



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 10, 2026

The Athletic

What went wrong for Jesperi Kotkaniemi with the Hurricanes, and what might be next?

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — It's not a surprise the Carolina Hurricanes might be shopping Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

Kotkaniemi ranked No. 10 on Chris Johnston's most recent NHL trade board this week, and Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman recently reported that Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsy is looking for a fresh start for Kotkaniemi, the 2018 No. 3 draft pick. Friedman previously tied Kotkaniemi to trade talks with the L.A. Kings and Vancouver Canucks.

So, what started as one of the most shocking acquisitions of the last decade looks like it will end in disappointment.

The Hurricanes, one year after fending off the Montreal Canadiens' offer sheet for Sebastian Aho, pulled off the move with Kotkaniemi in the summer of 2021. With Vincent Trocheck one year away from free agency and the opportunity to add a 6-foot-3, 200-plus-pound player to their lineup, Carolina signed Kotkaniemi to a one-year, \$6.1 million offer sheet. Montreal declined to match, instead accepting first- and third-round picks as compensation.

Kotkaniemi spent much of his first season in Raleigh playing on the fourth line before getting his opportunity as the Hurricanes' second-line center after Trocheck left for the Rangers in free agency in the summer of 2022. That also included a new contract: eight years, \$38.56 million.

It was an up-and-down season for Kotkaniemi, who finished with 18 goals and 43 points but had four separate stretches of going at least nine games without a goal.

It still proved to be the high-water mark of his time so far with Carolina.

Kotkaniemi scored a dozen goals in each of the next two seasons, finishing with 27 and 33 points, respectively, in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Logan Stankoven's move to the middle to start this season was a writing-on-the-wall moment for Kotkaniemi, who has mostly been relegated to fourth-line duty when he's in the lineup at all; he's played in 25 games and been in the press box for 19.

So what went wrong and led to a promising player failing to live up to expectations on one of the NHL's most consistently good teams?

The first finger should point at Kotkaniemi.

While Kotkaniemi's attitude was never questioned, he did seem to fail to find an identity to his game. There were times when he showed flashes of offensive potential that made him

intriguing to the Canadiens in the 2018 draft and the Hurricanes in 2021.

He showed the ability to finish chances, but he was also a reluctant shooter, never finishing a season with more than 129 shots on goal. In his eight-season career, he's averaged just over 1.5 shots on goal per game.

The organization was also intrigued by his on-ice vision, with some seeing him as perhaps the team's best east-west passer, a player who could create opportunities for talented wingers.

But none of it ever seemed to fall into place.

By the end of last season, Kotkaniemi was often relegated to fourth-line duty, even moving to the wing as Carolina made room for Mark Jankowski.

"It was pretty s—ty overall," he said at last May's end-of-season availability. "Tough year for me."

With Kotkaniemi in and out of the lineup with two goals and six points in 25 games this season, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour addressed the 25-year-old's role with the team this week, pointing to his lack of production and his need to find a niche within the team.

"KK's got to try to find that, I guess — what it is, what role you want to take on," Brind'Amour said. "There's been a little inconsistency to his play, for sure. There's obviously no production. We're not really looking for that. We need some other things to jump off the page. We'll see how it goes moving forward."

Kotkaniemi has consistently expressed his desire to fulfill his promise as a point-producing center, the potential 2C Carolina thought it was getting when it landed him via offer sheet. He also never seemed to embrace the opportunity to be a physical, heavy player, rather than a skilled one when the points didn't come, and Brind'Amour's confidence in him waned.

He said as much on locker clean-out day.

"I think postseason is always a little different. You want to bring more out (of) the physical part in the game," Kotkaniemi said. "I think if you run around 82 games, you're going to be pretty tired when the playoffs come. So you need to get smarter with that, too. So maybe I'll try to play a little more hockey in the regular season and maybe just run around a little more in the postseason."

The statement illustrated the gulf between Brind'Amour's expectations and Kotkaniemi's desires. You don't need to be around Brind'Amour long to know what he cherishes most in a player: consistency. The coach is quick to praise Jordan



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Staal and Jordan Martinook for their ability to play the same style shift after shift, game after game, regular season to postseason.

It seems Kotkaniemi still sees in himself the opportunity to be a top-six forward, a skill player who can be relied on for big minutes and significant production. That ship has sailed in Raleigh, but the Hurricanes should be able to find a team willing to take him on as a reclamation project.

For one, Kotkaniemi's contract — which has an AAV of \$4.82 million for four more years after this one — isn't the albatross many envision it to be.

The Sharks recently signed Alexander Wennberg to a three-year extension worth \$16 million, which illustrates how Kotkaniemi's deal is quickly becoming reasonable — as long as he can establish himself again as at least a third-line center.

Will Carolina be able to give Jesperi Kotkaniemi a fresh start? James Guillory / Imagn Images

Friedman also mentioned the Wennberg deal, along with Philadelphia's extension with Christian Dvorak (five years, \$5.4 million AAV), as proof that Kotkaniemi's contract could be palatable to teams in need of a center — a market that is bone-dry with several teams looking for help.

The question becomes what shape a trade will take.

Two offseasons ago, the Kings traded center Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Capitals in exchange for goaltender Darcy Kuemper, signed to a five-year contract totaling \$26.25 million by Washington after he helped Colorado win

the Stanley Cup in 2022, had been a disappointment in two seasons in D.C. Dubois had likewise flopped in Los Angeles, putting up 40 points in the first year of an eight-year, \$68 million deal.

It was a classic your-problem-for-my-problem trade, and one that worked out for both teams last season. Dubois rebounded with a career-best 66 points, helping the Capitals become one of the surprise teams of 2024-25, while Kuemper was a finalist for the Vezina Trophy.

It's a perfect example of how a trade can work for both sides. That's not to say it was — and still is — without risk. Kuemper is again having a good year with the Kings, but injuries have limited Dubois to six games, eating up \$8.5 million of cap space in Washington.

The more likely scenario may be the Hurricanes recouping as many assets as they can. Carolina is committed to a Stanley Cup run and isn't looking to subtract talent from its roster. With Noah Philp back in the concussion protocol, Kotkaniemi is one injury away from being back in the lineup regularly.

The contracts for Wennberg and Dvorak give Carolina some leverage in a paper-thin center market, and while an asset-based return won't be eye-popping, the Hurricanes are unlikely to settle for a small return just to give Kotkaniemi a fresh start.

But make no mistake: The expectation is that Kotkaniemi's time in Raleigh is coming to a close.

Each NHL team's biggest Olympic snub, from 4 Nations fall-offs to young stars

By: Scott Powers, James Mirtle, Aaron Portzline, Max Bultman, Arpon Basu, Michael Russo, Jonas Siegel, Jeremy Rutherford, Allan Mitchell, Kevin Kurz, Josh Yohe, Shayna Goldman, Fluto Shinzawa, Eric Stephens, Matthew Fairburn, Mark Lazerus, Jesse Granger, Harman Dayal, Sean Gentile, Peter Baugh, Joe Rexrode, Thomas Drance, Julian McKenzie, Cory Lavalette, Vincent Z. Mercogliano

The start of the men's hockey tournament at the Winter Olympics in Milan is just over a month away.

It's been 12 years since we last saw NHL players at the Games, and after this past week, we have a clear picture of who will be participating — and who won't.

From 4 Nations fall-offs to potential reserves to emerging young stars who fell just short, many players are likely feeling snubbed.

This week, we asked our reporters for their pick of the biggest Olympic snub from each NHL team.

Here are their choices.

Anaheim Ducks

Cutter Gauthier, USA

Jackson LaCombe is an honorable mention, but Gauthier's 20 goals are among the leaders for American players. With

that said, if a similar sniper in Jason Robertson couldn't make Team USA with the kind of season he's having, Gauthier wasn't going to make it. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Hampus Lindholm, Sweden

Lindholm did not play for Sweden in the 4 Nations Face-Off because he was sidelined with a broken kneecap. He is at full health now and averaging the second-most ice time per game among Bruins defensemen after Charlie McAvoy. He is used in all situations. Lindholm defines the all-around defenseman teams require at the Olympics. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Alex Tuch, USA

It's tough to consider any Sabres player as a true Olympic snub, but Tuch had the best case of those left out. He's on his typical scoring pace and also brings penalty-killing abilities that would have made him useful. But it's tough to argue with USA's roster. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Mikael Backlund, Sweden



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A perennially underrated defensive center who has represented Sweden on numerous occasions, including at the 2018 World Championship, where he earned a gold medal. However, he has never represented his country on the Olympic stage. It won't happen in February despite solid numbers in his age-36 season. Backlund would give Sweden a veteran, bottom-six presence; a solid faceoff taker and a penalty killer. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Seth Jarvis, Canada

Jarvis was one of the few members of Canada's winning 4 Nations team not to be named to the country's Olympic team. The question is why. Before his rib injury on Dec. 19, he was top 10 in the league in goals while continuing to be one of the best defensive wingers in hockey. While his window to impress the Team Canada brass was cut short by injury, there was enough familiarity to make an informed decision on his status. One has to wonder what changed to result in arguably the best forward on the Eastern Conference's top team being omitted. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Connor Bedard, Canada

Bedard's injury made the decision an easy one for Canada, but it would have been interesting to see what would have happened if he had remained healthy. He had built a case that he was deserving. He had elevated his game to an elite level and was producing with the league's best before his shoulder injury. He also returned to Chicago's lineup on Friday. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche

Mackenzie Blackwood, Canada

When healthy, there's no doubt Blackwood is one of the three best Canadian goalies. He was excellent last season and has been even better this season since returning from offseason surgery. The fact that he missed the first month and is currently back on IR could be reason enough to leave him off, but based on talent alone, Blackwood should be one of the three in Milan for Canada. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

No one

You'd have to stretch pretty hard to believe a Blue Jackets player was snubbed by his country's Olympic selection process. Zach Werenski was a slam dunk for Team USA. Elvis Merzjkins has been the goaltender of his generation in Latvia. Beyond that, there weren't a lot of Blue Jackets on the bubble. Jet Greaves has been one of the best Canadian-born goaltenders in the NHL this season, but he's a rookie who's just getting started in his career. Adam Fantilli will most certainly be a candidate in 2030. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars

Jason Robertson, USA

Herb Brooks in "Miracle" said that he wasn't looking for the best players, but rather the "right players." It made for a great line in a movie, but Team USA has stubbornly stuck to that ethos ever since. It also hasn't won a best-on-best tournament since, other than the 1996 World Cup. No

American player (and only two non-Americans) scored more goals in 2025 than Robertson's 49. Sticking with J.T. Miller or Vincent Trocheck over Robertson was galaxy-brain at its worst. Robertson's metrics say he's a far better two-way player than Bill Guerin seems to give him credit for, too. He's a plus-121 at five-on-five in his career. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings

Simon Edvinsson, Sweden

Alex DeBrincat made a strong case for Team USA as well, but it's more surprising to see Edvinsson left off the Sweden blue line after an outstanding first half for the Red Wings. The 6-foot-6 defender can play in any situation, with the length and mobility to smother rush offense and block all kinds of shots, and is a breakout machine who can add offense as well. The 22-year-old will be on future Olympic teams, I'm sure, but his first half suggested he was ready in 2026. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers

Evan Bouchard, Canada

Bouchard is a puck-moving defenseman with plenty of chaos in his game. There was some risk in taking him, but the rewards include exceptional outlet passing and deploying Connor McDavid's chief passing connection on Team Canada. Bouchard is a five-on-five outscorer in Edmonton, and would do the same at the Olympics. Management has to let go of bias in order to ice an optimal Canadian Olympic team. Maybe next time. — Allan Mitchell

Florida Panthers

Sam Bennett, Canada

Bennett's absence was perhaps the biggest surprise for Canada, after a dominant playoffs and showing at 4 Nations. But with so much talent to choose from and Bennett's slow start to the season, he was narrowly edged out by the likes of Nick Suzuki and Bo Horvat. Expect he'll be high on the injury replacement list, however. — James Mirtle

Los Angeles Kings

Brandt Clarke, Canada

The Kings have five Olympians, and there really aren't any players who were snubbed. But we'll use this to highlight Clarke, who has nudged aside Drew Doughty as L.A.'s top offensive blueliner while showing he has the chops to play quality defense. The 22-year-old could be in Canada's mix in 2030. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Marcus Johansson, Sweden

The 35-year-old is on pace for a career high in points and has already scored one more goal (12) than he had in either of the past two seasons (11 in 78 and 72 games, respectively). He also helped Sweden win bronze medals in the past two World Championships and a silver medal at the 2014 Olympics. After hearing he didn't make the cut this time, he said, "It's obviously sad and disappointing, but I've done what I can, I think. I think I've proven how I can play, and I guess it's not enough." — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens



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Lane Hutson, USA

Very tough call as Cole Caufield also deserved inclusion on Team USA, but that Hutson didn't even appear to be part of the conversation is simply absurd. He wasn't even invited to their summer orientation camp. It is impossible to overstate just how good Hutson has been this season, especially since moving back to his natural left side on Dec. 11. He entered 2026 as a point-per-game defenseman, the Canadiens have ridiculously dominated his minutes at five-on-five since his move back to the left and his perceived defensive deficiencies are more based on size bias than reality. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Steven Stamkos, Canada

It's not a huge surprise given the young talent that made the team instead of the 35-year-old Stamkos, but he is on a heater — he just collected his 600th goal — and it's a shame he'll end up never realizing the dream of playing in the Olympics for Team Canada. A broken leg kept him out of Sochi in 2014, and he would have been a lock in 2018 and 2022 when NHL players didn't participate. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Brett Pesce, USA

There's no great answer for the Devils to this prompt. The team's Olympic hopefuls all made their rosters. Pesce wasn't one of Team USA's big snubs, but he's probably the closest to Olympic level of any of the players not going. He is a strong defensive defenseman who can kill penalties: not a glamorous role, but one that teams always need. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Matthew Schaefer, Canada

Sure, Schaefer is 18 years old, and players his age don't often make Team Canada. However, Schaefer is playing at a ridiculous level this early in his NHL career, acing every challenge thrown his way. Once he showed he could thrive in matchup minutes, he should have made the team, even as a No. 7 or 8. Canada should want his dynamic skill as an option, and the opportunity for him to gain this type of experience early would only help this team in the long run. — Shayna Goldman

Adam Fox was trending toward a top-three Norris Trophy finish before a November shoulder injury. Carmen Mandato / Getty Images

New York Rangers

Adam Fox, USA

In less than a year, Fox went from one of the first six Americans picked for 4 Nations to off the Olympic roster entirely. If you want to make the case that he's been surpassed by Quinn Hughes and Zach Werenski for power-play duties and you'd prefer the other four defensemen in the lineup to be bigger, shutdown types, fine. But not even carrying him as one of the two extra defensemen is hard to justify. The 27-year-old was trending toward a top-three Norris Trophy finish before a Nov. 29 shoulder injury and has an elite body of work over seven NHL seasons that should

outweigh four subpar games at 4 Nations. — Vincent Z. Mercogliano

Ottawa Senators

Shane Pinto, USA

Pinto would've been a big help to Team USA with his two-way play as a shutdown center who can provide offense. Pinto played with the Americans last spring en route to a World Championship title. Team USA coach Mike Sullivan even commended Pinto's play during a recent visit to Ottawa. If only Pinto hadn't gotten injured in December, his case to make Team USA might've been stronger. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers

Trevor Zegras, USA

We could go with Travis Konecny here — he was part of Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster — but that team is stacked, and Konecny was inconsistent for the first couple of months. So Zegras is the choice, as he continues to lead the Flyers in scoring and is well on his way to the best season of his career and an inevitable contract extension. Zegras can also come in clutch in the shootout, going 17 for 28 in his career, which could have come in handy at the Olympics. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

Bryan Rust, USA

Maybe calling Rust a "snub" is a stretch, but maybe not. He's fast. He's a 30-plus goal scorer. He's tenacious. He kills penalties. He plays well with stars. He's a big-game icon in Pittsburgh. Think this roster could use those attributes? I do. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks

William Eklund, Sweden

Eklund wasn't chosen over Pontus Holmberg, and is a much better offensive player who is tied for third on the Sharks in scoring. However, Sweden does have plenty of offensive talent through the lines up front, and Holmberg may fit Sam Hallam's idea of a 13th forward more than the 23-year-old Eklund, who should have a better opportunity to participate in 2030. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

Brandon Montour, Canada

Like all Canadian defensemen who weren't part of the 4 Nations Face-Off, Montour faced an uphill climb in cracking this Olympic roster. When he starred for Canada at the World Championship this spring, however, and put together a sensational first season in Seattle, it seemed as if perhaps Montour had cracked the door open to making a dark horse case for inclusion. A slow start to this season, however, and some recent bad injury luck put Montour just too far behind the eight ball, as Canada opted to return the same D-corps it used at 4 Nations. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

No one



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There are no cases for a snub. The Blues have Colton Parayko and Jordan Binnington set to play for Canada, Philip Broberg for Sweden, Pius Suter for Switzerland and Dalibor Dvorsky for Czechia. At one point, Robert Thomas was in the conversation for Canada, but he hasn't played well enough to earn it. If anything, Joel Hofer has a case for Canada, having unseated Binnington as the starter in St. Louis. However, Hofer doesn't have the resume of Binnington, who won a gold medal with Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

No one

The Lightning will be sending 10 players to the Olympics, so there really aren't any noteworthy snubs here. Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel ultimately were both named to Team Canada, despite a deep pool of forward options. And J.J. Moser's excellent play this season earned him a role on Team Switzerland. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs

Matthew Knies, USA

I'm not sure that Knies was snubbed exactly. He is having a good, but not great, year for the Leafs. And it was probably going to take great for him to crack a deep American team. Knies is putting up almost a point per game, but the goal scoring, speed and physicality in his play haven't been as punchy or consistent as last season. Nor has he fit with Auston Matthews, which would have boosted his case. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Mammoth

No one

Logan Cooley could have been a contender for one of the final U.S. Olympic team spots. Unfortunately, his leg injury jeopardized those chances. Clayton Keller was on the bubble and would have been a snub if left off, but he was named to the American roster, which leaves Utah without an obvious Olympic snub. — Harman Dayal

Vancouver Canucks

Thatcher Demko, USA

A Vezina finalist in 2023, Demko would've been a shoo-in Olympian for Team USA 24 months ago. He might've even been tabbed to battle with Connor Hellebuyck for the

starter's job. Injuries, however, have waylaid Demko's progress. While he wasn't invited to Team USA's orientation camp this summer — with USA Hockey leadership preferring to reward World Championship-winning netminder Joey Daccord — Demko's progress was still tracked by Bill Guerin and company. Another month-long injury absence this season and some inconsistency, however, caused Demko to be on the outside looking in. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

No one

The Golden Knights already have seven players named to Olympic rosters, and it's tough to find a snub. The closest is probably goaltender Adin Hill, who was one of Canada's three netminders at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February. However, Hill was injured after playing only five games this season and hasn't seen game action since Oct. 20. That, combined with the resurgence of other Canadian goalies, makes it tough to consider him a true snub. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Jakob Chychrun, Canada

Canada's defensive group is a tough nut to crack, but Chychrun deserved heavy consideration. At the position, only Cale Makar has posted a better Net Rating this season. Chychrun's offensive production and impact have been immense, and he's done it all in huge minutes against top competition. This is what it looks like when a good player becomes a great one. He should be on the Norris shortlist. — Sean Gentille

Winnipeg Jets

Mark Scheifele, Canada

Since the start of the 2024-25 season, Scheifele ranks third among all Canadian NHL players in goals and fifth in points. Simply put, he's been an elite offensive producer. Scheifele's defensive game has improved in recent years, and even if that was still a concern, he could have easily slid to the wing. It would have been nice to have another offensive game-breaker on Canada's roster, in the event of an injury to one of the top scoring forwards or top-six chemistry issues (remember that Canada had a tough time finding the right top-six line combos at 4 Nations). — Harman Dayal



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Preview: January 10 vs. Seattle

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes look to go three-for-three against Western Conference opponents this week

RALEIGH, N.C. - Riding a three-game winning streak, the Carolina Hurricanes will close out their home stand against the Seattle Kraken this evening.

When: Saturday, January 10

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

Canes Record: 27-14-3 (57 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 5-2 Win over the Anaheim Ducks on Thursday, Jan. 8

Kraken Record: 20-14-8 (48 Points, 3rd - Pacific Division)

Kraken Last Game: 3-2 OT Loss to the Minnesota Wild on Thursday, Jan. 8

Last Time Out...

The Hurricanes overcame an early deficit to top the Anaheim Ducks 5-2 at Lenovo Center on Thursday.

Jalen Chatfield's first goal and first multi-point performance of the season earned him first star honors, with Logan Stankoven and Taylor Hall each chipping in a goal and an assist as well.

Frederik Andersen made 11 saves on 13 shots to end a nine-game winless skid and backstop his first victory since Nov. 6.

Stank's Streaking...

Thursday night was a third consecutive victory for the Canes, and also the third straight game in which Logan Stankoven found twine.

It's the second time in Stankoven's career that he has scored in at least three consecutive games, matching a run he enjoyed during the second, third and fourth games of his NHL career.

The 22-year-old is also riding a career-best four-game point streak, notching five points in that span.

In Net...

With Frederik Andersen starting on Thursday, it feels likely the Canes will turn to Brandon Bussi against Seattle this evening.

Before Andersen got the nod on Thursday, Bussi backstopped a pair of wins in Carolina's two prior games, totaling 48 saves on 51 shots.

He made more NHL history with his last win, becoming the fastest goalie in league history to reach 15 wins, doing so in just 18 appearances (15-2-1).

Conversely, should the Canes elect to go back to Andersen, he'd be seeking his first set of back-to-back wins since topping Philadelphia and Anaheim on Oct. 11 and 16, respectively.

On The Other Side...

Seattle suffered its first loss of 2026 on Thursday, snapping what had been a four-game winning streak. Still, the Kraken enter the fray with points in 10 straight tilts (8-0-2), recording a league-leading 18 points during that stretch.

Part of that success has come on the back of a potent power play, which has produced goals at a 34.8% clip since the team's point streak began on Dec. 20 - good for second in the league in that span, one spot ahead of Carolina (32.1%).

Captain Jordan Eberle leads his club in both goals (15) and points (28), and has found the scoresheet in seven of his last eight games.

Injury Updates...

Forward Noah Philp entered concussion protocol on Jan. 6. He did not play on Thursday against Anaheim.

Goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov is set to undergo hip surgery and was declared "probably out for the year" by Rod Brind'Amour on Dec. 29.

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, but has been practicing with the team in a standard sweater since Jan. 7.

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.



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What Are We Wearing?

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

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to practice on Sunday before flying to Detroit. They'll start a rare road back-to-back against

Central Division opponents on Monday, first taking on the Red Wings before heading to St. Louis.

Next Game: Monday, January 12 @ Detroit | 7:00 p.m. ET
| FDSNSO

Next Game: Friday, January 16 vs. Florida | 7:00 p.m. ET |
FDSNSO | Tickets | Parking



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The Hockey News

Imminent Return Feels Inevitable For Hurricanes Star With Latest AHL Reassignment

By: Ryan Henkel

Joel Nystrom's reassignment clears the path for Jaccob Slavin's inevitable return, bolstering the blueline.

The Carolina Hurricanes announced that they have reassigned defenseman Joel Nystrom to the Chicago Wolves of the AHL Friday morning, meaning that Jaccob Slavin should be returning to the lineup very, very soon.

Joel Nystrom reassigned to AHL, will Jaccob Slavin return Saturday?

The 31-year-old defenseman has been recovering from an upper-body injury he suffered after getting boarded from behind by Florida Panthers forward A.J. Greer on Dec. 19.

It was a tough blow for Slavin, who was just three games into his return from a lower-body injury that had sidelined him for 28 games previously, but perhaps the new injury gave him even more time for that injury to heal as it was one that had pestered him from the preseason and the team had been extra cautious on.

Slavin, who has been practicing with the team for a little over a week now and recently also shed the non-contact jersey, has been a much missed piece on the Hurricanes' blueline.

The team has done an admirable job stepping up in his and the plethora of other absences they've had to deal with this year, but there's simply no replacing the best defensive defenseman in the game.

With the reassignment, Slavin will be able to be activated off of IR, as the Canes needed to free up a roster spot, and barring no immediate setbacks, he should play Saturday night against the Seattle Kraken as Carolina looks for a fourth straight win.

Nystrom, 23, has been a real gem of a find for Carolina this season.

The sheer amount of injuries the Canes dealt with to start the year meant he got the chance to showcase himself and what an impression he made.

The Swedish blueliner parlayed his opportunity into an extended stretch of games — he now has 33 under his belt, with eight points in that span — and he proved that he can be an everyday NHL defenseman.

That's why the team signed the 2021 seventh-round pick to a four-year extension earlier in the year and if it wasn't for the fact that he can be reassigned to the AHL without the need for waivers, he'd probably still be with the team as the seventh defenseman.

But it'll also be better for him in the long run to get regular playing time down with Chicago Wolves rather than sitting up in the press box with Carolina.

He's gonna be a good player for years to come and his development also gives the Canes a little more flexibility when it comes to potential trade packages as well.

LINKS

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6957945/2026/01/10/carolina-hurricanes-kotkaniemi-trade/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6958384/2026/01/10/olympics-2026-hockey-biggest-snubs-nhl-team/>

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-january-10-vs-seattle>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/imminent-return-feels-inevitable-for-hurricanes-star-with-latest-ahl-reassignment>



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SportScan

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

1375194 Websites

The Athletic / Olympic hockey rink opens test event with holes in the exterior — and the ice: Exclusive first look

Players look on as a hole in the ice is filled at the first test event at Santiagiulia Arena on Friday. Chris Johnston for The Athletic

By Chris Johnston

Jan. 9, 2026 Updated 5:00 pm EST

MILAN — Stepping inside the Santiagiulia Arena for the first time felt like walking onto a construction site.

