



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 25, 2025

The Athletic

As Hockey Canada players' NHL return nears, how will they be embraced by their new teams?

By: Mark Lazerus

LAS VEGAS and RALEIGH, N.C. — Of the 61 NHL goaltenders who started at least 100 games between the 2018-19 and 2023-24 seasons, Carter Hart's .906 save percentage ranked 39th, wedged between Anton Forsberg and Philipp Grubauer. Fifty-three goalies saved more goals above expected than Hart's 12.93 in that span.

Meanwhile, 452 skaters posted more points than Michael McLeod's 85 in that same time span. He's a career minus-17 player who's averaged about 13 minutes per game.

But Hart was a No. 1 goalie in Philadelphia, a proven and reliable performer at a famously volatile position. And McLeod is a blazing skater and excellent at faceoffs, and, well, capable third-line centers don't grow on trees. Both are just 27 years old, in their physical primes. Both are unrestricted free agents. Both can help any number of NHL teams.

But both carry significant baggage, and signing them could come at a cost that goes beyond finances.

Almost from the moment Justice Maria Carroccia of the Ontario Superior Court deemed the so-called Hockey Canada Five — Hart, McLeod, Dillon Dubé, Cal Foote and Alex Formenton — not guilty of sexual assault at the end of a protracted and high-profile trial in July, much of the hockey world asked the same question: Would any NHL team sign any of these players? Or had their absence from the league been too long, the baggage too heavy, the potential public-relations backlash too severe?

It didn't take long to get an answer. The Hurricanes are seriously considering signing McLeod, a bottom-six center who last had 10 goals and nine assists in 45 games with the New Jersey Devils in 2023-24. And both the Hurricanes and Vegas Golden Knights are taking a long look at Hart, the Flyers' No. 1 goaltender for half a decade. The NHL decided that the players can agree to terms as soon as Oct. 1, can sign contracts on Oct. 15, and will be eligible to play in NHL games again on Dec. 1.

At this point, it's only a matter of time.

"Those guys have been through the whole thing and came out acquitted," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "I'm sure all of them regret what went on and what happened but are moving forward and moving on."

None of the players has played in the NHL since taking various forms of leaves of absence in January 2024, when

the sexual-assault charges were filed against them stemming from an incident in London, Ont., during a celebration of Team Canada's gold medal at the 2018 World Junior Championship. The trial lasted eight weeks, with several players' sexual encounter with a woman identified only as E.M. laid out in detail. The trial often had a carnival atmosphere, with an early mistrial and Carroccia dismissing a second jury and opting to decide the case on her own. Ultimately, Carroccia determined that E.M. had given clear consent that night.

In the meantime, McLeod and Dubé played in the KHL last season, while Foote played in Slovakia and Formenton remained in Switzerland, as he already was out of the NHL. Hart stayed in North America, preferring to train closer to home. Even after the trial ended, the league delayed their on-ice returns until Dec. 1, saying "the conduct at issue falls woefully short of the standards and values that the league and its member clubs expect and demand."

The Athletic visited both Raleigh, N.C., and Las Vegas in the past week to discuss the possible signings with each team. The Hurricanes acknowledged the gravity of the situation and were open to talking about it, even in somewhat awkward hypotheticals. Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour, for one, politely answered a few questions away from other gathered reporters following a practice on Friday. He pleaded unawareness of general manager Eric Tulsky's plans but had no qualms about bringing aboard one of the newly reinstated players.

"Obviously, that's news to me," Brind'Amour said when told the Hurricanes were considering both McLeod and Hart. "Rumors are rumors. Every time there's a player out there, they always say that our team's involved. I haven't given it much thought, but any player that comes here would be welcomed with open arms. That's the only reason we're bringing someone into this family. You've got to treat them like that. You're talking about a hypothetical, but that's how I would approach it."

On the other side of the country, the Golden Knights took a different tack. The team declined to allow head coach Bruce Cassidy to speak to The Athletic one-on-one after learning of the topic. Several minutes later, before Cassidy began a news conference, the spokesperson pulled an Athletic reporter out of the room and told him to leave the team's practice facility immediately. The Athletic's press pass for that evening's preseason game was revoked. The spokesperson said The Athletic had "ambushed" Noah Hanifin during routine locker-room media interviews that



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morning and the team was not “comfortable” allowing the reporter to cover the game.

Hanifin, for his part, showed no irritation at the questions (he was one of only two established players who made himself available for interviews that day). He said any player who joined the team would be shown love and support.

“Whenever you’re in a locker room with guys, you’re brothers, you’re family,” the veteran defenseman said. “You’re trying to take care of each other, no matter what’s going on, good or bad, off the ice. You want to make sure that when guys come to the rink, they feel they have the support and that they’re part of it. That’s a huge part of being on a team.

“Everyone that’s in this room right now, everyone has lives away from here. They have families, they have kids. When you come here, you’ve got to make sure everyone’s doing well mentally and feeling good. And if someone needs a hand or needs someone to talk to, that’s what your teammates are there for.”

That the Golden Knights, organizationally, were so on guard underscores the dicey nature of the decision facing Carolina, Vegas or any other team that chooses to sign one of the five players. On Tuesday morning, it was one reporter quietly asking somewhat vague and generalized questions. It’s not hard to envision what it’ll be like for any of these players following a morning skate in, say, Toronto, during the regular season.

Carter Hart leaves the courthouse on July 24, 2025 in London, Ontario, after being acquitted of sexual assault charges. (Cole Burston / Getty Images)

There are precedents for such a heightened media circus. In the summer of 2015, fresh off his third Stanley Cup championship, Chicago Blackhawks star Patrick Kane faced allegations of sexual assault in Western New York. The case dragged into training camp and the regular season. And even once the allegations were dismissed, Kane faced questions about the case in nearly every city the Blackhawks visited. Every road morning skate turned into an impromptu news conference at Kane’s locker stall. The swarms of reporters were particularly large and the questions particularly pointed in Canada, where the spotlight on hockey shines so much brighter than, say, Raleigh, Las Vegas or even Chicago. Some Blackhawks players privately groused about the frenzy, but it was mostly Kane’s burden to bear.

Brind’Amour doesn’t expect it to be any different should the Hurricanes sign McLeod and/or Hart.

“That’s on the player,” he said. “It does nothing for me.”

Staal faced a fraction of that scrutiny after his own teenage missteps. He’s never been on trial for his name and his career or had his sex life dissected in a courtroom, in barrooms and in newsrooms across the continent. And he’s never been out of the league for two years, wondering if he’d ever return, or if he’d ever be allowed to return. But he has been a young hockey star with the world at his feet, and he was arrested at age 18 for disorderly conduct, underage drinking and obstruction during his older brother Eric’s bachelor party in the summer of 2007. It was mostly late-night noise violations and harassing motorists. The charges

brought against the players in the Hockey Canada trial were far more serious and far more high-profile.

But Staal, now 37, is trying to extend some grace to them as they try to restart their careers.

“Everyone makes mistakes, including myself,” Staal said. “As an 18-year-old kid, I’ve done some stupid stuff. I went to jail. I had to go through a lot of crap because of it, and it wasn’t fun. I had to go through some crappy times, but I owned it.”

Staal has at least an idea of what the reinstated players might be looking at, particularly on trips to bigger, more hockey-obsessed markets.

“Media guys all want a little piece of them, and everyone wants to write their own little snippet and not miss out on the juicy stuff,” he said. “That’s part of making mistakes, too.”

As the Hockey Canada trial wore on, the Hurricanes weren’t really entertaining the idea of signing any of the five players should they be acquitted. But the nature of Carroccia’s judgment — she spent hours dissecting and picking apart E.M.’s claims — changed the team’s mindset. A team source, who spoke to The Athletic on condition of anonymity so they could talk candidly about sensitive information, was very clear that the organization isn’t merely writing off the incident as just “kids being kids” but noted there’s a significant difference between distasteful and criminal. The matter of consent was at the heart of the trial, and Carroccia’s determination that there was clear consent opened the door to the team at least considering signing the players.

From there, it becomes a matter of risk versus reward. The risk of signing any of these players is evident — they haven’t played in the NHL in two years and come with a hefty amount of public-relations baggage. Already, a group of fans in Carolina has organized to send the message to the organization that signing Hart or McLeod would be a red line for them, and 1,300-plus people have signed an online petition urging the team not to sign the players. Still, it’s no surprise that some teams would consider Hart, in particular, worth the risk, given his pedigree as a second-round pick and his steady career in Philadelphia.

From a roster-building standpoint, Vegas seems the more logical fit for Hart. Adin Hill’s backup, Akira Schmid, has only 48 NHL games under his belt, with a modest .903 save percentage. Carolina, meanwhile, has both Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov on the NHL roster, neither of whom would likely clear waivers to make room for Hart. Andersen is in the last year of his contract, though, so it might be worth it to Carolina to keep three goalies in the meantime to have a long-term solution in net.

Hurricanes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere played with Hart during the goalie’s first three seasons in Philadelphia.

“He was a really young guy when I played with him; he was our rookie, so to speak,” Gostisbehere said. “Great teammate, great kid. He’s obviously going through some stuff. But that’s the outside noise, and I’m sure he just wants to get back to playing hockey. If we do sign him, it’d be great. But we’ve got a good squad here, and I’m only going to comment on the guys who are in the room right now.”

McLeod isn’t nearly as high profile, but he can fill a need in almost any team’s bottom six. And for teams such as



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Carolina and Vegas that are chasing championships every year, any player could be the one who puts them over the top.

Players around the league, just like fans, are intimately familiar with the details of the Hockey Canada trial. But the players The Athletic spoke to were reluctant to draw any conclusions or make any judgments based on what they've heard or read. Hurricanes veteran Taylor Hall said any player who joined the team would get a fresh start, and a fair chance to prove himself a good teammate — and good person.

"Through the years, I've played with guys that you've heard things about," Hall said. "You just do your best to give them a clean slate and to respect them as a teammate, and ultimately help them be the best teammate they can be to help us be a good team and win games. It's not the end-all, be-all, winning games. But I've played with guys you've heard bad things about and they've been great. And then there's guys that have a great reputation and they come in and you're like, eh, not so sure."

As for the scrutiny that surely will follow these players, at least in the short term, Hall said that's just part of the job.

"Being an athlete, being a team, is about clearing those distractions out of the way and focusing on what's in here," Hall said. "If it ever came to that, I think we'd have chats as a team on how we're going to handle it internally, the media, and then go from there."

NHL players view their locker room as an almost hallowed place, their work a refuge of sorts. And outside issues —

whether familial and financial or salacious and self-inflicted — are left outside. Gostisbehere called hockey "an escape," saying that "you leave your problems at the door." The inevitable return of Hart, and the likely return of McLeod, will be one of the sternest tests of that magic force field yet.

There will be disdain and disgust from some corners, there will be forgiveness and acceptance from others, and there will be scrutiny from all. But in the cold calculus of professional sports, the quickest way for the players and the teams that sign them to move on will be to simply play well. The questions surrounding Kane in the fall of 2015 died down by midseason, not just because the case had been dismissed, but because Kane was lighting it up each night on his way to an MVP season. Fair or not, right or not, he changed the narrative. The sports world's attention span is fickle and fleeting like that.

"It'll all depend," Staal said. "If the outside stuff is affecting the game on the ice, then it definitely will come into the locker room. There's no question. Guys might hide it well, and you might not know, but in a lot of ways, you can tell. When there's stuff going on outside the rink and this person doesn't have the same mood as he usually does, you might know something's up, something's going on at home. That's where your teammates come in. We want to care for each other. That's a big thing we've tried to get a lot better at, being a family in here. It would end up in the room and it would have to get sorted out. But we'd help our teammate, our buddy, get through it. That's what being a team is all about."



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Recap: Late Surge Lifts Cats Past Canes

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

RALEIGH, N.C. - A largely dominant display by the Carolina Hurricanes crumbled in the third period on Wednesday as they fell to the Florida Panthers, 4-2, during the Canes' annual Community Benefit Game.

GAME SUMMARY | BOX SCORE | BUY TICKETS

A capacity crowd came ready to party, and just past the halfway point of the first period, they got their wish. As Ryan Suzuki opened the scoring with a deft deflection of Mike Reilly's wrister from range, Givani Smith simultaneously dropped the gloves with Ben Harpur, electrifying the locals.

Six minutes later, Jesperi Kotkaniemi extended Carolina's lead with a quick snap shot from the slot off an Andrei Svechnikov feed from behind the goal line.

But thanks in large part to some stellar stops from Daniil Tarasov (47 svs) that kept the Panthers in the game, Florida found late life with a seeing-eye shot early in the third. From there, three goals in the final four minutes lifted the visitors to victory.

Frederik Andersen stopped all eight shots he faced in the first 40 minutes, before Amir Miftakhov took over with four saves on seven shots in relief.

Stats & Standouts

Five players - Nikolaj Ehlers, Amir Miftakhov, Mike Reilly, Ivan Ryabkin and Dominik Badinka - made their Hurricanes preseason debuts on Wednesday. Reilly picked up the primary assist on Ryan Suzuki's opening strike and ranked second on the team in ice time (20:59).

Bradly Nadeau skated in Carolina's "top six" alongside Andrei Svechnikov and Jesperi Kotkaniemi. Known for his shooting ability, Nadeau fired four shots on net, but brought a notable edge to his game with four hits, good for second on the team behind Ivan Ryabkin.

Make it two fights in two games for Givani Smith, who is bringing his tenacious brand of hockey to Carolina on a Professional Try Out (PTO).

The Hurricanes fired a hefty 49 shots on net but solved Daniil Tarasov just twice, as the Russian backstop stood tall to keep the game in check amidst Carolina's dominance through two periods.

They Said It...

Nikolaj Ehlers following his first appearance with the team...

"I liked the way that we played in the first two periods. We put a lot of pressure on them and gave them nothing. I've played against this team enough to know that that's the identity of this team, and we did that for 40 minutes."

Nikolaj Ehlers on his first game with Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis...

"You want to lay a foundation in practice, but ultimately, it's the games that you find that chemistry, and you learn how to play with each other. I think we did a lot of good things today, but also a lot of shifts where nothing was happening at all. That's also part of playing in the NHL. We've got some work to do."

Sebastian Aho on the team's performance...

"Brutal third period, but at least we got the lesson on how not to play hockey in the third period. Obviously, this time of year, it doesn't really matter, but the good thing is we can get some clips and some talking points out of the third period. We had plenty of chances to put the game away..."

Rod Brind'Amour on the outcome...

"It sucks to play a game like that and lose. But there's a reason we lost, too. We could've walked out of that game and won 5-2, and still didn't have a very good segment in there. Now, it's obvious, so we can hammer home the point a little more. It's great that that game doesn't count."

Rod Brind'Amour appreciating the sell-out crowd and the Canes Community Game initiatives...

"I think it's really important... The fan base and the Hurricanes, we have a great relationship. Anything we can do to show our appreciation is special, so I'm glad that we do it."

What's Next?

The Canes are set to resume practicing in two groups on Thursday. They'll then take a group of players to Benchmark International Arena for a Friday night meeting with the Lightning.

Next Game: Friday, Sept. 26 at Tampa Bay | 7:00 p.m. ET | Watch Live on Hurricanes.com

Next Home Game: Sunday, Sept. 28 vs. Nashville | 7:00 p.m. ET | Tickets | Parking



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Sept. 24: NHL Preseason Roundup

By: NHL.com

Nikolaj Ehlers made his debut for the Carolina Hurricanes in a 4-2 loss to the Florida Panthers at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Wednesday.

The 29-year-old, who signed a six-year, \$51 million contract (\$8.5 million average annual value) as a free agent on July 3, was minus-3 and had four shots in 17:00 of ice time.

Daniil Tarasov made 47 saves for the Panthers (1-2-0). Ben Harpur and Mike Benning, who signed a one-year, two-way contract with Florida on Aug. 14, each had a goal and an assist.

Ryan Suzuki and Jesperi Kotkaniemi scored for the Hurricanes (0-2-0). Frederik Andersen stopped all eight shots he faced before being replaced by Amir Miftakhov, who allowed three goals on seven shots in the third period.

Suzuki gave Carolina a 1-0 lead at 10:07 of the first period, redirecting Mike Reilly's shot from the left point.

Kotkaniemi made it 2-0 at 16:20. Following a turnover by Florida below its own goal line, Kotkaniemi took a short pass from Andrei Svechnikov and scored under the glove of Tarasov from the right hash marks.

Harpur, who is attending camp on a professional tryout agreement, cut it to 2-1 at 3:56 of the third period. He scored through a screen with a shot from the right point.

Noah Gregor, who is also attending camp on a PTO, tied it 2-2 at 16:02. He poked the puck away from Miftakhov behind the net, skated out front, and took a pass from Gracyn Sawchyn before quickly scoring into the open cage.

Benning then gave the Panthers a 3-2 lead at 17:19, and Jack Studnicka shot into an empty net at 19:22 for the 4-2 final.

Blue Jackets 4, Penguins 1: Yegor Chinakhov and Dante Fabbro each had a goal and an assist, and the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins at Nationwide Arena in Columbus.

Jake Christiansen and Kent Johnson also scored, and Zach Werenski had two assists for the Blue Jackets (2-2-0). Jet Greaves made 24 saves.

Zach Gallant scored for the Penguins (0-1-1). Arturs Silovs stopped 12 of 14 shots before being replaced midway

through the second period by Filip Larsson, who made eight saves.

Gallant put the Penguins up 1-0 at 9:45 of the first period with a wrist shot from the right circle.

Chinakhov tied it 1-1 at 17:24. He took a feed from Werenski and scored with a wrist shot from the top of the left circle.

Christiansen gave Columbus a 2-1 lead at 4:53 of the second period with a power-play goal.

Johnson made it 3-1 during a 5-on-3 power play at 11:12 of the third period. With Boone Jenner providing a screen in front, Johnson beat Larsson with a wrist shot from just above the top of the left circle.

Fabbro scored a short-handed empty-net goal at 16:56 for the 4-1 final.

Penguins at Blue Jackets | Recap

Kraken 4, Oilers 1: Joey Daccord stopped all 16 shots he faced for the Seattle Kraken against the Edmonton Oilers at Rogers Place in Edmonton.

Ben Meyers and Logan Morrison each had a goal and an assist for the Kraken (2-1-0). Nikke Kokko allowed one goal on nine shots after replacing Daccord at the start of the third period.

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl were each held without a point in their first game this preseason for the Oilers (2-1-1). Stuart Skinner gave up three goals on 18 shots in his first game of the preseason.

Jagger Firkus scored on the power play at 19:30 of the first period to give Seattle a 1-0 lead.

