



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 20, 2025

NORTH STATE JOURNAL

From contact to 'quiet room': A look at NHL's concussion protocol | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

Hurricanes goaltender Frederik Andersen lays on the ice after a collision with teammate Jordan Staal during the third period of Carolina's 4-1 loss to the Capitals on Nov. 11 at Lenovo Center. (Karl DeBlaker / AP Photo)

RALEIGH — The NHL, like most professional sports leagues, has toed a delicate line with concussions, realizing that a flat-out denial of the impact of head injuries in hockey is no longer a reasonable defense.

Still, the league, which has faced criticism after several past enforcers' deaths were tied to the repercussions of fighting and blows to the head, is often secretive about how it handles concussions.

One sign of progress is the league's use of concussion spotters, who have the authority to pull a player from the game if they are determined to have exhibited signs of a head injury.

Such was the case last Tuesday when Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen was pulled from the game against the Capitals with just over five minutes remaining in the game following a collision with teammate Jordan Staal.

Andersen was slow to get up from the ice, though he said it was because he felt a twinge in his back after being "twisted the wrong way" after colliding with the rare player who is as big as his own 6-foot-4, 229-pound frame.

"It was just more about the other part of my body, not even the concussion part," Andersen said. "I just got up quick. I knew Doug (Bennett, the Hurricanes' head trainer) was right there. I just kind of wanted to skate away and get over and do my thing, get some water like I usually do in the TV timeout."

But as Andersen stretched in his crease preparing to continue play with Carolina trailing 3-1, one of the linesmen came over to tell Andersen he had been flagged by the league's concussion spotter.

"I was very surprised because, if anything, I think the one collision in the first would be the one that should have warranted some sort of a review or something," Andersen said of Capitals forward Nic Dowd colliding with him earlier in the game. "He made contact with the head there."

After exiting the ice surface, Andersen was taken to the team's training room in the Lenovo Center, a place where he can take the necessary tests without the full noise and distractions of the arena.

"The test can be tough if you're out there, like with all the different sounds and stuff," he said. "So I'm sure you've got to focus up a little bit to kind of get close to your baseline."

The baseline is cognitive tests players take before the season that give doctors and trainers a benchmark to compare the player's test results after the event that led to them being pulled from the game.

"It's an iPad test," Andersen said. "There's a few different ones. ... memory stuff or balance stuff, recalling numbers and random stuff, words you've got to remember. So if you're not fully there, it could definitely show as a sign that you're not fully with it."

For Andersen to do the balance tests, he needs to take off his skates — a bit more of a process for a goalie than a forward or a defenseman. Andersen said the tests are five to 10 minutes, which, on top of the time it takes to take off and put on equipment, can keep a goalie out of the game for a decent chunk of time.

He said by the time the Hurricanes returned to the locker room following their 4-1 loss, he was done with his test and in the locker room with the team.

Andersen said he has in the past recognized when something was not right following a collision, like when New Jersey's Timo Meier made contact with him in Game 4 of last year's first round playoff series, knocking him from the game.

"At the end of the day, they're trying to protect us and themselves," he said. "They're trying to protect both parties."

He also admitted that it's easy for an athlete's competitive nature to lead them to overlook or ignore warning signs.

"I think when you're in the moment," he said, "you want to keep competing and being out there. ... You may ignore some signs that made you feel, maybe, that you're not right there, but they take you out in a little bit quieter room, in the training room or something, where you can just go through it."

In Andersen's recent situation, he knew he wasn't going to be a key part in Carolina trying to erase a two-goal deficit in



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the final minutes of a game, making the concussion spotter's decision a bit easier to swallow.

He also said it helps that it's the team's trainers and doctors, people who know the players and their usual demeanor,

evaluating the results and are better suited to "see if something's up."

"At the end of the day," Andersen said, "you're thankful that you have people that try to look out for you."



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Recap: Blake Shines, But Canes Fall In Shootout

By: Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

"It was just one of those nights we didn't get rewarded for what we put out there."

ST. PAUL, Minn. - Jackson Blake scored twice in his home state to help the Carolina Hurricanes erase a two-goal deficit and force overtime, but the Minnesota Wild took the extra point in the shootout, winning 4-3 at Grand Casino Arena.

[GAME SUMMARY](#) | [BOX SCORE](#) | [BUY TICKETS](#)

Wednesday's defeat continued a troubling trend, as Carolina found itself facing an early deficit for the seventh time in its last 10 games. An unfortunate deflection yielded a lead for Minnesota just 1:54 in, and a tough turnover at the offensive blue line 10 minutes later led to Matt Boldy burying a breakaway and a 2-0 Wild lead.

A dominant second stanza began to turn the tide for the Hurricanes, who were rewarded with Blake's first of the night late in the frame en route to a 16-5 shot advantage in the period. But just 15 seconds into the third, that momentum hit a speed bump when Mats Zuccarello converted another breakaway bid to restore Minnesota's two-goal lead.

Once again searching for a pair of goals to get back on level terms, the Hurricanes found the first of those six minutes later as Sebastian Aho wired home a wrister from the left circle on a rush chance set up by Seth Jarvis and Andrei Svechnikov. Then, with just 1:06 remaining, Blake again came through for his club, sneaking a tap-in under the pad of Jesper Wallstedt and over the line as the Canes pulled even on their 42nd of 45 shots on the night.

Each club had its chances in overtime, though Carolina was credited with the only two shots of the bonus period, but neither could find the deciding tally. Minnesota's Boldy was the lone skater to score in the breakaway battle, with Wallstedt stopping Jarvis, Svechnikov and Taylor Hall from the Canes' side.

Stats & Standouts

Forward Jackson Blake posted his second career multi-goal game. The Eden Prairie product found twine in both games against his hometown team this season and has now recorded a point in 13 of Carolina's 20 games in 2025-26, trailing only Sebastian Aho (15) among Hurricanes skaters.

Forward Logan Stankoven picked up an assist on Blake's goal and fired a season-high six shots on goal. The 22-year-old now has points in two of his last three outings.

Exemplary work from Jackson Blake on the forecheck, and he gets rewarded for it.

He puts the pressure on Daemon Hunt, wins the battle, puts on a clinic down low with the puck, facilitates, then goes to the net for the tip.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour on the effort...

"I thought we played great. Obviously, we gave them a couple of breakaways. Those are the ones that you can't do. You have to give them credit; when they had their chances, they buried them, and their goalie played great, but I loved the way we played. Especially getting down two right away. We just kept going. I give the guys full marks. (In) overtime we had all of our chances, it was just one of those nights we didn't get rewarded for what we put out there."

Sebastian Aho discussing Jackson Blake's monster night...

"He's been playing really good. He obviously has some poise with the puck and works hard. Their line was good today. They were making plays when there was time to make plays and that was two big goals (from him). He just continues to get better."

Jackson Blake sharing his takeaway...

"Obviously, you're never really pumped about losing, right? But I think that there's a lot of stuff we can build from this game. I think we did a lot of good for the most part. One thing that this team does is we compete. We compete really hard, and we're always in it, every single game. We give ourselves a chance, but we just have to find a way not to give them those two freebies."

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to be off on Thursday. They'll return to game action on Friday against the Winnipeg Jets.

Next Game: Friday, Nov. 21 at Winnipeg | 8:00 p.m. ET | [FDSNSO](#)

Next Home Game: Wednesday, Nov. 26 vs. NY Rangers | 7:00 p.m. ET | [Tickets](#) | [Parking](#)



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Wallstedt, Wild recover, hold off Hurricanes in shootout

By: Jessi Pierce

Goalie makes 42 saves for Minnesota, Boldy wins it in 3rd round; Blake scores twice for Carolina

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Jesper Wallstedt made 42 saves and the Minnesota Wild held off the Carolina Hurricanes' late push with a 4-3 shootout win at Grand Casino Arena on Wednesday.

"I think maybe we didn't bring our best game, but the effort was there in all situations," Wallstedt said. "Guys were sacrificing themselves with blocks. They're backchecking as hard as they could. Maybe everything didn't click for us today, but you cannot say that the effort was not there. I think that shows how strong of a team we are even though we maybe didn't have our best game. ... Very nice, very nice two points."

Despite striking first and leading the entirety of the game, Minnesota allowed Carolina back in by giving up two goals. With Frederik Andersen pulled for the extra attacker, Jackson Blake ultimately sent the game to overtime with his second goal of the night when he crashed the net for the rebound between Wallstedt's pads at 18:54 of the third period to tie it 3-3.

Wallstedt denied Blake of the hat trick with a pad save on a breakaway at 4:06 of overtime, one of two shots he faced from Blake in the extra period before the game was decided by a shootout.

"Would have liked to put that one in in overtime, would have really capped that one off, but I thought for the most part we played well," Blake said. "... We got a point as a group, and I liked the way we kind of finished there, we were hungry. ... But would have been better if we got the win."

Matt Boldy scored the only goal in the third round of the shootout, extending Minnesota's point streak to six games (5-0-1).

Mats Zuccarello had a goal and an assist, Brock Faber also scored, and Danila Yurov had two assists for the Wild (10-7-4), who have won three straight. Wallstedt, who had not allowed a goal in 175:12, saved 42 of 45 shots faced.

"I thought in the first period we played really well, and then I thought they took control of the game, particularly in the second period," Minnesota coach John Hynes said. "I

thought in the third we got back to some things that we needed to do. But tonight's game, we had a good start. I thought we had some opportunistic scoring. We got great goaltending. It's not always going to be picture perfect every night, but the most important thing is you got to be able to, I think, take some things out of this, of why the game turned a little bit, but also we won the game. We've got to move on to get ready for another one as well."

Blake scored twice for the Hurricanes (13-5-2), who have lost two of their past three (1-0-2) but are 6-1-2 in their past nine. Andersen made 15 saves.

"I thought we played great," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Obviously, we gave 'em a couple breakaways. Those are the ones you can't do but you take those away, I mean you gotta give them credit when they had their chances, they buried them, and their goalie played great. But I love the way we played. Especially getting down two right away, we just kept going."

"So I give the guys full marks. Overtime we had all our chances. It's one of those nights we just didn't get rewarded for what we put out there."

Faber deflected in a Zuccarello shot off his pad for a quick 1-0 lead for the Wild at 1:54 of the first period.

Boldy increased the lead 2-0 at 11:46 with the first short-handed goal of his career on the breakaway. Boldy has four goals and three assists in a five-game point streak.

"I'll take it," Boldy said. "Yeah, I'll take it. Is what it is. A goal's a goal."

Blake cut the deficit 2-1 at 14:03 of the second period, tipping in a Sean Walker shot five-hole on Wallstedt. Blake's goal was the first 5-on-5 goal the Wild had allowed in 302:43.

Zuccarello made it 3-1, 15 seconds into the third period on the breakaway for his first goal of the season.

Sebastian Aho picked the right corner to bring it 3-2 at 6:34. Andrei Svechnikov passed between Joel Eriksson Ek's legs to find Aho in the left circle for the wrist shot.

"Tough bounce there early in the third but could go either way," Aho said. "You could either mail it or keep fighting, and we kept fighting. We were able to find a couple goals. Got a



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point. Obviously you'd like to see two points there but boys battled hard."

NOTES: Wallstedt's shutout sequence of 175:12 was the longest by a rookie since Anaheim's John Gibson (184:30 from Dec. 27, 2015 – Jan. 3, 2016). At 5-0-2, Wallstedt

became the second goaltender in franchise history with points in each of his first seven appearances during a season, following Niklas Backstrom (6-0-1 from Oct. 11-27, 2008). ... With his third period goal, Aho reached 650 career points (291 goals, 359 assists) in 697 games played.



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AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wallstedt, Boldy carry surging Wild past Hurricanes, 4-3 in shootout | AP News

By: Phil Ervin

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Jesper Wallstedt stopped a career-high 42 shots and three more in a shootout, Matt Boldy scored in regulation and had the lone goal in the tiebreaker in the Minnesota Wild's 4-3 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday night.

The Hurricanes outshot Minnesota 45-18 and scored with 1:06 left with their net empty to force overtime. But Wallstedt's third great showing in a row and 24 blocked shots helped the Wild improve to 5-0-1 in their past six games.

Jackson Blake scored twice for the Hurricanes, including late from the crease on a stuff-in that barely crossed the goal line and had to be reviewed. The Fargo, North Dakota, native had two more chances in overtime, including a breakaway.

Wallstedt then kept Seth Jarvis, Andrei Svechnikov and Taylor Hall from scoring in the shootout. Boldy's backhand off a deke got past Frederik Andersen to help give Minnesota its second shootout victory this season.

Mats Zuccarello scored his first goal of the season on a breakaway 15 seconds into the third to make it 3-1. Zuccarello missed Minnesota's first 15 games because of lower-body injury, returning to the lineup Nov. 7.

Sebastian Aho pulled Carolina to 3-2 with 13:26 left.

Wallstedt was particularly stingy early in the second period, when he made nine saves in less than seven minutes. It took Blake's net-front deflection with 5:56 left to finally solve the 23-year-old rookie from Sweden.

It was the first 5-on-5 goal allowed by Minnesota in over 302 minutes and ended a streak of 95 consecutive saves by Wallstedt. Encompassing consecutive shutouts against Calgary and Anaheim, Wallstedt's scoreless streak of 175:12 is the fourth longest in Wild history.

Wallstedt entered Wednesday as the only NHL netminder with more than one shootout this season.

Boldy extended his points streak to five games with an unassisted, short-handed goal from the left slot midway through the first period.

Minnesota opened the scoring on Brock Faber's tip-in from Zuccarello less than two minutes into the game.

Up next

Hurricanes: At Winnipeg on Friday night.

Wild: At Pittsburgh on Friday night.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes rally late, fall in SO to Wild, 4-3

By: Kyle Morton

The Carolina Hurricanes fell short in their bid to sweep the season series against the Minnesota Wild with a 4-2 loss in St. Paul on Thursday night.

After the Canes took the first showdown between the two teams in Raleigh, Minnesota was able to jump out to an early lead just like it did the first time around.

Defenseman Brock Faber, who paired with Jaccob Slavin for Team USA at February's 4 Nations Face-Off, got the scoring started when a Mats Zuccarello shot caromed off his skate and in.

The Hurricanes had a chance to equalize with the game's first power play, but a turnover by Sebastian Aho sprung Matt Boldy in on Frederik Andersen, and Boldy beat him through the five-hole to make it 2-0 after one.

Minnesota native Jackson Blake got the Canes on the board in a second period that Carolina dominated, but one goal was all the visitors could get in the second stanza as they went to the third period tied.

After his earlier assist, Zuccarello made the Hurricanes pay just 15 seconds into the third period on a breakaway to re-extend his team's lead right back to two goals. Carolina's first line responded about five minutes later when Seth Jarvis gained the zone and left the puck for Andrei Svechnikov, who promptly fed Sebastian Aho streaking down the left wing to make it a one-goal game again.

Despite getting held off the scoresheet for a while longer by Minnesota goalie Jesper Wallstedt, the Canes kept pushing. With Andersen vacating the net for the extra skater,

Blake worked a shot through Wallstedt off a perfect cross-ice feed from Nikolaj Ehlers to force overtime.

The Hurricanes started Jordan Staal in overtime again, and unlike last time around against Edmonton, he won the draw to allow the Hurricanes to start the 3-on-3 period with the puck.

The Canes trapped Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson-Ek on the ice for more than two minutes to start overtime, but they couldn't capitalize. Blake had a bid for a hat trick on a breakaway with just under a minute left, but a strong back check allowed Wallstedt to make a save that forced a shootout.

Zuccarello started the skills competition and was stopped by Andersen before Wallstedt denied a slick move by Jarvis. Kaprizov was up next in the two-spot for Minnesota, and he too couldn't beat Andersen with a shot. His fellow Russian Svechnikov got the next bid for the Canes, and Wallstedt flashed the glove in impressive fashion to keep it scoreless.

Boldy beat Andersen in the third round to put Carolina and Taylor Hall in a do-or-die position, and Wallstedt came up with the save to seal the win for his team.

The result put the Hurricanes alone in first place in the Metropolitan Division by points with the Devils off Wednesday.

Carolina is now halfway through a four-game road trip. The Canes will be right back at it again on Friday night against the Winnipeg Jets.



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The Hockey News

A True Leader Through and Through: What Teammates, Organization Have To Say About Carolina Hurricanes Captain Jordan Staal

By: Ryan Henkel

Teammates reveal how Jordan Staal's unwavering consistency and relentless effort define Carolina's winning culture and inspire them both on and off the ice.

Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal is 20 years into his NHL career, but his impact has remained consistent every year he's played.

The veteran centerman is a dominant two-way player, one of the physically strongest players in the league and on top of all of that, he's also a Selke-caliber defensive stalwart.

Night in and night out, Staal gives maximum effort out on the ice and he's a lead-by-example type that sets the tone for one of the league's best and most consistent teams in the Carolina Hurricanes.

Recently, Staal set a few milestones, such as scoring his 300th career goal, but also setting the team record for games played as a Hurricane, surpassing his brother Eric.

So while we all know the kind of player Jordan Staal is, I decided to go around the Canes' locker room and asked some of the guys who know him best to describe their captain.

Here's what they had to say:

Frederik Andersen

"Just gritty and hard to play against. I knew of him before I got to the league during his Pittsburgh times and how important he was to the team that won there. Sneaky, like he's been here a long time all of a sudden. I watched him in Pittsburgh and that's what I really remembered and then I got to the NHL myself and I was thinking about everyone in the league the same way. Now, I see it up front and just see how powerful he is and just how committed he is to the game plan that's been put on him. And he lives and breathes it. Just a great leader by example. A guy that loves to be in the mix with the boys and enjoys the times on the bus and the time on the plane and stuff. Just overall a great dude."

And how much does he help you as a goalie with the way he plays?

"One of the best defenses is offense and hemming them in. His line with Marty, who's been on his hip for most of the time I've been here, and it's been interchanged a little bit with Nino [Niederreiter] and Quickie [Jesper Fast] and now Cares [William Carrier]. But they just put it on guys and I think they're the definition of what makes it hard to come to Carolina and play and why a team knows they're in for a hard night. He sets the standard there."

Rod Brind'Amour

"I've known him forever it feels like and watched him grow up. We've shared a lot of time together so I just appreciate what he's done for us and this organization, but more so what he's done for me as a coach. What he does for our team, it's almost hard to put into words. Certainly we don't talk enough about him. Around here we do, but the hockey world doesn't as much as they really should because he's that valuable to our group."

What do you admire most about Jordo?

"There's a lot to admire. I think from a coach's standpoint, there's just a ton of things. It starts with consistency and that's what he is. And the fact that he just does it right on and off the ice. That's the kind of person you want representing your organization."

"One thing about Jordan especially is that he appreciates every day. You can see it in the way he plays. Like, 'This could be my last game.' It feels like every time he goes out there, that's how hard he plays. Because you just never know. That's why, for me personally, that's what I appreciate the most about him."

The decision to make him captain?

"When you're trying to think of a guy to lead your group, it has to be the guy who does it. He doesn't just talk the talk, right? Like, this guy walks it every day and that's why it was such an easy decision."

"He's our leader. We talk a lot about him and I can't say enough great things. There's a reason why he has the 'C' on his jersey."

Do you expect number 11 to be retired one day?

"Not any time soon, but of course."

William Carrier

"He's a great leader. I think the biggest part is if he has a bad shift, he gets his frustration out and then he's right back to it. He doesn't lag and it doesn't last any longer than that shift, which I think is something you can always take from him. When a shift isn't going your way, you don't want it to affect the next shift because then you start sliding. Sometimes it happens, but he gets back to the bench and he's all easy-peasy. He's played so many games, so he knows, but he gets back there and is like, 'Well, alright. That was a bad one,' and then is right back out there for the next."

Shayne Gostisbehere

"I think he's the ultimate example of longevity. The character of not only his family name and his brothers, but just the way



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he goes about his business. Professional. Quiet, but when he speaks up, everyone's ears are open, for sure. It makes sense why he's been in the league so long and had so much success. He has a good recipe going and it's also good for these young guys to see too. Just the daily process. He's maybe an old school player but in a modern day game. It's pretty cool to still see him get it done."

Taylor Hall

"Playing against Jordo was difficult. Obviously he's so big and rangy, but he moves so well for his size and that's really what's unique for him. That he's such a good athlete for such a big man. There are some guys who look big on the ice and it's just sort of the way their equipment looks or whatever and so you see them off the ice and you're like, 'Oh, okay. It's a normal sized guy.' But Jordan's just a big dude. So that's the first thing I noticed when I came here. Like, man, he's really graceful for being that size. Just consistent too. You knew he was always going to be in the right spot, always going to be on the right side of the puck when you were playing against him. There was never really going to be a shift off."

Seth Jarvis

"He's someone who's extremely consistent. I think he's kind of the pinnacle of consistency for our team. Every night, you know what to expect and I think he delivers and that's something our team really leans on. That's probably also a big reason why he's captain. Around the rink, he's definitely serious. He takes his job seriously, he makes sure everyone is pushing themselves and expects the best out of everyone, but away from the rink, he's full of jokes and doesn't stop laughing. He's just awesome to be around."

What about him do you admire most?

"The way he's been able to play at the same level for so long and just be such a big part of our team and be able to just contribute in all different ways, whether that's scoring, defense, faceoffs, it's really incredible how he can impact a game."

What do you like about playing on a line with him?

"Whoever gets to play with him, it's a blast. I think you just know what him and Marty are going to do all the time. You know what to expect, so it's easy to read off of him and I think they let me play a little more offensively and think offense a little more because I know I have two guys back there that are going to bail me out if I do mess up. It's definitely fun to be on that line."

Any favorite memory of Jordo?

"My favorite memory was probably finding out he went to jail. That was a fun one. That was a nice one to hang over his head. I mean, he's a felon so it's fun."

"Whoever gets to play with him, it's a blast." - Seth Jarvis
"Whoever gets to play with him, it's a blast." - Seth Jarvis

Jesper Kotkaniemi

"He's a great leader on and off the ice. When your captain works that hard every night, it's kind of easy to hop on that bus. I think he just leads by example every night. He brings it every night and there's no days off for him. It's always easy to follow him. ... He looks pretty tired every morning when he

walks in. Couple kids, probably running around the house. But he's sneaky funny. Low key."

