



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 2, 2025



Bussi Making Stops, Starting Strong In Raleigh

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

"(He's had) nothing but a great attitude, and at the end of the day, every start, he's been solid."

RALEIGH, N.C. - There are games within the game, and then there are also games before the games.

One of the games played during each NHL preseason is between the front offices of each club, when tough roster decisions must be made involving players who are required to go through waivers before they can be assigned to their American Hockey League affiliate. There are always teams that have openings due to injuries, and there are players who shine during exhibition play that may be revered as a better option than the existing ones for certain teams.

And while you may be able to sneak a player through on a day when the waiver list is light, that's never a guarantee, and trying to pull that off when your player is one of just a few could easily spell trouble. It's a slippery slope - particularly with goaltenders.

That exact situation is what transpired for the Carolina Hurricanes to conclude this year's training camp. When the Canes put a claim in for goalie Brandon Bussi on Oct. 5, it was merely as an insurance policy in case Cayden Primeau, who had two solid preseason starts, was snatched up by another club.

Had Primeau gone unclaimed, there is a world where the Canes would have turned around and placed Bussi back on waivers the following day - a common maneuver.

But the Toronto Maple Leafs had a need, and off went Primeau, leaving the Canes and Bussi to form a relationship on the fly.

Two months later, that relationship is beginning to evolve into something special, even if it started from a place of mystery.

"I didn't know much about him," said Canes Head Coach Rod Brind'Amour. "I knew the name because we'd talked about him a lot. I'd heard that name going around in the offseasons, but I had zero (idea). I'd never even seen him play."

Now, Bussi continues to stack wins - his seven victories are a franchise-best mark through a first-year netminder's first eight career starts with the club - and the player Brind'Amour had only heard of is quickly becoming an impactful part of one of the Eastern Conference's best teams.

"He's just a good dude, number one. Like, I love that part of it," continued Brind'Amour. "You can just talk to him for a

couple of minutes and know, 'Okay, this guy gets it.' So that's the thing that stands out. Can you stop pucks? Well, yeah, that looks like something that he's done for us really well."

For his part, Bussi, who was actually on his way to North Carolina to join Florida's AHL affiliate in Charlotte when Carolina claimed him, has cruised to a 7-1-0 start on the strength of his "timely saves" and calm demeanor.

Producing such impressive performances despite not enjoying the rhythm of starts that goaltenders typically prefer, with incumbents Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov having first claim to the net, makes Bussi's body of work all the more impressive.

"It's not easy not knowing when your next start is. Since he's arrived on the scene, that's what it's been. (He's had) nothing but a great attitude, and at the end of the day, every start, he's been solid. That's exactly what you need," said Brind'Amour.

Amid the unpredictable schedule, Bussi credits a regular routine for helping him stay sharp, whether he's suiting up for action or sitting up in the press box.

"It's actually a good balance of off days, getting your rest and mentally getting away from it, as well as when you come to the rink, now you're fully mentally there and ready on the ice, because you don't know when your next opportunity is going to be."

Naturally, when he faced just 28 total shots across his first set of consecutive starts on Nov. 28 and 30, Bussi's refrain was similar after allowing a single goal in the former and notching his first NHL shutout in the latter.

"You never know, as a goalie, when that moment will be, or if there will be a moment for a big play, or something crazy to happen," he said. "So it's just mentally staying with it. You never know."

"It's not like we've been leaving him out to dry or giving up 40 shots a night," said Brind'Amour. "It's not really that, but if there's a breakaway here or there, those are huge moments in tight games. Every game, it's almost been the same story. It's timely saves that allow us to have a chance, and that's what you ask for."

Bussi the goaltender and Bussi the person have both drawn rave reviews in Raleigh, but it's that ability to come through in decisive moments that continues to impress those around him.

"It's incredible. He played great all game. He didn't get tested a whole lot, but when he did, he was making big saves," said



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Seth Jarvis after the Canes' win over Winnipeg on Nov. 28.
"That one was massive for our confidence. To keep us in the game like that was huge."

"I think you're seeing him grow from game to game, too. He's got a lot of talent as a goalie, and he's a big body, obviously," echoed Taylor Hall in review of Bussi's first perfect outing on Nov. 30.

"I think he's got a bright future in this league, and he's only going to get better and better once he's used to the speed and just the talent that's in this league. But [he's a] great guy, and he's been a huge addition to us."

Bussi came to Carolina as a relatively unknown commodity, and understandably so. Such is the roll of the dice when it comes to waiver claims, particularly those involving goaltenders without NHL experience

Sometimes that roll reveals a talented player who, respectably, reached his ceiling in the AHL. But other times, you find an overlooked gem, just waiting for the chance to shine at the next level.

The more time Bussi spends between the pipes, the more he looks like the latter option.

"It doesn't matter if you're 22 or 26, especially if you're a goalie; there's no direct path to being what you are," said Hall. "When you're big and you're athletic like he is in the net, just keep going. Like I said, I think he's only going to get better and better."

And, as the saying goes after each Canes win in Lenovo Center: if you don't know, now you know.

"I think (the hockey world) knows who he is now," said Jarvis. "He's been electric. He's the best guy. There's no one I'm happier for."



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Bussi shines with first career shutout in Canes' win over Flames

By: Haley O'Neill

Showing out with stellar saves throughout the game, goaltender Brandon Bussi recorded the first back-to-back start of his career and walked away with his first-ever shutout.

The Carolina Hurricanes (16-7-2) had a steady match against the Calgary Flames (9-14-4), ending with zero regulation goals and 15 shots on-goal each. With the ice opening up, the Canes found a way to sneak the puck past goaltender Devin Cooley just under three minutes into overtime, taking the win 1-0.

Both playing left wing, Taylor Hall and Nikolaj Ehlers don't often find themselves playing together, but they managed to record the game-winning goal in 3-on-3 action. Using the help of defenseman Sean Walker, they crafted a counterattack into the offensive zone with a give-and-go around the defense. Flying in to finish the play, Ehlers snapped the final pass from Hall into the back of the net, recording the night's only goal and his first overtime winner as a Hurricane.

"A lot of the time, you'd rather a right-handed player receiving that pass," Hall said. "But I know that he probably gave me his forehand, and it was a good play. He and I don't get out a lot together. In practice, we don't get to do very many drills together because we're always working as a line. So it's funny when you get out there with a guy like him that's fast and elusive."

Even though there weren't many shots for either team, the goalie play was the main event Sunday night. Bussi, playing only his eighth game in the NHL, came out looking like a veteran. Making game-saving saves, he was the reason his team had a sliver of hope of walking away with the win. Across the ice from Bussi, Cooley was in the same boat. Coming out hot from the beginning, he was also the reason his team made it to overtime to receive a point.

"It pushes you a little bit," Bussi said. "It's just part of staying in the moment. It's not just trying not to focus on what the other guy is doing, but to be honest, [Cooley] is kind of a buddy of mine. We've trained together the last few summers, so I guess I'm pumped to be one up on him now."

Usually known for their speed and aggressive offense, the Hurricanes had to slow down the pace and commit more attention to their defense. The mistakes and turnovers from the Hurricanes allowed the Flames to dictate the speed of play and generate better opportunities.

"Before the game, they put up their analytics and could tell that they play some low-event hockey," Hall said. "They play a defensive style, and they're good at checking. There wasn't a lot of room in the [offensive] zone tonight. You know their record is what it is, but they played hard and gave us a really tough test. They forced us into making mistakes, they forced us into making plays and for a lot of the night, we didn't play the way we're accustomed to."

After hitting multiple posts and with chances being snatched away, it was evident that Carolina was losing steam and getting frustrated. Bussi, remaining calm and showing up when his team needed him most, was given a boost from the crowd as they chanted his name.

"Anytime you hear your name being chanted by the crowd, it's really cool," Bussi said. "The most important thing is kind of what's going on in this room and stuff, and how we're playing night in and night out. So obviously, I appreciate it. I don't want to understate that it is cool, but the most important thing is what we're doing here, and I'm trying to keep it going."

Next up, the Hurricanes take on the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday, Dec. 4, at 7 p.m. at the Lenovo Center.

LINKS

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/after-the-storm-bussi-making-stops-starting-strong-in-raleigh>
<https://technicianonline.com/152665/sports/bussi-shines-with-first-career-shutout-in-can-es-win-over-flames/>



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SportScan

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

1223677 Carolina Hurricanes

Bussi gets first career shutout, Ehlers scores lone goal in Hurricanes' OT win

Cory Lavalette 5-6 minutes 01/12/2025

RALEIGH — The Carolina Hurricanes had to wait for their chances against the defensive-minded Calgary Flames on Sunday at Lenovo Center.

But they didn't have to be as patient as Brandon Bussi has been to get his first career NHL shutout.

Neither the Flames nor the Hurricanes scored in regulation, but when Nikolaj Ehlers finished off a 2-on-1 rush with Taylor Hall to win the game 2:52 into overtime, Bussi — 1,324 days after he made his professional debut in the AHL — left the ice without allowing a goal in Carolina's 1-0 win.

"These are games that are fun for goalies," Bussi said. "It's a really good battle. You don't know what's going to be that moment to change the tide, and fortunately, we got it."

It wasn't a busy night for Bussi, who made 15 saves to counterpart Devin Cooley's 16, but the win did improve him to 7-1-0 since Carolina claimed him off waivers from Boston on Oct. 5.

"He's been great for us," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said of Bussi, who was making a second consecutive start for the first time since joining the Hurricanes. "I think he's come up with the timely save."

"That's kind of, for me, how I sum it up because it's not like you've been leaving him out to dry and we're giving up 40 shots a night. It's not really that, but there's a breakaway here or there all of a sudden. Those are huge moments in tight games."

While it will be a lifetime moment for Bussi, most who watched the game won't have fond memories of what could best be described as a slog induced by Calgary's trapping posture.

The first period had as many icings as shots on goal, nine apiece, and the following 40 minutes weren't much more exciting.

The two teams totaled just 32 shots — an amount the Hurricanes have matched or exceeded on their own in 15 of their previous 24 games this year.

But on Sunday, the Flames collapsed in their own zone and hoped to goad the Hurricanes into getting impatient and making a mistake.

"Before the game they put up their analytics, and you could tell that they play some low-event hockey, and they play a defensive style," Hall said. "And they're good at checking — there wasn't a lot of room in the O zone tonight."

Carolina did get caught a few times trying to do too much, but the Flames misfired on a couple of odd-man rushes. When their chances were on the mark, Bussi was there to snuff it out.

"Every game you can almost say the same story," Brind'Amour said of Bussi. "It's like, timely save, allow us to have a chance. And that's what you ask from him."

The wide-open ice of overtime finally gave the Hurricanes a chance to create some space, and Hall and Ehlers used their speed to play catch while entering the Calgary zone. Hall fended off Flames defenseman Rasmus Andersson and curled a pass across the crease to Ehlers, who beat Nazem Kadri to the far post for his fifth goal of the season and third game winner of the season.

"We were both coming with a lot of speed," Ehlers said. "He wanted it on the outside, and then my thought was just going to the net and give him the option. It's a great play by (Hall)."

Hall and Ehlers have played together just 7:22 this season, but Carolina has scored three goals in that short span — all at even strength — and now have a moment of their own together.

"(Ehlers) and I don't get out a lot together," Hall said. "And in practice, we don't get to do very many drills together because we're always working as a line. So it's funny when you get out there with a guy like him that's fast and elusive."

As for Bussi, his elusive first NHL shutout is another box he can check off in his miraculous turn with the Hurricanes.

"Anytime you hear your name being chanted by the crowd, it's really cool," Bussi said. "But the most important thing is kind of what's going on in this room and stuff, and how we're playing night in and night out."

"So obviously I appreciate it, so I don't want to understate that — it is cool. But you know, the most important thing is kind of what we're doing here and trying to keep it going."

Notes: Jesperi Kotkaniemi missed his eighth straight game with an ankle injury. ... The Hurricanes' 17 shots on goal are their fewest since they had 16 in a 5-0 loss on Oct. 23, 2014, at Calgary. The last time they had fewer in a win was 16 SOG in a 2-1 win over Winnipeg on Jan. 23, 2012.

The North State Journal LOADED: 12.02.2025

1223781 Websites

The Athletic / Holiday gift guide 2025: Something for every sports fan on your list

By Brooks Peck and David Betancourt

Last year, we shared gift ideas for the sports fan who has everything. This year, we're back with some new items to consider in a variety of



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categories. We also have another guest recommender from The Athletic's newsroom: senior college sports writer and expert gift giver Lindsay Schnell. We hope this list makes your holiday shopping a little less stressful!

— Brooks Peck and David Betancourt, The Athletic's memorabilia and collectibles editors

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Jordan Brand, and the sneaker line that changed the game, Assouline has

Published a gorgeous book featuring exclusive Images and fresh interviews and insights. Written by Adam Bradley, writer at large for the New York Times' T Magazine, and with a foreword by Jordan himself, this is perfect for anyone who has a closet full of Air Jordans (or wishes they did). The book comes in two versions: Classic Edition and Ultimate Edition, the latter of which is limited to just 1,000 copies and has sold out, but may still be found on eBay.

The Soccer 100. Photo: The Athletic

"The Soccer 100"

We're all impatiently waiting for the 2026 World Cup to arrive, and what better way to pass the time than by reading up on the greatest men's players in the history of the game? The Athletic's unmatched staff of experts has put together the ultimate ranking of the top 100 players (including 43 World Cup winners) with deeply reported profiles of each player, which is a must-have for any soccer fan. For a taste, you can read Oliver Kay's full introduction to the book here.

Other sports books from The Athletic: "The Football 100" by Mike Sando, Dan Pompei and The NFL Staff, "The Basketball 100" by David Aldridge, John Hollinger and The NBA staff.

New Era's retro style and nostalgia-infused Hardwood Classics collection is the perfect gift for that person in your life that is just a little too excited that the NBA is back on NBC. While these aren't officially the hats to wear when jamming to John Tesh's "Roundball Rock" after a Bob Costas or Marv Albert narrative intro, they should be. There are 33 team options (the Boston Celtics and Washington Bullets/Wizards have multiple offerings) and they're available in New Era's signature 59FIFTY fitted, 9FIFTY snapback, 9SEVENTY trucker and 9TWENTY adjustable, depending on the team. In a collection where every hat looks great, the standouts include the Grant Hill teal (not the name of the color, but it should be) Detroit Pistons, Minnesota Timberwolves, Seattle SuperSonics and the black Iverson-esque Philadelphia 76ers. There's also a throwback apparel collection to go along with the hats.

Other great hats: Jackie Robinson Day Commemorative Wool Ballcap by Ebbets Field; WNBA Hitch hats by '47 Brand; Wisconsin Frozen Pizzas (an identity adopted by the Milwaukee Brewers Single-A affiliate because Wisconsin consumes the most frozen pizza in the world) by New Era.

Star Wars and NFL teams might seem like a strange combo (OK, it definitely is), but the way Homage put this collection together makes it work. Each team has a custom light side and dark side design, giving fans a choice in how they want to rep their team and preferred side of the Force. Each design is hand-drawn, giving it that retro feel of the original Star Wars trilogy and is available in T-shirt or hoodie form with both youth and adult sizes, allowing you to do some fun mixing and matching, even within your family.

One of the WNBAPA shirt options from BreakingT.

BreakingT WNBAPA shirts

Back in July, the WNBA All-Stars wore T-shirts reading "Pay us what you owe us" made by BreakingT, a company that turns viral sports moments and figures into wearable form, licensed by a variety of players' associations. With the WNBA CBA dispute still ongoing, that shirt and other variations of that concept remain among the company's top sellers.

Other awesome apparel: Santurce Cangrejeros mesh v-neck jersey by Ebbets Field; WNBA x WNBPA collection by Round21; Teemu Selanne Anaheim Ducks 1995-96 teal alternate power play jersey by Mitchell & Ness (this might be the most '90s garment in existence).

Lindsay Schnell's picks

Oracle Park and Yankee Stadium pint glasses. Photo: Uncommon Goods

MLB ballpark pint glasses

Maybe you can't take someone out to a ballgame in the dead of winter, but you can pour them a frosty cold beverage in these glasses and make plans for the upcoming season. Each set of these glasses features a map of an iconic MLB stadium in the team's two main colors, and they're good looking enough to be displayed on a bar cart year-round. To ensure everyone can join in the fun, add this card-based sports drinking game.

Mini TENS unit

The ultimate stocking stuffer, this is the tool the adult athlete in your life needs. No matter if someone is a runner, weightlifter or the star of their slow-pitch softball team, a TENS machine will change their life if they have sore muscles or nagging injuries — I promise. Best of all, it's small, which means it can easily fit into someone's purse, backpack or carry-on suitcase. Plan ahead and order some replacement pads, too.

Sports art by Mallory Tolcher and Abriella Sammy

How does one find chic sports art? Look north of the 49th parallel toward Toronto, where two women artists and their work provide the answer. Mallory Tolcher "reimagines the symbols of sport as timeless luxury," while Abriella Sammy's expertise with epoxy resin creates some of the most beautiful basketball courts you've ever seen. Tolcher's most recent collection is an exploration of the NBA's evolving dress code rules, while Sammy's partnered with everyone from Canada Basketball to the NBA to create one-of-a-kind pieces. You can buy prints and sculptures directly from Tolcher, and you can wear or display Sammy's work.

Caitlin Clark coloring book

Odds are, you know someone who's a Caitlin Clark fanatic. And no matter that person's age, they're sure to enjoy this coloring book with illustrations that look strikingly similar to the 2024 WNBA Rookie of the Year. Clark has helped lift not just women's basketball, but all of women's sports, into the spotlight it's long deserved. What better way to celebrate that than by papering your fridge with pictures of one of America's most popular athletes?

Trading cards

Sports cards remain a highly sought-after collectible and make an easy and fun gift for kids, nostalgic adults or hardcore collectors. They're also usually available at a variety of price points. Here are some accessible picks for each sport:

NBA: 2025-26 Topps Basketball — Topps' return to licensed NBA cards after 15 years of Panini exclusivity. Set includes lots of fun insert designs, Cooper Flagg rookie cards and autographs from the likes of Victor Wembanyama and LeBron James.

WNBA: 2025 Donruss WNBA — Includes Paige Bueckers' rookie cards and the supremely popular Downtown inserts can be found in some hobby boxes.

MLB: 2025 Topps Chrome Baseball — This set includes the rare gold Logoman patch cards and as an added bit of value, cards of MVPs Shohei Ohtani and Aaron Judge can be traded in at hobby shops across the country for store credit.

NFL: 2025 Panini Mosaic Football — These are eye-catching cards with fun parallels and inserts (like the Stained Glass and Kaleidoscopic) to chase.



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Premier League: Topps Premier League 2026 — Topps' first set since getting the license includes vibrant designs and autographs from some of the Premier League's best — past and present.

NWSL: 2025 Parkside NWSL Collection Vol. 1 or 2025 Club and Country (for the USWNT fan) — The Club and Country set is especially cool since it shows players in both their NWSL and USWNT kits. Additionally, both sets include autographs to chase.

NHL: 2025-26 Upper Deck Hockey Series 1 — Find the coveted Young Guns rookie cards of the latest draft class, as well as the stunning photography of the UD Canvas inserts.

PWHL: 2024-25 Upper Deck PWHL — Includes the PWHL Young Guns and inserts like UD Portraits.