Morrison made it 2-0 at 15:02 of the second period, sliding a shot five-hole on Skinner from in front.

Andrew Mangiapane cut it to 2-1 at 9:03 of the third period. He was making his preseason debut with the Oilers after signing a two-year, \$7.2 million contract (\$3.6 million average annual value) on July 1.

Meyers responded at 12:13 to push the lead to 3-1. He one-timed a backhand pass from Jaden Schwartz, who was behind the net.

Jani Nyman scored into an empty net at 19:23 for the 4-1 final.



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Oilers forward Vasily Podkolzin did not play after taking a leave of absence to return to his native Russia following the death of his father, Alexander, on Tuesday.

Kraken at Oilers | Recap

Kings 3, Ducks 0: Darcy Kuemper stopped all 14 shots he faced in his first game this preseason for the Los Angeles Kings, who shut out the Anaheim Ducks at Honda Center in Anaheim.

Jeff Malott had a goal and an assist, and Kevin Fiala and Martin Chromiak also scored for the Kings (3-0-0).

Lukas Dostal stopped 17 of 18 shots for the Ducks (1-2-0) before being replaced midway through the second period by Calle Clang, who allowed two goals on 12 shots.

Chromiak gave the Kings a 1-0 lead at 18:26 of the first period, finishing on a rush with a wrist shot from the right circle.

Malott extended it to 2-0 at 7:42 of the third period, redirecting Kyle Burroughs' point shot from the slot.

Fiala made it 3-0 at 12:23 when he knocked in Alex Laferrriere's backhand pass from behind the net.

Kings at Ducks | Recap

Canucks 3, Flames 1: Tom Willander, who was selected with the No. 11 pick in the 2023 NHL Draft, had two assists for the Vancouver Canucks in their win against the Calgary Flames at Abbotsford Centre in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Thatcher Demko stopped 11 of 12 shots for the Canucks (1-1-0) before being replaced by Nikita Tolopilo at the start of the third period. Tolopilo made seven saves.

Ivan Prosvetov made 28 saves for the Flames (2-2-0).

Nils Hoglander gave the Canucks a 1-0 lead with a power-play goal at 5:02 of the first period, putting in the rebound of Willander's shot off the right post.

However, Hoglander left in the second period with a lower-body injury.

Victor Mancini made it 2-0 at 7:16 of the first period, burying a centering feed out of the left corner from Linus Karlsson.

Filip Chytil pushed it to 3-0 at 12:56 of the second period, scoring a power-play goal on a wrist shot from the left circle. Willander had the secondary assist on the play.

Connor Zary pulled Calgary to within 3-1 at 14:24, scoring his own power-play goal after Martin Pospisil redirected the puck to him at the right of the net.



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Stanley Cup contender rankings: Who dethrones Panthers, Oilers? - ESPN

By: Neil Paine

The NHL, especially in the salary cap era, is usually defined by change and upheaval -- familiar contenders turning their rosters over, while new powers emerge in their place.

That's why it was so striking to see the same two Stanley Cup finalists -- the Florida Panthers and Edmonton Oilers -- in back-to-back seasons, the league's first Cup rematch since 2008-09, and only the second since 1983-84. Add in Florida's appearance in the 2023 Final as well, and the NHL hasn't had fewer unique finalists over a three-year span (just three different teams) since 1954-56, when only the Detroit Red Wings and Montreal Canadiens reached the Final in those three years.

This run of Panthers-Oilers dominance won't last forever, and it almost certainly won't survive past 2025-26 if Connor McDavid doesn't re-sign with Edmonton after his current contract ends at the end of the year. But for now, ESPN BET's preseason odds again list Florida (+300) as the East favorite and Edmonton (+400) as the West's top pick, suggesting that another rematch is the likeliest outcome.

Of course, that's only true until it's not. So the question becomes: If it's not Florida and Edmonton yet again, who's next in line to face off for the Cup?

Let's dive into the most plausible challengers from each conference, just waiting to skate through if the Panthers and/or Oilers slip up, plus a couple of up-and-coming teams who could crash the party as well.

Note: All odds below courtesy of ESPN BET.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Carolina Hurricanes

Odds to make Final: +360 | Win Cup: +800

Why they haven't broken through yet: It's an excellent question that the Canes are still trying to answer. Despite making the postseason seven straight years, Carolina's 44 playoff wins have never led to a Stanley Cup Final appearance -- giving them the most victories amassed in such a stretch without getting there at least once, topping Toronto's old record of 41 from 1998 to 2004.

Along the way, the team has made the Eastern Conference finals in two of the past three seasons, but couldn't score enough to avoid a Florida sweep in 2023. And their goaltending, always a huge concern, couldn't stop enough Panthers (most notably Sam Bennett) in 2025.

Why 2025-26 could be different: Carolina will once again ride with Pyotr Kochetkov and Frederik Andersen in net, which is

reason enough to wonder if things will be different from last year (when they combined for a .823 SV% in the Eastern Conference finals loss to Florida). But new forward Nikolaj Ehlers ought to provide an offensive charge, while trade addition K'Andre Miller and prospect Alexander Nikishin give this blue line -- usually a big strength anyway -- more youth and upside, especially if Miller can recapture his 2022-23 form after a downturn in recent years.

Otherwise, the Hurricanes are counting on their familiar puck-possession system to finally add up to victory against a Florida core that returns mostly intact from last year. We'll see.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Odds to make Final: +650 | Win Cup: +1400

Why they haven't broken through (recently): Tampa Bay certainly has broken through before, winning two Cups -- in 2020 and 2021 -- and reaching another Final in 2022. And just when it seemed like that dynastic run was winding down, the Lightning rebounded in 2024-25, with their best goals per game differential since 2018-19 (+0.91).

But, as in the 2019 postseason, that regular-season success didn't translate. The Lightning were bounced in the first round by Florida in five games for the second straight year, a huge reversal from the old days of Bolts domination in the cross-state rivalry.

Why 2025-26 could be different: First and foremost, the Lightning continue to boast one of the league's most talented cores, which offers reason to think they can get back to seriously contending for the Cup again. They lost little of consequence over the offseason -- defenseman Nick Perbix was the only real departure -- though they also added little, and a team that was the NHL's fifth oldest in 2024-25 isn't getting any younger.

Someday Nikita Kucherov, Andrei Vasilevskiy, Victor Hedman and Jake Guentzel will slow down. But until then, this team still carries the potential to go toe-to-toe with Florida, even if the past two playoff results aren't what Tampa Bay has experienced previously in that rivalry.

New Jersey Devils

Odds to make Final: +850 | Win Cup: +1600

Why they haven't broken through yet: So much depends on the availability of Jack Hughes. When Hughes last played more than 62 games in a season in 2022-23, the Devils ranked No. 4 leaguewide in goals per game; with him missing 20 games in each of the past two seasons, New



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Jersey's ranking in that metric fell to 12th in 2023-24 and then 20th last season.

Along with that offensive slide, the team fell out of the playoffs in 2023-24 -- costing coach Lindy Ruff his job -- and lost in Round 1 to Carolina in five games a year ago, a disappointing end for a team that was third best in goal differential and third youngest (a promising combo!) back in 2022-23.

Why 2025-26 could be different: Hughes' return to health at the start of 2025-26 camp has New Jersey eyeing a return to the potential of a few years earlier. The Devils have scored 3.13 GPG over the past two seasons with Hughes in the lineup, versus 2.93 without him, which would be the difference between 12th and 21st in the league in 2024-25.

To help them score even more, the Devils added Evgenii Dadonov this summer. Russian right wing Arseniy Gritsyuk might be an interesting pickup as well. If they can resolve their contract impasse with Hughes' brother Luke, the Devils could challenge for the East -- but they'll need to figure out how to solve a Carolina team that bounced them in 2023 and 2025.

Worth a flier?

Ottawa Senators

Odds to make Final: +1200 | Win Cup: +3500

Ottawa finally broke its seven-year playoff drought in 2024-25 with a young core starring Brady Tkachuk, Tim Stützle, Jake Sanderson and Shane Pinto, who were all 25 or younger a year ago.

The Senators are still learning how to win, but they'll return that same young core -- plus good young defenseman Jordan Spence -- to see if they can improve further after last season's 19-point upgrade in the standings.

Montreal Canadiens

Odds to make Final: +2800 | Win Cup: +5000

The Habs have made real progress in recent seasons -- three straight campaigns of an improved goals differential -- culminating in their first playoff berth since 2021. Nick Suzuki's 89 points were the most by a Canadian in nearly three decades, and Cole Caufield's 37 goals were the most by a Montreal player his age since 1989-90.

With that young duo leading the way, and an upgraded roster that added defenseman Noah Dobson and forward Zack Bolduc, Montreal may finally be on the verge of something big.

The rest of the East

Toronto Maple Leafs (+1000 to make Stanley Cup Final)

Washington Capitals (+1400)

New York Rangers (+1600)

Boston Bruins (+3300)

Columbus Blue Jackets (+3300)

Detroit Red Wings (+3300)

Philadelphia Flyers (+3300)

New York Islanders (+4000)

Buffalo Sabres (+6000)

Pittsburgh Penguins (+6000)

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Colorado Avalanche

Odds to make Final: +450 | Win Cup: +800

Why they haven't broken through (recently): The Avs had one of the best teams in hockey history when they won the Cup in 2022, seemingly portending a run of future success in the same style the team enjoyed during the '90s and 2000s.

Instead, they fell victim to the familiar attrition that champions face during the salary cap era, between injuries (Gabriel Landeskog) and departures (Darcy Kuemper, Mikko Rantanen, Nazem Kadri, Andre Burakovsky). Colorado has remained among the league's better teams, but its goal differential has declined for four seasons running now.

Why 2025-26 could be different: Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar aren't slowing down. They've collectively posted 438 points over the past two seasons, the most in consecutive years by any forward/defenseman duo in more than three decades.

With that kind of talent at the core -- bolstered with the return of trade deadline acquisition Brock Nelson and the veteran additions of Brent Burns and Victor Olofsson -- the Avs may have another run in them despite losing to the Dallas Stars in consecutive postseasons.

Vegas Golden Knights

Odds to make Final: +450 | Win Cup: +850

Why they haven't broken through (recently): The Golden Knights were better on paper last regular season (+0.68 goal differential per game) than they were when they won the Cup -- still the only team to beat Florida in its past 12 postseason series -- in 2023 (+0.52).

But the playoff offense that once carried them has vanished, dropping from 4.00 goals per game in that Cup run to just 2.44 since, capped by back-to-back shutout losses to Edmonton in the second round last spring. The talent and depth have still been there, but the results have not quite followed.

Why 2025-26 could be different: The main reason for optimism in Vegas is that the Knights reeled in the biggest fish of the 2025 offseason, acquiring star winger Mitch Marner in a sign-and-trade from Toronto in late June. Marner has averaged 29 adjusted goals, 65 adjusted assists and 94 adjusted points per season since 2020-21, making him one of the most dangerous offensive threats (particularly among setup men) in the league.

While we've seen players take time to adjust to new systems and teammates, Marner will ease into his new situation alongside talents like Jack Eichel, which is a scary pairing to think about in the playoffs (where Marner's struggles have tended to be overstated).

Dallas Stars

Odds to make Final: +475 | Win Cup: +1000



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Why they haven't broken through yet: Why, indeed? Much like Carolina, the Stars keep slamming into a wall just shy of the Cup Final: Dallas has piled up 29 playoff wins over the past three seasons -- the most by a team in a three-year span without reaching the Final -- and all it has yielded is back-to-back losses to Edmonton in the conference finals.

Some historic franchises with similar near misses eventually broke through, but the lingering question for the Stars is whether their current group can ever take the final step.

Why 2025-26 could be different: Mikko Rantanen will be with the team for an entire season, which can only help after the Finnish winger became the best player in NHL history to skate for three different teams in the same campaign (Avalanche, Hurricanes, Stars) a year ago.

Otherwise, the Stars also shuffled the deck a fair amount over the offseason, firing coach Pete DeBoer -- bringing back former bench boss Glen Gulutzan -- and undergoing the biggest net loss in goals above replacement of any team. That may not seem like cause for optimism at all, but the Panthers could tell you that sometimes a drastic shakeup in identity is exactly what a team needs to finally get over the hump.

Worth a flier?

Los Angeles Kings

Odds to make Final: +1000 | Win Cup: +2000

It might seem wild to think the Kings, of all teams, could dethrone the Oilers in the West -- seeing as L.A. has now lost to Edmonton in four straight postseasons, becoming just the fourth team in any of the big four men's leagues to drop four consecutive playoff matchups to the same opponent (without a head-to-head win preceding the streak).

However, the Kings remain intriguing for their mix of youth and experience. And not for nothing, their offseason

additions included Corey Perry, whose team has made the Cup Final in five of the past six seasons.

Utah Mammoth

Odds to make Final: +2000 | Win Cup: +4000

It isn't very hard to get excited about the Mammoth as the next potential West contender. This was the league's seventh-youngest roster a year ago -- led by Clayton Keller, Mikhail Sergachev, Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther, all 26 or younger -- and the team improved its goal differential for the third consecutive season.

Adding to that foundation, Utah traded for talented forward JJ Peterka and signed veteran defenseman Nate Schmidt and forward Brandon Tanev during an offseason that was a net positive on talent added. Dating back to its Arizona days, this franchise has made the playoffs just once (2020) since 2012, but brighter days are on the horizon in Utah.

The rest of the West

Winnipeg Jets (+1200 to make Stanley Cup Final)

Minnesota Wild (+1700)

St. Louis Blues (+2200)

Vancouver Canucks (+3000)

Nashville Predators (+3300)

Calgary Flames (+4000)

Anaheim Ducks (+5000)

Seattle Kraken (+10000)

Chicago Blackhawks (+15000)

San Jose Sharks (+30000)



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Panthers 4, Hurricanes 2

By: Al Hood

A packed Lenovo Center witnessed a great first two periods for the Carolina Hurricanes, as the annual Preseason Community Game was a rousing success. Unfortunately the lack of goalie depth was also on display as the Panthers roared back from a 2-0 deficit to take the game 4-2.

Tickets were General Admission at just \$10 plus fees with fans able to sit anywhere, and the fans took advantage as they filled out every section. The atmosphere sounded closer to an important regular season game. The Panthers played their part by sending up a roster that will likely have no NHL regulars on it. Meanwhile the Hurricanes had their likely top line of Aho-Ehlers-Jarvis starting, as well as Jesperi Kotkaniemi centering a line with Andrei Svechnikov and top prospect Bradly Nadeau. Both lines showed out, though only one was able to score.

The Canes outshot the Panthers 17-3 in the first period, scored twice, and had about three minutes straight on the Power Play with a solid minute of 5-on-3. Panthers goalie Daniil Tarasov kept the Canes off the scoresheet during the Power Play, but couldn't hold them back the entire period.

Not long after the conclusion of the Power Plays, an odd sequence created the first Carolina goal. Mike Reilly blasted a shot from the blue line in on Tarasov, but in front of him the Canes' Givani Smith and Florida's Ben Harpur were jawing at each other. Ryan Suzuki was able to deflect the puck by Tarasov, followed immediately by Smith and Harpur fighting. The goal stood, and the Canes were off and running.

Six minutes later, Svechnikov fed a great pass from the board behind the goal to a wide open Kotkaniemi who didn't hesitate to shoot, getting it by Tarasov. It was good to see the chemistry early as the the number two center position is one fans are keeping an eye on, and if Kotkaniemi can

continue to produce it would answer a lot of questions. The Canes went into the locker room after the first up 2-0.

The second period was a little more disjointed as the Canes were called for their first two penalties of the night, and the kill did the job by keeping the Panthers off the board. Late in the second the Canes got another chance at the man advantage and again had a couple good looks, but were unable to connect. Through two periods the Canes had a 35-8 shot advantage but still led by a 2-0 score.

It looked like Andersen was going to play the whole game, but some action at the end of the second finished his night, and Amir Miftakov relieved him for the third, which is where the game went south for the Canes. After the game coach Rod Brind'Amour said the plan was to only play him half the game, but his lack of action necessitated him finishing out the period.

The Canes started the third with another empty Power Play—going 0-5 on the night. Not long after, Ben Harpur, Noah Gregor, and Michael Benning all scored to turn the game around for the Panthers. Gregor's goal was perhaps the most egregious as it came off a misplay behind the net from Miftakov, and the puck landed right in Gregor's stick for an empty net goal. Benning was able to just get one over the line to give the Panthers the lead, and then when the Canes pulled Miftakov, Jack Studnicka was credited with a empty netter when a clear trickled all the way into the cage.

Overall a lot of positives for the Canes and the crowd was entertained, but there'll be a lot to look for from the third period.

The Canes are in action next on Friday Night in Tampa before wrapping up the home portion of the preseason against Nashville on Sunday.



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The Hockey News

Carter Hart Reportedly Is Considering Signing With Hurricanes

By: Remy Mastey

According to Chris Johnston of The Athletic, Carter Hart is still considering signing with the Vegas Golden Knights, Carolina Hurricanes and one or two more unnamed teams.

The NHL announced earlier this month that it was reinstating the five players including Hart who were acquitted of sexual assault charges stemming from an incident in 2018 when they were members of Canada's world junior team, and that they will be eligible to sign a contract Oct. 15 and take part in games Dec. 1.

"It's getting down to decision time for Carter Hart, obviously a free agent ever since the NHL earlier this month cleared him

and his teammates from the Hockey Canada trial for reinstatement into the league," Johnston said.

"And where Hart has been since then is working through the available options. He's down to about three to four potential teams at this point in time, two of those teams I can tell you are the Vegas Golden Knights and Carolina Hurricanes. And the expectation here is in the coming day or two or maybe three, he will start to rule out some of those remaining teams, obviously pick where he is going."

The Hurricanes are going into the season with Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov as their main goalies.

'It's Great That The Game Doesn't Count, Let's Put It That Way': Nikolaj Ehlers, Sebastian Aho, Rod Brind'Amour On Preseason Loss

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes suffered a third-period collapse Wednesday night at Lenovo Center, losing 4-2 to the Florida Panthers in their second preseason contest despite outshooting them 49-16.

It was clear that the Hurricanes outclassed the Panthers' NHL regular-less roster through 40 minutes, but the Canes decided to start packing it in early after going up 2-0 and you can't really do that.

After the game, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour along with Nikolaj Ehlers and Sebastian Aho spoke with the media. Here's what they had to say:

Rod Brind'Amour

On his first impressions of Nikolaj Ehlers in game action and on the top line: I thought they were good early. Had some buzz and then as the game went on, it kind of wasn't great. But I think it's tough to play in these games, I get it. But you can see that they generated a bunch early. Hopefully that will continue.

