



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025



### NHL Power Rankings: The Ducks may be mighty once again with Leo Carlsson leading the way

By: Austin Nivison

The Ducks' rebuild is finally yielding results on the ice

The quack attack is back, Jack. One month into the NHL season, the Anaheim Ducks are one of the biggest stories in the league as the rebuild is finally taking flight in the first year under coach Joel Quenneville.

The Ducks did have their seven-game winning streak snapped by the Colorado Avalanche on Tuesday night, but they are still tied for the second-best record in the league. They rank second in goals scored (64), and they're getting great goaltending from Lukas Dostal.

After years of a painful rebuilding process, the prospects have left the pipeline to make a real impact at the NHL level. Leo Carlsson is tied for second in the league with 26 points -- only Nathan MacKinnon has more. Cutter Gauthier, Mason McTavish and Beckett Sennecke all look like they could be legit studs up front.

Defensively, Olen Zellweger has started to come into his own, and veteran Jacob Trouba looks like a new man. Other young blue liners, like Jackson LaCombe and Pavel Mintyukov still have things to clean up, but the aforementioned Dostal is there to erase any mistakes. Dostal ranks 10th in the NHL with 4.24 goals saved above average, and he's done it in a chaotic defensive environment.

There will surely be some ebbs and flows for this young Ducks team, but that's to be expected for an inexperienced group over the course of 82 games. For now, here are the latest NHL Power Rankings with Anaheim pushing its way into the top five.

All expected goals and goals saved above average data via Natural Stat Trick.

#### Biggest Movers

10 Bruins

9 Maple Leafs

1

**Avalanche** There hasn't been a back-to-back Norris Trophy winner since Nicklas Lidstrom's three-peat from 2006-08. That drought may end this season with Cale Makar totaling 23 points in 17 games and posting some strong underlying numbers. -- 11-1-5

2

**Hurricanes** The Canes have played well thus far, and that success has come in spite of pedestrian goaltending. In his return from injury -- and season debut -- Pyotr Kochetkov

posted a shutout. Can he take Carolina to the next level in the crease? 3 11-5-0

3

**Devils** New Jersey occupies first place in the Metro Division, and it's managed to do that even without Nico Hischier scoring at anywhere near a 30-goal pace. With Jack Hughes at full health, Hischier doesn't need to score at that level, but could you imagine if he did? -- 12-4-1

4

**Ducks** Cutter Gauthier had an encouraging rookie season in Anaheim last year, and he's now a critical part of the team's youthful resurgence in 2025-26. Not only is he up to 11 goals and 20 points, but Gauthier also boasts a plus-11 goal differential at five-on-five. 5 11-4-1

5

**Canadiens** Team USA will have some tough calls to make for the 2026 Olympic team, and Cole Caufield is playing himself off that bubble. As Caufield continues to assert himself as one of the best young scorers in the NHL (12 goals in 16 games), it will be nearly impossible to deny him a roster spot. 3 10-4-2

6

**Stars** As a proud member of the Thomas Harley fan club, I'm befuddled by his lackluster start to the 2025-26 season. Harley has a 44.0% expected goals share and a minus-7 goal differential at five-on-five. Those are staggering numbers, but some of that might be due to riding shotgun with Ilya Lyubushkin. 2 10-4-3

7

**Lightning** The Lightning are a very good team, but they seem to lack one final piece. Their top five forwards (Kucherov, Guentzel, Hagel, Point and Cirelli) are as good as advertised. However, it's tough to find reliable production outside of that quintet. Tampa needs one more legit top-six option to fill out its lineup. 6 8-6-2

8

**Golden Knights** Is Ivan Barbashev one of the more underrated players in the NHL? It sure seems that way. He has 55 goals and 128 points in 190 games with Vegas, and he helps the team dominate play on a nightly basis. 2 7-4-4

9

**Jets** The Jonathan Toews experiment may not be working out in Winnipeg. The Jets are relying on Toews to be a top-six forward, but the results just aren't there. He has



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

three goals and five assists while posting a 35.5% expected goals share and a minus-5 goal differential at five-on-five.

5 10-6-0

10

**Mammoth** Utah is backsliding a bit, and you need to look no further than the crease for the biggest reason why. Karel Vejmelka has really struggled of late, allowing three or more goals in six of his last eight starts. Unfortunately for the Mammoth, backup Vitek Vanecek isn't a good option until Vejmelka gets going again. 3 10-7-0

11

**Bruins** The Bruins have now won seven in a row, and they are averaging 3.39 goals per game (sixth in the NHL). I think I speak for hockey pundits everywhere when I say that we all definitely saw Boston being an offensive juggernaut this season. 10 11-7-0

12

**Penguins** I'm not sure how many people expected the No. 11 overall pick in the 2025 NHL Draft to make an immediate impact in the NHL, but Ben Kindel has done just that. He's up to five goals and two assists in 15 games, and the 18-year-old has more than held his own against grown men. 1 9-5-3

13

**Red Wings** Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider are both critical to the long-term success of the Red Wings, and that has been a scary proposition at times over the last couple years. However, both are operating at a high level right now. They both have strong five-on-five impacts, and Raymond is third on the team with 13 points. 3 9-7-0

14

**Senators** The good news? Ottawa has gotten at least one point in its last six games. The bad news? The Senators have gone 3-3 straight up in those contests. At least they're keeping pace with a highly competitive Eastern Conference. 4 8-5-4

15

**Panthers** If Brad Marchand and Sam Reinhart aren't scoring goals for the Panthers, you're going to have a hard time finding someone who is. Those two have combined to score 45.2% of Florida's goals, and no other player has more than four. 1 8-7-1

16

**Flyers** Tyson Foerster is evolving into a defensive monster at the forward position. With him on the ice at five-on-five, the Flyers are surrendering just 1.93 expected goals per 60 minutes. That is a lockdown rate, and that makes Foerster an intriguing weapon for Rick Tocchet. 8 8-5-3

17

**Capitals** The Capitals need some help at center behind Dylan Strome. Pierre-Luc Dubois is out for an extended period, and he hadn't registered a point in six games prior to the injury. Connor McMichael has one goal in 16 games,

struggling to replicate the magic he had last season. 5 8-7-1

18

**Kings** Los Angeles has been stuck in neutral for much of the season until now, but can back-to-back wins over the Penguins and Canadiens provide a spark? As is usually the case, the Kings still need to find consistent offense in order to really roll. 2 8-5-4

19

**Islanders** Bo Horvat has very quietly been one of the NHL's hottest players to start the season, and he has helped the Islanders come firing out of the gates with 12 goals in 16 games. Horvat's 21.8% shooting percentage does seem unsustainable, although he pulled it off for 49 games in 2022-23. 3 8-6-2

20

**Kraken** The Kraken were probably hoping Chandler Stephenson would get a bump in his second season with the team, but that just hasn't happened. His 33.6% expected goals share is the worst number on the team among full-time players. That won't get it done for \$6.25 million per year. 5 7-4-5

21

**Oilers** Connor McDavid can spackle over a lot of holes and cure a great many ailments. He proved that with a couple of showstopping goals in a desperately needed third-period comeback against the Blue Jackets on Monday. 4 8-6-4

22

**Blackhawks** It's impossible to be hotter than Connor Bedard is these days. He's riding an eight-game point streak, and he's got seven goals and 11 points in that stretch. Bedard is now tied for third in the NHL with 25 points. That third-year leap is devastating for the rest of the league. 5 8-5-4

23

**Maple Leafs** William Nylander's point streak has reached 11 games, and he's about the only thing working in Toronto these days. The Maple Leafs have dropped three straight, and they're back to .500. Craig Berube will start feeling the heat soon -- if he isn't already. 9 8-8-1

24

**Sharks** Macklin Celebrini is now tied for the second-most points in the NHL behind only Nathan MacKinnon. The expectations for Celebrini's sophomore season were high, but he has shattered them to this point. 4 8-6-3

25

**Blue Jackets** Coming off a miserable 2024-25 campaign, Elvis Merzlikins is off to a legitimately encouraging start this year. In seven appearances, Merzlikins has saved 2.82 goals above average, and he's given Columbus a chance to win in most outings. 6 8-7-1

26



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Rangers Congratulations to the Rangers on their first home win of the season. Did it come against the listless Predators? Yes it did, but New York is in no position to get picky about wins at Madison Square Garden. 3  
9-7-2

27

Wild Things are not going well for Minnesota's trio of talented young defensemen (Brock Faber, Zeev Buium and David Jiricek). None of them have better than a 46.6% expected goals share or minus-2 goal differential at five-on-five. 2 7-7-4

28

Canucks Vancouver cannot get any kind of momentum, and an upcoming road trip that features games against the Hurricanes, Lightning and Panthers probably won't help matters. That they play those three games in four days only adds to an already tall task. 2 8-9-1

29

Sabres Josh Doan flew under the radar in the trade that sent JJ Peterka to Utah, but he hasn't been under the radar in Buffalo this season. Doan looks like an impact player for a

long time to come with nine points and an eye-popping 60.9% expected goals share at five-on-five 4 5-7-4  
30

Blues There are trade rumblings around Jordan Kyrou, but I think that would be a mistake for the Blues to do that now. Kyrou has just one goal in his last six games, but the underlying numbers are actually pretty strong. I expect Kyrou to break through in the near future. 1 6-8-3

31

Predators Nashville has won one of its last nine games, and the vibes haven't been this low since the early expansion years. The Preds are off to Sweden for a couple Global Series games now, but you have to think Andrew Brunette might get a pink slip when arrives back on U.S. soil. 1 5-9-4

32

Flames Something positive for Calgary: Nazem Kadri played in his 1,000th game recently, and he has actually given Flames fans something to cheer about from to time to time. (Now how much longer until he gets traded?) --  
4-12-2



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025



## Canes fail to fight for win in loss against Capitals

By: Liela Hafshejani

It was a battle in the Lenovo Center Tuesday night. One side came out bloodied, and the other walked away victorious.

Coming off a four-game winning streak, the Carolina Hurricanes (11-5-0) hoped to stay hot versus the Washington Capitals (8-7-1). After the final horn rang in Lenovo Center, the streak died, ready to be restarted come Friday.

In the Canes' previous game, defenseman Charles-Alexis Legault injured his hand after punching the skate of Maple Leafs left winger Nick Robinson during a scrum. Medics from both sides rushed to him when they saw the spots of red littered on the white ice, quickly wrapping his hand with towels and taking him out of the game. It was later announced that Legault tore multiple extensor tendons and is expected to be out for three to four months, according to the team's general manager, Eric Tulsky.

Both injuries and fights seem to have become a common occurrence associated with Carolina this season. Their match against the Capitals further proved that.

Barely a minute after puck drop, defenseman K'Andre Miller was sent into the penalty box, awarding the Capitals a two-minute power play. Five minutes later, forward Brandon Duhaime, with help from fellow forwards Ethen Frank and Nic Dowd, scored the Caps' first goal of the night.

Much to the dismay of Carolina, Washington broke out in the game strongly. The Caps — known for their team coordination and aggressive playing style — looked like they were skating laps around Carolina. Nearly halfway through the first period, the Caps had twice the number of shots on goal, with eight compared to the Canes' four.

"I think when you play a team so many times, rivalries come up," said center Logan Stankoven. "Not sure if you can call this a rivalry or not, but there's a lot of physicality. It's big boy hockey out there. I enjoy playing that type of hockey."

Aggravated after a less-than-ideal first eight minutes, defenseman Mike Reilly was sent into the penalty box for tripping Frank.

That was just a taste of what was soon to come.

Fifteen minutes in, a recurring character of the game, Dowd, slammed into goaltender Frederik Andersen, knocking him down onto the ice. Dowd forgot the number one rule of hockey: never hit the goaltender. After Andersen was knocked down, defenseman Sean Walker joined the altercation and escalated the scrum. In a matter of seconds, both teams were bunched behind the Canes' goal. Punches were thrown, and helmets were ripped off.

While the majority of both teams were jumbled in one spot, off to the right of the goal were Stankoven and forward Jackson Blake, fighting with Caps defenseman Martin Fehérváry. The fight progressed to just Stankoven and Fehérváry as they pushed, pulled and punched. Split up by the officials, Stankoven was left with a bleeding face from a cut above his eye, which later resulted in stitches.

"When you see a teammate down like that, they try to push us around. I'm not going to stand for that, so I just tried to jump in there, and next thing you know, the gloves are off," Stankoven commented.

The game paused with five minutes remaining in the period, and the officials began handing out penalties to both teams. Fehérváry, Andersen and Stankoven were all penalized for roughing or fighting, while Dowd was penalized for interference.

After an eventful first period, the Capitals scored their second goal with a snapshot by forward Dylan Strome, assisted by defenseman John Carlson, along with forward and all-time top scorer in the NHL, Alex Ovechkin, five minutes into the second period. The puck came from the left side of Andersen to make it into the back of the net, a tight shot barely missing the side post.

Soon after, it looked as if another fight was going to break out when Ovechkin reached around forward Sebastian Aho's face to yank him back by the neck, a rare sight to see from Aho, who usually stays away from fights on the ice. The altercation was quickly split up by the officials in fear of a repeat from the first period.

Down two, Carolina scrambled to try and level the score. Forward Nikolaj Ehlers answered their prayers and scored in the 14th minute, assisted by Blake and defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere. While both sides' players were recovering from an attempt on the other end of the ice, Ehlers took possession of the puck and flew down the ice. Caught off guard by the sudden shift in play, Washington trailed behind them to defend and assist their goaltender Logan Thompson, but they couldn't stop the puck from a rebound off the stick of Ehlers to put the Canes on the board.

The third period mirrored the previous two as the Caps scored early in the sixth minute to make the game 3-1. Defenseman Jakob Chychrun, with help from fellow defenseman John Carlson and forward Ryan Leonard, won the face-off to shoot the puck down the middle into the back of the net.

With a mere five minutes left in the game, another injury cursed the Hurricanes. Andersen was knocked down again,



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

**NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025**

but this time, he had to be taken off the ice and was replaced by netminder Pyotr Kochetkov.

Thirty seconds before the last horn blew, Ovechkin scored the final goal of the game into an empty net, closing up the game 4-1.

“They made it hard on us, and, you know, two teams play a pretty similar game,” said Aho. “I think they played a good game, and we’re obviously nowhere we need to be.”

The Carolina Hurricanes are set to play the Vancouver Canucks at the Lenovo Center on Nov. 14. Puck drop is set for 7 p.m.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

## Sports Illustrated

### Carolina Hurricanes New Addition Finding Groove

By: Jacob Punturi

The Carolina Hurricanes took a big swing this past offseason, signing veteran winger Nikolaj Ehlers to a six-year contract during free agency. The deal brought the multiple-time 20-goal scorer to Carolina through the 2030-2031 season and made him the team's second-highest-paid forward.

The first five games of Ehlers' tenure with the Hurricanes were a feeling-out period for the 29-year-old winger, but he's finding his groove as the season progresses.

It didn't take much to realize why the Hurricanes and Ehlers were such a perfect match in free agency. Carolina's system demands a certain level of speed and skating ability, and that's exactly the type of game Ehlers thrives in. That's how he became such a dependable scoring forward during his tenure with the Winnipeg Jets, and it's how he's quickly become a key piece of the Carolina offense already.

Speed remains a key part of Ehlers' game, even as he approaches his thirties. According to NHL EDGE data from this season, he reached one of the fastest speeds in a game, recording a burst of 23.05 miles per hour. That figure ranks in the 95th percentile of all skating speeds recorded this season. He's also recorded 34 bursts between 20 and 22 mph, ranking in the 86th percentile this season, and reaching 18 to 20 mph 117 times, ranking in the 80th percentile.

It's exactly the type of consistent skating and speed that Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour demands of his players, and it's helped Carolina jump out to a top spot in the Metropolitan Division once again.

Oct 30, 2025; Raleigh, North Carolina, USA; Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) and left wing Nikolaj

Ehlers (27) talk against the New York Islanders during the third period at Lenovo Center. Mandatory Credit: James Guillory-Imagn Images / James Guillory-Imagn Images

Ehlers is not only a speedy player, he's also an efficient offensive one that coaches love because he fires the puck at the net. It's a simple aspect of an offensive plan, but this winger never turns down a shot opportunity.

