemi in the lineup for Game 2.

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Florida Panthers schedule

Game 1: Florida 5, Carolina 2

Game 2: Florida 5, Carolina 0

Game 3: Carolina at Florida, Saturday, May 24, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 4: Carolina at Florida, Monday, May 26, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 5: Florida at Carolina (if necessary), Wednesday, May 28, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 6: Carolina at Florida (if necessary), Friday, May 30, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 7: Florida at Carolina (if necessary), Sunday, June 1, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Postgame show: After each playoff game, WRAL's Chris Lea and Pat Welter will break down the biggest moments with insider analysis from former NHL pro Shane Willis. Tune into WRAL at 11:25 p.m. for postgame coverage.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Recap: Cats Blank Canes In Game 2

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Carolina trails 2-0 as series shifts to Sunrise

© Josh Lavallee / Carolina Hurricanes

By Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Hurricanes.com

May 22, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes fell behind early and couldn't recover from there, ultimately falling 5-0 to the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the 2025 Eastern Conference Final.

GAME SUMMARY | BOX SCORE | PLAYOFF TICKETS | PLAYOFF HUB

As they were on Tuesday, the Canes were stuck "chasing the game" from the first period onward. A Florida goal just 1:17 into the contest dulled the early buzz in the building, and two more in the back half of the frame put the home club in a three-goal hole through just 20 minutes.

The tough luck continued into period two, as Sebastian Aho's would-be goal 51 seconds in was ruled out upon review due to the play being offside in the build-up. Adding insult to injury, Florida made it 4-0 in the final minute of the frame on Sam Bennett's second of the night, and Aleksander Barkov tacked on another in the third to seal the Panthers' win.

Frederik Andersen turned aside 12 of 16 shots in the first 40 minutes, before Pyotr Kochetkov made three saves on four shots in the third.

FLA at CAR | Recap

Stats & Standouts

Although he took pre-game warmup, defenseman Jalen Chatfield missed a third consecutive game due to an undisclosed injury. Scott Morrow remained in the lineup for a second straight game, skating 10:25 and registering one blocked shot.

The loss marked Carolina's first consecutive defeats during the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs. The Canes were 2-0 following a loss entering the night.

The Hurricanes were shut out in the playoffs for the first time in exactly two years. Their last such showing came in Game 3 of the 2023 Eastern Conference Final, when they fell 1-0 to the Florida Panthers.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour offering his thoughts on the loss...

“Obviously, we’ve got to just figure out how to win a period. I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much and then we’re not doing the things as a team that normally help us. I didn’t know what I was watching in the period first and that didn’t go well. The margin here is so tight. We’re not going to beat this time if we’re not on the same page. And tonight, for whatever the reason, like I said [we weren’t]. Intentions were good, everyone’s trying, ‘okay, I’m going to do this,' but that’s not how we do it and it just backfired.”

Jordan Staal on if there’s anything to take away from this game…

“No, not really. It was pretty much an ass-whooping, all the way through the lineup. Goaltender to forwards, we’ve just got to be better. I don't know what we were expecting tonight. Especially the start, it just wasn’t good enough. They came at us right away and got a couple quick ones. We got behind and it kind of got worse, to be honest.”

Taylor Hall on what gives the team belief that they can play their game against the Panthers...

“They just went seven games against the Leafs, right? They’re not a perfect hockey team. We know that there’s areas to exploit, like any team. They’re exploiting our weaknesses, obviously. We have to play our game. And if we lose doing that, then sure, but I don’t know the expression, you’ve got to dance with the girl you brought. You’ve got to play your game.”

Andrei Svechnikov on the team's confidence after Game 2...

“[We have] good confidence. It’s 2-0, still, you know? This is nothing. We’ve got to still think positive, go to Florida and go shift-by-shift.”

Rod Brind'Amour speaks on tonight's 5-0 loss to the Florida Panthers.

What's Next?

The Canes are scheduled to practice and fly to Florida on Friday before squaring off with the Cats at Amerant Bank Arena on Saturday.

Next Game: Saturday, May 24 | ECF, Game 3 at Florida | 8:00 p.m. ET

Next Home Game (if necessary): Wednesday, May 28 | ECF, Game 5 vs. Florida | 8:00 p.m. ET | Tickets | Parking

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Panthers shut out Hurricanes in Game 2, extend lead in Eastern Final

By: Kurt Dusterberg

Bennett, Verhaeghe each has 3 points; Andersen pulled for Carolina

Panthers at Hurricanes | Recap | ECF, Game 2

By Kurt Dusterberg

NHL.com Independent Correspondent

12:47 AM

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Sam Bennett and Carter Verhaeghe each had three points, and Sergei Bobrovsky made 17 saves for the Florida Panthers in a 5-0 win against the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at Lenovo Center on Thursday.

The shutout was Bobrovsky's third of the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the Panthers, who lead the best-of-7 series 2-0. Game 3 will be in Sunrise, Florida, on Saturday (8 p.m. ET; MAX, truTV, TNT, SN, TVAS, CBC).

Bennett had two goals and an assist, and Verhaeghe had three assists for the Panthers, who are the No. 3 seed from the Atlantic Division. Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, and Aaron Ekblad and Evan Rodrigues each had two assists.

“It might have been natural to take a little bit to get going tonight, and it was the exact opposite,” Tkachuk said. “It was an unreal start for us. That’s just a [heck] of a road trip.”

FLA@CAR, Gm2: Bobrovsky earns his sixth NHL playoff shutout

Florida forward Sam Reinhart left the game after the first period with a lower-body injury.

"We'll get him looked at tomorrow," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said. "So, Saturday I'll have something (an update) for you."

Frederik Andersen allowed four goals on 16 shots before being pulled for the Hurricanes, who are the No. 2 seed from the Metropolitan Division. Pyotr Kochetkov made four saves in the third period.

Carolina has now lost 14 straight games in the Eastern Conference Final (swept in past three appearances).

“I don’t know what I was watching in the first period. That didn’t go well,” Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “The margin here is tight, you’re not going to beat this team when we’re not on the same page. I think the intentions were good, everyone was trying ... but it’s not how we do it and it just backfired.”

FLA@CAR, Gm2: Forsling snaps home goal early in opening period

Florida took a 1-0 lead at 1:17 of the first period. Tkachuk intercepted Andrei Svechnikov’s pass up the boards in Carolina's defensive zone and quickly fed Gustav Forsling, who curled out between the circles and scored with a snap shot over Andersen’s left pad.

“[Forsling’s] goal was huge to start the period,” Panthers forward A.J. Greer said. “Not being able to just settle and become comfortable there, that’s huge. They’re a good team and these are hard games. I know the scores are a little lopsided, but these are hard, hard games. These are grinding games. So, to be able to do that for 60 minutes after getting a lead, that says a lot about a team.”

Tkachuk made it 2-0 at 11:41. Verhaeghe brought the puck out from behind the net and passed across the crease to Tkachuk for a tap-in at the left post.

Bennett extended the lead to 3-0 at 15:50 of the first, deflecting Verhaeghe’s shot from the edge of the left circle for a power-play goal.

FLA@CAR, Gm2: Bennett tips in PPG to add to Panthers' lead

The goal came 20 seconds after Bobrovsky made one of his best saves of the game, denying Jordan Martinook from the slot on a short-handed rush with his right pad.

“We had a good game, a complete game again,” Bobrovsky said. “We skated, we worked hard, we were relentless. The group of guys are outstanding. It’s a privilege to be the goalie for this team.”

Bennett scored his second of the game at 19:21 of the second period to make it 4-0. Andersen stopped Verhaeghe's initial wraparound attempt, but Bennett buried the rebound at the right post.

"That's playoff hockey," Bennett said. "There's going to be a lot more greasy goals, banging away at the net, throwing pucks at the net. They're not all going to be pretty, especially in the playoffs. We'll take them however we can get them."

FLA@CAR, Gm2: Barkov extends Panthers' lead with PPG in 3rd period

Aleksander Barkov made it 5-0 at 13:49 of the third period, redirecting Ekblad's wrist shot from the right point past Kochetkov for a power-play goal.

"We didn't play up to our capability in the first two games," Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said. "Obviously, the start of the games is what put us in holes. They do a lot of things well all around the ice, so it's going to be difficult for us, but we can't really evaluate much until we can say we've played close to our best."

NOTES: Forsling is the seventh Panthers defenseman to score a goal this postseason, which is tied for the most by a team in a playoff year in NHL history. ... Hurricanes defenseman Jalen Chatfield participated in warmups but missed his third straight game with an undisclosed injury. Scott Morrow took his spot for the second straight game. ... Hurricanes forward Mark Jankowski replaced Jesperi Kotkaniemi in the lineup after missing the previous five games with an undisclosed injury. Jankowski had one shot on goal in 12:14 of ice time.

Reinhart leaves Game 2 for Florida with lower-body injury

By: Dan Rosen

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Sam Reinhart sustained a lower-body injury for the Florida Panthers in a 5-0 win against the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at Lenovo Center on Thursday.

"We'll get him looked at tomorrow," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said. "So, Saturday I'll have something (an update) for you."

While carrying the puck into the offensive zone on a power play, Reinhart took the brunt of an open-ice hip check from Hurricanes forward Sebastian Aho at 14:49 of the first period. He went rolling into the boards and came back to the bench wincing in pain.

It appeared that he was favoring his left hip or leg.

Reinhart returned for one 12-second shift before the first period ended but did not come back out for the start of the second.

He played 5:37 in eight shifts in the first period.

Reinhart has 11 points (four goals, seven assists) in 14 games in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. He had 81 points (39 goals, 42 assists) in 79 regular-season games.

Hurricanes defenseman Sean Walker did not return for the third period after taking a big open-ice hit from Panthers forward A.J. Greer in the second period. Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said he had no update on Walker.

In addition, Carolina forward Seth Jarvis didn't play the last 8:05 of the game. He went to the Hurricanes dressing room earlier in the third period after taking another big hit from Panthers defenseman Niko Mikkola.

Brind'Amour also said he had no update on Jarvis.

"I haven't even seen those guys, so we'll see," Brind'Amour said.

Carolina defenseman Jalen Chatfield also missed his third consecutive game with an undisclosed injury. Chatfield skated in pregame warmups and took rushes with regular defense partner Dmitry Orlov, but Brind'Amour said he knew after warmups that Chatfield wasn't going to play.

Rookie defenseman Scott Morrow played his second straight game in Chatfield's place.

Instant analysis: Hurricanes vs. Panthers, Game 2

By: Tom Gulitti

Sam Bennett had two goals and an assist, Sergei Bobrovsky made 17 saves, and the Florida Panthers suffocated the Carolina Hurricanes defensively in a 5-0 win in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Thursday.

Bobrovsky's shutout was his League-leading third of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, which is also a Panthers record for the most in a playoff year.

Following a 5-2 win in Game 1 on Tuesday, Florida leads 2-0 in the best-of-7 series and is two wins away from reaching the Stanley Cup Final for the third consecutive season. The Panthers defeated the Edmonton Oilers in the Cup Final last season after losing to the Vegas Golden Knights in the 2023 Cup Final.

On the negative side for Florida, forward Sam Reinhart did not play the last two periods after sustaining a lower-body injury on a hit from Sebastian Aho.

The Panthers scored on three of their first five shots to jump out to a 3-0 lead in the first period. Gustav Forsling's goal that opened the scoring 1:17 into the game was Florida's NHL-leading 13th from a defenseman in the playoffs. Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, and Carter Verhaeghe had three assists for the Panthers, who improved to 7-2 on the road in the playoffs.

Aaron Ekblad and Evan Rodrigues each had two assists.

The Hurricanes entered the night averaging 33.2 shots on goal in the playoffs but managed only seven in the first two periods.

Frederik Andersen allowed four goals on 16 shots for the Hurricanes before being replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov (four saves) to begin the third period.

Teams that take a 2-0 lead in a best-of-7 series are 359-58 (.861) all-time, including 6-2 in the 2025 playoffs. Florida is 6-0 when winning the first two games of a best-of-7 series, including 3-0 when the series begins on the road.

What we learned: After the Panthers swept the Hurricanes in the 2023 Eastern Conference Final by winning four one-goal games, including two that went to overtime, some were expecting another tight series. However, the defending Stanley Cup champions have been the superior team through the first two games. Florida has had no problems solving Andersen, who has allowed nine goals on 36 shots in the first two games after giving up just six goals on 95 shots in five games in the second round against the Washington Capitals. Bobrovsky had a much easier night following a 31-save performance in Game 1, but he has given the Panthers a big advantage in net. He has allowed two goals in the first two games and just six in his past six games overall. Florida has also scored four goals on the man-advantage in the first two games (4-for-5) after Carolina yielded just two power-play goals in the first two rounds.

What this means for the Panthers: Florida heads home in a commanding position, two wins from another trip to the Cup Final. Now, the Panthers want to bring their road game back to Amerant Bank Arena. As dominant as they have been on the road in the playoffs, outscoring their opponents 22-4 in their past four road games (all wins), they have been more vulnerable at home, going 3-2.

What this means for the Hurricanes: They have to clear their minds and forget that they've lost 14 straight games in the conference final: four to the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2009, four to the Boston Bruins in 2019, and six straight to the Panthers. After having some positives to point to in Game 1, Carolina had few in Game 2, so it needs to find a way to start strong on the road, where it is 3-2 this postseason, and get a lead. The Hurricanes have been chasing the Panthers since the first period of Game 1.

Key moment: With the Panthers leading 2-0 and on the power play with 4:30 remaining in the first period, the Hurricanes had a chance to get back in the game on a short-handed rush. However, Bobrovsky made a right pad save on Jordan Martinook's shot from the slot, and Florida went down the ice and increased its lead to 3-0 on a deflection from Bennett 20 seconds later.

Unsung player of the game: Fourth-line forward Jonah Gadjovich had six of Florida's 56 hits and blocked two shots, making the most of his 9:54 of ice time.

What's next: The series shifts to Amerant Bank Arena in Sunrise, Florida, for Game 3 on Saturday (8 p.m. ET; MAX, truTV, TNT, SN, TVAS, CBC) and Game 4 on Monday.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hurricanes' Hall, Panthers' Jones reunite in Eastern final after trades from rebuilding Blackhawks | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

Updated 11:15 AM EDT, May 22, 2025

Taylor Hall and Seth Jones started the 2025 calendar year as teammates on a Chicago Blackhawks team mired in a multiyear rebuild and sitting at the bottom of the NHL standings.

Now they're squaring off for a trip to the Stanley Cup Final.

The Carolina Hurricanes traded for Hall in January, while the Florida Panthers acquired Jones ahead of the March trade deadline. Their new teams — Hall with a perennial playoff team, Jones with the reigning Cup champion — have taken them on a postseason run that now includes a reunion in the Eastern Conference final with Game 2 on Thursday night on Hall's home ice.

"It's not something that we ever talked about really," Hall said. I didn't know if he'd be traded. I knew I would probably get dealt at some point. But just where we were — being at the bottom of the standings, being on a team, an organization, that the pressure to win wasn't really there overall — to where we are now, speaking for him, I'm sure he's excited. And so am I."

Hall, a 33-year-old forward, is in his 15th NHL season as a former No. 1 overall draft pick (2010) and 2018 Hart Trophy winner as league MVP. Jones, a 30-year-old defenseman, is in his 12th NHL season as a past all-star and No. 4 overall draft pick in 2013.

Before this year, Hall and Jones had each won just two postseason series, one being shortened 2020 qualifier series amid the pandemic. They've matched that now with Carolina and Florida winning two rounds to set up this rematch of the 2023 conference final won by the Panthers.

It's quite a turn from months earlier with the Blackhawks, who have just one playoff appearance (2020) in eight seasons.

From rebuilding to Cup chasing

Chicago acquired Jones from Columbus in July 2021, then acquired Hall from Boston in June 2023 amid what has become a nadir for an Original Six franchise. From the 2021-22 through the 2023-24 seasons, Chicago ranked last among 32 NHL teams in points (179 points) and points percentage (.364), next to last in wins (77 out of 246 games, ahead of only San Jose's 73) and last in goals scored (593), according to Sportradar.

As New Year's Day arrived this year, Chicago was last in the league with 26 points and .342 points percentage amid a rebuild centered around 2023 No. 1 overall pick Connor Bedard. That made both Hall and Jones were appealing to contenders seeking help.

"It was just a timeline of that organization, and nothing against them, I think they're going to be very successful in the future," Jones said. "And they wanted to build from the ground up, and there's nothing against that, nothing wrong with that. But in the case of me and Taylor, we were obviously pretty close there in Chicago, kind of in the same situation.

"So we just wanted to give ourselves an opportunity to play on a contending team, to win a Cup, just to have that feeling of playing important games."

Hall to Carolina

Hall joined Carolina in the January blockbuster that brought Mikko Rantanen to Raleigh for a brief stay that ended at the deadline. He was making $6 million with free-agency looming, but signed a three-year, $9.5 million extension through 2027-28 in April.

A fixture on the Hurricanes' second line, Hall had two goals and four assists in 11 postseason games. His first goal started Carolina's comeback from a 3-0 deficit to win the clinching Game 5 in the first round against New Jersey. His second was a third-period breakaway in a Game 4 win against conference top seed Washington in Round 2.

"Winning it all is amazing, but it's a ride too," said Carolina captain Jordan Staal, a Cup winner in 2009 in Pittsburgh. "It's so enjoyable to just go day-to-day battling with your buddies. there's something about that that gives me chills every time I talk about it and gets you excited. I'm sure Hallsy's feeling that and excited about the future here and how it's all going to play out."

Jones to Florida

The Panthers acquired Jones, who is under contract through 2030, in March for another title push. Through the series opener, he had three goals and three assists in the postseason while joining Gustav Forsling at plus-7 to lead Florida defensemen.

Jones came through with a key first-period play in Tuesday's 5-2 win, poking away Shayne Gostisbehere's pass to deny Carolina a prime chance. It was a glimpse of how general manager Bill Zito's work paying off in Florida's third straight conference-final appearance.

"The game actually simplifies in the playoffs more than it expands," coach Paul Maurice said. "Teams get to the bare bones of what they do and they just do it over and over again. So he's getting cleaner reps and reads on the way up the ice, and I think that's helped him an awful lot."

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Hurricanes' Game 2 loss to Panthers offers an unwelcome repeat of conference-final history from '23 | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

Updated 12:52 AM EDT, May 23, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — The frustration bubbled over late in the second period, after the Carolina Hurricanes' latest rush failed to get off even a shot as they trailed big against the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers.

"Shoot the puck! Shoot the puck!" the chants began, a departure for a venue known for rowdy chaotic zeal building a significant home-ice advantage.

The Hurricanes hadn't forgotten being swept out of the Eastern Conference final two years ago by the Panthers in four one-goal losses. This was supposed to be different. Instead, the Hurricanes are right back in a dire situation — only seemingly worse this time — against the Panthers after losing the first two conference-final games at home.

And that has only turned a losing streak that has was once merely a curious footnote into a growing weight with each passing game.

"I think we're all a little bit at a loss," Carolina forward Taylor Hall said.

The 5-0 loss in Game 2 marked Carolina's 14th straight loss in a conference final, going back to sweeps in 2009, 2019 and the '23 round with the Panthers. The past 10 of those losses have come during this current iteration that has won at least one postseason series for seven straight seasons. The first four of those came in '19 to favored Boston, as a young team happy to make it back to the postseason after missing the playoffs for nine straight years.

The past six though? All against the Panthers, with measuring-stick margins getting bigger along with the potential for self-doubt with the series shifting south for Games 3 and 4.

"This game is mental," Carolina captain Jordan Staal said. "I mean, it's all about the brain and your focus and the thoughts that can creep in. It's got to be the thoughts we've been thinking all year, and that's playing our game and focusing on our shifts and our battles and doing what we do.

"When you let those thoughts like that come in, it never looks good. I think we've got to believe in the group and what we have and what we've done all year, and go steal one in Game 3."

Does he worry those types of thoughts could creep into the locker room?

"No, I think tonight was obviously not great," Staal said, "but we're going to have to wash it and move on and own a crappy game."

Carolina's last win in a conference final was Game 7 in 2006 against Buffalo on the way to the franchise's lone Cup title, with Rod Brind'Amour being the captain of that team and scoring the winning third-period goal against the Sabres. Now he's coaching a team struggling for answers — any, really — after a 5-2 loss in Game 1 on Tuesday and then a Game 2 that got away from them about the time Florida's Gustav Forsling scored 77 seconds after the puck drop.

"Obviously, we've got to just figure out how to win a period," Brind'Amour said.

"We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. And tonight for whatever the reason — I think the intentions were good, everyone's trying, 'OK, I'm going to do this.' But that's not how we do it. And it just backfired."

The formula for Carolina through two five-game playoff series, including against the conference's top-seeded Washington Capitals, had been as straightforward as always. Use an aggressive forecheck to pressure opponents. Get the puck into the offensive zone and keep it there. Fire shots on nets, chase any loose rebounds and keep pressing the attack.

And oh yes, rely on a penalty kill that had been lights-out good in the playoffs.

Yet the Panthers have carried the action with a deep and tested lineup, jumping to 2-0 and 3-0 first-period leads in the past two games to play confidently from ahead. They've scored four times on the power play, double the total Carolina allowed as the postseason's best kill (28 of 30 with one short-handed goal) entering this series rematch.

And in this one, Carolina managed just three first-period shots on goal and just seven through two periods before finishing with 17 — its lowest total in any regular-season or postseason game since at least the start of the 2020-21 season, according to Sportradar.

By the end of the game, there was another meager chant trying to take form amid the final minutes of the loss.

"Canes in six! Canes in six!" a few fans yelled, trying to keep faith, in a chant that quickly faded.

Right now, anyway, the goal is to just get one.

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AP NHL playoffs: https://apnews.com/hub/stanley-cup and https://apnews.com/hub/nhl

Bennett, Verhaeghe help Panthers roll past Hurricanes 5-0, take 2-0 lead in Eastern final | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

Updated 11:52 PM EDT, May 22, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — The defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers are rolling. The Carolina Hurricanes are reeling.

Sam Bennett scored one of his two goals in Florida's three-goal first period, Sergei Bobrovsky made 17 saves and the

Panthers beat the Hurricanes 5-0 on Thursday night to take a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference final.

Gustav Forsling and Matthew Tkachuk also scored in another tone-setting opening 20 minutes for the Panthers, while Carter Verhaeghe had three assists.

“It might have been natural for us to take a little bit to get going tonight, and it was the exact opposite,” said Tkachuk, whose putaway off the feed from Verhaeghe at the crease marked his first goal since Game 3 of the first round against Tampa Bay.

“It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets. Yeah, that’s just a hell of a road trip.”

Florida had already ripped home-ice advantage away Tuesday night with a 5-2 win, the opener in a rematch of the 2023 conference final swept by the Panthers with four one-goal wins. Florida only tightened its grip on the series with this one, and now heads back south to host Game 3 on Saturday night.

Bennett scored a second time by skating in to clean up an attempt at the right post in the final minute of the second period to make it 4-0, ending a long shift in Carolina’s end prolonged by Hurricanes defenseman Brent Burns being stuck on the ice after breaking his stick. Aleksander Barkov added a goal midway through the third as punctuation.

Bobrovsky had his third shutout of the playoffs this year and the sixth of his career, with Florida’s defense smothering a Hurricanes team that typically peppers the net with shots but found little daylight.

Florida has four straight road games by a combined score of 22-4, this time sending Hurricanes fans fleeing for the exits early.

“It’s fun when you’re on the road and it goes quiet,” Verhaeghe said. “It feels like we’re doing our job.”

On the other bench, the Hurricanes found themselves on the receiving end of a crushing loss by a jarringly lopsided margin. And it marked their 14th straight loss in a conference final, going back to sweeps in 2009, 2019 and the ’23 tilt with Florida.

“From my standpoint, the seat I had, Florida was on it,” Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “And you’ve got to give them credit.”

The Hurricanes managed just three first-period shots and just seven through two periods, prompting a typically rowdy home crowd to vent its frustrations with two chants of “Shoot the puck! Shoot the puck!” Carolina had a brief boost when Sebastian Aho appeared to score on a turnover in the first minute of the second period to cut the deficit to 3-1.

But Florida successfully challenged that the play was offsides. It turned out Burns’ stick-check on Tkachuk near the blue line forced the puck back into the zone and right to Aho in the slot for the finish.

By the third period, Carolina had pulled veteran Frederik Andersen from net and went with backup Pyotr Kochetkov for the final period.

It wasn’t all great news for Florida. Veteran forward Sam Reinhart was knocked from the game in the first period after taking a hit from Aho in the left leg, causing Reinhart’s knee to bend awkwardly.

Coach Paul Maurice had no immediate update on Reinhart afterward.

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AP NHL playoffs: https://apnews.com/hub/stanley-cup and https://apnews.com/hub/nhl

Panthers' Sam Reinhart exits Eastern final Game 2 against Hurricanes with injury after Aho hit | AP News

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Florida forward Sam Reinhart left the Panthers’ 5-0 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday night in the Eastern Conference final with a lower-body injury and didn’t return.

Coach Paul Maurice said Reinhart would be examined Friday, the day before the series shifts to Florida with the defending Stanley Cup champions aiming to take a 3-0 series lead.

Reinhart was shaken up late in the first period when he was hit by Carolina’s Sebastian Aho as Reinhart carried the puck into the offensive zone. Aho hit Reinhart near the left knee, with the leg bending awkwardly. Reinhart made his way back to the bench and was grimacing in pain before heading to the locker room.

Reinhart’s injury came as the reigning Stanley Cup champion Panthers had raced to a 3-0 first-period lead in Game 2 after winning 5-2 on Tuesday night in the series opener.

On the Carolina side, defenseman Jalen Chatfield sat out for the third straight missed game going back to the Game 5 finale in the second-round series against the Washington Capitals. The Hurricanes also saw defenseman Sean Walker and forward Seth Jarvis apparently shaken up during the course of the lopsided loss.

Coach Rod Brind’Amour had said Chatfield is considered day to day and wants to play. He has been skating with the team, including before Thursday night’s game but remained a scratch. The Hurricanes tweaked the lineup in response to the Game 1 loss, moving forward Mark Jankowski into the lineup instead of Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

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AP NHL playoffs: https://apnews.com/hub/stanley-cup and https://apnews.com/hub/nhl

CAROLINA HURRICANES
NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

2025 Stanley Cup playoffs: Latest championship, Conn Smythe odds

P.K. Subban breaks down what went wrong for the Oilers in the third period when the Stars scored five straight goals. (1:20)

ESPN

May 23, 2025, 07:17 AM ET

Clear favorites in both the Eastern and Western Conferences have taken shape as the Florida Panthers and Dallas Stars have both seen their odds shorten after impressive starts to their respective series.

On Thursday night, the defending-champion Panthers won Game 2 against the Carolina Hurricanes to the tune of a 5-0 win. It was another dominating performance for the current favorite to once again raise Lord Stanley's Cup. Florida looks to go up 3-0 in the series on Saturday night.

The Dallas Stars reeled off five unanswered goals to climb out of a 3-1 deficit after the second period to take Game 1 against the Edmonton Oilers. The Stars are favored to win the West, and forward Mikko Rantanen is currently the Conn Smythe Trophy favorite ahead of Connor McDavid and Sergei Bobrovsky.

You can see the odds for every team to win the championship and conference, as well as the top players in the Conn Smythe Trophy race below.

All odds accurate as of publish time. For more, go to ESPN BET.

Odds to win conference, Stanley Cup

Team

Cup

Conference

Florida Panthers

+120

-700

Dallas Stars

+200

-190

Edmonton Oilers

+350

+160

Carolina Hurricanes

11-1

+425

Odds to win Conn Smythe Trophy

The Conn Smythe is awarded to the player deemed to have been the most valuable to his team throughout the playoffs. Players listed with 100-1 odds or better. More odds available at ESPN BET..

Mikko Rantanen, Stars: +300

Sergei Bobrovsky, Panthers: +360

Connor McDavid, Oilers: +450

Frederik Andersen, Hurricanes: +800

Jake Oettinger, Stars: +900

Aleksander Barkov, Panthers: 10-1

Leon Draisaitl, Oilers: 12-1

Sam Reinhart, Panthers: 15-1

Sam Bennett, Panthers: 15-1

Brad Marchand, Panthers: 25-1

Matthew Tkachuk, Panthers: 25-1

Carter Verhaeghe, Panthers: 25-1

Andrei Svechnikov, Hurricanes: 30-1

Sebastian Aho, Hurricanes: 30-1

Seth Jarvis, Hurricanes: 40-1

Jaccob Slavin, Hurricanes: 60-1

Roope Hintz, Stars: 75-1

Thomas Harley, Stars: 75-1

Tyler Seguin, Stars: 75-1

Eetu Luostarinen, Panthers: 100-1

Wyatt Johnston, Stars: 100-1

Hurricanes 'at a loss' down 2-0 in Eastern Conference Final - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

Greg WyshynskiMay 23, 2025, 12:41 AM ET

Close

Greg Wyshynski is ESPN's senior NHL writer.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. -- The Carolina Hurricanes generate more shot attempts than any team in the NHL. So when their fans began chanting "shoot the puck!" during the second period of their 5-0 defeat in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference finals Thursday night, it felt both surreal and indicative of how the Florida Panthers had absolutely dominated them to earn a 2-0 series lead.

"Tonight was not great. We're going to have to own a crappy game," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said.

After getting 33 shots on goalie Sergei Bobrovsky in Game 1, the Hurricanes generated only 17 shots, tied for third fewest in the franchise's Stanley Cup playoff history. They had 78 shot attempts in Game 1. In Game 2, they generated only 53.

Though a ferocious Florida forecheck had a role in that shot suppression, Carolina winger Taylor Hall acknowledged that the Panthers injected some hesitancy in the Hurricanes' offensive attack.

"We had chances to shoot. And we didn't. I think we're all a little bit at a loss," Hall said. "When we look up at the shot clock and see [the total], that's just not our game. That's just not how we play. We generate offense by shooting pucks and getting them back, and then we draw a penalty or get a rebound. We generate momentum by doing that. And we just weren't able to do it."

The Panthers were relentless in Game 2, taking a 3-0 lead in the first period and never looking back.

"I didn't know what I was watching in the first period. That didn't go well," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. The intentions were good. Everyone's trying. But that's not how we do it and it just backfired."

The catalyst for that first-period deficit was Carolina winger Andrei Svechnikov, their leading goal scorer in the playoffs with eight. He was antagonized by the Panthers' line of Sam Bennett, Carter Verhaeghe and Matthew Tkachuk.

The Panthers took a 1-0 lead just 1:17 into the game as the Bennett line created chaos in the attacking zone with a forecheck that forced a Svechnikov turnover. Defenseman Gustav Forsling slid into the slot and beat Frederik Andersen for his first of the playoffs.

Carolina is now 3-4 in the playoffs when it doesn't score first, after going 17-23-3 in that situation in the regular season.

That same line created Florida's second goal just over 10 minutes later. Again, the line threw the body on the forecheck. And again, it was Svechnikov coughing up the puck in his own end. Defenseman Niko Mikkola slid it behind the net to Verhaeghe, who noticed Carolina defenseman Dmitry Orlov was up the ice, creating a point-blank 2-on-1 with Tkachuk. Verhaeghe put the puck off Tkachuk's skate for the 2-0 lead. It was Tkachuk's first goal in 11 playoff games.

"It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets. That's just a hell of a road trip," Tkachuk said.

The Bennett line then made the Hurricanes lose their cool again. Tkachuk delivered a reverse hit on Svechnikov, who then checked him along the boards. Tkachuk delivered a cross-check to his back. Svechnikov retaliated near the benches and was whistled for roughing. Just like in Game 1 when Sebastian Aho earned a roughing minor in retaliation to an Anton Lundell cross-check, the Panthers made Carolina pay with a Bennett power-play goal to make it 3-0.

Brind'Amour said before Game 2 that all it takes is one lapse in judgment caused by the Panthers' agitation to hurt the Hurricanes. Svechnikov had that lapse in Game 2.

"He had a tough night. He's trying, but you've got to be on the same page, and he was on his own page. It didn't work," Brind'Amour said of Svechnikov.

Bennett scored again with less than a minute to go in the second period, his ninth of the postseason. Aleksander Barkov's power-play goal in the third period -- scored against Pyotr Kochetkov, who replaced Andersen -- completed the rout.

Staal said the challenge for Carolina is to not have negative thoughts about its chances of beating Florida enter its process.

"This game is mental. It's all about the brain and your focus and the thoughts that can creep in," Staal said. "When you let those thoughts like that come in, it never looks good. I think we've got to believe in the group and what we have and what we've done all year and go steal one."

Hall said it was important to remember that the Panthers aren't invincible, despite taking the first two games in Carolina by a combined score of 10-2.

"I mean, they just went seven games against the Leafs, right? They're not a perfect hockey team," Hall said. "We know that there are areas to exploit, like any team. They're exploiting our weaknesses, obviously."

Game 3 is Saturday night in Sunrise. The Hurricanes have now lost 14 straight games in the Eastern Conference finals, the past six of them to the Panthers.

Brind'Amour said he was surprised there wasn't more urgency in his team's game, considering the circumstances.

"I didn't feel like we were that intense for the moment that we needed. I felt like we were actually a little too casual," he said.

Panthers-Hurricanes Game 2 takeaways, early look at Game 3 - ESPN

By: Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

May 22, 2025, 11:10 PM ET

There's an ancient South Florida proverb about numbers: Not one. Not two. Not three. Not four.

Opening the Eastern Conference finals with five goals in Game 1 on Tuesday showed that at least for one game the Florida Panthers could find a breakthrough against the Carolina Hurricanes. Only for Thursday to arrive and the Panthers to once again post five more goals in a 5-0 win to take a 2-0 series lead before heading back to Sunrise for Game 3.

How did both teams perform? Who are the players to watch next game, and what are the big questions facing the Hurricanes and Panthers ahead of Game 3 on Saturday?

Carolina Hurricanes

Grade: D

Say what you will about the offside goal being akin to Charlie Brown getting the football pulled out from under him by Lucy. While it's possible that the disallowed goal could have provided momentum, there were other things that suggested the Hurricanes were going to struggle.

Under Rod Brind'Amour, they've become one of the teams that consistently generates the highest number of shots per game. They entered Game 2 averaging 33.2 shots per game, yet they hadn't even cracked double digits until there was 14 minutes remaining in the third period. Natural Stat Trick's metrics showed they had two high-danger scoring chances midway through the third period, and after giving up seven goals throughout the entirety of the second round, they've allowed 10 goals in the first two games.

Or view it this way: The Panthers had more goals than the Hurricanes had high-danger scoring chances. -- Clark

Florida Panthers

Grade: A+

What more is there to say about Florida, really? The term "clinic" doesn't seem to cover it. The Panthers have done it all against Carolina in these first two games.

Thursday was another dominant performance by the reigning Stanley Cup champions in an offensive and defensive effort that requires no notes. The Panthers set a tone early with Gustav Forsling's goal just 1:17 into the game and never relented. The Hurricanes were averaging over 33 shots per night in the postseason (second most among playoff teams), and Florida limited their chances to seven shots through the first two periods alone -- while the Panthers pummeled Carolina with 16 shots and four goals in the same span. It was enough to chase Frederik Andersen from the net, when he was replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov with a four-goal deficit.

The Hurricanes' top scorers were simply no match for Florida's attack or a locked-in Sergei Bobrovsky, who, while not heavily challenged, was a match for all comers in a 16-save shutout. The way Florida is playing right now, one has to wonder how the Hurricanes can get back in this series as the teams shift down to Florida. -- Shilton

Three Stars of Game 2

Panthers go up 3-0 on Sam Bennett's power-play goal

The Panthers threaten to run away with it after Sam Bennett's power-play goal makes it 3-0 in the first period.

1. Sam Bennett

C, Panthers

He had two goals and a helper, as the Panthers dominated the Hurricanes in Game 2. This is Bennett's second career 3-plus point playoff game and second career multigoal playoff game.

2. Team defense

The Hurricanes were averaging 33.2 shots per game this postseason, second in the playoffs to the Colorado Avalanche. But the Panthers, with their efficient and suffocating defense, held Carolina to five shots in the first 30 minutes of the game. Near the end of the second period, the fans at Lenovo Center were growing tired of it and started chanting "shoot the puck" at their team. Carolina did have more shot volume in the third period, ending with 17, but nothing got past Sergei Bobrovsky.

3. Offside reviews and coaching tactics

Normally, I'm not the biggest fan of lengthy offside reviews. I wish there was a timer -- if you can't make the call in 90 seconds, then the call on the ice stands. But the Florida Panthers executed one to perfection in Game 2. Up 3-0 in the second period, the Hurricanes scored, but thinking the play was offside, the Panthers called a timeout to buy more time to see every angle available, eventually calling for the challenge. It was indeed determined to be offside and the goal was taken away. -- Arda Öcal

Players to watch in Game 3

Andrei Svechnikov

F, Hurricanes

Let's start here with the Hurricanes. There's no shortage of options. Part of the reason Svechnikov is in this space is because he leads the Hurricanes in goals this postseason. The rest of it has more to do with whether the Canes can rely on a certain postseason pattern for Svechnikov holding true. After going goalless in Games 2 and 3 against the New Jersey Devils in the first round, he responded with a hat trick. He didn't score in the first two games against the Washington Capitals only to then score a goal in three straight games. Could Svechnikov respond by grabbing at least one goal in Game 3? Or are the Canes in store for more offensive struggles once they arrive in Sunrise? -- Clark

Matthew Tkachuk

LW, Panthers

The Panthers' instigator had been quiet since Florida's first-round series win over Tampa Bay, recording just five assists in eight games heading into Game 2 against Carolina. But Tkachuk looked more like himself Thursday, agitating the Hurricanes and making his physical presence felt. He also emerged early on the score sheet, registering an assist on Gustav Forsling's game-opening salvo and adding a goal -- Tkachuk's first in 10 games -- in the opening period to extend Florida's lead to 2-0. It was a testament to how commanding Tkachuk's line was with Sam Bennett (two goals and an assist) and Carter Verhaeghe (three assists) that he was able to finally appear as the Tkachuk of old. If this was indeed Tkachuk's reawakening after a slow stretch, then the Hurricanes better be well aware of Tkachuk going forward because he was as dangerous as ever at both ends of the ice in Game 2. -- Shilton

Matthew Tkachuk taps it in to pad the Panthers' lead

Matthew Tkachuk sneaks the puck past the goalie to pad the Panthers' lead against the Hurricanes.

Big questions for Game 3

What's the response to their worst playoff loss this year?

