



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2025



## Preview: December 23 vs. Florida

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes meet a familiar foe in their final matchup before the holiday break

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes and Florida Panthers square off for the second time in five days on Tuesday, going head-to-head at Lenovo Center.

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When: Tuesday, Dec. 23

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch: FanDuel Sports Network South, FanDuel Sports Network App | [Learn More](#)

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

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Canes Record: 22-10-3 (47 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 6-4 Loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning on Saturday, Dec. 20

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Panthers Record: 19-14-2 (40 Points, T-5th - Atlantic Division)

Panthers Last Game: 6-2 Loss to the St. Louis Blues on Saturday, Dec. 20

Last Time Out...

The Canes jumped out to a 3-0 first-period lead on Saturday in Tampa, before the Lightning completely flipped the contest and rallied to take a 6-4 result.

After losing 4-3 to the Panthers on Friday night, it was a second consecutive game in which the team blew a three-goal lead.

Goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov suffered just his second loss of the season, allowing five goals on 28 shots.

The highlight was top prospect Bradley Nadeau, who netted his second career goal after being recalled earlier in the day.

Powering Up...

After a slow start to the season, the Hurricanes' power play has found its stride recently with goals in a season-high four straight games.

Going back a bit further, the Canes' nine power-play markers in their last nine games rank T-3rd in the NHL in that span (since Dec. 6), trailing only Ottawa (11) and Edmonton (10).

Sebastian Aho, Taylor Hall and Jordan Staal have led the way in that department with two power-play goals apiece, while Jackson Blake, Nikolaj Ehlers and Bradley Nadeau have each cashed in once.

In Net...

With three days since their last game, the Canes are expected to have their full complement of goaltenders available tonight.

Brandon Bussi suffered the first post-regulation loss of his NHL career on Friday in Florida, but has been mostly stellar to start his NHL career. 11-1-1 through his first 13 appearances, it's certainly possible that the Canes go back to him tonight.

Pyotr Kochetkov has been a respectable 6-2 in eight appearances this season, making his most recent appearance on Saturday.

Veteran Frederik Andersen remains awaiting his next opportunity to try and get back in the win column after going 0-4-2 in his last six outings. His last start was Dec. 4, but he has remained optimistic that the record is not a reflection of his overall game.

"The way I look at it, I've played better hockey, and I've had worse numbers," he said following his most recent outing. "It doesn't look good, obviously. We're not getting the wins with me in the net lately, but I still feel like I've got my game. Maybe not perfectly where I want it, but like I've said, I've had worse stretches where things have looked better, and I've gotten more wins. That's how I look at it. I try to be positive and move on."

On The Other Side...

Winners of seven of their last nine, the back-to-back Stanley Cup Champions have found their stride after a slow start.

Missing key pieces in Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk, Brad Marchand has picked up the slack in a big way, leading the way with 40 points in 34 games. The 37-year-old is one of just nine players in the NHL to already hit the 20-goal mark this season.



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A strong team on home ice (12-7-2), the road hasn't been as kind to the Cats, who are 7-7-0 away from Amerant Bank Arena.

Injury Updates...

Defenseman Jaccob Slavin suffered an upper-body injury on Dec. 19 in Florida. He was labeled as "week-to-week" and placed on injured reserve on Dec. 22.

Forward Seth Jarvis was also injured during overtime on Dec. 19, suffering an upper-body injury. He was placed on IR on Dec. 20 and labeled as "week-to-week" on Dec. 22.

Forward Jordan Martinook left the game on Dec. 17 with a lower-body injury and has not skated since then. Rod Brind'Amour said on Monday that he would not play tonight, missing a third consecutive game.

Defenseman Charles Alexis Legault suffered a cut to his hand via a skate blade on Nov. 9 and underwent surgery to repair lacerated tendons on Nov. 10. He is expected to miss three to four months.

What Are We Wearing?

The Canes will wear their WHITE uniforms for the contest. To view the team's full 2025-26 uniform schedule, [click here](#).

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes will begin their league-mandated holiday break post-game. They'll be off on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, before resuming their schedule on Saturday when they host the Detroit Red Wings.

Next Game: Saturday, Dec. 27 vs. Detroit | 7:00 p.m. ET | FDSNSO, WRAL | Tickets | Parking

### Injury Report: Jarvis, Slavin Labeled Week-To-Week

By: Peter Dewar

"It's a weird year for all this, but you've got to deal with it. Next guy up's got to do his job..."

RALEIGH, N.C. - Just over a week after the Carolina Hurricanes returned to mostly full health for the first time this season, the injury bug has bitten once again.

Jaccob Slavin, Seth Jarvis, Jordan Marinook and William Carrier were each unable to participate in Monday's practice for various reasons.

Slavin, who missed 29 games earlier this season with a lower-body issue, was held out of Saturday's game in Tampa for what was then described as a planned absence as part of his recovery process. Now, he's been labeled week-to-week with a new upper-body injury, which may be a result of a hit he took from Florida's AJ Greer on Friday.

"I would assume (it's from the Greer hit) because that's where he got nicked up, and we didn't test him until we got home," said Rod Brind'Amour following Monday's practice.

(Note: Slavin was placed on injured reserve on Monday afternoon, following the publication of this article. In the same transaction, Joel Nystrom was recalled from Chicago.)

Jarvis also sustained an injury in Friday's loss to Florida, when he was tripped by Evan Rodrigues and collided with the goal post at full speed. Brind'Amour said after that game that Jarvis would be 'out for a while,' and the forward was placed on injured reserve on Saturday. On Monday, the Canes' coach stopped short of further specifying the ailment, other than noting again that it was a result of that play.

Martinook, meanwhile, has missed two games with a lower-body concern. Brind'Amour described his alternate captain as "day-to-day" on Dec. 19, but was unsure when Martinook would return, and struck a similar tune today.

"He obviously didn't practice today, so I would rule him out for tomorrow. I don't have a timeline, really, on him. Another guy that we need in there, obviously, but I don't expect him to play," said Brind'Amour.

The news was less dire on Carrier, who missed Monday's skate due to "not feeling great" when he woke up, but still brought the number of absences to four.

As the list of afflicted players grows, so too does the responsibility for other members of the team - something the Canes are equipped to handle, given the team's depth of talent and somewhat bittersweet experience in navigating significant absences.

"It's a weird year for all this, but you've got to deal with it. Next guy up's got to do his job. It leaves less room for error, but still, if we trust what we're doing, we should be fine," said Brind'Amour.

Bradly Nadeau is a prime example of the "next guy up" mentality, scoring on Saturday night after being recalled earlier in the day. Carolina's 2023 first-rounder was one of the best rookies in the AHL last season, and with another bright start to the 2025-26 campaign, is knocking on the door of being a full-time NHLer.

Though the circumstances at hand aren't what he'd like to be walking into, the 20-year-old talent could enjoy an extended audition at hockey's highest level while Jarvis works back to full health.

"It's been all year, we've dealt with (injuries). A lot of teams have dealt with it, maybe not to this extent, but for the whole year, it feels like we've had maybe two games where we've had our full group," said Brind'Amour. "But you know, the positive on it is that it's given other guys some opportunities that they normally wouldn't have. And I think that's obviously what's going to happen here over this next stretch."



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**SB NATION**  
**CANES COUNTRY**

## Game Preview and Thread: Panthers at Hurricanes

By: Kyle Morton

The Carolina Hurricanes return home on Tuesday night from a three-game road trip that saw them visit three other Sun Belt franchises.

The Canes went 1-1-1 in three games against the Nashville Predators, Florida Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning, maintaining their edge atop the Metropolitan Division standings despite some bad injury news and concerning blown leads in the latter two games.

In the process of coughing up a 3-0 lead to the Panthers in Sunrise, the Hurricanes lost stars Jaccob Slavin and Seth Jarvis to injuries. Playing without Slavin is nothing new to this year's iteration of the club, as he's made just five appearances to this point, but it's disheartening nonetheless.

Jarvis, on the other hand, is having a season ripped straight out of the Final Destination series. There was the concern over a long-term injury when he took a hard shot to the foot/lower leg, the near-miss when he took a high stick directly to the eye, and now he's crashed full speed into a goalpost after a blatant uncalled trip, suffering what seems to be a rib injury.

It's a testament to the star winger that despite the prior two ailments, he's scoring at the best pace of his career and gutting it out to help both Carolina and his chances at making Team Canada at the Winter Olympics. I'm not going to wade too far into the politics of Hockey Canada's roster decisions, but they'd be fools not to take him to Milan— especially given some of the other names reportedly under consideration.

As for Tuesday night, it will be interesting to see how, if at all, the Canes respond to the plays from Friday night that took out two of their very best.

The Panthers continue to be without their two best forwards in Matthew Tkachuk and Aleksander Barkov, but they're still hanging around the playoff race anyway. Brad Marchand and Sam Reinhart lead the team with 40 and 35 points, respectively.

Sergei Bobrovsky's numbers aren't stellar, but the seemingly ageless Russian netminder is winning Florida more games than he's losing them.

With Jarvis out, this figures to be another crucial stretch for Jackson Blake, slated to get another chance on the top line with Nikolaj Ehlers and Sebastian Aho. The 22-year-old has 22 points in 35 games, including four in his past four after a four-game stretch in which he was blanked.

This is the last game before the holiday freeze, and after the way the last two losses went down, you can bet the Canes will be extra motivated to set a better mood heading into the break.

Here's how to check out the action:

Time: 7:00 PM

Location: Lenovo Center - Raleigh, NC

TV: FanDuel Sports Network with Mike Maniscalco, play-by-play; Tripp Tracy, color analyst; Shane Willis, analyst; Hannah Yates, rinkside.

Radio: 99.9 The Fan FM

Line: ML: CAR -154; PL: CAR -1.5 +158



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## The Hockey News

### Hurricanes Top Defenseman Once Again Sidelined With Injury

By: Ryan Henkel

Injury sidelines top defenseman Jaccob Slavin again. Hurricanes face another hurdle with crucial blueliner sidelined week-to-week.

The Carolina Hurricanes got a double-whammy of bad news Monday morning, as the team announced that not only was leading scorer Seth Jarvis out week-to-week, but so too was top defenseman Jaccob Slavin.

Both players were injured in Friday's game against the Florida Panthers, with Slavin's injury more than likely resulting from a board he took from Florida forward AJ Greer, who was not penalized for the hit.

Hurricanes dealt bad hand with new injury updates

"I would assume [that's how he got injured] because that's where he got nicked up," said Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour. "We didn't test him until we got home."

Slavin exited the game temporarily after the hit, but did finish it out before missing the next game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

It's a tough blow for the American defenseman as he had played in just three games before once again winding up injured.

The 31-year-old blueliner missed the entire preseason and then 29 games in the season before returning to action just a week ago, but now he'll once again be sidelined.

The only good news is that it is not a lower-body concern with Slavin, which is the injury he had dealt with previously.

But it is brutal news for the Canes, who've dealt with injuries all season long.

"All year, we've dealt with it," Brind'Amour said. "A lot of teams have had to deal with it this year, maybe not to this extent. For the whole year, it's felt like two games where we've had our full group. But the positive on it is that it's given some other guys some opportunities they normally wouldn't have."

### Hurricanes Leading Scorer Seth Jarvis Out Week-To-Week

By: Ryan Henkel

Carolina's leading scorer suffers an upper-body injury after a collision, sidelining their offensive spark plug indefinitely and leaving fans questioning the severity.