Less than four weeks from the start of the Milan Cortina Olympics, the main ice hockey venue remains very much a work in progress.

The good news is that ice and seating are in place, with a few thousand spectators on hand Friday night for an Italian Cup game that marked the first test event played at the venue.

But construction dust also floated over the playing surface during Friday's game — a sign of the frantic push to get the building in working order by Feb. 5, when the women's Olympic tournament is scheduled to open with a game between France and Italy.

Organizers have a lot of work to get done before then. There were still multiple large holes in the exterior of the building as of Friday night, which poses a major challenge to icemakers since they can't properly regulate the conditions inside the arena.

The permanent dressing room area is also still under construction, with only three of the planned 14 rooms anywhere near complete. One construction worker told The Athletic on Friday that he'd just completed an 11-hour shift.

"We're very busy," he said.

Those dressing rooms and a practice rink are housed in a temporary structure adjacent to the arena, connected by a long walkway, parts of which are outside under a temporary cover.

The practice rink structure is currently dotted with forklifts, building materials and other tools. The ice in that building just had the lines painted on it Friday and can't yet be skated on. Getting that completed is vital since there won't be anywhere else for teams to skate during the Olympics, when the main rink will be jammed with as many as three games per day.

Things are coming along in the game rink. While it's far from perfect — the capacity will come in at 11,800, well short of the planned 14,000 because they ran out of time to finish entire sections — there's no sense on the ground that the Olympic tournament is in jeopardy.

Live look inside MH1 — the main Olympic arena in Milan, where construction is still ongoing but they'll play the first test game here tonight pic.twitter.com/LmBMY8kYx

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) January 9, 2026

The building currently features unpainted drywall and unfinished concrete floors throughout. There will be no fancy concourses or luxury boxes here. On Friday night, fans could purchase food and beer from food trucks parked outside.

The ice surface appeared soft and snowy in its debut, and there was a delay in the first period after a hole developed in front of one of the goals.

A tiny scoreboard that would look out of place in a Canadian junior rink hung over center ice. Organizers say it will be replaced by one that is twice as big before the start of the Olympics.

Prior to Friday's puck drop, officials from the International Ice Hockey Federation and various national teams toured the facility. That included Scott Salmond, Hockey Canada's senior vice president of high performance and hockey operations, who flew to Italy after the completion of the World Juniors earlier this week.

He took an optimistic view of the recent progress made at the building.

"The games are going to be great," Salmond told The Athletic. "Like every Olympics, there's challenges with what happens outside of the game, but we're Canadian. People grew up in small towns and small rinks, outdoor rinks. We can adapt to all of those things. The most important thing is that we can play in a rink, the families can come and watch it and people around the world are going to be able to watch it."

"It's exciting. I'm excited about it."

Salmond plans to provide an update to Team Canada. The men's team is due to practice in this building after arriving in Milan on Feb. 8. It opens the tournament against Czechia on Feb. 12.

While it's clear this Olympic arena will be nowhere close to NHL standards, Salmond believes the enthusiasm of NHL players after a 12-year hiatus since the 2014 Sochi Games won't be dampened by the setup.

"I think that the team that embraces just the challenges that are here and is willing to accept those and is able to put some of that aside and just focus on playing the games is the team that's going to be the most successful," Salmond said. "I think the excitement that our players have to be back in the Olympics will overshadow any of the challenges that we're going to encounter here."

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The Athletic / Canada announces roster for Olympic women's hockey:
Snubs, surprises and expectations

By Hailey Salvian

Jan. 9, 2026 Updated 5:36 pm EST

TORONTO — The Canadian women's national hockey team will lean on an experience-heavy roster at the 2026 Olympics, naming 20 returning players from the 2025 world championships to its 23-player roster on Friday afternoon.

That includes 13 forwards who represented the national team last April, including three of the top five goal scorers in the PWHL this season — captain Marie-Philip Poulin, Brianna Jenner and Daryl Watts. Jennifer Gardiner, who finished second in tournament scoring, will make her Olympic debut. So will Watts, who is second all-time in PWHL scoring behind only Poulin.

Sarah Nurse, who set the Olympic record for scoring in a single tournament (18) in 2022, will also return to the roster and should be ready for Milan after missing most of the 2025-26 season due to injury.

Among the six returning defenders are all three 2025 PWHL defender of the year finalists, Renata Fast, Sophie Jaques and Claire Thompson. No. 1 goalie Ann-Renée Desbiens — who has a .947 save percentage in the PWHL this season — will return to Canada's crease. And while she wasn't at last year's worlds due to injury, longtime back-up goalie Emerance Maschmeyer will head to her second Olympics. New York Sirens goalie Kayle Osborne will fill out the depth chart.

Overall, Canada's roster includes 16 players with Olympic experience and nine with more than two tournaments under their belts, led by Poulin, who will play in her fifth Olympic Games in Milan; Jenner, Natalie Spooner and defender Jocelyne Larocque will play in their fourth.

Seven players — Watts, Gardiner, Kristin O'Neill, Julia Gosling, Kati Tabin, Jaques and Osborne — will make their Olympic debuts when the women's tournament begins on Feb. 5.

Team Canada's preliminary round begins with a game against Finland and ends with a rivalry match against the U.S. on Feb. 10. The gold medal game is slated for Feb. 19.

The U.S. women's roster was named on Jan. 31 and can be viewed [here](#).

Snubs

Danielle Serdachny, Chloe Primerano, Ève Gascon and Micah Zandee-Hart were all left off the Olympic roster after winning silver at world championships in Czechia.

Serdachny, who scored the golden goal at 2024 worlds in Utica, is arguably the Canadians' biggest snub. She's played a depth role well for Canada over three straight world championships but has struggled to adjust to the PWHL, scoring just three goals and 10 points in 39 games over her first two seasons. Gosling, with four goals and eight points in nine games this season alone, might have simply jumped Serdachny on the depth chart.

It was surprising, in some ways, to not see defender Primerano on the roster, given she has established herself as one of the most promising prospects in women's hockey. After two years dominating girls high school hockey, Primerano graduated early and made her college debut for the University of Minnesota — and did it a year ahead of schedule at just 17 years old. Had she made this roster, she'd have been the first teenager to make a Canadian Olympic team since Poulin in 2010. While her ceiling is absurdly high, Primerano has yet to look dominant on the blue line at the senior international level. She will certainly be part of Canada's Olympic team in 2030.

Gascon, 22, who was named WCHA goalie of the year, looked to be an easy addition to the Olympic team behind Desbiens and Maschmeyer. However, Osborne, 23, has proven herself against the best in the world in the PWHL, starting every single one of New York's games this season. No goalie has made more saves than Osborne (280) or played more minutes (651:32).

Caitlin Kraemer and Hannah Miller also failed to make the cut from Canada's 30-player national team roster announced back in August. Canada general manager Gina Kingsbury confirmed on Friday that Miller is now eligible to play for Canada, after representing China at the 2022 Olympics. Miller's exclusion from the Olympic roster was not related to her IIHF eligibility appeal.

Surprises

The biggest surprise on the roster is, without a doubt, the selection of Tabin.

Tabin only made her senior national team debut at the November Rivalry Series in Cleveland and Buffalo, after establishing herself as a top defender in the PWHL.

Over two years in Montreal, Tabin has been a consistent all-situations defender who makes a good first pass, is defensively sound and can play physical when needed. Said Montreal general manager Danièle Sauvageau: "She does everything right."

Typically, it would be a surprise to see a 37-year-old on an Olympic roster. But Larocque is still one of the top eight defenders in Canada, according to Dom Luszczyzyn's PWHL data model, despite some age-related decline over the past year.

The only defender with a better Net Rating than Larocque who didn't make the Olympic roster is Minnesota rookie Kendall Cooper, who has played zero games with the senior national team. Larocque has played over 200. Cooper should definitely get a look on the national team, but less than 30 days from the Olympics is no time to bring in a brand-new defender.

Expectations

The bar couldn't be higher after Canada re-wrote the record books en route to a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics in 2022. This year, however, it will arrive in Italy as the No. 2-ranked team according to the IIHF standings. Canada is riding a six-game losing streak against Team USA after getting swept at the 2025 Rivalry Series and world championships.

While there's work to be done after getting outscored 24-7 at Rivalry, Canada's goal in Milan remains the same: to win Olympic gold.

Team USA poses an immense threat, with an elite combination of high-end veterans and dynamic young talent. However, Canada has the best player on the planet and the ultimate X-factor in Poulin, who has scored in all four Olympic gold medal games she's played. The Americans, who have only beat Poulin once in an Olympic gold medal game, know that well.

Canada will be scrutinized for taking so many veterans compared to the Americans, but it's important to remember Canada also has several elite players still in their prime — such as 2025 PWHL rookie of the year Sarah Fillier, defender of the year Renata Fast and goalie of the year Ann-Renée Desbiens.

Fillier is only 25 years old and was among the top scorers at the 2022 Olympics. Fast is arguably the best all-around defender in the world. Desbiens comes with a 4-0 record at the Olympics and has only lost in two championship games since taking over Canada's crease in 2021.

Not to mention, Canada's veterans have plenty of experience winning when it matters most.



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The Athletic / Which NHL teams have the most Olympians? Check out the full list

By James Mirtle

Jan. 9, 2026 10:50 am EST

Good morning, hockey folks. Today marks exactly four weeks until the NHL's Olympic break and the opening ceremonies in Milan. Let's get ready for the sprint.

Which NHL teams have the most Olympians?

With Slovakia naming its men's team for the Games yesterday, we now have every roster (except for host Italy) and the full list of 146 NHLers scheduled to play in Milan next month.

While the average NHL club will have 4 1/2 players at the Olympics — and every team has at least one — they're far from evenly distributed. These five teams have eight-plus Olympians, led by the Lightning, who are hockey's United Nations with a remarkable 10 players skating for seven different countries:

Tampa Bay Lightning (10): Oliver Bjorkstrand, F (DEN), Erik Černák, D (SVK), Anthony Cirelli, F (CAN), Zemgus Girgensons, F (LAT), Jake Guentzel, F (USA), Brandon Hagel, F (CAN), Victor Hedman, D (SWE), Pontus Holmberg, F (SWE), J.J. Moser, D (SUI), Brayden Point, F (CAN)

Florida Panthers (9): Uvis Balinskis, D (LAT), Gustav Forsling, D (SWE), Seth Jones, D (USA), Anton Lundell, F (FIN), Eetu Luostarinen, F (FIN), Niko Mikkola, D (FIN), Brad Marchand, F (CAN), Sam Reinhart, F (CAN), Matthew Tkachuk, F (USA)

Colorado Avalanche (8): Joel Kiviranta, F (FIN), Gabriel Landeskog, F (SWE), Artturi Lehkonen, F (FIN), Nathan MacKinnon, F (CAN), Cale Makar, D (CAN), Martin Nečas, F (CZE), Brock Nelson, F (USA), Devon Toews, D (CAN)

Minnesota Wild (8): Matt Boldy, F (USA), Jonas Brodin, D (SWE), Joel Eriksson Ek, F (SWE), Brock Faber, D (USA), Filip Gustavsson, G (SWE), Quinn Hughes, D (USA), Nico Sturm, F (GER), Jesper Wallstedt, G (SWE)

New Jersey Devils (8): Jesper Bratt, F (SWE), Nico Hischier, F (SUI), Jack Hughes, F (USA), Jacob Markström, G (SWE), Timo Meier, F (SUI), Šimon Nemec, D (SVK), Ondřej Palát, F (CZE), Jonas Siegenthaler, D (SUI)

Two teams, meanwhile, have just one lone player going: the Chicago Blackhawks with Teuvo Teräväinen, F (FIN) and the New York Islanders with Bo Horvat, F (CAN). So, perhaps they'll be more well-rested for a playoff push come April?

Here's the full list of NHL Olympians as it stands now.

Don't miss 🇨🇦: Canada is set to announce its women's hockey roster at 3:30 p.m. ET today. Keep an eye on this page. The Team USA women's roster, announced last week, is here.

The month's toughest schedules

After last night's busy 12-game slate, the NHL has 221 games left to play before the Olympics, meaning 17 percent of the entire campaign will take place in the next 28 days.

How does that compare to a "normal" season?

Well, NHL teams typically play an average of 3.08 games a week, spread over 6 1/2 months. These next four weeks, however, they'll average nearly 3.45 games, meaning they're playing roughly 12 percent more frequently than the norm and essentially every second night. Sidney Crosby rejoices.

The average club has seven home games and seven on the road in this stretch and 2.3 back-to-backs. Here's the league ranked in terms of strength of opponent in this span:

Thanks to our guy Dom Luszczyzyn for compiling this list.