Several questions will be asked when it comes to what adjustments can be made before Game 3. Could one of them be about what the Hurricanes must do to get off to a stronger start? Allowing two first-period goals in Game 1 already presented the reality that the Panthers were going to remain aggressive. But to then give up the first goal less than two minutes into the first before giving up three in total in an opening frame that saw the Panthers record just five shots on net? That only adds to the degree of difficulty for a team that has now lost two straight playoff games after losing two postseason games in total over the first two rounds, especially when the last time the Hurricanes were down 0-2 to the Panthers in a playoff series was during the 2023 Eastern Conference finals in which they were swept. -- Clark

Will Sam Reinhart be back at full strength for the Panthers?

Florida saw one of its top skaters exit in the first period after Sebastian Aho delivered a hit that forced Reinhart out for the remainder of the game with a lower-body injury. While Florida had Game 2 well in hand even before Reinhart became unavailable, it's safe to say the Panthers are a better team when he's in the lineup. Reinhart's status going forward is significant for Florida overall. Reinhart paced the Panthers with 39 goals and 81 points in the regular season and notched 11 points in 13 postseason tilts going into Game 2. Florida must hope that Reinhart isn't just available for Game 3 (and beyond), but that he's not too banged up to continue operating at a high level. -- Shilton

Sam Bennett has 2 goals as Panthers roll past Hurricanes 5-0

play

Aleksander Barkov notches a power-play goal to give the Panthers a commanding 5-0 lead in the third period. (0:51)

ESPN News Services

May 22, 2025, 11:01 PM ET

The defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers are rolling. The Carolina Hurricanes are reeling.

Sam Bennett scored one of his two goals in Florida's three-goal first period, Sergei Bobrovsky made 17 saves, and the Panthers beat the Hurricanes 5-0 on Thursday night to take a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference finals.

Gustav Forsling and Matthew Tkachuk also scored in another tone-setting opening 20 minutes for the Panthers, while Carter Verhaeghe had three assists in the win.

"It might have been natural for us to take a little bit to get going tonight, and it was the exact opposite," said Tkachuk, whose putaway off the feed from Verhaeghe at the crease marked his first goal since Game 3 of the first round against the Tampa Bay Lightning. "It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets. Yeah, that's just a hell of a road trip."

Florida had already ripped home-ice advantage away Tuesday night with a 5-2 win, the opener in a rematch of the 2023 conference finals swept by the Panthers with four one-goal wins. Florida tightened its grip on the series with this one and now heads back south to host Game 3 on Saturday night.

Bennett scored a second time by skating in to clean up an attempt at the right post in the final minute of the second period to make it 4-0, ending a long shift in Carolina's end prolonged by Hurricanes defenseman Brent Burns being stuck on the ice after breaking his stick. Aleksander Barkov added a goal midway through the third as punctuation.

Bobrovsky had his third shutout of the playoffs this year and the sixth of his career, with Florida's defense smothering a Carolina team that typically peppers the net with shots but found little daylight.

Florida has won four straight road games by a combined score of 22-4, this time sending Hurricanes fans fleeing for the exits early.

"It's fun when you're on the road and it goes quiet," Verhaeghe said. "It feels like we're doing our job."

The Panthers' Sam Bennett reacts after scoring a goal in the second period of Thursday's win. Josh Lavallee/NHLI via Getty Images

It wasn't all great news for Florida. Veteran forward Sam Reinhart was knocked from the game in the first period after taking a hit from Sebastian Aho in the left leg, causing Reinhart's knee to bend awkwardly.

Panthers coach Paul Maurice said after the game that Reinhart would be evaluated Friday and that there would be no update on Reinhart's status until Saturday.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

SPORTSNET™

Hurricanes buckling under the pressure that Panthers embrace

By: Eric Engels

RALEIGH, N.C. — Seconds after saying he wasn't much of a thinker, Brad Marchand waxed poetic on what it takes to rise above pressure and come through in the clutch, to crave opportunity and seize it once it presents itself.

He conjured up 424 words on the subject — the Stanley Cup champion's thesis on how to be a winner.

"I think the thing that I've found as I've gone on is that pressure is made up, it's a lot of noise," Marchand started.

Had the Carolina Hurricanes listened to everything else he had to say about it, they might have looked a little different than they did in Game 2 of this series.

Instead, they looked even worse than they did in dropping Game 1, losing 5-0 and getting booed off the ice by the few fans that remained at Lenovo Center when the final buzzer sounded.

The Hurricanes were disconnected from the start of Thursday's game, they were incapable of establishing the forecheck that's been so foundational to their success, they couldn't muster enough shots, they were dispirited before 16 minutes had even gone by, and they were so apparently suffocated by the pressure of the moment.

How else do you explain the way they habitually turned gold to lead in this one?

A sample: Jordan Staal breaking through the middle of the ice, clearing the Panthers defenders out of the way and dropping the puck to Jordan Martinook in the guts of the slot, only to have Martinook turn the best scoring chance of the night into a routine save for Sergei Bobrovsky.

That was right before Sam Bennett tipped Carter Verhaeghe's shot to make it 3-0 Panthers 15:50 into the game.

It was Florida's fifth shot on net.

Gustav Forsling scored on their first, Matthew Tkachuk scored on their third because those guys are comfortable under pressure.

They made the rest of this game feel like a funeral for the Hurricanes.

It was Carolina's 14th straight loss in the Eastern Conference Final, dating back to 2009. Their sixth straight to the Panthers in Round 3, dating back to 2023. And Marchand's words from earlier in the day resonated with every passing second of it.

"Pressure is something you can embrace, or it's something you can be nervous about," said Marchand. "What I've found the more I've gone on, and even early on, is when you've worked your whole life to be put in a position to have success or to achieve something that you only ever dreamed of potentially becoming a reality in winning the Cup, that's gotta excite you to want to be a difference maker and want to be a hero. And when you get that opportunity to make a difference, it's not to get nervous under pressure of what happens if you win or if you lose. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter if you win, or you lose, there's only one team that wins. The pressure, if you let it get to you, it can affect you. But if you're excited about it, and you want to be the hero, you want to score the big goal and make the big play, and you get excited and want to embrace that, then that's when I feel like the pressure just kind of slides off and it's not something you think about."

Ahead of this game, the stakes were higher than they've been for either team this season. And yet, it never felt that way for Marchand's Panthers.

That's the value of championship experience.

When we asked Tkachuk if he still gets nervous before these games, the 2024 champ said, "Not really anymore."

"I think the most nervous I'd ever been was before Game 4 of the finals last year, in Edmonton," Tkachuk added. "But ever since then, not really a whole lot. But that's just because you know how you're going to play. If we didn't how we were going to play out there and prepare…

"We're prepared. We know how we're going to play. We know each line's going to go out there, and we try to roll over them, and sometimes it doesn't work out perfectly. But when you know your game, you shouldn't be too nervous about it. You get beat. (There are) games you get beat… We lost a bunch last year and it's not always been perfect all the time. But you just continue to do the right things. And it's natural to be a little bit nervous. But when you have a great plan and you have a great work ethic, like our team does, it shouldn't be as bad."

For the Hurricanes, who've been chasing championship experience throughout this decade, it looked terrible.

You could feel the tension on their bench from the press box, and it obviously paralyzed them on the ice.

"I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much," said coach Rod Brind'Amour. "And then we're not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us. We were just — I didn't know what I was watching in the first period, and that didn't go well. I said the other day, the margin here is tight. We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. And tonight, for whatever reason — like I said, the intentions were good, everyone's trying, 'OK, I'm gonna do this' — but that's not how we do it, and it just backfired."

By the end of it, the Hurricanes were nursing more than just bruised egos.

After getting rocked by A.J. Greer in the second minute of the second period, defenceman Sean Walker played five

more shifts and didn't return. Seth Jarvis, who got popped by Niko Mikkola, missed the last 9:20 of the game.

Brind'Amour didn't have an update on either one of them.

He also didn't know how the Hurricanes would recover from this loss, with the series shifting to Florida and the Panthers appearing unbeatable.

"We gotta just, not throw this game away, but we gotta learn from it — what doesn't work — and give yourself a chance," Brind'Amour said. "That's what we didn't do. I thought we did the other night. Obviously, same result. But clearly, you go off the script and it's not going to go well. So that's the lesson learned there."

But can the Hurricanes learn to rise above the pressure? The evidence they don't know how keeps mounting.

They talked about bearing down on their chances after creating several high-quality ones in Game 1, but they passed all of them up in Game 2.

Literally.

There was Jarvis, flying down his off-wing on a late second-period two-on-one, forcing a pass instead of shooting before Jackson Blake followed his lead and passed to the Panthers instead of shooting from four feet in front of Bobrovsky.

Hurricanes fans, who are accustomed to seeing their team shoot even when they shouldn't, started chanting "shoot the puck."

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Broadcast schedule

Bennett listened and scored his second of the game to make it 4-0 in the 40th minute of play.

The Hurricanes kept trying to search for the perfect play thereafter, with none of them apparently wanting to be the difference maker, or the hero.

As Marchand said on Thursday morning, "You're not going to win playoff hockey with that."

"When you prepare the right way and you practise the right things, those things show up in the playoffs," he concluded. "And that's what the players that I've played with and that I've learned from (do). I'm fortunate enough to follow in their footsteps and learn those things so that when you get into those so-called high-pressure situations, you just do what you're used to doing, and usually the little, simple things are what comes up in those moments."

There's been nothing simple about how the Hurricanes have handled these moments. Nothing in recent years, nothing in recent days, and if that doesn't change, their losing streak in the Conference Final will continue.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

CBS SPORTS

Panthers forward Sam Reinhart exits Game 2 after awkward hit from Hurricanes' Sebastian Aho

By: Austin Nivison

Everything was going the Florida Panthers' way early in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final, but that start was dampened by an injury to star forward Sam Reinhart. In the first period, Reinhart got clipped by Carolina Hurricanes captain Sebastian Aho and will not return.

With just over five minutes remaining in the first period, Reinhart was carrying the puck into the Carolina zone when Aho attempted to throw a hip check. Aho's hit clipped Reinhart's left leg, and he slid into the boards.

Reinhart was able to skate back to the Florida bench, but he was in obvious discomfort before heading down the tunnel.

When Reinhart didn't emerge from the locker room for the second period, the Panthers announced that he had been ruled out for the remainder of Game 2, which ended up being a 5-0 win. After the game, the team said Reinhart would be evaluated back in Florida on Friday.

Although Aho caught Reinhart low on the check, no penalty was called in real time. As always, the NHL Department of Player Safety can review plays for supplemental discipline, even if a penalty was not called. We'll see whether the league takes an extra look at this one on Friday.

While the Panthers are deep up front, losing Reinhart would be a significant blow to their offense.

Reinhart has scored a combined 96 goals over the last two seasons, and he tallied 10 in Florida's Stanley Cup run last summer. He has four in 14 games so far this postseason.

Hurricanes vs. Panthers scores, schedule, odds: Florida posts shutout in dominant Game 2 win, takes 2-0 lead

By: Austin Nivison

The Florida Panthers were an unstoppable force, and the Carolina Hurricanes were a very movable object. That was the story of Game 2 on Thursday night as the Panthers walloped the Hurricanes, 5-0, to take a 2-0 series lead in the Eastern Conference final.

Much like Game 1, there was simply no doubt about which team was going to win this one. The Lenovo Center was rocking at puck drop, but it got quiet very quickly and remained that way for three periods.

A big reason for that was the way the Panthers defended from top to bottom -- from the first line to the third defensive pair. Whether it was in the offensive zone or right in front of Sergei Bobrovsky, every black jersey had a white jersey on its hip.

The Panthers limited the Hurricanes to just 17 shots, which is quite the feat. No one likes to shoot more than Carolina, which ranked second in the NHL in shots on goal and first in shot attempts during the regular season. In fact, some would say the Canes shoot too much and could afford to be more picky.

That was not an issue on Thursday because the Panthers simply didn't give them any options.

The biggest beneficiary of that defense was Bobrovsky, who notched his third shutout of the postseason.

Gustav Forsling jumped into the play just 1:17 into the game and buried a feed from Matthew Tkachuk to give Florida an early lead. That was the Panthers' 13th goal from a defenseman in these playoffs, which is a franchise record just two games into the third round.

As the first period wore on, the Panthers' forecheck overwhelmed the Hurricanes, and they extended their lead to 3-0. Tkachuk got his fourth of the postseason, and Sam Bennett netted his eighth.

In the second, the score only got worse for the Hurricanes when Bennett finished a beautiful feed to from Carter Verhaeghe to make it 4-0.

To pour a little salt in the wound, Aleksander Barkov cashed in on the power play late in the third to give us our final score.

It wasn't all good news for the Panthers, however. In the first period, Sam Reinhart took an awkward hit in the leg from Sebastian Aho and did not return to the game. That will be something to monitor ahead of Game 3.

The Hurricanes have now lost 14 straight conference final games, and they have been schooled in both games at home this time around. If Carolina is going to keep its season alive, it'll have to go into enemy territory and beat a team that has outscored it by eight goals thus far.

Eastern Conference Final schedule

All times Eastern, you can stream the entire series on fubo (try for free)

Game 1: Panthers 5, Hurricanes 2 | Recap

Game 2: Panthers 5, Hurricanes 0 | Recap

Game 3: Saturday, May 24 | 8 p.m. | at FLA | TNT, truTV

Game 4: Monday, May 26 | 8 p.m. | at FLA | TNT, truTV

*Game 5: Wednesday, May 28 | 8 p.m. | at CAR | TNT, truTV

*Game 6: Friday, May 30 | 8 p.m. | at FLA | TNT, truTV

*Game 7: Sunday, June 1 | 8 p.m. | at CAR | TNT, truTV

Hurricanes vs. Panthers odds

Odds via DraftKings

Series odds: Panthers -650, Hurricanes +475

Game 3 odds: Panthers -142, Hurricanes +120

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

SB NATION CANES COUNTRY

Panthers 5, Hurricanes 0

By: Bob Wage

The Carolina Hurricanes lost again to the Florida Panthers, this time by a score of 5-0, in a “must win” game two of their third round matchup.

The Canes entered this contest having lost 13 straight Eastern Conference Final games. They lost number 14 on Thursday night.

This game was never close. The Panthers dominated from puck drop to final whistle.

Just 1:17 into the game, the Panthers scored off a turnover and the rout was on.

Midway through the first, the visitors made it 2-0 and a couple of minutes later, it was 3-0.

In the meantime there was very little, if any, pushback from the home team.

The Canes, ordinarily a team that generates a plethora of shots, for good or bad, had a paltry 3 shots on goal in the first period and 4 shots on goal in the second.

The Panthers scored another in the second and closed out with yet another in the third.

Brind’Amour replaced Jesperi Kotkaniemi with Mark Jankowski, though it did not seem to make a difference.

He played Scott Morrow for the injured Jalen Chatfield. Morrow did not finish with a negative plus/minus stat in this game like he did on Tuesday, and did not take a penalty.

I was told that Nikishin was still getting used to the system, although by my eye, while he made mistakes, he showed some promise in the game he played against Washington.

Chatfield skated in warm ups, but could not go so is still day-to-day. Sean Walker and Seth Jarvis both had to leave the game early due to injuries, although Jarvis did return.

Carolina’s special teams, which they have relied on all season with decent success, continue to disappoint against Florida.

They allowed goals on both Panther powerplays and went 0-3 when they had the man advantage.

After the game, there were no words of wisdom.

Svechnikov, who was credited with a team high 3 giveaways and was -3 along with a penalty which resulted in a goal, admitted to his mistakes. He said he needs to remain positive.

Brind’Amour said postgame that Svechnikov was on his own page.

One cannot help but feel sorry for local fans who paid hundreds, if not thousands of dollars to watch those two hockey games. There will be no refunds.

The Canes will have a team meeting Friday before traveling to Florida to, most likely, continue being on the wrong end of a shellacking on Saturday night.

Game Summary - https://www.nhl.com/scores/htmlreports/20242025/GS030312.HTM

Event Summary - https://www.nhl.com/scores/htmlreports/20242025/ES030312.HTM

Post game interviews - https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/gq9s4gqsaf6fibn7u7zsr/AIS7DWj6bzIbzF-YZb0RVDM?rlkey=vfpdq8z0ndnrbo5ab8ssw4vl4&e=1&st=3dozubop&dl=0

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025



Hurricanes outclassed by Panthers in Game 1 of Eastern Conference Finals

By: Aidan Carlson, Contributor

In a 5-2 win over the Carolina Hurricanes, the Florida Panthers showed what the difference is between a team that won a Stanley Cup and one that has struggled to get over the hump of the conference finals.

The Canes got to their game out of the gate, but some perfectly placed shots from the Panthers gave them an early lead they didn't relinquish. As the game went along and the Canes failed to cut the lead, they became frustrated and their game dissolved from there.

"It's hard to win games in the playoffs when you're chasing them," defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere said.

Carolina didn't give up many shots to Florida —- only 20 all game —- but when given grade-A opportunities, the Panthers capitalized every time.

Panthers center Carter Verhaeghe started it 8:30 into the game when he roofed a backhand from in close on the power play. Defenseman Aaron Ekblad added on four minutes later with a snap shot that went off the far post and in from the left faceoff circle. In uncharacteristic fashion, center Jordan Staal turned the puck over in his own end leading directly to the Panthers' second goal.

"[I] tried to make a tight turn and with my hands, sometimes you never know what's going to happen," Staal said. "It just bounced over my stick, [it] was tough ice."

Despite outplaying the Panthers for the duration of the first, the Canes didn't have anything to show for it until center Sebastian Aho redirected the puck in with his skate with 16 seconds left in the period. In a dominant period, all the Canes had to show for it was a one-goal deficit.

Instead of using the momentum from the end of the first to tie the game, the Hurricanes had to watch the reigning champs retake a two-goal lead. On an odd-man rush attempt, left wing A.J. Greer was able to score on a cross-slot pass to the back post.

A failed back check by right wing Jackson Blake forced fellow rookie, defenseman Scott Morrow, who made his playoff debut, to leave Greer to try and deny the pass, but failed to do so. The night only got worse for Morrow, who sent the puck out of play for a delay of game penalty that led directly to Florida's fourth goal. He finished with a team-worst -3 in his debut.

"It's always hard to win this time of year because there's throwing someone in that hasn't had that experience, or you don't count on as much and put him in a tough spot," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

On an almost identical play to Ekblad's goal in the first, Florida scored its fifth goal of the game. Gostisbehere, clearly frustrated from an altercation with Panthers center Brad Marchand, decided he would play the body instead of the puck, leading to an easy pass that center Eetu Luostarinen put into the back of the net.

After Gostisbehere felt Marchand took a run at him along the boards, Gostisbehere got the puck back and fired it straight into Marchand's chest. Marchand took exception and started a fight that led to him getting a game misconduct.

"Just heated, I was pretty pissed off," Gostisbehere said. "He tried to take a run at me, I shot the puck at him. Had a little tuffle."

Carolina got one goal back at the end of the game when Blake scored a power-play goal. He and center Seth Jarvis went back-and-forth before Blake put it in, but a relatively meaningless goal in terms of the game.

Game 2 will be a must-win for this group. It can't afford to go down 2-0 at home like it did in 2023 when the Panthers swept them out of the playoffs. Puck drop is on Thursday at 8 p.m.

CAROLINA HURRICANES
NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

The Hockey News

'It Was An Ass Whooping': Rod Brind'Amour, Jordan Staal, Taylor Hall, Andrei Svechnikov On Game 2 Loss

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes have found themselves in familiar spot, a 2-0 series hole after dropping a second straight game at home to the Florida Panthers in the Eastern Conference final.

It was an embarrassing display for the Canes, who lost 5-0 Thursday night at Lenovo Center, from the start all the way to the end. There was never a bright spot in any of it.

After the game, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour, along with Jordan Staal, Taylor Hall and Andrei Svechnikov spoke with the media in Raleigh. Here's what they had to say:

It's been a long, long time since I've seen a game like this from the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Carolina Hurricanes Should Be Embarrassed It's been a long, long time since I've seen a game like this from the Carolina Hurricanes.

Rod Brind'Amour

On how you unpack this game [It seemed like it started bad, got worse and you never really got anything going]: Well you just summed it up. Not much to say other than what you just said. It was a tough night.

On if the team is mentally struggling with questions on if they can beat Florida: No, I don't think that's it. Obviously we have to just figure out how to win a period. I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was just trying to do too much and then we're not doing the things we do as a team that normally helps us. I don't know what I was watching in the first period. That didn't go well. I said the other day, the margins here are tight. We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. Tonight, for whatever the reason... I think the intentions were good. Everyone's trying, saying, 'Hey, I'm going to do this,' but that's not how we do it. Just backfired. And [the first question] probably put it as good as one could because that's exactly how that game went.

On if he has any updates on Sean Walker and/or Seth Jarvis who both went back to the locker room: Not yet. I haven't even seen those guys so we'll see.

On Andrei Svechnikov: He had a tough night. I know he's trying, but we have to do it within the way we need to. Be on the same page. And he was on his own page. Didn't work.

On having a better start on the road: That's what we're going to have to try and do obviously. We have to... It's not 'just throw this game away.' We have to learn from it and what doesn't work. Give yourself a chance. That's what we need to do. That's what we did the other night. Obviously same result, but clearly if you go of script, it's not going to go well. That's the lesson learned here.

On intentions being good, but execution falling so far away: You have to give them credit. I hope I'm not missing that. That's what happened there too.

On if the pressure of the situation played a role at all: I would have hoped we would have actually been more on that. I don't feel like we were that intense for the moment that we needed to be. I felt like we were actually a little too casual. But again, from my standpoint, Florida was on it and you have to give them credit.

On if he knew after warmups that Jalen Chatfield wasn't going to be able to go: Yeah.

On pulling Frederik Andersen after two periods: It wouldn't have mattered who we had in net tonight. Wasn't on him.

On getting the guys to belief down 2-0: That's a good question. Sometimes it's easier to recover from a game like that because there's nothing good out of it. If you're close, a play here or there makes a difference. There was nothing good from this game for us. We're going to have to learn, but everybody has to be.

Jordan Staal

On if there was anything positive to take away from that game: No, not really. It was an ass whooping all the way through the lineup from the goaltender to the forwards. Just have to be better. I don't know what we were expecting tonight, especially the start just wasn't good enough. They came at us right away and got a couple quick ones and then you're behind and then it just got worse, to be honest.

On the difficulty with getting shots off: They're a good, defensive team. They do a good job of just being on top of you. When we do get it to the points, they're doing a good job of getting in lanes and clearing out bodies in front and limiting our second chances when we do get them through. Really, our zone time just wasn't there. When we're in the zone, they're just doing a good job of being in lanes.

On finding belief down 2-0 and heading to Florida: It's one game, and it's a seven-game series. We know we have to be a lot better. Just have to stay positive there and we know we can find a way to get our game going. If it takes a greasy road win to get us going, it's going to have to start next game.

On the pressure of having to come out with their best game: I mean, we're in the Eastern Conference Final, there's pressure every game and that's what we have to bring. They've just done it better. There's no question that they've

been the better team, especially tonight. Last time was a little closer, but I think they've kept is simple. They've capitalized on their chances and defended well. We haven't kept it simple and haven't capitalized on our few chances. There wasn't much tonight. Just have to do a better job of being better.

On rallying the team: It's not easy. We have a long road ahead of us, but there's no quit in this team. You guys have watched us all season long. There's been plenty of games where we've been out of it, but clawed ourselves back. A series is no different. It just takes one. We'll focus on this next game and we'll go from there.

On the 'Shoot the puck' chants from the fans: What did we have, seven shots at that point? So I don't blame them. It's been a staple of our team for so long. We did give up a few good opportunities to shoot and passed up on a couple plays that were not bad plays, but the way the puck's been bouncing and stuff, it looked ugly. Our M.O. has always been to shoot first, ask questions later and we weren't doing that tonight. We didn't create enough chances or really anything.

On what makes the difference: It's got to be everyone. Everyone has to be pulling the rope. You can't have any hiccups, you can't have any guys going off on their own page or making mistakes. You gotta have everyone. Tonight, there was pretty much no one. It needs to be everyone going and everyone pulling the rope for any team to win at this time of the year.

On the penalty kill's struggles: We've been good in the first few series. Obviously this one, they've floated a couple in on us. We've got to find a way to kill them. Maybe get in lanes, change it up, I'm not sure, but it's gotta be an important thing that we have to focus on here. We'll look over it and try to make some changes and get some more kills.

On if this series is just as much mental as physical: This game is mental. It's all about your brain and your focus. Thoughts can start to creep in and it's gotta be the thoughts we've been thinking all year and that's playing our game and focusing on our shifts and our battles and doing what we do. When you let those other thoughts creep in, it never looks good. I think we've gotta believe as a group in what we have and what we've done all year and go steal one in Game 3.

On if he's worried about those thoughts creeping in: I think tonight was obviously not great, but we're going to have to wash it and move on. Own a crappy game. There's no question it wasn't great. It happens sometimes. Obviously we don't want it to happen again and we're going to have to go and take Game 3.

On the self-inflicted wounds: Last game was a better game for sure and we were close and like we said, we made a couple mistakes and they capitalized on them, but tonight was just not good. There really wasn't much to hang your hat on at all. It really just has to be an own it and wash it and go get them in Game 3.

Taylor Hall

On what they need to do to get back into the series with Florida: It's tough to really describe what we kind of need to do unless we play our best game or even close to it. We can say, 'tip your cap to them,' but we didn't play up to our capabilities in these first two games. Obviously the start of the games where what put us in holes. They're a very good team. They play hard, they play together, they do a lot of things all around well on the ice. It's going to be difficult for us, but we can't really evaluate much until we say that we've played close to our best.

On hesitancy creeping into their game: A little bit. You can always point to times on the ice when you need to shoot it, but you need to also have some freedom to make plays and whatnot. But yeah, when we look at the shot clock and see that, that's just not our game. That's just not how we play. We generate offense by shooting pucks and getting them back and then we draw penalties or get a rebound. We generate momentum and o-zone faceoffs by doing that. We just weren't able to do it. We had chances to shoot and we didn't. I think we're all a little bit at a loss. But this is the playoffs. You're playing against the best teams right now. Good thing is that we obviously have another chance really soon. Different venue, get on the plane and hopefully that can just put us in a different mindset, different frame of mind, because what we did obviously didn't work.

On what gives the team belief that they can still get back into the series: They just went seven games against the Leafs, right? They're not a perfect hockey team and we know that there's areas to exploit like any team. They're exploiting our weaknesses right now obviously, but we have to play our game. If we lose doing that, then sure. But you have to dance with the girl that you brought and you have to play your game. We haven't really.

On if they can play their game when trailing: Yeah. The playoffs are very difficult to come back in. You see comebacks happen, but a lot of the time, they're sprung on by power plays and things like that. If you're against the 8-ball 5v5, they're going to make it tough and they're going to flip stuff out and the pressure that you're trying to create is going to sometimes backfire a little bit. You saw that working in our favor against Washington. Listen, it's two games. They were up 3-0 last year and ended up winning in seven. There's still a lot of hockey to be played.

On the Aho goal getting called back: It is what it is. If it's offsides, it's offsides.

Andrei Svechnikov

On if he felt like he was trying to do too much tonight: Yeah, I mean, obviously, I made a couple turnovers in our D-zone and they kind of scored. My mistake. My mistake totally. Can't do anything right now, so have to move on and think positively.

On the difficulty with getting shots off: I think... It's hard obviously. We played the best team, right now, and it's just hard to get into their zone, get the puck into their zone. We just have to find a way and try to do that more.

On avoiding trying to do too much despite being in a 2-0 series hole: It starts with me playing simpler and everything will be fine.

On what his mentality was like in the first period: Yeah, tough. No question about it. But it happens sometimes. Just have to stay in control and stay positive. The first period, I didn't do that, but after I just tried to stay positive.

On what things the team is saying to each other: I mean, we don't need to say anything at that point. Everyone still thinks

positive and go shift by shift and see what happens, but it didn't go our way.

On if he was surprised by how the game went: Yeah, obviously. We've got to find a way.

On the team passing up too many opportunities: Obviously we have to make more shots and all that. I guess trying to find better position, but we were already in good positions. Probably just have to shoot more to score, for sure.

On the team's confidence levels: Good confidence. It's just 2-0 still. This is nothing. We have to still think positive and go to Florida and take it shift by shift, like I said.

The Carolina Hurricanes Should Be Embarrassed

Ryan Henkel

It's been a long, long time since I've seen a game like this from the Carolina Hurricanes.

In a must-win game, at home and coming off of a 5-2 loss in which they felt that they weren't that far away in, they played perhaps the worst they've ever played.

After a gut punch in the opening minute, the Canes just continuously unraveled for 20 minutes, then proceeded to limp there way through another 20 and then another before the mercy of the final horn sounded out in Lenovo Center, drowned out by the booing of the few fans who chose to remain.

This is not a young team. This is not a team lacking leadership. This is not a team without guys in the room that know how to win a Cup.

But tonight they were a bad team and they should feel embarrassed.

Again, the Carolina Hurricanes should be embarrassed by what went down in Raleigh tonight.

It's one thing to get beaten. It's another thing entirely to get beaten like they did with barely any shots on goal or semblances of defense.

And it's not like what the Panthers are doing is any different form what the Hurricanes want to do or expect.

They both play high-pressure, forecheck heavy systems that force opponents into mistakes. Everyone knew everything about the other coming into this series?

So what's the difference?

The only explanation here really, at least the only one I can really rationalize, is that Carolina is outclassed.

Plain and simple, Florida is the better hockey team.

And until something proves otherwise, that's just the fact of the matter.

They're the defending Cup champions for a reason, but the Hurricanes put up a better fight against them two years earlier than whatever they've done this year.

And the Canes are easily a much deeper team than they were in 2023. Yet none of that has mattered.

They're in the exact same position.

Is this as embarrassing as the stretch after 2009, when they were just a middling franchise for nearly a decade with not even a sniff of the playoffs? No, but times and standards have changed.

The expectation now is to be great, not just good.

But let's be real for a moment. The Hurricanes are one of the last four teams standing. That's really, really hard to do, and it comes in a season where many people expected them to be a lot worse than the year prior.

I can't tell you how many comments I read over the course of the season saying how this was either a non-playoff team or a first-round exit.

They've exceeded a lot of expectations, but they haven't exceeded their own.

If they're truly serious about being a winning organization and a perennial Cup contender like they say, they themselves will feel embarrassed by what went down on the ice.

And not just for themselves, but for the thousands of fans that came to support them.

Fans who paid hundreds and hundreds of dollars to come out and cheer on their favorite team, only to be treated to an embarrassing effort lacking composure and heart.

It's unacceptable and the team owes something to the fanbase.

The best thing to give them?

Wins.

Go on the road and get back into this series.

Don't let this be the last memory of the 2024-25 season in Lenovo Center.

Because another sweep in the Eastern Conference Final, the fourth time in 16 years, is just something that cannot happen.

Hurricanes Not Worried About Lack Of Finish Against Panthers

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes lost 5-2 to the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final, dropping their first postseason game at Lenovo Center in 2025.

Despite the final score, it wasn't an egregious loss for the Hurricanes.

They gave up just 20 shots and had a 10-5 edge in 5v5 high-danger chances.

Really, the only difference was finish.

The Hockey News Playoff Frenzy Live discusses Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final.

"They get a chance, it's in the net," said Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour after Tuesday's loss. "That's really what happened there. They play a heavy, hard game, but they can score. I didn't hate our game tonight. It's going to be hard. It's going to go back and forth. I think we had our opportunities,

early in the game too. We had a couple good opportunities, didn't capitalize. Then it went a different direction."

Florida capitalized on the few chances they got — breakdowns on the penalty kill, a rare Jordan Staal defensive-zone turnover, blown assignments off the rush — while Sergei Bobrovsky stymied most of Carolina's golden looks.

I mean, that's what's going to happen when two teams play nearly identical styles, yet one has multiple players who have scored 40+ goals in a season.

But for Carolina, the formula is there.

Who will be on the blueline tonight for the Carolina Hurricanes?

thehockeynews.comJalen Chatfield, Scott Morrow or Alexander Nikishin?: Carolina's Blueline Still Up In The Air Before Game 2Who will be on the blueline tonight for the Carolina Hurricanes?

"At this time of year, it's about the score, but the overall game was pretty good," Brind'Amour said. "We had a couple breakdowns and then... *boom.* They're in the back of the net. A couple penalties that you don't want to take that they made us pay on. Overall, it was a tight game. Not a lot of chances given up, not a lot of chances for. Exactly how we thought it was going to play out. But I liked the attention to our details, sticking to the game plan, we just have to find a way to not make those errors that cost you goals. We also have to create more in the offensive zone and get more pucks through. Overall, I didn't mind the game, but we have to win the game."

The Canes' top-six looked good, generating by far the best looks of the game.

The top line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis generated four high-danger chances and had a few breakaways and odd-man rush opportunities as well.

"I thought in the first period especially, we created a lot of chances, especially off the rush," Jarvis said. "Finishing a few of those would be a different game, but that comes with the fact that we have to finish them. Having chances to score is one thing, capitalizing on them is another. But you have to get the chances and I thought we did a good job with that."

The second line of Jack Roslovic, Taylor Hall and Logan Stankoven was also consistently down in Florida's end, generating look after look including two of the biggest 'What if?' plays with Roslovic getting a one-timer from the slot and Shayne Gostisbehere nearly finding Stankoven on the back door after breaking Tomas Nosek's ankles.

That line has been especially potent in these playoffs in terms of generating chances, but the 5v5 scoring hasn't quite aligned despite it.

"I don't think there's any added pressure," Stankoven said when asked about the amount of chances his line is getting. "It's just about bearing down on the chances that we get. When you're in the right spots, it's going to go in. It's just a matter of time."

But time isn't on the Hurricanes' side.

Their margin for error has shrunk with that Game 1 loss and we've seen exactly what can happen in a series if they don't find that finish.

Because at this time of the year, it isn't about how many chances you get. It's about how many goals you score.

"We have to finish," Brind'Amour said. "They're too good a team. They're going to get theirs. Like I said, they have some real good, high-end scorers, so when you get your opportunities, it may not be many, we have to find a way to put it by him. It's not really a secret here. That's what we have to do."

But Carolina is a veteran heavy team. They're calm and composed and they're not the type to get rattled.

"I'm not concerned," Jarvis said. "It's going to come. Obviously we have to find different ways, but it's about executing. That's something preaching and working on and we know that if we get the chances, they'll go in eventually."

"The game is still there," said Jordan Staal. "We have to be better, obviously, it wasn't like we were great, but we have an opportunity here and we're excited about the next one."

The Carolina Hurricanes fell 5-2 to the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final Tuesday night at Lenovo Center.

Is Mark Jankowski An Option For Game 2?

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes fell 5-2 to the Florida Panthers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final Tuesday night at Lenovo Center.

It was a disappointing result for the team, but is it one that could prompt some changes for Game 2?

When asked about potential line tweaks to try and find more finish, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour pushed back on the thought.

"There's a fine line and I don't know what changing lines would do," Brind'Amour said on Wednesday. "You have to figure out how the game's going and then make your adjustments from there. Like I said, I didn't mind the game. I liked large parts of it. We're playing the best team and so we know it's going to be hard to get our chances."

The Hockey News Playoff Frenzy Live discusses Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final.

However, what was notable was that the team had an optional skate on Thursday morning and Mark Jankowski was not taking part in it while Jesperi Kotkaniemi was.

Jankowski played just three games for Carolina this postseason before getting injured in Game 1 of the second-round series against the Washington Capitals.

The 6-foot-4 centerman is a strong depth option for the team, with his crazy scoring touch, good faceoff numbers and ability to play on the penalty kill.

Kotkaniemi on the other hand has just three points this series, a sub 50% faceoff win rate and hasn't scored a goal since February 1.

He's been fine, playing a good defensive game and bringing a bit of physicality, but he certainly hasn't been a difference maker at all.

Brind'Amour said Mark Jankowski is 100% healthy now and he could be an option for the team tonight.

"He's been a consideration for probably the last three or four games, I think," Brind'Amour said. "So he's ready to go if I decide to use him

Jalen Chatfield, Scott Morrow or Alexander Nikishin?: Carolina's Blueline Still Up In The Air Before Game 2

By: Ryan Henkel

Who will be on the blueline tonight for the Carolina Hurricanes?

That's the million dollar question right now as the team prepares for Game 2 of their Eastern Conference Final series against the Florida Panthers.

The Hurricanes have been missing the services of veteran defenseman Jalen Chatfield, who's been a top-four staple for the Canes all year.

Chatfield was injured in the team's last series against the Washington Capitals and has since missed Carolina's last two games.

The defender was practicing this morning and is nearing a return, but his status is still up in the air for tonight.

The Hockey News Playoff Frenzy Live discusses Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final.

In his place, the Hurricanes have alternated between a duo of rookie defensemen: Alexander Nikishin and Scott Morrow.

The issue is that neither player has really distinguished himself.

"Those are our two options if Chatty can't go," said Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour Thursday morning. "I think for both, it's a tough spot to put them in. Rookies who haven't had a lot of NHL experience. One guy that doesn't understand English that well. It's just not ideal for this time of year. I think those two are our best options and if Chatty can't go, it will be one of them. Scotty, I think he understands our game better because he's been playing it for a year and the flow of playing one game and coming right back to another game I think is a consideration. Those are all things we'll have to figure out if Chatty is unavailable."

Nikishin played in Game 5 against the Capitals and had two egregious turnovers in the early goings of the game (one of which ended up in a goal although it was ultimately called back for offsides) and only played a little more than 10 minutes.

Morrow played in Game 1 against the Panthers and was a -3 in 12:18 of ice time.

At this point, we're really splitting hairs over who's the better option because the truth of the matter is that neither seems ready for the moment.

The Canes really just need Chatfield to play.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025



Hurricanes news: Florida fan adds insult to Carolina injury after Game 2

By: Colin Gallant

The Carolina Hurricanes just cannot find a way to win a game in the Eastern Conference Final. After dominating the New Jersey Devils and Washington Capitals in the first two rounds of the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs, the script has been flipped at the hands of the Florida Panthers after a 5-0 Game 2 beatdown on Thursday night.

The Canes have now lost both games at home to the Cats in the series, being outscored 10-2 in the process. And dating back to 2009, Carolina has now somehow lost 14 consecutive games over four East Final appearances.

Insult was added to injury after a Panthers fan threw a rat on the ice at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh.

This Hurricanes team is built to win in the playoffs, and they showed that in tidy five-game victories over the Devils and Capitals. But the Panthers are a different beast altogether. Not only have the Canes not been able to get over the hump in the final four, they've completely imploded once again.

Florida swept Carolina in the 2023 East Final two years ago, and this series is on a very similar trajectory after back-to-back dominant performances by the defending Stanley Cup champions.

The game seemed to be over in the first period after the Panthers scored three goals on just five shots on Frederik Andersen in the opening frame.