On Bradly Nadeau: He had some chances, one near the end Svech set him up. Again, he's a young kid still trying to figure it out. We'll keep giving him opportunity.

On it being a community game: I think it's very important. The fanbase and the Hurricanes, we have a good relationship and I think anything we can do to show our appreciation is special, so I'm glad that we do it.

On Givani Smith: There's not much not to like about the way he's played. You always want to know when you ask about a player, 'What does he do and what can he provide?' and it's pretty obvious if you watch.

On seeing Dominik Badinka and Ivan Ryabkin in game action for the first time: They did fine. For a young kid, it wasn't NHL players they played against, but it's still men and I thought [Ryabkin] did well and Badinka isn't much older. He's a young guy too. The key is to not look out of place, right? If you can fit in and then all of a sudden, they did. They looked right at home there. So I think that's real positive.

On if he considered giving Frederik Andersen the full 60 minutes: Nah. Really, I think originally we were thinking maybe just go half, but it didn't feel like he even had to make a save. But it's not really about that either. It's more like, 'Okay, we got through it without any incidents, let's get him out of there.' That's kind of what the decision was.

On Mike Reilly: I thought he was good tonight. Again, those are guys that could be really, really important at some point or maybe even right away. You don't know how it's going to shake out. Those guys that are new like that, I think it's important for them to get acclimated to what we're doing. Now we have clips and things we can teach off of to get everybody up to speed even more so.

On having a learning moment from how the game ended: It sucks to play a game like that and then lose, but there's a reason we lost too. We could have walked out of that game 5-2 and still didn't have a very good segment in there, but now it's obvious. So we can hammer home the point a little



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more. It's great that the game doesn't count, let's put it that way.

Nikolaj Ehlers

On his impressions from his first game as a Hurricane: I like the way we played in the first two periods. We put a lot of pressure on them, gave them nothing. I've played against this team enough to know that that's the identity of this team and we did that for 40 minutes.

On the impact of game action over practice: You want to lay a foundation in practice, but ultimately, it's the games that you find that chemistry in and where you learn how to play with each other. I think we did a lot of good things today, but there were also a lot of shifts where there was really nothing happening at all, but that's a part of playing in the NHL. We got some work to do.

On putting on the jersey for the first time and playing in front of the Lenovo Center crowd: It was really cool. The jerseys were looking pretty nice. Lots of fans out there, which is always nice. You want to play in front of a lot of fans. Felt good. Obviously it sucks to lose, always does, but it was a good first game. Got some game legs in you, but there's a lot better in this room.

Sebastian Aho

On the team's performance: Obviously a brutal third period, but at least we got a lesson on how not to play hockey. Obviously this time of year doesn't really matter, but I guess the good thing is we can get some clips and talking points out of the third period, but obviously we had plenty of chances to put the game away, but obviously that last... You play a real game, you do whatever you can, the last little step to put the puck in. But I guess it was a good day to miss all those and save them for the regular season and the real games.

On building chemistry with Nikolaj Ehlers: I think that's the good part about the preseason. You bring a new guy in and there's probably a thousand little details that you have to soak in all at once and then when you play a game, you really see and feel how each situation goes. I know already that we're going to build a lot better chemistry just buying in and doing the little details the right way. Every team has different tendencies and like I said, that's why the preseason is good when you're trying to learn a new system and new guys and all that.

On getting reps with the full PP1 unit: Obviously when we start in a couple of weeks, that's a big part of hockey right now. Special teams, a lot of times, dictate how the games go and obviously we did some good things and had some good looks. We'll build here in the preseason so we can be as sharp as possible when we start.

Mike Reilly Provides Hurricanes With The Veteran Blueline Depth They Lacked Last Season

By: Ryan Henkel

There were many reasons why the Carolina Hurricanes came up short against the Florida Panthers in last season's Eastern Conference Final, but perhaps the biggest was due to the team's deployment of two rookie defensemen.

Injuries to Jalen Chatfield and Sean Walker put the Canes in a no-win position, and with no real veteran depth defenders in the organization at the time, the coaching staff was forced to turn to two players who quite simply were not ready for the moment.

Carolina Hurricanes Preseason Game #2

"[Having to play two rookies] is tougher than people realize," Brind'Amour said after the Florida series. "It just puts so much stress on the other guys. ... Throwing in guys who haven't played at this level, it's asking a lot."

Brind'Amour knew that the team had blundered with their blueline depth last season — perhaps also partly because the Mikko Rantanen trade went all the way to wire at the trade deadline, leaving the team with very little time for any other negotiations — and he didn't want that to be a recurring problem.

"We're going to go back this summer... when you get into the playoffs, you have to make sure you probably have a little more depth at that position," Brind'Amour said.

So when July 1 rolled around, the Canes knew that adding a veteran, depth blueliner was something that was high on their list.

Hence the signing of Mike Reilly to a one-year, \$1.1 million deal.

"It's critical when it becomes critical and, you know, it became critical," Brind'Amour said. "That was obviously a big issue. One way to avoid it is brining in veteran guys at that position and that's what we did."

The 6-foot-2 blueliner brings a two-way game and over 400 games of NHL experience to the table.

Reilly has played for six other organizations throughout his career, while racking up 18 goals and 124 points.

However, there was a worry that the Minnesota native wasn't even going to be able to continue playing just a year ago.

Reilly missed the majority of last season after a congenital heart condition was discovered during testing for a concussion he suffered in a game on Nov. 1, 2024.

"It was picked up through the different echocardiograms that you do for different reasons that you go through with any post-concussion situation," said Islanders general manager Lou Lamoriello back in November. "It's probably a blessing in disguise of what transpired. They detected this, something that you're sometimes born with but never knew. ... [His quality of life will be] 100 percent, and he will be able to play once this procedure is done."

The veteran was ultimately cleared to return to the ice, playing in the Islanders final seven games of the season, but the ailment certainly didn't do the blueliner any favors heading into free agency.



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"Obviously last year was a tough year," Reilly told The Hockey News. "Didn't play much and had all that health stuff going on, so coming into free agency, I was in a tough spot. But Carolina was interested in making it happen and I was excited."

Reilly is no stranger to the Hurricanes, having played against them for so many years, including two separate playoff series (2022 with BOS, 2024 with NYI).

"I've played against them a bunch, couple of playoff series and I'm familiar with a couple of guys who are here currently or had played here as well (perhaps former roommate and Golden Gopher teammate Brady Skjei had some good things to say)," Reilly said. "I think it's a fast-paced style and

structure, which I think suits me and I think there's good opportunities for the D to jump in once we get the puck going up north and moving with speed."

The veteran isn't likely to start the year, but injuries are a constant threat in the NHL, and there's a better chance than not that the Hurricanes will have to call on him eventually and he's confident that he'll be ready for that chance.

But he's okay with waiting for that moment too.

"I'm an easy-going guy and everyday I like to have a smile on my face regardless of what's going on," Reilly said. "I just try to be a good teammate."

Olympic Aspirations, New Teammates and Rising Stardom: A Q&A With Seth Jarvis

By: Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes have high hopes heading into another season with Rod Brind'Amour at the helm and a young, talented core.

One such piece of that young core is Seth Jarvis, who had a career season last year with 32 goals (led the team) and 67 points in 73 games.

I caught up with Jarvis Wednesday morning before his first preseason action of the year.

How was your summer?

"It was fantastic. Did nothing really. Stayed mostly in the city. Uhhhh... yeah."

How's the shoulder feeling?

"Faaaantastic."

From meeting the Finnish President to a surprise run-in with one of his childhood idol, Seth Jarvis had quite the summer adventure.

thehockeynews.com1 Week in Finland: Inside Seth Jarvis' Nordic Summer VacationFrom meeting the Finnish President to a surprise run-in with one of his childhood idol, Seth Jarvis had quite the summer adventure.

So they put out the trailer for the FACEOFF: Inside the NHL Amazon documentary. What was that whole experience like? Like having the camera crews following you around all the time and whatnot?

"It was weird. I've never had a camera crew follow me around like that before, but it was fun. It was cool to give them insight on kind of my life and my story and how I operate day-to-day. I think maybe some people expect it, but I think a lot of people will be surprised. It was fun for the most part."

You think it's gonna win you some new fans?

"I hope so. I don't know. I think a lot of people are gonna think I'm an idiot, which already happens, so..."

I don't think anyone here thinks that...

"On the team they do, for sure. Probably Roddy too."

Last season, you led the team in goals for the first time in your career. So what are your expectations for yourself heading into this year?

"I gotta do it again. I gotta score more. You always want to get better, always want to take big jumps. Obviously 30 to 40 is a big jump, but it's something I think I definitely can do and then once I get that, 40 to 50 and then keep going from there. Who knows, maybe even 82 one year. You never know. That would be fun."

What have been your impressions of Nikolaj Ehlers so far? You'll get the chance to finally play with him tonight.

"I'm excited. I think it will be a lot of fun. He obviously brings a ton of speed and skill, which is obviously always helpful, especially with the way we play. I think the pace that he brings is going to be really helpful for us and I think he just brings another element to our team that other teams have to worry about. The way he can create offense just by himself is super helpful for us."

Do you like playing preseason games? How many games do you like to get before starting the regular season?

"I like playing. I think a couple games usually because obviously we haven't really played with hitting or anything like that and that's a whole 'nother type of conditioning and then just getting into the systems and playing against a live team is always fun. I don't mind it at all. I think getting a couple of games in would be good to get ready."

How are you hoping to carry over your momentum from last year — leading goal scorer, strong playoffs, 4 Nations Face-Off — into winning a spot on Team Canada's Olympic roster?

"Obviously it's nice to have in the back of my mind that I'm capable of that stuff, but it's a new season. Everything that happened, so now it's up to me to make a push for the roster. Obviously it's super competitive, but I'm just going to go out there and try to put my best foot forward every night. Whatever happens, happens, but I just want to know that I gave it my best effort and that I put my best



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showing out and that I did everything I can in my control to influence their decision."

What's it like now not being the youngster anymore in training camp?

"It's cool. It feels like forever ago now [when I had my first training camp], but it's fun to see how these guys develop. Obviously you see them here for a short period of time and

then don't see them for a whole year and then it kind of repeats itself, so just seeing the steps those guys have taken is fun to watch. But obviously guys are pushing for your spot, so you always have to keep that in the back of your mind."

You gotta go let 'em know.

"Exactly."

LINKS

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

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The Athletic / The 2025-26 NHL prospects viewing guide: How to watch the CHL, NCAA, SHL and more

By Scott Wheeler

Sept. 24, 2025 Updated 11:02 am EDT

A new hockey season is here and you want to spend more time watching your team's prospects but you don't know where to start. I get it. There is a web of leagues outside the NHL sprawled across North America and Europe, and it can be hard to keep tabs on the various professional, junior, college and even high school levels.

Well, don't worry, because you're probably asking yourself the same questions a lot of other fans are: How and where can I watch, and what or who should I be watching?

That's where this piece comes in — bookmark it as your primer for all of the leagues outside the NHL for the 2025-26 season.

It includes the prospects calendar, with all of the key dates and events for the upcoming season, plus your viewing guide for all of the following leagues:

AHL and ECHL

CHL (OHL, QMJHL, WHL)

USHL and NTDP

NCAA (Big Ten, Hockey East, NCHC, CCHA, ECAC, Atlantic Hockey)

Canada and U.S. high school hockey

Russia (KHL, VHL, MHL)

Sweden (SHL, HockeyAllsvenskan, HockeyEttan, J20)

Finland (Liiga, Mestis, U20)

Czechia (Tipsport Extraliga, U20)

Slovakia (Tipos Extraliga, U20)

Germany (DEL, DEL2, U20)

Switzerland (National League, Swiss League, U20)

The 2025-26 prospects calendar

Aug. 11-16: Hlinka Gretzky Cup (Brno, Czechia and Trencin, Slovakia)

Aug. 28-March 3: Champions Hockey League

Sept. 11-15: NHL rookie tournaments



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Sept. 17-22: USHL Fall Classic (Cranberry Township, Penn.)

Oct. 21: QMJHL Prospects Game (Sherbrooke, Que.)

Oct. 31-Nov. 8: World Under-17 Hockey Challenge (Truro, N.S.)

Nov. 25-26: CHL / USA Prospects Challenge (Calgary and Lethbridge, Alta.)

Dec. 7-13: World Junior A Challenge (Trois-Rivières, Que.)

Dec. 26-Jan. 5: World Juniors (St. Paul and Minneapolis)

Jan. 14: OHL Top Prospects Game (Peterborough, Ont.)

Jan. 19: Chipotle All-American Game (Plymouth, Mich.)

Feb. 2 and 9: Beanpot (Boston)

April 9-11: Frozen Four (Las Vegas)

April 23-May 3: U18 World Championship (Bratislava and Piešťany, Slovakia)

May 22-May 31: Memorial Cup (Kelowna, B.C.)

NCAA

Where to watch

Atlantic Hockey: FloHockey

CCHA: Midco Sports Plus

Big Ten: BTN+ and Peacock

Hockey East and ECAC: ESPN+ and Stretch Internet

NCHC: NCHC TV

Many of the schools playing in the above leagues also have their games broadcast locally (as well as nationally) across CBSN, YouTube, Fox Sports, NESN, FanDuel Sports Network, Altitude, ESPNU and more stations. Stretch Internet also offers many of the U.S.-restricted feeds to international customers, while TSN+ picks up some NCAA games for Canadian viewers.

What you need to know

I had to start with the NCAA in this year's piece because college hockey is one of the stories of the year in the hockey world. Gavin McKenna is a story within the story all on his own, and with him the emergence of Penn State as a top program — and spender.

McKenna isn't the only story, though. He's not even the only top 2026 NHL Draft prospect to make the move, as Keaton Verhoeff will play his draft year at North Dakota with Calgary Flames 2025 first-rounder Cole Reschny. Several other top NHL prospects and picks have also made the move to the NCAA, too. Porter Martone and Cayden Lindstrom are a part of a glossy freshman class at Michigan State. Meanwhile, Michigan is bringing in a big freshman class that includes another 2026 prospect in Adam Valentini, as well as drafted prospects like Malcolm Spence, Jack Ivankovic and Henry Mews. (I'll be interested to see how their young group fares). Anaheim Ducks first-rounder Roger McQueen represents one of the biggest recruits in the history of Providence's program. Recruit Ryder Ritchie and transfer Sacha Boisvert join a Boston University program that's looking to go to a fourth straight Frozen Four under head coach Jay Pandolfo. Kris Mayotte and Colorado College have a strong freshman class coming in. The University of Nebraska-Omaha is trying something different and has recruited top players out of U Sports hockey in Canada. Maine has tapped into the QMJHL.

It's going to be a fascinating year.

OHL

Where to watch

FloHockey

TSN+

What you need to know

Despite a few notable departures to the NCAA, the OHL is adding an influx of young talent this year due to the eligibility rule changes.

The league has recruited top players out of Canadian Jr. A and the USHL in particular. College-committed players like Sharks prospect Haoxi Simon Wang and 2026 prospects Caleb Malhotra and Nikita Klepov feature in that group.

The league has also retained top prospects like Brady Martin, Cameron Reid, Jake O'Brien, Kashawn Aitchison and Jack Nesbitt, and will feature top 2026 prospects Ryan Roobroeck (Niagara), Ethan Belchetz (Windsor), and Chase Reid (Soo). Keep an eye on imports Adam Novotny in Peterborough, Oscar Hemming in Kitchener and Vladimir Dravecky in Brantford as well. Both are potential first-rounders in 2026. In the O, Dravecky and O'Brien's Bulldogs are also the league favorites. They'll chase a first title in Brantford with Chicago Blackhawks first-rounder Marek Vanacker, St. Louis Blues first-rounder Adam Jiricek, Montreal Canadiens D prospect Owen Protz, Buffalo Sabres goalie prospect Ryerson Leenders, impressive depth, and a new star in the league in Minnesota Wild prospect Adam Benak, who left the USHL's Youngstown Phantoms to come north.

Look for 19-year-olds like Zayne Parekh, Sam Dickinson, Liam Greentree and Beckett Sennecke to dominate the league if they don't make or stick with their NHL clubs as well.

WHL

Where to watch

Victory+

TSN+

What you need to know

Beyond the NCAA's eligibility changes and its impacts both ways in the WHL, there are two other stories of note out west this year: The Penticton Vees, a longtime giant in the Jr. A world, are the league's newest team and are bringing with them a longtime executive and head coach in Fred Harbinson, and the Memorial Cup is being hosted by the WHL's Kelowna Rockets. The Vees' inaugural roster post-expansion draft lacks top drafted and draft-eligible talent, but they have managed to add Islanders seventh-rounder and University of Minnesota recruit Jacob Kvasnicka, who should be a really good player for them. The Memorial Cup hosts will be led by Utah's top-10 pick Tij Iginla and a handful of other drafted prospects, including new import and Islanders prospect Tomas Poletin. They've also added overage D Mazden Leslie, successfully pulling him away from the college path to chase a title.

Ben Kindel (Calgary), Braeden Cootes (Seattle), Radim Mrtka (Seattle), Carter Bear (Everett) and Lynden Lakovic (Moose Jaw) are all 2025 first-rounders who are returning to the Dub as well.

Despite losing McKenna and Verhoeff to college, the WHL still boasts a very impressive 2026 draft class led by Ryan Lin (Vancouver), Mathis Preston (Spokane), Carson Carels (Prince Albert) and Tobias Tomik (an import for Vancouver). The Kamloops Blazers have also managed to pull talented 2026 prospect J.P. Hurlbert away from the U.S. NTDP, too. Noah Davidson, a Boston College commit who has left Shattuck to play in Medicine Hat, looks like a legit prospect for 2027 as well, and he'll play for the Tigers with the Ruck twins, who are decent 2026s.

The name to watch in the WHL this year, though, is 2027 exceptional status Everett defenseman Landon DuPont.

QMJHL



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Where to watch

FloHockey

RDS

What you need to know

The Blainville-Boisbriand Armada enter the 2025-26 QMJHL season as favorites. Both of their goalies, Jakub Milota (Predators) and Arseni Radkov (Canadiens) are drafted NHL prospects and they're going to have a high-powered offence in front of them led by top D Spencer Gill (Flyers), returning linemates Justin Carboneau (Blues) and Mateo Nobert (Golden Knights), the addition of Bill Zonnon (Penguins), and reigning QMJHL defenseman of the year and top 2026 prospect Xavier Villeneuve, who is one of the most talented players in the whole of the CHL.

The reigning QMJHL-champion Moncton Wildcats have done a nice job re-upping their roster as well, and will be getting Utah's Caleb Desnoyers back from wrist surgery in the late fall/early winter as well.