Eight NHL teams have 15 games to play by Feb. 5, and six are playing nine or 10 road games, some with multiple long trips mixed into a short window. So, this section of the schedule could be make-or-break for some clubs.

We've also already had an unusually high number of injuries this season; it'll be worth watching if that grows over the coming weeks.

MirTrivia Question

Simple-ish trivia for you today: In honor of Macklin Celebrini and Matthew Schaefer's incredible first halves ...

Who are the only two teenagers to ever win the Hart Trophy as league MVP and the only near-teenager to win the Norris Trophy as top defenseman?

Coast to Coast

🗨️ Another DGB banger: Eleven statistical droughts that feel impossible but apparently aren't.

📖 With two goals in a win over Vancouver last night, Red Wings star Patrick Kane became the 50th player to 500 goals in NHL history — and only the fifth born in the U.S.

😄 Julian McKenzie has an interesting read on the NHL's new relaxed dress code and how players feel about it after a half season of fewer suits.

📧 "Heated Rivalry" star Hudson Williams says he's received anonymous messages from closeted professional athletes, including hockey players, in the wake of the show's recent success.

🔪 The Power Rankings guys return from a 21-day holiday hibernation to offer us some much-needed perspective.

📺 On Thursday's episode of "The Athletic Hockey Show," Hailey Salvian and Sean Gentile debate the merits of Celebrini as a legitimate Hart Trophy candidate, and Peter Baugh joins to chat about the Rangers' woes.

New names in the trade rumor mill

Chris Johnston is a man of many trade boards these days, and his latest — released yesterday — has more intriguing insight into the names in play by the March 6 trade deadline.

A few notes from Chris on the top five newcomers on his list:

• No. 2: Andrew Mangiapane, Edmonton. "The fit hasn't worked out in Edmonton, where Mangiapane has become a routine scratch amid a wildly unproductive start. ... Mangiapane holds a full no-movement clause but will be open-minded about helping the Oilers find him a new opportunity."

• No. 5: Artemi Panarin, N.Y. Rangers. "The Rangers' leading point producer in all seven seasons since arriving on Broadway as a celebrated free agent in 2019, Panarin remains one of the NHL's elite playmakers. ... A collision of circumstances could create an environment



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where it happens here because the Rangers are weighing the merits of a retool and Panarin is a pending unrestricted free agent who is in line for another big payday.”

• No. 8: Luke Schenn, Winnipeg. “While Schenn is a sturdy veteran unlikely to recoup the assets Winnipeg gave up for him at last year’s deadline — they dealt a second- and fourth-round pick to Pittsburgh — he’ll carry value as a right-shot defenseman ideally suited for third-pairing duty.”

• No. 10: Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Carolina. “Kotkaniemi has lost his grip on an everyday roster spot with the Hurricanes, which makes him an intriguing trade candidate given the general lack of centers available leaguewide. ... Kotkaniemi still has four seasons remaining on his contract beyond this one, albeit at a reasonable cap number.”

• No. 11: Robert Thomas, St. Louis. “Nothing is off the table in St. Louis, including a potential deal involving the team’s top-line center. How likely that is depends on how you interpret the fact that his name has started to circulate again in chatter with rival teams.”

You can read more on these players and the rest of CJ’s 35 names on the full list.

Reminder 🗓️: There’s a roster freeze before the Olympics beginning Feb. 4, so that could act as a second deadline and encourage some movement in the next few weeks.

MirTrivia Answer

Hope you didn’t overthink this one.

Back in 1979-80, Wayne Gretzky was just 19 when he won the first of eight Hart trophies in a row he’d win in his prime with the Oilers. And Sidney Crosby in 2006-07, also at 19, won the first of his two leaguewide MVPs.

Bobby Orr, meanwhile, is the youngest Norris winner. He won for the first time shortly after turning 20 in 1967-68.

It’ll be a tall task for Celebrini or Schaefer to win either award this season, but just being in the running is incredibly impressive. You can tell their hardware cases will get plenty of additions in the years to come.

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The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: What happened during our hibernation?

Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn

We here at Power Rankings HQ aren’t going to wish you a Happy New Year. Nine days is too far past the threshold. It’d be wrong.

We will, however, apologize for the 21-day holiday hibernation. That’s far too long — and more than enough time for situations around the league to dramatically change. Every team, in one way or another, finds itself in a different spot than the one it was in on Dec. 19. How, exactly? Let’s see.

1. Colorado Avalanche, 32-4-7

Dec. 19 rank: 1

Sean: 1

Dom: 1

After winning 10 straight for the second time this season, the Avalanche lost two consecutive games in regulation for the first time all year. In January! There are a plethora of crazy Avalanche facts from this season. That might be the wildest.

The losing streak brought the Avalanche’s point pace down from a heroic 141 to a humiliating 135. Shameful stuff from Colorado, but the Avalanche made up for it by whooping the Senators so bad they signed a goalie mid-game.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning, 26-13-3

Dec. 19 rank: 10

Sean: 2

Dom: 2

On Oct. 24, after they’d lost six of their first seven games, we put the Lightning in the 32nd spot. Pretty sure it was a bit. Was it a funny one? Who knows.

In any case, we remembered it upon realizing the Lightning have literally not lost since we went on our sabbatical. They’re 8-0-0 and have outscored their opponents 39-22. In that stretch, Nikita Kucherov leads the league with 19 points. That’s a 194-point pace. Not bad.

3. Dallas Stars, 26-10-8

Dec. 19 rank: 2

Sean: 4

Dom: 3

We’d say we learned that the Stars are capable of hitting the skids — they beat Washington on Wednesday to snap a six-game losing streak — but we were already aware; Dallas had a four-game losing streak in October. Other than that, they’ve lost seven times, all non-consecutively. Not bad. (Also worth noting: during their most recent dip, they were still a pretty effective five-on-five team, with an expected goal share of about 52 percent.)

Also, for no reason in particular, Jason Robertson remains the most efficient American goal scorer on the planet, putting up 1.72 goals per 60. Just in case you were wondering.

4. Minnesota Wild, 26-11-8

Dec. 19 rank: 3

Sean: 3

Dom: 4

The Quinn Hughes Show continues, with the superstar defender scoring 11 points in 10 games — all assists. He’s making everything better in Minnesota, with the Wild rolling with a 55 percent xG since we’ve been gone. It may not be showing up in the standings yet (the Wild went 4-2-3), but Hughes has clearly changed the landscape of the team since his arrival.

5. Carolina Hurricanes, 27-14-3

Dec. 19 rank: 4

Sean: 6

Dom: 5

Andrei Svechnikov was held off the scoresheet in Carolina’s 5-2 win over the Ducks on Thursday night. In the 10 preceding games, though, he’d put up 15 points, fourth-most in the league. That outburst puts him on pace for 65, which would be the second-best mark of his career. Not bad for a guy who had 14 points on Dec. 17 and none in his first eight games.



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They haven't played together a ton, but Svechnikov, Nikolaj Ehlers and Sebastian Aho have been outstanding together. If that continues, it'll free up Seth Jarvis to produce elsewhere, and Carolina will likely be better for it.

6. Montreal Canadiens, 25-13-6

Dec. 19 rank: 13

Sean: 5

Dom: 6

Cale Makar will very likely win the Norris Trophy again, but boy, has the race become more interesting. Moritz Seider has been the complete package, Quinn Hughes has been at his absolute best with his new team and Zach Werenski continues to lead an otherwise unassuming Blue Jackets team.

Add Lane Hutson to that list for what he's done over the last few weeks. Over his past 10 games, Hutson has a league-best 13 points and has been an absolute beast at five-on-five with 58 percent of the expected goals while outscoring opponents 17-6. He's taken his game to another level, and the Canadiens may have as well.

7. Detroit Red Wings, 26-15-4

Dec. 19 rank: 15

Sean: 7

Dom: 7

Remember JVR? Well, he's back in vintage form. James van Riemsdyk has been putting up numbers over the past few weeks with four goals and nine points in eight games. The second pick in 2007 has even been promoted to the top power play, bumping the first pick in 2007 (Patrick Kane, who scored his 500th career goal on Thursday) to the second unit. That both are still contributing to the scoresheet 19 years later is a fun story for a rising team.

8. Pittsburgh Penguins, 21-12-9

Dec. 19 rank: 24

Sean: 9

Dom: 9

For most of December, the Penguins looked incapable of continuing their early-season run without Evgeni Malkin, and that carried over to our hiatus. In their final five Malkin-less games, though, they turned the bus around, going 5-0-0. If you wrote Pittsburgh off, reconsider. Malkin scored on Thursday night in his return, by the way, and Sidney Crosby is rolling, too.

The most interesting part of that run: Anthony Mantha and Justin Brazeau showed that they don't need to be on Malkin's wings to change games, scoring four and three goals, respectively.

9. Edmonton Oilers, 22-16-6

Dec. 19 rank: 8

Sean: 10

Dom: 8

Leon Draisaitl has made tremendous strides as a defensive player over the last couple seasons, and he wasn't on the ice for any of Winnipeg's three goals on Thursday night, but the eight games before that — woof. Edmonton was outscored 12-6 in Draisaitl's five-on-five minutes, and the expected goal numbers weren't much better.

10. Buffalo Sabres, 23-15-4

Dec. 19 rank: 20

Sean: 8

Dom: 11

The Sabres have won 12 of 14 and outscored opponents 51-35 along the way. What hasn't changed? In a month, we'll be talking about Mattias Samuelsson's Norris Trophy candidacy. Just you wait!

11. Vegas Golden Knights, 18-11-12

Dec. 19 rank: 5

Sean: 12

Dom: 10

Something interesting has been happening in Vegas over the last few weeks: Mitch Marner shifting to center as injuries continue to pile up.

Marner played some center in junior with the London Knights, but was never used there once in Toronto. He did play some shifts on defense, but apparently taking the odd face-off was a step too far. Perhaps it was for good reason. Since moving to center, Marner has a 49 percent xG rate while winning just 37 percent of faceoffs. That xG mark is way down from his previous level, a team-high 61 percent.

12. New York Islanders, 24-15-5

Dec. 19 rank: 9

Sean: 13

Dom: 12

With Ilya Sorokin injured for most of the holidays, it was up to "Big Save Dave" to make some big saves. And boy, did he deliver. David Rittich had the fourth-highest GSAx over the last three weeks, which greatly helped the Islanders continue their surge toward the playoffs.

13. Philadelphia Flyers, 22-12-8

Dec. 19 rank: 16

Sean: 11

Dom: 14

We've been willing to take the Flyers seriously for a bit in these parts, and they've made that faith stand up over the last few weeks, going 5-2-1 with legitimately good numbers at five-on-five, bumping up against the 60-percent mark in both actual and expected goals. The power play is still a mess, though, and the injuries are piling up. This feels like a make-or-break stretch.

14. Toronto Maple Leafs, 21-15-7

Dec. 19 rank: 23

Sean: 14

Dom: 13

Big news that serves our respective interests: Auston Matthews is back.

It's fair to wonder if Matthews specifically had beef with departed assistant coach Marc Savard for some reason; he has scored seven goals and 11 points in the six games since Savard's dismissal. During that time, he also has a 64 percent xG and the same swagger he showed during his two 60-goal seasons. If Matthews is back for real, the Leafs might not be cooked after all. And boy, does Team USA look even scarier.

15. Seattle Kraken, 20-14-8

Dec. 19 rank: 32

Sean: 15

Dom: 15



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Before (relatively) coming back to earth with a 31-save loss to Minnesota, Philipp Grubauer had been out of control, putting up a .971 save percentage in his previous four starts, all Kraken wins. Does the team wish Grubauer had found this level sometime before the end of 2025? Undoubtedly. In any case, his roll and an effective power play have helped the Kraken push their way back into playoff position.

16. Washington Capitals, 22-16-6

Dec. 19 rank: 6

Sean: 16

Dom: 16

With a 1.9 Defensive Rating that ties him with Tom Wilson for the top spot among Washington's forwards, Justin Sourdif had already shown some real value to the operation. More recently, he's started cashing in on those top-six offensive minutes, too, with nine points in his last five games. Mixed in there: The first hat trick by a Washington rookie since Alex Ovechkin.

17. San Jose Sharks, 22-18-3

Dec. 19 rank: 22

Sean: 17

Dom: 17

We'll take a break from gassing up Macklin Celebrini, deserved as it might be, to point out how good Igor Chernyshov has been in his first 10 NHL games. Chernyshov has three goals and eight points, and the Sharks are winning his minutes 12-9. Is part of that due to playing with Celebrini? Sure — but we're not going to dock Chernyshov points for succeeding in the minutes he's given.

18. Florida Panthers, 22-18-3

Dec. 19 rank: 7

Sean: 18

Dom: 18

Folks, we have to ask the question: Is former waiver-wire prodigy Gustav Forsling actually an Aleksander Barkov merchant? While the absence of the captain has affected every Panther, it's Forsling's numbers that have dipped the most. His xG is down to 51 percent and he's getting outscored badly for the first time in Florida.