He hasn't been great at getting shots on goal in tight so far, but he excels at finding the net from anywhere in the offensive zone. He's recorded 48 total shots on goal so far this season, ranking in the 96th percentile of all skaters. He's below the 50th percentile in high-danger shots on goal, but he ranks in the 88th percentile in mid-range and in the 99th percentile for long-range shots.

The results are also consistent with his entire line. He's spent the majority of his five-on-five ice time the last 11 games on the top offensive line with Seth Jarvis and Sebastian Aho. According to data from NaturalStatTrick, the trio has played just over 111 minutes of ice time.

They've outshot their opponents when this trio is on the ice by a wide margin. The line has netted 71 shots on goal compared to 55 allowed.

And the production has clicked for Ehlers after starting the season slowly. Despite going scoreless in the opening five contests, he's been on fire in the subsequent 11 and is currently on a five-game point streak. He's brought his season total up to three goals and seven assists for 10 points in 16 games, but all 10 have come in the past 11 contests. After a tough start, the veteran forward has quickly found his groove in Carolina.

#### LINKS

<https://www.cbssports.com/nhl/news/nhl-power-rankings-the-ducks-may-be-mighty-once-again-with-leo-carlsson-leading-the-way/>

<https://technicianonline.com/151719/sports/canes-fail-to-fight-for-win-in-loss-against-capitals/>

<https://www.si.com/onsi/breakaway/carolina-hurricanes-nikolaj-ehlers-finding-groove>



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

## SportScan

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

1367872 Carolina Hurricanes

How Logan Stankoven gave the Hurricanes a fighting chance against the Capitals

Chip Alexander 9-11 minutes 12/11/2025

Raleigh

Logan Stankoven of the Carolina Hurricanes has been called a lot of things: feisty, competitive, driven, a sniper.

And, yes, short.

But Stankoven also is a fighter, if need be. Forget his lack of height; there is no lack of fight.

"He's not going to back down," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Tuesday.

Stankoven showed that during the Canes' 4-1 loss to the Washington Capitals at Lenovo Center, ending an altercation with blood smeared on his face and an arena of cheering fans.

Late in the first period, Canes goalie Frederik Andersen left the net to play the puck. Caps forward Nic Dowd came charging in and banged into Andersen, the goalie falling to the ice.

Andersen popped back up, angry, going after Dowd. Then, chaos. Caps defenseman Martin Fehervary grabbed Canes forward Jackson Blake and Stankoven, one of Blake's closest friends on the team, would have none of that.

"When you see a teammate down like that, and they're trying to push us around, you're not going to stand for that," Stankoven said. "Sometimes, you've got to stand up for teammates and stand your ground. Being a smaller guy, you can't be afraid of getting in there and getting your hands dirty.

"I just tried to jump in there and next thing you know gloves are off."

It was on. Fehervary at 6-2 and 215 pounds is six inches taller and about 50 pounds heavier. Not that it mattered to Stankoven. He went toe to toe, trading punches, before the two wrestled to the ice.

"You don't really feel much in the moment, you're just swinging away," Stankoven said.

Both players were given fighting majors -- a first in the NHL for Stankoven -- and Stankoven came away with a cut on his right eyebrow.

The fans loved it. His teammates appreciated it.

"Honestly, I really enjoyed it," Stankoven said, smiling.

Enjoyed it?

"I actually did," he said.

In April, in a game against the Caps, Stankoven was ejected after sparring with Tom Wilson, one of the NHL's top bruisers and bad boys. He also was named the game's third star that night, coming back on the ice in shorts after the game to take a bow.

Stankoven came to Carolina in March of last season in a trade with the Dallas Stars that sent disgruntled forward Mikko Rantanen to Dallas for Stankoven and multiple draft picks, including two firsts. Stankoven quickly earned respect from his new teammates.

This season, Brind'Amour had a request: move from winger to center. Stankoven has done that, and his line with wingers Nikolaj Ehlers and Blake has carried a chunk of the Canes' offense of late.

Trailing the Caps 2-0 in the second period, the line produced a goal when Blake made a nice move to the net to get off a shot and Ehlers was there to follow up on the rebound. Ehlers had his third goal of the season and extended his point streak to five games.

Later in the period, Blake got off another shot while falling and Stankoven just missed on the rebound on the far side.

"That line, they were dragging us into the game, trying to get us going," Brind'Amour said.

The Caps made it 3-1 with a power-play goal from defenseman Jakob Chychrun in the third while the Canes soon came less than an inch from making it a 3-2 game after some heavy jamming at the Caps net — the ruling after a review being the puck did not completely cross the goal line.

The Caps' Alexander Ovechkin had a late empty netter — his 901st career goal — and the Caps got some quality play in net from goalie Logan Thompson, who had 30 saves. The Caps (8-7-1) were 1-5-1 in their previous seven games, but were the sharper team Tuesday.

The Canes (11-5-0) got a scare late in the game when Jordan Staal was tangling with a Caps player in front of the crease and fell on Andersen. The goalie was slowing getting up and then replaced by Pyotr Kochetkov — Brind'Amour later said Andersen was pulled from the game by the concussion spotter,

At 5-11 and listed at 185 pounds, Blake isn't much bigger than his teammate and centerman. His shiftiness and puckhandling skills make him a good fit for the Stankoven line along with Ehlers, the veteran winger the Canes obtained in free agency.

Brind'Amour says the competitiveness of Stankoven and Blake, along with the skill, allows them to be effective, saying, "That's the separator that allows guys that size to be able to compete against guys that are monsters."

Brind'Amour has liked much of what he has seen of the Stankoven move to center.

"He's been really solid," Brind'Amour said. "There's going to be moments where playing center is really different and you're not used to it. I think it takes a couple of years before you really see how this whole process can go."



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

As for Stankoven, he said, "It's getting better." He's still working to be better on draws — he has won about 43 percent of his faceoffs this season — and said he often watches video with Brind'Amour looking for ways to improve in the circle.

"Sometimes, it's a tough night in the faceoff dot, but you can't let that affect your game," Stankoven said. "You can't let it creep in your game or let it affect your confidence."

Little appears to do that, even when the gloves come off.

News Observer LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367968 Websites

The Athletic / Wayne Gretzky breaks silence on political backlash: 'I'm a Canadian for life'

By Rob Rossi

For the first time, Wayne Gretzky addressed recent criticism he has received — particularly in his native Canada — for his ties to U.S. President Donald Trump.

"People are going to say and believe what they want," Gretzky said on an episode of the "100% Hockey" podcast co-hosted by Darren Millard and John Shannon released on Wednesday. "The bottom line is, I know in my heart I'm Canadian, I've stayed Canadian and I'm a Canadian for life."

Gretzky particularly drew ire this year for his personal ties to Trump during the 4 Nations Face-Off, an international tournament that featured two high-profile games between Canada and the U.S.

Gretzky had not publicly addressed what, for him, has been a rare adverse reaction in Canada. Saying in the podcast that he "had a lot of support," Gretzky did not specifically discuss his political views or his relationship with Trump, but said the booing he received when he appeared at the 4 Nations Face-Off final likely would have bothered his late father, Walter.

"You've got to take the good with the bad," Gretzky said. "I'm glad he didn't have to see it."

Gretzky was pictured, along with his family, attending a party at the Trump-owned The Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Fla, on the night of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Gretzky and his wife, Janet, attended Trump's second presidential inauguration in January.

Trump has drawn the ire of the Canadian government and people by derisively suggesting that the country become the 51st state.

Introduced as Canada's honorary captain before the 4 Nations Face-Off championship game against the U.S. in February, Gretzky was booed by a majority of fans inside Boston's TD Garden. He did not wear a Team Canada jersey.

Still, Gretzky said on the podcast, "I had a lot of support." That included a phone call from Justin Trudeau, who was then Canada's prime minister.

"It was a wonderful phone call that he reached out," Gretzky said. "He gave me a great line. He said, 'I'm giving you a hug call.' I said, 'OK, I needed it right now.'"

Gretzky, the NHL's all-time leading scorer and Hockey Hall of Famer, is a Companion in the Order of Canada, where he was born and played for 10 seasons as a member of the Edmonton Oilers. He is widely considered hockey's greatest player, and certainly is viewed as the sport's most well-known ambassador.

### WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Why Canadians are stung by Wayne Gretzky's silence

Canada's greatest hockey player and a source of national pride has faced criticism from his home country.

Gretzky said in the podcast that he understood why he was criticized in Canada and booed at the 4 Nations Face-Off final. He described Canadians as "proud," but noted that despite finishing his NHL career with three U.S.-based franchises after a trade to the Los Angeles Kings in 1988 and since residing in the U.S., "I never became an American citizen."

"I'm Canadian," Gretzky said. "I can't vote in the U.S. because I live in the U.S. and I'm Canadian. I can't vote in Canada because I don't live in Canada.

"I'm not into politics. And so I can't stop the prime minister from saying something. I can't stop the president from saying something. I just kind of like, well, I'm just a hockey player, simple as that."

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367969 Websites

The Athletic / The NHL's most dangerous dynamic duos and what makes them tick

By Murat Ates

Chemistry is hard to define or describe, but you know it when you see it.

Maybe you grew up on Henrik and Daniel Sedin terrorizing the Western Conference or Nicklas Backstrom and Alex Ovechkin in the East. Or maybe it was Wayne Gretzky feeding Jari Kurri, Adam Oates finding Brett Hull, or Bryan Trottier and Mike Bossy leading the dynasty New York Islanders. Maybe your entry point is more recent: Steven Stamkos and Nikita Kucherov in Tampa Bay, or Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl in Edmonton.

Whenever you fell in love with the game, you know what it's like when two NHL athletes take over games by making plays only they seem to see. And if you've ever played hockey, you know the magical feeling that is having an idea on the ice, trying it out and discovering your teammate was on exactly the same page.

But dynamic duos are more than an enormous part of hockey lore. They're part of how modern-day NHL coaches build their lineups. Get two players that work, pair them together, and the rest all seems falls into place.

Today we take a look at the league's most dangerous duos to start the season, with clips, quotes and scoring-chance data from Meghan Chayka at Stathletes, helping us talk about the players who are connecting most to create the NHL's most dangerous plays.

Top 10 scoring chance data

Here are the league's most dynamic duos in terms of creating scoring chances, with the passer shown on the left and the shooter on the right.

The combinations you see twice? Those pairs are so good they've made the leaderboard in both directions.

Passer                      Shooter      Scoring Chances

Clayton Keller

→



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Nick Schmaltz

19

Martin Necas

→

Nathan MacKinnon

17

Jesper Bratt

→

Jack Hughes

16

Sidney Crosby

→

Bryan Rust

13

Kyle Connor

→

Mark Scheifele

12

Nathan MacKinnon

→

Martin Necas

12

Macklin Celebrini

→

Will Smith

12

Mark Scheifele

→

Kyle Connor

11

Lucas Raymond

→

Alex DeBrincat

11

Troy Terry

→

Leo Carlsson

11

Today's piece is heavily informed — but not fully dictated — by Stathletes' scoring chance data. We're also looking at point totals, finishing, and a subjective sense of players who can't help but find each other when they're on the ice.

Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz

The first of two Mammoth duos has absolutely dominated the flow of play, while connecting for the most scoring chances of any two players in the NHL this season. They're the the single most dangerous scoring chance pipeline in hockey, with 19 scoring chances coming from Schmaltz-to-Keller setups.

With those numbers, it's no surprise Schmaltz has factored in on 12 of Keller's 15 points so far this season. They overlap for the goal and primary assist on eight Utah goals (second only to Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor), outscoring their opponents 23-13 and outshooting them 106-73 through their first 16 games this season.

What are teams even supposed to do?

**KELLER AND SCHMALTZ CANNOT BE STOPPED RIGHT NOW!!**

These two are playing on a different level lately.  
[pic.twitter.com/yNmrx5YE7Z](https://pic.twitter.com/yNmrx5YE7Z)

— NHL (@NHL) October 20, 2025

Some of the duo's success comes from their role on Utah's top power-play unit, with the right-shooting Schmaltz in the high slot and the left-shooting Keller set up on his off wing. They play catch so well, threading needles into and out of the slot through sticks as needed.

A lot of their dominance is about what they do off the rush, where they're equally likely to find each other attacking at pace:

There's no stopping that one.

Schmaltzy stays hot and makes it 1-0, Utah!  
[pic.twitter.com/zDhvAkT8oc](https://pic.twitter.com/zDhvAkT8oc)

— Utah Mammoth (@utahmammoth) November 5, 2025

The Mammoth are one of the NHL's top teams in transition, which is entirely sensible for a team so young, fast and talented. Give credit to their coaching staff for finding different ways to exploit their speed.

On this milestone goal, JJ Peterka's touch pass plays a key role off a Mammoth breakout. The finishing strike belongs to Keller — his 100th career point with Utah — but Schmaltz's vision makes it all click.

With that goal, Clayton Keller has notched **1 0 0** -career points with Utah! [pic.twitter.com/XJxpJ7KxKv](https://pic.twitter.com/XJxpJ7KxKv)

— Utah Mammoth (@utahmammoth) October 24, 2025

Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther

Every duo on this list has put together a lengthy highlight reel. Cooley and Guenther's might just be the most spectacular. They simply find each other, no matter what else is happening on a shift.

They've connected directly for seven Mammoth goals, exploiting counterattack opportunities with their speed and finishing plays that display raw offensive instincts. This Cooley dangle was part of a natural hat trick he picked up in the first period against St. Louis, with Guenther setting up all three goals:

One wasn't enough for Cooley [pic.twitter.com/3aOgWKqD1u](https://pic.twitter.com/3aOgWKqD1u)

— Utah Mammoth (@utahmammoth) October 24, 2025

Counterattack and finishing brilliance are their hallmark. The duo is up 20-13 in goals with a 133-83 lead in shots, made possible by the speed at which the duo turns 50-50 pucks into quality scoring chances.

Watch how Guenther steals, spins and places a perfect backhand pass on Cooley's stick against Edmonton on Oct. 28. The goal starts with the Oilers on the attack, but Cooley gets it out of the zone leading to a fumble and Guenther's spinning pass. There are a lot of players who



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

wouldn't score on the shot Cooley ultimately chooses to take, but he puts it on off the post against the grain of Stuart Skinner's push.

Logan Cooley at it again!

1-0, Mammoth. 📷 [pic.twitter.com/UbfswlvGxR](https://pic.twitter.com/UbfswlvGxR)

— Utah Mammoth (@utahmammoth) October 29, 2025

It's not all about pace and counterattack, though. Cooley's first goal against the St. Louis Blues was a one-time bomb, teed up with a Guenther drop pass on a broken play. Guenther's game-winner against the Winnipeg Jets was the product of an aggressive forecheck and Cooley returning the spinning backhand favor with an incredible pass off the boards and into the slot.

The duo plays close together on Utah's No. 1 power play, connecting for two goals with the man advantage. They provided two layers of screen on the play that led to Cooley's third goal against the Blues.

Their pace, skill, and ability to find each other at pace are the best parts. It's no-numbers-needed chemistry, with elite finishing to boot.

DYLAN GUENTHER OFF A GROSS PASS FROM LOGAN COOLEY 🤔

The @utahmammoth are so much fun to watch right now!  
[pic.twitter.com/Pmq14IMM5s](https://pic.twitter.com/Pmq14IMM5s)

— NHL (@NHL) October 27, 2025

Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith

Macklin Celebrini is on the path to superstardom, emerging as a potential next face of the NHL, but don't overlook Will Smith's role in Celebrini's success.

Smith is in on 13 of Macklin Celebrini's 24 points so far this season — impressive, though not quite as influential as Celebrini factoring in on 13 of Smith's 16 points. Smith is half of the duo's famous "Dumb and Dumber" Tik Tok post and consistently finds himself on the business end of Celebrini's brilliant passes.

WHAT A PASS 🤩 [pic.twitter.com/wrbXDznpDA](https://pic.twitter.com/wrbXDznpDA)

— San Jose Sharks (@SanJoseSharks) October 29, 2025

The duo has outscored its opposition 14-3 while playing together at five-on-five, which is an incredible advantage given their underlying numbers are closer to 50 percent. Is it possible that generational talent defies PDO?