Formula 1: 2024 Topps Chrome Formula 1 — From the photography to the card designs, this is an attractive set and a fun rip while we wait for the 2025 edition to release.

Tennis: 2024 Topps Chrome Tennis — This set includes both men's and women's players, and the Aces inserts are sure to appeal to any fan.

A minimalist piece to commemorate the LA Dodgers' second consecutive World Series title. Image: S. Preston

S. Preston art

S. Preston combines sports and art in some really fun and unique ways. His minimalist works highlight defining and beloved elements of different ballparks, stadiums, mascots and more. Then his MLB/NHL x Looney Tunes and Sesame Street series mash-up of beloved teams and characters. His pieces look great anywhere from a kids' room to an office.

Trey Yesavage painted with a baseball as a brush. Image: Samantha Woj

Samantha Woj art

A Canadian artist who paints athletes using the equipment of their sport as a brush, Samantha Woj creates beautiful and unique works for a variety of sports. Her take on a shirtless Jason Kelce, famously celebrating in the stands at a Kansas City Chiefs versus Buffalo Bills game using the nose of a football, is definitely a standout.

Two picks for the road

Yeti's NBA team customization options. Photo: Yeti

Yeti team customs

Yeti has compiled licenses for the NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL, MLS, Red Bull Racing and over 100 colleges, allowing them to put sleek-looking logos on a variety of gift-worthy products ranging from coolers to water bottles and flasks. Wirecutter recommends Yeti's 20 oz. Rambler Tumbler with MagSlider Lid and the Colster Can Cooler, both of which are available for team customization.

The Tiny Tailgater Set. Photo courtesy of Fischer-Price

Fisher-Price Mini Me Moments Tiny Tailgater Set

Finally, a way to develop an infant's motor skills while also prepping them for the tailgate life. This set includes a roller hot dog, a plushie football, a crinkle cooler, a teether chip, a wearable crinkle "foam" finger and a goal post spinny mirror. It's as much a gift for football-loving parents as it is for the baby.

Wirecutter picks

Our friends at Wirecutter have tested and recommended what they've found to be the best sports-related gear available. Check out their reviews for a plethora of gift ideas:

The best health and fitness equipment

The best running gear

The best workout earbuds and headphones

The best fitness trackers

eBay insights

Knowing which athletes have been the most popular among collectors this year can help guide your gifting. Here are eBay's most searched athletes in some of the top leagues (data from January-September 2025):

In the NBA, a few legends remain just as popular as ever: Michael Jordan, Wembanyama, Kobe Bryant, James and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander.

It's a similar story in the NHL: Wayne Gretzky, Connor Bedard, Sidney Crosby, Patrick Roy and Mario Lemieux.

In the NFL, it's all about the young quarterbacks: Jayden Daniels, J.J. McCarthy, Caleb Williams, Bo Nix and Drake Maye.

In the WNBA, young stars also lead the way: Caitlin Clark, Bueckers, Cameron Brink, Sophie Cunningham and Sabrina Ionescu.

In MLB, multiple generations are still represented: Shohei Ohtani, Ken Griffey Jr., Mickey Mantle, Paul Skenes and Elly De La Cruz.

In golf, Tiger is still king: Woods, Rory McIlroy, Bryson DeChambeau, Scottie Scheffler and Jon Rahm.

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1223782 Websites

The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: Early offseason lessons, plus three teams with surprise arcs

By Sean McIndoe

It's December, which means it's not too early anymore.

At least for some things. For example, if a team is struggling to hit .500 at this point, it's not just a case of a slump or a run of rough luck. That team is bad. There's still time for them to get good again, absolutely. But right now? There's no more pointing at the calendar and pretending everything's OK.

I'm not as convinced it's not too early to pass judgement on the offseason. But we're doing it anyway, so here we go ...

Bonus five: Still-too-early offseason lessons

5. The Ducks defense wasn't the problem for John Gibson — For years, we watched Gibson struggle in Anaheim. Some of us wondered if he was cooked. Others pointed out he was playing behind a young Ducks team that wasn't offering him any help. When he was finally dealt to the Detroit Red Wings, we figured we'd finally get to see what he could do behind a better team. And so far, the results haven't been great. Even as the Wings have hung in the playoff race, it hasn't been due to goaltending, with Gibson especially putting up some ugly early numbers.

4. Maybe the Leafs and Mitch Marner should have figured it out — You're probably sick of hearing about the Leafs' struggles, if such a thing is possible. But they've been bad, and a big part of the story has been the things Marner did well, including special teams and playing in his own end. The Leafs tried to replace him in aggregate over the offseason and those moves have almost all been busts. The lesser side of the story is that Marner hasn't exactly been lighting it up in Vegas, where he's on pace for just 16 goals and his lowest full-season point total since he was 20 years old. He's probably still happier because he can make a mistake



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like this without seeing it on the front of every newspaper, but it hasn't been a perfect fit quite yet.

3. The Sabres won the JJ Peterka trade – They haven't won much else, but so far, Josh Doan is producing at the same rate as Peterka in Utah. Factor in age, salary and Michael Kesselring, and the early returns say Kevyn Adams may have actually won one here.

2. Playing it safe isn't always very safe – It's always interesting to look back at which teams had the quietest offseason. Sometimes it works. But in the summer of 2025, some of the quieter teams included the Flames, Canucks, Capitals and Predators. The Caps are OK, although they're on pace for a step back from last year's surprise. The other three? Maybe staying the course wasn't the right plan.

Speaking of which...

1. The Oilers should have gotten a goaltender – Easy to say it now, but how many of you thought it was a mistake at the time? Hm, OK, that seems to be literally everyone on the planet. Interesting.


We'll get into the Oilers a bit more down below. For now, let's move on to the rankings, which features a major absence this week...

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

Both the best and worst play of the weekend: Kyle Palmieri tearing his ACL, then gutting it out to set up a goal on his way off the ice.

This effort is different!

Kyle Palmieri would NOT quit on the play  pic.twitter.com/BTAghx5551

— SportsCenter (@SportsCenter) November 28, 2025

He'll be out for at least six months.

5. New Jersey Devils (16-8-1, +4 true goals differential*) – They've adjusted OK to life without Jack Hughes, with three wins in four games on the week. That basically leaves them neck-and-neck with ...

4. Carolina Hurricanes (16-7-2, +16) – I'm sorry, I know we're all working away in the online content mills, but there is no way that a 1-0 win over a last-place team which features 32 shots by both teams combined should result in a 10-minute "highlights" video.

3. Dallas Stars (17-5-4, +22) – Four straight wins and 21 goals scored. Not bad for a reasonably tough stretch of schedule. By the way, if you're wondering about their next matchups with the Avalanche, I checked the schedule and they'll play them twice in March, once in April and then seven times in May.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (16-7-2, +19) – The win streak is up to seven, which has been enough to open up a bit of a cushion on top of a weird Atlantic Division. They've got the Islanders twice this week, starting tomorrow, with the Penguins sandwiched in between.

1. Colorado Avalanche (18-1-6, +51) – It's important to make sure other teams in the league still feel like they have a chance, so let's highlight this week's sign that the Avs aren't unbeatable: Mackenzie Blackwood is occasionally letting the other team score again.

Mackenzie Blackwood's shootout streak finally comes to an end at 173:31 (nearly three full games).

It is the 3rd longest streak in Avalanche history (behind two by Patrick Roy).

Blackwood saved 84 consecutive shots without allowing a goal during the streak.

— Jesse Granger (@jessegranger.bsky.social) November 29, 2025 at 4:38 PM

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Minnesota Wild – We're getting close. We're not quite there yet.

It's tempting to find a way to sneak the league's hottest team into the top five, especially after they beat the Avalanche on Friday night. That game was a shootout, so call it a tie if you'd prefer, but even hanging with the unstoppable Avs right now is impressive. Getting two points in the process is a statement.

Unfortunately, so is a loss to the Sabres, which is what we got on Saturday in a classic letdown game. That one was a shootout too, as the coin flip giveth and taketh away. But if I was looking for cover for leaving the Wild out of this week's top five, the Sabres provided it.

The Other Rankings had already seen enough, moving the Wild into their five-spot before that Friday night showdown. We move a bit slower on this side of the weekend, since we're more focused on the long-term. But the Wild have been undeniably impressive lately, digging out from a 3-6-3 start with seven straight wins and just a single regulation loss since October. And that stretch includes wins over contenders like the Knights, Hurricanes, Jets and now Avs, so it's hardly been empty calories.

It hasn't been enough to cause a major shift in the projections quite yet, with Dom's model still having the Wild around the middle of the pack. And the betting odds, which I don't rely on but can serve as a useful sanity check, haven't caught up yet. In fact, most of them still have the Wild down with teams like the Habs, Senators and Ducks, which is to say teams with real but outside chances. If you think the Wild are obviously one of the five best bets to win the Cup right now, and you're the wagering type, let's just say there's some value to be had.

Or you could just enjoy the run and that fun feeling of watching a team where just about everything is clicking. Kirill Kaprizov looks like a guy who deserves a big contract. The youth is holding up their end, with Matt Boldy scoring and Brock Faber handling 24 minutes a night. The "Danila Yurov as first-line center" era is progressing nicely. And in the biggest story of the young season, Jesper Wallstedt is posting the sort of goaltending numbers the team was dreaming about when they invested a first-round pick in him all those years ago. He had his doubters, and it was deserved after last year's debacle, but he's proving them wrong.

Can they keep it up? Sure, at least for a while. They kick off a road trip tomorrow that starts with three games in Canada, and that's not a bad place to be these days. The schedule between now and the holidays is basically a whole bunch of very winnable matchups, plus statement games against the Stars and Avs, which are both on home ice.

Really, the only downside right now is that all this winning hasn't translated into a big jump up the standings, because the brutal Central just didn't give any ground near the top. It's not hard to imagine the Wild cooling down only slightly, going on to finish the season with well over 100 points, and then being rewarded with a first-round matchup that starts on the road in Dallas.

That's a ways away, though. For now, it's enough to enjoy watching a team hit on all cylinders. It's not quite a top-five performance just yet, but they're knocking on the door. Let's see if they break it down this week.

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last and the best lottery odds for Gavin McKenna (we think).

Let's get right to the big story...

For the first time since January 2022, the Sharks are not in the bottom five. First, we had to say goodbye to the Blackhawks a few weeks ago,



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and now the Sharks are also getting a chance to creep outside the warm embrace of failure and see what the real world is like.

(It's not all good news for the Sharks, though, because this is the week we found out they're dastardly rule-breakers.)

5. Vancouver Canucks (10-13-3, -18) – We held out as long as we could, but with five losses in six games, they haven't given us much choice. By points percentage, we're actually flattering them here — they'd be 29th overall. Oh, and they get the Avs tomorrow, so that should be fun.

The good news: It really does feel like some sort of change is imminent.

4. Buffalo Sabres (10-11-4, -12) – Shootout or no, coming out of Minnesota with two points is impressive. But it still leaves the Sabres as the only Eastern team that's under .500 on the year.

3. St. Louis Blues (9-10-7, -21) – Nasty stuff on Saturday, with Alexey Toropchenko ejected after sticking his knee out on Utah's Logan Cooley. The Blues killed it off and earned a 1-0 win, their second straight on this three-game homestand that wraps up tonight against the Ducks.

2. Calgary Flames (9-14-4, -17) – The thing about a lost season is that it can be hard to get up for every game, so when you're playing the defending champs you can be sure you'll be ready to play and ah, nevertheless...

The good news is they came back and won that game, so ... extensions for everyone.

1. Nashville Predators (8-13-4, -29) – Let's focus on the positive: They strung together consecutive regulation wins for the first time this season, winning on the road in Detroit and Chicago. Should that be enough to move them out of the bottom spot? Maybe, but the good news is they play Flames tomorrow so the two contenders can figure it out for themselves.

Not ranked: Edmonton Oilers – OK, let's do this.

The Oilers haven't been a focus of this column for most of the year. They made a brief appearance in the top five back in week one, reflecting their status as preseason favorites. They fell out quickly after a slow start, but that wasn't a big deal, because this was the Oilers — they always start slow, everybody always freaks out, they always end up running off 12 straight wins at some point, and we always say we won't get fooled again.

And I promised I wouldn't. While we made note of their struggles, including in last week's Canadian panic rankings, we tried hard not to overreact. They do this every year. You're not allowed to really worry about the Oilers in October and November.

OK. Now it's December. Can we worry yet?

Even after Saturday's win over Seattle, we're 26 games into the season and the Oilers have won just 11 times. They have yet to put up a three-game win streak. They've only won back-to-back games in regulation once, and that was in the season's first week. They have a loss where they gave up seven goals, plus one where they gave up eight, and also one where they gave up nine, all in the last month. The goaltending, to put it mildly, remains a concern, but it's far from the only problem. They have just six wins in regulation, which is tied for the fewest in the league. In Daniel Nugent-Bowman's most recent report cards, there are nine players in goal or on the blue line who received grades, and only one did better than a C.

So what now? Earlier in the month, we ran a couple of interesting pieces from Lowetide that covered the two apparent possibilities: staying the course, or making a trade to shake things up, especially in goal. Neither feels like an ideal option right now, which isn't a good sign of a team that's in one.

So how worried should Oilers fans be? I put that question to Daniel in last week's newsletter, and he was more optimistic than I might have expected. Granted, that was before the Dallas disaster, but his points about the team getting back to full health and fixing a few of the five-on-five issues make sense. And despite what the calendar says, there's still time.

So I'll go ahead and plant my flag: I still think there's no way this team misses the playoffs. They're too good, there's too much runway left and the division just isn't strong enough to keep them out. And once they're in, they'll be a favorite against any Pacific team aside from (maybe) Vegas. They're not scaring a team like the Avs right now, but nobody is. It will be fine. It should be fine.

And if it isn't, well, we're looking at the season's biggest disaster. And maybe we'll look back at early December and wonder why nobody was worried enough. I just can't see it playing out that way. Oilers fans, can you?

The Athletic LOADED: 12.02.2025

1223783 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Awards WATCH: Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Matthew Schaefer dominate early races

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Throughout the season, I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers of course aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players who may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

Welcome back to another year of NHL Awards Watch. We're now officially past the quarter mark of the 2025-26 season, making it a good time to start looking at the key awards races.

While it's still way too early to form any conclusions, enough time has passed to start building some narratives: Colorado's best players are unreal, Matthew Schaefer is special and Jeremy Swayman is back. A lot will change from now until game 82, but here's how we're looking to start.

Based on my interpretation of the numbers, here's how each of the key races currently shakes out.

Data as of Nov. 30

Hart Trophy

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

The Colorado Avalanche are unstoppable and their two best players have been directly at the heart of that. Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar have been the best players in hockey this season.

MacKinnon is arguably having his best season to date, scoring at a 66-goal and 144-point pace while obliterating opponents at five-on-five. That the Avalanche are up 35-9 in his minutes already is absurd and he's the easy Hart front-runner with how dominant he's been on the league's best team.



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Makar, though, is a big part of that. The duo forge a special connection with the Avalanche up 23-6 in their minutes together. Makar taking on tough minutes with Brock Nelson away from MacKinnon shouldn't be ignored either. While MacKinnon's offense is undeniable, Makar does make up some ground defensively because of that.

Down the list are some noteworthy defensemen anchoring their teams and the current Vezina favorite. Among the remaining forwards, Jason Robertson looks like he's back to the form he flashed in 2022-23 when he finished fourth in MVP voting. He's been the focal point of Dallas' five-on-five success with a team-leading 56 percent expected goals rate while also outscoring opponents 24-11.

Brandon Hagel and Jack Eichel round out the forward group with their five-on-five games being key factors. The Lightning earn 61 percent of xG with Hagel on the ice while the Golden Knights are at 58 percent with Eichel, both in tough-minute roles. Hagel may feel like a bit of a surprise, but his relative-to-teammates impact on xG of plus-1.05 is the best mark in the league among top-of-the-lineup players. He's really good.

What about the league's top scorers?

Noticeably absent from the list above are Connor McDavid (plus-6.1 Net Rating), Leo Carlsson (plus-5.3), Connor Bedard (plus-4.5) and Macklin Celebrini (plus-4.5), who currently occupy the league's top five in scoring after MacKinnon.

All four are a lot closer by Offensive Rating, but are lower in Net Rating thanks to average or worse defensive impacts. Celebrini and Bedard have been porous on bad teams and while their difficult situations are accounted for, it's not quite enough to get to MVP level. They've had special seasons that look franchise-level, but it's hard to clear the high bar of MVP caliber with sub-45 percent xG rates.

Carlsson's underlying numbers look better but only 13 of his 33 points have come at five-on-five, where he ranks 41st among forwards. As for McDavid, the Oilers are somehow getting outscored in his minutes, which is notable enough to keep him out of the top 10.

Norris Trophy

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position.

Criteria: Defensemen ranked by Net Rating.

Cale Makar is the best defenseman in the world and already looks extremely likely to run away with his third Norris trophy. He is on pace for 105 points and is crushing tough minutes to the tune of a 59 percent xG while outscoring teams 33-10 at five-on-five. Makar leads all defensemen in Offensive Rating and is also sixth in Defensive Rating. His all-around work has been incredible, as is usually the case. No one's doing it like him.

After Makar there's an intriguing blend of old guard, young blood and pleasant surprises.

Adam Fox is having a great "comeback" season for those who wrongly believed he even needed one. He's close to point-per-game status, but the more interesting wrinkle for him this season is that he's been given matchup minutes for the first time in his career — and he's acing the assignment. That said, going on LTIR on Sunday with a left shoulder injury will likely hamper his chances.

Zach Werenski and Josh Morrissey are both back in the top five with similarly strong combinations of production and play-driving, while Miro Heiskanen looks primed for his first top-five Norris finish if he keeps this up, given his sterling reputation.

Shea Theodore is technically part of the usual suspects crowd, but the way he's getting there this season is different and noteworthy. It's not dynamic offense, it's pure shutdown ability with a league-leading plus-five

Defensive Rating. In heavy matchup minutes, Vegas is allowing just 2.17 xGA/60 and 1.2 GA/60 with Theodore on the ice.

Amongst the new crowd, it's truly special that Matthew Schaefer is already on this list and seems to be getting better every game. Since November, when Schaefer started playing on the Islanders' shutdown pair, he's earned 56.5 percent of expected goals and 74.5 percent of actual goals — and just 2.17 xGA/60. Right under him is Moritz Seider who has arrived as a franchise defenseman, doing his best Drew Doughty impression.

As for the pleasant surprises, Jakob Chychrun is having a terrific season after signing a big extension. The scoring is nice, but it's been great to see him handle a tougher role on one of the league's best pairs. In a similar vein, J.J. Moser has really stepped up for Tampa Bay amidst all the team's injuries. He's second to Theodore in Defensive Rating.

What about Quinn Hughes?

A plus-4.9 Offensive Rating puts him in the league's top five among defensemen — but his minus-1.7 Defensive Rating is concerning enough for exclusion.

Selke Trophy

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

Criteria: Forwards who play over 16 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face top-line forward competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

With no Aleksander Barkov this season, the Selke trophy race will likely be this season's most fascinating.