“I don’t know what I was watching in the first period. That didn’t go well,” Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said afterwards, per NHL.com's Kurt Dusterberg. “The margin here is tight, you’re not going to beat this team when we’re not on the same page. I think the intentions were good, everyone was trying … but it’s not how we do it and it just backfired.”

Hurricanes look like they're going to go quietly

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Even without star forward Sam Reinhart, who was injured on a Sebastian Aho hit, the Panthers just looked like the better team from start to finish. And there isn't a ton of belief this squad — which hasn't won an East Final game since capturing the 2006 Stanley Cup — can recover.

“We didn’t play up to our capability in the first two games,” forward Taylor Hall admitted, per Dusterberg. “Obviously, the start of the games is what put us in holes. They do a lot of things well all around the ice, so it’s going to be difficult for us, but we can’t really evaluate much until we can say we’ve played close to our best.”

Florida deserves a ton of credit; the defending champs look absolutely potent after beating the Toronto Maple Leafs in a thrilling Game 7 earlier this week.

It's going to take a herculean effort for Carolina to get back in the series, and not just because they look like the inferior team in all facets. Andersen, who had been the best goalie in the playoffs coming in, was pulled in favor of Pyotr Kochetkov in the third period.

And the Hurricanes now have to go into a hostile Amerant Bank Arena in Sunrise and win at least one game to extend the series. If they don't win both, it will probably be another disappointing finish in 2025.

Puck drops on Game 3 just past 8:00 p.m. on Saturday night.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Athlon Sports

Panthers Coach Reveals Next Move for Sam Reinhart Amid Injury Concerns

By: Antonio Losada

The Florida Panthers left Raleigh with a commanding 2-0 series lead in the Eastern Conference finals after a dominant 5-0 win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

Game 2 also left Florida with an injury concern after forward Sam Reinhart exited in the first period and did not return.

Reinhart, who led the team in scoring during the regular season with 81 points in 79 games, suffered a lower-body injury after taking a hit from Carolina's Sebastian Aho near the blue line.

The impact appeared to bend Reinhart's left leg awkwardly, and though he returned to the bench briefly, he soon left for the dressing room. Reinhart did not come back to the game.

Following the 5-0 win, Panthers head coach Paul Maurice provided the only official update for now, revealing what's next for the forward and the organization.

"We'll get him looked at (Friday)," Maurice said. "We'll get an update Saturday."

The injury casts uncertainty over one of Florida's most productive playoff performers.

Reinhart had recorded 11 points in 13 games before Thursday night and played a pivotal role in Florida's first-round win over Tampa Bay.

Despite Reinhart's absence, the Panthers have overwhelmed Carolina through the first two games of the Eastern Conference finals, outscoring them 10-2.

Florida Panthers forward Sam Reinhart reacts during the second period against the Carolina Hurricanes at Lenovo Center.

Florida Panthers forward Sam Reinhart reacts during the second period against the Carolina Hurricanes at Lenovo Center.

James Guillory-Imagn Images

Game 2 featured two goals from Sam Bennett, along with tallies by Gustav Forsling, Matthew Tkachuk and Aleksander Barkov.

Florida has now outscored its opponents 22-4 across its last four road games and returns home two wins away from a third consecutive trip to the Stanley Cup Final.

Game 3 is set for 8 p.m. Saturday night in Sunrise, Florida

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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SportScan

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

1353390 Carolina Hurricanes

Outplayed and outclassed, Hurricanes have come too far to play this poorly

By Luke DeCock

Updated May 22, 2025

Raleigh

Forget winning the series, let alone any thought of the Stanley Cup. Just try to avoid another sweep. Or at least win a period, for God's sake. Maybe score a goal. Try walking away from an altercation for once.

Things are so bad for the Carolina Hurricanes they need to set their sights lower, as low as they get. How about: Stop embarrassing themselves. Might be a good place to start.

By the end of the second period, fans were even chanting "shoot the puck" at the home team, right before the Florida Panthers scored their fourth goal in a 5-0 win.

You endure the whole season, through 82 long games, through two rounds of the playoffs, for the right — the privilege – to be here, on this stage, playing for these stakes. And sometimes the better team does win, even wins six games in a row, but you have to at least show a little more fight than this.

It's too hard to get this far to go down this easy once you're here.

"Obviously, we just have to figure out how to win a period," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

The total margin of victory in this series is already twice as large as it was in 2023, and we're only halfway to another sweep, which may not be inevitable, but certainly feels that way.

Not only can the Hurricanes not impose their will the way they did in the first two rounds, they can't play their game at all. The team that was questioned for its "shot volume approach" had all of seven shots through two periods and basically abandoned the aggressive forecheck that is the Hurricanes' trademark.

That wasn't boring hockey. This actually is.

"They're just doing it better, no question," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "They've been the better team, especially tonight."

If getting mocked by your own fans in your own building en route to a 14th straight conference-finals loss isn't bad enough — "We didn't have enough shots tonight, so there's probably something to that," Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said — Game 2 started badly for the Hurricanes and got worse.

Andrei Svechnikov kicked it off by throwing a blind pass up the boards against the Florida forecheck. In a flash it was on Gustav Forsling's stick in the slot and the Hurricanes were playing from behind after only 77 seconds.

Svechnikov was on the ice for three goals against and watched the third Florida goal from the penalty box after punching Matthew Tkachuk in the back of the head for no reason, a power-play goal seconds after Sergei Bobrovsky stopped Jordan Martinook on a short-handed breakaway and Jordan Staal couldn't get to the rebound.

"I made the couple of turnovers in our (defensive) zone and they scored," Svechnikov said. "So my mistake, my mistake totally. And, you know, I can't do anything right now, so got to move on and think positively."

When the Hurricanes did dent Bobrovsky, Sebastian Aho shooting it off his right pad and in, it didn't count. What looked like Tkachuk playing the puck back into his own zone actually came off Brent Burns. The Panthers are soundly beating the Hurricanes even in the offside-challenge department.

And then there are the depth issues on defense, which certainly raise the question of how the Hurricanes expected to manage an injury on the blue line if one came up at any point. Jalen Chatfield took warmups but wasn't ready to go, which left Scott Morrow in the lineup after his painful playoff debut in Game 1 over Alexander Nikishin, who had a rough debut of his own in Game 5 of the second round — a series of cascading and critical failures.

Morrow didn't play in the first 12 minutes and the Hurricanes were essentially down to four defensemen for a bit after Sean Walker took a hard hit from A.J. Green coming across the middle. If Riley Stillman and Ty Smith aren't up to the task when the other options are rookies who are clearly not ready, why are they even here? What was the plan if a defenseman got hurt, anyway? Hope for the best? Pray?

Carolina's Frederik Andersen (31) keeps his eyes on the puck as Panthers' Anton Lundell (15) can't score during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Carolina's Frederik Andersen (31) keeps his eyes on the puck as Panthers' Anton Lundell (15) can't score during the second period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

If the Hurricanes want to stop being asked about why they can't beat the Panthers, they're going to have to not only beat the Panthers at some

point, but play at their level once in a while. That wasn't an issue in 2023, when three of the games were decided on the final play, but neither game this year has even been close. The Panthers are faster, stronger, more opportunistic and more determined. Other than that, it's pretty even.

"They're not a perfect hockey team," Hall said. "We just have to play our game, and we haven't really."

In the ongoing absence of that, the Hurricanes are getting absolutely rolled, in a way that hasn't happened in a playoff series since they were swept by the Boston Bruins at this stage in 2019. That was at the beginning of this run of playoff appearances and playoff series wins, when nothing was expected and everything was a surprise.

The only surprise here is how noncompetitive the Hurricanes have been. Outplayed and outclassed. The Panthers aren't only beating them at their own game; they're playing a completely different one. They can change all that on the road, and bring the series back here even, but they'll have to start somewhere after going nowhere.

News Observer LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353391 Carolina Hurricanes

Be prepared for pricey parking at the Canes game tonight. Tips to save money

By Trinity Olivier

Updated May 22, 2025

Carolina Hurricanes fans are back for Game 2 of the Eastern Conference finals against the Florida Panthers at the Lenovo Center. Puck drop is 8 p.m. on Thursday, May 22.

Fans should know conference final parking at the Lenovo Center is more expensive than regular season pricing, so attending the game might cost you a pretty penny.

Here's what you need to know about parking for the game in Raleigh.

A variety of price signs, reflecting the wide range of parking costs for events at Lenovo Center, shown inside of one of the parking and traffic staff vehicles on Tuesday, May 6, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

A variety of price signs, reflecting the wide range of parking costs for events at Lenovo Center, shown inside of one of the parking and traffic staff vehicles on Tuesday, May 6, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Canes game parking costs

Lenovo's parking lots (there are 12) are located at 1400 Edwards Mill Road in Raleigh. There are general, VIP and premiere lots, along with a lot for buses, RVs and other large vehicles.

Here's how much it costs to park at the Lenovo Center ahead of Game 2:

General parking: $48 online and $65 onsite

Premiere parking: $80 online and $95 onsite

Premiere Gold parking: $120 online and $135 onsite

Bus, limo and RV parking: $160 online and $200 onsite

VIP parking: $160 online and $200 onsite

Online prices don't include service fees.

The Premier lots are closest to the Lenovo Center and require the least amount of walking. General parking is the farthest away (0.2 miles).

Fans that have not prepaid for their spots are suggested to arrive one hour before puck drop to secure parking. (Lenovo also warns of heavy traffic on I-40, I-440 and Wade Avenue on weekdays.)

Parking lots open three hours before hockey games, the website says.

Learn more at lenovocenter.com/parking-guide.

Lenovo Center employee Caleb Glover places traffic cones along Peter Karmanos Jr. Drive in preparation for the Linkin Park concert on Tuesday, May 6, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Lenovo Center employee Caleb Glover places traffic cones along Peter Karmanos Jr. Drive in preparation for the Linkin Park concert on Tuesday, May 6, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

How to pay for Canes parking online

Fans can secure cheaper parking by buying their tickets online ahead of the game.

Visit parkwhiz.com to purchase your spot. Many lots are sold out, and the cheapest available parking (as of Thursday 2 p.m.) starts at $48.

"We encourage the prepay option because it expedites traffic flow especially during capacity events like tonight," said Crystal Pace, vice president of arena programming and marketing for the Lenovo Center.

Regular season pricing

Caniacs will know these are not the usual Canes game parking prices.

Regular season parking starts at $27 for cars and $100 for buses and RVs, Lenovo's website says.

Free parking options for Canes games

To avoid paying for parking altogether, you can:

▪ Taxi or Uber/Lyft to the arena: Drop-offs and pick-ups are directed to enter via Gate C (Trinity Road) and drive along the Carter Finley Roadway to the drop-off location.

Lenovo also has a Taxi Pick-Up & Drop-Off Zone, which is located right outside the VIP Entrance, the website says.

▪ Take public transportation: GoRaleigh's Route 26 Bus can drop you off across from the Lenovo Center.

News Observer LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353392 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers throttle Hurricanes in Game 2, Carolina in 0-2 series hole to Florida

By Chip Alexander and Luke DeCock

Updated May 23, 2025

Raleigh

The Florida Panthers have a big, tough, experienced team that won a Stanley Cup last season, and is after another.

For the second straight game, the Panthers also looked like a team that doesn't plan to let the Carolina Hurricanes stand in their way.

The Panthers rolled into Lenovo Center, scored three times in the first period, stifled the Canes and came away with a 5-0 victory Thursday, and a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference Final.

While goalie Sergei Bobrovsky notched his third shutout of the playoffs, the Panthers got two goals and an assist from Sam Bennett and three assists from Carter Verhaeghe in pounding out the decisive victory.

“That was pretty much a (butt) kicking,” Canes captain Jordan Staal said, summing up the loss succinctly.

The best-of-seven series now moves to Florida for a pair of games, with the Panthers looking to close it out in a four-game sweep and the Hurricanes looking for answers to what might be some unsolvable problems.

“But there’s no quit on this team,” Staal said. “You’ve seen that all season. We’ll focus on this next game and go from there. We’ve got to believe in our group and what we’ve done all year and go steal one.”

Both teams play similar aggressive, in-your-face styles. The Panthers are better at it than the Canes, who again played without injured defenseman Jalen Chatfield, who took the pregame warmup Thursday but could not go.

The Canes had three shots in the opening period and seven through the first 40 minutes as the Panthers had tight gaps defensively, checked hard and well along the boards and allowed few Hurricanes forays near Bobrovsky’s crease.

In the second period, after Canes winger Seth Jarvis decided to pass off the rush rather than shoot, a new chant broke out loudly at Lenovo Center: “Shoot the puck! Shoot the puck!”

“What did we have, seven shots at that point? I don’t blame them,” Staal said. “Our M.O. has always been ‘shoot first and ask questions later’ but we weren’t doing that tonight.”

Canes center Sebastian Aho did get a puck past Bobrovsky in the opening minute of the second period after a bad Florida turnover. But the Panthers won a coach’s challenge, claiming the puck left the Florida zone and then knocked back in by Canes defenseman Brent Burns, making Aho offside, and the score was overturned.

It was the kind of play the Hurricanes badly needed, and they continued to try and push the pace in the second with some juggled lines, only to have Bennett score his second goal with 39 seconds left in the period – a final dagger for the Canes.

By the third, Canes coach Rod Brind’Amour had lifted goalie Frederik Andersen and inserted Pyotr Kochetkov in net. Kochetkov did make a few early saves to earn some cheers.

The Panthers did beat Kochetkov on a third-period power play as Aleksander Barkov scored.

The first period, which proved to be decisive, was total misery for the Canes and a display of total domination by the Panthers, who scored their three goals on five shots.

Of the Hurricanes’ three shots in the period, two by defenseman Dmitry Orlov. They spent a lot of time in their own zone, chasing, watching the Panthers control the puck with a precise forechecking game.

Canes forward Andrei Svechnikov, discombobulated on the ice much of the period, turned the puck over and defenseman Gustav Forsling scored on the Panthers’ first shot of the game.

Svechnikov turned it over a second time and Florida’s Matthew Tkachuk scored off the bounce of a Verhaeghe shot.

Svechnikov took a penalty for roughing after a tussle with Tkachuk and Bennett scored his first of the game on the power play.

The Canes had their first power play late in the first period, only to have Jarvis whiff on a shot from the left circle. So it went for Carolina, which was 5-0 in the playoffs at home before facing the Panthers.

Both teams had players leave the game. The Panthers’ Sam Reinhart left with a lower-body injury and Canes defenseman Sean Walker took an open-ice hit and went to the locker room in the second.

With Chatfield out, Brind’Amour gave rookie defenseman Scott Morrow a second straight start, then did not play him in the first 12 minutes of the game. Morrow had two first-period shifts.

Svechnikov begs off blame for Bob bang

A clip of Svechnikov making contact with Bobrovsky’s head as he skated through the crease during the second period of Game 1 ended up going semi-viral on social media, although neither team brought it up after the game Tuesday or on Wednesday.

Svechnikov, on Thursday morning, said he didn’t even know about it until afterward.

“After the game, actually, my brother and a couple friends asked me, ‘Did you see your hit on Bob?’” Svechnikov said. “I’m like, ‘What you are you guys talking about?’ It looks like I hit him on purpose, but I didn’t mean it at all.”

Panthers forward Brad Marchand was asked Thursday what he thought of Canes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere shooting a puck at him before the two dropped the gloves to fight in Game 1.

“I’m not much of a thinker,” Marchand said, grinning. “I don’t have much thought on that.”

Gostisbehere’s comment after the game: “He tried to take a run at me and I shot a puck at him. It is what it is.”

Marchand was given a 10-minute misconduct penalty. Panthers coach Paul Maurice also has declined to comment on the incident.

News Observer LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353393 Carolina Hurricanes

How the Hurricanes’ would-be rebuilding year became another year as a contender

By Luke DeCock

Updated May 22, 2025

Raleigh

Andrei Svechnikov scoffed at the question, a reasonable one given the Carolina Hurricanes’ considerable offseason — and midseason — turnover. Had this team, in the Eastern Conference Final for the second time in three years, overachieved in what was expected to be a rebuilding year?

“Maybe some people were talking about that but we as a group, we never thought it was a rebuilding year,” Svechnikov said earlier this week. “We’ve got so many good players here. We just know we’ve got a new team. Especially in playoffs, it’s a different animal. We got so much experience the last six years.”

Both the question and the answer were fair. Long before they ended up here, this was supposed to be at least a little of a retooling for the Hurricanes. The departures of trade-deadline rental Jake Guentzel and stalwarts like Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei and Teuvo Teravainen over the summer prompted a regrouping and retrenching with limited cap space.

That all presaged what figured to be a bigger splash in 2025-26, when hotshot rookie defenseman Alexander Nikishin would claim a spot on the blue line as big-money contracts for players like Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov fell off the books.

The best laid plans, etc. etc. — but in a good way.

First, even working with limited resources, the Hurricanes seemed to find all the right players at all the right prices during the offseason. Sean Walker, a quietly efficient and reliable defenseman, not the skater Bret Hedican was or as big, but very much in the same mold. The return of Shane Gostisbehere to run the power play, empowered as The Guy this time. Big, hard-skating forwards William Carrier and Eric Robinson to bang around the opposition’s defensemen. Jack Roslovic, a 22-goal scorer who showed he could finish some of the chances the Hurricanes always create that too often went lacking.

No big names, only good deals. That’s about as far as anyone could ever stretch $12 million in cap space.

“We had a phenomenal hit rate this year, and that’s a huge credit to our scouting staff,” first-year Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said.

“It’s a credit to our coaches working with us on understanding what they’re looking for and what a fit would look like. It’s probably not sustainable.

“When you bring in seven or 10 new players, I don’t think you can bet on every single one of them fitting in the way you hope they all will. We’ve been lucky that this year, it’s gone that way, and it’s a testament to the players who came in and their ability to adapt. It’s a testament to the coaching staff and their ability to help them get acclimated.”

The group — along with rookie forward Jackson Blake, another pleasant surprise — meshed so quickly that what might have been a rebuilding year became just another contending season, comfortably cruising toward the playoffs for a seventh straight time despite the now-routine rash of midseason goalie injuries.

Things were going so well, the Hurricanes decided to make the kind of big swing they had been saving for this summer and pulled the trigger on the now-infamous Mikko Rantanen trade in January.

There’s obviously going to be revisionist history given the way things turned out, but the deal made sense at the time, just as flipping him to the Dallas Stars for Logan Stankoven and a pair of first-round picks made sense 42 days later when it was clear Rantanen would not or could not give his full effort here. (He has shown, in these playoffs, just how potent that full effort can be, which only highlights what a low percentage the Hurricanes were actually getting from him.)

Stankoven, Mark Jankowski and Taylor Hall may not have Rantanen’s star power, but like their summer predecessors, the new arrivals fit quickly into their roles among their new teammates, adapting quickly to the Hurricanes’ style of play in a way Rantanen never did.

“I love the group we ended up with at the end of all that,” Tulsky said. “I don’t know that in my 10 years here we’ve had a team that’s been the way this one is in terms of every single player being a fit for the way we want to play, being bought in, competing as hard as they can. This group is made to play Carolina Hurricanes hockey. That puts us in a good situation, a good position to win.”

And that’s how a rebuilding season becomes something else entirely. Svechnikov isn’t wrong. No player wants to be told his group isn’t as competitive as it thinks it should be. But that group also had everything to do with changing what would have been the narrative. Despite the doom of July, it is still playing in May, in the conference finals for the third time in seven years. Maybe expecting less is one reason it has delivered more.

Setting the record straight

It has now been more than seven years since Ron Francis was fired as Hurricanes general manager, but he is still often credited on national broadcasts for “building the foundation” of this Hurricanes team.

The reality is that time has diluted Francis’ influence, to the point where his predecessor, Jim Rutherford, may have more fingerprints on this group than Francis — and both have long since been exponentially eclipsed by the work of first Don Waddell and then Eric Tulsky since Tom Dundon purchased the team in 2018.

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1353394 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes listless in 5-0 Game 2 loss to Panthers

May 22, 2025

Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — A disastrous opening 20 minutes sank the Hurricanes in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final. The question is whether they can recover after losing the opening two games at home to the Panthers with the next two set for South Florida.

Florida scored off an Andrei Svechnikov turnover in the opening minutes into the game, converted on another miscue by the Carolina winger just past the midway point of the opening period and then closed the frame with a power play goal while he was in the penalty box en route to a 5-0 win Thursday at Lenovo Center.

“That was pretty much an ass-whooping all the way through the lineup,” Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said.

It was a disastrous turn for the Hurricanes, who have shrugged and laughed off questions about the team’s futility in the third round of the playoffs yet lost their 14th straight conference final game since 2009.

“We’ve got to just — it’s not throwing this game away, but we’ve got to learn from it, what doesn’t work, and give yourself a chance,” Hurricanes coach Rod Brind’Amour said.

Things started bad and got worse for the home team.

Svechnikov’s blind backhand up the left boards in the defensive zone was stolen by Panthers winger Matthew Tkachuk, who found Gustav Forsling at the top of the left circle. The Florida defenseman curled to the slot and fired a shot past Frederik Andersen (12 saves) to give the defending champions a 1-0 lead just 77 seconds into the game.

After Niko Mikkola held Svechnikov’s clearing attempt at the right boards, and the Florida defenseman worked the puck behind the Carolina net to Carter Verhaeghe. Verhaeghe circled to Andersen’s left and threw the puck in front, and Tkachuk banged it in to make it 2-0 at 11:41.

“I made the couple turnovers in our D zone, and they scored,” Svechnikov said. “So my mistake, my mistake totally. And, you know, I can’t do anything right now, so I’ve got to move on and think positively.”

Then, with Svechnikov in the box for roughing Tkachuk, Sam Bennett redirected a Verhaeghe point shot at 15:50 to give the Panthers a 3-0 lead heading into the first intermission.

“He had a tough night,” Brind’Amour said of Svechnikov. “We know he’s always trying, but you’ve got to be within the way we need to, be on the same page. He was on his own page tonight a little bit, and it didn’t work.”

Florida’s three-goal lead drained the energy of the Lenovo Center crowd and had the Hurricanes’ players and coaches befuddled at the team’s unrecognizable effort.

“I think we came out with the right intentions, but they were trying to do too much, and then we’re not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us,” Brind’Amour said. “I didn’t know what I was watching in the first period, and that didn’t go well.”

Sebastian Aho appeared to score in the opening minute of the second period to give Carolina life, but Florida challenged for offside. It was determined that Hurricanes defenseman Brent Burns’ stick check at the blue line led to Tkachuk losing control to Aho in the slot of the Florida zone, and the goal was overturned.

Not that it would have mattered much. Bennett scored his second of the game in the final minute of the second period to extend the lead to 4-0, and the Hurricanes had just seven shots on goal in the game’s first 40 minutes.

“I think our M.O. has always been shoot first, ask questions later, and we weren’t doing that tonight,” Staal said. “We didn’t create enough chaos — or really anything.”

That was also when Andersen — who allowed four goals on 16 shots and has a .750 save percentage in the series — saw his night end. Pyotr Kochetkov (4 saves), playing for the first time since Game 5 of the first round series against New Jersey on April 29, came on in relief.

“It wouldn’t have mattered who we had in net tonight. It wasn’t on him,” Brind’Amour said of Andersen.

The Panthers added one more goal for good measure, again victimizing Carolina’s league-best penalty kill.

Aleksander Barkov’s redirection goal in the third period extended the lead to 5-0, making the Panthers 2 for 2 on the night with the man advantage and 4 for 5 in the series’ first two games.

“We’ve got to find a way to kill them,” Staal said. “Maybe getting in lanes, change it up, I’m not sure. But it’s got to be an important thing that we focus on here, and we’ll look it over and try to make some changes and get some more kills.”

There’s plenty more for the Hurricanes to figure out before Game 3 on Saturday in Sunrise.

“It takes a little greasy road win to get us going,” Staal said. “It’s just going to have to start next game.”

Notes: Hurricanes defenseman Jalen Chatfield took warmups but missed his third consecutive game with an undisclosed injury. … Florida forward Sam Reinhart left the game in the first period after a hit by Aho and did not return. Panthers coach Paul Maurice said he would be checked out Friday. … Carolina’s Sean Walker and Seth Jarvis both left the game briefly after taking hits but later returned. … Carolina center Jesperi Kotkaniemi was scratched in favor of Mark Jankowski.

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1353395 Carolina Hurricanes

Category 5: Hurricanes look for answers before Game 2

May 22, 2025

Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes find themselves down 1-0 in the Eastern Conference final after dropping Tuesday’s Game 1 at home to the Florida Panthers, 5-2. Carolina will need to bounce back in Thursday’s Game 2 to avoid heading to South Florida down two games in the series.

1. It was a tough Game 1 for rookie defenseman Scott Morrow in his NHL playoff debut, subbing for Jalen Chatfield, who missed his second consecutive game with an injury.

In his first game in nearly a month, Morrow played 12:18 and registered three shots on goal. He was also on the ice for three of Florida’s five goals and in the penalty box for another — not exactly a night he’d want to remember.

Coach Rod Brind’Amour seemed more optimistic Wednesday about Chatfield’s chances of playing in Game 2, saying the defenseman is more “day to day” while adding he’d need to be cleared medically and be determined to be the best option for him to play.

“All the athletes want to play,” Brind’Amour said at Wednesday’s media availability. “But if they’re not capable, they’re not capable.”

Chatfield skated with the extras Wednesday morning before the team’s media availability, and getting him back in the lineup would be a boost for Carolina as it looks to avoid a 2-0 series hole on Thursday night.

If Chatfield can’t play, Brind’Amour may go back to Alexander Nikishin, who had struggles of his own in his first NHL game in Carolina’s series-clinching Game 5 win in Washington over the Capitals.

2. The Hurricanes’ penalty kill was 28 for 30 in the first two rounds of the playoffs, the best among any team this postseason. But Carolina couldn’t contain Florida’s power play in Game 1, allowing two goals on three chances, including the game’s first goal.

“I think we’ve got to stick with the plan,” defenseman Jaccob Slavin said Wednesday. “I think we’ve got to be smart out there and not take penalties that don’t need to be taken and give their power play opportunities that don’t need to be had. But we’re all over it on the penalty kill. We’ve just got to stay with it and keep doing what we’ve been doing.”

Slavin said miscommunication led to Florida’s power play success in Game 1, adding that the Hurricanes “just need to block shots too.”

What will be key for the Hurricanes is to not unravel on the PK as they have in past playoff exits. The Panthers’ power play is clicking, and Carolina needs to at least play even with them on special teams to have a shot in the series.

One thing to keep an eye on: Jordan Martinook, one of the Hurricanes’ top penalty-killing forwards, has been limited at practices of late, and he seemed to not have his usual burst in Game 1.

Purely speculation, but whatever is ailing him could stem from a blocked shot in Game 3 against the Capitals.

There are many examples why he's called the heart and soul of the locker room, and here's another one.

3. While much of the story of Game 1 was Florida winning the special teams battle, Carolina did get a late power play goal and otherwise looked effective.

The top unit of Sebastian Aho, Jackson Blake, Shayne Gostisbehere, Seth Jarvis and Andrei Svechnikov had six shots on goal and was credited with eight scoring chances — including three high-danger chances — in under five minutes of 5-on-4 ice time (Gostisbehere missed about a minute of that in the penalty box), with Blake scoring in the third period.

“I thought, for the most part, our power play was pretty good last night,” Blake said Wednesday. “At the end of the day … it’s about capitalizing. Maybe if we put one in earlier, it’s a different game. Obviously we get that one late; the game’s pretty much over then. But I thought the power play was good. We’ve just got to continue to build on it because it’s going to be a huge thing the next couple games.”

4. Jarvis was asked about his missed redirection in front that didn’t find its mark on an early power play in Game 1 and if it stuck in his craw, given how the game unraveled.

“No,” said Jarvis with a steely glare. “People miss shots all the time, and not everything’s going to go in. We’re playing a great goalie. You’ve got to move on from it.”

Whether Jarvis truly feels that way or not is up for interpretation, but it’s undeniably the right thing to say and shows a step forward in the 23-year-old’s ongoing development. Jarvis has been tough on himself in the past and even vocal about it.

And while he was understandably not his fun-loving self following the Game 1 loss, he was able to move past — or at least put on the facade of doing so — any negativity from the series opener.

“He’s matured as a player, and you have to move on,” Brind’Amour said. “He had a good game. I think he understands he’s a big part of what we’re doing. We need him dialed in on the next shift. We’re always focusing on what you’ve done is out the window now. What about the next shift? He’s done a really good really good job all year, I think, on doing that.”

5. The Hurricanes fell into a 2-0 hole in Game 1, forcing them to, as Brind’Amour is quick to call such situations, “chase the game.” Carolina knows getting a lead is key to success in this series.

“That’s extremely important,” Slavin said. “Both teams, we kind of have the same game plan of getting in and out as quick as we can and keeping it in the O zone as much as possible.

“And so anytime you can get a lead with that style play, it’s huge. It’s hard to dig yourself out of a hole, especially this time of year when every team’s playing that way. And so, yeah, it’s huge to get off to a good start, and also, and also not dig yourself that hole.”

Carolina scored first in half of their 10 games in the first two rounds and also showed an ability to rally from behind against the Devils and Capitals. That won’t be as easy against the playoff-hardened Panthers.

“They’re the reigning Cup champs,” Slavin said. “They know how to play this time of year. They’re a good team. … And so it’s a battle. It’s definitely a battle out there.”

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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1353396 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers hand Hurricanes 14th straight conference finals loss with Game 2 rout: Takeaways

By Michael Russo and Sean Gentille

May 22, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. — Well, unlike their previous five Eastern Conference final games against the Florida Panthers, the Carolina Hurricanes can't claim they deserved better this time.

From the opening puck drop, the Panthers dominated Thursday, beating the Canes into submission with constant pressure and scoring three goals in the opening 20 minutes of a one-sided 5-0 victory in Game 2 of the series at Lenovo Center.

The Hurricanes registered only five shots through 32 minutes, seven through 40 and 17 through 60, leading to restless fans chanting, "Shoot the puck!!!" throughout the second period.

"Our fans are amazing. The support they give us is incredible. We didn't have enough shots tonight, so there's probably something to it," Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said.

The defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers are now two wins away from making a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final as the series shifts to Florida with Games 3 and 4 on Saturday and Monday.

"It was a great game," said Sergei Bobrovsky, who made 17 saves for his franchise-record third shutout of the playoffs. "But we have to reset, refocus, be humble and get ready for home. It's a new game. The score is 0-0. We're going to prepare ourselves for the fight."

The Carter Verhaeghe-Sam Bennett-Matthew Tkachuk line factored in on three even-strength goals — by Gustav Forsling, Tkachuk and Bennett — with Bennett and Aleksander Barkov also adding power-play goals. Bennett tied Dallas' Mikko Rantanen for the league lead with nine playoff goals and notched Florida's first multi-goal game since Nate Schmidt and Tkachuk scored twice apiece in their first game of the postseason back in the first round on April 22 against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

That's how deep this team is.

Verhaeghe finished with three assists. The Panthers now have four power-play goals in two games after Carolina entered the series 28-for-30 on the penalty kill.

"It was an unreal start from us," Tkachuk said.

The loss extended Carolina's losing streak in Eastern Conference final games with Rod Brind'Amour as captain or coach to 14 games after the Canes were swept in 2009, 2019 and 2023.

The Panthers, on the other hand, have gone 14 consecutive Eastern Conference final games without losing in regulation. They have 12 wins in that stretch. Their last conference-final regulation loss was on May 28, 1996 in Game 5 against the Pittsburgh Penguins. They then won the final two games of that series to advance to the Stanley Cup Final against the Colorado Avalanche in only their third year of existence.

Florida, which swept Carolina in 2023, also became the first team to earn six consecutive wins against a single opponent in the round before the Stanley Cup Final since the Detroit Red Wings did it against the Chicago Blackhawks from Game 4 of the 1966 semifinal to Game 3 of 1995 conference final.

The Panthers are now 28-0 under Paul Maurice when holding a lead at the end of the first or second period in the playoffs.

The news wasn't all good for the Panthers, who lost regular-season scoring leader Sam Reinhart late in the first period with a lower-body injury. Coach Paul Maurice said he'll be examined Friday and he hopes to have an update Saturday.

Carolina right wing Seth Jarvis was hurt late in the second period when he was checked by Niko Mikkola. He played four shifts in the third period but not the final eight minutes. Similarly, defenseman Sean Walker was on the bench throughout the third period after being checked by A.J. Greer early in the second, but he didn't play a shift after the second intermission.

The Panthers improved to 7-2 on the road in the playoffs with a plus-25 goal differential (43-18). They've outscored their opponents 22-4 over the past four road games. What's behind it?

"If I knew that — I think we were a game over .500 on the road this year (20-19-2) — I would have used it way earlier," Maurice said. "I wouldn't have waited for the playoffs. I'd have fired that out in December."

Here are four takeaways.

Pressure breaks Canes

If you've paid attention to this series, or any other involving either of these teams for the past several years, you've heard plenty about their forechecks.

Florida, in the opening minute of the game, gave Carolina a costly reminder on it. The Panthers' first goal was a prime example of what sustained pressure can do, regardless of the opponent.

First, it was Tkachuk harassing Dmitry Orlov along the back boards. Orlov was almost certainly trying to rim the puck along the glass and out on his backhand, but he didn't come close to completing the play. Walker picked up the loose puck and shuffled it along to Andrei Svechnikov along the boards.

Svechnikov skated toward his own net before looping back up ice and attempting a pass to Jack Roslovic. Tkachuk picked off the puck and passed it to Forsling in the slot. Forsling's shot deflected off Orlov and past Freddie Andersen.

To go down by a goal 77 seconds into the game was a nightmarish start that Carolina couldn't afford — and it was a textbook goal for one of the league's elite pressure teams.

Then on Tkachuk's goal just inside 12 minutes into the period, the Verhaeghe-Bennett-Tkachuk line forechecked the heck out of the Canes again.

"First period, they were in their zone the whole period," Barkov said of the Bennett line.

"I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much," Brind'Amour said. "And then we're not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us. We were just — I didn't know what I was watching in the first period."

Tough start for Svechnikov

Svechnikov said before the series that during the 2023 playoffs, he used to drive to games and sit in his car for a while before being able to stomach entering the arena because he was "depressed." His season was lost with a torn ACL just after the trade deadline.

So after scoring eight goals in the first two rounds, Svechnikov could not wait to play the Panthers for the first time in this series.

Well, two games in, Svechnikov has one assist in two games, only one shot and Thursday night was minus-3 and took an undisciplined penalty that led to Florida's third goal of the first period.

Svechnikov was goaded into it by Tkachuk, who hit him with a reverse hit in the corner, then jabbed at his lower back with a cross-check in the neutral zone after Svechnikov took a run at him. Later in the shift, Svechnikov took another run at Tkachuk, then punched him in the back of the head at Carolina's bench.

On the ensuing power play, after Bobrovsky denied Jordan Martinook on a three-on-two shorthanded rush, Verhaeghe assisted on the first of Bennett's two goals.

"He had a tough night," Brind'Amour said. "He's trying, but we gotta do it within the way we need to (and) be on the same page. And he was on his own page tonight a little bit. Didn't work."

Freddie looks fried

For the second game in a row, the Hurricanes had problems extending beyond Freddie Andersen. For the second game in a row, he didn't come close to bailing them out and instead added to the pile.

Carolina's starting goaltender allowed three goals on the first five shots he faced and four on 16 overall in two periods of work before being replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov for the third.

Whether it was to spark the rest of the Hurricanes, to give Andersen a rest or to give Kochetkov a look at Florida before Game 3 may remain to be seen, but Brind'Amour certainly sounded uninterested in blaming Andersen for all that much.

"It wouldn't have mattered who we had in net tonight," he said.

Kochetkov replaced Andersen in Game 4 of Carolina's first-round series against the Devils and played competently enough, stopping 45 of 50 shots in two wins.

If Andersen does get the start Saturday, it'll be due to his play in the first two rounds, when he was deservedly showing up on Conn Smythe shortlists. It certainly won't be because he's been any good against the Panthers; Andersen has allowed nine goals on 31 shots in the series for a cool .710 save percentage. Two of Florida's goals (Tkachuk's and Bennett's second) started on wrap-around attempts by Verhaeghe.

Carolina's blue-line mess

On a few different occasions this week, Brind'Amour brought up defenseman Jalen Chatfield's absence as playing a major factor in the Game 1 result. It was understandable enough. Chatfield is a good, important player who helps the Hurricanes' defensive pairs fall into place.

Ahead of the game, it seemed like Carolina was going to get him back. Chatfield took line rushes and generally looked the part of a player who was preparing for a hockey game. When the scratch list came out, though, his name was on it. Scott Morrow, who struggled mightily in Game 1, was in his place. Alexander Nikishin, who replaced Chatfield in Game 5, was not.

Brind'Amour has not seemed enamored with either.

Lo and behold, Morrow played just 1:42 on two shifts in the first period. In the second, he was on the ice for 4:04 — and that was with Walker missing a chunk of the period after Greer's hit. It's tough to imagine Chatfield missing Game 3, especially if the alternative is Carolina basically playing a man down. The Hurricanes played most of the season with the same three defensive pairings, too, so they're particularly ill-equipped to handle this.

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1353397 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers star Sam Reinhart leaves Game 2 after Sebastian Aho hit, won't return

By Michael Russo

May 22, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. — Sam Reinhart, the Florida Panthers' first-line right wing and regular-season scoring leader, was knocked out of Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final Thursday night with a lower-body injury sustained late in the first period.

With the Panthers leading 3-0, Reinhart was nailed by a hip check from Carolina Hurricanes star forward Sebastian Aho as he crossed the blue line into Carolina's end. Reinhart's left leg took the brunt of the force. Reinhart was seen grimacing on the bench after the check. Reinhart played one more 12-second shift before period's end, then went to dressing room and didn't come out for the second period.

Reinhart, 29, scored 39 goals and 81 points in the regular season to become the first skater in club history to post four consecutive 30-goal seasons. He has led the Panthers in goals and points the past two regular seasons, scoring 57 and 94 in 2023-24. The 57 goals ranked second in the NHL that season, and his 96 over the past two seasons combined also rank second.

Reinhart also led all Panthers skaters with six points (two goals) in a first-round win over the Tampa Bay Lightning and has four goals and 11 points in 14 playoff games. He signed an eight-year, $69 million contract to forgo free agency after winning the Stanley Cup last season.

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1353398 Carolina Hurricanes

Jaccob Slavin, 'a walking manual for how to play defense,' has earned this moment

By Sean Gentille and Michael Russo

May 22, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. — For six years, Matthew Tkachuk and the most underrated elite defenseman in the NHL were ships passing in the night.

