



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The News & Observer

Hurricanes must turn focus to next season. Who will stay? Who could leave?

By: Chip Alexander

The nature of every team sport these days is that when one season ends, preparations for a new season begin quickly, intensely. There is no downtime. Harsh, perhaps, but necessary.

There's the roster to analyze and contracts to sort out for the next year. In the NHL, if a team goes deep in the Stanley Cup playoffs, the NHL draft and free agency can be upon it rapidly.

That's what the Carolina Hurricanes face now, after bowing out of the Eastern Conference Final. Their season ended Wednesday with a 5-3 loss to the Florida Panthers in Game 5 of their series at the Lenovo Center.

Canes center Sebastian Aho seemingly was near tears after the game in talking about this team, of how it would be the last time this group would be together. Changes, he knows, will be made and there will some goodbyes.

"That's the bad part of this business," Aho said. "You build friendships. It's like a family, right? Everyone cares a ton about each other. You try to push all the chips to the middle and try to do something great together.

"I'm sure whenever we're able to do that, we'll share that bond. I'll share the bond with these guys, but it's different when you win. That (stinks) that we weren't able to do it, but this group is special. It was a lot of fun to come into work every day."

Aho paused for moment, saying again, "It's part of the business."

A year ago, there was a lot of change after the Canes lost out in the second round to the New York Rangers. Fixtures like defensemen Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei left in free agency, as did forwards Teuvo Teravainen and Stefan Noesen. Forward Jake Guentzel wound up with the Tampa Bay Lightning when the Canes could not sign him to an extension.

"With what we lost and with the pieces that were left with this organization, it was like, 'I don't think we're making the playoffs,'" Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Wednesday. "It was such a mass exodus of good players to free agency. Then you were able to find good players to fill in and then I was like, 'I don't know if they're that good.'

"But they hung in there. I've got nothing but pride with this group."

What the Canes lacked in the conference final against the Panthers — called "the standard" by Brind'Amour — was precisely what they sought, had and then decided to let go: a consistent scorer in Mikko Rantanen.

A year ago, the Canes traded for Guentzel, a proven point producer and former Stanley Cup winner with Pittsburgh. This season it was Rantanen.

Canes general manager Eric Tulsy caused ripples throughout the NHL when he traded for Rantanen. The deal with the Colorado Avalanche for the Finnish superstar forward also included getting Taylor Hall from the Chicago Blackhawks as Tulsy looked ahead to the playoffs in adding both a proven scorer and former Stanley Cup winner and Hall, a former league MVP.

We all know how that ended. Rantanen was disgruntled from the start and Tulsy quickly elected to send him on his way to the Dallas Stars, who agreed to send forward Logan Stankoven to the Canes as part of that deal.

"Every time you make a change you're taking some risk that it's not going to go quite the way you'd hoped," Tulsy said. "When you're bringing in a player like Mikko, the upside of having that work out is worth the risk in my mind."

It didn't work out. But Tulsy said recently that though the Canes had to part with Rantanen, he still believed they had a competitive enough team to contend for the Cup this year.

"We want to compete for the Cup every year and we think we've built a team that's capable of doing that," he said in late April.

Compete, yes. But the Canes now have reached the playoffs for a seventh straight season under Brind'Amour but been unable to advance beyond the third round. There have been three trips to the conference final, where the road has ended.

Stankoven, 22, did his part in the playoffs and has earned the trust of his Brind'Amour. The Canes also made a very late addition when they brought in defenseman Alexander Nikishin from Russia, adding a player who had starred in the KHL and will be a big part of the Canes' future.

The subtractions after this season?

Some believe defenseman Brent Burns will not return. His 21st NHL season, and his third as Jacob Slavin's defensive partner, might be his last with the Hurricanes.

Defenseman Dmitry Orlov, like Burns, is a veteran D-man who played the final year of his contract and is due to become an unrestricted free agent. He, too, could leave.

The Canes, because of injuries to defensemen Jalen Chatfield and then Sean Walker in the playoffs, used Nikishin and Scott Morrow in the Panthers series. It was trial by fire, especially for Nikishin, who jumped into the playoffs, trying to learn on the fly.

That was a lot to ask of Nikishin and Morrow, but the experience of being in the most pressure-packed games of the season should help their development.



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The Canes also have decisions to make on Eric Robinson and Jack Roslovic. The two forwards, new to the team this season, will be UFAs, and Tulskey might decide to let them test free agency.

Tulskey already has signed Hall and goaltender Frederik Andersen to contract extensions, and might consider more.

With the NHL salary cap for the 2025-26 season projected at \$95.5 million, a sizable increase from this year's \$88 million

cap, the Hurricanes will have the cap space to make major moves. Tulskey, undaunted by what happened with Guentzel and Rantanen, would not surprise anyone by making another home run swing or two.

Should be an interesting offseason, and it's fast approaching.

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The Athletic

Hurricanes have the roster and cap space to pull off a very memorable offseason

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — For the second time in three seasons and third time since Rod Brind'Amour took over as coach in 2018-19, the Carolina Hurricanes' season ended just short of the Stanley Cup Final with a loss in the conference final.

And so begins another offseason of Carolina attempting to find the missing pieces that will get them over the hump. The good news for rookie GM Eric Tulsy? He'll enter his second year on the job with a lot more flexibility and without an expected exodus of key players — along with a boatload of cap space and assets with which to get creative.

Decision time

Unlike last summer, when the Hurricanes lost Jake Guentzel, Stefan Noesen, Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei and Teuvo Teravainen — all key contributors — due to a cap crunch, Carolina doesn't have a lot of in-house business to take care of this summer.

At forward, Eric Robinson and Jack Roslovic are the only full-time contributing forwards who are on expiring deals. The contracts of Jesper Fast and Tyson Jost — injured for the season and a depth player, respectively — also come off the books; Jost could remain a depth option.

Despite having a 22-goal, 39-point season, Roslovic's time in Raleigh is very likely over. He was a healthy scratch in six of Carolina's 15 playoff games, but his goal total — 17 of which came before the calendar flipped to 2025 — will surely intrigue some teams looking for secondary scoring.

Robinson, on the other hand, was a perfect fit in Brind'Amour's system. He too did much of his damage early in the season — nine of his 14 goals and 20 of his 32 points came in the first three months — but his contributions on the penalty kill and as a bottom-six forward were valuable. There should be a path for Robinson and the Hurricanes to renew their partnership.

On defense, veterans Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov were second and fourth, respectively, in average ice time for Carolina this season, combining for nearly 41 minutes a night. Both are now headed toward free agency, and with them goes more than \$14 million in salary cap obligations.

Both had their ups and downs this season. Burns, once one of hockey's elite point-producing defensemen, had less than half the amount of points this season (29) than he did two years ago in his first year in Raleigh (61). Orlov was statistically consistent, but his defensive play was often erratic.

Still, both were valuable top-four contributors and a key part of the NHL's top penalty kill. That said, there is youth coming (more on that in a moment), and unless Burns and Orlov are willing to take a haircut on their salary and accept a diminished role, chances are the team will move on from them.

Eric Robinson's value in the bottom six and on the penalty kill could earn him another contract. (James Guillory / Imagin Images)

Young blood

Carolina got a glimpse at the future of its defense when Brind'Amour's hand was forced in the playoffs due to injuries to Jalen Chatfield and Sean Walker. They know they have a stud in Alexander Nikishin, who went from being lost in his first career NHL game — Game 5 against the Capitals and one of his idols, Alexander Ovechkin — but quickly improved. Scott Morrow had a solid first professional season in the AHL but looked overwhelmed at times when thrust into the NHL playoffs.

Both are good enough to hold down spots next season — Nikishin for sure — but the Hurricanes will need to decide if they can afford to replace two seen-everything veterans with a pair of rookies.

The other young player to watch is Bradley Nadeau, who scored 32 goals and had 58 points in 64 games with the Chicago Wolves as a first-year pro. He can fill the net — a need for Carolina — but his 200-foot game is a work in progress. He'll need to have a more impressive training camp than last season to earn a roster spot.

Come cap in hand

The expected departures and a bump in the cap ceiling mean the Hurricanes should have more than \$28 million in space with which to add to their roster — and not many holes to fill. If Nadeau, Nikishin and Morrow all make the team out of camp, Carolina would have 12 forwards, six defensemen and two goalies.

The Hurricanes also don't have many big-ticket items coming up after next season. Mark Jankowski and Frederik Andersen will be UFAs. Logan Stankoven, Jackson Blake, Morrow and Nikishin will be RFAs, with only Nikishin holding arbitration rights.

That means Carolina is poised to be a big player this offseason.

Mitch Marner is expected to be the biggest name on the market, and he fits the archetype of what the Hurricanes are looking for: an elite point producer who can boost a power



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play. The bonus with Marner is that he's also a reliable penalty killer.

Of course, Marner will be pursued by several teams willing to give him a blank check. Also, Carolina hasn't exactly been predictable with its moves. The combination of cap space, draft picks — two extra first-round picks from the trade that sent Mikko Rantanen to Dallas — and assets means Tulsy can get creative with what he and the front office pursue.

Let's say, for example, the Hurricanes want to get a top-pairing defenseman to play alongside Slavin. They could potentially use assets like Morrow and a first-round pick to acquire such a player.

What if Carolina had its eye on an impact forward on the trade market? The team's wealth of young forwards could be used to upgrade the top of its lineup, and low-priced talent will be attractive to teams looking to clear cap space while still getting back a player who can contribute in the present.

In a nutshell, the Hurricanes have the means to do a lot of things if they can find the right fit.

Expect the unexpected

Since Tom Dundon took over as owner, the Hurricanes haven't been shy about being a bit ruthless, and this summer could see more of that.

If Carolina wants to shake up its roster, that won't mean just bringing more players in — some will have to head out too.

Jesper Kotkaniemi's contract has four years at under \$5 million, and a team desperate for size down the middle could look back on Washington's acquisition of Pierre-Luc Dubois and think there's a reclamation project in the making.

Could the defense be reworked if an upgrade comes along? Don't forget how the Hurricanes traded away Calvin de Haan after just one season of the four-year contract they gave him.

While Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov are locked in on reasonable contracts, if an upgrade came along, would anyone be surprised to see Carolina pounce?

The fact is, no one usually sees what's coming from the Hurricanes. From the Guentzel, Burns and (both) Rantanen trades, to the signing of Orlov and the blockbuster deal that started it all — Elias Lindholm and Noah Hanifin to Calgary for Dougie Hamilton, Micheal Ferland and Adam Fox — Carolina isn't afraid to make noise.

Without any roadblocks other than negotiating with agents or rival GMs, this Hurricanes offseason has the potential to be the wildest one yet.

(Top photo of Alexander Nikishin and Dmitry Orlov: Bruce Bennett / Getty Images)

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Hurricanes know they need to get better. Here's what they could look to do this offseason.

By: Brian Murphy, WRAL News

The Carolina Hurricanes — accustomed to playoff success but unable to break through with a Stanley Cup Final appearance in almost two decades — entered the offseason Thursday with plenty of cap space, a few roster holes and lingering questions about their ceiling and style of play.

Florida eliminated the Hurricanes from the Eastern Conference Final on Wednesday night with a 5-3 victory in Game 5. The Panthers, the defending Stanley Cup champions, have won the Eastern Conference three years in a row, twice knocking out Carolina in the conference final.

Carolina has lost 16 of its last 17 games in the semifinal round, including 11 of 12 under coach Rod Brind'Amour, who has guided the Hurricanes to the playoffs in seven consecutive seasons. Three of those seasons have included trips to the conference final.

"It's the craziest thing that we're this far, and all we're hearing is negativity from everybody," Brind'Amour said after Wednesday's loss.

Brind'Amour, 54, is 325-160-49 in seven seasons and 47-42 in the playoffs. As a player, he captained the Hurricanes to a Stanley Cup win in 2006. Of active NHL coaches, he has the fifth-highest points percentage over his seven seasons at the helm. He is a franchise icon.

But there are questions, especially after Florida dominated the early part of the series, if Brind'Amour's grinding, forechecking style can win big in the playoffs.

"A big part of it is going to come back to: Whether or not this system under Rod Brind'Amour is a Stanley Cup system?" Liam McHugh, the host of TNT's postgame show, said after Carolina was eliminated.

In his postgame press conference, Brind'Amour was asked a similar question: Do you think it requires some level of change in terms of the way you guys play? Brind'Amour responded by noting that Florida had adopted — and improved upon — a system similar to the Hurricanes' style.

"How do you think they play?" Brind'Amour said, referring to Florida. "They're the standard. I see out-in, forecheck hard, wait for your chance, try to capitalize. I mean, it's hard hockey. If anything we got to figure out how to get that much to our game. But that's the standard right there. I feel like that's been our game for a long time. They kind of picked it up the last couple years and made it that much better. So that's what got to get."

Everyone, it seems, has ideas for what the Hurricanes need to get to the Panthers' level — or who the franchise needs to get rid of.

TNT analyst Rick Brownson on Wednesday shared his list: a second-line center, a top-end offensive defenseman and, perhaps, an upgrade in net.

Jesper Kotkaniemi, 24, who is signed through the 2029-30 season, played that second-line center role on Wednesday and for much of the playoffs. He took a critical penalty in the second period of Game 5, helping to fuel Florida's comeback win. Kotkaniemi had zero goals and four assists in 14 postseason games. He was a healthy scratch in Game 2 of the Florida series.

The Hurricanes have taken big swings for talented scorers in recent years, trading for prolific left-winger Jake Guentzel during the 2023-24 season and for high-scoring right-winger Mikko Rantanen during this season. Guentzel left as a free agent after Carolina traded his rights in the offseason, and when it became clear Rantanen wouldn't sign a long-term deal, the Hurricanes pivoted and dealt him to Dallas.

The Hurricanes have the ability to reach high again for a missing piece or two in the offseason. The core of the Hurricanes remain under contract — and the franchise has more than \$30 million in cap space entering the offseason, according to Sportrac. Carolina also has four first-round picks in the next three drafts, including two in 2026 — picks that could be used as trade chips or to bolster the team's corps of prospects.

"There's always an opportunity to get better," captain Jordan Staal said after Wednesday's game. "I'm sure as an organization and management, they're going to try to get better. Obviously, we have to be better. There's still room for improvement. I think with the group we have here and players adding to it will only make us more dangerous."

Hurricanes forwards Jack Roslovic, Eric Robinson, Tyson Jost and Jesper Fast, who missed the entire season, are unrestricted free agents. Everyone else is signed, including 27-year-old Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov, 25; Seth Jarvis, 23; and Kotkaniemi, who are all signed through at least the 2028-29 season.

Veteran defensemen Brent Burns, 40, and Dmitry Orlov, 33, are unrestricted free agents. Carolina has ready-made replacements for them in rookies Alexander Nikishin, 23, and Scott Morrow, 22, who were forced into playoff action due to injuries along the blue line. Orlov struggled in the series against Florida. Nikishin, considered one of the top prospects



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in hockey, could become the high-scoring offensive defenseman noted above. All-world defender Jacob Slavin is signed through 2032-33.

Carolina's top two goaltenders — Frederik Andersen, 35, and Pyotr Kochetkov, 25 — are under contract for a combined \$4.75 million for next season.

Toronto center Mitch Marner, 28, is the top unrestricted free agent, a list that also includes Florida center Sam Bennett, 29, Vancouver winger Brock Boeser, 28, Winnipeg winger Nikolaj Ehlers, 29, Florida winger Brad Marchand, 37, Colorado center Brock Nelson, 33, and Toronto center John Tavares, 34. Florida defenseman Aaron Ekblad, 29, is the top defenseman available.

The Hurricanes' first-year general manager, Eric Tulsky, shrewdly remade the roster last offseason, generally adding low-cost players who played big roles for this season. The Hurricanes lost Guentzel, Teuvo Teravainen and Stefan Noesen and the defensive pairing of Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei in free agency last year and entered the year expected to take a step back.

"With the pieces that left this organization, I was like, 'I don't think we're making the playoffs.' I was that worried about it because it was such a mass exodus of good players to free

agency," Brind'Amour said Wednesday. "And then we were able to find good players to fill in. And then I was like, 'I don't know if we're that good.' But they hung in there. I got nothing but pride for this group. And, yeah, we didn't love how this went, this series, but again, that's the standard right there. You're not giving Florida enough credit."

Only two NHL coaches have been with their teams longer than Brind'Amour, who was hired in May 2018: Tampa Bay's Jon Cooper, who won back-to-back Cups in 2020 and 2021 and coached in two other finals, and Colorado's Jared Bednar, who won the Cup in 2022.

Hurricanes players and fans are hopeful the offseason acquisitions can put Brind'Amour in that company.

"We didn't get near what we planned on," Jarvis said. "Our goal is always to be the last team standing, no matter who we have on the ice. And we have that confidence in ourselves all year ... It's the hardest trophy to win. And when you're feeling like this, you wish you could go back in time, but you can't, and now you got to sit on it for a whole summer."



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Offseason keys for NHL teams, including draft, free agency - ESPN

By: Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

The 2024-25 NHL regular season is over and the playoffs are underway..

This is the place where we look ahead to the offseason for all the teams eliminated from contention: Who will those teams try to add via free agency, trades and the draft? How much better will the team be in 2025-26?

Read on for a look at what went wrong for each eliminated team, along with a breakdown of the biggest keys this offseason and realistic expectations for next season. Note that more teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton, and Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per PuckPedia. Dates listed with each team are when the entry was published. Teams are listed alphabetically by publication date.

Jump to a team:

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WSH | WPG

Playoff teams

Dallas Stars

Projected cap space: \$5.32 million

2025 draft picks: 3rd, 5th, 5th (NJ), 6th, 7th

What went right? There's no questioning their status as a championship contender. Not that the Stars' aspirations were ever in question, but the moves that GM Jim Nill made throughout the 2024-25 season further reinforced the Stars to win now.

A team that once thought of draft picks as sacred moved on from first- and fourth-round picks in this summer's draft in a trade that returned Cody Ceci and Mikael Granlund. Then Nill moved even more draft capital (two first-round picks and

two third-round picks) and promising young forward Logan Stankoven to get Mikko Rantanen, before signing the superstar Finn to an eight-year extension.

All of that helped get the Stars back to the Western Conference finals for the third straight season.

What went wrong? Some of the questions that were present throughout the Stars' playoff run -- such as their depth -- were issues in the conference finals against the Edmonton Oilers. It initially appeared as if the Stars had found a solution with the number of players who contributed to their 6-3 comeback win in Game 1.

But the next three games would see them score only twice, which made the Stars the second team that was in the top five in goals per game during the regular season to be effectively silenced by the Oilers in a playoff series (the Vegas Golden Knights were dispatched in the second round).

Failing to consistently score goals or generate some sort of a breakthrough in other areas is what led to Stars becoming the first team to reach three straight conference finals without advancing to the Stanley Cup Final in NHL history.

Keys to the offseason: Perhaps the only thing more draining than being a championship contender that can't seem to reach the Stanley Cup Final? Figuring out how to remain in contention despite having only so much cap space.

The Stars have built well from within, allowing them to maintain the sort of cap space that has given them an advantage to this point. But with Wyatt Johnston and Jake Oettinger set to receive significant pay bumps on their new deals, and the first year of Rantanen's new contract kicking in, the Stars will need to get creative -- along with making some difficult decisions this summer. Matt Duchene, Jamie Benn, Evgenii Dadonov, Granlund, and Ceci headline the class of unrestricted free agents.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Much like they were this season, the Stars will again be among that category of teams in a championship window. But what will make next season hypothetically more challenging is the fact that the young core who have been key performers on those cheap contracts are now making more money. That not only amplifies the need for the Stars to hit on players on team-friendly deals, but it ramps up the pressure to start winning in this part of their window.

May 28: Carolina Hurricanes

Projected cap space: \$36.18 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd (TB), 4th, 6th, 6th (TB), 7th



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What went right? Carolina had another impressive regular season. The Canes finished in second place in the Metro Division, with a 99-point effort that set them up in good position for a long playoff run.

The Hurricanes were strikingly stingy again on defense, finishing in the top 10 in goals-against average (2.80), and their penalty kill was tops in the league (83.6%). Carolina's offense was propelled by Seth Jarvis (32 goals) and Sebastian Aho (74 points), and worked in complement with their dialed-in defense.

The Hurricanes also lucked out in the trade-gone-bad for Mikko Rantanen; while Rantanen didn't stick around, Carolina did get Logan Stankoven in return from Dallas (along with a bounty of picks) when it traded Rantanen away. Stankoven has been a key player for the Hurricanes this postseason, and will be for seasons to come.

Carolina managed to put it all together and get rolling to start the playoffs too, losing a combined two games in the first and second rounds to punch its ticket to a second Eastern Conference finals in three years.

What went wrong? Well, about that conference finals appearance. It did not go well. The Hurricanes lost -- again -- to Florida, although they won one game, which was one more than two years ago. Prior to the Game 4 victory, it was 15 straight losses in conference finals action. Not ideal.

Carolina had benefited from terrific goaltending from Frederik Andersen in the first two rounds, but the Hurricanes' netminder was no match for the Panthers' punishing attack. Coach Rod Brind'Armour replaced Andersen with Pyotr Kochetkov in Game 3, but that did little to slow Florida's roll as they pounded Kochetkov just the same. Andersen was strong in Game 4, but couldn't sustain it in Game 5.

The Hurricanes' offense was no help, scoring three goals total in the series' first three games. That lack of depth up front is what GM Eric Tulsy tried to address in acquiring Rantanen in the first place. Knowing Rantanen wouldn't be sticking around long term -- and was hardly a difference-maker with two goals in the 13 games he did play for Carolina -- Tulsy had no choice but to give him up. Now he'll have to try again at finding ways to put Carolina over the top.

Keys to the offseason: The Hurricanes have ample cap space to use in the offseason. That's a bonus considering they've got some holes to fill.

There's a need for Carolina to get -- and keep -- a Jake Guentzel or Rantanen type of player -- that big, game-breaking talent who can drive their offense in a tough division, and get them a goal when they need it most in the playoffs. While Jarvis, Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and even Stankoven are excellent players, they aren't moving the needle enough for Carolina when it counts. Whether it's another splashy trade or finding someone on the open market to fill that role, the Hurricanes will be better equipped for the 2026 playoffs if they can land a headliner.

Tulsy has draft capital to wield as well, with a 2025 first-round choice a prime asset. The front office also must make decisions on an unrestricted free agent class that includes forwards Jack Roslovic, Eric Robinson, Jesper Fast and

Tyson Jost, along with defensemen Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov.

And speaking of the back end, the Hurricanes are getting long in the tooth on their blue line. An infusion of some younger talent -- along with increased opportunity for Alexander Nikishin (23) and Scott Morrow (22) -- would go a long way.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Carolina has too many good players not to be in the playoff field again. It's just a matter of what the results will be like when they arrive. There's reason to question what they can put together after another disappointing showing on the heels of such early playoff promise.

May 18: Toronto Maple Leafs

Projected cap space: \$27.49 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd (FLA), 3rd (EDM), 5th, 5th (PIT), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Maple Leafs enjoyed another terrific regular season. Toronto won its first division title in 25 years by finishing fourth overall in points (108) and wielding the seventh-best offense (3.26 goals per game). First-year coach Craig Berube restructured the Leafs into a team that could not only score goals but play a strong collective defensive game, too, resulting in the Leafs' eighth-ranked defense (2.79 goals against).

The goaltending tandem of Anthony Stolarz (21-8-3, .926 save percentage, 2.14 goals-against average) and Joseph Woll (27-14-1, .909 SP, 2.73 GAA) worked seamlessly in Stolarz's first season with the club, and new additions on the blue line -- especially Chris Tanev -- made the Maple Leafs more physically robust than they'd been in years.

The Leafs also got unexpectedly strong contributions from some familiar faces, including John Tavares; the veteran had one of his most productive seasons for Toronto, with 38 goals and 74 points. And rising star Matthew Knies had a breakout season with 29 goals and 58 points, success that he carried over into the postseason, with several solid performances. Speaking of which, the Leafs actually won a playoff round!

What went wrong? Toronto may have skated past the Ottawa Senators with a first-round victory, but the Leafs' postseason demons were alive and well in their second-round clash with the Florida Panthers.

Toronto squandered an early 2-0 series lead, watching it evaporate in Florida's come-from-behind victory in Game 3 and a shutout win in Game 4. The Leafs were booed off their own ice in Game 5's 6-1 drubbing, where Toronto's lack of star power was blatantly obvious. Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander were all goal-less against the Panthers to that point, but they rose to the occasion in Game 6 to drag the Cats back to Toronto for Game 7.

That's where the Leafs' run ended, marking the sixth Game 7 loss for Toronto in the Matthews era. Florida is designed to wear opponents down, and while Toronto blocked shots with gusto the entire series, the Panthers' heavy forecheck and strong play in front of a rock-solid Sergei Bobrovsky was too much to overcome. Toronto's once-potent power play was no help, either, going 2-for-20 in the series.



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Granted, the Leafs lost Stolarz in Game 1 of the series to an undisclosed injury, but Woll gave them every chance to take Game 4, was strong early in Game 5 and shut the door completely in Game 6. The Leafs simply couldn't produce offensively, and in hallmark fashion their top skaters failed to show up when it mattered. Berube said Toronto was "overthinking" late in the postseason. That may have been true -- and once again, there's another too-long summer ahead to dwell on what could have been.

Keys to the offseason: First things first: Is Marner still a Maple Leaf next season? The pending unrestricted free agent wanted to play out the final year of his contract before deciding whether to recommit to Toronto. It's time now for both sides to decide whether renewing their vows -- or an amicable split -- makes more sense.

The Leafs will have salary cap space to use on a significant extension, but depending on where Marner hopes to land (likely among the league's highest-paid forwards), Toronto will have to balance his asking price with their other needs. Knies is a restricted free agent in whom the Leafs will want to invest, and Tavares' deal is up, too. Given how the latter performed this season, there has to be interest on both sides to stay together.

There's also the matter of Nicholas Robertson, another pending RFA who has in the past expressed his desire to leave Toronto. Will GM Brad Treliving find a suitable trade partner now?

The Leafs don't have much draft capital, having traded their first-round pick this season for Jake McCabe in 2023, but the cap space they have will be useful on the open market -- and Robertson could come into play as a trade chip as well.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Toronto is built to win now, and the team will be back chasing a division title again next season. Will it lead to anything of note in the playoffs? Well, it's easy to wonder what it will take to make that a reality.

May 17: Winnipeg Jets

Projected cap space: \$36.36 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Any questions about how Scott Arniel's first season as the head coach would go after previous serving as Rick Bowness' assistant were emphatically answered. Especially with the Jets pulling off something they hadn't done since the 2020-21 season: advancing to the second round of the playoffs.

Much of their success stemmed from being able to trust they could receive contributions throughout their entire lineup. That was further fortified by having a consistent defensive structure that was enhanced by Connor Hellebuyck, who is in line to become the first American to win three Vezina Trophies.

What went wrong? There was never a concern about whether the Jets were a playoff team. But there were questions about how the Jets could fare against a team in a legitimate championship window if they got beyond the first round.

Facing the Dallas Stars provided glimpses that the Jets could keep games close for a time, before succumbing to the big

period against one of the West's top contenders. It's what happened in Games 1 and 3, when the Stars had a pair of three-goal periods in those contests. Or it was seeing how key players such as Mikael Granlund and Mikko Rantanen paced the Stars with hat tricks and the Jets didn't get the same high-octane offense.

Keys to the offseason: The Jets are going to have a lot of money this summer to address their roster.

Some of that will likely go toward re-signing pending restricted free agent Gabriel Vilardi, who just had his third straight 20-goal campaign while scoring a personal-best 61 points.

Where it gets complicated, interesting or both is figuring out how they'll handle pending unrestricted free agent winger Nikolaj Ehlers. Does he stay? Does he leave? If he leaves, will they do a sign-and-trade and not risk losing him for nothing?

And if he does go, how do the Jets replace a dynamic, seven-time 20-goal scorer?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: No team is guaranteed a playoff berth. But there are those that are judged more on what they did or didn't do in the postseason compared to what they did in the regular season. That's where the Jets currently live.

The Jets should challenge for a playoff spot in a demanding Central Division. It's just that their well-noted struggles to get out of the first round is what makes the regular season, while important, not the barometer by which they will be assessed. Whether or not they can get out of the first round -- and the second, and beyond -- will be the new litmus test for the Jets.

May 15: Washington Capitals

Projected cap space: \$12.38 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (BOS), 3rd (CAR), 4th, 5th

What went right? Washington was supposed to be rebuilding, and this season showed the Capitals didn't need long to regroup. They were excellent from the outset of the regular season and quickly climbed atop the Eastern Conference standings. That's where the Capitals stayed most of the season, accumulating the second-most points (111) in the league on the strength of their second-ranked offense (averaging 3.49 goals per game) and superb goaltending from Logan Thompson (31-6-6, .910 SV%, 2.49 GAA).

There was no bigger -- or better -- storyline for the Capitals though than seeing captain Alex Ovechkin make history when he surpassed Wayne Gretzky as the NHL's all-time scoring leader with career goal No. 895 on April 6. It was an individual accomplishment Ovechkin chased with his entire team; his teammates referenced that quest as a constant source of motivation through the ups and downs of their season.

In addition to the Capitals' veteran guard showing off, the Capitals saw terrific growth from some other emerging stars as well, including Ovechkin's frequent linemates Aliaksei Protas (with a 30-goal campaign) and Dylan Strome (who led the club with 82 points). Coach Spencer Carbery deserves ample credit for turning the Capitals around in record time.



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What went wrong? The Capitals' greatest strength in the regular season became their biggest challenge by the playoffs. Washington's red-hot offense began drying up in their second-round series against Carolina, as the Hurricanes' stout defense and outstanding goaltending smothered the Capitals' rush attack.

Ovechkin was particularly absent from the scoresheet against Carolina, failing to get on the board until he notched a power-play marker in Game 4. But Washington's depth wasn't the asset it could have been, with the team averaging just over two goals per game.

While Thompson did his best to hold the Hurricanes at bay, he didn't receive enough support to turn those efforts into victories. The Capitals weren't creating high-danger chances like they could in the regular season, and the lack of a net-front presence made it too easy for Frederik Andersen to shut the door.

Meanwhile, Washington's own defensive efforts never matched Carolina's intensity, and the Hurricanes leaned on 10 different goal scorers for a more balanced offense than what Washington rolled out. Carolina also capitalized on a poor Capitals penalty kill (72.7%) to send them into an early summer.

Keys to the offseason: Washington is in a good position for a bright future. In the process of getting there, the Capitals will also be saying a likely goodbye to some critical veteran presences from their past.

T.J. Oshie is a pending unrestricted free agent after missing the entire 2024-25 season with a chronic back issue. Same for Nicklas Backstrom, who missed the entire campaign with a hip injury. With those skaters off the books, the Capitals will be able to restock on the open market, and should be targeting top-nine skaters to help avoid running aground offensively again in the postseason.

The Capitals have other veterans with expiring deals as well -- namely Lars Eller and Anthony Beauvillier -- who have been role players in what was a strong season. Washington can also do some damage at the draft -- whether via trades or using the picks -- with selections in the first five rounds. Then, of course, there's the question of Ovechkin: is he done now after that historic achievement? Or is there another year ahead for him in the NHL? He has one year remaining on his contract.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Washington may need some offensive upgrades, but it's nothing so drastic as to keep them from being a playoff team again. Expect to see them trend in a similar direction -- towards the top of the Metropolitan standings -- next season.

May 14: Vegas Golden Knights

Projected cap space: \$9.62 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (WSH), 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (WSH)

What went right? For all the concerns about how much they lost in free agency last summer, the Golden Knights found solutions. Homegrown talent Pavel Dorofeyev led them in goals in the regular season (35), and others such as Brett Howden had breakout campaigns.

Many of those contributions -- coupled with what they received from their stars and other venerable figures --

allowed the Golden Knights to remain in the category of teams that could challenge for a Stanley Cup. Their depth was certainly on display against the Minnesota Wild in the first round.

What went wrong? In the second round against the Oilers, that depth disappeared. They came into Game 5 trying to find the type of answers that eluded them all series.

Players such as Ivan Barbashev, Tomas Hertl and Howden combined to score 78 goals in the regular season -- but had zero in the series against Edmonton. Their defensemen combined for 35 goals during the regular season, but had only one in the playoffs.

A lack of consistent scoring was pivotal in the series, particularly in the games in which the Golden Knights scored the first goal in an attempt to gain a grasp of control only to watch the series slip through their fingers.

Keys to the offseason: Next offseason will be the one in which the Golden Knights will face some major questions: Franchise center Jack Eichel's current deal runs through 2025-26, while the contracts for Mark Stone, Alex Pietrangelo and William Karlsson run through 2026-27.

But for now, they have 16 players under contract for next season, and Brandon Saad and Reilly Smith are part of a six-player unrestricted free agent class. Nicolas Hague is their key restricted free agent; he has one year of team control remaining before he hits UFA status.

It's possible that the Golden Knights use their cap space to add around the edges, while trying to secure a deal with Hague that works for both sides ahead of what's expected to be a busy 2025-26 campaign.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The demand -- as always, for a franchise that has made winning at all costs its hallmark -- is challenging for the Stanley Cup.

But that comes with the caveat that this upcoming season could have two major roster-construction wrinkles: Eichel and Dorofeyev. As noted, Eichel is entering the final year of a contract that sees him earn \$10 million annually. As for Dorofeyev, replicating or surpassing the career-high 35 goals he scored this season could see him cash in on a new deal; he'll be a pending RFA that's set to earn \$1.835 million in 2025-26. Finding long-term solutions to both situations will be critical.

May 4: St. Louis Blues

Projected cap space: \$7.15 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 5th, 6th

What went right? Every move that GM Doug Armstrong made throughout the summer and into the season.

The offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway led to Broberg, when healthy, having a career-high eight goals and 29 points while logging more than 20 minutes per game. Not to be outdone, Holloway had his first 20-goal campaign.

The trade for Cam Fowler resulted in him having one of the strongest seasons of his career -- and leading the team in scoring for much of the first round.

Moving on from Drew Bannister to hire Jim Montgomery resulted in the Blues gaining a legitimate level of consistency



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that they used to reach the playoffs for the first time since the 2021-22 season.

What went wrong? Part of the issue was that the Blues could never win a game at Canada Life Centre. The rest stems from the Blues having a proven blueprint that worked twice but failed to be replicated two more times to win the series against the Winnipeg Jets.

Generating a combined 20 high-danger scoring chances in Games 3 and 4 was instrumental in the Blues scoring 11 goals against Connor Hellebuyck in those contests. That created a belief that the Blues could capitalize on the struggles of one of the best goalies of his era, whose regular-season success had yet to translate to the playoffs. But Hellebuyck and the Jets would find a counter en route to advancing to the second round.

Keys to the offseason: For starters, the Blues don't have a ton of cap space. But they have only one pending restricted free agent in goaltender Joel Hofer, while center Radek Faksa and defenseman Ryan Suter are their only pending unrestricted free agents.

Then there's the Torey Krug situation. He missed the entire regular season and playoffs after undergoing ankle surgery in the preseason. Getting Krug back would not only give the Blues a logjam of defensemen, but it would give them six blueliners under contract who are each earning more than \$4 million annually -- and all of them except Broberg have some form of trade protection.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Returning to the playoffs, or at least remaining in the hunt for a playoff spot late into the season, is the plan. The Central Division is still going to have teams such as the Avalanche and Stars that are in a championship window, with the Jets trying to establish themselves as a perennial threat.

Meanwhile, the Wild are expected to be an active player in free agency, while the same could be said for Utah after it stayed in contention for a wild card entering the final two weeks of the season. Adding the Blues to that equation means there will be six teams (at minimum) in the division legitimately vying for a playoff spot in 2025-26.

May 3: Colorado Avalanche

Projected cap space: \$8.70 million

2025 draft picks: 4th (VAN), 7th

What went right? Adjustments and course corrections. By December, the Avalanche already had concerns about their supporting cast -- along with the problems created by an inconsistent goaltending tandem.

That prompted Avs general manager Chris MacFarland to make a series of trades that saw Colorado do everything from get a new tandem in net -- led by Mackenzie Blackwood -- to make key additions at the trade deadline to make the Avs one of the more dangerous teams heading into the playoffs. Their first-round exit came at the hands of a team that's seeking to make its third straight conference finals appearance.

What went wrong? The margins for error were extremely tight. Then again, that was likely to be the case in a first-round matchup of two teams that are clearly in a

championship window -- and both finished with more than 100 points in the regular season.

Opening the series against the Dallas Stars with a 5-1 win and taking Game 4 with a 4-0 win spoke to just how commanding the Avs could be against a fellow Stanley Cup challenger.

But the overtime wins the Stars had in Games 2 and 3 were the difference in the Avs either sweeping the series or, in this case, being knocked out in seven after an impressive Game 6 win. They even led 2-0 in Game 7, only to witness an historic third period by former teammate Mikko Rantanen.

Keys to the offseason: Determining the best way to spend their limited cap dollars is the task every team in a championship window faces. The Avalanche know this reality all too well with the biggest factor being Gabriel Landeskog's health. While his return provides the Avs with a top-six forward, his \$7 million cap can't be moved to long-term injured reserve to create financial flexibility as the team had done the past few years.

That's what leaves the Avs with a projected \$8.70 million in cap space to address a seven-player unrestricted free agent class that includes Jonathan Drouin and trade deadline pickups Ryan Lindgren and Brock Nelson.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: They're still expected to remain among the top contenders that will challenge for a Stanley Cup. The Avs have their core and quite a few members of their supporting cast under contract through at least next season. What they do in the offseason will play a role in supplementing what they already have, with the notion they're going to be among that handful of Western Conference teams that feel the title is within reach.

May 1: Los Angeles Kings

Projected cap space: \$23.48 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (PHI)

What went right? Nearly everything they did in the regular season. Something that might get lost within the discourse around the Kings was their 48 wins tied the franchise record for the most single-season victories, while their 105 points was also tied for the most in their history.