The Carolina Hurricanes will be without top forward Seth Jarvis for the foreseeable future as the team announced on Monday that he would be out week-to-week with an upper-body injury.

Jarvis was injured Friday night in a game against the Florida Panthers. In overtime, Jarvis tried to emake a power move to the front of the Florida net and Panthers forward Evan Rodrigues tripped the Hurricanes forward, causing him to crash hard into the goal post.

Hurricanes dealt bad hand with new injury updates

He left the game and would not return.

When asked specifically if Jarvis was dealing with a rib injury on Friday, Brind'Amour was a bit vague in answering.

"I know that's what caused the injury," Brind'Amour said. "I can't really tell you what it is. But yeah, that's the reason he's out."

The 23-year-old is Carolina's leading scorer this season, with 19 goals and 29 points in 34 games.

Playwire House Ad

The Canadian winger is also one of the league's best two-way players and a key piece in every situation for the Hurricanes, so his absence will definitely be one that is felt.

Hopefully this injury will only be a minor one and won't affect his Team Canada consideration as the team is set to be picked at the end of the year. Jarvis won gold with the Canadians at the 2024 Four Nations Face-Off.

#### LINKS

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-december-23-vs-florida>

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/injury-report-jarvis-slavin-labeled-week-to-week>

<https://www.canescountry.com/general/52556/carolina-hurricanes-florida-panthers-nhl-game-preview-discussion>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/hurricanes-top-defenseman-once-again-sidelined-with-injury>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/hurricanes-leading-scorer-seth-jarvis-out-week-to-week>



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## SportScan

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

1372831 Websites

The Athletic / ECHL player union announces strike notice starting Friday

By Eric Stephens

Dec. 22, 2025

The ECHL, one of the top minor hockey leagues in North America, could go dark with a work stoppage Friday as its membership has served a notice to go on strike following unsuccessful labor negotiations toward a new collective bargaining agreement.

The Professional Hockey Players' Association announced the move Monday after authorizing a strike Thursday, citing a forced step "to protect the integrity of the bargaining process" resulting from what it alleges are "ongoing unfair labor practices" by the ECHL.

"We have informed the ECHL that we are willing to continue discussions to resolve all outstanding matters," PHPA executive director Brian Ramsay said in a statement. "For several months, we have been engaged in bargaining with the league, and their unlawful and coercive conduct throughout this process has been incredibly disappointing.

"We are asking for basic standards around health, safety and working conditions that allow the players to remain healthy, compete at a high level and build sustainable professional careers. Our members have never been more united and remain ready to return to the bargaining table at any time. We sincerely hope the ECHL will engage in good-faith negotiations so a fair agreement can be reached and any disruption to the season can be avoided."

Formerly named the East Coast Hockey League, the 30-team ECHL has 13 games slated for Friday after the Christmas holiday break. The ECHL, which in North American pro hockey is two rungs below the NHL, plays a 72-game schedule. Players are seeking more pay and improved rest and travel as teams can on occasion play three games in three nights or four games in five nights.

The PHPA represents more than 1,800 players across the American Hockey League and ECHL. Both leagues have been playing without CBAs this season after the previous agreements expired over the summer amid contentious talks. While there is strong belief that a CBA will be reached with the AHL – reports are the sides are closing in on a five-year contract – the union and the ECHL have reached an impasse.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Pro hockey's minor leagues are in a heated labor battle: What I'm hearing

The AHL and ECHL have been playing without new CBAs this season, as frayed negotiations have bled into the campaign.

The union and the league have been in CBA discussions since January. But the latest breakdown in talks has players prepared to take their boldest step in seeking an improvement in working conditions.

"This is a league that has taken almost a year to concede that we should be entitled to choose helmets that properly fit us and are safe," Ramsay said. "This is the league that still supplies our members with used equipment. This is a league that shows no concern for players' travels and, in fact, has said the nine-hour bus trip home should be considered your day off.

"We have had members this year spend 28 hours-plus on a bus to play back-to-back games on a Friday and Saturday night, only to be paid less than the referees who work those very same games."

On its website, the ECHL said it has offered an immediate 16.4 percent increase to the salary cap for this season, which will be paid upon CBA ratification retroactively from the start of the season. The league also said additional salary-cap increases are planned in future years, which would increase total player salaries by nearly 27 percent.

The league also contends that it will continue to cover all player costs for housing, utility and internet costs along with medical and dental benefits. It has made proposals geared to improving health and safety, including addressing requirements for mandatory days off, travel between games on consecutive nights and modifying holiday and midseason schedule breaks.

"As we continue to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the Professional Hockey Players' Association (PHPA), our goal continues to be reaching an agreement that increases player compensation, improves health and safety, and delivers on new initiatives that are responsive to our players to support them on and off the ice," the ECHL said Monday. "Negotiations have been progressing, but not as quickly as we would like. We have reached a number of tentative agreements and remain focused on reaching a comprehensive new agreement that supports our players and the long-term health of every team in our league."

All 30 ECHL teams are affiliated with NHL clubs, with only the Columbus Blue Jackets and Utah Mammoth lacking a direct connection to the league this season. Teams typically assign prospects to the ECHL to get them additional playing time instead of occupying a depth role or press box seat in the AHL, where the level of play is higher and there are higher-paid veteran players.

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The Athletic / The top 25 NHL prospects playing at the 2026 IIHF World Junior Championships



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By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler

Dec. 22, 2025

Every year, The Athletic's prospects experts Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler produce a joint ranking of the top 25 NHL prospects participating at the World Juniors.

This year, they each submitted an individual list of their top 26 prospects, and then the rankings were averaged. Players who appeared on one list but not the other (of which there were four each) were assigned a rank of 27th.

These aren't the top players now, or the players they expect to have the greatest impact at the tournament, but rather the top prospects based on their NHL projections. Pronman and Wheeler had a shared top-five and top-12 prospects, but their orders differed.

Here's their combined ranking, as well as their individual lists, ahead of the 2026 tournament in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

1. Michael Misa, C, Canada (San Jose Sharks)

Pronman's rank: No. 1

Wheeler's rank: No. 1

Misa enters the tournament as an MVP favorite who can use his high-end skating and improvisation skills to break down defenses. He projects as a top-line center for Canada who drives play and can be a leading scorer in the tournament.

2. Ivar Stenberg, RW, Sweden (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 4

Wheeler's rank: No. 2

Stenberg is an electric offensive weapon who can crack a game open with his high-end puck handling, playmaking and natural scoring touch. He projects to be a primary scorer on the wing and a focal point of Sweden's power play.

T3. Porter Martone, RW, Canada (Philadelphia Flyers)

Pronman's rank: No. 3

Wheeler's rank: No. 4

Martone is a heavy winger who uses his elite hands and massive frame to bully opponents and dominate the area below the hash marks. A returning forward for Canada, he projects to be a go-to scorer who thrives in traffic, wearing down defenders physically while possessing the soft skill to finish in tight.

T3. Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, Canada (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 2

Wheeler's rank: No. 5

A towering presence on the blue line, Verhoeff combines exceptional size with good hockey sense, a high compete level and a heavy point shot to make an impact at both ends. He's a 17-year-old, though, so the top draft-eligible shouldn't be expected to play many minutes at the tournament.

5. Gavin McKenna, LW, Canada (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 5

Wheeler's rank: No. 3

McKenna possesses off-the-charts vision and puck skills that allow him to pick apart defenses and generate high volumes of scoring chances. A

2026 draft eligible, McKenna projects as a dynamic top-line playmaker who will quarterback Canada's power play.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

What I saw and heard at Canada's World Junior camp: Gavin McKenna, the bubble, the NHLers, more

Scott Wheeler spent the last three days at the Gale Centre Arena in Niagara Falls for a series of practices and scrimmages.

6. Alberts Smits, LHD, Latvia (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 6

Wheeler's rank: No. 9

Smits offers a complete package of size and mobility. He will be the top defenseman for Latvia, and excels at killing plays with his length. He has a big point shot and can make enough plays to generate offense as well.

T7. James Hagens, C, USA (Boston Bruins)

Pronman's rank: No. 9

Wheeler's rank: No. 7

Hagens is a high-tempo offensive driver who uses elite edge work and vision to create plenty of chances in open ice. He projects as a top-line center for USA who can dominate possession and should be a top scorer in the tournament.

T7. Chase Reid, RHD, USA (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 8

Wheeler's rank: No. 8

Reid is a dynamic offensive catalyst from the blue line, using speed, vision and hands to generate chances and act as a fourth forward off the rush. While his defensive game is average, his ability to quarterback a power play and push the pace makes him a significant weapon in transition and provide much-needed skill to Team USA's blue line.

T9. Zayne Parekh, RHD, Canada (Calgary Flames)

Pronman's rank: No. 12

Wheeler's rank: No. 6

Parekh projects to run the first power-play unit for Canada with his elite ability to see the ice. His capacity to create scoring chances out of nothing makes him a game-changing offensive weapon, even if his defensive play isn't a selling point.

T9. Carson Carels, LHD, Canada (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 7

Wheeler's rank: No. 11

Carels is a powerful two-way force who uses his fluid skating to close plays physically and escape pressure with the puck. He projects as a reliable defender, even as a 17-year-old, who can kill penalties for Canada.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

How farm boy Carson Carels became the 2026 NHL Draft's hottest prospect

Carels is climbing up draft boards for his universally well-liked brand of hard, physical and firm hockey.

11. Anton Frondell, C, Sweden (Chicago Blackhawks)

Pronman's rank: No. 11

Wheeler's rank: No. 10



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Fronnell is a versatile offensive threat who blends smooth puck skills with a lethal shot that can beat goalies from range. He projects as a top-six center who can finish plays or set up teammates, while offering a strong physical presence that allows him to compete in the hard areas.

12. Cole Hutson, LHD, USA (Washington Capitals)

Pronman's rank: No. 10

Wheeler's rank: No. 12

Hutson is an offensive dynamo from the back end, using elite agility and vision to walk the blue line and make plays to his teammates. Expect him to be a top point-producer among defensemen in the tournament.

13. Caleb Desnoyers, C, Canada (Utah Mammoth)

Pronman's rank: No. 15

Wheeler's rank: No. 13

Desnoyers is a prototypical two-way center who can be trusted to play in defensive situations while also providing some offense. His blend of size, speed and playmaking intelligence makes him a candidate to play in any situation.

14. Kashawn Aitcheson, LHD, Canada (New York Islanders)

Pronman's rank: No. 14

Wheeler's rank: No. 15

A miserable-to-play-against defender, Aitcheson brings a physical edge and agitation that wears down opponents. He projects to shut down top forwards while contributing secondary offense through his strong skating and heavy point shot.

15. Tj Iginla, C/LW, Canada (Utah Mammoth)

Pronman's rank: No. 17

Wheeler's rank: No. 14

Iginla is a pure scorer who thrives in one-on-one situations, using his quick hands and release to beat defenders and goaltenders alike. He projects as a top-six forward who can create his own shot and break open shifts with his individual skill, although he can play center as well.

16. Brady Martin, C, Canada (Nashville Predators)

Pronman's rank: No. 16

Wheeler's rank: No. 16

Martin combines high-end skill with a punishing physical game, making him a unique presence in the top nine. He projects to win battles and provide offense in the hard areas.

### WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Canada beats Sweden in World Juniors pre-tournament game: Who stood out?

Canada still has a few roster cuts to make before the tournament begins on Boxing Day.