I'm interested to see what Chicoutimi import Maxim Schäfer (Capitals) looks like in major junior after making the move from Germany as well. He has impressed me internationally.

And while Villeneuve is the most interesting 2026 prospect out of the Q, I'm also going to be watching Russian forward Yegor Shilov (Victoriaville), who lit it up in preseason, and Swiss forward Lars Steiner (Rouyn-Noranda).

AHL and ECHL

Where to watch

FloHockey

What you need to know

The Greensboro Gargoyles are the new kid on the block in the ECHL this season and will be the affiliate for the NHL Carolina Hurricanes and AHL Chicago Wolves, who renewed their affiliation with the Canes last season.

Training camps will determine which top NHL prospects end up back in the AHL, but you can expect to see incoming CHLers like Nick Lardis (Rockford), Luca Pinelli (Cleveland), Colby Barlow (Manitoba), Carson Rehkopf (Coachella Valley), Andrew Cristall (Hershey), Brayden Yager (Manitoba), Riley Heidt (Iowa), Oliver Bonk (Lehigh Valley) and Easton Cowan (Toronto) in the league — plus potentially guys like Tanner Molendyk in Milwaukee and Calum Ritchie in Bridgeport.

I'll be watching Russian arrivals Daniil But and Dmitri Simashev closely in Tucson as well. I'm also interested to see how Swedish D Tom Willander (Abbotsford) and Theo Lindstein (Springfield) do in their first full seasons in the AHL.

USHL and NTDP

Where to watch

USHL: FloHockey

NTDP: USA Hockey TV

While FloHockey owns the streaming rights to the USHL, USA Hockey runs its own streaming services for the NTDP and its various tournaments/showcases (Chipotle All-American Game, World Junior Summer Showcase, Five Nations, etc.).

What you need to know

The '08 group of U18s at the program this year is a weaker crop for a second year in a row. There are people who talked about Casey Mutryn and Luke Schairer as first-rounders last year coming off strong showings

at the World Under-17 Hockey Challenge, but I didn't see it then and don't now. Mikey Berchid is the most talented player on the team, but probably lacks the size to be a first-rounder. The best prospect on the team is probably Sammy Nelson, but he's a 2027 prospect.

There is more buzz about the '09s, led by forwards Carter Meyer and Rocco Pelosi, as well as goalie Nate Chizik.

Though the USHL has lost significant talent in the last year to the CHL, they have managed to hang onto some really important ones, led by Muskegon captain and Boston University commit Tynan Lawrence, who made the decision to return and chase back-to-back Clark Cup titles with the Lumberjacks. Lawrence, a center, is one of the top prospects in the 2026 draft.

Youngstown center Jack Hextall and Des Moines forward Blake Zielinski are also legit prospects for 2026, and Hextall's teammate Evan Jardine, a late '07, has some fans.

Russia (KHL, VHL, MHL)

Where to watch

KHL: The KHL signed a streaming rights deal with ESPN+ (U.S. only) and Portable.tv (U.S. and Canada) in 2021, but both have been abandoned since the war in Ukraine. Games can be streamed through the KHL's website and app.

The second-tier VHL and junior-level MHL both broadcast games on YouTube.

What you need to know

For the first time in a while, there's no Ivan Demidov or Matvei Michkov to watch in Russia. Other top young players like But and Simashev, as well as Arseni Gritsyuk and Danila Yurov, have also all made the move to North America this season. There's a little less appeal in Russia this season for NHL fans as a result. Predators first-rounder Yegor Surin is off to a great start with Lokomotiv. 2024 No. 10 pick Anton Silayev (Devils) takes up the mantle as the league's highest-drafted NHL prospect with Torpedo. Second-rounders Roman Kantserov (Blackhawks), Alexander Zharovsky (Canadiens) and Nikita Artamonov (Hurricanes) are worth tracking as well.

At the junior level MHL, 2026 draft eligibles Lavr Gashilov (who is off to a hot start), Gleb Pugachyov, and Viktor Fyodorov have drawn early attention from scouts, and others will emerge. The 2027 class out of Russia looks more promising than the 2026 one, though. Nazar Privalov is a 6-foot-4, 16-year-old forward with CSKA who is turning heads early on this season. Dmitri Savin, Semyon Gerasimov and Sergei Skvortsov all look like they could be legit, too.

Sweden (SHL, HockeyAllsvenskan, HockeyEttan, J20)

Where to watch

SHL and HockeyAllsvenskan: FloHockey (select SHL games with English commentary), TV4 Play and MTV Katsomo

HockeyEttan: HockeyEttan Play

J20: SvenskHockey.tv

What you need to know

The prospect to watch in Sweden this year is Frölunda winger Ivar Stenberg, one of the top prospects in the 2026 draft class.

Djurgården is the team to watch in Sweden this year, though, and not for the first time over the last few years. They've earned promotion to the SHL and have three of the country's top forward prospects all playing up with the big club: Blackhawks No. 3 pick Anton Frondell, Islanders first-rounder Victor Eklund, and 2026 prospect Viggö Björck. Their J20 team



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also includes Flames prospect Theo Stockslius and a second potential 2026 first-rounder, Marcus Nordmark (a personal favorite of mine).

Unsigned 20-year-old Habs prospect Filip Eriksson is off to a hot start on a Luleå team that also has Golden Knights second-rounder Jakob Ihs-Wozniak and 2026 D prospect William Håkansson. Timrå — with Red Wings prospect Eddie Genborg, Hurricanes prospect Simon Forsmark, Jets prospect Alfons Freij and Panthers prospect Linus Eriksson — is worthwhile, too.

In the second-tier HockeyAllsvenskan, IK Oskarshamn has a handful of NHL prospects, including World Junior team hopefuls Viggo Nordlund (Hurricanes) and Victor Johansson (Maple Leafs).

Stenberg, Björck, Nordmark and Håkansson aren't the only 2026s of interest, either. It's a strong group for the Swedes, and MoDo's Elton Hermansson, Örebro's Axel Elofsson, Linköping's Oscar Holmertz and HV71's Malte Gustafsson are also all worth your time.

Finland (Liiga, Mestis, U20)

Where to watch

Liiga: TV4 Play and MTV Katsomo

Mestis: MTV Katsomo

U20: Leijonat TV

What you need to know:

There are several mid-round NHL prospects playing in Finland's top-flight Liiga this season. They include Wild prospect Aron Kiviharju (HIFK), Habs prospect Aatos Koivu (TPS), Ducks prospect Lasse Boelius (Åssät) and Predators prospect Daniel Nieminen (Pelicans), who will all be a big part of the Finnish World Juniors team in December.

Finnish titans Tappara might be the team to watch this season, though, with two of the country's top prospects for the 2026 NHL Draft — forward Oliver Suvanto and defenseman Juho Piipparainen — up with the big club to start the year. Latvian defenseman Alberts Smits got off to a hot start with Jukurit's junior team and is a potential first-round pick as well. Keep an eye on 2026s Samu Alalauri (Pelicans), Vertti Svensk (SaiPa), Simon Katolicky (Tappara) and Vilho Vanhatalo (Tappara) as well.

For 2027, defensemen Roni Kuukasjärvi (Ilves) and Max Syrjäläinen (Jokerit) are supposed to be legit prospects, and forward Luca Santala (Kiekko-Espoo) is a talented scorer.

Czechia (Tipsport Extraliga/ELH, U20)

Where to watch

FanSeat

What you need to know

The Utah Mammoth have a trio of prospects playing in Czechia's top flight in Stepan Hoch (HC Motor České Budějovice), Vojtěch Hradec (BK Mladá Boleslav) and Ales Cech (also BK Mladá Boleslav). Kings second-rounder Vojtech Cihar is playing for HC Energie Karlovy Vary and Capitals prospect Petr Sikora is playing for HC Oceláři Třinec, but that's about it in terms of NHL-affiliated content. With Novotny, Drapevsky and Katolicky playing elsewhere, there isn't much by way of draft-eligible content this year either.

The small but extremely talented Lukas Kachlir, who isn't even eligible until 2027, is already playing pro at 5-foot-8 with Bílí Tygři Liberec, though, and there are some who have time for 2026 forward Filip Novak with HC Sparta Praha's junior team.

Slovakia (Tipos Extraliga, U20)

Where to watch

YouTube

What you need to know

This is a better draft class for the Slovaks than the Czechs and HK Nitra, who've developed the bulk of the country's top NHL prospects in recent years, are the team to watch again with a pair of top-two-round prospects in forwards Tomas Chrenko and Adam Nemecek (who have both been selected in the CHL Import Draft and have so far decided to stay at home). Right-shot defenseman Adam Goljer is playing with HK Dukla Trenčín as well.

Slovakia did lose 2026 Tobias Tomik to the WHL's Vancouver Giants and 2027 Oliver Ozogany (a standout at the Hlinka who has played in the U.S. for years) to the USHL's Tri-City Storm, though.

Germany (DEL, DEL2, U20)

Where to watch

DEL: Magenta Sport

DEL2: SportDeutschland.tv

What you need to know

Forward Max Penkin, who isn't eligible for the draft until 2027, looks like a promising prospect. He played well at U18 worlds as a 15-year-old and has already scored his first DEL goal with Adler Mannheim at 16.

Switzerland (National League, Swiss League, U20)

Where to watch

NL: NL TV Pass, FanSeat, TV4 Play and MTV Katsomo

SL: SL TV

What you need to know

The top Swiss prospect in the 2026 class, Lars Steiner, is a legit player but is playing for Rouyn-Noranda in the Q. Otherwise, it's a pretty weak age group, with the only 2026-eligible prospect of note playing in the country actually being Lithuanian forward Simas Ignatavicius (Genève-Servette HC). Ignatavicius is interesting, though. He's a big right-shot forward with some tools.

The country does have a solid prospect for 2027, however, in EHC Biel-Bienne's Jonah Neuenschwander, who burst onto the scene last year when he started picking up points in the NL and played on Switzerland's power play at the World Juniors as a 15-year-old.

Canada and U.S. high school hockey

Schools to watch (and where)

High school hockey is the trickiest to watch and follow because the best schools are spread out across two countries, multiple states and provinces, and several different loops.

You can access many (but not all) of the Minnesota high school hockey games through NSPN.TV and MNHockey.TV.

But a lot of the big prep schools do their own thing. St. Andrew's College (SAC), which has produced an NHL prospect or two annually for the last several years, broadcasts its games on YouTube and the school's website. It started the Prep Hockey Conference with six of the top private school programs in North America in 2021 in order to play a more competitive schedule.

The Canadian Sport School Hockey League (CSSHL) broadcasts its games through FloHockey.

There are other worthwhile prep school programs — many of which broadcast their own games — scattered across the United States, led by Minnesota's Shattuck-St. Mary's School (a prospect factory streaming its



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games on its website) and including New Hampshire's Kimball Union Academy; Massachusetts' Cushing Academy, St. Mark's School, St. Sebastian's School, Dexter Southfield School and Thayer Academy; Connecticut's Salisbury School, South Kent School and Avon Old Farms; Indiana's Culver Academies; Rhode Island's Mount St. Charles Academy; and New York's Northwood School. The NFHS Network can also be a handy resource for streaming high school hockey games in the U.S.

What you need to know

At Shattuck, 2010-born right-shot D Drew Daley (2028 NHL Draft) is supposed to be the player to watch this year, but 2027-eligible 6-6 Latvian forward Roberts Naudins (a Harvard commit who played at last year's World Juniors) is fascinating as well.

I've had several people talk up Mount St. Charles Academy's Wilson Bomedienne, a 15-year-old Swedish forward who is the younger brother of Jets prospect Sacha Boumedienne, over the last couple of years as well. If what they've said is true, he's going to be a very high pick in 2028. I've heard good things about his teammate Zaac Charbonneau (another 2028) as well. Blackhawks first-rounder Sacha Boisvert's younger brother Thomas is on that Mount St. Charles team, too.

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The Athletic / How NHL teams can cheat the league's new playoff salary cap system

By James Mirtle

Sept. 24, 2025 6:00 am EDT

One would think that life is easy these days for an NHL capologist.

The league's salary cap jumped more than ever in the offseason, from \$88 million to \$95.5 million. More big increases are set to come as it skyrockets up to at least \$113.5 million by 2027.

Entering this season, for the first time since the cap was introduced 20 years ago, more than half of the NHL has at least \$4 million in breathing room and only a handful of teams are right at the limit, ostensibly making front office executives' lives that much simpler.

The only problem? There's a new wrinkle this season — the playoff salary cap.

The postseason, beginning in mid-April, may seem far away, but with the way the NHL's new playoff cap calculation works, teams will need to keep track of two cap counts simultaneously throughout the year. One will be done the old way, with a set amount of salary for every day a player is on the roster throughout the regular season. The other will be the new playoff cap, which simply mandates that the cap hit of the 20 players on the roster for a postseason game is under \$95.5 million.

What the NHL is trying to do is avoid a situation like in last season, when the Florida Panthers entered the deciding game of the Stanley Cup Final with a roster that was \$5 million over the salary cap and nearly \$13 million more than that of their opponent, the Edmonton Oilers.

But after talking to team executives and others around the league the past few days, it's clear the new system may have some unintended consequences.

We calculated the new Playoff Cap Hit for the rosters that played in the final 2025 Cup Final Game: #LetsGoOilers Playoff Cap Hit was \$80.6M vs \$88M Cap #TimetoHunt Playoff Cap Hit was \$93.0M vs \$88M Cap

See full calculations & details on Playoff Cap: <https://t.co/VAFVnwsZq>

— PuckPedia (@PuckPedia) July 11, 2025

In the past, teams like the 2015 Chicago Blackhawks, the 2021 Tampa Bay Lightning, the 2023 Vegas Golden Knights and last year's Panthers all won the Cup with rosters over the cap by using long-term injured reserve to stash a star player's salary during the season.

While that loophole will no longer be available under the new system, I've come up with four others that we may see exploited in the playoffs by teams looking for an extra edge.

1. Disappearing the backup goalie

The new CBA's "Playoff Cap Counting" rules state that teams "must list 18 skaters and two goaltenders on its playing roster for each playoff game." What they do not stipulate is which players those have to be.

For example, a team with two goaltenders making a lot of money could now dress a cheaper backup in a playoff game and free up that excess salary to be allocated to other players.

The Vancouver Canucks have starter Thatcher Demko on a \$5 million cap hit and backup Kevin Lankinen at \$4.5 million this season. If they were willing to use third-stringer Jiri Patera, who makes a league-minimum \$775,000, as the bench-door opener in the playoffs, it would free up \$3.725 million or \$4.225 million depending on which starter they played.

It's debatable whether having a much cheaper, less experienced backup would cost a team games. Second goaltenders are rarely used in playoff games, and when they are deployed, it's often in a cause that's already lost.

In the past, without a playoff cap, teams could simply play as expensive a goalie tandem as they wanted. Now they will have to calculate if the money they are using on their backup would be better used on a trade-deadline addition at forward or defense instead.

And if they're willing to roll the dice on having their No. 3 on the bench — and their backup in the press box.

2. Parking the overpaid veteran

One new maneuver that may be more common than an unorthodox goalie swap: simply sitting a player deemed to be making too much money. Teams could take a long hard look at their rosters before the trade deadline, determine that an underperformer down the lineup won't be on their playoff roster, and then spend that money elsewhere.

One team I could see this making sense for this season would be the New Jersey Devils. Once they have RFA defenseman Luke Hughes signed, the Devils are likely to be at the cap all season, and they have aging winger Ondrej Palat on a \$6 million cap hit.

Palat will be 35 years old by the postseason and had only 28 points last season. His value is down to only \$1.5 million by our projections, meaning that putting him in the playoff lineup leaves a lot of value on the table. The Devils could theoretically add a \$6 million player using salary retention and cap space accrued throughout the regular season and then bench Palat in the playoffs in order to get under the postseason cap.

New Jersey is in a unique situation on defense, too, as they have two young players on entry-level contracts (Simon Nemec and Seamus Casey) who could be played instead of a veteran making \$4 million or more, opening up more cap room that way.

They could also take a hybrid approach and sit either Palat or a high-paid defenseman depending on what the situation called for in a playoff series.



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Either way, this loophole would mean teams would be putting millions of dollars up in the press box for cap reasons on a night-to-night basis, as opposed to simply dressing their best lineup talent-wise.

"Players were all for this (new playoff salary cap) in the new CBA, but they're going to be livid," one executive said of the fact that players with larger salaries could end up being sat in playoff games so teams can get under the cap.

3. Paying for insurance

This option is probably less of a loophole and more of a luxury for bigger-market teams that don't mind spending extra money.

These general managers could opt to add players, even if they put the clubs over the playoff cap, simply as a means of adding injury insurance. Acquiring an extra \$3 million winger and/or \$2 million defenseman right before the trade deadline — when only a quarter of their salary will count against the regular season cap — may make a lot of sense as a reserve option for a top team.

The Oilers ran into this issue last year when key defenseman Mattias Ekholm went down with a serious injury a few weeks after the trade deadline, meaning they weren't able to replace him at the time. Ekholm ended up missing all but seven games of Edmonton's Cup run, leaving them with \$6 million in value out of the lineup a lot of the time.

In the new order, they could potentially add proactive injury insurance and then have more options when the playoffs started, even if they theoretically wouldn't be able to play their new additions with a fully healthy roster.

Again, under this example, the playoff cap likely means more salary in the press box overall. That's because, unlike during the regular season when every player on the 23-man roster counts against the cap, only 20 players will be part of the calculation in the playoffs, no matter what.

And because there's no roster limit in the postseason, a big-budgeted team could fill its press box with talent as long as they can squeeze them under the cap for the final quarter of the regular season.

4. Betting big on bonuses

One other line in the new CBA's explanation of the playoff salary cap immediately stands out:

"The amount included for a player with performance bonuses and/or games played bonuses shall be the sum of the player's Paragraph 1 NHL salary, signing, roster and reporting bonuses only (i.e. performance and/or games played bonuses shall not be included)."

Paragraph 1 salary is a player's base salary, and signing bonuses are money that's given up front (usually on July 1) in most star players' contracts. But older players on one-year deals and young players on entry-level deals are eligible for performance bonuses that essentially will not exist under the playoff cap.

Jonathan Toews' contract with the Winnipeg Jets could be a big beneficiary of this rule, as he has just a \$2 million base salary but \$5 million in additional potential bonuses. While many of those are targets he can hit during the playoffs — e.g. \$250,000 bonuses for the Jets winning each of the first three rounds and a \$1 million bonus if they win the Cup — that money will either be counted against the regular season cap or, if that is exceeded, carried over to the next season.