Zoom into the goals themselves and you'll find tap-ins like Smith's above, netfront pileups, and yes, a little bit of luck. Mostly you'll find a steady stream of passes from Celebrini to Smith for scoring chances — the fifth most scoring chances created by one teammate for another in the NHL.

Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor

The Jets have scored 47 times so far this season. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor have scored 18 of those goals, with one of them directly setting up the other 10 times. That's a greater degree of overlap for primary points than any other two players on this list — and the scoring chance numbers back it up.

Via Stathletes, Connor has set Scheifele up for 12 scoring chances so far this season — the fifth-highest total in the NHL. Scheifele has set Connor up for 11. There is only one other duo creating this many scoring chances in both directions — Nathan MacKinnon and Martin Necas — and one of those players is a Hart Trophy winner who routinely scores well over 100 points per season.

ROOF DADDY 🤩 [pic.twitter.com/XqeYPaexb](https://pic.twitter.com/XqeYPaexb)

— Winnipeg Jets (@NHLJets) October 31, 2025

"They're like the Harlem Globetrotters in the o-zone," new Jets forward Cole Koepke said early this season. "When J-Mo's out there, all of them are just wheeling and dealing, passing the puck, gives, goes, and the next thing you know it's in the back of the net."

The Globetrotters reference is a reminder that Connor and Scheifele can wheel in open ice. In this case, Connor uses his speed to beat one defender and then draw a second one toward himself before finding Scheifele on the wing.

Goal scorers touch 🤔🤔🤔 [pic.twitter.com/rFCLakb3WE](https://pic.twitter.com/rFCLakb3WE)

— Winnipeg Jets (@NHLJets) October 31, 2025

There is also a slower, cycling, in-zone element to this duo's offence: Scheifele is one of the NHL's top skilled forwards in terms of puck protection, turning his back to the play, boxing out his defender, and moving the puck into dangerous space. It's a perfect complement for Connor, who is great at finding soft ice and then using a deceptive, quick release to beat goaltenders outright.

Their sense of spacing — when to play tight, when to look for holes, and when to stretch the offensive zone to the fullest — is second to none, based on nine seasons' worth of playing together on the Jets' top line.

Nathan MacKinnon and Martin Necas

Nathan MacKinnon leads the NHL in points and it's not close, following his four point game in Edmonton by picking up five points in Vancouver the very next night. The scary thing is that, based on the number of scoring chances between MacKinnon and Martin Necas, MacKinnon could have even more points than he already does.

MacKinnon scores with everyone, seemingly at will. He's combined with Necas for 11 points — a much higher percentage of Necas' 19 points this season than MacKinnon's 29. They've combined to be the scorer and the primary assist six times, which is fewer than most of the other pairs on this list, and it's clear that MacKinnon is on another level than Necas (or any other player in the league right now).

It's the sheer volume of scoring chances they create that earns them their spot. Necas' speed gives the Avalanche another dynamic threat through the neutral zone and he's not afraid to play East-West hockey, using the full width of the offensive zone to create space for his teammates.

We're on Nathan MacKinnon hatty watch 🤩 #NHLFaceOff  
[pic.twitter.com/av3Wpt8rqa](https://pic.twitter.com/av3Wpt8rqa)

— NHL (@NHL) October 13, 2025

It's not surprising that one of the world's best — and fastest — players can exploit that space. The surprising part might be that, according to Stathletes data, there are more Necas-to-MacKinnon passes for scoring chances than any other combination in the league.

Necas had fed MacKinnon for 17 such changes, second only to Schmaltz feeding Keller, so it can't be argued that MacKinnon is doing things all by himself.

Even when he makes plays like this one:

WE SEE YOU, NATE 🤩

Nathan MacKinnon opens the scoring with a beauty! #NHLFaceOff  
[pic.twitter.com/QVpPLvP67c](https://pic.twitter.com/QVpPLvP67c)

— NHL (@NHL) October 13, 2025

Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki

If you don't watch a lot of Montreal Canadiens games, you might not know quite how dominant Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield have been together this season. The Canadiens have outscored teams 11-3 with the



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

two of them playing together at five-on-five, while earning 60 percent of shots and expected goals.

Juraj Slafkovsky deserves credit here, too — he's finished off some stunning passing plays — but Suzuki and Caufield connect for the lion's share of moments that make you wonder how they even found each other. Suzuki has points on 12 of Caufield's 18 points and the primary assist on five of Caufield's 12 goals, including this game-winner:

COLE CAUFIELD ENDS IT WITH TWO SECONDS TO GO IN OVERTIME! 🏒

And that's @Energizer OT winners in back-to-back games for him!  
pic.twitter.com/6RTIMYfeUt

— NHL (@NHL) October 17, 2025

It doesn't hurt that the two get so many puck touches on the NHL's fifth-best power play, either — Suzuki is tied for sixth with nine power play points and Caufield's had a hand in six of them.

Jesper Bratt and Jack Hughes

The Jesper Bratt to Jack Hughes passing pipeline has created the third-most scoring chances in the NHL. That's a trend that might surprise you if you're not paying close attention to the Devils — Hughes tends to get most of the acclaim — but the hockey world is starting to take notice.

"I feel like Bratt flies under the radar so much around the league for how good he actually is," one scout told Peter Baugh when granted anonymity for this piece. "So dynamic, such a creative passer. Him and Jack's chemistry is great."

Bratt has set Hughes up for 16 scoring chances in all situations so far this season, including this beauty against Colorado:

Your daily serving of PB&J. pic.twitter.com/hPY9Jreuv

— New Jersey Devils (@NJDevils) October 29, 2025

Hughes and Bratt have managed to get outscored 10-8 despite controlling the flow of play, including a sizable advantage in scoring chances. The Devils have managed just .878 goaltending behind the duo at five-on-five, a number that won't last even if team defence stays a bit loose with so many young defencemen in the lineup and Brett Pesce out of it.

Give Bratt and Hughes credit for success on the forecheck, too, as on this play for Hughes' outstanding goal against Edmonton.

Jack's a human highlight reel. pic.twitter.com/waM0Ezrdi2

— New Jersey Devils (@NJDevils) October 18, 2025

Honorable mentions:

Lucas Raymond and Alex DeBrincat

Sidney Crosby and Bryan Rust

Leo Carlsson and Troy Terry

Evan Bouchard and Connor McDavid

Logan Stankoven and Jackson Blake

There are some notable absences here, including Jack Eichel and Mark Stone — who would almost certainly qualify had Stone stayed healthy — and any combination involving Connor Bedard. It shouldn't need to be said but it's not remotely a bad thing that Bedard, Carlsson or Eichel are all well inside the top-10 in league scoring despite generating their offense with various combinations of players.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367970 Websites

The Athletic / Why does NHL keep floating expansion? Have giveaway stats changed? Mirtle mailbag

By James Mirtle

You might be tired of hearing this about the 2025-26 NHL season, but what an interesting start to the campaign.

The changing-of-the-guard effect looks very real, with upstart teams like the Anaheim Ducks, Chicago Blackhawks and San Jose Sharks winning far more than anyone expected, while a bunch of established playoff teams (i.e. the Washington Capitals, St. Louis Blues, Minnesota Wild, Edmonton Oilers and Toronto Maple Leafs) are off to very slow starts.

I put out the call for your questions last week, and you didn't disappoint with a pile of interesting queries on everything from Macklin Celebrini versus Connor Bedard, trading for high draft picks, the best Canadian NHL team, expansion teams, and how statistics have evolved.

Let's dig in for Round 1 of the mailbag...

Note: Questions have been lightly edited for clarity.

How do you view Celebrini's or Bedard's chances of making the Olympic team? I think at the very least, it would be valuable to have them as the 13th and 14th forwards. — Candidateid\_44

Certainly they're going to be important players for Canada internationally for a long, long time. The question is: Are they ready at 19 and 20 years old?

CJ and Pierre had a great story earlier this week looking at all of Canada's toughest decisions throughout the roster. The way they're hearing it, one of the young wunderkinds is likely on the team and the other off — if one of them in fact makes it.

If that's the case, in my opinion, it's going to be Celebrini who gets the nod. He made a very good impression at worlds in the spring, but more importantly, he's shown a more well-rounded game so far in his young career with the Sharks.

Offensively, you can argue Bedard is the slightly more dangerous player, and he's put up a 4.9 offensive rating so far this season that is second to only Nathan MacKinnon among forwards league-wide. Celebrini isn't far behind, however, in 10th, but there's clear separation in their defensive play (+0.9 for Celebrini vs -1.5 for Bedard). Some of that is situational, but it's not as if either player is surrounded by an elite cast.

The more intriguing debate for me is whether they simply just take both players. Statistically, both have been among the top 12 Canadian forwards, so if you're just going entirely on merit, you'd say yes.

An Olympic roster allows for 25 players, and the expectation is Canada will have 14 forwards. If we assume Celebrini is on one of the top three lines, there doesn't seem to be a lot of harm in having Bedard as one of the extras as opposed to someone like Tom Wilson, especially given how many other players with veteran intangibles will already be in the lineup.

That would be the way I'd lean right now, based on how well both of the kids are playing. Canada can't repeat its mistake of 2006 when it left Sidney Crosby, in the midst of a 102-point rookie season, sitting at home for the Games.

Sometimes the greats are just ready early, and both of them certainly look the part. And the experience of being there to soak it in, even if they don't play every game, will be invaluable.

For teams that are in the playoffs on a regular basis and therefore picking in the second half of the first round (or not at all if they trade their picks),



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

wouldn't it be prudent to try and ensure that you have a top 10 and 15 pick every three to five years by trading a good player for a high draft pick or high-end prospect before you end up paying their UFA contracts? — Peter B.

Love the complex setup here. And you're right, in theory, this would make some sense.

A couple holes I can poke in what you're saying, however:

1. If you're a team making the playoffs regularly, you're trying to contend and win every year, too. How, then, do you justify trading a good player for a draft pick that might not be able to contribute for three or four years? And what does that do to your lineup and dressing-room chemistry?

Windows are finite in the NHL, and talent in the moment matters — and can be hard to replace when you're moving a sure-thing, established player for what's more of a gamble.

2. Will it even be possible to trade an aging soon-to-be UFA veteran for a high pick? That may be a tough sell to a younger, rebuilding team, too, unless you're losing the deal. If that's the case, why do it?

3. Yes, historically UFA years have been more expensive and in some cases a misuse of salary cap space. But we're seeing that evolve quickly lately, with a lot of young stars getting big money right after their entry-level deal, when large parts of those second contracts are RFA years. I think you could continue to see teams putting pressure on their veterans, like the Leafs did with John Tavares, to take less than they can get on the open market to stay with a team they're comfortable with.

If the player pushes back, like Steven Stamkos did with the Tampa Bay Lightning, then making a move, either for immediate help or for future assets as you're talking about, makes sense.

The other thing that might make more sense is trading assets to get cost-controlled players in their primes that aren't going to be ready in time to benefit a rebuilding club. The Lightning giving Chicago two first-rounders for a still-young Brandon Hagel back in 2022, for example, made a lot of sense for both teams at the time, as it extended Tampa's contention window and gave the Blackhawks two more prospects that are starting to contribute now (Oliver Moore being one) as they rise up the standings.

That's the kind of win-win you're looking for in that situation, and with free agency looking like it'll matter less and less going forward, I expect we'll see more of it in this rising-cap era.

Moves like Steven Stamkos' to the Predators could become more common as the cap continues to rise. (David Kirouac // )Jpg

Are the Canadiens now the most likely team to bring the Cup home to Canada? — Darryl W.

If you asked me this at the start of the season, I would have picked the Oilers, largely on the strength of their back-to-back trips to the Stanley Cup Final.

Now... yeah, not so much.

Our projections as of Tuesday morning still had the Oilers and Winnipeg Jets ahead of Montreal in terms of points, but it's so close that the three teams were effectively tied. You look at how wide-open the East looks right now, with the Florida Panthers really struggling in the Atlantic, and it feels like there's a big opening there for the Canadiens. Especially if Sam Montembeault can get his game figured out.

(The rest of the Canadian teams aren't worth considering at this point, as Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver are off to tough starts and Calgary looks like it could win the Gavin McKenna sweepstakes. I can't see any of them winning a Cup in the near future.)

The model is still a bit more deferential to Edmonton and Winnipeg over the Habs in terms of being a Cup contender, in part because they have a

longer track record, but that gap is narrowing, too. And what's really interesting is Montreal has a better cap situation and assets to trade to address its biggest need (a second-line center) before the deadline.

The Canadiens also have a very smart front office that has made a lot of savvy moves of late.

If they can add that missing piece up front, I like their chances. And if we expand our debate to include future seasons, there's no question the Canadiens are in the best spot, given the high-end talent in their prospect pool is starting to pay dividends in the NHL already.

It's a good thing, too, because if there's anything longtime Montreal fans need, it's more championships.

Why does the league bother sending expansion trial balloons through the media? It seems unnecessary to request media say 'Fans won't notice talent dilution' and 'Auston Matthews is from Arizona.' Are they changing any hearts and minds outside the potential expansion markets? — Landis K.

I can think of two billion reasons.

Actually, I guess it's four billion, given there would be two expansions coming within a short time frame.

I know we hear big numbers thrown around in pro sports all the time, but \$4 billion, even split 32 ways, is a massive windfall for NHL owners. That's \$125 million apiece as pure profit in a league where a lot of teams are pretty close to breaking even every year.

So that's why you get the positive messages filtered through. The owners want this so the league brass want this, and with franchise values skyrocketing, there are potential ownership groups around North America that want those new teams — even at that massive price.

Honestly, I can't really blame them, either. The Vegas Golden Knights have been such a runaway success, and even the Seattle Kraken are managing to charge huge ticket prices for what's been a mediocre team. There's clearly been demand for the product right now.

Whether they can re-enter places like Arizona and Atlanta and get it right remains to be seen. So much of it will hinge on what happens with the arena location and if they can get an entertainment district around it, unlike the last two attempts.

If it has to happen, I'd prefer expansion to be targeted either into large new markets (like Houston) or no-brainer wins (like the greater Toronto area) rather than where they've failed before.

But it is coming, and you're going to continue to hear rosy projections until it does.

What's been the deal with takeaways and giveaways the past two seasons? One has more than doubled in frequency while the other has been cut in half. Obviously the NHL has changed their criteria, but it seems odd that they would be so quiet about it when they were fairly transparent about auditing hit counts a few years back. — Trevor J.

Good question.

The NHL has definitely been investing a lot of resources in having better data fidelity the past few years, including using the tracking data to automate the process rather than have a bunch of people in 32 press boxes around the league tracking all these stats in different ways.

This process has focused on some stats more than others, depending on how important they are. So things like shots on goal have been refined probably to the greatest extent, as they influence things like save percentages, expected goals and individual player totals in categories that are increasingly important to get right given the rise of in-game betting.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

As for giveaways and takeaways, I asked a well-placed source what was happening with those numbers and heard back the following:

"Giveaways and takeaways always varied wildly from arena to arena, much more than any other stats. About two seasons ago, it moved from off-ice officials poorly scoring them to a combination of being flagged by automation and then some of them being checked by central auditing.

"They're much better. For additional expenditure and manpower, they could be further improved, but that's probably unlikely. They're not a central building block towards bigger concepts — like possession, passes, shots, etc. — so it's not like improving takeaways improves anything else (in the NHL's data ecosystem)."

So there you have it: What you see now is, in the view of the league, a much better version of these numbers than what they had in the past. And don't expect major changes there going forward.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367971 Websites

The Athletic / Goalie Tracking: The modern stand-up netminder, and how to make glove saves look easy

By Jesse Granger

The days of the true stand-up goalie are long gone. The style dominated the position until the 1980s, when it eventually was replaced by the modern butterfly style. Now, goalies spend more time on the ice than ever before, and for good reason. Sealing the ice, especially when the puck is in close, is usually the most efficient and effective way to keep it out of the net.

But for the hockey fans who yearn for the days of goalies staying on their feet to react to shots, you may have a new favorite netminder. His name is Lukáš Dostál, and he's backstopping the Anaheim Ducks to the most surprising start in the NHL.