To start, Nick Suzuki is the leader by Defensive Rating in a fairly wide open field. With Suzuki on the ice, the Canadiens give up just 2.27 xGA/60, 0.24 fewer relative to his teammates. The Canadiens are up 17-7 in his five-on-five minutes and his line has been dominant all season. The one qualm with Suzuki is his lack of penalty-killing, but he's up to almost one minute per game over the last month. That's good enough for me.

After Suzuki things get a lot tighter with a lot of worthwhile options. This list will be ever-changing all season, but right now I'm impressed by Mikael Backlund's impact, which may be flying under the radar on a poor Flames team.

Backlund is dominating defensively in tough minutes, allowing just 1.72 xGA/60 and 2.16 GA/60 — both much stronger than the team average. The offense may not be there, but defensively he's delivering. Backlund's extreme usage — including some nasty defensive zone start numbers — is important context relative to some of the field here and is what gives him the edge in a close race. Mitch Marner, Leon Draisaitl and Matty Beniers have all put up excellent results, but it's worth noting that none of the three are playing their team's matchup minutes. Their results are strong enough to be in the running as worthy threats, but for now I'm leaning Backlund.

Further down the line, Tyson Foerster is creating a name for himself with another strong defensive season. Mika Zibanejad has been doing well in a shutdown role. Sebastian Aho has taken over Jordan Staal's usage and done well. Brock Nelson is the underrated cog in the Colorado machine, morphing into a shutdown force to free up MacKinnon. And Shane Pinto is starting to build a strong defensive reputation.

What about Nico Hischier?

The Devils are giving up 2.97 xGA/60 with Hischier on the ice this season, 0.23 more than his teammates. Playing the fourth-toughest minutes in the league brings his Defensive Rating up to plus-0.9, which is good — just not enough for Selke consideration at the moment.



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Calder Trophy

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

Criteria: Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

There are a lot of ways to show just how unbelievably good Matthew Schaefer has been out of the gate, and they all point to an extremely special player.

It could be that he's playing 23.3 minutes per night, is starting to crush matchup minutes and is on pace for almost 60 points as an 18-year-old defenseman. It could be that his plus-6.7 Net Rating is not only almost three goals up on the next best rookie skater, it places him in the top 10 among all defensemen. But my favorite Schaefer fact might be this one: The only rookie since 2007-08 who has had a better projected Net Rating than Schaefer's plus-12.8 is Connor McDavid, who was at plus-13.6.

Schaefer is genuinely looking generational, and I don't say that lightly. If he stays healthy and can keep most of this up all year, he should be a Calder lock. Perhaps unanimously so.

The real fight might be for who gets to be a finalist behind Schaefer. Alex Nikishin and Ivan Demidov are the top skater choices right now with both doing well in sheltered roles. Nikishin has a strong 56 percent xG rate, while Demidov is scoring at a 65-point pace despite playing just 14 minutes per night. Between the pipes, Yaroslav Askarov and Jesper Wallstedt are living up to the hype with some excellent seasons. Asakrov has the slight edge at the moment, but Wallstedt has been better on a per-game basis.

That's a strong secondary class, but none of them hold a candle to Schaefer. He's impossibly good.

What about Beckett Sennecke?

With a plus-0.5 Net Rating, Sennecke wasn't far off and I'd imagine he climbs the list as the season goes on given his production. But defensively he's giving a lot back with 3.68 xGA/60 at even strength, one of the worst marks on the Ducks.

Vezina Trophy

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

Criteria: Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving-Hockey and MoneyPuck.

An injury to Connor Hellebuyck should open the door wide for a new Vezina winner for the first time since 2023. Hellebuyck is still in the top five, but one month off (or more) will likely hinder his chances.

The current leader should probably be Jeremy Swayman who is bouncing back terrifically after last year's struggles. His .916 save percentage is well above what's been expected of him in Boston and he's currently saving just over one goal above expected per game. He's also starting to separate himself from the rest of the field with a three-goal lead over fellow American Spencer Knight. If you're wondering how the Bruins and Blackhawks currently have winning records, these two are why.

Not far off are some usual suspects. Andrei Vasilevskiy has once again been sensational for the Lightning and his work is made even more impressive by a slew of defensive injuries in front of him. Logan Thompson is Canada's answer to its goaltending malaise and is once again one of the top GSAX goalies (with Darcy Kuemper not far off). Ilya Sorokin and Igor Shesterkin both figure to be in the mix as usual.

The best story in net so far, though, has to be Dan Vladar. Over the previous three seasons, Vladar's minus-17 GSAX ranked eighth-worst

among all goalies, narrowly ahead of Ville Husso. This year he's in the top 10.

What about Scott Wedgewood?

He's been a terrific story this season and his .918 save percentage ranks third among goalies to play 10 or more games. But playing behind Colorado's defense helps Scott Wedgewood get there. By GSAX he sits just behind Kuemper at plus-8.0.

Art Ross Trophy

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

Slower-than-usual starts from the Edmonton duo and Nikita Kucherov has put MacKinnon firmly in the driver's seat for the Art Ross trophy. He currently has an eight-point cushion on McDavid with a game in hand and while it's never wise to count out McDavid, the model now expects both MacKinnon and McDavid to score at the same pace going forward (121 points per 82).

Macklin Celebrini is the most interesting threat on the list. He ranks lower due to his lack of a track record scoring at this level, but that's not always relevant for young players taking the next step. Like MacKinnon's own massive jump in 2017-18, Celebrini's ascent might have more staying power than suggested here.

Rocket Richard Trophy

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

The goal-scoring crown also feels like MacKinnon's to lose, and he's no stranger to the 50-goal level. Last year's 32-goal campaign, though, is holding his projection back slightly — enough to expect Kirill Kaprizov and Leon Draisaitl to make things interesting.

Morgan Geekie is shockingly tied with MacKinnon for the league lead and has been the league's best goal scorer over the last calendar year. While it is probably safe to expect his scoring pace to tail off slightly given his previous track record, his last year at this level suggests he's got the ability to be a real Rocket wild card.

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1223784 Websites

The Athletic / NHL goalie tandem power rankings 1.0: Evaluating all 32 teams in net this season

By Jesse Granger

We've passed the quarter mark of the regular season, so it's a good time to check in on how all 32 goalie tandems are performing.

As a whole, the trend of increased offense in the NHL has continued. Shots are down, goals are up and, as a result, the league average save percentage has dipped below .900 for the first time in 20 years. As the speed and skill of the game continue to increase, we're having to adjust what constitutes strong goaltending statistics.

While statistics are obviously a big factor in this ranking — results matter, above all — we will also be considering how these goaltenders have looked on film, and take their career-long performances into consideration. The roughly 25-game sample size we have for each team



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is enough to evaluate how each goalie is performing this season, but we can't ignore their priors.

Deciding how much weight to give each of the goalies when evaluating tandems can be tricky. For this exercise, goalies capable of handling a heavy workload, such as Andrei Vasilevskiy and Connor Hellebuyck, are given more weight within their tandem than goalies who play closer to a 50-50 split. In those cases, the impact of the backup is minimized but not ignored entirely. Conversely, tandems with two goalies performing at a high level are boosted in this ranking.

Without further ado, here's how every goalie tandem in the league has stacked up in 2025-26:

1. New York Rangers

Goalie Record Save % GSAs

Igor Shesterkin

10-9-2

.911

12.55

Jonathan Quick

3-3-0

.944

8.68

The first quarter of the season has been a roller coaster for the Rangers, but the one constant is the goaltending. Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick have combined to save an impressive 21.23 goals above expected.

Shesterkin is the highest-paid goalie in the NHL. He was the top-rated goalie by our anonymous panel of goalies and goalie coaches prior to the season, and through the first quarter, he has played up to all of those expectations. He transitions from saves to recoveries faster and more fluidly than any goalie in the world. It allows him to make sequences of saves that few can.

Meanwhile, the oldest goalie in the NHL has been stellar behind him. Quick is adding yet another chapter to his already storied career with what has been a fun final act for the team he grew up rooting for. His unique, crouching stance still covers the bottom half of the net with the best of goalies, and he has lateral explosion to spare, even at age 40.

Picking between these top tandems is like splitting hairs, and the Rangers' trump card of being able to send out the best goalie in the world was the tiebreaker that gave them the top spot.

2. Minnesota Wild

Goalie Record Save % GSAs

Filip Gustavsson

7-7-3

.905

9.67

Jesper Wallstedt

7-0-2

.938

8.40

Only five goalies have posted multiple shutouts this season, and two of them play in Minnesota. Filip Gustavsson and Jesper Wallstedt have

been arguably the most balanced tandem in the league, and they're the biggest reason for Minnesota's red-hot November.

The two Swedish netminders play a similar style, and when they're on their game, it feels like there's no net to shoot at. They have an excellent understanding of shooting angles, a great feel for where the net is behind them, and they use positioning and posture to make themselves big in the crease.

Gustavsson is doing what we all have come to expect from him, but the real revelation has been Wallstedt. He has all but erased any worries from a disappointing season in the AHL last year, looking the part of a future franchise goalie.

He made some huge saves on Friday to end Colorado's 10-game win streak, and crowned it with his fun shootout celebration.

[7](https://pic.twitter.com/MkqdorifExK) STRAIGHT WILD W'S GOT WALLSTEDT LIKE:
pic.twitter.com/MkqdorifExK

— NHL (@NHL) November 28, 2025

3. Colorado Avalanche

Goalie Record Save % GSAs

Scott Wedgewood

13-1-3

.920

9.95

Mackenzie Blackwood

5-0-1

.925

5.88

The Avalanche have allowed the fewest goals in the NHL by a good margin, and they've done it while missing their No. 1 goalie for the majority of the time. The way Scott Wedgewood has performed in Mackenzie Blackwood's absence is a perfect example of the impact a strong tandem can make.

Wedgewood is playing the best hockey of his career, allowing either zero goals or one goal in more than half of his starts. You won't find a goalie who has stayed square to the puck better than he has this season, thanks to great anticipation and edge work.

Meanwhile, Blackwood finally returned after missing the first 12 games due to offseason surgery and has looked great. The Avalanche have been the best team in the league, and the goalies are a big part of it. While Wedgewood may not be able to maintain this level for the entire season, Blackwood could more than pick up the slack.

4. New York Islanders

Goalie Record Save % GSAs

Ilya Sorokin

7-7-2

.901

12.72

David Rittich

6-2-1

.901

8.79



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The Rangers' tandem led this ranking, but the duo across the East River has been excellent as well. Ilya Sorokin and David Rittich have been standing on their heads to propel the Islanders back into the playoff picture after a slow start.

The Islanders are allowing high-danger chances at a higher rate than any team in the league, but the goalies have been great at stopping those difficult shots.

Sorokin looks like one of the best goalies in the world, regularly making acrobatic stops in big moments, and "Big Save Dave" is living up to his nickname. Rittich has been a pleasant surprise with Semyon Varlamov still unavailable with a knee injury. He may be punching a bit above his weight at the moment, but we're only two years removed from his strong 2023-24 season in Los Angeles.

5. Boston Bruins

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Jeremy Swayman

11-6-0

.915

22.38

Joonas Korpisalo

4-6-0

.875

-1.84

This is the Jeremy Swayman the Bruins hoped for when they signed him to a massive extension last offseason. Few goalies can control a game the way Swayman does with his positioning and rebound control.

Boston's save percentage isn't overly impressive, but the Bruins' defense has been putrid, so the goals saved above expected tell the story better, and Swayman leads all goalies in that metric.

The structure of his game has been immaculate this season. His hands and feet all move in unison, keeping him connected and leaving no holes for the puck to get through. Korpisalo is off to a mediocre start statistically, but he has deserved better than his current numbers based on the eye test. He has been a victim of some unfortunate bounces and deflections while playing behind a defense that allows the most expected goals per 60 minutes in the NHL.

6. Washington Capitals

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Logan Thompson

10-6-1

.912

14.34

Charlie Lindgren

4-3-1

.886

3.19

As a team, the Capitals have taken a small step back from last season, but Logan Thompson and Charlie Lindgren have picked up right where they left off as one of the most reliable tandems in the NHL.

Thompson has been at his best on the toughest saves. He leads all goalies with a .888 save percentage on high-danger shots thanks to his

improvisational skills and active hands, which are among the best in the NHL.

Lindgren has seen a decline in playing time, assuming a true backup role to Thompson as opposed to the 50-50 split we saw last season, but has been solid in relief. He is the prototypical 1B goalie, plenty good enough for coach Spencer Carbery to not overwork Thompson.

7. Tampa Bay Lightning

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Andrei Vasilevskiy

11-5-2

.915

16.55

Jonas Johansson

5-2-0

.895

-1.63

We've reached the first tandem on the list that is heavily carried by the statistics of one netminder, but that's how good Andrei Vasilevskiy is.

The big, hulking Russian has been locked in early this season. His rare combination of athleticism, balance and size makes it easy to see why teams struggle to get the puck past him. Vasilevskiy has won his last eight starts while posting a ridiculous .956 save percentage over that span.

Behind him, Jonas Johansson has been good enough to win in most of his starts, and that's exactly what Tampa Bay is looking for. His numbers aren't eye-popping, but he has won five of seven. His job is to inspire enough confidence from coach Jon Cooper to allow him to keep Vasilevskiy fresh, and thus far he is doing that job.

8. Chicago Blackhawks

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Spencer Knight

7-5-4

.920

20.22

Arvid Söderblom

3-4-1

.879

-3.42

The start to the Spencer Knight era in Chicago couldn't be going much better.

The 24-year-old is second behind only Swayman with an impressive 20.22 goals saved above expected, and has stood on his head in most games for the Blackhawks. Perhaps the most impressive and encouraging thing for Chicago's future has been how good Knight has looked in desperation situations when plays break down. Knight's fundamentals and technique have always been exceptional, but he's showing more improvisation this season.

Arvid Söderblom has taken a small step back, but is still a talented young goalie. He has been inconsistent from game to game, but it's Knight who is carrying the load on this ranking.



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9. San Jose Sharks

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Yaroslav Askarov

9-6-1

.908

14.93

Alex Nedeljkovic

3-5-2

.897

-1.13

Just as the young, star forwards have taken over the NHL this season, a similar revolution is happening in the crease. In his first season as a full-time NHLer, Yaroslav Askarov has looked the part of a future star.

His quick feet and precise edge work keep him in the play, no matter how many lateral passes the opposition whip around the zone, and he is getting even better the more he plays. After a sluggish October, Askarov has completely dominated in November, leading all goalies with 18.02 GSx.

Askarov month-to-month splits

Stat Record Save % GSx

October

1-4-1

.844

-3.09

November

8-2-0

.944

18.02

Alex Nedeljkovic has been a solid 1B in the tandem for San Jose. He has had a few poor outings, but is a solid veteran backup who should push Askarov while also helping him develop along the way.

10. Winnipeg Jets

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Connor Hellebuyck

8-6-0

.913

14.26

Eric Comrie

5-4-0

.898

0.49

When he's healthy, Connor Hellebuyck is the type of goalie who singlehandedly makes a tandem worthy of a top-five or top-six spot. However, his recent knee injury, which required surgery and projects to keep him out of the lineup for more than a month, combined with the fact that Eric Comrie isn't an elite backup option, caused the Jets to tumble down this ranking.

We've already seen the team begin to flounder without Hellebuyck.

When asked to play 15 to 20 games, Comrie is a great fit behind Hellebuyck. He's a smart, veteran backup who a coach can trust in spot starts, but he has struggled in his increased role. When the defending back-to-back Vezina Trophy winner returns, the Jets will belong higher on this list.

11. Dallas Stars

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Jake Oettinger

11-4-2

.900

3.91

Casey DeSmith

5-1-2

.919

7.39

Considering his age, talent, and the team in front of him, this felt like the year Jake Oettinger could win his first Vezina Trophy. Through the first quarter, he hasn't quite taken that step.

Oettinger has been fine. His stats are slightly above average, and he has made some clutch stops late in games to earn victories, but he hasn't been dominant. Statistically, he has actually been inferior to his backup, Casey DeSmith, who is off to an excellent start.

While it's been disappointing in relation to Oettinger's sky-high expectations, Oettinger and DeSmith have been a reliable tandem that rarely costs their team, and consistently help it earn points.

12. Pittsburgh Penguins

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Tristan Jarry

7-2-0

.905

5.49

Arturs Silovs

4-4-4

.898

4.22

Sergey Murashov

1-1-1

.913

2.09

What a turnaround it has been in the Pittsburgh crease.

After Penguins goalies combined to save 14.22 goals below expected a year ago (second-worst in the NHL), they've been one of the team's biggest strengths early in 2025-26. That includes a rejuvenated Tristan Jarry, who has won seven of his nine starts and looks more like himself after a disastrous 2024-25.

Acquiring Artūrs Šilovs for cheap this offseason is looking like a savvy move by Kyle Dubas. Coming off a career year in the AHL last season, in



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which he was named playoff MVP, Šilovs has rolled that right into this season and has looked equally impressive on the biggest stage. He has looked big, calm and collected in the net, and is making a case to be Latvia's starter in the Olympics in February.

Even prospect Sergey Murashov has looked good when called upon. It's hard to believe how positive things feel for the Penguins in goal after how last season went.

13. Seattle Kraken

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Joey Daccord

7-5-4

.902

4.81

Philipp Grubauer

4-0-1

.912

3.77

Matt Murray

0-2-1

.922

5.60

Somewhat under the radar, Joey Daccord has been excellent for three straight seasons now. He's the best puck-playing goalie in the league, and actually saves his team from having to defend, and himself from having to make saves, every night because of it. What has the Kraken this high in this ranking, though, is how wily veterans Philipp Grubauer and Matt Murray have played behind him.

The Kraken have scored the fewest goals in the NHL this season, but the trio of goalies have combined to rank ninth in GSAX and fifth in save percentage, and it's a huge reason Seattle has climbed into a playoff position.

14. New Jersey Devils

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Jacob Markström

7-4-1

.874

-2.80

Jake Allen

8-4-0

.919

11.63

This summer, the Devils prioritized hanging onto Jake Allen, signing him to a five-year, \$9 million contract. That decision has paid off. Not only has Allen continued to be one of the best backups in the NHL, but he has been so good that we may not be referring to him as the backup for much longer.

When Jacob Markström missed two weeks in late October, all Allen did was lead New Jersey to five straight wins. Since Markström returned, the two have split the action and Allen has been one of the 10 best goalies in the league.

It's a good spot to be in for the Devils. They have two older goalies, but each can be good enough to win games and singlehandedly turn the tide in New Jersey's favor. If Markström finds his form, this tandem could soar up this list.

15. Anaheim Ducks

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Lukáš Dostál

11-5-1

.904

11.48

Petr Mrázek

3-3-0

.881

0.96

Ville Husso

1-0-0

.852

-0.69

Young scorers Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier and Mason McTavish have turned Anaheim into one of the most entertaining teams in the NHL, but nothing has propelled the Ducks into playoff contention more than Lukáš Dostál's emergence as an elite netminder.

The Ducks have scored the second-most goals in the NHL this season, but they also have allowed the most scoring chances per game of any team. Insert Dostál, one of the most cerebral goalies in the game, capable of making high-danger saves look easy with quick reads.

Almost every game, the Ducks get into a back-and-forth offensive duel, and almost every time, Dostál outplays the other goalie. Anaheim will have to rely on its depth in goal. Dostál is sidelined with an upper-body injury, and Petr Mrázek left Sunday's game with an injury. That leaves Ville Husso, who is an excellent as far as third goalies go, to carry the load, most likely.