They overcame losing Drew Doughty to a preseason injury, finally found a stable presence in goal with Darcy Kuemper, established themselves as one of the strongest defensive units in the NHL and received contributions throughout the entirety of their lineup-- to the point that 14 players had more than 20 points, with five of them being defensemen. But ...

What went wrong? Losing to the Edmonton Oilers in the first round ... again.

Winning the first two games of the series by scoring six goals in each contest created the early impression that this could be the year that saw the Kings finally advance to the second round for the first time in more than a decade. Instead, their first-round loss has raised questions:

Why did they struggle to make adjustments beyond Game 2? Why were they able to build a commanding lead in Game 2 yet blew consecutive leads in Games 3 and 4? Why is it that just simply typing Jim Hiller's name in an internet search is immediately met with "Jim Hiller challenge" because there's



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a belief his Game 3 decision might have been the turning point in the series? And then there's one more pressing question to consider given their latest first-round exit.

Keys to the offseason: Are the Kings going to stay the course or do they use this offseason to make significant changes?

If they move on from Hiller, that will give the Kings their third head coach since February 2024 when they fired Todd McLellan. Or could ownership be inclined to look at a front office that, while making several moves to improve the roster, hasn't quite found the definitive combination to get the Kings beyond the first round?

Anything the Kings do this offseason will be with the purpose of not only trying to win in the first round but figuring out how they can win against elite teams in the conference.

The Kings have a six-player UFA class that's led by Vladislav Gavrikov and Andrei Kuzmenko. Should they elect to get deals done for at least those two, it leaves the Kings with the financial flexibility to address the roster to compete against the best in the west at the most demanding time of the season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Maybe more than just making the playoffs? They have the majority of their roster coming back, while also having quite a bit of cap space. Although nothing about that exact circumstance means there are guarantees, there is an expectation that the Kings will once again be challenging for a playoff spot.

But what they do in the offseason, however, will come with this one crucial question: Will it be the difference in the Kings advancing to at least the second round -- or could it result in another promising run cut short by an early postseason exit?

May 1: Minnesota Wild

Projected cap space: \$21.88 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 4th (TOR), 5th (CBJ), 6th

What went right? Navigating Kirill Kaprizov's absence to make the playoffs. Before Kaprizov sustained the December injury that kept him out until April, the Wild were establishing a case for why they might be one of the best teams in the Western Conference. They were scoring enough goals in tandem with a defensive structure and goalie performances that allowed them to excel in tight situations.

But Kaprizov's injury resulted in the loss of their leading scorer, which prompted the Wild to rely on their defensive identity in order to capture a wild-card spot and advance to the playoffs.

What went wrong? Their ability to win one-goal games went dormant. Bizarre as it sounds, the trait that allowed the Wild to manifest their playoff berth was also the one that doomed them to losing in the opening round for the fifth time in the past six seasons.

One of the arguments for why the Wild could reach the second round was because they won 18 of their 28 one-goal games in the regular season. But to lose not just one, but two games in a row to the Vegas Golden Knights by a single goal in overtime? It represents how, in future seasons, the Wild might not be that far off from reaching the second round for the first time since the 2014-15 season.

Keys to the offseason: They have lots of cap space. That's not always been the case in Minnesota. But it will be this offseason for a franchise that now has the necessary space to strengthen a roster that's had to largely rely on its homegrown talent.

One of the questions the Wild must answer, however, is what becomes of Marco Rossi. A first-round pick in 2020, Rossi emerged into a top-six center, but had 14 points throughout February, March and April after he scored that same amount in January. He bounced back to score two goals and three points in the playoffs entering Game 6, but had the third fewest minutes per game of any Wild player.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Maybe more than just making the playoffs? Having more than \$20 million in projected cap space is going to make the Wild something of a player in free agency. How they spend that money could then set the expectations for the Wild. Even with that caveat, there is a belief that the 2025-26 season has a chance to be one that sees the Wild get additional offensive help to keep pace in the treacherous Central Division -- with the intent of being a team that could create problems for opponents in the postseason.

May 1: Ottawa Senators

Projected cap space: \$18.44 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd (FLA), 4th (SJ), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Ottawa took a crucial step forward by finally making the postseason. It signaled that, after a seven-year absence from the playoff field, the Senators' rebuild is essentially over. And expectations should increase accordingly.

Ottawa showed it could be a stout defensive team, buying into the structure that first-year head coach Travis Green laid out and refused to back down from until his players embraced executing the right way. The Senators' young stars -- namely Brady Tkachuk, Tim Stutzle and Jake Sanderson -- all showed significant growth in their games, and the playoff experience earned should be invaluable to them (and the rest of the Senators) moving forward.

Linus Ullmark also proved he could give Ottawa something it hasn't had in years: a dependable No. 1 goaltender in whom to feel confident. The Senators' foundation is on sound, solid ground.

What went wrong? The postseason is a different beast. It's a lesson that can only be learned -- and truly appreciated -- once you've been there. Ottawa was an average offensive team throughout the regular season (collecting fewer than three goals per game), and its scoring dried up even further in the playoffs (sliding to just two goals per game). The Senators' penalty kill also repeatedly let them down in the regular season (at 77.7%) and got even worse in the playoffs (68.8%).

Aside from a Game 5 shutout, Ullmark stumbled when the Senators needed him to stand tall, posting a poor .883 save percentage and 2.80 goals-against average in the postseason. It's not that Ottawa didn't come close in that first-round series against Toronto -- three games were decided in overtime, after all, one of which the Sens won -- but the Senators were just too green to take advantage of the Toronto Maple Leafs' occasional mistakes.



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Now that the Senators have established their defensive game, it's time they figure out how to bring a consistent offensive effort to match.

Keys to the offseason: The Senators have some in-house decisions to make on a pair of veteran skaters approaching free agency. Claude Giroux has been an integral part of Ottawa's lineup and dressing room since arriving three seasons ago. If the 37-year-old plans to keep playing, it would behoove the Senators to retain his services, for depth and mentorship.

Then there's Anton Forsberg. He worked in tandem with Ullmark this season, and should the 32-year-old leave, GM Steve Staios will be determining whom to pair with Ullmark in the coming seasons.

Ottawa has a handful of other forwards who could depart in free agency, so the Senators should expect to be somewhat active in free agency, shoring up their bottom six to ensure they can complement the elite scoring threats they have in Tkachuk, Stutzle & Co. Ottawa worked hard to be in a position where there aren't many gaps to fill, though. The Senators don't necessarily need to be splashy, just smart.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Ottawa should absolutely expect to compete for a playoff spot next season. It's never easy getting over the disappointment of a swift postseason exit, but those frustrations will add fuel to the fire for next season to show that this was only the beginning of the Senators' next chapter.

April 30: Tampa Bay Lightning

Projected cap space: \$9.10 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd (LA), 4th (EDM), 5th, 7th, 7th (MIN), 7th (SJ), 7th (UTA)

What went right? Tampa Bay proved it was (still) a powerhouse in the regular season, with a league-leading offense (averaging 3.56 goals per game), a top-five power play (at 25.9%) and arguably the NHL's best forward in Nikita Kucherov (who paced his peers with 121 points). And the Lightning managed to stay out front even after parting ways with former captain Steven Stamkos. His successor with the C -- defenseman Victor Hedman -- put in another elite campaign anchoring Tampa Bay's blue line and penalty kill.

The Lightning's old hands were up to their same tricks in every area, especially goaltending. Andrei Vasilevskiy earned yet another Vezina Trophy finalist nod on the strength of his season (.921 save percentage, 2.18 goals-against average). Jon Cooper, now far and away the NHL's longest tenured head coach, capably guided Tampa Bay through the season's inevitable rough patches, and somehow the Lightning always came out for the better.

They reached the postseason for an eighth straight year to make good on GM Julien BriseBois' repeated decision to sacrifice long-term possibility (via draft picks) to stay focused on the chance of present-day success.

What went wrong? The Lightning were rightly expected to dominate offensively in the playoffs, too, and, well, it didn't happen. Tampa Bay averaged the second-fewest goals per game among postseason teams (2.25), and Kucherov was particularly absent, with zero goals in the Lightning's first four games against the Florida Panthers. And that power play?

Nonexistent, at 1-for-15, as Tampa Bay was on the ropes going into Game 5.

The Lightning also had to deal with the theatrics of a physical first-round series that included Matthew Tkachuk's blistering hit on Jake Guentzel and losing Brandon Hagel twice (first to a suspension in Game 3 for his hit on Aleksander Barkov, and then to a vicious elbowing by Aaron Ekblad).

That was only part of the story, though. The Lightning were often their own worst enemy. Tampa Bay's defense let them down in Game 4 when, after the Lightning had held a lead with the potential to tie their series 2-2, a pair of late goals against (scored 11 seconds apart) cost them a victory. It was a tough comedown, having already seen Hagel depart as well. In the end, the Lightning didn't do enough with their opportunity, and it was over too soon.

Keys to the offseason: Tampa Bay will have some cap space (for once), so BriseBois can get creative to bolster the Lightning next season. What does that look like, exactly?

Is it right for Tampa Bay to try running it back again after a third consecutive first-round exit? Does BriseBois need to change tactics to see the Lightning's chances improve at that most crucial time of year? BriseBois has mortgaged much of Tampa Bay's future (via trade of players and picks) to keep pushing their chips in on another Stanley Cup run. Will he be aggressive in pursuing that again? If so, it's all about the trade and free agent market for Tampa Bay.

The Lightning have just three picks in the first five rounds of the draft (one second, one fourth and a fifth), so maybe BriseBois could leverage those somewhere.

Otherwise, it will just be about filling in the gaps. Nick Perbix is the only UFA of note for BriseBois to consider, but he will want to ensure scoring depth won't be an issue next year at this time. Adding another goaltender to play with Vasilevskiy (current backup Jonas Johansson is a UFA) would also be prudent.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Lightning's regular-season performance put them in the running for an Atlantic title. It's hard to think they'll fall off entirely from there -- not after BriseBois went all-in getting Guentzel on a long-term deal and when Kucherov is still in his prime. There's little doubt Tampa Bay will push to be back in the postseason.

April 30: Montreal Canadiens

Projected cap space: \$10.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (CGY), 2nd, 2nd (PIT), 3rd, 3rd (NJ), 3rd (VAN), 4th, 4th (BOS), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Montreal reached the postseason in Year 3 of what has been an arduous rebuild. That's no small feat. The Canadiens stumbled out of the gate this season but didn't let early adversity deter them from powering through.

When the Canadiens topped Buffalo 5-2 on Nov. 11, it was practically the start of a new season for the team -- Montreal went 36-22-9 to the finish line, earning the league's 11th-best points percentage in that stretch and eventually the Eastern Conference's final wild-card playoff spot.

It wouldn't have been possible without some exceptional performances from Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield, a breakout showing from rookie defenseman Lane Hutson and



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strong secondary contributions from Patrik Laine, Juraj Slafkovsky and Jake Evans. Star prospect Ivan Demidov was a nice surprise addition to the playoff roster and did not look out of place.

Coach Martin St. Louis also deserves credit for treating the Canadiens like they deserved to be in playoff contention. That sort of confidence is what fuels a team to exceed expectations -- which is exactly what Montreal was able to accomplish.

What went wrong? The Canadiens' scoring was top-heavy in the regular season, and that caught up to them again in the playoffs. While facing the Washington Capitals was always going to be an uphill battle, Montreal made it harder when, outside of Caufield, Suzuki and Christian Dvorak, they didn't have many offensive contributors.

Goaltending also became an issue after starter Sam Montembeault was injured in Game 3, to be replaced by backup Jakub Dobes. The latter performed admirably given he had appeared in all of 16 NHL games before the series, but Montreal losing its No. 1 in Montembeault certainly weakened the team as well. Dobes and his defenders lacked effective communication, and it cost the Canadiens on the scoresheet.

In the end, it was the Canadiens' lack of postseason experience that shuttered their run. Washington capitalized on seemingly every Montreal mistake, learned behavior by a veteran team that has been used to winning. While the Canadiens were impressive in areas such as special teams during their run, it's the details (like key faceoff wins, for example) that can be daunting. Montreal will have to learn from its mistakes to take positive steps next season.

Keys to the offseason: The way GM Kent Hughes has handled the Canadiens' rebuild so far -- words such as "slow" and "steady" come to mind -- suggests he won't be using Montreal's playoff tenure as an excuse to start fast-tracking.

The Canadiens have two picks in each of the first two rounds of this draft; those selections will be vital for Montreal as it continues stocking the cupboards with young talent to carry the franchise forward. Hughes will have to address the goaltending situation in some fashion, though, likely with a free agent signee to support Montembeault while Dobes continues to cook in the minors.

And then there's the club's scoring depth. Hughes acquired Laine last offseason to boost the Canadiens up front -- and he did add 20 goals and 33 points -- but the often-injured forward appeared in only 52 games. Montreal needs more from Laine and a couple other skaters Hughes could see playing a top-nine role for the Canadiens. Even when Suzuki and Caufield are rolling, it's not enough to expect they can carry Montreal's offense again -- especially come playoff time.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Montreal will be in the thick of another fight to earn an Eastern Conference playoff spot. The Atlantic might just be the league's most competitive division, though. If the Canadiens want to stay in the mix again, some changes should be made to give them a boost over their division rivals.

April 29: New Jersey Devils

Projected cap space: \$13.86 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 2nd (EDM), 3rd (VGK), 4th, 6th, 6th (SJ)

What went right? New Jersey overcame significant adversities this season to be a playoff team. It's a testament to the Devils' resiliency that even after losing top skater Jack Hughes in March they managed to stay in the hunt and punch their ticket. The Hughes injury highlighted the seasons that some of New Jersey's other burgeoning stars were having, including Jesper Bratt (in an 88-point campaign) and Nico Hischier (a dominant two-way center, who scored 35 goals).

The Devils owed a large portion of their success to improved goaltending from Jacob Markstrom -- and GM Tom Fitzgerald for finally shoring up that position by acquiring Markstrom in the first place. The veteran was solid in the regular season, and soared during the Devils' postseason run as one of the best goaltenders in any first-round series.

New Jersey's first-year head coach Sheldon Keefe managed to implement a solid system and get the Devils to buy in, even when the going got tough. New Jersey should rightly feel good about what a fully healthy lineup can look like moving ahead.

What went wrong? Ah, injuries. They caught up big time for these Devils. Hughes was gone in March, while Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler missed significant time in the regular season before returning. And throughout New Jersey's playoff run, its defensemen began dropping like flies, with Brenden Dillon, Luke Hughes and Johnathan Kovacevic all missing in action. Not even Markstrom's brilliance could account for that many important players sitting out.

The Devils didn't help themselves, though. New Jersey was a whopping 0% on the power play, averaged just 1.75 goals per game and struggled on the penalty kill (69.2%). Outside of Hischier -- who collected three goals in the postseason -- the Devils simply couldn't get rolling offensively.

In a way, it's hard to assess New Jersey's efforts fully given how banged up it became. How much better might the Devils have been across the board had the infirmary not filled up? We'll never know. It's clear that Fitzgerald's inaction at the trade deadline (where he made minor moves such as adding third-line center Cody Glass and blueliner Brian Dumoulin) hurt New Jersey in the long run.

Keys to the offseason: Fitzgerald has a few things to figure out for the Devils. His top priority is pending restricted free agent Luke Hughes and figuring out what the 21-year-old's next contract will look like.

Then there's New Jersey's goaltending, and who will be Markstrom's partner next season. Jake Allen is set to hit free agency, and Nico Daws may not be ready for full-time backup duty.

Free agency should be filled with skaters for Fitzgerald to parse through in order to revamp the Devils' offense. The Devils have five veterans hitting unrestricted free agency, and a pair of RFAs in Glass and Nolan Foote. Inaction didn't serve New Jersey well in the past, and there's a need to infuse their lineup with at least a couple viable scoring



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threats to keep the Devils from turning top-heavy again next season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New Jersey has felt notoriously hard to predict in recent years. It has oscillated from winning a playoff round to not making the postseason at all. If the Devils can keep (most) everyone available next year, though -- and make some offseason adjustments -- they should expect to be top contenders in the Metro again.

The non-playoff teams

April 16: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$42.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (MIN), 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 7th (VGK)

What went right? Columbus stayed in the playoff race until the final week. That alone is a victory for this group. The Blue Jackets set out to play meaningful hockey in March and April and that's what they did through a special season that will give Columbus confidence to enter 2025-26 as a viable postseason contender.

Zach Werenski had a Norris Trophy-caliber campaign, with a team-leading 75 points through 76 games. Rising stars Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli showed their continued maturity in great seasons. Overall, the Blue Jackets' 11th-ranked offense (with 3.17 goals per game) exceeded expectations. Columbus showed real progress over the course of an emotionally turbulent season.

What went wrong? The Blue Jackets were bitten by the injury bug. Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan all missed significant time with various ailments. That hurt Columbus from the get-go, with no Jenner or Gudbranson for the first few months of the season.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending was subpar too, with Elvis Merzlikins owning a middling .892 save percentage as the club's No. 1. It's no wonder Columbus finished sixth worst in goals-against average (3.42) and they were among the league's worst teams in allowing third-period markers. The Blue Jackets' youth shone through in good ways and bad throughout the year, particularly against tougher opponents, and it's something they'll have to learn from for the season ahead.

Keys to the offseason: Columbus has a pair of first-round draft choices to play with this season, and that's a good thing for GM Don Waddell. He knows how green this franchise still is, and wants to keep building a foundation that the Blue Jackets benefit from for years to come. There are also important RFAs to negotiate with, including Dmitri Voronkov and Daniil Tarasov.

In free agency, Waddell can shift focus to Columbus' netminding. Merzlikins hasn't come up with a season save percentage above .900 since 2021-22. Can Columbus expect to take a step forward if Merzlikins is their go-to guy in the crease next year? Can they give the reins to Jet Greaves, who closed out the season with a dominant stretch?

Waddell wasn't active at the March trade deadline so as not to disrupt his club's chemistry. This summer he can make some meaningful changes that give the Blue Jackets a solid boost by September's training camp.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Columbus should be pressing for a playoff berth. They nearly corralled one this season, and the confidence that injected into the team could carry over to next season and beyond. As long as the young players can stay on their positive trajectory, there's considerable depth for Columbus to lean on.

April 15: Calgary Flames

Projected cap space: \$36.21 million

2025 draft picks: 1st (FLA), 1st (NJ), 2nd (COL), 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Flames made progress in more ways than one. They went from finishing with 81 points in 2023-24 to challenging for a playoff spot until the final week.

But what might get lost is that they established an identity. Whether it be with their roster, their coaching staff or their front office, change has been a constant with the Flames for the last few seasons. This season saw them attain and then maintain a level of continuity that could see them contend for a playoff spot -- if not make the playoffs -- next season. Dustin Wolf was a revelation in goal, cementing his status as the Flames' No. 1 goalie moving forward, and making a Calder Trophy case.

What went wrong? An offensive disconnect. Normally a lack of goals can be traced back to challenges in several areas. But a look under the hood at their underlying numbers paints a confusing picture.

The Flames were top 10 in shots per 60 minutes, and were 13th in scoring chances per 60. Yet they were in the bottom third when it came to high-danger chances per 60. When combined, those factors led to the Flames finishing with the second-fewest goals per game, and having the NHL's second-worst shooting percentage.

Keys to the offseason: Securing new deals for pending restricted free agents Kevin Bahl, Matt Coronato and Connor Zary is a priority, given what they mean to both the present and future of the Flames.

After those deals are in place, the Flames will still have quite a bit of cap space to address their needs -- perhaps with some more consistent sources of offense? Whatever the front office decides, they must do so with the notion of getting one step closer toward reaching the postseason.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. Whenever teams get this close to a playoff spot without making it, there's an expectation that the following season should include a playoff berth. Some of that will depend upon what happens in the offseason. Not only with the Flames, but with other clubs in a competitive Western Conference where 11 teams will finish with 89 points or more.

April 14: Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$39.55 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 3rd (TOR), 4th (DET), 5th, 5th (EDM), 6th, 7th

What went right? The team's young core made progress. Unlike his rookie season, Leo Carlsson wasn't limited to a certain number of games, and the result was a 20-goal season. Goaltender Lukas Dostal won 20 games, and was in



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the top 20 in save percentage. Cutter Gauthier flirted with a 20-goal season as a rookie. Jackson LaCombe went from 17 points in 71 games in 2023-24 to having 14 goals and 43 points in 70 games, averaging an additional three minutes of ice time. Mason McTavish had his first 20-goal and 50-point season.

Those players are all key building blocks, and all played a role in the Ducks finishing with more than 70 points after consecutive, sub-60-point seasons.

What went wrong? The defensive infrastructure around Dostal. After finishing the 2023-24 season with a minus-91 goal differential, the Ducks needed to be better in the defensive zone in 2024-25. This season, they did cut the differential to minus-34, which speaks to some progress. But their underlying metrics prove there's still more work to be done. Natural Stat Trick's data shows that the Ducks gave up the NHL's most shots per 60 minutes, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Again, it goes back to the young core. Dostal is a pending restricted free agent and is expected to receive a significant increase from his \$812,500 salary. McTavish timed his first 20-goal season well; his entry-level contract ends, meaning he'll also need to sign a new deal this offseason. Securing those contracts should still give the Ducks quite a bit of cap space as they seek to add more help around their core for the next phase.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: In a way, they appear to be on the same path the Utah Hockey Club took in 2024-25. Although the playoffs might not be in reach next season, the Ducks were nearly at a point-per-game pace. Another year of experience for their core -- coupled with what they could do in free agency -- could have them contending for a wild-card spot until next season's final weeks.

April 14: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$27.14 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (CAR), 2nd (STL), 3rd, 4th (PHI), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The best thing Boston did this season was lean all the way into a rebuild. It was inevitable that after a decade of perennial playoff contention the Bruins were going to take a step back -- and take stock. GM Don Sweeney's early coaching change -- from Jim Montgomery to Joe Sacco -- didn't give Boston a boost, and by the trade deadline it was smart for Sweeney to be a big-time seller. The Bruins acquired valuable draft capital -- including four picks in the first and second rounds -- and they added some intriguing new faces such as Casey Mittelstadt and Fraser Minten. Some burgeoning late-season chemistry between David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie is a nice bonus for the Bruins as a potential pairing to watch.

What went wrong? Boston lost seven of its first 11 games. That was hardly a good omen for what was ahead. The Bruins' calling card has long been its defensive play, so losing top defenseman Hampus Lindholm to a season-ending patella fracture in mid-November was crushing. Montgomery was fired the same week. Jeremy Swayman -- following a contentious contract dispute -- was mediocre in net. And there was little help from the Bruins' offense in making up for any of their defensive and goaltending issues.

Boston is 29th in scoring, averaging just 2.63 goals per game, and on the power play (15.5%).

Charlie McAvoy's upper-body injury in early February at the 4 Nations Face-Off was another gut punch. It's no wonder Sweeney keyed on major changes -- such as moving on from captain Brad Marchand -- considering how much these Bruins pale in comparison to what previous teams produced.

Keys to the offseason: The Bruins need a permanent head coach. Sweeney could opt to remove Sacco's interim tag or explore who else is available. Once Sweeney has that person in place, they can start preparing for an important upcoming draft in which Boston will have a high first-round selection and two picks in the second round. Those picks take on a greater meaning now considering the Bruins don't have a deep prospect pool. The focus then shifts to determining which of Boston's young players will be ready to take a leap in the NHL, and how the Bruins will prioritize adding veteran players around them in free agency. The rebuild will be in full swing.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Boston still has a 40-goal scorer in Pastrnak. If Lindholm and McAvoy return to full health, and Swayman can be a game-changer in net again, there's hope for the Bruins to be a fun club to watch -- if not one that reaches the playoffs after a one-year absence. It's not as if they're starting from scratch.

April 14: Buffalo Sabres

Projected cap space: \$22.32 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (MIN), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NSH), 7th (WSH)

What went right? Buffalo proved this season it is capable of being a playoff team. The Sabres overcame a slow start to hold a postseason slot at Thanksgiving, which is often a good indicator of a club's potential to stay there through the season. Tage Thompson had a terrific season, scoring 44 goals and averaging a point per game; when the Sabres do finally break through, they'll have him in large part to thank for keeping their offensive engine going. Rasmus Dahlin also continues to be a standout with 62 points from the back end.

GM Kevyn Adams was able to trade underperforming Dylan Cozens and added Josh Norris (injured for most of his Sabres' tenure to date) for the future.

What went wrong? The Sabres have failed to qualify for the playoffs in 14 straight seasons. That's tied with the New York Jets for the longest active drought in major professional sports. But Buffalo had its chance. The Sabres were in the mix until a 13-game winless streak through December torpedoed things. And Adams didn't do anything at the trade deadline to make Buffalo better despite its many flaws. The Sabres' collective goaltending was awful, with the league's second-worst save percentage. Buffalo gives up the fourth-most goals per game (3.47) and that's all the more disappointing considering the Sabres are seventh in scoring (3.27).

The Sabres can be their own worst enemy. Ditto with how Buffalo started strong -- with the third-most first period goals -- only to offer up the fourth most in the third period. The Sabres' attention to detail wasn't where it needed to be, and expected growth from players such as Jack Quinn and Zach Benson didn't materialize.



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Keys to the offseason: This was Adams' fifth season in Buffalo -- all, obviously, without a playoff appearance. Will ownership keep him on for another kick at that can? It was Adams who installed Lindy Ruff as coach (again) last season, and that alone might keep Adams around. The Sabres have several personnel decisions to make from there. Quinn, JJ Peterka, Bowen Byram, Devon Levi and Ryan McLeod are all restricted free agents. Who will Buffalo retain -- and who winds up without a qualifying offer?

Then it's on to additions from the outside. The Sabres need stronger goaltending next season, and if Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Levi can't provide it as a tandem, then Adams must explore the market for a veteran who can either support one of them or take the reins as a No. 1. That would go a long way in supporting Buffalo toward consistently being the team it has been of late, winning 10 of 13 through March into April -- when, unfortunately, it was all too little, too late.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Dare we say it? Playoffs. That's where Buffalo absolutely must get. And they have the talent to do it. It's on management to fill in the gaps and get the Sabres out of their historic skid.

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$29.17 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TOR), 2nd, 2nd (DAL), 3rd, 4th, 4th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Seth Jones trade. After Jones told Blackhawks management that he wanted to be moved to a contender, how would they strike a deal for a player with three more years on his contract worth \$9.5 million annually?

Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson found a suitor in the Panthers, and received a 2026 first-round pick and goalie Spencer Knight, while retaining \$2.5 million of Jones' salary each of the remaining seasons. The trade got the Blackhawks their goalie of the present and future in Knight, and provided them with another first-round pick for 2026, extending a streak of multiple first-round picks dating to 2022.

What went wrong? There was only nominal improvement after one of the more aggressive free agency windows of any team last offseason. They had 22 wins through 78 games, and though they trimmed their goal differential from minus-111 in 2023-24 to minus-74, it was still a season of frustration that peaked with the firing of coach Luke Richardson after 26 games, replacing him with interim coach Anders Sorensen.

Keys to the offseason: Does Sorensen get the full-time coaching job, or do the Blackhawks go in another direction? There's also a discussion about what to do with Ryan Donato, who led the team in goals this season. Donato is a pending unrestricted free agent, who is having the best season of his career. The Blackhawks obviously have the cap space, but might it be better spent elsewhere?

Once they have agreed upon new deals for their four-player restricted free agent class that includes Philipp Kurashev and Arvid Soderblom, the Blackhawks could use the remaining money while having one eye on what lies ahead after the 2025-26 season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Next season will be a crucial one, mainly because another season without significant progress could prompt the front office to face bigger questions; after all, the Blackhawks are looking to reach the 70-point plateau for the first time since 2019-20.

So, what does the future look like? Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar and Knight, who are all central to their future plans, are going to be entering the final years of their respective deals. Bedard and Nazar are coming off their entry-level contracts, and Knight would be seeking his third deal -- but his first as a No. 1 goalie.

April 14: Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$22.98 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 3rd (NYR), 4th (TB), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (STL)

What went right? Detroit showed its tenacity and resilience multiple times this season. The Red Wings overcame a slow start by leaning into a coaching change -- from Derek Lalonde to Todd McLellan -- that ignited the team's December surge into a playoff spot. Detroit fell in and out of contention until February and looked ready to go on a run. Leading that charge was captain Dylan Larkin -- with 29 goals this season -- and Lucas Raymond, who leads Detroit in points with 75. Raymond's development has been especially positive for Detroit and signals how he can continue carrying their offense into the future. The Red Wings also must feel good about being buoyed by a fourth-ranked power play (27.6%).

What went wrong? The Red Wings' defensive play has been a hindrance for years. This season was no exception. Detroit gave up the 12th-most goals against per game (3.14), while ranking 23rd in scoring (2.81). That's a tough combination to overcome. The Red Wings' putrid penalty kill was also worst in the league (69.6%), another indication of their defensive deficiencies.

GM Steve Yzerman didn't do much at the trade deadline to address any of the Red Wings' problems, and Yzerman's continued failure to add impact players in free agency is showing in how Detroit continues to stop short of reaching the playoffs. The Red Wings need consistency, and a strong defensive structure players buy into and can execute. There wasn't enough of it this season to get Detroit out of its nine-year playoff drought.

Keys to the offseason: Yzerman isn't one for making wild moves. But even he must be open to trying something new. There are internal choices to make, including on key RFAs Albert Johansson and Elmer Soderblom, and veterans Patrick Kane and Alex Lyon are both pending UFAs. How drastic Yzerman gets in terms of personnel turnover could foretell where Detroit goes from here.

The Red Wings need more scoring and have been top-heavy in that respect, relying on Larkin, Raymond and Alex DeBrincat for a large chunk of their output. Improving depth there, with proven defense-minded talent, will help the Red Wings keep up with their Atlantic rivals. Generally boosting the blue line wouldn't hurt, either.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Detroit has playoff potential. They've shown it repeatedly. The Red Wings' goal going into next season should be as contenders for the



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postseason. The question is whether Yzerman provides Detroit with more resources to get there.

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$17.26 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 1st (VGK), 2nd, 2nd (TB), 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (COL)

What went right? Their prospects. Of note, Matthew Wood averaged more than a point per game at the University of Minnesota before signing a professional contract. Joey Willis went from scoring 29 goals in his first two OHL seasons combined to having 27 goals this season. At the NHL level, Justin Barron, Zachary L'Heureux and Fedor Svechikov had expanded ice time.

What went wrong? Everything else. They went from being a playoff team that spent big in free agency to get Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault, Brady Skjei and Luke Schenn to having the third-worst record in the NHL. They were consistently disconnected. They are sixth in shots per game, but last in goals per game. They have one of the top 10 penalty kills yet gave up the seventh-most goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: With three first-round picks and more than \$17 million in cap space, the Preds have options -- especially if their first-round pick becomes the No. 1 pick via the draft lottery. But the Predators are trying to find a way that allows them to win now and in the future. It's why they began shifting course toward playing young players after a poor start to the season. Now it's all about strengthening that plan as they seek to recover from one of the more trying seasons in franchise history.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Preds can go in a number of directions. They entered the 2023-24 season as a team on the rise and made the playoffs. They entered 2024-25 as a team that could be in the conference finals discussion before ending up in the lottery. If they aren't in the playoff mix next spring, there will be some big questions for the front office to answer.

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$28.90 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Islanders showed determination by putting themselves into a contending position this season, particularly during an 11-3-0 run through January ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off break. They benefited from some terrific individual performances along the way, most notably from Bo Horvat (with a team-leading 54 points) and Anders Lee (pacing New York with 28 goals).

Noah Dobson continued to show why he's one of the league's burgeoning stars on the back end and Alexander Romanov appears increasingly comfortable in his role. GM Lou Lamoriello also deserves credit for the tidy trade of Brock Nelson, which primarily netted New York (among other things) a first-round pick in 2026 NHL draft and promising prospect in Calum Ritchie.

What went wrong? The Islanders failed to truly excel in any category. They're 25th in the scoring (averaging 2.77 goals per game) and gave up the 13th-most goals against (3.14),

with a putrid, 31st-ranked power play (13.1%) and equally awful penalty kill (72.0%). Losing Mathew Barzal to injury for all but 30 games this season certainly took its toll in basically every respect. Starting goaltender Ilya Sorokin has been fine (with a .905 save percentage) but hardly the spectacular figure he was in helping New York reach the playoffs in recent seasons.

The Islanders didn't have enough difference-makers, and Lamoriello did not bring anyone on board before the trade deadline. In fact, Lamoriello held onto guys such as Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Kyle Palmieri -- a pending UFA -- and seemingly missed out on a chance to add draft assets for a much-needed overhaul. By the time head coach Patrick Roy was publicly calling out forward Anthony Duclair and subsequently seeing Duclair take a leave of absence from the team, it was clear how tensions were boiling over.

Keys to the offseason: New York must at least consider taking a big swing. But is Lamoriello going to do that? The Islanders should have about \$28 million in cap space to use for next season, and they've got a couple of high draft picks. It's time to decide though what direction the franchise is headed. Can Lamoriello steer this group back to contending status? Or is a rebuild on deck?

There are also critical personnel decisions to make. The Islanders have a large collection of pending RFAs, including Dobson, Romanov, Scott Perunovich, and Adam Boqvist. Who New York keeps will have a major impact on their blue line. The Islanders again need to address their scoring depth. Barzal's absence absolutely hurt New York. Shoring up the offense so it can withstand injury will go a long way. But step one is getting honest about where the organization is right now, and whether they keep pushing to compete in the Metro or take a step back and retool.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Islanders sputtered this season after making consecutive playoff appearances -- both with first-round exits. Unless there's some significant changes in the offseason, one-and-done in the postseason is about as good as New York can expect.

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$9.67 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (SEA), 4th (ANA), 4th (COL), 5th (MIN), 6th, 6th (SEA), 7th

What went right? New York didn't need any added distractions this season, so the fact GM Chris Drury was able to offload underperforming former captain Jacob Trouba early was a shrewd move and kept the Rangers from dwelling on that particular problem all season. The Kaapo Kakko trade was a necessary swap as well that was swiftly handled. And bringing on J.T. Miller was, at least, an attempt to give New York a needed boost up front.

Meanwhile, New York saw growth from some of its young players, especially Will Cuylle (with a career-high 20 goals and 43 points this season). Artemi Panarin has done his part to lead the Rangers on offense (37 goals and 87 points) and Adam Fox anchored the blue line with trademark efficiency.

What went wrong? Oh boy. Are the Rangers this season's biggest disappointment? It's hard to argue otherwise. Last season's Presidents' Trophy winners are a shadow of their former (114-point) selves. All the previous characteristics



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New York displayed as regular-season champions evaporated. The Rangers lacked consistency (they haven't won three games in a row since November), veteran contributions (Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider have been particularly lackluster), a functional power play (ranked 27th at 17.6%) and failed time and again to show any sort of resiliency (they have won five games all season when trailing by one in the third period).

The lack of urgency and determination that elevated New York teams of the past has been missing. But why? Was it the rumored locker room issues? Has coach Peter Laviolette's message been falling on deaf ears? Whatever the reason, New York never truly put its game together. To be officially eliminated from the postseason in a dispiriting 7-3 loss to Carolina on Saturday was a fitting salvo in a lost season.

Keys to the offseason: Can Laviolette survive to coach another season? That's question No. 1 -- and a bafflingly one to even be considering given he led the Rangers to their best regular season the season before. But it seems inevitable New York is going to make drastic changes after this clunker of a season.

Next, Drury must assess this Rangers' core and figure out who to build around, and who to move out. The way Kreider and Zibanejad have struggled could lead Drury to find them new homes. And New York's blue line is probably in need of a redo given the Rangers gave up the 14th-most goals against (3.10) and that's with one of the league's better goalie tandems in Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick. It's not as if New York has to tear it all down. Drury must identify where the biggest leaks this season came from and do what's necessary to patch the holes.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New York can easily be a playoff team again next season. But it will require some form of change. To stand pat would send the wrong message about how poorly the Rangers performed this season. A chip on the shoulder will help New York get back to its potential.

April 14: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected cap space: \$25.64 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (COL), 1st (EDM), 2nd, 2nd (ANA), 2nd (CGY), 2nd (CBJ), 3rd, 5th, 5th (CAR), 6th

What went right? Philadelphia had its moments. The arrival of Matvei Michkov signaled the start of a new era for the Flyers in which Michkov -- a 20-year-old dynamo leading all NHL rookies with 24 goals -- has seemingly unlimited potential to drive their offense into the future. And Philadelphia has other young players -- such as last year's No. 13 pick Jett Luchanko -- to be excited about too after his brief NHL audition.

The Flyers' old guard wasn't all bad, either. Travis Konecny had another strong season with a career high in points ahead of his long-term extension starting next season. Ultimately, Philadelphia can't stay in a rebuild mode forever and it was positive to see GM Danny Briere actually make some moves -- such as trading Joel Farabee and Scott Laughton and firing coach John Tortorella -- to help kick-start Philadelphia into 2025-26.

What went wrong? The Flyers were too big a mess in too many key categories. Philadelphia's collection of goaltenders

produced a woeful .888 save percentage at even strength, the worst recorded by a team since 2009-10. Samuel Ersson wasn't the reliable No. 1 the Flyers needed, and it showed too often in how games slipped away. Philadelphia's putrid power play was another problem -- 30th in the league (14.9%) -- and a 24th-ranked offense hasn't been much help. By the time Philadelphia had lost 11 of 12 through mid-March, it was no surprise Tortorella was gone. Something is clearly still missing in Philadelphia.

Keys to the offseason: First, Philadelphia needs a head coach. Briere will decide quickly whether that's via removing the interim tag from Brad Shaw or a new addition. There's much work to be done with the next permanent bench boss in place.