17. Michael Hage, C, Canada (Montreal Canadiens)

Pronman's rank: No. 21

Wheeler's rank: No. 18

Hage is a dynamic skater with the creativity to generate offense at top speed, making him a threat in transition. He projects as a reliable top-six forward who will help Canada's power play and consistently drive play with his skill and pace.

18. Oliver Suvanto, C, Finland (2026 NHL Draft)

Pronman's rank: No. 13

Wheeler's rank: Not ranked

Suvanto is a heavy, direct center who blends a large frame with soft hands to make flashy plays in tight. He projects to play significant minutes for Finland down the middle, even as a player who is days away from being eligible for the 2027 draft.

T19. Will Horcoff, LW, USA (Pittsburgh Penguins)

Pronman's rank: No. 21

Wheeler's rank: No. 23

One of the breakout sophomores in college hockey this season, Horcoff is a big forward with legit skill who should be an important player for Team USA up front.

T19. Ryker Lee, RW, USA (Nashville Predators)

Pronman's rank: Not ranked

Wheeler's rank: No. 17

Lee is an extremely gifted puck handler who can dazzle with his one-on-one skill and possesses an NHL shot and a sneaky competitive streak.

21. Braeden Cootes, C, Canada (Vancouver Canucks)

Pronman's rank: No. 18

Wheeler's rank: Not ranked

Cootes is a hardworking, competitive center whose consistent effort level and impact make him a projectable middle-six NHL center — and someone some observers believe will wear a letter in the league. He may not have the high-end skill of many on this list, but he's well-liked.

T22. Adam Jiricek, RHD, Czechia (St. Louis Blues)

Pronman's rank: No. 19

Wheeler's rank: Not ranked

Jiricek is entering his third World Juniors for Czechia and should be one of the top defensemen in the tournament this year.

T22. Cole Eiserman, LW, USA (New York Islanders)

Pronman's rank: Not ranked

Wheeler's rank: No. 19

Eiserman is a sniper whose diverse shooting arsenal makes him a threat from anywhere inside the offensive zone and a marked man on the power play. He's got the ability to be a one-shot game-breaker for Team USA.

T24. Cole Reschny, C, Canada (Calgary Flames)

Pronman's rank: No. 23

Wheeler's rank: No. 24

Reschny is slated to play a prominent role for Canada. The highly intelligent and competitive center is a two-way player who can be used in a bunch of different ways.

T24. Carter Bear, LW, Canada (Detroit Red Wings)

Pronman's rank: No. 20

Wheeler's rank: Not ranked

Carter Bear will likely start the tournament as a healthy scratch for Canada, but could be a versatile addition for them later in the tournament. He can score, PK and plays quite hard.



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The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2025

1372833 Websites

The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: Time for another round of holiday panic

By Sean McIndoe

Dec. 22, 2025

It's the most wonderful time of the year. Unless it isn't.

The first half of the season is filled with checkpoints for NHL teams. There's the curse of Nov. 1, when you'd better be within four points of the playoffs. By U.S. Thanksgiving, you'd better be in there, somewhere, or else you've really got your work cut out for you.

But by the holiday freeze? At this point, for most teams, you are what you are. And when some teams open up their presents at this time of year, they find a lump of coal and a handwritten note from Santa reading "you guys stink."

Yes, it's holiday crisis time for teams around the league. Let's see if we can narrow the list down to five.

Bonus five: Teams facing a holiday crisis

5. Los Angeles Kings – They beat the slumping Tampa Bay Lightning to snap a four-game losing streak, then celebrated by trading away Phillip Danault. Wait, are they sellers now? Not necessarily, since Danault reportedly wanted out and wasn't exactly lighting it up so far this year. Still, the Kings feel like they're flat-lining and desperately need a spark. The good news is they get the Columbus Blue Jackets and Seattle Kraken before the break, so maybe that's four badly-needed points as they cling to a wild-card spot.

4. Chicago Blackhawks – It was fun while it lasted, right Hawks fans? See you down in the bottom-five section. You know the way.

3. Pittsburgh Penguins – Before last night's shootout win against the Montreal Canadiens, they'd lost three in a row according to the NHL's official standings and eight in a row according to everyone else. That might actually be good news since it should end any playoff talk and clear the deck for Kyle Dubas to get to work on some tough decisions.

2. Toronto Maple Leafs – They're a mess, they sure seem like they've quit on their coach, their best players aren't producing anything besides hilariously tone-deaf soundbites, and the 18-wheeler is well and truly headed off the cliff. The good news is they're not even selling out any more, which we were always told was the reason the team never won anything. Yay?

1. Winnipeg Jets – As bad as the vibes are in Toronto, the sub-.500 Jets have a worse record, have been colder in recent weeks, and face an even deeper hole to dig out of in their own division. And they're doing it by falling from a greater height as defending Presidents' Trophy champions. It's been so bad they've driven poor Murat mad, and the question now seems to be less about whether they should sell and more about when it should happen.

Honorable mention: The Edmonton Oilers, who are playing reasonably well but must be holding their breath after newly acquired goaltender Tristan Jarry was injured last week.

On to the rankings. Spoiler alert, none of the teams above made the top five this week...

Road to the Cup

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

We all knew it was coming, but seeing Sidney Crosby actually pass Mario Lemieux is still a super cool moment.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (16-8-10, +4 true goals differential\*) – They're the fakest of fake .500, not to mention the only NHL team to hit double digits in loser points. Or are they bonus points? It's not just semantics, and your view on the question probably has a lot to do with whether you think the Knights are actually good. I think they're good ... enough, at least as far as the Pacific Division goes.

4. Carolina Hurricanes (22-10-3, +16) – They're still comfortably holding down the top seed in the East, but it was not a great weekend. They just lost back-to-back games on their Florida mini-trip and they lost Seth Jarvis with what appears to be long-term injury. Oh, and Jack Hughes is back in New Jersey, further complicating the Metro.

3. Minnesota Wild (22-10-5, +17) – To be the best, you've got to beat the best. The Wild had their shot against the Avs last night and couldn't get it done. Still, the seven straight wins that came before were a strong message that Minnesota is for real.

2. Dallas Stars (25-7-5, +35) – Does it make sense for a ranking that's supposed to be about who's going to win the Stanley Cup to have three teams from the same division in the top three spots? No, not really, thanks for asking. Eventually, we're going to have to look ahead to playoff matchups and start penalizing the Central, given one of these three teams is guaranteed to be going out in round one. For now, let's just enjoy how good all these teams are.

1. Colorado Avalanche (26-2-7, +65) – It's easy to take them for granted these days, but seeing them walk into Minnesota and roll to a win was quite possibly their most impressive performance of the season.

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

Not ranked: Florida Panthers – Well, well, look who's back.

Not all the way back, mind you. But back enough, thanks to wins in seven of nine, even after Saturday's loss to the Blues. Given that their other loss came against the Avalanche in Colorado, we can say the Panthers went into the weekend undefeated against teams that play in the NHL instead of whatever galactic champions league the Avs are currently in.

In the lethargic East, that stretch has been more than enough to put the Panthers back into the playoff mix, and even back into the conversation for first in the Atlantic. The projections have their playoff chances at 67 percent, up from a 50 percent coin flip at the start of the month. And honestly, 67 percent feels low. They're back.

Who could have seen this coming? Well, everyone. I'm not sure I ran into a single fan, pundit or expert who was willing to write off the Panthers, even when they were stumbling along at fake .500 through two months. We all know the story in Florida — a Presidents' Trophy in 2023 followed by an early exit, then barely making the playoffs in 2024 only to go all the way. Last season, they went into the playoffs as the 11-seed. They were one point ahead of the just-happy-to-be-there Senators. And then they rolled to another Cup, because the regular season doesn't matter to these guys.

Given their injuries, most notably to Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk, it wasn't hard to figure out the script to this season. Tread water until Tkachuk returned, then ease down on the gas to make the playoffs. Don't worry about seeding, don't worry about matchups, just get in and then welcome Barkov back at some point in the spring before rolling everyone on the way to a three-peat.



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There were times when you wondered if they were falling a bit too far behind, but you never really worried. They'd figure it out. Probably right when Tkachuk was back.

If anything, they're ahead of schedule, with Tkachuk's return imminent but not quite here yet. But the Panthers are back, because they never left, because the regular season is nothing to them but a long runway before it's time to actually fly.

Good luck to Detroit and Montreal and anyone else with their eyes on top spot in the Atlantic. You might get it, but only because the Panthers didn't want it in the first place. They'll see you down the road, in April and May, if you make it that far. For now, at least, we're pretty sure we know they will.

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last and the best lottery odds for the top pick in this year's draft.

Let's start with a team that isn't in this week's rankings: After serving as the East's lone representative in the bottom five for the past five weeks, the Buffalo Sabres have found their stride. They've won six straight, with five of those coming after the firing of Kevyn Adams.

New GM Jarmo Kekäläinen has spent the week building out his new front office, which will include a familiar set of biceps face in former Habs boss Marc Bergevin.

Is it all coming too late to make a playoff push? Not in this year's East it's not.

5. Seattle Kraken (13-14-6, -24) – Saturday's win in San Jose snapped a four-game losing streak, which came on the heels of a six-game losing streak, and now they're selling. Ah well, it was fun while it lasted.

4. Vancouver Canucks (15-17-3, -19) – They've won four straight, including a three-game stretch where they only allowed two goals. The conclusion: Quinn Hughes was holding them back. Hey, the numbers don't lie.

3. Chicago Blackhawks (13-16-6, -11) – And they're back. And you could even make a case that they should be all the way back to the one-spot here. I'm not quite there yet, but they're certainly headed towards another bottom-five finish. And as Scott points out with an assist from Corey, that might not be the worst thing in the world.

2. Calgary Flames (15-17-4, -11) – Ryan Lomberg had a fun night on Saturday.

1. Nashville Predators (15-16-4, -21) – By beating the Rangers last night, the one-spot team in my bottom five moved ahead of last year's Presidents' Trophy winners in the standings. The NHL makes a lot of sense.

Not ranked: Columbus Blue Jackets – Is this a good hockey team?

I don't mean that rhetorically. And I don't even mean it in that "Who really knows anything in this weird NHL?" sort of way. I mean it as a genuine question. Maybe even an existential one. And I'm not the only one asking it: captain Zach Werenski is too.

I'm a Leafs fan, so I'm a bit of an expert in player soundbites during losing streaks. And I have to say, "We're a good hockey team, and we're losing games. So maybe we're not a good hockey team. I don't know..." is an all-timer.

So let's build the case for both sides. The argument for the Blue Jackets being a good team — not a great one, or a Cup contender, but a playoff team at least — starts with last year. That was back when we all counted them out before the season even began, only to watch them fight for a spot all year long, becoming everyone's second-favorite team in the process. Werenski was the guy leading that charge with a Norris-worthy

season, and he might be even better so far this year. The goaltending is better, thanks to rookie Jet Greaves. And they've earned wins against some good teams, including Tampa, Minnesota and Dallas, three Cup favorites the Jackets had beaten in regulation before the time the season was two weeks old.

And maybe most importantly, their front office clearly thinks they're good. Or at least good enough to get some reinforcements, as the team pulled off a pre-freeze deal for Mason Marchment. Both the trade and the timing are interesting, and Portzline gets into the details here.

The argument for them not being good is ... well, everything else.

A recent five-game losing streak dropped them to fake .500 on the season, and while they beat the Ducks last week to snap that skid, they entered the weekend in dead last in the East, trailing even a Sabres team in such bad shape that they cleaned house and hired the Blue Jackets' assistant GM to join Kekäläinen in Buffalo.