16. Los Angeles Kings

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Darcy Kuemper

8-4-5

.907

10.77

Anton Forsberg

4-2-2

.894

2.06

The Kings have struggled to score goals this season, but they're still one of the toughest defensive teams in the West. They play with great structure, which makes life easier on their goalies, and both Darcy Kuemper and Anton Forsberg have taken advantage.

Here's something odd about the Kings' defensive metrics: They rank fifth in the NHL in expected goals allowed per 60 minutes, but 22nd in high-danger chances allowed. That means Los Angeles doesn't allow much, but when it does, the shots are close to the net. That can be good for the



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total number of goals allowed, and rough on a goalie's individual statistics, but Kuemper has actually handled it well. His .859 save percentage on high-danger shots is tied for the sixth-best.

17. Calgary Flames

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Dustin Wolf

6-12-2

.890

-2.44

Devin Cooley

3-2-1

.930

10.71

The sophomore slump has been real for Dustin Wolf.

After a historically brilliant rookie season, the 24-year-old has lost 14 of his 20 starts and saved 2.44 goals below expected. The team in front of him has done him no favors, and Wolf still looks great when it comes to the eye test. He's still the fast, twitchy goalie who took the league by storm a year ago, but in a results-oriented business, it's hard to rank the Flames any higher than this with their current stats.

Backup Devin Cooley has shown well in limited action, and the future is still incredibly bright for Wolf, but the first quarter of the season has been rough.

18. Columbus Blue Jackets

Goalies Record Save % GSAX

Jet Greaves

7-4-5

.901

8.06

Elvis Merzjkins

4-5-0

.894

0.09

It hasn't taken Jet Greaves long to prove he's the most talented goalie in the organization. After impressing for a few seasons in the AHL, the 24-year-old was handed the lead role in Columbus and is running with the opportunity.

Greaves is a lot like Wolf in that he does everything incredibly fast. He has quick feet to dart back and forth across his crease to stay with the puck. He has quick hands on high shots and quick recoveries in scramble situations. It's still a small sample size, but it looks like the Blue Jackets have something here.

Meanwhile, Elvis Merzjkins has played right about in line with what we've come to expect over the last several seasons, in a much smaller role. While he hasn't developed into the franchise goalie Columbus once hoped, he is a more than serviceable backup. Merzjkins is a smooth, flowy goalie who can be nearly impossible to beat when he's on his game. Inconsistency has hurt him, but with a smaller workload, that problem has been minimized.

19. Philadelphia Flyers

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Daniel Vladař

10-4-1

.912

12.52

Samuel Ersson

4-2-2

.859

-1.04

In his first six seasons in the NHL, Daniel Vladař had yet to show that he was more than a backup. He played behind two good goalies in Markstrom and Wolf, and never played at a level to demand more starts.

Credit to GM Daniel Briere and goalie coach Kim Dillabaugh for seeing he could be more, and signing him to a two-year, \$6.7 million contract in free agency. It's still early, but their bet on Vladař has worked out. Vladař has taken over the No. 1 spot in Philadelphia and is playing the best hockey of his career.

The potential has always been there. Vladař is a giant, and he's fluid for his size. He has looked more under control this season, and takes away most of the net even when he's down in the butterfly. It's a big reason he has the fourth-highest save percentage (.878) on shots inside 30 feet.

20. Florida Panthers

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Sergei Bobrovsky

10-7-0

.882

-4.45

Daniil Tarasov

2-4-1

.907

2.95

Similar to the Panthers as a whole, Sergei Bobrovsky hasn't been as great as expected. Statistically speaking, Florida belongs lower than this. It ranks 27th in GSAX and 22nd in team save percentage.

But this is Bobrovsky we're talking about. His multiple Vezina trophies and Stanley Cup championships afford him the benefit of the doubt, especially when he still looks sharp. At 37 years old, the fear of him hitting the age cliff is real, but on film, Bobrovsky still looks as quick and explosive as ever. The defense has struggled in front of him, and he's been beaten by a lot of tipped and screen shots that he had little chance of stopping.

The move to acquire Daniil Tarasov was a good one for Florida's future, and he has looked solid in limited opportunities. It looks like he's learning how to use his monstrous frame more effectively to cut off shooting angles, and honestly, the Panthers should use him more. Bobrovsky is on pace to start nearly 60 games, and at his age, that's too many.

21. Vancouver Canucks

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Thatcher Demko

5-4-0



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.903

7.58

Kevin Lankinen

4-7-3

.881

1.24

Nikita Tolopilo

1-1-0

.892

0.96

Life hasn't been easy for this talented (when healthy) goalie tandem. Unfortunately for the Canucks, that qualifier about health has been required for the last several years, and Thatcher Demko is currently out with a lower-body injury.

Only the Islanders have allowed more high-danger chances than the Vancouver Canucks. Demko, and backups Kevin Lankinen, Jiri Patera and Nikita Tolopilo have played reasonably well considering the circumstances, but haven't been good enough to overcome the poor defense in front of them.

22. Carolina Hurricanes

Goalie	Record	Save %	GSAX
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Frederik Andersen

5-6-2

.878

0.65

Brandon Bussi

6-1-0

.899

2.77

Pyotr Kochetkov

4-0-0

.926

0.84

We transition from some of the busiest goalies in the league to the tandem that faces the fewest shot attempts against per 60 minutes, thanks to Carolina's possession-heavy style. The Hurricanes have been running the rare three-goalie rotation when at full strength.

The two with the most starts — Frederik Andersen and Brandon Bussi — both have save percentages south of .900. Bussi, who made his NHL debut this season, has looked the strongest of the group. He has an unorthodox style that could be throwing shooters off, using some throwback techniques like a half-butterfly on shots from in tight. It's been fun watching him run with this opportunity, but it's also fair to wonder if Carolina has the goaltending to finally get over the hump this spring.

23. Utah Mammoth

Goalie	Record	Save %	GSA
--------	--------	--------	-----

Karel Vejmelka

10-7-2

.887

5.99

Vitek Vaněček

2-4-1

.870

0.63

In terms of workload, Karel Vejmelka has been up there with the true workhorses of the sport for the last two seasons. The Mammoth lean heavily on the big, Czech netminder, and he has handled it relatively well.

Vejmelka's save percentage isn't great, but that's partially a product of the way Utah defends. The Mammoth have allowed the fewest shots per 60 minutes in the NHL, but a higher percentage of those shots are high-danger looks.

Servicable is the best word to describe Vejmelka and Vitek Vaněček this season. They haven't stood on their heads to singlehandedly win games, but they're also rarely a problem for Utah.

24. Buffalo Sabres

Goalie	Record	Save %	GSAX
--------	--------	--------	------

Alex Lyon

3-6-3

.899

4.08

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen

3-3-1

.891

-0.46

Colten Ellis

4-2-0

.898

-1.14

Early in the season, it looked like veteran journeyman Alex Lyon could take command of the Buffalo net, but he cooled off considerably in November.

Lyon looked great early, playing his aggressive style with his heels at the top of his crease to great effect. He was excellent in six of his first seven starts, helping Buffalo earn wins. Since Oct. 28, he has come back down, with an .865 save percentage in six appearances.

Colten Ellis has had his moments, including a solid performance to help the Sabres end Minnesota's win streak on Saturday, and Ukko Pekka Luukkonen has the worst statistics of the three.

25. Nashville Predators

Goalie	Record	Save %	GSAX
--------	--------	--------	------

Juuse Saros

7-9-3

.889

0.20

Justus Annunen



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1-4-1

.842

-2.72

For the second straight season, Nashville is an unmitigated disaster. Statistically, the Predators duo of Juuse Saros and Justus Annunen is bottom-five in both save percentage and GSAX. The only thing keeping them slightly higher in this ranking is a belief that Saros is an elite goalie under the right circumstances.

The eye test says that's still the case. He is still one of the best skaters at the position, and manages depth incredibly well to mitigate his size disadvantage. The biggest problem is, that style relies on making the right reads, and the Nashville defense has made that increasingly difficult. Saros is talented, but behind this team he is unlikely to put up statistics that match that.

26. Toronto Maple Leafs

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Anthony Stolarz

6-5-1

.884

-0.01

Joseph Woll

2-3-1

.914

3.67

Dennis Hildeby

1-2-1

.914

5.14

A lot has gone wrong for Toronto, and the goaltending has played a part. The biggest difference between this season and last for Anthony Stolarz is how he has performed on shots from in tight. In 2024-25, he was one of the best in the league at stopping high-danger shots from around the net, but this season that hasn't been the case. His .778 save percentage on those shots is well below the league average (.811) and is even further behind his impressive mark from a year ago (.850).

Woll has played well since his return, but has only won two of his six starts despite it. Goaltending hasn't been the biggest of the Leafs' worries, but it certainly hasn't been a strength.

27. Vegas Golden Knights

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Adin Hill

1-0-2

.888

-0.57

Akira Schmid

9-2-4

.896

2.83

Carl Lindbom

1-4-2

.870

-1.53

Adin Hill wasn't off to a great start prior to his injury, but losing him to a lower-body injury in late October has really hurt the Golden Knights.

In his absence, Vegas has rolled with a tandem of Akira Schmid and rookie Carl Lindbom. The defense has played admirably in front of them, allowing the second-fewest high-danger chances per 60 minutes (9.36), but the goalies have still produced a combined save percentage of only .888.

It's a lot to ask of two inexperienced young goalies. To their credit, they've played well enough to keep Vegas in nearly every game, but if the Golden Knights are to regain the form of a true contender, it will start in the crease.

28. Montreal Canadiens

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Samuel Montembeault

5-5-1

.864

-5.52

Jakub Dobeš

8-3-2

.888

1.21

It's been an uncharacteristically inconsistent season for Samuel Montembeault. He has served as a stabilizing force for the Canadiens for the last several years, but has had more lows than highs in a rocky start to the season. If there's one area with the biggest room for improvement, it's stopping screened shots from the point. Far too many of those chances have found the net. There's obviously blame to go around for the players in front of him on those chances as well.

For the youngster, Jakub Dobeš, there have been more highs but plenty of lows. He started the season red-hot, forcing his way into a bigger role in the rotation. He cooled off in November, though, allowing at least three goals in all seven appearances with an .888 save percentage.

29. Detroit Red Wings

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Cam Talbot

9-4-1

.887

2.60

John Gibson

4-7-1

.865

-5.48

It's early, but so far John Gibson hasn't been the answer to Detroit's lengthy search in net. On film, he has looked like himself, playing with aggressive depth, often challenging shooters well outside of his blue



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paint. The results have been sub-optimal, though, and the Red Wings have rightfully leaned more on Cam Talbot lately.

Talbot hasn't exactly lit the world on fire either, but he's given Detroit more consistent and dependable performances on a nightly basis. When the Red Wings have won in 2025-26, it has been because of their offense. The goalie tandem ranks 31st in save percentage, and 29th in GSAX.

30. Ottawa Senators

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Linus Ullmark

9-5-4

.880

-6.35

Leevi Merilainen

3-3-0

.874

-2.98

The Senators' goaltenders have earned this spot near the bottom of these rankings, but it doesn't appear they'll be here for long. Things are trending upward for Linus Ullmark, who has gone 4-1-1 in his last six starts with a .914 save percentage.

He still ranks 73rd of 74 goalies in GSAX this season. That's how poor the start was. Ullmark's recoveries have looked curiously sluggish, leading to rebound goals that he'd typically stop. At his age, the drop off in speed or athleticism is always a concern, but he's strung together a handful of impressive starts lately to quell those concerns for now.

Analytically, the Senators should be much better than their record. They've looked structured defensively and allowed very little, but have been let down by goaltending. The good news is that Ullmark has the talent to turn it around.

31. Edmonton Oilers

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Stuart Skinner

9-7-3

.885

3.45

Calvin Pickard

2-3-2

.847

-3.69

Stuart Skinner's 25-save shutout against Seattle on Saturday may quiet things for a bit, but the noise around the Oilers' struggles in net still seems louder than ever. It's easy to see why. The two-time defending Western Conference champs are currently outside a playoff position and rank last in team save percentage.

When Skinner is on, he's a strong starting goalie. He uses his size well to take away shooting options and plays with good structure when he's reading plays well. He just hasn't been at his best nearly as consistently as Edmonton needs. He also doesn't have the strongest reinforcement behind him. Calvin Pickard's -3.69 GSAX brings his career total to -41.26, which ranks 251st out of 258 goalies to play since 2014.

32. St. Louis Blues

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Jordan Binnington

6-5-5

.882

-7.63

Joel Hofer

3-5-2

.877

-3.69

Based on perceived talent, the Blues' goalie tandem would be ranked much, much higher than this. Jordan Binnington is viewed as a clutch performer and could still start for Team Canada at the Olympics. Entering this season, Joel Hofer was widely considered one of the best backups in the NHL, capable of starting for multiple teams.

Based on the results this season, though, this tandem couldn't be ranked anywhere but last. The Blues have actually played decent hockey as a team, ranking in the top half of the league in nearly every underlying metric. They've given up the second-fewest expected goals per 60 minutes.

The problem has been the -11.32 goals saved above expected, which are equally shared by Binnington and Hofer. They are two talented goalies, and they may very well rank much higher the next time these rankings come out, but thus far, they've been the weakest tandem in the NHL.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.02.2025

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ESPN / The NHL's best this week: Kyle Palmieri, 'hockey guy' - ESPN

Arda Ocal

It was one of those plays that, if you described it to a hockey fan, they'd respond with "yep -- hockey guy."

On Friday, veteran forward Kyle Palmieri tore his ACL while chasing a puck in the offensive zone. He crumbled to the ice in visible pain while the play continued into the neutral zone.

Palmieri got up, hobbled toward the Isles bench, but along the way the Philadelphia Flyers brought the puck back into their own zone. Palmieri, somehow with the wherewithal to keep his mind in the game through what was no doubt excruciating pain, stripped the puck from Flyers defenseman Emil Andrae, passed it off and got an assist on the ensuing goal. Palmieri didn't even see the goal as he was off the ice and helped to the locker room. He will be out six to eight months due to the injury.

To recap: Palmieri tore his ACL. Got up by himself. Hobbled toward the bench. Made a takeaway in the offensive zone and made a (SAUCER!) pass that led to a goal.

That might be the most gangster way to leave a game due to injury in NHL history.

And again, if you told that story to a hockey fan, their response would be, "yep -- hockey guy."



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In that moment, Palmieri exemplified one of the big reasons we love hockey: that natural toughness, stubborn unwillingness to give up in the face of adversity. We have a running hockey inside joke where we laugh, often bewildered, at the laundry list of injuries that come to light after a team gets eliminated from the playoffs.

Like in 2020, when Steven Stamkos came back from a lengthy injury for only two minutes and 47 seconds and scored on his first possession? Hockey guy.

Or when 42-year-old Zdeno Chara played with a broken jaw (and modified face mask) in Game 5 of the 2019 Stanley Cup Final? Hockey guy.

Or in 2017 when Joe Thornton played with a torn ACL and MCL through the playoffs? Hockey guy.

Veteran of over 1,000 NHL games and now-ESPN analyst T.J. Oshie reacted thusly when he saw Palmieri's effort:

That's the hockey culture. Torn ACL and still made his way to the bench without help. Oh and he stripped the puck and got an assist on the way. What a warrior. What a sport. Hoping for a full recovery.
<https://t.co/mASNyLeW11>

— T.J. Oshie (@TJOshie77) November 29, 2025

These kinds of heroics aren't exclusive to hockey, of course. Kirk Gibson will forever be a hero for his 1988 World Series home run for the Dodgers and hobbling around the bases, for example. But hockey seems to have the most publicly known cases of such examples. And, quite frankly, the most believable culture of athletes that would go to those lengths to compete and win. Hockey guys.

Jump ahead:

Games of the week

What I loved this weekend

Hart Trophy candidates

Social post of the week

Stick taps

Biggest games of the week

Chicago

Blackhawks at

Vegas

Golden Knights

Tuesday, 10 p.m. | ESPN+/Hulu

These are two teams that need a kick. The Golden Knights are 4-2-4 in their past 10, while the Blackhawks are 4-4-2. The two teams are separated by five points, which is not something many people would have expected at this stage of the season.

Plus, lots of star power on display in this one, including Connor Bedard vs. Jack Eichel at 1C. Let's go!

Pittsburgh

Penguins at

Tampa Bay

Lightning

Thursday, 7 p.m. | ESPN+

The Penguins head to Tampa to play the Lightning, and even though it's not a "return" per se, it's always fun to see a player play against many

former teammates. Jake Guentzel against Sidney Crosby and the Pens will be interesting.

Colorado

Avalanche at

New York

Rangers

Saturday, 12:30 p.m. | ESPN+

The league's bulldozer, the Avalanche, head to Madison Square Garden on Saturday. The Rangers are still struggling at home but have picked up a couple of wins at the Garden recently. But if the vibes stay bad and the hottest team in the NHL is coming to your barn, that has the makings of a disaster. The Avs doubled up the Rangers the last time these teams played (in Denver on Nov. 20) 6-3.

Other key games this week

Pittsburgh

Penguins at

Philadelphia

Flyers

Monday, 7 p.m. | NHL Network

Washington

Capitals at

Los Angeles

Kings

Tuesday, 10:30 p.m. | ESPN+

Dallas

Stars at

New Jersey

Devils

Wednesday, 7 p.m. | ESPN+

Minnesota

Wild at

Edmonton

Oilers

Thursday, 9 p.m. | ESPN+

Chicago

Blackhawks at

Los Angeles

Kings

Thursday, 10 p.m. | ESPN+/Hulu

Washington

Capitals at

Anaheim

Ducks

Friday, 10 p.m. | ESPN+



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New Jersey

Devils at

Boston

Bruins

Saturday, 7 p.m. | ESPN+

Chicago

Blackhawks at

Anaheim

Ducks

Sunday, 8 p.m. | ESPN+

What I loved this weekend

Many in the hockey world talk about growing the game, and this weekend included one excellent example of doing that courtesy of the Minnesota Wild.

For the first time in NHL history, in honor of Native American Heritage Day, the game between the Wild and Avalanche had Ojibwe-language commentary:

In speaking with fans who consume hockey games in their native languages, it means the world to them and particularly their family members who can fully experience and fall in love with hockey, surrounded by their family and friends. You absolutely love to see it.

Shout out to Jessi Pierce, who covers the Wild and also cohosts the "Bardown Beauties" hockey podcast for bringing this to my attention.

Hart Trophy candidates if the season ended today

Nathan MacKinnon might stay on this list for the rest of the season. He's building a sizable gap between him and No. 2 in the Art Ross (currently seven points ahead of Macklin Celebrini) and is battling with Morgan Geekie for the league lead in goals. He's a finalist every week and continues to build his case.

I hate to give two spots to one team, but I simply can't deny Scott Wedgewood. The veteran goaltender has a .920 save percentage to help drive his 13-1-3 record, and he has allowed only 36 goals in 18 starts this season. I'll admit that I love when goalies get some love in the Hart race, so that plays a factor. If the Blackhawks were in a playoff spot, I'd give the nod to Spencer Knight, because he has been incredible too, with the same save percentage as Wedgewood behind a much younger D corps.

And, since I love having some youth in this race, Celebrini is back in the third spot. He's second in the NHL in points. He had five points in four games this week, which is a slow week for him -- a somewhat wild thing to say about a second-year player.