Philadelphia absolutely must capitalize in the draft. They hold three first-round picks and four second-round choices. There's a chance if the Flyers draft high enough that one of those first-rounders steps into their lineup at some point next season. Briere must be smart in how he cashes in on that capital. Then it's all about development. Philadelphia doesn't project to be overly active in free agency given the amount of talent it already has in the NHL and waiting in the wings. What the Flyers need are for those players to take steps forward so when training camp comes around there is serious competition for spots, and it sets up Philadelphia for a competitive season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: This is the fifth consecutive season Philadelphia has missed the postseason. The Flyers must at least challenge well into April for a spot next season. Briere has been patient with this group continuing to grow and it's about time those investments paid dividends.

April 14: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$24.58 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (NYR), 2nd (WSH), 3rd, 3rd (MIN), 3rd (OTT), 4th, 5th (CHI), 5th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? Pittsburgh can always count on Sidney Crosby to breathe some sort of life into their season, and the captain delivered again with a 30-goal campaign that suggests the 37-year-old isn't slowing down. And that's a great thing -- because the Penguins' recent youth movement might signal brighter days ahead. GM Kyle Dubas brought up Rutger McGroarty -- acquired via trade earlier this season -- and Ville Koivunen to get Pittsburgh's next wave ready with some NHL experience. Smart decision. The Penguins needed to end the season on a high note, and showcasing what the franchise has coming seemed invigorating for old and new skaters alike.

What went wrong? It was death by a thousand cuts in Pittsburgh. The Penguins don't have the depth to compete with other Eastern Conference powerhouses -- outside of their top line (with Crosby, Rickard Rakell and Bryan Rust mostly), there wasn't enough consistent scoring. Even Evgeni Malkin struggled with only 15 goals this season.

That dearth of scoring issue was amplified by the Penguins' problems keeping pucks out of their net. Tristan Jarry flamed out as the team's expected No. 1 goaltender, being demoted to the AHL along with his 3.31 goals-against average and .884 save percentage through mid-January. To be fair, Jarry



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(and the Penguins other netminders) got no help from a leaky blue line that surrounded the second-most goals per game (3.58) this season. It would have challenged Pittsburgh to overcome its issues in only one phase of the game, let alone all three.

Keys to the offseason: Pittsburgh doesn't appear close to firing coach Mike Sullivan, so that allows the Penguins to hit the ground running again in figuring out how to capitalize on its youth movement. McGroarty and Koivunen will be counted on to compete for slots in training camp.

Then it's on Dubas to address the Penguins' lack of scoring with some strategic veteran additions. The market should play out in Pittsburgh's favor there -- and offering the incentive of potentially skating alongside Crosby never hurts in a negotiation. And the Penguins' defense? It can't stand as is. If Dubas is still trying to avoid a full-scale rebuild, then it's crucial to use this offseason to find roster balance between the Penguins' present and future additions. Some degree of outside help is required to make that happen.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: It's not reasonable to say Pittsburgh makes it back to the playoffs -- unless there are some key changes. If the Penguins rightly address their leaks, then there's talent enough to put Pittsburgh back as a playoff contender. But that's a mighty large question as this season comes to a close.

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.19 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (DAL), 2nd, 2nd (OTT), 3rd (COL), 4th (STL), 4th (WPG), 5th (COL), 7th (NJ)

What went right? The blueprint for the future. Star rookie center Macklin Celebrini leads the team in points, and fellow star rookie forward Will Smith is fifth. They used the trade deadline to add a pair of first-round picks; they'll have two first-rounders in 2025 and again in 2026, continuing a trend since 2023. Even though they're going to finish with the NHL's worst record for a consecutive season, the Sharks have already shown some sense of improvement given they went from a minus-150 goal difference to minus-98 entering the final week of the regular season.

What went wrong? Well, there was quite a bit. But that's to be expected whenever a team is in the midst of a rebuild.

The Sharks were in the bottom 10 in goals per game, the power play, scoring chances per 60 minutes, shots per 60 and high-danger chances per 60, which explains their offensive struggles. On defense, they gave up the most goals per game, had the worst penalty kill, and were in the bottom 10 in most scoring chances allowed per 60, most shots allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Do they get the No. 1 pick for a consecutive year? Or will it be No. 2 or No. 3? Whatever happens, this will be the third straight draft cycle and the fourth time in the past five in which the Sharks have a lottery pick. Picking that high along with having a second first-round pick will certainly advance their rebuild.

Then there's the fact they'll have more than \$42 million in cap space, which can be used to address their roster -- with

the caveat that the Sharks might not be major players in free agency for at least a few more years.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Continuing to watch the progress made by Yaroslav Askarov, William Eklund, Celebrini and Smith, among others, is going to be the priority. The Sharks will seek to make more improvements while further developing those franchise cornerstones in Ryan Warsofsky's second year behind the bench. But there's also a possibility the Sharks could either sign players in free agency or move on from players on their current roster ahead of the deadline to add even more draft capital for their future plans.

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$21.75 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 4th, 4th (DAL), 5th, 7th

What went right? All three of the trades they made this season. Moving on from Will Borgen led to them getting a one-time No. 2 overall pick in Kaapo Kakko, plus draft capital. At the trade deadline, they acquired a pair of first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 in exchange for Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde. Parting ways with Brandon Tanev netted them a second-round pick in the 2027 draft. Kakko has 10 goals and 29 points in 46 games for the Kraken as part of a season in which he set a career high with 43 points.

What went wrong? Between their underlying defensive metrics and the fact they sent Philipp Grubauer to the AHL? It wasn't the most consistent season for the Kraken when it came to goal prevention. Having a new coaching staff included the departure of assistant coach Jay Leach, who played a crucial role in the Kraken's defensive identity. This season, they were in the bottom 10 in shots allowed per 60 minutes, scoring chances allowed per 60 and high-danger chances allowed per 60. The underperformance from Grubauer didn't help, and in fact, Joey Daccord (who began as the backup) was one of their more consistent performers.

Keys to the offseason: Dan Bylsma's coaching staff helped pull the Kraken from the bottom five in goals per game in 2023-24 to being around league average this season. Could they find a defensive version of that solution heading into 2025-26, with the idea that it might provide the Kraken with the consistency that has eluded them as a franchise? That is one of the most significant questions facing the Kraken now that they have missed the playoffs in three of their first four seasons.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Kraken must be in contention for a wild-card spot (at minimum), or there will be some big questions to answer for the front office at this time next year.

April 14: Utah Hockey Club

Projected cap space: \$21.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went right? Quite a bit. The trade during draft weekend for franchise defenseman Mikhail Sergachev set the stage for a season in which the franchise made real strides. Before moving to Salt Lake City, the Arizona Coyotes had one 80-point season since 2014-15. The Utah Hockey Club had 84



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points with four games left. The team was still fighting for a playoff berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season, which was another step forward for the core -- and proves that bigger things could be on the horizon.

What went wrong? Overtime and shootouts. Entering the final two weeks of the regular season, only the Flames and Canucks had more overtime losses than Utah, two teams that were also chasing a Western Conference wild-card spot. But losing those 12 games in overtime or a shootout demonstrates how Utah was close in many games. If it can get on the winning end of those extra-time coin flips next season, the results will be different too.

Keys to the offseason: Remember how the Coyotes were hamstrung by a need to be miserly with cap space? The Utah Hockey Club doesn't have that issue. That much was made clear last offseason when GM Bill Armstrong invested \$22 million for each of the next two seasons in bolstering the defensive unit. Utah will have more than \$21 million in space this summer, which is enough to improve a roster that could seriously challenge for a playoff spot. A top priority? Improving an offense that was 21st in goals per game, with a power play that was 15th.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. It's really that simple. Utah has a core that has gone through its growing pains. It's a group that has shown it can make progress from one year to the next. Nearly the entire roster is either under contract or team control for next season, and the front office has enough cap space to add the sort of players who could help clinch a playoff berth in the club's second season in Salt Lake.

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$15.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd (SJ), 4th (OTT), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Despite all the inconsistencies, the numerous injuries to key players, and the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson friction, the Canucks were still in the hunt for a wild-card berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season. Yes, there were those who had strong individual seasons, including reigning Norris Trophy winner Quinn

Hughes and Pius Suter, who had his first 20-goal effort and more than 40 points. But those performances could only get the Canucks so far, in a season in which they will miss the playoffs after winning their division and coming within a game of the conference finals a year earlier.

What went wrong? All those inconsistencies, those numerous injuries and the Miller-Pettersson friction.

One detail that speaks to those inconsistencies is that the Canucks were among the top five in the NHL in terms of fewest shots allowed per 60 minutes and scoring chances allowed per 60 -- and yet were 19th in goals allowed per game. It's what made the need for scoring depth even more crucial. This became more evident in the wake of trading Miller to the Rangers and trying to find ways to replace a forward with three consecutive seasons of more than 80 points.

Keys to the offseason: What happens to head coach Rick Tocchet? Does he stay on his one-year option as a bridge to a longer-term contract? Or could he be swayed to leave, which would then leave the Canucks searching for a fourth coach since 2020?

After the coaching situation is resolved, what happens to Brock Boeser? A six-time 20-goal scorer, he's a pending UFA who could command a significant payday should he reach the open market. Do the Canucks ink him to a long-term deal?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Add the Canucks to the list of teams whose situation could become clearer once free agency ends. They have most of their team either under contract or team control for next season. But two of their three leading goal scorers -- Boeser and Suter -- are pending UFAs, whereas there is also uncertainty surrounding Tocchet.

Getting those questions answered along with addressing their other concerns could provide a stronger grasp for how the Canucks navigate next season. But a return to the postseason is certainly within grasp.



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yahoo!sports

3 Hurricanes trade targets after Panthers series loss

By: Christopher Hennessy

The Carolina Hurricanes lost to the Florida Panthers in the Eastern Conference Final. It is their seventh straight playoff appearance without making the Stanley Cup Final. Things have to get better this offseason for Carolina to make any noise in the Eastern Conference. Which offseason trades can the Hurricanes pull off to improve their team? Could Erik Karlsson be the perfect fit on their blue line?

The Hurricanes will have a ton of cap space when July 1 comes around. They were saving space for a Martin Necas extension, which turned into space for the Mikko Rantanen expansion. But the Hurricanes now have neither and can go shopping in the offseason. That does not just include free agency, as they will be able to add salary through trades this offseason. On the contrary, there will not be many teams shedding salary for small costs like there have been in recent years.

The Hurricanes can add key players on offense and defense this offseason. Which ones should they target?

Erik Karlsson would be the perfect fit with the Hurricanes

Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Erik Karlsson (65) clears the puck during the first period against the Chicago Blackhawks at United Center.

Talia Sprague-Imagn Images

Already on the Hurricanes' blue line is Jaccob Slavin, one of the premier defenders in the league. He is about to start an eight-year deal worth \$6.4 million per season, an incredible bargain for his talent level. Add in Alexander Nikishin, who will be on a rookie deal, and they will have cap space to spend on a defenseman. Enter the Pittsburgh Penguins, who should be rebuilding this offseason. Erik Karlsson would be a great fit for the Hurricanes.

It may cost a first-round pick, but that is a price Carolina should be willing to pay. They picked up two first-rounders from the Stars in the Rantanen trade and should be willing to spend them. Karlsson makes \$10 million through 2027, which is a high price. But if Pittsburgh retains some salary, they could fit it in no problem. Putting the elite offensive defenseman of his generation next to the best defender in the league would create a dominant pair.

Marco Rossi comes east

The Minnesota Wild had a great start to this season, but collapsed late in the year due to injuries. Now, they have the biggest contract in franchise history to give out to Kirill Kaprizov. He is eligible for an extension on July 1, and the pen should be hitting the ink shortly after that. That could leave them without enough space to bring Marco Rossi back, as he needs a new contract. After a 60-point season at 23 years old, he has high expectations for the remainder of his career.

Article Continues Below

Another part of the Rantanen trade was Logan Stankoven, who was one of the Hurricanes' most important forwards in the postseason. Rossi is an undersized center who can score, so he should see Stankoven's success and think he could do the same. After their playoff loss to the Panthers, they should be focused on getting more talent on their front line.

This is another time that the Hurricanes should be okay giving out a first-round pick. They have an extra one in 2025 and 2027 and have not traded any of their own. The Wild should be holding out for a first-round pick because of Rossi's great start so far.

The Predators give up on Jonathan Marchessault

Last offseason, the Nashville Predators spent big in free agency. Steven Stamkos, Brady Skjei, who was on the Hurricanes, and Jonathan Marchessault all signed big-money deals. They finished with the fifth-worst record in the NHL, collapsing from the get-go. If Predators GM Barry Trotz wants to part ways with one of those players, the Hurricanes should call about Marchessault.

Marchessault won the Conn Smythe Trophy with the 2023 Vegas Golden Knights. He spent one more year in Vegas before hitting free agency and pricing himself out of Vegas' price range. Trotz brought him in on a five-year deal worth \$5.5 million per season. With four years left, the Hurricanes could take that contract off their books and still add in other places.

The Predators have no leverage in this deal, so the Hurricanes could get away with not trading a first-round pick in this deal. Marchessault is a proven playoff performer who could help Carolina get over the hump in the playoffs.



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Carolina Hurricanes eliminated by Panthers in Game 5, continue Stanley Cup Finals drought

By: Haley O'Neill

The Carolina Hurricanes came out hot. Knowing this could be their last game, they played a dominant first period, scoring two goals. But as the game dragged on, the Panthers took the upper hand, scoring three goals in just under five minutes.

Once Florida found its game, it became a force that couldn't be stopped, ending the Canes' season with a 5-3 victory.

The Canes couldn't find a way to get back into the game once center Carter Verhaeghe found the back of the net with eight minutes left in the game. Although the Canes had a hard fought season and were disappointed with the outcome, head coach Rod Brind'Amour was nothing but proud of his team who left it all on the ice.

"It's the craziest thing that we're this far and all we're hearing is negativity from everybody," Brind'Amour said. "This [past] summer, with the pieces that were left in this organization, I didn't think we were making playoffs. I was that worried about it because there was such a mass exit of good players to free agency. Then we were able to find good players to fill in, I didn't know if they were that good but they hung in there. I have nothing but pride with this group."

A solid effort from left wing Matthew Tkachuk and center Aleksander Barkov set up Verhaeghe at the net for a simple snap shot to the top of the goal, out of the reach of goaltender Frederik Andersen, lifting the Panthers to the Stanley Cup Final.

Although the Canes came out hot in the first period, Florida regrouped and came out stronger in the second, dominating the ice majority of the frame. Scoring three unanswered goals against Carolina put them in a good position that would be difficult for any team to come back on. Scoring their first goal on the powerplay off a tip-in from Tkachuk sparked life into the team. Just 30 seconds later, they saw another go in due to the effort and quick movement of center Evan Rodrigues. Finishing off the scoring for this period, coming

directly off the face-off, center Anton Lundell found nylon to put his team up 3-2.

"A lot of their goals are really nice plays," Brind'Amour said. "They're a great team, and it's obvious the last couple of years they're the standard. They have some guys that can finish."

Giving the Canes a solid chance was center Sebastian Aho, who scored the first two goals of the game, both in a similar manner. Getting to the puck as it was being cleared from the Panthers' zone, he intercepted it and took it directly to the net where he was able to dump them both in under the arm of Bobrovsky.

Keeping up with the pace of Florida, the Canes had no quit in them and kept fighting. Tying the game up at three was center Seth Jarvis who made his way to the net as a pass from right wing Andrei Svechnikov came across his path. Jarvis flicked it up into the netting to where Bobrovsky had no chance.

"That's the killer," Brind'Amour said. "The first one was great, we had a couple good looks. [Blake] is all on the front and then even the last one [Svechnikov] is right there. Those have to find a way to get in the net. Looking back on this game, that'll be a couple lost moments there for sure, but it's done now."

The Canes struggled on the power play, going 0-6 for the night, unable to break through on the man advantage.

With less than a minute left and down one goal, the Canes fought to keep the season alive. Already on the power play, and with Andersen on the bench, the Canes forged a few chances with the two-man advantage. But as the penalty to center Sam Bennett wore off, he rushed out of the box.

Already halfway down the ice, a loose puck fell into the Canes' zone that Bennett scooped up and dumped into the Canes' empty net, shutting down any chance the Canes had at coming back. The Panthers secured the Prince of Wales trophy for the third year in a row, and for the second time at the expense of the Hurricanes.



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The Hockey News

Hurricanes Defenseman Recognized As KHL All-Star

By: Ryan Henkel

What a year it's been for Alexander Nikishin.

The touted prospect finally made his way to North America after years of hype and was even able to get a few games under his belt in the NHL playoffs too.

The 23-year-old defenseman made his NHL debut facing one of his hockey idols in Alex Ovechkin, playing in Game 5 of the Carolina Hurricanes' second-round series against the Washington Capitals.

While that game wasn't necessarily one to remember for him, Nikishin was forced back into the lineup due to additional injuries to the Hurricanes' blueline and that's when he really started to impress.

Despite facing the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers in the Eastern Conference Final, Nikishin looked calm and composed and was even tasked with playing significant minutes.

He looked every bit an NHL regular despite that inexperience.

But before he was in North America, he was finishing up his sixth season in the KHL.

Nikishin's final year in Russia was another big one as the 6-foot-3 defender racked up 17 goals and 46 points in 61 games while captaining SKA St. Petersburg.

The talented blueliner was an integral piece for SKA, playing 20+ minutes nightly and in all situations.

As such, he was recognized at the end of the year as one of six players selected to the 2025 KHL All-Star Team.

Former Hurricane Josh Leivo was also named to the 2025 All-Star Team as he set the KHL single-season scoring record with a 49-goal campaign.

Carolina GM With Message To Fans, Organization

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes' season came to an end Wednesday night, as the team fell to the Florida Panthers in the Eastern Conference Final.

Despite the result, it was still overall a successful campaign for the Canes in their first year under new general manager Eric Tulsky.

Following the team's elimination, Tulsky took to X with a message for the fanbase.

"This has been a remarkable season, and I want to take a minute to thank everyone who helped make it special. First and foremost, that means the fans."

"The passion you show is incredible. You show up hours before the game to start the party, and when the game starts, it ramps up even more. The players go all-out every shift, but they get to go to the bench between shifts; you bring the energy nonstop for 60 minutes. Heck, some of you even come to the airport at 1 AM to cheer our return after a road game. I can't tell you how much your support means to us."

Tulsky also had some positive words on the players as well as all the members of the organization who each play a role in making the season possible.

"From the outside, you may not see what an incredible effort goes into making this all possible. You see the effort the players put in on the ice, but should know how hard they work on everything from fitness to nutrition to sleep to optimize their performance."

"You know our games are fun, but should know how hard our game ops crew works to keep the arena buzzing, how hard our sales staff works to keep it full, how hard our arena ops crew works to keep the experience smooth. From an equipment manager preparing gear at 6 AM to a team services person working at midnight to find the best travel options for a call-up, from a chef doing prep at 6 AM to a development coach going over prospect video at midnight, the effort is tremendous."

Finally, Tulsky ended his thread with a look toward the future. The Hurricanes are positioned very well with the majority of their core locked into team-friendly deals, a talented pipeline and a ton of upcoming cap space.

"It obviously did not get us to the result we want yet. But we are building toward it; this organization is special, and I want to sincerely thank all of you for your part in that."



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SportScan

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

1354049 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes must turn focus to next season. Who will stay? Who could leave?

Chip Alexander

Raleigh-The nature of every team sport these days is that when one season ends, preparations for a new season begin quickly, intensely. There is no downtime. Harsh, perhaps, but necessary.

There's the roster to analyze and contracts to sort out for the next year. In the NHL, if a team goes deep in the Stanley Cup playoffs, the NHL draft and free agency can be upon it rapidly.

That's what the Carolina Hurricanes face now, after bowing out of the Eastern Conference Final. Their season ended Wednesday with a 5-3 loss to the Florida Panthers in Game 5 of their series at the Lenovo Center.

Canes center Sebastian Aho seemingly was near tears after the game in talking about this team, of how it would be the last time this group would be together. Changes, he knows, will be made and there will some goodbyes.

"That's the bad part of this business," Aho said. "You build friendships. It's like a family, right? Everyone cares a ton about each other. You try to push all the chips to the middle and try to do something great together.

"I'm sure whenever we're able to do that, we'll share that bond. I'll share the bond with these guys, but it's different when you win. That (stinks) that we weren't able to do it, but this group is special. It was a lot of fun to come into work every day."

Aho paused for moment, saying again, "It's part of the business."

A year ago, there was a lot of change after the Canes lost out in the second round to the New York Rangers. Fixtures like defensemen Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei left in free agency, as did forwards Teuvo Teravainen and Stefan Noesen. Forward Jake Guentzel wound up with the Tampa Bay Lightning when the Canes could not sign him to an extension.

"With what we lost and with the pieces that were left with this organization, it was like, 'I don't think we're making the playoffs,'" Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Wednesday. "It was such a mass exodus of good players to free agency. Then you were able to find good players to fill in and then I was like, 'I don't know if they're that good.'"

"But they hung in there. I've got nothing but pride with this group."

What the Canes lacked in the conference final against the Panthers — called "the standard" by Brind'Amour — was precisely what they sought, had and then decided to let go: a consistent scorer in Mikko Rantanen.

A year ago, the Canes traded for Guentzel, a proven point producer and former Stanley Cup winner with Pittsburgh. This season it was Rantanen.

Canes general manager Eric Tulsy caused ripples throughout the NHL when he traded for Rantanen. The deal with the Colorado Avalanche for the Finnish superstar forward also included getting Taylor Hall from the Chicago Blackhawks as Tulsy looked ahead to the playoffs in adding both a proven scorer and former Stanley Cup winner and Hall, a former league MVP.

We all know how that ended. Rantanen was disgruntled from the start and Tulsy quickly elected to send him on his way to the Dallas Stars, who agreed to send forward Logan Stankoven to the Canes as part of that deal.

"Every time you make a change you're taking some risk that it's not going to go quite the way you'd hoped," Tulsy said. "When you're bringing in a player like Mikko, the upside of having that work out is worth the risk in my mind."

It didn't work out. But Tulsy said recently that though the Canes had to part with Rantanen, he still believed they had a competitive enough team to contend for the Cup this year.

"We want to compete for the Cup every year and we think we've built a team that's capable of doing that," he said in late April.

Compete, yes. But the Canes now have reached the playoffs for a seventh straight season under Brind'Amour but been unable to advance beyond the third round. There have been three trips to the conference final, where the road has ended.

Stankoven, 22, did his part in the playoffs and has earned the trust of his Brind'Amour. The Canes also made a very late addition when they brought in defenseman Alexander Nikishin from Russia, adding a player who had starred in the KHL and will be a big part of the Canes' future.

The subtractions after this season?

Some believe defenseman Brent Burns will not return. His 21st NHL season, and his third as Jacob Slavin's defensive partner, might be his last with the Hurricanes.

Defenseman Dmitry Orlov, like Burns, is a veteran D-man who played the final year of his contract and is due to become an unrestricted free agent. He, too, could leave.



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The Canes, because of injuries to defensemen Jalen Chatfield and then Sean Walker in the playoffs, used Nikishin and Scott Morrow in the Panthers series. It was trial by fire, especially for Nikishin, who jumped into the playoffs, trying to learn on the fly.

That was a lot to ask of Nikishin and Morrow, but the experience of being in the most pressure-packed games of the season should help their development.

The Canes also have decisions to make on Eric Robinson and Jack Roslovic. The two forwards, new to the team this season, will be UFAs, and Tulsy might decide to let them test free agency.

Tulsy already has signed Hall and goaltender Frederik Andersen to contract extensions, and might consider more.

With the NHL salary cap for the 2025-26 season projected at \$95.5 million, a sizable increase from this year's \$88 million cap, the Hurricanes will have the cap space to make major moves. Tulsy, undaunted by what happened with Guentzel and Rantanen, would not surprise anyone by making another home run swing or two.

Should be an interesting offseason, and it's fast approaching.

News Observer LOADED: 05.30.2025

1354050 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers take Game 5, eliminate Hurricanes from playoffs

Sebastian Aho had two first period goals in the loss

Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes built a two-goal lead, lost it and clawed back to tie the game in the third period.

It wasn't enough.

Panthers captain Aleksander Barkov wriggled free from Carolina defensemen Dmitry Orlov to set up Carter Verhaeghe's go-ahead goal with 7:39 left to give Florida a 5-3 win in Game 5 of the Eastern Conference final and end Carolina's season.

"Their best player made an elite play," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

Hurricanes right wing Seth Jarvis ignited the Lenovo Center crowd when he turned a Carolina forecheck into a tying goal by flipping the puck over Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky (20 saves) at 8:30 of the third period.

But Barkov quieted the building with an unreal individual effort, shaking off Orlov below the goal line and dishing the puck across to Verhaeghe, who roofed a shot over a sprawling Frederik Andersen (17 saves) for his 12th game-winning playoff goal of the past four seasons and third career series-clinching goal to restore Florida's lead at 4-3.

The Hurricanes had an opportunity to tie the game with a late power play, but Andrei Svechnikov's chance in the slot was high, and Sebastian Aho's bid on the rebound slid behind Bobrovsky but wide. Carolina finished the night 0 for 6 on the power play.

"You'd like to see a power play go tonight there, and they got one and we didn't get any," Aho said.

Florida's power play goal in the second period started a three-goals-in-4½-minutes burst for the Panthers that erased the Hurricanes' 2-0 lead — both Aho goals — and put the defending champions back in the driver's seat.

First, with Jesperi Kotkaniemi in the box for taking a holding penalty at the tail end of a Carolina power play. Florida winger Matthew Tkachuk redirected an Aaron Ekblad shot past Andersen to cut the lead in half at 7:23 of the second period.

"The game was going, I thought, we couldn't have done much better," Brind'Amour said. "And then we take an O zone penalty, and they score on that — little floater, nice tip. But it's all of a sudden, that just kind of got them going — momentum."

Thirty seconds later, Tkachuk was able to fend off a Jordan Martinook hit near the Panthers' bench to get a pass to Evan Rodrigues entering the Carolina zone. Rodrigues passed to Sam Bennett and then beat Alexander Nikishin to the front of the net to direct in the return pass to tie the game.

Then at 11:59 of the second, Anton Lundell beat Aho to the front of the net off a faceoff win and tipped in a Brad Marchand pass to give Florida a 3-2 lead.

"You never want that to happen," Jarvis said. "It was a tough four-minute stretch. I thought we responded well, but giving up three goals that quickly, it's tough for any team to kind of come back from that."

But the Hurricanes did, with Jarvis scoring his sixth goal of the season after Shayne Gostisbehere held the puck in at the blue line and Svechnikov forked the puck to him in front.

Then Barkov — who had been on the ice for all three of Carolina's goals — put the Panthers on his back with the series-defining goal.

In the first period, however, it looked like Aho would be the Finnish center leading his team to a win.

First, Aho stole Florida defenseman Gustav Forsling's pass in the neutral zone and raced past him for a breakaway. Aho shot over the pad and under the glove of Bobrovsky to make it 1-0 at 4:39 of the game.

Aho then doubled the lead late in the opening period off another neutral zone steal.

Florida defenseman Niko Mikkola tried to pass the puck up the boards, but Jarvis deflected it. Aho again collected it, came up the right wing and snapped a shot between Mikkola's legs and past Bobrovsky for a 2-0 lead with 66 seconds left in the first period.

The Panthers, however, still found a way to reach their third straight Stanley Cup final and will have a chance to defend their title against either Dallas or Edmonton.

"That's a great hockey team," Aho said. "One team has beat them the past three seasons, right? So we knew it was going to be a big task to try to beat him. And we truly believe that we have what it takes, but obviously we fell short yet again. So, yeah, really pissed off."

Jarvis added, "It's the hardest trophy to win. And when you're feeling like this, you wish you could go back in time, but you can't. Now you've got to sit on it for a whole summer."

Notes: Florida center Eetu Luostarinen was injured in the first period and did not play the final 40 minutes. ... The Hurricanes outthit Florida 48-31, led by six each from Staal and Eric Robinson. ... William Carrier was called for two penalties for the first time this season.

The North State Journal LOADED: 05.30.2025

1354051 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers punch ticket to Stanley Cup Final — is Connor McDavid next?

James Mirtle

Happy Thursday! Today marks Day 41 of the NHL playoffs, and the Stanley Cup Final will (likely) start Wednesday. It's sure looking like we're in for a rare rematch, too ...

Panthers wagon rolls on

The Carolina Hurricanes looked like they might make things interesting after winning Game 4 3-0 and then putting up an early 2-0 lead in Game 5 last night.

Then the Florida Panthers did what they do — i.e., ending hopes and dreams — in what became a heartbreaking 5-3 win to eliminate Carolina in Round 3 (yes, again).

The story of this Panthers run has really become one of balance. Again, they had goals from five different scorers last night, with Evan Rodrigues becoming their 19th different goal-getter of the postseason. Only eight



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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teams in NHL history have ever had more than that, but there's still another round for Tomas Nosek and Mackie Samoskevich to get on the board and help them match the record (21, held by the 2019 Bruins and 1987 Flyers).

Florida also became the ninth team in league history to make three consecutive finals, which is ridiculously hard to do in a 32-team, hard-capped league. The Lightning (2020-22) are the only other club to pull it off since the 1985 Oilers (!).

In fact, in all of the Big Four North American men's pro sports, the Panthers are just the 11th team in the last 30 years to play for a 'ship three years in a row.

This team is special. So special we might have to pull out the D word if they win again. (No, not that D word.)

What do the Hurricanes do now?

This was a weird season for Carolina. The Hurricanes lost quite a bit of talent to free agency a year ago, then stunned the hockey world by acquiring Mikko Rantanen, only to stun everyone again by trading him 13 games later.

They again dominated the ol' shot attempts in the regular season (a heady 59.5 percent), but this wasn't a close series, with Florida outscoring them 15-5 at five-on-five and outclassing them on special teams and in goal.

This has happened often enough that the Hurricanes are going to have to find a way to adapt in the offseason. Winning the Meh-tropolitan Division isn't the goal at this point. The good news is they have their core signed, some strong young players coming and nearly \$30 million in cap space. (Not a typo.)

They're obviously going to take another run at Mitch Marner, but upgrading in goal and on the blue line — where Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov's age has been showing — are vital, too. But the best still appears to be coming.

Will McDavid get his revenge?

My apologies to Stars fans, who are hoping they can claw back into this series while down 3-1 with Game 5 in Dallas tonight (8 p.m. ET puck drop).

But all you hear when you talk to folks around the league right now is how a finals rematch will be the only good thing to come out of a blah Round 3. Oilers-Panthers didn't disappoint a year ago, with a crazy Edmonton comeback from down 0-3 ending with Game 7 dramatics going Florida's way.

The clash of styles between the take-no-prisoners Panthers and the Connor McDavid Show is fun to watch, too. (Really too bad about Zach Hyman, though.)

Plus, we almost never get a championship rematch in this league. This one would, again, be only the second time since the 1984 final.

The recent Cup final double shots

Detroit Red Wings vs. Pittsburgh Penguins: 2008 and 2009

New York Islanders vs. Edmonton Oilers: 1983 and 1984

Montreal Canadiens vs. Boston Bruins: 1977 and 1978

Montreal Canadiens vs. St. Louis Blues: 1968 and 1969

(The first two, the teams split, with the upstart Oilers and Pens getting the better of the dynastic Isles and Wings. The second two, the Habs won all four as part of a stretch of 10 Cup wins in 15 years.)

We'll have to wait and see if Dallas mounts an unlikely comeback, but right now, everyone seems to be looking forward to moving on from these conference finals. And getting this thing over with by mid-June, for once.

💡 Mirtrivia question

The 1968 and 1969 Blues and 1977 and 1978 Bruins were the last two teams to lose back-to-back Cup finals to the same team. Which big names were they coached by?

Coast to Coast

😊 Trade SZN is almost here, and that means a big ol' trade board from Christopher E. Johnston to get us ready for the fury. Spoiler: Chris Kreider takes the top spot. With free agency looking kind of tame, this might be our best hope for fireworks this offseason.

🔪 Harman Dayal has an interesting feature today about the mental health challenges that slumping NHL players face during hard times. (Wyatt Johnston came to mind for me, given he's staring at a record low minus-18 right now.)

📄 The PWHL is about to hold a big expansion draft to bring Seattle and Vancouver — its seventh and eighth teams — into the league, and the terms are pretty favorable for the newcomers. Hailey Salvian has a good breakdown of the latest here.

😬 Jonas Siegel digs into the question everyone in Toronto wants to know: Is there a way the Leafs can be ready to try and pry McDavid out of Edmonton when his contract is up in 2026? (Hey, they're looking for hope these days.)

🗣 On "The Athletic Hockey Show," the gang explores how Corey Perry found the fountain of youth with the Oilers, plus much more.

Called Smythe: Who's leading our MVP watch?

With Round 3 winding down, it's time for our weekly Conn Smythe ranking. As always, direct all complaints to Sean McIndoe on social media:

Connor McDavid, Edmonton

Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton

Aleksander Barkov, Florida

Sergei Bobrovsky, Florida

Sam Bennett, Florida

Mikko Rantanen, Dallas

Evan Bouchard, Edmonton

Matthew Tkachuk, Florida

If you missed it: DGB handicapped the uncoveted Conned Smythe award, looking for "the team that had the biggest impact on the playoffs by making the worst trade with a contending club."

I don't know how he comes up with all this stuff either. But at some point, they should study his brain for science.

Some key upcoming dates

June 1-7: NHL scouting combine in Buffalo

June 4: Start of Stanley Cup Final (if Oilers win Game 5; June 7 otherwise)

June 27-28: NHL Draft in Los Angeles

July 1: Free agency opens leaguewide

July 2: James writes his last newsletter of 2024-25, then lies on the floor for a while

The 📦 Statpack

Who doesn't love a good stat? The NHL's official data squad has been coming up with all kinds of good numbers of late. Here are a few that caught my attention this week:

1. "The home team has won 49 games during the 2025 playoffs, which is tied with 1993 and 1992 for the third most through this stage of a postseason (78 GP). Only 2013 (54) and 1990 (52) have seen more."

That was prior to last night in Raleigh, so it's now 49 in 79 games played. Home teams winning 62 percent of the time, however, is domination by NHL standards. This follows a regular season where teams had surprisingly good home records, a trend I'm afraid I don't have a great explanation for.



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No matter who advances from the West, the Panthers will be the road team in the final. Given they're 23-10 away from the Elbo Room the last three postseasons, however, I'm not sure they're all that worried about it.

2. "Connor McDavid recorded the 45th multi-point game of his playoff career (in Game 4 on Tuesday). McDavid has recorded a multi-point outing in more than 50 percent of his postseason games (45 of 89)."

And...

"McDavid (89 GP) can become the second-fastest player in NHL history to record 100 playoff assists behind only Wayne Gretzky (70 GP). No other player has reached the mark in fewer than 125 games."

Hot tip: Someone should really cover that guy.

In NHL history, only Gretzky and Mario Lemieux have a better career playoff points per game than McDavid, who is up to 1.58. Talk about thriving under the pressure of being a star in a hockey-crazed Canadian market.

If McDavid's not on hockey's Mount Rushmore yet, he will be with a Cup win.

3. "A Hurricanes win (in Monday's Game 4) guaranteed there will be no sweeps through the first three rounds in a postseason for the fifth time since the Division Semifinals changed from best-of-five to best-of-seven in 1987."

It still kind of felt like a sweep though, didn't it? 🧊

💡 Mirtrivia answer

A couple of bench bosses you may have heard of ... one was Scotty Bowman, who started his coaching journey in his early 30s with the expansion Blues. The other? Don Cherry.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.30.2025

1354052 Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes are still missing something — and Aleksander Barkov gave them proof

Sean Gentile

SUNRISE, Fla. — In the end, or at least at the beginning of it, the Carolina Hurricanes did what we asked of them.

Make no mistake: The first period of the final game of their 2024-25 season never quite seemed like it'd be enough to save them. That wasn't the point. Because even in the moment, even with them at their best, the ghosts of games 1, 2 and 3 against the Florida Panthers waited around the corner. No team in the history of the NHL has dug itself a hole like that against the defending champs and lived to tell the tale.

But in an era of Hurricanes hockey that has been and may continue to be defined by widespread perception that they're lacking a sixth gear, or a knob that turns to 11, or the type of high-end talent necessary to advance to conference finals and then continue to climb, the first period felt like real, live pushback. It felt like we were learning something.

In the end, though — the real end — we learned the truth, and Aleksander Barkov taught the lesson.

"Their best player," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said, "made an elite play."

Sebastian Aho is Carolina's best forward, their first-line center, and their highest-paid player. He's led his team in scoring in seven of the last eight seasons. And he's wonderful — creative, responsible, highly skilled, a player you can win with, a player you can build around. The question, though, as ever, is whether that's enough. The question is whether he's elite. And it's a fair one; only so many players — 10, maybe 15 — should get that label. For someone who, in his last two trips to the conference finals, had two goals in 10 games, it's tough to argue the case.

And in the first 20 minutes on Wednesday night, he did his best. Aho, at 4:39 of the first period and with his team buzzing around him, intercepted a neutral-zone pass by Florida's Gustav Forsling and, in clear, beat Sergei Bobrovsky cleanly from the slot. With 1:06 remaining, he scooped up a loose puck along the boards, took off toward Bobrovsky and used Panthers defenseman Niko Mikkola as a screen to beat Bobrovsky again.

In a period that was even in plenty of ways, Aho's goals were the difference. In a game that was just as even — something you could say about three of the five we saw here — it was not. The difference was Barkov.

Florida's first-line center is not first-team all-world, but he's close enough to it. If Connor McDavid is at the top of the list, and if Nathan MacKinnon and Auston Matthews swap spots behind him depending on the season, Barkov is probably next in line. He's consistently the most complete player of the four, the only one who's won a Selke and one of two, along with MacKinnon, who's been the best player on a Stanley Cup champion. And as the clock drained, and media members in the press box at Lenovo Center priced out hotel rooms for a potential Game 6, Barkov pulled the plug.