Forsling's slump has been particularly noticeable over the last few weeks, where he's been on the ice for 43 percent of the expected goals while being outscored 9-6. That's not great for the team's No. 1 defenseman.

19. Utah Mammoth, 21-20-3

Dec. 19 rank: 21

Sean: 19

Dom: 20

The big news in Utah is that the two-year-old franchise is getting its first Winter Classic next year in what should be an epic Rocky Mountain showdown against Colorado. What the NHL is likely giving up in ratings, they'll more than make up for in scenic aura. Look at those mountains!

On the ice, the Mammoth are leading the league in xG over the last few weeks at 63 percent. The wins have to be coming soon, right?

20. Los Angeles Kings, 18-14-10

Dec. 19 rank: 12

Sean: 22

Dom: 19

Happy Holidays, Kings fans. Your team gifted you eight aggressively mid hockey games. Jim Hiller remains the coach.

Other than that, the most interesting things to happen to L.A. in the last few weeks were Macklin Celebrini dragging the Sharks past them on Wednesday and Will Ferrell dressing up like a referee on Jan. 1. And even there ... eh.

21. Boston Bruins, 23-19-2

Dec. 19 rank: 17

Sean: 20

Dom: 22

When we were gone, Morgan Geekie went goalless in seven games. Over that same stretch, David Pastrnak had six goals. Balance is being restored in the universe.

22. Nashville Predators, 20-19-4

Dec. 19 rank: 26

Sean: 21

Dom: 21

The Preds won six of their nine hiatus games — four by one goal, two by two goals. They'll take it. Who cares that their 1.92 five-on-five goals per 60 was 31st in the league? Steven Stamkos scoring five times and shooting 29 percent in that stretch helped quite a bit.

23. New Jersey Devils, 22-20-2

Dec. 19 rank: 14

Sean: 24

Dom: 23

In his first eight games back from that hand injury, Jack Hughes produced points (1.38 per 60) at the same rate as Hampus Lindholm. All due respect to the Bruins defenseman/Swedish Olympic snub, but that's a bad, bad sign for the Devils. Worse, in fact, than Jakob Markstrom putting up the worst single-game GSAX (minus-7.1) of any goaltender not to get the hook since at least 2007-08 in that 9-0 loss to the Islanders.

24. Chicago Blackhawks, 18-18-7

Dec. 19 rank: 30

Sean: 23

Dom: 26

It was easy to assume that the Blackhawks would circle the drain without Connor Bedard, and for a spell, it was true, but they managed to win five of nine games and stop the spiral. Stouter team defense was a big reason for that — they've allowed the 11th-fewest expected goals against per 60 since Jan. 1 (2.57) after spending the first three months of the season among the league's very worst.

25. Columbus Blue Jackets, 18-18-7

Dec. 19 rank: 25

Sean: 25

Dom: 24

While other young guns light it up, Adam Fantilli is continuing to quietly struggle at the top of Columbus' line up. He's getting all the opportunities in the world next to Kirill Marchenko and on the top power play, but that hasn't manifested into much production. Fantilli failed to score in his last



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game before our holiday hiatus and has been held off the board in each of the eight games since.

26. New York Rangers, 20-19-6

Dec. 19 rank: 19

Sean: 26

Dom: 25

Just as Adam Fox was heating up for the Rangers amidst an Olympic snub, he's been sidelined long-term once again. Add a devastating injury for Igor Shesterkin and that might be the ballgame for the Rangers. Maybe they can hang on, survive, and storm back after the Olympics with their two franchise pillars in the mix — but what's the point, given the way this season has gone?

27. St. Louis Blues, 17-19-8

Dec. 19 rank: 28

Sean: 27

Dom: 27

With an .858 save percentage and minus-2.2 GSAX during the hiatus, Jordan Binnington, Canadian Olympian, is still bad. However, he is not insubordinate. Do not put in the newspaper that he is insubordinate.

28. Ottawa Senators, 20-18-5

Dec. 19 rank: 18

Sean: 29

Dom: 28

Nothing has changed in Ottawa, actually. Everything is fine.

After releasing that statement on Thursday night, the Sens went out and lost 8-2 to the Avs. In Ullmark's absence, Leevi Meriläinen has been a disaster — he carried an .860 save percentage into the Colorado game, before allowing three goals on 12 shots.

29. Calgary Flames, 18-22-4

Dec. 19 rank: 31

Sean: 28

Dom: 29

After an extremely shaky start, Dustin Wolf is back to looking like a future star. Through seven starts, he put up a .905, a much better mark than the .890 he put up over the first two months of the season.

30. Anaheim Ducks, 21-20-3

Dec. 19 rank: 11

Sean: 30

Dom: 30

When we left, we were still singing Anaheim's praises. The Ducks were 20-12-2, sat just outside the top 10, and looked like a very likely playoff bet. Their Christmas song pick was cheerful and jolly. Since? It's been a horror show.

The Ducks have completely sunk, going 1-8-1 and falling to sixth last in the league by points percentage. Everything about the team is a disaster with Lukas Dostal looking rough and Leo Carlsson seeming invisible. Those are the team's two franchise cornerstones; it's time for them to start leading the charge back. No team was outscored more than the Ducks who were minus-25 over the last 10 games.

31. Vancouver Canucks, 16-22-5

Dec. 19 rank: 29

Sean: 31

Dom: 31

The rebuild writing is on the wall, with Thomas Drance literally putting it there himself daily. The Canucks were in the midst of a nice little run after the Quinn Hughes trade, but it's been business as usual over the last three weeks. They've recently lost seven of eight while being outscored 36-20. Their center depth remains abhorrent.

32. Winnipeg Jets, 15-22-5

Dec. 19 rank: 27

Sean: 32

Dom: 32

Only one team failed to win a single game while we were away and that was despite their starting goaltender, arguably the best in the world, returning. Connor Hellebuyck is rocking an .860 over the last three weeks and that's not going to cut it with the talent in front of him. The Jets have now won just three of their last 23 games. Yikes.

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The Athletic / Ranking the 10 best NHL matchups we haven't seen yet this season

The Maple Leafs' Auston Matthews and Golden Knights' Mitch Marner face off for the first time next Thursday. James Guillory and Bill Streicher /

By Sean McIndoe

We're officially halfway through the NHL regular season schedule, and given each team plays every other team at least twice, that means you might expect to have seen every possible matchup at least once by now. Of course, that's not how the schedule works — things aren't spread out quite so evenly, with some matchups frontloaded into the first few months and others making us wait.

For example, you could probably stump your friends by asking them to name the only two teams that have already played each other four times this season. That would be the Ottawa Senators and the Boston Bruins, two divisional rivals who'd already finished their entire season series by the holiday break. (If you use that in a bar bet and win a free beer, you have to send me a sip in the mail. I don't make the rules.)

For today's post, we're going to look at the other extreme: the teams that have yet to face each other even once so far this season. By my count, there are 70 such pairings still on the table out of a possible 496, the vast majority of which are interconference tilts. Not all of those are exactly marquee matchups; I'm guessing there aren't too many fans out there begging to see the New Jersey Devils finally square off with the Seattle Kraken. But some of the pairings we haven't seen yet are good ones, and today we're going to rank them.

Here are my picks for the 10 best matchups that the schedule has yet to offer us as the season heads into its second half.

10. Edmonton Oilers vs. Los Angeles Kings

Why it should be good: We love playoff rematches, don't we folks? OK, sure, there's such a thing as too much familiarity, especially when you're talking about a rivalry where the same team wins every time. Still, these



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two teams have been linked ever since the Smythe Division days and the Wayne Gretzky trade, and it's kind of weird that they haven't crossed paths yet this season.

(By the way, I was originally going to use this spot for Oilers vs. the Anaheim Ducks, but by the time they finally meet at the end of the month, the Ducks might have lost 16 straight and/or been relegated to the ECHL.)

When we'll finally see it: Tomorrow, with the Kings in Edmonton for a classic Saturday night late game. The Oilers will visit Los Angeles in their first game back from the Olympic break, and then again in April in a meeting that could have serious playoff implications.

9. Buffalo Sabres vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Why it should be good: It's the Jack Eichel revenge matchup. And although we've already seen that a few times over the last few years, this could be the first time where the Sabres are actually good — and at the rate things have been going, maybe even with a better record than Vegas. It's like running into your ex after you finally got around to getting a decent haircut and a gym membership. Hey there, look who can get out of their own defensive zone without crying!

When we'll finally see it: The Sabres will host the Knights on March 3 and visit them on March 17. I'm sure the St. Patrick's Day crown in Las Vegas will be super chill.

8. New Jersey Devils vs. New York Rangers

Why it should be good: It's a classic Patrick Division rivalry between two teams with plenty of history. And this year, the fact both teams are spiraling and should be desperate for every second-half win they can get adds a sense of urgency. OK, it's not exactly going to be the 1994 conference final all over again, but bad teams can make for fun games when there are still stakes in play.

When we'll finally see it: Not until March, when the teams will face off on the 7th, again on the 18th and then one more time on the 31st.

7. Philadelphia Flyers vs. Washington Capitals

Why it should be good: It's another classic Patrick matchup, this one involving two teams that are in the thick of the playoff mix. The Flyers have shocked everyone by hanging around the Metro race and even making a push for home ice. The Capitals have been up and down, and will need to keep banking points to hold onto their spot. A first-round preview? It's unlikely, but far from impossible.

When we'll finally see it: They'll face off on Feb. 3 in Philadelphia, the first of two February meetings that will be followed by two more in March.

6. Dallas Stars vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Why it should be good: They're two of the most star-studded teams in the West, and there should still be plenty of lingering bad blood from three playoff meetings since 2020. And if you're getting pumped for the Olympics, could we interest you in 13 players between the two teams who'll be heading to Milan?

When we'll finally see it: At the end of the month, when they meet in Vegas on Jan. 29. The Stars will then host the Knights twice in March. And then ... maybe again in late May?

5. Minnesota Wild vs. Tampa Bay Lightning

Why it should be good: If you're looking for a Stanley Cup final preview, this could be the one. The Lightning are arguably the best team in the East, while the Wild have leveled up since acquiring Quinn Hughes.

(Speaking of Hughes, and in case you're wondering: The Wild had already made their trip to Vancouver before the trade and the only game left between the two teams is in Minnesota on April 2. And as far as his

brothers go, the Wild are also done visiting New Jersey, but do host them on Monday.)

When we'll finally see it: The Lightning and Wild won't meet until March 3 in Minnesota, the first of two meetings that month.

4. Montreal Canadiens vs. New York Islanders

Why it should be good: Both teams are good, maybe even surprisingly so. There's the Patrick Roy factor, which is always fun. It will be a meeting between the two presumptive favorites for this year's Calder Trophy, Matthew Schaefer and Ivan Demidov. And if all of that isn't enough, don't forget Noah Dobson, facing his former team for the first time since the offseason trade that sent him to Montreal for two first-round picks.

When we'll finally see it: Not until Feb. 26, which is the first game back after the Olympic break for both teams. They also play in March and then again in April.

3. Detroit Red Wings vs. Colorado Avalanche

Why it should be good: There was a time when it was the greatest rivalry in the game for the better part of a decade. That was a while ago, and plenty has changed since — the physical side of the game has evolved and the two teams are now in different conferences. It's hard to remember the last time a game between these teams meant all that much beyond nostalgia for us olds.

But! This year, the Avalanche are one of the league's few must-watch teams, steamrolling everyone and setting a pace that could result in one of the greatest regular seasons we've ever seen. And while the Red Wings aren't in that tier, they've been good enough to look like a playoff team for the first time since 2016, and were even briefly in first place in the East last week.

I won't go overboard with any Stanley Cup Final preview talk (although, could you imagine?). But it's not completely out of the question that when these two teams finally cross paths, they could be the top seeds in their respective conference.

When we'll finally see it: In three weeks, when the Wings and Avs clash in an old-school home-and-home on Jan. 31 and Feb. 2.

2. Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Why it should be good: One of the players on the Golden Knights used to play for the Maple Leafs. You may have heard about it.

Oh, also, both teams are supposed to be Cup contenders but are struggling through disappointing seasons, so every point matters. But yeah, mostly the Mitch Marner thing.

When we'll finally see it: Next Thursday, when the Golden Knights host the Leafs. Then comes the big one: Marner heads to Toronto for the first time on Jan. 23. The fan response should be interesting, to say the least.

1. Chicago Blackhawks vs. San Jose Sharks

Why it should be good: These two teams have been following similar trajectories in recent years, going from aging contenders to tear-it-down rebuilds. Heading into this season, neither was expected to be any good. But they've both had better first halves than expected, and both were even hovering around the fringe of the playoff race.