Saturday saw them drop a close one in regulation to Anaheim despite a Marchment goal in his debut, marking their seventh loss in eight games. It could have been far worse, as Werenski left the game after blocking a shot. It looked bad, but early reports say the injury isn't serious and Werenski is day-to-day.

If you are what your record says you are, then the Blue Jackets are indeed not good. And as bad as the last few weeks have been, it doesn't feel like rock bottom. As Portzline writes in that link up above, "This could get away from them in a hurry if they aren't careful. Maybe it already has."

For now, I'm keeping them out of the bottom five, although I'm not completely sure if that's based on merit or just a lingering feel-good status from last year's run. Check back next week, when there's a good chance I won't have a choice.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2025

1372834 Websites

The Athletic / Why are shots on goal disappearing across the NHL?

By Jesse Granger and James Mirtle

Dec. 22, 2025

Calgary Flames goaltender Devin Cooley flashed the leather and made a highlight-reel glove save in a recent game against the Carolina Hurricanes. He windmilled his arm to snare the puck, and the Carolina crowd groaned in disbelief. After the whistle, Cooley lifted his mask for a drink from his water bottle, revealing a beaming grin.

He was pumped. It was a massive save for his team.

Except it wasn't a save. At least not officially. The shot was counted on the scoreboard inside the arena and on the TV broadcast, but two minutes later, it was removed from the total.

Shots on goal are vanishing around the NHL, and the goalies are noticing.

"It's a letdown sometimes," Cooley said. "You'll make three or four saves, and you're like, 'All right, it feels good.' They put the shots up, and then you look up a couple of minutes later, and they're all gone. You're like, 'Aw man.'"

Shots on goal are at close to an all-time low in the NHL this season. Entering the weekend, goaltenders were facing an average of only 27.9



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shots against per game, the fifth-fewest since the league began tracking and publishing shot data 70 years ago.

It's not a coincidence or a statistical anomaly.

This month, The Athletic contacted multiple sources with knowledge of how the NHL's statistics system works and what may have changed. Historically, the league has relied upon a small group of off-ice officials at each arena — watching the action from a considerable distance away, in the press box — to record these metrics as games unfold, but that process has evolved in recent years.

With the puck and players now tracked using chips that provide information available in real time, the NHL is deploying that data — as well as increased video resources and third-party auditors — to refine its stat-gathering processes.

As a result, the NHL is scrutinizing shots on goal more than ever. If the puck's trajectory, based on the tracking data, is deemed to be heading wide of the posts — or in the case of Cooley's windmill glove save, above the crossbar — it is not counted as a shot on goal, or a save.

"The NHL uses a variety of methods, including analyzing puck-tracking data and reviewing multiple video angles, to audit and update statistics in real-time, and, if necessary, the following day," a league spokesperson confirmed to The Athletic. "We will continue to use every tool at our disposal to produce the most accurate statistical account of our games possible."

That, more than any strategic change, is what likely accounts for the league's recent drop in shots on goal and the rise in missed shots, a shift that, according to The Athletic's analysis, has been taking place over the past three seasons.

Two years ago, in 2023-24, team shot totals fell from 30.9 per 60 minutes the previous season down to 30.0. Last season, that drop accelerated, with shots falling another 6.7 percent down to 28.0 per 60 minutes. This season, that figure has dipped again, this time down to 27.6.

In the time frame when shots have fallen off, missed shots have jumped more than 20 percent, from 11.4 misses per 60 in 2022-23 to a historic high of 14.4 per 60 this season.

According to sources with knowledge of how the NHL's stat tracking has worked in the past, it was sometimes difficult for the in-arena counters to tell if borderline shots were on net or not, even when using multiple video angles to check. Pucks often changed direction and/or were shot through (or from within) traffic, with players' bodies and sticks flung between shot attempts.

The NHL's new tracking technology, however, is accurate down to an inch or two from the goal, meaning it can tell the stat trackers whether a puck that hits a goaltender was headed wide, for the post or into the net.

"One thing that's improved (the most) is a better sense of when a goalie gloves a shot attempt that was going to miss by three to six inches," said one source with knowledge of how the NHL has changed its process. "Technology can now figure out whether it's really a shot on goal or not, within a couple inches. If it's close, the goalie would get the benefit of the save."

The difference in the stats is fairly dramatic, especially the past two years. The only four NHL seasons with a lower shots on goal average were all in the league's dead puck era (1997-2004), when teams adopted a physical, defensive style and goal scoring dropped to slightly more than five goals per game. The lowest season ever for shots per game was 1997-98, when there were 27.3, only 0.6 lower than this season.

This drop in shots on goal has affected a lot of other important league statistics, most notably save percentages for goalies, shooting percentages for players and teams, and expected goals and scoring

chance models on popular sites such as MoneyPuck and Natural Stat Trick.

The league has been pleased with the progress it has made in improving shot attempt tracking, which includes more accurate numbers for all three of shots on goal, missed shots and blocked shots — the latter of which have also increased (roughly 17 percent) as more player-deflected pucks are picked up by the tracking technology.

They've also worked hard to more accurately categorize shots that players have taken from below the goal line in an attempt to bank them off goalies.

Shot attempts are typically the statistic that requires the most attention from in-game auditors because they can be the hardest to pick up live, given their frequency — there are often 120 shot attempts between both teams every game — and the speed of the game. The league's staff sometimes takes a frame-by-frame approach to audit instances that can't be accurately recorded in real time, which leads to shot totals changing over the course of — and sometimes even after — a game.

While the majority of NHL statistics are finalized within 15 to 20 minutes after the final horn, there's also an appeal process in which teams can request that a particular statistic be looked at following a game, which sometimes results in changes the following day.

This more elaborate, multi-stage auditing process — in which every stat is rechecked by a second set of eyes — is new for the NHL and has also affected other stats, such as hits, giveaways and takeaways.

It's all now possible due to the advances in technology — and also more necessary because of the increase in sports wagering and the league's embrace of it. With fans now able to wager on how many shots on goal a particular player will have in a game, for example, the importance of accurate stat-keeping has increased dramatically.

Before, there wasn't much consequence to a shot heading wide of the net being counted as a save. In fact, goalies would even catch those pucks intentionally to pad their save percentage when possible.

"That's 100 percent a thing," Seattle Kraken goalie Joey Daccord said.

Not anymore.

"Honestly, we've noticed it for two or three years," Daccord explained. "The shots will be 10-8, and then you look back up a couple of minutes later and it's 7-4. We're like, 'Dude, what? How did we just lose three saves?'"

"We were actually talking about it (recently) at the Christmas party," Vegas Golden Knights netminder Akira Schmid said. "Even some of the other guys are noticing it, too. There's not much we can do. We still try to stop the puck, but it definitely hurts our stats a little bit."

On one hand, most goalies don't mind the change. It is more accurate, after all.

"It makes things more fair and more realistic," Cooley said. "So I think, overall, it's a positive, even if the goalies' stats are going down. It's going to affect the whole league, not just a few guys, which is fine."

There is an argument to be made that goalies are still being judged against historical numbers, however, and those included a few extra saves each night. The league average save percentage this season is below .900 for the first time in 30 years, so these changes will require a new understanding of what constitutes good goaltending statistics.

But Daccord argues that the stops goalies make on shots going just wide of the net should count as saves.

"To me, it's crazy," he said. "My biggest argument is that if a guy shoots a puck from behind the net, it's physically impossible for it to go in, right? However, if it hits the goalie and then goes in, is it a shot on net? If it hits



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the goalie, even if it's going wide, it could've hit the goalie and gone in, so it's still a save, in my opinion. That's my argument.

"I got scored on a couple of years ago by Jack Hughes from behind the net, and if it didn't hit my head and go in, it wouldn't have been a shot on net. But it went in, so it's a shot on net. So in theory, if it hits the goalie, it should be a save."

With the combination of the new scrutiny on saves and the league's continued trend toward skill and offense, it's a tough time to be an NHL goaltender. But at the end of the day, the challenge is why most of them chose this position in the first place.

"The league just keeps getting better, quicker and guys just aren't wasting shots anymore," Cooley said. "It's definitely making our job a little more difficult, but that's what makes it fun."

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1372835 Websites

ESPN / The NHL's best this week: Is Craig Berube on the hot seat? – ESPN

Arda Ocal

Which NHL coach is on the hottest seat right now?

Is it Andrew Brunette? In his third year coaching the Nashville Predators, Brunette's team just can't find chemistry, despite having some terrific players on the roster.

Is it Lindy Ruff? After Kevyn Adams was fired as Buffalo Sabres GM, social media ran rampant about the possibility of new GM Jarmo Kekalainen making a change behind the bench, possibly even looking toward a certain ESPN analyst to fill the role. But the Sabres have won five straight and are deflecting that talk right now (winning cures everything, after all).

Then, there's Toronto.

The Maple Leafs are struggling; there's no question. After finishing first in the Atlantic Division last season, they're near the bottom of the Eastern Conference standings, with 35 points through 34 games. They have allowed 113 goals, the 12th most in the league, and more surprisingly, have scored 108 goals themselves; that's good for 15th in the NHL but much lower than their expected output (especially compared to recent seasons). The loss of Mitch Marner has certainly played a part.

But after a particularly stinging loss against the Predators, the postgame quotes painted quite an interesting picture.

"Yeah, it is. It's mental, for sure. We've got to get through it," Maple Leafs head coach Craig Berube told reporters. "We've got to get over that. We've got to make better decisions throughout the game."

But then there's this from captain Auston Matthews: "I think mentally we're fine. I thought tonight, as s---y as it is losing, I thought the process was better. I thought we had good energy all night. And even though you're leaving the rink upset, not getting out of any points in tonight's game, I think just the process that we had throughout is something that we can take and move forward."

Are the coach and his players not on the same page?

Two quotes a fired coach does not make, but in a hockey-crazed market like Toronto, they will certainly get people asking more questions. The spotlight is simply brighter and the leeway a bit shorter.

The Leafs have lost two in a row; what if the streak reaches five? Of course, the Leafs have been hit by the injury bug -- but many other teams have, too. Toronto will be an interesting team to keep an eye on in the next few weeks, especially after the holiday roster freeze lifts.

Philly has lost four of its past five, including to the Rangers at MSG where the home team can't buy a win this season. They face Vancouver, a team with an infusion of young talent from the Quinn Hughes trade. I'm interested to see how they jell and develop (before the next inevitable veteran trade).

Speaking of Hughes, he has a goal and two assists in four games with Minnesota so far, looking dangerous with Brock Faber as the Wild's top defensive pairing. Maybe we can get Nick Saban to join during the intermissions since he just bought a minority stake in the Predators. Hey, a guy can dream!

The Colorado Avalanche-Vegas Golden Knights game has a lot of fire power, and Colorado still has just two regulation losses through 34 games. They are appointment viewing so long as they keep pace for the NHL season points record, which they are on pace to break.

But I like the Rangers on Long Island to face the Isles. The Blueshirts are lights-out away from home, but it will feel like a home game with the amount of Rangers fans at UBS Arena for the game. We will see how the Rangers respond to a choppy stretch that included a home win against the Flyers but also losses to Vancouver, Anaheim and Chicago.

Phillip Danault is back with the Canadiens -- will the pizza tradition continue if they make the playoffs?

The Bolts have regressed after a hot start in late October and November; they are 3-6-1 in their past 10. Both teams are dealing with injuries. Both teams have a very viable shot of being playoff teams in an Eastern Conference that is starting to see a little separation after they were superglued together by the end of November.