Tkachuk had heard things about Jaccob Slavin, of course. How could you not? The backbone of the Carolina Hurricanes might be under-discussed, but he is not invisible. But when Tkachuk played for the Calgary Flames, he only had to deal with Slavin twice a year, limiting his firsthand experience and forcing him to base most of his opinion on the words of others.

In the 2023 Eastern Conference finals, his appreciation grew.

"Each game you play (Slavin) you see something different," Tkachuk said.

To truly learn what Slavin is about, though, is to skate with him. To watch him up close — and on that front, thanks to the 11-year absence of true best-on-best international hockey, Tkachuk never had the opportunity. In February 2025, that changed.

"At that (4 Nations Face-Off)," Tkachuk said. "I really saw how unbelievable a player he is.

"Defensively, his stick, blocking shots, the little plays he'd make. He got every shot through. Like, the little stuff that people don't get credit for that you might look at — the top point-getters in the league for (defensemen) get all the credit. But I mean, he's right up there with the best in the world."

It made sense, then, for Tkachuk to help start a moment that Slavin, three months later, still seems to be living inside. He had already been one of the tournament's breakout stars in the United States; broadcast crews on ESPN and TNT decided, en masse, that it was time for the guy who does the little things better than anyone to assume a larger platform.

Tkachuk helped it along. Wearing a microphone for the 4 Nations final against Canada, Tkachuk, along with his brother Brady and Detroit Red Wings center Dylan Larkin, were recorded on the Team U.S. bench gassing up Slavin for one of his signature skills.

"What a stick, Slavo," Tkachuk yelled. "That was special."

On May 15, Capitals coach Spencer Carbery pushed the snowball even further down the hill, moments after his team's season ended. Carbery could've opened his media conference by saying anything about anyone. He chose to gas up the guy who'd tortured Washington most acutely in their five-game series, keeping the Capitals in neutral and turning yet another appreciator into a true believer.

"He doesn't get enough credit," Carbery said. "I think he's started to get credit since the 4 Nations. Jaccob Slavin — how he's not in the Norris Trophy conversation every single year, it doesn't seem right. Obviously the guys that are there are tremendous players in their own right, but that is one heck of a player.

“This team — and that’s the reason I mentioned Slavin early, because he leads the charge in this — they are just relentless with their pressure. And their ability to break plays up with their sticks, there’s no team in the league like ’em.”

Slavin, for his part, appreciates the shine but says he doesn’t require it. A lyric from the Christian artist Lecrae — “If you live for their acceptance, you’ll die from their rejection” — is never far from his mind.

Why this degree of recognition was delayed is, in all likelihood, due to a combination of factors. The Hurricanes play in a small market, which never helps. Their head coach is the face of their franchise, which is uncommon. Slavin’s game revolves around breaking up plays, batting down passes and cutting off puck carriers, which takes him out of the Cale Makar class.

“Slavin doesn’t get that (level of attention),” Minnesota Wild and Team USA defenseman Brock Faber said. “And so you never really understand the impact he can make on a game, with basically just being invisible, when you don’t notice him. He’s the best because he’s just closing plays. He’s not turning the puck over. He’s doing so many little things that just go unnoticed that make such an impact.”

Slavin’s 2024-25 season was, for him, boilerplate; he was seventh among regular NHL defensemen in both scoring chance percentage (57.4) and expected goals percentage (56.4) at five-on-five, according to Natural Stat Trick. He did all that playing tough minutes against elite competition, and he did it while leading one of the NHL’s best penalty kills. That’s who he is, and it’s who he’s been for years.

In any case, the recognition has arrived. And it’s deserved, regardless of how much time Slavin spends on tracking it.

“I think anybody would say it’s nice to have it happen that way and people starting to notice that you’re a good player, but at the end of the day for myself, it’s just words,” Slavin said. “It’s not where my identity lies. That’s not where my confidence comes from.”

And that confidence, if you watch closely enough, manifests on ice. What other word would you use to describe the goal Slavin scored to put Carolina up 2-0 in Game 4 of their first-round series against the New Jersey Devils?

Slavin, already inside New Jersey’s blue line, pressured Devils forward Stefan Noesen even further, denying the clearing attempt and setting up a bad-angle shot for himself that he still managed to bury.

It didn’t happen quickly enough to miss — but it might have happened too quickly for the full impact to fully register.

“Most players in that situation would be trying to get their stick in the lane, hoping to deflect the clearing attempt. Jaccob doesn’t just try to get his stick on it; he swings his stick down toward the puck like a fly swatter,” Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said.

“The audacity of that play is incredible — he’s not just trying to deflect the dump-out, he’s trying to catch it! And he does, and then he finishes the play with a perfect shot, but it all starts with a defensive stick play that I don’t think anyone else in the league would even try to make.”

Scott Morrow feels the same. The Hurricanes rookie defenseman, with all of 17 NHL games under his belt, has spent large chunks of the last few months watching Slavin at practice, on video and from the press box. In some ways, Morrow said, Slavin is “a walking manual for how to play defense.” In others, well …

“He’s an alien, almost, with how good he is at some of this stuff,” Morrow said. “I try and learn as much as I can, but there’s some things where I’m like, ‘Oh man, I don’t know if I could ever be as good as this guy at this specific thing.’”

Such as?

“The way he bats pucks out of the air, like, instinctively,” Morrow said. “If I’m playing a rush, I have my stick on the ice trying to take away the passing lanes, but he’s got the whole airspace covered as well. It’s insane how he has 3-4 a game where he just knocks out of the air and kills the play. It’s incredible to watch.”

That doesn’t just apply to rookies, either. Longtime teammates can be amazed, too.

“You try and get it through him and when you do, you get pretty excited about it. That’s like scoring a goal. So you cheer pretty hard when you can get it through him or get it by him,” said Jordan Martinook, who has played with Slavin since 2018.

“Obviously, we’re lucky to see that every day and we’re not gonna take it for granted, because he’s an incredible player and it’s nice that he starts getting some recognition that he deserves.”

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1353399 Carolina Hurricanes

What do NHL’s best forecheckers look like? Just watch Panthers and Hurricanes

By Matthew Fairburn

May 22, 2025

When Paul Maurice took over as head coach of the Florida Panthers in the summer of 2022, he was already thinking about the playoffs. He sought to make a subtle but important change to the Panthers’ rush-heavy offense that helped Florida lead the NHL in goals and win the Presidents’ Trophy the previous season.

“The Panthers were built on stretching and the speed game,” Maurice said during Florida’s run to the Stanley Cup Final in his first season. “It can be really good except for the most part, the rush game starts to disappear in the playoffs. So you need another piece.”

That other piece isn’t as glamorous but has become the foundation of who the Panthers are. According to SportLogic, no team in the NHL dumped the puck in more frequently than the Panthers this season. And no team had a higher dump-in retrieval rate than the Panthers. Forechecking has become Florida’s superpower. And you could say the same about the Carolina Hurricanes, the Panthers’ opponent in the Eastern Conference final.

“They play a simple game,” Panthers defenseman Seth Jones said of Carolina. “There’s no secret plays or anything like that. They’re a very straightforward hockey team. They have great sticks. It’s man-on-man. They’re in your face. There’s not a lot of space out there. It’s kind of a similar style to how we play. I think you’re going to see two similar styles going at it. They’re known for trying to suffocate you, not turning pucks over in the neutral zone and playing a brand of hockey that everyone understands how to play.”

As the NHL has become more about speed and skill, controlled zone entries and puck possession are at a premium. But Maurice recognized early on that the playoffs are a different game. Physicality and intensity ramp up, and there’s not as much time and space to create plays off the rush. The teams and players who thrive in that environment are willing to play the game another way.

Of the eight teams that advanced to the second round of the NHL playoffs, six were above average in terms of generating chances off the cycle and forecheck, according to AllThreeZones. The Panthers and Hurricanes, the two Eastern Conference finalists, were both among the top three teams in pressures per 60 minutes and puck retrievals per 60 minutes.

This isn’t just about a coach emphasizing a different playing style, either. Forechecking at the elite level required in the postseason is a skill that isn’t easy to find. We spent the latter part of the NHL season asking various defensemen and coaches about what makes a good forechecker and who stands out in that department. The Panthers and Hurricanes came up a lot.

“I think it’s one of those talents that the average fan doesn’t see or recognize,” said Sabres defenseman Mattias Samuelsson. “But when you know the game at a higher level and watch a lot of hockey, you can

pick that stuff up and really see who is effective in those situations. It's a unique skill."

The checking part is often the most noticeable element of forechecking. Capitals forward Tom Wilson jumps to mind as a relentless bruiser who is miserable to play against. And the Panthers lead the playoffs with more than 45 hits per 60 minutes during this postseason. But when asking around the league, a willingness to hit is only a small part of the equation. In some cases, that's exactly what the defenseman wants.

"As a D-man, I want the forechecker to try to hit me because usually that means their stick is in the air," Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman said. "That gives you a chance to get the puck out of the way."

Deception is the trait that comes up a lot when discussing the best forecheckers. As Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin said, "Really smart players are the scary ones." At lower levels, the fastest, most aggressive and most physical players are typically the difference-makers on the forecheck. But in the NHL, there are also subtle skills like reading the play and having the hand-eye coordination to pick off passes that make a big difference. Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy said a player needs physicality, hockey IQ and a good stick. Two of those three make an effective forechecker, all three make an elite forechecker.

"If they're right on you they're probably going to stay right on you," Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin said. "But if there's a little separation, you don't know if they're going to continue and try to hit you or peel off and try to take away your pass. Speed, deceptiveness and the smarts to read the play. Sometimes it might not be the first forechecker that is what kills a breakout."

The Hurricanes might be the best example of Slavin's last point. When asking defensemen the toughest forecheckers to play against, they rattled off some individuals but also routinely named the Hurricanes as a group.

"It doesn't surprise me that defensemen don't love playing against our team when it comes to the forecheck," Slavin said with a smile.

Part of it is how relentless the forwards are when pressuring the puck. But the involvement of the defensemen blocking passing lanes is a factor, too. The Hurricanes are connected as a group in a way that makes them exhausting to play against.

"You don't just go aimlessly running in there," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "You have to have good reads. The teams that do forechecking best understand it's a five-man forecheck. It's not about one guy."

According to AllThreeZones, no team in the NHL had more pressures per 60 minutes than the Hurricanes. They had 27.41 shots per 60 off the cycle and forecheck, according to AllThreeZones. That was three more shots per 60 than the next closest team.

"Carolina isn't going to finish every check but they're going to forecheck hard and pressure the puck," Sabres defenseman Connor Clifton said. "You try to go up the strong side and that F2 is already there on the wall and F3 is coming over. If you get it by F2, the next thing you know, the defenseman is pinching down the wall. You are one or two good plays from a two-on-one, but if they're on their game and anticipating where we're trying to go with it, it's just so hard to break out."

That showed up in Carolina's 4-1 series win over Washington in the second round. The Hurricanes had a 12:41 advantage in offensive zone time, according to SportLogic. They pressured the puck all over the ice and made life hell for the Capitals' defensemen.

But not every team is the Hurricanes. Individuals can make a difference in this area of the game. Forechecking is the ultimate effort skill in the ultimate effort sport. If you're relentless in your pursuit of the puck, shift after shift, it starts to wear on an opponent.

"Fitness is a big part of it," said Rangers and Team USA coach Mike Sullivan. "You have to be a dog on a bone on the puck and it takes effort."

"If a guy does lose you, you can stay in the hunt and maybe catch him from behind if he thinks he's beat you," Cassidy added. "Those are the (Brad) Marchands of the world, those guys that stay on battles."

The Panthers adding Marchand, one of the league's most tenacious forecheckers, was not only a natural fit. It made an already elite group even more of a headache to play against. Florida is led by arguably the best forechecker in the NHL in captain Aleksander Barkov. No player had more shots off the forecheck and cycle than Barkov this season, and he was among the league leaders in puck pressure and puck retrievals per 60, according to AllThreeZones. When your captain and best player is the one leading the way in that regard, it's easy to get buy-in from the rest of the team.

Rush offense will show up on the highlight reels throughout the regular season, but forechecking offense can make the biggest difference in May and June. Dumping the puck in is less risky than trying to make the extra play at the blue line. But you need to have players who skate well enough, have a physical edge and are able to win puck battles. Otherwise, dumping the puck in is just giving away possession. According to SportLogiq, the Panthers have the most goals within 10 seconds of a turnover during the playoffs. The Hurricanes have the most scoring chances within 10 seconds of a turnover. That's a direct result of the pressure they create on the forecheck.

Panthers vs Hurricanes…

Florida leads the playoffs in goals scored via turnovers.

Carolina leads in scoring chances off turnovers.

The forecheck starts before a team enters the zone, though. A team standing still and dumping the puck into the zone is not going to win the puck back often. Teams that are able to come through the neutral zone with speed and dump the puck to the right area of the ice have a chance to get an advantage. How a player dumps the puck is just as important as a willingness to dump it. Putting it in a place where the goalie can't easily get it and also to an area where a defenseman can't use the net to box out a forecheck is key to having a chance to create possession off a dump-in. The best forecheckers are also able to find an extra gear after they dump the puck in so they can either draw a penalty or at least prevent the defenseman from easily boxing him out of a play.

"It's all angles, right?" said Penguins defenseman Erik Karlsson. "Any team that comes with speed through the neutral zone and is not just dumping pucks in standing still on the blue line, it's hard. They're going to force you one way or the other. That initial forecheck might not always get the puck, but it's those second and third opportunities. Usually that's on the first guy to facilitate that without getting any real credit."

The impact of an effective forecheck is felt beyond the offensive zone, too. The neutral zone is where so many games are won and lost in the playoffs. The aim of the forecheck is to prevent a breakout first. A lousy forecheck makes it easy for a team to transition to offense through the neutral zone. The teams that can slow the other team down in their own end have a better chance of creating chaos in the neutral zone and controlling the pace of play.

That's a big reason the Panthers and Hurricanes are the last two teams standing in the Eastern Conference. They pressure the puck and mitigate risk by dumping the puck in and working to get it back. That style of play is repeatable and wears on the opposition.

"I think Carolina and Florida are the two teams in the East, and I'm not being disrespectful to the other teams, who most consistently play to their identity on a regular basis," Maurice said at the start of the series. "When you come watch Carolina play and come watch us play, you have a pretty good idea of what it's going to look like."

"We're built for playoffs and they are as well," added Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk.

Game 1 between the two teams provided plenty of evidence of that. The Panthers and Hurricanes combined for 97 hits in a game the Panthers won 5-2. And one of the keys to victory was Florida's ability to beat Carolina's forecheck. According to SportLogiq, the Panthers were able to exit their defensive zone with possession on 89 percent of their exit attempts. No team in these playoffs has been as successful at beating Carolina's forecheck in a single game.

"That's the game," Brind'Amour said after the game. "They're doing it, too. They're trying to forecheck, too. They probably put more pucks in than we did tonight. They put more stress on us than we did on them. That's how they play. That's why they're the best and we're trying to beat it."

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353400 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers at Hurricanes Game 2 picks, odds, schedule: Carolina narrow favorite, down 1-0

By Shayna Goldman

May 22, 2025

The defending-champion Florida Panthers took Game 1 of the Eastern Conference final on Tuesday night. Now it's up to the Carolina Hurricanes to swing the momentum while still on home ice. The Canes are slight favorites for Game 2, but the Panthers are -250 to take the series. Here's what you need to know heading into Thursday night's playoff action.

Shorthanded situations are one of the Hurricanes' best strengths. Their penalty kill is stingy in their own zone and disruptive enough to generate some chances. Heading into this series, the Canes only allowed two goals against, both to the Capitals. But the Panthers quickly doubled that in Game 1, with power-play tallies from Carter Verhaeghe and Sam Bennett.

The Hurricanes generated some momentum at times and tried to take back control; Sebastian Aho's late first-period goal gave Carolina a chance, and they amped up the pressure in the third period. But the Panthers had the answers on Tuesday night, with contributions from depth forwards and defensemen, physical play and steady goaltending. Sergei Bobrovsky gave his team a chance to win with a quality start, saving 1.17 goals above expected in all situations and earning a 0.939 save percentage.

The Panthers are just three wins away from reaching the Stanley Cup Final for the third straight year. Now the Canes have to find a way to swing the series back in their favor, before play shifts back to Florida.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353424 Florida Panthers

One year into fatherhood, Jonah Gadjovich 'loving life' and helping Panthers in playoffs

By Jordan McPherson

May 23, 2025 12:23 AM

RALEIGH, N.C.

The play won't make the highlight reels. It wasn't the difference maker in the Florida Panthers' 5-0 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday to take a 2-0 series lead in the best-of-7 Eastern Conference final.

But you wouldn't tell by the team's reaction when Jonah Gadjovich blocked a shot late in the third period with the game firmly in the Panthers' hands.

"The bench lost its mind," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said. "They cheer for each other differently."

Gadjovich is an easy player for the team to cheer for.

And Thursday was a particularly important day for the 26-year-old forward.

Thursday was the first birthday for his twins, son Lion and daughter Adalee.

"Oh, man, it's been busy, that's for sure," Gadjovich told the Miami Herald recently of how the past 12 months have been since becoming a dad. "We've had a lot of fun. It's been fun watching them grow up and start buzzing around and developing their little personalities. For me, obviously I come to the rink and try to do my job here, work hard, and then when I go home, I just go try to be full dad and full husband. Just loving life. It's good."

When the twins were born last year, Gadjovich spent a little more than a week away from the team. He rejoined them for Game 5 of their Eastern Conference final series against the New York Rangers — a game Florida ultimately won 3-2 in overtime and after which gave Gadjovich the game puck.

"So happy for him," defenseman Gustav Forsling said at the time. "Everything went well and it's cool to share. That's a good experience for him and I've been through that. It's awesome to see."

Gadjovich said becoming a parent made him learn "what you have to prioritize."

"Obviously, for me, now that's my kids," Gadjovich said. "I've got to do whatever I have to do for them and then hockey is after that. Family has to come first. There's been times throughout the year where you just have to figure out how to play tired. You have some sleepless nights or whatever, and you just have to find a way to do your job. It's been a learning experience, and I'm surrounded by such good staff and such a good group of guys here that they've all been so supportive. It's fun coming to the rink every day."

Especially now. While Gadjovich was with the Panthers throughout their run to their first Stanley Cup last season, he didn't play at all in the postseason.

This year, he finally drew into his first postseason contest in Game 3 of Florida's second-round series with the Toronto Maple Leafs when Maurice decided to swap out his entire fourth line. Gadjovich scored a goal that night, and the trio of Gadjovich, A.J. Greer and Tomas Nosek has been in the lineup ever since.

"Obviously, I was around last year and just watching what the guys were doing and trying to learn from them even though I wasn't in the lineup," said Gadjovich, who has two goals and an assist to go along with 40 hits in seven games on this playoff run. "I tried to, I guess, carry my experience over this year. My goal and focus was to just stay ready. I knew that if I was called on to get in the lineup that I'd be ready. I've just been having fun with it. There's honestly, a lot of stresses and anxieties that come along with playing in the NHL, but I'm just trying to have fun and check those aside and just enjoy what I'm doing."

Florida Panthers left wing Jonah Gadjovich (12) holds his twins, Lion and Adalee, after defeating the Edmonton Oilers in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final at Amerant Bank Arena on Monday, June 24, 2024, in Sunrise, Fla.

Florida Panthers left wing Jonah Gadjovich (12) holds his twins, Lion and Adalee, after defeating the Edmonton Oilers in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final at Amerant Bank Arena on Monday, June 24, 2024, in Sunrise, Fla. Matias J. Ocner mocner@miamiherald.com

He certainly is enjoying life, both on and off the ice.

The hope is that another Stanley Cup is on the horizon.

Lion and Adalee already got to experience it once, with Gadjovich and wife Allison putting both of them inside the Cup as the Panthers celebrated the victory last June.

"It was fun to have the twins on the ice and putting them in the Cup was just such a cool experience," Gadjoivch said. "They were still so tiny that they both fit in the Cup at that time. They're awesome. It's fun having them having them be part of that."

Florida is six wins away from the Gadjoviches getting to experience it again.

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1353425 Florida Panthers

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Cote: Florida Panthers' joy ride continues in 5-0 road mastery, 2-0 East finals lead as Carolina reels | 0pinion

By Greg Cote

Updated May 23, 2025 12:20 AM

"The Happiest Team in America" continues to lift South Florida as it deep-freezes opponents in its path.

The Florida Panthers are on the greatest stretch we have seen in Miami-area sports since the Heat's Big 3 era produced four straight NBA finals and two championships from 2010 to 2014. It will take 16 playoff victories for the Cats to win a second straight Stanley Cup, and they're 10 wins in now with Thursday night's 5-0 victory at Carolina in Game 2 of the NHL's Eastern Conference finals.

Teams up 2-0 in hockey playoff history have won the series 86.1% of the time, and now the Panthers head home to the Sunrise barn for games Saturday and Monday. Florida swept Carolina in the 2023 East finals. Can the Panthers do it again? The Hurricanes on Thursday lost a 14th consecutive conference final game, so they made need a pick axe and a miner's helmet to dig deep enough to locate any confidence.

Carolina looks overmatched — embarrassed — in this series, outscored 10-2 in the two games, as Florida continues not just winning, but having fun on the way.

Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour sounded beaten after the game. When a reporter began a question, "It started off, bad got worse..." — he jumped in with "You summed it up. Tough night. I didn't know what seeing that first period. Florida was on it. You gotta give them credit."

Florida is now on a 7-2 run on road playoff games, and by a 22-4 goals margin in the past four.

"It's fun when you go on the road and it goes quiet," Carter Verhaeghe said.

It was a couple weeks shy of 40 years ago when the late great Miami Hurricanes baseball coach Ron Fraser coined "The Happiest Team in America" to describe his 1985 College World Series-winning group.

For the first time since it's time to unearth the phrase for a South Florida team.

Sports Business Journal on Wednesday named the reigning Cup-champion Panthers the national "Sports Team of the Year" for March 2024 through February 2025, an honor that encompasses accomplishment both on and off the playing field, in this case ice. And so much of that success, both ways, is the culture of camaraderie and an emphasis on fun amid the pressure — a we-are-family vibe instilled when general manager Bill Zito and coach Paul Maurice took over.

The mood is light even when the task is heavy.

"Pressure is made up. It's a lot of noise, media attention," Brad Marchand says. "Pressure is something you can embrace or something you can be nervous about. This is why you work your whole life, to be in a position to have success. That excites you to wanna be a difference-maker, to want to be a hero. That's when the pressure just kind of slides off."

A late-season trade from Boston left Marchand trying to fit in with a team that once hated him. That team made it easy.

"I can't say enough about the organization or the group," he said. "Their culture is incredible."

This franchise treats its players right and the players respond. The roster is tailor-made with two kinds of 'fit' the prerequisite.

"The thing our management group does the best is find guys who can fit in the room and fit our style of play," Maurice said Wednesday, the order there intentional.

Led by the example of captain Aleksander Barkov, there is no caste system evident, no star-system in attitude. Matthew Tkachuk and Marchand are equal teammates with the guys on the fourth line.

"That's all Barkov," Maurice said. "Tkachuk and Brad, too, they're just one of the guys in the room."

That's how Maurice explains Florida's 7-2 record on the road this postseason.

"You are at an emotional deficit [on the road]," he said. "You get that emotion from the bench, from the guys supporting an encouraging each other. The players are running the bench."

Befitting that, the entire Panthers' depth chart is producing in these playoffs, the goals coming from all over the roster, all over the ice, as steady Sergei Bobrovsky protects the Cats' net in a masterful 'Playoff Bob' sequel. He has now allowed only six goals in the past six playoff games.

The Panthers led 1-0 Thursday just 77 seconds into Game 2 in a start straight out of a nightmare for Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour as Gustav Forsling put in a snap shot that turned Raleigh quiet. The setup was from Tkachuk as Forsling became the 18th different Cat and eighth different defensemen to score a goal this postseason.

"The team that loses the first game will come out with the hardest push possible," Maurice had said.

Instead it was Florida's fast start that had Carolina on its skate-heels.

Cats made it 2-0 mid-first on a Tkachuk tip-in from Verhaeghe — Tkachuk ending a nine-game goal drought this postseason.

Sam Bennett's tip-in made it 3-0 later in the first on a power play, with Verhaeghe also part of the assault on Carolina's blue half-moon. The Panthers given a man advantage in this series is like Jeff Bezos getting a raise. The scoring sequence followed a lovely Bobrovsky save on a shorthanded odd-man rush — the Cats firing on all cylinders. It took only five shots on goal for Florida to cash those three scores.

"It was an unreal start from us," said Tkachuk. "The way we played in the first period was as good as it gets."

The Verhaeghe-Bennett-Tkachuk line was fabulous Thursday.

"You saw a really veteran game out of those guys," Maurice said.

The only negative in a sublime opening period for Florida was Sam Reinhart leaving with an apparent knee injury after enduring a questionable hip-check hit from Sebastian Aho that the league should take a look at.

Florida caught a break 51 seconds into the second period when an apparent goal by Aho was negated by offside after a Panthers timeout and a smart coach's challenge by Maurice. I thought the overturn was justified but yet a close and perhaps debatable call. A bit of luck flew with Maurice's challenge.

"A pivotal moment," said the coach.

Bennett's second goal of the night and NHL-high ninth of the playoffs made it 4-0 in the final minute of the second period. Verhaeghe's big night continued with a wrap-around shot/pass that Bennett stuck in.

Florida had a modest 15 shots on goal through two periods but Carolina had a meager seven.

Frustrated Hurricanes fans were chanting, "Shoot the puck!"

The third period would bring no relief, or hope, to Carolina. They put the backup goalie in. A bit late?

The most notable shot in the third was the one Marchand took to flatten Shayne Gostisbehere for the intentional puck he had aimed at Marchand in Game 1.

The other one was Barkov's redirect of an Aaron Ekblad shot that made the 5-0 final.

Maurice afterward, respecting the opponent, said, "This is so much tighter than the score tells you. This is not a flow series. It's a grind."

To the rest of us, it seems like a rout.

"We want to get greedy," Panthers defenseman Seth Jones had said Thursday before the puck dropped. "We want to come in here and not be just OK because we won the first one.

We want to put their backs to the wall."

Consider it done.

The Cats' joy ride chugs on, strengthening, accelerating.

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1353426 Florida Panthers

Panthers wanted to put Hurricanes' 'backs against the wall.' Mission accomplished

By Jordan McPherson

Updated May 23, 2025 12:24 AM

RALEIGH, N.C.

The Florida Panthers had just one goal in mind on Thursday. They already took the series opener in the Eastern Conference final against the Carolina Hurricanes in convincing fashion.

Why stop there?

"We want to get greedy," defenseman Seth Jones said after the team's pregame morning skate. "We want to come in here and not just roll over and not be OK with playing an OK game just because we stole one on the road. We want to come here, get two [wins] and put their backs against the wall."

Mission accomplished.

The Panthers flat-out dominated the Hurricanes on Thursday, cruising to a 5-0 win at the Lenovo Center to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-7 series with a spot in a third consecutive Stanley Cup Final at stake.

The series now shifts to Sunrise for Games 3 and 4, with Florida in a position to sweep the Hurricanes in the conference final for the second time in three years.

"We got what we wanted," Bennett said, "but still obviously lots of work to do. We're not gonna relax or sit back now. We know it's gonna get more difficult for sure."

The Panthers thought that would have been the case on Thursday after their 5-2 win in the series opener on Tuesday. The expectation was the Hurricanes, who had strong underlying metrics in Game 1 but couldn't finish at the net, would apply pressure early and make the game competitive.

That was far from the case.

Defenseman Gustav Forsling opened scoring 1:17 into regulation to kickstart a three-goal first period despite the team only getting five shots on goal in the opening 20 minutes.

Star winger Matthew Tkachuk broke a 10-game goal drought. Bennett scored twice — with 4:10 left in the first period and again with 39 seconds left in the second — to give him three in the series and nine for the playoffs, moving him into a tie with Dallas' Mikko Rantanen for the most this postseason. Carter Verhaeghe had three primary assists.

They chased Carolina goaltender Frederik Andersen after two periods, with Andersen giving up nine total goals through the first five periods of the series. And for good measure, Aleksander Barkov added a power-play goal in the third period against Pyotr Kochtekov to round out scoring.

"It might have been natural for us to take a little bit to get going tonight, and it was the exact opposite," Tkachuk said. "It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets, and that's just a helluva road trip."

But perhaps the most dominant aspect of the win came on the defensive end. Florida held Carolina, the team that ranked second in the NHL in the regular season with an average of 31.7 shots on goal per game, to just 17 shots on goal — their lowest single-game mark of the playoffs (the previous was 18 in their 3-1 win over the Washington Capitals on May 15). Sergei Bobrovsky stopped them all for his third shutout of the postseason.

"The guys skated well," said Bobrovsky, who has a .958 save percentage (136 saves on 142 shots against) and two shutouts over his past six games. "They were always in front of them. They kept Carolina on the outside. It's a good challenge for us."

Carolina's appeared to score a goal in the opening minute of the second period, but it was overturned after Florida successfully challenged that Carolina was offside.

"At 3-1 with 39 minutes left, you've got a problem," Panthers coach Maurice said. "That was a really pivotal moment."

And Florida succeeded in that challenge despite note having star winger Sam Reinhart for the majority of the game. Reinhart, one of three finalists for the Selke Trophy given annually to the league's top defensive forward, exited the game after taking a hip check by Carolina forward Sebastian Aho with about five minutes left in the first period and was ruled out with a lower-body injury.

Maurice said Reinhart will be evaluated Friday and will have an update on his status before Game 3 on Saturday.

And the Panthers, even after outscoring the Hurricanes 10-2 through the first two games, aren't letting the early series lead make a difference in how they approach the games at home. They know Carolina has the potential to flip things quickly if there's any sense of hesitation.

"There's not the comfort level that the final score tells you," Maurice said. "You didn't feel [it was that lopsided]. ... I will not feel comfortable going into Game 3.

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1353427 Florida Panthers

Panthers' Sam Reinhart knocked out of Game 2 vs Hurricanes after hit by Aho

By Jordan McPherson

Updated May 22, 2025 9:41 PM

RALEIGH, N.C.

Florida Panthers star winger Sam Reinhart left Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final vs the Carolina Hurricanes with a lower-body injury after taking a hit by Sebastian Aho late in the first period.

The team announced that he will not return to the game.

Here's the hit from Aho that took out Reinhart.

We'll see if Reino comes back out for the 2nd.
pic.twitter.com/eGHBxBmFGQ

— Jameson Olive (@JamesonCoop) May 23, 2025

The hit came with just over five minutes left in the first period as Reinhart was entering the offensive zone on the power play. Aho checked Reinhart low, and Reinhart went tumbling down.

Reinhart entered Thursday with four goals and 11 points this postseason. He led the team in the regular season with 39 goals and 81 points.

Coach Paul Maurice rotated his fourth-line forwards at Reinhart's spot as the right wing on Florida's top line with Evan Rodrigues at left wing and Aleksander Barkov at center. Carter Verhaeghe is also taking some shifts with the top line, with Tomas Nosek and A.J. Greer moving into Verhaeghe's spot on the second line when that happens.

Florida led 3-0 at the end of the first period.

Miami Herald LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353428 Florida Panthers

Eastern Conference final live updates: Florida Panthers vs Carolina Hurricanes, Game 2

By Jordan McPherson

Updated May 22, 2025 11:46 PM

The Florida Panthers already took one game on the road from the Carolina Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference final.

Can they head home with a commanding 2-0 lead in the best-of-7 series, or will things be level when the series shifts to Sunrise?

Puck drop for Game 2 on Thursday from Raleigh's Lenovo Center is set for 8 p.m. The game will be broadcast on TNT and truTV while available via stream on Max.

Follow along throughout the game for live updates, news, analysis and commentary.

Panthers dominate again

It was an all-around stellar effort for the Panthers, who trounced the Hurricanes 5-0 to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-7 series.

The recap is here.

Goalie change for Carolina

Frederik Andersen is out of the game. Pyotr Kochetkov is in net for Carolina to start the third period.

Bennett strikes twice

Sam Bennett gets his second goal of the game with 39 seconds left in the second period.

He has nine goals this postseason — tied with the Dallas Stars Mikko Rantanen for most in the NHL.

It's 4-0 Panthers after two periods.

Sam Reinhart out rest of Game 2

Florida Panthers star winger Sam Reinhart left Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final vs the Carolina Hurricanes with a lower-body injury after taking a hit by Sebastian Aho late in the first period.

The full story is here.

Panthers' road dominance continues

With three more goals tonight, the Panthers have matched the record for the most road goals within the first nine road games of a postseason with 41. They join the 2022 Colorado Avalanche.

All Panthers in the first period

Florida keeps the 3-0 lead after one period.

Shots on goal have been minimal — the Panthers have a 5-3 edge — despite 34 total shot attempts.

One thing to monitor: Sam Reinhart went to the room late in the first period after a hit from Sebastian Aho.

Here's the hit from Aho that took out Reinhart.

We'll see if Reino comes back out for the 2nd.
pic.twitter.com/eGHBxBmFGQ

— Jameson Olive (@JamesonCoop) May 23, 2025

And now a power play goal

It's 3-0 Panthers after a Sam Bennett power-play goal.

Carolina goaltender Frederik Andersen had given up 12 total goals through the first two rounds of the playoffs. He has given up eight — 8! — through just under four periods against the Panthers.

Tkachuk goal

2-0 Panthers. That Matthew Tkachuk guy finally got a goal. First for him since Game 3 vs. Tampa to snap a 10-game goal-less drought.

8:19 left in the first.

Panthers strike early

Gustav Forsling opened scoring 1:17 into regulation, scoring on a pass from Matthew Tkachuk.

He is the 18th Panthers player and seventh defenseman to score a goal this postseason.

Nevermind

Well, it looks like Chatfield isn't playing after all. He's listed as a scratch on the roster report. Scott Morrow is back in the lineup.

Jalen Chatfield back for Carolina?

The Hurricanes' blue line appears to be getting a boost, with top-four defenseman Jalen Chatfield appearing to be back in the lineup. Mark Jankowski is also replacing Jesperi Kotkaniemi. Here's how Carolina's lineup looked during warmups...

Forward pairs

Andrei Svechnikov-Sebastian Aho-Seth Jarvis

Taylor Hall-Jack Roslovic-Logan Stankoven

William Carrier-Jordan Staal-Jordan Martinook

Eric Robinson-Mark Jankowski-Jackson Blake

Defense pairs

Jaccob Slavin-Brent Burns

Dmitry Orlov-Jalen Chatfield

Shayne Gostisbehere-Sean Walker

Goaltenders

Frederik Andersen

Pyotr Kochetkov

Panthers lines in warmups

The Panthers' lines and pairings during pregame warmups looked like the usual...

Forward lines

Evan Rodrigues-Aleksander Barkov-Sam Reinhart

Carter Verhaeghe-Sam Bennett-Matthew Tkachuk

Eetu Luostarinen-Anton Lundell-Brad Marchand

A.J. Greer-Tomas Nosek-Jonah Gadjovich

Defense pairs

Gustav Forsling-Aaron Ekblad

Niko Mikkola-Seth Jones

Nate Schmidt-Dmitry Kulikov

Goaltenders

Sergei Bobrovsky

Vitek Vanecek

Series schedule

▪ Game 1 — Panthers 5, Hurricanes 2: Florida struck early, played its defense-centric style the rest of the way and had a steady performance in net from Sergei Bobrovsky to take the series opener. Carter

Verhaeghe, Aaron Ekblad, A.J. Greer, Sam Bennett and Eetu Luostarinen all scored for the Panthers, with Verhaeghe and Bennett scoring on the power play.

▪ Game 2: Tonight

▪ Game 3: Saturday, May 24, 8 p.m., TNT, truTV, Max, Sunrise's Amerant Bank Arena

▪ Game 4: Monday, May 26, 8 p.m., TNT, truTV, Max, Sunrise's Amerant Bank Arena

▪ Game 5 (if necessary): Wednesday, May 28, 8 p.m., TNT, truTV, Max, Raleigh's Lenovo Center

▪ Game 6 (if necessary): Friday, May 30, 8 p.m., TNT, truTV, Max, Sunrise's Amerant Bank Arena

▪ Game 7 (if necessary): Sunday, June 1, 8 p.m., TNT, truTV, Max, Raleigh's Lenovo Center

Pregame reading

Need to catch up ahead of Game 2? Here are the highlights of the Miami Herald's coverage over the past few days.

▪ The Panthers have dominated on the road this playoffs. Game 1 vs. Carolina was no exception

▪ Led by Bobrovsky, Panthers handle Hurricanes in Game 1 of Eastern Conference final

▪ Why Sam Bennett's goal in Florida's Game 1 win against Carolina had special meaning

▪ Panthers stay mum on Marchand-Gostibehere dustup in Game 1 of Eastern Conference final

▪ How one key play highlighted three under-the-radar Panthers to start the conference final

Miami Herald LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353429 Florida Panthers

How one key play highlighted three under-the-radar Panthers to start the conference final

By Jordan McPherson

Updated May 22, 2025 4:08 PM

RALEIGH, North Carolina

The play was executed perfectly, even if Paul Maurice never wants to see it again.

As center Tomas Nosek drove down the ice through the neutral zone on the boards early in the second period of the Florida Panthers' Eastern Conference final opener against the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday, Niko Mikkola tapped his stick on the ice calling for the pass. Nosek obliged, sliding the puck to the defenseman in the middle of the ice as they entered the offensive zone.

Mikkola used his stick to work around Carolina defenseman Scott Morrow and send a slick pass across the crease to winger A.J. Greer, who fired a one-timer past Hurricanes goaltender Frederik Andersen 3:33 into the middle frame.

The play was pivotal. It gave Florida a two-goal lead in their eventual 5-2 win and stunted any chance for the Hurricanes to steal momentum after scoring in the final seconds of the first period.

As for the play itself? It's one Maurice doesn't care for. Passes to the inside at the blue line are risky. If it isn't executed properly, it can result in an easy takeaway and clear breakaway for the opponent.

"I got mocked heavily on the bench for that goal," Maurice said with a smile postgame. "It was a wonderful inside play to Mikkola at the line, which I abhor. We're going to do everything we can to never see that again."

Added Nosek: "If you make those plays, you have to make it. If you don't, then you get in trouble."

Nevertheless, the play highlighted three under-the-radar players who have been critical for this Panthers team on their latest deep playoff run.

Nosek and his second chance

Nosek's season with the Panthers hasn't been the smoothest.

He got injured early in training camp and didn't play his first game until Nov. 1. He held his own as Florida's fourth-line center and a key player on the penalty kill but dropped out of the lineup after the team acquired Nico Sturm at the trade deadline.