Jordan Martinook

"He's turned into one of my best friends since my time being here. We've done family vacations with him and we just enjoy each others company. Obviously everybody sees the serious side of him, but he's just a lot of fun to be around. I enjoy him as a person more than a teammate and that's pretty hard to say since I've been riding shotgun with him for however many years now. With him breaking the record, I've been thinking about my time and I just thought about him calling me when I was a free agent, saying, 'Don't leave!' and Roddy calls me saying, 'You're going to play with him for the next X years,' and that was a big part of why I... I always wanted to stay, but that was another reason. Knowing that I was going to be on his line and play with him. It makes my job easier and I like to think that I help him a little bit too. But he's just the model of consistency and the way the Hurricanes want to play. I've said it many times. You could put a picture up on the wall of him for the way Roddy wants everybody to play. It's a testament to what he's done over his career."

"He's turned into one of my best friends." - Jordan Martinook
"He's turned into one of my best friends." - Jordan Martinook

K'Andre Miller

"It always sucked playing against Jordo. He does such a good job of just playing simple and playing to his strengths and playing a 200-foot game. Obviously the big body and big frame has a lot to do with his style of play and the skills that he has. I think he does a great job of protecting the puck, working it down low and just being hard to play against. But yeah, I hated it."

Logan Stankoven

"Just a great leader. A calming presence, for me at least. Like, he just doesn't get too high or too low. I'm fortunate enough to sit next to him in the room, so we're always chatting. He's always there for me. I was talking with him the other night and it's just so hard to get to this league and to now be the team leader in games played, that's unbelievable. You can't ask for a better career than that. Really happy for him. He's the heart and soul of our team and the reason we have the success that we do."

Andrei Svechnikov

"He leads by example and that means that he plays hard every game and leads us everywhere. He's probably the hardest worker I've ever seen. He's always working hard on the ice, off the ice. And if you take the hockey away, just an unbelievable person and an unbelievable family. It's fun to be around him"

Eric Tulsky

"He's unbelievable. He's the heart and soul of this team and our approach. He epitomizes the way we want to carry ourselves, the way we want to play on the ice. Just every single shift, you know what you're going to get out of him. He's going to play as hard as he can and he's going to make it hard for the opponent. He's going to get the best out of his game and there are not a lot of people that stay as effective



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as he is as late into their career as he has. Part of that is because of that attitude that he brings on and off the ice. Every single day he's working to make sure that he doesn't

lose a step, doesn't miss a beat, doesn't pass up a chance to make himself and his teammates better."

LINKS

<https://nsjonline.com/article/2025/11/from-contact-to-quiet-room-a-look-at-nhls-concussion-protocol/>
<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/recap-blake-shines-but-can-es-fall-in-shootout>
<https://www.nhl.com/news/carolina-hurricanes-minnesota-wild-game-recap-november-19-2025>
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<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/players/a-true-leader-through-and-through-what-teammates-organization-have-to-say-about-carolina-hurricanes-captain-jordan-staal>

SportScan

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

1368747 Carolina Hurricanes

From contact to 'quiet room': A look at NHL's concussion protocol

Cory Lavalette 5-6 minutes 19/11/2025

RALEIGH — The NHL, like most professional sports leagues, has toed a delicate line with concussions, realizing that a flat-out denial of the impact of head injuries in hockey is no longer a reasonable defense.

Still, the league, which has faced criticism after several past enforcers' deaths were tied to the repercussions of fighting and blows to the head, is often secretive about how it handles concussions.

One sign of progress is the league's use of concussion spotters, who have the authority to pull a player from the game if they are determined to have exhibited signs of a head injury.

Such was the case last Tuesday when Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen was pulled from the game against the Capitals with just over five minutes remaining in the game following a collision with teammate Jordan Staal.

Andersen was slow to get up from the ice, though he said it was because he felt a twinge in his back after being "twisted the wrong way" after colliding with the rare player who is as big as his own 6-foot-4, 229-pound frame.

"It was just more about the other part of my body, not even the concussion part," Andersen said. "I just got up quick. I knew Doug (Bennett, the Hurricanes' head trainer) was right there. I just kind of wanted to skate away and get over and do my thing, get some water like I usually do in the TV timeout."

But as Andersen stretched in his crease preparing to continue play with Carolina trailing 3-1, one of the linesmen came over to tell Andersen he had been flagged by the league's concussion spotter.

"I was very surprised because, if anything, I think the one collision in the first would be the one that should have warranted some sort of a review or something," Andersen said of Capitals forward Nic Dowd colliding with him earlier in the game. "He made contact with the head there."

After exiting the ice surface, Andersen was taken to the team's training room in the Lenovo Center, a place where he can take the necessary tests without the full noise and distractions of the arena.

"The test can be tough if you're out there, like with all the different sounds and stuff," he said. "So I'm sure you've got to focus up a little bit to kind of get close to your baseline."

The baseline is cognitive tests players take before the season that give doctors and trainers a benchmark to compare the player's test results after the event that led to them being pulled from the game.

"It's an iPad test," Andersen said. "There's a few different ones. ... memory stuff or balance stuff, recalling numbers and random stuff, words you've got to remember. So if you're not fully there, it could definitely show as a sign that you're not fully with it."

For Andersen to do the balance tests, he needs to take off his skates — a bit more of a process for a goalie than a forward or a defenseman. Andersen said the tests are five to 10 minutes, which, on top of the time it takes to take off and put on equipment, can keep a goalie out of the game for a decent chunk of time.

He said by the time the Hurricanes returned to the locker room following their 4-1 loss, he was done with his test and in the locker room with the team.

Andersen said he has in the past recognized when something was not right following a collision, like when New Jersey's Timo Meier made contact with him in Game 4 of last year's first round playoff series, knocking him from the game.

"At the end of the day, they're trying to protect us and themselves," he said. "They're trying to protect both parties."



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He also admitted that it's easy for an athlete's competitive nature to lead them to overlook or ignore warning signs.

"I think when you're in the moment," he said, "you want to keep competing and being out there. ... You may ignore some signs that made you feel, maybe, that you're not right there, but they take you out in a little bit quieter room, in the training room or something, where you can just go through it."

In Andersen's recent situation, he knew he wasn't going to be a key part in Carolina trying to erase a two-goal deficit in the final minutes of a game, making the concussion spotter's decision a bit easier to swallow.

He also said it helps that it's the team's trainers and doctors, people who know the players and their usual demeanor, evaluating the results and are better suited to "see if something's up."

"At the end of the day," Andersen said, "you're thankful that you have people that try to look out for you."

The North State Journal LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368859 Websites

The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Canadiens trade targets, Olympic venue update, Evgeni Malkin's future

By Pierre LeBrun

A week after raising the alarm over arena construction in Milan, the NHL is relieved to some degree following an update from its people on the ground.

Derek King and Dean Matsuzaki were in Milan this week, taking a look at the arena site for the league.

"It appears that positive forward progress is being made with respect to the necessary hockey-related facilities in Milan," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic on Wednesday. "We intend to continue to monitor progress as we get closer to the planned test events and the Games themselves."

An International Olympic Committee spokesperson said Wednesday the IOC stood by the statement it sent last month. On Oct. 16, the IOC said the arena is "scheduled for completion mid-December" and that a new event has now been scheduled for early January, roughly a month before Olympic competition is set to begin at the arena on Feb. 5, with women's hockey.

As colleague Chris Johnston reminded us on our Insider Trading segment Tuesday on TSN, there is no Plan B venue planned or available. The rink in Milan must be completed — or else.

The NHL, at least, seems more positive about it now.

Habs open-minded on potential forward upgrade

The longstanding search for a No. 2 center for the Canadiens hasn't gone away, but the reality in talking to other front office sources around the league is that Montreal is also open to a trade for winger. Which is to say, the Habs are openminded in their approach to boosting their forward group.

The truth is that the Canadiens were making these types of calls around the league even before their recent significant injuries, but that has obviously exacerbated the situation.

Still, the Habs' management duo of Jeff Gorton and Kent Hughes are not known for rash decisions. They're not going to make a panic move. Deep

down, they know they're not Stanley Cup contenders yet, so they're not going to do anything foolish. Any bigger trade they'd consider would have to help the team this year — and beyond.

Now, I also think the Habs have examined the cheaper options, too; less dramatic moves that could fill a hole to help with the injuries (they tried on David Kämpf, but the veteran free-agent center chose Vancouver last weekend).

Right now, I think it's a dual-track approach for Montreal when making calls around the league.

The problem, of course, is that there are few sellers with the standings so jammed up. Calgary and St. Louis are listening, for sure. But Flames ownership doesn't want Nazem Kadri traded (he would be an obvious fit for Montreal). We'll see if that changes over time. The Flames are in no hurry to move Blake Coleman, either, if they move him at all. But I could see the Canadiens also keeping an eye on that name.

Before making the Zach Bolduc-Logan Mailloux trade last summer, the Habs did talk to the Blues several times about Jordan Kyrrou. But that was before his full no-trade clause kicked in on July 1. I sense that Kyrrou, as of now, doesn't intend to waive for any trade to any team. Those things can change, but that's what I've been told. However, that feeling for any player can change on a dime. Kyrrou may not want to waive today, but will he feel the same in two or three months, depending on how things play out?

Jonathan Marchessault, 34, has three and a half years left at a \$5.5-million AAV. I think the term on that deal would scare the Habs to some degree. And I also think any team looking at Marchessault would have to assess how much his offensive decline has to do with the lack of playmakers in Nashville compared to Vegas versus his natural age regression. I think there's a lot of hockey left in Marchessault, but one understands why some teams would be asking that question.

All of which is to illustrate that, yes, my sense is the Canadiens are making calls around the league, but the options aren't deep this early in the season.

I would also say this about Montreal: management can try to upgrade the forward group all it wants, and it probably will at some point; but the best way for the Canadiens to get a boost in the short-term is by getting more saves. The goaltending hasn't been nearly good enough.

Team Canada to meet again Dec. 6-9

Canada's Olympic braintrust just had a huge, nine-hour meeting in Toronto last week where it cut down its player list to 35 to 40 names. The management group plans to meet again in person from Dec. 6-9, in what will be a critical meeting in further crystallizing where the roster is headed.

Team Canada GM Doug Armstrong says he hopes to come out of those three days of meetings in early December "at least 70 percent" comfortable with the roster.

That means heading into the final three weeks with at least 18 or so of the 25-man roster more or less decided and the final spots going to the wire.

And there's no question the goalie position remains the most wide-open and likely will come down to the last remaining days ahead of Dec. 31 roster deadline.

Team USA GM Bill Guerin says a date hasn't been set yet, but his management group will also meet in person one last time over the coming weeks.

Malkin to be discussed during Olympic break

Evgeni Malkin has turned back the clock so far, leading the Penguins in scoring. He looks like a totally different player from a year ago, when it



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appeared Father Time had caught up. The 39-year-old is playing on an expiring deal. Penguins GM Kyle Dubas has had clear communication from the outset this season on how the team would handle things, with a plan to convene at the Olympic break to discuss Malkin's situation. That will give everyone involved on both sides greater clarity on how Malkin is feeling as the season progresses and allow any decision to be made with greater time and reflection.

For a player like Malkin and with what he means to the Penguins, the trade deadline has no bearing on decisions at hand. Unless he wanted out in-season, which everyone seems to think is very doubtful, he will finish the season in Pittsburgh.

Does Malkin want to come back for another season? That remains unanswered. But how he plays the rest of the way could impact his thinking.

Tuch, Sabres face sizeable gap in talks

Adrian Kempe's extension this week further clarified the evolving forward market for UFAs. The next man up on that dwindling pending UFA list is Alex Tuch.

My understanding is that there remains a sizeable gap in positions in those talks. Which is to say I don't think Buffalo has gone to double digits on the AAV yet. And I mean, who's to say if the Sabres ultimately will?

Neither side has shut down talks, though, and both are willing to pick up the conversation at any time. For now, those talks are status quo.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368860 Websites

The Athletic / IIHF says neck guards will be mandatory at 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina

By Julian McKenzie

The International Ice Hockey Federation has confirmed to The Athletic that neck guards will be mandatory for hockey players participating in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina in February.

BBC Sport first reported the news.

The IIHF announced in December 2023 that neck guards would be mandatory at all levels, including the senior level, but hadn't yet announced when that rule would come into effect because of a "supply situation."

That announcement occurred nearly two months after the death of Adam Johnson, who died after defenseman Matt Petgrave cut Johnson's neck during an Elite Ice Hockey League game in England.

Neck guards will be mandatory for new NHL players as of next season, in accordance with the new collective bargaining agreement rules. However, those who have played at least one NHL game before the 2026-27 season won't be subjected to the rule.

In February 2024, 78.45 percent of NHL players who participated in an Athletic players poll opposed the idea of a neck guard mandate. NHL players will participate in the men's hockey tournament at the Olympics for the first time since 2014.

Additionally, players from this past spring's IIHF World Championship in Sweden and Denmark were all mandated to wear neck guards in games.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368861 Websites

The Athletic / The best teenage defenseman of all time? Plus, CFP rankings

By Chris Branch

Good morning! Run your own race today.

While You Were Ranking: Hello, Dawgs

At this point, the College Football playoff bracket exists in an exciting state of limbo. The field still feels new, as last night's rankings update was just our third installment of the season. But we still have so many important regular season games to play, which will undeniably change this list.

Here's our current setup, as of last night:

Nov. 18 CFP rankings bracket

8

Oklahoma

9

Notre Dame

5

Texas Tech

12

Tulane

7

Oregon

10

Alabama

6

Ole Miss

11

Miami

1

Ohio State

4

Georgia

2

Indiana

3

Texas A&M

First five out

BYU

Utah

Vanderbilt

USC



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Georgia Tech

Note: The CFP has moved to a straight seeding model in 2025. The five highest-ranked conference champions receive automatic bids, and first-round byes will go to the top four overall ranked teams. Seeds 5-8 will host first-round games before the rest of the games are played at neutral venues.

Two things to note:

Georgia, fresh off its rout of Texas, surged into a bye in the No. 4 slot, replacing the departed Alabama. Both the SEC and Big Ten title games will go a long way into determining seeding with the teams above, barring upsets.

Tulane (8-2) slid up into the Group of 5 slot over 9-1 James Madison, which clearly indicates the committee's preference of the American Conference over the Sun Belt. The Green Wave still needs to win out, including a conference championship game, to maintain this spot. Keep an eye out.

Let's get icy:

Phenoms: The differing timelines of hockey's young stars

When you become a parent, you learn that many of the platitudes you've heard throughout life are rooted in truth. Principle among them is the phrase any teacher, counselor or fellow parent has uttered countless times to stressed-out moms and dads: Every kid runs their own race.

Forgive me for comparing two extremely successful hockey players to toddlers, but bear with me.

Being the No. 1 pick in any sport brings immense pressure. There's typically an expectation to deliver immediately; dip below that expectation even once, and a flurry of posts and podcasts will question legitimacy.

The point of the parenting metaphor here is that no child — or in this case, top draft pick — develops at the same pace. Consider:

Connor Bedard, the wunderkind drafted by Chicago at No. 1 in 2023 who drew comparisons to Wayne Gretzky and any other hockey great you can imagine. He wasn't a superstar immediately, though, just showing flashes of potential in his first two seasons on bad Blackhawks teams. Year 3? Chicago is good, and Bedard is finally proving worthy of his status. His 26 points are tied for fourth in the NHL. The 20-year-old might even push for an Olympic roster spot for Canada.

And then look to Matthew Schaefer, the Islanders rookie drafted No. 1 just four months ago. He is already a star defenseman, and the Islanders look like a playoff team thus far. He is just 18 years old and is by far the NHL's youngest player. This is not normal.

Right on "schedule" is the No. 1 pick in between these two, Macklin Celebrini, the Sharks center who en route to superstardom in his sophomore season. The 19-year-old is third in the NHL in points right now and was voted by his peers as the next face of the league in an Athletic survey before the season. Unlike the previous two gents, this is both delightful and expected.

I went to a smarter hockey mind, Pulse friend and NHL senior writer Sean Gentille, for more on our "off-schedule" No. 1s:

Be honest: Were you ever worried about Bedard? Are you surprised in any way about his burst this year?

"I wasn't worried. Do NOT put in the newspaper that I was worried. I did, though, need to start seeing a liiiiittle bit more. I checked in this week for an upcoming piece with an NHL coach who'd felt the same — that Bedard was relying far too much on stuff he'd done against teenagers a few years ago — and his concerns, like mine, are largely gone. The defensive game is still a work in progress, but he got stronger, faster and learned from his experience. Now, we can all freely enjoy his work."

Oppositely, Schaefer is the definition of instant success. What are your early impressions?

"That he might already be the best teenage NHL defenseman of all time. That's the way he's tracking at least — and he's doing it in style, too. Dude is an incredibly fun to watch, and maybe the first player we've seen who a) grew up watching Cale Makar mixtapes and b) is actually capable of doing the same stuff. Incredible toolbox and a big ol' brain. I've certainly never seen an 18-year-old player quite like him."

You can see both Bedard, Schaefer and Celebrini in our early list of Olympic candidates from each NHL team. Let's keep moving:

News to Know

USMNT's shocking win

Remember when we wondered whether the U.S. men's national team should fire Mauricio Pochettino before it was too late? That was mere months ago, and suddenly after last night's 5-1 blowout win over a good Uruguay squad, things could not be better for Poch and the upcoming World Cup hosts. The Americans are unbeaten in their last five matches, and raced out to a stunning 4-0 lead last night on goals from players we didn't even expect to be on this team. See more from the big win here.

More news

Big news from WNBA negotiations: The league offered players a max salary of \$1.1 million for the next collective bargaining agreement, up from the current \$250,000. More details inside.

In other soccer news, Curaçao qualified for the World Cup last night for the first time. It's the smallest nation to ever qualify.

Three suspects broke into Shedeur Sanders' home during the Browns game Sunday, making off with \$200,000 worth of property. It's a troubling trend.

Aaron Rodgers fractured his non-throwing wrist in Pittsburgh's loss Sunday, and his status is uncertain for this week's game.

Lane Kiffin said Ole Miss didn't give him an ultimatum, but didn't exactly comment on his future either. Read his comments.

Tatsuya Imai, the top Japanese pitcher in this year's free-agent class, has been posted for MLB teams. Scouting report here.

Find more news here 24/7.

What to Watch

NBA: Rockets at Cavaliers

7 p.m. ET on ESPN

These are two of the NBA's best teams thus far, and we aren't talking enough about Houston. I loved this story from William Guillory on the unique connection Kevin Durant and Alperen Şengün have.

NHL: Hurricanes at Wild

9:30 p.m. ET on TNT/HBO Max

Carolina is once again elite, while in Minnesota we're already wondering if Kirill Kaprizov is overpaid. Probably unfair considering his recent performance, but still something to ponder.

Get tickets to games like these here.

Pulse Picks

We have an, ahem, special series of stories coming this week on the special teams revolution in the NFL. Today's entry is a spectacular deep dive on kickers and how they've stretched the limits of what constitutes a long field goal. The lore is deeper than you think.



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I thought Mike Silver's story about how the Cowboys used their play as a tribute to Marshawn Kneeland on Monday night was really poignant. Make time for this.

Mirin Fader's debut feature for The Athletic is a banger: On Cavaliers star Evan Mobley, the quiet prince who was promised.

It's been heartbreaking to see all the reactions around football to the murder of John Beam, a coach famous for his role on "Last Chance U," who impacted the lives of many. He was everyone's football dad.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368862 Websites

The Athletic / NHL trade board 2025-26: Latest on the top 25 targets to watch — Stamkos, Schenn, O'Reilly and more

Chris Johnston

More than one-third of players who have appeared in an NHL game this season own some form of no-trade protection in their contract.

That helps account for transactions remaining so difficult to complete, even after the salary-cap jump over the summer created extra room for teams to maneuver. The fact that 36 percent of NHLers currently have trade restrictions, according to data compiled by PuckPedia, is even more staggering when you factor in that players aren't eligible to negotiate those clauses for seasons in which they are a restricted free agent.

It was the league's general managers who handed out those contracts, but in the early days of this season, more than one has grumbled about how debilitating they've been to making moves.

When you couple that reality with recent changes to the collective bargaining agreement, the NHL's bunched-up standings and multiple teams off to surprising starts, both good and bad, the trade market is frozen.

There's a long way to go before the March 6 trade deadline. But it's not too soon to start sketching a rough outline of where things might be headed over the next few months.

For the first time in 2025-26, it's the return of the Big Board.

As always, players are listed by how closely they demand watching, based on their potential impact and the current amount of buzz around them.

Note: Net Ratings and market values are via Dom Luszczyszyn's model and are projected for the full season based on statistics through Nov. 16. Goals saved above expected (GSAx) are via Evolving-Hockey, also through Nov. 16. Contract info is via PuckPedia.

Expand all

Collapse all

1

Rasmus Andersson

CALGARY FLAMES

DEFENSEMAN

RIGHT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN

2

Steven Stamkos

NASHVILLE PREDATORS

FORWARD

WINGER

CENTER

3

Alex Tuch

BUFFALO SABRES

FORWARD

WINGER

4

Blake Coleman

CALGARY FLAMES

FORWARD

WINGER

5

Yegor Chinakhov

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

FORWARD

WINGER

6

Brayden Schenn

ST. LOUIS BLUES

FORWARD

WINGER

CENTER

7

Ryan O'Reilly

NASHVILLE PREDATORS

FORWARD

CENTER

8

Justin Faulk

ST. LOUIS BLUES

DEFENSEMAN

RIGHT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN

9

Brandon Carlo

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

DEFENSEMAN

RIGHT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN

10



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Jonathan Marchessault
NASHVILLE PREDATORS
FORWARD
WINGER
11
Boone Jenner
COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS
FORWARD
WINGER
CENTER
12
Anders Lee
NEW YORK ISLANDERS
FORWARD
WINGER
13
Ryan Hartman
MINNESOTA WILD
FORWARD
WINGER
CENTER
14
Bryan Rust
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS
FORWARD
WINGER
15
Christian Dvorak
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS
FORWARD
CENTER
16
Alexander Wennberg
SAN JOSE SHARKS
FORWARD
CENTER
17
Kiefer Sherwood
VANCOUVER CANUCKS
FORWARD
WINGER
18

Jaden Schwartz
SEATTLE KRAKEN
FORWARD
WINGER
19
Connor Murphy
CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS
DEFENSEMAN
RIGHT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN
20
Jordan Kyrrou
ST. LOUIS BLUES
FORWARD
WINGER
21
Nazem Kadri
CALGARY FLAMES
FORWARD
CENTER
22
Mario Ferraro
SAN JOSE SHARKS
DEFENSEMAN
LEFT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN
23
Brennan Othmann
NEW YORK RANGERS
FORWARD
WINGER
24
Erik Karlsson
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS
DEFENSEMAN
RIGHT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN
25
Morgan Rielly
TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
DEFENSEMAN
LEFT-SHOT DEFENSEMAN
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The Athletic / Wayne Gretzky on Canada's hopes and why the World Cup will transform the nation

By Joshua Kloke

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Canada's World Cup will begin in less than seven months and on Tuesday, the men's national team recruited their biggest fan to date.