What I loved this weekend

The Habs have had a goaltending conundrum this season, eventually calling up Jacob Fowler to alleviate the concerns of the play of Sam Montembeault and Jakub Dobes. The 21-year-old rookie, who played his college hockey at Boston College, earned a shutout in the fourth start of his NHL career, stopping all 31 shots the Pittsburgh Penguins sent towards goal. Fowler became the youngest Canadiens goalie with a clean sheet since Carey Price in 2007-08.

Speaking of young achievements on the Canadiens, Lane Hutson became the fourth fastest American defenseman to reach 100 career points (119th game), behind only Mark Howe (94), Brian Leetch (102) and Phil Housley (106).

And speaking of the Penguins, I generally love the concept of "no lead is safe," but we've had two examples that won't exactly fill the respective fan bases' hearts with joy. Last weekend, Pittsburgh became the first team in NHL history to squander multiple three-plus-goal leads in the third period in the same season. This weekend, the Hurricanes made it back-to-back games saying goodbye to three-goal leads then losing. Ouch.

Hart Trophy candidates if the season ended today

Uh oh, Avs fans ... here comes Connor McDavid!

Here I was thinking that Nathan MacKinnon would lead the way for the rest of the season while sleeping on McDavid ... you just can't do that! McDavid and MacKinnon are tied atop the points race, so they both get a Hart Trophy nod this week. Nate is on a seven-game point streak, with six points in his last three games. Connor, meanwhile, is on a nifty nine-game heater and has seven points in his past three games. This one could flip-flop like a pancake on a skillet for the rest of the season.



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For that third spot, we're taking a one-week hiatus from pushing the "goalie for Hart" narrative. Macklin Celebrini continues to shine bright like a diamond, on a team that is battling for a wild-card spot. So it's the Return of the Mack for a Hart Trophy nod this week from me -- Celebrini has 10 points in his past four games.

Social media post of the weekend

One of the most popular, fun and inventive hockey creators out there is Pavel Barber.

In the clip below, he flips a puck in the air and picks up a baseball bat to hit a home run. Is there anything this guy can't do on the ice? (Bonus points for the GO Train speeding by as he does it; great catch.)

Stick taps

I have a few this week. First, stick taps to one of the greatest American hockey players of all time, Hilary Knight, who announced that the upcoming 2026 Winter Olympics will be her last. Knight has played 105 international games across Olympic games and World championships, winning Olympic Gold and 10 World championships (no big deal). She was a great analyst to work with at ESPN -- we hosted a couple Stanley Cup Final pregame shows for international markets together.

Stick taps to Auston Matthews, who recently said that he wishes there was a season two of "The Acolyte" (same, Auston, same).

Stick taps to anniversaries! Dec. 19 marked 46 years since ESPN aired its very first NHL game, the Hartford Whalers vs. the Washington Capitals at the Springfield Civic Center. The graphics from that game are peak retro!

ESPN LOADED: 12.23.2025

1372836 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks Takeaways: Demko's heroics not enough as great road trip ends in loss

Iain MacIntyre

A great road trip ended badly as the Vancouver Canucks lost 5-2 Monday to the Philadelphia Flyers.

It ended the Canucks' five-game, pre-Christmas trip at 4-1. So, they're not perfect. When have they been?

But after an emotional and revealing 10 days, the Canucks are a lot less imperfect than they used to be.

Rather than defeat them, the monster trade of captain and best player Quinn Hughes to the Minnesota Wild on Dec. 12 — during Vancouver's outbound flight — provided clarity and purpose to the struggling National Hockey League team. It also provided energy with the arrival of middle-six centre Marco Rossi, world-class defence prospect (and NHL-ready) Zeev Buium, and speedy winger Liam Ohgren.

Their course re-set by management, the Canucks became a new team over the road trip, which opened with three games and a full week in the New York area.

The return to top form of goalie Thatcher Demko was a massive factor, and even on Monday the Canucks starter was beaten cleanly by a Flyers' shooter only once, when Owen Tippett sealed the win by stuffing a breakaway forehead under the back bar of the goal frame after a rare misstep by Canucks rookie Tom Willander.

As we've noted, if Demko stays healthy, he is a one-man tank-buster, a goalie too good and too capable of carrying his team for the Canucks to stay at the bottom of the overall standings.

What has helped him is the noticeable uptick in the team's defensive play, although they yielded the middle of the ice too often in Philadelphia and Boston, where the Canucks were outshot 42-22 by the Bruins but won 5-4 in a shootout on Saturday due to backup goalie Kevin Lankinen and timely scoring by members of the Vancouver youth movement.

Coach Adam Foote noted after that game that the Canucks' younger players, like Ohgren, Linus Karlsson and Max Sasson, drove the attack in the absence of impact from veteran forwards.

Two nights later in Philadelphia, there really wasn't anyone behind the wheel.

The Canucks actually had some good early shifts, outshooting the Flyers 10-2 in the first six minutes while outshooting them 3-2. But a dreadful power play after Christian Dvorak took a holding-the-stick penalty at 10:52 extinguished Vancouver's momentum, and a dangerous Philadelphia power play following Tyler Myers' holding penalty at 13:51 completely turned momentum the other way.

The Canucks never got it back. They were outskated and outplayed by Rick Tocchet's Flyers from then on. Vancouver struggled through the neutral zone, rarely sustained shifts in the offensive end, were a step late everywhere and left too much open ice in front of Demko.

The goalie kept the game scoreless until Nikita Grebenkin deflected a puck past him at 13:13 of the second period after Flyer Rodrigo Abols easily turned away from Sasson with the puck.

With the game still there for them, the Canucks had chances to tie it early in the third, but Flyers goalie Dan Vladar stopped Evander Kane at the side of the net and Conor Garland on a wraparound, and Kiefer Sherwood hit the post from distance.

But at 5:58, unchecked in the middle of three Canucks, Carl Grundstrom whacked his own rebound past Demko after Trevor Zegras' centring pass forced a point-blank save. And at 7:49, with the Canucks disorganized on their back check after a bad pinch and an outnumbered rush for the Flyers, Dvorak made it 3-0 by bunting in a friendly rebound off the end glass from Zegras' high shot.

Sasson scored a pretty goal for the Canucks at 13:05, sliding the puck between Vladar's pads on a breakaway after a nice pass by Garland. But Tippett countered on his solo dash at 15:35 after Willander, the smart and fleet Vancouver rookie defenceman, was caught slightly flat-footed and then was turned the wrong way by one of the NHL's fastest skaters.

After Matvei Michkov's empty-net goal at 18:49, the 20-year-old Buium made his nicest offensive play since the Minnesota trade, weaving deep into the Philadelphia zone before dishing to Drew O'Connor in the slot for a goal with 18 seconds remaining.

"They had more juice than us, their legs were going, they got inside ice on us," Foote told reporters in Philadelphia. "They got to the net and, you know, that was the difference.

"It was a good trip. . . especially with all the movement and what happened. It just looked like tonight we ran out of gas."

BACK TO PROBLEM ONE

The improvement in systems play the last month, repairs to the penalty kill and the return to health and form of Demko means the Canucks' biggest challenge now is what was expected before the season began: scoring goals.

They had timely depth/youth scoring during the trip, some puck luck and a Sherwood hat trick on Long Island. But most veterans at the top of the lineup continue to struggle to score. Garland (1-4-5 pts in 9 games), Jake



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DeBrusk (1-4-5 in 13) and Evander Kane (1-3-4 in 9) each has one goal in December, and Brock Boeser's last goal was Nov. 28. He has one assist in 11 games since then. Even Rossi had just one assist in his first five Canuck games.

If the Canucks continue to get goaltending like they had on this trip, they don't need to score a lot. But they can't be relying on Sasson and O'Connor (in Philadelphia) and Karlsson, Sasson and Ohgren (in Boston) to be driving the attack.

### PLAYING HURT (OR NOT)

Although neither is talking about it, it's pretty clear that Boeser and Garland have been grinding through ongoing injuries. Their team was in last place, their close friend and captain was traded, so Boeser and Garland are not only in the lineup but pushing themselves through big minutes.

But the paramount player missing entirely is centre Elias Pettersson, whose absence was regarded as day-to-day when the trip began. By definition, each game the \$92.8-million centre missed increased the likelihood that he would play the next one. But it never happened.

Before Monday's game, Foote told reporters that Pettersson "tweaked or jammed" his upper-body injury last week, but that "he's getting close." But the coach couldn't say if Pettersson will play the first game after the Christmas break, Saturday at home against the San Jose Sharks, or the second game or when. The Canucks need him back.

### BOTTLE THIS QUOTE

Tocchet, who left the uncertainty of the Canucks after last season to return to the Flyers, has a star-less team that was widely expected to miss the playoffs at 18-10-7. With Dan Vladar as its starting goalie.

Many of the questions Tocchet gets is about Matvei Michkov, whose empty-net goal Monday was just his ninth in 35 games, and the coach's handling of the second-year player, which included an intense interaction at the Flyers bench during Saturday's game. Michkov's average ice time of 14:41 is down two minutes from last season, when the Russian enjoyed greater latitude from previous coach John Tortorella.

This is the shortened version of what Tocchet told reporters before Monday's game: "What are we 17-10? We've got a good record. I've answered six Michkov questions. I mean, enough is enough, guys. You're trying to make something that's not. He's got to learn to play the game and he's trying. He's a lot better defensively, he's a lot better playing a team game, and that's how you win hockey. It's not about catering to one person, I hate to tell you guys. That's it."

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Sportsnet.ca / Geoff Molson committed to making Canadiens a winner on, off the ice

Eric Engels

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — When July 1 comes, Geoff Molson will cut \$26 million worth of cheques to four members of his Montreal Canadiens, and then he'll make a \$5-million payment to Mike Matheson within the first couple of months of next season because, as he put it in an interview with Sportsnet following the NHL's recent Board of Governor meetings, "If we want a player, that's what we'll do."

"We'll do whatever it takes to win," said Molson, who's doing much more than just this to bring the Canadiens back to prominence.

But this is good business. It's the type of good business Molson must do to incentivize players to save Canadiens president of hockey operations Jeff Gorton and general manager Kent Hughes money on salary cap as they continue to construct what Molson, Gorton, Hughes and these players hope will be a Stanley Cup contender for years on end.

Phillip Danault wasn't one of them. The player — along with his contract, which includes a \$1-million signing bonus in 2026 — was most recently acquired from the Los Angeles Kings.

But Matheson, Juraj Slafkovsky, Noah Dobson and Lane Hutson all did their part before Danault came, taking a bit less than their market values over long-term deals in exchange for protection against lockouts, injuries and buyouts Molson gave them when he signed off on front-loading their contracts and offering them lump-sum payouts near the beginning of each new season.

Slafkovsky's eight-year pact was structured to pay him \$19 million of the \$60.8 million he signed for over the first three years, with payments of \$7 million and \$3 million going out in July 2025 and 2026, respectively. Dobson's deal pays him \$46 million of his \$76 million in the first four of his eight years, with \$38 million of it spread over the first four Julys. Hutson's nets him \$55 million of his \$70.8 million in signing bonuses to be paid out before the start of the first six of his eight seasons, while 31-year-old Matheson will get \$20.8 million of his \$30 million in signing bonuses spanning the entire term of his five-year contract.

Not every owner would've done this.

According to the data found on PuckPedia.com, five owners in the league won't pay a single dollar in signing bonuses come 2026 and there are six more committed to paying less than \$5 million each.

That's the way they want it.