He picked up the puck deep in Carolina's zone along the right boards and carried it behind the net. Along the way, he picked up a hitchhiker — Hurricanes defenseman Dmitry Orlov — carried him into the left corner and then ejected him from the car. A move toward the crease set up a feed to Carter Verhaeghe, and that was that. Florida was up 4-3 with 7:40 left, but if you were smart, you went to bed.

"Everything happened quick," Barkov said afterward. Orlov would agree.

"I had good momentum there, had good speed, so I just tried to protect the puck."

Evan Rodrigues has spent plenty of time on the ice with Barkov over the last two seasons. He knows what he's watching. He knows who Barkov is and how he does what he did on Wednesday night.

"It's kind of his demeanor, to be honest, Rodrigues said. "It's just who he is as a person. He doesn't get too high, doesn't get too low. His emotion level is always even-keeled, so when there's a stressful environment or a high-emotion environment, he's able to play his game, stick with his game, and just do the right thing over and over and over again, and his skill just kind of takes over. You never see him force anything, you never see him try anything dangerous.

"He's just all-world, all skill, all talent, and it just comes out."

Players like Barkov making plays like the pass to Verhaeghe aren't inevitable. None of them are; a standard line about McDavid in particular is that, at times, he feels like he can simply decide to score. Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final is proof that's not the case. But the vibe exists, and that counts for something. It's not just about scoring goals or setting them up; it's about the timing. It's about the sequencing. Aho had it early. He didn't have it late.

And that's a bitter bit of irony — not just for him, either. Carolina, at last, got a two-goal, take-charge, juiced-up period from its best player, and it didn't matter all that much.

For six minutes after the loss, Aho stood at his locker, taking questions about another season that ended earlier than any hockey player would like. He answered them thoughtfully, emotionally, reasonably and honestly, talking about the second-period meltdown and missed opportunities on the power play.

One of the questions was about the idea that losing in five games rather than four could be a moral victory

"To me, you either win or lose (a) series," Aho said. "What's it matter? If you lose in four or seven or whatever, you lose the series, right?"

"And obviously, that's a great hockey team. I mean, one team has beat them the past three seasons, right? So we knew it was going to be a big task to try to beat them. And we truly believe that we have what it takes, but obviously fell short yet again. So, yeah. Pissed. Really pissed off."

Brind'Amour, a few minutes later, was in a similar spot. He wasn't interested in the idea that his team should try to adapt. Florida, he said, won a Cup and might win another based on a style that isn't far off from his own. Exit your zone, enter theirs, forecheck hard, wait for your chance and capitalize.



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"I feel like that's been our game for a long time. They've kind of picked it up the last couple of years and made it that much better," he said, thumb and forefinger a couple of inches apart

"So that's what we've got to get."

For a moment, it seemed like they had it. And now it seems more clear than ever before that they don't.

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The Athletic / Carter Hart, first defendant to testify in Hockey Canada sexual assault trial, details encounter

By Katie Strang, Kamila Hinkson, Dan Robson

May 29, 2025 Updated 2:53 pm EDT

LONDON, Ont. — Carter Hart took the stand Thursday morning in the Hockey Canada sexual assault trial, beginning his testimony by detailing his version of events on the night and early-morning hours in question.

Hart, Michael McLeod, Dillon Dubé, Alex Formenton and Cal Foote are each accused of sexual assault for a 2018 incident in which a 20-year-old woman said she was assaulted over the span of several hours in a London, Ont., hotel room while the players were in town to celebrate their 2018 Canadian World Juniors championship. All five players pleaded not guilty in the trial, which is now in its sixth week. Hart is the first of those five to take the stand.

Hart's attorney Megan Savard asked him about a night of drinking with his teammates at two bars that followed a Hockey Canada gala in London, Ont., on June 18, 2018, and his expectations for "romantic or sexual opportunities."

"What were you hoping for?" Savard asked.

"I was open to sexual encounters," Hart said. "A single guy, I was having a good time that weekend. I was open to it."

Hart, who was testifying in person, said that after a night of drinking at multiple bars with teammates, he received a group chat text message and spoke to McLeod on the phone about coming back to McLeod's room for a three-way.

Savard asked Hart why he responded "I'm in" to the text from McLeod, which was sent to a group chat with members of the Canadian world junior team.

"I kind of looked at it as an invitation, I assumed, that he was with a girl who wanted to have a threesome with another guy," Hart said.

Hart said that after he received the text message from McLeod he also had a phone call with McLeod. He was with Formenton and Rob Thomas at the time, and said he assumed they probably heard the conversation but couldn't remember.

"I don't remember the exact details word for word," Hart said. "But the gist of the conversation was that Mike was with a girl back at the hotel who wanted to have sex with some of the boys — 'boys' meaning some of my teammates."

Hart's testimony about the phone call was the first reference to McLeod and Hart's direct communication about a potential sexual interaction. Hart said this was only his third time drinking alcohol and that he was very "buzzed" and excited about the prospect of engaging with a woman sexually.

He said his first memory of seeing the woman in the room was when she was lying naked on the floor atop the bedsheet. Hart said she was masturbating and, to him, appeared to be "aroused" by the players in the room watching her. He said she then asked players to have sex with her.

Hart said he did not want to have vaginal intercourse with her but asked her "Can I get a blowie?" ("Blowie" is slang for oral sex.)

Hart said she pulled down his pants, khaki joggers with a drawstring, and performed oral sex with him for approximately 30-60 seconds. He said it didn't last long because he could not get fully erect and found the experience "weird" with other people watching. He described making eye contact with another player as it was happening, which he also described as "weird."

He said players were feeling a sense of "shock and awe" that E.M. was asking players to have sex with her and that many didn't want to because they had girlfriends.

"I could not believe some of the things she was saying," Hart said.

He said her demeanor changed to "annoyed" that players would not engage. Hart testified that he remembered seeing Formenton, who was single at the time, and E.M. go into the bathroom (he said she wasn't "dragging but leading" him into the bathroom and described them holding hands).

Savard showed Hart a text message he sent to teammate Dante Fabbro, which read "Get to 209." Hart estimated it was during the time that Formenton and E.M. were in the bathroom and that he sent it to Fabbro because he was one of the other guys on the team who was single.

Hart said he was in the room for approximately one hour. During that time frame, he said he did not see Dubé or McLeod engage with E.M. sexually or Dubé slap her on the buttocks (other players have testified to seeing both players receive oral sex from her and Dubé slapping her). He did say he witnessed Foote perform the splits over her while she was lying on her back but said he was fully clothed at the time and never made physical contact with her.

Hart said it was a "cool" thing Foote, "a big, tall dude," would do occasionally, and had done so at the bar previously that weekend. Hart said that others in the room — he didn't remember exactly who — encouraged Foote to do it.

"I remember when he did it, guys thought it was pretty funny. I thought it was funny," Hart said, adding that he saw E.M. "laughing as well."

Foote is accused of doing the splits over her and grazing his genitals over her face.

Hart, who was wearing a maroon jacket, white shirt and dark blue tie, provided succinct, straightforward answers to questions from his lawyer during his testimony.

Later, during cross-examination, Hilary Dudding, an attorney for Formenton, asked Hart if he witnessed anything degrading happen to E.M. in the hotel room.

"Never, no," Hart said.

"Is that something that would have stood out to you?" Dudding asked.

"If something like that happened, I would have stopped or I would have left," he said. "I can't see why I would have stayed in that room for so long."

"Why is that?" Dudding said.

"If something disrespectful or degrading happened?" Hart said. "It's not OK."

Hart is expected to be cross-examined by Crown attorneys on Friday.

Prior to Hart taking the stand, the prosecution in the Hockey Canada sexual assault trial told Justice Maria Carroccia Thursday morning that the Crown has called all of its witnesses and has concluded its case. The defense now has a chance to call witnesses.

The announcement followed an unexpected development late in Wednesday's proceedings in which Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham told the court there was a possibility that the Crown would call an additional player witness. Cunningham asked for time to consider that possibility, which prompted one of the more tense exchanges of the trial as she and defense attorney Megan Savard sparred about what Cunningham characterized as the "late-breaking events."

Savard protested that the defense had not been provided ample notice. Cunningham pushed back and read from an email in which the Crown notified the defense had been told he may be called as an additional witness. Carroccia ruled in the Crown's favor, allowing Cunningham and



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assistant Crown attorney Heather Donkers time to discuss whether to call the player as a witness.

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The Athletic / NHL offseason trade board: An early look at the summer's top targets, from Kreider to Rossi to Ehlers

NHL offseason trade board: An early look at the summer's top targets, from Kreider to Rossi to Ehlers

By Chris Johnston

May 29, 2025 Updated 4:44 pm EDT

The Athletic has live coverage of Oilers vs. Stars Game 5 from the 2025 NHL Western Conference Final.

The NHL offseason is about to kick into high gear.

With June on the horizon, many teams have already gone through pro scouting meetings or are in the midst of conducting them. Next week, they'll all travel to Buffalo for the NHL Scouting Combine — an important event where general managers and agents start laying the groundwork for the player movement to come this summer.

At a time when the salary cap ceiling is taking a significant jump to \$95.5 million, the conditions are ripe for upheaval.

Flexibility is returning to the league's financial system, and teams have more needs collectively than the free-agent list offers solutions.

So there's every reason to expect a fertile trade market.

With that in mind, here's an early look at the names in play entering the summer.

1. Chris Kreider

Team: New York Rangers

Position: Left Wing

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 22 goals, 30 points, 68 games

Age: 34

Contract: \$6.5 million AAV through 2027; 15-team no-trade list

A fresh start seems in order here. The Rangers started shuttling veterans this season, including former captain Jacob Trouba, and general manager Chris Drury mentioned Kreider's availability in a memo circulated to his peers in November. While Kreider is coming off his lowest goal-scoring season in eight years, with 0.32 goals per game, his cap hit is moderate on a contract that runs through 2026-27. Kreider remains a strong skater who sits in the 90th percentile in speed bursts over 22 miles per hour, according to NHL Edge data. He maintains some say in the process courtesy of a 15-team no-trade clause.

2. Marco Rossi

Team: Minnesota Wild

Position: Center

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 24 goals, 60 points, 82 games

Age: 23

Contract: RFA coming off three-year, \$2.59 million deal

Enormously skilled but on the lighter side at 5-foot-9 and 182 pounds, there is still some debate about what Rossi can be as an NHL player. It's pretty clear where the Wild are leaning after they gave him just 11 minutes of ice time per game in the playoffs following a 60-point regular

season. Now it's decision time with Rossi hitting restricted free agency and seeking a long-term contract. Minnesota has shopped Rossi before and appears unlikely to give him the kind of money a second-line center typically commands, so he's available to be had.

3. Bowen Byram

Team: Buffalo Sabres

Position: Defense

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 7 goals, 38 points, 82 games

Age: 23

Contract: RFA coming off two-year, \$7.7 million deal

The Sabres have a glut of defensemen on the left side, and the 23-year-old needs a new contract coming off his healthiest and most productive NHL season. That's why Buffalo has been gauging the trade market on the RFA. Byram is an elite skater who can log big minutes and still has his best years ahead of him, making him an intriguing option for teams looking for a blue-line upgrade.

4. Rasmus Andersson

Team: Calgary Flames

Position: Defense

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 11 goals, 31 points, 81 games

Age: 28

Contract: \$4.55 million AAV through 2026; six-team no-trade list

One year out from unrestricted free agency, the right-shot defenseman is expected to draw a crowd if he doesn't sign an extension with the Flames when he's eligible this summer. Andersson is an all-around defender who excels at winning puck battles and can jump into the attack. He brings highly valued off-ice intangibles, too, and recently wore the "C" for Sweden on home ice at the World Championship. While there are some minor concerns — such as his foot speed and an ugly minus-38 rating this season — Andersson is a major asset for Calgary to peddle.

5. John Gibson

Team: Anaheim Ducks

Position: Goalie

2024-25 stats: 11-11-2, .911 save percentage, 2.77 GAA

Age: 31

Contract: \$6.4 million AAV through 2027; 10-team no-trade list

The pickings are slim in the free-agent goaltending market and Gibson is coming off a bounce-back performance. While he may have relinquished the Ducks' No. 1 job to Lukáš Dostál, the veteran finished with a .911 save percentage and an impressive 15.3 goals saved above expected, according to MoneyPuck. Multiple teams have kicked tires on Gibson in recent years, with no trade materializing, but his contract looks more movable than ever with just two seasons remaining and the cap on the rise.

6. K'Andre Miller

Team: New York Rangers

Position: Defense

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 7 goals, 27 points, 74 games

Age: 25

Contract: RFA coming off two-year, \$3.872 million deal



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A confluence of factors has made Miller's future a little bit murky in New York. For starters, he's due a qualifying offer north of \$4.6 million this summer and is eligible to hit unrestricted free agency as soon as 2026. Basically, this is a time when the Rangers would typically be looking to make a big investment in a 23-year-old player. However, the team has to be mindful of the salary cap, and Miller's game showed some real cracks this season with defensive lapses and a dip in production contributing to the struggles the Rangers' blue line endured. Still, he would be a prime trade asset due to his age, skating ability and elite physical tools.

7. JJ Peterka

Team: Buffalo Sabres

Position: Left Wing

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 27 goals, 68 points, 77 games

Age: 23

Contract: RFA coming off three-year, \$2.775 million deal

Another restricted free agent due for a hefty pay raise, there'd be strong trade value for the Sabres to mine if they moved off a winger who's twice crested 25 goals and finished the season tied for second on the team with 68 points. While Buffalo GM Kevyn Adams told reporters in March that Peterka is one of the team's "core young guys," it's not clear that he's willing to make that kind of commitment to the organization. Peterka is a candidate for an offer sheet if he's not traded before July 1.

8. A Montreal Canadiens first-round pick

The Canadiens currently own a pair of picks smack dab in the middle of the first round, and it won't be surprising if they don't end up using both of the Nos. 16 and 17 selections on June 27 in Los Angeles. Montreal has an array of prospects already in the pipeline and is open to moving a pick if it can be used to acquire a more immediate need for the current roster. Another center would be ideal.

9. Jonathan Marchessault

Team: Nashville Predators

Position: Right Wing

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 21 goals, 56 points, 78 games

Age: 34

Contract: \$5.5 million AAV through 2029

What a difference a year makes. The Predators swung a mighty bat last July 1, landing Marchessault plus Steven Stamkos and Brady Skjei off the open market, and they already find themselves facing another roster renovation. The 2023 Conn Smythe Trophy winner can still put the puck in the net and boasts a resume that includes 102 career playoff games. What's more, his cap hit should become even more palatable as it ages.

10. Erik Karlsson

Team: Pittsburgh Penguins

Position: Defense

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 11 goals, 53 points, 82 games

Age: 34

Contract: \$10 million cap hit through 2027

The fit has never seemed quite right in Pittsburgh for the three-time Norris Trophy winner, who last appeared in the Stanley Cup playoffs six years ago. Karlsson will be 35 when next season begins, and it makes sense for him and the retooling Penguins to work together on finding him a new home. Karlsson's \$10 million cap hit offers a significant barrier, even if Pittsburgh steps up with some retention. Perhaps there is some hope to be found in his strong performance for Sweden at the 4 Nations Face-Off over the winter for any team thinking about taking the plunge.

11. Jean-Gabriel Pageau

Team: New York Islanders

Position: Center

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 14 goals, 42 points, 79 games

Age: 32

Contract: \$5 million AAV through 2026; 16-team no-trade list

Set to enter the final season of his contract, the veteran center is a candidate to find a new home with recently hired Islanders GM Mathieu Darche set to start turning over the team's underperforming roster. Pageau is elite in the faceoff circle and a strong penalty killer who is due just \$3.5 million in actual salary next season. He does own a 16-team no-trade clause.

12. Nick Robertson

Team: Toronto Maple Leafs

Position: Left Wing

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 15 goals, 22 points, 69 games

Age: 23

Contract: RFA coming off one-year, \$875,000 deal

It's 11 months on from his trade request and the 23-year-old forward is still looking for a change of scenery. Robertson once again found himself watching the Leafs' most important games from the press box, dressing for just three of 13 playoff games, and is a restricted free agent holding arbitration rights this summer. Robertson has a wicked release and high work rate, scoring 29 goals across the past two seasons despite seeing limited power-play time.

13. Connor Murphy

Team: Chicago Blackhawks

Position: Defense

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 2 goals, 19 points, 68 games

Age: 32

Contract: \$4.4 million AAV through 2026; 10-team no-trade list

Big, strong and experienced, Murphy posted good defensive results under less-than-favorable conditions with the Blackhawks this season. The right shot comes with an expiring contract that should be fairly easy to move, particularly in light of how well he compares to this summer's free-agent class. This is a time of transition in Chicago so roster flexibility is paramount.

14. Brayden Schenn

Team: St. Louis Blues

Position: Left wing

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 18 goals, 50 points, 82 games

Age: 33

Contract: \$6.5 million AAV through 2028; full no-trade list becomes 15-team no-trade list on July 1

There was plenty of discussion around Schenn leading up to the trade deadline, but the Blues captain told the team his preference was to stay at that time. Could that change? Schenn's full no-trade clause is set to convert to a 15-team no-trade list this summer, which shifts more leverage to the front office if it chooses to reengage the market on the veteran center. The Blues set a high price on Schenn in talks last season. He remains a productive point producer who brings value at both ends of the ice.

15. Bryan Rust



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Team: Pittsburgh Penguins

Position: Right Wing

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 31 goals, 65 points, 71 games

Age: 33

Contract: \$5.125 million AAV through 2028; no-movement clause expires June 30

The Penguins won't be looking to move a highly dependable, low-maintenance winger with ties to their back-to-back Stanley Cup years. However, with Rust's no-movement clause set to expire on June 30, it's possible — if not likely — that the 33-year-old will be one of their most sought-after assets. Rust is coming off a 31-goal, 65-point season and remains an above-average skater who plays an effective two-way game. An added bonus comes from the fact that the actual money owing over the final three years of his contract is below his already-affordable cap number.

16. Elvis Merzlikins

Team: Columbus Blue Jackets

Position: Goalie

2024-25 stats: 26-21-5, .892 save percentage, 3.18 GAA

Age: 31

Contract: \$5.4 million through 2027; 10-team no-trade list

Merzlikins has seemingly been on thin ice in Columbus for a couple of years now, with open discussions about a trade dating back at least 16 months. He's consistently struggled to perform up to the level of his contract, which is why colleague Aaron Portzline identified a goaltending overhaul as an organizational priority in Columbus this summer. Amid a muddled goaltending market, Merzlikins is available. He'll also likely be a buyout candidate if a trade doesn't emerge.

17. Morgan Geekie

Team: Boston Bruins

Position: Right Wing

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 33 goals, 57 points, 77 games

Age: 26

Contract: RFA coming off two-year, \$4 million deal

Geekie finds himself in a prime negotiating position, coming off a 33-goal season and sitting one year away from unrestricted free agency. Chancing. While there's every expectation that he and the Bruins will engage in negotiations on a contract extension, a move remains a possibility if they aren't able to find common ground. Geekie turns 27 this summer and Boston already started accumulating future assets with an aggressive sale ahead of the trade deadline.

18. Calle Järnkrok

Team: Toronto Maple Leafs

Position: Right Wing

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 1 goal, 7 points, 19 games

Age: 33

Contract: \$2.1 million AAV through 2026

A reliable player who can be trusted across 200 feet, Järnkrok is coming off a season where he struggled to find any kind of rhythm after not being healthy enough to play before March. Still, he's a low-risk bet with a strong track record of consistent play and favorable contract status. Once his \$1.325 million bonus is paid on July 1, Järnkrok will be owed just \$775,000 in salary next season — making him the equivalent of a league-minimum player.

19. Logan Mailloux

Team: Montreal Canadiens

Position: Defense

Shoots: Right

2024-25 stats: 2 goals, 4 points, 7 games

Age: 22

Contract: \$875,000 AAV through 2026 (RFA)

The Canadiens' cupboards are overflowing with promising young defensemen, which makes the path to the NHL roster a little crowded. Call it a good problem to have. Mailloux played a big role for the AHL's Laval Rocket this season and got a brief taste of NHL experience with the Habs, scoring twice in seven games. While he's certainly not a player Montreal has to move, the belief is he could be had in the right deal.

20. Nikolaj Ehlers

Team: Winnipeg Jets

Position: Left Wing

Shoots: Left

2024-25 stats: 24 goals, 63 points, 69 games

Age: 29

Contract: UFA coming off seven-year, \$42 million deal

With Ehlers set to become an unrestricted free agent on July 1, there may be some desire from a suitor to get a jump on the market if he signals an intention to part ways with the Winnipeg Jets before the end of June. There aren't many pure goal-scorers among this crop of free agents. And even though Winnipeg GM Kevin Cheveldayoff indicated that he'd like to make Ehlers a "Jet for life," the early indications are that he's going to have a difficult time doing so.

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2025 NHL Draft: 30 prospects who just missed the cut for Wheeler's final top 100

By Scott Wheeler

May 29, 2025 7:00 am EDT

This week, we're rolling out my 2025 NHL Draft package at The Athletic in advance of my final top 100 draft board. On Monday, we released my ranking of the top 15 overagers in the class. Today, we release scouting reports for the 30 prospects who just missed the cut for my board.

These prospects range from the final cuts at forward, defense and goalie for my board, who will be mid-to-late-round picks, to others who aren't even ranked by NHL Central Scouting but I have at least some time for/some interest in continuing to track.

Consider them my honorable mentions.

Note: Players are sorted alphabetically.

Karl Annborn, RHD, 6-foot-1 (HV71)

Annborn used to be considered a top prospect in this Swedish age group and was still a top-four D for the national team and a productive J20 defenseman who got his first SHL point (albeit with bottom-feeding HV71) this season. But whenever I've watched him, I've always come away thinking, "He's just OK." There's just a lot of mediocre, or average. Average size. Average feet. Average offense. Average defense. He's a fine player and solid two-way D at this level, but I just don't see a quality that will carry him or a clear identity/role up levels beyond becoming an



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average five-on-five two-way depth D in the SHL or AHL. He penalty kills against his peers, but I don't see him as a penalty killer up levels. He ran a power play in J20, but I don't see him doing that up levels. He's not physical. He's a fine young player whom I felt I should mention here, but it's just pretty bleh.

Asher Barnett, LHD, 6-foot-0.5 (U.S. NTDP)

Barnett, a Michigan commit, was one of my final cuts on D. He wore the "C" at the NTDP this year and was a consistent top-four D on an NTDP blue line that struggled around him for the most part. He's an average-sized D with average tools, which limits his ultimate upside and has made me wonder if he's just a potential AHLer/solid two-way college D as an upperclassman. He's a decent skater who played to positive two-way results this year and makes the right plays, something some of his teammates struggled with. He seems to know who he is and how he needs to play, with a focus on efficiency and effectiveness over flash. He's got a good feel for his decision-making and a willingness to simplify when that's what's called for. While he's not dynamic and doesn't always take the right guy/make the right read defensively, he defends well and is a relied-upon player who can contribute in multiple ways at a good level. He'd be a late-round candidate for me.

Quinn Beauchesne, RHD, 6-foot (Guelph Storm)

Beauchesne is a Hockey Canada darling who wore a letter for them and played top-four defensive minutes for them at both U18 worlds and the Hlinka, has worn a letter and played more than 20 minutes per game for the Storm this year in the OHL. I haven't seen what they see in him, though. He's a strong athlete who is physically developed and is, by all accounts, an honest worker. He played to half a point per game on a low-scoring Guelph team despite missing time after his leg swelled up from a charley horse injury. He defends well in-zone and competes. But I find he struggles under pressure and turns over a lot of pucks, I find he gets beat more than he should in transition if he wants to become a defensive, complementary depth partner at the next level and I don't know if he can become that as a 6-foot D without NHL offense to chip in with. It's possible I've seen the wrong games, though, as he does have some believers.

Donato Bracco, LHD, 5-foot-11 (U.S. NTDP)

Bracco isn't ranked by NHL Central Scouting and has some flaws as a player that will make becoming a legit NHL prospect a challenge, but he's a thinker of the game who I think will show more in college than he did at the NTDP and I think he's worth at least following into college. Bracco is a player who sees the game at an advanced level, navigating the ice with his smarts and anticipation. He's a natural handler, skater and passer of the puck with great edges and comfort level atop the offensive zone. His head is always up, he knows where to place pucks and he executes the plays he sees. He can open up and swing around the offensive zone to create movement. He learned to pick his spots offensively this season, but there were times when I wanted to see if he could really lean into an offensive identity more than he did. The game and the puck travel through him nicely. He's got good hands and feet and a comfort level on the puck to take pressure and then make plays into the space beyond it. He needs to get a lot stronger, which will help him defend better down low and get pucks through to the net harder, but he's a late-July birthday with some time to do that. There are some in U.S. hockey circles who think he sees the game at a very high level and have vouched for him to me and others who don't see a pro prospect at all.

Jan Chovan, C, 6-foot-2 (Tappara)

Chovan wore a letter and was a top-six center for Slovakia at this year's U18 worlds. He played his draft year in Finland with Tappara's junior team and wasn't particularly productive, but he has some pro tools and has played well for the national team. He's also a Sudbury import draft selection who I'd be interested to see come over here and play on the North American sheet/in the North American style, because I think it would suit him. Chovan is big, protects pucks well and can be relied upon to play a two-way game. He picks up his marks and supports play effectively. He's also got a nice shot that has some power behind it and I've seen him finish cleanly from mid-range pretty regularly in my viewings. He needs to continue to get stronger as he can get pushed off of pucks and he doesn't use his frame or impose himself physically like coaches will want him to but he's a smart player who is worth late-round consideration for me (he might go in the middle rounds, though).

Kale Dach, C, 5-foot-10 (Sherwood Park Crusaders)

Dach was one of the most talented and productive players in the BCHL this season, registering 100 points in 62 combined regular-season and playoff games for Sherwood Park, leading the league in assists and getting named a First Team All-Star. He's a Penn State commit but will play his post-draft season with the Calgary Hitmen in the WHL next year following the NCAA's eligibility changes. He's an undersized center by NHL standards and he's got a lot of work to do in the faceoff circle if he wants to continue to play the middle up levels, but he functions as a conduit for his teammates with his smarts, playmaking and sixth sense for spacing and timing as a distributor. He passes the puck at a high level, sees the play develop early, and understands how to slow the game down and distribute/pick apart coverage. He can run the flank on the power play. His skill level is legit in terms of his hands and touch. He's a good skater. I would have liked to see him score more and compete harder at times this season, though, and he's going to have to continue to produce up levels to have a shot. I do wonder if he tops out as an AHL top-sixer, but he's worth following and I'd consider him in the draft's later rounds.

Kieren Dervin, C, 6-foot-1 (St. Andrew's College)

Dervin, a Penn State commit, spent the bulk of the last two seasons playing at SAC (where he was a top player in the prep school circuit) before making the move to the OHL with the Kingston Frontenacs following the NCAA's eligibility change. With the Fronts, he registered just two goals and six points in 21 combined regular-season and playoff games from December to April, but they were a deep team that was trying to contend and he slotted in mostly as their fourth-line center. With SAC, there were stretches where he played hard and physical and really imposed himself, knowing he could go get pucks and dominate. But with Kingston, he often lacked intensity. He's got good size, he's a high-end skater, he's an impressive athlete (who I'm told will stand out at the combine), and he had some transition sequences this year where he drove down ice and really attacked the net. He's also got some elusiveness for a pro-sized player and can make plays one-on-one with D and goalies. But there were other games where he played on the perimeter too much with Kingston and blended in and lacked that quote-unquote "urgency." Those who've worked with him in Kingston and at SAC talk about his athleticism, good skills, vision, skating and hockey IQ. He just needs to get to the inside more consistently.

When I surveyed a couple of folks about him at the end of his season, one source felt he was a third-round pick and another wasn't sold. But with time and proper development, he's got the tools to be a player. I strongly considered ranking him in my top 100.

Jordan Gavin, LW, 5-foot-11 (Brandon Wheat Kings)

Gavin is a fall 2006 birthday who was the No. 2 pick in the 2021 WHL Bantam draft after top 2024 prospect Berkly Catton, was productive for his age in the two seasons prior to this one, but plays a low-pace game that disappointed this year both in Tri-City to start and after a trade to Brandon, resulting in him going from potential mid-rounder to start the year to not ranked by NHL Central Scouting at all.

He lit it up in the prep school circuit, registered 54 points in 62 games in his rookie season two years ago, and played to a point per game as one of the top offensive players on Tri-City last season. Typically, players with that statistical profile are definite picks, but questions about Gavin's style of play and whether he has another level to find have followed him and, frankly, revealed themselves this year.

He can drift to the perimeter. He's got some deception on the puck and does a good job holding onto it to wait for secondary options to open up, but slows the game down too much. He does a good job leading rushes through neutral ice and then identifying the trailer in transition. He's got good hands and an accurate shot from the slot. He makes a lot of slip plays under sticks. He reads coverage well. But there are also times when you'd like to see him drive play more, or take charge more. Gavin relies on his smarts and sense to make good reads and his understanding of how to play in the offensive zone is a strength, but questions about his pace/competitiveness do linger.

Owen Griffin, C, 5-foot-9.75 (Oshawa Generals)

I've watched a lot of Griffin with the Gens over the last two years and he came a long way with them over the course of both seasons, going from a player who struggled out of minor hockey to have much of any impact and flipped between center and the wing, to one who was a top-six center and power-play staple on one of the best teams in the CHL this



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year. He really elevated again in the OHL playoffs as well, registering 29 points in 21 games. He was even counted on in the playoffs to take key D-zone draws right into the OHL Championship series against London, too. By year's end, he'd registered 38 goals and 80 points in 83 combined regular-season and playoff games. Those are very respectable numbers on a team like that.

He's got good skill in tight and carried a lot of pucks into the offensive zone for his lines this year, navigating through neutral ice and across the blue line. He's not afraid to play around the net as a smaller player and has great offensive instincts both on it and off it. He can play the flank and the bumper on the power play and plays the bumper role well because of how quickly he can make the next play. He's a good skater who plays on his toes. He sees the ice well and is noticeable on the puck. I thought he was noticeable at the OHL Top Prospects Game when measured against just his peers, too. He plays with jump and handles the puck at pace. I and others do wonder if he's just a really good junior player whose game might not translate in the pros, and that kept him off of my list, but his OHL playoffs nearly sold me enough and he didn't get pushed around as the games got heavier this year. I like him and he has really grown on me. He was one of my very last cuts at forward, and I strongly considered ranking him in the 90s.

Emile Guite, LW, 6-foot-1.25 (Chicoutimi Saguenéens)

Guite won QMJHL Rookie of the Year as a 16-year-old and was a No. 2 pick in the league, but hit a huge wall this year and actually saw his production dip. He's a low-pace shooter who can finish plays. He needs the right kind of usage and linemates to be successful, though, because he's not a great skater, with knees that can knock and splay, though I think he's a little more competitive than he has gotten credit for in conversations I've had with folks (he still certainly also has a lot of work to do to round out his game) and he does have some big-game pedigree at a young age. He was a Quebec U18 AAA champion and Telus Cup MVP, the leading scorer on Canada White's gold medal-winning team at world under-17s, and a top producer at the Hlinka and for Chicoutimi last season. If you leave him open in the offensive zone, he can burn you. He has a multifaceted shot (one-timer, catch-and-release, in-motion, standing still, you name it). He has power-play skills and is a threat on his off wing on the flank. He's 6-foot-2. But he's too one-dimensional and should be a more impactful player than he is. He reminds me a little of Predators prospect Matthew Wood at the same age, but Wood managed to produce enough to remain a top prospect despite some obvious flaws, and Guite hasn't done that. The lack of progression this season was concerning enough for me to omit him from my list. If you're going to be an offensive guy, you have to produce.

Travis Hayes, RW, 5-foot-10.5 (Soo Greyhounds)

One of the youngest players in the draft, Hayes wore a letter for Team USA at the Hlinka last August and then had a respectable year with Greyhounds, registering 51 points in 65 games and a plus-rating on a negative team. He doesn't have the dynamic skill you look for in a smaller player and it's hard to be a bottom-six checker/pest when you're under 6 feet, and that kept him off my board, but he's a player with real identity that I felt deserved a mention here. He plays hard, he plays in the fight, he finishes all of his checks, and he and Brady Martin had a really good thing going these last two years, both in terms of chemistry and style of play. He also plays with pace on and off the puck, has a nose for the net and likes to get his hands dirty. I think he probably becomes a bottom-six AHLer, but he's worth Round 6-7 consideration.

Here's Soo general manager Kyle Raftis: "He gets under the opponents' skin like crazy, he's got a great release, he just finds ways to score goals in the blue paint constantly, and he's got a ton of confidence and belief in his ability. He has been excellent and he's on the PK, power play and we've got a younger team and he wants the puck on his stick in key situations."

Stepan Hoch, LW, 6-foot-4 (HC Motor České Budějovice)

Hoch is a big, strong two-way forward who played center when he played at Czechia's U20 level or with their national team against his peers this year (against whom he was actually strong in the faceoff circle), but was a winger when he played at the pro level. He doesn't have a ton of natural offense in his game, especially for an October '06 who I would have liked to see produce more in junior by now, but he can penalty kill, he's got a legit shot (which I've seen him really lean into in my viewings and would like to see him use more) and he plays off his linemates well. I think he needs to develop more of an identity as well, because he's not a

power forward, or a skill guy, or a checker. He is a solid all-around player, but he's a high-floor, low-ceiling type who I thought was more of a future AHLer than NHLer.

Burke Hood, G, 6-foot-2.75 (Vancouver Giants)

Hood was a great story for the Giants this year, going from a sixth-round bantam draft selection who wasn't in the league as a 16-year-old to starting and playing to a winning record and .910 save percentage across 42 games as a 17-year-old. That play earned him his first invite from Hockey Canada as well (he served as their third-stringer at U18 worlds). He gave up a couple of six packs in the first round of the WHL playoffs, but Spokane did that to more than one team and he was the reason the Giants won Game 3 of that series. He was also excellent in the second half. Hood is a smart goalie with good size and decent athleticism/movement. He reads, tracks and anticipates the play well, seems to have a studious approach to the position, gets to his spots early, has patience on his outside edges and has good dexterity. I don't think he's the most purely gifted goalie, and he's still got some things to work but he stays square, is reliable and has tools to develop. He's the kind of goalie I'd target in the draft's later rounds once the true top goalie prospects are gone.

Lev Katzin, C, 5-foot-8.5 (Guelph Storm)

Katzin was a star in the GTHL coming up and has been a very good junior player in Guelph in the OHL, in Green Bay in the USHL before that, and most recently with Canada at U18 worlds, where he was both very productive and very effective. Whenever I've watched him play over the last couple of years, he has played well and made an impact on games. He has skill, plays a likable style, works and has proven he can play both center and the wing against his peers and still play the same consistent shift-to-shift game. He's strong for his size, too. But even though I like him, and even though coaches and scouts also respect his game, it's hard to climb up levels at his size unless you put up huge numbers or have a defining skill/trait. He's got good hands and first touch. He sees it well. He's got a quick shot. He's a good skater. He'll win inside body positioning. He stays around it and plays between the dots. He's a tough 5-8 and a good player. I think he'll be a good college player at Penn State, too. But he's probably a late-round pick or someone you follow in college.

Lucas Karmiris, C, 5-foot-11 (Brampton Steelheads)

Karmiris didn't produce enough as one of the older first-year eligibles in the draft to make his way onto my list but I've liked watching him and I think he and Jacob Kvasnicka, who was the last player ranked on my board and is almost a year younger, have some similarities as competitive 5-11 forwards who work hard, play with pace and involve themselves in the action at the junior level without having a dynamic trait. Karmiris is a good junior player who can touch a lot of what happens in a game. He was a driver for the Steelheads on his lines at five-on-five when healthy this season (the injury bug hit him a couple of times, including an injury to his face in the fall), penalty killed for them and contributed on their second power play. He can skate pucks through neutral ice, track and forecheck inside the offensive zone and work to get pucks. He's got decent skill and keeps his feet moving. He might just be what he is, but I like him as a player and have enjoyed watching him.

Liam Kilfoil, C, 5-foot-11 (Halifax Mooseheads)

Kilfoil is a smart, committed three-zone forward who had 24 goals and 51 points in 73 combined regular-season and playoff games with the Mooseheads this season, both of which led the team in scoring, believe it or not. He also wore a letter for them and was a bottom-sixer and penalty killer for Hockey Canada at U18 worlds and the Hlinka. He's a decent skater, he makes quick decisions and plays a heady game. He's not a particularly physical player, but he works to get pucks back. He sees the ice well and can anticipate play offensively and defensively. He'll hustle and win races and inside body positioning. He consistently finds his teammates through traffic and on the back side of coverage, and also goes there for them. I think he has more offense than his numbers indicate. I considered ranking him at the back of my top 100 and expect he'll be a mid-to-late-round pick.

Jesper Kotajarvi, LHD, 5-foot-11 (Tappara)

Kotajarvi has been an above-average player on a well below average '07 Finnish national team, played a dozen games with one of Liiga's top clubs this year and played to half a point per game at Finland's junior level. He's a 5-11/6-foot left-shot D with average tools, though, and that



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kept him off my list. He's a decently smart, decently competitive defenseman with a decent shot and a bit of an offensive tilt. He can move pucks and he defends at a reasonable level. He's a decent player. He's also a summer birthday. I think he has shown enough to make himself a candidate at the back of the draft, but he has never really grabbed me, and I'm not sure what his role/next level looks like.