Dostál isn't dancing around the crease quite like Kirk McLean or Bill Ranford, but in today's goaltending ecosystem, with most goalies dropping to the ice by default, Dostál may be the closest thing to the old-school, stand-up style.

Welcome back to Goalie Tracking, where we examine the details of the position and attempt to explain why goalies do what they do. In a position at which margins are razor-thin and the game is faster than ever, details are the difference between saves and goals. We try to highlight exactly what different goalies are doing to separate themselves.

In the first edition of the 2025-26 season, we'll examine Dostál's unique stance and play style, and even how he sharpens his skates in a peculiar way to facilitate both. We'll also dig into Tampa Bay Lightning star Andrei Vasilevskiy's glove positioning and how he's using it to great effect.

Back to Dostál, who had saved the third-most goals above expected in the NHL entering Tuesday and helped the Ducks to an early lead atop of the Pacific Division. The 25-year-old took over Anaheim's starting job at the beginning of last season, impressed throughout that campaign and has looked even better early this season.

Dostál plays with a very narrow stance, keeping his skates much closer together than most. As a result, his leg pads sit much more vertically as he navigates around his crease — somewhat reminiscent of the days of the true stand-up goalies.

Lukáš Dostál plays a game different from most modern goalies. (Gary A. Vasquez // )Jpg

"I've gone through phases growing up," Dostál told The Athletic. "If you see some of the pictures from when I was playing under-16 or under-17, my stance was very wide. I started working with my coaches then on a closer stance, because I like it when I have my feet underneath me, especially for mid-range or long-range shots."

A narrow stance does several things for Dostál. Most importantly, by keeping his feet underneath him, he stays in a coiled, athletic position, ready to react to the play. The wider a goalie's skates become, the more his skates dig into the ice and the less leverage he has to move laterally.

"You feel like you're under control all of the time," Dostál explained. "Once you get wide, there's only so much you can do. You basically either have to slide or make a short T-push, and that's it."

Which leads us to the reason Dostál may be the closest modern example of a stand-up goalie. He is an excellent reader of the play, anticipating passes before they happen and getting to his spots on his feet, rather than sliding on his pads.

Here's an example of Dostál staying on his skates in a situation where almost every goalie in the NHL would've dropped to the ice.

As Carolina Hurricanes forward Jackson Blake (No. 53) carries the puck below the faceoff dot, many goalies would've defaulted into the RVH (reverse vertical horizontal) position, with their left leg flush to the ice and their body leaning against the nearside post. Shooters have picked up on this trend and have started picking the short-side top corner, and that's exactly what Blake tried to do on this play.

Not only did Dostál not go into the RVH, he also never fully dropped into the butterfly, even after Blake released the shot. He widened his skates slightly but held onto his edges, which allowed him to react athletically and get a shoulder on the high shot.

The way Dostál keeps his knees bent and his skates underneath his hips, he looks like a tightly-wound spring, ready to uncoil with power at any moment. Those quick bursts keep him ahead of the play when teams pass the puck around the zone, rather than chasing it. This sensational save against Tampa Bay on Oct. 25 demonstrates a lot of what Dostál does well.

Notice the first thing Dostál did the moment he realized his defenseman was being tied up by a forechecker behind the net. He crouched into his post to load his legs, and made two quick shoulder checks to scan the ice and identify passing threats. Those are important because he saw Brandon Hagel (No. 38) early, so when the pass was made from the corner, Dostál knew exactly where he needed to get to the top of his crease to be ready for that potential one-timer.

The biggest key to this entire play was how quickly Dostál got to that spot and set his feet. He didn't guess that Hagel would rip the one-timer and slide into a butterfly. He took as much depth as possible, then came to a hard stop and set his feet.

"That's something we're always preaching here in Anaheim," he said. "Always make sure you're set before the shot, even if you have to sacrifice a little bit of depth. It's better to be set than moving toward the puck, because then when there's a rebound, you start chasing."

Being set before the release of a shot gives a goalie two major benefits. First, it helps the nervous system track the puck and react to it because it isn't partially preoccupied with other movements. Think of what it's like to squint to read a sign from a long distance, and how much harder it would be if your head were moving while trying to read it.

Second, being set prior to a shot gives the goalie balance in his stance, so he can react in any direction. In this case, because Dostál was set for the shot and in his narrow, athletic stance, when Hagel made the extra pass to a wide-open Nikita Kucherov on the backside of the play, Dostál was ready to explode across. Even then, he didn't slide in desperation. He got across in perfect balance and dug his right skate into the ice to



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

set himself once again. That's why when Kucherov tried to deke back against the grain, and then again to his forehand, Dostál stayed with him the entire way and made an impressive blocker save.

"When the puck gets closer, you have to get slightly wider, but then it's about patience," Dostál said. "If you can stay narrow as long as you can, then you're loaded and you can always push."

There were multiple opportunities for Dostál to slide out of control on that play, and either would've resulted in Kucherov shooting the puck into a wide-open net. Because he kept his balance and edges throughout, Dostál was able to react to every lateral move Hagel and Kucherov made, and stayed one step ahead the entire way.

Dostál was kind enough to let us in on a secret of his that helps him to play this way. The way he has his skate blades sharpened is as unique as his stance, and the two work in harmony.

"I have a high inside edge, so it allows me to glide when I have a narrow stance," he explained. "That's part of why I can keep the narrow stance quite a lot. I always have my edges, but I can also push with a nice glide. If I had just a regular three-eighths cut, I would need to be a little wider. It would take more effort to push."

This graphic by Blade Tech Hockey shows an exaggerated example of how skate blades look when sharpened to different hollows. Each player has their preferred radius. The smaller the radius, the more pronounced the inside and outside edges become, giving the blade more bite into the ice.

In these examples, the inside and outside edges are all symmetrical, which is the standard technique, but Dostál has his contoured so the inside edge of his skate blade is higher and more pronounced than the outside edge. It's enough of a difference that you can actually see it by holding the skates and looking at the blade with the naked eye.

Dostál believes it gives him the best of both worlds. When he is standing upright, with his skates narrow and more vertical, his outside edge is less exposed in order to give him the glide he wants for smooth shuffles and change of direction. If he wants more bite, all he has to do is widen his stance a bit, and that raised inside edge catches the ice perfectly to anchor that skate for a strong push in either direction.

Dostál is quickly rising up the ranks as one of the most exciting young goalies in the league. If Anaheim can continue taking steps in its overall team game, the Ducks could be a legitimate contender earlier than many expected, and Dostál's emergence is one of the biggest reasons.

### Why Vasilevskiy glove saves look easy

After a slow start to the season for Vasilevskiy and the Tampa Bay Lightning as a whole, he and his team have turned things around in a big way. Vasilevskiy is 5-1-0 in his last six starts with a .923 save percentage and 5.86 goals saved above expected since Oct. 25.

It's nothing new for the hulking Russian netminder, who was a Vezina Trophy finalist for the fifth time in his career last season. He's one of the best in the world, and arguably has a Hall of Fame resume already, but still works hard on the details of his game.

Watching him practice while the Lightning were in Las Vegas ahead of their game against the Golden Knights on Nov. 6, one thing that really stood out was how far Vasilevskiy holds his gloves in front of his body.

"Glove projection," as most coaches call it, is nothing new or unique to Vasilevskiy, but he exaggerates it more than most. Just compare his glove position to that of Dostál, who also has his gloves in front of him, but not nearly to the same extent.

Vasilevskiy gets two main benefits from this posture. By extending his gloves so far out, he distributes his weight further away from his center of mass. Like with a tightrope walker using a pole for balance, Vasilevskiy's hands serve as a counterbalance to his backside, which sticks out behind

his skates. It gives him a solid base to play on his toes and move without losing his balance forward or backward.

Equally important, it also makes his gloves appear significantly bigger to the puck and eliminates shooting angles. We've covered the concept of "box control" more extensively in a past edition of Goalie Tracking, but if you haven't read that, it's the idea that the puck can only travel in a straight line once it leaves the shooter's stick, so a goalie only needs to protect the box in front of him that the puck must travel through to hit the net. The closer the goalie is to the puck, the smaller that box becomes. This coaching video by David Schultz at Stop-It Goaltending and Pure Hockey visualizes the concept.

Some goalies will even try to visualize this imaginary box while training. It can help to understand how little they actually have to move to cover the net when they have proper depth. At 6-foot-4, 223 pounds, Vasilevskiy already has plenty of net coverage. By projecting his gloves out in front of his body, he gives shooters even less room to pick the high corners.

By shrinking the box, Vasilevskiy minimizes the movement needed to make glove saves. It's why you'll rarely see him make a spectacular-looking windmill snare with a lot of movement. Instead, it looks like he's stabbing the puck out of the air with the smallest of adjustments, like this:

Here's an example in game action, on a glove save by Vasilevskiy on Golden Knights defenseman Noah Hanifin on Nov. 6.

By overlaying the box control visual onto this play, you can see how small the area Vasilevskiy must defend actually is. You can also see how projecting his glove out in front of this window makes his life easier, and how little room there is above the glove.

Here's another example of Vasilevskiy making a glove save with very little reaction required from his glove hand. This time it was on Colorado's Cale Makar, who leads all defensemen in goals and points, from a dangerous shooting spot in the middle of the slot.

Because he's standing tall at the top of his crease, Vasilevskiy barely has to move his glove at all to make this save. It may not look as visually impressive, but from a technique and process standpoint, it's perfection. It would be easy to say, "Makar shot it right into his glove," but the truth is, Vasilevskiy gave him nowhere else to shoot.

Vasilevskiy is a supreme athlete, but he also has incredible details to his game and understands shooting angles as well as any goalie in the world. It's a big reason why he's been able to sustain a high level of performance for such a long period of time. He's a month into his 12th season in the NHL (10th full season) and has produced a save percentage below league average only once, and that was in 2023-24, when he was coming off back surgery.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367972 Websites

The Athletic / NHL players play with missing teeth. Why don't they fix them?

Fluto Shinzawa

Patrick Brown is quick with a smile. As such, it does not take long to see that Brown has suffered one of the consequences of being a hockey player.

"I'm missing one tooth, obviously," the 164-game NHL veteran says, flashing a gap up top. "It's come out a bunch of times."



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Brown's troubles started when he was 18 years old. He was playing summer hockey while wearing a half shield. One of his best friends high-sticked him in the mouth. Half of the tooth crumbled.

"But it was just the bottom half," Brown says. "I got to the dentist. They fixed it. So that was good."

It turned bad, by his recollection, in 2022. Brown, playing for the Philadelphia Flyers, was on the forecheck. Martin Fehervary was in his sights. As Brown closed on the forecheck, the Washington Capitals defenseman lifted his elbow into his face.

"His elbow pad literally goes into my mouth and caves — the same tooth that was already broken in — the whole thing in," Brown says. "So then the whole thing almost came out. It was split at the bottom. They tried to put a top on it. But there wasn't enough base left. So they just had to take it out."

In more polite company, Brown inserts a prosthetic, commonly known as a flipper, so he can flash an acceptable smile.

"I'll wear it to my country club," Brown says with the accompanying grin. "Parent-teacher conferences. Kids' birthday parties."

But on the ice and in the room, Brown lets the air flow through the hole that Fehervary opened. Others do the same.

It's not just for the look.

Safety first

Brown has company when it comes to missing teeth. With a look to his right, he can see Riley Duran, his AHL linemate, laying claim to a similar gap on the top row.

In 2024-25, during the Boston Bruins' rookie tournament in Buffalo, Duran stretched out his stick and had a puck ride all the way up it and into his mouth. He needed stitches on site and a root canal upon returning to Boston.

"Teeth kind of suck," says the Anaheim Ducks' Troy Terry, whose bottom row juts in multiple directions following a handful of wayward high sticks. "Nerve endings. Eating. That type of thing."

If there is any consolation to eating a puck, it's that the aesthetic outcome comes with bragging rights. Players like Brent Burns and Miles Wood look like stereotypical hockey players because of how many teeth they are currently without.

"It's a badge of honor sometimes to have been through the fight out there and lost a tooth or chipped a tooth," Bruins team dentist Dr. Edwin Riley says. "Just a different mentality."

Brown required two procedures following his run-in with Fehervary. First, the little that was left of his tooth had to come out. Then he had a metal post put in to serve as the base of a future full-time replacement.

That, however, will wait until he retires. The risk is not worth the reward.

"If it happens again and you have the fake one in over the post and it breaks the post, the post can actually break the bone. That could be a major surgery," Brown says. "You try not to get that. Guys will get little pieces of the teeth fixed. But if you're getting a whole new one stuck up there, it can break the base if you get another injury to it."

A player could roll the dice that the odds are low of having the same area smashed multiple times. But the severity of such an outcome goes hand in hand with the likelihood of teeth being exposed to injury.

"Accidents where people fall off bikes or people trip, fall and hit the ground, those are all similar kinds of injuries where you're going to see lacerations to the lip and to the soft tissue around the teeth, fractured teeth, teeth that could get pushed," Riley says. "It's usually just that in hockey, the exposure to the potential for that is much higher."

A dental bridge is a more permanent alternative to a flipper. But players may prefer to wait for this procedure until they retire because of the risk of a repeat strike. Not only that, a bridge also puts the neighbors of the original injured tooth at risk.

"Let's say you lose one tooth," says Dr. Dennis Fasbinder, clinical professor and director of the University of Michigan School of Dentistry's Dental Faculty Associates. "The player decides, 'I want a bridge. I don't want to have an implant done.' Well, we have to put a crown on the teeth on either side of that space. So it looks like the tooth is replaced. But now three teeth are connected. If they get hit there again, they might lose additional teeth now, not just the one they lost to begin with."

Dentists prefer prevention over intervention. Wearing a mouth guard would reduce the likelihood of injury.

"Most trauma occurs not because the tooth itself gets hit. That is obviously one option," Fasbinder says. "But a lot of times, it happens by hitting the chin and slamming the teeth together, so it's a tooth-to-tooth contact. Any kind of custom mouth guard of a couple millimeters is going to protect those teeth from hitting each other. That cuts down a tremendous amount of trauma right there. It also shields the front of the teeth. So if you start out with a hockey stick or puck, it will diffuse the force on those teeth and protect them from being chipped or broken."

But mouth guards are not mandatory in the NHL. Most times, when a player hits the ice, he's playing with fire.

Rapid response

Dentists like Riley attend their teams' home games — they are responsible for visiting players as well — to be on hand when things go sideways. Care is usually not out of the ordinary. According to Fasbinder, dentists learn how to assess and treat such facial trauma (lacerations to the lips, cuts in the soft tissue around the teeth, fractures to the teeth) in pediatric dentistry, oral surgery and endodontics courses. The job starts with triage.

"Were the teeth fractured? Were the teeth moved out of position?" Riley asks. "If it's something we can address immediately, whether it be a repositioned tooth, we have a dental kit and some equipment on site where we can try to splint or help reposition the tooth, or cover up the tooth if there's an exposed nerve or pulp. And usually if there are soft-tissue lacerations, usually with the medical team sutures can be done and try to stabilize the patient that way."

It can be a challenging process. The player is in discomfort. The injury has occurred during a shift. Adrenaline and heart rate are high. In some cases, the medical staff has to assess whether a concussion has occurred at the same time.

"You're in the middle of an acute injury," Riley says. "You're battling the player maybe not really wanting to be there, wanting to get out right away."

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Inside the bloody, spine-tingling rush of NHL in-game dentistry when teeth go flying

Players almost never leave games for injuries related to their teeth.

If a tooth comes out entirely, its prompt recovery makes saving it more likely. According to Fasbinder, emergency technicians sometimes carry bottles for displaced teeth containing a solution that mimics saliva's slight acidity. Milk can also be used.

"It's a very time-dependent success or failure mechanism," Fasbinder says. "The longer the tooth is out of the mouth, the less success you're going to have that the tooth is going to be able to be replanted and become a part of the dentition again."



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

The best-case scenario, if you can call it that, is a fractured tooth. An on-site dentist's priority is to determine that it is not loosened to the bone. If that is the case, Fasbinder says the dentist can treat the player's pain with a local anesthetic at the base of the tooth. The player can then return to the game.

The time Fehervary elbowed his tooth from his mouth, Brown didn't recall the pain being severe. Perhaps it was because he knew his tooth was beyond saving.