Take the Anaheim Ducks, for example. The only signing bonus they're paying ahead of next season is the \$1 million going to Chris Kreider, whose seven-year, \$45.5-million contract was originally awarded to him by Gorton when he was running the Rangers. As one financial advisor to NHL stars we consulted with for this story said, "It's something the Ducks have been dead set against when signing their own players, not wanting to set a precedent, and there are a number of teams who operate the same way."

Molson has had no such reservations.

Nor did he pause before sending the Canadiens head-first into their first-ever rebuild on the heels of the first global pandemic in over 100 years.

This came after they ran through the 2021 playoffs with no fans in the Bell Centre until 500 — and then eventually 3,500 people — were permitted to attend games. It was made official within six weeks of being able to finally operate the building at full capacity, when Molson fired general manager Marc Bergevin and hired Gorton to set things in motion. He made a bold decision committing to what could be years of not being competitive after the most financially arresting period of the franchise's history.

The entertainment branch of Groupe CH, Evenko, which now hosts between 1,600-1,700 shows per year, had also been in hibernation for the better part of two years, but that didn't stop Molson from steering the Canadiens full steam ahead into uncharted territory.

When we interviewed him at the Broadmoor Hotel, he said there was some concern over how the fans might react but none over the potential revenue losses he might incur from the decision.

"I don't think finance ever even crossed my mind," the 54-year-old said.

It sure did when Molson was 39 and preparing to take a Shohei Ohtani-sized swing to bring the Canadiens back into his family's portfolio.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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It could've been a foul ball but turned out to be a grand slam, with the value of the franchise climbing all the way up \$3.4 billion in 2025, according to Forbes.

The franchise value was at \$1.6 billion, with big potential for growth to stagnate, when the owner decided to rebuild.

The decision, Molson said, came naturally to him.

"I think if you look at the season before, when we got into the playoffs at the very last minute and played Toronto, when we went down 3-1 and then by will or luck or call it miracle, ended up pulling that one off in seven before riding momentum through the rest of the playoffs, it didn't necessarily mean that we had the team for the future," Molson said. "The decision didn't just happen overnight. I was evaluating things for what I would say was a 12-month period, and then when we found out that Shea Weber and Carey Price were badly injured, and that just accelerated the thinking. And after a terrible start, you say to yourself, 'It's time.'"

It was more than time for the Canadiens to rebuild their organization; to stop riding its reputation of being the New York Yankees of hockey and start living up to it again; to beef up team services, player development, analytics and scouting; to abandon the make-the-playoffs-and-anything-can-happen mentality and adopt a different one; and to reshape the culture and create the type of environment people would want to be in.

"The lesson I learned was, every once in a while, you have to look in the mirror and ask yourself if you're doing things the right way," said Molson.

He made changes and started making major investments, and not just in hockey operations.

There was also commitment to delivering a better fan experience at the Bell Centre.

A small part of that was spending millions on the creation of the Air Canada Signature Club, where over 200 select season-ticket holders now enjoy a premium experience. The bar/lounge area is outfitted with cushioned leather seats, from which patrons can enjoy upscale food items and complimentary drinks while watching the Canadiens.

It was unveiled in October 2022, precisely three years before the CIBC Vault opened at ice level. That project, which was developed during that time, is a first-of-its kind, 9,000-square-foot lounge near the Zamboni entrance, accessible to 325 premium-seat holders spanning three sections. It features gourmet food stations and an open bar.

"These products have been super well-received by the fans, and we continue on developing and looking at different ways of expanding the Bell Centre from within, using space that was previously unused," said France Margaret Belanger, who serves as Groupe CH's president of sports and entertainment.

She confirmed other such projects are in the works, including one to create "a party deck" that would host 100 people above the press box, and another to expand the space housing the Tricolore Sports Boutique to, as she put it, "ease lineups and make it easier to navigate."

As the Canadiens continue to take steps toward icing a better product, the process to optimize the value for fans attending games at the Bell Centre is never-ending.

"I think every time a fan comes to the Bell Centre, we hope to deliver a win on the ice. But at the end of the day, it's the overall experience," said Belanger. "It's the fan experience from the minute you arrive that we always try to improve. From how our thousands of employees working day and night greet people, to the entertainment between plays to how we balance catering to such a very varied group of people, we're constantly trying to improve. There are very young fans, and older fans as well, so we're always looking to find the appropriate balance between the novelties we bring to an event and maintaining the traditions that

make things special and unique to our building, like Diane Bibaud and her organ, and Michel Lacroix as the announcer. We try to navigate through that and make the experience the best we can."

There are no expenses being spared in this department, though Groupe CH cut some in other departments over the last year.

"We had to take a hard look at the workforce to reorganize our operations," said Belanger. "Post-COVID, we had to ramp up so rapidly, had to hire so many people to get back up to speed, and after catching up, the time came to properly scale operations and make sure we had the right people across Groupe CH.

"The business is strong and growing, and we're always looking for new opportunities to bring people into it."

The Canadiens have already entered what they expect will be a new era of attracting players to Montreal.

Dobson was one of the first high-profile ones to come in his prime — and not just for the signing-bonus money.

"Just the opportunity to be part of the Montreal Canadiens, it's an honour," Dobson said, after his sign-and-trade from the New York Islanders was consummated. "It's the best hockey market in the world. The fans are incredible. I love playing at the Bell Centre, and just also the group of players they have already and the talent they have on that team and what they've been building. I'm just super excited to join that group and add to it."

Matheson, Hutson and Slafkovsky all said playing for coach Martin St. Louis, in the culture that's been fostered through the rebuild, pushed them toward long-term commitments.

"When you rebuild, you don't just change your players, you try to change your culture," said Molson. "And a big part of changing your culture is the people who surround your players with. I don't take credit myself for bringing in all the new people that have changed our culture, but all these people came in with different perspectives and added something."

Molson nodded to Gorton and Hughes, to assistant general manager John Sedgwick, to St. Louis and his assistants, to director of development Adam Nicholas, team services director Alex Case, and to head athletic therapist Jim Ramsay and head of performance Dale Lablans among others.

But Hughes said it's the owner who has shaped the atmosphere around the Canadiens.

"He's the first person to call a newly acquired player and welcome them to the team, and he does the same for outgoing players," the GM said. "He helps make a big business have a family feel, and it's critical to attracting players and keeping players with an organization."

As the team approaches contender status and the salary cap increases significantly, Molson said he'll do whatever else is necessary.

"That has never been any different ever since I got here," he said. "Money has never been an issue, and I will always support any investments and expenditures that are going to possibly make us better."

He made one to put Montreal centre stage in February, when the city co-hosted the wildly successful 4 Nations Face-Off with Boston, and he's pushing for the 2028 World Cup of Hockey to also be played at Bell Centre.

"We're in the process," Molson said. "I think it's known we're in that process, and we would love to host it. It's up the NHL and NHLPA where they want to go, but we would love to have it."

Still, what Molson is most excited for is the path the Canadiens are on. The one he led them down.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"I think we've turned the corner, and it's exciting to think about the short term and the next 10 years. I think we've got something we can build on and have a good ride," he said.

"We had some ups and downs over my tenure here. We've had some pretty good teams that have been built, as opposed to rebuilt. We had the best goalie in the world and a good defence group, and I've realized there's other ways to do it, and it's been a good learning experience for me. In this case, we did the full rebuild, and I think when you do that, you gain a longer-term perspective on being successful for a long period of time as opposed to a shorter period of time."

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Sportsnet.ca / Surging Connor McDavid on Gretzky-like pace with Oilers

Ryan Dixon

When we get an NHL occurrence like Sidney Crosby passing Mario Lemieux to become the all-time Pittsburgh Penguins scoring leader, it's obviously a moment to pause, zoom out and appreciate everything two guys — the previous leader and the new one — have done in the game.

It can also be the gateway to other conversations of God-tier greatness.

While Crosby was collecting two points to move past Le Magnifique during Pittsburgh's 4-3 shootout win over Montreal on Sunday night, Connor McDavid was putting together a three-point night to give his Edmonton Oilers a critical 4-3 victory over their visiting Pacific Division rivals, the Vegas Golden Knights.

What Crosby is doing at 38 years old — on pace for 47 goals, which would be more than anyone has put up past their age-36 season — is remarkable and we should never take for granted what The Kid continues to provide hockey fans.

Let's just also be sure to not sleep on McDavid because, if we're being honest, we may have been head-bobbing ever so slightly earlier in the season.

It sounds crazy to say, but with the Oilers scuffling for more than a month and so many other amazing/surprising individual performances to focus on, No. 97 got lost in the shuffle a bit.

Consider the deck re-ordered.

After hitting twine versus the Knights, McDavid has found the net in four straight games and has a dozen goals in his past 10 outings. In the past month, since Nov. 22, McDavid has 14 goals (tied for most in the NHL with Nathan MacKinnon) and is averaging a league-best 2.14 points-per-game (next in line is Nikita Kucherov at 1.85).

The Oilers are far from out of the woods, but after beating Vegas, Edmonton is 7-2-1 in its past 10 outings and averaging 4.4 goals per game in that stretch.

Penguins fans surely feel spoiled to have watched both Lemieux and Crosby in their town, while Northern Alberta has obviously been blessed to watch both Wayne Gretzky and McDavid dazzle.

Gretzky ended his Oilers career with 1,669 points. At his current pace, McDavid would conclude the year with about 1,219 career points, every one of them collected while representing Edmonton.

If you take McDavid's scoring pace since the start of 2023-24 — 1.63 points per game — and play it out, he could become the Oilers' all-time points leader a little before the halfway point of the 2029-30 campaign.

Of course, Edmonton fans would just be happy if McDavid — who turns 29 next month — is still an Oiler at that point given his he's not under contract with the club beyond 2027-28. And McDavid himself is crystal clear about the fact he cares about nothing beyond getting his hands on a Stanley Cup that Gretzky, Lemieux and Crosby all won multiple times.

Let's not let those high-level concerns compromise our appreciation for the here and now, though. Because even with everything else going on in the NHL, McDavid's brilliance usually shines brightest.

Weekend Takeaways

- The Buffalo Sabres' expected goals for percentage, according to Natural Stat Trick, is actually last in the NHL (41.84 per cent) during their six-game winning streak. But if you think we're here to dump on Buffalo like a Christmastime snowfall, prepare to be disappointed. The Sabres' streak — extended with a 3-1 victory in New Jersey on Sunday — has several encouraging elements to it, including the fact four of the wins have come on the road. That's one more road victory than Buffalo had the entire season prior to the start of this run in Edmonton on Dec. 9. The Sabres are allowing just two goals pergame on their hot streak, while Swords stars Tage Thompson (five goals in six games) and Rasmus Dahlin (eight points) are leading the way offensively. With Jarmo Kekalainen taking over as GM — representing a major adult in the room where previously there's been some highly inexperienced suits — it's more than OK to allow yourself some optimism right now, Western New York.

- Buffalo's winning run and the noise of the regime change there has sort of drowned out the sound of the Detroit Red Wings moving up in the Atlantic Division. The Wings completed a weekend, home-and-home sweep of the Washington Capitals on Sunday with a 3-2 overtime win in the Motor City. Detroit — atop the Atlantic with a .608 points percentage — has seven wins in its past nine outings, including five away from home.