Carter Klippenstein, C, 6-foot-2.5 (Brandon Wheat Kings)

Klippenstein is a November '06 who has established himself in the WHL as a worker who plays a physical, competitive, honest, what-you-see-is-what-you-get game. He wasn't nearly productive enough/didn't show nearly enough offense for me to slot him given his age, and it's very hard for players who play checking roles in junior (he played 10-15 minutes per game for Brandon) to rise to checking roles in the NHL. And while he's listed as a center, he also played a lot of wing this year. He's got some believers as a potential fourth-liner because of his combination of compete, size, strength, physicality and skating (he can really get going down hill in straight lines), but he finished 11th on his junior team in scoring this year as an older draft eligible and from what I've seen he's got some limitations in terms of hockey IQ and puck play. The team that picks him will be betting on his clear identity — and that he's got development in front of him, despite the birthday.

Another highlight for the Carter Klippenstein collection!@bdnwheatkings | #NHLDraft pic.twitter.com/wfGddvdyv

— Western Hockey League (@TheWHL) March 23, 2025

Alex Misiak, RW, 5-foot-11 (Waterloo Black Hawks)

Misiak scored five professional goals in Slovakia's top flight in the fall, spent the winter playing for a top team in the USHL and then left the Black Hawks (who went on to the Clark Cup) to play for Slovakia at U18 worlds. He plays a driven, middle lane game with decent skill and a nose for the net. He's not a natural individual creator or playmaker, but he makes plays for his linemates, plays hard and has some secondary skill. In my viewings, he has worked to involve himself in the action and keep his feet moving. I think he's got the ability to slow it down as well and has more offense than his good but not great numbers with Waterloo and the national team indicate. Consistency has been a bit of an issue at times in some of my viewings (as it is for his older brother Martin Misiak, a Blackhawks prospect, though I think Alex plays a more conducive style) but I've seen him finish checks and don't have the issues with work ethic that I had with Martin with Alex. He's less talented, though. Alex would be a late-round flier option for me, but that's about it.

Zachary Morin, LW, 6-foot-1 (Saint John Sea Dogs)

Morin is a Boston University commit who was a minor hockey star in Quebec and Michigan but really had a tough time with discipline and consistency in the USHL with Youngstown, resulting in a move to the Sea Dogs in the Q (where he made some progress but still showed some selfish tendencies). There's a camp of people who don't think he plays winning hockey or has the mental makeup to become an NHLer and find he plays hero hockey too much. He is a 6-foot-1/2 forward with some legit tools, though, and that keeps him relevant. I wonder about his hockey IQ and have often thought he has a bit of an identity crisis (does he think he's a skilled player, or a pest, just always frustrated and forcing both?) and immaturity to his game, though. He made some really nice skill plays beating or shaking defenders one-on-one inside the offensive zone after the move to the Sea Dogs this year and he shows you those flashes at his size and it piques your interest. When he's feeling himself and confident, he's dangerous. I've seen him drive down ice and push his way to the net, and make skill plays in bunches. He's a good athlete. But there are also games of his that I watched and found his play selection frustrating, felt he was forcing it, and he rendered himself quite ineffective (all common criticisms). I could see him pop next year and put it all together without the pressure of the draft, but there's also risk he remains a mercurial, what-could-have-been prospect who doesn't have the interest or willingness to change his style of play.

Dakota Rheaume-Mullen, LHD, 5-foot-11.75 (University of Michigan)

The son of legendary goaltender Manon Rheaume, Rheaume-Mullen is a late-2006 who, after two years at the NTDP, played college hockey with the Wolverines in his draft year. He played third-pairing minutes at Michigan but played his role effectively — if a little lackluster at times. He's a good skater with projectable four-way mobility. He handles pressure well. His head and eyes stay up and his reads seem to be in a good place. But whenever I've watched him over the last three seasons,

I've felt he had more smarts and offense and that just hasn't come due to both roles at the NTDP and Michigan, but also his play. He played behind Cole Hutson and Logan Hensler for offensive opportunities at the program and behind EJ Emery and Will Skahan in terms of his role defensively, and that carried over into Michigan, where his role and game feel like it's caught up in no man's land a little. I could see him take a step at a program like Michigan as a junior or senior and become an involved, puck-possession two-way D. But he looks more like he's on a path to becoming more of an AHLer/ECHLer after that at the moment.

David Rozsival, LW, 6-foot-0.5 (Bili Tygri Liberec)

Rozsival played the majority of this year at Czechia's junior level and was a top player and a real threat, but didn't light it up. He was also a good player for the Czech national team at U18 worlds and the Hlinka, but didn't light it up in either of those, either (four points in 10 games between the two). He's a summer birthday, though, and he does look like a pro-style player. He wins inside body positioning. He's strong over pucks and in battles. He'll drive and go to the net. He plays on his toes and plays a North American style. And he does have some smarts and know-how. He's a decent player in his age group and should have a long pro career, but that career may just be in Europe or the AHL.

Maxim Schafer, RW, 6-foot-3.25 (Eisbaren Berlin)

Schafer caught my eye at both the World Juniors and the U18 worlds. After the latter, I decided to sit down and watch some of his tape in Germany this year, where he dominated the junior level and played more than 30 games in limited minutes in the DEL. His NHL Central Scouting ranking (102nd among European skaters) suggests he's a fringe prospect to get drafted, but I'd strongly consider him in the draft's latter rounds based on what I've seen. Schafer is big and he can skate and shoot it. He gets the first touch on loose pucks. He wins 50/50s and then picks up the next play quickly. He's not a physical player for his size, but he'll work smartly and he's got some of the other tools you look for in terms of the size, the skating, the shot and some of the game sense and feel.

Oliwer Sjostrom, LHD, 5-foot-10 (Lulea HF)

Sjostrom's not ranked by NHL Central Scouting and might not get picked, but he has been a top-four D for this Swedish age group internationally and has been productive at the J20 level for his age in each of the last two seasons. He's undersized, though, and while he has offense, skating and puck-moving ability, none of it's dynamic, take-over-a-game talent. I do like him defensively as well, though. He has been a go-to penalty killer on his teams. He's got a good stick. He's got balanced skating posture going backward and gaps up well (though I do think there are times when he could close earlier and he waits for carriers to come to him head-on). His profile makes him a long shot, but I wanted to at least mention him here.

Andreas Straka, RW, 6-foot-0.5 (Quebec Remparts)

Straka is a July birthday who still played for Slovakia at the last two U18 worlds. I liked him enough in each to spend some time on him as an import with the Remparts this year as well and while his production is vanilla (34 points in 53 games) at a glance, that team struggled to score this year and he was a pretty consistent contributor for them who played to mostly positive results relative to his teammates. He tracks. He arrives on time and gets open effectively. He's strong and can drive (though I'd like to see him finish more). He protects the puck well and can hold it and find guys off the cycle inside the offensive zone. He makes smart little plays on bump passes or little slips. I think he deserves Round 6-7 consideration and could see him take a step next year.

Caden Taylor, LW, 6-foot-2.25 (Peterborough Petes)

The Petes were one of the toughest teams to watch in major junior hockey for much of this year and that made evaluating their prospects its own challenge as well. Their leading scorer finished the year with 37 points. Taylor was their second-leading goal scorer with 15 and finished third on the team in points with 31 in 68 games. I've listed him here because he's got a legitimate NHL-level shot/release and sometimes having that one tool, when you've also got a pro frame to build upon, is enough to make you worthwhile as a late-round pick. He was a big-time scorer in minor hockey, a ninth-overall pick into the O, and I and some around the province wouldn't be surprised if he scores 30-40 goals as a north-south shooter next year. He'll work and finish his checks and seems capable of playing the style a team would want him to play as



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well. His game's still unrefined in some ways, but late in the draft, sometimes you're just looking for a prospect you can mold and work with.

WHAT A SHOT BY CADEN TAYLOR 🏒️ #NHLDraft eligible Caden Taylor rips one up high to give @PetesOHLhockey an early lead on the road! 📺📱 #OHL | @CHLHockey pic.twitter.com/3gRnb5M5mh

— Ontario Hockey League (@OHLHockey) February 23, 2025

Malte Vass, LHD, 6-foot-1.75 (Farjestad BK)

Vass is a pro-size D who plays a highly physical, hard, stand-up defensive style. He hits hard, defends the rush firmly and loves to engage in battles (sometimes a little over-zealously). Despite his physical tilt, he also has a good stick. He plays more on instinct and timing than poise and calm, but he knows who he is and has a clear identity already as a young player. He's never going to have a ton of offense, but he skates well enough to potentially project as a hard-to-play-against depth D option. He was one of the last defenders cut from my list.

Artyom Vilchinsky, LHD, 6-foot-4 (SKA)

I'm very unsure about Vilchinsky, a hulking, heavysset, 240-something pound late-September 2006 who played his third season in the MHL with SKA this year. I wonder about his fitness. I think his mobility and skating are a concern and that he'll struggle at KHL pace without some real progress on and off the ice. He moves fine and certainly, his defensive results have been strong on a good team, but I don't think he reads the game particularly well on or off the puck and his puck play itself is pretty bare bones. I understand the appeal of him and why a team would want to work with him and consider late in the draft, and it's notable that he's had defensive success over an extended period in the MHL at an early age, but a lot of work would have to happen for him to realize his potential.

Max Westergard, C, 5-foot-10 (Frolunda HC)

Westergard has been one of the Finnish U18 team's top forwards with his age group, but it's the weakest group I can remember the country producing and he's a 5-10 forward without high-end skill. He was also above a point per game with Frolunda's J20 team and gets credit for his ability to be a driver or a complementary piece who can play with skilled players and play with intensity and energy. He's not a dynamic skill type and that comes with some questions about a below-average-sized player, but he's also a September 2007 who was nearly eligible for the 2026 class, could still grow and does a lot of things well. His best attribute is his ability to find soft space around the net/slot, routinely getting open for his linemates for tap-ins. He's got a great know-how on the ice and has shown an ability to make an impact both with top players with Frolunda or as more of a go-to guy with a Finnish national team that lacks that. He's also a fast skater who uses that speed to complement his timing. I'd consider him in Rounds 6-7, probably, but I just don't know if he has a projection beyond a good SHL player and that kept him off my list.

Patryk Zubek, LHD, 6-foot-3.25 (Bańska Bystrica)

Zubek is a big, heavy D who has been the most productive defenseman in Slovakia's junior level over the last two seasons but also has some flaws as a player that made him the national team's No. 7 defenseman at U18 worlds (though he was moved up to the first pairing with Luka Radivojevic for the bronze medal game). He plays hard, has size and is a volume shooter inside the offensive zone who puts a lot of pucks on net and can hammer it. But despite his production, he's a little slow-moving out there and he's not particularly creative, playing more on instinct and the first play he sees. I'm not sure what to make of him, but I think he's worth tracking, and I'd be very interested to see him get picked in the CHL Import Draft and come play in junior over here as more of a test for his toolkit.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.30.2025

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The Athletic / Inside the mental health challenge slumping NHLers face: 'You can't get away from it'

Harman Dayal

May 29, 2025 7:00 am EDT

Cody Glass was alone in his Las Vegas apartment, unable to walk because of a torn ACL.

Glass' rookie NHL season wasn't supposed to end like this. Everything until that point suggested that the speedy, talented playmaking center was on an accelerated path to stardom. He was drafted No. 6 by the Vegas Golden Knights in 2017. He lit up the WHL. He turned pro late in 2018-19 and quickly became one of the top players on a Chicago Wolves team that reached the Calder Cup finals. He scored six points in his first nine NHL games as he centered stars Mark Stone and Max Pacioretty.

"I was living on a high this whole time," Glass reflected.

However, one by one, life dealt him setbacks that shattered the dream-like start to his career.

As Vegas got healthier, he was demoted down the lineup. He was sometimes moved to the wing, a position he'd rarely played before. Glass' point production cratered to just six points in his final 30 games. He got hurt and underwent season-ending knee surgery in early March, around the same time that the world was shutting down due to COVID-19 in 2020.

Glass couldn't walk for several weeks. Even basic tasks were a struggle. Trips crutching up and down the stairs of his apartment to retrieve groceries were a nightmare. His father, Jeff, visited him during the first week after the surgery but had to rush back to Winnipeg as airports were on the verge of shutting down.

All at once, Glass was dealing with the first major slump of his pro career while carrying the weight of being the Golden Knights' first draft pick in franchise history, a crippling knee injury, and isolation from his family and girlfriend.

For months, his only face-to-face human contact was with the team trainer, who helped rehab his knee as he wrestled with all this new adversity.

"Mentally, I was in a pretty dark place," Glass said. "I've talked through it with multiple psychologists and all this kind of stuff to get me back to..." — he paused, searching for the right word — "normal, I would say."

The injury and isolation-related challenges eventually went away, but on the ice, things weren't getting any easier.

Glass bounced between the NHL and AHL in 2020-21, managing just 10 points in 27 big-league games. The three players taken directly ahead of him in the 2017 draft — Miro Heiskanen, Cale Makar and Elias Pettersson — all became instant stars, which made the burden Glass put on himself to perform heavier.

"In my head I was (thinking), 'Do I even want to play hockey anymore?'" Glass said. "That was my biggest issue, it just wasn't fun anymore ... and that's something that I hated. I hated (that) deeply just because I loved it for so long and it was really picking and choosing if I really wanted to keep playing just because of my mental space."

"It (hockey) has given me the best times of my life, and it's also given me maybe the worst times of my life."

In the NHL, on-ice struggles carry enormous stakes. A bad stretch at the wrong time can cost a player his reputation, job, and millions of dollars. Fans and media don't waste a second turning against an underperforming player. It makes for an exceptionally difficult mental challenge. Here's a window into the burden players experience during a slump, and some of the strategies they're learning to cope with it.

One or two bad games aren't usually enough to throw a player off mentally. But when a run of subpar games extends to a couple of weeks or a couple of months, the mix of pressure, nervousness and frustration takes players out of the confident flow state where correct plays and on-ice decisions come instinctually.

"I remember when I felt my worst about it, it felt like the arena is just closing in on you," said Frank Corrado, a former NHL defenseman and current TSN analyst. "It felt like (the fans) were on your shoulder, just kinda hovering over you. You felt like you were small."



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The NHL is a ruthless, what-have-you-done-for-me-lately business. Non-star players are more interchangeable than ever before. Tomorrow is never promised, so it's easy for worst-case-scenario fears to creep into a player's mind, adding to the mental toll. A player's specific worry could be about their role, ice-time, the effect a down year could have on their next contract, or getting traded or sent down to the minors, which might mean relocating to a new city.

"My thought (during a slump) was, 'Well, that's it, I'm gone and somebody else who's doing well in the minors or somewhere different is coming to take my position,'" Corrado said. "That's very insecure ... but there probably is a certain percentage of players that think that way."

If a player's self-esteem is tied to their on-ice performance, it can further add to the mental distress. And there isn't much of an opportunity to disconnect from the pressure that comes with a rough patch because the NHL season is a meat grinder with nonstop games, practices, travel, meetings, recovery and gym sessions.

"It consumes your entire life," said Dallas Stars defenseman Thomas Harley. "I don't know how true it is for other guys, but I'm never not thinking about hockey."

"When you're not playing well, you're struggling and you can't get away from it, it's not great."

It isn't always easy to open up when a tough stretch of play weighs on you mentally. Some players are especially reluctant to openly discuss the challenges and issues they're facing within their team.

"If you think about it from a player's standpoint, to speak in-house about their struggles, where does that put a coach's mindset usually?" said Dr. Alicia Naser, a board-certified behavior analyst who works with several NHL players. "(A coach might think) 'Is he consistent? Is he reliable? Can I put him in?'"

"By speaking up and talking about struggles, I'm not saying that coaches aren't supportive or accepting of it, they very much are, but we have to remember that coaches also want job security, they also need to win games. If they feel as though perhaps putting a player in may not be the best move if he's expressing that he's struggling, then they may not put him in or he loses ice time or he gets a different contract."

Naser said that even among teammates, where you'd expect players to have closer bonds, those conversations aren't happening often. When Corrado underperformed, for example, he could confide in one or two of his closest friends on the team, but he didn't feel comfortable being vulnerable with the group beyond that. Naser has heard similar stories from her clients.

"It's not often that you find a player will share with their teammates that they're struggling," she said. "Again, same reason, not wanting to lose ice-time or it coming back to decision-makers when it comes to lineup changes."

NHL teams are investing heavily in resources to help players with the mental side of the game. Increasingly, however, players like Glass are reaping rewards from turning to outside help so they can fully let their guards down.

"I think a lot of players and men in general (used to) kinda look away from that (seeking the help of a professional) because we're supposed to be tough guys and not talk to people and that kind of stereotype," Glass said. "I feel like that's big in our game now, just talking to someone and getting it off your chest... I feel like that lifted so much baggage off me, made me feel a lot better on the inside and just put me in a better mood at all times."

Edmonton Oilers head coach Kris Knoblauch told NHL.com earlier this season that "half — if not more — of our players probably have their own personal psychologist," which is one example of this growing trend.

One of the most common problems Naser sees from players during a slump is them replaying a mistake over and over, which amplifies self-inflicted pressure and anxiety. She said these lingering negative thoughts are a big reason some players have difficulty falling asleep during a downturn.

How can players overcome this? Naser has a multi-step strategy. Players are first instructed to set a timer on their phone for 10 minutes and to let their brain run wild with whatever negative thoughts and emotions they're feeling. Naser describes this as going to the penalty box in a proverbial

sense and depositing those thoughts there, which she says is important because if you try to resist them completely, they only become harder to fight off. Once the 10-minute timer goes off, players make an active choice to leave those thoughts inside the penalty box, so to speak, and move on to trying to fall asleep again.

Corrado said many of the best players he played with were able to, "Think about (a bad performance) for 50 minutes after the game and then completely let it go." Ironically, this is where some players who weren't as obsessed with hockey had an advantage.

"You can call it the 'give a s— meter,'" Corrado said. "Some guys didn't have the super high give a s— meter, it almost worked in their favor because you're like 'That guy, he's not getting caught up in it' and it kinda works for him in that way and he's able to let it go because he just doesn't know any better."

Most players, however, aren't wired this way. This is where changing the way one frames mistakes in one's head can be enormously helpful.

"The first thing we do is go, 'OK, how does any high performer view mistakes?'" Naser said. "We view it as a bad thing... why don't we change our perception of mistakes so it's not so much a bad thing but another circumstance that happens on the ice?"

"Then we go from fighting and resisting mistakes to accepting it. And when you accept it, it's less of a barrier and it gives more power back to the player because a lot of times with negative thoughts, players feel like it takes all the power away from them."

When a player no longer views mistakes as an overwhelmingly bad, crippling thing — Naser is able to get players to buy into this theory by explaining that occasional mistakes are inevitable in a hockey game — it's easier to move on. When players commit one turnover, they can still go out on the next shift and keep playing their natural game instead of playing more tentatively out of fear of making another blunder.

"The fear of (making a mistake) is almost just as bad as it itself," Corrado said. "Once you lose that fear, that's when you can really start to see some change in how you operate under those circumstances."

Pressure is another common issue that players face. It's another emotion that's easier to cope with once you've reframed it in your head.

"How we frame it is, 'If you're feeling pressure, that must mean you care and it's a really great thing as an NHL player to care. I would be concerned if you didn't care,'" Naser said. "We reframe pressure as a good thing because it means you care and the absence of pressure would be more concerning than the feeling of it."

Reframing concepts like mistakes and pressure isn't going to completely rid all the negative thoughts and stress associated with a weeks-long rough patch. However, these reframes help make those low points less crippling and more manageable, so they won't drastically hinder their future performance and overall mental health.

Finding tools and strategies that work during hard times is essential because outsiders will never truly understand what NHL players are going through when they underperform on the biggest stage, where the consequences are career and life-altering.

"There's a lot (that) fans and media don't understand," said Boston Bruins defenseman Nikita Zadorov. "But it's hard to explain because I feel like you have to go through the life we had to actually understand what (it takes) to be a professional hockey player."

"You guys probably see 10 percent of the stuff going on behind closed doors. We could sit here for three hours, I could tell you everything and that's the first time you'll be hearing (what we're going through)."

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ESPN / Stars-Oilers Game 5 grades, early look at Stanley Cup Final – ESPN

Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski, Arda Ocal



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 30, 2025

May 30, 2025, 04:10 AM

The Edmonton Oilers are headed back to the Stanley Cup Final for the second straight season, having eliminated the Dallas Stars with a 6-3 victory in Game 5 after ousting them in six games last season in the Western Conference finals.

The Oilers chased Stars goalie Jake Oettinger just over seven minutes into the game with goals from Corey Perry and Mattias Janmark -- the only two shots Oettinger faced. Edmonton skated back to the locker room after the first period with a 3-1 lead. For the rest of the game, the Oilers' offense answered every Dallas goal, draining the Stars' momentum, while the Oilers' defense once again stifled its opponent in the third period.

Now, it's time to take on the Florida Panthers again -- the team that beat the Oilers in three straight games before they rallied to push the series to seven only to fall short of raising the Cup.

In the expansion era (since 1967-68), there have been four instances of the same two teams meeting in the Stanley Cup Final in consecutive seasons. The last time it happened was in 2008 and 2009, when the Detroit Red Wings defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins and then the Penguins beat Detroit the following season, giving Sidney Crosby his first Stanley Cup.

The last team to beat the same opponent in the Stanley Cup Final in consecutive seasons was the Montreal Canadiens, who beat the Boston Bruins in 1977 and 1978.

It's going to take a better effort from Florida to beat this version of the Oilers. Edmonton has leveled up considerably since last season in both defensive acumen and playoff confidence.

Kristen Shilton and Greg Wyshynski look back at what happened in Game 5, along with what lies ahead for each franchise.

Edmonton Oilers

Grade: B+

The Oilers wasted no time getting down to business in Game 5 -- as in, scoring with their first shot on goal when Perry tallied a power-play marker less than three minutes into the contest. Then it was Janmark capitalizing on a lazy line change by the Stars to double the Oilers' total less than halfway through the first period. Then it was Jeff Skinner scoring his first career playoff goal on the newly inserted Casey DeSmith. Wild.

The Oilers didn't have Zach Hyman in the lineup, and yet they hardly missed a beat thanks to their enviable depth showing up in a hurry.

But the Stars weren't about to go quietly. Brett Kulak's turnover wound up behind Stuart Skinner courtesy of a Jason Robertson goal that cut the Oilers' lead to 3-1. Edmonton's penalty kill had to come alive in the second, and while the Oilers killed off Kulak's sloppy hooking minor, they couldn't do it again when Mattias Ekholm took another infraction; Roope Hintz's tally got Dallas within one.

From there, it was like a call-and-response game for the Oilers. Connor McDavid didn't miss on a breakaway chance just over two minutes after Hintz's marker. When Robertson came calling again just 38 seconds into the third period to make it 4-3 Edmonton, Evander Kane restored the Oilers' two-goal cushion just over two minutes later.

The Oilers might not have played their best game of the series, but the way they recovered from every misstep showed why they have been such a force since they lost Game 1. Dallas' explosion of power-play goals in that outing seemed to flip a switch, and Edmonton would not be denied. -- Shilton

Dallas Stars

Grade: C-

The start earned an "F" for Dallas, which didn't score first in any game of this series. To do so on Thursday night would have meant the Stars could exhale a little bit and give the Oilers something -- anything -- to worry about in this series. Instead, rookie Mavrik Bourque, back in the lineup for the first time since Game 4 against Colorado, took a high-sticking penalty just 1:47 into the game and Perry converted on the power play.

Five minutes later, with his entire team sleepwalking in front of him, Oettinger was beaten on a partial break by Janmark. And then the franchise goalie's night was suddenly over -- pulled 7:09 into the game having given up two goals on two shots. It was a Hail Mary desperation move by head coach Pete DeBoer, who watched the Oilers buzz backup Casey DeSmith until Jeff Skinner scored his first playoff goal in his second career playoff game -- after 1,078 regular-season games -- to put Dallas in a 3-0 hole.

No matter what happened after that, this was the original sin for Dallas in Game 5 and the story of the series: The Stars eventually doing something positive in the process of trying to dig out of their own grave, and frequently ceding momentum right back. Hintz cuts the lead to 3-2 ... McDavid scores 2:01 later. Robertson, brilliant again, scores his second of the game to make it 4-3 ... Kane bounces a puck off Esa Lindell less than three minutes later to create another two-goal cushion.

The Stars overcame incredible obstacles to reach the Western Conference finals for a third straight season. They eliminated the Avalanche in seven games while missing both Robertson and Miro Heiskanen. They bounced the Presidents' Trophy-winning Winnipeg Jets in six games.

The kind reading of their demise was that the Stars played well enough to win more than one game, but bad puck luck against a championship-level Edmonton defensive effort in front of Stuart Skinner was their undoing. (And what an incredible third-period team the Oilers have become.) The cynical reading of their elimination is that Dallas' stars didn't shine with the same magnitude as Edmonton's, its supporting cast was outplayed and Oettinger bent the knee to Skinner before pulled from the series.

Either reading leads to the same place: One round short of playing for the Stanley Cup for the third straight year under DeBoer, despite having arguably the best collection of talent in those three postseason runs. How the franchise reacts to this will be fascinating. -- Wyshynski

Three Stars of Game 5

1. The "hope killer" Oilers

Edmonton flew out of the gate in Game 5, going up 3-0 in the first period. Then, as Dallas made it a one-goal game, Connor McDavid created a breakaway by outpacing his marker and scored. After Jason Robertson scored to make it 4-3, Evander Kane banked one in off Esa Lindell to stiff-arm the Stars. Whenever Dallas had hope, Edmonton found a way to dash it.

2. Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl

C, Oilers

Both had two points in the series-clinching Game 5 win. And both now have three postseasons with 25 or more points, tied for fourth most in NHL history. Only Mark Messier (6), Wayne Gretzky (6) and Jari Kurri (5) have more.

3. Jeff Skinner

F, Oilers

Game 5 was Skinner's second career playoff game, drawing in with Zach Hyman out. He's the only NHL player to play 1,000 NHL games before making his postseason debut. He scored his first career postseason goal to make it 3-0 in the first period. What a moment! -- Arda Öcal

Big questions

How will Zach Hyman's absence impact Edmonton in a Cup Final against Florida?

The Panthers play a physical game. Hyman was (and still is) the postseason hit leader (with 111 in 15 games). He was also one of Edmonton's most productive forwards, skating alongside McDavid and contributing to both special teams units.

Make no mistake, just because the Oilers cruised without him in Game 5 against Dallas doesn't discount the hole Hyman will leave when they are squaring off against the Panthers. Hyman had two goals and four points in the Cup Final last year, and he was even better production-wise in these playoffs than last.



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Kris Knoblauch put Skinner in for Game 5, and that worked well enough, but will he remain the best option for Edmonton going into Game 1 versus Florida? Especially knowing the Panthers are a different type of team than the Stars?

The Cup Final is a series where Hyman's particular set of skills would have been a game-changer. But he won't be available, and how the Oilers adjust will be critical to whether they come away with a different result than 12 months ago. -- Shilton

Is this the end for Pete DeBoer in Dallas?

When DeBoer was hired in 2022 to replace Rick Bowness, he reportedly signed a four-year contract. He coached the Stars to three straight Western Conference finals in his first three seasons in Dallas.

The knock on DeBoer has been an inability to get his teams over the hump. He coached the New Jersey Devils (2012) and San Jose Sharks (2016) to the Stanley Cup Final but failed to win the championship in either trip. Since 2018-19, DeBoer has lost in the Western Conference finals six times in eight years.

Again, it's hard to argue with the regular-season success (.665 points percentage, his best with any of the five teams he has coached) or the fact his teams have made three straight conference finals. But they've bumped their heads against the ceiling three times.

He couldn't find a way to unlock the Stars in the conference finals this time. His pulling of Oettinger in the first will be a subject of debate.

The ultimate question for GM Jim Nill: Is there another coach who could get more from Dallas, or does the team run it back with DeBoer and several roster tweaks? -- Wyshynski

ESPN LOADED: 05.30.2025

1354159 Websites

ESPN / Offseason keys for NHL teams, including draft, free agency – ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

May 30, 2025, 03:50 AM

The 2024-25 NHL regular season is over and the playoffs are underway..

This is the place where we look ahead to the offseason for all the teams eliminated from contention: Who will those teams try to add via free agency, trades and the draft? How much better will the team be in 2025-26?

Read on for a look at what went wrong for each eliminated team, along with a breakdown of the biggest keys this offseason and realistic expectations for next season. Note that more teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton, and Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per PuckPedia. Dates listed with each team are when the entry was published. Teams are listed alphabetically by publication date.

Jump to a team:

ANA | BOS | BUF | CGY

CAR | CHI | COL | CBJ

DAL | DET | LA | MIN

MTL | NJ | NSH | NYI

NYR | OTT | PHI | PIT

SJ | SEA | STL | TB

TOR | UTA | VAN | VGG

WSH | WPG

Playoff teams

Dallas Stars

Projected cap space: \$5.32 million

2025 draft picks: 3rd, 5th, 5th (NJ), 6th, 7th

What went right? There's no questioning their status as a championship contender. Not that the Stars' aspirations were ever in question, but the moves that GM Jim Nill made throughout the 2024-25 season further reinforced the Stars to win now.

A team that once thought of draft picks as sacred moved on from first- and fourth-round picks in this summer's draft in a trade that returned Cody Ceci and Mikael Granlund. Then Nill moved even more draft capital (two first-round picks and two third-round picks) and promising young forward Logan Stankoven to get Mikko Rantanen, before signing the superstar Finn to an eight-year extension.

All of that helped get the Stars back to the Western Conference finals for the third straight season.

What went wrong? Some of the questions that were present throughout the Stars' playoff run -- such as their depth -- were issues in the conference finals against the Edmonton Oilers. It initially appeared as if the Stars had found a solution with the number of players who contributed to their 6-3 comeback win in Game 1.

But the next three games would see them score only twice, which made the Stars the second team that was in the top five in goals per game during the regular season to be effectively silenced by the Oilers in a playoff series (the Vegas Golden Knights were dispatched in the second round).

Failing to consistently score goals or generate some sort of a breakthrough in other areas is what led to Stars becoming the first team to reach three straight conference finals without advancing to the Stanley Cup Final in NHL history.

Keys to the offseason: Perhaps the only thing more draining than being a championship contender that can't seem to reach the Stanley Cup Final? Figuring out how to remain in contention despite having only so much cap space.

The Stars have built well from within, allowing them to maintain the sort of cap space that has given them an advantage to this point. But with Wyatt Johnston and Jake Oettinger set to receive significant pay bumps on their new deals, and the first year of Rantanen's new contract kicking in, the Stars will need to get creative -- along with making some difficult decisions this summer. Matt Duchene, Jamie Benn, Evgenii Dadonov, Granlund, and Ceci headline the class of unrestricted free agents.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Much like they were this season, the Stars will again be among that category of teams in a championship window. But what will make next season hypothetically more challenging is the fact that the young core who have been key performers on those cheap contracts are now making more money. That not only amplifies the need for the Stars to hit on players on team-friendly deals, but it ramps up the pressure to start winning in this part of their window.

May 28: Carolina Hurricanes

Projected cap space: \$36.18 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd (TB), 4th, 6th, 6th (TB), 7th

What went right? Carolina had another impressive regular season. The Canes finished in second place in the Metro Division, with a 99-point effort that set them up in good position for a long playoff run.

The Hurricanes were strikingly stingy again on defense, finishing in the top 10 in goals-against average (2.80), and their penalty kill was tops in the league (83.6%). Carolina's offense was propelled by Seth Jarvis (32 goals) and Sebastian Aho (74 points), and worked in complement with their dialed-in defense.

The Hurricanes also lucked out in the trade-gone-bad for Mikko Rantanen; while Rantanen didn't stick around, Carolina did get Logan Stankoven in return from Dallas (along with a bounty of picks) when it



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traded Rantanen away. Stankoven has been a key player for the Hurricanes this postseason, and will be for seasons to come.

Carolina managed to put it all together and get rolling to start the playoffs too, losing a combined two games in the first and second rounds to punch its ticket to a second Eastern Conference finals in three years.

What went wrong? Well, about that conference finals appearance. It did not go well. The Hurricanes lost -- again -- to Florida, although they won one game, which was one more than two years ago. Prior to the Game 4 victory, it was 15 straight losses in conference finals action. Not ideal.

Carolina had benefited from terrific goaltending from Frederik Andersen in the first two rounds, but the Hurricanes' netminder was no match for the Panthers' punishing attack. Coach Rod Brind'Armour replaced Andersen with Pyotr Kochetkov in Game 3, but that did little to slow Florida's roll as they pounded Kochetkov just the same. Andersen was strong in Game 4, but couldn't sustain it in Game 5.

The Hurricanes' offense was no help, scoring three goals total in the series' first three games. That lack of depth up front is what GM Eric Tulsy tried to address in acquiring Rantanen in the first place. Knowing Rantanen wouldn't be sticking around long term -- and was hardly a difference-maker with two goals in the 13 games he did play for Carolina -- Tulsy had no choice but to give him up. Now he'll have to try again at finding ways to put Carolina over the top.

Keys to the offseason: The Hurricanes have ample cap space to use in the offseason. That's a bonus considering they've got some holes to fill.

There's a need for Carolina to get -- and keep -- a Jake Guentzel or Rantanen type of player -- that big, game-breaking talent who can drive their offense in a tough division, and get them a goal when they need it most in the playoffs. While Jarvis, Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and even Stankoven are excellent players, they aren't moving the needle enough for Carolina when it counts. Whether it's another splashy trade or finding someone on the open market to fill that role, the Hurricanes will be better equipped for the 2026 playoffs if they can land a headliner.

Tulsy has draft capital to wield as well, with a 2025 first-round choice a prime asset. The front office also must make decisions on an unrestricted free agent class that includes forwards Jack Roslovic, Eric Robinson, Jesper Fast and Tyson Jost, along with defensemen Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov.

And speaking of the back end, the Hurricanes are getting long in the tooth on their blue line. An infusion of some younger talent -- along with increased opportunity for Alexander Nikishin (23) and Scott Morrow (22) - - would go a long way.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Carolina has too many good players not to be in the playoff field again. It's just a matter of what the results will be like when they arrive. There's reason to question what they can put together after another disappointing showing on the heels of such early playoff promise.

May 18: Toronto Maple Leafs

Projected cap space: \$27.49 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd (FLA), 3rd (EDM), 5th, 5th (PIT), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Maple Leafs enjoyed another terrific regular season. Toronto won its first division title in 25 years by finishing fourth overall in points (108) and wielding the seventh-best offense (3.26 goals per game). First-year coach Craig Berube restructured the Leafs into a team that could not only score goals but play a strong collective defensive game, too, resulting in the Leafs' eighth-ranked defense (2.79 goals against).

The goaltending tandem of Anthony Stolarz (21-8-3, .926 save percentage, 2.14 goals-against average) and Joseph Woll (27-14-1, .909 SP, 2.73 GAA) worked seamlessly in Stolarz's first season with the club, and new additions on the blue line -- especially Chris Tanev -- made the Maple Leafs more physically robust than they'd been in years.

The Leafs also got unexpectedly strong contributions from some familiar faces, including John Tavares; the veteran had one of his most productive seasons for Toronto, with 38 goals and 74 points. And rising star Matthew Knies had a breakout season with 29 goals and 58 points, success that he carried over into the postseason, with several solid performances. Speaking of which, the Leafs actually won a playoff round!

What went wrong? Toronto may have skated past the Ottawa Senators with a first-round victory, but the Leafs' postseason demons were alive and well in their second-round clash with the Florida Panthers.

Toronto squandered an early 2-0 series lead, watching it evaporate in Florida's come-from-behind victory in Game 3 and a shutout win in Game 4. The Leafs were booed off their own ice in Game 5's 6-1 drubbing, where Toronto's lack of star power was blatantly obvious. Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander were all goal-less against the Panthers to that point, but they rose to the occasion in Game 6 to drag the Cats back to Toronto for Game 7.

That's where the Leafs' run ended, marking the sixth Game 7 loss for Toronto in the Matthews era. Florida is designed to wear opponents down, and while Toronto blocked shots with gusto the entire series, the Panthers' heavy forecheck and strong play in front of a rock-solid Sergei Bobrovsky was too much to overcome. Toronto's once-potent power play was no help, either, going 2-for-20 in the series.

Granted, the Leafs lost Stolarz in Game 1 of the series to an undisclosed injury, but Woll gave them every chance to take Game 4, was strong early in Game 5 and shut the door completely in Game 6. The Leafs simply couldn't produce offensively, and in hallmark fashion their top skaters failed to show up when it mattered. Berube said Toronto was "overthinking" late in the postseason. That may have been true -- and once again, there's another too-long summer ahead to dwell on what could have been.

Keys to the offseason: First things first: Is Marner still a Maple Leaf next season? The pending unrestricted free agent wanted to play out the final year of his contract before deciding whether to recommit to Toronto. It's time now for both sides to decide whether renewing their vows -- or an amicable split -- makes more sense.

The Leafs will have salary cap space to use on a significant extension, but depending on where Marner hopes to land (likely among the league's highest-paid forwards), Toronto will have to balance his asking price with their other needs. Knies is a restricted free agent in whom the Leafs will want to invest, and Tavares' deal is up, too. Given how the latter performed this season, there has to be interest on both sides to stay together.

There's also the matter of Nicholas Robertson, another pending RFA who has in the past expressed his desire to leave Toronto. Will GM Brad Treliving find a suitable trade partner now?

The Leafs don't have much draft capital, having traded their first-round pick this season for Jake McCabe in 2023, but the cap space they have will be useful on the open market -- and Robertson could come into play as a trade chip as well.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Toronto is built to win now, and the team will be back chasing a division title again next season. Will it lead to anything of note in the playoffs? Well, it's easy to wonder what it will take to make that a reality.

May 17: Winnipeg Jets

Projected cap space: \$36.36 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Any questions about how Scott Arniel's first season as the head coach would go after previous serving as Rick Bowness' assistant were emphatically answered. Especially with the Jets pulling off something they hadn't done since the 2020-21 season: advancing to the second round of the playoffs.