Social media post of the week

Ice tennis has hit the NHL!

I first discovered this on Pavel Barber's social feed but ice tennis now has the honor of saying it was featured at the World's Most Famous Arena. Pretty cool!

Credit to Jonny Lazarus (who among many other things, calls college hockey games for ESPN+) for the video:

Stick taps

Normally I reserve this space to show love to people who do great things in hockey and don't usually get credit for it -- reach out to me on social media with your nominees. But I'm going to empty my notepad for this week instead -- and it is a stick-related story, so it fits.

During last week's Blackhawks vs. Wild broadcast, John Buccigross and Cassie Campbell-Pascall discussed how P.K. Subban used to get a new stick for every power play and often switch back out. I asked P.K. why, and he explained that it was because he wanted a fresh twig with "less chance of breakage." New stick equals stiffer stick, so he was able to get the shots he wanted -- and often scored on. Mystery solved, thanks to the Subbanator!

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs Notebook: Stecher's value skyrockets with Carlo's injury setback

Luke Fox

The damaged right side of the struggling club's blue line has taken another surprise hit as Brandon Carlo left the road trip early on Monday.

Carlo suffered a setback in the recovery of his undisclosed lower-body injury and flew back to Toronto to see a specialist. The team expects an update on Carlo's status Tuesday.

The top-four minute-muncher has already been sidelined for 18 days and counting.

As of Saturday, Carlo was planning to practise Monday with his teammates in Fort Lauderdale with hopes of returning to action as early as this week.

Now?

Carlo's return feels about as imminent as that of fellow right-handed defenceman Chris Tanev (head/neck) — which is to say, not very.

If the Maple Leafs are to climb back into a playoff position, they'll be forced to do so with a lefty-heavy blue line and some patchwork pairings.

Luckily, the all-lefty duo of Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Morgan Rielly (20 points apiece) has provided an offensive threat, and Stecher, the veteran righty, has been quick to find a groove with his seventh team.

The sudden absence of Simon Benoit on Saturday prompted coach Craig Berube to bump Stecher — typically a sheltered, third-pairing guy — onto his shutdown duo with lefty Jake McCabe.

Despite not practising, the two fared well in a big road win and will stick together in Tuesday's revenge match against the Florida Panthers.

"We were vocal together, and we tried to put our best foot forward. But the onus is on us to do it again tomorrow night," said Stecher, who revealed that he had trained with McCabe over the off-season.

Past relationships with some of his new Leafs mates and comfort with changing sweaters mid-season has helped Stecher make such a smooth transition.

"I just wanted to dive in and try to play my game," Stecher explained. "Systems and tendencies would fall into place over repetition. And give a lot of credit to my teammates and the coaching staff for allowing me to kind of play that way.

"Overall, I feel like I've had my legs, which is a strength of mine. In saying that, there's some details I've seen on film that I'd definitely like to clean up, stickwork in the D-zone and having tighter gaps."

Berube credited the under-sized Stecher's competitiveness and pace for his ability to flip from a scratch in Edmonton to an essential in Toronto.



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"He closes on people quick and moves his feet really well," the coach said. "He's simple with the puck, right? He makes the first pass, or makes a hard play when he has to. And he's been defending well; he's been defending hard at our net. So, he's been a good player for us since he got here."

Berube prefers McCabe on his natural left side as much as possible and is leery of using Benoit on the left.

All of which spells opportunity for Stecher, who has a couple assists, a plus-2 rating, and has avoided the penalty box during his elevated importance.

"He stepped in and he's made an impact right away," captain Auston Matthews said. "You know, it's never easy to come over to a new team, and I feel like he's fit in so well.

"He's a veteran guy. I don't think he's very shy. He just came in and he knows his job. He knows his role, and he just tries to the best of his ability. He communicates a lot in the ice."

Ekman-Larsson loves the passion and consistency of the newest defenceman: "Just a veteran pro. He leaves everything on the on the ice, and you know what you're getting every single game."

Even better? Stecher is right-handed every night.

Berube stands up McCabe

Monday's skate brought much-needed levity to the Leafs in the form of some accidental physical comedy.

Matthews trucked over Derek Lalonde during an odd-man rush, popping the assistant coach's hat right off his head, and Jake McCabe collided hard with Berube in open ice.

"Newsy gettin' run over on the ice! He got rocked," Berube laughed. "I didn't go down."

In fact, the un-padded Berube went over to his hard-hitting D-man and jokingly and loudly asked McCabe if was all right.

"I was doing the same drill few years ago in St. Louis, and David Perron ran me right over. Like, I didn't see him. I was a little too close involved, you know, and I went down. I cracked a rib. We were laughing," Berube smiled, recalling an incident from September 2022.

"So, the next day, the boys drew an outline of me on the ice. We got a good chuckle out of that."

The local news crew had some fun with that one:

Auston Matthews and the five-forward power-play

The Maple Leafs scored a rare power-play goal as part of Saturday's touchdown in Pittsburgh, but it was the second unit that did damage.

The top-unit experiment — which throws five forwards on the ice and asks Matthews to quarterback from the point — continues.

But it certainly comes with risk.

"I mean, it's a pretty big adjustment," said Matthews, who has rotated into Morgan Rielly's old spot. "I was telling Mo, 'It's definitely not as easy as it looks up there.' But I think it's come along all right. I thought we had some better looks (Saturday). It was nice to be able to practise it out here.

"And for me, I want to still be aggressive. But knowing that I'm kind of that last man back, I can't get sucked in too far into the O-zone there."

It might not be the ideal look, but the desire to try something different and not sit idle with a 25th-ranked power play (15.87 per cent) is certainly understandable.

More convincing was Matthews' beating Tristan Jarry clean with one of his patented wristers.

"Feels good," said Matthews of his first goal since returning from a lower-body injury that sidelined him for two weeks. "It always feels good to put one in the net, and obviously getting a win like that. This does a lot for our confidence. And you just want to continue to put the push the pedal to the ground."

Berube was encouraged that Matthews beat a goalie unscreened from distance — something that was once a regular occurrence.

"I think he's starting to feel better and more comfortable out there and getting better looks on the power play," Berube said. "Up top, he's got an opportunity to shoot a lot of pucks in there, and the puck is on his stick a lot. Which we like right now."

One-Timers: Ekman-Larsson assured the upper-body ailment that ended his night early in Pittsburgh was "nothing major" and he's good to go. The Swede has a shot at a tying Tom Kurvers' franchise record for longest point streak by a defenceman (10 games) Tuesday. "I didn't know that. Thanks for telling me," Ekman-Larsson laughed. "No pressure."... Calle Järnkrok and Matias Maccelli appear to be stuck in the press box as Berube keeps his winning forward lines intact after a seven-goal outburst... Dakota Mermis could be scratched now that Benoit has rejoined the club after attending a funeral over the weekend... William Nylander appears to be battling something. He has missed four games this season (three to a lower-body injury, one to illness), a few practices to "maintenance," and was first off the sheet Monday. That's unusual when he's feeling healthy. "Willy's a gamer," Berube said.

Maple Leafs projected lineup Tuesday in Florida:

Knies – Matthews – Domi

Cowan – Tavares – Nylander

Joshua – Roy – McMann

Lorentz – Laughton – Robertson

Rielly – Ekman-Larsson

McCabe – Stecher

Benoit – Myers

Woll

Hildeby

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Sportsnet.ca / All-around play puts Suzuki on good footing to win spot with Team Canada

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — Doug Armstrong couldn't have missed it.

With seconds left in overtime of a game on Nov. 4 at the Bell Centre, he had a bird's eye view of one prospective Team Canada member robbing another of a game-winning opportunity, and it had to have made a strong impression on him.

Surely the architect of Canada's Olympic team noted the whole sequence, which started with Montreal Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki



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winning a defensive-zone draw back clean right before bailing his team out for not recovering the puck.

But when the Philadelphia Flyers snapped it around before it arrived on Travis Konecny's stick for a one-timer, seeing Suzuki flash out, drop to a knee and block Konecny's shot to send the game to a shootout had to have been eye-popping to Armstrong.

Had it been Konecny on Suzuki, it wouldn't have stood out as much to him. Konecny's penchant for putting his body on the line to win a game is a big part of what earned him his role on Team Canada for the 4 Nations Face-Off last February, so watching him step out of the lane on a Suzuki shot to beat his Flyers would've been watching him do something completely out of character.

But Suzuki showing that doing this kind of thing is a feature of his character—in his 22nd minute of action in a game he'd already contributed a goal to—would have to weigh in the balance of the Olympic decision, which must be rendered by Dec. 31.

Since Nov. 5, it's only gotten more complex for Armstrong and the others involved in choosing the roster.

Suzuki and Konecny have each recorded nine points and plus-5 ratings through their last 11 games, though the former did it while simultaneously nursing his way back to full health after blocking the latter's shot. Meanwhile, other players in contention for coveted spots have exploded offensively.

One of them is Connor Bedard, who's put up 21 points in 12 games since Nov. 5, placing him only behind one other Canadian—Nathan MacKinnon, who has 24 points and a plus-21 rating over his last 11 games and is already locked into the roster.

Armstrong is certainly not the only one who's noticed what Bedard's been doing.

"I watched the Hawks (Sunday) night and they were down 3-0 early, and he kind of brought them back pretty quick," said Suzuki's linemate, Cole Caufield. "So...four points..."

Macklin Celebrini had just one on Saturday, but he still produced 18 over the 12 prior to that, making him the third-most productive Canadian player since Suzuki blocked that Konecny shot in front of Armstrong at the Bell Centre.

The 19-year-old, who was taken first overall by the San Jose Sharks in 2024, has 13 goals and 37 points through 26 games so far. And 20-year-old Bedard, who was taken first by the Blackhawks in 2023, has 16 goals, 37 points through 25 games.

They both have produced more than any other player not named MacKinnon, and each of them have posted nine more points than Suzuki, who's only played 24 games so far.

Where Bedard and Celebrini fall behind the Canadiens' captain is in big-game experience, which is more a function of their ages than anything else. As is the level of detail in their game when compared to Suzuki's.

Martin St. Louis, who coaches Suzuki and played for Team Canada at the 2014 Olympics, said that last part is what matters most to Team Canada.

We didn't have to ask him if he believes Suzuki should make it based on his attention to detail. We know he does.

But hearing St. Louis say, "If you lack little details, you have to be a top-10 player in the world," only highlighted how tempted Armstrong and the Canadian brass may be in having both Bedard and Celebrini at the Olympics.

Bedard being plus-10 on his season while averaging 21:15 per game suggests his details have come a long way.

And Celebrini showed those who were watching him—and those who were playing with him—at the 2025 world championship that he's got a lot more detail to his game than most players his age.

"I think that's what makes him really special, is he's not a one-trick pony," said Canadiens defenceman Mike Matheson, who played for Team Canada alongside Celebrini last summer. "He doesn't just get it done on one side of the ice. He's very committed to both sides and he already has a very responsible game for a guy who's putting up very good numbers. So, obviously a guy that you could envision being up and down the lineup on a team like that."

Matheson knows the same is true of Suzuki.

He's played with the London, Ont., native since 2022 and watched him blossom into one of the most complete players in the league. It's left the 31-year-old in awe of the growth in his teammate's game.

"I think it's just getting more and more complete every season, every game," said Matheson. "He's so consistent in the way he plays. He just kind of keeps adding to it, which is really impressive from where it was at the beginning of my time here."

Konecny was strong over the same period, with back-to-back 30-goal seasons leading into a 24-goal, career-high 76-point 2024-25 campaign.

Konecny just hasn't been as productive to start this season, making it harder to envision him filling a role further up Canada's roster.

He had a hard time filling a role further down the lineup at the 4 Nations. He was in and out of their lineup due to illness and injury, which only ratcheted up the pressure on him to follow up a strong finish to last season with an explosive start to this one.

Five goals and 19 points through 24 games wouldn't be considered explosive by any measure.

But even if goals and points aren't the only measures of what makes Konecny effective, his totals are underwhelming compared to those of other Canadians who could fill the type of role he'd occupy at the Olympics.

Both he and Anthony Cirelli have to be looking over their shoulders at Suzuki and six-foot-four winger Tom Wilson, who's recorded 15 goals and 29 points through Washington's first 26 games.

Like Konecny, Cirelli's numbers are far from exceptional.

But they are respectable, as he has nine goals and 17 points in 21 games so far this season. And even if Suzuki and Wilson produce more and can also kill penalties, Cirelli is the most dependable penalty killer for the Tampa Bay Lightning, who currently have the NHL's most effective penalty kill.

Jon Cooper, who coaches the Lightning and Team Canada, will have a huge say in the Olympic decision, and you better believe he'll be pushing to have Cirelli next to fellow Lightning and 4 Nations winger Brandon Hagel for the tournament.

With 11 goals and 18 points in 11 games since Nov. 5, Hagel's another player who's outproduced Suzuki of late.

But Suzuki showing at the beginning of November that he's about more than just production in front of Canada's lead decision maker was more important for his case than anything else that's happened since. Because Armstrong saw Suzuki lead all NHLers with 56 points from the first game after 4 Nations through the one on Nov. 4 and already knew he had the top-end production to play up Team Canada's lineup.

Seeing Suzuki reinforce his league-leading plus-25 through that stretch with a sacrifice to keep the Canadiens alive in that game against the Flyers showed he can play in any role.



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It puts Suzuki on strong footing in the tightening race for spots to complete Canada's forward group.

Now he must sprint towards the finish line while continuing to show he's willing to do anything else it takes to get the job done.

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Sportsnet.ca / Ranking the top 32 prospects for the 2026 NHL Draft

Jason Bukala

Now that all of the 2026 draft prospects I've been monitoring have gone well past a segment of 10 games played, I have a better understanding of how the players are trending. Some of the players you are going to read about here are off to fantastic starts, while other highly touted pre-season prospects have struggled out of the gate.

I'm excited about the depth of the 2026 NHL Draft class. Last year's group provided teams with options to select players who projected more as middle-of-the-lineup contributors. The 2026 class seems to project more top-six forwards and top-pairing defencemen.

Without further ado, here are my first rankings for the 2026 NHL Draft, based on what I've personally seen from the players.

TOP 16: THE LOTTERY PLAYERS

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

Verhoeff has been averaging over 20 minutes per game in his freshman year at North Dakota. The bulk of his shifts come at even strength and on the power play.

When Verhoeff isn't contributing offensively, he's providing consistent detail defensively. He's plus-3 to start the year and earning more trust in all situations as his game continues to mature. Right-shot defencemen with Verhoeff's size and skill are highly valuable assets at the NHL level. At this stage of the year Verhoeff is my top-ranked prospect, and I wrote about why more in-depth here.

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

On November 14 the Nittany Lions were defeated 7-1 in their game versus Michigan. Penn State had been suffering through some significant growing pains as a team before that game — they were swept the previous weekend at Michigan State — but to their credit they dug in and have persevered since that night, running off three straight wins.

In McKenna's first 10 games he contributed 4G-10A, but he was minus-8 in the segment. Since the lopsided Michigan defeat he has four assists in his last three games and he's plus-3. His attention to detail off the puck and effort tracking back the entire length of the ice has noticeably improved.

McKenna averages over 21 minutes of ice time per game, with the majority of his shifts coming at even strength and the power play. His 4G-14A land him in the top 20 of NCAA scoring. I only require McKenna to commit to average results defensively. I recognize his elite offensive element is what projects him as a top-line NHL scoring forward. If he continues to play the way he has in his last three games, he will undoubtedly retake the first-overall ranking on my list.

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

Stenberg is having an incredible season at the pro level playing for Frolunda in Sweden's top league. He's averaging 0.95 points per game

despite only being deployed for around 13 minutes of ice time per game. At the time of writing Stenberg had produced 5G-17A in his first 23 SHL games.

I've been tracking Stenberg for the past two seasons. He's part of the leadership group on the Swedish national team and will be a key member of their roster for the WJC tournament in Minneapolis at the end of the month. Stenberg has the hockey sense and commitment to be used in a variety of roles, and in time he will mature into a complete player at the NHL level. He's stocky/strong, plays fast and is always engaged in the trenches. He's a relentless competitor.

For perspective on how historically incredible Stenberg's season has gone so far at the SHL level, here are some of the results from top scorers at that level in their draft seasons:

PLAYER

SEASON

TEAM

GP

G

A

PTS

PTS/G

Daniel Sedin

1998-99

Modo

50

21

21

42

0.84

Henrik Sedin



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1998-99

0.57

Leo Carlsson

Modo

2022-23

49

Orebro

12

44

22

10

34

15

0.69

Elias Lindholm

25

2012-13

0.57

William Eklund

Brynas

2020-21

48

Djurgardens

11

40

19

11

30

12

0.63

Nicklas Backstrom

23

2005-06

0.58

No. 4: Carson Carels, D, 6-foot-2, 202 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)

Brynas

Carels is a two-way defenceman who can be trusted in all situations. He battles in the trenches to win pucks and is physically capable to handle weight. He's a very efficient skater who's quick in small areas and powerful in open ice. Carels is efficient with the puck. He outlets on time, and from long range. He's also not shy about joining offensively as an extra layer off the rush.

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Carels is a name to keep a close eye on throughout the season. He's a complete player -- not outstanding in any one category, but very strong in all of them -- with top pairing upside.

10

No. 5: Caleb Malhotra, C, 6-foot-2, 182 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)

16

Malhotra is one of the most intriguing prospects for the 2026 draft and he's on the rise. He is, arguably, the most trustworthy centre in the draft

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class. Malhotra has the skill to create off the rush and make plays on the power play. He also can match-up against top lines in a shutdown role if required. His combination of speed, hockey IQ, consistent compete, and skill project Malhotra as a potential top-line NHL forward in time. His approach to the game is similar to Nick Suzuki with the Montreal Canadiens.

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

Reid sprung on to the scene as a priority prospect when he arrived in the Soo, via Bismarck in the NAHL, before Christmas last year. He's an intriguing right-shot defenceman who averaged over 25 minutes per game of ice time in his recent 10-game segment while contributing 7G-5A. Almost all of his ice time comes at even strength and on the power play. He's a high-volume shooter and creative playmaker. Four of his five assists were primary ones in this segment. The two-way defenceman and Michigan State commit (2027) projects as a potential top-pairing defenceman.

No. 7: Tynan Lawrence, C, 6-foot-1, 185 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)

Lawrence has been in and out of the Lumberjacks lineup to start the season after suffering a lower-body injury at training camp. The team is being cautious with his recovery. So far this season he has contributed 6G-3A in the five games he has played.

Lawrence is highly skilled and plays the game fast. He's a threat in transition with the puck on his stick and sees the ice exceptionally well. When he moves the play to a linemate his ability to keep his feet moving and find open ice in high danger areas speaks to his hockey sense. He has top-six NHL upside.

Tynan's hockey journey, so far, has taken him from his hometown of Fredericton, New Brunswick to Shattuck-St. Mary's prep school in Minnesota and Muskegon in the USHL. He's a Boston University commit (2026).

No. 8: Ethan Belchetz, LW, 6-foot-5, 228 pounds, Windsor Spitfires (OHL)

Belchetz is a towering forward who uses his long reach to his advantage offensively and defensively. He's a strong skater who, when he gains the edge off the rush, is very hard to defend on his way to the crease. Belchetz leans goal scorer more than playmaker. His first instinct generally is to direct pucks on net. He has the hockey sense and ability to be deployed in a variety of roles.