The Caps, meanwhile, suddenly have just a single victory in their past half-dozen contests and are failing to average two goals per game in that bumpy run.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (19-12-5) Phillip Danault, acquired from the L.A. Kings on Friday, will play his first game with the Habs since the 2021 Stanley Cup Final when the squad visits Boston on Tuesday.
2. Edmonton Oilers (18-13-6) Major stick-tap to Connor Ingram, who got his first win with the Oilers — and first in the NHL since Feb. 9 — Sunday night at home versus Vegas.
3. Ottawa Senators (18-13-4) The Sens have won four straight after dropping Boston 6-2 in Massachusetts on Sunday and Tim Stutzle — who scored versus the B's — has a whopping eight points in those four victories.
4. Vancouver Canucks (15-17-3) Only nine American players have more goals this season than Ohio native Kiefer Sherwood, who boosted his total to 16 with a hat trick on Long Island on Friday night.
5. Calgary Flames (15-17-4) Captain Mikael Backlund fired his second straight two-goal effort during Calgary's big 6-3 win in Vegas on Saturday night. The scoring outburst in the past couple games nearly doubled Backlund's season output, as he's now up to nine goals on the year.
6. Toronto Maple Leafs (15-15-5) Toronto is second-last in the Eastern Conference by points percentage and has the hardest remaining schedule of any NHL club.
7. Winnipeg Jets (15-17-3) It's break time for the Jets and, man, do they need it. Winnipeg will be in full desperation mode upon its return and, right out of the gate, has tough draws at home in the Wild and Oilers.

The Week Ahead



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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- The suddenly-hot Canucks will visit their former coach, Rick Tocchet, when Vancouver drops into Philly for a tilt with the Flyers on Monday.
- The NHL will be dark from Dec. 24 to 26, but both the final night of action and the first day back are 13-game slates. There's a Battle of Alberta on Tuesday in Edmonton with the Flames in town, then a return match in Southern Alberta on Saturday when the Oilers visit Calgary. The Battle of Ontario is also set to go Saturday night in Toronto when the Sens visit. That night will see rivalry games all over the league, with the Lightning visiting the Panthers, the Ducks in Los Angeles and Quinn Hughes playing his first game in Winnipeg — or anywhere in Canada — as a member of the Wild.
- There might not be any NHL action for three days, but the world junior championship kicks off on Boxing Day in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minn. Canada's first game will be on Friday, when it faces the Czechia squad that has ended the Red and White's past two WJCs in the quarterfinal.
- The NHL roster freeze lifts at midnight on Friday. Could we — after seeing a couple buzzer-beater deals ahead of the freeze — see more action coming right out of it as the trade market starts to shake loose?

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Thomas Chabot's presence changes everything for Senators

Alex Adams

"I'm not going to sit here and say we don't miss (Chabot)," Senators coach Travis Green said last week, when the defenceman was out with an injury.

The Senators did, and his importance was on display against Chicago and Boston, where he racked up two assists while dominating possession and re-invigorating Ottawa's second power-play unit.

Chabot has missed 15 games this season with what is believed to be an oblique-muscle injury. He initially was injured against Dallas on Nov. 11, and returned on Nov. 22 against San Jose only to re-injure his mid-body, which he called "s----- luck."

It was for the Senators too, as they went 7-8-0 without Chabot, a big difference from the 11-5-4 record when he's played. Chabot's presence adds a layer of dynamism with his elite puck-moving and ability to be a one-man breakout on a blueline starved of those elements outside of Jake Sanderson.

Before Sanderson's rise, Chabot was overused for years as a No. 1 defenceman. Now, he can be an elite second-pairing defenceman. He's finally in the perfect slot.

In the past, Chabot has struggled with defence; yet, under Green, that element to his game has drastically improved. This season, Chabot ranks 210th out of 747 skaters with 2.47 expected goals allowed when he's on the ice at five-on-five.

"What's probably been the most impressive thing with Chabot is he's committed to defending, the last year and a half. He's such a gifted skater that it was easy for him just to play on the move," said Green.

"And now, there are certain moments in the game where you have to come back and just stop and play defence. And he's a strong guy. He's not the thickest guy, but he's strong, and he's able to box up when he puts his mind to it and be strong on the puck."

Plus/minus is an imperfect stat, but it gives some indication of Chabot's effectiveness. In his first seven seasons combined, Chabot was a minus-76 and was never a plus player after any one season. In the last two seasons, however, he is a combined plus-24.

Chabot's offence was always on display, but becoming a more well-rounded defenceman has opened up Ottawa's offensive generation, particularly at five-on-five. From Dec. 4-15, without Chabot, the Senators were held scoreless in four of five games at five-on-five. Since his return, they've scored eight five-on-five goals in two games, with Chabot being on the ice for four of them.

Chabot might wear an "A," but you don't need to be Captain Obvious to see the immense impact he has on the Senators.

This season, when Chabot has been on the ice, the Senators score at a rate of 3.87 goals per 60 minutes, the best record of any player on the team. His offensive generation was on display when he kept a puck in against Chicago and circled around two Blackhawks to find Brady Tkachuk in the slot for a goal. He also made a Bobby Orr-esque end-to-end rush to find Tim Stutzle for a goal against Chicago, but it was called off for goalie interference.

"He's an unreal player," Stutzle told reporters. "The confidence he has, what he brings in the room, his voice, yeah, I'm just really happy he's back. And, yeah, he made some unreal plays (against Chicago). So, really lucky to have him on our team."

Since the start of 2024-25, Chabot ranks 19th in the league in wins above replacement, according to Evolving Hockey.

Elite.

Chabot has also revitalized the Senators' second power-play unit, which was floundering. The second unit has scored three goals in Chabot's first two games back, including when Chabot set up Fabian Zetterlund for a power-play goal against Boston.

Chabot's return has also had a domino effect. Sanderson will no longer be forced to routinely grind out more than 30 minutes a night. In the two games since Chabot's return, Sanderson has averaged 25:49 of playing time. And in those two games, Ottawa has dominated, outshooting its opponents, 68-44.

Tyler Kleven and Jordan Spence had been elevated into a second-pairing role in Chabot's absence, and despite what the analytics said, on multiple occasions both were overwhelmed against superior competition. Against New Jersey, they were individually at fault for three goals, and Kleven's mistake against Minnesota cost the team at least a point with 22 seconds left, when Joel Eriksson Ek won the game off a poor Kleven clearance.

The pair had a very good 57 per cent expected goal share before Chabot's injury as a third pairing while on the ice for only two goals at five-on-five in 83 minutes. Against Boston with Kleven out, Green put Chabot and Spence together, the thinking being both will be excellent at holding onto the puck. Right before Chabot's injury, they had been paired together briefly and thrived; they were also excellent against Boston while on the ice for three five-on-five Senators goals. This season, the duo has an expected goals share at 58 per cent while outscoring opponents 6-0 at five-on-five. Maybe Ottawa has found its second pair: Chabot and Spence.

Meanwhile, Sanderson and Artem Zub have dominated their minutes with the lowest expected goals rate of any duo this season.

That means with Chabot bringing stability to the second pair, the Senators have one of the best 1-2 punches on the backend in the league.

Drinking coffee.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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An iced brown sugar, oat-milk shaken espresso from Starbucks, to be exact.

Teammate Michael Amadio got him into it.

"I kind of just wanted to wait as long as I could to not drink (coffee)," said Sanderson.

"I felt like I was a morning person. But I think, in the season, it can be a grind sometimes."

Stutzle has been hotter than a spicy bratwurst. He is on a seven-game point streak with 14 points in that span. It's not just his offence: he's had three short-handed breakaways in his last two games while providing elite defensive aptitude.

After the victory in Boston, Stutzle alluded to the fact he was known as a perimeter player, saying, "earlier on in my career, I was told I play on the outside a lot." His goal against Boston was the opposite: he outworked Andrew Peeke in front to score his sixth goal in his last seven games.

Since 2024-25, Stutzle ranks fifth in wins above replacement. It's a telling stat when Leon Draistaitl, Connor McDavid, Thomas Harley and David Pastrnak are the names ahead of you. He is entering a superstar vortex.

Zetty-watch

After scoring one goal in his first 17 games, Zetterlund has eight goals in his last 16. Against Boston, he recorded his first two-goal game as a Senator. He feeds off his scoring.

"I don't know what to say. When the puck goes in, it's easier to play," Zetterlund told Sportsnet.ca earlier this month.

Zetterlund's goal celebrations exude a mix of relief and passionate happiness. Can his smile possibly get bigger?

Maybe that's what GM Steve Staios has been doing of late.

The Senators traded away real assets and paid Zetterlund to be a top-six winger. He's been that and more of late. His ferocious shot and great forechecking have made him a perfect complement to Stutzle and Tkachuk on the first line. The trio has been absolutely dominant this season, with a 70 per cent expected goals. It's the best of any line in the NHL with a minimum of 100 minutes played.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Don't know if I've felt like this': Nylander, Maple Leafs hit new low in confidence

Luke Fox

DALLAS — William Nylander could well be the most confident man in Toronto, most nights.

"I don't know if I've felt like this before. If I've had a stretch like this," Nylander said Sunday, following his team's third straight loss and fifth in its past six tries.

The superstar was wearing all his clothes and speaking so quietly that reporters were tempted to mush their recorders into his beard to catch his words.

"I'm not sure. I don't feel like I've had that in the NHL, at least."

Nylander began this season among the (very) early Art Ross contenders. When the red flags of a campaign in peril popped up in November, he

laughed. He said everything was fine. Check back in a month. Dirt off the shoulder.

The punchline Buffalo Sabres are now three points up on the Leafs, following the latter's 5-1 loss to the Dallas Stars.

All the while, the smooth-skating Swede has not scored a goal in 11 games.

No, it's not Nylander's worst stretch quite yet; that would be his 13-game drought at the end of 2023-24, when a Leafs' playoff spot was already etched in stone and his coach suggested the dynamo had become bored with the regular season.

But this is without question the most meaningful cold spell for Nylander and his fellow Leafs stars, who have never sat dead last in their division this close to Christmas.

"He is getting his looks, and they're not going in. But sometimes you've got to get around the net and get greasy and score some dirty goals," coach Craig Berube suggested.

Thing is, the Maple Leafs played much better on Sunday, despite facing a tougher test, than they did on Saturday, and better on Saturday than on Thursday.

They defended hard around the blue paint. They outshot their opponent (28-21), which hasn't been the case often enough. And they generated 11 high-danger chances to the Stars' three, per NaturalStatTrick.com.

Still, it's not enough.

The Stars' Vezina candidate, Jake Oettinger, was dialed, and their game-breakers and penalty-killers did enough to land on the right side of it.

"We need to finish, right?" Berube said.

"We want bounces? We want luck? You've got to earn them, and you've got to keep earning them, you know. Like, it doesn't just happen."

Points-wise, nothing happened on a three-game road trip in which Toronto got outscored 14-4 and went 0-for-10 on a power-play that gives fans night terrors. This was the franchise's most demoralizing roadie since the P.A. Parenteau era.

Consider the stat lines of the big guns, who've all been affixed with silencers:

"We've been building positively the past two games. But when we haven't been playing well consistently for a while, we have to grind through it even more," Nylander said.

"If we were playing well consistently, maybe tonight would have gone our way. Maybe last night would have gone our way. But, I mean, we're just in that slump right now where you got to work yourself out of it."

A dangerous-looking Auston Matthews thought for sure he had Oettinger solved on an early breakaway generated by his clean strip of Thomas Harley. He said, "We deserved a better fate." Then the captain admitted how tough it's been to remain positive.

John Tavares spoke of fighting the sense that everything is going against them, perhaps thinking of injuries or absences or special teams or turnovers or...