"It was all crumbled up in my mouth," Brown says. "So I just gave what I had to my trainer, Tommy (Alva). Didn't miss a shift."

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2025

1367973 Websites

The Athletic / Why is the NHL aligning with prediction markets as others raise red flags?

By James Mirtle

The announcement came two weeks after the NHL season started and landed plenty of fanfare and publicity, especially with the big business publications.

The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, CNBC and Fox Business were all talking about hockey, or at least something hockey-adjacent, as the league promoted new partnership deals with prediction market companies Kalshi and Polymarket.

Utah Mammoth owner Ryan Smith was part of the PR push and trumpeted the agreements on Fox, calling the increased prevalence of betting "part of fan engagement" and "where our gaming society is going."

"For me, I love that the NHL is leaning in and trying to partner (with them)," Smith said of Kalshi and Polymarket. "I think it's smart to help maybe curate an experience and try to do something innovative."

"Two great partners and couldn't be happier to have both of them," NHL president of business Keith Wachtel told Bloomberg. "And (excited for) what we think this does for the NHL in growing engagement but also allowing us to participate with those two companies in helping build what markets they're going to use and making sure the NHL is part of that, which is really important."

Their excitement, however, has not been shared elsewhere. Government officials in the U.S. and Canada, along with gaming association officials and anti-match-fixing experts, were alarmed. That a major North American sports league had partnered with what they view as effectively unlicensed and underregulated betting companies was fresh new territory they had hoped to avoid.

"I think it's a little bit crazy," said Chris Kronow Rasmussen, a director of financial crime prevention at Advisense and adjunct professor of sports betting integrity at the University of New Haven. "They don't call it sports gambling but prediction markets. But basically it's the same. They don't call it sports betting because then they would need a license."

Bill Miller, the president and CEO of the American Gaming Association, quickly branded the NHL's twin partnerships "deeply concerning," pointing to the heavy volume of ongoing litigation around the fledgling companies.

"Contrary to the league's claims, the future of these platforms is far from certain, evidenced by the legal proceedings in multiple states, the views of well over half of the nation's attorneys general, and state regulators

determining these platforms to be illegal," Miller said in a statement. "This move sends a troubling message: that integrity, responsibility, and clear legality are optional in sports gaming."

Other major North American sports leagues have also pushed back. The NFL, NBA and MLB have all been critical of Kalshi and Polymarket, at least publicly, including sending the Commodity Futures Trading Commission letters voicing concerns over their exponential growth — growth that, as of earlier this year, is mostly due to sports-related contracts. The NCAA recently joined the chorus, sending a legal letter to Kalshi in an attempt to distance itself from the appearance of a partnership with the company.

"These contracts would mimic sports betting but seemingly without the robust regulatory features that accompany regulated and legalized sports betting, and which help to mitigate threats to the integrity of our contests," Jonathan Nabavi, at the time the NFL's vice president of public policy and government affairs, wrote in a letter to the CFTC.

At the heart of the controversy is the somewhat semantic argument of what constitutes sports betting. Prediction market companies argue what they are offering is actually an exchange selling financial products, a description they've used historically as part of offering "contracts" where people can put money on the line while weighing in on everything from election outcomes to natural disasters. That designation is why a federal financial regulator like the CFTC is involved in an oversight capacity instead of a state gaming commission.

It's also how Kalshi can currently allow younger people to wager than regulated sportsbooks, which have a minimum age of 21, and how it continues to operate across the U.S. — even in the many states where online sportsbooks are banned. (It is currently unavailable in Canada, the UK and Australia.)

It's a fight that has become political, with Kalshi facing lawsuits in states such as Massachusetts and the company returning the favor elsewhere. The states argue Kalshi is accepting online wagers without following state laws that govern sports gaming or obtaining licenses from state gaming commissions.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump Jr., the U.S. President's son, was named a strategic adviser to Kalshi in January and then to a similar role with Polymarket seven months later.

Adding to the complexity (and controversy) is the fact that Polymarket, in particular, is a cryptocurrency-based prediction market, something that further aligns it with incoming CFTC head Mike Selig. Polymarket is set to return to the U.S. in the near future after several years out of the market after a \$1.4 million settlement with the CFTC for operating an unregistered exchange.

Critics argue the issue with having the CFTC attempt to oversee what is effectively sports wagering is that it is ill-prepared to do so, especially in comparison to the heavily regulated gaming bodies that have been developed at the state and provincial levels in North America over the past decade.

Kalshi head of corporate development Sara Slane disputed that notion and called the oversights in place for prediction markets appropriate. Polymarket did not respond to a request for comment.

"Kalshi has state-of-the-art surveillance, (anti-money laundering) protections and compliance infrastructure, including suspicious trading detections," Slane said. "The CFTC has strong regulatory standards that have safely overseen trillions of dollars in American commodities markets for decades. It's a ridiculous claim to assert that just because Kalshi is not subject to the jurisdiction of state regulators, we do not have integrity provisions in place to monitor suspicious trading."

"People are coming to Kalshi because our product is better for the end customer. That's what these claims are really about — legacy players



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

trying to defend their turf. They are more interested in protecting their state government-protected monopolies than doing what is in the best interest of the customer.”

Rasmussen, however, compares the situation with the rise of prediction markets to the influence unlicensed bookmakers have had overseas in soccer, including lucrative sponsorships and match-fixing scandals.

“In my view, they are not doing their homework on the governance part,” he said. “If you don’t have a license, you don’t have any obligation towards any laws in the state or in the country. Then you basically don’t know where the money is coming from and you don’t know if there is any tax evasion or money laundering or match-fixing attempts and so on. So if there is match fixing — and we’ve seen that lately in the U.S. — then you will only see that in the ones that are regulated.”

The NHL’s partnership with the prediction markets has come at a time when the relationship between sports betting and competitive integrity is under increased scrutiny, from the NBA’s alleged match-fixing scandal to the indictment of two MLB pitchers on the weekend.

Hockey has not been immune to betting-related concerns, with last year’s Shane Pinto suspension and the Arthur Kaliyev investigation serving as recent examples.

It may well be that the league is simply reading the evolving landscape — politically, financially and otherwise — and views getting in bed with these companies as inevitable. Prediction markets have become massive business — with Kalshi’s latest round of VC funding valuing the company at \$5 billion — and it’s possible there will be a wave of similar partnerships coming from other leagues, as the NFL, NBA and MLB get onboard as a way to attempt to influence how their games are presented on these sites.

When contacted for comment on the partnerships with Kalshi and Polymarket and asked why the NHL was alone in doing such deals, a league spokesman referred The Athletic to the media appearances made by league personnel when the agreements were first announced.

Wachtel, for example, told Bloomberg TV that having Kalshi and Polymarket as partners will give the NHL some control over how the league appears on their sites and apps, including using full team names and logos, something the prediction markets have to date been unable to use. And Wachtel indicated they will invest in ensuring nothing untoward happens, potentially building out the league oversight piece that is currently missing.

The NHL is currently a tiny sliver of the up to \$800 million that’s spent weekly on Kalshi’s sports markets, ranking well behind the other three big North American leagues, as well as trailing NCAA football, the PGA Tour, and men’s and women’s tennis. That likely changes with these announcements, as the NHL legitimizes and promotes the partnerships.

“It allows us to determine with our partners what prediction markets we want to provide to consumers,” Wachtel said on Bloomberg. “We’re both looking at using integrity monitoring services to make sure there are no issues in that area as well.”

Rasmussen, however, remains skeptical of such an arrangement, as without robust governmental checks and balances there can be financial incentives to looking away from potential match fixing.

And the end result of unchecked wagering can be devastating.

“You can ruin the league,” Rasmussen said. “Because it will be all about money, money laundering and match fixing. We’ve seen that in other countries. (Without proper regulations), there will be a bigger risk of match fixing and money laundering, and when that risk rises, you don’t trust the games. And when you don’t trust the games, you don’t want to go see them.”

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1367974 Websites

ESPN / Are the Utah Mammoth and Anaheim Ducks really this good? - ESPN

Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski

The NHL could use some new contenders, and not just because the Stanley Cup Final had the same participants for two straight seasons.

Fresh faces and burgeoning stars are intriguing. Teams on the rise bring renewed enthusiasm to the playoff races. Seeing teams that haven’t been postseason participants crashing the playoff party is a blast.

This season has a handful of teams seeking to break through into the playoffs. Two of them are in the Western Conference: the Utah Mammoth, in their second season in Salt Lake City; and the Anaheim Ducks, who’ve missed the playoffs for seven straight seasons. As of Tuesday, both of them were in playoff spots, with the Mammoth as a wild card and the Ducks leading the Pacific.

They’re new. They’re compelling. And above all, they’re fun to watch.

“Well, I guess it’s fun for you. It’s not fun for me,” joked Ducks GM Pat Verbeek, whose team has generated a lot of scoring chances but has also allowed its fair share. “Although sometimes chaos can go the right way.”

Can the Mammoth and Ducks sustain their early-season success? Here’s a look at how they became breakout teams this season and whether they’re destined for playoff berths or are just an early season tease that eventually fades from memory.

Jump ahead:

Mammoth

Ducks

Are the Mammoth for real?

What has changed since last season?

Before there was a team called the Utah Mammoth, there was a Utah Hockey Club.

The former Arizona Coyotes swapped desert heat for snow-packed peaks in search of brighter days for a franchise that had made one playoff appearance in 12 years (during the COVID-19 shortened campaign) and was in desperate need of a new identity.

Utah would need time to develop that in their new digs (hence the generic Hockey Club moniker for Year 1). GM Bill Armstrong -- who has been with the organization since 2020 -- arrived with nine players selected in the first round of the NHL draft from 2021-25. With new ownership in place (the Smith Entertainment Group), Utah’s hockey team had the sort of support last season that it hadn’t in Arizona. And it led to one of its strongest seasons in over a decade.

At the Christmas break, Utah was 16-12-6. But the team ebbed and flowed from there, hovering around the .500 mark while continuing to establish some consistency in its game.

There would be another preview of Utah’s potential in the final stretch of last season, when the team took off on a 17-9-4 run to cap off an 89-point season -- 12 points ahead of where it was in 2023-24. It didn’t get Utah into the playoff field -- its 38-31-13 record left it seven points shy of the Western Conference’s final wild-card slot -- but it suggested there were



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

parts coming together that could take Utah's claim to a spot sooner than anyone expected. And, well, here the Mammoth are, doing exactly that.

It's still early enough in the NHL season to be skeptical of all 32 teams' success -- or failures -- to this point. But Armstrong intended to give his group every chance of pushing past their previous ceiling. Defenseman Dmitri Simashev -- the No. 6 pick by Arizona in 2023 -- has landed on their blue line, and at just 20 years old, he is making a difference with some top-pairing looks. Veteran defender Nate Schmidt signed a three-year contract with Utah in the offseason.

And perhaps most importantly, Utah chose its permanent name in May, which signaled a new beginning. So it went that the Mammoth carried their momentum from last season into this one, opening the season with a 7-2-0 stretch that put them among the NHL's top clubs.

There's a long way to go, but there's reason to believe the Mammoth aren't far off from venturing back into the playoff picture.

Key factor No. 1: The stars are (really) scoring

The Mammoth offense is no one-trick pony; more like a multiheaded beast.

Utah has a one-two punch up front, featuring top-10 draft picks that are finally coming into their own. Logan Cooley -- selected third in 2022, and the recent recipient of an eight-year, \$80 million contract extension -- has posted the team's second-most goals (eight) and 13 points, sitting just behind Nick Schmaltz (a top-20 draftee by the Chicago Blackhawks in 2014) and his team-leading nine goals and 19 points.

Dylan Guenther (picked ninth overall by Arizona in 2021) and Clayton Keller (seventh overall in 2016) are tearing it up with 13 and 15 points, respectively. JJ Peterka -- a trade addition from Buffalo in the offseason -- is thriving too, with four goals and 10 points, while top-pairing defenseman Mikhail Sergachev is pitching in with 11 points from the back end.

All that to say, Utah has shown there is serious chemistry throughout its lineup and that's only bred confidence. Through the Mammoth's first 10 games, they ranked sixth in offense (3.70 goals per game) and they were one of the stingiest defensive clubs (ranking third overall with 2.40 goals against).

But it's not just that the Mammoth can score; they're opportunistic. Guenther shares the NHL lead in game-winning goals (four) and Keller kept the Mammoth perfect in overtime this season when he netted a marker in extra time over Buffalo earlier this month. Utah has found ways to be resilient no matter their circumstance.

Best of all, Utah's core is signed for the long term. Cooley, Guenther, Peterka and forward Jack McBain are signed through 2029-30. Keller is inked through 2027-28.

Building that out on the ice, though, was no easy task for coach Andre Tourigny. Now in his fifth year with the organization, Tourigny endured the final rough years with his squad in Arizona before they moved to Salt Lake City in 2024. The then-Coyotes lost 40 or more games in each of their final three seasons in the desert, where the same skaters now lighting up the scoresheet with ease were floundering on the ice and off it, lacking the kind of infrastructure and resources now provided by SEG; think not playing out of a college arena and having access to state-of-the-art facilities.

"I think [Tourigny's] had a great impact on them, raising them right and making sure that they play on both sides of the puck," Armstrong told ESPN on Tuesday. "It's not just all offense. I think sometimes when you have young, hungry, offensive guys, things can get swayed, and then you don't teach the right things when they're young about playing on the other side of the puck.

"And it's also situational play of getting pucks deep at the right time and playing the clock and [managing] the score. And he's done a good job with that."

Like many young teams before them, the Mammoth had to take their lumps while becoming a competitive, 200-foot team. Over the first six weeks of last season, for example, they were averaging fewer than three goals per game while giving up the 12th most in the league (3.25). Tourigny's patience with the Mammoth's evolution is finally paying off, and it's most obvious in the way their best players are, finally, their most impactful ones, too.

Key factor No. 2: Goal suppression buy-in

Karel Vejmelka took his time breaking into the NHL. Now, it looks like his moment to break out.

The 29-year-old goaltender had three seasons under his belt with the Coyotes when the franchise moved to Salt Lake City, and Utah wasted no time putting its weight behind Vejmelka as its No. 1. The 55 starts he made last season were not only a career high (by a significant margin), but tied for the fourth-most games played by any NHL goalie in 2024-25. Not only that, but Vejmelka made an eye-popping 22 consecutive starts as Utah made its postseason push.

While the team may have fallen short, there was no sleep lost in deciding that Vejmelka would enter this season on track to once again be Utah's primary keeper of the crease.

Vejmelka started six of the Mammoth's first eight games and was terrific over that stretch. He's been identified as a calming presence by Utah teammates, and a backbone of their confidence every night. His numbers have dipped slightly since the Mammoth's hot start cooled at the end of a long road trip, but there's little doubt from Utah that he will bounce back and continue giving them the necessary goaltending to keep competing at the highest level.

If Utah's forwards have been courting the headlines, then their defensive improvements deserve at least a few lines on the front page. Because it's come together for Utah thanks to internal growth and some key additions.

There was Schmidt and Simashev coming in and filling roles to deepen the Mammoth blue line. Simashev has been a particular spark, and has skated with Sergachev on the club's top pairing. But Utah's gains in the defensive end are a product of their group effort. The Mammoth are allowing the fewest shots against in the league (24 per game) and their quick transition game can overwhelm opponents. While Utah can boast incredible offensive skaters, the way those same players pitch in without cheating for chances up the ice is a major reason why Utah has been in position to win so often this season.

Armstrong hasn't been shy about discussing how painful the team's rebuild has been. No GM hopes to be selecting at the top of the draft every year. This version of Utah is what Armstrong believed in all along -- where'd they have the goaltending, the defensive buy-in and enough firepower to compete with any team.

What the analytics tell us

Rachel Kryshak, the data analyst behind Betalytics and a prospects writer for ESPN, had the Mammoth as her under-the-radar team headed into the season.

"My model had them finishing in the top wild-card spot, one point back of third in the Central," she said.

Kryshak likes what she sees so far to back up the prediction.