Much of their success stemmed from being able to trust they could receive contributions throughout their entire lineup. That was further fortified by having a consistent defensive structure that was enhanced by Connor Hellebuyck, who is in line to become the first American to win three Vezina Trophies.

What went wrong? There was never a concern about whether the Jets were a playoff team. But there were questions about how the Jets could fare against a team in a legitimate championship window if they got beyond the first round.

Facing the Dallas Stars provided glimpses that the Jets could keep games close for a time, before succumbing to the big period against one of the West's top contenders. It's what happened in Games 1 and 3,



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when the Stars had a pair of three-goal periods in those contests. Or it was seeing how key players such as Mikael Granlund and Mikko Rantanen paced the Stars with hat tricks and the Jets didn't get the same high-octane offense.

Keys to the offseason: The Jets are going to have a lot of money this summer to address their roster.

Some of that will likely go toward re-signing pending restricted free agent Gabriel Vilardi, who just had his third straight 20-goal campaign while scoring a personal-best 61 points.

Where it gets complicated, interesting or both is figuring out how they'll handle pending unrestricted free agent winger Nikolaj Ehlers. Does he stay? Does he leave? If he leaves, will they do a sign-and-trade and not risk losing him for nothing?

And if he does go, how do the Jets replace a dynamic, seven-time 20-goal scorer?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: No team is guaranteed a playoff berth. But there are those that are judged more on what they did or didn't do in the postseason compared to what they did in the regular season. That's where the Jets currently live.

The Jets should challenge for a playoff spot in a demanding Central Division. It's just that their well-noted struggles to get out of the first round is what makes the regular season, while important, not the barometer by which they will be assessed. Whether or not they can get out of the first round -- and the second, and beyond -- will be the new litmus test for the Jets.

May 15: Washington Capitals

Projected cap space: \$12.38 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (BOS), 3rd (CAR), 4th, 5th

What went right? Washington was supposed to be rebuilding, and this season showed the Capitals didn't need long to regroup. They were excellent from the outset of the regular season and quickly climbed atop the Eastern Conference standings. That's where the Capitals stayed most of the season, accumulating the second-most points (111) in the league on the strength of their second-ranked offense (averaging 3.49 goals per game) and superb goaltending from Logan Thompson (31-6-6, .910 SV%, 2.49 GAA).

There was no bigger -- or better -- storyline for the Capitals though than seeing captain Alex Ovechkin make history when he surpassed Wayne Gretzky as the NHL's all-time scoring leader with career goal No. 895 on April 6. It was an individual accomplishment Ovechkin chased with his entire team; his teammates referenced that quest as a constant source of motivation through the ups and downs of their season.

In addition to the Capitals' veteran guard showing off, the Capitals saw terrific growth from some other emerging stars as well, including Ovechkin's frequent linemates Aliaksei Protas (with a 30-goal campaign) and Dylan Strome (who led the club with 82 points). Coach Spencer Carbery deserves ample credit for turning the Capitals around in record time.

What went wrong? The Capitals' greatest strength in the regular season became their biggest challenge by the playoffs. Washington's red-hot offense began drying up in their second-round series against Carolina, as the Hurricanes' stout defense and outstanding goaltending smothered the Capitals' rush attack.

Ovechkin was particularly absent from the scoresheet against Carolina, failing to get on the board until he notched a power-play marker in Game 4. But Washington's depth wasn't the asset it could have been, with the team averaging just over two goals per game.

While Thompson did his best to hold the Hurricanes at bay, he didn't receive enough support to turn those efforts into victories. The Capitals weren't creating high-danger chances like they could in the regular season, and the lack of a net-front presence made it too easy for Frederik Andersen to shut the door.

Meanwhile, Washington's own defensive efforts never matched Carolina's intensity, and the Hurricanes leaned on 10 different goal scorers for a more balanced offense than what Washington rolled out.

Carolina also capitalized on a poor Capitals penalty kill (72.7%) to send them into an early summer.

Keys to the offseason: Washington is in a good position for a bright future. In the process of getting there, the Capitals will also be saying a likely goodbye to some critical veteran presences from their past.

T.J. Oshie is a pending unrestricted free agent after missing the entire 2024-25 season with a chronic back issue. Same for Nicklas Backstrom, who missed the entire campaign with a hip injury. With those skaters off the books, the Capitals will be able to restock on the open market, and should be targeting top-nine skaters to help avoid running aground offensively again in the postseason.

The Capitals have other veterans with expiring deals as well -- namely Lars Eller and Anthony Beauvillier -- who have been role players in what was a strong season. Washington can also do some damage at the draft -- whether via trades or using the picks -- with selections in the first five rounds. Then, of course, there's the question of Ovechkin: is he done now after that historic achievement? Or is there another year ahead for him in the NHL? He has one year remaining on his contract.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Washington may need some offensive upgrades, but it's nothing so drastic as to keep them from being a playoff team again. Expect to see them trend in a similar direction -- towards the top of the Metropolitan standings -- next season.

May 14: Vegas Golden Knights

Projected cap space: \$9.62 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (WSH), 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (WSH)

What went right? For all the concerns about how much they lost in free agency last summer, the Golden Knights found solutions. Homegrown talent Pavel Dorofeyev led them in goals in the regular season (35), and others such as Brett Howden had breakout campaigns.

Many of those contributions -- coupled with what they received from their stars and other venerable figures -- allowed the Golden Knights to remain in the category of teams that could challenge for a Stanley Cup. Their depth was certainly on display against the Minnesota Wild in the first round.

What went wrong? In the second round against the Oilers, that depth disappeared. They came into Game 5 trying to find the type of answers that eluded them all series.

Players such as Ivan Barbashev, Tomas Hertl and Howden combined to score 78 goals in the regular season -- but had zero in the series against Edmonton. Their defensemen combined for 35 goals during the regular season, but had only one in the playoffs.

A lack of consistent scoring was pivotal in the series, particularly in the games in which the Golden Knights scored the first goal in an attempt to gain a grasp of control only to watch the series slip through their fingers.

Keys to the offseason: Next offseason will be the one in which the Golden Knights will face some major questions: Franchise center Jack Eichel's current deal runs through 2025-26, while the contracts for Mark Stone, Alex Pietrangolo and William Karlsson run through 2026-27.

But for now, they have 16 players under contract for next season, and Brandon Saad and Reilly Smith are part of a six-player unrestricted free agent class. Nicolas Hague is their key restricted free agent; he has one year of team control remaining before he hits UFA status.

It's possible that the Golden Knights use their cap space to add around the edges, while trying to secure a deal with Hague that works for both sides ahead of what's expected to be a busy 2025-26 campaign.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The demand -- as always, for a franchise that has made winning at all costs its hallmark -- is challenging for the Stanley Cup.

But that comes with the caveat that this upcoming season could have two major roster-construction wrinkles: Eichel and Dorofeyev. As noted, Eichel is entering the final year of a contract that sees him earn \$10 million annually. As for Dorofeyev, replicating or surpassing the career-high 35 goals he scored this season could see him cash in on a new deal; he'll be a pending RFA that's set to earn \$1.835 million in 2025-26. Finding long-term solutions to both situations will be critical.



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May 4: St. Louis Blues

Projected cap space: \$7.15 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 5th, 6th

What went right? Every move that GM Doug Armstrong made throughout the summer and into the season.

The offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway led to Broberg, when healthy, having a career-high eight goals and 29 points while logging more than 20 minutes per game. Not to be outdone, Holloway had his first 20-goal campaign.

The trade for Cam Fowler resulted in him having one of the strongest seasons of his career -- and leading the team in scoring for much of the first round.

Moving on from Drew Bannister to hire Jim Montgomery resulted in the Blues gaining a legitimate level of consistency that they used to reach the playoffs for the first time since the 2021-22 season.

What went wrong? Part of the issue was that the Blues could never win a game at Canada Life Centre. The rest stems from the Blues having a proven blueprint that worked twice but failed to be replicated two more times to win the series against the Winnipeg Jets.

Generating a combined 20 high-danger scoring chances in Games 3 and 4 was instrumental in the Blues scoring 11 goals against Connor Hellebuyck in those contests. That created a belief that the Blues could capitalize on the struggles of one of the best goalies of his era, whose regular-season success had yet to translate to the playoffs. But Hellebuyck and the Jets would find a counter en route to advancing to the second round.

Keys to the offseason: For starters, the Blues don't have a ton of cap space. But they have only one pending restricted free agent in goaltender Joel Hofer, while center Radek Faksa and defenseman Ryan Suter are their only pending unrestricted free agents.

Then there's the Torey Krug situation. He missed the entire regular season and playoffs after undergoing ankle surgery in the preseason. Getting Krug back would not only give the Blues a logjam of defensemen, but it would give them six blueliners under contract who are each earning more than \$4 million annually -- and all of them except Broberg have some form of trade protection.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Returning to the playoffs, or at least remaining in the hunt for a playoff spot late into the season, is the plan. The Central Division is still going to have teams such as the Avalanche and Stars that are in a championship window, with the Jets trying to establish themselves as a perennial threat.

Meanwhile, the Wild are expected to be an active player in free agency, while the same could be said for Utah after it stayed in contention for a wild card entering the final two weeks of the season. Adding the Blues to that equation means there will be six teams (at minimum) in the division legitimately vying for a playoff spot in 2025-26.

May 3: Colorado Avalanche

Projected cap space: \$8.70 million

2025 draft picks: 4th (VAN), 7th

What went right? Adjustments and course corrections. By December, the Avalanche already had concerns about their supporting cast -- along with the problems created by an inconsistent goaltending tandem.

That prompted Avs general manager Chris MacFarland to make a series of trades that saw Colorado do everything from get a new tandem in net -- led by Mackenzie Blackwood -- to make key additions at the trade deadline to make the Avs one of the more dangerous teams heading into the playoffs. Their first-round exit came at the hands of a team that's seeking to make its third straight conference finals appearance.

What went wrong? The margins for error were extremely tight. Then again, that was likely to be the case in a first-round matchup of two teams that are clearly in a championship window -- and both finished with more than 100 points in the regular season.

Opening the series against the Dallas Stars with a 5-1 win and taking Game 4 with a 4-0 win spoke to just how commanding the Avs could be against a fellow Stanley Cup challenger.

But the overtime wins the Stars had in Games 2 and 3 were the difference in the Avs either sweeping the series or, in this case, being knocked out in seven after an impressive Game 6 win. They even led 2-0 in Game 7, only to witness an historic third period by former teammate Mikko Rantanen.

Keys to the offseason: Determining the best way to spend their limited cap dollars is the task every team in a championship window faces. The Avalanche know this reality all too well with the biggest factor being Gabriel Landeskog's health. While his return provides the Avs with a top-six forward, his \$7 million cap can't be moved to long-term injured reserve to create financial flexibility as the team had done the past few years.

That's what leaves the Avs with a projected \$8.70 million in cap space to address a seven-player unrestricted free agent class that includes Jonathan Drouin and trade deadline pickups Ryan Lindgren and Brock Nelson.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: They're still expected to remain among the top contenders that will challenge for a Stanley Cup. The Avs have their core and quite a few members of their supporting cast under contract through at least next season. What they do in the offseason will play a role in supplementing what they already have, with the notion they're going to be among that handful of Western Conference teams that feel the title is within reach.

May 1: Los Angeles Kings

Projected cap space: \$23.48 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (PHI)

What went right? Nearly everything they did in the regular season. Something that might get lost within the discourse around the Kings was their 48 wins tied the franchise record for the most single-season victories, while their 105 points was also tied for the most in their history.

They overcame losing Drew Doughty to a preseason injury, finally found a stable presence in goal with Darcy Kuemper, established themselves as one of the strongest defensive units in the NHL and received contributions throughout the entirety of their lineup-- to the point that 14 players had more than 20 points, with five of them being defensemen. But ...

What went wrong? Losing to the Edmonton Oilers in the first round ... again.

Winning the first two games of the series by scoring six goals in each contest created the early impression that this could be the year that saw the Kings finally advance to the second round for the first time in more than a decade. Instead, their first-round loss has raised questions:

Why did they struggle to make adjustments beyond Game 2? Why were they able to build a commanding lead in Game 2 yet blew consecutive leads in Games 3 and 4? Why is it that just simply typing Jim Hiller's name in an internet search is immediately met with "Jim Hiller challenge" because there's a belief his Game 3 decision might have been the turning point in the series? And then there's one more pressing question to consider given their latest first-round exit.

Keys to the offseason: Are the Kings going to stay the course or do they use this offseason to make significant changes?

If they move on from Hiller, that will give the Kings their third head coach since February 2024 when they fired Todd McLellan. Or could ownership be inclined to look at a front office that, while making several moves to improve the roster, hasn't quite found the definitive combination to get the Kings beyond the first round?

Anything the Kings do this offseason will be with the purpose of not only trying to win in the first round but figuring out how they can win against elite teams in the conference.

The Kings have a six-player UFA class that's led by Vladislav Gavrikov and Andrei Kuzmenko. Should they elect to get deals done for at least those two, it leaves the Kings with the financial flexibility to address the



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roster to compete against the best in the west at the most demanding time of the season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Maybe more than just making the playoffs? They have the majority of their roster coming back, while also having quite a bit of cap space. Although nothing about that exact circumstance means there are guarantees, there is an expectation that the Kings will once again be challenging for a playoff spot.

But what they do in the offseason, however, will come with this one crucial question: Will it be the difference in the Kings advancing to at least the second round -- or could it result in another promising run cut short by an early postseason exit?

May 1: Minnesota Wild

Projected cap space: \$21.88 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 4th (TOR), 5th (CBJ), 6th

What went right? Navigating Kirill Kaprizov's absence to make the playoffs. Before Kaprizov sustained the December injury that kept him out until April, the Wild were establishing a case for why they might be one of the best teams in the Western Conference. They were scoring enough goals in tandem with a defensive structure and goalie performances that allowed them to excel in tight situations.

But Kaprizov's injury resulted in the loss of their leading scorer, which prompted the Wild to rely on their defensive identity in order to capture a wild-card spot and advance to the playoffs.

What went wrong? Their ability to win one-goal games went dormant. Bizarre as it sounds, the trait that allowed the Wild to manifest their playoff berth was also the one that doomed them to losing in the opening round for the fifth time in the past six seasons.

One of the arguments for why the Wild could reach the second round was because they won 18 of their 28 one-goal games in the regular season. But to lose not just one, but two games in a row to the Vegas Golden Knights by a single goal in overtime? It represents how, in future seasons, the Wild might not be that far off from reaching the second round for the first time since the 2014-15 season.

Keys to the offseason: They have lots of cap space. That's not always been the case in Minnesota. But it will be this offseason for a franchise that now has the necessary space to strengthen a roster that's had to largely rely on its homegrown talent.

One of the questions the Wild must answer, however, is what becomes of Marco Rossi. A first-round pick in 2020, Rossi emerged into a top-six center, but had 14 points throughout February, March and April after he scored that same amount in January. He bounced back to score two goals and three points in the playoffs entering Game 6, but had the third fewest minutes per game of any Wild player.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Maybe more than just making the playoffs? Having more than \$20 million in projected cap space is going to make the Wild something of a player in free agency. How they spend that money could then set the expectations for the Wild. Even with that caveat, there is a belief that the 2025-26 season has a chance to be one that sees the Wild get additional offensive help to keep pace in the treacherous Central Division -- with the intent of being a team that could create problems for opponents in the postseason.

May 1: Ottawa Senators

Projected cap space: \$18.44 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 3rd (FLA), 4th (SJ), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Ottawa took a crucial step forward by finally making the postseason. It signaled that, after a seven-year absence from the playoff field, the Senators' rebuild is essentially over. And expectations should increase accordingly.

Ottawa showed it could be a stout defensive team, buying into the structure that first-year head coach Travis Green laid out and refused to back down from until his players embraced executing the right way. The Senators' young stars -- namely Brady Tkachuk, Tim Stutzle and Jake Sanderson -- all showed significant growth in their games, and the playoff experience earned should be invaluable to them (and the rest of the Senators) moving forward.

Linus Ullmark also proved he could give Ottawa something it hasn't had in years: a dependable No. 1 goaltender in whom to feel confident. The Senators' foundation is on sound, solid ground.

What went wrong? The postseason is a different beast. It's a lesson that can only be learned -- and truly appreciated -- once you've been there. Ottawa was an average offensive team throughout the regular season (collecting fewer than three goals per game), and its scoring dried up even further in the playoffs (sliding to just two goals per game). The Senators' penalty kill also repeatedly let them down in the regular season (at 77.7%) and got even worse in the playoffs (68.8%).

Aside from a Game 5 shutout, Ullmark stumbled when the Senators needed him to stand tall, posting a poor .883 save percentage and 2.80 goals-against average in the postseason. It's not that Ottawa didn't come close in that first-round series against Toronto -- three games were decided in overtime, after all, one of which the Sens won -- but the Senators were just too green to take advantage of the Toronto Maple Leafs' occasional mistakes.

Now that the Senators have established their defensive game, it's time they figure out how to bring a consistent offensive effort to match.

Keys to the offseason: The Senators have some in-house decisions to make on a pair of veteran skaters approaching free agency. Claude Giroux has been an integral part of Ottawa's lineup and dressing room since arriving three seasons ago. If the 37-year-old plans to keep playing, it would behoove the Senators to retain his services, for depth and mentorship.

Then there's Anton Forsberg. He worked in tandem with Ullmark this season, and should the 32-year-old leave, GM Steve Staios will be determining whom to pair with Ullmark in the coming seasons.

Ottawa has a handful of other forwards who could depart in free agency, so the Senators should expect to be somewhat active in free agency, shoring up their bottom six to ensure they can complement the elite scoring threats they have in Tkachuk, Stutzle & Co. Ottawa worked hard to be in a position where there aren't many gaps to fill, though. The Senators don't necessarily need to be splashy, just smart.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Ottawa should absolutely expect to compete for a playoff spot next season. It's never easy getting over the disappointment of a swift postseason exit, but those frustrations will add fuel to the fire for next season to show that this was only the beginning of the Senators' next chapter.

April 30: Tampa Bay Lightning

Projected cap space: \$9.10 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd (LA), 4th (EDM), 5th, 7th, 7th (MIN), 7th (SJ), 7th (UTA)

What went right? Tampa Bay proved it was (still) a powerhouse in the regular season, with a league-leading offense (averaging 3.56 goals per game), a top-five power play (at 25.9%) and arguably the NHL's best forward in Nikita Kucherov (who paced his peers with 121 points). And the Lightning managed to stay out front even after parting ways with former captain Steven Stamkos. His successor with the C -- defenseman Victor Hedman -- put in another elite campaign anchoring Tampa Bay's blue line and penalty kill.

The Lightning's old hands were up to their same tricks in every area, especially goaltending. Andrei Vasilevski earned yet another Vezina Trophy finalist nod on the strength of his season (.921 save percentage, 2.18 goals-against average). Jon Cooper, now far and away the NHL's longest tenured head coach, capably guided Tampa Bay through the season's inevitable rough patches, and somehow the Lightning always came out for the better.

They reached the postseason for an eighth straight year to make good on GM Julien BriseBois' repeated decision to sacrifice long-term possibility (via draft picks) to stay focused on the chance of present-day success.

What went wrong? The Lightning were rightly expected to dominate offensively in the playoffs, too, and, well, it didn't happen. Tampa Bay averaged the second-fewest goals per game among postseason teams (2.25), and Kucherov was particularly absent, with zero goals in the Lightning's first four games against the Florida Panthers. And that power



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play? Nonexistent, at 1-for-15, as Tampa Bay was on the ropes going into Game 5.

The Lightning also had to deal with the theatrics of a physical first-round series that included Matthew Tkachuk's blistering hit on Jake Guentzel and losing Brandon Hagel twice (first to a suspension in Game 3 for his hit on Aleksander Barkov, and then to a vicious elbowing by Aaron Ekblad).

That was only part of the story, though. The Lightning were often their own worst enemy. Tampa Bay's defense let them down in Game 4 when, after the Lightning had held a lead with the potential to tie their series 2-2, a pair of late goals against (scored 11 seconds apart) cost them a victory. It was a tough comedown, having already seen Hagel depart as well. In the end, the Lightning didn't do enough with their opportunity, and it was over too soon.

Keys to the offseason: Tampa Bay will have some cap space (for once), so BriseBois can get creative to bolster the Lightning next season. What does that look like, exactly?

Is it right for Tampa Bay to try running it back again after a third consecutive first-round exit? Does BriseBois need to change tactics to see the Lightning's chances improve at that most crucial time of year? BriseBois has mortgaged much of Tampa Bay's future (via trade of players and picks) to keep pushing their chips in on another Stanley Cup run. Will he be aggressive in pursuing that again? If so, it's all about the trade and free agent market for Tampa Bay.

The Lightning have just three picks in the first five rounds of the draft (one second, one fourth and a fifth), so maybe BriseBois could leverage those somewhere.

Otherwise, it will just be about filling in the gaps. Nick Perbix is the only UFA of note for BriseBois to consider, but he will want to ensure scoring depth won't be an issue next year at this time. Adding another goaltender to play with Vasilevskiy (current backup Jonas Johansson is a UFA) would also be prudent.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Lightning's regular-season performance put them in the running for an Atlantic title. It's hard to think they'll fall off entirely from there -- not after BriseBois went all-in getting Guentzel on a long-term deal and when Kucherov is still in his prime. There's little doubt Tampa Bay will push to be back in the postseason.

April 30: Montreal Canadiens

Projected cap space: \$10.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (CGY), 2nd, 2nd (PIT), 3rd, 3rd (NJ), 3rd (VAN), 4th, 4th (BOS), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Montreal reached the postseason in Year 3 of what has been an arduous rebuild. That's no small feat. The Canadiens stumbled out of the gate this season but didn't let early adversity deter them from powering through.

When the Canadiens topped Buffalo 5-2 on Nov. 11, it was practically the start of a new season for the team -- Montreal went 36-22-9 to the finish line, earning the league's 11th-best points percentage in that stretch and eventually the Eastern Conference's final wild-card playoff spot.

It wouldn't have been possible without some exceptional performances from Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield, a breakout showing from rookie defenseman Lane Hutson and strong secondary contributions from Patrik Laine, Juraj Slafkovsky and Jake Evans. Star prospect Ivan Demidov was a nice surprise addition to the playoff roster and did not look out of place.

Coach Martin St. Louis also deserves credit for treating the Canadiens like they deserved to be in playoff contention. That sort of confidence is what fuels a team to exceed expectations -- which is exactly what Montreal was able to accomplish.

What went wrong? The Canadiens' scoring was top-heavy in the regular season, and that caught up to them again in the playoffs. While facing the Washington Capitals was always going to be an uphill battle, Montreal made it harder when, outside of Caufield, Suzuki and Christian Dvorak, they didn't have many offensive contributors.

Goaltending also became an issue after starter Sam Montembeault was injured in Game 3, to be replaced by backup Jakub Dobes. The latter

performed admirably given he had appeared in all of 16 NHL games before the series, but Montreal losing its No. 1 in Montembeault certainly weakened the team as well. Dobes and his defenders lacked effective communication, and it cost the Canadiens on the scoresheet.

In the end, it was the Canadiens' lack of postseason experience that shuttered their run. Washington capitalized on seemingly every Montreal mistake, learned behavior by a veteran team that has been used to winning. While the Canadiens were impressive in areas such as special teams during their run, it's the details (like key faceoff wins, for example) that can be daunting. Montreal will have to learn from its mistakes to take positive steps next season.

Keys to the offseason: The way GM Kent Hughes has handled the Canadiens' rebuild so far -- words such as "slow" and "steady" come to mind -- suggests he won't be using Montreal's playoff tenure as an excuse to start fast-tracking.

The Canadiens have two picks in each of the first two rounds of this draft; those selections will be vital for Montreal as it continues stocking the cupboards with young talent to carry the franchise forward. Hughes will have to address the goaltending situation in some fashion, though, likely with a free agent signee to support Montembeault while Dobes continues to cook in the minors.

And then there's the club's scoring depth. Hughes acquired Laine last offseason to boost the Canadiens up front -- and he did add 20 goals and 33 points -- but the often-injured forward appeared in only 52 games. Montreal needs more from Laine and a couple other skaters Hughes could see playing a top-nine role for the Canadiens. Even when Suzuki and Caufield are rolling, it's not enough to expect they can carry Montreal's offense again -- especially come playoff time.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Montreal will be in the thick of another fight to earn an Eastern Conference playoff spot. The Atlantic might just be the league's most competitive division, though. If the Canadiens want to stay in the mix again, some changes should be made to give them a boost over their division rivals.

April 29: New Jersey Devils

Projected cap space: \$13.86 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 2nd (EDM), 3rd (VGK), 4th, 6th, 6th (SJ)

What went right? New Jersey overcame significant adversities this season to be a playoff team. It's a testament to the Devils' resiliency that even after losing top skater Jack Hughes in March they managed to stay in the hunt and punch their ticket. The Hughes injury highlighted the seasons that some of New Jersey's other burgeoning stars were having, including Jesper Bratt (in an 88-point campaign) and Nico Hischier (a dominant two-way center, who scored 35 goals).

The Devils owed a large portion of their success to improved goaltending from Jacob Markstrom -- and GM Tom Fitzgerald for finally shoring up that position by acquiring Markstrom in the first place. The veteran was solid in the regular season, and soared during the Devils' postseason run as one of the best goaltenders in any first-round series.

New Jersey's first-year head coach Sheldon Keefe managed to implement a solid system and get the Devils to buy in, even when the going got tough. New Jersey should rightly feel good about what a fully healthy lineup can look like moving ahead.

What went wrong? Ah, injuries. They caught up big time for these Devils. Hughes was gone in March, while Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler missed significant time in the regular season before returning. And throughout New Jersey's playoff run, its defensemen began dropping like flies, with Brenden Dillon, Luke Hughes and Johnathan Kovacevic all missing in action. Not even Markstrom's brilliance could account for that many important players sitting out.

The Devils didn't help themselves, though. New Jersey was a whopping 0% on the power play, averaged just 1.75 goals per game and struggled on the penalty kill (69.2%). Outside of Hischier -- who collected three goals in the postseason -- the Devils simply couldn't get rolling offensively.

In a way, it's hard to assess New Jersey's efforts fully given how banged up it became. How much better might the Devils have been across the board had the infirmity not filled up? We'll never know. It's clear that Fitzgerald's inaction at the trade deadline (where he made minor moves



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such as adding third-line center Cody Glass and blueliner Brian Dumoulin) hurt New Jersey in the long run.

Keys to the offseason: Fitzgerald has a few things to figure out for the Devils. His top priority is pending restricted free agent Luke Hughes and figuring out what the 21-year-old's next contract will look like.

Then there's New Jersey's goaltending, and who will be Markstrom's partner next season. Jake Allen is set to hit free agency, and Nico Daws may not be ready for full-time backup duty.

Free agency should be filled with skaters for Fitzgerald to parse through in order to revamp the Devils' offense. The Devils have five veterans hitting unrestricted free agency, and a pair of RFAs in Glass and Nolan Foote. Inaction didn't serve New Jersey well in the past, and there's a need to infuse their lineup with at least a couple viable scoring threats to keep the Devils from turning top-heavy again next season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New Jersey has felt notoriously hard to predict in recent years. It has oscillated from winning a playoff round to not making the postseason at all. If the Devils can keep (most) everyone available next year, though -- and make some offseason adjustments -- they should expect to be top contenders in the Metro again.

The non-playoff teams

April 16: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$42.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (MIN), 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 7th (VGK)

What went right? Columbus stayed in the playoff race until the final week. That alone is a victory for this group. The Blue Jackets set out to play meaningful hockey in March and April and that's what they did through a special season that will give Columbus confidence to enter 2025-26 as a viable postseason contender.

Zach Werenski had a Norris Trophy-caliber campaign, with a team-leading 75 points through 76 games. Rising stars Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli showed their continued maturity in great seasons. Overall, the Blue Jackets' 11th-ranked offense (with 3.17 goals per game) exceeded expectations. Columbus showed real progress over the course of an emotionally turbulent season.

What went wrong? The Blue Jackets were bitten by the injury bug. Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan all missed significant time with various ailments. That hurt Columbus from the get-go, with no Jenner or Gudbranson for the first few months of the season.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending was subpar too, with Elvis Merzlikins owning a middling .892 save percentage as the club's No. 1. It's no wonder Columbus finished sixth worst in goals-against average (3.42) and they were among the league's worst teams in allowing third-period markers. The Blue Jackets' youth shone through in good ways and bad throughout the year, particularly against tougher opponents, and it's something they'll have to learn from for the season ahead.

Keys to the offseason: Columbus has a pair of first-round draft choices to play with this season, and that's a good thing for GM Don Waddell. He knows how green this franchise still is, and wants to keep building a foundation that the Blue Jackets benefit from for years to come. There are also important RFAs to negotiate with, including Dmitri Voronkov and Daniil Tarasov.

In free agency, Waddell can shift focus to Columbus' netminding. Merzlikins hasn't come up with a season save percentage above .900 since 2021-22. Can Columbus expect to take a step forward if Merzlikins is their go-to guy in the crease next year? Can they give the reins to Jet Greaves, who closed out the season with a dominant stretch?

Waddell wasn't active at the March trade deadline so as not to disrupt his club's chemistry. This summer he can make some meaningful changes that give the Blue Jackets a solid boost by September's training camp.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Columbus should be pressing for a playoff berth. They nearly corralled one this season, and the confidence that injected into the team could carry over to next season and beyond. As long as the young players can stay on their positive trajectory, there's considerable depth for Columbus to lean on.

April 15: Calgary Flames

Projected cap space: \$36.21 million

2025 draft picks: 1st (FLA), 1st (NJ), 2nd (COL), 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Flames made progress in more ways than one. They went from finishing with 81 points in 2023-24 to challenging for a playoff spot until the final week.

But what might get lost is that they established an identity. Whether it be with their roster, their coaching staff or their front office, change has been a constant with the Flames for the last few seasons. This season saw them attain and then maintain a level of continuity that could see them contend for a playoff spot -- if not make the playoffs -- next season. Dustin Wolf was a revelation in goal, cementing his status as the Flames' No. 1 goalie moving forward, and making a Calder Trophy case.

What went wrong? An offensive disconnect. Normally a lack of goals can be traced back to challenges in several areas. But a look under the hood at their underlying numbers paints a confusing picture.

The Flames were top 10 in shots per 60 minutes, and were 13th in scoring chances per 60. Yet they were in the bottom third when it came to high-danger chances per 60. When combined, those factors led to the Flames finishing with the second-fewest goals per game, and having the NHL's second-worst shooting percentage.

Keys to the offseason: Securing new deals for pending restricted free agents Kevin Bahl, Matt Coronato and Connor Zary is a priority, given what they mean to both the present and future of the Flames.

After those deals are in place, the Flames will still have quite a bit of cap space to address their needs -- perhaps with some more consistent sources of offense? Whatever the front office decides, they must do so with the notion of getting one step closer toward reaching the postseason.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. Whenever teams get this close to a playoff spot without making it, there's an expectation that the following season should include a playoff berth. Some of that will depend upon what happens in the offseason. Not only with the Flames, but with other clubs in a competitive Western Conference where 11 teams will finish with 89 points or more.

April 14: Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$39.55 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 3rd (TOR), 4th (DET), 5th, 5th (EDM), 6th, 7th

What went right? The team's young core made progress. Unlike his rookie season, Leo Carlsson wasn't limited to a certain number of games, and the result was a 20-goal season. Goaltender Lukas Dostal won 20 games, and was in the top 20 in save percentage. Cutter Gauthier flirted with a 20-goal season as a rookie. Jackson LaCombe went from 17 points in 71 games in 2023-24 to having 14 goals and 43 points in 70 games, averaging an additional three minutes of ice time. Mason McTavish had his first 20-goal and 50-point season.

Those players are all key building blocks, and all played a role in the Ducks finishing with more than 70 points after consecutive, sub-60-point seasons.

What went wrong? The defensive infrastructure around Dostal. After finishing the 2023-24 season with a minus-91 goal differential, the Ducks needed to be better in the defensive zone in 2024-25. This season, they did cut the differential to minus-34, which speaks to some progress. But their underlying metrics prove there's still more work to be done. Natural Stat Trick's data shows that the Ducks gave up the NHL's most shots per 60 minutes, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Again, it goes back to the young core. Dostal is a pending restricted free agent and is expected to receive a significant increase from his \$812,500 salary. McTavish timed his first 20-goal season well; his entry-level contract ends, meaning he'll also need to sign a new deal this offseason. Securing those contracts should still give the Ducks quite a bit of cap space as they seek to add more help around their core for the next phase.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: In a way, they appear to be on the same path the Utah Hockey Club took in 2024-25. Although the playoffs



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might not be in reach next season, the Ducks were nearly at a point-per-game pace. Another year of experience for their core -- coupled with what they could do in free agency -- could have them contending for a wild-card spot until next season's final weeks.

April 14: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$27.14 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (CAR), 2nd (STL), 3rd, 4th (PHI), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The best thing Boston did this season was lean all the way into a rebuild. It was inevitable that after a decade of perennial playoff contention the Bruins were going to take a step back -- and take stock. GM Don Sweeney's early coaching change -- from Jim Montgomery to Joe Sacco -- didn't give Boston a boost, and by the trade deadline it was smart for Sweeney to be a big-time seller. The Bruins acquired valuable draft capital -- including four picks in the first and second rounds -- and they added some intriguing new faces such as Casey Mittelstadt and Fraser Minten. Some burgeoning late-season chemistry between David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie is a nice bonus for the Bruins as a potential pairing to watch.

What went wrong? Boston lost seven of its first 11 games. That was hardly a good omen for what was ahead. The Bruins' calling card has long been its defensive play, so losing top defenseman Hampus Lindholm to a season-ending patella fracture in mid-November was crushing. Montgomery was fired the same week. Jeremy Swayman -- following a contentious contract dispute -- was mediocre in net. And there was little help from the Bruins' offense in making up for any of their defensive and goaltending issues. Boston is 29th in scoring, averaging just 2.63 goals per game, and on the power play (15.5%).

Charlie McAvoy's upper-body injury in early February at the 4 Nations Face-Off was another gut punch. It's no wonder Sweeney keyed on major changes -- such as moving on from captain Brad Marchand -- considering how much these Bruins pale in comparison to what previous teams produced.

Keys to the offseason: The Bruins need a permanent head coach. Sweeney could opt to remove Sacco's interim tag or explore who else is available. Once Sweeney has that person in place, they can start preparing for an important upcoming draft in which Boston will have a high first-round selection and two picks in the second round. Those picks take on a greater meaning now considering the Bruins don't have a deep prospect pool. The focus then shifts to determining which of Boston's young players will be ready to take a leap in the NHL, and how the Bruins will prioritize adding veteran players around them in free agency. The rebuild will be in full swing.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Boston still has a 40-goal scorer in Pastrnak. If Lindholm and McAvoy return to full health, and Swayman can be a game-changer in net again, there's hope for the Bruins to be a fun club to watch -- if not one that reaches the playoffs after a one-year absence. It's not as if they're starting from scratch.

April 14: Buffalo Sabres

Projected cap space: \$22.32 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (MIN), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NSH), 7th (WSH)

What went right? Buffalo proved this season it is capable of being a playoff team. The Sabres overcame a slow start to hold a postseason slot at Thanksgiving, which is often a good indicator of a club's potential to stay there through the season. Tage Thompson had a terrific season, scoring 44 goals and averaging a point per game; when the Sabres do finally break through, they'll have him in large part to thank for keeping their offensive engine going. Rasmus Dahlin also continues to be a standout with 62 points from the back end.

GM Kevyn Adams was able to trade underperforming Dylan Cozens and added Josh Norris (injured for most of his Sabres' tenure to date) for the future.

What went wrong? The Sabres have failed to qualify for the playoffs in 14 straight seasons. That's tied with the New York Jets for the longest active drought in major professional sports. But Buffalo had its chance. The Sabres were in the mix until a 13-game winless streak through December torpedoed things. And Adams didn't do anything at the trade deadline to make Buffalo better despite its many flaws. The Sabres' collective

goaltending was awful, with the league's second-worst save percentage. Buffalo gives up the fourth-most goals per game (3.47) and that's all the more disappointing considering the Sabres are seventh in scoring (3.27).

The Sabres can be their own worst enemy. Ditto with how Buffalo started strong -- with the third-most first period goals -- only to offer up the fourth most in the third period. The Sabres' attention to detail wasn't where it needed to be, and expected growth from players such as Jack Quinn and Zach Benson didn't materialize.

Keys to the offseason: This was Adams' fifth season in Buffalo -- all, obviously, without a playoff appearance. Will ownership keep him on for another kick at that can? It was Adams who installed Lindy Ruff as coach (again) last season, and that alone might keep Adams around. The Sabres have several personnel decisions to make from there. Quinn, JJ Peterka, Bowen Byram, Devon Levi and Ryan McLeod are all restricted free agents. Who will Buffalo retain -- and who winds up without a qualifying offer?

Then it's on to additions from the outside. The Sabres need stronger goaltending next season, and if Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Levi can't provide it as a tandem, then Adams must explore the market for a veteran who can either support one of them or take the reins as a No. 1. That would go a long way in supporting Buffalo toward consistently being the team it has been of late, winning 10 of 13 through March into April -- when, unfortunately, it was all too little, too late.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Dare we say it? Playoffs. That's where Buffalo absolutely must get. And they have the talent to do it. It's on management to fill in the gaps and get the Sabres out of their historic skid.

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$29.17 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TOR), 2nd, 2nd (DAL), 3rd, 4th, 4th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Seth Jones trade. After Jones told Blackhawks management that he wanted to be moved to a contender, how would they strike a deal for a player with three more years on his contract worth \$9.5 million annually?

Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson found a suitor in the Panthers, and received a 2026 first-round pick and goalie Spencer Knight, while retaining \$2.5 million of Jones' salary each of the remaining seasons. The trade got the Blackhawks their goalie of the present and future in Knight, and provided them with another first-round pick for 2026, extending a streak of multiple first-round picks dating to 2022.

What went wrong? There was only nominal improvement after one of the more aggressive free agency windows of any team last offseason. They had 22 wins through 78 games, and though they trimmed their goal differential from minus-111 in 2023-24 to minus-74, it was still a season of frustration that peaked with the firing of coach Luke Richardson after 26 games, replacing him with interim coach Anders Sorensen.

Keys to the offseason: Does Sorensen get the full-time coaching job, or do the Blackhawks go in another direction? There's also a discussion about what to do with Ryan Donato, who led the team in goals this season. Donato is a pending unrestricted free agent, who is having the best season of his career. The Blackhawks obviously have the cap space, but might it be better spent elsewhere?

Once they have agreed upon new deals for their four-player restricted free agent class that includes Philipp Kurashev and Arvid Soderblom, the Blackhawks could use the remaining money while having one eye on what lies ahead after the 2025-26 season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Next season will be a crucial one, mainly because another season without significant progress could prompt the front office to face bigger questions; after all, the Blackhawks are looking to reach the 70-point plateau for the first time since 2019-20.

So, what does the future look like? Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar and Knight, who are all central to their future plans, are going to be entering the final years of their respective deals. Bedard and Nazar are coming off their entry-level contracts, and Knight would be seeking his third deal -- but his first as a No. 1 goalie.

April 14: Detroit Red Wings



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Projected cap space: \$22.98 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 3rd (NYR), 4th (TB), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (STL)

What went right? Detroit showed its tenacity and resilience multiple times this season. The Red Wings overcame a slow start by leaning into a coaching change -- from Derek Lalonde to Todd McLellan -- that ignited the team's December surge into a playoff spot. Detroit fell in and out of contention until February and looked ready to go on a run. Leading that charge was captain Dylan Larkin -- with 29 goals this season -- and Lucas Raymond, who leads Detroit in points with 75. Raymond's development has been especially positive for Detroit and signals how he can continue carrying their offense into the future. The Red Wings also must feel good about being buoyed by a fourth-ranked power play (27.6%).

What went wrong? The Red Wings' defensive play has been a hindrance for years. This season was no exception. Detroit gave up the 12th-most goals against per game (3.14), while ranking 23rd in scoring (2.81). That's a tough combination to overcome. The Red Wings' putrid penalty kill was also worst in the league (69.6%), another indication of their defensive deficiencies.

GM Steve Yzerman didn't do much at the trade deadline to address any of the Red Wings' problems, and Yzerman's continued failure to add impact players in free agency is showing in how Detroit continues to stop short of reaching the playoffs. The Red Wings need consistency, and a strong defensive structure players buy into and can execute. There wasn't enough of it this season to get Detroit out of its nine-year playoff drought.

Keys to the offseason: Yzerman isn't one for making wild moves. But even he must be open to trying something new. There are internal choices to make, including on key RFAs Albert Johansson and Elmer Soderblom, and veterans Patrick Kane and Alex Lyon are both pending UFAs. How drastic Yzerman gets in terms of personnel turnover could foretell where Detroit goes from here.

The Red Wings need more scoring and have been top-heavy in that respect, relying on Larkin, Raymond and Alex DeBrincat for a large chunk of their output. Improving depth there, with proven defense-minded talent, will help the Red Wings keep up with their Atlantic rivals. Generally boosting the blue line wouldn't hurt, either.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Detroit has playoff potential. They've shown it repeatedly. The Red Wings' goal going into next season should be as contenders for the postseason. The question is whether Yzerman provides Detroit with more resources to get there.

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$17.26 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 1st (VGK), 2nd, 2nd (TB), 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (COL)

What went right? Their prospects. Of note, Matthew Wood averaged more than a point per game at the University of Minnesota before signing a professional contract. Joey Willis went from scoring 29 goals in his first two OHL seasons combined to having 27 goals this season. At the NHL level, Justin Barron, Zachary L'Heureux and Fedor Svechikov had expanded ice time.

What went wrong? Everything else. They went from being a playoff team that spent big in free agency to get Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault, Brady Skjei and Luke Schenn to having the third-worst record in the NHL. They were consistently disconnected. They are sixth in shots per game, but last in goals per game. They have one of the top 10 penalty kills yet gave up the seventh-most goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: With three first-round picks and more than \$17 million in cap space, the Preds have options -- especially if their first-round pick becomes the No. 1 pick via the draft lottery. But the Predators are trying to find a way that allows them to win now and in the future. It's why they began shifting course toward playing young players after a poor start to the season. Now it's all about strengthening that plan as they seek to recover from one of the more trying seasons in franchise history.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Preds can go in a number of directions. They entered the 2023-24 season as a team on the rise and made the playoffs. They entered 2024-25 as a team that could be in the

conference finals discussion before ending up in the lottery. If they aren't in the playoff mix next spring, there will be some big questions for the front office to answer.

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$28.90 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Islanders showed determination by putting themselves into a contending position this season, particularly during an 11-3-0 run through January ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off break. They benefited from some terrific individual performances along the way, most notably from Bo Horvat (with a team-leading 54 points) and Anders Lee (pacing New York with 28 goals).

Noah Dobson continued to show why he's one of the league's burgeoning stars on the back end and Alexander Romanov appears increasingly comfortable in his role. GM Lou Lamoriello also deserves credit for the tidy trade of Brock Nelson, which primarily netted New York (among other things) a first-round pick in 2026 NHL draft and promising prospect in Calum Ritchie.

What went wrong? The Islanders failed to truly excel in any category. They're 25th in the scoring (averaging 2.77 goals per game) and gave up the 13th-most goals against (3.14), with a putrid, 31st-ranked power play (13.1%) and equally awful penalty kill (72.0%). Losing Mathew Barzal to injury for all but 30 games this season certainly took its toll in basically every respect. Starting goaltender Ilya Sorokin has been fine (with a .905 save percentage) but hardly the spectacular figure he was in helping New York reach the playoffs in recent seasons.

The Islanders didn't have enough difference-makers, and Lamoriello did not bring anyone on board before the trade deadline. In fact, Lamoriello held onto guys such as Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Kyle Palmieri -- a pending UFA -- and seemingly missed out on a chance to add draft assets for a much-needed overhaul. By the time head coach Patrick Roy was publicly calling out forward Anthony Duclair and subsequently seeing Duclair take a leave of absence from the team, it was clear how tensions were boiling over.

Keys to the offseason: New York must at least consider taking a big swing. But is Lamoriello going to do that? The Islanders should have about \$28 million in cap space to use for next season, and they've got a couple of high draft picks. It's time to decide though what direction the franchise is headed. Can Lamoriello steer this group back to contending status? Or is a rebuild on deck?

There are also critical personnel decisions to make. The Islanders have a large collection of pending RFAs, including Dobson, Romanov, Scott Perunovich, and Adam Boqvist. Who New York keeps will have a major impact on their blue line. The Islanders again need to address their scoring depth. Barzal's absence absolutely hurt New York. Shoring up the offense so it can withstand injury will go a long way. But step one is getting honest about where the organization is right now, and whether they keep pushing to compete in the Metro or take a step back and retool.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Islanders sputtered this season after making consecutive playoff appearances -- both with first-round exits. Unless there's some significant changes in the offseason, one-and-done in the postseason is about as good as New York can expect.

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$9.67 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (SEA), 4th (ANA), 4th (COL), 5th (MIN), 6th, 6th (SEA), 7th

What went right? New York didn't need any added distractions this season, so the fact GM Chris Drury was able to offload underperforming former captain Jacob Trouba early was a shrewd move and kept the Rangers from dwelling on that particular problem all season. The Kaapo Kakko trade was a necessary swap as well that was swiftly handled. And bringing on J.T. Miller was, at least, an attempt to give New York a needed boost up front.

Meanwhile, New York saw growth from some of its young players, especially Will Cuylle (with a career-high 20 goals and 43 points this season). Artemi Panarin has done his part to lead the Rangers on



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offense (37 goals and 87 points) and Adam Fox anchored the blue line with trademark efficiency.

What went wrong? Oh boy. Are the Rangers this season's biggest disappointment? It's hard to argue otherwise. Last season's Presidents' Trophy winners are a shadow of their former (114-point) selves. All the previous characteristics New York displayed as regular-season champions evaporated. The Rangers lacked consistency (they haven't won three games in a row since November), veteran contributions (Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider have been particularly lackluster), a functional power play (ranked 27th at 17.6%) and failed time and again to show any sort of resiliency (they have won five games all season when trailing by one in the third period).

The lack of urgency and determination that elevated New York teams of the past has been missing. But why? Was it the rumored locker room issues? Has coach Peter Laviolette's message been falling on deaf ears? Whatever the reason, New York never truly put its game together. To be officially eliminated from the postseason in a dispiriting 7-3 loss to Carolina on Saturday was a fitting salvo in a lost season.

Keys to the offseason: Can Laviolette survive to coach another season? That's question No. 1 -- and a bafflingly one to even be considering given he led the Rangers to their best regular season the season before. But it seems inevitable New York is going to make drastic changes after this clunker of a season.

Next, Drury must assess this Rangers' core and figure out who to build around, and who to move out. The way Kreider and Zibanejad have struggled could lead Drury to find them new homes. And New York's blue line is probably in need of a redo given the Rangers gave up the 14th-most goals against (3.10) and that's with one of the league's better goalie tandems in Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick. It's not as if New York has to tear it all down. Drury must identify where the biggest leaks this season came from and do what's necessary to patch the holes.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New York can easily be a playoff team again next season. But it will require some form of change. To stand pat would send the wrong message about how poorly the Rangers performed this season. A chip on the shoulder will help New York get back to its potential.

April 14: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected cap space: \$25.64 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (COL), 1st (EDM), 2nd, 2nd (ANA), 2nd (CGY), 2nd (CBJ), 3rd, 5th, 5th (CAR), 6th

What went right? Philadelphia had its moments. The arrival of Matvei Michkov signaled the start of a new era for the Flyers in which Michkov -- a 20-year-old dynamo leading all NHL rookies with 24 goals -- has seemingly unlimited potential to drive their offense into the future. And Philadelphia has other young players -- such as last year's No. 13 pick Jett Luchanko -- to be excited about too after his brief NHL audition.

The Flyers' old guard wasn't all bad, either. Travis Konecny had another strong season with a career high in points ahead of his long-term extension starting next season. Ultimately, Philadelphia can't stay in a rebuild mode forever and it was positive to see GM Danny Briere actually make some moves -- such as trading Joel Farabee and Scott Laughton and firing coach John Tortorella -- to help kick-start Philadelphia into 2025-26.

What went wrong? The Flyers were too big a mess in too many key categories. Philadelphia's collection of goaltenders produced a woeful .888 save percentage at even strength, the worst recorded by a team since 2009-10. Samuel Ersson wasn't the reliable No. 1 the Flyers needed, and it showed too often in how games slipped away. Philadelphia's putrid power play was another problem -- 30th in the league (14.9%) -- and a 24th-ranked offense hasn't been much help. By the time Philadelphia had lost 11 of 12 through mid-March, it was no surprise Tortorella was gone. Something is clearly still missing in Philadelphia.

Keys to the offseason: First, Philadelphia needs a head coach. Briere will decide quickly whether that's via removing the interim tag from Brad Shaw or a new addition. There's much work to be done with the next permanent bench boss in place.

Philadelphia absolutely must capitalize in the draft. They hold three first-round picks and four second-round choices. There's a chance if the Flyers draft high enough that one of those first-rounders steps into their lineup at some point next season. Briere must be smart in how he cashes in on that capital. Then it's all about development. Philadelphia doesn't project to be overly active in free agency given the amount of talent it already has in the NHL and waiting in the wings. What the Flyers need are for those players to take steps forward so when training camp comes around there is serious competition for spots, and it sets up Philadelphia for a competitive season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: This is the fifth consecutive season Philadelphia has missed the postseason. The Flyers must at least challenge well into April for a spot next season. Briere has been patient with this group continuing to grow and it's about time those investments paid dividends.

April 14: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$24.58 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (NYR), 2nd (WSH), 3rd, 3rd (MIN), 3rd (OTT), 4th, 5th (CHI), 5th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? Pittsburgh can always count on Sidney Crosby to breathe some sort of life into their season, and the captain delivered again with a 30-goal campaign that suggests the 37-year-old isn't slowing down. And that's a great thing -- because the Penguins' recent youth movement might signal brighter days ahead. GM Kyle Dubas brought up Rutger McGroarty -- acquired via trade earlier this season -- and Ville Koivunen to get Pittsburgh's next wave ready with some NHL experience. Smart decision. The Penguins needed to end the season on a high note, and showcasing what the franchise has coming seemed invigorating for old and new skaters alike.

What went wrong? It was death by a thousand cuts in Pittsburgh. The Penguins don't have the depth to compete with other Eastern Conference powerhouses -- outside of their top line (with Crosby, Rickard Rakell and Bryan Rust mostly), there wasn't enough consistent scoring. Even Evgeni Malkin struggled with only 15 goals this season.

That dearth of scoring issue was amplified by the Penguins' problems keeping pucks out of their net. Tristan Jarry flamed out as the team's expected No. 1 goaltender, being demoted to the AHL along with his 3.31 goals-against average and .884 save percentage through mid-January. To be fair, Jarry (and the Penguins' other netminders) got no help from a leaky blue line that surrounded the second-most goals per game (3.58) this season. It would have challenged Pittsburgh to overcome its issues in only one phase of the game, let alone all three.

Keys to the offseason: Pittsburgh doesn't appear close to firing coach Mike Sullivan, so that allows the Penguins to hit the ground running again in figuring out how to capitalize on its youth movement. McGroarty and Koivunen will be counted on to compete for slots in training camp.

Then it's on Dubas to address the Penguins' lack of scoring with some strategic veteran additions. The market should play out in Pittsburgh's favor there -- and offering the incentive of potentially skating alongside Crosby never hurts in a negotiation. And the Penguins' defense? It can't stand as is. If Dubas is still trying to avoid a full-scale rebuild, then it's crucial to use this offseason to find roster balance between the Penguins' present and future additions. Some degree of outside help is required to make that happen.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: It's not reasonable to say Pittsburgh makes it back to the playoffs -- unless there are some key changes. If the Penguins rightly address their leaks, then there's talent enough to put Pittsburgh back as a playoff contender. But that's a mighty large question as this season comes to a close.

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.19 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (DAL), 2nd, 2nd (OTT), 3rd (COL), 4th (STL), 4th (WPG), 5th (COL), 7th (NJ)

What went right? The blueprint for the future. Star rookie center Macklin Celebrini leads the team in points, and fellow star rookie forward Will Smith is fifth. They used the trade deadline to add a pair of first-round picks; they'll have two first-rounders in 2025 and again in 2026, continuing a trend since 2023. Even though they're going to finish with



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the NHL's worst record for a consecutive season, the Sharks have already shown some sense of improvement given they went from a minus-150 goal difference to minus-98 entering the final week of the regular season.

What went wrong? Well, there was quite a bit. But that's to be expected whenever a team is in the midst of a rebuild.

The Sharks were in the bottom 10 in goals per game, the power play, scoring chances per 60 minutes, shots per 60 and high-danger chances per 60, which explains their offensive struggles. On defense, they gave up the most goals per game, had the worst penalty kill, and were in the bottom 10 in most scoring chances allowed per 60, most shots allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Do they get the No. 1 pick for a consecutive year? Or will it be No. 2 or No. 3? Whatever happens, this will be the third straight draft cycle and the fourth time in the past five in which the Sharks have a lottery pick. Picking that high along with having a second first-round pick will certainly advance their rebuild.

Then there's the fact they'll have more than \$42 million in cap space, which can be used to address their roster -- with the caveat that the Sharks might not be major players in free agency for at least a few more years.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Continuing to watch the progress made by Yaroslav Askarov, William Eklund, Celebrini and Smith, among others, is going to be the priority. The Sharks will seek to make more improvements while further developing those franchise cornerstones in Ryan Warsofsky's second year behind the bench. But there's also a possibility the Sharks could either sign players in free agency or move on from players on their current roster ahead of the deadline to add even more draft capital for their future plans.

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$21.75 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 4th, 4th (DAL), 5th, 7th

What went right? All three of the trades they made this season. Moving on from Will Borgen led to them getting a one-time No. 2 overall pick in Kaapo Kakko, plus draft capital. At the trade deadline, they acquired a pair of first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 in exchange for Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde. Parting ways with Brandon Tanev netted them a second-round pick in the 2027 draft. Kakko has 10 goals and 29 points in 46 games for the Kraken as part of a season in which he set a career high with 43 points.

What went wrong? Between their underlying defensive metrics and the fact they sent Philipp Grubauer to the AHL? It wasn't the most consistent season for the Kraken when it came to goal prevention. Having a new coaching staff included the departure of assistant coach Jay Leach, who played a crucial role in the Kraken's defensive identity. This season, they were in the bottom 10 in shots allowed per 60 minutes, scoring chances allowed per 60 and high-danger chances allowed per 60. The underperformance from Grubauer didn't help, and in fact, Joey Daccord (who began as the backup) was one of their more consistent performers.

Keys to the offseason: Dan Bylsma's coaching staff helped pull the Kraken from the bottom five in goals per game in 2023-24 to being around league average this season. Could they find a defensive version of that solution heading into 2025-26, with the idea that it might provide the Kraken with the consistency that has eluded them as a franchise? That is one of the most significant questions facing the Kraken now that they have missed the playoffs in three of their first four seasons.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Kraken must be in contention for a wild-card spot (at minimum), or there will be some big questions to answer for the front office at this time next year.

April 14: Utah Hockey Club

Projected cap space: \$21.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went right? Quite a bit. The trade during draft weekend for franchise defenseman Mikhail Sergachev set the stage for a season in which the franchise made real strides. Before moving to Salt Lake City, the Arizona Coyotes had one 80-point season since 2014-15. The Utah

Hockey Club had 84 points with four games left. The team was still fighting for a playoff berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season, which was another step forward for the core -- and proves that bigger things could be on the horizon.

What went wrong? Overtime and shootouts. Entering the final two weeks of the regular season, only the Flames and Canucks had more overtime losses than Utah, two teams that were also chasing a Western Conference wild-card spot. But losing those 12 games in overtime or a shootout demonstrates how Utah was close in many games. If it can get on the winning end of those extra-time coin flips next season, the results will be different too.

Keys to the offseason: Remember how the Coyotes were hamstrung by a need to be miserly with cap space? The Utah Hockey Club doesn't have that issue. That much was made clear last offseason when GM Bill Armstrong invested \$22 million for each of the next two seasons in bolstering the defensive unit. Utah will have more than \$21 million in space this summer, which is enough to improve a roster that could seriously challenge for a playoff spot. A top priority? Improving an offense that was 21st in goals per game, with a power play that was 15th.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. It's really that simple. Utah has a core that has gone through its growing pains. It's a group that has shown it can make progress from one year to the next. Nearly the entire roster is either under contract or team control for next season, and the front office has enough cap space to add the sort of players who could help clinch a playoff berth in the club's second season in Salt Lake.

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$15.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd (SJ), 4th (OTT), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Despite all the inconsistencies, the numerous injuries to key players, and the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson friction, the Canucks were still in the hunt for a wild-card berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season. Yes, there were those who had strong individual seasons, including reigning Norris Trophy winner Quinn Hughes and Pius Suter, who had his first 20-goal effort and more than 40 points. But those performances could only get the Canucks so far, in a season in which they will miss the playoffs after winning their division and coming within a game of the conference finals a year earlier.

What went wrong? All those inconsistencies, those numerous injuries and the Miller-Pettersson friction.

One detail that speaks to those inconsistencies is that the Canucks were among the top five in the NHL in terms of fewest shots allowed per 60 minutes and scoring chances allowed per 60 -- and yet were 19th in goals allowed per game. It's what made the need for scoring depth even more crucial. This became more evident in the wake of trading Miller to the Rangers and trying to find ways to replace a forward with three consecutive seasons of more than 80 points.

Keys to the offseason: What happens to head coach Rick Tocchet? Does he stay on his one-year option as a bridge to a longer-term contract? Or could he be swayed to leave, which would then leave the Canucks searching for a fourth coach since 2020?

After the coaching situation is resolved, what happens to Brock Boeser? A six-time 20-goal scorer, he's a pending UFA who could command a significant payday should he reach the open market. Do the Canucks ink him to a long-term deal?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Add the Canucks to the list of teams whose situation could become clearer once free agency ends. They have most of their team either under contract or team control for next season. But two of their three leading goal scorers -- Boeser and Suter -- are pending UFAs, whereas there is also uncertainty surrounding Tocchet.

Getting those questions answered along with addressing their other concerns could provide a stronger grasp for how the Canucks navigate next season. But a return to the postseason is certainly within grasp.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Here we are': Oilers return to Stanley Cup Final ready for a different ending

Mark Spector

DALLAS — As it wound down in Dallas, inside a dressing where the celebration for this Conference Final win was less jubilant than what used to happen after a Round 1 or 2 win, there was only one word to describe how the Edmonton Oilers looked.

Ready.

Ready to return to the Stanley Cup. Ready to find a different ending than they found a year ago.

What makes them better?

"I think we're better off for going through last year. It's really driven us all year," said Connor McDavid, who touched the Clarence S. Campbell Bowl just to change the luck, after a 6-3 dismantling of the Dallas Stars and a clean, five-game series win.

The Oilers won the final four games against Dallas after dropping Game 1. They won three times in Vegas while speedily disposing of the Golden Knights in five.

They hit the gas after a 0-2 start against Los Angeles in Round 1 and won four straight — the start of a 12-2 playoff run that speaks to the distance between this Oilers team and those out West who would try to supplant them.

And somehow, it all seemed rather routine. Almost ordinary, as the Oilers' best game — rolled out night after night this spring — proved too much for whatever opponent was standing on the other blue line for the national anthems.

"I think this run has felt different than last year. It's felt very normal," McDavid said. "It hasn't been as emotional. We haven't had the highs and we haven't had the lows ... and that puts us in a good position.

"Those games can be emotionally draining. We're not drained."

There was a time around here that, whenever trouble of any kind arose or something needed to get done, the coach threw Nos. 97 and 29 over the boards with a few dudes, and everyone else sat on the bench watching the big boys ride to the rescue again.

Not anymore.

Today, on a steamy night in Dallas with a trip to the Final on the line, the lead was built on a three-goal surge by Corey Perry, Mattias Janmark, and — coming into the lineup after five weeks in the press box — Jeff Skinner.

Upon that kind of depth, championship teams are built. Here, thick layers of support players lie underneath two of the game's most lethal stars — both dead in their prime, with an insatiable thirst to take a step this team wasn't quite good enough to take a year ago.

If last season was Cup or bust, this is something even more seminal than that.

"It's amazing," said Leon Draisaitl. "We put in a lot of work over the year, and a lot of guys stepped up at different times. We just found our game, we found our pieces in the right spot. We're starting to find our stride."

Starting to find their stride. Yikes.

Whether it was a 0-2 deficit to L.A. in Round 1, a Stanley Cup-hardened Vegas team in Round 2, or a Stars club that vowed not to go out in Round 3 for the third straight year, Edmonton has had an answer for every question posed this spring.

"We're mature. We've learned and we're learning every game," said the ageless wonder Perry, whose seven playoff goals leave him tied with Draisaitl for the most on Edmonton and puts him fourth — fourth! — in playoff goals across the NHL this spring.

"The way we're playing, the calmness on the bench, guys making plays when things are going hairy on the ice....," marvelled Perry. "This group,

it's been a want since the end of last year. There's been a lot of thinking about what happened last year and self-reflecting. Here we are."

Of course, a seminal win like Thursday's is unlikely to pass without a play by McDavid that will linger in every hockey memory and highlight package for the next week or so.

He out-raced Roope Hintz to score on the breakaway, a game-winner for the ages.

"My hockey brain goes to, that's probably one of the nicest goals I've seen him score," said Draisaitl. "Just the whole situation: how it played out, who he had coming up behind him.... Of course, there's only one player in the world that can do that in that moment."

McDavid's goal was a metaphor for the poor Stars' luck in this series, as the Hockey Gods placed a rebound off a Mattias Ekholm shot block into McDavid's orbit with open ice ahead of him.

"It was the story of the entire series, Connor's goal," said beleaguered Dallas head coach Pete DeBoer, whose team was much further away from defeating the Oilers this year than last. "We're pushing to try and get back in the game, and the puck bounces into the neutral zone, he's coming off the bench..."

"He's not missing that," DeBoer knew. "It's game over."

Perhaps the best vantage point of what the Florida Panthers will face in this Oilers team comes from DeBoer, one of the NHL's elite coaches, whose teams have taken their share of misery at the hands of McDavid and Co.

"I can tell you, that Edmonton team is better than the team we played last year," he promised. "Deeper, defends harder, harder to play against. That's a lot better team than the team we played last year in the Conference Final.

"There's no doubt," DeBoer added, "the two best teams are playing for the Cup."

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Sportsnet.ca / 'DNA has to change': Treliving under pressure to make right calls with Marner, Tavares

Luke Fox

TORONTO — More could be gleaned from what Brad Treliving did not say than from what he did say at his long-awaited end-of-season press conference.

The Toronto Maple Leafs general manager and — now — the organization's top decision-maker when it comes to hockey personnel did not say that he would be working his damndest to hammer out contract extensions for Mitch Marner and John Tavares, two of this summer's most coveted impending unrestricted free agents.

What Treliving said definitively about pending RFA Matthew Knies's extension — "I'd like to get it done as soon as possible" — he didn't come close to applying to the Marner and Tavares files.

Treliving did not float hopeful platitudes about internal growth and lessons to be learned. He didn't philosophize about plucking some ungraspable "killer instinct" out of the ether and injecting it into the dressing room's core. He didn't speak about crummy bounces and tweaking the fringes and keeping banging on the door and eventually that sucker will topple down under the force of Toronto's assembled talent.

Because, yeah, if the ninth time didn't do that, well, the 10th surely should.

No.

Instead, Treliving hinted at major surgery. Deep cuts.



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"There's some DNA that has to change in our team," Treliving said Thursday, during a 50-minute meeting with a roomful of reporters at the Maple Leafs' practice facility.

"That's on me now."

Like the chief roster shot-callers before him, Treliving did speak to the value of scar tissue and how disappointment can be spun into achievement. But he didn't shy away from the cold, hard failures.

With Treliving watching fervently from up high, he saw his Leafs come up short in 2024's Game 7 in Boston, fail to stomp the throat of Ottawa in Game 5 at home in 2025, then blow chances to stick it to Florida in Games 3, 5, and 7 in Round 2.

"There's some experience you get from that," Treliving said, "but ultimately sometimes you just have to change."

"I felt there was a real tightness of our team."

"Champions are the calmest at the most critical time. That's an area we've got to get through."

Which brings us back to Marner, a key strand of this roster since 2016-17 and the club's most prolific scorer in 2024-25 (102 points).

In those four aforementioned critical playoff games, Marner mustered a total of two assists (both in Game 3 versus the Panthers) and four shots. He didn't score. He was a minus-6.

"Can I think Mitch can succeed? Yes, I do. But as I said before, we've all got to kind of take a step back and look at," Treliving said. "You can't be rigid in our thought process, saying we can only do something one way."

Truth is, the Maple Leafs no longer hold a stitch of leverage with Marner, and their only leverage with Tavares is knowing that the family man desperately wants to ply his trade near home.

Given the opportunity, Treliving did not guarantee that a formal contract offer would be presented to either star forward. And it is safe to say that if total dollars are top priority for these athletes, they'll be able to fetch that elsewhere.

First, Treliving's office will undergo an internal evaluation and have discussions with Darren Ferris (Marner's agent) and Pat Brisson (Tavares's rep).

Eleven days after the debacle of Game 7, Treliving was talking about letting emotions cool, about taking time to think clearly and then working through all options to restructure a forward core that failed to score at the most important time.

"You're miserable. And then two days later, we all get together, and we do exit meetings, and it's emotional, right? Like, it's emotional. This one's gonna stay for a while," Treliving said.

"Mitch and I had a discussion. It's emotional right now, right? And so my discussion with Mitch: Let's all take a step back. Let's take a deep breath. I gotta decompress a little bit."

To be fair, Treliving was dealt "a curveball" (his phrase) last week with the firing of president Brendan Shanahan, the man who hired him two seasons ago, and he's only tiptoeing into a closer working relationship with MLSE chief Keith Pelley.

But the draft looms in four weeks. Free agency opens in less than five.

And if Marner indeed walks, how does one infuse 100 points into its DNA?

All options will be investigated.

"We have to drive what we think is the best outcome. In Mitch's case, he's got a say in the matter," Treliving said. "We have to change the makeup of the team."

"And it may take some time to figure out the best way to move forward."

The executive is on the clock.

We have a mountain of evidence showing how the Maple Leafs' players perform at the most critical time.

This summer is shaping up to be Treliving's Game 7. Or, at the very least, his Game 6.

We're fascinated to see how he handles the pressure.

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Sportsnet.ca / Treliving says Maple Leafs must 'evolve' mindset after Game 7 collapse

Sonny Sachdeva

As Brad Treliving sees it, if the Toronto Maple Leafs are to get to the lofty post-season heights its fanbase craves, a fundamental change is needed.

That was the message the Maple Leafs' general manager delivered Thursday, speaking to the media from the team's practice facility in Etobicoke, Ont., for the first time since the club's season came to an end. It was 11 days ago that Toronto's promising post-season descended into a full-blown Game 7 collapse, a 6-1 rout at the hands of the Florida Panthers — who've since booked their ticket to their third straight Stanley Cup Final — that wrapped up with jerseys, beer cans and boos raining down on the ice from the Scotiabank Arena stands.

Having rewatched that season-ending tilt a few times since, Treliving said he felt the Game 7 loss boiled down to more than just X's and O's, or missed opportunities.

"It reminded me of a game I was in. I've talked to Shane Doan about it," Treliving said Thursday. "We were in Arizona and we played Detroit in Game 7. We had won an afternoon game in Detroit in Game 6, came back for Game 7. And you're all fired up for Game 7."

"And one team looked like they were completely comfortable in the situation — the other team didn't."

The Maple Leafs were overwhelmed by the Panthers through the opening 10 minutes of their own Game 7 earlier this month, starting on the wrong foot, briefly recovering, but ultimately seeing the night slip away in a seven-minute, second-period collapse.

For Treliving, it was his club's response to Florida's first goal, three minutes into that second period, that was most telling.

"I thought we survived," the GM said of the game's early going. "I thought they came out, I know the shot attempts and all that stuff were one-sided — I didn't think we gave up a lot of grade-A stuff. We found our footing, killed a penalty at the end of the first period. Even before that, from the 10-minute mark on, we were carrying play — we had some grade-A chances, we had some breakaways. I thought the turning point was the first goal."

"When the first goal happened, we almost looked like a team that [thought] it was 4-0."

It's a criticism not unfamiliar to these Maple Leafs, who've seen the unflattering statistics about their lack of success in elimination games brought out each time they've faced a new one. For all the regular-season success this era of Maple Leafs hockey has claimed, the struggle to break through in the post-season — to put together the type of deep runs other top-end teams have managed — has largely seemed to come down to a lack of composure in the big moments. An inability, among these Leafs' best, to rise to those moments, to find the type of legacy-building nights seen on the post-season stage from the Connor McDavids, the Leon Draisaitls, the Nathan MacKinnons.

It was that lack of composure, when the lights were brightest in Game 7, that stood out most to Treliving.

"It's being able to find your footing," he continued. "It's being able to know, as we talk about all the time within a series, you park it and you move on to the next one. There was a tension. I'll never question the want, the care. These guys want it. They want to be successful. They want to get to where we all want to get to. But at that point, it looked like one team looked more comfortable than the other in the situation."

"You know, there's more things that we can talk about in the nuances of the game, in terms of our team structure, all that sort of stuff. But from



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the 10,000-foot view, when it became 1-0, I felt there was a real tightness of our team. There was a real tightness in the moment. Champions are the calmest at the most critical time. And that's an area that we've got to get through."

The Maple Leafs GM didn't offer specifics Thursday on how the team will look to shift that mentality and find that missing piece, but Treliving made it clear changes would be coming to his roster.

The most pressing matter on that front is, of course, the pending unrestricted free agency of Mitch Marner — the club is still working through its process to determine whether an offer will be extended to the star winger, Treliving said. Decisions must be made, too, on pending UFAs John Tavares and Steven Lorentz, and RFAs Matthew Knies, Nick Robertson and Pontus Holmberg. Treliving spoke, too, of looking to add more offence to the club's much-improved defence corps.

What's clear, though, is that underpinning any changes this off-season will be a focus on bringing more of that champion mindset to the blue-and-white. More of that intangible quality that has seemed to elude this group year after year — the "killer instinct," the composure, the greatness.

"If you look at that critical moment in Game 7, I don't care if you're playing in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, if you're playing whatever sport, if you're playing in the Masters — champions have the ability to be calm, and at their very best when it matters the most. And that is an area that we've got to improve. ... We have to be able to find a way to push through at the most critical moments," Treliving said Thursday.

"We've got to continue to change and evolve our mindset, and we've got to find a way to create the team — both between the ears, and personnel — to be our very best at the most critical moments. There's some DNA that has to change in our team. That's one thing that I've found. ... When you keep getting the same result, there's some DNA that needs to change. So, that's on me now, going forward."

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Sportsnet.ca / Love of hockey has brought Panthers' Zito to pinnacle of sport

Eric Engels

RALEIGH, N.C. — From the bowels of the Lenovo Center, where his Florida Panthers are going through morning preparations for a game that can propel them to their third consecutive Stanley Cup Final, Bill Zito appears as comfortable as he would be on his couch.

He has spent most of his 60 years on the planet in arenas — first as a hockey player born in Pittsburgh and raised in Wisconsin, later as an agent who founded ACME World Sports, and finally as an executive — and they are where he feels at home.

So, it should come as no surprise that with the biggest game of the season nearing and the pressure mounting, Zito is feeling calm, happy and, thankfully for us, talkative.

"I feel totally relaxed," he says. "We're in the Eastern Conference Finals. No matter what, life's pretty good."

It's been this way for some time now, with the Panthers enjoying so much success under his watch.

Zito took over as GM from Dale Tallon in September of 2020. He inherited great players — like captain Aleksander Barkov and goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, to name a couple — but, with the help of the hockey lifers he immediately surrounded himself with, he built on that foundation to create the perennial contender we see before us. And so, he's rightfully being recognized for that with his second consecutive nomination for the Jim Gregory Award for general manager of the year.

Still, the idea of being a finalist and sharing that honour with someone as esteemed as Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill, who has won the award in each of the last two years, feels fantastical to Zito.

"I promise you, you never think about being put in the same sentence as Jim Nill," he says. "He's not only one of the best GMs; he's one of the finest people I've ever met."

Do tell...

"I was an agent, it was the 22nd or 23rd of December, and I had a potential client and his dad who asked if they could have tickets to the Red Wings (when Nill was still working in Detroit)," Zito started. "I was recruiting this player, and it was a big guy, and I said, 'Yeah.'"

"I called Valterri Filppula, who was there and arranged it. Then I got a phone call at about 6:00 p.m., and they say, 'Billy, there's no tickets.'"

"I just panicked. Maybe the player forgot to leave them. This guy and his dad drove a long way. Maybe from Brampton, Ont., to Detroit around Christmas Day... I called Jimmy Nill, asking him to help me, and he goes, 'Settle down. What's the guy's name?' Then he walks out there himself, meets the player and his dad, brings them in and says, 'You're friends with Billy, right? Before you go up to the seats you'll be sitting in, I'd like you to come meet Gordie Howe.'"

"That's who Jim Nill is as a human. To be mentioned in a sentence with that guy and (Winnipeg Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff) Chevy, who I knew when I was an agent in Chicago, they're just such smart, hard-working, great people."

Zito's no slouch, either.

Not that you'll find him tapping himself on the back.

Over the 20 minutes we spent with Zito on Wednesday, he said he may have "vetoed" his staff or "freelanced" on a couple of acquisitions, but refused to say which ones. He blushed at the idea all of this was his doing, crediting his pro scouts, who were in consensus about bringing in players like Carter Verhaeghe and Gustav Forsling ("slam dunks," as he categorized them) and effusively praising his advisors, Paul Krepelka, Brett Peterson, Sunny Mehta, Gregory Campbell, Paul Fenton, Rick Dudley, Roberto Luongo and, up until recently, Les Jackson.

Jackson was ready to walk away from hockey after 34 years with the Stars in various capacities, a role with the now-defunct Atlanta Thrashers, and some scouting with the Panthers.

But Zito called him four times to talk him out of it.

Why?

"Because he would tell me to pound sand for my own good," Zito said. "When you have someone like Les, with his knowledge base and his character, and you know that he cares about you, you know when he tells you yes or no, black or white, red or blue, that it's virtuous and coming from a good place, and that's invaluable."

Welcoming the truth, no matter its form, is a feature of being a strong leader.

Luongo has been around his fair share of them since arriving in Florida as a 21-year-old goaltender, and he recognized Zito as one as soon as he began working for him in 2020.

"He lets everyone be themselves and he is not afraid to hire or surround himself with staff that challenges him and each other," the 46-year-old said via text Wednesday. "Collaborative approach, with no yes-men, which leads to good decisions in personnel."

You look at the players that have landed in Florida since Zito's been on the job, and it's hard to find fault with that process.

"I don't think anybody would argue he's done a terrific job," said Montreal Canadiens general manager Kent Hughes when we spoke to him over the phone Wednesday.

"He's sitting on the cusp of his third straight Stanley Cup Final," the former long-time agent continued. "The things that stand out to me are, for one, I think Billy's had a vision for the kind of team that he wanted and the players that fit the style that he wanted to play, and two, he has a coach that would have a team play that way and coach that style of hockey and demand of it his players."