"It's a big time in our country, hosting one of the greatest sporting events in the world," Wayne Gretzky said.

Gretzky, largely considered the greatest player in hockey history, was in attendance for Canada's 1-0 friendly win over Venezuela in Fort Lauderdale. He was invited by Canada head coach Jesse Marsch to attend the game and speak to Canada's players before kickoff.

In a conversation with The Athletic, Gretzky shared his excitement about the 2026 World Cup, which will be co-hosted by Canada, the United States and Mexico.

"Obviously hockey is our passion and our love out there, but there's room for other sports," Gretzky said. "More and more kids are playing soccer in Canada, more and more girls are playing in Canada. What the women's team has done over the years has been tremendous. So this is a great chance for the country to rally around."

Gretzky believes Canada's home World Cup will be a transformational event for Canada and its sports culture.

"You're going to see some great soccer players from not only Canada, but from around the world, and Jesse's pretty excited about coaching this group of young men. Good for them. It's going to be exciting for all Canadians," Gretzky said.

Gretzky's support took many Canadian players aback.

"Having Canadian icons behind us is something that we don't take lightly, because these are the great Canadians that marked history," Canada goalkeeper Maxime Crepeau said. "Given their situation, I think they can mark what's coming for us and for the country. And getting these kind of people behind us is something truly special and that's the first step (towards) the country being moved pretty soon."

Gretzky has lengthy experience playing for Canada. He led Canada at the 1987 Canada Cup and was executive director of the Canadian team at the 2002 winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, where Canada won the gold medal.

Gretzky sees parallels between some of the best national teams he was part of and the Canadian side that Marsch hopes will "make history and do something very special."

"Obviously, you've got to have skill and Jesse was telling me today that this is about as talented (a) group of players that Canada has ever had. And then you've got to have unselfishness. You've got to play as one. It's vital that each and every guy is on the same page in the sense that no matter how small your role is or opportunity is to make the team better, it's important and vital for the success of the team," Gretzky said.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

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

"People are going to say and believe what they want," Gretzky said on a podcast episode.

What will be paramount for Canada, in Gretzky's view, is that this still up-and-coming team manages the inevitable emotional wave they will experience playing World Cup games in Canada.

Gretzky pointed to the 1987 Canada Cup in Canada, long thought to be one of the best international tournaments in hockey history. Canada beat the Soviet Union 6-5 in Game 3 of the best-of-three final. Gretzky had two points in Game 3.

"The big thing for the Canadian kids is because they're hosting some of the games, their emotions are going to be so high," Gretzky said. "And that's a good thing. You ride those emotions. And I think back all the way to 1987 when we played in the Canada Cup, obviously with players like (Mark Messier) and (Mario Lemieux) and guys of that caliber. We were a good team, but I think the emotion carried us over the top. Because the Russians were good with the big five, but emotionally, the fans would rally around the players, and the players have to rally around the fans, and I think they'll do that."

In a video posted on Canada's men's national team's X account, Gretzky said he would attend the World Cup draw on Dec. 5 in Washington.

A Canadian Icon 🇨🇦 🖋️

Une icône canadienne 🇨🇦 🖋️ #CANMNT pic.twitter.com/LzgpNivCk

— CANMNT (@CANMNT_Official) November 19, 2025

Canada will be a Pot 1 team, but will likely be drawn with strong teams in their group. Canada is still searching for its first World Cup point after losing three games in Qatar in 2022.

"I think that they're going to end up really enjoying themselves," Gretzky said. "You embrace the pressure. It's a situation where these kids are going to be under the microscope so to speak because it's in Canada. The last World Cup wasn't in our country, so they probably got around relatively easily and could blend in with everyone. But they're going to be under a microscope here and it's going to take tremendous leadership from their experienced players and it is going to be a big onus on the coaching staff to keep the focus with their emotional ambition."

"They have to ride the wave," Gretzky added.

Gretzky believes coaching will help maintain that focus. His eyes lit up when describing Marsch's "energy and passion."

"He's one of those guys that wakes up and every day is exciting," Gretzky said.

Gretzky and Marsch connected through a mutual friend. Gretzky offered his support and told Marsch to reach out if he ever needed assistance. Marsch did, and the two have remained close.

"Wayne and I have been in contact for over a year," Marsch said. "He's been curious about the team and excited about supporting us. When we came down here, he called me and said that he would like to be around the team. I invited him to training, then we talked about the match, and he said he was going to come early and say 'Hi' to the team, and I thought he was just amazing with the group. He has such presence. I don't think there's a better person to come in and speak to our team about being Canadian, about being united, about competing for the country, and he was fantastic. Really humble, really excited to be here."

The relationship could lead to more involvement from Gretzky with the national team. Marsch originally invited Gretzky to attend Canada's training sessions before the friendly, but Gretzky's priority was watching his grandsons play baseball and basketball.

"Players can feed off (Marsch's) energy. Then the other thing is, you can tell he's positive. He's extremely positive. I started chatting with him over a year and a half ago and he's really excited about coaching a Canadian team. That's very unique in the hockey world, where you coach your country, right? And the soccer world doesn't necessarily go that way, right?" Gretzky said.

During the 4 Nations Face-Off hockey tournament earlier this year, Gretzky drew criticism in Canada for his personal ties to U.S. President



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Donald Trump. Gretzky recently addressed that criticism on an episode of the “100% Hockey” podcast.

“People are going to say and believe what they want,” Gretzky said on the podcast. “The bottom line is, I know in my heart I’m Canadian, I’ve stayed Canadian and I’m a Canadian for life.”

Gretzky is becoming more invested in soccer. He recalled attending an FA Cup game between Arsenal and Tottenham and one of David Beckham’s first games in Los Angeles when he signed for the LA Galaxy in 2007.

“I’ve had the good fortune to meet a lot of nice people, a lot a great athletes. I went down to the (Galaxy) locker room after the game. At the time my son was seven, and (Beckham) took my son around the locker room with a jersey and got every single player to sign it. And right then and there I said, ‘OK, now I see why he’s Beckham. Not only is he magnetic, but he’s also very nice.’”

The World Cup will be an opportunity for Canada’s stars to become household names and garner mainstream interest the way Beckham did in 2007.

After spending time with the team in Florida, Gretzky believes Canada is close to having the same kind of impact.

“Sports needs people like that,” Gretzky said. “That’s what sells the game. Not only how good you are, but how you treat people.”

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368864 Websites

The Athletic / Wayne Gretzky shows at Canada friendly to give team talk

By Joshua Kloke

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. – One of Canada’s greatest athletes attended Canada’s men’s national team’s friendly against Venezuela, offering support in their build-up to the 2026 World Cup.

Wayne Gretzky travelled to Chase Stadium in Fort Lauderdale to speak to Canada before the match. The NHL legend and all-time leading scorer was greeted by Canada head coach Jesse Marsch upon arrival at Chase Stadium and spoke with him on the field before the game.

Gretzky is no stranger to managing Canadian teams at international events. Gretzky served as Canada’s men’s national hockey team executive director at the 2002 Winter Olympics, where Canada won its first men’s Olympic hockey gold medal in 50 years.

Gretzky shook hands with the entire team before addressing them.

“Thanks for the invite. (Marsch) invited me to the game the other day. Actually, he invited me to practice. I didn’t even like practice when I played. I said I’ll come to the game instead of practice,” Gretzky joked.

“These guys practice hard, man,” Marsch said.

“I’m excited to be here. I didn’t play a lot of soccer growing up. It wasn’t as popular in Canada as it is now. You guys have helped make it more and more popular. So, good for you guys. And I know you’re all excited about the upcoming World Cup. We’re all excited to see you guys play. I’m going to be in Washington on December 5 for the draw. I hope you guys enjoy yourselves. You should be very proud to represent our country. Congratulations to your families.”

Gretzky was presented with a Canada jersey with “Gretzky 99” on it.

The Great One is in the 🏠 to support the boys!

La Grande Légende est dans la place pour encourager les gars!#CANMNT pic.twitter.com/PtFaT0vhYr

— CANMNT (@CANMNT_Official) November 19, 2025

“I will tell you, I received one soccer jersey in my life. It was a Tottenham game. And they spelled my name wrong,” Gretzky said.

Canada has welcomed other notable Canadian figures into the dressing room as of late. After their Copa América quarterfinal win over Venezuela in 2024, NHL star Sidney Crosby visited the team’s dressing room and spoke to players after the win. Following Canada’s October friendly loss to Australia in Montreal, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke to the team postgame.

“You are going to transform this country,” Carney told Canada. “This is soccer. It’s unifying Canada. It’s showing the world what Canada is, what kind of people we are and what kind of competitors we are.”

During the 4 Nations Face-Off hockey tournament earlier this year, Gretzky drew criticism in Canada for his personal ties to U.S. President Donald Trump.

Wayne Gretzky talks with Jesse Marsch walking into Chase Stadium in Florida (Joshua Kloke / The Athletic)

Gretzky recently addressed that criticism on an episode of the “100% Hockey” podcast released on Nov. 12.

“People are going to say and believe what they want,” Gretzky said on the podcast. “The bottom line is, I know in my heart I’m Canadian, I’ve stayed Canadian and I’m a Canadian for life.”

Canada’s men’s national team is currently ramping up campaigns to draw widescale public interest in their World Cup campaign. Canada Soccer recently launched their “Iconic XI” campaign to bring together Canadian cultural leaders to act as supporters and ambassadors of the men’s national team. Crosby, an NHL icon in his own right, and Shawn Mendes, the Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter, were among the first players added to the campaign.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368865 Websites

The Athletic / Why Gavin McKenna’s path to 2026 NHL Draft’s No. 1 pick is in question

By Corey Pronman

After a less-than-stellar first month in his freshman season at Penn State, Gavin McKenna isn’t a lock to be the No. 1 pick in the 2026 NHL Draft.

If the draft were held today, I still think he would go first, but the debate among NHL scouts and front offices over him would likely be far more intense than most observers imagined it would be in the summer. I’ve talked to seven NHL scouts who said they would have a different name at the one slot on their list. Ten scouts I’ve talked to argue he’s still clearly the guy, though, emphasizing his body of work over a dozen college games.

McKenna has never been a perfect player. He has often frustrated scouts over the years with his effort level and perimeter play, but he softened those concerns with dazzling displays of skill and incredible offensive production at the junior level. The scouts who love McKenna compare him to Patrick Kane; the ones who are not quite as high on him reference Mitch Marner or Artemi Panarin.



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He has struggled to translate his game to the college level. He looks electric with the puck on his stick and on the power play, but the physicality of the level has pushed him, and he's struggled more than expected at even strength.

Some have and will continue to argue that if he had returned to the WHL, we would not be having this discourse. As a player who put up absurd numbers and dominated major junior last season, he would have been extremely likely to repeat that feat and waltz to the top pick.

But that's not the reality we're living in. He went to the NCAA to play against better players, and we have very compelling information through the opening month about how his game translates up levels.

Who are the alternatives?

One of the biggest variables keeping McKenna at the top of many scouts' rankings is the lack of a clear alternative. There are other excellent prospects in this year's draft, but nobody has clearly grabbed the mantle. We may be looking at a below-average draft at the top.

North Dakota defenseman Keaton Verhoeff's game is nowhere near as spectacular and dynamic as McKenna's. His profile often inspires comparisons to Aaron Ekblad, and Ekblad did go No. 1 in his draft ahead of dynamic offensive players in Sam Reinhart, William Nylander and Leon Draisaitl.

Windsor winger Ethan Belchetz's toolkit is easy to draw a comparison to 2022 No. 1 pick Juraj Slafkovský. He's a huge winger who can skate, has legit skill, plays hard and has a finishing touch, all elements that led to Slafkovský being the top pick in his draft, even if I think Slafkovský may have a bit more natural offensive ability.

Muskegon's Tynan Lawrence is a dynamic two-way center. He has great speed and skill to go with a super high motor. In some ways, he reminds me of the profile that led to Nico Hischier being the top pick in 2017, and a lesser version of Macklin Celebrini's profile. When he's played, he looks like a challenger for the No. 1 spot, but he's been injured all fall.

Frolunda's Ivar Stenberg is an electric smaller winger, but the profile is probably too analogous to McKenna and arguably a step below skill-wise.

Some scouts would argue for Alberts Smits, Jukurit's big Latvian defenseman, in this discussion as well. He has been attracting a ton of attention early on this season in Liiga.

McKenna's path to No. 1

McKenna is a 5-foot-11 winger without elite speed who isn't overly hard to play against. Unless the offense is off the charts good, which, to date this season, it hasn't been, his profile won't excite general managers with the first pick.

I wrote in the summer that I thought McKenna would be an average top pick because of those flaws. The difference between him and some other great juniors whose offense didn't translate against better players like Alexis Lafrenière, for example, is due to the new landscape of amateur hockey; we are getting our first look at it with McKenna.

There's a lot of hockey left to be played, more than half his college season, and a crucial World Juniors, where he's expected to play a leading role for the favorites in Team Canada. There's still a probable path to McKenna going No. 1, but what's clear is that there's now a race for the top pick. Let's see how the rest of the season plays out.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.20.2025

1368866 Websites

ESPN / NHL Bubble WATCH: Projecting playoff hopes for all 32 teams - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

The NHL playoff bubble is pretty much the size of that one Glinda flies around in during "Wicked."

Heading into Tuesday night, no team in the East was more than four points out of the wild-card spot. In the West, all but three teams were within three points of a playoff spot. If the NHL is striving for parity, this has been an ideal start.

The NHL Bubble Watch is our monthly check-in on the Stanley Cup playoff races using playoff probabilities and points projections from Stathead for all 32 teams. We also reveal which teams shouldn't worry about any of this because they're lottery-bound already.

This month, we're also looking at points of concern early this season for teams inside and outside the bubble.

But first, a look at the current playoff bracket:

Current playoff bracket

M1 Carolina Hurricanes vs. WC2 Tampa Bay Lightning

M2 New Jersey Devils vs. M3 Pittsburgh Penguins

A1 Detroit Red Wings vs. WC1 New York Islanders

A2 Boston Bruins vs. A3 Montreal Canadiens

C1 Colorado Avalanche vs. WC2 Seattle Kraken

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Winnipeg Jets

P1 Anaheim Ducks vs. WC1 Chicago Blackhawks

P2 Vegas Golden Knights vs. P3 Los Angeles Kings

ATLANTIC DIVISION

The locks

Tampa Bay Lightning

Record: 10-7-2, 22 points

Playoff chances: 95.1%

The Stathead model still loves the Lightning despite an inconsistent start. A lot of that can be chalked up to a torrent of injuries to players such as forwards Anthony Cirelli and Nick Paul, and defensemen Victor Hedman and Ryan McDonagh. Less understandable has been star center Brayden Point's inability to hit the score sheet with his typical consistency during his first 18 games of the season.

All of these factors have contributed to the Lightning's power play sputtering to 29th in the NHL this season, which is a huge reason their offense ranked 17th after 18 games. Since 2022, Tampa Bay's power play (26.6%) was second only to Connor McDavid and the Oilers (27.8%) in conversion rate.

There's a reason the Lightning were a popular pick to win the Atlantic, and Stathead still has them projected for 103 points this season. They can be an elite team when healthy and playing to their full potential.

Cause for concern: After the Vancouver Canucks rallied with six straight goals to beat the Lightning in Tampa last weekend, coach Jon Cooper lamented that his team clearly rested on its early lead, comparing the matchup to "the tortoise and the hare." There have been a few too many instances where the Lightning haven't kept their foot on the gas.



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Yes, it's early. Yes, a healthy veteran lineup should correct that. But you want to see the killer instinct of a team like Colorado when it comes to what many believe could be the beast of the East this season. And the Lightning haven't necessarily found that yet.

Work to do

Ottawa Senators

Record: 9-6-4, 22 points

Playoff chances: 60.4%

The Senators got three games out of Brady Tkachuk before their captain was sidelined with a thumb injury, having last played on Oct. 13. Ottawa has gone 8-4-4 in his absence, which is admirable considering how much Tkachuk is the team's engine. Balance has been the name of the game.

Ottawa is still giving up more goals on average than it's scoring, but it is finding ways to win games. Tim Stutzle (10 goals in 19 games) has been great, as have Drake Batherson (18 points in 16 games) and Shane Pinto, who earned a new contract with a strong offensive start. The Senators have eight different players in double digits in points through 19 games and have gotten goals from 17 different players.

Analytically, they're outscoring their expected goals at 5-on-5. The trouble is, they're worse defensively than their expected goals against per 60 minutes, which ranks second in the league. That's because ...

Cause for concern: ... their goaltending has been a horror show. Through 19 games, both Linus Ullmark (minus-8 goals saved above expected) and Leevi Merilainen (minus-2.6) are underwater analytically, and their traditional stats aren't any better, as both netminders had save percentages under .875.

Ullmark has played slightly better recently, but things with rookie Merilainen were so bumpy that he was demoted to the AHL for a bit to locate his game.

Florida Panthers

Record: 10-8-1, 21 points

Playoff chances: 47.7%

The Panthers had one prime directive to start the season: Tread water until the reinforcements arrive.

Florida knows it'll get Matthew Tkachuk back in either December or January after he underwent surgery on his groin. Maybe forwards Tomas Nosek and Jonah Gadjovich and defenseman Dmitry Kulikov will return later in the season. Perhaps the Panthers' prayers are answered and star captain Aleksander Barkov comes back to the lineup after a freak preseason injury that required surgery to repair the ACL and MCL in his right knee.

Whatever happens, Florida's hopes for a dynastic Stanley Cup three-peat -- the first one since the New York Islanders won four straight Cups in the 1980s -- rest on the Panthers not digging an early-season hole in the standings. They've successfully avoided that through 19 games, earning a .553 points percentage.

The Panthers' MVP this season has easily been the Rat King himself, Brad Marchand. The 37-year-old had 23 points in his first 18 games, including a team-leading 13 goals. His partnership with center Anton Lundell saw them go from an essential checking line during last season's Cup run to the team's top scoring line in Tkachuk's absence.

Cause for concern: There's a reason no one has captured three Stanley Cups in three straight seasons since the days of Mike Bossy and Denis Potvin. There are a lot of miles on some of these Panthers' tires, especially when you consider they also made a run to the Stanley Cup Final before their back-to-back Cups. There's already been a wave of injuries this season.

If Florida makes the postseason cut, it's foolish to believe it couldn't pull off the three-peat, because this team seems to have been designed in a lab to win in the playoffs. But it'll be four years of this grind, and that's a lot of grinding.

Montreal Canadiens

Record: 10-6-3, 23 points

Playoff chances: 47.3%

After a surprising return to the Stanley Cup playoffs last season, the Canadiens picked up where they left off with a potent offense (sixth in scoring through 18 games) overcoming a somewhat porous defense (25th). Their top line of Cole Caufield, Nick Suzuki and Juraj Slafkovsky is among the best in the NHL, with Suzuki (21 points in 18 games) and Caufield (13 goals) both making early declarative statements to make their respective Olympic teams.

The next wave of Canadiens has made an impact, too. Defenseman Lane Hutson built on his Calder Trophy win with 14 points in 18 games. Winger Ivan Demidov, this season's Calder favorite, has started strong.

Perhaps most importantly, rookie goalie Jakub Dobes has been outstanding as veteran netminder Sam Montembeault has struggled mightily out of the gate.

Cause for concern: Injuries, injuries and more injuries. Center Kirby Dach will miss the next four to six weeks with a fractured foot. Defenseman Kaiden Guhle could miss up to 10 weeks after undergoing an adductor muscle surgery. Forward Alex Newhook will miss the next four months because of a broken ankle.

The trio joined an injury list that already included scoring winger Patrik Laine, who will miss at least three months after core muscle surgery.

Detroit Red Wings

Record: 12-7-1, 25 points

Playoff chances: 34.9%

For years, the debate around Dylan Larkin has been whether he was a true No. 1 center. After an eye-opening performance at the 4 Nations Face-Off last season, Larkin has answered that question with a brilliant first 19 games of the season, with 11 goals and 12 assists as the Red Wings' early-season MVP.

The Red Wings' offense should be better than their production. They're ninth in expected goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 but rank 26th in goals scored. Getting Patrick Kane back from injury has helped, but Detroit needs to find a little more help beyond its consistent offensive options such as Alex DeBrincat and Lucas Raymond.

Cause for concern: Wait, wasn't John Gibson supposed to be the answer in goal when GM Steve Yzerman acquired him from Anaheim? Gibson has been outplayed by incumbent Cam Talbot this season, sporting a .875 save percentage in 11 starts and playing to slightly below replacement levels.

Long shots at best

Toronto Maple Leafs

Record: 9-9-2, 20 points

Playoff chances: 24.9%

Life without Mitch Marner has proved difficult for this Maple Leafs team, which had a .474 points percentage entering Tuesday night's games, tied for last in the conference. Marner is not irreplaceable, but there was zero chance this season's Maple Leafs were going to sufficiently replace his regular-season contributions on both ends of the ice.



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They can still score, as their goals per game through 19 games was higher than last season's average. William Nylander has been brilliant again, with 26 points in 16 games. John Tavares has 11 goals in 19 games. But a team that finished eighth in the NHL in goals against per game last season under Craig Berube ranks 31st this season. Injuries to forward Scott Laughton, defenseman Chris Tanev and goalie Joseph Woll have contributed to that. Also not helping matters is goalie Anthony Stolarz being unable to find a groove, playing well below replacement level with an .884 save percentage.