But while there's lots to like at the team level, that's not what this is about. No, we're talking about Macklin Celebrini vs. Connor Bedard, a battle of the league's two brightest young stars. It won't be their first head-to-head meeting, but it will be the first since they both went supernova. Imagine trying to tell somebody that before the season started.

When we'll finally see it: On Feb. 2 in Chicago, which is just days before Celebrini is headed to the Olympics and Bedard probably should be. That



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will be it until a pair of games in April, which could have playoff implications for one or both teams.

Honorable mentions: The Boston Bruins and Pittsburgh Penguins have an underrated historical rivalry and meet for the first time on Sunday. The Rangers and Winnipeg Jets could chat about the Presidents' Trophy curse when they meet on March 12. Leafs/Canucks is usually fun, and we get that for the first time tomorrow. Sabres/Lightning on Feb. 3 could be a first-round preview. And finally, the Avalanche and Penguins don't play until after the trade deadline, which has some fun Sidney Crosby implications.

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Sportsnet.ca / Eight thoughts on the NHL at mid-season

Justin Bourne

A few thoughts around the NHL at the mid-way point of the 2025-26 season...

1. Goal differential outlier to the extreme

On this date last year, the NHL's goal differential leader was the Winnipeg Jets at plus-46. That's 30 goals below where the Avs sit this season, holding a goal differential of plus-76. They've failed to pick up points in just four of 43 games this season, and the next-best goal differential team (Tampa Bay, plus-34) could be doing twice as good and would still be eight goals back.

(There is some real weirdness to this, as two years ago the plus-minus leader on Jan. 9 was the Vancouver Canucks at plus-53. Today, just one and two years later, the Jets and Canucks are dead-last and second-last in the NHL standings. I do not see the Avs heading for the same fate, but who knows?)

So yeah, the Avs have even lost a couple games recently, and they're still on pace to be the best goal differential team we've seen since the 1970s. (In 1977, the Montreal Canadiens finished plus-216, which if I may, "lol".)

2. Parity gone bonkers

I recognize this makes no sense, but according to the NHL standings, only four teams are below .500 and none of them are in the Eastern Conference. Of course, they list "points percentage, so a team like Columbus that's "won" 18 of 43 games are still listed as .500, but still.

Through half a season, 15 teams in the East are either in playoffs or within five points of the final wild card spot. You can say the same for 13 teams in the West. Almost nobody's season is "over," which is just the way Gary Bettman likes things, as fanbases get to think they have a chance for as long as possible and will hopefully stay invested deeper into the year when the NFL is gone and the NHL gets more eyeballs, generally.

3. If every team is average, any of them can get red hot

When everyone is just OK, or "mid" (since our podcast calls it the MidHL), there's room for randomness. If you've spent much time in a casino, you'll know that in roulette the ball can land on black five or even 10 straight spins. That's just how randomness works.

In the NHL, you basically need to get healthy and get some saves at the same time, which should come up as a W for you in a mid-vs.-mid matchup. As a result, the Buffalo Sabres won 10 straight games. The

Seattle Kraken just won five straight. The Pittsburgh Penguins have won six.

Are they all Cup contenders? Probably not. But they're at least OK and the spins came up their way for a good run of games. I don't read a ton more into it than that.

4. We're in the scheduled portion of the season where non-all-stars can get red-hot too

In the NHL there are general swings in terms of effort and energy built into the calendar. When the season opens, you get a crazy combination of effort and errors. (Playoffs bring effort and fewer errors.) In that early going you get big effort as players jockey for lineup positioning, and teams jockey for early standings success. Everyone is healthy, in shape, and so guys are flying around out there. But because there are also players on new teams with new linemates, mistakes are made. Many goals get scored.

This flawed play with hustle means there's some randomness early, but eventually team play tightens up and the best players are the ones who're still able to break through.

There are surges of effort throughout the season as checkpoints come up -- trade deadline, end of season, moments like that. But as you get to where we are now, teams are fairly broken. There've been injuries, and you can't keep up the pace of the first week all season long. Schedules have worn guys down, energy is low, and so with thin and tired rosters, this is the time to get your young prospects into the league, or to give more opportunity to some players you'd like to see thrive.

The other night Anthony Duclair got a hat trick, his fifth, sixth and seventh goals of the season. The game is a little slower right now, and so your guys just below the cusp of elite are more liable to have some good games if they're feeling healthy.

5. League has another wave of "face of the league"-type players

This overtime play by Celebrini is one of my favourites, as he makes the play to get the rush, sorts out the complication of the officials' skates, and just out-thinks the goalie.

He never looks at the net, always pass, and if you know it's Celebrini you know he's not going to telegraph is pass...right? As the goalie, that's a sure-fire fake-pass to shot, and maybe a no look shot.

Celebrini even starts to leg-kick like he's beginning to shoot, enough that Darcy Kuemper has to honour a shot for a tenth of a second and freezes his skate, before Celebrini actually passes and never once looks at the net.

Nasty.

6. Hockey players will always be people, which will always provide drama

The couple years I spent working in the Toronto Maple Leafs organization was eye-opening about one thing in particular: so many decisions that confound the public are made for very human reasons.

The Ottawa Senators put out a statement denying allegations about what's going on with their team behind the scenes (and maybe the situation with Linus Ullmark not dressing). There's something happening there, we just don't know exactly what.

We also don't know exactly why Team USA doesn't want to take Jason Robertson, or why Canada doesn't take Mark Scheifele. Certainly we think they're hockey-based reasons, but we don't really know.

With the Marlies I was in enough meetings involving both the Leafs and Marlies staff to know how often this personal stuff plays into decision-making. You just can't tease the things apart, try as you might, and that's not criticism, it's life. As outsiders, we can do the best we can to guess at



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why certain decisions are made, but there's often more to it than we know.

7. Olympics loom

I would say there's just about as much attention on injuries as there is results these days. For Canada, it feels like most people want to get Sam Bennett and Matthew Schaefer on the roster. That said, I don't think anyone is rooting for injuries to the country's best players, so there's this weird sort of watchfulness going on.

OK, Bo Horvat is hurt, but how bad? OK, Tom Wilson is out, when's his return date? It honestly feels like some of these players will be playing to stay healthy as much as have success over the next few weeks.

But further to this is that everyone's eyes are on the Milan arena and if it will be a functional rink in time. My gut feeling is the ice and seating and everything will be fine and functional, but the "amenities" and "infrastructure" will be a disaster.

For example, there are pictures of the dressing room for the men where it looks like the early days of Mullett Arena, with just about a month to go before the Olympic tournament. For the women, their first games are in less than a month. Not great, Bob.

8. Central Division may be the best case to go back to 1-vs-8 in the playoffs we've ever seen

I think it's all well and good that the NHL wants to do the silly thing with the standings where they look tighter than they are (catching anyone is hard because of three-point games). I can tolerate that because typically the good teams still get in the playoffs and the bad ones don't.

But I truly can't stand forcing divisional play in the post-season because it's really, really hard to build one of the elite teams in the NHL, and if you're one of the top-three in the regular season, there's no way you should have to face the other elite teams in Round 1.

In fact, the owners who employ Bettman shouldn't like this either. Why shouldn't they get the easier path that they've earned with a successful 82-game regular season performance? Don't we want to place more value on those games? If you've spent the money to make your team good, don't you deserve a better chance at reaching the second round?

Right now the top three teams in the league in points and points-percentage are the Avalanche, Stars and Wild, who are all in the Central. They're first, third, and fourth in goal differential. They're unequivocally all top-five teams in the league, but I think legit top-three. And one of them will get eliminated at the same time as some one-legged Western team that scabbles into the playoffs with 90 points and goes out in four games.

Come on, now.

If the NHL used a 1-vs-8 playoff formula, these three Central teams would line up against Seattle, San Jose and Los Angeles if the playoffs were today (ordered by total points). And I'd like their odds.

doing the same thing but ordering by points percentage, one of the Central Three would have to face Edmonton, which is in sixth. What's great about that is it creates real incentive to climb to second in the division, and not just be happy with third.

Using the NHL's current playoff formula, whether you finish second or third in the division you'll play the same opponent, so there's no regular season drama. Let's go back to 1 vs. 8. It's time.

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Sportsnet.ca / Jack Adams Award WATCH: First-place Avs' Bednar in line to buck trend

Ryan Dixon

This year's race for the Jack Adams Award is one that really brings an old trope around the honour into focus: are we sometimes too quick to reward a coach whose team outstripped expectations rather than the one who oversaw the highest level of excellence?

Of the 51 occasions the NHL has handed out the Jack Adams beginning in 1974, only 10 times did it land in the hands of the bench boss who guided a team to first overall in the standings.

Another thing that happens very infrequently is repeat winners. The only two coaches to win the Adams twice this century are Barry Trotz and John Tortorella. In all, only seven coaches have won the award twice, with the late Pat Burns being the lone three-time winner.

The way things look at the halfway point this year, though, there's a very good chance coach of the year goes either to the guy whose team wins the Presidents' Trophy or to a suit who does have one win under his belt already.

With that in mind, let's examine the candidates.

Three years ago, Jim Montgomery won the Jack Adams on the strength of the Boston Bruins setting an NHL record with 135 points.

Seems reasonable.

So how could we not hand this award to Bednar if his Avs break the Bruins' mark? After all, Colorado is currently on pace to tie.

Even if the Avalanche fall a few points shy, it sure seems like a 125-point showing should land a few guys on the team some hardware, including the coach.

If Bednar wins a second Cup and gets a first coach-of-the-year nod in the next six months, he instantly becomes one of the defining bench bosses of this century.

Jon Cooper, Tampa Bay Lightning

Remember how we said it's hard to imagine Bednar not winning the Adams if his team sets a new points record? Well, seven years ago, Cooper's Lightning tied the all-time wins record with 62 (Boston broke it four years later with 65) and he still finished as the runner-up to Barry Trotz of the New York Islanders. Believe it or not, that's the highest Cooper has ever finished in voting.

Let's be real: we're in lifetime achievement territory here for a guy who's the longest-tenured coach in the NHL and just spent his 1,000th career game behind the bench. Being Canada's coach at the 4 Nations Face-Off and for the 2026 Olympics has lifted Cooper's profile again just as Tampa has dipped in terms of being a team that makes deep playoff runs.

'Coop' is still getting the most out of a Bolts club that could easily finish as the top seed in the East. Nobody would have an issue with him getting his first Adams.

The Canadiens made the playoffs last season, but there was certainly no guarantee the young club would make it back this spring. While basically nobody is safe in the East in terms of getting in — and certainly not a club that's still cutting its teeth — Montreal is well-positioned to make a post-season return, especially thanks to its current 9-2-2 run through a tough stretch of schedule.

Canadiens players sound reverential when they speak about St. Louis, which has basically been the case since he took over a team at the bottom of a rebuild nearly four years ago. The question with St. Louis



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was always whether he could be a tactician behind the bench and, more and more, he's putting those queries to bed.

We might as well finish off our trio of Atlantic Division candidates right here.

As everyone knows, the Wings have not seen the post-season since 2016. McLellan was hired just over a year ago to try to change that fact — and he's got Detroit in a good spot with half a season to go.

McLellan — an assistant coach on the Wings staff when they won the 2008 Cup — has pushed the right buttons in the Motor City, overseeing a Red Wings squad that's seventh in goals against since Dec. 1 and ninth in goals for during that span.

My goodness, somehow it was only two seasons ago that Tocchet won the Adams behind the Vancouver Canucks bench. That seems like something that happened when the NHL still had games end in ties.

This felt like a good fit from the beginning when Tocchet was hired last spring, though few people could have envisioned the Flyers having the fifth-best points percentage in the Eastern Conference past the halfway point.

Why Tocchet over somebody like Dan Muse, who coaches another Pennsylvania-based squad (Pittsburgh) that's overachieving? In a word, consistency.

The Flyers have lost back-to-back games in regulation time just once this year. Combine that steadiness with Tocchet's ability to get the best out of newcomer Trevor Zegras and he might win two Adams in three seasons.

Patrick Roy, New York Islanders

Roy won the Jack Adams as a rookie NHL coach in Colorado during Nathan MacKinnon's debut season of 2013-14. Now, in Matthew Schaefer's freshman campaign with the Isles and Roy's second full year with the club, New York could make a surprise return to the playoffs one season after being a deadline seller.

As hockey folks sometimes like to say, "show me a good goalie and I'll show you a good coach." Hey, that phrase was probably uttered more than a few times in French during Roy's playing days with the Canadiens. Certainly the Isles have benefited from fantastic play both from No. 1 guy Ilya Sorokin and backup David Rittich, but few clubs fit the bill of a surprise squad without superb goaltending.

If Roy can push this Islanders squad to a top-three finish in the Metro, he's going to get Adams consideration no matter how much nerds point to New York's underwhelming analytics.

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators' season going from very bad to even worse

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — The game of hockey should just be called "goalie."

Most nights, the team that ices the best goalie in the NHL is the one that wins.

Recently, the Ottawa Senators and netminders go as well together as the Toronto Maple Leafs and Game 7s.