In his last 10-game segment Belchetz contribute 5G-5A. He averaged over 22 minutes per game of ice time with almost all of his shifts coming at even strength and the power play. He also has the commitment and IQ to be deployed on the penalty-kill if required.

No. 9: Alberts Smits, D, 6-foot-3, 205 pounds Jukurit (Liiga)

Smits is a Latvian native who is playing in Finland's top pro league. He's a player to watch closely. Smits has a ton of upward momentum and could end up disrupting the draft inside the top six by the time the season is over.

Smits is logging big minutes playing for Jukurit in Liiga. His combination of size and skill are attractive attributes. He's engaged defensively, gets in shooting lanes on the penalty-kill, and averaged over 21 minutes of ice in his latest 10-game segment. So far this season he has contributed 6G-6A. He's being deployed in all situations depending on the opponent and the flow of the game.

No. 10: Adam Novotny, LW, 6-foot-1, 204 pounds, Peterborough Petes (OHL)

Novotny is adjusting to the way the game is played in North America. He's a powerful winger who possesses a fantastic release. He shoots the

puck accurately and with authority. I appreciate how Novotny uses his strength to leverage and extend plays along the boards and working off the cycle. His three zone reads can range at times, but his detail and consistent compete is on the rise. Novotny's primary ice time comes at even strength and on the power play. He's a potential top-six scorer in time, but if he's going to maximize his upside, he has room to play faster every time his number is called.

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

Preston provides a combination of speed, skill and tenacity. He isn't the biggest, or strongest, prospect but he doesn't shy away from contact or battling for pucks in traffic. He's a strong skater, quick out of the blocks and fast in transition. He shoots the puck with authority, either in stride or working the weak side flank on the power play. Preston is willing to block shots defensively. He's the kind of energetic player who can be deployed in a variety of roles. I'm monitoring his offensive output. Preston isn't elite offensively -- in his recent 10-game segment he produced 2G-4A -- but players who are programmed the way Preston is contribute to team success overall.

No. 12: Ryan Lin, D, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)

Lin is easily defined as a two-way, transitional defenceman and power play quarterback. He's an outstanding skater, quick and agile, who easily tracks the full 200 feet. Lin will pinch down to extend plays in the offensive zone, plus he sees the ice and works off the perimeter to make plays. He leans distributor more than shooter, but does have the ability to one-time pucks from the weak side and beat goalies clean from mid-range.

Lin is generally engaged defensively. His skating allows him to close on opponents quickly, which leads to more of a 'puck on stick' approach than physicality. Lin projects as a top four NHL defenceman. He's best paired with a stay-at-home 'D' partner who allows him to roam freely for offence.

No. 13: Daxon Rudolph, D, 6-foot-2, 206 pounds, Prince Albert Raiders (WHL)

Rudolph is a two-way defenceman who contributes secondary offence. He provides a generally low risk approach. He doesn't stray too far out of position seeking offence or to lead the rush. Rudolph does, however, have the pace and vision to recognize when to join as an extra layer off the puck.

I appreciate how Rudolph engages physically. He might end up as a 'match-up or shut-down' defenceman more than two-way/secondary scorer at the NHL level, but his combination of size, sense and compete are attractive attributes and he's hard to play against. I compare Rudolph's game to that of New York Rangers defenceman Braden Schneider.

No. 14: Marcus Nordmark, LW, 6-foot-1, 180 pounds, Djurgardens (Sweden J20)

Nordmark can be polarizing at times. It's important to digest this kind of prospect's overall body of work to fully grasp his potential upside.

Nordmark has the skill to take over shifts at the U20 level and when skating on the international stage representing Sweden. When fully engaged defensively he creates turnovers and explodes up ice with the puck on his stick. Opponents have to respect his speed and puck skill and time their gaps appropriately or Nordmark will expose them by making plays and driving the play to the net.

Nordmark has produced 6G-7A recently, but there have been some nights where he left me concerned about his three-zone detail. His offence wins out, but I'm monitoring Nordmark's commitment when his group doesn't have the puck.

No. 15: Viggo Bjorck, RW, 5-foot-9, 177 pounds, Djurgardens (SHL)



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Bjorck is another player on my list who I believe could move into the top 10 by season's end. He's a highly skilled, darting forward who has played the bulk of his games at the SHL level in Sweden and contributed 3G-4A in a limited role. Bjorck generally skates between nine and 11 minutes a game at the pro level, with almost all of his shifts coming at even strength, compared to averaging around 16 minutes and being deployed in all situations with Sweden's national team.

I trust Bjorck's overall detail and his stature has not been a concern in my viewings. He has reliable hockey sense and defensive commitment to go along with his explosive offensive upside.

No. 16: Xavier Villeneuve, D, 5-foot-11, 172 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)

Villeneuve is the most active offensive defenceman in the 2026 draft class. He craves having the puck on his stick and making plays in the offensive zone. He quarterbackes the power play and has become more of a shooting threat in addition to his elite vision and playmaking. Villeneuve competes to the best of his ability every shift. He's engaged in the play and is always noticeable. There's some risk/reward with this approach, but he works to win pucks back defensively and, despite his stature, he engages physically.

THE REST OF THE FIRST ROUND

No. 17: Pierce Mbuyi, LW, 5-foot-10, 160 pounds, Owen Sound Attack (OHL)

Mbuyi is the fifth-leading scorer in the OHL overall, but he's first among draft eligible prospects. As of Sunday he had contributed 14G-22A and is also a plus-9, which speaks to his well-rounded game. I especially appreciate Mbuyi's combination of "skill and will". He's an energetic forechecker who creates turnovers, never quits on a play and is a shooting option working the weak side flank on the power play.

No. 18: Elton Hermansson, RW, 6-foot-1, 181 pounds, Modo (Allsvenskan)

Hermansson is an intriguing player who has potential to soar in my rankings in the second half of the year playing in Europe. He's split time between the U20 and pro team at Modo and plays to a consistent identity. Hermansson has loads of room to add strength to his frame, which will lead to more open ice power and pace. He's best described as equal parts shooter/playmaker. Hermansson is deceptive with the puck on his stick. He draws attention before making a decision to release the play to the net or wait out a better passing option. Hermansson has scored 4G-3A in 11 games of pro hockey.

No. 19: Maddox Dagenais, C, 6-foot-4, 196 pounds, Quebec Remparts (QMJHL)

Dagenais is another prospect who combines his size with a relentlessly competitive approach. He was one of Team CHL's most noticeable players at the Prospects Challenge versus Team USA. He's on the rise overall. Dagenais is a two-way centre who is mostly deployed at even strength and the power play, but has the commitment to be used in a checking role if asked.

No. 20: Tomas Chrenko, C, 5-foot-11, 170 pounds, HK Nitra (Slovakia)

Chrenko is a darting, undersized forward who's playing pro in Slovakia. He's difficult to check. He has the ability to escape pressure and make plays in small areas, and has produced 4G-11A in 23 games. All of his ice time comes at even strength and the power play. The team that selects Chrenko will be banking on his offensive upside to translate to the NHL in time.

No. 21: Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW, 6-foot-1, 184 pounds, Orebro (Sweden U20)

Aaram-Olsen hails from Norway, but in Sweden is splitting time at the U20 and pro level with Orebro. Aaram-Olsen is a solid skater who

possesses a fantastic release. In my opinion he leans shooter more than playmaker. I also appreciate his commitment off the puck on the defensive side. He's a well-rounded prospect overall.

No. 22: Juho Piiparinen, D, 6-foot-3, 201 pounds, Tappara (Liiga)

Piiparinen is the definition of a two-way/shutdown defenceman. He's the kind of player who complements a defence partner like Xavier Villeneuve, who we mentioned earlier on this list. Piiparinen is capable with the puck. He outlets on time and recognizes when to maintain his position on the offensive blue line to extend plays. He's a big, strong, agile, right-shot defenceman who is capable of playing hard minutes at even strength and on the penalty-kill.

No. 23: Malte Gustafsson, D, 6-foot-4, 200 pounds, HV71 (Sweden J20)

Gustafsson is a big, rangy defenceman who has the pace, vision and puck skill to lead the rush and make plays in the offensive zone. His defensive detail ranges at times, but he's working to use his length as more of an asset when killing plays in his zone. I would like to see Gustafsson add more small area burst and quickness to his game, but he has time on his side and a solid foundation to work with overall.

No. 24: William Hakansson, D, 6-foot-4, 207 pounds, Lulea (SHL)

Hakansson is one of the many defencemen available in this draft class who has towering size. He makes life difficult on opponents when the game slows down along the boards and out front of his net with his physicality. His skating is sound for a young player with his size and he generally keeps things simple with the puck, although he can surprise at times and lead the rush up ice before distributing to support arriving later in the sequence.

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

To say Hurlbert's move from the USNTDP to Kamloops in the off-season agrees with him is an understatement. Hurlbert is thriving with the Blazers, being deployed in all situations, and contributing 20G-28A in his first 27 games, which leads the WHL in scoring. I'm monitoring Hurlbert's skating and looking for him to add more explosiveness as he matures, but his puck touch and overall impact speaks for itself. Hurlbert has committed to the Michigan Wolverines and is slated to head to the NCAA next fall.

No. 26: Egor Shilov, C, 6-foot, 177 pounds, Victoriaville Tigres (QMJHL)

Shilov is an intriguing prospect who has the potential to be a difference maker offensively. He has fantastic puck skill and the ability to elude checks with his crafty approach. Shilov can play the game quickly when he wants to, but I'm looking for more consistency from a shift-to-shift perspective as the season rolls along. He's contributed 12G-21A in 33 games.

No. 27: Jack Hextall, C, 6-foot, 185 pounds, Youngstown Phantoms (USHL)

Hextall is a Michigan State commit (2026) who started his season on a high note representing Team USA at the Hlinka/Gretzky Cup in the summer and contributing 2G-5A for the gold medal-winning American side. Hextall provides a combination of high-end compete and skill. He's a playmaker who's exceptionally dangerous on the power play.

No. 28: Oscar Holmertz, C, 6-foot, 192 pounds, Linkoping (SWE J20)

Holmertz is best described as a two-way centre. He's reliable on and off the puck in all three zones and is an outstanding skater. He uses his reach to intercept plays and pounce on pucks in open ice. He isn't the most elite offensive prospect in the first-round, but he plays the game the right way and provides better than secondary scoring. Holmertz has contributed 5G-12A in 20 games at the U20 level.

No. 29: Oliver Suvanto, C, 6-foot-3, 207 pounds, Tappara (Liiga)



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Suvanto has a lot in common with Holmertz, but he's bigger and projects to provide a shade less offence. Suvanto is playing pro in Finland. He's understanding what it takes to defend and lean on mature opponents, but it comes at a bit of cost in relation to his scoring output. In time he might provide more offence -- he's contributed 2G-4A in his first 26 games -- but it's his attention to detail in all three zones that earns my trust.

No. 30: Luke Schairer, D, 6-foot-3, 195 pounds, USNTDP (USHL)

Schairer is a "glue guy" for the U18 American team. He's deployed in all situations and thrives on the defensive side. Schairer is capable moving the puck and extending plays in the offensive zone, but he's not much of a shooter -- he doesn't have a goal, but has been credited with nine assists so far this year. What I appreciate most about this two-way/matchup prospect is his consistent buy-in to kill plays defensively and lean on opponents. He isn't the most dynamic player, but teams need players like Schairer to complement their roster.

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

I'm intrigued with Shcherbakov's upside. He's a very strong skater for his stature, smooth out of the blocks and agile. He handles the puck with confidence and leans distributor more than shooter. Defensively he's a bit of a work in progress. Shcherbakov is engaged physically, but on occasion he could use his long reach and overall length to cut down plays more aggressively on the defensive side. At the end of the day, young defencemen who skate like Shcherbakov and can make plays offensively, are attractive assets to pursue.

No. 32: Ilya Morozov, C, 6-foot-3, 205 pounds, Miami of Ohio Redhawks (NCAA)

Morozov is the youngest player in the NCAA this season and skating on Miami's top line. He's averaging over 19 minutes of ice time per game with the bulk of it coming at even strength and on the power play. Morozov, especially for a young freshman in the NCAA, is reliable on and off the puck in all three zones. He's improving his win/loss rate in the face-off dot and contributes on the power play by ripping pucks from the weak side flank. Morozov is a solid skater who's produced 7G-6A in his first 14 games and he's a plus-7.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.02.2025

1223789 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Brock Boeser adjusting to Canucks' centre woes: 'It's hard'

Iain MacIntyre

LOS ANGELES — Brock Boeser has seven primary assists this season, and the five centres he has played with on the Vancouver Canucks' second line have none.

Without a National Hockey League playmaker down the middle, winger Conor Garland had been creating scoring chances for Boeser from the opposite side of the line, but now Garland is hurt, too.

"That's the definition of this year," Boeser lamented after Monday's practice in El Segundo, Calif. "I mean, it's hasn't been the greatest of luck. And finally, when you start to get some confidence, something like this happens."

After missing Saturday's 2-1 overtime loss to the Los Angeles Kings with an undisclosed injury, Garland was scheduled to fly home to Vancouver Monday afternoon for further medical evaluation while the Canucks travelled to Denver to take on the force of nature that is the Colorado Avalanche.

At 10-13-3, the Canucks are not yet through the first third of their season, and Garland is already out of the lineup for the third time after missing only two games the last three years.

With Boeser now playing left wing for the first time in his career, Kiefer Sherwood is the new second-line right winger alongside centre David Kampf, who does not yet have a point in six games since joining the Canucks following his contract termination in Toronto.

An experienced, respected fourth-line NHL centre, Kampf has spent the last five games in the middle of the Canucks' second line.

Filip Chytil started the season as the second-line centre and scored three goals before suffering another serious concussion in Game 6. Bottom-six centre Teddy Blueger was injured the same game. Neither has played since.

Between Chytil and Kampf, inexpensive pickup Lukas Reichel had 12 games at second-line centre before playing himself right out of coach Adam Foote's lineup. There was also one game for Aatu Raty and two for Max Sasson, both recent graduates of the American Hockey League.

As CanucksArmy.com reported, in 26 games, the Canucks' various second-line centres have contributed one secondary assist — a defensive-zone point for Reichel in a Nov. 8 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Say what you want about Canucks president Jim Rutherford, but the Hall-of-Fame manager was excruciatingly accurate when he said after last season that Vancouver needed to add a top-six centre and that it would be expensive, "but it'll also be very expensive not to get one."

The team never acquired one, and here it is three points from the bottom of the NHL.

It's hard for the Canucks to feel positive these days, although the energy and enthusiasm of Nils Hoglander in his first practice since pre-season ankle surgery helped the mood on Monday.

"It is hard," Boeser said. "Like, it's hard. But we're coming to the rink. . . I think we've played some good games. Guys show up and work hard, and we're following our structure, and then we'll lose a tight game. I feel like that's happened a lot. And after it happens to you a few times, it gets frustrating.

"When I was playing with a guy like Gar, you know, he's really good at creating space for himself and for others. He's such a good playmaker. That's kind of where I think we've gotten a lot of those (scoring) chances, but obviously he's hurt now.

"I do feel like I've been making a lot of plays — more so than in past years when I was playing with J.T. (Miller) all the time. That was a little different. I do feel like I've created a lot of stuff, but I don't think I have a secondary assist yet. They're all primary, which is crazy. But, I mean, it doesn't really change anything. Like, I've got to shoot the puck. I know I need to score goals for our team. . . and it doesn't matter who's in the middle. I've got to show up and try to have a good game and try to produce and not get scored on."

Considering who has been available as Boeser's centre, the longest-tenured Canuck is actually having a decent season with nine goals and seven assists in the 24 games he has played.

But the Canucks have just two wins in their last 10 games (2-5-3), and in the last eight, Boeser has one goal. The 28-year-old, however, has had a pile of scoring chances among his 21 shots on target during this time.

He looked dangerous in all three games in California, where the Canucks went 1-1-1.

"I've been right there," Boeser said. "When you're getting chances, that means you're close. When you're not getting chances, that's when I know I've got problems."



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Minus a major move by Allvin for centre, Boeser making a U-turn in the hour before free agency opened on July 1 and re-signing in Vancouver for seven years and \$50.75 million was the biggest hockey news of the summer on the West Coast.

But things haven't quite gone as Boeser and Canucks had hoped.

The critical mass of injuries, headlined by starting goalie Thatcher Demko and two of the team's three NHL-proven centres, contributed to inconsistency in systems play. And since general manager Patrik Allvin informed other teams that the Canucks are willing to move their UFA-eligible players, trade conjecture is becoming deafening. Sherwood, the team's leading goal-scorer with 12, has been at the epicentre of rumours whirlwind.

"To be honest, I haven't really heard much because I'm not really on social media," Boeser said. "I've overheard some of it. I know it can be tough. I've gone through (trade rumours) and I've had a lot of noise around me, and it can be hard. As much as you don't want to think about it, it's definitely in the back of your head and might affect you a little bit. But at the end of the day, it's part of the business, and you've got to push forward and push through."

Two months into his seven-year extension, is Boeser worried where the Canucks might be headed?

"If my brain tries to go there. . . I try not to go there just because we've been dealt with some tough luck," he said. "You know, look at our centres. We've had Heats and Teddy out pretty much the entire year. That hurts. Those guys are important pieces to our team, and I thought we were playing some good hockey when we did have those guys in the lineup. You know, I think everyone's trying hard. Even last game, I thought we worked hard and we were right there. We just ended up on the wrong side of it."

• With minor-league callup Nikita Tolopilo summoned home for the birth of his child, the Canucks recalled goalie Jiri Patera to join them in Colorado and back up Kevin Lankinen.

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.

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HOW THE CANUCKS PRACTISED

Forwards

Kane-Pettersson-Lekkerimaki

Boeser-Kampf-Sherwood

O'Connor-Sasson-DeBrusk

Bains-Raty-Karlsson

Defencemen

Hughes-Hronek

M. Pettersson-Myers

Pettersson Jr.-Willander

Goalie

Lankinen

Extras

Hoglander (non-contact)

Reichel

Joseph

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1223790 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers hope homestand sparks latest turnaround

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — It was The Tragically Hip that warned us of the perils of ruminating on yesterday's accomplishments.

"You can't be fond of living in the past," advised the great Canadian poet Gord Downie. "Cause if you are then there's no way that you're going to last."

So how does that apply to an Oilers team that has stunk the joint out for three consecutive autumns, yet embarks on a five-game homestand Tuesday with full confidence that they are ready to pull the same rabbit out of that same old top hat from which the last two seasons were magically rescued?

"Our locker room has been through it before," Zach Hyman said on Monday, the day before Edmonton was to play just their 10th home game in 27 starts. "We've been through adversity, through the outside noise, through all the chaos that comes with it..."

"We're used to it. We know we have to play better, and you can be the judge of whether you believe in us or not. I think we've proven it year over year."

Right around this time two seasons ago, with Kris Knoblauch just a few weeks into his tenure behind the Oilers' bench, Edmonton walked into Washington and won 5-0. They never looked back, going 44-15-5 from that game onwards.

"More Oiler-like," Hyman assessed that evening in D.C. "Great special teams, great PK, great power play. Great saves that kept us in it early. Great even strength play..."