"I also think more than anything else, the consistency in how Billy has done what he's done stands out to me. And it also stands out to me that



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he's not afraid to make bold decisions and is pretty decisive about what he wants to do."

Consider early moves for Sam Bennett and Matthew Tkachuk. Or think about Zito's more recent body of work.

There was an eight-year, \$69-million contract for Sam Reinhart, who scored 57 goals last season and helped the Panthers win their first Cup; a six-year deal with a \$5-million cap hit for Anton Lundell, who had been dynamite through his first three seasons in the league; shrewd signings of veterans Nate Schmidt, Dmitry Kulikov, and Niko Mikkola before them; Tomas Nosek and A.J. Greer brought in for pennies on the dollar; trade deadline acquisitions that did more than just add to the depth of the roster.

Right before 3:00 p.m. on Mar. 7, Zito acquired future Hall of Famer Brad Marchand from the Boston Bruins for what ended up being a 2028 first-round pick — a move he said "wasn't a hard call" — and that was after he traded Spencer Knight and a 2026 conditional first-round pick to Chicago for minute-munching, versatile defenceman Seth Jones and got the Blackhawks to retain \$2.5 million in each of the remaining five seasons on Jones's contract.

"I wasn't around for it, but Billy had to be all over that one with Jones," said Jackson when we touched base with him Wednesday. "He knew him and certainly had a lot of respect for the kid's ability and would know where he'd fit with the team and how he'd help, so he'd have led that conversation."

It was one of many that turned the Panthers into the team they are now.

Jackson wouldn't have agreed to be a part of all the other conversations from 2023 through 2024 had he not believed in Zito's acumen, which was evident to him in early conversations he had with Zito back when he was working in Dallas and Zito was making his way as an agent.

"He wasn't just one of those guys just trying to sell his players," Jackson said. "He understood the needs of our team, and I found that refreshing. A lot of guys would call saying you need this player and that player without really understanding the depth of your organization and the internal options you had coming and others you might be looking at. Bill was always respectful that way, and he knew our organization. He sounded like he was a member of your group when you talked to him."

As a member of Zito's group in 2024, Jackson finally saw his name engraved on the Cup.

It was a lifetime of work that was rewarded in one instant, and Jackson is forever grateful to Zito for it.

"He gave me that opportunity," he said. "It was such a good one because it's also about the group you work with, and Bill is so good at pulling those guys together."

It's a labour of love, and Zito feels fortunate to be doing it.

He made it clear it hasn't felt like work to him at all.

"We joke about it all the time," Zito says. "Someone will ask: 'What are you up to?'"

"I'll say, 'Oh, I'm going to work,' (laughs) and work is I'll sit around and bullshit with a couple of Hall of Famers, hang out with Paul Maurice, talk about hockey, and maybe we'll go out as a staff and skate and shoot puck on Lou and make fun of him, and then we'll have a five-star meal."

There are other rewards, too, like chasing the Cup — and winning it.

Not that Zito will take credit for it.

"You can get self-interested, or selfish, or self-reflective, and then two future Hall-of-Famers like Sasha (Barkov) and Chucky (Tkachuk) walk by and you're immediately humbled," he says. "Imagine getting to work with them?"

There's good fortune in that, for sure.

But Zito worked his way into that position — through his years at Yale to the ones he spent acquiring a law degree at the University of Wisconsin, through all the time he spent building his agency, and through the seven years he worked as an executive with the Columbus Blue Jackets before landing with the Panthers.

Five years into life in South Florida, the president of hockey operations and GM of the club is having as much fun as he ever has.

"You might have a better word for it, but I use the word romance to talk about all the fun of the sport and all the cool, neat things we get to experience on this side of the sport," said Zito. "We all love hockey. I love hockey."

It's what makes the arena a second home for him.

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Sportsnet.ca / Carter Hart testifies at hockey sexual assault trial

Paul D. Grant

LONDON, Ont. — Carter Hart told court on Thursday that the sexual contact he had with the complainant at the centre of a sexual assault trial involving five former NHLers in 2018 was consensual.

Hart, only the second witness of the entire trial to take the stand in the courtroom, said that after a night of drinking in two London bars on June 18-19, 2018, he returned to the Delta Armouries hotel after receiving a text message in a group chat from Michael McLeod about joining a threesome with a woman.

"Did you go to Room 209 that night?" Hart was asked by his lawyer, Megan Savard.

"Yes," Hart said.

"Did you see E.M. there?" Savard said.

"Yes," he responded.

"Did you have sexual contact with her?" Savard asked.

"Yes," he responded.

"Was it consensual?"

"Yes."

Hart said he was single at the time and was "open to sexual encounters" while in London for the Hockey Canada gala event that took place over three days.

Hart said he got a call from McLeod after the text was sent about the threesome, "the gist was that Mike was with a girl back at the hotel who wanted to have sex with some of the boys."

Hart also testified that shortly after he and the woman engaged in a sex act, he saw Cal Foote do the splits over the woman, known as E.M. because of a publication ban on using her name, but Foote was clothed and did not touch her when he did them.

"Guys thought it was pretty funny," Hart told Savard. "I thought it was funny. I looked and saw that (E.M.) was laughing as well."

Hart also testified that he first learned an investigation was being conducted into the events of June 18-19, 2018, when he was at Philadelphia Flyers development camp on the Jersey Shore. Once he was able to get access to his phone on June 26, 2018, he noticed he had 117 text messages from a group chat involving players from the 2018 world junior team.

He replied to the chain with, "Honestly boys nobody did anything wrong, like we got consent to anything that she did, she was the one begging for guys to bang her."

Hart also testified that Alex Formenton, whom he walked back to the Delta with after being out at the bars, followed E.M. to the washroom to have sex and that E.M. and Formenton were holding hands.

Hart agreed with the suggestion from Hilary Dudding, one of Formenton's lawyers, that Formenton was a "rule follower" and a "little bit shy."



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When asked by Dudding if Hart remembered any of the players in the room being “disrespectful” to E.M., he said, “no, never.”

“If something like that would have happened, I would have stopped or I would have left,” he said. “If something disrespectful or degrading happened, it’s not OK.”

He said if he had seen something degrading or disrespectful, he would’ve said, “Don’t do that” or “Stop” and left the room. He said he did not see anyone spit on E.M.

McLeod has been charged with two counts of sexual assault, including one relating to aiding in the offence. Dillon Dube, Foote, Formenton and Hart have each been charged with one count of sexual assault. All have pleaded not guilty to their charges.

Court ended on Wednesday with the Crown saying it might call another player as a witness, but assistant Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham told court first thing Thursday morning that it was not going to call further witnesses and had closed its case.

The trial is set to complete its sixth week on Friday.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Treliving addresses talks with Marner, Tavares, Knies

Emily Sadler

Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brad Treliving said the team is currently “in the process” of determining the best way forward when it comes to the future of star forward and pending unrestricted free agent Mitch Marner.

“I can’t sit here and give you a definitive answer,” Treliving told reporters when asked during a press conference on Thursday about his approach to Marner’s future. “We’ve got to, No. 1, go through the process with Mitch. Our staff is in the process now of looking at all different outcomes. But we’ve got to kind of drive what we think is the best outcome. In Mitch’s case, he’s got a say in the matter.”

Treliving was quick to praise Marner when asked about the forward early on in Thursday’s media availability, and to point out the two-way nature of the talks to come.

“I think Mitch is a tremendous player,” Treliving said. “I think he’s a star.”

The GM said he and Marner had a discussion during the team’s exit-meeting process shortly after the team was eliminated, during which he stressed the importance of time.

“It’s emotional right now, right? My discussion with Mitch was, ‘let’s all take a step back, let’s take a deep breath. I gotta decompress a little bit,’” he said.

Treliving acknowledged the departure of Brendan Shanahan — “a bit of a curve ball,” he called it, which required a few days for the team and its players and personnel to digest the major front-office shift.

The decision by MLSE CEO Keith Pelley not to renew Shanahan’s contract following his 11-year tenure was the first of many changes to come this summer.

That word — change — factored in heavily to Treliving’s opening remarks Thursday. He spoke of the many changes that came last summer, and throughout the 2024-25 season; of the changes in playing style under Year 1 of head coach Craig Berube, and how the team evolved; and of the changes he saw during two rounds of playoff hockey, before a painful Game 7 elimination that too closely resembled more of the same.

“There’s some DNA that has to change in our team,” said Treliving, now wrapping up his second season as Toronto’s GM and opening preparations for his third.

“We’ve changed — we’ve changed a lot in the last 12 months. There will be change moving forward — that’s just the nature of the business,” he said. “No team comes back the same.”

Whether — or how — that change extends to Marner, who as the biggest name on this summer’s list of unrestricted free agents, is a question still without an answer.

Marner himself has been non-committal about his feelings on his future, and where that might be, telling reporters early last week he’ll take some time to discuss the best options for his career and his family.

Said Treliving, “You have to try to prepare for every potential outcome. And it may take some time. It may take some time to figure out the best way that we move forward. But that’s what we’re in the process of doing right now.”

While Marner is the biggest name at the forefront of potential changes to come, he’s not the only star due a new deal in Toronto. Veteran forward and former captain John Tavares, too, hits unrestricted free agency on July 1, while breakout star Matthew Knies is set to cash in as a restricted free agent.

On Tavares, like Marner, Treliving was quick to praise but reserved in his response to reporters.

“I’m a huge John Tavares fan. Had a really good discussion with him,” Treliving said Thursday. “We’ve got to take a step back, meet with our group. How do we best move forward? What are the costs? All those things that go into a contract and everything else. How does it fit within the puzzle? So, we’ll see how that happens over the course of the next couple of weeks.”

Asked about any impending offers to his top two UFAs, Treliving could not say for certain whether Marner or Tavares would be extended offers by the team prior to July 1.

“As I said before, we’re going through that process right now,” he said.

Treliving did express a sense of certainty — and urgency — when it comes to re-signing Knies, who he called “a big part of the future moving forward.”

“I’d like to get it done as soon as possible,” he said, adding that he felt the 22-year-old RFA-to-be “had a tremendous year.”

“We’re sort of seeing him evolve in front of our eyes,” Treliving said. “It’s a big step for a young player to become a really important player ... he became a really important player.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Amazon unveils the 14 stars of 'Faceoff: Inside the NHL': Season 2

Luke Fox

Amazon Prime Video is digging in — and widening its scope — for Season 2 of its hockey docuseries Faceoff: Inside the NHL.

The streamer announced Thursday that its behind-the-scenes peek into the lives of NHL stars will feature the return of two Season 1 protagonists — Toronto Maple Leafs winger William Nylander and Florida Panthers lightning rod Matthew Tkachuk — as well as 12 other personalities.

Sidney Crosby (Pittsburgh Penguins), Marc-Andre Fleury (Minnesota Wild), Mikko Rantanen (Dallas Stars), Brendan Shanahan (Hockey Hall of Famer), Sean Monahan (Columbus Blue Jackets), Thomas Harley (Dallas Stars), Seth Jarvis (Carolina Hurricanes), Wyatt Johnston (Dallas Stars), Anze Kopitar (Los Angeles Kings), Zach Werenski (Columbus Blue Jackets) and Quinton Byfield (Los Angeles Kings) will all be showcased prominently in Season 2’s six episodes.

Brady Tkachuk (Ottawa Senators) was previously announced as a participant.



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"Expect the unexpected," Mark Shopiro, head of Amazon Prime Video Canada, told Sportsnet. "You saw last year in Season 1 just peeks behind that we had never seen before in the NHL and more access to players than ever before. And what we're excited about for Season 2 is getting to go even deeper with the players."

Shopiro promised more interviews from teammates, friends and family members surrounding the series' stars on top of the usual standard production company Box To Box established with past binge-worthy sports hits like *F1: Drive to Survive* and *Full Swing*.

"Heading into Season 2, the players certainly have more of a flavour for it, and I think we also have more of a flavour for what types of stories are resonating best," Shopiro said. "We have some pretty monumental moments within hockey as a whole, and then obviously bringing new players into the forefront."

Amazon's cameras were rolling behind the scenes during February's 4 Nations Face-Off, which was crowned the Sports Event of the Year at last week's SBJ Sports Business Awards, and during Alex Ovechkin's breaking of Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals record.

Of particular interest will be glimpses into the life of the private Crosby and the potential for further insight into Rantanen's two trades, Fleury's last hurrah, Monahan's emotionally taxing winter and Shanahan's last stand in Toronto.

Shopiro declined to reveal the number of streams Season 1 of Faceoff fetched. He did note that the series' renewal speaks to fan interest and that Amazon's partnership with the NHL is a priority considering Prime's Monday Night Hockey, which scored well with a younger demographic and will also return in 2025-26.

With excitement bubbling over Season 2, should fans bank on a third season of Faceoff?

"We'll see. It's tough to say," Shopiro says. "We'll get through Season 2 and then evaluate what we have. We feel really good about it and see a lot of legs to the series. We want to make sure that as long as we're making content that's interesting and exciting to fans and our Prime members, we'll continue to try and provide that to them."

Faceoff is executive produced by James Gay-Rees, Paul Martin and Hillary Olsen for Box To Box; Steve Mayer for NHL Productions; and showrunner Daniel Amigone.

The 2025 release date for Season 2 will be announced later.

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TSN.CA / Treliving on Leafs roster after disappointing playoffs exit: "Some DNA that has to change"

Mark Masters

Brad Treliving did not like the way his team responded after the Florida Panthers scored first in Game 7 of their second-round series.

"There was a real tightness in the moment," the Maple Leafs general manager said in his first public comments since Toronto's season ended on May 18. "Champions are the calmest at the most critical time, and that's an area that we've got to get through."

The defending Stanley Cup-champion Panthers built a 3-0 lead in the second period of Game 7 en route to a 6-1 win. The Leafs also lost 6-1 at home in Game 5. After starting the series with consecutive wins at Scotiabank Arena, the Leafs suffered lopsided losses in the most important home games of the year.

Treliving also highlighted the Game 3 overtime loss in Florida as a key moment.

"You've got a chance to get them on the mat," Treliving lamented. "We're up 2-0. We're up 3-1. Critical moment. We weren't able to close that out."

At the critical moments throughout the series, the Panthers were simply better.

"That series is going to stay with me for a long time," Treliving said. "The way it ended will stay with me for a long time. It would stay with me if it was 2-1 in triple overtime. When you think you have a chance to win and you don't, it stays with you."

This Leafs core has had plenty of these chances. Toronto is now 0-7 in series-deciding games since 2018. Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander and Morgan Rielly have played in each of those games. John Tavares has suited up in five of them.

The Leafs have scored just five goals total in their last six series-deciding losses.

"When you run up against that wall and it happens time and time again that leaves some scars," Treliving said.

Toronto has made the playoffs in nine straight seasons, but the Leafs have won just two series in this stretch.

This season, the first under new coach Craig Berube, had the potential to be different. The Leafs finished first in the Atlantic Division for the first time this year and then beat the Ottawa Senators in six games in the first round.

But the team still did not live up to their own expectations.

"We fell short of where we wanted to be, and we fell short of where I thought we could be," Treliving admitted.

"We've got to find a way to create the team, both between the ears [and] personnel, to be our very best at the most critical moments. There's some DNA that has to change in our team. That's one thing that I found."

How Treliving will go about changing the DNA, though, is unclear.

"The margins are really, really thin," he said. "I don't believe that you have to go and change 20 players. It's not always about that. It is about what we can do to help our guys, what we can do to find guys who can help, and if there is a change to be made to our team, how do we bring people in who have a mindset like that?"

Play

Treliving: 'When you keep getting the same result, there's some DNA that needs to change'

Treliving: 'When you keep getting the same result, there's some DNA that needs to change' Brad Treliving laments the Leafs' inability to push through in the critical moments against the Panthers and admits that Toronto's playoff exit is going to stay with him for a long time. Treliving says that 'when you keep getting the same result, there's some DNA that needs to change' within the team.

Marner is a pending unrestricted free agent and did not engage in extension talks during the season. The Leafs approached Marner about potentially waiving his no-move clause at the trade deadline, but the 28-year-old declined.

During his end-of-season availability with reporters, Marner did not express a desire to return to his hometown team. The 102-point winger said he was grateful for his time in Toronto and would discuss things with his wife in the days ahead.

"Mitch has a say in this as well," Treliving pointed out. "So this isn't the world according to Brad. I think he's a great player. He's been a great player here. We'll have to see. We'll have to see how this all works. [Do] I think Mitch can succeed? Yes, I do. But, as I said before, we all got to kind of take a step back ... We can't be rigid in our thought process saying we can only do something one way."

Among pending unrestricted free agents, no one had more points than Marner this season.

Treliving plans to reach out to Marner and his representatives after allowing the emotion of the Game 7 loss to subside a bit.

"We do our exit meetings," Treliving said. "Mitch and I had a discussion. It's emotional right now, right? And so my discussion with Mitch is let's all take a step back. Let's take a deep breath."



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Mitch finished second on the team with 13 points in 13 playoff games, but he had just one assist and three shots on net in the final four games of the Florida series.

'We'll see': Treliving refuses to guarantee Leafs will offer Marner a contract extension
Maple Leafs GM Brad Treliving jokes that he's shocked it took three questions before he was asked about Mitch Marner's future in Toronto, but says they're still in the process of figuring out all of the different outcomes. Treliving refused to guarantee the Leafs offer Marner or John Tavares a contract extension this summer.

Tavares is also a pending unrestricted free agent, but the 34-year-old has repeatedly expressed a desire to stay with his hometown team.

"I'm a huge John Tavares fan," Treliving said. "Had a really good discussion with him. We've got to take a step back, meet with our group. How do we best move forward? What are the costs? All those things that go into a contract and everything else, and how does it fit within the puzzle?"

Tavares served as Toronto's second-line centre this season and actually took over top-line duties when Matthews missed games due to a nagging upper-body injury. Tavares racked up 38 goals and 74 points in 75 games.

Tavares produced five goals and seven points in 13 playoff games. He hit the scoresheet in only one of seven games against the Panthers.

Treliving was asked how much he will prioritize improving the team's centre depth this summer.

"There was talk that, ok, we got to get a second-line centre," Treliving said. "The guy who was playing there had 38 goals. Like to go find somebody that scored more than that was hard. Centres, it's a priority, right? It's a priority. Having said that, there's probably 26 other teams that are saying it's a priority. Like I said, I'm a big fan of John. Had a hell of a year, so we'll see how it all goes."

Among pending unrestricted free agents, no one scored more goals than Tavares this season.

LeBrun: Treliving is freed from 'The Shanahan' and doesn't have to be loyal to Leafs core
TSN Hockey Insiders Chris Johnston and Pierre LeBrun join Mark Masters to discuss what Brad Treliving meant by his comments about needing to change the DNA of the Maple Leafs, how he handled the questions about Mitch Marner's future in Toronto, the chances Morgan Rielly might waive his no-movement clause, and more.

Last week, MLSE president and CEO Keith Pelley made the decision not to renew the contract of Leafs president Brendan Shanahan, who hired Treliving two years ago. Treliving described that move as a "curve ball."

Treliving opened Thursday's news conference by recognizing Shanahan's contribution to the organization.

"It's been a difficult few days," Treliving said in his opening remarks. "Brendan's the person that brought me in here, and I really enjoyed my time with Brendan. We had a strong working relationship that grew into a real strong friendship. Enjoyed our chats.

Enjoyed all the interaction that I had with him and, from my view, Brendan did a lot of good things here. He did a lot of good things with the Toronto Maple Leafs. I think he built a real solid foundation."

Pelley said he looked forward to working more closely with Treliving and Berube moving forward.

"We didn't spend a whole lot of time together," said Treliving, who had dinner with Pelley on Sunday.

"So, like any relationship, we're going to find our cadence. Keith's made it very clear: 'Your job is to go out and do the things that you see fit with your staff to get the team where we want it to go.' So ultimately, you know, we're going to work through that a little bit.

There's probably going to be a little bit of tweaks in terms of how things operate a little bit. But, by and large, what I'm responsible for and where my energies are directed aren't going to change a whole lot."

Treliving missed Pelley's news conference last week because he was in Calgary for his daughter's high school graduation.

Pelley eager to work closely with Treliving, Berube as Shanahan exits with no replacement
One day after informing Brendan Shanahan that he would not be continuing on as Leafs president and alternate governor, MLSE president and CEO Keith Pelley explained why it was time for the organization to split from the Hall of Fame player after 11 years. Mark Masters reports.

Treliving struck a different tone when asked about pending restricted free agent Matthew Knies.

"I like to get it done as soon as possible," he said.

And then the 55-year-old executive tried to lighten the mood.

"Usually term and money are the only two issues that come into play on contract negotiations," he said with a grin.

Knies, 22, made it clear on locker clean-out day that he wants to stay in Toronto and has no desire to use an offer sheet to facilitate a deal.

"Matthew had a tremendous year," Treliving said. "We're sort of seeing him evolve in front of our eyes. It's a big step for a young player to become a really important player, right? Like you can be a good player and have a role. He became a really important player."

Knies spent the entire season on the left wing of Toronto's top line and produced 29 goals and 29 assists in 78 games.

"Matthew's a big part of the future moving forward," Treliving said.

Play

Treliving wants Knies signed as soon as possible: 'Matthew is a big part of the future'

Treliving wants Knies signed as soon as possible: 'Matthew is a big part of the future'
Brad Treliving weighs in on the 'tremendous year' Matthew Knies had in his second full season with the Maple Leafs and says he wants the pending restricted free agent signed 'as soon as possible' before July 1. Treliving believes Knies took a big step forward and calls him 'a big part of the future' in Toronto.

Brad Treliving: "We fell short of where we wanted to be, and we fell short of where I thought we could be." pic.twitter.com/CCF7D2Dd9g

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) May 29, 2025

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TSN.CA / From Crosby's leadership to Fleury's prank, Martone soaked up 'surreal' men's Worlds

Mark Masters

After New York Islanders centre Bo Horvat sustained a tournament-ending injury at the World Championship, Brampton Steelheads winger Porter Martone joined Team Canada's roster and became the only draft-eligible player to suit up at the event.

When Martone initially signed up to join Team Canada at training camp there was no guarantee he would end up playing. The 18-year-old was happy to simply soak up the experience.

"Any time you get to surround yourself with NHL players and the calibre of players that are there, it's a great experience," Martone said. "It's definitely surreal being able to step on the ice with Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon for the first time."

Martone played in the preliminary-round finale against Sweden and in the quarterfinal loss to Denmark. He also played in both of Canada's pre-tournament games, scoring a goal in an exhibition encounter against Hungary.



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Along the way, Martone learned from Crosby's leadership, MacKinnon's competitiveness, Marc-Andre Fleury's attitude, Ryan O'Reilly's compete, and Kent Johnson's creativity. He also learned something about himself.

"I realized I could play with those guys," Martone said. "I started the pre-tournament on a line with Macklin Celebrini and Travis Konecny and, at first, there's definitely an adjustment with just being able to keep up with the pace. But once you get used to that, you're playing with really good players, and you're able to gain confidence. When I got into the tournament, I feel like I got better shift by shift."

The experience provided Martone some momentum as he prepares to head to Buffalo for the NHL Scouting Combine next week.

Martone is expected to be a top pick at next month's NHL draft in Los Angeles. He came in No. 3 in the draft-lottery edition of TSN Hockey Insider Bob McKenzie's prospect rankings. TSN director of scouting Craig Button has Martone going second overall to the San Jose Sharks in his latest mock draft.

During a conversation with TSN, Martone reflected on his month with Team Canada. The Peterborough, Ont. native shared his takeaways from being around some of Canada's top talent. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TSN: What was your No. 1 pinch-me moment at the World Championship?

Martone: Probably when you're actually on the ice and you're in the drills and you're passing the puck over to Crosby or you're in line rushes with other NHL players. I thought it was pretty cool. These guys were my idols growing up.

TSN: What was your first conversation with Crosby like?

Martone: He introduced himself and said 'Hi' and everything. It was pretty cool being able to talk to him and meet him and then, while the tournament went on, he just kind of became your teammate. He was very good to me and everyone. You could tell why he's such a good captain in the NHL and why he's such a prestigious hockey player.

TSN: What's one thing he said to you that resonated?

Martone: Before my first game against Sweden, we were walking out of the room and he just told me to be myself out there on the ice and 'Just go play our game.' I thought that was pretty cool with him being one of the best players in the world. Telling me that really gave me a lot of confidence going into that game.

TSN: What stood out about MacKinnon?

Martone: How competitive he is and how much he wants to win and the drive he has. You know he's got all the skill in the world, but he wants to win championships. I think that was pretty cool just to see that firsthand, and how much he competed on the ice. He's a very good guy off the ice as well and just willing to talk to me about different things and teach me a lot of different things.

TSN: What's something that you learned from him?

Martone: The way he prepares himself for games. They treat their body so well and just the way they kind of get prepared for games, you know, it's a lot different than what I've seen in junior. So, I think it was a good experience for me to be able to learn off those guys and how much they put into getting ready for a game day. They have the same routine every day and it was cool to see that.

TSN: What was your best moment?

Martone: I could name so many. We had tons of fun. It's a great group of guys, and just going out for team dinners, just being around the guys, you kind of make friendships with those guys. Maybe, you know, two years ago, three years ago, I never thought I would ever meet all these NHL players but now, you know, I could see them around and be able to say 'Hi.'

TSN: What was your best off-ice story from the Worlds?

Martone: We were at lunch one day and all the guys were kind of quizzing me about older hockey players. I knew some of them, but I didn't know some and they were kind of blown away with how I didn't know these guys. They're quizzing me and some of them I didn't know who they were, and they actually played on Crosby's team and Fleury's team

in Pittsburgh when they started their career. And they're like, 'Holy smokes!' (Smiles) Yeah.

TSN: Well, you're young. Could you teach them anything as a young guy? Maybe about social media?

Martone: I know a couple of them don't have Instagram or Snapchat, but, yeah, I don't know. It was cool being around them and talking to them. Realistically, they were role models and now you can consider them your friends.

TSN: Did Fleury get you with a prank?

Martone: Ha, no, not me, but he got a couple guys. I was talking to him and I was like, 'I love how you do that.' He said it went on throughout his hockey career. When he was a rookie, he said it happened to him and he just thought of so many things along the way. A funny one on Adam Fantilli, he sewed the bottom of his pants together so, like, he couldn't put on his pants after a game. I thought it was hilarious. He's another person who is such a great role model. You can just see how much he loves the game because he's always there, smiling, laughing and chirping. That's another person to look up to and take things from.

TSN: In the OHL Coaches Poll, you came in first in the best shootout shooter category. Anyone catch your eye with their moves at the World Championship?

Martone: Kent Johnson. He's kind of a shootout specialist. He taught me some other moves so maybe I have to pull them out of the bag next season ... The stuff he was doing in practice, it looked like he was about to almost fall over sometimes, and he would just slide it in. He was teaching me a lot of different things.

TSN: What's the top thing you learned from Johnson when it comes to shootout moves?

Martone: I don't even know. He's just a magician with the puck. He just throws a bunch of head fakes and he just beats the goalie. He's a very good guy. He talked me through his past experiences over there as well.

TSN: What's your go-to move in the shootout?

Martone: I like to come in slow and then I'd wait for the goalie to try to make the first move and hopefully he would bite on a fake or something and, you know, I think I'd either bring to my backhand or try to shoot back there.

TSN: What do you like about that situation?

Martone: I like the pressure. It's one-on-one with you and the goalie. It's fun for me definitely being an offensive, skilled player. You like to go down and kind of showcase your moves. I think the biggest thing is just kind of being patient when you're going down there. I try to wait for the goalie to make the first move and then kind of see what's open.

TSN: It was a tough ending for Team Canada. What was that Denmark game like?

Martone: They're a good Denmark team and we played them in Denmark. The fans, it was a great atmosphere, and they kind of just hung around. We got up 1-0 but they were just kind of always there and they got two goals late. They worked really hard. They competed and it's a hockey game so anything could change. There could be a different bounce, and we get that win. It was definitely a shock. Definitely from Canada, you always want to win a gold medal. I think it could be a learning experience for everyone, especially for the guys going to the Olympics next year. It could be big for them. And then, for me, if I get another shot at the World Juniors, I could take that back. You're always going to treat every game like it could be the last.

TSN: What stood out about how the guys reacted to the loss?

Martone: Seeing the interviews after the game, and even throughout the game, they're always so calm. We didn't panic at all and, you know, we didn't get it done but they handled it with professionalism, and I think that's a big thing. Win or lose, you're always going to be a good professional. I could see in everyone's eyes that it was tough, but they handled it with professionalism.

TSN: You also experienced a tough quarterfinal loss at the World Juniors. What did you take from that experience?



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Martone: Playing for Team Canada on home soil is a dream. I remember watching World Juniors as a kid every Christmas and being able to be in that spotlight was pretty cool. Obviously, it didn't end the way we wanted it to and that was tough. No one really expects Canada to lose. So, it was tough, but I think I could take those experiences and, if I do get another shot at it next year, I think we can learn from things. We could attack adversity differently ... If I do get another shot and I'm playing in Minnesota, I'd be very determined to win a gold medal.

TSN: Your draft season, at least in terms of games, is done. How would you sum it up?

Martone: It was really fun. I got to play a full season in the Ontario Hockey League. I got to be a part of the CHL game against the U.S. development team. I got to play at the World Juniors and then I got to end off playing at the men's World Championship. It was pretty jam-packed. I had a lot of games and I think I developed and learned from other people. I developed as a person and as a player throughout the season, and being able to end it off playing in the men's World Championship was pretty cool.

TSN: In which ways do you feel like you're a better player now versus the start of the year?

Martone: I developed more of a complete game. I think a big part of that actually came with the men's Worlds. I realized you're going to get your chances if you're back checking, you're reloading and you're not diving in, and if you're playing a smart game. I think that's kind of why all those NHL players are so good. They take care of the defensive side of the puck and they compete every shift. O'Reilly talked to me about just winning your battles. I think that's a big thing too. Maybe at the start of the season I wasn't so concentrated on that, but by the time playoffs came around, and when I got to go play at the men's worlds, that was a big thing for me. I focused on winning my battles and focused on playing a good defensive game and then the offensive chances are going to come. I think I became more of a complete player.

TSN: What sort of advice did you get from the Team Canada guys on the draft and upcoming combine?

Martone: Whether it's talking to Crosby or Fleury or kind of getting to the younger guys in Fantilli and Celebrini, they all have great advice for me. I think the biggest thing is just, 'Be where your feet are.' Draft day only happens once, being at the combine only happens once. They gave me tons of advice.

TSN: Have you spoken to any of your Team Canada teammates since returning home?

Martone: I still stay in touch with a couple of guys, you know, a couple of the younger guys for sure. It's cool to be able to have those guys in your contacts and if you ever need to reach out to them and ask them a question, I feel like they'd always be willing to help. It was cool to learn from them and create those bonds.

📍 Stockholm, SWE se#MensWorlds | #MondialMasculin
pic.twitter.com/ZL8tKyknfr

— Hockey Canada (@HockeyCanada) May 8, 2025

TSN: What's your focus this summer?

Martone: I'm going to be in the gym a lot. It's a big summer for me with just trying to fill out my frame a bit more. I want to try to crack my NHL lineup next year.

TSN: Where do you feel like you rank or should be considered in this year's draft class?

Martone: I'm not too sure right now. I think there's lots of good players in this draft ... It'll be interesting on draft day and where I do end up. Obviously, I want to go as high as I can. I want to be the highest pick I can be, but I think the real work will happen after that.

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TSN.CA / Hart takes the stand after Crown rests at London hockey trial

Rick Westhead

LONDON, ONT. – Carter Hart testified Thursday morning that he asked E.M. for oral sex when he and his teammates were in Michael McLeod's hotel room during the early morning hours of June 19, 2018, because he was intoxicated, excited and single.

Hart, 26, began testifying in person in his own defence in the sexual assault trial of five former members of Canada's 2018 world junior hockey team.

Hart's testimony came after Michael McLeod declined the opportunity to testify in the case.

The court has heard testimony that McLeod sent a group text message to all of the Team Canada players at 2:10 a.m. that morning that said "Who is up for a 3 way quick... 209-mikey"

Hart testified McLeod also phoned him to invite him to his room.

"The gist was Mike was with a girl back at the hotel who wanted to have sex with some of the boys," Hart testified about the call. "I was open to sexual encounters. A single guy, I was having a good time that weekend. I was open to it."

Hart told the trial that by that point in the evening he was "probably pretty drunk," after having consumed a number of drinks of champagne, vodka sodas and beer earlier.

McLeod, Hart, Alex Formenton, Dillon Dube, and Callan Foote are accused of sexually assaulting a then-20-year-old woman in McLeod's hotel room in the early morning hours of June 19, 2018. McLeod is facing a second charge as being a party to the act. The players have all pleaded not guilty.

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.

The Crown has alleged that Formenton had sex with E.M. in the bathroom, that McLeod, Hart and Dube received oral sex from the complainant, that Dube slapped E.M.'s naked buttocks, that Foote did the splits over E.M.'s head and "grazed" his genitals over her head, and that McLeod had sex with E.M. for a second time in the hotel room bathroom.

E.M. previously testified that while she was in McLeod's room, players spit on her, slapped her hard, laughed at her, and asked if she "could take" a golf club inside her vagina.

Hart testified that his first memory of E.M. in the room was seeing her laying on the floor masturbating in front of seven players.

"She seemed to be enjoying it," Hart testified. "She seemed to be enjoying that players were watching her do that. I remember her moaning."

"How were you feeling?" Hart's lawyer, Megan Savard, asked.

"Pretty excited," Hart answered. "I'm 19 years old and there's a naked girl in the room doing these things willingly. It was something I'd never seen before."

Hart testified that E.M. then asked the players to have sex with her.

"Guys were looking at each other like, is this real?" Hart said. "It was kind of crazy. Guys were saying to each other, 'You do it,' or 'You do it.' Most of the guys in the room had girlfriends... I was single at the time... I was the one standing closest next to her so I said, 'Can I get a blowie?' meaning blow job... She said 'Yeah' or 'Sure' or something along those lines."

Hart testified that E.M. helped him pull his khaki jogger pants down and gave him oral sex for between 30 and 60 seconds.

"I remember not being able to get fully erect," he said. "I was half hard, I guess... I do remember making eye contact with somebody. It just was like, weird."

Savard asked Hart why he would agree to a public sex act and he answered that he did not have vaginal sex with her.



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"I had a lot to drink that night," he said. "I was single. I was open to taking her up on one of her offers."

Hart testified that he remembered E.M. again asking players to have sex with her and then watched Formenton hold hands with E.M. and enter the bathroom together.

At about that point, Hart testified that he sent a text message to Team Canada teammate Dante Fabbro that said, "get to 209."

"Why did you invite him?" Savard asked.

"I remember most guys had girlfriends at the time," Hart answered. "Fabs was one of the only other guys on the team at the time who was single."

Hart testified that after E.M. came out of the bathroom, she lay down on the ground again and he watched as Foote did the splits overtop of her.

"Other guys in the room said, 'Do the splits,'" Hart said. "He's a big, tall dude, super flexible. It's a pretty cool thing for him to do... I don't believe he even went into a full split."

Hart testified that Foote did not make contact with E.M. and he wore a shirt and shorts.

"I remember when he did it guys thought it was pretty funny," Hart testified. "I thought it was funny, and I was standing right next to [Foote] when it happened. I looked and saw E.M. was laughing as well."

Hart, who said he was in McLeod's hotel room for about an hour, testified that he did not see E.M. have any sexual contact with Dube or McLeod.

Hart also testified Thursday about a June 26, 2018, group chat in which 11 players talked about what to say to Hockey Canada and police investigators who were probing E.M.'s complaint of sexual assault.

"We all need to say the same thing if we get interviewed," McLeod wrote to the group at 8:09 p.m. "Can't have different stories or make anything up."

Two minutes later, Jake Bean wrote: "No, boys. Like we don't need to make anything up. No one did anything wrong. We went to that room to eat. The girl came, she wanted to have sex with all of us. No one did. She gave a few guys head, and then we got out of the room when things got too crazy."

"All we have to say is someone brought the girl back to the room," Brett Howden wrote at 8:14 p.m. "We were all in there ordering food and then this girl started begging from everyone to have sex with her. Nobody would do it. But then as time went on she gave 3 guys head. Once things started to get out of hand we all left and got her out."

Hart testified on Thursday that at the time of that group text message, he was playing with the Philadelphia Flyers and was in New Jersey doing Navy SEAL training during the NHL team's development camp.

Hart testified that he first read the chat after he returned to his hotel room in New Jersey and saw 117 new text messages on his phone. After that group chat, Hart and McLeod spoke on the phone, Hart testified.

"I wanted to confirm if it was Hockey Canada or police or both who were doing an investigation," Hart said.

Hart testified that there were as many as eight men in the hotel room when E.M. was performing sexual acts on a bedsheet on the floor.

Under cross-examination from Formenton's lawyer, Hilary Dudding, Hart testified that he never saw anyone spit on E.M., laugh at her, degrade her, or treat her disrespectfully.

"Is that something that would have stood out to you?" Dudding asked.

"If something like that would have happened, I would have stopped, I would have left..." Hart answered.

Court adjourned for the day at about 2:30 p.m. ET after Crown attorney Meaghan Cunningham asked the judge for some time to prepare before her cross-examination of Hart.

Earlier on Thursday, Cunningham advised Justice Maria Carroccia that the Crown had finished presenting its case.

On Wednesday, Cunningham had told the court that she was considering calling an additional witness to testify following retired London police sergeant Stephen Newton.

Cunningham had contemplated calling Maxime Comtois, a former member of the 2018 Canadian world junior team who played this season in the KHL, a source familiar with the matter told TSN.

Comtois has not been accused of any criminal wrongdoing in the case.

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