The critics are out for the Leafs already in Toronto, with some questioning if this roster is playoff-worthy. The heat on Berube was turned up so high that GM Brad Treliving had to give a vote of confidence. (Uh-oh.) This is what happens when the Blue Jays' playoff run ends.

Cause for concern: Easily the biggest cause for concern is Auston Matthews. The star center had nine goals and five assists in 17 games before leaving the lineup with a lower-body injury. The Leafs experienced life with a diminished Matthews last season, when he scored 33 goals in 67 games after scoring 69 goals in 81 games in 2023-24. If Toronto is going to rally for a playoff berth, it needs its MVP in the lineup and playing like one.

Buffalo Sabres

Record: 7-8-4, 18 points

Playoff chances: 11.2%

The Sabres are seeking their first playoff berth since 2011, and it was starting to look like that streak would remain very much intact. But a couple of wins over the Red Wings and the Edmonton Oilers have Buffalo trending in the right direction again.

Tage Thompson has been on a scoring heater. Rasmus Dahlin returned to the team after tending to a personal matter. Some of the young players in the supporting cast have started to contribute more.

Offensively, the Sabres are just outside the top 10 in expected goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, but they have some work to do in puck possession, ranking around 25th in percentage of shot attempts.

Cause for concern: The Sabres are tap-dancing on a land mine when it comes to their goaltending, behind a defense that still yields too much at even strength. Can Alex Lyon be counted on throughout this season? Is Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen part of the solution or potential trade bait? And what to make of rookie Colten Ellis, whose starts have either been Calder-worthy or cringe? (And whither Devon Levi?)

Boston Bruins

Record: 12-9-0, 24 points

Playoff chances: 3.2%

Again, it must be stressed that this is what the Stathletes model currently projects as the Bruins' playoff chances, despite this team being in second place in its division after Tuesday's games.

New coach Marco Sturm played five seasons with the Bruins, three of them in the defensive system of Claude Julien. He was inspired by Julien's layers of defensive zone coverage, adopting that system for himself. But Sturm tweaked that philosophy to include man-on-man defense to better pressure puck carriers. So far, the results are ... well, it's a work in progress. The Bruins are 26th in the NHL in expected goals against, and they're 27th in shot attempts against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5.

Luckily, a full training camp did goaltender Jeremy Swayman some good. Through 12 games, he had over nine goals saved above average and eight wins. Offensively, the Bruins have been one of the surprises of the league, with 3.35 goals per game through 20 games. Although 18 different players have a goal this season, it's been the Morgan Geekie

and David Pastrnak show. Geekie proved wrong his doubters who thought that last season was a fluke, scoring 12 goals in 21 games. Pasta continues to be one of hockey's elite scorers with 11 goals. Combined, they have 44 points on the season.

Cause for concern: Can two players carry an entire offense? Geekie and Pastrnak are the only players to score more than six goals through 21 games this season. It's never a good sign when a team's offense can be better defined as a "duo."

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

The locks

Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 13-5-1, 27 points

Playoff chances: 99.6%

The Hurricanes don't have an offensive superstar like Mikko Rantanen, but they might have the best offensive depth that they've had under head coach Rod Brind'Amour. Carolina was averaging 3.62 goals per game through 19 games, led by Seth Jarvis (10 goals) and Sebastian Aho (18 points) but buoyed by Taylor Hall, Logan Stankoven and Nikolaj Ehlers, all players who arrived in Raleigh in the past calendar year. Second-year man Jackson Blake has also taken a significant leap in production.

Meanwhile, they're still playing Brind'Amour-quality defense despite star blueliner Jacob Slavin having been limited to just two games because of injuries, and K'Andre Miller missing a half-dozen games as well.

Cause for concern: Will that offensive depth eventually be enough to break through the Eastern Conference into the Stanley Cup Final, or will we continue to have those "what if" conversations about another Brind'Amour team that couldn't produce a key goal at a key time in the postseason?

Washington Capitals

Record: 9-8-2, 20 points

Playoff chances: 90.4%

The Stathletes model likes the Capitals quite a bit.

If this is Alex Ovechkin's final season -- and despite a disturbing amount of jersey swaps with other NHL stars, that hasn't been decided yet -- coach Spencer Carbery's team seems determined to make it another playoff year for its captain.

The Capitals continue to chug along with a combination of dependable veterans, energizing young players and solid team defense in front of outstanding goaltending. Ovechkin scored goal No. 900 and is starting to heat up. Their leading scorer has been Tom Wilson (nine goals, nine assists), who is down bad to earn a Canadian Olympic team spot.

But their MVP has been goalie Logan Thompson, who might not have the same stunning won-loss record as last season but has better overall numbers in this campaign.

Cause for concern: Despite having Ovechkin blasting pucks from his office, the Capitals' power play has been a point of concern for Carbery for the past two seasons. It ranked 30th in the league through 19 games this season, and it's missing the injured Pierre-Luc Dubois, who was tied for fifth on the team in power-play points last season.

Work to do

New York Rangers

Record: 10-9-2, 22 points

Playoff chances: 87.8%



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The Stathletes model loves the Rangers' playoff chances despite an unbalanced start to their season. And by "unbalanced" we're of course referring to the fact that they were 1-7-1 at home and 9-1-1 on the road in their first 20 games, which is a heck of a thing.

It took a minute for the scoring stats of some of the Rangers' top players to catch up to their analytics. Players such as Alexis Lafreniere, Artemi Panarin and Will Cuylle are starting to hit their marks, with Cuylle beginning to look more like the Chris Kreider replacement he was billed to become. Perhaps he can help jump-start J.T. Miller, whose seven even-strength points in his first 20 games is one of the season's most curious numbers.

The good news as always for the Rangers: The goaltending of Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick can paper over a lot of deficiencies on this team.

Cause for concern: It remains the Rangers' depth, which really gets exposed when the big dogs aren't barking. They are a team with solid top-six forwards, a fantastic top defensive pairing of Adam Fox (quieting critics) and Vladislav Gavrikov (worth the investment) and then not enough behind them -- at least not yet -- to make this group a real contender for the Cup, even if its regular-season prospects are solid.

New York Islanders

Record: 11-7-2, 24 points

Playoff chances: 56.6%

With Matthew Schaefer, all things are possible. The 18-year-old first pick was like a shot of adrenaline to the heart of this franchise, both in his charismatic personality and his stellar play by any standard, let alone a rookie's. Schaefer had 15 points in 19 games to start his NHL career, second on the Islanders. His skating and offense have earned him early comparisons to Cale Makar. He has been that good.

Schaefer has grabbed the headlines, but the Islanders have had a handful of strong starts to put them in the playoff conversation, including Bo Horvat (12 goals in 19 games), Mathew Barzal (15 points in 18 games) and especially Emil Heineman (nine goals), who arrived from Montreal in the Noah Dobson trade.

Cause for concern: Ilya Sorokin has 8.8 goals saved above expected in 13 games because the Islanders' 5-on-5 defense in front of him has been leaky -- 29th in the NHL in expected goals against per 60 minutes, and generating only 48.5% of the shot attempts. They must turn those underlying numbers around to contend in the East.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Record: 10-8-2, 22 points

Playoff chances: 50.1%

There are so many things about the Blue Jackets that one loves to see so far this season.

Winger Kirill Marchenko's star keeps rising with 22 points in 19 games. Ditto forwards Dmitri Voronkov (16 points) and Adam Fantilli (13 points). Defenseman Zach Werenski, Norris Trophy runner-up last season, is off to another strong start. Young goalie Jet Greaves could be the solution in net they've been waiting for.

Cause for concern: But what do these parts add up to? The Jackets still have trouble defending, with their surprisingly stout goaltending overcoming some wonky D-zone metrics. Their special teams, in particular their penalty kill (26th), are in the bottom third of the league.

Again, there are a lot of things to like about Columbus and it's an easy team to root for. But does coach Dean Evason have a playoff team on his hands or one that'll just hang around the bubble?

Pittsburgh Penguins

Record: 10-5-4, 24 points

Playoff chances: 41.8%

The Penguins' 10-5-4 start has them in a playoff spot 19 games into the season, which has significantly reduced the speculation about the futures of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. They want to play in the playoffs. If the Penguins are good enough to offer them a legitimate chance of doing so, they're likely not leaving Pittsburgh this season.

Of course, they're also the primary reason the Penguins are pushing for the postseason. Malkin, in a contract year, had 23 points through 19 games. Crosby led the team, and nearly the league, with 12 goals. Through a variety of linemates and lineups, the Penguins' two franchise icons are willing this team to relevance.

Cause for concern: Is this real? Crosby had openly talked about how the Penguins didn't rebuild on the fly the way the Capitals did around Ovechkin. So far, Pittsburgh's young supporting cast has provided enough around the veteran core to make things work under new coach Dan Muse.

But the Penguins are getting better defensive results than their metrics would predict, thanks to the second-best team save percentage in the NHL (.915). To which we ask again: Is this real?

Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 9-6-3, 21 points

Playoff chances: 27.2%

In some ways, the Flyers are a very similar team to the one that predated new coach Rick Tocchet's arrival. They don't earn the majority of shot attempts. They are fairly good defensively at 5-on-5, although with a propensity to get stuck in their own zone a bit too much. Luckily, goalie Dan Vladar (.909 save percentage in 11 games) has been one of the offseason's best pickups, giving the Flyers saves they weren't getting last season.

Where Tocchet has made an impact is in giving this retooling team some structure, which helps in suppressing shots but at the sacrifice of some offense. It's a tough team to play against, but perhaps not a dangerous enough one.

Cause for concern: The Flyers' best offensive player this season is a flashy trick-shot artist with a dynamic offensive game. That this player is Trevor Zegras -- scoring more than a point per game -- and not Matvei Michkov is a bit of a surprise. But it's been bumpy ride for Michkov in his second season, with inconsistent play and fluctuating ice time that included being benched by Tocchet. That tough love is designed to make him a better player. But in the short term, the Flyers need the kind of production Michkov had last season.

New Jersey Devils

Record: 13-5-1, 27 points

Playoff chances: 21.8%

I was sort of baffled by the playoff probability here, as the Devils are tied atop the Metro Division, but had playoff odds in the neighborhood of the St. Louis Blues and Red Wings.

The way the Stathletes' model works, the probability is based on the current lineup for the full season. Which means a Devils team without Jack Hughes, who needed surgery on his hand after a "freak accident" at a recent team dinner. In reality, if Hughes is out for eight weeks, that means he'd miss around 50% of their remaining games. The probability then would be more in the neighborhood of 45% rather than this dire prediction.

The Devils are going to miss Hughes greatly, considering what an incredible start he had. Regrettably but understandably, they have



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learned to play without him, as they did last season when Hughes missed the last month and a half while the Devils scratched and clawed to make the playoff cut. That's especially true of winger Jesper Bratt, who had 16 points in the 13 games after Hughes was injured last season.

Cause for concern: One way to get through the Jack-less part of the schedule would be for the Devils to rely on their goaltending. But Jacob Markstrom remains a goaltender who can't be trusted. He has an .870 save percentage in eight starts, with a minus-2.1 goals saved above expected. He has been outplayed by crease-mate Jake Allen. Markstrom has a higher ceiling and could carry this team if he gets hot. But the Devils will settle for him to be consistent enough to make this tandem something better than 11th in team save percentage.

CENTRAL DIVISION

The locks

Colorado Avalanche

Record: 13-1-5, 31 points

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Just 19 games into the season, there is a 0.01% chance the Avalanche don't make the playoffs. They'll probably take those odds.

The Avs have one regulation loss in their first 19 games. ONE! The Bruins beat them 3-2 on Oct. 25 thanks to 31 saves from Jeremy Swayman. Otherwise, it's been all victories and post-regulation losses for the Central Division leaders.

Entering Tuesday night, Colorado led the league in goals scored (4.11 per game, the only NHL team scoring four or more on average) and goals-against average (2.37 per game). Nathan MacKinnon led the league in goals (14) and points (33) and plus-minus (plus-19). Cale Makar led all defensemen in points (25). Sixteen different Avs had scored at least a goal this season.

Meanwhile, journeyman goalie Scott Wedgewood was a revelation through 15 games, going 11-1-2 while Mackenzie Blackwood worked his way back from injury.

Colorado is the NHL's best team about a quarter way through the season, and there's still room for improvement.

Cause for concern: Let's assume that the team's power play (16.7%) eventually finds its groove and focus on two players who haven't sprinted out of the gate for Colorado. Brock Nelson, who signed a new deal with the Avalanche after they acquired him from the Islanders at the trade deadline last season, has nine points in 19 games. Captain Gabriel Landeskog remains of the NHL's greatest feel-good stories, but he has just six points in 21 games while skating 13:41 on average.

Dallas Stars

Record: 12-5-3, 27 points

Playoff chances: 87.4%

When it comes to the Stars, it's been interesting to see what hasn't gotten the full attention of the NHL. Like the fact that Mikko Rantanen, whose status as a superstar player was debated during his dual trades last season, had 26 points in 19 games, good for sixth in the NHL in points-per-game average (1.37). Or that Jason Robertson, mentioned more in trade rumors than anywhere else last season, has 23 points for the Stars. Or that Wyatt Johnston, last seen not scoring in the playoffs, leads the team with 11 goals.

Under new head coach Glen Gulutzan, the Stars are in the top 10 in both offense and defense, with both Jake Oettinger and Casey DeSmith playing well in goal. They've overcome some injuries and rougher starts for players to become entrenched in second place in the Central.

Cause for concern: The Stars' defensive depth wasn't all that deep to begin with before losing standout Thomas Harley, who is week-to-week with a lower-body injury. With Nils Lundkvist also on long-term injured reserve, that lack of depth is being tested early for Dallas. When Harley does return, the Stars hope it's with a better run of play than his first 18 games, in which he scored one goal and skated to a minus-7.

Work to do

Minnesota Wild

Record: 9-7-4, 22 points

Playoff chances: 82.7%

Whether Kirill Kaprizov is worth \$17 million against the salary cap annually remains a debate worth having, especially when one considers the contracts signed in the aftermath of that megadeal. What can't be disputed is his offensive acumen and how vital it is to the Wild. Kaprizov led the team with 23 points, including 11 goals, in their first 20 games of the season.

Matt Boldy (21 points, including 10 goals) and his linemate Marcus Johansson (17 points) were the Wild's other leading scorers. Rookie defenseman Zeev Buium (10 points) has helped juice their power play to fourth in the NHL.

One of the more intriguing developments for the Wild is the start for Jesper Wallstedt, the team's perpetual "goalie of the future." Perhaps the future is now: He won four of his first six starts with a stellar .924 save percentage and two shutouts. The Wild are the fifth-best team in 5-on-5 goals against per 60 minutes.

Cause for concern: Alas, they were 32nd in the NHL in goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 through 20 games (1.79). There's a significant drop-off after those top three scorers. The Wild have dealt with some injuries up front, including one to center Marco Rossi that has him week-to-week. That obviously has played a role in this, but overall it's been a sputtering offensive start for Minnesota.

Utah Mammoth

Record: 10-7-3, 22 points

Playoff chances: 78.5%

The Mammoth were picked by many to make the playoffs in their second season in Salt Lake City, and they've been in the playoff mix through 19 games. They're getting offensive contributions from veterans such as Nick Schmaltz (22 points) and Clayton Keller (18 points) and their outstanding younger stars such as Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther (both with 15 points). Forward JJ Peterka, acquired from Buffalo last offseason, has hit his marks as well (13 points).

Cause for concern: The Mammoth should be better defensively at 5-on-5 than they've been, based on the analytics. But Vitek Vanecek (.875) and Karel Vejmelka (.883) haven't played up to expectations, with both in the negative in wins above replacement, per Evolving Hockey.

Winnipeg Jets

Record: 12-7-0, 24 points

Playoff chances: 74.9%

Once again, the Jets' holy trinity of Mark Scheifele (24 points), Kyle Connor (10 goals) and Josh Morrissey (19 points) is the driving offensive force for Winnipeg. Along with Gabriel Vilardi (14 points) and Nino Niederreiter (11 points), they're the only Jets to have double-digit points through 18 games.

Meanwhile, Connor Hellebuyck (.913 save percentage, 2.51 goals-against average) is pushing for a Vezina Trophy hat trick as the Jets' last



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line of defense. His underlying numbers indicate he's doing some heavy lifting: 12.5 goals saved above expected in 14 games.

Cause for concern: The reason Hellebuyck has had to be so good? The Jets have inexplicably been one of the worst 5-on-5 teams, ranking 30th in the NHL in expected goals for and against this season. That includes generating just 45% of the shot attempts at 5-on-5. Looking back at last season, this is all a bit stunning. Was Nikolaj Ehlers the secret sauce after all?

Long shots at best

St. Louis Blues

Record: 6-9-5, 17 points

Playoff chances: 24.8%

Stathletes still gives the Blues a 1-in-4 chance of making the Stanley Cup playoffs, which is probably news to the St. Louis fans who are in a full-on panic about a team with a .421 points percentage after 19 games.

There isn't much that's working for the Blues right now. They were 25th in the NHL in goals per game and 32nd in goals against, with the league's worst goaltending so far (.861 save percentage). No one on the roster averaged a point per game. No one had cracked double digits in goals. Things are ... not good.

Cause for concern: The Blues are 13th in expected goals against this season, down from third in the NHL at 5-on-5 last season, but still the kind of thing you'd expect from a Jim Montgomery team. The problem, again, is Jordan Binnington (minus-8.4 goals saved above expected) and Joel Hofer (minus-3.7) have been the league's worst goaltending tandem through a quarter of the season, subverting any positive momentum the Blues can generate defensively.

Lottery-bound

Nashville Predators

Record: 6-10-4, 16 points

Playoff chances: 3.0%

GM Barry Trotz recently said the Predators are in a "transitional phase." That's a polite way of saying that the team he built might have some uncomfortable conversations and difficult decisions ahead of it after Nashville's second straight bad start.

The Predators had a .400 points percentage after 20 games this season. From losing defenseman Roman Josi to injury to another inexplicably putrid start for Steven Stamkos (four goals in 20 games), few things have trended in the right direction under head coach Andrew Brunette.

Cause for concern: At the start of the season, it looked like the old Juuse Saros was back as the 30-year-old goalie was seeking to rebound from his worst NHL season statistically. But after 16 games, Saros had a .892 save percentage and was on the wrong side of both goals saved above expected and wins above replacement. The safety net had frayed, again.

Chicago Blackhawks

Record: 10-5-4, 24 points

Playoff chances: 0.5%

Whether or not the Blackhawks make the playoffs matters not. This season needed to show some proof of concept. After 18 games, they've watched Connor Bedard dominate to the tune of 26 points in 18 games, including 10 goals. (That'll get Team Canada's attention.)

They've also seen Frank Nazar (12 points in 16 games) show that he can be Bedard's offensive complement. They've seen Spencer Knight, acquired from Florida in the Seth Jones trade, play like a potential

franchise goaltender with a .924 save percentage in 13 games under new head coach Jeff Blashill.

Cause for concern: Sam Rinzel is 20 years old with less than 30 games of NHL experience, so "concern" is a relative term here. But the 6-4 rookie defenseman was expected to be a significant contributor offensively this season, including as a potential power-play quarterback. After 17 games, he had one goal and two assists, having been already pulled from the line for a mental reset. He's a terrifically talented player. He'll be fine. But this was a rough start.

PACIFIC DIVISION

The locks

Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 9-4-6, 24 points

Playoff chances: 99.8%

The Stathletes model clearly believes that the Golden Knights are much better than their very average start to the season -- or at least that when the smoke clears in the Pacific Division, they'll be in a playoff spot.

There have certainly been times this season when the Golden Knights have looked formidable against good teams. The performances from stars Jack Eichel (24 points in 18 games) and Mitch Marner (20 points) have been as advertised, and Vegas has also gotten great starts from Pavel Dorofeyev (11 goals), Tomas Hertl (15 points) and Shea Theodore, who has played well as the new No. 1 defenseman after Alex Pietrangelo bowed out due to injury this season.

But given their recent stumbles and some lineup absences, there's a sense that the best is yet to come for the Golden Knights.

Cause for concern: Injuries to key players is nothing new for Vegas, but that doesn't make it any easier to play through these absences.

Mark Stone last played on Oct. 18 before leaving the lineup with a wrist injury. His absence impacts every facet of the Knights' game. Ditto William Karlsson, who is week-to-week with a lower-body injury. Starting goalie Adin Hill hasn't played since Oct. 20. Ask the Knights and they'll tell you this is nothing new, and that teams play through injuries every season. But until they get these key performers back, it's hard not to see Vegas as being stuck in neutral.

Los Angeles Kings

Record: 10-6-4, 24 points

Playoff chances: 83.4%

Anze Kopitar's decision to hang up the skates after this season lends some urgency -- and perhaps a little melancholy -- to the 2025-26 Kings campaign. GM Ken Holland certainly managed the roster with a win-now attitude, adding old Edmonton allies in winger Corey Perry (seven goals) and defenseman Cody Ceci.

But overall, this is much the same group that's been unable to overcome the Oilers in the first round of the playoffs. Adrian Kempe (19 points in 20 games), Quinton Byfield (17 points) and Kevin Fiala (15 points) lead an offense for a team that basically gives up as much as it scores at 5-on-5, but one that ranks in the top six defensively at even strength.

Cause for concern: With 16 players age 29 or over on the roster, the ability for the Kings to stay healthy is paramount. They're going to be without defenseman Drew Doughty for a couple of weeks due to a lower-body injury. Perry and Kopitar have both missed time this season. Their team defense and the goaltending of Darcy Kuemper should hopefully help them through injury absences, as they're the reason L.A. has a .600 points percentage to start the season.

Work to do



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Edmonton Oilers

Record: 9-8-4, 22 points

Playoff chances: 75.9%

The Oilers and early-season panic over middling results ... find a more perfect couple. Edmonton had a .524 points percentage through its first 21 games, leaving some to wonder if the Oilers would make the playoffs, let alone advance to a third straight Stanley Cup Final. Connor McDavid (30 points) and Leon Draisaitl (24 points) are dragging this group through that early-season malaise, with an assist by Jack Roslovic (seven goals), who has been a great addition to the roster.