"It's the kind of game that you look up to and say 'Yes. This is how we should play.'"

Roughly a year later, back in the glue again with a middling 10-9-2 record on Nov. 22, Mattias Ekholm was speaking to the concept of how a Stanley Cup finalist can make just a few changes, yet arrive to start the season like a bunch of total strangers.

"Ultimately, it's about how you gel as a team," said Ekholm. "Things can look great on paper, and you're thinking, 'Oh, they're just going to take off where they left off, right?' Well, it doesn't work that way."

"It can change in a heartbeat. It could be one guy here or one guy there, and then all of a sudden, nothing works."

Today, the Oilers find themselves somewhere in the same postal code of both 2023 and 2024, a couple of points removed from the Western Conference playoff picture on American Thanksgiving.

Edmonton is an 11-10-5 team, though it somehow resides just four points south of Pacific Division leading Anaheim. A two-time Stanley Cup finalist, the Oilers haven't won three games in a row yet, have the worst team save percentage in the NHL (.877), and are ranked 30th in goals allowed per game at 3.58.

All of that can be assuaged, however, with a solid homestand against Minnesota, Seattle, Winnipeg, Buffalo and Detroit.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"When the world's caving in, you take a look at things, and it's still right there within our grasp," said veteran centreman Adam Henrique. "I know you (media) guys love Thanksgiving and those sorts of things. But it's there, and we know that."

With the goaltending under intense scrutiny here, Stuart Skinner authored a shutout on the road in Seattle Saturday, the latest in a growing number of solid wins that were supposed to begin the turnaround, but never did.

The Edmonton power play went two-for-two in that game, the penalty killers a perfect six-for-six.

If ever there was a springboard game, this was that.

"We've had a few of those where we want to get going," Henrique said. "It was a complete game. Now, being at home here for a little bit, we've got to step on the gas."

"It's a big, big stretch for us," echoed Hyman, "to come home, establish our game at home. We're usually very good at home. It's a fun building to play in, and we've got the most amazing fans, so it makes it easy to come to the rink every day and play.

"It's going to be a good stretch for us to get back on track."

It always has been, around this time of year.

You wonder how long the Edmonton Oilers can keep living this way?

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.02.2025

1223791 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How Michael Jordan, Andre Agassi and stoicism have helped shape Senators' Jake Sanderson

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — In the NHL, some stars are known for wearing their emotions on their sleeves. Think of Connor McDavid's eruption of emotions in the 2024 Stanley Cup Final.

Yet we have a star amongst the ranks who practises stoicism: Jake Sanderson.

"Just a lot of stoicism. That's my big thing," said the Ottawa Senators defenceman.

The always-reserved, quiet and reflective Sanderson has taken up the principles of the ancient Greek philosophy to monitor emotional regulation and to accept what you cannot control.

"I would be scared (at some points), but I (remind myself) it's not going to last forever," Sanderson told Sportsnet.ca about how stoicism has changed his hockey mindset. "You may be nervous at some points in a high-pressure situation, but you're going to look back in 20 years and you're going to wish you had those in your life again."

It's been working. Sanderson has 20 points in 25 games while being one of the best defensive defencemen in the world with his blend of monstrous speed, immense IQ and whiff of offensive firepower. Not a bad combination.

Sunday night offered an example of his prowess as he single-handedly cycled in the Dallas zone to score the lone goal in the Senators' loss. That goal moved him past Zdeno Chara (pretty good hockey player) for fifth all-time in points by a Senators defenceman.

It's part of Sanderson's nature not to be a rah-rah guy — in complete contrast to his always emotive captain, Brady Tkachuk.

"I think the vocal stuff is continuing to come, and the comfort with that (type of leadership)," said Sanderson.

When asked if he ever gets hot on the ice or in the dressing room, he had a clear answer.

"No, I know I don't," he said. "Sometimes I get fired up on the ice or on the bench too, but I'll never really yell."

However, last season Sanderson felt he rode the high and lows of the game too often, which led to a poor start that initially kept him off Team USA for the 4 Nations tournament. (He eventually made the team as an injury replacement.)

"I think, last year, with the pressure of trying to make the 4 Nations team and me wanting it really badly, it affected me," said Sanderson. "It was a great learning experience for me, and not wanting to change who I am as a player and just, again, be confident with who I am."

This season, he's had a different approach: every day when he drives to the rink, he gets perspective through Ryan Holliday's podcast, The Daily Stoic.

"So, I'll just throw it on for like 10-15 minutes," said Sanderson.

"Sometimes I'm not totally paying attention, but I hear some good snippets every now and then. But, yeah, just the perspective, how lucky I am to be doing this, but also the mental too. It's a high-pressure atmosphere, but you learn different ways in how to cope with it."

What sticks out about Sanderson's game is how consistent it is. There are no highs and lows — it's regulated between great and really good, in a similar vein to the emotional regulation he's trying to achieve.

"Rarely will he make a mistake," said Senators coach Travis Green.

His play has led to some high praise and comparison to an always steady, almost mistake-free Hall of Famer.

"He reminds me a lot of how Scott Niedermayer wheels around out there," said Chris Pronger.

Like Niedermayer, Sanderson is one of the best skaters in the league who can chew up heavy minutes with elite confidence like a dog with its chew toy. That's why Sanderson is trusted to play a career-high 24:40 of ice time per game this season.

Sanderson is always trying ways to improve, calling himself an "everydayer." He's a hockey nerd's hockey nerd. Tkachuk affectionately called him "boring" for how locked he is with hockey.

After last season, Sanderson said, "Comfort kind of kills growth ... you want to seek out challenges every single day."

Sanderson has multiple contraptions at home for recovery that he doesn't share publicly, to keep an edge on opponents. But he tries to learn from others who've gone through similar pressures as high-performance athletes. Recently, Sanderson has taken inspiration from Michael Jordan's "Last Dance" documentary and former World No. 1 tennis player Andre Agassi's renowned "Open" autobiography.

"Wanted to read it just because I've gotten big into tennis this summer," said Sanderson.

"What I've taken away from it so far is how much has gone into his life, the stress of tennis, just the routine too, as well. And it kind of just puts in perspective about my hockey as well.

"I'm in a team sport. I know he mentions it multiple times in the book, that he wishes he played a team sport, and how lonely tennis can be. So, I'm lucky. I have 25 brothers to go out on the ice with me."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The interesting dynamic that presents itself to Sanderson is the tug between his ego and the stoic belief that you need to escape the ego.

"You have to have a little bit of both," said Sanderson.

"I think with ego, you have to be confident in your abilities, but also you have to be open to constructive criticism to get better and expand your abilities. Just taking it all in, and with a Michael Jordan (mindset) too. He talks about ego and how it's a big part of his competition, and in stoicism, ego is not good. I think, for me, just finding the balance between the two."

It's allowed Sanderson to have an excellent start to the season with all the pressure that comes with being a franchise defenceman.

Sanderson has quarterbacked the 11th-best power play in the absence of the Senators' most talented power-play talisman, Tkachuk, who has played in just five of the first 25 games.

"It's funny how really good players in the league find a way to just get the job done," said Green of Sanderson's play.

He's also starting to enter the Norris Trophy conversation. Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman on a recent 32 Thoughts described Sanderson as just a notch behind Cale Makar.

"I know it's still early for Sanderson, but this is how good he is," Friedman said. "Is Sanderson going to be at a point in time in the league the best player who's never won a Norris Trophy?"

Sanderson is 10th in defenceman scoring, including 13 points in 14 road games, and is tied for fourth in power-play points by a defenceman. He is also tied for 14th in WAR (wins above replacement) of any player and eighth in WAR among defencemen. Sanderson blends Jaccob Slavin's elite defence with outstanding offensive attributes.

It becomes a challenge to name a defenceman who is clearly better than Sanderson in the Eastern Conference.

Sanderson has all the tools to be a Norris Trophy candidate for years to come, even if he won't say it.

"I think you know my personal goals, at the end of the day," Sanderson told Sportsnet.ca with a smirk.

As Green said last season, perhaps summing up the passionate fervour Senators fans have for their star defenceman: "We're lucky to have him."

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1223792 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / With patience and poise, Flames' Yan Kuznetsov sets example for development

Eric Francis

NASHVILLE — Yan Kuznetsov is the poster boy for the organizational patience being preached by the Calgary Flames.

After waiting 666 days between NHL starts, the 23-year-old defenceman was summoned from the Wranglers almost a month ago, and has stepped seamlessly into the roster spot with the Flames in which he'll remain for years to come.

Another building block in place.

Five-and-a-half years after being a second-round draft pick, Kuznetsov is ready, as evidenced by the 22 minutes he's playing every night alongside MacKenzie Weegar on the Flames' second pairing.

"It was definitely hard at times, because you're waiting for your opportunity," said the well-spoken Russian, who spent parts of six seasons in the AHL.

"I was just focusing on the process. I kind of worked on my craft and I knew at some point (the call would come).

"Even when last year (didn't include a call-up), I stuck with it. I'm really proud of it at this point."

As he should be.

Kuznetsov insisted he never got frustrated at seeing others called up ahead of him, as they were friends and teammates he wanted to support.

He never lost faith.

Unlike many forwards, whose offensive production can prompt a promotion, Kuznetsov is a big, stay-at-home type whose value can't be measured by points.

Instead, it's measured by impact, which is something the six-foot-four, 209-pound lefty has provided in spades.

"I remember checking in with Weegs early on, like, 'How's it going? How's the pair?'" said Flames coach Ryan Huska.

"He's like, 'I actually love it. He's one guy that I feel talks more than I do on the ice, he's been very vocal.' It's awesome. Even when Mackenzie makes a poor play, it's Kuzy that's kind of, 'Hey, we're good.' So he's grown a lot."

Kuznetsov has helped stabilize Weegar's game, giving the veteran a consistent partner with whom he can continue building chemistry.

For an organization in the midst of a rebuild that could take some time, Kuznetsov's success story stems from the type of extended development that protects players from being rushed to the bigs before they're ready.

"Totally — I think he's a great example," said Huska.

"Everybody wants the player to be effective and an impact guy right now. But in reality, it's not the way it is. They need to learn how to play against men. His first couple years in the minors, he was in and out. He was trying to play a different role than we expected him to be able to play. And then, over the last year-and-a-bit, he started to really figure out, 'OK, if I play this way I'm gonna play in the NHL.' So now he has a pretty good handle on what we look for. I think the time in the American league is very valuable for a young player."

The list of those he continues to learn from includes his father, who watches every game from Russia, chiming in with advice via text.

"Yeah, before the Florida game he texted me, 'Oh, you got to work on your shot,'" Kuznetsov laughed.

"He said, 'You gotta get it through.'"

One night later, against the Panthers, he scored his first NHL goal with a blistering shot past a defender that kickstarted a comeback win.

"He's been coming and coming, and it took probably longer than he wanted, but now you see where he's at and we're really happy with his game," said general manager Craig Conroy.

"He's big, he skates long, he's got a heck of a shot, he's really good at the penalty kill, and when he hits, it's hard. It's just nice to see his confidence come. He's come up and been very impressive, so I'm excited for him and for us.

"I think we always thought he was ready, but it was all about getting him in and how much he was going to get to play here. So for him to come up and play the same minutes that he would play in the American league, that's perfect. And he's proven that he can do it.



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"It's been fun to watch."

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Sportsnet.ca / Streaking Lightning putting mediocre Atlantic Division on lockdown

Ryan Dixon

Here's something, on the first day of December, you wouldn't expect to say about a team that in late October was last in its group: Are the Tampa Bay Lightning a lock to win the Atlantic Division?

Actually, let's go one further: Is Tampa the safest bet to win its division in the NHL?

Two teams — the Lightning and the freakin' insane Colorado Avalanche — have four-point leads in their division right now. On Sunday, Sportsnet was touting the idea Colorado could break the all-time points record set by the Boston Bruins (135) in 2022-23. If you want to bet a nickel on Nathan MacKinnon's team to merely claim the Central Division, nobody is going to stop you.

That said, even after burying the Montreal Canadiens 7-2 on Saturday for their 11th win in 12 tries, the Avs are still dealing with a Dallas Stars squad that — after their own beatdown of an Atlantic club, a 6-1 walloping of Ottawa on Sunday night — is 10-1-1 in its past 12. There's also the hard-charging Minnesota Wild, who beat the Avs 3-2 in a shootout Friday night.

The Avs have a game in hand on both teams and it's hard to imagine Minny making up a nine-point gap. But Dallas could certainly erase that four-point deficit and even if they're clear of the Wild, the Avalanche still have to face the strong squad three more times this season — not to mention three more tilts with the Stars, to boot.

Now let's look at Tampa.

The Bolts, who beat the Wings in Detroit on Friday and the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden 24 hours later, are now 15-3-0 since waking up the morning of Oct. 24 last in the division (and tied for second-last in the conference) with a .286 points percentage after seven games.

Tampa has now won seven straight games despite the fact captain Victor Hedman and fellow top-four D-man Ryan McDonagh have both been out for nearly a month. Erik Cernak, another key blue-liner for this club, has been sidelined for over a week.

How good are the Lightning going to be when those defencemen return? And, more to the point, how good will they have to be to win the Atlantic anyway?

Tampa's plus-19 goal-differential is the only positive figure in the group; its .680 points percentage is No. 1 and Montreal (.604) is the only other team over .600.

By points percentage, Tampa Bay's closest pursuers are Montreal, Ottawa (.560), Boston (.556) and Detroit (.538).

The Canadiens and Senators have some proof of concept, having made the playoffs last year, but neither one of them is a club you look at and feel good about placing ahead of the Bolts. The Bruins have been plucky this year, but remain in some form of a soft reset, while the Wings are trying to break a near decade-long absence from the playoffs and will be life and death to do so.

Beneath those teams sits a Florida Panthers club that's going through it with vital players injured long-term, while the Toronto Maple Leafs are clumsily trying to find their way through life after Mitch Marner.

Do any of those six teams sound like a better bet to pass the Bolts than Dallas is to jump Colorado?

(Out of respect to Tampa, we're not even mentioning the Buffalo Sabres).

There's an in-the-bone, institutional knowledge element to Tampa when it comes to winning games. There's also defenceman Darren Raddysh producing 13 points in his past eight games to provide an offensive surge Martin St. Louis, Vincent Lecavalier and Nikita Kucherov would all be proud of. (OK, Kucherov has 18 points in his past nine games, but you get the point).

Suffice it to say, everything on the ice is going right for Tampa.

But even when it's not, which Atlantic club do you like to take the Bolts down?

Weekend takeaways

- It's getting a little harder to completely dismiss the Philadelphia Flyers after they earned two road victories against division rivals on the weekend, a 4-3 shootout win on Long Island on Friday and a 5-3 victory on Saturday in Jersey against one of the top squads in the East. Those wins gave the Flyers three straight road W's and a 6-2-0 record in their past eight.

Trevor Zegras has obviously been a dream fit in Philly and he scored against both the Isles and Devils (and, naturally, also kicked in a successful shootout attempt versus New York as the best shootout artist the league has ever known). Another off-season pickup, Christian Dvorak, isn't getting quite the same ink as Zegras, but he's been incredibly important to the Flyers' success, too. Dvorak — who inked a one-year, get-right deal after injury troubles plagued much of his time in Montreal — picked up an apple on Owen Tippett's game-opening goal against the Devils and the line of Dvorak between Zegras and Tippett has been a good one for first-year Philly coach Rick Tocchet.

It comes with caveats — even during their recent good run, the Flyers' underlying numbers aren't great — but Philadelphia sits in a playoff spot right now and has a positive goal differential at plus-1.

- Staying in the Metro, the Washington Capitals have now won four straight (and seven of eight) after downing the Islanders 4-1 on Sunday afternoon. Following 2-6-2 dip from late October through mid-November, the Caps are rolling. Washington's plus-27 goal differential at five-on-five is the only one in the league in the same neighbourhood as NHL-leading Colorado (plus-37). Nobody else is even plus-15 at five-on-five.

- With three more tucks on the weekend, Morgan Geekie is keeping the idea alive that he could join Jonathan Cheechoo in the conversation for most unlikely Rocket Richard Trophy winners ever. Right now, the Boston winger is tied with Nathan MacKinnon for the league lead at 20 goals and the 15 even-strength goals potted by Geekie tops all snipers.

However the Richard race shakes out, Geekie has the inside track on the Cy Young Award with a 20-6 (goals-assists) line right now.

- Big hockey hugs to Clayton Keller and his entire family after Keller's dad, Bryan Keller, passed away in his sleep on Thanksgiving Day in the United States late last week. And a huge stick tap to the St. Louis Blues for their tribute to Keller's dad on Saturday while the St. Louis native was in town to play the team he grew up watching.

Red-and-white power rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (13-8-3): The Canadiens may have been hammered 7-2 by the Colorado Avalanche (wearing Quebec Nordiques colours) on Saturday afternoon, but a victory Friday afternoon in Vegas



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ensured a four-point road trip through Utah, Nevada and Colorado. That's a win for the Habs.

2. Winnipeg Jets (13-11-0): Seeing Nino Niederreiter (two goals, one into an empty net) and Cole Perfetti (one goal) hit the game sheet during Saturday's 5-2 victory in Nashville was huge for a Jets team that's been so, so reliant on the top unit of Mark Scheifele, Gabe Vilardi and Kyle Connor.

3. Ottawa Senators (12-9-4): Ottawa had three wins through four outings to start a gruesome seven-game roadie in late November. But after losing 4-3 to St. Louis on Friday and 6-1 at the hands of the Stars in Texas Sunday night, the Sens suddenly need to close out this voyage with a win in Montreal on Tuesday to restore some good vibes.

4. Toronto Maple Leafs (11-11-3): You can talk about trades all you want, but nothing pulls a team out of a funk/makes the coach look smart/raises your floor like quality goaltending. Since Joseph Woll debuted on Nov. 15, the Leafs have a .916 team save percentage, a number bested by only five clubs in the NHL.

5. Edmonton Oilers (11-10-5): How about a nice 1-1-2 return for Ryan Nugent-Hopkins during a — can we call it critical? — 4-0 road victory over the Seattle Kraken on Saturday. RNH had been out of the lineup since Nov. 8.

6. Calgary Flames (9-14-4): Devin Cooley has been awesome for Calgary this season, so it was tough to see the 28-year-old stopper lose a bid for his first NHL whitewash on Sunday night when Carolina downed the Flames 1-0 in overtime after 62:39 of shutout hockey from Cooley. Still, how about Cooley's league-best .930 (!) SP in 10 outings this year.

7. Vancouver Canucks (10-13-3): We're less than three weeks away from the NHL's holiday roster freeze and no team is being watched closer than Vancouver.

The week ahead

- The Eastern Conference's two wild-card teams both reside in Pennsylvania and we'll get a Keystone State battle Monday night when Sidney Crosby and Co. visit Philly. After three more tallies on the weekend, Crosby is on pace for 55 goals in his age-38 season. The only players in NHL history to score 50 goals at age 35 or older are Johnny Bucyk (51) when he was 35 in 1970-71 and Alex Ovechkin (50) when he was 36 in 2021-22.

Also Monday, Josh Norris — who was injured in Buffalo's first game of the season — will return to the Sabres lineup when they host the Jets.

Finally, rugged Devils D-man Brenden Dillon is slated to play his 1,000th NHL contest on Monday when Jersey hosts the Columbus Blue Jackets.