"Thus far, the Mammoth are out chancing their opponents at even strength and they are among the league's best at creating higher-danger scoring opportunities. On average, they outshoot their opponents by five shots per game and control the pace of play," she said. "Their top six has done a fantastic job of utilizing their speed and skill to control the game.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Their young talent is starting to mature in the NHL and develop chemistry together and when that is combined with high end speed, it becomes very difficult to defend."

Micah Blake McCurdy, who does hockey data visualizations on Hockeyviz.com, has been most fascinated with the Mammoth in the defensive end.

"I'm most impressed by their team defense. They've been comfortably better at limiting chances against at 5-on-5 than last season, and a lot better limiting chances against on the penalty kill. The goaltending looks about like I expected it -- a shade below average," McCurdy said.

Offensively, the Mammoth haven't been getting a large volume of shots, but that hasn't been an issue with the way they're converting chances. "If there's a concern, it'll be that the finishing touch is a shade high for the roster and might come down," McCurdy said. "They're also very score-affected: Chasing hard when losing and turtling when winning. Teams that go on deep playoff runs usually play more consistently across all score states."

Vince Masi, a stats analyst for ESPN Research, wonders if regression is already starting for Utah, having gone through a stretch where they scored three or fewer goals in seven straight games.

"While they are controlling the 5-on-5 shot attempts at a good clip in the early going, they were dead last in 5-on-5 save percentage at .875," said Masi, who suggests the Mammoth may be overworking Vejmelka.

"Since the return after the 4 Nations Face-Off in regular-season games, Vejmelka has played the most of any goalie in the league," he said.

Is this sustainable?

In a word: probably.

Because the Mammoth are about to find out what they're made of -- one way or another.

Utah is riding its first extended losing streak of the season, having dropped three straight and five of its last six. Only one of those defeats was at home though, and the Mammoth are finally back in Salt Lake City for six of their next eight after almost three weeks on the road.

And it's not like Utah has necessarily been bad. They just ran into typical early-season struggles, like going 0-for-13 on the power play when they were previously operating at 21.1% with the extra man. The Mammoth's penalty kill, on the other hand, was a perfect 10-for-10 in the same stretch.

Utah has all the talent it needs to be a contender this season. But there is still a learning curve that comes with winning, as the Mammoth have quickly discovered.

"When you go through as many road games as we played, I think you get worn down a little bit," Armstrong said. "It's kind of refreshing to come home, and it's a little bit humbling to know that, hey, you won all those games in a row, but now you're battling to get back on track. It's a good league, and there's a fine line between winning and losing, and we've got to find that line."

First, there are things to fix, starting on special teams. While the Mammoth's gaudy offensive stats from October were bound to level out as the league's teams settled into November -- and remembered how to play defense -- there's no reason Utah can't adjust and be right back among the Central Division's best clubs.

Vejmelka will be a significant part of the turnaround. He's 1-3-0 of late, with an .831 SV% and 3.78 GAA. That's not what Utah can expect from Vejmelka when he's on point. As long as he's able to steer out of the skid, it will keep Utah from wasting its solid defensive efforts (they were still averaging the fewest shots against in the league while racking up recent losses).

The famous American Thanksgiving deadline is looming. Teams in the playoff field at that point tend to still be in position at season's end. This next run of games is Utah's opportunity to prove itself. Their schedule features four teams not in the postseason picture now, and if the Mammoth can leverage their home-ice advantage (they are 4-1-0 this season at Delta Center) then Utah can show they were no flash in the pan.

Are the Anaheim Ducks for real?

What has changed since last season?

It has been seven seasons since the Ducks last waddled into the postseason, losing in the first round back in 2018. To timestamp this drought, that team had Ryan Getzlaf, Corey Perry, Kevin Bieksa and 37-year-old Ryan Miller on the roster.

Since then, the Ducks have been amassing young talent through the draft. Most of them -- Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Jackson LaCombe, Olen Zellweger, Pavel Mintyukov, Beckett Sennecke, Lukas Dostal -- are the foundation for Anaheim's rebuild. Some of them were eventually traded, like when the Ducks traded defenseman Jamie Drysdale to the Philadelphia Flyers for forward Cutter Gauthier, now a burgeoning star.

Powered by that young core, Anaheim saw a remarkable 21-point improvement in the standings year over year in 2024-25, but that was only good enough to place 12th in the Western Conference. Coach Greg Cronin was dismissed after two seasons. GM Pat Verbeek lured coach Joel Quenneville to Anaheim, and that might turn out to be one of the NHL offseason's most significant moves.

Quenneville, 67, hadn't coached in the NHL since resigning from the Florida Panthers in 2021 after an independent review by a law firm detailed how the Blackhawks organization failed to properly address allegations by player Kyle Beach that he was sexually assaulted by video coach Brad Aldrich during the team's 2010 Stanley Cup run. Quenneville, who coached that team, was ineligible to work for other NHL teams until commissioner Gary Bettman lifted a ban on the coach and two former Blackhawks executives in July 2024.

Verbeek said at the time that Anaheim had done its due diligence on Quenneville. "Our findings are consistent with Joel's account that he was not fully aware of the severity of what transpired in 2010. It is clear that Joel deeply regrets not following up with more questions at the time, has demonstrated meaningful personal growth and accountability, and has earned the opportunity to return to coaching," he said in a statement.

The arrival of a three-time Stanley Cup-winning head coach had a transformative effect on the Ducks.

"The thing that really resonated was that Joel's got a great resumé. He's a winner. He has won three times as a head coach, one as an assistant coach," Verbeek told ESPN on Monday. "So I think the instant respect was there, not only from the older guys but from the younger guys. They're all hungry to win. Bringing Joel in from just that aspect alone has made a huge difference.

If Quenneville's arrival didn't signal that the Ducks were ready to turn the corner back to playoff contention, the rest of Verbeek's offseason certainly did. The Ducks signed center Mikael Granlund away from Dallas (three years, \$21 million). They traded goalie John Gibson (Detroit) and forward Trevor Zegras (Philadelphia), ending long-standing trade speculation about both. Perhaps most significantly, they traded for longtime New York Rangers winger Chris Kreider.

Verbeek knew Kreider well from his days in Tampa Bay's front office, as the Lightning battled Kreider's Rangers. He wanted a winger with speed that could improve the Ducks' special teams, but he also wanted Kreider's singular abilities around the crease.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

"I'm not sure there's a better guy in front of the net than him over the last seven or eight years," Verbeek said.

One player that Verbeek consulted about Kreider: Defenseman Jacob Trouba, who was Kreider's friend and teammate with the Rangers. It's not often that one team brings in multiple players from an opponent's leadership group, but that's exactly what Anaheim did in trading for Trouba, who captained the Rangers, and Kreider, a 13-season veteran with the franchise.

Trouba, Kreider, forward Alex Killorn and defenseman Radko Gudas are part of a veteran core that Verbeek designed based on his own experiences as a player. He recalled how important veteran players were to his development as a young star with the 1980s New Jersey Devils, relying on the advice of goaltender Chico Resch and forward Mel Bridgman, who passed away on Nov. 8.

"I told our [veterans] that you have a huge opportunity to make such a huge impact on these young players. You have no idea how much these players are going to respect you," he said.

He's seen that in Kreider already. "He's been a great example for a bunch of our other guys seeing the success that he's had," Verbeek said. "Guys want to emulate that."

Key factor No. 1: Ducks fly together

The most notable beneficiary from the Ducks' offseason moves and the maturation of their young stars has been their offense. They're not just winning games; they're scoring touchdowns.

Last season, Anaheim ranked 30th in the NHL in goals per game (2.65). Through 15 games this season, the Ducks were first in the NHL in scoring with an average of 4.13 goals per game. They put up seven goals in wins against the San Jose Sharks, Boston Bruins, Florida Panthers and Dallas Stars.

"We're playing fast. We certainly have speed," Verbeek said.

The Ducks' 5-on-5 play has improved across the board under Quenneville. They're averaging 3.21 goals per 60 minutes, up from 2.36 last season. Their expected goals per 60 minutes (2.86), scoring chances percentage (48.4%) and high-danger shot attempts (46.7%) are all up from last season. Perhaps most importantly, their percentage of shot attempts has jumped from 45.9% last season to 50.9% this season so far.

"We've added speed and size. It's made a difference in puck possession down in the offensive zone. Joel preaches it every single day to the younger guys: Puck possession, hang onto it and if we lose it, we've got to get it back fast. I think that has resonated well and the guys have taken to it," Verbeek said. "They've been executing and they've been getting rewarded for that."

Of course, it helps to have players that can execute. Carlsson was among the NHL's top scorers through 15 games with 25 points (10 goals, 15 assists). Gauthier led the Ducks with 11 goals through 15 games. Kreider had a stretch of nine goals in 11 games, shooting a flabbergasting 32.1%. Veteran winger Troy Terry had 19 points through 15 games, while rookie Beckett Sennecke had 11 points.

Five of Kreider's goals have come on the power play, which ranks in the NHL's top 10 with a 23.7% conversion rate. Again, the word "improvement" doesn't do the year-over-year jump for the Ducks justice: They were last in the NHL last season with a 11.8% power-play conversion rate.

The Ducks are dominating offensively. Defensively ... well, it's a work in progress.

Key factor No. 2: Lukas Dostal

Last season, the Ducks were 23rd in the NHL in goals against per game (3.18). That number could have been much worse. Anaheim was last in the league in expected goals against per 60 minutes (2.96) but were bailed out by the seventh best 5-on-5 goaltending last season, courtesy of Gibson and Dostal.

Quenneville immediately sought to improve the Ducks' defensive structure this season. "He simplified our D-zone coverage. There's a lot of support in how we defend," Verbeek said.

The good news for the Ducks is that they're able to score their way out of any problem so far this season. The bad news is that their 5-on-5 defense is that aforementioned problem. Anaheim has a 3.15 expected goals per 60 minutes through 15 games. Their scoring chances against is right around where it was last season.

The best news is that Dostal is now their primary goaltender, and he's been nothing short of astounding in 12 games. He's third in the NHL in goals saved above expected (9.6) and has a .908 save percentage. Dostal is facing over 28 shots per game on average. He has 1.6 wins above replacement so far, via Money Puck.

Dostal has been their last line of defense and, at times, the entirety of their defense. Anaheim is not near the top of their division without him.

What the analytics tell us

"They've been playing real chaos hockey," McCurdy said.

McCurdy has seen the Ducks create a ton of scoring chances and give them up, too. But the results are better year over year.

"Last year at 5-on-5, they were the league's worst defense and nearly the worst offense," he said. "They've improved the two together for a net improvement of almost a goal per sixty minutes, just in chances."

Kryshak, the data analyst behind Betalytics, sees Dostal's Vezina Trophy-worthy play as the reason the Ducks can get away with "high-octane hockey" so far this season -- to the benefit of their younger players.

"Their young players make mistakes but aren't benched. They are given opportunities to learn and grow through them which is paying off for the likes of Beckett Sennecke and Olen Zelwegger," she said.

She added that Anaheim's core players are driving its offense.

"There is little doubt the Ducks have the ability to score. Leo Carlsson is tracking to be Sweden's top center in Milan, Cutter Gauthier is generating shots at superstar levels, both Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba look rejuvenated. It's all coming together," she said. "The Ducks' ability to generate offense ranks fifth in the NHL at even strength, and their pace of play ranks second to Columbus, largely because of their ability to generate rush chances as one of the fastest teams in the NHL."

Masi says the Ducks are generating "just a ridiculous amount of offense" this season, with historic precedence:

In the last 30 years, only the 1995-96 and 2019-20 Pittsburgh Penguins scored seven goals in a game at least four times in their first 13 games of the season.

Carlsson and Gauthier are just the sixth pair of 21-and-under teammates with 20 points in their first 15 games of the season. The rest of that list includes players like Wayne Gretzky and Paul Coffey (Oilers) and Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin (Penguins).

Entering this week, the Ducks were third in chances off the rush and off odd-man rushes, as well as high-danger chances.

So they can score. But is that enough?

"They are so much fun to watch, but you can't be considered a true contender when you trade scoring chances at the level the Ducks do and are currently getting Vezina-level goaltending," Kryshak said.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Is this sustainable?

McCurdy is perplexed.

It was clear that Quenneville would be an improvement behind the bench in terms of structure and that players like Carlsson were ready to level up. "I anticipated those things in the summer and they're still outperforming even that," McCurdy said. "It doesn't seem like the kind of improvement that can last, just because of how unusual such a sudden improvement is historically. I don't feel like I understand it very strongly."

Masi is curious.

"Are they a PDO monster?" he asked, referencing the stat that combines a team's shooting percentage with its save percentage and informally measures "luck" in the NHL.

"They have a 103.2 5-on-5 shot-plus-save percentage, which ranks third behind the Blackhawks and Canadiens," he said.

Kryshak is skeptical.

"The Ducks are not a house of cards, but their reliance on Lukas Dostal is significant. Their play style is to trade chances, knowing that their goaltender is likely to be better than their opponents' on any given night. If that is not the case, the Ducks will lose games 7-6 or 6-5 and so on," she said.

But Verbeek is optimistic. The Ducks GM acknowledged that his team has some ground to make up defensively this season, but was confident they could.

"I think it's about getting more comfortable. I expect this to be better in the next 15 to 20 games. And consequently taking another step in the last half of the season, the last 30 games," he said. "When Joel and I talk, he's super excited that he sees that every day is a process. Every day we're getting better."

"In some instances we're very young. That's why having the vets can kind of stabilize things when it gets a little Helter Skelter out," the GM added. "Having a calming presence helps."

The Ducks have shown enough improvement early in the season for this start not to be an aberration. But as noted several times here, their MVP is Lukas Dostal. They can outscore the defensive foibles of a young roster. They can't outscore those issues without having Dostal as their elite safety net.

If he stays healthy and playing to his standards? There's no reason the Ducks can fly into the postseason, perhaps a little ahead of their assumed schedule.

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Sportsnet.ca / Fortune favours Oilers in second straight overtime win

Mark Spector

PHILADELPHIA — Luck: "Success or failure apparently brought by chance rather than through one's own actions."

"We got a little bit lucky," admitted two-assist man Matt Savoie, after perhaps his best NHL game with assists on both Oilers goals in a 2-1 OT win.

Fortunate, blessed, favoured, born under a lucky star... All are accurate descriptors for an Edmonton Oilers team that collected back-to-back wins this week, first on a shorthanded, own-goal by the hapless Columbus

Blue Jackets with 58 seconds to play, and then when an offside challenge negated Travis Konecny's apparent game-winner with 37 seconds to play last night in Philadelphia.

The Oilers won both games in overtime. Both on goals by Jack Roslovic.

"Jack has been a great addition to our team," gushed his head coach, Kris Knoblauch. "Five-on-five, power play, obviously overtime... We want more speed — I don't think you can have enough speed in your lineup. He helps with that, and some secondary scoring that he has provided. So we're very, very fortunate to have him."

Fortunate. There's that word again.

When you play in back-to-back Stanley Cups — when you win nine playoff series in four years — somehow you build up some credit with the Hockey Gods. Don't ask us why, but it was that way for all the good teams over all the years we've been around the game.

But if you make your own breaks, as hockey lore would tell us, then it must be said that the Oilers were the better team in Philadelphia, outshooting the Flyers 32-21 in their OT victory. Edmonton earned its luck, but oh boy, their reward could not have been bigger than wiping that potential game-winner off the board, when video showed that Owen Tippett was clearly a few inches offside.

"It's a game of inches," said the Oilers head coach. "They got a goal taken away just being offside by a couple inches, and we were able to score the overtime goal just because we were onside by a couple inches."

In a long season that will see the breaks fall both ways, the Edmonton Oilers have taken those two massive breaks and cashed in all four points — courtesy of back-to-back Roslovic goals in OT.

Or as the great Darren Dutchyshen used to say, "Back to back Jacks!"

Did he see a hole behind Philly netminder Dan Vladar on that OT snipe?

"Well, when it's an empty net, you don't really see a hole. You see just a really big hole," Roslovic said. "The pass was great, right in my wheelhouse, and really hard for (Vladar), obviously."

Roslovic becomes only the second player in Oilers history with OT goals in consecutive games — joining Andrew Cogliano (three in a row) in March 2008 — burying a pass from Matt Savoie on a two-man jail break in overtime.