"It's a choice," Tavares said. "You can either let things like that seep in, or you push back against it and choose to be confident and believe in one another and stick together."

No quick-fix trade, no see-we-did-something firing can mend the mental wound here, which may be lingering from May for some, or reach back nine years for others.

"Tough sleddin' right now," added veteran Scott Laughton.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"Yeah, it's hard. It weighs on guys. Guys care. That's the biggest thing. And if it didn't weigh on guys, then we have a bigger problem, right?"

They care. They tried hard this night, truly.

Maybe that's even more concerning.

"Look. You just got to leave the rink now and forget about it," Nylander advised. "Everybody's frustrated. Can't bring it home. You need to let your mind relax and just focus on the next game, next shift."

Laughton, 31, has seen all kinds of ups and downs over his 13 seasons.

But considering the Maple Leafs were thinking Stanley Cup two months ago and have hit the basement?

"Yeah, it feels a little bit different," Laughton said. "But, I mean, I've lost 10 in a row and won 10 in a row in the same year and made the playoffs. So, you keep grinding, you keep working on it."

"You can string some together here and see what happens — but it's gonna have to happen soon."

Fox's Fast Five

- Rookie Easton Cowan got the healthy-scratch treatment as Max Domi, who sat Saturday, drew back onto the top line.

Berube noted that Cowan would be served well watching a game after looking "light" in some situations in Nashville.

Indeed, the 20-year-old was muscled off a couple of pucks. He also helped create much-needed offence, put up an assist, and was one of only six Leafs to finish as a plus.

The coach was banking on another bump from scratching Domi, who played his best hockey (five points in three games) in response to his first trip to the press box.

- If you show us a better alternate sweater than the Dallas Stars' '99s, we'll come to your house and cater the Christmas feast. These things are positively dreamy.

Even better? "Otter" Oettinger's custom '99 mask, a tribute to Eddie "The Eagle" Belfour:

- Jason Robertson leads all American NHLers this season with 23 goals. Make him an Olympian.

- As soon as the Stars finish killing a penalty, the Dallas game operations drop Eminem rapping, "Guess who's back!" (from "Without Me") as the penalized player hops out of the box and rejoins the action.

It is delightful.

- Quote of the Night.

Oettinger was tempted to go for the goalie goal late with the Maple Leafs' net empty, but chose an easy outlet pass instead.

"I obviously wanted to shoot it, but I felt like I was going to end up all over social media in a bad way if I tried it. I don't have it perfected yet. Thankfully, Esa (Lindell) made a nice play, and I ended up getting an assist," the goaltender said.

"It was a business decision."

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TSN.CA / Jr. A owner asks Ontario court to overturn Hockey Canada suspension

Rick Westhead

An Ontario Junior A hockey team owner is asking an Ontario Superior Court judge in Ottawa to overturn his two-and-a-half-year suspension, which was levied by Hockey Canada's Independent Third Party (ITP) after two separate misconduct complaints accused him of bullying players and mismanaging team finances.

Alex Armstrong, the owner, general manager and head coach of the Pembroke Lumber Kings of the Central Canada Hockey League (CCHL), was also accused in complaints to Hockey Canada of consuming alcohol on the team bench, pressuring players to attend "optional" skills development sessions that cost between \$1,000 and \$4,000, seeking money from players' parents by intimidating players, threatening to "bury them" by taking away their ice time, and failing to supervise his team adequately, which led to instances of hazing.

Armstrong has been suspended through the 2026-27 hockey season, a sanction that will effectively sideline him from junior hockey for two and a half years. While he was originally sanctioned Feb. 17, 2025, Hockey Canada's ITP issued stiffer penalties on Dec. 5 after it received two videos that purported to show Armstrong violating the terms of his suspension, Armstrong's lawyer, Trent Morris, told TSN in an interview.

Morris called Armstrong's sanction "punitive" and said he plans during the legal process to ask a judge to order Hockey Canada to hand over all of the ITP's discipline decisions for misconduct so there is clarity about how penalties have been levied against other offenders.

"When we are asking questions about whether sanctions are reasonable, there's nowhere to even look," Morris said. "It's the same with provincial regulators where there is this star chamber where the privileged people go free and other people who they don't like get thrown in the dust bin. I believe sunlight is a disinfectant. All of these sanctions by Hockey Canada should be made public. Hockey Canada wants to do things the way they used to do things. They just do it now under the cloak of the ITP."

"Hockey Canada gets these videos and just says, 'Okay, we found that you violated your sanction, so you're kicked out for an additional year. He's already suspended. It's as if they're admitting there's no possible way they can get to this before September [2026]. What would be the possible harm of giving Alex an appropriate hearing? It's absurd."

Hockey Canada has not yet filed its response to Armstrong's court filing.

Armstrong's suspension is posted on the website of Hockey Eastern Ontario, an organization that supervises the CCHL.

Armstrong has been told not to directly or indirectly engage in any communication, instruction, or supervision of players, team officials, or on-ice officials. He is also prevented from coaching, assisting, or acting in any leadership capacity in any on-ice or off-ice team activities, practices, games, or competitions, as well as any player evaluations, tryouts, selection, or roster decisions.

Armstrong said in a notice of application filed in Ontario Superior Court on Oct. 14 that the two misconduct complaints against him were retaliatory, driven by disgruntled parents and three players seeking trades, and that the investigation process was fundamentally unfair. It's unclear when the court will hear his case, Morris said.

"One player was seeking a trade because he needed to move away from playing in Pembroke as he was facing serious issues over the distribution of a video," Armstrong's court filing said. "The other two eventually sought trades because they were not playing the amount that they wished. One of the players eventually (now) played in Junior C. The other plays in Junior B on a team owned by his father. In the case of the parents of two of these players, either Armstrong's wife or he was



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threatened with the complaints process if he did not cooperate with trades to where they wished to play.”

Morris said that the CCHL's owners voted at the end of September to suspend the Lumber Kings organization because the team has \$55,000 in fines that have not been paid. Armstrong is appealing that decision, Morris said.

Armstrong's disciplinary process began Feb. 23, 2023, when an anonymous complainant filed a complaint about him with Hockey Canada.

Hockey Canada's ITP accepted jurisdiction on May 16, 2023, and appointed investigator Paul Gee to probe the allegations.

On Jan. 18, 2024, a parent of a player on the Lumber Kings filed a second complaint against Armstrong, alleging that he bullied players during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 seasons and used team or league money for his personal gain.

By mid-2024, investigation reports in both matters had been completed. In February 2025, adjudicator Kathleen Simmons was commissioned by Hockey Canada to determine appropriate sanctions against Armstrong.

After his initial suspension of one and a half seasons, Armstrong appealed to the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC), where an arbitrator upheld the sanction in a Sept. 12 decision.

Two months later, after video evidence established Armstrong had breached his sanction conditions, Simmons determined he should be suspended from his coaching duties until a day before the 2026-27 hockey season.

While the SDRCC decision did not detail which allegations against Armstrong were considered credible, Morris said that the adjudicator in the case determined allegations that Armstrong pressured families to pay more money to ensure ice time for their children were credible.

The adjudicator also confirmed an investigator's finding that Armstrong pressured a player to play through a broken collarbone and subsequently failed to provide adequate medical care, Morris said.

However, allegations related to Armstrong's supposed drinking alcohol on the bench and driving while under the influence were not supported by evidence, Morris said. The allegation Armstrong did not supervise players and created a climate for hazing was similarly unsupported by evidence, Morris said.

“In terms of hazing, what we are talking about was a fine jar where players had to pay a few dollars if they did something wrong,” Morris said. “The senior players started it and when Alex learned of it, he stopped it.”

A central issue throughout Armstrong's case and appeal was anonymity. Armstrong argued he could not fairly defend himself without knowing the identities of complainants and certain witnesses, particularly where credibility findings were decisive. Hockey Canada's ITP also refused to hand over to Armstrong the specific evidence provided by witnesses in the case, and only offered generalized statements, Morris said.

“The whole ITP process is absurd,” Morris said. “There's no procedural process. It's the wild west. The ITP has relied on anonymous witnesses, allowing them to retain anonymity because of concerns about reprisals. Well, some of the players who would have been on Alex's team in 2022, when this behaviour was alleged to have happened, have already aged out of junior hockey. It's not like Alex is going to cut them from a team, right?”

The SDRCC arbitrator determined in its September decision that Hockey Canada's policies explicitly permit anonymous complaints and that lifting anonymity would risk deterring future complainants.

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1372842 Websites

TSN.CA / Andersson an intriguing trade target for teams seeking blueline help

Travis Yost

NHL teams interested in upgrading their blueline at the trade deadline were beaten to the punch last week, with the Minnesota Wild going all-in to acquire superstar defenceman Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks.

And while Hughes is a game changer of the highest order, there are several intriguing defensive options still available. Topping that list is Calgary's Rasmus Andersson.

The Flames have been amidst a strategic rebuild since the 2023-24 trade deadline and have moved several notable names to contenders, including forwards Elias Lindholm and Andrew Mangiapane, defencemen Noah Hanifin and Chris Tanev, and goaltender Jacob Markstrom.

Pacing towards another lottery pick this season, it's expected the trade market in Calgary will once again heat up. Names like Nazem Kadri, Blake Coleman, and the aforementioned Andersson have already generated plenty of speculation.

Andersson is an intriguing trade target for two critical reasons.

First, he's an established top-four defender in his playing prime (he turned 29 in October) and has an expiring contract with a reasonable cap hit (\$4.5 million per year). That means he could be a target for a team interested in retaining him long term, as well as one that wants a hired gun for the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Second, he's playing some of the best hockey of his career on a talent-poor team, and with Hughes off the market, the premium to acquire him has likely gone up.

Andersson's counting numbers are fantastic: he's tallied 25 points in 36 games (15th amongst league defencemen, tied with the likes of Pittsburgh's Erik Karlsson) amidst a career high in usage (24:09 per night).

But more noteworthy is that the Flames are outscoring the opposition with Andersson deployed – a notable achievement on a team otherwise getting beaten up these days. Consider Andersson's performance relative to the other Calgary regulars, as well as some notable comparables:

Travis Yost on Rasmus Andersson (TSN)

It's not just that Andersson is clearly outperforming other Calgary defenders, it's that he's the only defender seemingly capable of igniting Calgary's lowly attack from the back end.

Whereas most Flames defenders are struggling to yield even 2.0 goals per 60 minutes, independent of who they're playing with, Andersson is at 3.1 goals per 60 minutes. In other words, Calgary scores like the Seattle Kraken (dead last) with Andersson off ice, and like the Anaheim Ducks (second in the NHL) with Andersson deployed.

He's giving some of that back defensively, but it illustrates how the Swedish defenceman is capable of juicing offence even in challenging playing environments. Andersson could be a difference maker on a better team with more forward talent to capitalize on his transition play.

What's notable to me is that, despite the challenging start to the year for Calgary, the Flames' on-ice scoring with Andersson deployed looks



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comparable to that of Ivan Provorov in Columbus, Noah Dobson in Montreal, and Evan Bouchard in Edmonton. These aren't superstar-level blueliners like a Cale Makar, but this second tier of top-four defenders typically can elevate the play of anyone they play with, a hallmark sign of a defensive difference maker.

TSN's Insider Trading last week speculated on some potential trade partners for Andersson, with the in-need Toronto Maple Leafs and New Jersey Devils likely amongst the contenders. But considering Andersson's inherent value and light cap hit, rest assured they will be two of many suitors from now until the trade deadline.

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