But injuries and Florida opting to rest players down the stretch of the regular season gave Nosek a second chance to show he can make an impact for the Panthers when it matters most.

And since rejoining the lineup full-time in Game 3 of Florida's second-round series against the Toronto Maple Leafs, he has stepped up. Nosek has three assists and has a plus-minus rating of plus-5.

On three separate occasions, he has had to move up in the lineup midgame — twice because of injury (Evan Rodrigues in Game 4 against Toronto and Anton Lundell in Game 7 against Toronto) and once because of an ejection (Brad Marchand in Game 1 against Carolina).

"It's a credit to him because that's a tough situation," Maurice said. "His play was fine all year, and then we were looking to improve our penalty kill, we made a trade and kind of cost him his job for a little while. But to his credit, he kept working. ... I think he probably also kind of looked at it like a second chance to maybe — I don't think he took it for granted at first, but certainly he didn't take it for granted when he came back in."

Mikkola the 'Condor'

Mikkola is a big-bodied defenseman at 6-6 and 204 pounds, which has brought out a new nickname: The Condor.

"Bird of prey," Maurice said. "More of a scavenger."

Mikkola has been a steady presence in Florida's lineup ever since he signed a three-year deal ahead of the 2023-24 season. He was known more for his defensive prowess than offensive skill up to that point in his career.

But once he got to Florida, the offensive numbers have seen an uptick while his defense has remained steady.

He logged 39 points (nine goals, 30 assists) the past two regular seasons after having just 23 total points (five goals, 18 assists) in his first four-plus seasons in the NHL.

"It's the agility," Maurice said. "[His previous teams] played completely different games than we played. Then he gets here, and he's up the ice all the time. ... His straight-line speed is incredible."

So, too, is his relationship with his teammates. While Mikkola comes off as quiet in public settings, he's constantly chatting on the bench. Sometimes it's going over the previous shift. Other times, it's just joking around.

"Sometimes I don't even know what he's saying," fellow defenseman Gustav Forsling said, "but he's always coming back to the bench saying something, and it's hilarious."

Added defenseman Aaron Ekblad: "I always find myself chuckling when he comes back to the bench and he's yelling about something."

And they marvel at his skill set as well.

"He's such a complete defenseman," forward Carter Verhaeghe said. "If I was on the other team, I definitely wouldn't like playing against him. He has such a long reach, good stick and he's a good skater."

Greer adding to Panthers' identity

And then there's Greer, who brings a perfect blend of physicality and offensive pop to fit exactly what Maurice wants in a fourth-line forward.

He led the Panthers in the regular season with 222 hits while setting or matching career highs in goals (six), assists (11) and points (17).

Greer has points in three of Florida's past four games while still showcasing his brute force on the ice (33 hits in nine games).

"There's an identity on that fourth line. Whether you're in or you're out you know how to play,'' Greer said. "You know that you're going to get a call and you're going to have to be ready. It was a big moment in my career to get that first playoff game under my belt. I just want to come in and help the team as much as possible. ... You know what your job is. The more I get into it, it just becomes another game. It's the best time of year and it's stuff that you dream about. I'm very grateful."

Miami Herald LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353430 Florida Panthers

Panthers stay mum on Marchand-Gostibehere dustup in Game 1 of Eastern Conference final

By Jordan McPherson

Updated May 22, 2025 1:14 PM

RALEIGH, North Carolina

If Florida Panthers winger Brad Marchand had thoughts on the dustup between him and Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere on Tuesday, he kept them to himself.

The two tussled in the third period of Florida's 5-2 win in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference final after Gostisbehere intentionally shot a puck at Marchand in retaliation for Marchand "trying to take a run at me," as Gostisbehere put it.

Marchand was assessed a four-minute double-minor penalty for roughing and a 10-minute misconduct after the scrap.

"I'm not much of a thinker," Marchand said after morning skate Thursday. "I don't have much thought on that situation."

The Panthers have stayed relatively low-key with their reactions to the play.

Panthers coach Paul Maurice, who rarely speaks about plays that could lead to discipline, declined to give his thoughts on the incident postgame Tuesday.

On Wednesday, when asked how he would categorize a play when a player intentionally shoots a puck at another player, he simply said "it's somebody else's problem," alluding to that being something the league deals with.

Added defenseman Aaron Ekblad: "We block shots all the time, so what's the difference? ... Intent or not, it hurts the same."

Gostisbehere was not fined by the NHL's Department of Player Safety.

Panthers named SBJ team of year

The Florida Panthers on Wednesday were named the "Sports Team of the Year" by the Sports Business Journal.

The announcement was made at SBJ's 18th annual Sports Business Awards, which celebrate excellence in the business of sports and factor all facets of the team's operations both on and off the ice. The Panthers were also nominated for "Team of the Year" in 2023.

The other nominees for Sports Team of the Year were the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, WNBA's Indiana Fever, MLS' Inter Miami CF, MLB's Los Angeles Dodgers, NFL's Washington Commanders and USA Gymnastics.

"The Florida Panthers are honored to be named 'Sports Team of the Year,' a humbling acknowledgment of how far our team has come under the passionate and steadfast leadership of the Viola family," Panthers president and CEO Matt Caldwell said in a statement. "We are grateful to Sports Business Journal for this tremendous recognition that represents the unwavering and unified commitment of our players, coaches, staff members and ownership to success both on and off the ice."

In addition to winning the franchise's first Stanley Cup last June, the Panthers sold out of season ticket allotment for the first time in franchise history and generated a more than $125 million impact on the local economy through the last two Stanley Cup Playoff runs, both of which ended in the Stanley Cup Final. The club also secured a new media rightsholder partnership with Scripps Sports, which increased access to Panthers hockey to more than 2.6 million households for free and doubled viewership in the first year.

The Panthers also amended and extended the Arena Operating Agreement for the County-owned facility Amerant Bank Arena to stay in Broward County long-term, opened their new practice facility Baptist Health IcePlex and reopened a revitalized War Memorial Auditorium concert venue in Fort Lauderdale.

Charlotte Checkers

The Panthers aren't the only team under the organization's umbrella having postseason success.

The Charlotte Checkers, who are the Panthers' American Hockey League affiliate, on Wednesday advanced to the conference finals of the Calder Cup playoffs after completing a three-game sweep of the Hershey Bears, the affiliate for the Washington Capitals and the back-to-back defending Calder Cup champions.

This puts Charlotte two rounds away from winning the Calder Cup for the second time in team history and first since 2019.

The Checkers became the Panthers' AHL affiliate beginning with the 2021-22 season. This season is the furthest they have advanced while affiliated with Florida.

Forward Rasmus Asplund, who played in six games with the Panthers this season, leads the Checkers with four goals and is tied for the team lead with six points through their first two rounds of the Calder Cup playoffs. Others players on the Checkers roster who spent time with the Panthers this season include defenseman Tobias Bjornfot (two goals, three assists in playoffs), forward Jesse Puljujarvi (four assists in playoffs) and defenseman Matt Kiersted (one assist in playoffs).

Goaltender Kaapo Kahkonen, who the Panthers acquired at the trade deadline, has played all eight games in net, posting a 1.85 goals against average and .918 save percentage.

Miami Herald LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353431 Florida Panthers

Dave Hyde: Everything looks possible as Panthers cruise past Carolina in Game 2

Dave Hyde4-5 minutes 23/05/2025

It was 1-0 in the opening seconds, 2-0 before everyone settled in and, when it reached 3-0 still in the first period, it wasn't so much that anything looked possible Thursday for the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final.

Everything looked possible beyond this night, too.

A sweep-peat of Carolina?

Why not?

A little rest before the Stanley Cup Final?

That, too.

And then? Do you dare look where the defending champs aren't?

“Fun,’’ was the word Panthers Carter Verhaeghe used to describe silencing another road crowd with a 5-0 win over Carolina Thursday night.

That wasn’t a quiet in Carolina like the one Sunday in a Game 7 drubbing of Toronto that said their season was done. But Thursday felt close to that. It felt like Carolina fans wondered if they’d get this series back.

The Panthers are capable of ending it the next two games in Sunrise. That introduces an odd question: Do they want to come home Saturday night for Game 3?

Thursday made four straight road wins for the Panthers — two in Toronto, two in Carolina — by a combined 22-4 goal differential. They aren’t just winning these games. They’re dominating them. They picking teams up and dragging them around the ice.

“There was nothing good from this game for us,’’ Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “We’re going to have learn from it, but everybody has to be better.”

Brind’Amour talked after Game 1 about the need to come out desperate, and the loud crowd backed up the idea …

Until the Panthers trademark aggressive forecheck led Matthew Tkachuk to intercept a pass and feed Gustav Forsling’s opening goal just over a minute into the game.

Until another aggressive forecheck led Carter Verhaeghe to try to jam home a wraparound shot and the saved puck was left for Tkachuk to put in the net.

Until Sam Bennett then scored the first of his two goals that tie him for the NHL playoffs lead with nine.

“I don’t know what I was watching that first period,’’ Brind’Amour said. “That didn’t go well.”

The Panthers had three goals that period. Carolina had three shots.

“Shoot … the … puck!’’ Carolina fans were chanting by the second period.

Two years ago, when the Panthers swept Carolina in these same conference finals, each win was by a goal and Brind’Amour said people would, “look back at this and everyone’s going to say you got swept. That’s not what happened … It could’ve been four games the other way.”

No one was saying anything in these opening two games could go the other way.

“You got to give (the Panthers) credit,’’ Brind’Amour said. “I hope you’re not missing that.”

It wasn’t all good news for the Panthers. Sam Reinhart’s knee was injured after a borderline hip-check by Carolina’s Sebastian Aho. Coach Paul Maurice said afterward there was no word on the extent of Reinhart’s injury, but that is a core loss no team can afford this deep into the playoffs.

Reinhart is part of the Panthers’ talent nucleus. Toronto showed the problem with only having a Core Five of talent. The Panthers have a Dirty Dozen — yeah, embrace that style (Reinhart, Bennett, Tkachuk, Forsling, Verhaeghe, Aleksander Barkov, Sergei Bobrovsky, Anton Lundell, Niko Mikkola, Aaron Ekblad, Seth Jones and Brad Marchand).

Of course, that means leaving a few out and …

“The biggest cheer on the night was when Jonah Gadjovich blocked a shot,’’ Maurice said. “The bench lost its mind.”

Maybe your mind was blown, too, by these four straight road games. Not many teams are capable of that kind of focused domination. But these Panthers keep showing they aren’t any team. Remember what Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said after losing in the opening series — “They’re excellent. Not average. Excellent.”

Nothing has happened thus far in the playoffs to think otherwise.

“We’re prepared,’’ Tkachuk sad. “We know how we’re going to play. We know how each line is going out and we’ll roll over lines and it doesn’t always work perfectly. Sometimes you get beat. But when you have a good plan and a great work ethic that’s where it starts.”

They finished off Toronto and put Carolina on the ropes on this road trip. Now let’s see what they can do at home.

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353432 Florida Panthers

Panthers blow out Hurricanes for second straight game, take 2-0 lead in series

By Adam Lichtenstein | alichtenstein@sunsentinel.com | South Florida Sun Sentinel

UPDATED: May 23, 2025 at 12:56 AM EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Panthers have a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference final after beating the Hurricanes in Game 2 on Thursday. But the mere two-game lead undersells Florida’s dominance in the series.

After beating Carolina 5-2 in Game 1, the Panthers put together an even more lopsided performance on Thursday, routing the Hurricanes 5-0 at the Lenovo Center. Now Florida returns to Sunrise with a chance to sweep Carolina in the conference final for the second time in three years.

“It might have been natural for us to take a little bit to get going tonight, and it was the exact opposite,” Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk said. “It was an unreal start from us. The goals aside, just the way we played in the first period was as good as it gets, and that’s just a helluva road trip.”

The Panthers seized control of the game almost immediately. The Hurricanes turned the puck over in their own zone; Tkachuk got in the way of a pass and quickly gave it to Gustav Forsling, who fired a shot past Carolina goalie Frederik Andersen. The goal was Forsling’s first of the playoffs. He is the 18th Florida player to score in the postseason and seventh defenseman.

Tkachuk got a goal of his own later in the first period. Carter Verhaeghe wrapped around the net and took a close-range shot, and the puck tipped off Tkachuk and past Andersen to give Florida an early 2-0 lead. The goal broke Tkachuk’s 10-game goalless streak.

“I just took the puck, got a nice play from (Nike Mikkola),” Verhaeghe said. “(Bennett) was hard on the forecheck, and (Mikkola) gave it to me. I just took it to the net, saw Matthew driving back door, and just tried to put on a stick and he did the rest like he does.”

The offensive bombardment continued with a Panthers power play in the final five minutes of the period. Florida started the man advantage slowly, with Carolina getting the first good chance while down a player. But Sam Bennett deflected a Carter Verhaeghe shot into the net, notching his team-leading eighth goal of the playoffs.

The stellar first period did not come without a cost, though. Star winger Sam Reinhart left the game and was ruled out with an injury after a hit from Sebastian Aho. Florida coach Paul Maurice did not have an update on Reinhart after the game.

The Hurricanes appeared to get some momentum back after the first intermission, with Aho getting a puck past Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky. But Maurice challenged the goal for offsides, and the goal was overturned.

“It’s three-nothing but at three-one with 39 minutes left, you’ve got a problem,” Maurice said. “So that was a really pivotal moment.”

The Panthers’ defense continued breaking up Hurricanes scoring attempts throughout the second period, and Bennett added to the lead with 39 seconds left in the fourth period. His two-goal game is the first multi-goal game for a Panther since Tkachuk and defenseman Nate Schmidt scored two each in Game 1 of the first round against Tampa Bay. Bennett is now tied with Dallas star Mikko Rantanen for the most goals in the playoffs so far.

Florida’s prolific offense chased Andersen — who entered the series as the league’s top goaltender in the playoffs — after the second period.

Andersen allowed nine goals in the first two games of the series. On the other side of the ice, Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky turned in his second stellar game in a row, stopping 16 shots en route to a shutout — his third of this year's playoffs.

"(The defensive players) do their job very well," Bobrovsky said. "So we work for each other, and it's fun to be (here). We build the atmosphere here, and it's a pleasure to be part of this atmosphere."

The goalie change did not help much, as Panthers center Aleksander Barkov tipped in an Aaron Ekblad shot on a power play, putting the last nail in Carolina's Game 2 coffin.

The Panthers return to Sunrise with a 2-0 lead in the conference finals. Game 3 is Saturday at 8 p.m., and Maurice believes it will be closer than the first two games' scorelines indicate.

"This is so much tighter than the score tells us," Maurice said.

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353433 Florida Panthers

Panthers star Sam Reinhart ruled out for Game 2 with injury

By Adam Lichtenstein | alichtenstein@sunsentinel.com | South Florida Sun Sentinel

UPDATED: May 22, 2025 at 11:40 PM EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — Panthers star Sam Reinhart left Florida's Game 2 win against the Hurricanes with a lower-body injury, the Panthers announced during the first intermission.

Reinhart took a big lower-body hit from Carolina's Sebastian Aho in the first period, left the game and did not return. Florida coach Paul Maurice did not have an update on Reinhart after the game.

"He'll get looked at tomorrow. … Saturday, I'll have something," Maurice said.

Florida turned to a mix of Carter Verhaeghe and fourth-line forwards A.J. Greer, Tomas Nosek and Jonah Gadjovich to fill in for Reinhart for the final two periods of the win.

"Obviously, hate to see a guy go down, and as a team and as a band of brothers, you pick everyone up," Greer said. "So as far as myself getting upline shifts, that's great. I don't see myself trying to change my game at all, and I'm trying to just do the same things I do on the fourth line, and not trying to force anything. So I thought we did a really good job at kind of staying composed there."

Reinhart, a first-line forward, has four goals and seven assists in the playoffs this year. His 11 playoff points were tied for third on the team entering Thursday's Game 2.

Reinhart had a team-leading 39 goals and 81 points during the regular season.

"We've had guys step up all year, and when guys go down, it's just someone else's opportunity to fill a bigger role," Panthers forward Sam Bennett said. "And again, everyone stepped up tonight and helped fill that massive hole."

Here's the hit from Aho that took out Reinhart.

We'll see if Reino comes back out for the 2nd.
pic.twitter.com/eGHBxBmFGQ

— Jameson Olive (@JamesonCoop) May 23, 2025

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— Jameson Olive (@JamesonCoop) May 23, 2025

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353434 Florida Panthers

Panthers have 'a quiet confidence' in playoffs, 'so just believe'

By Adam Lichtenstein | alichtenstein@sunsentinel.com | South Florida Sun Sentinel

PUBLISHED May 22, 2025 at 1:39 PM EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — While the Panthers recovered from their Game 1 win against the Hurricanes and prepared for Thursday's Game 2, Dallas and Edmonton kicked off the Western Conference final. It proved to be one of the wildest games in this year's postseason.

The visiting Oilers, who were the Panthers' opponent in last year's Stanley Cup Final, took a 3-1 lead over the hosting Stars. But Dallas battled back, scoring five goals in the third period to win Game 1, 6-3. It was the latest in a long list of dramatic playoff swings, which the Panthers have experienced numerous times in their three playoff runs under Paul Maurice.

"The emotions for both teams can swing in the playoffs far more radically than they do in the regular season," Maurice said. "So at 3-1 in the regular season, yeah, you score the next goal. But the 3-1 in the playoffs, when that next goal goes in — especially if you're in the home building — you've got a lot of time on the clock in the third period. It's only one shot. It's almost that overtime feel. Handling those emotions and settling back in the game are really important."

The Panthers are in a different situation. They beat the Hurricanes 5-2 on the road, giving them an early advantage in the Eastern Conference final. Teams that have won Game 1 of the conference or Stanley Cup finals over the last three years won eight of those nine series.

That might be an interesting stat, but it means nothing to the Panthers, who won Game 1 of the first round against the Lightning but lost two in a row to start their second-round series against the Maple Leafs.

"I didn't feel after Game 1 win against Tampa or the Game 1 game the other night that there was any kind of euphoria," Maurice said. "They're happy, but it's over. And then when we lost Game 1 in Toronto, … it was almost like the series starts now."

Defenseman Seth Jones, who joined the team in March, said he was surprised by the team's drive to win another Stanley Cup when he first arrived. When Florida fell behind 2-0 to Toronto, he noticed that there was no defeatism in the locker room.

"There's definitely a quiet confidence in this room," Jones said. "I think in the Toronto series, it (was) different because they're supposed to win their two home games, right? So we knew we had the opportunity to win our two home games. And the series doesn't really start till someone wins on the road, right? So we understood that if we took care of business at home, that was going to be back to a 2-2 series.

"But going down 0-2, we had a lot of confidence in this room that — like I keep saying — if we play the way we know how to play, we're going to give ourselves a good chance."

Center Anton Lundell, who has been a part of the Panthers' Stanley Cup Final runs the last two years, has seen his team take early series leads and nearly lose and come back from early series deficits. He has learned that the playoffs are "all about momentum."

"Sometimes you're behind and sometimes you feel good and you have the lead," Lundell said. "But you just got to battle all the way, as we saw yesterday. It's never over, and a lot can happen even if you're a few goals behind. So just believe."

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353435 Florida Panthers

CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 23, 2025

Evacuate! Panthers Start Game 2 Fast and Furious, Run Hurricanes

Published 5 hours ago on May 22, 2025 By George Richards, FHN Publisher

The Florida Panthers have evacuated the Carolinas, and are headed home with a commanding lead after controlling Game 2 of the 2025 Eastern Conference finals against the Hurricanes.

The Panthers scored three in the first period, again hearing the home team booed off the ice.

Florida kept up the pressure on Carolina and won 5-0 to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-7 series.

The Panthers have won six straight against the Hurricanes in the ECF dating to 2023 — with Carolina now having lost an NHL-record 14 straight in the ECF since winning the Stanley Cup in 2006.

Of the Panthers' 10 playoff wins this year, seven have come on the road — and they have outscored Toronto and Carolina 22-4 in their past four wins.

Florida came out hot from the start, Gus Forsling — who was waived by the Hurricanes in 2021, then claimed by the Panthers — making it 1-0 at 1:17.

The Panthers got a goal from Matthew Tkachuk off the left post at 11:41; Sam Bennett deflected a Carter Verhaeghe power-play shot at 15:50 for the 3-0 lead.

Bennett got his second late in the second — off another Verhaeghe wraparound.

Verhaeghe (three assists) and Bennett (goal, two assists) had three-point nights; Tkachuk and Aaron Ekblad each had two points.

Sergei Bobrovsky only faced three shots in the first, and, aside for a few Grade-As, had a quiet night.

Still, 17 saves or not, it is his third shutout of these playoffs — most in a single postseason since Andrei Vasilevskiy had five in 2021.

Andersen left after the second period down 4-0. After giving up 10 goals in his first nine playoff games, he allowed nine to the Panthers in just two.

Sasha Barkov made it 5-0 on a power-play deflection of a point shot from Ekblad in the third.

Game 3 is on Saturday night in Sunrise.

ECF GAME 2: PANTHERS @ HURRICANES

The Panthers played much of Thursday without top scorer Sam Reinhart (lower body) after he collided with Sebastian Aho in the first.

Florida is the sixth team in Stanley Cup playoff history to score five or more goals in four consecutive road games. The 2022 Oilers and Avalanche did it last.

Tkachuk has recorded a point in all six playoff games against the Hurricanes dating to 2023. Only three players in Panthers history have posted a run of that length in the playoffs against one opponent: Barkov (seven vs. BOS 2023-24) and Verhaeghe (six vs. TBL 2024-25). Tkachuk also had a six-game scoring streak against Tampa Bay (2024-25).

Forsling became the 18th different Florida player with a goal this postseason. The only teams in NHL history with more through 14 games in a playoff year are the 1988 Bruins, 1987 Flyers and 1984 Oilers (all with 19).

Forsling's goal was also the fastest by a Florida defenseman in postseason history, and he was the seventh different Panthers defenseman with a goal this postseason. That matches an NHL record — with the 2021 Golden Knights doing it last.

The Panthers have scored three or more goals in seven consecutive road games dating to Game 5 of the First Round against the Lightning.

The only team with a longer streak in NHL history — not counting the Toronto bubble — is the Avalanche (eight in 1996).

SCORING: PANTHERS @ HURRICANES

Florida 1, Carolina 0 (1:17 1st): Andrei Svechnikov turns over the puck, Matthew Tkachuk gets it to Gus Forsling who whips it through traffic and gets this thing going.

Florida 2, Carolina 0 (11:41 1st): Carter Verhaeghe does a nice job of getting the puck behind the net; he comes in on a wraparound attempt but puts the puck across the goalmouth and onto the stick of Tkachuk

Florida 3, Carolina 0 (15:50 1st PP): Veraheghe throws up a wrister from the left circle and Sam Bennett deflects it past Frederik Andersen.

Florida 4, Carolina 0 (19:21 2nd): Another wraparound from Verhaeghe goes off Andersen's paddle — and Bennett is right there for his second of the night.

Florida 5, Carolina 0 (13:49 3rd PP): Sasha Barkov gets low and deflects a point shot from Aaron Ekblad.

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353436 Florida Panthers

Panthers Lose Reinhart to Injury in Game 2 vs. Hurricanes

Published 7 hours ago on May 22, 2025 By George Richards, FHN Publisher

The Florida Panthers could not have gotten off to a better start in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference finals on Thursday night — with one big exception.

The Panthers were without forward Sam Reinhart for the remainder of the game after being tripped up by Sebastian Aho during the opening period.

Reinhart went to the bench in pain, favoring his right leg.

The Panthers announced during the first intermission that Reinhart would not return to the game.

Following Florida's 5-0 win in Game 2, the only update Paul Maurice had was that Reinhart would be evaluated Friday.

Florida took a 3-0 lead on the Hurricanes in a first period in which it only took five shots on goal.

Gus Forsling opened the scoring 77 seconds into the game; Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett later scored.

Carolina appeared to cut the lead to 3-1 early in the second on a goal from Aho, but video review showed it was offside. The Panthers won the challenge.

Reinhart, Florida's leading scorer during the regular season, had four goals and 11 points in the first 13 games of the playoffs.

2025 STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS

EASTERN CONFERENCE FINAL: GAME 3

CAROLINA HURRICANES @ FLORIDA PANTHERS

Panthers lead Best-of-7 Series 2-0

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.

Where: Amerant Bank Arena, Sunrise

National TV: TNT/truTV

National Streaming: Max

Radio: WQAM 560-AM; WPOW 96.5-FM2; WBZT 1230-AM (Palm Beach); WCTH 100.3-FM (Florida Keys); SiriusXM

Panthers Radio Streaming: SiriusXM 932, NHL App

Series Schedule (all games on TNT/tru, 8 p.m.) — Game 1: Florida 5, Carolina 2; Game 2: Florida 5, Carolina 0; Game 3: Saturday @Florida; Game 4: Monday @Florida; Game 5*: Wednesday @Carolina; Game 6*: Friday, May 30 @Florida; Game 7*: Sunday, June 1 @Carolina

This Regular Season (Panthers Won 2-1) — At Florida: Panthers 6, Hurricanes 0 (Nov.30); Hurricanes 3, Panthers 1 (Jan. 2). At Carolina: Panthers 6, Hurricanes 3 (Nov. 29).

How They Got Here: Carolina d. New Jersey (5), Washington (5); Florida d. Tampa Bay (5), Toronto (7).

All-Time Regular Season Series: Carolina/Hartford leads 74-49-10, 11 ties

Postseason History: Florida 1-0 (2023 ECF in 4)

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353437 Florida Panthers

ECF Game 2, Panthers at Hurricanes: How to Watch, Lines, Betting Odds

Published 13 hours ago on May 22, 2025 By George Richards, FHN Publisher

The Florida Panthers are expecting to get the absolute best from the Carolina Hurricanes tonight in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference finals.

The Hurricanes, who hold an ignominious NHL record with 13 straight losses in conference final games, should be desperate to get a home win against the Panthers after losing 5-2 in the opener on Tuesday.

“When you lose a game, especially at this point, the teams that have come this far are able to rebound,’’ Brad Marchand said. “We expect the best game out of Carolina tonight. You have to be completely prepared to match that, and what they’re going to bring.’’

Florida will bring back the same lineup as in Game 1, but the Hurricanes could have another change.

Defenseman Jalen Chatfield is day-to-day and missed Game 1, replaced by rookie Scott Morrow who was minus-3 and committed the delay of game penalty which led to Sam Bennett’s power-play goal.

If Chatfield misses tonight, with Morrow or Alexander Nikishin could come in.

Per NHL.com, Jesperi Kotkaniemi skated with the extras on Wednesday and could potentially be replaced in the lineup by Mark Jankowski.

ECF GAME 2: PANTHERS @ HURRICANES

How to WATCH: Tonight’s game is available on TNT and truTV in the United States, and Sportsnet, CBC, and TVAS in Canada. It can also be streamed on Max.

Starting Goalies: The Panthers will, surprise!, stay with Sergei Bobrovsky, who has allowed six goals in his past five games. Carolina counters with Frederik Andersen, who gave up a total of 12 goals in nine playoff games before allowing five in Game 1.

NHL Betting Odds: The local book has Carolina as a slight favorite (-130) on the money line. If you think the Panthers will win, a $100 bet pays $110.

Subscribe to the FHN YouTube Channel to hear from the Florida Panthers throughout the postseason.

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353438 Florida Panthers

Sergei Bobrovsky Has Returned to Form for the Florida Panthers

Published 20 hours ago on May 22, 2025 By George Richards, FHN Publisher

Just two weeks ago, there were questions swirling around the play of Sergei Bobrovsky in these playoffs for the Florida Panthers.

Perhaps not by his teammates or coaches, but by those on the outside looking in.

“There’s not much that can get him off his game,’’ Dmitry Kulikov said. “He can have a off day for him, which is a pretty good day for a good goalie in the NHL, and he always bounces back because he has this foundation, this routine every day that he does. When he is in there, we are very confident.’’

The Panthers, at the time, had just lost the first two games of their second round series in Toronto.

Bobrovsky had allowed nine goals in the two losses, and his numbers in Florida’s first seven games of the playoffs — which included a 4-1 series win against the Lightning — did not look good.

Things have certainly changed.

Of the 18 goalies who had played at least three playoff games in the postseason, Bobrovsky’s .876 save percentage ranked 16th. His GAA of 2.90 was 13th.

Bobrovsky also had a goals-saved above average of minus-3.9 which was only better than Adin Hill, Stuart Skinner, and Connor Hellebuyck.

Today?

The stats certainly look a lot different.

The Panthers ended up winning four of the final five games in that series against the Maple Leafs — and Bobrovsky was critical in those victories.

He also made 31 saves on Tuesday night in Game 1 against the Hurricanes.

Bobrovsky’s updated numbers are much better than they were just a couple of weeks ago.

His save percentage is up to .905 and ranks eighth among playoff goalies. His GAA of 2.29 is all the way up to fourth in the NHL.

Bobrovsky has now saved 1.7 goals above average, which ranks sixth.

And Bobrovsky’s biggest stat — at least the most important one to him — is victories.

Only he and Dallas’ Jake Oettinger have won nine games.

Good old ‘Big Game Bob’ has been back.

“He is unbelievable,” AJ Greer said. “To be able to do what he is doing, with all of the pressure, he makes big saves when we’re necessarily having our best game on certain shifts. That’s a huge part of why we win games. I can’t talk enough about Bob. He’s just such a pro, such a great person, and just a competitor.”

Bobrovksy has never been one to concern himself with what the numbers look like.

Whether good or bad, all he cares about is celebrating wins with his teammates once the final horn sounds.

But since Game 2 against the Leafs, Bobrovsky’s numbers have been terrific.

He came within 66 seconds of pitching back-to-back shutouts against the Maple Leafs, and has allowed 2 goals or fewer in each of his past two games.

On Tuesday night, the only goals Carolina got against him came on a redirect off Sebastian Aho’s skate and a power-play goal in garbage time with the Panthers up 5-1.

“Sergei is not a kid, he has been through it,” Paul Maurice said. “He has bumped, he has been run over — by our own defense, at times. He has developed a skill set that it just doesn’t bother him.”

2025 STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS

EASTERN CONFERENCE FINAL: GAME 2

FLORIDA PANTHERS @ CAROLINA HURRICANES

Panthers lead Best-of-7 Series 1-0

When: Thursday, 8 p.m.

Where: Lenovo Center; Raleigh, N.C.

National TV: TNT/truTV

National Streaming: Max

Radio: WQAM 560-AM; WPOW 96.5-FM2; WBZT 1230-AM (Palm Beach); WCTH 100.3-FM (Florida Keys); SiriusXM

Panthers Radio Streaming: SiriusXM 932, NHL App

Series Schedule (all games on TNT/tru, 8 p.m.) — Game 1: Florida 5, Carolina 2; Game 2: Thursday @Carolina; Game 3: Saturday @Florida; Game 4: Monday, May 26 @Florida; Game 5*: Wednesday, May 28 @Carolina; Game 6*: Friday, May 30 @Florida; Game 7*: Sunday, June 1 @Carolina

This Regular Season (Panthers Won 2-1) — At Florida:Panthers 6, Hurricanes 0 (Nov.30); Hurricanes 3, Panthers 1 (Jan. 2). At Carolina: Panthers 6, Hurricanes 3 (Nov. 29).

How They Got Here: Carolina d. New Jersey (5), Washington (5); Florida d. Tampa Bay (5), Toronto (7).

All-Time Regular Season Series: Carolina/Hartford leads 74-49-10, 11 ties

Postseason History: Florida 1-0 (2023 ECF in 4)

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353439 Florida Panthers

Florida Panthers Named SBJ Sports Team of the Year

Published 21 hours ago on May 22, 2025 By George Richards, FHN Publisher

The Florida Panthers were honored by the Sports Business Journal on Wednesday night by being named ‘Team of the Year’ at the 18th Annual Sports Business Awards in New York.

The Sports Business Awards celebrate excellence in the business of sports, while factoring in ‘all facets of the team’s operations.’

The Panthers, who were nominated for this award in 2023, beat out the Cleveland Cavaliers (NBA), Indiana Fever (WNBA), Inter Miami CF (MLS), Los Angeles Dodgers (MLB), USA Gymnastics, and the Washington Commanders (NFL).

Sports Business Journal noted that the Panthers not only won the Stanley Cup for the first time in franchise history, but sold out of season tickets, opened their new training facility in Fort Lauderdale, and launched a new over-the-air and streaming television platform.

And, yeah, won the Stanley Cup.

“The Florida Panthers are honored to be named ‘Sports Team of the Year,’ a humbling acknowledgement of how far our team has come under the passionate and steadfast leadership of the Viola family,” said Panthers President/CEO Matt Caldwell.

“We are grateful to Sports Business Journal for this tremendous recognition that represents the unwavering and unified commitment of our players, coaches, staff members and ownership to success both on and off the ice.”

It was a big day for Caldwell.

Also on Wednesday, The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University announced the creation of the Matt Caldwell Veterans Program.

“The Matt Caldwell Veterans Program reflects Kellogg’s commitment to welcoming veterans into its community and enhancing their transition from military service to successful civilian careers,’’ the announcement read.

“The program will advance veteran student recruitment, provide support for veteran students throughout their MBA experience, and create continued opportunities for connection as alumni.”

FLORIDA PANTHERS / FHN

The Charlotte Checkers join the Panthers in the Eastern Conference finals after sweeping the two-time defending champ Hershey Bears.

Sergei Bobrovsky has quieted some of the critics who were quick to jump on him early in the Toronto series.

The Panthers jumped to an early lead and rolled to a Game 1 win against the Hurricanes on Tuesday night.

Sasha Barkov sets the tone for the egoless Panthers.

The Hurricanes have to change things up in Game 2.

Did Sebastian Aho get away with a kicked goal in the first period of Game 1? No, he did not.

A.J. Greer is having a blast in his first Stanley Cup playoff run. The Panthers are enjoying it, too.

We certainly did not get the goalie duel many expected.

Brad Marchand got tossed from Game 1 after tussling with South Florida’s own Shayne Gostisbehere.

Anthony Stolarz said he was concussed due to the hit from Sam Bennett in Game 1 of the Toronto series, but he knows it was not intentional or done with malicious intent.

Don’t forget to subscribe to the FHN YouTube channel to Watch video interviews with the Florida Panthers throughout the postseason. Wednesday brought Paul Maurice, Aar

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353440 Florida Panthers

Panthers hand Hurricanes 14th straight conference finals loss with Game 2 rout: Takeaways

By Michael Russo and Sean Gentille

May 22, 2025Updated May 23, 2025 12:21 am EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — Well, unlike their previous five Eastern Conference final games against the Florida Panthers, the Carolina Hurricanes can’t claim they deserved better this time.

From the opening puck drop, the Panthers dominated Thursday, beating the Canes into submission with constant pressure and scoring three goals in the opening 20 minutes of a one-sided 5-0 victory in Game 2 of the series at Lenovo Center.

The Hurricanes registered only five shots through 32 minutes, seven through 40 and 17 through 60, leading to restless fans chanting, “Shoot the puck!!!” throughout the second period.

“Our fans are amazing. The support they give us is incredible. We didn’t have enough shots tonight, so there’s probably something to it,” Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said.

The defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers are now two wins away from making a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final as the series shifts to Florida with Games 3 and 4 on Saturday and Monday.

“It was a great game,” said Sergei Bobrovsky, who made 17 saves for his franchise-record third shutout of the playoffs. “But we have to reset, refocus, be humble and get ready for home. It’s a new game. The score is 0-0. We’re going to prepare ourselves for the fight.”

The Carter Verhaeghe-Sam Bennett-Matthew Tkachuk line factored in on three even-strength goals — by Gustav Forsling, Tkachuk and Bennett — with Bennett and Aleksander Barkov also adding power-play goals. Bennett tied Dallas’ Mikko Rantanen for the league lead with nine playoff goals and notched Florida’s first multi-goal game since Nate Schmidt and Tkachuk scored twice apiece in their first game of the postseason back in the first round on April 22 against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

That’s how deep this team is.

Verhaeghe finished with three assists. The Panthers now have four power-play goals in two games after Carolina entered the series 28-for-30 on the penalty kill.

“It was an unreal start from us,” Tkachuk said.

The loss extended Carolina’s losing streak in Eastern Conference final games with Rod Brind’Amour as captain or coach to 14 games after the Canes were swept in 2009, 2019 and 2023.

The Panthers, on the other hand, have gone 14 consecutive Eastern Conference final games without losing in regulation. They have 12 wins in that stretch. Their last conference-final regulation loss was on May 28, 1996 in Game 5 against the Pittsburgh Penguins. They then won the final two games of that series to advance to the Stanley Cup Final against the Colorado Avalanche in only their third year of existence.

Florida, which swept Carolina in 2023, also became the first team to earn six consecutive wins against a single opponent in the round before the Stanley Cup Final since the Detroit Red Wings did it against the Chicago Blackhawks from Game 4 of the 1966 semifinal to Game 3 of 1995 conference final.

The Panthers are now 28-0 under Paul Maurice when holding a lead at the end of the first or second period in the playoffs.

The news wasn’t all good for the Panthers, who lost regular-season scoring leader Sam Reinhart late in the first period with a lower-body injury. Coach Paul Maurice said he’ll be examined Friday and he hopes to have an update Saturday.

Carolina right wing Seth Jarvis was hurt late in the second period when he was checked by Niko Mikkola. He played four shifts in the third period but not the final eight minutes. Similarly, defenseman Sean Walker was on the bench throughout the third period after being checked by A.J. Greer early in the second, but he didn’t play a shift after the second intermission.

The Panthers improved to 7-2 on the road in the playoffs with a plus-25 goal differential (43-18). They’ve outscored their opponents 22-4 over the past four road games. What’s behind it?

“If I knew that — I think we were a game over .500 on the road this year (20-19-2) — I would have used it way earlier,” Maurice said. “I wouldn’t have waited for the playoffs. I’d have fired that out in December.”

Here are four takeaways.

Pressure breaks Canes

If you’ve paid attention to this series, or any other involving either of these teams for the past several years, you’ve heard plenty about their forechecks.

Florida, in the opening minute of the game, gave Carolina a costly reminder on it. The Panthers’ first goal was a prime example of what sustained pressure can do, regardless of the opponent.

First, it was Tkachuk harassing Dmitry Orlov along the back boards. Orlov was almost certainly trying to rim the puck along the glass and out on his backhand, but he didn’t come close to completing the play. Walker picked up the loose puck and shuffled it along to Andrei Svechnikov along the boards.

Svechnikov skated toward his own net before looping back up ice and attempting a pass to Jack Roslovic. Tkachuk picked off the puck and passed it to Forsling in the slot. Forsling’s shot deflected off Orlov and past Freddie Andersen.