As far as the playoff cap is concerned, Toews is just a \$2 million player in the postseason, no questions asked.

This season, seven other veteran players have performance or games-played bonuses of \$1.5 million or more in their contracts: the Kings' Corey Perry, the Avalanche's Brent Burns, the Senators' Claude Giroux, the Red Wings' Patrick Kane, the Stars' Jamie Benn, the Devils' Evgenii Dadonov and the Penguins' Anthony Mantha.

Elite young players on entry-level contracts, meanwhile, will cost their teams a maximum of only \$975,000 under the playoff cap. This includes burgeoning stars like Chicago's Connor Bedard, Anaheim's Leo Carlsson, Montreal's Ivan Demidov and Carolina's Alexander Nikishin, among others.

There are limitations to performance bonus-laden deals for veterans, as they're only for one-year contracts and typically for older players or those coming off serious injuries, but expect this contract type to proliferate with their added playoff value.

It'll be fascinating to see how the first postseason under a salary cap unfolds next spring, and whether any of these loopholes (or any unforeseen ones) lead to changes down the line.

The league's new CBA includes a provision where the NHL and NHLPA "will meet and confer after the first playoffs for which these rules are in effect to discuss and seek any concerns with their operation." There will also be an opportunity after the second playoffs with these rules for either party to "reopen these provisions for potential modification."

After digging into some of these potential loopholes, I expect there will need to be some additional refining. Having differently calculated hard salary caps for the regular season and playoffs is a new frontier for pro sports, and NHL GMs have a way of finding advantages that can "break" the cap when given enough time and resources to do so.

We've certainly seen it before.

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ESPN / Bold predictions for every NHL team: Playoffs, milestones, more – ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

The Florida Panthers hoisted the Stanley Cup for the second straight season back on June 17. The 2025 NHL draft was decentralized, but there was no shortage of memorable moments and celebrity cameos. Finally, free agency was not quite as frenetic as in years past, but hundreds of players signed new deals.

And then, the hockey world went into its hibernation period for the rest of July and August.

But as a chill enters the air, the leaves start to change color and many pumpkin-themed items appear on food and drink menus, it's time to get ready for another NHL season.

To help you get fully prepared for the coming weeks of the preseason -- as teams make final decisions on rosters, lineups and goaltending tandems -- let's take a look at the biggest lingering question for all 32 clubs, thanks to ESPN reporters Ryan S. Clark (Western Conference) and Kristen Shilton (Eastern Conference).

How to watch the 2025-26 NHL season on ESPN networks -- including 100 exclusive games and the out-of-market package (over 1,050 games).

Atlantic Division

Boston Bruins

Can Jeremy Swayman be a true No. 1 netminder again?

No one could fault Swayman for chasing a big-time contract extension after the way he carried Boston at the end of the 2024-25 campaign. But after the netminder secured the bag -- with a protracted contract



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negotiation last summer culminating in a seven-year deal worth \$8.25 million per season -- he was meant to perform like one of the league's highest paid goalies.

That didn't happen. Swayman posted career-worst numbers in 2024-25 with an .892 SV% and 3.11 GAA. Without a genuine tandemmate to back him up -- as he had with Linus Ullmark before the latter departed to Ottawa -- Swayman carried a hefty 58-game schedule and didn't wear it well.

Boston requires better this season, especially considering the Bruins still don't have a bona fide backup for Swayman (that would be Boston's Burning Question, Part II). Regardless of who is second though, Swayman must prove he can be a true No. 1 -- and what will it mean for the Bruins' chances this season if he can't?

Buffalo Sabres

Will Buffalo finally end its postseason drought?

It's the overarching theme for Buffalo seemingly every year: Can the Sabres actually snap their historically long skid as non-playoff contenders? Or in other words: Is Buffalo's rebuild over yet?

It's only been ...15 years now since Sabres fans saw their team in postseason action. And the better part of this decade has been an exercise in slow progress. For every step forward Buffalo has taken -- most notably building its enviable young core -- the Sabres have repeatedly stalled short of reclaiming a place as playoff contenders.

GM Kevyn Adams made a risky move acquiring oft-injured forward Josh Norris; but if Norris can stay healthy, that's a potential No. 1 center for Buffalo. And the Sabres have intriguing newcomers Josh Doan and Michael Kesselring to fill out their roster.

What impact could those fresh faces -- plus improvements from players like goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (already dealing with a "tweak" heading into training camp) and forward Jack Quinn -- have on Buffalo's chances? Every little bit helps. Ottawa and Montreal have proven to be quicker studies that Buffalo in rising through the Atlantic Division ranks. Is it the Sabres' time now to do the same?

Detroit Red Wings

Will John Gibson be a game changer for the Red Wings?

It's not like Detroit hasn't had decent goaltending in recent years. What the Red Wings have lacked is consistency. For all the good runs Ville Husso and Petr Mrazek managed to put together, they inevitably bookended too many subpar stretches that, combined with Detroit's below-average defensive play, held the Red Wings back from fulfilling their potential.

Well, the midseason addition of head coach Todd McLellan yielded improvement. And now, enter John Gibson. GM Steve Yzerman traded for the veteran netminder from Anaheim in a bold offseason move that could be the difference between whether Detroit sinks or swims this season.

Gibson struggled a bit with the rebuilding Ducks, but the Red Wings are a more established team with enough talent to support him. He still posted a .911 save percentage in 29 appearances last season, showing he has the potential to reclaim his form as a No. 1 goalie. If Gibson can indicate early on he's a reliable presence in the crease, then confidence should spread in Detroit and give the club a boost that's been missing. Can Gibson provide all that in Year 1? We'll find out.

Florida Panthers

Are the Panthers built for a three-peat?

Listen, what Florida GM Bill Zito pulled off this offseason was quite impressive. While the Panthers were basking in a second straight

Stanley Cup victory, Zito managed to re-sign Sam Bennett, Aaron Ekblad and Brad Marchand, while also acquiring an intriguing backup goalie in Daniil Tarasov.

All good ... right? Florida can't be concerned about their depth when they've kept so many key players in the fold ... correct?

It's at least worth wondering whether the Panthers might run into issues there, given all they've invested salary-cap-wise in their top skaters. There's an excellent chance that growth from within -- from top young players like Mackie Samoskevich -- will give Florida quite an edge in their bottom six. But there's also the fact Matthew Tkachuk's health status is in doubt -- that torn adductor and sports hernia issue suffered at the 4 Nations Face-Off has been a problem for Tkachuk ever since, and may hold him out to start the season -- and there's no telling what shape Tkachuk will be in when he can return.

Then, of course, there's fatigue. Of course, we've wondered about that in regards to Florida before and they've shown serious mettle in reaching three straight Cup Finals (winning the last two). Do the Panthers have it in them to do it all over again?

Montreal Canadiens

Can the Canadiens' youth movement produce another playoff run?

Montreal was a surprise postseason contender last season thanks to a 91-point campaign that provided just enough juice to secure the second wild-card spot. Was that a fluke? Or are the Canadians more ready to step forward than we thought?

GM Kent Hughes improved Montreal with the offseason addition of defenseman Noah Dobson and physical winger Zack Bolduc. Now the Canadiens are eager to see if their internal growth can continue as well.

All eyes will be on how 2024's fifth-overall pick Ivan Demidov develops, how Lane Hutson keeps maturing and what sort of gains Juraj Slafkovsky can make, too. It'll be a combination of factors -- from Montreal's established stars in Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield -- to its burgeoning skaters and questionable returnees (what does Kirby Dach have to offer when he's healthy?) that will ultimately decide what trajectory the Canadiens take this year.

While their first-round experience in 2024-25 was valuable, there's no telling what a regular season of sustained success could also do for Montreal's core confidence. Certainly Hughes has put his weight behind this roster to signal his own assurance that they're capable of reaching last season's threshold.

Ottawa Senators

Has Ottawa adequately addressed its offensive depth?

It's no secret the Senators struggled to score at 5-on-5 last season. Ottawa tallied the second-fewest even-strength markers in 2024-25, and if it wasn't for a strong power play, it's possible the Senators wouldn't have forced their way into the playoffs at all. Despite what alarm bells could be ringing in that respect from Canada's capital, GM Steve Staios didn't do much to alter the Senators lineup in free agency, save for adding defenseman Jordan Spence and veteran Lars Eller.

The lack of significant movement indicates Ottawa is likely banking on internal improvement to win the day. That would have to include better performances from Dylan Cozens -- still finding his way post-trade from Buffalo -- and Fabian Zetterlund -- a deadline pickup from San Jose -- now that they're acclimated to the organization. But will that be enough to give the Senators' offense a true boost? Claude Giroux is also back in the fold -- although where he plays in the lineup is up in the air -- and Shane Pinto should be a top offensive driver coming off a gold medal-winning showing at the men's world championships.

Ottawa just needs to find its mojo more often in the coming year -- and that's going to require a stronger collective effort up front.



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Tampa Bay Lightning

Can Tampa Bay's offense maintain an elite scoring level?

It's easy to gloss over the fact Tampa Bay was the NHL's highest-scoring team last season, given how their playoff run ended (with a first-round thud against Florida). The Lightning were formidable up front though all season long, averaging 3.56 goals per game and owning a top-five power play.

Four Lightning skaters eclipsed the 35-goal mark, two hit 40-plus (there were only eight players in the league who reached that benchmark) and Nikita Kucherov won the Art Ross Trophy (again) with 121 points.

Suffice to say, Tampa Bay felt confident in running it back with a similar roster of offensive threats. Is that wise, though?

Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde will have a better handle on the Lightning system after coming in at the deadline, but beyond those new faces Tampa Bay is counting on a repeat from Brayden Point, Jake Guentzel, Kucherov & Co. to maintain their place as perennial postseason contenders. Given how the Lightning continually find ways to keep the spark alive, so to speak, it won't be shocking if they maintain their status quo. But it's worth wondering how far they can stretch when their Atlantic rivals keep loading up around them.

Toronto Maple Leafs

How will Toronto evolve without Mitch Marner?

The Maple Leafs accepted a true gut punch when trading Marner to Vegas before he could walk away (for nothing) in free agency. And no disrespect to Nicolas Roy -- the returning player in that transaction -- but losing a top-line, 102-point producer who appears in every situation -- including as one of your most reliable penalty killers -- creates a crater no team would envy trying to fill. The Leafs' success this season will depend on their ability to do just that.

More responsibility than ever falls on Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Matthew Knies and John Tavares to anchor Toronto's top two lines, while depth performances will be more critical than ever to keep the Leafs from falling too far off a cliff offensively.

What sort of strategy will head coach Craig Berube employ to have Toronto evolve into a new chapter for the franchise? Don't forget: former president Brendan Shanahan is gone, too, and there are new voices behind the scenes being amplified. This is a transitional time for the Leafs in multiple respects. What sort of maturity have they cultivated to be able to handle what's ahead?

Metropolitan Division

Carolina Hurricanes

Did Carolina do enough to tackle its scoring woes?

The Hurricanes landed a big fish in free agency when Nikolaj Ehlers came on board with a six-year, \$51 million contract. That cemented him as the consistent scoring winger Carolina's been lacking in previous seasons (particularly when it came to the postseason).

But even with Ehlers in the mix, Carolina has questions to answer about its offense.

The Hurricanes have been using Jesperi Kotkaniemi in a second-line center role for which he's not wholly suited. Carolina opted not to re-sign free agent Jack Roslovic -- who remains a free agent, and could be an option in that spot -- and there's no obvious upgrade over Kotkaniemi at the moment.

Will Logan Stankoven or Seth Jarvis have to move off the wing to cover for Carolina's flimsy depth down the middle? Or will GM Erik Tulsky look at what's available on the market before the season starts and make a change? It has to still sting the way Carolina produced just 10 total goals

in their Eastern Conference finals loss against Florida last spring. If the Hurricanes expect to advance to the Cup Final, they'll need to have the scoring prowess to match the competition.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Will Columbus' defense derail them again?

The Blue Jackets didn't have trouble scoring goals last season. It was keeping pucks out of the net that held Columbus back.

GM Don Waddell's priority was addressing the latter issue this offseason and, well, he did. Sort of. As some of the top free agent defensemen were snapped up on July 1, Waddell opted to simply re-sign Ivan Provorov to a seven-year, \$59.5 million contract.

Meaning there has been no specific upgrade on a blue line that -- while anchored by a Norris Trophy-worthy performance from Zach Werenski -- ranked eighth-worst in the NHL in goals against last season (3.26 per game). Considering Columbus was also eighth overall in goals scored (with 3.26 per game), it's clear the defensive deficiencies were a serious factor in the Blue Jackets falling just shy of making the playoffs.

Are they doomed to a similar fate this season? Coach Dean Evason was transparent about Columbus' need to improve on the back end; the only question is whether there's enough internal improvement to make that a reality early and often. Steady goaltending would help in this regard as well; will the low-risk move of trading for Ivan Fedotov give the Blue Jackets some insurance behind (or beside) Elvis Merzlikins?

New Jersey Devils

How will Jack Hughes' health affect the Devils' season?

It's not every team that has a single player capable of making or breaking their success. Jack Hughes is that for New Jersey, though.

The top-line forward just isn't available as much as the Devils need him to be. Hughes has been hampered by injuries throughout his young career, limited to 62 or fewer games in two of his six seasons, and currently coming off shoulder surgery that cost him the final 25 regular-season games and five playoff contests.

Hughes is practically a point-per-game player when he's healthy, and the 24-year-old is arguably New Jersey's best, most impactful skater. But what more might the Devils be able to do in helping Hughes maintain his on-ice presence? Is there something amiss in their training protocols? Does he require more rest days? Whatever the recipe for keeping Hughes on the ice ultimately has to be New Jersey's priority to figure out. The Devils can't afford to lose more of what a generational talent like Hughes can bring to their lineup on a nightly basis.

New York Islanders

How will Matthew Schaefer impact the Islanders' defense?

The Islanders made a no-brainer decision by drafting defenseman Matthew Schaefer at No. 1 overall in June. The just-turned 18-year-old has all the makings of a franchise blueliner who will capably patrol New York's back end for years to come. The question is whether that NHL tenure starts immediately, or if the Islanders ease Schaefer into the pro game. It's a trajectory that will have ripple effects at multiple levels of the organization.

There's a scenario where Schaefer jumps right into the Islanders' lineup, joining Adam Pelech, Alexander Romanov and Ryan Pulock to punctuate their top-four rotation and start this new era for a New York defense corps that saw Noah Dobson depart via trade on draft night. Throwing Schaefer directly into that mix would be a strong statement about how the Islanders' view their coveted new addition. But defensemen notoriously take longer to thrive in the NHL than their forward counterparts, and New York won't want to shake Schaefer's confidence out of the gate, either.



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It's a delicate balance, and how the Islanders choose to manage him ahead of their season opener could have short- and long-term effects on the team's year overall.

New York Rangers

How will Mike Sullivan restructure the Rangers?

There's no doubt New York needed a new voice behind the bench. And it'll fall on Mike Sullivan to build the Rangers back into a contender.

Sullivan's first task will be deciding where exactly Mika Zibanejad should be playing -- at center or on the wing. Zibanejad turned in a disappointing 62 points over 82 games last season -- his lowest output through a full campaign since 2017-18 -- and it wasn't until Zibanejad moved from center to J.T. Miller's wing in the latter half of the season that he began to look like himself again. Will that encourage Sullivan to load up the Rangers offense by keeping Miller and Zibanejad together? Or will he put Zibanejad back at center so as not to disrupt the team's overall depth?

And beyond where to place Zibanejad, who exactly will Sullivan find to make up for the contributions that left with Chris Kreider -- looking at you, Will Cuylle?

But before we move on from the subject of who plays where, how will Sullivan piece together the blue line now that Vladislav Gavrikov is in the lineup? Fortunately for Sullivan, he has had a long summer to think about what might work for the Rangers. The preseason will be a valuable time to tinker with the various options to get this team back among the postseason contenders.

Philadelphia Flyers

Have the Flyers upgraded enough at the right spots?

Philadelphia had two glaring needs after last season: better center depth and stronger goaltending.

The Flyers acquired Trevor Zegras from Anaheim in the hopes he could slot into a top-six center role despite the 24-year-old having spent the better part of the previous two seasons pushed off to the wing. Zegras maintains he's more comfortable at his natural center position, and that should be music to Philadelphia's ears -- if Zegras' defensive game can match his offensive capabilities. Going after him was a low-risk, high-reward move for the Flyers. New coach Rick Tocchet should give him every chance to excel there.

But then there's the Flyers' goaltending. GM Danny Briere brought in veteran Dan Vladar to play opposite Samuel Ersson, but given the numbers each netminder produced last season (with an .898 SV% and .883 SV%, respectively), there's reason to wonder whether Philadelphia is truly better off with that tandem. Vladar stated his case to suit up in more than 30 tilts as he did a year ago, and if sharing an even workload gives Ersson more confidence when he is in the crease, the experiment might work.

Time will tell if Briere's offseason changes will move the needle for Philadelphia.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Would the Penguins really trade Sidney Crosby?

There's no such thing as an un-moveable star. If the Edmonton Oilers would trade Wayne Gretzky, well, it could happen to anyone.

Is this the year Pittsburgh completes a once-unfathomable transaction of its own by trading franchise icon Sidney Crosby? If the Penguins were ever going to do it, is now the time?

Crosby is under contract with Pittsburgh through the 2026-27 season (thanks to a team-friendly extension he inked last year). But the 37-year-old wants (and deserves) another chance or two at not just competing in the playoffs, but contending for the championship. Those aren't

necessarily opportunities Pittsburgh can offer him now. The Penguins are young and hungry, and they are being guided by a first-year NHL coach in the newly instated Dan Muse.

Evgeni Malkin is in the final season of his contract, too, signaling that more changes are to come in the next 12 months for the Penguins. It might be in everyone's interest -- Crosby's and Pittsburgh's -- to part now while the return can help the Penguins in their ongoing retooling. And while Crosby wearing another NHL sweater would be jarring, there's no denying he has earned the right to make the final years of his career as successful as they can be. But whether the Penguins could find a suitable partner who checks all the boxes on both sides remains to be seen.

Washington Capitals

Can Washington's offense run deeper than before?

The Capitals had an enviable 2024-25 season, producing 111 points as the Eastern Conference's top squad -- and having Alex Ovechkin break Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals record. The problem is, Washington was top-heavy. It leaned on its top six to produce, and while Dylan Strome, Ovechkin, Pierre-Luc Dubois & Co. were happy to oblige with impressive output, relying too much on too few is rarely a championship-winning strategy.

So, the question must be asked: Is Washington deeper now than it was last year?