Pure, unabashed disappointment.

The crisis in the crease was front and centre on Thursday — one of the craziest days ever in Sensland, a title for which there is a lot of competition.

Reacting to unsavoury social media rumours surrounding Linus Ullmark's absence from the team, the team released an official statement condemning internet "trolls" and "sick" people spreading what it called "completely fabricated and false stories."

A statement you rarely see in the NHL for unfounded rumours.

And that was just the appetizer.

The main course was the Senators enduring an 8-2 drubbing on Thursday to the best team in the NHL, the Colorado Avalanche.

Every Colorado shot looked destined to hit twine, no matter its angle of launch.

The game was a microcosm of the Senators' season, earning them the league-worst save percentage and a burgeoning disaster in the standings.

When was the last time you saw a goaltender get pulled, and later return to the game because their replacement was so bad?

We never had.

It was Leevi Merilainen, then pulled for Mads Sogaard, then later replaced by Merilainen.

It was so bad that, unbelievably, it led to the Senators signing James Reimer to an AHL professional tryout, a deal that came through midway into the 8-2 debacle in Denver, a sight to be seen. Reimer is a 37-year-old goalie with 525 career games under his belt who signed a PTO with the Leafs, of all teams, in the fall before being released and before Ottawa snagged him. He played with Buffalo last season.

The Senators have been freefalling down the standings, high on the deserve-to-win-o-meter most nights but low, very low, on the save-o-meter every night.

In the midst of the craziness, Ullmark's timeline for return is as unclear as ever. On Thursday in Denver, the Senators moved him off their roster to make room for the return of Lars Eller, who suffered a broken foot last month. However, when the former Vezina Trophy winner was playing, before his leave of absence on Dec. 28, he didn't look the part. To that point, he had been the worst goaltender in the league in terms of goals saved above expected.

Because Ullmark is signed for \$8 million for each of the three seasons after this one, he's virtually untradeable. A potential buyout would be onerous for a cash-strapped Senators team.

Ullmark is not the first goalie to lose his Midas glove touch in Ottawa.

Ottawa has become the city where netminders' save percentages nosedive into the sub-.900 range. There hasn't been one goaltender in Ottawa in the last decade who hasn't been caught in the vortex.

How do we explain it?

First it was Matt Murray.

His glove malfunctioned.

Then Cam Talbot.

The Talbot era is remembered by who he was traded for, with the Senators losing Filip Gustavsson in the process of acquiring Talbot in a short-term move.

Finally, Joonas Korpisalo.

It was "Four Goals Allowed" Korpisalo.



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All the while, Joey Daccord and Gustavsson have gone on to become elite NHL goaltenders — traded away or let go despite immense promise. Gustavsson will play for Team Sweden at the Olympics. Ullmark will not.

There is still no explanation for why goaltenders barely survive in Ottawa but thrive elsewhere. All we know is that it's a trend, not a blip.

Maybe Ullmark returns to form whenever he's ready to come back, but that must seem like fool's gold if you're general manager Steve Staios.

Perhaps the newly signed Reimer can provide saves. Reimer's .897 save percentage last season would do wonders for Ottawa if he could replicate that in Senators red and black. If so, it would feel like the Senators had signed prime Dominik Hasek.

Nevertheless, the moniker of "Steady Steve" Staios will be put to the test. Sure, Reimer could work, but Laurent Brossoit, with a better track record and pedigree, was just traded to San Jose. Ottawa seems to have chosen the lower-cost option.

Arguably, the Sens' conundrum began with Staios' decision in the off-season not to bring in a veteran goaltender to back up Ullmark, who had never played more than 49 games in a season in his injury-prone career. Instead, the team was relying on Merilainen, who had just 14 games of NHL experience.

Staios wears a lot of this. As of today, he quite simply chose the wrong netminder to believe in due to his underperformance on the ice this season. It could be an organizational disaster of a decision if Ullmark doesn't return to elite status, although it is still possible Ullmark returns to glory. No Vezina winner forgets how to be a good goaltender overnight, but goalies are prone to dramatic fall-offs in play.

The goaltending mess surely looks like it will impede Ottawa's progress toward being a contender in the window with Brady Tkachuk under contract until 2028.

Senators fans are used to saying, "What could have been?" when it comes to their past goalies; those words are now starting to blend into their sentiments about the Tkachuk era.

Despite all the pressure on management, the Senators are just five points out of a playoff spot, but are second-last in the conference with so many teams they must surpass.

This is looking like it might be a lost season for the Senators. And, oh yeah, they don't have their first-round draft pick for this spring.

"We'll contend when we're ready to contend," said Staios in the days before Thursday's news, not much consolation to fans who imagined their team making runs this year and for years to come.

The 8-2 loss needs to be the turning point of the 2025-26 Senators. With even league-average goaltending, they would have allowed 25 fewer goals this season. They'd be a playoff team even with just a modicum of saves.

And, sure, we can point to how Tkachuk has underperformed, how the Senators' depth defencemen have underwhelmed and to the fact that they've had a porous penalty kill. All valid points. But they would be moot if the Senators just got... well, you know what they need.

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Sportsnet.ca / Friday Four: Seider doing it all to lead Red Wings' playoff chase

Michael Amato

The Friday Four is a collection of thoughts and information on some intriguing player storylines from around the NHL. On deck this week is:

Death, taxes and the Detroit Red Wings making the playoffs.

Those were the three guarantees in life for a long time. The Wings made the playoffs from 1990-2016, a 25-season stretch where only a lockout could stop them. That must seem like a lifetime ago for Wings fans, though, as Detroit has now missed spring hockey for nine consecutive campaigns. A lengthy rebuild under the watch of Steve Yzerman, dubbed the "Yzerplan," has taken far longer than anyone in the organization hoped. That said, patience may finally be paying off. Detroit is sitting second in the Atlantic, looking poised to finally end its lengthy playoff drought, and Moritz Seider, the backbone of their blue line, is the biggest reason the Wings appear to have turned a corner.

Seider has been a standout defenceman for some time now, but this year he has taken his game to a different level and is starting to get mentioned in the same conversation with the league's elite rearguards. The 24-year-old's unique blend of size, skill, physicality and the ability to play in every situation makes him somewhat of a unicorn when it comes to No. 1 defenders.

Detroit leans on Seider heavily, to the tune of more than 25 minutes a night. That's the sixth-highest ice time per game in the league and nearly three more minutes than Detroit's next-highest defender. Those aren't easy minutes either. Seider is playing more than a minute and a half a game shorthanded and starting his shifts in the defensive zone more than 50 per cent of the time, often playing against the opponent's best competition.

The pair of Seider and Simon Edvinsson has become one of the best shutdown duos in the game, thanks to their dominance in the defensive zone. Heading into Thursday night, and despite starting in the offensive zone together only 32 per cent of the time, the Wings had still generated 576 scoring chances at five-on-five with Seider and Edvinsson on the ice compared to just 482 against. That's a near plus-100 in more than 563 minutes together. Detroit is also plus-72 in shots with Seider and Edvinsson on the ice and is plus-10 in goals. The Wings have a goals-for percentage of 60 when they are on the ice together. Seider and Edvinsson have delivered all this while being on the ice for the fifth most (208) defensive zone draws this season.

Even though Seider is relied on for major defensive responsibilities, he's still putting up career offensive numbers. Seider hasn't scored more than 50 points since he was a rookie, but he's on pace for more than 55 this season thanks to quarterbacking the sixth-ranked Red Wings power play. He's also already notched seven goals, so Seider should easily shatter his previous career best of nine.

Seider is not afraid to put his body on the line to keep the puck out of the net as well. He frequently hovers around 200 hits and 200 blocks a year, and he's trending similarly again this season with 74 and 103, respectively. Seider's 103 blocks put him fifth in the NHL, and the entire Wings blue line has committed to the craft. Ben Chiarot and Edvinsson also rank in the top-25 league-wide in blocks, as Detroit makes it very difficult to get both pucks and bodies to the net. Plus, even though he plays a very physical style, Seider hasn't missed a game yet in his career.

Of course, Seider isn't the only part of the Yzerplan. It's been a slow build that's included drafting Lucas Raymond, Edvinsson, Sebastian Cossa, Marco Kasper, Nate Danielson and Axel Sandin-Pellika in the past six years, who all figure to be a big part of the Wings' core for years to come. Dylan Larkin and Alex DeBrincat having great seasons isn't hurting, either. However, Seider is the one driving the bus, and you could probably count on one hand the number of defenders in the league today you'd rather build a defence around over him.



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It's interesting that Yzerman, a huge point producer during his career, has moulded this team around a hard-nosed blueliner and a top defensive pair that appears to be carrying this team back to the post-season. If Detroit gets in this season with Seider leading the charge, there's a good chance it's the start of another long run of playoff hockey that includes the Red Wings.

The Pittsburgh Penguins had one of the roughest weekends in recent memory last month. To kick things off, they blew a 5-1 third-period lead to the San Jose Sharks and eventually lost in overtime. Then history repeated itself the following day, when the Pens squandered a 3-0 advantage in the third frame to the Utah Mammoth. Once the game went into overtime, it was as good as over when Dylan Guenther stepped onto the ice. Guenther buried the game-winner off the rush with his patented quick release, something he's becoming known for in his brief career.

That goal from Guenther was his fifth game-winner this season, which equates to nearly 25 per cent of his total goals (21) on the year. If you think that's some sort of anomaly, it isn't. The 22-year-old also had nine game-winning goals last season and is now up to 19 for his career. When you consider that Guenther has 72 total goals since he entered the NHL, then the 19 game winners he's scored account for 26 per cent of his entire scoring output. That's an impressive percentage.

Now, game-winning goals can be deceiving sometimes. Let's say you scored the third goal in a game that was once 5-0, and the opposition ends up scoring a pair to make the final 5-2, you'd ultimately get credit for a game-winner. Guenther, though, often comes through in big moments. That goal against the Penguins was his third overtime winner in 2025-26, tied for the most in the league. He had three overtime winners last season, too.

The Mammoth really need Guenther's contributions now with Logan Cooley sidelined for the foreseeable future with an injury. Cooley provides Utah with a lot of offence, and they'll be hoping Guenther can pick up the slack. There were playoff expectations for the Mammoth this season, and currently, they are on the outside looking in when it comes to the playoff picture, but if they don't get in, it won't be from lack of trying by Guenther.

When the Capitals traded for Justin Sourdif this summer, it didn't exactly send shockwaves around the league. Washington swung a deal for the former third-round selection back in June, giving up a pair of draft picks in return to the Florida Panthers. Sourdif had only played four NHL games up to that point and tallied one goal, so expectations weren't very high.

The early returns have been excellent so far, though, as Sourdif has found a home in the top six and given the Caps some major secondary scoring. Sourdif is only on pace for 15 goals this season, but he's starting show signs of becoming an impact player for Washington. The 23-year-old is coming off a five-point game on Monday, which included a hat trick. That gives him nine points in five games, and it's brought much more balance to the Capitals forward group.

It's not easy playing a top-six role, as you have to handle big minutes that often come against the opposition's best competition. Sourdif certainly doesn't look out of place with these new responsibilities, averaging close to 18 minutes a night this month and playing as much as 20:51 in a game against Chicago last week. The extra ice time hasn't come at the expense of his responsibilities in his own zone, either. Sourdif is a plus-13 on the year, which ranks him third among all Caps forwards.

If you plan to win a division title and go on a deep playoff run, you're going to need some unsung heroes to chip in along the way. Sourdif would certainly qualify as that. Washington will now be a much more difficult and balanced team to match up against if Sourdif continues to play this way. When healthy, it will give them three lines that can score and allow them to spread their minutes around more evenly. The Sourdif addition appears to be one of the savviest moves of the off-season and could help pay big dividends for the Capitals this spring.

Admitting you need to take a step back is a tough thing to do when you've been competing for a Stanley Cup for so long, but that's where the Boston Bruins found themselves last season. A perennial playoff team, the Bruins chose to re-tool at last year's deadline and reset for 2025-26.

That plan included moving Brandon Carlo for a first-round pick and Fraser Minten. The first-round pick could end up being very good depending on where the Toronto Maple Leafs finish this season, but Minten was key to the deal. Adding Minten also allowed them to flip longtime centre Charlie Coyle for more assets, knowing the newly acquired prospect was going to fill that role. And so far, he's done an excellent job.

Minten has been getting top six minutes at times and has tallied eight goals and 17 points, good enough for a tie for seventh in team scoring. What's more impressive? Minten is tied for the team lead in plus/minus at plus-9. It's rare for someone as young as Minten to be so defensively responsible, and the Bruins look like they've found a great two-way centre for years to come. He's no Patrice Bergeron, obviously, but the fact that a 21-year-old is so trusted in his own end is a great sign for Boston.