FLORIDA SCORES FIRST! 🚨

Gustav Forsling puts the @FlaPanthers up 1-0 just 1:17 into the game! #StanleyCup

US: @NHL_On_TNT & @SportsonMax ➡️ https://t.co/4TuyIATi3T

CA: @Sportsnet or stream on Sportsnet+ ➡️ https://t.co/4KjbdjVctF pic.twitter.com/9A8X41OUKO

— NHL (@NHL) May 23, 2025

To go down by a goal 77 seconds into the game was a nightmarish start that Carolina couldn’t afford — and it was a textbook goal for one of the league’s elite pressure teams.

Then on Tkachuk’s goal just inside 12 minutes into the period, the Verhaeghe-Bennett-Tkachuk line forechecked the heck out of the Canes again.

“First period, they were in their zone the whole period,” Barkov said of the Bennett line.

Matthew Tkachuk extends the lead for the @FlaPanthers! ✅ #StanleyCup

US: @NHL_On_TNT & @SportsonMax ➡️ https://t.co/4TuyIATi3T

CA: @Sportsnet or stream on Sportsnet+ ➡️ https://t.co/4KjbdjVctF pic.twitter.com/j1BYIW6jd2

— NHL (@NHL) May 23, 2025

“I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much,” Brind’Amour said. “And then we’re not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us. We were just — I didn’t know what I was watching in the first period.”

Tough start for Svechnikov

Svechnikov said before the series that during the 2023 playoffs, he used to drive to games and sit in his car for a while before being able to stomach entering the arena because he was “depressed.” His season was lost with a torn ACL just after the trade deadline.

So after scoring eight goals in the first two rounds, Svechnikov could not wait to play the Panthers for the first time in this series.

Well, two games in, Svechnikov has one assist in two games, only one shot and Thursday night was minus-3 and took an undisciplined penalty that led to Florida’s third goal of the first period.

Svechnikov was goaded into it by Tkachuk, who hit him with a reverse hit in the corner, then jabbed at his lower back with a cross-check in the neutral zone after Svechnikov took a run at him. Later in the shift, Svechnikov took another run at Tkachuk, then punched him in the back of the head at Carolina’s bench.

Svechnikov punches Tkachuk in the back of the head and the Panthers are heading to the power play. pic.twitter.com/bQ8oYC9STI

— Jameson Olive (@JamesonCoop) May 23, 2025

On the ensuing power play, after Bobrovsky denied Jordan Martinook on a three-on-two shorthanded rush, Verhaeghe assisted on the first of Bennett’s two goals.

“He had a tough night,” Brind’Amour said. “He’s trying, but we gotta do it within the way we need to (and) be on the same page. And he was on his own page tonight a little bit. Didn’t work.”

Freddie looks fried

For the second game in a row, the Hurricanes had problems extending beyond Freddie Andersen. For the second game in a row, he didn't come close to bailing them out and instead added to the pile.

Carolina's starting goaltender allowed three goals on the first five shots he faced and four on 16 overall in two periods of work before being replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov for the third.

Whether it was to spark the rest of the Hurricanes, to give Andersen a rest or to give Kochetkov a look at Florida before Game 3 may remain to be seen, but Brind'Amour certainly sounded uninterested in blaming Andersen for all that much.

"It wouldn't have mattered who we had in net tonight," he said.

Kochetkov replaced Andersen in Game 4 of Carolina's first-round series against the Devils and played competently enough, stopping 45 of 50 shots in two wins.

If Andersen does get the start Saturday, it'll be due to his play in the first two rounds, when he was deservedly showing up on Conn Smythe shortlists. It certainly won't be because he's been any good against the Panthers; Andersen has allowed nine goals on 31 shots in the series for a cool .710 save percentage. Two of Florida's goals (Tkachuk's and Bennett's second) started on wrap-around attempts by Verhaeghe.

Carolina's blue-line mess

On a few different occasions this week, Brind'Amour brought up defenseman Jalen Chatfield's absence as playing a major factor in the Game 1 result. It was understandable enough. Chatfield is a good, important player who helps the Hurricanes' defensive pairs fall into place.

Ahead of the game, it seemed like Carolina was going to get him back. Chatfield took line rushes and generally looked the part of a player who was preparing for a hockey game. When the scratch list came out, though, his name was on it. Scott Morrow, who struggled mightily in Game 1, was in his place. Alexander Nikishin, who replaced Chatfield in Game 5, was not.

Brind'Amour has not seemed enamored with either.

Lo and behold, Morrow played just 1:42 on two shifts in the first period. In the second, he was on the ice for 4:04 — and that was with Walker missing a chunk of the period after Greer's hit. It's tough to imagine Chatfield missing Game 3, especially if the alternative is Carolina basically playing a man down. The Hurricanes played most of the season with the same three defensive pairings, too, so they're particularly ill-equipped to handle this.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353441 Florida Panthers

Panthers star Sam Reinhart leaves Game 2 after Sebastian Aho hit, won't return

By Michael Russo

May 22, 2025Updated 9:47 pm EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — Sam Reinhart, the Florida Panthers' first-line right wing and regular-season scoring leader, was knocked out of Game 2 of the Eastern Conference final Thursday night with a lower-body injury sustained late in the first period.

With the Panthers leading 3-0, Reinhart was nailed by a hip check from Carolina Hurricanes star forward Sebastian Aho as he crossed the blue line into Carolina's end. Reinhart's left leg took the brunt of the force. Reinhart was seen grimacing on the bench after the check. Reinhart played one more 12-second shift before period's end, then went to dressing room and didn't come out for the second period.

Sam Reinhart has gone to the dressing room following this hit from Sebastian Aho pic.twitter.com/7OlFajHkLq

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) May 23, 2025

Reinhart, 29, scored 39 goals and 81 points in the regular season to become the first skater in club history to post four consecutive 30-goal seasons. He has led the Panthers in goals and points the past two regular seasons, scoring 57 and 94 in 2023-24. The 57 goals ranked second in the NHL that season, and his 96 over the past two seasons combined also rank second.

Reinhart also led all Panthers skaters with six points (two goals) in a first-round win over the Tampa Bay Lightning and has four goals and 11 points in 14 playoff games. He signed an eight-year, $69 million contract to forgo free agency after winning the Stanley Cup last season.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353442 Florida Panthers

Jaccob Slavin, 'a walking manual for how to play defense,' has earned this moment

By Sean Gentille and Michael Russo

May 22, 2025 8:00 am EDT

RALEIGH, N.C. — For six years, Matthew Tkachuk and the most underrated elite defenseman in the NHL were ships passing in the night.

Tkachuk had heard things about Jaccob Slavin, of course. How could you not? The backbone of the Carolina Hurricanes might be under-discussed, but he is not invisible. But when Tkachuk played for the Calgary Flames, he only had to deal with Slavin twice a year, limiting his firsthand experience and forcing him to base most of his opinion on the words of others.

In the 2023 Eastern Conference finals, his appreciation grew.

"Each game you play (Slavin) you see something different," Tkachuk said.

To truly learn what Slavin is about, though, is to skate with him. To watch him up close — and on that front, thanks to the 11-year absence of true best-on-best international hockey, Tkachuk never had the opportunity. In February 2025, that changed.

"At that (4 Nations Face-Off)," Tkachuk said. "I really saw how unbelievable a player he is.

"Defensively, his stick, blocking shots, the little plays he'd make. He got every shot through. Like, the little stuff that people don't get credit for that you might look at — the top point-getters in the league for (defensemen) get all the credit. But I mean, he's right up there with the best in the world."

It made sense, then, for Tkachuk to help start a moment that Slavin, three months later, still seems to be living inside. He had already been one of the tournament's breakout stars in the United States; broadcast crews on ESPN and TNT decided, en masse, that it was time for the guy who does the little things better than anyone to assume a larger platform.

Tkachuk helped it along. Wearing a microphone for the 4 Nations final against Canada, Tkachuk, along with his brother Brady and Detroit Red Wings center Dylan Larkin, were recorded on the Team U.S. bench gassing up Slavin for one of his signature skills.

"What a stick, Slavo," Tkachuk yelled. "That was special."

On May 15, Capitals coach Spencer Carbery pushed the snowball even further down the hill, moments after his team's season ended. Carbery could've opened his media conference by saying anything about anyone. He chose to gas up the guy who'd tortured Washington most acutely in their five-game series, keeping the Capitals in neutral and turning yet another appreciator into a true believer.

"He doesn't get enough credit," Carbery said. "I think he's started to get credit since the 4 Nations. Jaccob Slavin — how he's not in the Norris Trophy conversation every single year, it doesn't seem right. Obviously

the guys that are there are tremendous players in their own right, but that is one heck of a player.

“This team — and that’s the reason I mentioned Slavin early, because he leads the charge in this — they are just relentless with their pressure. And their ability to break plays up with their sticks, there’s no team in the league like ’em.”

Slavin, for his part, appreciates the shine but says he doesn’t require it. A lyric from the Christian artist Lecrae — “If you live for their acceptance, you’ll die from their rejection” — is never far from his mind.

Why this degree of recognition was delayed is, in all likelihood, due to a combination of factors. The Hurricanes play in a small market, which never helps. Their head coach is the face of their franchise, which is uncommon. Slavin’s game revolves around breaking up plays, batting down passes and cutting off puck carriers, which takes him out of the Cale Makar class.

“Slavin doesn’t get that (level of attention),” Minnesota Wild and Team USA defenseman Brock Faber said. “And so you never really understand the impact he can make on a game, with basically just being invisible, when you don’t notice him. He’s the best because he’s just closing plays. He’s not turning the puck over. He’s doing so many little things that just go unnoticed that make such an impact.”

Slavin’s 2024-25 season was, for him, boilerplate; he was seventh among regular NHL defensemen in both scoring chance percentage (57.4) and expected goals percentage (56.4) at five-on-five, according to Natural Stat Trick. He did all that playing tough minutes against elite competition, and he did it while leading one of the NHL’s best penalty kills. That’s who he is, and it’s who he’s been for years.

In any case, the recognition has arrived. And it’s deserved, regardless of how much time Slavin spends on tracking it.

“I think anybody would say it’s nice to have it happen that way and people starting to notice that you’re a good player, but at the end of the day for myself, it’s just words,” Slavin said. “It’s not where my identity lies. That’s not where my confidence comes from.”

And that confidence, if you watch closely enough, manifests on ice. What other word would you use to describe the goal Slavin scored to put Carolina up 2-0 in Game 4 of their first-round series against the New Jersey Devils?

Slavin, already inside New Jersey’s blue line, pressured Devils forward Stefan Noesen even further, denying the clearing attempt and setting up a bad-angle shot for himself that he still managed to bury.

It didn’t happen quickly enough to miss — but it might have happened too quickly for the full impact to fully register.

“Most players in that situation would be trying to get their stick in the lane, hoping to deflect the clearing attempt. Jaccob doesn’t just try to get his stick on it; he swings his stick down toward the puck like a fly swatter,” Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said.

“The audacity of that play is incredible — he’s not just trying to deflect the dump-out, he’s trying to catch it! And he does, and then he finishes the play with a perfect shot, but it all starts with a defensive stick play that I don’t think anyone else in the league would even try to make.”

Scott Morrow feels the same. The Hurricanes rookie defenseman, with all of 17 NHL games under his belt, has spent large chunks of the last few months watching Slavin at practice, on video and from the press box. In some ways, Morrow said, Slavin is “a walking manual for how to play defense.” In others, well …

“He’s an alien, almost, with how good he is at some of this stuff,” Morrow said. “I try and learn as much as I can, but there’s some things where I’m like, ‘Oh man, I don’t know if I could ever be as good as this guy at this specific thing.’”

Such as?

“The way he bats pucks out of the air, like, instinctively,” Morrow said. “If I’m playing a rush, I have my stick on the ice trying to take away the passing lanes, but he’s got the whole airspace covered as well. It’s insane how he has 3-4 a game where he just knocks out of the air and kills the play. It’s incredible to watch.”

That doesn’t just apply to rookies, either. Longtime teammates can be amazed, too.

“You try and get it through him and when you do, you get pretty excited about it. That’s like scoring a goal. So you cheer pretty hard when you can get it through him or get it by him,” said Jordan Martinook, who has played with Slavin since 2018.

“Obviously, we’re lucky to see that every day and we’re not gonna take it for granted, because he’s an incredible player and it’s nice that he starts getting some recognition that he deserves.”

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353443 Florida Panthers

What do NHL’s best forecheckers look like? Just watch Panthers and Hurricanes

By Matthew Fairburn

May 22, 2025 7:00 am EDT

When Paul Maurice took over as head coach of the Florida Panthers in the summer of 2022, he was already thinking about the playoffs. He sought to make a subtle but important change to the Panthers’ rush-heavy offense that helped Florida lead the NHL in goals and win the Presidents’ Trophy the previous season.

“The Panthers were built on stretching and the speed game,” Maurice said during Florida’s run to the Stanley Cup Final in his first season. “It can be really good except for the most part, the rush game starts to disappear in the playoffs. So you need another piece.”

That other piece isn’t as glamorous but has become the foundation of who the Panthers are. According to SportLogic, no team in the NHL dumped the puck in more frequently than the Panthers this season. And no team had a higher dump-in retrieval rate than the Panthers. Forechecking has become Florida’s superpower. And you could say the same about the Carolina Hurricanes, the Panthers’ opponent in the Eastern Conference final.

“They play a simple game,” Panthers defenseman Seth Jones said of Carolina. “There’s no secret plays or anything like that. They’re a very straightforward hockey team. They have great sticks. It’s man-on-man. They’re in your face. There’s not a lot of space out there. It’s kind of a similar style to how we play. I think you’re going to see two similar styles going at it. They’re known for trying to suffocate you, not turning pucks over in the neutral zone and playing a brand of hockey that everyone understands how to play.”

As the NHL has become more about speed and skill, controlled zone entries and puck possession are at a premium. But Maurice recognized early on that the playoffs are a different game. Physicality and intensity ramp up, and there’s not as much time and space to create plays off the rush. The teams and players who thrive in that environment are willing to play the game another way.

Of the eight teams that advanced to the second round of the NHL playoffs, six were above average in terms of generating chances off the cycle and forecheck, according to AllThreeZones. The Panthers and Hurricanes, the two Eastern Conference finalists, were both among the top three teams in pressures per 60 minutes and puck retrievals per 60 minutes.

This isn’t just about a coach emphasizing a different playing style, either. Forechecking at the elite level required in the postseason is a skill that isn’t easy to find. We spent the latter part of the NHL season asking various defensemen and coaches about what makes a good forechecker and who stands out in that department. The Panthers and Hurricanes came up a lot.

“I think it’s one of those talents that the average fan doesn’t see or recognize,” said Sabres defenseman Mattias Samuelsson. “But when you know the game at a higher level and watch a lot of hockey, you can

pick that stuff up and really see who is effective in those situations. It's a unique skill."

The checking part is often the most noticeable element of forechecking. Capitals forward Tom Wilson jumps to mind as a relentless bruiser who is miserable to play against. And the Panthers lead the playoffs with more than 45 hits per 60 minutes during this postseason. But when asking around the league, a willingness to hit is only a small part of the equation. In some cases, that's exactly what the defenseman wants.

"As a D-man, I want the forechecker to try to hit me because usually that means their stick is in the air," Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman said. "That gives you a chance to get the puck out of the way."

Deception is the trait that comes up a lot when discussing the best forecheckers. As Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin said, "Really smart players are the scary ones." At lower levels, the fastest, most aggressive and most physical players are typically the difference-makers on the forecheck. But in the NHL, there are also subtle skills like reading the play and having the hand-eye coordination to pick off passes that make a big difference. Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy said a player needs physicality, hockey IQ and a good stick. Two of those three make an effective forechecker, all three make an elite forechecker.

"If they're right on you they're probably going to stay right on you," Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin said. "But if there's a little separation, you don't know if they're going to continue and try to hit you or peel off and try to take away your pass. Speed, deceptiveness and the smarts to read the play. Sometimes it might not be the first forechecker that is what kills a breakout."

The Hurricanes might be the best example of Slavin's last point. When asking defensemen the toughest forecheckers to play against, they rattled off some individuals but also routinely named the Hurricanes as a group.

"It doesn't surprise me that defensemen don't love playing against our team when it comes to the forecheck," Slavin said with a smile.

Part of it is how relentless the forwards are when pressuring the puck. But the involvement of the defensemen blocking passing lanes is a factor, too. The Hurricanes are connected as a group in a way that makes them exhausting to play against.

"You don't just go aimlessly running in there," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "You have to have good reads. The teams that do forechecking best understand it's a five-man forecheck. It's not about one guy."

According to AllThreeZones, no team in the NHL had more pressures per 60 minutes than the Hurricanes. They had 27.41 shots per 60 off the cycle and forecheck, according to AllThreeZones. That was three more shots per 60 than the next closest team.

"Carolina isn't going to finish every check but they're going to forecheck hard and pressure the puck," Sabres defenseman Connor Clifton said. "You try to go up the strong side and that F2 is already there on the wall and F3 is coming over. If you get it by F2, the next thing you know, the defenseman is pinching down the wall. You are one or two good plays from a two-on-one, but if they're on their game and anticipating where we're trying to go with it, it's just so hard to break out."

That showed up in Carolina's 4-1 series win over Washington in the second round. The Hurricanes had a 12:41 advantage in offensive zone time, according to SportLogic. They pressured the puck all over the ice and made life hell for the Capitals' defensemen.

But not every team is the Hurricanes. Individuals can make a difference in this area of the game. Forechecking is the ultimate effort skill in the ultimate effort sport. If you're relentless in your pursuit of the puck, shift after shift, it starts to wear on an opponent.

"Fitness is a big part of it," said Rangers and Team USA coach Mike Sullivan. "You have to be a dog on a bone on the puck and it takes effort."

"If a guy does lose you, you can stay in the hunt and maybe catch him from behind if he thinks he's beat you," Cassidy added. "Those are the (Brad) Marchands of the world, those guys that stay on battles."

The Panthers adding Marchand, one of the league's most tenacious forecheckers, was not only a natural fit. It made an already elite group even more of a headache to play against. Florida is led by arguably the best forechecker in the NHL in captain Aleksander Barkov. No player had more shots off the forecheck and cycle than Barkov this season, and he was among the league leaders in puck pressure and puck retrievals per 60, according to AllThreeZones. When your captain and best player is the one leading the way in that regard, it's easy to get buy-in from the rest of the team.

Rush offense will show up on the highlight reels throughout the regular season, but forechecking offense can make the biggest difference in May and June. Dumping the puck in is less risky than trying to make the extra play at the blue line. But you need to have players who skate well enough, have a physical edge and are able to win puck battles. Otherwise, dumping the puck in is just giving away possession. According to SportLogiq, the Panthers have the most goals within 10 seconds of a turnover during the playoffs. The Hurricanes have the most scoring chances within 10 seconds of a turnover. That's a direct result of the pressure they create on the forecheck.

Panthers vs Hurricanes…

Florida leads the playoffs in goals scored via turnovers.

Carolina leads in scoring chances off turnovers.

Two aggressive teams who pressure opponents into mistakes as well as anyone. Will be an interesting series from that standpoint. pic.twitter.com/4vW4YyQwuU

— Mike Kelly (@MikeKellyNHL) May 20, 2025

The forecheck starts before a team enters the zone, though. A team standing still and dumping the puck into the zone is not going to win the puck back often. Teams that are able to come through the neutral zone with speed and dump the puck to the right area of the ice have a chance to get an advantage. How a player dumps the puck is just as important as a willingness to dump it. Putting it in a place where the goalie can't easily get it and also to an area where a defenseman can't use the net to box out a forecheck is key to having a chance to create possession off a dump-in. The best forecheckers are also able to find an extra gear after they dump the puck in so they can either draw a penalty or at least prevent the defenseman from easily boxing him out of a play.

"It's all angles, right?" said Penguins defenseman Erik Karlsson. "Any team that comes with speed through the neutral zone and is not just dumping pucks in standing still on the blue line, it's hard. They're going to force you one way or the other. That initial forecheck might not always get the puck, but it's those second and third opportunities. Usually that's on the first guy to facilitate that without getting any real credit."

The impact of an effective forecheck is felt beyond the offensive zone, too. The neutral zone is where so many games are won and lost in the playoffs. The aim of the forecheck is to prevent a breakout first. A lousy forecheck makes it easy for a team to transition to offense through the neutral zone. The teams that can slow the other team down in their own end have a better chance of creating chaos in the neutral zone and controlling the pace of play.

That's a big reason the Panthers and Hurricanes are the last two teams standing in the Eastern Conference. They pressure the puck and mitigate risk by dumping the puck in and working to get it back. That style of play is repeatable and wears on the opposition.

"I think Carolina and Florida are the two teams in the East, and I'm not being disrespectful to the other teams, who most consistently play to their identity on a regular basis," Maurice said at the start of the series. "When you come watch Carolina play and come watch us play, you have a pretty good idea of what it's going to look like."

"We're built for playoffs and they are as well," added Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk.

Game 1 between the two teams provided plenty of evidence of that. The Panthers and Hurricanes combined for 97 hits in a game the Panthers won 5-2. And one of the keys to victory was Florida's ability to beat Carolina's forecheck. According to SportLogiq, the Panthers were able to exit their defensive zone with possession on 89 percent of their exit attempts. No team in these playoffs has been as successful at beating Carolina's forecheck in a single game.

"That's the game," Brind'Amour said after the game. "They're doing it, too. They're trying to forecheck, too. They probably put more pucks in

than we did tonight. They put more stress on us than we did on them. That's how they play. That's why they're the best and we're trying to beat it."

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353444 Florida Panthers

Panthers at Hurricanes Game 2 picks, odds, schedule: Carolina narrow favorite, down 1-0

By Shayna Goldman

May 22, 2025Updated 11:52 am EDT

The defending-champion Florida Panthers took Game 1 of the Eastern Conference final on Tuesday night. Now it's up to the Carolina Hurricanes to swing the momentum while still on home ice. The Canes are slight favorites for Game 2, but the Panthers are -250 to take the series. Here's what you need to know heading into Thursday night's playoff action.

How to watch Florida Panthers at Carolina Hurricanes Game 2

Venue: Lenovo Center — Raleigh, N.C.

Time: 8 p.m. ET, Thursday

TV (U.S.): TNT, truTV

TV (CAN): Sportsnet, CBC, TVA Sports

Stream: Max

Watching in person? Get tickets on StubHub.

Panthers at Hurricanes odds for Game 2

Panthers lead the series 1-0

Series odds: Panthers -250, Hurricanes +200

Shorthanded situations are one of the Hurricanes' best strengths. Their penalty kill is stingy in their own zone and disruptive enough to generate some chances. Heading into this series, the Canes only allowed two goals against, both to the Capitals. But the Panthers quickly doubled that in Game 1, with power-play tallies from Carter Verhaeghe and Sam Bennett.

The Hurricanes generated some momentum at times and tried to take back control; Sebastian Aho's late first-period goal gave Carolina a chance, and they amped up the pressure in the third period. But the Panthers had the answers on Tuesday night, with contributions from depth forwards and defensemen, physical play and steady goaltending. Sergei Bobrovsky gave his team a chance to win with a quality start, saving 1.17 goals above expected in all situations and earning a 0.939 save percentage.

The Panthers are just three wins away from reaching the Stanley Cup Final for the third straight year. Now the Canes have to find a way to swing the series back in their favor, before play shifts back to Florida.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353483 Websites

The Athletic / Canada shocked by Denmark in major upset at men's hockey World Championship

By Josh Yohe

May 22, 2025Updated 6:34 pm EDT

Team Canada was eliminated in the quarterfinals of the World Championship in stunning fashion Thursday thanks to a dramatic 2-1 comeback victory for Denmark.

Canada, led by the duo of NHL superstars Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon, had rolled through the tournament, suffering only a shootout loss to Finland while easily handling the field.

The Canadians, however, shockingly met their match in the quarterfinals.

Most of the game was a scoreless tie featuring a goaltending duel between Canada's Jordan Binnington and Denmark's Frederik Dichow.

Order seemed to be restored five minutes into the third period as Crosby set up Travis Sanheim for the game's initial goal and a 1-0 Canada lead.

Canada held that lead until Denmark's Nikolaj Ehlers scored with 2:17 remaining in regulation to even the score. Ehlers' shot from the left point came with Denmark's goaltender pulled.

The score didn't stay tied for long.

Nick Olesen scored what will go down as one of the most memorable goals in Denmark's hockey history when he banged a rebound past Binnington for the winner.

GAME. CHANGER. Nick Olesen sends @dkishockey through! DK💥 #MensWorlds #IIHF pic.twitter.com/en6PBK4F9I

— IIHF (@IIHFHockey) May 22, 2025

Dichow was the game's star, stopping 39 of Canada's 40 shots to backstop the major upset.

Canada outshot Denmark 40-33.

While Canada wasn't showcasing its Olympic roster, its team still featured the likes of Crosby, MacKinnon and the very impressive Macklin Celebrini, not to mention Binnington, who led Canada to victory in the 4 Nations Face-Off in February.

This also officially concludes Marc-André Fleury's hockey career. He was Binnington's backup in this game and confirmed last week that this tournament will mark the end of his career.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353484 Websites

The Athletic / Judge weighs text evidence after Brett Howden's emotional testimony

By Dan Robson

May 22, 2025Updated 5:13 pm EDT

LONDON, Ont. – The judge in the Hockey Canada sexual assault trial will decide whether text messages Brett Howden sent to a teammate describing Dillion Dubé smacking the complainant's buttocks are admissible as evidence.

"Dude, I'm so happy I left when all that sh– went down. Ha, ha," Howden wrote to Taylor Raddysh, also adding: "Man, when I was leaving, Duber was smacking this girl's ass so hard. It looked like it hurt so bad."

On Thursday, Justice Maria Carroccia heard arguments from both the Crown and defense as to whether the text exchange between Howden and Raddysh could be submitted as evidence as "past recollection recorded." Court ended early, as Carroccia said she needed time to make a ruling on the key piece of the prosecution's evidence.

Carroccia is expected to deliver her ruling on Friday morning.

Howden sent the text message to Raddysh on June 26, 2018, as the former 2018 Canadian World Juniors teammates learned that Hockey Canada was opening an investigation into allegations that a woman had been sexually assaulted by several members of that team a week earlier in a London, Ont., hotel room.

Howden and Raddysh were roommates at the hotel, where they stayed during a Hockey Canada gala and golf tournament. Neither Howden nor Raddysh are accused of wrongdoing.

On Thursday morning, Howden — now a member of the Vegas Golden Knights — appeared in court via video feed from Las Vegas, where he resides.

As he was questioned by Lisa Carnelos, counsel for Dubé, Howden grew visibly emotional as he recalled learning about the Hockey Canada investigation and having to tell his father about the incidents. Carnelos later pressed Howden about his state of mind at the time.

“You’re scared of a number of things,” she said. “You’re scared of your dad.”

Howden paused, and appeared to choke up.

“It was one of the hardest things to go through,” he said.

Carnelos pressed further, asking about his girlfriend at the time.

“That girlfriend was very important to you right?”

“Yes,” Howden said. “She’s my wife.”

“You’ve just had your second child with her, correct?”

Howden’s face grew red.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Congratulations,” Carnelos said.

At that, Howden began to cry.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said, composing himself after Carroccia asked him if he needed a moment.

The exchange underscored a second day of testimony from Howden. In his first appearance on the stand Tuesday, he repeatedly said he couldn’t recall details about the alleged incident, prompting Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham to accuse him of being dishonest about his lack of memory. Howden continued to insist he didn’t remember specifics even when given access to transcripts from past statements he made to Hockey Canada investigators and police.

During a voir dire hearing on Wednesday over a Canada Evidence Act application by the Crown seeking to cross-examine Howden, prosecutors and the defense argued over Howden’s truthfulness on the stand.

After a day of deliberations, Carroccia found that she didn’t believe Howden was feigning memory loss, but agreed that there were elements of his testimony that were inconsistent with his past statements. Carroccia ruled that four areas out of the 18 Cunningham presented could be further questioned.

During arguments on Wednesday, Megan Savard — attorney for Carter Hart — said that Howden was an unsophisticated, inarticulate witness who didn’t even dress properly for court. Howden appeared in a hoodie during his first day on the stand.

When Howden returned to the stand on Thursday, he wore a white polo shirt and appeared more forthright in his answers. He is the fourth member of the 2018 World Juniors team called as a Crown witness. Raddysh, Boris Katchouk and Tyler Steenbergen have already testified.

Howden’s former World Juniors teammates — Dubé, Michael McLeod, Carter Hart, Alex Formenton and Cal Foote — looked on from the courtroom. They are each accused of sexually assaulting a woman in the early hours of June 19, 2018, after a Hockey Canada gala in London. All five players pleaded not guilty in the trial, which is now in its fifth week.

The Crown says that McLeod, Hart and Dubé all obtained oral sex from E.M. without her consent, and that Formenton had vaginal sex with E.M. without her consent. The Crown has also told the jury that Dubé slapped E.M.’s naked buttocks while she was engaged in a sexual act with another person, and that Foote did the splits and grazed his genitals over her face as she lay on the ground.

Howden recalled being shocked when he read the contents of his text exchange with Raddysh during a later Hockey Canada investigation. He said he could not recall sending those messages.

But he told Cunningham that he had “no reason to lie” at the time.

Later, Carnelos pressed Howden about his state of mind and the casual nature of the text messages he exchanged about the incident in 2018. He said it was hard to remember details, but recalled being stressed and scared at the time.

“For so long, I’ve been trying to move on past this and forget about it,” Howden said. “I remember the gist of what happened that night, but it’s hard for me to go back in that time and remember it.”

Carnelos and other members of the defense argued that the text messages should be dismissed because Howden was not attempting to be accurate when he wrote them and did not expect them to be used as evidence seven years later.

Later, when Cunningham re-examined Howden, she again asked him whether — even if he doesn’t recall the events described — he believed he was being truthful when he wrote the text message.

“I believe what I said back then,” he said. “I was being honest.”

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353485 Websites

The Athletic / Why Anton Frondell is 2025 NHL Draft’s most difficult top prospect to evaluate

By Corey Pronman

May 22, 2025 7:00 am EDT

Evaluating Anton Frondell ahead of the 2025 NHL Draft is anything but straightforward. Depending on who you ask in the NHL, he’s either a future franchise center or a solid middle-six contributor. Scouts are split, with some seeing him worthy of a top-three selection, while others view him somewhere between six and 10.

The variance in opinion stems from Frondell’s Jekyll-and-Hyde spectrum of performances over the past two years. All players have good games/events and bad ones, but Frondell’s have been more pronounced than usual.

On his best nights, Frondell looks like a player who can tilt the ice in his favor. His season in the Allsvenskan with Djurgården was a major selling point: 25 points in 29 games against men, production comparable to what William Nylander and David Pastrnak posted at similar stages and slightly behind Elias Pettersson’s Allsvenskan numbers in his draft season. That’s elite company and a big reason why some scouts are bullish on him.

As a 16-year-old, his numbers in Sweden’s top junior level were among the best in recent memory. On the international stage, he showed he could rise to the occasion, most notably at the U18 Five Nations tournament in February 2024, where he scored two clutch late goals to upset the United States on their home ice. Moments like that reinforce the belief that Frondell has the potential to be a true difference-maker.

However, inconsistencies have clouded his evaluation. Despite strong performances in some tournaments, Frondell had forgettable showings in others, even against relatively modest competition. For instance, during the U18 Five Nations tournaments in both November and February, he was a mixed bag, producing some strong games but also disappearing at times. His production against U18 players was actually worse in his draft season than in his draft-minus-one season. At the 2024 World Junior A Challenge, he was solid but unspectacular as a 17-year-old, tallying just four points in five games against a fairly average talent pool. He also didn’t even touch a point/game against in Sweden’s top junior league in 10 games played this season.

During the spring playoffs with Djurgården, fellow draft-eligible Victor Eklund earned regular minutes, but Frondell’s ice time shrank. After Djurgården secured promotion to the SHL, Frondell joined Sweden’s roster at the U18 World Championship. Expectations were high, but he registered only three points in five games and didn’t make a major impact, even though he faced strong opposition, arriving just in time for

the medal round. Compared to draft-eligible peers like James Hagens and Porter Martone (who are late 2006s like Eklund while Frondell is a 2007), who dominated the previous year's tournament, Frondell's modest output stood out for the wrong reasons.

The Frondell debate ultimately boils down to two interpretations of his skill set:

Case for optimism: Frondell has NHL-caliber tools. He's a strong skater, a highly skilled puck handler and a player who competes hard and doesn't shy away from physicality. His shot is high-end, with a release and velocity that can beat NHL goalies from distance. He also has the playmaking ability to facilitate offense. Scouts who are high on Frondell view his production in the Allsvenskan as a sign that he can handle difficult competition and believe that with time, he will iron out the inconsistencies.

There's also the matter of Frondell's season arc. He started slowly, partly due to injury, but found his stride in the second half against men. The Frondell bulls see a player similar to Anze Kopitar or Aleksander Barkov — a big, responsible, two-way center who can anchor a top line and a guy you win with in the playoffs. They also caution about overreacting to his U18 World Championships, as players who were great against men but had a bad tournament, such as Pastrnak and Martin Necas, tend to slide in their draft years after a poor ending to their season.

Case for caution: On the flip side, skeptics point to the uneven performances, particularly internationally, and concerns about his hockey sense. In games where Frondell isn't at his best, he can fade into the background. On his off nights, he doesn't look like a true play driver and can be someone who leans on his linemates to get him the puck in scoring positions. This leads some to project him more as a very good second-line center who brings size, compete and scoring punch but doesn't consistently tilt the ice like a franchise player. Names like Bo Horvat and Anton Lundell are thrown around for this side of the coin — who are still excellent players, mind you.

Colleague Max Bultman noted Frondell's inconsistencies are similar to those of Elias Pettersson in his draft season. Pettersson ended up becoming a great player but those issues have lingered in his NHL career.

Frondell's evaluation ultimately comes down to the interpretation of the data. You can view the exact same information as someone else, and tilt your head in a slightly different direction to look at it and come to a different conclusion.

If you believe his flashes of high-end production and mature, translatable game against men are signs of a potential hard-to-play-against No. 1 NHL center, he's worth a top-three pick and potentially the No. 2 pick after Erie's Matthew Schaefer.

If you're more concerned about his streakiness and lack of dynamic, game-breaking traits, he fits more comfortably as a top-six center — valuable, but not necessarily someone to form your rebuild around.

Personally, I lean toward the latter camp. Frondell has the potential to be a very good second-line center on a contending team. He's skilled, strong and competes hard, but over two years of viewings, the high-end offensive displays haven't been consistent enough to put him in the same category as someone like Michael Misa, who is a better athlete and much more consistent producer. That said, Frondell is still an excellent prospect and a true premium young center talent.

Frondell embodies the complexity of projecting 17-year-olds into the NHL. There are a lot of variables that go into the mix between the physical maturity, the offensive tools, the character and the body of work can comprise over 100 games at varying levels of competition with different levels of stakes. I won't blink if Frondell is the second player picked, and similarly I won't if he goes seventh. His resume has the highest degree of uncertainty this year among the top prospects in the 2025 NHL Draft.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.23.2025

1353486 Websites

The Athletic / Should NHL teams spend their cap space now or save for 2026? How the UFA classes compare

By Shayna Goldman

May 22, 2025 7:00 am EDT

Did Mitch Marner and John Tavares play their last games in Toronto Maple Leafs sweaters? Will another team be able to land Nikolaj Ehlers? Is Mikael Granlund a pending free agent worth investing in?

With 28 of 32 NHL teams officially on the outside of the playoff picture, most of the league is already in offseason mode. And this offseason has a lot of potential, with the salary cap jumping from $88 million to $95.5 million on July 1 — the biggest year-to-year increase since the salary cap was introduced in 2005.

The increasing cap can be looked at in two ways. It buys a team that is up against it more breathing room — and it gives general managers more money to spend. The latter adds some intrigue to free agency.

But it's not as simple as opening up the checkbooks to any free agent this summer. Teams have to contemplate whether this is the summer to swing big or if they should wait for a potential star-studded free agent class in 2026.

The 2025 unrestricted free agent class has a number of impact players, starting with Marner. He's an elite puck-mover whose two-way game makes him an all-around threat. And that should earn him a payday this summer, even with some concerns about his play in high-pressure situations. Evolving-Hockey projects a seven-year contract worth an average annual value of $12.7 million. But up-and-coming teams with extra cap flexibility could push the boundaries even more, up to the $14 million range.

Marner isn't the only big-name player set to become a free agent. Barring an extension in the next couple of weeks, Ehlers — who beat some of his playoff demons this spring in Winnipeg — could be looking at a seven-year deal, worth $8.9 million a year on average.

Teams that strike out on those wingers could explore the tier below, with players like Brock Boeser, Brock Nelson and Matt Duchene.

Boeser's goal-scoring ability is valuable, especially in a league where offense can win championships. But is he something of a passenger otherwise, which adds risk to his next contract. A seven-year extension, with a projected $8 million cap hit, is rich for someone who doesn't drive play enough in his own right.

Brad Marchand and Sam Bennett are two other players likely to cash in this summer, if available on July 1. This may not be Prime Marchand anymore, but he is showing what he has left in the tank in Florida and how impactful he is in the playoffs. Bennett's physical, playoff-style of hockey tends to appeal to general managers, too.

On defense, Aaron Ekblad is one of the few pending free-agent defensemen in line for a long-term deal; Evolving-Hockey projects a six-year deal with a $7.7 million AAV. Vladislav Gavrikov is also of first-pair caliber, but is more likely to sign a deal with a shorter term. Dante Fabbro, Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov highlight the list of second-pair defenders currently set to hit the market.

All in all, it's a fine set of players, but it doesn't come close to the potential star power in 2026.

The 2026 class also has a handful of second-line caliber forwards and second-pair defensemen on expiring deals. But what separates these groups of free agents is the talent available at the top.

While the 2025 class boasts one elite player in Marner, the 2026 class is headlined by three MVP-caliber forwards: Connor McDavid, Kirill Kaprizov and Jack Eichel.

The 2026 free agent class outshines 2025's two first-line caliber players with five — Kyle Connor and Adrian Kempe, who should make eight figures on their next deals, along with Artemi Panarin, Martin Necas and Alex Tuch.

The defensive group is a bit thinner. But between Mattias Ekholm, John Carlson, Jake Walman and Ryan McDonagh, there are four true first-pair caliber defenders with expiring contracts in 2026.

So, how should general managers navigate the next couple of seasons?

The easy answer is to wait until 2026 if a team misses out on the top impact players in 2025. The salary cap is set to rise again, to $104 million, which will provide managers with even more money to work with. But it's actually not that simple.

It all depends on who is left to sign by 2026. That's the 10-plus million dollar question every year.