It's the same story as always for Edmonton, as Kris Knoblauch coaches through injuries and middling performances and mediocre goaltending to keep the Oilers close enough that Connor and Leon can carry them into the postseason. But how far can they go beyond that?

Cause for concern: Roslovic has been the exception to the rule for the Oilers, as many of their player additions in the past year haven't made much of an impact. (Looking at you, Trent "one goal in 21 games" Frederic.) Young solutions on cheap contracts such as Matt Savoie and Isaac Howard weren't ready to be the answer quite yet.

Overall, this roster seems diminished from previous editions, and not just because it lost the worm-like whimsy of Corey Perry. That's not a great thing to have happen when the clock is ticking on McDavid's time in Edmonton.

Anaheim Ducks

Record: 12-6-1, 25 points

Playoff chances: 68.1%

The arrival of coach Joel Quenneville and winger Chris Kreider helped supercharge the Ducks' offense. They averaged 3.63 goals per game through 19 games, hanging a touchdown on a few opponents along the way.

Kreider had 10 goals in 15 games, with five of them coming on the power play. But the offensive parade in Disneyland was led by burgeoning young stars Leo Carlsson (26 points, including 11 goals) and Cutter Gauthier (22 points, including 12 goals) as well as Ducks mainstay Troy Terry (21 points). Anaheim is never out of a game thanks to that offense.

Cause for concern: Unfortunately, the game has another facet called "defense," and Quenneville has some work to do there in order for the Ducks to be a real contender.

Entering Tuesday night, Anaheim was the second-worst team in expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, and 25th in shot attempts surrendered. Lukas Dostal's Vezina Trophy-worthy goaltending has papered over much of this defensive deficiency, but that's not a sustainable model for a playoff team in the West. The Ducks are young. They'll improve. But they're not there defensively yet.

Long shots at best

Seattle Kraken

Record: 9-5-5, 23 points

Playoff chances: 9.9%

Lane Lambert's arrival behind the Kraken bench has given the team better structure and more confidence early this season. The Kraken have cut down on the high-danger chances for opponents and have been near the top 10 in expected goals against. That has helped their goalies to seventh in the NHL in save percentage. When even Philipp Grubauer's stats look good, you know the defense is doing its job.

Seattle is getting enough offensive contributions from veteran scorers such as Jaden Schwartz (14 points) and Jordan Eberle (13 points) to sit

second in the Pacific after 18 games, winning three games in overtime and picking up five charity points.

Cause for concern: As much as Lambert's defensive structure has benefitted the Kraken, their offense hasn't been nearly as effective. Seattle ranked last in expected goals for and 30th in goals per 60 minutes during this hot start.

Getting Jared McCann back from injury should help, as he was limited to just five games after topping 60 points in each of the past three seasons. But the Kraken need more offensive crackle to make the playoff cut.

Lottery-bound

San Jose Sharks

Record: 9-8-3, 21 points

Playoff chances: 5.7%

The Sharks were a surprising .500 team through the first 19 games of the season thanks to Macklin Celebrini playing like a Hart Trophy finalist. His 27 points in that span were 10 points better than teammate Will Smith to lead the Sharks, including 10 goals.

It's a season so dominant that he might have played his way onto the Canadian Olympic team, and rightfully so.

Cause for concern: There should be some concern about the chiropractic health of Celebrini and the Sharks' goaltenders, because they've carried the team on their backs so far this season. Yaroslav Askarov and Alex Nedeljkovic have San Jose just outside of the top 10 in team save percentage, with Askarov in particular playing better than expected.

The Sharks probably don't have the depth to avoid the lottery again, but they're fun and full of potential.

Calgary Flames

Record: 5-13-3, 13 points

Playoff chances: 5.0%

There might not be another team with a larger gulf between its metrics (54.5% expected goals at 5-on-5) and its actual numbers (46.3% goals for percentage, 25th in the NHL). Much of that is due to a sputtering offense that's last in the NHL in goals per game (2.10), thanks in no small part to the league's most powerless power play (11.9%).

The good news is that goaltender Dustin Wolf has overcome a frustrating start to play much better over the past few weeks. His overall numbers haven't reflected it yet, as Wolf is still at minus-2.6 goals saved above expected, but the Flames' last line of defense is starting to act as such again.

Cause for concern: Is the season lost already? The Flames (.325) had the worst points percentage in the NHL through 20 games. The conversation about the Flames trading players like Rasmus Andersson and Nazem Kadri is starting to go from "if?" to "when?" That's not the noise the Flames want to hear midway through November.

Vancouver Canucks

Record: 9-10-2, 20 points

Playoff chances: 0.4%

Quinn Hughes is a rather important player for the Canucks. Despite missing a handful of games, he led the team in scoring with 20 points in 16 appearances, including 10 points in three games recently. He's averaging well over 26 minutes per game in ice time, including nearly five minutes per game on the power play. He has been incredible, again.

If only he had a little more help. Injuries (especially to center Filip Chytil) and ineffectiveness have created a team that's 30th in expected goals



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percentage at 5-on-5 and underwater on shot attempts (44.7%). There have been some real offensive highlights -- Kiefer Sherwood's goal explosion, Elias Pettersson getting near a point-per-game pace again -- and there have been some lowlights, such as Evander Kane's start (three goals in 21 games).

Cause for concern: The Canucks' penalty kill ranked last in the NHL heading into Tuesday night, at a putrid 67% rate. They've given up a power-play goal in 15 games, and multiple ones in eight games. Getting Teddy Blueger back from injury will help, but the team is feeling the offseason departures of Pius Suter and Dakota Joshua. Of course, having a healthy Thatcher Demko in goal would help, too.

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Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Bedard, Celebrini making strong cases for Team Canada

Elliotte Friedman

- Pavel Mintyukov is a name to watch in trade
- Can Oilers, Leafs turn around rocky starts?
- Why Nashville's decision-making process is tough to read

Last week, at the NHL GM meetings in Toronto, commissioner Gary Bettman jumped on the Generation Z bandwagon.

There was a video highlighting the fact Zoomers led 18 teams in goals, with 10 per cent of all goals scored coming from players aged 21 or younger — the highest since 2018-19. There were slides showing a 20-year age range among the top 10 scorers, with both teenagers and 35-plus geriatrics represented.

Seven days after that presentation, Connor Bedard and Macklin Celebrini put on another show. Energized by an "A" stitched onto his jersey (smooth move, Blackhawks), Bedard sealed a 5-2 win over Calgary with his second hat trick of the season. Ninety minutes later, Celebrini matched with his third of the night an overtime winner to beat Utah.

It was the second night in NHL history with hat tricks by players 20 or younger. Almost 82 years ago, on Feb. 19, 1944, Jack Hamilton and Bud Poile combined for seven Toronto goals in a 10-4 victory over Boston.

Bedard and Celebrini deserve a ton of credit. Bedard's been very private about last summer's training — the one detail that's understood is better co-ordination of his workouts to truly impact on-ice performance — but the impact is obvious. In all of 2024-25, he had 70 speed bursts of at least 32 km/h. That was in the 55th percentile of the NHL. By last weekend, he was already at 60, now in the 97th percentile. He's Barry Allen, after the lightning bolt struck his forensic lab.

More importantly, the back-to-back No. 1 picks are elevating their organizations. Entering Wednesday's games, Chicago's a wild-card team and San Jose is two points out of the playoffs. No one saw this coming. (Apropos of nothing, if this continues, Spencer Knight is going to build himself a heck of a Vezina case.)

Now, there is an even bigger conversation.

Twenty years ago, Team Canada left 18-year-old Sidney Crosby off the Olympic team. Did it prevent them from winning gold? That's a stretch. But, with 20/20 hindsight, would a different decision be made?

Both Bedard and Celebrini attended the August Olympic orientation camp in Calgary. You can definitely see Canada thinking, "We hope one of

them forces us to think hard." Two? Nope. No way, not happening, not even a conversation over Doug Armstrong's favourite Scotch.

Yet here we are in the year 2025 AD. Team Canada is careful about discussing these decisions, knowing the nuclear nature of discourse.

The case for Bedard/Celebrini is obvious: use your eyes. And: not taking them is anti-fun.

But there are enough clues to understand where resistance might come. In putting together the 4 Nations champion, Canada emphasized winning pedigree at the senior level. That mattered. It was a short, stressful event with a nail-biting championship that had an entire country sweating buckets on their couches. The calmness of those who'd played in multiple main events won the day.

Bedard and Celebrini don't have that experience, due to their age and that when you get taken first overall, you don't get an elevator straight to the top. Bedard won back-to-back World Junior golds, featuring highlight-reel material and 31 points in 14 games. He had eight points in 10 games at the 2024 World Championship, where Canada finished fourth. Celebrini had eight points in five games at the 2024 World Juniors, and six points in eight games at the 2025 World Championship. Canada was eliminated in the quarterfinals at both. (Obviously, that's not solely on him.)

I think you can, however, shape this into an argument for them. Mitch Marner celebrated junior success — a Memorial Cup — and won silver at the 2017 World Championship, but had not been past the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs. He talked at length about Sidney Crosby's poise, how the bench never lost positivity, then set up the tying and winning goals in the 4 Nations gold-medal game.

If that attitude elevated Marner, there's no reason it can't do the same for Bedard and Celebrini.

The more I think about it, though, the more I wonder if the real debate is defensive play. If the 4 Nations taught us anything, it's that if you weren't committed to being a two-way demon, you weren't going to be trusted. Look at all of the players on the Canadian and U.S. rosters who were more dogged defensively than with their regular teams. Look how hard it was for even Connor McDavid, the most dynamic player in the sport, to do what he needed to do. Every inch of the ice was a fight.

Neither Bedard nor Celebrini have seen this before, but, again, it's a factor of being drafted to bad teams. I think it's safe to say they'd do whatever they could to show they'd adopt the same attitude. The underlying numbers indicate Chicago and San Jose give up more goals (and shots) when they are on the ice as opposed to when they aren't — although it should be pointed out they do play against the best players.

The debate is not Bedard vs. Celebrini. It's about both. There's no way Team Canada thought this would happen. The brain trust is remembering 4 Nations overtime: can they play 200 feet in that?

32 THOUGHTS

1. All of that discourse and didn't even mention Matthew Schaefer. As impressive as Bedard and Celebrini are, Schaefer's ascension to this discussion is mind-blowing. He was added to the Olympic drug-testing protocol, making him eligible to be selected by Team Canada. Total credit to him. He's been above 25 minutes six times in 20 games, and his arrival breathed new life into Long Island. You can't tell me his positive aura isn't an important factor in their rise to a .600 points percentage.

Canada was very happy with its 4 Nations defence, so it would be a surprise if anyone was deleted. (Drew Doughty's injury timeline is not a factor.) There's an extra spot in Milan that Schaefer's in the fight for. The Islanders do an excellent job deploying the defender, shielding him a bit against the toughest competition so he can freely wreak havoc. His ice-times (at home) vs. key opponents:



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Macklin Celebrini: Schaefer 2:52 (Pelech 14:03)

Connor McDavid: Schaefer 2:06 (Pelech 8:43)

The numbers were closer against Dylan Larkin, Alexander Ovechkin and Mark Scheifele. Would Canada be comfortable with his lack of experience against the best? His attitude would be welcome anywhere, though.

2. Patrick Roy's eruption at Alexander Romanov's injury is about one thing: standing up for his team, making sure the players know he has their backs. That resonates.

Florida and Tampa Bay were warned last weekend before their first meeting since the exhibition brouhaha, and Roy will be too before the Dallas/Islanders rematch in March. Don't let things go too far. (Didn't stop the Panthers and Lightning from playing their typical, nasty affair.) One thing the officials were told to do that didn't happen during the pre-season meeting? Throw players out of the game, right away. Don't be afraid of that.

3. One more Olympic note: At the 1956 Summer Olympics, the equestrian events were held in Sweden, away from the rest of the Games, in Australia. That country's laws required all foreign horses to be quarantined for six months, an impossible ask. So, while there's precedent to host one event separately from the rest, the NHL and NHLPA made it very clear they are not interested in anything remotely similar this February. Both sent emissaries to the Milan rink this week. Reaction: There's still a lot of work to do, although the hosts are saying the right things. One source who saw photos last week called the facility "Stonehenge." I said no way it's that bad. He laughed. Clearly, Bettman is agitated that this is even a discussion. The last thing he wants is injury because of a rushed rink.

4. It is impossible not to look at what is happening in Anaheim, Chicago and San Jose without wondering about attitudes to rebuilds. The arguments against them are simple: there are no guarantees, the lottery is a fickle mistress (ask Detroit) and, perhaps the one that scares owners the most — you get financially pummelled while going through them. Organizations will tell you fans may support rebuilds, but not the way it most matters in a gate-driven league. There was a lot of pain for the Ducks, Blackhawks and Sharks. That said, every team reaches a point where you must consider it. You can't help but look at those rises and think: wouldn't it be easier to sell that now?

5. Those three teams are must-watch, with a new, particularly promising trend arriving in Anaheim. At the GM meetings, another slide was about power play/penalty kill differential. A couple of people noticed the Ducks weren't in their customary position, last. Heading into Wednesday, they were even: 67 power plays, 67 penalty-kills, and were around plus-7 until last week.

Over the past 20 years, the Ducks were the worst team in the NHL in this differential — a gap the size of the Pacific Ocean, minus-722. Second-worst was Boston, minus-327. It's kind of hilarious that the difference between 31st and 32nd was more than the Bruins' entire total. When the Ducks won the Stanley Cup in 2007 and were at their peak, it was a tactic. They bullied you and dared you to do something about it. But they made a conscious point of trying to change that this year, and so far, it's working. A few coaches on other teams have said that several members of the staff received short-term contracts (I think two years), so they're happy for their peers to make an instant impact.

6. Best teams? Carolina (plus-518) and San Jose (Plus-411).

7. There was never a question Adam Lowry wanted to stay, the latest Jet in a close-knit group to make a Manitoba commitment. Lowry showed why he's the captain, not complaining that he wasn't the first priority, knowing Kyle Connor's puzzle piece needed to be inserted first. He's a unique case at his age (33 when the deal kicks in) and has intangible value to the organization. I have zero doubt the Jets wanted to make a

splash at their Wednesday-night gala, and bent a bit to get it done in time. His teammates will be thrilled to see him taken care of.

8. After back-to-back healthy scratches, word filtered that Ducks defenceman Pavel Mintyukov would like to be moved if he's not going to play. He has fallen behind Jackson LaCombe and Olen Zellweger on the left side of Anaheim's defence. Ian Moore, who had a strong camp, was elevated in Mintyukov's place. This is the 10th overall pick in the 2022 draft, so Ducks GM Pat Verbeek will not be rushed into anything. Something to keep an eye on.

9. There was no mention of Marnier during Toronto GM Brad Treliving's media meeting on Tuesday. I'm not interested in re-litigating the past, but it's impossible to look at their current struggles without recognizing the connection to his departure. Marnier was everywhere: gobbling up points, getting it to Auston Matthews, entering zones, power play, penalty-kill, defending leads and a huge part of the off-ice social construct. They are still adjusting, and if the first six weeks taught us anything, it's that this may take much longer than everyone hoped.

Toronto's been looking for a top-six forward since the summer, but if that was an easy solve, it would be done already. Before our Nov. 8 broadcast, head coach Craig Berube shared some thoughtful observations regarding the fact he'd used 20 forward lines by that date, tied with Edmonton for most in the NHL. Injuries, which everyone is dealing with, are obvious. He wasn't sure Matthews and William Nylander would work because the latter likes to hold the puck and the former prefers give-and-go, but they've showed real promise. He likes Steven Lorentz with Scott Laughton. He wanted Matias Maccelli with Dakota Joshua and Nicolas Roy, because Maccelli's greatest success in Arizona came with bigger players: Nick Bjugstad and Lawson Crouse.

Now, Matthews is out, maybe (?) back Saturday. Laughton is out. Roy is out. Add Matthew Knies — who didn't play Tuesday — although they don't seem worried it's long-term. There is not a definitive timeline for Chris Tanev. Tough to build chemistry.

10. The second part of this problem is that, barring the injection of another elite offensive talent, Toronto may have no choice but to change its identity and mentality. Last year, Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll were human swiffers, cleaning up all messes. In 2024-25, the Maple Leafs were fourth in save percentage. Now they are 23rd. (Woll just returned with two strong starts, but Stolarz is injured.) Adding deeper Sportlogiq numbers, they were second in even-strength save percentage and eighth in inner-slot save percentage. Now they are 29th in both.

It's not simply: goalies, make more saves. They have to defend better, particularly against the rush. That was the focus of a harsh meeting last Monday, about the way they have to play as they adapt to their new reality. Last Thursday, they played one of their best defensive periods of the season, structured and disciplined, leading Los Angeles 2-0. But it's not what they are used to, and they couldn't hang on. Tuesday brought a massive win against St. Louis. It's going to be a grind until they figure it out.

11. I do not believe Berube is in trouble. Treliving, as is his way, has looked around. He would like to do roster-for-roster deals, if he can. They do not want to trade futures (include Easton Cowan in that). They will listen to anyone not named Matthews, Nylander, Knies or John Tavares.

12. The Bruins outbid Toronto by \$500,000 for Nikita Zadorov in the summer of 2024. Now that the Maple Leafs have a WWE partnership, maybe they dress Roman Reigns against him on Jan. 4.

13. Treliving called his team "vanilla." I see the same with Edmonton. I believe the Oilers' desire is to let their players figure it out. I admit, though, I'm surprised at how long this malaise continues. There are a lot of reasons not to panic. They're too good, too experienced, they always start slow, they've played a lot of hockey, there's always one weirdly awful stretch every season and the compressed travel is harder on teams



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in more... remote outposts. But they are sleepwalking, and it continued Wednesday in Washington.

The most insane stat I've seen so far this season was unearthed by Jonathan Willis in his The Corsi Knight blog. Per Natural Stat Trick, the Oilers had nine five-on-five rush attempts in their first 21 games. That shouldn't be possible. There were rumours last week that Edmonton was considering bringing back Paul Coffey, but that was denied to me. It's easy to throw everything on Stuart Skinner or Calvin Pickard, and you always hope a goalie bails you out, but it's not like Edmonton is playing like the 1977 Canadiens in front of them.

I'm waiting for Kris Knoblauch to pull some shock benching to wake up everyone. There was a hilarious post-game interview last weekend with AHL Bakersfield's Connor Clattenburg, a first-year pro out of OHL Flint. I don't know that he's ready for NHL action, but I thought his energy is what they need.

14. I am a big Brett Kulak guy. Big. Every year, people are like, "Oh, he'll drop down to a third-pairing guy." When the games get bigger, he gets better, the Oilers lean on him more and more. Never fails. Happened before he got to Northern Alberta, too. Someone sent me a stat that Edmonton's been outscored 15-0 this month at five-on-five with him on the ice. That's insane. Just as crazy as the lack of rush chances.

15. Less than one week after David Kampf terminated his contract to stay in the NHL at a lower salary, there are rumours that Alexandre Texier is considering the same. He has played only one game for St. Louis since Oct. 28 and is making \$2.1 million.

16. Would Texier make any sense for Montreal? The Canadiens are looking to plug injury holes. The standings are tight, so few white flags are waving.

Here's what's out there.

Calgary gets a lot of calls, but few they'd consider serious (reminder: all it takes is one legitimate conversation to change everything). They can be patient, they have players people want. Nashville is starting to get calls and will have decisions to make. (More on them shortly.) We mentioned the Maple Leafs. Minnesota's been pretty consistent, looking for forwards and edge on defence. Vancouver and centres is the romance waiting to be consummated. Washington, looking for speed. The Hurricanes, as always, and the Senators are lurking, looking to hit a home run.

17. St. Louis? The thing about Armstrong is he's sent thunderbolts before, including an epic pre-Christmas 2018 memo laced with holiday shopping motifs. Six months later, they won the Stanley Cup. He's gone to that method a couple of times since, hoping it shocks everyone back to their senses. One of the Blues said this week that "everyone's been bad at the same time, which never happens." Another said they were trying to be more aggressive, particularly with a lead. When it comes to Brayden Schenn, teams that have talked to St. Louis the last two seasons say the price was very high.

18. I've talked quite a bit about Buffalo's goalie situation, because there are a lot of bodies. The thing I can see becoming an issue here is if Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen feels the cluttered crease costs him a shot at the Olympics. He's only played four games. He has to be better, too.

19. Not surprised Andrew Brunette survived Nashville's post-Sweden break. Mid-season changes usually come when a team shows zero pushback, and the Predators' late comeback in the first game was the exact opposite.

20. The toughest thing with trying to read Nashville's decision-making process is that we don't have a long runway with new owner Bill Haslam. What we do know is that he went with the team on their Canadian road trip early in the season, and joined them in Sweden. I've heard that, in his wish to make informed decisions about the future, he is making sure he spends "up-close" time before committing to anything. So, what we're

getting here is an education into his process. It's not as fast as fans might like, but it's the right move. He's also trying to keep a lid on things because the NHL can be leaky. (No way that's true.)

21. It seems like there are a billion injuries out there. I asked Steve Fellin, one of the brains behind Sportsnet Stats, who did some work with the people behind the invaluable nhljurybiz blog. (Thank you to both.) We are on-pace for 7,230 man games lost to injury in 2025-26. That's more than last season (6,723), but less than 2023-24 (7,375) and 2022-23 (9,152). Just seems like 15 guys are going down every night.

22. Anze Kopitar took about 20 sticks on the Kings' recent road trip. A few were, obviously, for game use. Others were given to opponents wanting a keepsake from his final season. Apparently, a referee received one. Let's see who gives the Kings a few extra power plays down the stretch. One teammate, asked if Kopitar has changed at all during his last season, laughed, "No, he's still a robot."

23. Flames president of hockey operations Don Maloney joined Brendan Parker during the first intermission of Calgary's Wednesday win in Buffalo. On the John Beecher waiver claim: "We need more speed in our lineup. It's called from the first 20 games, we need to be quicker." Overall, Maloney called the season start "terribly disappointing," adding they weren't giving up.