Connor McMichael is key to that answer. If he can step into a third-line center role for Washington -- and build off his career-best totals from last season in goals, points and assists -- then the Capitals will be in good shape. They'd be better off, though, knowing how various personnel will deploy on the wing. Lars Eller, Taylor Raddysh and Andrew Mangiapane are gone. The Capitals then will turn to their own internal skaters -- like Ryan Leonard and Hendrix Lapierre, plus trade acquisition Justin Sourdis -- to fill in the gaps.

Washington can't count on a repeat of the extraordinary years that guys such as Ovechkin and Strome had in 2024-25. Coach Spencer Carbery will need to maximize the Capitals' collective talent to see their success stretch beyond just the regular season.

Central Division

Chicago Blackhawks

How much advancement does their rebuild make in 2025-26?

Suggesting this is one of the most frustrating stretches in Blackhawks history isn't quite as hyperbolic as it sounds.

Having a fifth straight season of less than 70 points is the franchise's longest streak of that regard since it went seven consecutive campaigns of doing the same from 1953 through 1960 -- when the NHL had only six franchises.

Many items contributed to why the Blackhawks finished with the second-fewest points in the NHL last season. They were in the bottom 10 in goals scored per game, goals allowed per game, shots per game, shots allowed per game and team save percentage per 60.

Finding a solution to those challenges is what awaits Jeff Blashill in his first season in charge of a team that will seek to find cohesion with its young core led by Connor Bedard and a veteran group that added Andre Burakovsky in the offseason.

Colorado Avalanche

Is their supporting cast enough or do they need to add more?

Signing Brent Burns and Victor Olofsson was an indication of two items facing the Avalanche entering the season. The first is the need to find



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proven depth at a team-friendly price, which is why Burns signing for \$1 million and Olofsson for \$1.575 million has its own value.

The second is: Do the Avs have enough options within their supporting cast, or should they use the rest of their \$1.325 million in projected cap space to do so?

Burns is expected to play on the Avs' third defensive pairing with Sam Malinski, while Olofsson looks as if he'll be on the third line with Ross Colton and Jack Drury. It leaves them a fourth line that could have Parker Kelly, Joel Kiviranta and rookie Ivan Ivan.

What complicates the decision to spend their remaining cap space is Logan O'Connor. He underwent knee surgery and is slated to come back some time in November or December, meaning they'll need space for him when he does return.

Dallas Stars

What adjustments will Glen Gulutzan make to reach the Cup Final?

Are there other questions that could be asked about the Stars? Sure. It's just that any question that's worth considering all comes back to if it can be the difference between the Stars winning the Stanley Cup or falling in a fourth straight Western Conference finals -- or possibly not returning to the conference finals at all.

Championship windows are difficult to open, with the argument that they might be even harder to sustain for an extended period. Part of the reason why the Stars hired Gulutzan, who previously coached the team from 2011 to 2013, was his experience as an Oilers assistant. He has been on teams that advanced to the conference finals three times in four years -- and the Cup Final two years in a row -- with their two most recent appearances coming after a coaching change.

Minnesota Wild

So ... about that Kirill Kaprizov contract extension.

Any time a star player or a team's most important player is in the final year of his contract, it's always going to be a primary topic of conversation. The discussion around Kaprizov further intensified on Sept. 10 when Frank Seravalli reported that Kaprizov turned down an eight-year extension worth \$128 million that would have given him the highest average-annual-value deal in the NHL.

Wild GM Bill Guerin said on a podcast later that day that he and Kaprizov's agent have "a very good relationship" while both sides were "working through things." Guerin stated that he didn't want the market to go into "an all-out panic mode" while noting he believes the Wild are "in a really positive place" with their star winger. But this remains a significant question until pen is put to paper on a new deal.

Nashville Predators

Can the Predators find the defensive stability that eluded them last season?

The Predators' 2024-25 challenges can be viewed in one of two ways. The first is that Brady Skjei, who played in all 82 games, was the only Preds defenseman who played more than 70 games in 2024-25. Another is that he was one of 15 defensemen whom the team used to get through a campaign that began with high expectations -- only to end with Nashville being high in the draft lottery.

Adding Nicolas Hague and Nick Perbix in the offseason gave the Preds a pair of proven options who have been top-four fill-ins when needed. But how will they handle being a consistent top-four option for the first time in their careers?

The same questions exist for Justin Barron and Nick Blankenburg. Barron emerged as a top-four option after he was traded to the

Predators, and Blankenburg played more games last season than he had in his previous three combined.

St. Louis Blues

Where do they fit in the Western Conference landscape?

The Blues scraped together a playoff appearance last season. The moves they made in the offseason -- adding Nick Bjugstad, Logan Mailloux and Pius Suter -- along with the idea that prized prospect Jimmy Snuggerud is expected to challenge for a top-six place, suggest that they are in a window to return to the playoffs for the foreseeable future.

But what if the Blues are more than just "a playoff team"? Should they be included in the group of top Stanley Cup contenders in the Western Conference?

They return seven players who finished with more than 16 goals, with the expectation that Snuggerud can join that group. Meanwhile, Suter scored a career-high 25 goals in 2024-25. Couple that with how they responded to systematic changes made by Jim Montgomery, and the Blues should be setting their sights higher in 2025-26.

Utah Mammoth

Will they make the playoffs in 2025-26?

Exactly what was it that prevented the Mammoth from making the playoffs in their first season in Salt Lake City? Was it not scoring enough goals? Was it goal prevention? Was it both?

Or was it something different altogether?

Mammoth GM Bill Armstrong's actions in the offseason saw him provide a potential answer to those questions.

Armstrong traded for one of the most sought-after top-six winger options in JJ Peterka, with the hope he can help the Mammoth improve upon being 21st in goals per game. Their defensive concerns led to them signing a proven two-way, bottom-six forward in Brandon Tanev, a veteran top-six defenseman in Nate Schmidt and goalie Vitek Vanecek.

Schmidt and Vanecek, who won the Stanley Cup with the Panthers, now give the Mammoth five players in their defensive setup with a championship ring, joining Ian Cole, Olli Maatta and Mikhail Sergachev.

Winnipeg Jets

Can their new-look second line find continuity amid change?

Options aren't necessarily the challenge facing Scott Arniel and his staff when it comes to what they'll do with their second line. If anything, it's more about what's the best way to manage their second-line situation, with the realization that change might be the constant, at least to start the season.

Nikolaj Ehlers is gone. Adam Lowry is recovering from a hip surgery but told reporters last week that he is targeting a late October/early November return. Jonathan Toews is coming back to the NHL after missing the past two seasons with inflammatory and immune system issues. Gustav Nyquist is seeking cohesion on his third team in the past year, and Cole Perfetti could be in line for a breakout season after scoring a career-high 50 points.

It appears the Jets might use Perfetti, Nyquist and Toews on their second line to start the season, with the idea they'll face a decision about finding the strongest possible combination when Lowry returns.

Pacific Division

Anaheim Ducks

Is this the season the Ducks reach the playoffs again?



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While still young, their homegrown core has varying levels of experience, from Troy Terry going into his seventh season to Cutter Gauthier seeking to build on a 20-goal rookie campaign. Over time, the Ducks have insulated that group with veterans. What began with getting Alex Killorn and Frank Vatrano years ago continued this offseason as they added Chris Kreider and Mikael Granlund.

They finished the 2024-25 campaign with 80 points for the first time since the 2018-19 season, which gives the Ducks confidence to reach the next stage of their rebuild -- that stage being the end of the rebuild itself.

So, is this the season in which the Ducks transition from promising project to the latest perennial playoff contender? Or is this the campaign that allows them to understand what gaps they must fill in order to reach that desired destination?

Calgary Flames

How will they navigate the Rasmus Andersson situation?

One of the Flames' most important players is entering the final year of his contract. This is nothing new for them, based on recent history. But Andersson's circumstances are different from those of Noah Hanifin and Elias Lindholm because this version of the Flames is in contention for a playoff spot.

Teams will be willing to pay a premium for a proven top-pairing, right-handed defenseman like Andersson. The Flames need to determine the strongest window for them to maximize any potential return if they can't re-sign Andersson.

Does it make more sense for them to see how they start the season before making a decision? Do they wait until closer to the trade deadline? Could they hold off if they're in a playoff spot or close to one at the deadline, and seek to add help instead? What can they receive for him? Or do they possibly risk losing him for nothing?

It's going to be fascinating to watch this saga play out.

Edmonton Oilers

Is this version of the Oilers as good as the past two seasons?

There will be frequent conversations surrounding 2026 free agent Connor McDavid and his future -- and if that future includes staying with the Oilers or heading elsewhere next summer.

But another issue that's likely to be raised is whether this can be the season in which the Oilers win another Stanley Cup and, in turn, allow the game's premier player to win a title and stay with the only pro team he has known.

Edmonton parted ways with veterans such as Viktor Arvidsson, Connor Brown, John Klingberg, Evander Kane and Corey Perry in cost-cutting decisions this offseason. That opened the door for them to make the trade for Isaac Howard, with the intent that having young forwards such as Howard and Matthew Savoie can provide the Oilers with promising talents on cheap cap hits.

Like any team, the Oilers face questions about what lies ahead, and if there are any other changes that need to be made prior to the postseason. It's just that those questions are ramped up with the world's best player on an expiring contract.

Los Angeles Kings

Does the regular season really matter that much for the Kings?

Posing that particular question is usually reserved for teams that have won a championship, or ones that are in a championship window, mainly with the idea that the regular season is a necessary formality in order for them to advance to the postseason.

This current iteration of the Kings hasn't won a championship. Nor has it shown it is in a tangible championship window. What the Kings have shown is that they're a perennial playoff team that can finish with more than 100 regular-season points.

But failing to get beyond the first round for a fourth straight postseason ultimately cost GM Rob Blake his job and led to a summer overhaul that saw his replacement -- Hall of Famer Ken Holland -- sign numerous veterans. Above all, it's also led to the reality that any of the major questions about the Kings won't be answered until the end of the first round of the playoffs.

San Jose Sharks

Can they win 30 games this season?

The strongest sign concerning the state of the Sharks' rebuild was witnessing the three main pillars of the young core -- Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund and Will Smith -- finish in the top four on the team in points in 2024-25. More growth is expected from that trio this season, with the expectation that goaltender Yaroslav Askarov could be the next promising prospect to carve out a key role.

Part of the team's growth was fostered thanks to veterans such as Tyler Toffoli. The addition of more experience in the form of John Klingberg, Dmitry Orlov and Jeff Skinner this summer could lead to additional gains.

Is that enough for the Sharks to win 30 games this season? They've finished with fewer than 30 wins for three straight campaigns. That's only the second such sequence in franchise history. In fact, the Sharks have won 30 games just once since their most recent playoff appearance in 2019.

Seattle Kraken: What changes will new coach Lane Lambert make?

Through their first five years of existence, the Kraken are already on their third head coach, with Dan Bylsma lasting one season before they hired Lambert. In that time, they've gone through a number of questions that essentially come back to the same place: What must the Kraken do to attain consistency throughout all facets of their game?

Although they were 13th in 5-on-5 goals and 16th in goals per game last season, they finished in the bottom 10 in high-danger scoring chances, total scoring chances and shots per game. They also had a power play that was 23rd, with an 18.9% success rate.

Their defensive play also faced struggles, as the Kraken were in the top 10 in most goals allowed, most high-danger scoring chances allowed and total scoring chances allowed in 5-on-5 play, with a penalty kill that was 21st with a 77.2% success rate.

Vancouver Canucks

Is their current center situation good enough for them to compete in the loaded West?

There was Elias Pettersson's decline from finishing with 89 points in 2023-24 to scoring nearly half that amount (45 points) a year later. The friction between Pettersson and J.T. Miller going public led to Miller being traded, with the Canucks losing another proven scoring option down the middle. That was further compounded when Pius Suter and his 25 goals left for the Blues in free agency this summer.

Entering training camp, there's a belief that Pettersson could rediscover the spark that allowed him to emerge as a franchise center. But what does that mean for the rest of the group?

Second-line center Filip Chytil, who came over in the Miller trade, has one 20-goal season in his career, which was also his only 40-point campaign on an NHL résumé that has been interrupted by injuries.

As for the Canucks' bottom six? Teddy Blueger's two-way consistency makes him a consistent contributor who can chip in more than 25 points



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a season. Aatu Raty's stint with the club last season included seven goals and 11 points in 33 games, in his longest run in the NHL to date.

Vegas Golden Knights

How will their defense look without Alex Pietrangelo?

Yes, the Knights made the splashiest move of the offseason in landing Mitch Marner. But there was major news on the blue line, as Pietrangelo will miss this season while recovering from femur reconstruction surgery and might never play again.

That poses questions about how the Golden Knights will fill the void left by a physically imposing, right-shot, top-pairing defenseman who led them in average ice time and was second in short-handed minutes -- while trying to win another Stanley Cup after winning one in 2023.

Vegas' current top-four setup could have Brayden McNabb partner with Shea Theodore on the top line, while Noah Hanifin could be joined by Zach Whitecloud, who lost his longtime defensive partner, Nicolas Hague, in a trade with the Predators. That would slot Kaedan Korczak and Jeremy Lauzon as the third pairing.

Under that potential configuration, Korczak and Whitecloud are the Golden Knights' only right-handed defensemen.

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL teams in danger of falling out of playoffs — and those ready to jump in

Ryan Dixon

It's a stretch to say no team is safe from missing the playoffs. Even in a salary-capped league designed to help everyone live, more or less, in the same neighbourhood, some clubs won't be moving from the sunny side of the street.

That said, last season served as a particularly harsh reminder that an invite to the big dance is something even quality organizations can't take for granted.

Five teams that made the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs missed the boat one year later, and, to varying degrees, the failure of each one registered as a surprise.

The New York Rangers not only made the 2024 playoffs, but advanced to the Eastern Conference Final — just as they had two years earlier in 2022. Twelve months ago, the Blueshirts — coming off a first-overall showing in the standings — were viewed as Cup contenders. But a 4-15-0 stretch from about American Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve totally scuttled that talk and greased New York's slide out of the post-season.

The Boston Bruins made the playoffs for the eighth straight year in 2024, but only three teams had a worse goal-differential than the minus-50 posted by a B's team that finished last in the Atlantic Division in 2024-25 and missed the post-season for just the third time in 18 campaigns.

The Nashville Predators made the second season for the ninth time in 10 years in 2024, went out and signed multiple top-tier UFAs in the off-season, then promptly became one of the worst teams in the NHL.

In Vancouver, the Canucks fell from a 109-point, Pacific Division-winning showing in 2023-24 to a team with 19 fewer points in 2024-25 that was squarely outside the playoff picture.

Even the New York Islanders missing could be deemed a small surprise given the squad had figured out a way to get in with largely the same group in five of the past six seasons before 2024-25.

On the other side of the coin, the Ottawa Senators — after missing the post-season for seven straight years — ended the drought by making the playoffs in 2025. And how about the Montreal Canadiens, who found a way to grab the final berth in the East after three straight seasons of being bad enough to select in the top five picks of the draft.

There's a push-pull in the hockey universe that sees unexpected squads rise above, while others are shocked by being left out in the cold.

Who could be on the post-season chopping block this year? And who stands to benefit when a 2025 Stanley Cup participant stubs their toe? Let's identify some vulnerable squads before we cite the up-and-comers.

TEAMS IN DANGER OF FALLING OUT

Every 2025 wild-card entry

You could feasibly argue that the arrow is actually pointing up on all four wild-card clubs from last year. The Canadiens are adding Noah Dobson and Ivan Demidov, Ottawa will have 2C Dylan Cozens in the fold all season, the Minnesota Wild made it despite stud winger Kirill Kaprizov and top centre Joel Eriksson Ek both missing about half the year, and St. Louis was the best team in the league after the 4 Nations Face-Off. While turnover is inevitable, the Habs, Sens, Wild and Blues can all make good cases for a playoff return in 2026.

That said, when you snag the last or second-last spot available, it's hard to argue you're bulletproof. Montreal and Minnesota were the only playoff squads to have negative goal-differentials, and the Blues' 96 points were the same number posted by a Calgary Flames team that only missed by virtue of having fewer regulation wins than St. Louis. As for Ottawa, there's just an inherent challenge that comes with playing in a loaded Atlantic Division. Any slip and the Sens could find themselves in trouble again.

The Devils may have finished third in the Metropolitan Division, but their 91 points were six fewer than Ottawa had as a wild-card team and the same number posted by Montreal as WC2.

The Devils may be the most high-variance team in the league based on the number of oft-injured players they have in big roles; think Dougie Hamilton, Jack Hughes and Jacob Markstrom.

On one hand, you could see New Jersey challenging for first place in the Metro; on the other, the injury bug biting a few of his favourite Devils again could have them life and death to make the playoffs.

Recall, this team had 112 points in 2023, then dropped 31(!) points to 81 in 2024.

This is more of an acknowledgement that teams take sizable stumbles than sounding a warning siren that the Kings are in serious trouble.

Again, the Rangers had a league-best 114 points in 2023-24, the Devils had 112 in 2022-23, Vegas tied Colorado for the best record in the NHL in the pandemic-shortened 2021 campaign and each of those clubs tumbled out of the playoffs the following year.

So why nominate the Kings as opposed to, say, the overachieving Washington Capitals? First off, because it's been taking about 95 to 98 points to clear the cutoff in the West, as opposed to about 91 to 93 in the East the past few years.

The Kings also failed to make a significant offensive addition over the summer, while also saying goodbye to a valuable defenceman in Vladislav Gavrikov.

Really, though, this comes down to the fact that Darcy Kuemper was one of the best goalies in the league last year and while that could absolutely



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be the case again in 2025-26, Kuemper is 35 with a lengthy history of missing significant chunks of season. If he's shelved for eight weeks, would that be enough to drop the Kings — even with their steady play — from 105 points to 97 in a year where you might need 98 to get in?

TEAMS THAT COULD JUMP INTO THE PLAYOFFS

New York Rangers

The Rangers may not be the Cup challenger some thought they were 12 months ago, but it is not hard to envision this club climbing back into the top eight in the East.

J.T. Miller — recently minted as captain of the team — will get a full season on Broadway after arriving in a trade with Vancouver on the final day of January. Miller produced 35 points in the 32 contests he played with the Rangers last year, and he'll relieve some of the burden that was on fellow centre Mika Zibanejad.

Igor Shesterkin posted the worst save percentage of his career (.905) last year, but perhaps with his contract situation fully settled, the 29-year-old can get closer to the form that saw him win the 2022 Vezina Trophy and establish himself as one of the best in the game. The team also added Vladislav Gavrikov in free agency, and the big blue-liner should help settle the defence corps a bit in front of Shesterkin.