The 2025 free agent class was star-studded at one point … and then players started signing extensions early, pictured in red below.

Jaccob Slavin signed on the first day he was eligible, on July 1, as did Juuse Saros. Pavel Buchnevich and Victor Hedman quickly followed.

Travis Konency, Leon Draisaitl and Sidney Crosby all extended before the puck dropped on the 2024-25 season. Carter Verhaeghe and Shea Theodore were locked up in October, then Igor Shesterkin signed his eight-year deal in December.

Few big-name pending free agents make it to the deadline without an extension in place. When that happens, general managers are faced with two options: trade the player to ensure a return, instead of letting them walk for nothing on July 1, or use them as a rental and deal with the fallout later.

Tavares, Panarin, and Johnny Gaudreau are three rare examples of the latter; Tavares left the Islanders for the Maple Leafs, Panarin from the Blue Jackets to Rangers, and Gaudreau from the Flames to Blue Jackets.

But in some cases — hello, Mikko Rantanen — general managers take a more proactive approach. The Rantanen situation had its own unique quirks, though, since he was traded twice in one season. In the end, he was signed to an eight-year extension in Dallas, which took another high-end player off the board.

And this isn't a trend exclusive to this past year.

The 2024 free-agent class was set to be headlined by Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Sebastian Aho, Jake Guentzel, Sam Reinhart, Gus Forsling, Devon Toews, Noah Hanifin, Connor Hellebuyck and Ilya Sorokin, among others. Not one of those players made it to July 1 unsigned. The closest was Guentzel, whose signing rights were traded from Carolina to Tampa Bay, where he signed an eight-year deal on June 30.

Instead, a very different caliber group headlined free agency in 2024: Elias Lindholm, Chandler Stephenson and Steven Stamkos were among the top centers on the board, which inflated their signing values. Jonathan Marchessault, Teuvo Teravainen, Sean Monahan, Alexander Wennberg, Tyler Toffoli, Jake DeBrusk and Tyler Bertuzzi were among the other available forwards. On the back end, Brady Skjei, Brandon Montour, Matt Roy, Brett Pesce, Chris Tanev and Sean Walker were some of the available defensemen.

Rewind to 2023. Nathan MacKinnon, David Pastrnak, Dylan Larkin, Bo Horvat, J.T. Miller and Mackenzie Weegar were all off the board by the time free agency opened. That left names like Alex Killorn, Ryan O'Reilly, J.T. Compher, Ryan Graves, Dmitry Orlov, Niko Mikkola and Joonas Korpisalo available on July 1.

Aleksander Barkov, Mika Zibanejad, Tomas Hertl, Sean Couturier, Valeri Nichushkin, Ryan Pulock, Morgan Rielly and Darnell Nurse all extended early ahead of 2022 free agency. Filip Forsberg re-signed in Nashville the day before his contract expired. So the top players available when the market opened included Nazem Kadri, Vincent Trocheck, Andrew Copp, Claude Giroux, Mason Marchment, Ben Chiarot, Darcy Kuemper and Jack Campbell.

Could these next couple of years be different in a rising cap world?

Maybe teams won't make the mistake the Avalanche did and move Rantanen too soon. Maybe they will be more willing to hold onto pending UFAs as internal rentals, even if that player is set to walk away on July 1. And maybe that opens the door to general managers signing elite talent in free agency next summer.

Or maybe players will start taking more control of their futures. If Marner can get $14 million, what could that mean for someone like Eichel on the open market?

Then again, who knows if that even happens this summer?

Ehlers could sign an extension with the Jets tomorrow. The Panthers could lock up Bennett and Marchand sometime within the next month. That could shrink the free agent class even further, and subsequently lead to middle-class overpayments, which tends to be the case when few impact players are left on July 1.

If anything, general managers should use this summer to gauge the best way to utilize their spending power, rather than letting that extra cap burn a hole in their pockets. There is no reason to spend just for the sake of spending, especially with the 2026 class looming — unless they can land a true top-line caliber impact player.

Basically, it's a balancing act.

If Marner is available this summer, teams should try to sign him because it's rare that an elite player makes it to free agency. General managers shouldn't look past him in the hopes that Kaprizov is available next July (especially since he has already expressed that he wants to stay in Minnesota).

But when Marner, Ehlers and Tavares are off the board, whether or not that happens before or on July 1, teams shouldn't necessarily jump to sign Boeser for $8-9 million a year, either. Instead, teams have to start taking more calculated risks and learn when to spend and when to wait.

In a perfect world, free agency is the best way to acquire top players, since it only requires cap space. But the reality is that top-tier players rarely make it to July 1, so teams have to measure the risk-reward of penciling in any 2026 free agents.

General managers should stay mindful of the list of players set to be available in 2026, but it shouldn't be at the forefront of any decision-making, either. Instead, teams have to keep exploring every other avenue to acquire high-end players, whether it's the few players set to be available this summer, offer sheets, or trades.

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ESPN / Panthers-Hurricanes Game 2 takeaways, early look at Game 3 – ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

May 23, 2025, 04:10 AM

There's an ancient South Florida proverb about numbers: Not one. Not two. Not three. Not four.

Opening the Eastern Conference finals with five goals in Game 1 on Tuesday showed that at least for one game the Florida Panthers could find a breakthrough against the Carolina Hurricanes. Only for Thursday to arrive and the Panthers to once again post five more goals in a 5-0 win to take a 2-0 series lead before heading back to Sunrise for Game 3.

How did both teams perform? Who are the players to watch next game, and what are the big questions facing the Hurricanes and Panthers ahead of Game 3 on Saturday?

Carolina Hurricanes

Grade: D

Say what you will about the offside goal being akin to Charlie Brown getting the football pulled out from under him by Lucy. While it's possible that the disallowed goal could have provided momentum, there were other things that suggested the Hurricanes were going to struggle.

Under Rod Brind'Amour, they've become one of the teams that consistently generates the highest number of shots per game. They

entered Game 2 averaging 33.2 shots per game, yet they hadn't even cracked double digits until there was 14 minutes remaining in the third period. Natural Stat Trick's metrics showed they had two high-danger scoring chances midway through the third period, and after giving up seven goals throughout the entirety of the second round, they've allowed 10 goals in the first two games.

Or view it this way: The Panthers had more goals than the Hurricanes had high-danger scoring chances. -- Clark

Florida Panthers

Grade: A+

What more is there to say about Florida, really? The term "clinic" doesn't seem to cover it. The Panthers have done it all against Carolina in these first two games.

Thursday was another dominant performance by the reigning Stanley Cup champions in an offensive and defensive effort that requires no notes. The Panthers set a tone early with Gustav Forsling's goal just 1:17 into the game and never relented. The Hurricanes were averaging over 33 shots per night in the postseason (second most among playoff teams), and Florida limited their chances to seven shots through the first two periods alone -- while the Panthers pummeled Carolina with 16 shots and four goals in the same span. It was enough to chase Frederik Andersen from the net, when he was replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov with a four-goal deficit.

The Hurricanes' top scorers were simply no match for Florida's attack or a locked-in Sergei Bobrovsky, who, while not heavily challenged, was a match for all comers in a 16-save shutout. The way Florida is playing right now, one has to wonder how the Hurricanes can get back in this series as the teams shift down to Florida. -- Shilton

Three Stars of Game 2

1. Sam Bennett

C, Panthers

He had two goals and a helper, as the Panthers dominated the Hurricanes in Game 2. This is Bennett's second career 3-plus point playoff game and second career multigoal playoff game.

2. Team defense

The Hurricanes were averaging 33.2 shots per game this postseason, second in the playoffs to the Colorado Avalanche. But the Panthers, with their efficient and suffocating defense, held Carolina to five shots in the first 30 minutes of the game. Near the end of the second period, the fans at Lenovo Center were growing tired of it and started chanting "shoot the puck" at their team. Carolina did have more shot volume in the third period, ending with 17, but nothing got past Sergei Bobrovsky.

3. Offside reviews and coaching tactics

Normally, I'm not the biggest fan of lengthy offside reviews. I wish there was a timer -- if you can't make the call in 90 seconds, then the call on the ice stands. But the Florida Panthers executed one to perfection in Game 2. Up 3-0 in the second period, the Hurricanes scored, but thinking the play was offside, the Panthers called a timeout to buy more time to see every angle available, eventually calling for the challenge. It was indeed determined to be offside and the goal was taken away. -- Arda Öcal

Players to watch in Game 3

Andrei Svechnikov

F, Hurricanes

Let's start here with the Hurricanes. There's no shortage of options. Part of the reason Svechnikov is in this space is because he leads the Hurricanes in goals this postseason. The rest of it has more to do with whether the Canes can rely on a certain postseason pattern for Svechnikov holding true. After going goalless in Games 2 and 3 against the New Jersey Devils in the first round, he responded with a hat trick. He didn't score in the first two games against the Washington Capitals only to then score a goal in three straight games. Could Svechnikov respond by grabbing at least one goal in Game 3? Or are the Canes in store for more offensive struggles once they arrive in Sunrise? -- Clark

Matthew Tkachuk

LW, Panthers

The Panthers' instigator had been quiet since Florida's first-round series win over Tampa Bay, recording just five assists in eight games heading into Game 2 against Carolina. But Tkachuk looked more like himself Thursday, agitating the Hurricanes and making his physical presence felt. He also emerged early on the score sheet, registering an assist on Gustav Forsling's game-opening salvo and adding a goal -- Tkachuk's first in 10 games -- in the opening period to extend Florida's lead to 2-0. It was a testament to how commanding Tkachuk's line was with Sam Bennett (two goals and an assist) and Carter Verhaeghe (three assists) that he was able to finally appear as the Tkachuk of old. If this was indeed Tkachuk's reawakening after a slow stretch, then the Hurricanes better be well aware of Tkachuk going forward because he was as dangerous as ever at both ends of the ice in Game 2. -- Shilton

Big questions for Game 3

What's the response to their worst playoff loss this year?

Several questions will be asked when it comes to what adjustments can be made before Game 3. Could one of them be about what the Hurricanes must do to get off to a stronger start? Allowing two first-period goals in Game 1 already presented the reality that the Panthers were going to remain aggressive. But to then give up the first goal less than two minutes into the first before giving up three in total in an opening frame that saw the Panthers record just five shots on net? That only adds to the degree of difficulty for a team that has now lost two straight playoff games after losing two postseason games in total over the first two rounds, especially when the last time the Hurricanes were down 0-2 to the Panthers in a playoff series was during the 2023 Eastern Conference finals in which they were swept. -- Clark

Will Sam Reinhart be back at full strength for the Panthers?

Florida saw one of its top skaters exit in the first period after Sebastian Aho delivered a hit that forced Reinhart out for the remainder of the game with a lower-body injury. While Florida had Game 2 well in hand even before Reinhart became unavailable, it's safe to say the Panthers are a better team when he's in the lineup. Reinhart's status going forward is significant for Florida overall. Reinhart paced the Panthers with 39 goals and 81 points in the regular season and notched 11 points in 13 postseason tilts going into Game 2. Florida must hope that Reinhart isn't just available for Game 3 (and beyond), but that he's not too banged up to continue operating at a high level. -- Shilton

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ESPN / Top NHL prospects playing in the 2025 Memorial Cup – ESPN

Rachel Doerrie

is a professional data consultant specializing in data communication and modelling. She's worked in the NHL and consulted for professional teams across North American and Europe. She hosts the Staff & Graph Podcast and discusses sports from a data-driven perspective.

The 2025 Memorial Cup is upon us, and there is a ton of intrigue. The tournament is brimming with talented young players, some of whom will play in the NHL as soon as next season and one who is the consensus first overall selection in 2026.

There's everything from elite forwards who should become 30-goal scorers in the NHL to top-four defenders that will man NHL blue lines for years to come. The level of talent on display in this Memorial Cup surpasses those of the last few years. There is no shortage of eye-popping talent in every game of this tournament, and each team has a few players that NHL fans should expect to see as soon as this fall.

Here's a team-by-team rundown of the top prospects, including scouting notes on each:

London Knights

OHL

Easton Cowan, Toronto Maple Leafs

It is no small feat to hold the playoff scoring record for the London Knights given the top-flight talent that has come through the team, and Easton Cowan has accomplished that feat; he now has 96 playoff points after tallying 39 points in 17 playoff games this year. He is the straw that stirs the drink in London, and will be looking to avenge a loss in last year's Memorial Cup Final.

Cowan plays an in-your-face style with high-end skill. He hits, gets in the kitchen of opponents, dangles and creates high-danger scoring chances. His chemistry with Halttunen played a key role on London's OHL Championship run, and everyone expects him to be a major talking point over the next 10 days.

Kasper Halttunen, San Jose Sharks

The MVP of the OHL playoffs tallied 15 goals in 17 playoff games, including multiple hat tricks in the OHL final. He went through playoff opponents like a hot knife through butter, and is going to be the No. 1 shut-down target in the Memorial Cup.

If London is going to win as the Memorial Cup favorites, Halttunen will likely need to lead the tournament in goal scoring. He can score from distance with an NHL-ready shot, and can also deflect pucks, and drive the net. On the power play, his one-timer is a significant weapon. Halttunen will be one of the best offensive players in the tournament and the top priority for opponents to neutralize.

Sam O'Reilly, Edmonton Oilers

The two-way center was fantastic for London throughout the OHL playoffs, tallying 22 points while shutting down the opponent's best players. He is going play a key role in shutting down the likes of Gavin McKenna, Andrew Basha, Caleb Desnoyers and Jacob Mathieu.

O'Reilly is a quality penalty killer and excellent matchup center because he's relentless on the puck, his stick routinely breaks up passes and he wins most of his puck battles. O'Reilly is Dale Hunter's go-to player in tight situations, and will be deployed in every key spot. If he can effectively neutralize the opponent's best players and put up around four points, London will be in good shape.

Sam Dickinson, San Jose Sharks

Dickinson is one of two standouts on the Knights' blue line and is their best offensive defenseman, tallying 31 points in the OHL playoffs. The offensive facilitator has been excellent as a junior player, and finds himself projected to become a top-pair defender in the NHL.

Dickinson will be expected to play a steady game, break up plays and thwart offensive threats. He's at his best when he plays a simplified defensive game while joining the rush offensively with excellent skating ability. He can tilt the ice in the Knights' favor from the back end, and if he plays mistake-free hockey defensively, the Knights will be in good shape.

Oliver Bonk, Philadelphia Flyers

Bonk is not flashy the way Dickinson is, but Hunter relies on him to play the toughest matchups. He's a steady presence on the blue line, shutting down opponents effectively by forcing them into poor areas of the ice and killing the play.

He's a defense-first player who doesn't get caught up ice. His gap control allows him to force turnovers, steer opponents through the neutral zone and force dump-ins. Hunter will need him to shut down junior hockey's best players, and it will be a major test of Bonk's ability to neutralize NHL-caliber players. If Bonk can win his matchups against McKenna, Desnoyers and Cataford, the Knights will be in pole position to win the Memorial Cup.

Medicine Hat Tigers

WHL

Cayden Lindstrom, Columbus Blue Jackets

After missing a year with injury, the No. 4 overall pick from 2024 tallied four points in four WHL championship games. The big forward is going to have a lot of eyes on him at the Memorial Cup after losing a year of development. He needs to use his body to protect pucks, drive to the middle and be a consistent scoring threat.

Lindstrom has the ability to tilt the ice in Medicine Hat's favor, driving offense and physically imposing himself on opponents. He is the X factor for Medicine Hat; if he's excellent, the Tigers have a real chance to win the Memorial Cup. If he can't perform at his very best, they may struggle to handle the depth of London and Moncton.

Gavin McKenna, 2026 draft prospect

There will be at least two or three viral plays from Gavin McKenna in the Memorial Cup. One of the best players -- if not the best player -- outside of the NHL is not draft-eligible until 2026.

McKenna has eye-popping offensive abilities, elite hockey sense and routinely turns defenders into pretzels. He's the most gifted player in this Memorial Cup, and if Medicine Hat is going to win, will likely lead the tournament in scoring.

McKenna is a threat with and without the puck, in the offensive zone and in transition, and no one at the junior hockey level has effectively neutralized him. He's a truly special talent, and unlike other special talents before him (Connor McDavid, Connor Bedard), McKenna has the opportunity to play in the Memorial Cup.

Ryder Ritchie, Minnesota Wild

A point-per-game player in the WHL playoffs, Ritchie doesn't get the same media attention as McKenna, Lindstrom and Basha do, but he's a very effective player. A dual-threat offensive talent, Ritchie struggled to adjust to Medicine Hat's system of play earlier in the season after an August trade from Prince Albert, and rounded into form as the season wore on.

Ritchie can shoot the puck with authority and his playmaking ability prevents defenders and from cheating to the shot or pass. He can drive play, create scoring chances and facilitate for his teammates. Medicine Hat will need him to facilitate offense and be a catalyst in the middle of the lineup to provide scoring depth.

Andrew Basha, Calgary Flames

Basha missed a significant portion of the regular season and playoffs recovering from ankle surgery, but made an immediate impact when he returned. At his best, Basha is a dynamic offensive threat who beats defenders with speed. He can beat teams in many ways, with playmaking and scoring ability.

While he's more of a playmaker than shooting threat, Basha will be a major part of Medicine Hat's offensive production at even strength and on the power play. With the likes of Lindstrom, McKenna and Ritchie, Basha has no shortage of players with whom to make plays. He's the type of player who elevates the play of his teammates, and shows flashes of truly elite offensive talent.

Tanner Molendyk, Nashville Predators

With 20 points in 18 playoff games, Molendyk continues to be an elite defenseman at the junior level. He defends the rush with supreme effectiveness, which will be key against the likes of Easton Cowan, Kasper Halttunen, Caleb Desnoyers and the like.

He neutralizes elite offensive talent in transition with elite skating and puck moving. His identity as a two-way defender who moves the puck well and defends the rush gives him a confident projection as a top-four defender in the NHL. Molendyk is the leader on Medicine Hat's back end, and the player relied upon to drive play from the blue line. Expect him to play a significant role in all situations for the Tigers at the Memorial Cup.

Rimouski Océanic

QMJHL

Mathieu Cataford, Vegas Golden Knights

The two-way forward will be key for the hosts of the tournament, who lost to Moncton in the QMJHL Final. Cataford is a well-rounded player that provides significant value on both sides of the puck. He will need to be impactful on the forecheck, facilitate offense with his passing skill and get quick shots off from scoring areas.

He's got the strength and skill to drive transition play and create plays at the net front. He can and will play in all situations, and will need to be a catalyst in all three zones for Rimouski to overcome the champions of the OHL, QMJHL and WHL.

Jacob Mathieu, Undrafted free agent

The leading point producer in the QMJHL playoffs will need to lead the charge for the hosts in the Memorial Cup. The 21-year-old undrafted player is looking to make an impression to earn an invite to an NHL development camp and perhaps, an entry-level contract.

Mathieu tallied 31 points in 23 playoff games, including four goals and seven points in the QMJHL Final. He's found the offensive game that many teams hoped to see in his draft year, and has put it together at the right time for Rimouski. They will need him to produce and drive offense, as well as support plays in all three zones. If Mathieu continues to perform and produce at the Memorial Cup, he will surely get consideration for an NHL contract this fall.

Spencer Gill, Philadelphia Flyers

The big, right-handed defender missed the entirety of the QMJHL playoffs with a broken ankle, and is hopeful to return for the Memorial Cup. He's a quality defender who can be a difference-maker on the back end with his physicality and transition ability, if he's able to play.

There is no word on whether he will be ready or not, but Gill's presence in the lineup would be a major boost to for the host's chances after losing 4-2 to Moncton in the QMJHL Final.

Moncton Wildcats

QMJHL

Caleb Desnoyers, 2025 draft prospect

Desnoyers has a rare chance to make a final impression on scouts and NHL executives long after many of his draft-eligible counterparts have stopped playing. While they're readying for the combine, Desnoyers is looking to lead his team to a Memorial Cup.

An excellent two-way player, Desnoyers has excellent hands and quality playmaking ability. He plays in the face of opponents and can neutralize their best players. Moncton is expecting him to lead the charge offensively while playing head-to-head against the top players. If Desnoyers has a standout performance on both sides of the puck, he may find himself inside the top 5 when the draft rolls around.

Gabe Smith, Utah Mammoth

One of Moncton's best players in the playoffs, with 22 points in 19 games, the big center will continue to play a key depth role for Moncton after scoring the series clincher in the QMJHL Final. He is a menace at the net front, proving near impossible to move, with proven ability to deflect pucks and finish rebounds in tight.

At 6-5 and 207 pounds, he's almost too much to handle at the junior level, bullying his way through battles, forechecking and holding opponents off. He should be able to continue physically dominating players at the Memorial Cup, even if he lacks dynamic skill. He plays an effective, power-forward game and can turn momentum with a big hit or altercation.

Juraj Pekarcik, St. Louis Blues

Expected to play on the top line with Desnoyers, Pekarcik tallied nine goals in the QMJHL playoffs, including goals in each of the first three games against Rimouski in the Final. Pekarcik is one of the smarter players on the Wildcats' roster, and can execute plays at a high pace. He understands how to read defensive coverage, find holes and attack them with speed. He takes what defenders give him and will need to continue that to produce alongside Desnoyers.

He'll play a key role on the power play recovering pucks, funneling the puck to the net and dissecting coverage.

Etienne Morin, Calgary Flames

One of the best defenders in the QMJHL playoffs, Morin is the catalyst from the back end for Moncton. Tallying 11 power-play points this postseason, Morin was a major reason the Wildcats made opponents repeatedly pay for their infractions.

He quarterbacks the Moncton power play, is a shooting threat from the point and facilitates opportunities for Desnoyers and Pekarcik. Defensively, he plays a physical game, punishing opponents while effectively moving the puck and getting himself out of trouble. He'll play major minutes against the top players in the tournament, and will be required to shut them down for Moncton to have success.

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1353489 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Hurricanes buckling under the pressure that Panthers embrace

Eric Engels

RALEIGH, N.C. — Seconds after saying he wasn't much of a thinker, Brad Marchand waxed poetic on what it takes to rise above pressure and come through in the clutch, to crave opportunity and seize it once it presents itself.

He conjured up 424 words on the subject — the Stanley Cup champion's thesis on how to be a winner.

"I think the thing that I've found as I've gone on is that pressure is made up, it's a lot of noise," Marchand started.

Had the Carolina Hurricanes listened to everything else he had to say about it, they might have looked a little different than they did in Game 2 of this series.

Instead, they looked even worse than they did in dropping Game 1, losing 5-0 and getting booed off the ice by the few fans that remained at Lenovo Center when the final buzzer sounded.

The Hurricanes were disconnected from the start of Thursday's game, they were incapable of establishing the forecheck that's been so foundational to their success, they couldn't muster enough shots, they were dispirited before 16 minutes had even gone by, and they were so apparently suffocated by the pressure of the moment.

How else do you explain the way they habitually turned gold to lead in this one?

A sample: Jordan Staal breaking through the middle of the ice, clearing the Panthers defenders out of the way and dropping the puck to Jordan Martinook in the guts of the slot, only to have Martinook turn the best scoring chance of the night into a routine save for Sergei Bobrovsky.

That was right before Sam Bennett tipped Carter Verhaeghe's shot to make it 3-0 Panthers 15:50 into the game.

It was Florida's fifth shot on net.

Gustav Forsling scored on their first, Matthew Tkachuk scored on their third because those guys are comfortable under pressure.

They made the rest of this game feel like a funeral for the Hurricanes.

It was Carolina's 14th straight loss in the Eastern Conference Final, dating back to 2009. Their sixth straight to the Panthers in Round 3, dating back to 2023. And Marchand's words from earlier in the day resonated with every passing second of it.

"Pressure is something you can embrace, or it's something you can be nervous about," said Marchand. "What I've found the more I've gone on, and even early on, is when you've worked your whole life to be put in a position to have success or to achieve something that you only ever dreamed of potentially becoming a reality in winning the Cup, that's gotta excite you to want to be a difference maker and want to be a hero. And when you get that opportunity to make a difference, it's not to get nervous under pressure of what happens if you win or if you lose. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter if you win, or you lose, there's only one team that wins. The pressure, if you let it get to you, it can affect you. But if you're excited about it, and you want to be the hero, you want to score the big goal and make the big play, and you get excited and want

to embrace that, then that's when I feel like the pressure just kind of slides off and it's not something you think about."

Ahead of this game, the stakes were higher than they've been for either team this season. And yet, it never felt that way for Marchand's Panthers.

That's the value of championship experience.

When we asked Tkachuk if he still gets nervous before these games, the 2024 champ said, "Not really anymore."

"I think the most nervous I'd ever been was before Game 4 of the finals last year, in Edmonton," Tkachuk added. "But ever since then, not really a whole lot. But that's just because you know how you're going to play. If we didn't how we were going to play out there and prepare…

"We're prepared. We know how we're going to play. We know each line's going to go out there, and we try to roll over them, and sometimes it doesn't work out perfectly. But when you know your game, you shouldn't be too nervous about it. You get beat. (There are) games you get beat… We lost a bunch last year and it's not always been perfect all the time. But you just continue to do the right things. And it's natural to be a little bit nervous. But when you have a great plan and you have a great work ethic, like our team does, it shouldn't be as bad."

For the Hurricanes, who've been chasing championship experience throughout this decade, it looked terrible.

You could feel the tension on their bench from the press box, and it obviously paralyzed them on the ice.

"I think we came out with the right intentions, but it was trying to do too much," said coach Rod Brind'Amour. "And then we're not doing the things that we do as a team that normally helps us. We were just — I didn't know what I was watching in the first period, and that didn't go well. I said the other day, the margin here is tight. We're not going to beat this team if we're not on the same page. And tonight, for whatever reason — like I said, the intentions were good, everyone's trying, 'OK, I'm gonna do this' — but that's not how we do it, and it just backfired."

By the end of it, the Hurricanes were nursing more than just bruised egos.

After getting rocked by A.J. Greer in the second minute of the second period, defenceman Sean Walker played five more shifts and didn't return. Seth Jarvis, who got popped by Niko Mikkola, missed the last 9:20 of the game.

Brind'Amour didn't have an update on either one of them.

He also didn't know how the Hurricanes would recover from this loss, with the series shifting to Florida and the Panthers appearing unbeatable.

"We gotta just, not throw this game away, but we gotta learn from it — what doesn't work — and give yourself a chance," Brind'Amour said. "That's what we didn't do. I thought we did the other night. Obviously, same result. But clearly, you go off the script and it's not going to go well. So that's the lesson learned there."

But can the Hurricanes learn to rise above the pressure? The evidence they don't know how keeps mounting.

They talked about bearing down on their chances after creating several high-quality ones in Game 1, but they passed all of them up in Game 2.

Literally.

There was Jarvis, flying down his off-wing on a late second-period two-on-one, forcing a pass instead of shooting before Jackson Blake followed his lead and passed to the Panthers instead of shooting from four feet in front of Bobrovsky.

Hurricanes fans, who are accustomed to seeing their team shoot even when they shouldn't, started chanting "shoot the puck."

Bennett listened and scored his second of the game to make it 4-0 in the 40th minute of play.

The Hurricanes kept trying to search for the perfect play thereafter, with none of them apparently wanting to be the difference maker, or the hero.

As Marchand said on Thursday morning, "You're not going to win playoff hockey with that."

"When you prepare the right way and you practise the right things, those things show up in the playoffs," he concluded. "And that's what the players that I've played with and that I've learned from (do). I'm fortunate enough to follow in their footsteps and learn those things so that when you get into those so-called high-pressure situations, you just do what you're used to doing, and usually the little, simple things are what comes up in those moments."

There's been nothing simple about how the Hurricanes have handled these moments. Nothing in recent years, nothing in recent days, and if that doesn't change, their losing streak in the Conference Final will continue.

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1353490 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Shanahan era defined by comfort, not Cups

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The president's boss set the bar one year before he dropped the hammer.

"The fans here not only deserve, they demand a championship. And there's no complacency," Keith Pelley declared in May 2024.

Pelley, the brand-new chief of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, was just weeks on the job. This was the first time his direct report, Toronto Maple Leafs president Brendan Shanahan, had a single superior whom fans could identify. A boss with a face and emotions. One who could pump a fist in victory or shake his head in embarrassment if, say, one of his sports teams crumbled in the big moment and got booed off the ice.

Already, Pelley was demanding results publicly, with Shanahan sitting on the same dais, sitting a quick outlet pass away.

That sentiment felt new, refreshing. Even if so many of the characters charged with reaching Pelley's high bar in 2024-25 were the same ones he inherited, the same ones that have now reached the post-season nine consecutive times but the second round just twice and never beyond.

"We're not here to sell jerseys. We're here to win. And we're gonna do everything we possibly can to do that," Pelley went on that day. "As much as I love the city and Toronto is my home, that was not the allure for me to come back. The allure for me to come back was the possibility and the commitment to be successful in winning with the Toronto Maple Leafs."

That same magnet drew Mimico, Ont., native and Hockey Hall of Fame player Shanahan back here too, 11 long years ago, that seemingly whisked by in a blink.

Less than a year after Pelley gave his introductory speech — and four days after a handful of those jerseys he wasn't trying to sell were thrown onto Scotiabank Arena's ice in disgust — Shanahan was dismissed.

On Thursday, Pelley met with the MLSE board, which is composed of ownership stakeholders Rogers (which owns Sportsnet), Bell, and Larry Tanenbaum, to discuss Shanahan's fate.

Shortly thereafter, the club announced it would not be renewing Shanahan's contract, which expires on June 30.

"It was determined that a new voice was required to take the team to the next level in the years ahead. The franchise will be forever grateful for Brendan's contributions and wish him and his family every success and happiness in the future," Pelley said in a statement.

General manager Brad Treliving, who was hired by Shanahan in the 2023 off-season, will remain safe, according to insider Elliotte Friedman.

While departing under disappointing circumstances, the well-compensated Shanahan, 56, should be fine, too.

The former New York Ranger and New Jersey Devil has already been granted permission to speak with the New York Islanders about their

front office opening, ironically following the dismissal of Lou Lamoriello — whom Shanahan hired to guide these Leafs early in his tenure.

Shanahan's 11-year run began with a scorched-earth rebuild in 2014. He was successful in winning the Mike Babcock sweepstakes in the summer of 2015, securing the most prized free-agent coach at the time.

Shanahan was in the building when, after strategically bottoming out, the Maple Leafs won the 2016 draft lottery and the right to draft franchise cornerstone Auston Matthews first overall.

He took a chance on rookie GM Kyle Dubas and was instrumental in securing prized free agent John Tavares in 2018.

Shanahan also updated the logo, unveiled Legends Row, oversaw the Leafs' centennial celebrations, and established — repaired, in some cases — strong connections with the team's alumni.

What he did not do was deliver an on-ice product that, while brimming with high-end individual talents, reached greatness.

Under the "Shanaplan," the sum of the hockey team never equalled the president's assembled parts.

Moreover, by guaranteeing the security of Matthews, Tavares, Mitch Marner, and William Nylander via trade protection, Shanahan failed to adjust his strategy in the face of mounting evidence.

He helped create a culture of comfort, not Cups.

Letting stars like Zach Hyman and, in all likelihood, Marner also walk away from their hometown team with nothing, for nothing, will be part of Shanahan's legacy too.

"While I am proud of the rebuild we embarked on starting in 2014, ultimately, I came here to help win the Stanley Cup, and we did not. There is nothing more I wanted to deliver to our fans, and my biggest regret is that we could not finish the job," Shanahan said in a statement.

"I greatly enjoyed working with Brad and Craig (Berube), and I firmly believe they are excellent in their roles and have done a great job in their time with the team.

"Also, I want to thank the players, they are committed and passionate about delivering a championship to this city and will do everything within their power to accomplish that goal. I wish them all the very best."

Much like Dubas and former coach Sheldon Keefe in lost seasons before him, Shanahan already knew he was on thin ice entering his final season with the Maple Leafs. Hence, the exit strategy.

As a man who made his name with victories, he knew that results mattered. That no matter how badly you want them, this is the cost of coming up short.

That day when new boss Pelley spoke in May 2024, Shanahan, too, said something prescient and true before heading into this encouraging, disappointing lame-duck campaign.

"I've been in this game a long time. Whether it's myself or the players or staff, we know how it works," Shanahan said that day.

"We've all seen the good, the bad, and we accept the consequences that might come to any of us."

Pelley will address the media at Scotiabank Arena at 1 p.m. on Friday to discuss Shanahan's departure and what comes next.

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Sportsnet.ca / Draisaitl breaks unwritten rule, calling out Oilers struggling penalty kill

Mark Spector

DALLAS — Among the many unwritten rules that govern a hockey dressing room, one of the most sacred is the one that Leon Draisaitl contravened in the discouraging moments after Game 1 of the Western Conference Final.

Let's call it "The Code", and subsection XXVI, article 62.2 reads as such: No player shall critique a part of the team that he is not party to or a participant therein.

What it means is, a goalie never criticizes the skaters (or vice versa), a forward never tells a defenceman how to handle his gaps or block a shot, and a guy who isn't a regular on a stinky Oilers penalty killing unit is expected to hold his comments on how that fermenting PK has crippled the team during parts of this post-season.

"We've got to stay out of the box," began Draisaitl, standing in the Oilers' room after a 6-3 loss that fell directly at the feet of the penalty killing units. "There are going to be penalties. You've got to come up with a kill."

At that moment, Draisaitl knew that he had trod on to murky ground, and was to some degree speaking out of turn — despite his stature in the room and the fact he had just produced a game for the ages, all wasted by a penalty kill that surrendered three goals in six minutes early in Period 3.

Draisaitl, however, is not a tap dancer. Either he says nothing, or he speaks the truth, and this elite piece of German engineering doesn't really have a third gear.

"I'm not on it, so who am I to say anything?" he said. "But that's just common sense. That's a fact.

"Then, once you have a chance to tie the game up on the power play, it's our turn to be much better than that."

For what it's worth, Connor McDavid, who only recently began killing penalties semi-regularly, stepped outside those same accepted norms of team etiquette the very next day. Again, in the spirit of stating the obvious.

What was McDavid's takeaway from Game 1?

"Really good for 40 (minutes), and really bad for 20," he deadpanned. "Where it got away from us, obviously, (was) the kill. A two-goal lead in the third, we take a couple penalties, and we've got to find a way to get a kill. Giving up three is obviously not good enough."

Later, he doubled down: "Ultimately, we've got to find a way to get a kill on one of those, two of those, whatever. Just to give ourselves a chance."

The visual of McDavid sitting on the bench next to Draisaitl, as the Stars' powerplay poured pucks past goaltender Stuart Skinner, who definitely needs to be better, while a crucial playoff lead transformed into a deficit before their very eyes, was stark.

A McDavid glance to Draisaitl. A wordless acknowledgement back to the captain that, yes, this is becoming an issue again.

The internet eats that stuff up, that McDrai look that reminds us all that no matter how super the superstars might be, this isn't the NBA. It takes a team to win a Stanley Cup.

"Of course it needs to get figured out," said Connor Brown, a charter member of a penalty kill that surrendered just four goals in 25 games last spring, but has leaked away 14 already in these playoffs. "Anytime you have a you have a hole in your game, you're looking at it.

"We're not shying away from it. We're not just pretending it's going to get fixed without attention to detail and accountability."

A unit that functioned at 94.3 percent a year ago has spiralled to 62.2 percent this spring.

The Oilers have, as we said, allowed 14 goals in 12 games. Meanwhile, the three other remaining teams — Carolina, Florida, Dallas — have combined to allow 16 power-play goals against this spring.

That's not just a malady or a touch of the hockey flu. It could be fatal to the Oilers' Stanley Cup chances.

Head coach Kris Knoblauch and assistant coach Mark Stuart have been under the hood of this unit all season long. It was a middle-of-the-pack

unit rife with wild inconsistency all season long, and it hasn't been any better in the playoffs.

The question is, will it become an Achilles heel in this latest Stanley Cup quest?

"We talk about the penalty kill quite a bit," Knoblauch said on Thursday. "We are always trying to make adjustments, and through the first two rounds we've done a pretty good job of making adjustments that are needed."

We did the math — and Knoblauch is right.

In Games 1-3 of the L.A. series, the Kings' power play went 7-for-12. In Games 3-6, it went 1-for-8.

Against Vegas, the Golden Knights went 3-for-7 in Games 1-2 and were then 0-for-6 for the rest of the series.

This series opened with a win-turned-loss that can be directly blamed on a leaky P.K.

We're not sure the Oilers will get three or four games to figure that out, this time around.

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Sportsnet.ca / From L.A. to New York, top landing spots for Mitch Marner in free agency

Ryan Dixon

In the aftermath of another hollow spring, all kinds of talk — and no small amount of shouting — has been focused on the future of pending free agent Mitch Marner.

And despite what angry Toronto sweater-tossers would tell you, all 32 clubs — including the only one that's ever provided Marner a paycheque so far — will have some level of interest until the moment he puts pen to paper on a new deal.

Marner entered the league with his hometown team in 2016 and, since that season, only seven players — Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Nathan MacKinnon, Nikita Kucherov, Artemi Panarin, David Pastrnak and Sidney Crosby — have tallied more points than the 741 posted by the fourth overall pick in the 2015 draft.

Marner, who just turned 28, was a Selke finalist in 2023 and — scoff if you will — has never missed the playoffs in a nine-year career.

Now, he's about six weeks away from being able to sign with any team in the league.

While it's too early to close the door on a return — Leafs coach Craig Berube "100 per cent" wants Marner back — it sure feels like the writing is on the boards here and, after another excruciating spring, Marner will turn the page and search for a different kind of work-life balance in a new locale.

Of course, while Mitch Marner, free agent is going to attract all kinds of attention, some landing spots are more logical than others.

With that — and with the assumption Marner won't be inking a new deal with Toronto — let's run down the still-lengthy list of teams that could go hard at the type of player who rarely hits the open market.

If any team can relate to the Leafs' throbbing pain of banging your head against the wall every spring, it's L.A. The club that has dropped four straight first-round series to the Edmonton Oilers just changed general managers — bringing in former Oilers boss, Ken Holland, in fact — and is surely primed to make a splash.

The need for scoring — and bringing in players who can help with that — has been an organizational theme in L.A. for 15 years. In 2012, the club made a swap with Columbus to acquire Jeff Carter; two years later, L.A. went back to the Columbus well to snag Marian Gaborik, who wound up leading the playoffs in goals in 2014 as L.A. won its second title in three years.

Were Carter (who was sulking in Ohio) or Gaborik (a one-dimensional, often-injured winger) perfect players when L.A. got them? Certainly not. But they made a huge difference in the plight of the Kings.

The bones of this L.A. squad may not be quite as sturdy as those championship-level teams from 2012 and 2014, but there's no doubt the Kings are a team that could hit a whole other level with an injection of raw talent.