"We're just determined not to throw young players in before they are ready," he said. "It doesn't work, it's not good for your culture. We go into the season, we want to win hockey games. We expect to be a playoff team. That's how we have to enter in our minds, every season... We want a team people will want to watch and be proud of... this identity we established (last year) as a hard out, a hard-working team, that's who we are. When (our young players) are ready, they are going to get a chance."

24. That quote will raise eyebrows locally, but it's part of another conversation in hockey development circles. The NHL and NHLPA agreed in the new CBA to allow one 19-year-old per organization to play in the AHL, beginning in 2026-27. However, that's more of a guideline than a negotiated rule and teams are pushing for more flexibility.

The Flames are used as an example, with another executive saying, "If Calgary wants to put Matvei Gridin and Zayne Parekh in the AHL, why shouldn't a team be able to do what's best for their development? These are million-dollar investments."

I don't speak to everyone, but have received a lot of sympathy for this position and I don't sense — yet — the NHL is against the idea. Some teams are protective of the CHL, recognizing it is an excellent development path and not wanting to hurt that, others don't care as much. But, one thing everyone seems to agree on is that there aren't 50 19-year-olds who would bolt. The AHL is a tough league and not everyone is ready for that. The NHLPA has a vote here, too. This is one to keep an eye on.

25. The NHL made it very clear it wants the USHL to be protected. One CHL executive agreed, saying, "It's not good to have every 16-year-old American playing in Canada." That's why you are hearing a lot of rumours about its future. At the GM meetings, there was also a stat tossed out saying this NCAA freshman class was more than 50 per cent Canadian. Crazy times.

26. There's a lot of Gavin McKenna slander out there. Sportsnet's Jason Bukala and Sam Cosentino — who are much more plugged in than I am — dropped him out of the No. 1 draft position. I'm not an expert, but I'll say this: All of this is the best thing that could happen to him. The road is never straight. When you're a big dog, everyone comes after you. Get used to it now, and, even more importantly, get used to handling it.

27. The NHL's time of game (regulation only) is up one minute. From 2:32 to 2:33. You'd be surprised at how much they care about this, but they do.



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28. Smiled when I saw Ben Hutton score his first of the season the other night. One of the NHL's nice people still carving out a role in Vegas. There's another great story unfolding, Braeden Bowman. Undrafted three times, captain of the 2023-24 OHL Guelph Storm. Attends Golden Knights prospect camp last year, ticketed for the ECHL. Does enough to get an AHL deal, where he finishes second in scoring. Now, an injury replacement, he's playing with Jack Eichel and Ivan Barbashev, earning first power play time. Love to see it.

29. Dallas players call rookie Justin Hryckowian "Ritz-Carlton" because it's easier to pronounce than his real name.

30. Attended the Dallas Stars Hall of Fame last weekend. I've said it 100 times, but every team should be doing this. It's such a fantastic event. Was great to see Joe Nieuwendyk recognized, because, as you can imagine, he needed time after being let go as GM. There are so many players who name him their favourite teammate, including Jamie Langenbrunner, who introduced him (and Mats Sundin). Nieuwendyk looked it up in preparation for the speech, but Lanny McDonald was 36 when the Flames won the 1989 Stanley Cup. Then he added, "Jamie Benn is 36." The message was not lost on the other players.

He also told a great story about Jere Lehtinen, who was there. Nieuwendyk said Ken Hitchcock kicked the great checker's line — with Brett Hull and Mike Modano — out of practice once to make a point. Hull and Modano rushed to the showers to make an earlier-than-expected tee time, while Lehtinen sat on the bench "apologizing like he was in a church confession."

The Builder inductee was Ralph Strangis, like so many play-by-play orators, the voice connecting the fans and the team. Introduced by Dan Stuchal, he was afire. He had a priest deliver grace, later saying, "You think you have a hard job? He's my priest, and I'm an atheist." He revealed that, when he got divorced, Tyler Seguin helped him create a Tinder profile. And he added advice we all need from time to time: "If you want to create things, don't listen to anyone."

31. The great Michael Russo added another Nieuwendyk story after listening to the podcast. Nieuwendyk signed with Florida in 2005, when he covered the Panthers. Russo was vacationing in Italy at the time, and his hotel room was robbed. He still needed to file a story, so he got a note to Nieuwendyk asking him to phone an internet cafe. "I'm sitting at one of the computers, and all of a sudden the guy working there asks, 'Is there a Mike Russo here?'" Nieuwendyk made the call. Russo sheepishly admitted he offered to reimburse the cost, but switched jobs and never got the opportunity. Nieuwendyk should collect, with interest.

32. Last week, Major League Baseball debuted a new off-season golf event, called the MLB Open, at Shadow Creek Golf Course in Vegas. It was a two-day tournament won by the duo of Twins third basemen Royce Lewis and recently retired Aaron Hicks. I would love to see something like this in the off-season for NHL players. The NHL has looked into it, but cost is an issue. Golf is notoriously expensive to produce. The league is brainstorming "a signature off-season event." This is something I'd love to see tried at least once. There are some great golfers, active and retired.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers still lacking defensive details as road trip slogs on

Mark Spector

Is it getting any better? Or is nothing really changing?

That's likely the most worrisome part when it comes to an Edmonton Oilers team that has mastered the slow start, big finish routine over the past two seasons.

When do they turn that corner? Can anyone even see a corner?

After 22 games, the .500 Edmonton Oilers are a soft team with meh goaltending, tragic defensive zone coverage, and about 12 players who have helped their team to a pair of Stanley Cups playing like they are fighting to stay in the league.

Yet Edmonton did score three even-strength goals in Washington, in a 7-4 loss (with two empty-net goals) to the Capitals. If you squint hard enough, you might be able to see a world where at least part of their game is beginning to improve.

"(Players are) feeling very discouraged," said head coach Kris Knoblauch, whose team fell behind 2-0, then traded goals all the way to a 5-4 deficit late in the third period. "But I like the energy. I don't necessarily like the defensive details of our game, but they're pushing. They have the energy."

Another game passed on Wednesday where the Oilers were the second-best team in pretty much every category, however.

Washington goalie Logan Thompson was better than Stuart Skinner; Brett Kulak was minus-3 before the 11-minute mark of Period 1; Jake Walman still pinches more than a cheap pair of underwear, and the Oilers lost again — with two games in Florida left on this seven-game death march.

"You travel a lot, you play a lot, but we have to change some things for sure," said David Tomasek, who drew into the lineup and scored a goal. "It's too many goals against. Find a way to be better, especially on a long road trip like this."

No NHL team has allowed more than the 65 even-strength goals the Oilers have surrendered (not counting empty netters). Their minus-17 goal differential at evens is the third-worst in the NHL this season.

Their play at even strength — particularly their defensive play — is the root of their troubles. Edmonton just can't defend, and as such, they just can't win enough games, going 2-3 on this road trip so far.

"Cleaning up our own end is the biggest thing, I know we're spending too much time there," Walman said after the morning skate, before posting a minus-2. "Shift after shift, period after period. Try and build something from the ground up. We're struggling lately, but we have the ability to bounce out of it if we put a couple of periods together here."

With Team Canada GM Doug Armstrong in the press box and the game well within reach at 3-2 for the Capitals, Evan Bouchard weakly attempted to stop Ryan Leonard as the rookie drove Edmonton's net. Bouchard bounced off of Leonard, who scored the 4-2 goal, exploiting the very part of Bouchard's game that stands between him and the Olympic team.

Skinner, who mentioned early in the season that his goal was to be an Olympian, did not show well either — despite one of the worst environments a goaltender could possibly be punished with.

But, the Oilers didn't quit. You have to give 'em that. They're pesky, if not polished.

If they could have kept the puck out of their net a little bit more, there was a win to be had here.

"Every time we pushed, they were able to find a way to capitalize on a chance," said two-goal man Darnell Nurse. "It's frustrating, but we battled back. We haven't been able to battle back many times this year, and we were able to find some goals and keep ourselves in the game."



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OIL SPILLS: Nurse scored twice, the fifth multi-goal game of his career — tied with three other defencemen for second on the Oilers all-time list. Paul Coffey has 39 such games ... Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl became the sixth pair of teammates to combine on 500 goals, in 10-plus seasons as teammates ... Calvin Pickard will likely tend the twine in Tampa Thursday. He's scuffling along with an .830 save percentage and a 4.17 goals-against average.

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1368869 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Flames Takeaways: Offensive explosion leads to win over Sabres

Eric Francis

Finally, something positive the Calgary Flames lead the league in.

Exploding for a season-high six goals in a 6-2 win in Buffalo Wednesday night, the Flames have won an NHL-best 40 straight games when scoring four goals or more.

It's a streak no other team in the league comes close to matching.

Eclipsing the three-goal mark for just the fourth time this season, the Flames broke a 2-2 tie in the third period with four-straight goals from four different players.

In three cases, the goal they scored was their fourth of the season.

How fortunate.

All said, seven different Flames had multi-point games, led by Rasmus Andersson's goal and two assists.

"Been getting the bounces lately and it feels good," said Andersson, who has scored in back-to-back games.

"The whole year we kind of just had games where it feels like we've had so many chances and so many bounces that didn't go our way, it's nice to get rewarded for it, finally," added Joel Farabee, a native of Syracuse, N.Y., who scored twice in front of a large contingent of family and friends.

"Naz(em Kadri) and Sharky (Yegor Sharangovich) just made so many good plays the whole night and made it really easy for me."

Jonathan Huberdeau, Kadri and Sharangovich all had a pair of assists, while Matt Coronato and Morgan Frost each chipped in a goal and an assist.

"Much better — there's a pretty complete game for us from start to finish," said Ryan Huska, one night after being furious over his club's effort.

"It was nice to see the guys score some goals tonight, even a couple that were lucky — we haven't seen a lot of those."

Indeed, following an opening quarter of the season in which the Flames have had very little puck luck while posting the league's lowest shooting percentage, the evening was capped with a Coronato chop at the puck that bounced high off the glass behind Sabres goalie Colten Ellis, and in off the back of the netminder's leg.

More takeaways from a game that sent the Flames back to Calgary in a good mood:

Cooley and the gang

Devin Cooley picked up his first win as a Flame since Apr. 11, 2024, making 28 saves to earn a steady line of well-wishers on the ice, congratulating him for what has been a long road between NHL triumphs.

"He's been awesome for us," said Farabee of the Flames backup, who is now 1-2-1 in six appearances, posting a stellar 1.80 GAA and .935 save percentage.

"For a guy who hasn't played much, for him to come in on a tough back-to-back and play that way is awesome, and we're pumped for him."

Challenging times

A key moment in the game came with five minutes left in the first period, with the Flames up 2-0.

Rasmus Dahlin scored to narrow the gap, but Flames eagle-eyed video coach Jamie Pringle prompted Huska to challenge for goalie interference by Tage Thompson.

Despite having two previous challenges this season denied, including one the previous game, Pringle was spot on, as the league's video review determined Thompson impaired Cooley's ability to play his position in the crease prior to the shot.

The decision was made in accordance with Rule 69.1, which states, in part, "Goals should be disallowed only if: (1) an attacking player, either by his positioning or by contact, impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within his crease or defend his goal."

The new guy

Plenty of eyes were on John Beecher, who started the day introducing himself to his new teammates, one day after being claimed off waivers from Boston.

Brought in for his speed and size as a fourth-line centre, he had to start his Flames stint on the left wing after Sam Morton was one of the Flames' best players the night before.

It meant fan favourite Ryan Lomberg had to take a seat for the evening.

It was a quiet night for Beecher, who played two-and-a-half of his almost 13 minutes helping Calgary's penalty kill unit go a perfect 3-for-3.

He had two shots on goal, one hit and forced a turnover in Buffalo's end early in the third period to set up a good Adam Klapka chance.

One night after Klapka tied a franchise record with 11 hits, the big man had just one, while Morton added two.

The Flames flew home after the game to prepare for a Saturday affair with Dallas, before jetting off on a five-game trip through Vancouver, Tampa, Sunrise, Carolina and Nashville.

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Sportsnet.ca / Hughes staying positive as Canucks face challenges: 'Control what you can'

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — One of the hardest things Quinn Hughes must do as captain these days is deal with the media in a hockey-mad market fearful that another National Hockey League season is headed towards disappointment. But the most important thing he has to do is stay positive.



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Not for reporters, necessarily. But for teammates and everyone who sees him daily inside the Vancouver Canucks' compound.

Hall of Fame former captain Henrik Sedin, now a Canucks development coach, talked about the importance of a positive outlook when he was mentoring Bo Horvat, who succeeded Sedin and preceded Hughes as captain.

No matter what was happening with his game or the team, Sedin said it was vital to bring the same positive attitude and work ethic to the rink every morning — to lead by example.

A quarter into the Canucks' season, positivity is Hughes' challenge as injuries have again buckled the team and contributed to a 9-10-2 record.

"I think that message is definitely right," Hughes said in an interview after Wednesday's practice at Rogers Arena. "But it's obviously really hard to do because you're frustrated, and it's hard to flip a switch where nothing's going to bother me today and I'm going to be completely positive. But that's why Henrik is a Hall of Famer. He was able to be mentally strong, and that's why he probably became the player he became and the leader he became. That message was probably spot on.

"You can always find a way to be negative. Always. But you can always find a way to be positive, too. I've been there at times this year where you're on the negative side a bit, and you've just got to flip it and control what you can control. I mean, it'd be nice if we started 7-3, but we didn't. Now we're at where we're at and just have to move on from here. Obviously, I'm never happy losing."

Hughes told Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas in the 32 Thoughts podcast before the season that the Canucks, after last year's upheaval, really needed to start well and win six or seven of their first 10 games.

He explained Wednesday that he knew that would be difficult, especially if there was another outbreak of injuries. By Game 12, soon after a stretch of seven games in 11 nights, the Canucks were missing nine players.

"It's obviously frustrating, but I honestly thought this would happen," Hughes said of the injuries. "It was a big concern of mine coming into the year. If you look at the schedule, how is anyone supposed to stay healthy? You look around the league, we've had nine guys out. Tampa had five guys out when we played them (on Sunday). It's like every team around the league has four or five guys out. Us being at nine at one point, you know, was beyond insane. You feel for the injured guys because they want to be playing. That's the (crappiest) thing, being injured."

Hughes himself has missed five games with two different injuries.

But in his last three games, the 2024 Norris Trophy winner has 10 assists, the first player in Canucks history to amass that total over nine periods.

The offensive outburst, which matched Hughes' point total from his first 13 games, has rocketed the 26-year-old back among the defenceman scoring leaders in the NHL, five points behind arch-rival Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche, who has played three more games.

With Canuck systems play alarmingly frayed by injuries and personnel changes, Hughes and blue-line partner Filip Hronek are not dominating possession like they did the last two seasons. But Hughes looks like a world-class defenceman again.

His 49.2 per cent of shot attempts is still far below the 56.6 share he posted the last two seasons, when he won one Norris and was runner-up to Makar for the other, but Hughes' expected-goals of 50.1 per cent is still the best among Canucks regulars.

"I liked my game earlier, I really did," he said of his slow start offensively. "But maybe there was, like, a per cent or two missing — just a little bit of

swagger. Just a little bit cleaner on some touches in the O-zone, where I would have been normally. Like, I remember a play in Chicago (on Oct. 17) where I lost the puck on the blue line, which I wouldn't if I'm at my best. I would never lose the puck there. You just keep going. You can't play great for 82 games, so I'm trying to be mentally tough and stay focused on the things I can control. I think that's helping."

Ah, yes, the focus.

This is the season of The Great Decision by Hughes, and whether the best player in franchise history wants to sign an extension with the Canucks this summer, a year ahead of unrestricted free agency, or leave to try to play with his brothers, Jack and Luke, in New Jersey.

Hughes declined Wednesday to discuss The Great Decision, saying that his entire focus is on trying to help the Canucks win.

But we did ask him about "the noise."

Hughes told Sportsnet before the season that as captain he could "handle the noise" that would accompany conjecture about his future all season.

He smiled Wednesday and said: "I'm not on social media, so, like, the only noise is the noise inside my own head."

Well, hopefully that's not too loud then.

"It depends on the day and what that noise is," Hughes countered. "When I say, I can handle the noise, that's my own thoughts."

"Obviously, I know there's noise out there. It is weird, but I just know in my head that all I have to do is just control what I can control, which is to try to bring my best every night. At the start of season ... when it wasn't going in for me, what's the point in pouting or wondering: Why didn't this go in or that go in? If you think you're that good, then just go score or go make a play. And that's kind of what I'm trying to do. Just go play and see what I can do."

How are things going to get better for the Canucks?

"I think that we're being coached well, very well," he said. "We work extremely hard. You can never doubt ... everyone in here is working hard. Our goaltending is great. We're hopeful to get some guys back soon, and we're competitive, so we're going to try our hardest. And wherever that takes us, it takes us."

INJURY NEWS

With a two-game homestand starting Thursday against the Dallas Stars, key winger Conor Garland fully practised with teammates Wednesday after sitting out Monday's 8-5 loss to the Florida Panthers. Coach Adam Foote said Garland did not suffer a concussion in his fight with Tampa Bay Lightning defenceman Darren Raddysh early in the Canucks' 6-2 road win on Sunday. ... Foote said centre Teddy Blueger (undisclosed injury) suffered a setback after practising recently, but will be back on skates soon. Winger Nils Hoglander (ankle surgery) could return within three weeks. Goalie Thatcher Demko (groin) remains week-to-week. There is still no timeline for the return of centre Filip Chytil (concussion) and defenceman Derek Forbort (abdominal).

WEDNESDAY'S PRACTICE

Forwards

Kane-Pettersson-Sherwood

Boeser-Kampf-Garland

DeBrusk-Raty-O'Connor

Reichel-Sasson-Karlsson

Extras: MacEachern, Bains



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Defencemen

Hughes-Hronek

M. Pettersson-Myers

E. Pettersson Jr.-Willander

Extra: Joseph

Goalies

Lankinen

Patara

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1368871 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Seven takeaways from first quarter of NHL season

Justin Bourne

TORONTO — We've officially ticked past the quarter mark of the 2025-26 NHL season, and somehow it feels like we know less about what to expect from this season than we did before it all started. The season has gone all pear-shaped.

I'll explain what I mean with seven takeaways from the 2025-26 season to date below.

Atlantic's reign of terror is over

On Tuesday night, the Tampa Bay Lightning took down the New Jersey Devils by a score of 5-1. That brought their goal differential on the season out of the negative, and up to plus-three. Before that game, no team in the Atlantic Division had a positive goal differential.

For the past decade, the league has looked to the Atlantic as the home of true Stanley Cup threats, whether it's been the Florida Panthers, Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay or even the Toronto Maple Leafs, who've had some nice regular seasons.

At this point, picking a favourite to win the Atlantic is no different from picking a name out of a hat. Any of the seven non-Sabres teams is a reasonable choice, and, honestly, the Sabres themselves aren't 100 per cent out of it.

The Detroit Red Wings are in the lead with their even goal differential and nine regulation wins in 20 games. Incredible stuff. That's not to say one or two of these teams won't figure it out, but boy, unless Florida gets fully healthy at the right time, that division is anyone's game.

From there, the rest of the East isn't much better.

East is a muddled mess

I suppose Carolina gets the nod as the clear Eastern favourite, but it's also got nine regulation wins in 19 tries, which has led to their modest plus-16 goal differential (modest as far as league leaders goes). New Jersey's got the same record yet with even fewer regulation wins and sits at plus-5. And the rest of the conference?

I dunno, man.

It's never been more muddled. A good week and you're in playoffs, a bad one and you're in dead last.

I think this is going to change in the years ahead. This extreme parity comes from years and years of the flat salary cap forcing good teams to trade any excess talent they had, while bad teams drafted and drafted

and drafted. This is the year the top drops, the bottom finally rises, and it's all a hodgepodge. After this, good teams should be more capable of keeping their talent, the top dogs will spend, and you'll see some separation.

But for now, this is anyone's year — assuming the Colorado Avalanche all contract the plague in late April and don't win 16 straight in the playoffs.

Avs are not messing around

The Avs have a plus-31 in goal differential in just 19 games, they've collected a points percentage of .815, and are truly head and shoulders above whoever you consider to be the next-best team this season. They have captured lightning not in a bottle, but their hands, and they're using it to shock everyone in their path.

A full year with both Gabriel Landeskog and Valeri Nichushkin helps, and Martin Necas has acquitted himself well there, which combined with finally getting some elite goaltending has made their games awfully one-sided. When you flip to their channel, it's a different sport than the rest of the muddy middle. So we have league-wide parity, with one clear Cup favourite right now.

Shots are down, save percentage is down, goals kind of level

During the 2021-22 NHL season, the average shot count at the end of each game read something like 32 to 31. The team average eventually settled at 31.4, which was pretty normal, as it was the fifth time in six years the average settled in the 31s.

The next season it went down to 31.1, then to 30.1 in 2023-24, then to 28.1 last year, and this year it sits at 27.7, the lowest total since 2001-02.

We're talking about a drop of 3.5 shots per team, so seven shots per game, in just a four-year span.

The thing is, in 2001-02, the average save percentage was .908, which meant we saw just 2.62 goals per team, per game.

This season, we're seeing 3.05 goals per game, just up from last year (and way up from the decade of 2010-20), on the backs of goalies having a collective .897 save percentage.

To better understand this: coaches have finally come to grips with the fact that "Shoot from everywhere!" was always a dumb strategy, and became particularly dumb when goaltenders started progressing to the level they're at today.

Shot attempts today are partially seen as forfeiting possession, and you only want to do that if you think you've got a reasonable chance to score. It's the painful overtime strategy we see today dragged into five-on-five hockey.

The attempts that are worthwhile now include shooting from distance through traffic, passing off the pads and other low-percentage shots at times, but mostly it means you aren't warming goalies up from distance, and you're waiting until you're somewhere you can legitimately score from to pull the trigger.

Life has gotten harder for goalies over the past decade and it's not about to get any easier. Shooters are far better, and since they're not wasting attempts, every save will be a battle.

Changing of the guard?

I mentioned the bottom of the league rising up, which is something that gets theorized just about every year, but it finally seems to be happening. (Come on Buffalo, catch the wave!)