At the top, the Blueshirts have a new coaching staff headed up by two-time Stanley Cup champion Mike Sullivan. That alone should go a long way to altering the awful vibes we saw in New York last year.

If the Jackets receive competent goaltending from the duo of Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves, Columbus — which finished two points behind playoff teams Montreal and New Jersey last season — could push its way into the big dance.

The Jackets have one of the best young forwards in the game, Adam Fantilli, looking to take another step following his 31-goal breakout campaign as an NHL sophomore last year.

Fantilli is part of a top-six forward group that has ample skill and size across the board. If Columbus can get to the post-season, it should find playoff-style hockey to be right up its alley.

One season after he was the runner-up for the Vezina, Thatcher Demko was limited to 23 games last year. His lengthy injury history speaks for itself, but if Demko can play 50 games this year, backup Kevin Lankinen should comfortably be able to handle 32.

It's impossible to write about last year's Canucks without using the word 'vibes' in a negative way. The team's top two centres, Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller, were feuding, and the fallout saw Miller dealt to the Rangers. Even if the move hurt the club on paper, something had to give.

Speaking of Pettersson, it goes without saying the Canucks can't get off the mat without a much, much better showing from their top-line pivot. The 26-year-old is going to get every chance to right the ship under new coach Adam Foote.

Even if people are already fretting about Quinn Hughes leaving in two years, the Canucks captain remains one of the best defencemen in the world. There's potential for a post-season return in B.C.

The Ducks already made a big leap last year, jumping from 59 points in 2023-24 to 80. Could they tack on another 17 or 18 and squeeze in?

The team has young players like Leo Carlsson and unsigned RFA Mason McTavish who could really pop: a goalie, in Lukas Dostal, with the potential to jump up and be one of the best in the game at his position and a coach, in Joel Quenneville, who's done a lot of winning at the NHL level.

Throw in some steadying vets like Jacob Trouba and his fellow former Ranger, Chris Kreider, and the Ducks are a team on the rise.

Utah was without two key defencemen — Sean Durzi and John Marino — for a significant portion of last season. The Mammoth (R.I.P. Hockey Club) had a .605 points percentage in their final 38 games and added a great young winger in JJ Peterka over the summer. With Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley on the rise, the top-six forward group could suddenly start to look potent.

Just for fun, a quick history lesson: Detroit made the playoffs just twice in a 17-season stretch from 1966-67 through 1982-83, then cracked the post-season every campaign but two in a 32-year stretch, and has now missed the second season for nine consecutive springs.

That's one elongated boom-or-bust cycle.

Detroit will get a full go under Todd McLellan — a mid-season replacement last year — and hope young players Moritz Seider, Lucas Raymond and Simon Edvinsson can propel a largely veteran group forward.

It's hard to envision Detroit making a big jump, but you could see the Wings nudging up to 93 or 94 points.

Calgary Flames

Calgary finished tied for the 14th-best points percentage in the league last season (.585), but was edged out of the West's top eight teams on a tiebreaker.

Any dip from Dustin Wolf as a sophomore goalie likely scuttles the Flames' chances, but we must include them on this list based on what Wolf showed last year.

Boston Bruins

We needed a team to serve as a reminder that clubs can come out of nowhere to make the playoffs. Sixteen squads missed the big dance last year, and, if you haven't figured this out already, except for a handful of them — Chicago, San Jose, teams that play in Pennsylvania — it's really tough to rule out the possibility of post-season participation seven months before the tournament begins.

What's the case for a team that finished last in its division to possibly reappear in the playoffs? After injuries submarined their seasons, Charlie McAvoy and Hampus Lindholm return to anchor the top four, while Jeremy Swayman — who never got going following a summer-long contract negotiation last year — is a prime bounce-back candidate in goal. Throw in the endless ability of David Pastrnak to produce offence and Morgan Geekie proving his breakout showing was no fluke, and you've got a competitive B's team capable of grinding out points.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Aatu Raty following own blueprint in battle for roster spot

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — For most players like Aatu Raty, navigating the years-long journey to the National Hockey League is complicated.

There is no one-size-fits-all plan for making it although Raty, at least, has a blueprint. Literally, he has written a blueprint.

Growing up in Finland the son of a hockey coach, the Vancouver Canucks prospect kept a training diary from a young age. It wasn't so much about what made him happy or sad, but what made him better. And what didn't.



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Now 22 and the top candidate to fill the Canucks' hole at centre in the bottom six — pending any moves by general manager Patrik Allvin between now and Vancouver's season-opener on Oct. 9 — Raty continues to keep a journal.

And for this training camp and pre-season, which included Wednesday night's solid 3-1 win against the Calgary Flames in Abbotsford, B.C., Raty has the advantage of looking at his notes from last year when he forced his way on to the Canucks' opening-day roster.

"I mean, I don't write everything in there," Raty said before the game. "But especially, like in training camp, we go over a lot of schemes and stuff that I want to write down, just to remember. And also just kind of how I feel each day, and then, you know, what worked and what didn't.

"Always from a young age, I kept a food diary and, especially for summer training, what I did for workouts, and then what I ate, how I slept, all that stuff. I just feel like that's where, at the end of the day. . . you can read and look back at that and evaluate. And if you say, 'I can't do anything better than this,' then it's pretty easy to go to camp.

"There's always a chance to take a big jump at any age, but especially at my age, it's something that comes just with physiology. I'm feeling great. Even though it was a short summer, I think I made some big strides. That stuff that I was talking about (last year) with my skating, it was easy to build on that blueprint knowing what worked. So I definitely feel good, really comfortable."

Raty skated at training camp in Penticton with wingers Vitali Kravtsov and Linus Karlsson, two other guys with experience in Europe and the minors who are pushing to gain (or re-gain) a foothold in the NHL.

On Wednesday, Raty centred Kravtsov and Chase Stillman, the former first-round pick the Canucks acquired in July in the trade that sent third-string goalie Arturs Silovs to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

A second-period injury to Canucks winger Nils Hoglander, however, scrambled the forward lines.

Raty has the advantage over most of the other prospects of playing as a robust centre who takes faceoffs ambidextrously and won 57.4 per cent of his draws in 33 games for the Canucks last season. Only J.T. Miller was better in the circle than Raty, and the Canucks badly missed Miller's faceoff dominance after he was traded last January to the New York Rangers.

Eight months later, there continues to be a hole at centre that Raty, who has spent 2 ½ years in the Canucks' development pipeline, is eager to fill.

Teenager Braeden Cootes and minor-leaguer Max Sasson, who was lively and dangerous Wednesday on a line with Karlsson and Arshdeep Bains, are other young centres contending for an NHL spot.

Raty stuck with the Canucks last season until December, then spent three months in the American Hockey League before returning for the final three weeks of Vancouver's frantic and failed Stanley Cup playoff push after top centres Elias Pettersson and Filip Chytil were injured.

In 33 games at the NHL level, Raty scored seven goals and 11 points in just 10:39 of average ice time while posting expected-goals-for of 48.3 per cent.

He said he is a better player now than he was a year ago, an assertion endorsed by Allvin, who noted this week that Raty's fitness testing was impressive and that the six-foot-two player has more confidence than a year ago.

Raty also has waiver eligibility for the first time, which adds another layer of urgency to his Canucks audition. If he's not playing in Vancouver this season, there's a chance he will be in another NHL city.

"Obviously, you always want to get to . . . where you want to be," he said of his NHL development, which began with the New York Islanders before the 2023 trade of Canucks captain Bo Horvat. "Now it's easy to say, when I've been able to play in the NHL, 'you know, it wasn't so hard.' But I can't lie; obviously, there's been days I must have been frustrated or just kind of thinking that I could be there. But that's the thing, you can't just skip that (development) time and get there right away.

"I would say (this is) the most opportunity that I've had. Every year, there's so much competition and that doesn't change for this year. But I think, yeah, there's a chance, and I'm definitely going to give everything I can to play. I'm really, really excited for that opportunity."

Dear diary, is this the year?

QUICK CUTS

- Hoglander and Chytil on the power play, and Victor Mancini at even strength, scored for the Canucks. But the most encouraging performance was probably starting goalie Thatcher Demko, trying to bounce back from an injury-plagued season, opening his pre-season campaign by stopping 11 of 12 shots and looking sharp over two periods. But the undisclosed injury to Hoglander took some of the lustre off what was an impressive win in a game between mostly-young lineups. Hoglander left the arena in a walking boot, and coach Adam Foote said the winger would be re-evaluated Thursday.

- Although the competition at centre is the most important positional battle for the Canucks, the most entertaining one is on defence where any of the three of Mancini, 23, Elias Pettersson (Junior), 21, or rookie pro Tom Willander, 20, could make the team on the third pairing. Canuck coach Adam Foote's desire to unleash defencemen offensively and be more aggressive seems to suit Mancini's skating and puck-carrying. But Willander was also good on Wednesday, finishing with a pair of assists and playing another understated but sound defensive game. Pettersson did not play in Abbotsford.

- The Canucks started five skaters who helped the Abbotsford Canucks win the AHL title in June. But the forward line of Bains-Sasson-Karlsson was more than ceremonial. The best line from the Calder Cup run was also Vancouver's best line on Wednesday. In a perfect world, they could graduate as a trio to the NHL but the Canucks probably don't have three roster spots available to them. Sasson also is still waiver-exempt at age 25, which makes it harder for him to displace others.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers takeaways: Edmonton loses pre-season snoozer to Kraken

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — While the fans at Rogers Centre stressed and fumed over a Toronto Blue Jays club that is leaking oil at the most important time of the season, across the country at Rogers Place in Edmonton, we're not even sure the Oilers players were overly concerned with the outcome of perhaps the most meaningless game of their entire season.

OK — that's probably not fair.

But as Edmonton's big guns came out to play for the first time, what ensued was a "how to" video for why the National Hockey League will be going down to four pre-season games starting next September.



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Over-passing, over-skating, and inevitably, overcharging those brave fans who couldn't resist a September night at an NHL rink, the Oilers were pedestrian at best in a low-event, 4-1 loss to the Seattle Kraken.

"A little sloppy," said the Oilers' only goal scorer, Andrew Mangiapane. "Good, though, to get the rust off."

The Oilers were simply missing something on Wednesday.

Edmonton debuted its new top line of Connor McDavid between Leon Draisaitl and Trent Frederic. Three players whose last game was Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Final looked decidedly in pre-season form, with more dangles and hope passes than you'll see in a week of playoff hockey.

After 60 minutes, the McDavid line had combined for four shots on goal, zero points and a minus-9 overall.

"Well, if you look at the stat line, it doesn't look very good. But they spent a lot of time in the offensive zone," offered head coach Kris Knoblauch. "(Frederic) was doing what he was supposed to be doing. He was around the net, made some plays on the half wall. It's early."

Stuart Skinner made his pre-season debut, and was only average as well. Which is fine — it was the opening pre-season game for so many, and history tells us it often turns out this way.

"I didn't feel amazing out there," he said. "I certainly feel like I could have stopped the second and third goals."

They are a necessary evil, these pre-season games. No matter how stultifying, or how devoid of an NHL calibre of hockey gets played.

Podkolzin on leave

One day after announcing a new three-year deal for Vasily Podkolzin, the news on Wednesday was decidedly less welcome. The Oilers announced that Podkolzin's father had passed away suddenly back in Russia, and the Oilers winger would take a leave to return home for the funeral.

After the morning skate, before the news was made public, Draisaitl spoke in glowing terms of the young Muscovite, who has found a home next to the German star.

"I see a lot of upside in him," Draisaitl said. "He has a smart, bright hockey mind. He really understands the game. With his work ethic, it's just a matter of time until it all clicks. Year by year, you're going to see more on the offensive side of things."

"Yesterday was maybe his best day of his life, signing that contract," said Knoblauch. "Then today, what happened unexpectedly. Pods is a very popular guy in our room — guys have a lot of respect for him. We feel terribly for his family."

For now, Draisaitl will skate with McDavid and Frederic, a unit that Knoblauch hopes will still be intact when the season begins on Oct. 8. Frederic seemed to keep up with his linemates on Wednesday, despite the high ankle sprain he took into the summer.

"With that specific injury, you've got to give him time — into the season as well," Draisaitl said. "That's an injury that lingers around for a while. It's always nagging at you."

"The history with Freddie, he scored 18 goals two years in a row (2022-24 in Boston) in a third-line role, so that's impressive," Draisaitl continued. "He certainly has skill. He's tough as nails, and he's certainly a guy who is willing to learn a certain way to play to be successful (with McDavid and Draisaitl). If we can help him become more productive, more successful, of course we're going to do that."

Inevitably, Draisaitl was asked about starting the campaign on a line with McDavid. He sighed.

"Guys, we've done this for 10-11 years," he said to the media. "It's going to switch; it's going to go back and forth. I do think it's probably easier to

coach the bench when we're together. But we've done this for so long — we know exactly how to flip flop when we're together or apart. Obviously, it's a pleasure to be on the same line as him."

On being the NHL's top-paid player this season, Draisaitl shrugged: "I put more pressure on myself than the contract ever could. Than any dollar ever could. I don't try to think about the number much."

How they lined up

Draisaitl-McDavid-Frederic

Jarventie-Tomasek-Mangiapane

Janmark-Lazar-Hutson

Hamblin-Samanski-Clattenburg

Ekholm-Bouchard

Leppanen-Regula

Millman-Akey

Skinner-Jonsson

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Sportsnet.ca / Why the Maple Leafs' bottom-six forwards matter more than ever

Justin Bourne

For some years now, the Leafs have been in a rut. Granted, with an NHL-best nine straight post-season appearances it's a rut some franchises would do ungodly things to get stuck in, but it's been a rut all the same. Even if it's a positive one, it's still a problem when you're trying to move the ol' cart from the good to the great lane.

That "rut" has been defined by one thing: They paid top dollar for four superstars right when the cap went flat. They were great players, yes, and it was a great place to start from, of course.

But ...

As a result, they had to fill in around them with cheap depth options.

As result, they had ho-hum depth guys who were fine but couldn't move the needle.

As a result, they didn't play them in big moments.

As a result, it all fell on the stars who knew — along with their opponent — that they were going to be out there when games were on the line, regardless of how they'd been playing.

As a result, they had a clear Team A and Team B, where a handful of guys mattered (including maybe a few names past the Core Four), and the rest were extras in a movie with a predictable ending.

When Mitch Marner chose to leave the city of Toronto, he accomplished something for the franchise that it had either been unwilling or unable to do for itself: he loosened up salary cap space from the top, allowing the Leafs to finally be constructed a different way.

Different, yes.

Better?

Well ... stand by on that.



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Now again, (cover your ears one last time, Craig Berube) the 'Core Four,' those Team A-led Leafs, were pretty darn good, as you may recall. They won the Atlantic for the first time last year, and they put up 100-plus points as a team regularly. Last season they beat Ottawa in the playoffs and gave Florida its hardest fight in a Stanley Cup run, if you think that matters for anything.

Most of the detractors, though, chalked up Toronto's slew of "moral victories" (such as "gave a team a good fight!") to the problem alluded to above, which they've viewed as a critical deficiency. That being that only Team A mattered, that their depth couldn't help, and so when the top guys were keyed on and shut down (or shut down by their own doing), they didn't have a Plan B to power through.

The Leafs have never had anything close to a third line with names like Anton Lundell, or Eetu Luostarinen, let alone a Brad Marchand. It's a high bar, focusing on the depth of a Cup champion team where nobody was making a penny more than \$10 million a year, but that's the direct competition. That's the "great lane" that exists just left on the Leafs' comfortable rut.

These detractors thought the Leafs' depth should matter more, and so, here we are, with them getting their wish.

Because, oh buddy, does it ever matter now.

The graduation from "spectators" to "people of importance" comes with some pressure. Getting a few chip-in points won't be gravy, it's needed as part of the main course with the departure of what Marner provided the offence.

The good news for Leafs fans is the team didn't just go get a few available free agents from what was out there. They traded for some prime-aged depth guys who can matter, who have moved the needle in the past, and who can allow a top-to-bottom gradient rather than there being some oceanic drop-off in quality at the bottom six.

They've bet on improvements from players with upside coming off down years, and I'm not even sure they need them to be spectacular for the depth to be improved.

Last year's most common bottom two lines included a lot of Connor Dewar and Pontus Holmberg and Ryan Reaves and, yes, some Nick Robertson on fairly purposeless depth lines. Calle Jarnkrok was hurt, David Kampf was in the doghouse, and they just couldn't tape together any kind of group that had a clear purpose.

This year Toronto's bottom six could start with pairs like:

In those two open winger spots, take your pick from whoever of Bobby McMann, Max Domi and Matias Maccelli aren't in the top six. Then you've got Jarnkrok (who is healthy this time around), Kampf (who's played 15-16 minutes a night on good Leafs teams), Robertson, Michael Pezzetta, and even Easton Cowan depending on how things go.

Sure, there's enough ingredients there to cook up something that works.

Joshua-Roy-McMann is an extremely big third line with some skill. Lorentz-Kampf-Laughton is a solid fourth, while something like Domi-Laughton-Robertson/Cowan could be deployed offensively. Lorentz-Laughton-Pezzetta could be a forechecking and feisty force. And none of those mention Jarnkrok who, again, can be a contributor when healthy.

Options.

I also believe that by the trade deadline, the Leafs will add a top-six winger, which are always for sale in February. They just don't have enough top-end skill to fill the top six how you'd want, and Brad Treliving has confirmed that with his own comments. Add one more name up top, and the bottom-six gets better again.

That's a lot of prime-aged guys with good size and a willingness to do whatever is asked of them. There are higher ceilings: McMann has

scored 20, Roy gets 15 a year, Joshua has threatened 20 before (in 63 games), Laughton scored 18 a couple years back, and Lorentz is good for 10. None of that gets you to Marner's totals, but if they can relieve the pressure from the top-six, there's more to be had from both Auston Matthews and Matthew Knies.

It's obvious some players are going to get moved out of Toronto (or even waived), and probably soon. The bottom six options I wrote above barely include Robertson, Kampf or Jarnkrok, to say nothing of Cowan. There's just a glut; way too many NHL forwards.

The point of this exercise isn't to pin down exactly what Toronto's bottom six is going to be, but to highlight how effective it could be, and how many directions they could go to build it in the image the coach and GM want.

They don't know what they'll get from everyone, and some will have down years. But with all those options, they should be able to make a few good bets.

And if they do, the detractors will finally get what they've been after. Less attribute points clustered at the top of the lineup, and more contributors throughout. It will be a team much more in the image of the St. Louis Blues that Berube won a Cup with, and it's not hard to see there being games where in the final minutes some depth guys get the nod if the top guys haven't brought it.