- The Leafs are in Sunrise on Tuesday to face the Florida team that bounced them in the second round last year for the first time this season. You have to think a victory for Toronto — after a big 7-2 W in Pittsburgh on Saturday — would go a long way toward helping the Buds exhale a little bit.

- Brock Nelson and the Avalanche will be on Long Island Thursday night to face the Isles team Nelson skated with for nearly 13 full seasons. The Colorado centre bagged a pair of goals versus Montreal on Saturday and has 11 points in his past nine outings.

- Saturday night is marked by a couple of big all-Canadian matchups, with the Habs in Toronto to visit the Leafs before the Oilers and Jets — two teams that also need all the points they can get right now — clash in Northern Alberta.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames' Cooley impressing with carefree approach, strong play

Eric Francis

RALEIGH — Breaking the silence in a dressing room quieted by a 1-0 overtime loss, Devin Cooley was asked about the opportunity he's been presented.

In a season in which the Calgary Flames' backup wasn't expected to get many more than a half dozen starts by Christmas, his number was called Sunday for the fifth time in six games.

No, Dustin Wolf is not nursing an injury, nor are they resting him.

Cooley has simply played his way to prominence, with numbers that have him among league leaders in goals against (1.88) and save percentage (.930).

On Sunday, he was at his best once again, keeping the Flames in a tight game against the league's third-best offence, until Nikolaj Ehlers poked home the winner three minutes into extra time.

When asked how he's managed to break through in such dramatic fashion, the 28-year-old rookie said his key is keeping it loose.

"I'm laughing, I'm smiling, I'm singing, you know, I'm making jokes," said Cooley despite losing out on his first NHL shutout minutes earlier.

"(Andrei) Svechnikov comes up to me and he goes, 'Give me a goal.' And I'm like, 'I don't want to give you a goal.' He says, 'maybe five-hole?,' and I say 'maybe.'"

He then cited a third-period turnover of his that prompted him to have to poke away a centring pass.

"It's a horrible play by me, but then I go in the corner, I'm like laughing, I'm looking at Wolfie and he's laughing too," said Cooley, who stopped 16 of 17 shots in a 1-0 loss.

"It just helps take away the severity of the mistakes you make and makes the game a lot more fun. That's when I play my best.

"When I stop having fun, and I start gripping my stick a little too hard, that's when maybe I don't play so good. So I'm just gonna continue to try to have as much fun as possible."

Anecdotes like these are not normal in a hockey world in which beige is always the colour of the day, and sticking out is shunned.

As coach Ryan Huska joked recently when asked about Cooley's oversharing, "When I hear things like that, I just think, 'goalie.'"

Craig Conroy thinks the same thing, but admits he's been chastised by his wife for doing so.

"My wife even mentions that, because I'll say, 'Whoa, that was a lot,' and she goes, 'Craig, you used to say some stuff too,'" laughed the Flames GM, who was one of the more colourful, chatty types as a player.

"So, I get it. That's just his personality. But, again, sometimes you're like, 'Oh, why would you say that?' It's just the wording sometimes. But then you hear the response, and people love it. It's just kind of a breath of fresh air, and he's being him. It's fun."

It started with the day he arrived at camp from San Jose two summers ago with a road trip tale that involved two flat tires, his pet rabbit Tito and an accident involving a truck spilling exploding whipped cream canisters.

Every chat since is full of animation, including the recent revelation that during games, he repeats a simple mantra to calm himself: "Nothing matters. Nobody cares. We're all going to die."



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It went viral.

"I'm trying not to think too much about myself at all," said Cooley, who went from being the best goalie in the AHL last season to the worst following a mid-season concussion.

"I think in previous years, and maybe even in pre-season, I was just so focused internally, stressed and second-guessing myself. And now it's like, I'm only focused on what's happening outside, and what the other team is doing, and trying to have a lot of fun while I play.

"I just continue to learn and continue to get better, and hopefully I can continue that for the whole season, because anybody in this league can have a stretch of, like, 10 good games as a goalie, but the test is if you can do it consistently over a season. So that's kind of my goal is just to continue to progress and continue to be consistent."

He's getting more chances to do that, which is a significant development for a team worried in the pre-season it would have to play Wolf upwards of 60 times.

"Devin has been really good, so there isn't a sense that we have to overplay Dustin," said Huska, explaining his decision to keep playing Cooley.

"We have two good goaltenders now and Devin has proven that we need to look at him that way. He's finding a way to get us points and making key saves at the right time, so you want to reward him."

Asked if he could have fathomed getting a cluster of starts like this, given the pre-season struggles he had, he shrugged.

"I try not to think about it, you know, and I've said this a few times before, like, I don't care if I play 50 games or five games or I'm not even here," said Cooley.

"I just want to continue to take things day by day and continue to have fun with it. This is my purpose in life right now, you know? And this is what gives me energy and what gives me happiness, and what I enjoy more than anything. And I'm just happy to be here and continuing to learn and grow."

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TSN.CA / Marchand believes reports of Leafs demise are greatly exaggerated

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs and Panthers held practices at the Baptist Health IcePlex in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. on Monday.

The Toronto Maple Leafs are starting December four points outside a playoff spot, but Brad Marchand still views them as "a very good contending team."

The Panthers winger believes it's too early to make any judgements about a team's playoff prospects. He is, however, well aware that the concern level is high in Toronto.

"Obviously with the media attention and the fan support that they have in Toronto, you know, things get blown way out of proportion up there," Marchand said. "What are they, four points out of a playoff spot? If people are thinking they're out of a playoff spot for the season they got to find a new job."

Marchand sees a simple reason for why the Leafs, who finished first in the Atlantic Division last year, are currently sitting in 15th place in the Eastern Conference.

"They're battling some injuries, stuff like that, which affects your overall game and your consistency and just how comfortable you are with your linemates and everything," Marchand said.

Only four Leafs players (centre John Tavares, winger Bobby McMann, defenceman Jake McCabe and defenceman Oliver Ekman-Larsson) have suited up in all 25 games this season.

The Leafs pushed the eventual Stanley Cup champion Panthers to seven games during the playoffs last season. What does Marchand remember most about the second-round series?

"They were one goal away from from beating us, essentially," he said.

Toronto led the best-of-seven series 2-0 and had chances to take a stranglehold lead in overtime of Game 3 before Marchand scored the winning goal.

"They compete very hard," Marchand recalled. "They're very deep. Their defensive structure is way better now than it was in the past."

After the series ended, Marchand expressed sympathy for Leafs players.

"When you see the pressure Toronto faces ... they just beat the pressure into this team," he said.

"When you see the pressure Toronto faces... they just beat the pressure into this team."

Brad Marchand says the Toronto fans and media put extra pressure on the team. pic.twitter.com/rX5SHyNytM

— TSN (@TSN_Sports) May 19, 2025

Florida is tied with Toronto with 25 points this season, although the Panthers have played one fewer game and have four more regulation wins (11-7).

"We're going through the same thing," said Marchand. "We're both trying to find our game."

The search continues on Tuesday night when the Leafs and Panthers faceoff for the first time since Florida's decisive 6-1 win at Scotiabank Arena in Game 7.

Head coach Craig Berube doesn't plan on bringing up the Game 7 beatdown when it comes to preparing his group, but there's no doubt that it is a motivating factor for some of his players.

"I think it's good to use that," said Ekman-Larsson, who won the Cup with Florida in 2024. "You always want to learn from games and your experience, so I think it's great to have that in the back of your head."

"I think you use it as motivation," agreed Leafs captain Auston Matthews. "At the same time, it's a divisional game. Looking at where we're at in the standings and just how important these games are, especially against your own division, I don't think there's really any extra motivation needed."

The Leafs have won two of three games to start this season-long five-game road trip. The Panthers have lost three straight at home and three of four overall.

"There's going to be a lot of juice in the building for both teams," predicted Panthers defenceman Aaron Ekblad. "These are always emotional matches against teams that we play in the playoffs and they bring it just as much as we do. So, it's always a fun game for the fans and a fun game for us to find our mojo again."



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"It's going to be very emotional," said Panthers forward A.J. Greer. "It was a hard-fought series. A series that goes to seven games, for one team it is a great accomplishment and for the other it is a hard pill to swallow. I think the intensity is going to be very, very high and just expecting us to come out, play a playoff game, do the simple things right and set the tone early."

The Leafs are coming off their most lopsided win of the season. Seven different players scored during Saturday's 7-2 rout over the Pittsburgh Penguins, including Matthews. It was the centre's first goal since returning from a five-game injury absence.

"It feels good," Matthews said. "The first couple games getting back, you just want to try to find your rhythm and get back to, you know, just your momentum and your feel and touch out there. So it always feels good to put one in the net. And obviously getting a win like that just does a lot for our confidence. We just want to continue to push the pedal to the ground."

Saturday's goal by Matthews was a classic snipe from 42 feet out.

"It was good to see," said Berube. "What was good about it for me is [that it's a] distance shot. You know what I mean? He's scored a lot of goals that way in his career, and it's good to see that one go in because his shot can beat goalies from distance."

Matthews has scored 10 goals in 20 games this season, but only four via a wrist shot.

Last year, Matthews potted a career-low 33 while suiting up in 67 games. An upper-body injury plagued Matthews throughout the campaign.

In the 2023-24 season, Matthews claimed his third Rocket Richard Trophy by scoring 69 goals. Marchand believes it may actually be a good thing that Matthews isn't posting eye-popping goal totals any more.

"He's focusing more on a 200-foot game," Marchand observed. "He's playing more physical defensively. I think that's one of the things I really noticed about him last year. He was much more reliable, much tougher to play against in his end of the ice than in years past."

"Good for him. He easily could have worried about cheating and scoring goals and chasing 60-plus goals every year ... He's gonna have to sacrifice scoring maybe the way he did in the past and that's what you have to do to win, and that's part of why they were such a good team last year."

Your humble correspondent relayed Marchand's comment to Matthews, who agreed with the sentiment.

"I always want to be the best player that I can be and produce and do all these things," the 28-year-old said. "But, in the end, the most important thing to me is winning with this group here. And so, whatever the sacrifice needs to be, I mean, I'm willing to make it."

"You look at the teams that win, you know, the Barkovs, Bergerons, Crosbys, all those guys, Toews, Kopitar, all the guys that win playing that centre position, I mean, they do it on both ends of the ice, so I definitely want to be that kind of player."

Matthews is tied for the team lead at plus-nine this season. He leads all Leafs forwards in blocked shots.

Matthews may be sacrificing some offence for defence, but that doesn't explain why he's struggling to score on the power play. Matthews has just one goal and two points on the man advantage this season.

Matthews potted 10 power-play goals and produced 25 power-play points last season. Toronto's power play finished tied for eighth overall last year

(24.8 per cent) thanks to a five-forward alignment with Mitch Marner at the quarterback spot.

With Toronto's power play ranking 25th (15.9 per cent) so far this season, the team has decided to go back to the five-forward look with Matthews replacing defenceman Morgan Rielly at the top.

"It's a pretty big adjustment," said Matthews. "I was telling Mo, it's definitely not as easy as it looks up there, but I think it's come along all right. I thought we had some better looks [Saturday], and it was nice to be able to practice it out here."

"He's got an opportunity to shoot a lot of pucks from there," said Berube. "The puck is on his stick a lot, which we like right now."

The Leafs unveiled the new alignment on Wednesday against the Columbus Blue Jackets without having completed any practice reps with that formation. Toronto worked on it at practice on Thursday and again on Monday.

Berube whistled Monday's practice over, but Matthews asked for additional reps.

"For me, I want to still be aggressive," Matthews said. "But knowing that I'm kind of that last man back, I can't get sucked in too far into the O-zone there. So, just trying to move it and create some space for other guys, and shooting the puck when I can and just trying to find some openings."

Toronto's top unit surrendered a 3-on-1 chance during a power play in Columbus and allowed a breakaway on Saturday in Pittsburgh. On both occasions the team's goalie bailed out the top unit.

The Leafs scored on one of their three power plays on Saturday. The lone goal was scored by Nicolas Roy as part of a second-unit shift.

The Panthers have played the entire season without captain and top-line centre Aleksander Barkov and alternate captain and top-six winger Matthew Tkachuk. In the absence of those key players, and several other regulars, Marchand is leading the way.

"He's [got] the team on his back right now," said Ekblad. "He's incredible. His ability to hold on to pucks and make plays, but also play that simple game, and be aggressive and get under the other team's skin is second to none."

Marchand is leading the Panthers in goals (15), points (27) and penalties drawn (12).

"He scores every game pretty much," marvelled winger Carter Verhaeghe. "This is crazy. To be doing that at this point in his career is absolutely insane. I hope I can be half that at that age. So, yeah, he's been our leader in driving every game."

The 37-year-old is simply picking up where he left off last season when Marchand finished as runner-up for the Conn Smythe Trophy.

"He looks like he did in the playoffs and has that same kind of energy every day and we need that right now," said coach Paul Maurice. "He's been really, really important to us."

Marchand downplayed his contribution this season and actually took the blame for the most recent loss to the Calgary Flames.

"It's just unacceptable," he said of Florida's sloppy play. "We're better than that. It starts with me last game. I turn a puck over when we're up 2-0. We're in control and the momentum changes. It's just understanding that a single play is enough to impact the game in a negative way or positive way and just doing our job. I think that's why we've been really good, and why we've had success as a group is because we value the little details that most teams don't, and most players don't, and especially down the stretch in the playoffs."



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Brandon Carlo returned to practice on Thursday in Washington and the hope was the injured defenceman would skate again with the team on Monday. But Carlo, who has not played since Nov. 13, did not hit the ice in Florida. Instead, he travelled back home to Toronto to meet with a doctor.

Berube confirmed Carlo suffered a setback in his recovery.

"We'll know something probably in the next 24 hours on him," the coach.

When Carlo missed practice on Nov. 14 it was described as simply a "maintenance day" by the team. When he missed the game on Nov. 15 the timeline cited by Berube was "day-to-day." Now, the 29-year-old is out for the foreseeable future.

Fellow right-shot defenceman Chris Tanev is also sidelined with no timeline for his return from an upper-body injury sustained on Nov. 1.

Down a couple right-shot rearguards, the Leafs have leaned on waiver wire pick-up Troy Stecher.

"He plays with pace," said Berube. "I think that's one of the biggest things I noticed. He closes on people quick and moves his feet really well. And just, he's simple with the puck, right? He makes the first pass or makes a hard play when he has to, and he's been defending well. He's been defending hard at our net and things like that."

Stecher is plus-two while averaging 17:27 of ice time in six games with the Leafs. On Saturday in Pittsburgh, with Simon Benoit absent for personal reasons, Stecher moved up to the second pair beside Jake McCabe and led the team in ice time (23:52).

Even with Benoit back at Monday's practice, Stecher remained beside McCabe.

"I met Jake this summer, actually, skating in the off-season, so just kind of that little familiarity definitely helps," said Stecher, who played two Stanley Cup Final games against the Panthers while with the Edmonton Oilers last season. "I thought we were vocal together, and we tried to put our best foot forward. But the onus is on us to do it again tomorrow night."

McCabe had been playing on the right side on a pairing with Benoit.

"I do like McCabe on the left," Berube said. "He was a lot better on the left that game. Not that he hasn't done a good job on the right, but I'd rather him on the left as much as possible. And him and Stecher were good together the other night."

Benoit partnered with Philippe Myers on the third pair at practice while Dakota Mermis rotated in as the seventh defenceman.

With righties Stecher and Myers in the top six on defence, there's only one player being forced to line up on their weak side, but it certainly doesn't seem to bother Ekman-Larsson. The team's oldest defenceman carries a nine-game point streak into Tuesday's tilt.

If Ekman-Larsson hits the scoresheet in Florida, he will tie Tom Kurvers (10 games in 1989-90) for the longest point streak by a defenceman in Leafs history.

"I didn't know that," Ekman-Larsson said with a laugh. "Thanks for telling me. No pressure."

Did TSN just jinx OEL? Probably not.

"He's extremely poised," said Ekblad. "Nothing ever bothers him. He's a gamer."

With 20 points (only three on the power play) in 25 games, Ekman-Larsson is on pace for his most productive season ever at age 34.

"He's done it before," said Matthews, an Arizona native. "I've been watching him since I was a young kid when he was [with] the Coyotes. He's always been great offensively with the puck. He plays with a little edge to him as well. You're just seeing him jumping up in plays, being available. He's got a good shot. He can get pucks through, and, you know, it's finding him right now."

After leaving Saturday's game in the third period due to an upper-body injury, Ekman-Larsson participated fully in practice on Monday.

"Nothing major," the Swede said with a shrug. "Yeah, I'm not giving much [information], but I'm fine. I'm feeling good. So just, yeah, taking care of the body and making sure that it was all good."

"He's not afraid to get hit and roll off hits," noted Ekblad. "I think the guys that stick around a long time know how to do that and do that well and do it under pressure and protect themselves as well."

There were a few injury scares at Monday's practice.

William Nylander fell awkwardly after being tripped up by the stick of Myers during a drill. He went to the bench, sat down and spoke briefly with assistant athletic therapist John-Paul Laciak before continuing on.

Nylander was the first player off the ice at practice. The star winger usually stays out late for some extra work.

Nylander missed Thursday's practice for maintenance and missed three games earlier this season due to a lower-body issue.

Through it all, Nylander continues to produce. He has only been held off the scoresheet in two of his 21 games. He leads the team in assists (21) and points (32).

Nylander scored the overtime winner in Columbus on Wednesday. During the third period of that game, he had a conversation with Berube on the bench, which garnered a lot of media attention. On Monday, Berube was asked about it and said he had no memory of that interaction.

Berube did say that Nylander is very good at dealing with criticism.

"Takes it really well," Berube said. "I mean, there's different guys I've had over the years that they could take it better than others. He's very good at it."

The coach stressed that his relationship with Nylander is in a good spot.

"It's tricky," he said with a laugh. "It's a good relationship. I always say that. I never know what I'm going to get from Willy. It keeps me on my toes about things. But, no, I think our relationship is good. I mean, we obviously have our opinions about things and certain things but, for the most part, I think we communicate really well together. For me, personally, I really enjoyed the challenge of coaching him."

Berube accidentally bumped into McCabe during a drill late in practice.

"I asked him if he was all right," Berube said with a grin. "I was doing the same drill a few years ago in St. Louis, and David Perron ran me right over. Like, I didn't see him, you know, I was a little too close and involved. I went down and I cracked a rib. We were laughing. So, the next day, the boys drew an outline of me on the ice. They got a good chuckle out of that."

Earlier in Monday's practice, Matthews knocked over assistant coach Derek Lalonde.

"He got rocked," Berube cracked. "I didn't go down."



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Will Lalonde be ready to coach on Tuesday night?

"Yeah, he's fine," Berube said with a smile.

Lines at Monday's practice:

Knies - Matthews - Domi

Cowan - Tavares - Nylander

Joshua - Roy - McMann

Lorentz - Laughton - Robertson

Jarnkrok, Maccelli

Rielly - Ekman-Larsson

McCabe - Stecher

Benoit - Myers

Mermis

Woll

Hildeby

Power play units at Monday's practice:

QB: Matthews

Flanks: Nylander, Cowan

Middle: Tavares

Net front: Knies

QB: Ekman-Larsson

Flanks: Rielly, Domi

Middle: McMann

Net front: Roy

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