The Anaheim Ducks are first in the Pacific. The Montreal Canadiens have had a few losses of late, in part due to some tough injuries, but they made playoffs last season and sit within a playoff spot this year too. The Ottawa Senators made the playoffs and are around them again despite



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missing Brady Tkachuk, and we mentioned Detroit being atop the Atlantic.

The San Jose Sharks are better, the Utah Mammoth are better, the Seattle Kraken are better. This whole rebuilding thing, it's painful, but it's a lot easier to justify when the improvements are made, the bandages are off and the team starts to take real strides. (Maybe something for teams like the Nashville Predators, Vancouver Canucks or Calgary Flames to at least consider?)

Youth movement

When Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux left the game, Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin showed up to carry the mantle for the league. We've since added Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon, and it looks like the next wave of "faces of the league" have arrived.

On Tuesday night, Macklin Celebrini and Connor Bedard had duelling hat tricks, and now both sit inside the NHL's top five in scoring, right there with MacKinnon and McDavid (oh, Canada).

Superstars don't tend to ease their way into the league, and in Year 2 and 3 of their careers, these two fellas are no exception. They're absolute musts on Team Canada now at the Olympics and sit poised to dominate the NHL's conversation for years to come.

Olympics have an impact

Olympic hockey teams will be selected on Jan. 1, which means that right now, players are making their cases to be on them. We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this matters to guys and it's on their minds. It's a fun process to follow and hypothesize about.

But the Olympics have also condensed the schedule for teams and there's an awful lot of injuries league-wide. With injuries, and games more condensed, teams are practicing less, and I'd argue you can see that reflected in the play.

Still, it will be worth it for fans and players alike as we move toward the Winter Olympics in Italy in February.

From there, it will be a sprint for the league: the trade deadline follows shortly after, then the race to playoffs for all these standings-jammed teams, followed by a two-month grind to the finish. It's only 20 games in for most teams, but with Christmas one month away, and the Olympics looming after, events are going to start unfolding faster from here.

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Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet's 2026 NHL Draft Rankings: November Edition

Sam Cosentino

This isn't a one-horse race after all.

While the floodgates haven't opened up to several players making a case to go No. 1 overall, there is a large groundswell of scouts who have commented on the emergence of North Dakota's Keaton Verhoeff. Those same scouts have also been keeping close tabs on Penn State's Gavin McKenna. And, due to their recent play, the two are moving spots from where they sat in our October rankings.

For a more detailed account as to why Verhoeff is moving to unseat McKenna atop the draft board, please refer to Jason Bukala's piece from earlier this week.

And, while Ivar Stenberg is not quite there yet, his historic production in SHL play has him also entering this discussion about possibly ending up first overall.

After those three players, there are still a number of great options for teams to pour through.

When looking at Verhoeff vs. McKenna, there are a few things to consider before deep-diving into play.

When it comes to McKenna, does he project as a centre? If not, there is more significant value in a right-shot defenceman. Do you see McKenna growing more than six feet tall and playing at 190 pounds? Both are likely, but not currently the case. If Verhoeff doesn't grow another inch or lose any weight, he's still 6-foot-4, 200 pounds and will likely play closer to 215, and maybe 220 in the NHL. So, for a team, the question is: does McKenna's elite offensive ability outweigh a top-pairing, two-way, right-shot defenceman?

If the draft were held tomorrow, it would likely come down to team need as the tiebreaker between McKenna and Verhoeff for first off the board. The margin is razor thin.

For the rest of the draft class, there have been several opportunities to get noticed, with more on the horizon. Recently, a couple of international events at the U18 and U20 levels were contested in Europe. Closer to home, players should be in mid-season form. Next week, we will get a chance to see the second edition of the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge, which will take place Nov. 25 and 26 in Calgary and Lethbridge, respectively. The CHL roster will feature 15 "A" rated players according to NHL Central Scouting's Players to Watch list released in October. In a slightly different twist from last year, the CHL team includes four American-born players who won gold at the 2025 Hlinka-Gretzky.

On the other side, the USNTDP is always a must watch. Their roster includes names such as "A" rated defenceman Luke Schairer and as many as seven "B" rated players including team leading scorer Victor Plante, along with Casey Mutryn, and Mikey Berchild.

We're about a month away from the world juniors in Minnesota, and we're likely to see a large contingent of draft eligibles participating there. Players can often alter the course of where they're ranked due to how they perform at that tournament.

But before we get that far, here are our November rankings:

No. 1: Keaton Verhoeff, D, 6-foot-4, 208 pounds, North Dakota (NCAA)

The basics of Verhoeff are something every NHL team covets: a big, right-shot defenceman. Beyond that, it's the mature play he has exhibited as a freshman in the NCAA that has him landing at No. 1 today. Where McKenna's off-puck play has been brought into question, Verhoeff's ability to control play and regularly maintain over 20 effective minutes per game have vaulted him into top spot this month.

No. 2: Gavin McKenna, LW, 5-foot-11, 170 pounds, Penn State (NCAA)

There's never been a question about the prolific offensive skills McKenna brings to the table. He's a threat to produce with every puck touch past centre ice. McKenna's brain and creativity force teammates to be on the lookout at all times. He has a bag of tricks at his disposal to ward-off would-be defenders and put him and his teammates in a position to produce. Questions have started to arise regarding off-puck play and defensive awareness. And for that reason, he gets moved down one spot in this month's rankings.

No. 3: Ivar Stenberg, LW, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Frolunda (SHL)

Stenberg continues to impress at the SHL level. He uses his smarts and tenacity to move around the ice and impact play in all three zones. Stenberg has shown deft puck handling skills and most importantly he's not afraid to get to middle ice. He's also adept at using his quick hands to win board battles in tougher areas on the ice. Stenberg has shown



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excellent distribution skills at the SHL level. It will be fun to track his play at the world juniors to see if he feels comfortable being a little more selfish when getting back to playing closer to his age-group.

No. 4: Ethan Belchetz, LW, 6-foot-5, 228 pounds, Windsor Spitfires (OHL)

Belchetz is becoming everything he was expected to be when the Spitfires took him first overall in the 2024 OHL Priority Selection. He continues to use his size to win board battles and get to the net effectively. When the net front is not an option, he shoots it well enough to beat goalies from distance. His combination of quick hands and long reach make it difficult for defenders to separate him from the puck. He will engage physically at every turn and has some swagger to his game.

No. 5: Tynan Lawrence, C, 6-foot-1, 185 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)

He has been a difficult player to get a handle on due to an injury sustained during training camp. He got into two late October games, but was shut down after that weekend and has yet to return. Of course, he produced a point in each of those two games, both Muskegon wins. As such, Lawrence is still living off the currency he created at the Hlinka-Gretzky, where he showed a number of elements in his game that scouts think will translate well to the next level.

No. 6: Carson Carels, D, 6-foot-2, 202 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)

I like the fact he's always at the ready, aware of what's happening around him, and anticipates plays well as a result. Carels exhibits a slightly hunched-over playing style that sometimes makes him look smaller than he is, but also acts as a surprise mechanism when he uncoils against would-be attackers. Carels is an aggressive player in all three zones. He projects as a solid two-way defenceman who can play both special teams.

No. 7: Adam Novotny, LW, 6-foot-1, 204 pounds, Peterborough Petes (OHL)

Has experienced an uptick in interest over the past month. Surely time was needed to adjust to a new home, a new league and a new team as he arrived to the OHL from Czechia this season. On his best nights, Novotny touches many parts of the game. He shows grit and compete, but also plenty of skill and creativity. He skates well enough to disrupt the opponent all over the ice and, as a result, is a good transitional player.

No. 8: Mathis Preston, RW, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Spokane Chiefs (WHL)

Preston is an excellent puck transporter. He gets to top speed quickly, and is able to handle the puck with his head up. When you add in his agility and shooting ability, he's quite the threat off the rush. He backs defenders off with ease and his finishing ability has to be respected.

No. 9: Chase Reid, D, 6-foot-2, 188 pounds, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds (OHL)

Another good-sized, right-shot defenceman, Reid moves effortlessly around the ice. He is comfortable using his skating and scanning ability to ward off would-be forecheckers. Once in control of the puck in his own zone, he has a number of options for which to initiate the breakout. He can zip lengthy passes up ice, find the shorter, safer option, or use his wheels to transport the puck to provide a second layer of attack.

No. 10: Ryan Lin, D, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)

Definitely one of the most dynamic defencemen this draft class has to offer. Lin is a threat all over the ice. He can make a good first pass, but when that's not available he can break pucks out on his own. He's deadly on the power play where he has even more time and space.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL Insider Elliotte Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

Latest episode

No. 11: Daxon Rudolph, D, 6-foot-2, 206 pounds, Prince Albert Raiders (WHL)

Is being leaned on so heavily that it's not uncommon for him to play upwards of 25 minutes on any given night. He has an uncanny ability to find open lanes and release pucks quickly from anywhere in the offensive zone. He's someone you have to pay attention to if you're the opposition because he will jump the rush in a hurry and pinches often.

No. 12: Ryan Roobroek, C, 6-foot-3, 215 pounds, Niagara IceDogs (OHL)

As a late birthday, this player has had more than his fair share of viewings and, after so many, there's a tendency to emphasize the weaknesses as opposed to reinforcing the positives. Playing to the identity of a power forward is an expectation for a player his size. Roobroek is not likely to be that guy, but as he matures and continues to understand how to use his big frame more effectively, at the core of this player is an elite shot. Getting to areas where he can utilize that shot more consistently is something to work on as the year progresses.

No. 13: Caleb Malhotra, C, 6-foot-2, 182 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)

He continues to climb the draft eligible ladder and by year's end, he may be inside our top 10. Malhotra plays a complete game with the ability to make an impact even if he's not producing. Being named captain of the CHL Top Prospects team tells me all I need to know about what he brings to the table in terms of intangibles.

No. 14: Alberts Smits, D, 6-foot-3, 205 pounds, Jukurit (Liiga)

The typical path for players from smaller European nations is to play in Sweden, not necessarily Finland. Smits has been in Finland since his U16 season and he's taken a steady path to prominence for this draft because of it. He got into nine Liiga games last year and has been on a nice run with Jukurit lately, having put up seven points in his last nine games, while averaging over 20 minutes per game. Clearly he made the right choice.

No. 15: Marcus Nordmark, LW, 6-foot-1, 180 pounds, Djurgardens (Sweden J20)

Approaches the game with a plan. Nordmark doesn't use unnecessary energy in going to places on the ice where nothing happens. He's efficient in his routes, arriving on time to the forecheck, or swooping in on the net-front. At the U20 level, his strength is evident, but so too is his efficiency as he plays top line minutes.

No. 16: Viggo Bjorck, RW, 5-foot-9, 177 pounds, Djurgardens (SHL)

While he is not a speedy burner, Bjorck still maintains the ability to pace a game. He has a keen sense of where to go to buy himself more time to make a play. He has excellent hands and deft passing skills. Bjorck is not afraid to play with some risk in his game, but is skilled enough to execute difficult plays.

No. 17: Elton Hermansson, RW, 6-foot-1, 181 pounds, MODO (Allsvenskan)

At the J20 level, he can beat goalies from distance. He has a deceptive release and isn't afraid to shoot it from anywhere inside the offensive zone. Hermansson is more of a finesse player, always looking to make plays as opposed to bringing a physical brand of hockey. I would like to



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see him get inside a little more and use his good hands in front of the net instead of working off the walls. He transitions well and realizes when there's a faster player option, but then gets to a place where he can get the puck back.

No. 18: Xavier Villeneuve, D, 5-foot-11, 172 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)

Another dynamic defenceman who puts defenders on their heels when the puck is on his stick. Like Lin, he's a magician running the power play and leans heavy towards the distribution side as opposed to the goal-scoring side. He gives off Samuel Girard vibes where he plays big minutes, exhibits top-level confidence and has some swagger in his game.

No. 19: Juho Piiparinen, D, 6-foot-1, 201 pounds, Tappara (Liiga)

His Liiga minutes started to dwindle in the second week of October and a short time later, Piiparinen was able to participate in a U20 event with the national team. This mini departure from Liiga play allowed Piiparinen to get back to playing second pair minutes. He leans more to the defensive side and has earned a reputation as a play killer.

No. 20: Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW, 6-foot-4, 184 pounds, Orebro (Sweden U20)

His one-timer isn't so much of a bomb, but more of a sweeper style that's timed perfectly and acts almost like a change-up. When he's not using the one-timer, look for him on the off-side post where he seems to have a knack for going unnoticed.

No. 21: Malte Gustafson, D, 6-foot-4, 200 pounds, HV71 (Sweden J20)

Is a nice skater who can cut the net to initiate the breakout or remain strong on his skates in a stationary role protecting the net-front. He will often make the right decision, but isn't always quick to execute his plan, adding unnecessary risk to his game. As he matures, and as he grows into his body, he projects to be a second pairing-type of defence man -- 2-3 potential. So far this season, his play has earned him a couple of brief looks at the SHL level.

No. 22: Brooks Rogowski, C, 6-foot-7, 232 pounds, Oshawa Generals (OHL)

It might be a little heady ranking him here, especially now that he's injured and expected to miss at least a month. But he created currency as part of the Team USA that won the Hlinka-Gretzky. You can't help but notice a 6-foot-7 player. Looks like a Brian Boyle-type.

No. 23: Oliver Suvanto, C, 6-foot-3, 207 pounds, Tappara (Liiga)

Although he's a little smaller than Aliaksei Protas, he exhibits the same posture and skating style. He won't dazzle you with his speed, but he gets to where he needs to go on time. Like Protas, he's a big body and excellent around the net. When he sets up shop he is hard to move, yet Suvanto also has the hands to finish plays in tight, and even in coverage. Keep in mind, he's one of the youngest players in this draft class, so there's plenty of runway left for development.

No. 24: Oscar Hemming, LW, 6-foot-4, 195 pounds, Kitchener Rangers (OHL)

The drama continues for Hemming, who is still battling to get a release from his Kiekko-Espoo club team in Finland. While there was some thought he might be able to get into a BCHL lineup, that was nixed and Hemming remains in limbo. There have been a number of cases where players taken in the first round didn't play much during their draft year, as was the case with Matthew Schaefer last season. For now, it remains a wait and see situation for Hemming.

No. 25: J.P. Hurlbert, LW, 5-foot-11, 176 pounds, Kamloops Blazers (WHL)

Continues to produce at an elite level and is still leading the WHL in scoring. No doubt Hurlbert will be highly motivated to perform well at the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge, where he will get a chance to compete against his former USNTDP teammates. His performances over the two-game set will be fun to track.

No. 26: Tomas Chrenko, C, 5-foot-11, 170 pounds, HK Nitra (Slovakia)

Has a nifty set of hands that he's not afraid to show-off despite playing in the highest men's league in Slovakia. His puck handles are silky smooth and he definitely has some finish to his game. He has to be respected as a dual threat option on offence.

No. 27: Alessandro Di Iorio, C, 6-foot, 188 pounds, Sarnia Sting (OHL)

Hard to get a read on Di Iorio's play considering he's just a few games back from injury and a recent coaching change in Samia. Di Iorio is a smart, two-way player. He can win puck battles at the junior level and while he has shown some willingness to get to middle ice, he could do it more often. He will need some time to get back up to full speed and he should be close to that by the time the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge takes place in Alberta next week.

No. 28: Luke Schairer, D, 6-foot-3, 195 pounds, USNTDP (USHL)

Plays an updated style of defence. When it looks like he might get caught on the opposition's blue line, he's actually positioning himself to surf over and kill plays in neutral ice. He's not a bruiser, but uses his big frame effectively to shield players along the wall and take care of the net front. Leans more as a complementary defenceman.

No. 29: Nikita Klepov, RW, 5-foot-11, 178 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

Played minor hockey in Russia and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, of all places. Klepov was spurned by the USNTDP, and instead won gold playing for the US at the 2025 Hlinka-Gretzky. He will be highly motivated to play against the program in the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge. By the way, he's third in OHL scoring and is the only rookie inside the top 15.

No. 30: Egor Shilov, C, 6-foot, 177 pounds, Victoriaville Tigres (QMJHL)

Although he was mostly ineffective and exhibited inconsistent effort in a most recent viewing, his high-end skill is clearly evident. Shilov is brilliant with the puck on his stick, either attacking one-on-one or dishing to others in small areas. He gets a hall pass for his most recent viewing based on a five-point effort two nights earlier. He will get written off by a number of teams, but there will be others that will be intrigued by the skill.

No. 31: Nikita Shcherbakov, D, 6-foot-5, 187 pounds, Ufa (Russia)

Will get plenty of looks based on his size. Shcherbakov makes many good decisions, whether he's pinching at the blue line, trying to close out plays in neutral ice or moving the puck from his own zone. However, he shows hesitation when doing so. As a result, the execution of his ideas aren't always effective because of those brief moments of hesitation. It looks more like a confidence thing to me, as opposed to being a slow-processing hockey mind.

No. 32: Jasper Kuhta, C, 6-foot-2, 194 pounds, Ottawa 67's (OHL)

Having gone undrafted as a late 2006 birthday, Kuhta is making a lot of noise for the 2026 draft. Up until last season, he had not represented Finland internationally, and now there's a chance he'll make the country's U20 team for the world juniors. While he may lack some first step quickness, Kuhta rarely has an issue getting to areas on the ice where he can use his size to protect pucks, or utilize his cannon of a shot. Kuhta is a low maintenance, late-bloomer.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs quarter-mark report: Depth forwards, defence in disarray

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The hockey team that came closest to knocking out the champs and was within one win of a ticket to the final four is now staring blankly at a trip to the lottery.

The first-quarter descent of the Toronto Maple Leafs — who awake after 20 games to see only the sad-sack Buffalo Sabres below them in conference standings — has been as precipitous as it is befuddling.

They've been ripped publicly by their starting goalie and riddled with injuries.

They've laid eggs when everyone expects a pushback and lost confidence despite dressing one of the most experienced cores in the game.

General manager Brad Treliving is making trade calls and launching Hail Marys on the waiver wire. Craig Berube is trying every trick and tinker in the head coach's playbook.

We took a poll.

Roughly 44 per cent of Leafs viewers are ready to tap out on 2025-26.

A not-so-overwhelming majority, however, believes that a significant trade, the jolt of a coaching change, or patience and faith in this good-on-paper collection of talent will extend their league-best post-season streak to 10 years.

"We still have more than half a season to go," says go-to spokesman and Maple Leafs truther John Tavares. "So, just stay together, stay composed, and know we have to play better.

"We just gotta continue to stay with it."

Most encouraging development: Tavares refuses to age

How's this for a wild quarter-mark stat?

The only Canadian with more even-strength points than 35-year-old Tavares (21) is Hart Trophy frontrunner Nathan MacKinnon (24).

Tavares sniped his 500th career goal and just kept flooring the gas.

Even with Auston Matthews injured and the power play turning colder than an ex, Tavares has remained the picture of consistency.

On a team that hasn't shown much of it through mid-November.

"He brings so much experience," defenceman Simon Benoit says. "He's been around the league for so long, and he's such a good guy off the ice too. He's always ready to help out, give some advice. Having him around has been a blessing."

Whether it's effort, production, faceoff prowess, leadership in the face of a stripped captaincy, or value against the cap, Tavares is soaring all expectations.

"He's always got the right voice," Bobby McMann says. "He's always got a good voice, good things to say, has a good beat on the room. He's been around a long time, so he knows that there's ebbs and flows in seasons. He knows that it's not the end all, be all, and we need to continue to work on our game."

Most concerning development: Defence in disarray

The decline of the Maple Leafs' defensive game is as surprising as it is disturbing.

To think: Treliving brought back the top eight defencemen on his depth chart. His D corps is big, long, and experienced.

And getting buckled to the tune of nearly four goals a night.

It's a head-scratcher.

Injuries haven't helped matters, nor has the subtraction of one-time Selke finalist Mitch Marner.

If the Leafs aren't digging an early hole with shaky defensive starts, they are watching leads disintegrate at the feet of mental errors. Their confidence in one-goal affairs — a previous strength — is now a crippling weakness.

Berube keeps harping on structure and patience, safe decisions and smart pinches.

Either the coach's message is falling on deaf ears, or the personnel is simply not up to the task.

Top-six forwards: Grade A-minus

For all the Maple Leafs' flaws and fret over replacing Marner's 102 points, elite firepower is not the issue here.

Half their top six — William Nylander, Matthew Knies, and Tavares — are on pace for the most productive seasons of their careers, and that's despite major power-play frustrations.

Prior to injury, Matthews was tracking a 43-goal campaign, which isn't 69 but isn't 33 either.

And Nick Robertson has risen to his top-six challenge and been nearly a point-per-game positive since earning the (tentative) promotion.

Do the Leafs need another top-six winger and Matthews' latest ailment to be a blip, not a winter-long storyline? Absolutely.

But Toronto still threatens with a top-five NHL offence. They still employ game-breakers, as their third-best 12.6 shooting percentage attests.

And, as Nylander says, scoring goals is harder than preventing them.

Bottom-six forwards: D-minus

The opening pitch was that this edition of the Leafs would be deeper, more balanced. They would overwhelm, in the mold of the '19 Blues, with waves of forechecking that grind you into the boards and win the net-fronts with big bodies.

Twenty games in, we've yet to see it for any sustained stretch.

The bottom of the lineup is patchwork and disjointed and forever in-flux.

Whether it's David Kämpf not making the cut or bum-luck Scott Laughton getting injured twice, whether it's Calle Järnkrok getting healthy-scratched after starting hot or Matias Maccelli failing to earn trust or power-play time or Easton Cowan yo-yoing around lines and leagues, the curiosities and inconsistencies down the bench are troubling.

Centre Nicolas Roy was brought in to play a matchup role and chip in a few; he's a minus-4 with one goal and now injured. Dakota Joshua's bounce-back has stalled at two goals; he's a dash-6.

Max Domi is a team-worst minus-10. He's on the books at \$3.75 million for next season and the one after that, too. With trade protection.

As great a job Treliving did with the Tavares and Knies contract extensions, none of his bets on support forwards have paid off yet.

Defence: D

Funny. We cannot, in good conscience, give the blue line a passing grade when Toronto is giving up more goals per game (3.7) than any squad in the Eastern Conference.



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Rush chances are a serious problem. Same with D-zone coverage and zone exits and net-front protection.