Having to earn the good opportunities is a concept the Leafs' top-six has yet to be confronted with.

The Leafs are going to be a curious case study, in that their offence should in theory decline a great deal without Marner. And it likely will. But they're shaped to try to generate goals differently, and in a way that holds up when the calendar flips to May.

But October comes first. And if this depth is finally going to matter more, they need to be better than what's been there. Because if they're not, the team won't even get a chance to answer the question about how they'd perform in the warmer spring weeks.

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1362019 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / San Jose Sharks team preview: Can Celebrini lead charge out of basement?

Emily Sadler

Rebuilds aren't supposed to be fun. But even by incredibly low standards, the last few years in San Jose have been tougher than most. After falling just shy of a berth in the 2019 Stanley Cup Final, the club bottomed out before leaning all the way into an extensive tear-down that has required plenty of patience.

Last year showed signs of life — OK, maybe not in the standings, where the Sharks' painful 20-50-12 record earned them just 52 points and the second overall selection one year after picking first. But it was there. Rookies Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith took their first strides, second-year pro William Eklund found his footing, and while Yaroslav Askarov stumbled in his first year in teal, his presence gives the young club a netminder to build around.

The building continues in 2025-26, with more fresh faces looking for roster spots — top prospects Michael Misa and Sam Dickinson among them — and brighter days (read: more wins!) on the horizon. How many more wins is the big question here. Because while the club is expected to progress in the standings, success in the upcoming campaign likely won't



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be measured in the win column alone. Meaningful hockey in March would be a great place to start.

The year ahead should see plenty of new faces get their first starts with the club as the team looks to continue its youth movement, but the veteran additions can be just as important to help the vision come to life. While there is understandably a lot of focus up front this year as the Sharks look to up their offensive game and turn things over to the kids, the 2025-26 season will be a year of much change on the blue line, too. The signing of Orlov to a two-year, \$13-million pact this summer instantly made the 34-year-old not only the highest paid rearguard on the roster but the owner of the longest current contract at the position. The lone defenceman signed beyond this season, Orlov brings valuable experience — 10 straight years of playoff hockey, including a Stanley Cup ring in Washington — and a stable presence to San Jose's blue line in a year of change. With top defensive prospect Sam Dickinson looking to break into the lineup, and second-year NHLer Shakir Mukhamadullin hoping to build on last season's promising start, the Sharks should be able to rely on Orlov to help set the tone while also providing a little offence from the back end after bouncing back in the stats department the last two years in Carolina.

Under-the-radar player to WATCH: Shakir Mukhamadullin

Speaking of the blue line, all that opportunity bodes well for 23-year-old Mukhamadullin to make the most of his one-year, \$1-million bridge deal and prove to Sharks brass he's a piece the club can build around. The 2020 first rounder (Devils) started last season with the AHL Barracuda and once he got the call from the big club last December was able to stick with the Sharks. Nine points in 30 games with San Jose show glimpses of his offensive upside. Where he fits in depends at least in part on whether top D prospect Dickinson can solidify his spot on the roster out of camp. Dickinson has the potential to be a franchise cornerstone in teal. If Mukhamadullin can find his footing as a top-four guy, the Sharks will have the beginnings of a strong young unit.

Top prospect: Michael Misa

Misa's arrival couldn't have come at a better time for the Sharks, whose offence struggled mightily last season as the club turned over its top six to the youth movement. Misa is as creative as they come, a masterful playmaker and setup man but also a dangerous scoring threat no matter the play. A something-from-nothing scorer, Misa's spectacular showing in Saginaw last season — 62 goals and 134 points in 65 games and the league's most outstanding player title — shows a player who's ready for his next challenge. The Sharks' second overall selection in June signed his entry-level deal in time to attend training camp, and while he has yet to actually make the opening-night roster it's hard not to imagine the magic Misa can bring to a top six that includes Celebrini, Smith, and Eklund. Speed bumps abound, sure, but this could be fun.

Three Burning Questions

1. Can Celebrini lead Sharks' offence out of the basement?

The Sharks ranked dead last in goal-scoring per game (2.54) in 2024-25, despite the addition of first-overall pick Celebrini and 2023 first-round pick Will Smith taking the reins. Celebrini's 25 goals and team-leading 63 points was a great start for the top talent of the Class of 2024, and all signs point to both numbers rising in Year 2. Tyler Toffoli's 30 markers on the season set the pace, with only he and Celebrini scoring more than 20 goals on the season. A full NHL off-season for Celebrini and Smith, plus another year for Eklund to build on, should see this group grow together, and the aforementioned Misa getting a good, long NHL look could yield some strong chemistry, too.

2. How many rookies will make the jump?

The youth surge is in full swing, and whether top prospects like Misa and Dickinson can make their mark will tell us a lot about what to expect from the Sharks' rebuild timeline. But while Misa and Dickinson are the biggest

names on the brink of making their NHL debuts, they aren't the only ones pressing. Winger Quentin Musty, San Jose's 26th overall pick from 2023, turned pro last spring when he joined the AHL Barracuda for a short stint. He brings size and speed off the rush and a little sandpaper to board battles in his quest to make the Sharks roster. Igor Chernyshov, too, is a big body with speed who will likely warrant some attention should he get an opportunity.

3. Can Yaroslav Askarov prove he's the guy?

When the Sharks traded for top goaltending prospect Yaroslav Askarov last August, the team appeared confident they'd found their long-term franchise netminder. A lacklustre start to his Sharks tenure shouldn't deter that feeling, but there's no denying this season holds a little extra pressure for the 23-year-old to regain his footing. Askarov started just 13 games for San Jose last season as he dealt with injury issues, posting an uncharacteristic 3.10 goals-against average and equally uninspiring .896 save percentage. He looked better during his stint with the Barracuda — especially in the playoffs — and is poised to reclaim his crease with the Sharks and make good on his second chance at a first impression. While the top job is his, San Jose's signing of backup Alex Nedeljkovic this summer helps solidify things should the injury bug strike, and will be worth watching if San Jose opts to deploy the duo as a tandem to help both thrive.

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Sportsnet.ca / Pittsburgh Penguins team preview: Can they find a way back to playoffs?

Sonny Sachdeva

After three seasons mired in mediocrity — three seasons of early summers, of trading away pieces, of taking steps backwards — the heat is being turned up in Pittsburgh.

The vultures are circling, questioning when, not if, Sidney Crosby will ask out of town. The franchise icon's own agent added fuel to the fire, and Crosby himself didn't shut down the talking point quite as emphatically as he has in the past. Three seasons without playoff hockey have no doubt weighed on the ever-competitive Penguins captain, and the jury's out on whether 2025-26 will bring a realistic chance at a different outcome.

But the new season will feel different. After a decade in black and gold — and two Stanley Cup banners hung at PPG Paints Arena — Mike Sullivan's tenure as Penguins head coach is through. In his place, Dan Muse has taken the reins. An off-the-board choice for GM Kyle Dubas, Muse joins the Pens after a two-year run as an assistant coach for the New York Rangers. Before that, the 43-year-old served as a head coach with the USNTDP, an assistant coach with the Nashville Predators, and in different capacities in the USHL and NCAA, earning a reputation as a teacher who can get the most out of young up-and-coming talents.

If there's any reason to believe this year might be different for Crosby and Co., it's Muse's arrival. There's no telling how exactly the rookie big-league coach will fare in his first year behind the Pens' bench, but there will, if nothing else, be change. The Penguins faithful are hoping that's enough to tilt things in the right direction.

The Penguins have been quiet this summer, which is one reason those on the outside looking in — and perhaps some on the inside, too — find themselves wondering whether this season will bring any progress. Despite leaving much to be desired offensively last season — the club's 2.95 goals per game ranked 18th league-wide — Dubas opted against



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taking any big swings to bring in more talent up front, his focus still aimed at a longer-term rebuild. There was one move that could potentially move the needle, though: the one-year flyer handed to Anthony Mantha.

Fresh off an injury-plagued season in Calgary, Mantha joins the Penguins once again looking to get his career back on track. The 31-year-old has had a tumultuous run in the league of late — making his name in Detroit, and then enjoying a solid run in Washington, the winger played out a brief stint in Vegas after being acquired at the 2024 deadline, and then joined the Flames on a one-year deal last season, only to see his campaign cut short by an ACL injury.

How that injury impacts his 2025-26 remains to be seen. But the veteran seems a worthwhile dice-roll for Pittsburgh — at his best, Mantha's a reliable 20-25-goal threat, and adds imposing size to the Penguins' top six. Likely slotting in alongside Evgeni Malkin on Pittsburgh's second line, he should have an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the black-and-gold's cause.

There has been no greater question mark in Pittsburgh than the one that looms over the club's cage. Even taking into account the oft-questioned decision to acquire Erik Karlsson, Dubas's most polarizing act as GM might've been the five-year pact he handed to netminder Tristan Jarry in 2023. In the years since, the 30-year-old's performance has fallen off significantly, to the point of Jarry being sent down to the AHL to find his footing last season. In his place, the now-departed Alex Nedeljkovic took the reins in Pittsburgh, while young Joel Blomqvist showed glimpses of potential.

Now, the club's goaltending corps has a new wild-card thrown into the mix: Arturs Silovs. Acquired by the Penguins in July, the 24-year-old enters the new year with a very real chance at snagging the No. 1 job from Jarry. You need only rewind to the 2024 post-season to get a sense of Silovs' potential — then a third-string option for the Vancouver Canucks, the young Latvian was thrust into playoff starting duties when regulars Thatcher Demko and Casey DeSmith both went down injured. He rose to the moment, guiding the Canucks to a Round 1 win — shutting out the Nashville Predators in the series-clincher — before backstopping Vancouver through a wild, seven-game series with Connor McDavid's Edmonton Oilers.

He's shown his level on the international stage too, and joins the Penguins fresh off leading the AHL's Abbotsford Canucks to a championship, his performance during that earning Silovs playoff MVP honours. He's yet to prove he can be an everyday NHLer, but there's no questioning his potential. A breakout big-league campaign for the Latvian in 2025-26 would be season-altering for Pittsburgh.

Since taking over in Pittsburgh, the focus for Dubas and his front office has been clear: add more young talent, improve the prospect pool, and bring some stability to the club's long-term future. While that focus has meant Pittsburgh has put up fewer and fewer points in each of the past few seasons, it also means the club enters the new campaign with some noteworthy young prospects ready to make their names on the NHL stage.

Leading that group is Rutger McGroarty, the 2022 14th-overall pick who starred for the University of Michigan before forcing a trade out of the Winnipeg Jets organization and ultimately landing in Pittsburgh. The 21-year-old played eight games in the big leagues last season before spending the rest of the campaign with Pittsburgh's AHL affiliate, where he turned in a solid 14 goals and 39 points.

While much of the rookie fanfare in Pittsburgh has focused on McGroarty, right there with him is Ville Koivunen. A second-round pick in 2021, Koivunen was a key part of the return in the deal that saw Pittsburgh ship star winger Jake Guentzel to Carolina. After a similar eight-game NHL run last year, Koivunen was sent down to the AHL for the season too, and the Finnish winger excelled, pacing the team with 21 goals and 56 points through 63 games.

Given Pittsburgh isn't brimming with options on the wing, and the club is focused on developing its young talent, there's a good chance both McGroarty and Koivunen stick in the NHL this season, and both should have a chance to contribute meaningfully.

Three Burning Questions

1. Will the Penguins trade any roster mainstays before the season begins?

The trade the rest of the hockey world is waiting for — Crosby to Colorado, or maybe Montreal — seems beyond a long shot between now and Oct. 7. The captain will be a Penguin this season. Now, if Pittsburgh continues to flounder, and finishes outside the playoff picture for a fourth straight year? Then, who knows.

The real question here is what happens to the two wingers who play beside him. There's been plenty of interest in Bryan Rust and Rickard Rakell dating back to last year's trade deadline — both wingers are coming off career years, Rust finishing the season with 31 goals and 65 points, Rakell finishing with 35 goals and 70 points. Given the seismic impact their departures would have on the Penguins' season, Dubas's ask is understandably high. Then there's Karlsson, who's coming off back-to-back 50-point seasons in Pittsburgh — and a 100-point, Norris-winning season in San Jose before that — but just hasn't seemed the right fit in black and gold.

Should any of the three veterans be moved before the new season begins, the Pens' chances of clawing their way back to a post-season spot will diminish even further. And the chances of No. 87 sticking around might, too.

2. Will this be the final season of the Crosby-Malkin Era in Pittsburgh?

Speaking of No. 87, are we entering the Crosby-Malkin Era's last dance? Along with Kris Letang, the duo have had an unprecedented run together — entering their 20th season as teammates, Crosby, Malkin and Letang have played together longer than any other trio in North American sports history. It's no doubt been a successful run, the trio bringing three Stanley Cups to Pittsburgh, a slew of individual honours, and a decade-and-a-half of seasons that gifted fans the thrill of playoff hockey.

But now the success has run out, the franchise has shifted focus to the future, and the chapter appears to be closing. In June, longtime Penguins beat writer Josh Yohe reported that the 2025-26 campaign will be Malkin's final season in Pittsburgh. It's unclear whether the future Hall of Famer will retire following his 20th big-league campaign, but the Penguins are not expected to offer Malkin a new contract when his current deal concludes, per Yohe.

While Crosby has been able to turn in continued ageless performances, Father Time has been less kind to Pittsburgh's No. 71, injuries slowing the former Hart and Art Ross winner. Still, Malkin has shown glimpses of his old form here and there in recent seasons — heading into what seems likely to be his last year in black and gold, with some new wingers beside him, could Mr. 101 turn back the clock in 2025-26?

3. Can this summer's moves finally pull Pittsburgh back into the playoffs?

All of this leads to the only important question in Pittsburgh this season: Can the club end its post-season drought, or is it time to truly turn the page on this golden era of Penguins hockey?

It's been an awkwardly slow descent for Pittsburgh. Just four years ago, they were still a 100-point club, the biggest issue being a string of first-round playoff losses in the wake of back-to-back Cups in 2016 and 2017. Then came a couple seasons on the fringes, Pittsburgh finishing one point out of the wild-card race in 2023, and just a handful out in 2024. Last season marked the true step backwards — trading away some longtime stars, turning all attention to the future, and coming up short in addressing the holes in the roster, the Penguins finished 2024-25 in the Eastern Conference basement, miles away from the post-season.



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The new campaign will be pivotal in showing Dubas and Co. where exactly this group sits. Should they challenge for a spot higher up in the standings early, and look like they have a realistic shot at a wild-card spot, maybe the Penguins brass stay the course. But should they come out of the gates stumbling and put up another campaign like last year, there's a good chance the franchise cuts its losses and leans even further into a full-tilt rebuild.

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Maple Leafs' Bobby McMann must make good on top-six trial

Luke Fox

Sure, NHL pre-season games are cluttered with half efforts and 'tweeners. They're lousy with imperfect chemistry and saggy legs and lines-in-progress.

The proverbial two points are nowhere to be found.

And yet, when you're a 20-goal man who slunk out of the previous season on a 24-game goal drought (regular season plus playoffs), roofing a crisp backhander and seeing a blast of red light feels like progress. A small reward. Pre-season or not.

"I just see it as I want to be the best version of myself. I want to reward myself for the summer I put in," scorer McMann told reporters following Tuesday's 3-2 pre-season loss to Ottawa.

"Hopefully it comes to fruition throughout the year."

What a year this is for McMann, who is skating in the final season of a deal that pays him a modest \$1.35 million and is tracking a coveted opening-night spot alongside John Tavares and William Nylander, in addition to shifts on the second power-play unit.

Not a bad promotion for a streaky late bloomer who had tumbled down to the fourth line in mid-May and often looked overwhelmed in his first taste of post-season action (no goals, three assists, minus-2, and 16 penalty minutes in 13 games).

"The intensity level and how quick the game is and everything like that, it changes," Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube says.

"It's a different level. And he's got some experience under his belt. I think he'll be more prepared."

McMann, 29, is a natural straightline speedster with a deadly release off the rush. He can beat goalies from distance and burn D-men wide. But Berube is trying to inject a dash more Matthew Knies into the left winger.

Taking the coach's messaging to heart, the Wainwright, Alta., native has been training in Toronto since July, working on his touch down low (that backhander was no accident), explosiveness from the corners, and varying his angles of attack to the net.

Berube wants McMann driving inside the dashers, not sniping from the walls.

The player won't place a statistical benchmark for 2025-26. (Twenty goals sure feels like the minimum, considering the opportunity.) Instead, McMann judges his own performance on three pillars: competitiveness, physicality and speed.

"Am I putting the work in daily? Am I cheating the work that I could be doing? Am I paying enough attention to rest, recovery?" McMann explains.

"I judge it more on the process rather than the results, and trust that's going to continue to propel me to be a better player and the best version of myself that I can be."

McMann, you'll recall, was a surprise healthy scratch on 2024's opening night after failing to wow the staff last September. He rebounded nicely, of course, but his longest NHL campaign (74 games) was an education.

"Waves of playing well, thinking you can play better ... always a learning curve, always trying to get better," says McMann, one of about 15 NHL-level forwards battling for ice time in Toronto's camp.

"Playing here at this level, there's so many good players, and everybody's fighting for spots. Especially as you come down the end of the season, the play gets so good, so competitive into playoffs. But I learned a lot in that playoff run, and I'm taking a lot of that into this year."

His greatest lesson?

"Just the competitiveness of it," McMann says. "Making sure that even when you're not contributing offensively, there's a lot you can be doing to contribute. Those are long series, and you can really wear a team down if you're doing the little things right."

Nailing the details will be critical in McMann's bid to ride shotgun with Tavares and Nylander.

The Leafs outscored opponents 11-5 in the 158 minutes McMann joined the all-star duo in 2024-25, according NaturalStatTrick.com, and Berube needs that unit to produce.

The coach also believes in forward pairs more than trios; McMann could well return to the bottom six if things don't click.

Consider the current whiteboard a challenge, not a promise.

"Bobby could take another step in his game," Berube says, "especially playing with those two guys. Getting those guys the puck more, getting to the net more, things like that. I like a big guy with those guys to forecheck, get in there and create loose pucks."

Burying a few loose ones won't hurt either.

One-Timers: Simon Benoit (upper body) last participated in team practice five days ago. He skated solo Tuesday. ... Max Domi on the prospect of joining Auston Matthews' top line: "There's open spots everywhere. Doesn't matter where you play. You gotta go out and do your best." ... The Maple Leafs' pre-season continues with a home-and-home against Montreal Thursday and Saturday. Expect cuts to a more NHL-focused group early next week.

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