Philly hit two posts in the game's opening 90 seconds, as Edmonton hit the road for seven games in 11 nights, an odyssey that began with the Oilers ranked as the NHL's 27th best road team. They play Columbus on Thursday, in a building where they've lost their last four games.

The Oilers haven't won in Columbus since they beat the Blue Jackets 4-1 in October of 2019.

OIL SPILLS — Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (undisclosed injury) did not make the trip with the team ... Edmonton's all-time record versus the Flyers is amazingly even at 39 wins, 40 losses, eight ties ... The Oilers are the worst five-on-five team in the league, by goal share. But Evan Bouchard's blast that made it 1-0 late in Period 1 was a five-on-five goal ... Edmonton entered the game as the 31st ranked team in saves percentage (.862). Unless you're talking five-on-five. Then it's 32nd (.873).

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1367976 Websites



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Sportsnet.ca / Demko's absence will test Canucks' ability to clean up defensive lapses

Adam Vingan

Thatcher Demko is back on the shelf after suffering a lower-body injury Tuesday against the Winnipeg Jets. The Vancouver Canucks' oft-injured starting goaltender, who just returned from a week-long break for maintenance reasons, will miss at least the next two weeks. (The team travelled to Carolina on Wednesday to start a three-game road trip, so an official update is expected Thursday.)

"If you look at the league, anyone (who's) won (or) gone deep in the playoffs (has had) a good goalie," Canucks head coach Adam Foote told reporters Tuesday. "It's like football. You need the quarterback. We have a good goalie tandem. It is what it is. Guys are going to miss games. Guys are going to get injured."

Outside of captain Quinn Hughes, Demko is the one player the Canucks can least afford to lose. Demko has covered up for Vancouver's many defensive lapses, saving 10.9 goals above expected. That places him sixth in the NHL in that category. He has recorded eight quality starts in 10 tries, meaning he has allowed more goals than expected just twice this season.

The 8-9-1 Canucks can't withstand a long rough patch. Their defensive play has cratered in Foote's first season as head coach. Vancouver's 3.61 expected goals against per game are second-worst in the league after finishing 15th last season (3.07 per game).

Opponents have feasted on the Canucks' porous coverage directly in front of the net, scoring 33 goals from the inner slot. Only the St. Louis Blues (34) and Nashville Predators (36) have allowed more inner-slot goals than the Canucks this season.

Under Foote, the Canucks' opponents are averaging 46 seconds more of offensive-zone possession time per game than they did last season, when Rick Tocchet coached the Canucks. Relatedly, Vancouver's cycle scoring chances against year-over-year are up from 9.4 to 12.2 per game.

The Canucks' defensive issues wouldn't be as damaging if their offence were clicking, which it isn't. They are 28th in expected goals per game and led in scoring by 30-year-old forward Kiefer Sherwood, whose 11 goals in 18 games are more than halfway to his career high of 19 from last season. Sherwood has scored 7.2 goals above expected, which unsurprisingly leads the league.

Hughes, who recently missed four games due to a lower-body injury, continues to drive possession at an elite rate, but the Canucks are not dominating his minutes the way they have in previous years. Vancouver is being outscored 15-12 and out-chanced 120-108 at five-on-five when Hughes is on the ice. Last season, the Canucks had a plus-8 goal differential and plus-92 scoring-chance differential during his five-on-five minutes.

Demko's latest injury means Vancouver will now turn to backup Kevin Lankinen, who made a career-high 49 starts last season in Demko's absence. Lankinen played slightly better than expected in 2024-25 based on the shot quality he faced, recording a 0.11 GSAE per 60 minutes (5.76 total GSAE).

In nine appearances (eight starts) this season, Lankinen has posted a 0.06 GSAE per 60 (0.54 total). Though, to be fair, Lankinen has dealt with harsher conditions. He has faced 26.2 scoring chances per 60 this season — up from 20.9 per 60 last season.

"That's what we do," Lankinen told reporters when asked about filling in for Demko. "That's part of the job. You've got to be ready at all times. ... We're all human beings. I don't think anybody understands a goalie as

well as another goalie. I haven't had a chance to talk to him, so I'm not quite sure what's going on, but I hope for the best."

The Canucks committed to Demko over the summer despite his concerning injury history, signing him to a three-year, \$8.5 million-per-year contract. The fact that Demko has already been out of the lineup more than once this season should raise alarm bells.

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Sportsnet.ca / Breaking down what is wrong with the Maple Leafs

Justin Bourne

Now, they're not good right now either, but the true talent of the group is much better than their play to date. I've heard and seen the chatter about the potential for them to miss playoffs, and certainly with this start and some bad injury luck, that outcome is not out of the question. But if they missed, they'd be among the more talented groups to do so in the past decade.

After giving up 15 goals over their past three games, and in the aftermath of a flood of articles about their shortcomings — a wave which I contributed to — it's time to assess which problems are legitimate.

This exercise is necessary for fans, as the opposite of the expression "winning cures everything" also holds true. A lot of blame gets tossed about when you lose, and it's not generally done very methodically. It's mostly just noise before a sham trial concludes that, yes, Derek Lalonde has ruined the Leafs (or whatever).

The first-year assistant coach has not ruined the Leafs. No single thing has, and the idea that they're "ruined" is no sure thing, either. A bold implication, I know.

So, let's pick up some of the accusations and place them under the microscope.

In fact, let's start with the one I just mentioned that I've seen on Twitter a few times:

Changes that were made by the incoming Lalonde are responsible for their porous defensive play so far

Doing video work is hard, and harder when you don't have the tech to look at systems play easily. Hockey is sloppy, and so you rarely get clean positional play to evaluate in a game — maybe just a few times each night. I note that, because I did video work in the AHL for a couple years, see this stuff well, and to my eye I just don't think the Leafs are trying anything different than last year, systems-wise. I think they're doing a far worse job of what they're trying to do, though. Claiming something different without being able to point to the specific change they've made is grasping at straws.

And so, the idea that it's on Lalonde is a strange one. An assistant coach would never get to come in and dictate something as massive as the team's defensive structure to the head coach. Hell, that's half of the job of the head coach, implementing what he believes is the best plan.

If Lalonde had stepped in and said "OK, scrap the 1-2-2 forecheck and scrap the hybrid D-zone coverage of yore, we're doing (X) now," and it looked this bad, it would be entirely incumbent on the head coach to step in and say "OK, yeah that's over, we're going back to the better way."



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

The buck always stops at the top, no matter which assistant has been delegated which area of specialization. (And to the point of many, Mike Van Ryn spends more time with the D-men anyway.)

Verdict on blaming new assistant: Not guilty

The Leafs' desire to become more Florida-like has led to a talent drain

The Leafs lost Mitch Marner, and that hurts. You can quibble with the details of how that went down, but that's a big hole to fill.

With Marner, the Leafs of old very much prioritized skill and playmaking, to the point of much derision. They had Rasmus Sandin and Timothy Liljegren and Connor Timmins on the back end — guys who struggled in the playoffs too — but they could at least move the puck up the rink. So could Justin Holl and TJ Brodie (until his last year), but none of those guys were deemed tough enough. They made fans crazy, but as I regularly pointed out, they did a good job at getting the puck going back the right way.

Their fourth line often had guys like Jason Spezza, Joe Thornton or Wayne Simmonds, which wasn't a great fit, but again, those guys could make plays. Same goes for depth guys like Alex Kerfoot or Ilya Mikheyev or Ondrej Kase. The Leafs would love ol' 'Flex Seal' — Keffoot — as we call him on our show on their third line.

And so, it looks like this:

The Leafs certainly could have success doing it differently, and they beat Florida three times in Round 2 of the playoffs last season by limiting Grade A's, getting solid goaltending, and finishing well. But there's a level of chasing the game where you just can't win, and the Leafs are fully there now.

Do they need to play more to Berube's simple, straight-lines style? Does he need to allow his guys to make more plays? Do they need to make personnel changes?

Whatever they do, they just can't keep doing this, where this seems to be prioritizing grit over ability. It's funny, they were probably ahead of the curve, too far ahead in fact, when it came to needing more skill guys. And as the league gets faster, their decision to consciously go the other way doesn't look great.

Verdict on talent drain: Guilty

The goaltending is letting them down

There's no doubt Anthony Stolarz is off to a bad start this season. At the same time, he was dealt some brutal cards to play out of the gates, with his tandem partner on a leave of absence, and the team has been sloppier in front of him than it has ever been in the Auston Matthews era. Surely it's been exhausting, and now after two straight pulls, it sounds like he's got some nagging injury.

Trying to chalk up his poor play to "he once he criticized his teammates" about a month ago also is grasping at straws. Maybe it didn't help, but as causes go, the truth is it's just been a brutal environment for a goalie.

Real Kyper and Bourne

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Full episode

Joseph Woll figures to be back on the weekend, but he's missed training camp and six weeks of the season, so expectations should be low.

There's not much to do there, but wait and hope they start to get something close to what they got in the crease last year.

Verdict: Guilty

They don't have enough pushback

There is great irony in this one, given the team seems to have sacrificed its more talented players for more of this, only ... they're no better in this department. Yes, maybe they're more physically capable of doing it considering they're the biggest team in the league by raw dimensions, but they don't have the guys who want to do it.

When Scott Laughton got drilled by the giant Nikita Zadorov, the Leafs got their best response of the year, with Bobby McMann going after the big man. It seemed like Zadorov might be a guy the Leafs would want to set a tone with early the next game, to let the Bruins know they came to play.

A few minutes into the game, the bruising Bruins D-man took a similar run at Nick Robertson, and the Leafs' most fight-likely D-man Simon Benoit ... skated right on by like nothing happened, at least as we could see in the video. The play sure didn't stop.

And even though the hit itself was fine, it's a tone thing. Zadorov crushed Robertson later in the period too, and not much came of it then either. So when it came time to put a lick on Matthews in the numbers, why not right? Nobody's gonna do anything anyway.

And y'know what? Nobody did anything, because by and large, the Leafs are big, but they don't want to play that game. Dakota Joshua doesn't, Nick Roy doesn't, even Bobby McMann doesn't really. Matthew Knies doesn't, obviously Matthews doesn't ... like they're huge, but they aren't those guys. The back end is the same, Philippe Myers, Chris Tanev, Brandon Carlo ... all big, but not exactly physical.

Max Domi may have recognized that the Matthews thing wasn't a great look, but his delayed reaction attempt on Zadorov just led to a penalty and the icing of the game as the Bruins would get their fifth goal on that very power play.

The Leafs don't have to fight. But they don't seem to take anything anyone does to them personally, save for Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Jake McCabe. They definitely lack that attitude.

Now is it why they don't win? I don't think so, not really. They've never been that team, and they've won a pile of hockey games the past five-plus years. But if you're not going to be skilled, it would be nice if they were something else.

Verdict: Guilty

Auston Matthews isn't a good enough captain

Just a short note on this one: I don't think we can know what kind of captain Matthews is, though we can roughly speculate. But when he got the 'C', I think the idea was that he's the face of the franchise, and as he goes, they go. He's the leader, like it or not. And with that, if he were having a Hart Trophy-contending season, or another Selke Trophy-contending season, you wouldn't need to look to anything else he does for inspiration.

But as I wrote Monday, the guy is obviously in real decline here, and nobody's sure why. As I noted in that piece earlier this week, it isn't the absence of Marner, as Matthews has thrived without him in the past, actually scoring more when Marner wasn't on his line than when he was.

Here's a table from Natural Stat Trick, numbers all at 5-on-5.

Season

Penalties drawn/60

Giveaways/60



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

Takeaways/60	2.19
Hits/60	3.86
Hits taken/60	2.08
2016-17	3.44
0.93	2020-21
1.96	0.9
3.36	2.84
1.03	2.77
5.27	3.88
2017-18	3.95
1.03	2021-22
3.49	0.61
3.68	1.99
1.03	4.08
5.49	3.06
2018-19	4.59
0.82	2022-23
3.18	1.47
2.82	2.15
1.47	3.19
5.41	3.72
2019-20	4.5
0.68	2023-24



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

0.53

1.98

3.24

3.87

3.77

2024-25

0.88

3.21

1.64

2.71

2.08

2025-26

0.24

4.65

1.47

2.94

0.98

Just look at the ratio of giveaways and takeaways compared to a few seasons ago. Hits taken just shows how little he's in the battles compared to usual.

So all this stuff about "is he a good enough captain," I barely think it matters. What they need is for him to be a superstar. And so far this year, he's been ... good? His line outscores whoever they play against, and he was on pace for 40-something goals. He's been just good, rather than supernova.

The rest of the game isn't there, and until it is, it doesn't matter if he's David Goggins or whatever motivational speaker you want him to be. It won't matter.

Verdict: Not Guilty

Overall, the Leafs still have so much talent that they should figure it out. They can score, their goalies should be better, this D-core has a history of being way better. They should be able to find it. But nothing is promised, and some of the problems right now are very real. We'll see how desperate things get in the weeks to come, as their schedule slowly turns from easy to much harder.

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1367978 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / NHL Rumour Roundup: Is this the year the Blues shake things up?

Emily Sadler

St. Louis Blues general manager Doug Armstrong knows how to send a message. So does his head coach — Jim Montgomery's bold decision to scratch veteran forward Jordan Kyrrou ahead of the Blues' game against Buffalo last week certainly got everyone's attention.

Armstrong's time in St. Louis has seen him send more than a few powerful messages to his players, and the roster always seems to respond. The most notable case was around Christmas 2018, when the GM reportedly put out a memo to his NHL peers that the Blues were ready to sell. (As Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman described in Monday's edition of 32 Thoughts: The Podcast, Armstrong's language was a little more creative — and festive — than that.) Of course, we all know what happened afterwards: The Blues climbed from worst to first and completed their historic ascent by hoisting the Stanley Cup.

Last season, as the Blues again found themselves near the bottom of the league standings late into fall, Armstrong's squad was again the subject of much trade speculation. Blues players were well-represented in rumour mills and reports, with captain Brayden Schenn the most popular target. But Armstrong gave his players the opportunity to climb back into relevance and let their play dictate the GM's deadline approach. What followed was a double-digit win streak coming out of the 4 Nations Face-Off, a quiet trade deadline for the Blues, and a wild card berth.

Now, as the 2025-26 season nears the quarter-mark with St. Louis sitting seventh in the Central Division with a 6-8-3 record, the Blues are once again at a crossroads and in the crosshairs of the rumour mill, so we can't help but wonder... will this year be different?

"For teams that have called general manager Doug Armstrong as the Blues have struggled, the message is, 'the Blues are open for business,'" reported NHL insider Frank Seravalli during a Prime segment last week.

When breaking down the Blues' situation on Monday's podcast, Friedman said Schenn's name has "been out there" again already this season. It's easy to understand why. The captain is a strong leader, a productive playmaker, and is still under contract for two more years at a very reasonable \$6.5-million AAV. This year also ushers in a change in his contract, shifting from a full no-trade clause in the first five years of his deal to a modified no-trade clause that kicked in this season, which states he can submit a 15-team no-trade list.

Another point of interest differentiating this year from previous seasons: This is Armstrong's final year as Blues GM before handing the reins to Alexander Steen.

"I think that Armstrong wants to leave the team in a good place for Steen," said Friedman. "I just cannot believe for a second that Armstrong would do anything that he thinks would leave Steen in an overall worse position as he enters GM of the Blues. It just doesn't strike me as the



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

way that he's wired, and he has really worked hard to put Steen in a position to be successful once he takes over."

Added Friedman, "I would be really surprised if he did something that he didn't think long-term was beneficial for the new manager, who's basically his right-hand guy."

Making the case for an early coaching change in Nashville

The Blues aren't the only team in the Central Division off to a slow start. In fact, no team has generated less offence than the last-place Nashville Predators, who for the second straight season have fallen completely flat out of the gates despite obvious star power on the roster.

General manager Barry Trotz took a patient approach with his squad last season, but considering just how bad the roster has performed so far he likely cannot afford to do the same this year. Through 18 games, the Predators have strung together back-to-back wins just once and are currently riding a five-game losing streak straight to the bottom of the standings. Seravalli spoke Monday of a "toxic energy" around the team, and we've heard the frustration from players during media availabilities — most notably, Ryan O'Reilly last week, who provided a brutal assessment of his own play (and one that, if you've watched his career, is far too harsh.)