From Marner's perspective, L.A. would seem to be as appealing a fit as any team we'll touch on today. You can see the potential for deep playoff runs while your family lives a fantastic California life.

Expect the Kings to be among the first to call Marner's camp.

Is L.A. still a bit too close to Canada for you? Then let's move a bit south to Orange County.

The Ducks fired coach Greg Cronin after the season and replaced him with Joel Quenneville, a move that lent credence to ownership's insistence that this is the summer to open up the wallet and spend in Anaheim.

On the ice, the Ducks made a big leap from 59 to 80 points this season. But, obviously, when a coach loses his job — and when a team hasn't seen the post-season since 2018 — nobody is satisfied.

Anaheim has good young players or prospects at every position. Of all the non-playoff teams that could take a run at Marner, it feels like the Ducks — and another one we'll mention soon — can make the best case for being competitive in the immediate future.

That's especially true if No. 16 joins the squad.

Utah Mammoth

New name, new star?

Utah made a big splash in its first summer as a franchise last year — empowered GM Bill Armstrong traded for Mikhail Sergachev from Tampa — and there's a universal expectation Utah will go big-game hunting again.

Mammoth fans can credibly dream of a world where they pursue Marner as a UFA and pair that move with a splashy trade or second big-time UFA signing.

Salt Lake City holds appeal as a place to settle and the team — which was in the Western Conference playoff hunt until the late stages of the season — is on the upswing.

As always, the Knights must be mentioned any time a high-profile player can be had. Add to that Vegas' need for help on the wing and you start to wonder if there's a perfect marriage here.

The Knights are the first team we've mentioned that would have to massage the roster a bit to create some space for Marner, but we know anything is in play when this club gets ruthless. If that means moving an "Original Misfit" like William Karlsson to clear nearly $6 million in cap space, then that's what it takes.

The fact Vegas has won one playoff series in two years since claiming the 2023 Cup means hunger levels will be extra high in the desert.

Watch out.

Until now, we've exclusively mentioned Western Conference clubs and it does seem like the more logical fits are on that side of the draw.

Still, there's an obvious connection in Pittsburgh in that the deal Marner played on for six years was inked by former Leafs GM — and current Pens boss — Kyle Dubas.

Pittsburgh doesn't want to tear it down and has been re-tooling on the fly. What better way to move the puck forward than adding Marner to play with Sidney Crosby for the final years of Sid's career?

It's impossible to know how Marner would feel about joining a team that's been trending down as opposed to up, but Crosby is always a draw and there's a clear personal connection there in Dubas.

We might as well address the other potential pre-existing connection before going any further. Brendan Shanahan — president of hockey operations for the Leafs for the past decade — is talking to the Islanders about a similar position there this week.

Like Marner, Shanahan is at the end of his contract with Toronto and there's a strong sense the relationship has run its course.

Could an Isles organization with new leadership at the top — a GM is coming at some point to replace Lou Lamoriello — use winning the draft lottery as motivation to put the hammer down, draft a stud first overall in June, then add a 100-point player in free agency a few days later?

That would sure spice things up on Long Island.

And could you imagine if, seven years after John Tavares departed New York for Toronto, Marner did the opposite?

Frustration is growing in Colorado, where the team has won just a single playoff round since claiming the 2022 Cup. Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar are super-duper star players still at the height of their powers and both just won the 4 Nations Face-Off with Marner, where the latter was a very important player for Canada.

If Colorado can't find the 2C it has been in search of since Marner's one-time teammate Nazem Kadri left Denver, maybe the Avs just pivot to a play-driving winger to make the second line sing — especially if MacKinnon is drawing the tough assignments on the first line.

The Avs would have to re-arrange the books a bit to make this work and, surely, some portion of the fanbase would question the logic of essentially letting Mikko Rantanen leave, then signing Marner for (presumably) similar dollars.

But we are where we are, and Colorado is a great team looking for something to help it get back to the top.

The Hawks are on the hunt to make this team better NOW, pure and simple. You could definitely see Chicago cutting a blank cheque here and telling the player nobody is going to pay more for him.

Again, it's hard to know how Marner would feel about joining a team that appears very far from real contention, but Chicago is an all-time sports city and boasts a bevy of good, young players in the mix already with Connor Bedard.

We didn't want to touch on the Canes too early because they're still very much in the hunt for the Cup and it's hard to know what summer priorities will be. That said, if Carolina loses out in the conference final and the bugaboo is, once again, the team's inability to find goals, you have to think the Hurricanes are making a serious pitch.

We know there's recent history here, as Carolina and Toronto discussed a potential Rantanen-for-Marner swap ahead of the deadline. Ultimately, the Canes dealt Rantanen to Dallas after — as was his right — Marner enacted his no-trade protection to nix the deal.

It's completely understandable why a player would do that at any point, and especially in the middle of a season's stretch run. But just because you don't want to uproot your family on the fly to move to North Carolina doesn't mean you wouldn't consider that part of the world — one many players adore living in — in a different context.

We had to save a wild card for last. The Caps had an incredible season that ended in second-round disappointment. Alex Ovechkin is back next year for his age-40 season on a contract that runs out in July, 2026.

Maybe he's back for more, maybe that's the end.

Either way, the offensive engine of this team is leaving soon and it could use Marner now to help get over the hump with Ovi still playing and later to make sure the scoring doesn't dip too much when the greatest goal-scorer of all-time hangs 'em up.

The Caps would need a bit of salary maneuvering to make this happen, but nothing crazy.

Washington smoked the off-season last year — could the Capitals do it again?

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Sportsnet.ca / Howden breaks down during testimony at hockey sexual assault trial

Paul D. Grant

LONDON, Ont. — Brett Howden broke down and cried Thursday while being questioned by defence counsel about his memory of what happened on June 19, 2018, at the trial of five former NHLers accused of sexual assault.

While being questioned by Lisa Carnelos, who represents Dillon Dube, about explaining the night at the Delta Armouries to his dad, Howden, 27, started blinking and moving his eyes rapidly from side to side. Testifying via Zoom from Las Vegas, Howden, voice shaking, said that it was "one of the hardest things to go through, explaining this to my family."

When Carnelos asked Howden, now a member of the Vegas Golden Knights, about telling his girlfriend, who's now his wife and the mother of their two young children, Howden broke down and cried.

Earlier, assistant Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham questioned Howden about text messages he sent on June 26, 2018, to former Canadian junior teammate Taylor Raddysh, who was his roommate at the Delta Armouries for the Hockey Canada gala event. The admissibility of the text messages is being challenged by the defence.

Howden read the text messages, one of which read, "Dude, I'm so happy I left when all the (expletive) went down." Referring specifically to when he left Room 209, Howden texted Raddysh, "Duber (Dube) was smacking the girl's (butt) so hard, it looked like it hurt so bad."

When asked to vouch for the accuracy of the texts, Howden said, "I had no reason to lie. I believe I was being truthful."

Carnelos suggested to Howden and the court that the text exchange was an informal conversation between two friends, and it wasn't meant to be an official statement of events along the lines of what would come out of a police interview.

"Obviously, I wasn't thinking this would be used," Howden said. "I have no reason to lie. No reason to hide anything. Seeing what I said, it's hard to remember."

Howden added he remembered being more worried at the time about Hockey Canada's code of conduct than his professional career. He testified he was in New York for Rangers development camp when the text exchange occurred.

Riaz Sayani, co-counsel for Carter Hart, contended the text messages shouldn't be allowed into evidence because Howden wasn't able to say definitively that they weren't inaccurate. Howden answered earlier that his memory of some of the 10 pages of texts could be inaccurate, but couldn't say which ones.

Cunningham later countered Sayani's assertion that "accuracy and honesty are different things" by saying "they are both components of truth."

Justice Maria Carroccia said she will make her ruling on the admissibility of the text exchange between Howden and Raddysh on Friday.

Michael McLeod has been charged with two counts of sexual assault, including one relating to aiding in the offence. Dube, Cal Foote, Alex Formenton and Carter Hart have each been charged with one count of sexual assault. All have pleaded not guilty to their charges.

The trial is nearing the end of its fifth week.

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 12 RFAs of 2025: Latest rumours, reports

Luke Fox

No. 1 defencemen, No. 1 centres, No. 1 wingers and No. 1 goalies. Bridge candidates and future superstars that need to be locked up before the big breakout.

The 2025 class of impending restricted free agents offers a little bit of everything enticing.

And while several potential RFAs avoided drama and uncertainty by signing well before July 1 (the Rangers' Alexis Lafreniere, Dallas's Jake Oettinger and Wyat Johnston, Minnesota's Brock Faber, St. Louis's Jake Neighbours, Utah's Dylan Guenther chief among them), plenty of intriguing young names remain unsigned for next season.

As these RFAs look to bank off their platform campaigns and managers wonder how to spend their dollars against a spiking salary cap, plenty of tense negotiations (or a couple of trades?) are still on deck.

The situations in Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Anaheim are particularly compelling.

Here's where things stand with the top 12 RFAs of 2025, as the flurry of trades and signings at the deadline settles.

1. Evan Bouchard

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: $3.9 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Top-10 draft pick. Right shot. Releaser of the Bouch Bomb. Key power-play contributor. Stanley Cup finalist. Followed an 82-point regular season with 32 points in a 25-game playoff run. Holds record for most assists by a D-man in one playoff year (26).

The latest: The Edmonton Oilers haven't dressed such a productive offensive defenceman since Paul Coffey, and Bouchard's performance — particularly come postseason, where he is better than a point per game — has set him up to flip his bridge deal into a whopper.

"Nothing on that yet," GM Stan Bowman told reporters. "He's still a very big priority for our team, he had a fantastic season, he's a great player, and I think his best years are still ahead of him."

Bouchard's pricy extension took a back seat to that of Leon Draisaitl's over the 2024 off-season, and Connor McDavid's raise lies right around the corner.

Bowman knows he must squeeze in another superstar salary on the back end (somewhere in the $10-million range?) for Bouchard, which is partly why St. Louis's offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway were successful last summer.

Because Bouchard has his defensive lapses, however, the idea of committing eight figures and locking him up long term has divided the fan base.

"Bouch does get a lot of criticism — I think a lot unfairly so," Bowman told Frank Seravalli on Feb. 26. "He's a great player. He really is a big part of our team. He's very effective, and I think sometimes when… your mistakes get spotlighted, for whatever reason, then maybe there's more attention given to it.

"But he's played well. He's very good at complementing our best players. That's an important role. When you got really creative offensive players who are forwards, you need to have someone who can help them score."

Bouchard saw his point total drop from 82 to 67 in the regular season, but he has again been a major contributor when it matters most and was impactful without security blanket Mattis Ekholm early in the 2025 playoffs.

2. Luke Hughes

Age on July 1: 21

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: $925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Fourth-overall draft pick. Legit hockey family. World junior medallist. Already repped Team USA twice at world championships. Calder finalist. Named to 2024 NHL All-Rookie Team. EA Sports cover boy. Impressive 47-point rookie campaign and instant top-four D-man in the pros.

The latest: After hiring a new coach and making a ton of UFA noise in the summer of '24, New Jersey Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald's top priority is now clear: Get Hughes locked up for a team-friendly rate.

The Devils did just that with Hughes' older brother, Jack, and a great long-term comparable for Luke emerged when fellow 2024 Calder Trophy finalist Brock Faber re-upped in Minnesota for eight years at $8.5 million per season.

Such a deal would elevate Luke's salary over Jack's $8 million, which is excellent value.

Luke underwent off-season shoulder surgery, missing the first few weeks of his platform campaign, but rebounded strong and stepped up down the stretch with injuries to Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler.

Fitzgerald said he would begin negotiating with Hughes's agent in January, but concrete updates have been scarce.

Bridging the young defenceman at, say, $5.1 million per season, could save money now but set the Devils up for a monster bill when Hughes approaches UFA status and the salary cap has gone through the roof.

The smart money says buy big now.

3. Noah Dobson

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: $4 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Right-shot blueliner with tremendous vision. Top-12 draft pick. One of two Islanders defencemen to record 60 assists in a single season. First Isles D-man to hit 70 points since Denis Potvin. Seldom takes penalties. Member of Team Canada at 2025 worlds.

The latest: General manager Lou Lamoriello got ahead of his most important RFAs, forward Mathew Barzal and goaltender Ilya Sorokin, in off-seasons past. But Dobson has entered 2024-25, the final year of his bridge pact, with uncertainty in the air.

The aging Islanders can ill afford not to invest in young talent.

Hampered by injury in 2024-25 and struggling at both ends of the ice, Dobson's production got chopped in half. A disappointing season for all involved.

Dobson switched agents, from Andrew Maloney to Wasserman's Judd Moldaver and Olivier Fortier, ahead of this critical negotiation.

Another cautious bridge deal, and the Isles could walk a top-four right shot straight to UFA.

Should the Islanders go long-term here, the player could be pushing for an eight-year deal nearing $8 million per season.

Dobson should soon become the highest-paid player on the team's back end.

4. Matthew Knies

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Left wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: $925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Top-line power forward who skates on both special teams. Meshes well with superstars Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner. Biggest, youngest player on the Maple Leafs. Strong playoff showing. Easily crushed career highs in goals (29), points (58) and minutes (18:31). Net-front presence. Fights own battles. Olympian.

The latest: So much for the sophomore slump.

Knies packed on 10 pounds over the summer, then got shot out of cannon. The second-year pro instantly gained trust (and ice time) from new Toronto coach Craig Berube and has been one of the Leafs' best stories of 2024-25.

“He’s a beast,” confirms fellow Arizonan Auston Matthews.

Berube has gone so far as to compare Knies to power forwards like Keith Tkachuk, Bill Guerin and John Leclair — comments GM Brad Treliving hopes Knies' agent didn’t catch wind of.

In speaking with Knies, he has made it clear that he loves being a Maple Leaf and has no thoughts of leaving Toronto.

He has politely declined to publicly discuss the state of extension talks, but there is no doubt Treliving wants to keep him in the fold, rebuffing rival GMs' trade interest at the deadline.

“Matthew is just realizing how big and strong he is, and he’s getting more comfortable,” Treliving said of his top-line left wing on March 7. “He’s sort of grown right in front of our eyes. So, he’s a big part of our team now (and will) continue to be moving forward. And he’s a unique player. You know, that’s a big, strong man at 22 years old.”

Of course, the Leafs have monster decisions to make on UFAs Marner and John Tavares, but with the cap and Knies’s stock both on the rise, we can’t see a good reason not to lock him up for as long as possible.

5. Gabriel Vilardi

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Centre / Right wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: $3.44 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. 2021 IIHF world champion with Team Canada. Traded a significant asset to obtain him. Three straight 20-goal seasons. Integral player in Presidents’ Trophy bid. Enjoying career season.

The latest: A major reason why trading Pierre-Luc Dubois to L.A. a couple years back looks so good on GM Kevin Cheveldayoff, the versatile Vilardi has flourished as a Winnipeg Jet.

Not only has the forward grown from a third-liner to a top-six staple but he has become one of the more dangerous power-play threats in the league.

Another two-year bridge deal would walk Vilardi straight to free agency, so we suspect Cheveldayoff aims for term here. The fit with core forwards Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor has been fantastic.

Cheveldayoff keeps his cards close to vest, but when he was asked about doling out big raises for impending UFAs like Nikolaj Ehlers, the executive said that he needs to sort out extensions for his younger RFAs.

Reading the tea leaves, we’d say the odds of Vilardi — who wants to stay — getting his money in Winnipeg are greater than Ehlers’.

“The contracts, that’s going to take care of itself,” Cheveldayoff said of Viladri and fellow RFA Dylan Samberg. “We’ll work on that. We’ll find a way to find common ground. But those are the guys that we're challenging.”

6. JJ Peterka

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: $855,833

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: 2022 AHL All-Rookie Team. Silver medallist and Best Forward at 2023 world championships. Superb skater. Sniper. Career-high 41 assists and 68 points in 2024-25.

The latest: In the case of his previous RFAs who showed early promise — Tage Thompson, Dylan Cozens, Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power, Mattias Samuelson — Buffalo GM Kevyn Adams has tried getting ahead of breakouts by locking up young Sabres for major term.

A scorer in the ballpark of Guenther’s capabilities, Peterka — one of the great bargain deals of 2023-24 — could be looking for an AAV north of $7 million should Adams wish to buy UFA years.

Failing that, a bridge deal would be the easier route.

Adams maintains that he is philosophically open to buying term, betting that the AAV would benefit the team against a rising cap.

“We're always open. We've done it before, but we've also gone the other way,” the executive said, cautiously. “It's always about what's right for us and what's right for the player.”

Despite a flurry of trade deadline rumours, Adams’ stated goal is to sign Peterka to an extension at season’s end. He planned to talk to Peterka’s agent, Allan Walsh, before the Sabres were eliminated.

“Zero, zero truth to that, anything around JJ in terms of looking to move him or any of that stuff,” Adams said. “We’ll get to his agent immediately, say, ‘OK, where do we go from here?’

“He’s one of our core young guys. We need him to continue to get better, and we need to make sure that we’re also explaining to him how we’re going to make the team better.”

Peterka’s strong production has done himself a favour, hanging back-to-back 20-goal showings on a talent-starved team with cap space to spare.

7. K'Andre Miller

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: $3.872 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. World junior silver medallist. NHL All-Rookie Team. Durable. Great size and reach at 6-foot-5, 210 pounds. Productive despite limited power-play time. 43 games of playoff experience already. Excellent skater.

The latest: Big, strong, smart blueliners in their prime are essentially must-keeps.

So, while the New York Rangers were quick to re-sign power forward Lafreniere, elite goaltender Igor Shesterkin, and newly acquired defenceman Will Borgen, locking up Miller before he wraps his bridge contract should be imperative.

All these raises add up, and Miller survived the Rangers’ in-season salary purge that sent Jacob Trouba, Kaapo Kakko, Ryan Lindgren, Reilly Smith, and Jimmy Vesey packing.

GM Chris Drury will be staring at a $4.65-million qualifying offer to retain Miller’s rights this summer; a long-term deal should push Miller’s AAV into the $6 million–to–$6.5 million range.

New York still holds a couple years of club control here, so Miller’s file has taken a back seat. That he survived the deadline bodes well for an extension, though Miller’s inconsistency puts that in doubt. He also needed surgery for an upper-body injury.

“Kind of hard to talk about my future here,” Miller told reporters as season’s end. “I have a great agent who is going to help me throughout this summer’s process. I love being a New York Ranger. I think this has been some of the best years of my life. These past five years have been unforgettable in about every aspect you can think of. That’s all I really have to comment on.

“I love New York, and I wouldn’t want to play anywhere else right now.”

8. Lukas Dostal

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Goaltender

2024-25 salary cap hit: $812,500

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Gold (2024) and bronze (2022) medallist at world championships. Crowned Best Goaltender at '24 worlds. AHL All-Star. Clear successor to John Gibson as Anaheim's No. 1 goalie. Fantastic traditional and underlying stats despite playing behind a subpar team of skaters. Ducks sure can use saves.

The latest: With Gibson sidelined by an appendectomy to begin 2024-25, Dostal happily carried the workload in Orange County and began performing among the league's elite at his position.

Dostal's strong track record has met opportunity at the perfect time, and the goalie is putting himself in line for a massive payday.

GM Verbeek was in no panic to extend Dostal before the season began, but the way Dostal has performed, the executive may wish for a time machine.

"We'll take our time on that," Verbeek stated at the start of training camp when asked about extensions for his pending RFAs. "To me, that's far down the road."

Well, now that the end of the road is fast approaching, Verbeek has begun discussions with Dostal's agent, Michael Deutsch.

That Gibson's salary could still get moved this summer — the Ville Husso trade feels like foreshadowing — only clears more space for a significant commitment to Dostal.

Young goalies who can play 54 games are hard to find. You gotta keep them.

Dostal prioritized health over repping his native Czechia at the worlds.

"Lukáš still doesn't have a contract, that was the main reason," Czechia goalie coach Ondrej Pavelec told reporters. "To risk something would not be ideal, which we respect."

Age on July 1: 26

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: $2 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Young, talented centre on a team in a reset. Improved his NHL production in five consecutive seasons. Hot off first 30-goal, 50-point season. Big frame (6-foot-3, 209 pounds). Net-front presence.

The latest: Geekie should see plenty of opportunity now that the Boston Bruins have entered a (hopefully quick) rebuild and have gotten thin up front.

The gradually improving pivot enjoyed a career high in ice time (16:55) in 2024-25, and the salary-shedding B's now have cap space to spare.

In multiple interviews, GM Don Sweeney has expressed confidence that Geekie will be re-signed without much stress.

One catch here: Geekie's offensive breakout was juiced by a 22 per cent shooting percentage, which is well above his average.

"Can he continue to expand his game and be one of the building blocks and core pieces moving forward?" Sweeney said to NHL.com's Amalie Benjamin. "That's what we're going to try and find out this summer.

"He's identified this as a place that he wants to play, and we've got work to do to find a contract, and that's what we'll do. I believe we'll get one done."

10. Marco Rossi

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: $883,334

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Top-10 pick. Ontario Hockey League MVP. Austrian national team captain. Put up 21 goals and 40 points in first full NHL season, then followed with a 60-pointer. 2024 NHL All-Rookie Team. Can never have enough skilled centres.

The latest: Sure, Minnesota Wild GM Bill Guerin will soon be squirming out from the weight of the Ryan Suter and Zach Parise buyout payments, but only to face requests for significant pay bumps from integral forwards.

While Rossi's raise is a priority, Guerin's cap planning must begin with locking in team MVP, Kirill Kaprizov, to an eight-figure deal. Kaprizov is eligible to re-sign as early as July 1, but knowing his number will help inform how Minnesota allots the rest of its dollars.

The longer Guerin waits to negotiate with Rossi's agent, Ian Pulver, however, the more Rossi — already on pace for a career high in points — should ask for.

In light of Minnesota's tight budget and other centre prospects coming (Danila Yurov, Riely Heidt), things could get tricky here.

The best route is likely a short-term, kick-the-issue-down-the-road solution. Think something along the lines of Cole Perfetti's two-year, $6.5-million extension in Winnipeg.

Rossi says he "100 per cent" wishes to stay in Minnesota.

Guerin denied any thoughts of trading Rossi to The Athletic in late December. He also said there is "no rush at all" to re-sign the improving asset.

"I'm very happy with Marco. Oh, my God, yeah," Guerin said. "Just his pace of play, his engagement every night, he has been one of our best players. I think the biggest thing, too — and I know this is the hardest thing for young players — is his consistency.

"He's one of our better net-front presence guys. And he's not the biggest guy, but he stands in there and that's why he's getting rewarded. All his goals are from 10 feet and less. He's doing all the right stuff."

And yet, Rossi's ice time plummeted in playoffs (11:18), and there's rumours of native Minnesotan and UFA centre Brock Nelson having mutual interest with the Wild.

From The Athletic: "The team made (Rossi) a contract offer a few months ago — one he didn't accept. Is that offer still on the table? Does Rossi, a pending restricted free agent who is offer-sheet eligible, even want to re-sign when it looks like his future in Minnesota isn't in the top six or on the top power play?... You live and learn when it comes to the postseason, so Rossi will likely be much better in his next try. The question is whether the next try comes with Minnesota."

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: $894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Third-overall draft pick. Olympian. 2022 world junior gold medallist, MVP, and author of the "McTavish Miracle." Three straight 40-plus-point seasons in the NHL. Key piece of the Anaheim Ducks' future.

The latest: The seven-year, $49-million contract Pat Verbeek issued young RFA centre Troy Terry in 2023 might tell us something about the type of deal the Ducks GM may wish to strike with McTavish, the next young stud centre on his to-do list.

The Terry deal took time to come together, however, and Verbeek's other high-profile forward, Trevor Zegras, settled for less money and less term.

The executive has cap space to play with but is mindful of the number of players he'll have knocking at his door for raises. He has a track record of patience, playing out situations where he holds the hammer.

That McTavish hasn't earned arb rights hurts. That he has improved defensively while remaining an offensive threat and reaching a career-high 52 points helps.

So, how are talks going?

“Nothing yet. I'm sure it'll kind of happen as the summer goes on. Obviously, I love it here, and hopefully I can stay here,” McTavish said in mid-April. “They believe in me. (No numbers, but) I think that's more between my agent, me, and Pat.”

A comparable for McTavish’s next contract could be Quinton Byfield’s recent five-year extension in Los Angeles, which carries a $6.25-million AAV.

Here’s Verbeek on Apil 19 talking about McTavish and Dostal: “They’re very important players to our organization, and the hardest thing is going to be to figure out what the contracts look like.

“I've actually had conversations with both agents before the season had ended, so we're just going to kind of pick up where we had left off. I spoke to two young players as well, and they’re excited. They're excited to get going and so hopefully we can work through this expeditiously.”

12. Dmitri Voronkov

Age on July 1: 24

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: $925,000

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Silver medallist at world juniors and Olympic Games. Star player for Ak Bars Kazan in run to 2023 Gagarin Cup final. Seamless transition to North American game. Set career highs in goals, assists, points, and plus/minus. Time as No. 1 centre on team in playoff race.

The latest: Voronkov has been a wonderful success story on an underdog Columbus Blue Jackets team brimming with them.

The fourth-round pick has made an immediate impact since flying across the Atlantic after developing his game for four seasons in the KHL. He hit the 20-goal and 40-point plateaus.

Asked to spotlight an under-the-radar player who has impressed him, GM Don Waddell pointed to his centreman.

“Well, I think Dmitri Voronkov has really taken a step forward. He’s a big guy. For a big guy, he’s got great hands. He goes to the net. He knows where to be,” Waddell told The Hockey Writers.

Columbus is flush with cap space, and Voronkov is the perfect age to grow with Waddell’s emerging core. He’s getting a top-six opportunity.

We see no reason why both sides won’t wish to extend the relationship here, but management is taking its time.

“The good and bad (News) is we’re done April 17, so we’ve got time on our hands here where we can really look at it,” Waddell told reporters upon elimination.

“It also gives us time to study the market and say, ‘OK, if we don’t sign player X, can we replace him with player Z?’ All of that will happen over the next four to six weeks.”

More notable pending RFAs: Ryan McLeod, Philipp Kurashev, Jakub Dobes, Fabian Zetterlund, Morgan Frost, Joel Hofer, Will Cuylle, Connor Zary, Devon Levi, Daniil Tarasov, Mason Lohrei, Tyson Foerster, Cameron York, Bowen Byram, Luke Evangelista, Alexander Holtz, Simon Holmstrom, Alex Laferriere, Hendrix Lapierre, Kaapo Kakko, Jack McBain, Jack Quinn, Adam Boqvist, Nick Robertson, Alexander Romanov, Pontus Holmberg

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TSN.CA / Brett Howden briefly breaks down crying during testimony in London hockey case | TSN

Rick Westhead

LONDON, ONT. – Vegas Golden Knights forward Brett Howden broke down crying while testifying Thursday about text messages he sent to a former Team Canada teammate in June 2018 when they learned Hockey Canada was investigating an alleged sexual assault that took place a week earlier following a golf and gala event in London, Ont.

Howden, who is 27, was testifying about messages he exchanged with Taylor Raddysh on June 26, 2018, about a week after an alleged incident in Michael McLeod’s hotel room in the early morning hours of June 19, 2018.

Howden became emotional as he spoke about his family and about his memories of telling his father about the alleged incident.

McLeod, Alex Formenton, Carter Hart, Dillon Dube, and Callan Foote are accused of sexually assaulting a then-20-year-old woman in McLeod’s hotel room. McLeod is facing a second charge as being a party to the act.

The woman, whose identity is protected by a publication ban and is referred to as E.M. in court documents, has alleged that after she had consensual sex with McLeod, he surreptitiously invited his teammates to his room and that she was sexually assaulted for hours.

Lawyers for the defendants have alleged that any sexual activity that took place was consensual. The players have pleaded not guilty.

E.M. has alleged during her testimony that Dube slapped her buttocks without her consent while they were in McLeod’s hotel room.

On Thursday, Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham began a past recollection voir dire application – basically a trial within a trial – to have Howden’s text messages with Raddysh admitted as evidence.

“Dude, I’m so happy I left when all the s--t went down,” Howden’s June 26, 2018, text message said. “Haha. Man, when I was leaving, Duber was smacking this girl’s ass so hard. Like, it looked like it hurt so bad.”

Cunningham has argued that Howden was being truthful when he wrote that message and it should be admitted.

Howden, who testified remotely from Las Vegas, has not been accused of wrongdoing.

Cunningham asked Howden to review the 10 pages of transcripts of text messages he wrote to Raddysh, including the one about Dube slapping E.M.

“Were you describing something you knew to be true at the time?” Cunningham asked.

“Yeah, I had no reason to lie,” Howden answered.

“Do you believe you were being truthful in those messages?” Cunningham asked.

“Yes, I believe I was being truthful,” Howden answered.

Dube’s lawyer, Lisa Carnelos, has argued that Howden’s text message about the alleged slapping should not be admitted.

Howden agreed with Carnelos that he could have been distracted while he was texting Raddysh, and that they were not having a formal conversation. He also agreed that some of the texts could have been inaccurate.

Carnelos read aloud the first few texts between Howden and Raddysh on June 26, 2018, in which Raddysh told Howden that Hockey Canada was investigating an alleged sexual assault.

Howden testified that he was nervous and afraid.

“You’re scared of your dad, right?” Carnelos asked.

“Yeah, very,” Howden answered. “That was one of the hardest things to go through, telling my family.”

“Not only did you have to explain this to your family, at some point… you’re going to have to explain to your girlfriend, right?” Carnelos asked.

“Exactly, it all wasn’t easy,” Howden answered, confirming that he had married a woman who was his girlfriend in 2018.

“You’ve just had your second child with her, congratulations,” Carnelos said.

At that point, Howden broke down sobbing. He declined an offer from justice Maria Carroccia to take a break to collect himself.

Carnelos suggested to Howden that he was “spitballing” in the text exchange with Raddysh, was careless with the facts, and was asking for feedback from a friend about the narrative he planned to share about the night of the alleged incident.

In one text message to Raddysh that Carnelos read loud, Howden wrote: “I’ll just say I was in there and then just came back to my room when things got really weird.”

“You’re worried about what you’re going to say to people and how you’re going to say it,” Carnelos said.

“What I’m saying is what I know from me,” Howden answered. “It’s not like I was going lie to my dad… it was just a hard time. I wasn’t sure how to approach it with my parents.”

Carnelos asked Howden whether he was worried in 2018 that his professional future would be affected by the alleged incident.

“Honestly I didn’t think that far out,” Howden testified. “I was mostly worried with Hockey Canada and their standards and their code of conduct. I never thought it would come to what it has now. I was worried about what Hockey Canada would think of the fact there was a girl there. That was my main worry.”

Justice Carroccia has not yet decided whether to admit Howden’s text message about seeing Dube slap E.M.

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TSN.CA / Cowan embraces the hate as Knights get second chance at Memorial Cup

Mark Masters

After a heartbreaking loss in the Memorial Cup final last year, the London Knights are back for a shot at redemption.

"It means a lot just to have that opportunity again," said Knights right winger Easton Cowan, who is one of 13 returnees on the roster. "Most of us thought about it all summer when we were training. It kind of to pushes you a bit more."

The last-minute loss to the host Saginaw Spirit in the championship game last year helped drive the Knights to another Ontario Hockey League title.

"Unfortunately we lost but, like they say, you come back stronger," Cowan added.

The Knights sure looked stronger. London steamrolled through the OHL playoffs, losing just one game.

The Knights will open their Memorial Cup schedule on Saturday against the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League champion Moncton Wildcats before facing the host Rimouski Oceanic on Sunday. London will wrap up the preliminary round on Tuesday against the Western Hockey League champion Medicine Hat Tigers.

Last year, London ran the table in the round-robin to earn a bye to the final. But the Knights started slow in the biggest game of the year against Saginaw, falling behind 3-0. A hard lesson was learned and the mindset this year is clear.

"It's just about coming out hot and playing every game like it's your last," said Cowan.

The native of Mount Brydges, Ont., who celebrated his 20th birthday on Tuesday, is looking to cap an incredible junior career with a championship. The Toronto Maple Leafs prospect is expected to make the jump to the professional ranks next season.

During a conversation with TSN, Cowan reflected on his growth this season, explained why he embraces the hate in visiting arenas, and also shared the best advice he's received from Leafs winger and Knights alumnus Mitch Marner. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TSN: In Game 5 of the OHL final against Oshawa, you scored the empty netter to seal the series and set off a celebration in London. What was that moment like?

Cowan: It was unreal. Honestly, kind of blacked out. Just an unreal experience and just an awesome feeling to bring home a trophy to London.

TSN: You go to the heartbreaker celebration. We've seen that before.

Cowan: Yeah, it's pretty cool. I like the celly, obviously. Patrick Kane used to play for the Knights, so it's pretty cool.

EASTON COWAN WITH THE DAGGER INTO THE EMPTY NET, LONDON CAN TASTE IT NOW! pic.twitter.com/T4XlSC6PcB

— TSN (@TSN_Sports) May 16, 2025

TSN: After 12 straight wins to start the playoffs, the Knights lost Game 1 of the OHL final. You had a number of great chances in that game, including a penalty shot, but failed to convert. You responded with five points in Game 2. How did you regroup between games?

Cowan: I just kind of stuck with it. I knew I had the chances and eventually they go in. And eventually they went in in Game 2. It felt good to get that win and start capitalizing.

TSN: What was it like going up against Oshawa Generals defenceman Ben Danford, a fellow Leafs prospect, in the series?

Cowan: It was cool. I saw him most shifts. He's a great player, hard to play against, blocks every shot and makes good plays. I actually was just texting him now. It's good to catch up again, and always fun playing against him. I'm excited to see him at development camp this summer.

TSN: How much has he grown this year as a player?

Cowan: A lot. I've always thought he has sneaky good offensive skill. Not many people talk about it, but I think he's really good offensively. And then, obviously, defensively, he blocks every shot, makes good outlet passes and he wears the 'C' so he's a great leader and just a great guy. And, yeah, really fun to play against.

TSN: It's a fierce battle in the playoffs. What's it like when you're first breaking the ice after that?

Cowan: Yeah, well, he texted me 'Happy birthday!' so that kind of broke it up easy. And then we were just texting from there and seeing what he's up to and how he's been and stuff. He blocked one shot with his throat, so I made sure he's okay with that.

— BarDown (@BarDown) May 16, 2025

TSN: How are you a different player this year?

Cowan: I think I've really just rounded my game out well. A good 200-foot game. Obviously, I didn't have the point production during the regular season (69 points in 46 games, which was down from 96 points in 54 games the previous season), but eventually it came in the playoffs. But just being able to manage the puck at different times of the game, and when to be risky and when not to be risky, and just getting pucks out, getting pucks in, I feel like I've matured my game a lot.

EASTON COWAN INTERCEPTS THE PASS AND RIFLES ONE HOME TO MAKE IT 2-0 CANADA 🚨#WorldJuniors pic.twitter.com/RYf3zOywrs

— TSN (@TSN_Sports) December 27, 2024

TSN: How did you work on that?

Cowan: Lots of video sessions with the coaches here. And then it's just a mindset, really. Like, obviously if you're up 4-2, you just got to get it in. You can't be fancy. But if you're down 4-2, it's maybe different, you know,

maybe you make that extra play, hold on to it a bit longer. So, just being more mature with the puck has helped me a lot.

TSN: Do you feel like you've grown as a person as well off the ice?

Cowan: Yeah, for sure. London's helped me out so much with being a better player and a better person off the ice. I feel like I've been a great leader all four years in London. I'm a guy that's easy to talk to and stuff. So, just got to keep that going and keep getting better each and every day.

TSN: What hasn't changed is your playoff production. Once again you led the OHL playoffs in scoring (13 goals and 39 points in 17 games). What is it about playoff hockey that brings out the best in you?

Cowan: It's fun, obviously, especially playing in London. We have a lot of good fans here and it's super loud. And then at away rinks, you know, everyone hates London so when we come into an away barn there's boos and all that. It's cool. It's cool stuff. It pushes you extra. And, yeah, it's just playoff hockey is super fun. It's do or die every game, so you got to bring your all.

TSN: You don't mind being the villain?

Cowan: No. It's fun. I mean, you don't want to go to an away rink and the barn's empty. You want to be there and it's packed. The other teams have good fans, too, so it's fun just going to these barns. Traveling across the OHL, and now when we head to Rimouski it might be the same, everyone hates London, and we're up for the challenge.

TSN: You'll see some familiar faces on the other side at the Memorial Cup, including phenom Gavin McKenna with Medicine Hat. You got to play with him at the World Juniors. What makes this guy special?

Cowan: He's elite. Obviously, we got to know when he's on the ice. He makes plays with the puck. He's got a good stick and he capitalizes on his chances and he's able to thread those passes through anything. We got to be on him early, and know when he's out there and limit his chances.

TSN: Marner is always keeping an eye on the Knights. We're not sure if he'll be back in Toronto next year(opens in a new tab), but what has his mentorship meant to you as a young Leafs prospect?

Cowan: It's been awesome. I text him quite a bit. He texts me all the time, always congratulates me, and just sees how I'm doing. He's been nothing but great to me. I really look up to him. He's been my childhood favourite player ever since I was growing up, so to be able to text him whenever has meant the world to me. It's super cool and I'm forever grateful for that.

Yes, Easton Cowan is a Mitch Marner fan … @Marner93 … (Thanks to the family for the photo) … #Leafs pic.twitter.com/meZBXkJDf4

— Kevin McGran (@kevin_mcgran) June 29, 2023

TSN: When's the last time you heard from him?

Cowan: We texted after Game 6 when they won in Florida. He was just saying, 'Congrats on winning,' and we were just shooting it back and forth, and just talking about his new baby and stuff. It's super cool to have him be that close to me.

TSN: What's the biggest thing you've learned from him?

Cowan: Never take anything for granted. Enjoy your time in London, your time in Toronto will come. Just kind of enjoy every moment with the team here in London. So, I've been really, you know, just sitting back every day and hanging out with my teammates a lot and getting close to them because you never know when it's your last day with each other and you may not play with each other ever again. You just can't take anything for granted.

— NHL (@NHL) June 29, 2023

TSN: You guys had a team dinner on Tuesday. Did your birthday come up?

Cowan: Yeah, all the boys ordered me a cake from The Keg and then they sang "Happy Birthday." It was pretty cool. It was good stuff.

TSN: What cake was it? Do you have a favourite?

Cowan: It actually was my favorite cake, which is the Billy Miner Pie at The Keg.

TSN: I know you're in playoff mode. Did you indulge? Did you eat it?

Cowan: I actually didn't, no. A couple of the guys did it for me.

TSN: There's that off-ice maturity you were talking about.

Cowan: "I guess so [laugh]."

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