And yet, Morgan Rielly and Oliver Ekman-Larsson have both rediscovered some offensive juice that was missing last season, and sturdy Jake McCabe remains a solid plus-6 facing the tough assignments. Same goes for Chris Tanev, who unfortunately has suffered two injuries above the shoulders and who knows when he'll play another game. Or if he should.

The top four is already overtaxed, the lefty-right equilibrium is out of whack, and the coach has lost faith in the depth. Hence, the waiver pickup of Troy Stecher. He brings some jam.

Goaltending: C-minus

Talk about a roller coaster.

While the Anthony Stolarz –Joseph Woll tandem operated nicely in the pocket last season and stood tall in the face of Grade-As, the Maple Leafs' goaltenders have been scrambling since camp.

James Reimer and Cayden Primeau have come and gone. Prospect Dennis Hildeby got called up, played admirably, but never won.

Stolarz started strong but got overworked and hurt. Woll's first appearance waited until Game 19, and he has played well enough that the Leafs' 25th place in save percentage feels like the category for easiest improvement.

Quarter Mark Awards

MVP: John Tavares

Most Improved Player: Nick Robertson

Best Defensive Player: Oliver Ekman-Larsson

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens notebook: Time for goaltenders to step up, fight for net

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que.— Where the Montreal Canadiens left off was with a step in the right direction in Columbus, in a 4-3 shootout loss over which they were much more resemblant of the team that shot out to a 9-3-0 start to the season and much less so the one that dropped five of six games prior to losing against the Blue Jackets.

Now, their restored confidence must be bolstered by one of their goaltenders, and it doesn't matter which one.

Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis knows.

Earlier in the season, with the Canadiens winning with regularity, he could stand by No. 1 goaltender Samuel Montembeault and give him more opportunity to find the best version of himself, especially with backup Jakub Dobes playing at the height of his abilities.

But now, after four straight losses, with the gaps in the Eastern Conference standings narrowing with each passing day and nearly a quarter of the season played, that luxury no longer exists. The Canadiens need more saves, and they'll take them from whomever appears more likely to provide them.

It's why when we asked St. Louis on Wednesday if it was time for a more open competition between Montembeault and Dobes for the starting position, he responded: "I think we're there."

Neither goaltender has risen to the challenge throughout this turbulent, 1-3-3 stretch for the Canadiens, and both know the team is depending on them to do it now.

"The one thing the guys need in the games is maybe more key saves at key times to maybe give them a little bit of momentum," said Dobes, "so that's the one thing I'm trying to do in future games."

It's what the 24-year-old did with regularity through his first five starts of the season.

Dobes won all those games, stopping 141 of the 150 shots he faced.

But since then, he's won just one of four games and allowed 15 of 85 shots to get by him.

Montembeault has made 11 appearances and hasn't fared any better, too rarely appearing like the goaltender who seized the starter's role two seasons ago and earned the leash that was extended to him through Montreal's good start to this campaign.

The 29-year-old knows why it's being tightened right now.

"My job is to give the team a chance to win," Montembeault said on Wednesday.

He has owned not doing it to his—or the team's—satisfaction to date, with a 4-5-0 record and a career-low .858 save percentage serving as ugly reflections of that reality.

It's knocked Montembeault out of the comfortable chair he occupied to start the season, but also put him in the less cozy one he's been familiar with his whole life.

"Even growing up, always been in competition," he said. "Didn't always play the highest level of hockey, so I always had to fight and keep persevering and trying to get better."

It's what the Canadiens need from Montembeault right now, with his number being called for Thursday's game against the Washington Capitals, and with his teammates taking the step in Columbus that they believe brought them to the final one they must take to get out of this hole.

If the goaltender doesn't rise to the occasion, Dobes must be ready to pounce on the best opportunity he's had over his short career to become an NHL starter.

It's a scenario the Ostrava, Cze., native has been dreaming of, and it's good that he doesn't seem fazed by the pressure that comes with it.

"There's obviously a lot of pressure in Montreal, but pressure is a privilege at the end of the day," Dobes said. "Everyone would like to have this kind of pressure and play in front of these fans and play for this logo. So, I feel like at the end of the day it's always a positive thing and you've just got to focus on your thing. I personally don't notice much during a game. I'm so in my zone that I have no idea what's going on, so the pressure part doesn't really affect me."

It's only going to ratchet it up on him and Montembeault if neither of them begins producing results.

Jared Davidson avoiding early-career traps, gaining confidence

The sample size is admittedly miniscule, but still revealing in certain ways.

Because Davidson, 23, has been able to show in just under 17 minutes of ice-time spread over his first two NHL games that he's not too overwhelmed to rely on his instincts.



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It's the hardest thing to do for a player realizing his lifelong dream of playing in the world's best league—to turn the mind off and just go play—and it's especially difficult to do while running on pure adrenaline.

"I couldn't sleep for 24 hours before," Davidson said about the time between receiving his promotion from the AHL's Laval Rocket and his debut on Hockey Night in Canada, against the Boston Bruins.

"I think before the game, maybe I was thinking a little more than normal, just not knowing what to expect really," Davidson added. "But once I'm on the ice, things just shut off and whatever I've worked on in the past just kind of took over. It's not really like I'm thinking when I'm out there. I'm just kind of reacting and trying to, I don't want to say predict what's going to happen but going to where the puck's going to be. I don't think I'm overthinking, just playing."

Of equal importance was Davidson not overplaying.

It would've been normal for the former fifth-round pick to allow his desire to stand out overtake his need to play a simple, reliable game.

But he never gave into that temptation.

"I think they've been watching all year when I was in Laval, and the last couple of years, so they know what kind of player I am, and I know what kind of player I am," Davidson said. "I don't think I need to go and re-invent the wheel. I think I know what I'm good at, and I think when I'm on my game, it's just simple and I'm not overcomplicating anything. When pucks come, shoot it, finding little spots to get open. It's not like I have to force it.

"Once you start forcing it, you grip your stick a little tighter and pucks don't come to you, you're too fast or too slow, you're not in the right spots."

And that would be too big a departure from exactly what brought Davidson to Montreal.

He's been an edgy player dating back to his start with the Seattle Thunderbirds in 2018, and that's part of what made him appealing to the Canadiens in the 2022 Draft—and part of what made him a good option to call on right now.

But Davidson's positioning—which enabled him to score 80 goals over his last 124 games in the WHL before popping 33 goals over his last 84 games in the AHL—is indicative of strong hockey sense, which he's been able to display to generate five shots despite playing such limited minutes so far in the NHL.

What we've seen so far is his game, which he's put a lot of work into, particularly off the ice.

Davidson said watching video has been the biggest contributor to him seemingly always arriving in the right spots at the right time.

"Watching the game, you see structure in the d-zone, you see how guys move off of where the puck is, and once you're able to figure out where guys are going to be, you can almost predict where the holes are going to be," the Edmonton native said. "I think just a lot of watching games, watching film and knowing what they're going to do so then I can figure out how I'm going to manipulate it. It's a lot of just studying and seeing what's there, what's not. When pucks go from below the goal line to the blue line, you can't go somewhere high to get a shot when you've got to go a little lower to find different angles. And maybe reverse that if it goes high to low. Just watching the game is the biggest thing that's helped me."

Finally experiencing it for the first time at this level and not being overwhelmed by the speed, physicality and skill all around him has made Davidson feel like he has reason to believe he can stick here.

"I think just getting a few shots in the first game (he had four in just 7:14 versus the Bruins), playing physical, playing my game and seeing it

works, I think that kind of helps me think it's possible to have a career here," he said. "And I want to, so I think that helps. But it's just continuing that and evolving and finding little things to improve on and just getting better every day."

Capitals not quite same team that knocked Canadiens out of playoffs

They were the best team in the Eastern Conference last season before beating the eighth-ranked Canadiens in five games of the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, but the Capitals currently have the 14th-best record in the conference and are searching for some positive momentum that's proven elusive thus far.

We'll see if they gain some against the Edmonton Oilers Wednesday before they travel to Montreal to take on the rested Canadiens.

The Capitals are coming off a 2-1 win over the Los Angeles Kings, but it was only their third win in their last 10 games and the scoreline was indicative of the main problem they've had so far.

After scoring the second-most goals per game of any team in the league last season, the Capitals rank 24th in the category through 19 games. And their power play, which ranks 30th, is scoring on just 14 per cent of its opportunities, which is almost 10 full points below what it finished at last season.

It's laid waste to some remarkable performances Logan Thompson has offered.

Through 13 starts, the Capitals' goaltender has put up the best save percentage (.925) and goals-against average (1.85) of the 51 goaltenders who have made at least six appearances so far.

Meanwhile, Thompson is starting against the Oilers Wednesday, making it most likely the Canadiens will face Charlie Lindgren Thursday.

Lindgren, who debuted with the Canadiens in 2016 and played against them for just over six minutes of last year's playoff series (after Thompson left Game 3 with an injury), is 2-3-1 with an .893 save percentage and a 3.16 goals-against average.

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TSN.CA / Penalties called for discrimination increased in 2024-25, Hockey Canada says

Rick Westhead

The number of penalties called in Hockey Canada-sanctioned games for discrimination-related offences, including slurs related to race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, disabilities, and marital or family status, rose 16 per cent during the 2024-25 season, the federation wrote in its annual report on maltreatment.

Referees called 1,494 penalties during the 2024-25 season for verbal discrimination that contravened Hockey Canada's Rule 11.4, according to Hockey Canada's Maltreatment in Sanctioned Hockey Report, which was released Wednesday. The number of penalties rose from 1,291 in 2023-24, 913 in 2022-23, and 512 in 2021-22.

"Hockey Canada recognizes that despite the positive outcomes that can be achieved through participating in the sport, maltreatment does occur in hockey," the report said. "It is critical to continue collecting, monitoring and publishing national data from sanctioned hockey programming, which will help build awareness and support various initiatives that facilitate safeguarding and culture change. Maltreatment is unacceptable



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and fundamentally incompatible with the core values that lie at the heart of hockey.”

Of the 1,494 penalties for verbal discrimination documented in Wednesday’s report, 558 were called by referees in the Ontario Hockey Federation (OHF), most among provincial and territorial federations (PTSOs), followed by 230 in Hockey Quebec, and 146 in Hockey Alberta.

Hockey Canada said it had 516,147 registered players in 2024-25. The OHF accounted for 179,132, or 34 per cent, of all registered players.

When the number of registered players within a PTSO was factored into consideration, Hockey Eastern Ontario had 5.28 verbal discrimination penalties per 1,000 players, most among PTSOs. Hockey PEI had 4.01, and Hockey Manitoba had 3.82.

Players at the U18 level accounted for 815 of the 1,494 Rule 11.4 penalties in 2023-24, the most among the age groups, followed by U15 (391) and Junior (118).

The report did not include statistics from Canadian Hockey League games.

Hockey Canada’s independent third party (ITP), an arms-length agency run by Ottawa-area lawyer Jahmiah Ferdinand-Hodkin that receives and investigates complaints of abuse,

Published its own annual report on Wednesday that detailed the number of complaints it received and investigated during its third year of operation.

During its third year, the ITP received 1,464 complaints, and accepted and investigated 214. (1,031 complaints were redirected to other hockey organizations.)

The ITP, which said one-third of complainants asked to remain anonymous after filing a complaint, reported that in 2024-25, it received 711 complaints alleging bullying/harassment, 216 alleging discrimination, 119 alleging physical abuse, and 96 alleging sexual maltreatment. There were also 78 complaints alleging social-media harassment and 17 complaints alleging that hazing took place.

The ITP said that 13 complaints represented false allegations and five complaints were made because of retaliation. Four complaints led to criminal charges, the ITP said.

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TSN.CA / Tavares’ effort in helping Leafs to OT victory leaves teammates awestruck

Mark Masters

John Tavares won a puck battle against three St. Louis Blues to help set up the game-winning goal by William Nylander late in overtime on Tuesday night. Head coach Craig Berube highlighted the play in the Toronto Maple Leafs’ dressing room after the game.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Berube told his players. “That’s what wins hockey games.”

Moments later, Matias Maccelli passed Tavares the team’s player-of-the-game belt.

Tavares had already been on the ice for more than a minute when defenceman Jake McCabe passed him the puck at the St. Louis blue line.

Tavares briefly bobbed it.

“Just was fighting the puck a little bit and couldn’t really get into a good spot where I could make a play towards the net,” he said.

So, Tavares carried the puck along the wall to try and buy time as McCabe and Bobby McMann started to head off for a change following a long spell of Blues possession.

“I actually had my back turned,” McMann recalled. “I don’t know if [Tavares is] coming out of this one with the puck so I was like, I better get off and make sure we have a fresh body out there. And then I turn back and the puck’s coming out to Willy.”

Tavares was surrounded by Pavel Buchnevich, Dylan Holloway, and Philip Broberg along the wall. Buchnevich and Broberg engaged with Tavares while Holloway waited a few steps away anticipating his teammates would pry the puck loose.

“Once I got a sense that I had the two guys on me and saw their other guy a little more towards the corner, I just had to hopefully fight them off long enough and just get the puck free,” Tavares said.

The Leafs centre somehow retained possession.

“He’s a beast,” gushed goaltender Joseph Woll.

“That was wild,” said Nylander. “That’s dad strength.”

Tavares, a father of three, trapped the puck under his skate blade before sending a back-heel kick-pass to defenceman Morgan Rielly.

“That play there symbolizes John Tavares,” said Berube. “That’s what he’s all about.”

Tavares, who was the first-overall pick in the 2009 NHL Draft, has always had the will to match his high-end skill.

“It was incredible, but you kind of expect nothing less,” said new Leafs defenceman Troy Stecher. “You remember that one-handed move he made with the Islanders in overtime, so he’s done it before. But it kind of leaves you speechless.”

The play by Tavares came at the end of a heavy-minute night for the 35-year-old, who is filling in as Toronto’s No. 1 centre while Auston Matthews is sidelined.

“Sometimes you’re going to have to compete when you’re tired and maybe not as fresh as you’d like to be,” Tavares said. “Those are the things you try to push yourself through in the off-season, every day in practice, and just having that mindset of finding a way to make a play or get it done even when you’re tired.”

With the Leafs holding an optional practice on Wednesday, Tavares stayed off the ice to get some extra rest. There’s no doubt he deserved it. Tavares ended up logging 23 minutes and 43 seconds on Tuesday, which was his highest total in a regular season game since Jan. 16, 2020.

“He was double-shifting in OT and in the last 10 minutes of the third,” noted forward Steven Lorentz. “It’s just that leadership that he brings, qualities like that, second and third efforts against three top players on their team to be able to win that battle.”

Tavares is averaging 21 minutes and 56 seconds of ice time in the three games since Matthews got hurt. That’s way up from the 17 minutes and 37 seconds he averaged in the first 17 games of the season.

“It’s a lot to ask of him,” admitted Berube. “But, you know, he’s willing for sure. He’s played pretty well. I think he’s handled it pretty well, but I’ve got to try to lower that.”

The overtime assist on Tuesday brought Tavares’ point total to 25. He’s on pace for 102 points, which would be a career high.



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Nylander made sure that Tavares' hard work paid off by pulling off a goal-of-the-year candidate.

"Just kind of mesmerized watching Will," said Woll. "Fired me up."

The night got off to a rocky start for the 29-year-old Swede, who accidentally knocked a puck into his own net to gift the Blues a 1-0 lead.

"I got two goals tonight," Nylander told TSN with a smile after the game.

What the heck happened on the "first" goal?

"Snipe," Nylander said with a grin. "To be honest, I don't even know what I was thinking, but it was a little bit reactionary, I think. But it was nice to find the back of the net early."

Tavares could only shake his head.

"He never ceases to amaze me," Tavares said. "I personally don't worry, in situations like that, [about] his ability to just kind of let it go and focus on the rest of the game and stay with it."

"That's elite," Woll said. "His persona is kind of his superpower ... whether he scores on our net or their net, he's pretty much the same, so pretty awesome"

Nylander apologized to Woll after the misplay.

"I said, 'Sorry,'" Nylander recalled. "He said, 'It's all good.' I said, 'Thank you.'"

"He made up for it so all good," Woll confirmed.

Woll stopped 28 of the 29 Blues shots fired his way on Tuesday to earn his first win of the season.

"Pretty sweet," he beamed. "Pretty nice to win at home with the fans like that. Yeah, I always try to look around [and] take it in when we win like that, especially in overtime."

The St. Louis native notched his first win against his hometown team after going 0-2-0 against the Blues last season.

Woll now has a .934 save percentage in two games since returning from personal leave.

"It's like he's in mid-season form," said McMann. "He's solid. He looks square to every shot. He's athletic across the crease. I think he's just been elite, honestly, since he's been back. I think maybe the ones that have gone in aren't necessarily on him, they're more on us. He's been great."

But considering Woll missed training camp and the start of the season, the team will be careful with his workload. The 27-year-old stayed off the ice on Wednesday.

"We got to make sure we manage the practice time," Berube told TSN before the game against St. Louis.

Goalie Anthony Stolarz has not been on the ice since suffering an upper-body injury on Nov. 11 in Boston.

The Leafs are currently dealing with injuries to seven regulars, including winger Matthew Knies, who was a late scratch on Tuesday. Berube said Knies has been dealing with a lingering lower-body issue that recently got worse.

Knies did not stake on Wednesday and will also miss Thursday's game against the Blue Jackets.

The only injured player who may return on Thursday is centre Scott Laughton, who has been sidelined since taking a big hit from Bruins defenceman Nikita Zadorov on Nov. 8.

"He's progressing," said Berube. "We'll see."

Laughton, who was a full participant in Monday's practice, missed the start of the season after blocking a shot off his foot in a pre-season game. He was only playing his second game back when the Zadorov hit caused an upper-body injury.

Matthews, who sustained a lower-body injury on Nov. 11, and defenceman Chris Tanev, who was stretchered off the ice with an upper-body injury on Nov. 1, skated by themselves before the optional practice on Wednesday.

Matthews is improving, but is unlikely to play this week. Tanev remains "a ways away," Berube said.

Centre Nicolas Roy (upper body), defenceman Brandon Carlo (lower body) and Stolarz stayed off the ice on Wednesday.

Winger Sammy Blais left Tuesday's game after coughing up blood following a bodycheck to the chest. After tests came back clear, he was back on the ice on Wednesday and is available for Thursday's game.

Tuesday's win snapped a five-game skid (0-4-1), which was Toronto's longest winless streak since April 2021.

"It's no secret how big that one was for our group," said Lorentz, who scored Toronto's second goal. "Everyone knows what's going on. It hasn't been the greatest little stretch here for us, but carving out a win like that one, especially with so many guys out, it's definitely a vote of confidence for our group. That's why guys are extra happy."

"Just relief," said McCabe, who liked how resilient the team was in the wake of the Nylander own goal.

"One goes off our own twig in the net. It could have been like, 'Oh, f—k, here we go again,' kind of thing, but we stuck with it."

The Leafs ended up outshooting the Blues 10-4 in the first period and evened the score thanks to a goal by McCabe.

"I thought our forwards worked their butts off all night forechecking, you know, tracking through the neutral zone," McCabe said. "I thought us defencemen did a pretty good job protecting the middle of the ice too."

But consistency has proven elusive for the Leafs this season.

"It doesn't mean much," McCabe noted. "A long way to go here to keep building our identity and building with this group ... We're not going to be satisfied just getting one win. I mean, that's a big monkey off our back in a sense, but we got to start stringing them together and stringing efforts like that together."

The Blues did start taking control of the game in the later stages of the second period.

"Second period I thought was one of our better seconds until I started taking penalties and kind of messed up the flow," McCabe said.

McCabe was whistled for tripping Nathan Walker and Jordan Kyrou in the middle stanza. The Blues converted on one of the power plays to tie the game up at 2-2.

McCabe didn't appear thrilled by either call.

"I think I have a case for both of them, but also they're borderline and I can't disagree with them," McCabe said. "So, yeah, don't get me in trouble now."

Berube was willing to say a bit more.

"The second one's a tough one for me," the coach said. "He's jumping out of the way of the guy. He's kind of trying to jump around him. I don't



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know, that's a tough call in my opinion. But it is what it is. It's a split-second [decision] right? It's hard. And they're going to get it wrong sometimes. So it's the way it goes. We have more time to look at it."

McCabe has taken five penalties during the last five games.

The Blues, meanwhile, didn't like it when Buchnevich was whistled for holding Stecher in the first period.

"They thought I dove," Stecher said with a grin. "I just tried to use my feet to escape pressure."

Stecher, who was claimed off waivers from the Edmonton Oilers over the weekend, logged 13 minutes and 31 seconds and finished plus-one in his Leafs debut.

"Surprisingly, I actually didn't have any nerves," the 31-year-old said. "I've been traded three times, so I've been familiar stepping into different locker rooms."

Stecher was playing for the first time since Oct. 30.

"I felt actually really good, which I kind of honestly expected," he said. "Like, I hadn't been playing very much in Edmonton, so I've been getting a lot of extra skating in, so my legs and cardio felt really good. Besides my compete level, I feel like my greatest strength is my feet, so it definitely helped with feeling comfortable out there, knowing that I was going to have my legs last night."

McCabe lauded Stecher for being vocal during the game despite having just joined a new team.

"The biggest thing they've stressed with me so far up to this point is just to be myself," Stecher said. "I'm a vocal guy throughout the game. I'm honestly a bit of a cheerleader on the bench. It's nice any time that you feel you can be yourself and you don't have to be somebody you're not. That was just a good way for me to also feel part of the game."

Shot attempts favoured the Leafs 10-6 in Stecher's 5-on-5 minutes, per NaturalStatTrick.com. He led the team in that department (62.5 per cent CorsiFor).

"Just made simple plays and made a difference," McCabe said. "He gave us a little spark on the back end."

"He's a great skater," said McManis. "I didn't realize how good of a skater he is and how well he can get himself out of those D-zone scenarios with his skating and puck moving."

Leafs lines at the start of Tuesday's game:

Robertson - Tavares - Nylander

McMann - Domi - Cowan

Maccelli - Quillan - Blais

Joshua - Lorentz - Jarnkrok

Rielly - Ekman-Larsson

Benoit - McCabe

Mermis - Stecher

Woll

Hildeby

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