O'Reilly is one of the few stars on this team who doesn't have a protection clause on his contract — though Trotz's respect for the veteran had him handling his position with the club last year as though he did. Considering all three of the team's highest-paid forwards (Filip Forsberg, Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault) all have no-move clauses tied to their contracts, Trotz's hands might be otherwise tied should he decide to try to shake things up.

One obvious area where Trotz can take immediate action is behind the bench. Head coach Andrew Brunette coached the Predators to a 47-30-5 record and a playoff spot in 2023-24, but the club finished with only 30 wins last season and so far is on track for most of the same at 5-9-4 so far.

After standing by Brunette last spring despite an uninspiring season, could we see Trotz make a change? Now would be an interesting time to do so, as Seravalli points out, considering their schedule around the NHL Global Series. The Predators take on the Pittsburgh Penguins in Sweden Friday and Sunday, after which they don't suit up again for nearly a week while traveling home and settling back in.

"Loads of extra practice days, time overseas to bond, maybe hear a different voice," suggested Seravalli. "Maybe that's a galvanizing change, a shot in the arm, that they might need as they try and turn their season around."

Where do Panarin and the Rangers go from here?

Three goals in three games, including two against Nashville on Monday, ended Artemi Panarin's career-high six-game pointless skid — and, apparently, justified his decision to shave his head.

Maybe his hair was weighing him down, but it wasn't the only thing. While Panarin seems to have rediscovered at least a little bit of his scoring touch since speaking with The Athletic's Vincent Mercogliano last week, there's still the fascinating matter of his contract. As Mercogliano wrote in the piece (which was

Published just prior to Panarin's skid-breaking game against Detroit), "Panarin admitted the uncertainty surrounding his future is weighing on him."

Sportsnet's Nick Kypreos also reported on Panarin's situation earlier this month, writing that Panarin "has made it clear to the Rangers that he is not interested in a pay cut from his current \$11.642 million, and that has shut down any chance of negotiations."

The Rangers, noted Kypreos, don't want him at that same rate again. Where that leaves talks will likely depend greatly on where the team sits in the standings by the midway point of the season. The 8-7-2 club has plenty of ground to make up if they're to jump back into contention in Mike Sullivan's first year at the helm.

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators' Batherson, Stutzle showcasing great chemistry

Alex Adams

Evidence in favour of the pairing was produced on the first shift of the game against Dallas on Tuesday, when Stutzle and Batherson rushed into the Stars zone, leading to a Batherson goal.

The two were first paired up against the New York Islanders on Oct. 20. Since then, they have played together almost exclusively. The duo has combined for 30 points in the team's last 12 games.

It's much-needed offensive production for a Senators team without Brady Tkachuk.

Before this season, the two had played together for 31 per cent of Stutzle's five-on-five ice time over the last three years. This season, it's 53 per cent, which includes the first five games where they mostly played on different lines.

Many players and coaches will tell you playing with Stutzle isn't easy because of his dynamic play and skating ability. Batherson can keep up with Stutzle and has the talent to mesh with the German.

"Obviously, he's a special player, and plays different from other players," Batherson said. "So, it just takes time, the more time you spend with (him), the easier it gets. The longer we go, the better off we're going to be, too."

The Senators have outscored opponents 9-2 at five-on-five with the duo on the ice while outchancing opponents 57-45.

"Most of my goals have just been in around the net area, so just trying to win battles in front, get the rims back from the point, little things like that. To just create space for Timmy," Batherson said.

Stutzle loves playing with Batherson.

"I think he's a hell of a player. I told you guys that many times," Stutzle said. "I think he's one of the most underrated players, one of the best playmakers in the game, in my opinion."

Batherson has 17 points in 14 games. At age 27, he's just entering his prime. Both players are improving and when Tkachuk returns, how about a top line of Tkachuk-Stutzle-Batherson? In three seasons from 2022-25, the trio outchanced opponents 302-258 at five-on-five with a respectable 53 per cent expected goal rate.

We will see. Regardless, the line could become this era's version of the Pizza Line that carried the Senators in the 2000s with Dany Heatley, Jason Spezza and Daniel Alfredsson.

Third-line dominance

There is a reason Senators coach Travis Green has maintained his third line of Michael Amadio, Shane Pinto and Claude Giroux while switching up his first two lines this season. The trio is seventh in expected goals percentage of any line in the NHL this season, at 65 per cent. It's no



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

coincidence that the Senators have a point in 10 of their 11 games since facing Edmonton on Oct. 21, the game the line was put together.

"That line is probably the only line that I haven't touched for a little while. You guys know me that when that happens, some good things are happening," said Green.

The third line is routinely tasked with shutting down the opponents' star players, such as Mikko Rantanen, David Pastrnak and Alex Ovechkin. They've outscored opponents 9-3 at five-on-five, which is outstanding, considering their matchups.

The line is not just analytically dominant. Amadio recently had four goals in four games, Pinto is on a four-game assist streak and Giroux brings an added playmaking element that makes the line effective defensively and offensively. Giroux is on pace for more points than he had last season at age 37. The unit has combined for 22 points in 11 games — including Amadio and Giroux setting up Nick Jensen's goal on Tuesday against Dallas.

When Tkachuk returns, we know what line will stay together.

Chabot injury a concern

The Senators have only three NHL-calibre left-shot defencemen. Now, their depth on the left side likely will be tested. Thomas Chabot left the game after the first period against Dallas with an upper-body injury. Green had no update post-game, but said the injury was caused by Chabot reaching out for a puck in the first period.

With the injury, the Senators likely will have to pair two right-shot defencemen together, which is unusual.

With Donovan Sebrango waived and claimed by Florida, Ottawa's next best left-shot defenceman in its system, at least for now, is Jorian Donovan, who is at AHL Belleville. No slight to Donovan, who has played well in Belleville, but he's not ready for the NHL with only 78 career AHL games under his belt.

The Senators also have Scott Harrington, a native of Kingston, Ont., who has 255 games of NHL experience but hasn't played in the league since 2022-23."

Maybe the Senators give 2024 first-round pick Carter Yakemchuk a look? But with six NHLers available to Green, not including Chabot, who would Yakemchuk replace in the lineup, and is that better for his development than continuing to marinate in the AHL?

We are sure GM Steve Staios will try to address the need for another left-shot defenceman at some point before the deadline, but will it be soon if Chabot is out for a significant period of time? If Chabot is out only briefly, the Senators should be fine, but an injury to Tyler Kleven or Jake Sanderson would really test their depth.

Sens doing just fine without Tkachuk

Tkachuk was seen on Tuesday without a cast on his injured thumb. Could that mean his return is sooner than we think?

Meanwhile, the Senators have points in 10 of their last 11 games without Tkachuk. According to Sportsnet Stats, the last time the Senators had points in 10 of 11 was off the blocks in the 2017-18 season (Oct. 5-27, 2017), when they went 5-1-5. Ottawa's season has been more ugly than pretty, grinding out results without its captain. Racking up points early could define the season for the Sens.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Montembeault falters vs. Kings, loses ground in race to Olympics

Eric Engels

MONTREAL — He was calm, cool, collected, in control of all his movements, oozing confidence and lending it to his team from 190 feet away from the man he was in the process of burying in the Olympic conversation.

We're talking about 35-year-old Saskatoon native Darcy Kuemper, who came to the Bell Centre and offered direct contrast to Becancour, Quebec's Samuel Montembeault in a 5-1 win for his Los Angeles Kings over Montembeault's Montreal Canadiens. Good for him that it happened in front of Team Canada brass members Doug Armstrong, Don Sweeney and Julien Brisebois.

Not so good for Montembeault, who's staring all the way up at Kuemper from the very bottom of the list of Canadian hopefuls in the running to be one of Canada's three goaltenders in Milan come February.

That statistical reality was punctuated on Tuesday night by both men. Kuemper came into the game ranked fifth in the league in goals saved above expected and came out of it having stopped a couple more. Montembeault came into it ranked 71st out of 73 goaltenders in the category, and once again failed to make enough of the saves you'd expect him to make.

He made 12 stops in the first, but it would be stretching the truth to say he appeared calm, collected and confident in front of his net, with two pucks getting by him and striking iron.

When the Canadiens fell asleep at the start of the second period, Montembeault went from shaky to rattled.

The Kings capitalized, scoring three goals on four shots in a span of four minutes and change — and that third one came when instead of deflecting the puck out of harm's way, Montembeault put it right on Kevin Fiala's stick for a tap-in.

It was deflating for the Canadiens, and it likely sucked the last breath out of Montembeault's Olympic bid, which was already on life support before Tuesday.

Let's be clear: he didn't lose this one on his own for the Canadiens. And even at his best, he probably wouldn't have won it for them, given how defensively fallible and offensively impotent the team was through most of the night.

But Montembeault's inability to keep the Canadiens afloat when they needed him added another page to this unflattering chapter he's authored through the start of this season.

One that doesn't quite fit in the book Montembeault has written through this Canadiens rebuild.

"He's bailed us out a number of times throughout the course of years," said Canadiens' Josh Anderson, who beat Kuemper with an unbelievable shot for Montreal's only goal of the game.

But even if Anderson said twice that the Canadiens have faith in Montembeault's ability to return to regularly bailing them out, you can't help but feel the goaltender's belief in himself to do it is currently dangling in the wind.

How could it not be?

Through nine starts, Montembeault is 4-4-1, sporting the 51st-best save percentage (.861) out of 54 goaltenders to have appeared in at least five games. And that's from behind a Canadiens team that's played only one other game like the one it had against the Kings, a team that came into



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025

this one tied with the Carolina Hurricanes for third in the NHL in points percentage.

At least Jordan Binnington, Canada's starter at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February, can partially pin his .859 save percentage on a completely out-of-sorts St. Louis Blues team.

We don't think Kuemper or Logan Thompson (who's played tremendously for the Washington Capitals) will unseat him.

But both goaltenders came into Tuesday's action well ahead of Montembeault, and Kuemper gained a couple more strides.

Meanwhile, forget about Team Canada in February; this Canadiens team needs the Montembeault who's capable of playing much better than he has this season.

They remain faithful that they'll get him.

"I don't think I'm worried," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis.

Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki doesn't appear to be, either.

"A few of those goals, guys are just sitting back door, and we've gotta clean that up," he said. "He's been playing better as of late, and we just want to keep that confidence high for him."

Montembeault must lift it himself, though.

He appeared ready to do it after a tough start against Philadelphia last week ended with him stopping 31 of the final 32 shots he faced to save the Canadiens a point in a game that mirrored this one against Los Angeles. He built on that performance by stopping 25 of 27 shots in a 6-2 win over the Utah Mammoth on Saturday, giving him some positive momentum for the first time this season.

But Tuesday's loss was another step back, while Kuemper took a big one forward in front of key decision makers for Team Canada.

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1367981 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' fight to stay afloat takes another hit with loss of Demko

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — When Vancouver Canucks coach Adam Foote tried without much success on Friday to explain why Thatcher Demko could miss back-to-back games on the weekend, the goalie's issue sounded like more than "maintenance" but less than injury.

Demko was too sore to play and needed a couple of days off. Fine. Not to worry, he would likely be back for Tuesday's game against the Winnipeg Jets.

And Demko was back. He allowed three goals on eight shots in the first period and was not seen again. Kevin Lankinen played the final two periods for Vancouver, just like he played most of last season, as the Canucks lost 5-3 to end a 1-2-1 homestand.

The limping team now has to travel all the way to the Atlantic to play both Florida teams and the Carolina Hurricanes.

But it could have been worse on Tuesday.

Canucks captain and superstar Quinn Hughes also left the game in the second period with an apparent arm or shoulder injury but returned a few minutes later.

None of the Jets' first three goals were Demko's fault. Two of them bounced in off Winnipeg skates and another off a Vancouver stick.

The team announced at the start of the second period that Demko would not return, and Foote did not have much to add post-game except confirm the injury is "lower body."

The coach said Demko was ready to start after sitting out weekend games against the Columbus Blue Jackets and Colorado Avalanche.

"I mean, yeah, you can't control injuries," Canucks winger Jake DeBrusk said. "There's different stuff that happens to guys, you know, (and) since I've been here, there's been a lot. You know what? Kevin came in cold, did a great job, gave us a chance. Obviously, you hope (Demko is) okay, and you hope he's back as fast as possible. That's just how you take it on the bench.

"I was even talking to him a little bit when he came over (during the first period); I knew something wasn't right."

The best of Demko's five saves also looked like the most demanding — a post-to-post stretch to get his left pad in front of Cole Perfetti's backdoor shot about six minutes in when it was already 1-0 for Winnipeg.

Lankinen has struggled at the start of this season to replicate the form (and .902 save percentage) from last year that earned him a five-year, \$22.5-million contract extension. But he had one of his best games so far in relief of Demko.

He stopped 20 of 21 shots and wasn't beaten until the Vancouver's dreadful penalty killing allowed Gabe Vilardi time and space between the hash marks to collect Kyle Connor's pass, measure a backhand and flip the puck past the goalie's stick-side to make it 4-2 for Winnipeg 48 seconds into the third period.

So, that's a goaltending positive for Vancouver.

But Lankinen may have to do this for a couple or many games in a row.

Foote said Demko would be re-evaluated Wednesday, which is the Canucks' travel day. Their three-game cross-continental jaunt opens Friday in North Carolina.

"We're all human beings, and I don't think anybody understands a goalie as well as another goalie," Lankinen said of the emotional aspect of Demko's injury. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him, so I don't know. . . I'm not quite sure what's going on, but I hope for the best.

"I'm ready to play every single game. That's what I love to do. That's what I always wanted to do."

Lankinen reiterated it is the backup goalie's responsibility to always be ready, and make sure he's prepared to seize the opportunity to start if it arises. After playing four straight games, the 30-year-old from Finland feels the starter's workload is helping him.

"I think so, yeah," he said. "And probably most of the goalies would agree on that. The game slows down a little bit, and you make better reads when you're in the game, and the preparation gets a little easier because you're in the rhythm and you're feeling it. So who knows what's going to happen the next few days here. But I've got to learn from this and get better."

You must remember, for context, that Demko carries more baggage than a Samsonite freighter when it comes to injuries.

Demko's rare and confounding popliteus muscle tear in his knee clouded his career before last season and delayed his entry to the Canucks' lineup until December. He was injured twice more before the season was over, and Demko explained later that his lack of adequate pre-season preparation left him physically vulnerable and unable to withstand the rigors of the every-second-day NHL schedule.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

**NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 13, 2025**

This past summer, with the chance to fully train and get back to peak condition, Demko changed his routine and broadened his personal "team" to make preparation more preventative, guarding against future injuries.

Because without Demko, even with a backup-plus in Lankinen, the Canucks have little chance to be successful.

In order, the most important basic prerequisites for a bounce-back season in Vancouver and a return to the Stanley Cup playoffs were:

1. Demko staying healthy.
2. Elias Pettersson playing like an elite centre.

There are many other factors but none come close to the essentialness of these first two.

Until the Canucks' last road trip, Demko was not only the team's most valuable player through 11 games, statistically he was about the best goalie in the NHL in October.

Whether he misses another game, another month or the rest of the season, he is part of the injury crisis that has undermined the Canucks' opening quarter of the season.

They've had as many as nine players out. And with Demko unavailable, they are currently without seven.

If only their health matched their heart. The 8-9-1 Canucks continue to compete with desperation, trying to survive this spell well enough to be in the playoff fight when they get healthy.

Even against the Jets, Brock Boeser's rebound goal as the Canucks skated six-against-five brought Vancouver within one, down 4-3, with 90 seconds remaining. Alex Lafallo's empty-netter clinched it for Winnipeg.

After playing 51 games last season as Demko's stand-in, Lankinen certainly sounds up to the challenge now.

"I feel great," he said. "The more I play, the better I feel. That's always what you want to do as a goalie — you want to be the guy, you want to carry the load and help the team win. And I've been feeling really good, and hopefully we'll get some more results here soon.

"I'm just living day by day, you know? Just one day at a time and not worrying too much about the future."

If only Canuck fans could feel so unencumbered.

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