That's not to say the Bruins brilliantly reset the course of the franchise with the moves they made last year, though it could be a good blueprint for a number of Eastern Conference teams this season. In addition to Minten, they added James Hagens in the draft last summer and have two more firsts in 2026, while remaining in the playoff mix. With the standings so bunched up, you have to wonder if another team that doesn't believe it's a true contender looks at what the Bruins did and decides to sell off a few assets as well and regroup for next season. Minten definitely feels like he's not going to make the Bruins regret their decision.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks, Red Wings moving in opposite directions

Iain MacIntyre

DETROIT – What was old in Detroit is new again.

Beautiful Art Deco towers, once abandoned, are occupied with businesses and residents. The downtown has been refurbished and re-inhabited, and there is a distinct energy and excitement about the renewal. A long-dormant city has come back to life.

It's a perfect place for 37-year-old Patrick Kane to revitalize and extend his career, and help lead the Detroit Red Wings back towards the National Hockey League playoffs after one of the game's oldest and proudest franchises missed the Stanley Cup tournament the last nine years amid a dubious, seemingly endless rebuild.

Kane's pair of goals on Thursday against the Vancouver Canucks, capped by an empty-netter in Detroit's 5-1 win, made him just the fifth American to score 500 goals in the NHL. It also made the Red Wings 13-4-3 since Nov. 28.

On a rebuild of their own that they hope will take far less than nine years, the Canucks are moving the other way in the NHL standings.

After a season-high, four-game winning streak just before Christmas gave the team hope for saving its season, the Canucks have lost seven of eight games since then, including five in a row.

There was an inescapable reality on display here Thursday night. There is only so much the Canucks can do while missing three NHL centres



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due to injury and filling the bottom third of their lineup with first- and second-year prospects.

Unless their goalie steals them a game, the Canucks need to play something close to error-free hockey. Or at least, they can't continue to make big mistakes like they made against the Red Wings.

Vancouver played well in the first period and wasn't rewarded. And then the Canucks were careless defensively in the second and got crushed.

"I thought we had some good moments, especially in the first," Vancouver defenceman Tyler Myers told reporters. "But our details just aren't good enough. We're giving, odd-man after odd-man rush... and it seems to be, you know, consistent in the last stretch here. It's not because we're not talking about it or going over it or working on it. It comes down to the guys here in the room. We've got to be much better with our details because it just accumulates, it just trickles down the line with our team game.

"We have to be much better. You know, if we didn't have the two goalies that we have, the score would be way worse."

Goalie Kevin Lankinen stopped several two-on-ones, but looked at fault on Kane's power-play goal that made it 1-0 with 29 seconds remaining in the first period, deep in his net and too far off his near post as the future Hall-of-Famer exploited that opening.

The Canucks were two players short after David Kampf, having failed on what should have been a clearance, took a tripping penalty 19 seconds after Zeev Buium's high stick at 17:47.

"You get to five-on-three and give up a goal, and I think that kind of took our momentum (away) a little to finish the period there," winger Brock Boeser said. "But I think then that's part of kind of maturing. Coming into the second period, we have to kind of learn to regroup and bring that same tenacity as how we started the game."

The Canucks didn't.

They managed only four shots in the middle period, gave up a handful of outnumbered rushes and simply botched five-on-five coverage on Detroit goals by Axel Sandin-Pellikka at 5:09 and J.T. Compher at 10:10.

After Elias Pettersson turned over the puck during what had been a strong shift for the Canucks, the Red Wings countered three-on-two. Vancouver survived the rush. But on his backcheck, Canuck left winger Evander Kane strayed needlessly to the far side of the ice, leaving Sandin-Pellikka open as the trailer to beat Lankinen top corner.

On Compher's goal, which came three minutes after Jake DeBrusk scored from Kiefer Sherwood's pass on a Vancouver power play, defenceman Myers shadowed his check to the blueline, where the Canucks again doubled up on the wrong Red Wing, leading to another series of mistakes and open space in front of Lankinen that Detroit exposed.

The Canucks have yielded 40 goals in the last nine games, and look at times tentative and second-guessing where they should be while defending.

"Yeah, of course, the puck goes in your net a lot, you don't play the same way," DeBrusk concurred. "It's just human nature; you don't want to get scored on. Yeah, I think that has something to do with some of our breakouts and plays and things we've been getting caught (on). Sometimes it makes you play on your heels. And, you know, when you play on your heels in this league, bad things happen."

"There's going to be breakdowns at different times of the game," Myers said. "It's the same conversation all the time: Where does it start? Does it start with your breakouts, with your forecheck? If we spend more time doing the right things, getting pucks behind guys, getting on our forecheck more, it means we're defending less. It means those breakdowns happen less. And then at the same time, you know, you can

look at them and figure out... a way to be better and more consistent with your D-zone. Everything's connected. You've just got to come in and try and figure it out every day and make little tweaks here and there. Just get better."

The Canucks haven't scored more than three times in a game since Dec. 20, and everything that happened after they fell behind 3-1 felt inconsequential – except of course for Kane scoring into an open net after Vancouver coach Adam Foote pulled Lankinen with 5:08 remaining in the two-goal game and Buium, one of two 20-year-old rookies on the Vancouver blue line, fanned on his pass after having time and space to make one.

The Red Wings streamed off their bench to mob Kane, looking like a team on its way to something.

"I was super young and we always watched his highlights," Boeser, who is also American, said of Kane. "It's obviously not fun to be out there when he scores his 500th, but it's a supercool accomplishment. I love seeing how well he's doing at his age. It just shows you that he's probably one of the best, if not the best, American player to ever play the game."

Pointless through the first third of their season-long six-game road trip, the Canucks will rest Friday before visiting the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday, beginning a stretch of three games in four nights.

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Sportsnet.ca / Why the Maple Leafs rely on the spirit of Scott Laughton

Luke Fox

A few days before his emotional and triumphant return to Philadelphia, Scott Laughton is sitting in the Toronto Maple Leafs dressing room and rhyming off names.

All those Flyers icons he tracked down for advice and reached out for connection over the course of his 13 years and 661 games in the City of Brotherly Love.

"Bobby Clark. Bill Barber. Bernie Parent, before he passed. Paul Holmgren, who drafted me," Laughton says, in conversation with Sportsnet.ca. "The best part of the game is the alumni, the guys who came before you.... You seek them out.

"You just ask them about their experiences and how they won. They're legends in the Flyers community. You ask them how they went about things in their career. And so, there's certain conversations that have definitely stuck throughout my career, with some of those guys. And I'll hold on to it."

Laughton, too, will grip this night, one he's had circled since his difficult trade away from his "second home" in Pennsylvania back to his first home in Ontario.

Beyond the customary hallmarks of a return date — leading the morning stretch; saluting the adoring locals during an emotional video tribute; chucking some money from the final year of his Flyers-signed contract on the board — Laughton's fingerprints were all over Thursday's dramatic 2-1 overtime win, which runs the Maple Leafs' point streak to eight.

Until the low-event contest reached its 55th minute, one of Laughton's favourite ex-teammates, Travis Konecny, was poised to be the lone scorer in a 1-0 decision for Philadelphia.



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It was then that Laughton — an integral cog in the NHL's hottest penalty kill — broke in 4-on-5, toe-dragged, and snapped Dan Vladar's shutout bid with a high laser.

Laughton's timely shorthanded strike pushed the game into a wild fourth period, where rookie Easton Cowan (a frequent target of Laughton's friendly chirps) capped off the comeback on a pretty rush feed from John Tavares.

"We found a way," Laughton said.

Equally impressive was Laughton's dominance in the dot. He went 19-1(!) in faceoffs, his specialty usage in OT.

"His blade's pretty big, so maybe that helps," Cowan told the broadcast postgame.

Always yapping, Laughton says he probes fellow centres Tavares, Auston Matthews and Nicolas Roy for faceoff scouting tips prior to puck drop.

The 31-year-old Laughton is an old soul with a childish zest for life. He's dead serious and hilariously lighthearted about his craft all at once.

He listens to Elvis Presley and The Tragically Hip and gets excited to cross paths with Darcy Tucker around the Leafs' rink. When Mats Sundin flew eight and half hours across the sea just to congratulate Matthews on the goal record, Laughton said: "That's what it's all about."

The veteran is also quickest to poke fun at his teammates, past and present.

He knows when to build them up or take them down a peg.

During a recent roadie, the Leafs held a practice with only one goalie. Laughton tried forcing anyone who missed scoring on the Shooter Tutor to drop and do 10 pushups in their skates.

"I mean, I can think of plenty examples. I just think he's an incredible teammate, an incredible person," captain Matthews says.

"The impact he's got, both on the ice and off it, are incredibly valuable to the team. And the energy that he brings, he makes everybody smile, everybody laugh, and he's a guy that you love to have on your team out there, because he's a competitor as well."

"He's just always got something to say, something to keep you honest with," Tavares adds, with a grin.

"His energy goes a long way, keeping the mood light. Just the enjoyment about being around him, he's constantly keeping everyone on their toes. Even on some of the mornings where you feel a little groggy or when you're on a long road trip... he just brings a certain energy and attitude that is a big part of our locker room."

Craig Berube has worked with Laughton in both cities.

The coach uses the word spirit repeatedly in discussing Laughton's contributions. Tough to identify on a spreadsheet. Impossible to ignore when you feel the presence.

In that respect, Berube compares Laughton to Cup winner Pat Maroon, another guy whose personality outweighed his shift count.

"Team spirit is really important. And I believe — no, I don't believe it. I know it, that he brings that team spirit every game. He's a great teammate," Berube says.

"Likeable guy, you know? Always chatting. So, he brings a lot to the team outside of the ice, and it's important. Locker room guys are very important in this game, and then he impacts the ice with his work ethic and second and third effort out there as a player.

"He's all about the team."

For years, Laughton proudly wore an "A" for the Flyers. He invited a cluster of friends he'd made from local charities to Thursday's game.

"He gave everything he had here, when he was on the ice and in the community," Flyers forward Owen Tippett says. "He took every opportunity could to get out and meet fans. He was also one of the guys that kept this group together year after year. I even heard that before I came in the locker room — and it proved.

"He's a leader. Whether things are going wrong and we all get together for a dinner, whatever it is, he's the guy that brings everyone together. And he's missed in this room, for sure."

Even a dollar-store decoder ring will reveal the invisible leadership letter Laughton now wears for the Maple Leafs, earned through effort, experience, and exuberance.

"No matter where you are, you have to be accountable to yourself, first and foremost. That's where it starts," Laughton says. "And then you try to hold everyone accountable. The guy beside you has got to hold you accountable, and you got to do the same. And it always doesn't have to be from the coach; it can be from within the room.

"When teams gel the best is when you know the guy beside you is going to do the same thing. I've learned from a lot of good guys throughout the years and had a lot of conversations with old alumni."

All that brain-picking couldn't have fully prepared for Laughton's rocky introduction to Leafs Nation, of which he was a member as a boy.

GM Brad Treliving paid a pretty penny to end Laughton's love affair with Philly, and the bottom-six forward struggled with confidence and minuses toward the end of 2024-25.

A fresh start in 2025-26, Laughton's contract year, was set back first by a busted foot in pre-season and later by a Nikita Zadorov-delivered concussion four periods into his November return.

"That one stung a little bit more than the first one," Laughton says.

The double whammy threw the usually healthy Laughton for a loop. He was grateful to the Leafs' strength trainers and medics but sick of gym days and isolation.

"It's hard when you're hurt. That's what you miss most, is being on the road with the guys, being in the room, being in the battle. That's the biggest thing — being a part of it," Laughton says. "So, I tried to stick around quite a bit throughout (the rehab)."

That included a false-start homecoming with the Leafs to Philly in late October, when Laughton participated in the team Halloween party but not the hockey game against the Flyers that followed.

Laughton brought his family to that game, too, and did rounds of interviews with a Philly media corps that misses its go-to guy for an honest quote.

"He's been milking it pretty hard. And, quite frankly, the guys are getting tired of it," said Morgan Rielly, wryly. "Happy to get it out of the way."

And happier, surely, the way Laughton helped author the storybook finish.

Fox's Fast Five

- Toronto's penalty kill has allowed just four goals over its past 24 games, and the Maple Leafs are proud owners of the league's best penalty kill since Nov. 10 (87.3 per cent).

The pristine PK went 3-for-3 Thursday, including a big 5-on-3 kill and a plus-1 rating.

"PK was excellent again," Berube said. "Had to be."



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- How 'bout some love for Dennis Hildeby, who stopped 21 of 22 shots and all five on the Flyers' power play?

The towering Swede's stellar night was bookended by breakaway stops on Denver Barkey and Trevor Zegras. His season save percentage jumped to .920 on a night when the high-danger chances were 22-9 in the Flyers' favour, per NaturalStatTrick.com.

Berube: "He was locked in from the get-go."

- Laughton, with love, on Konecny: "He's a rat. He's a big-time rat... He's about as big of a rat as they come."

- Hey, Trevor Zegras, which Flyer do we not talk about enough?

"Travis Sanheim —not even close. Or Noah Cates. I'll give you a forward and a defenceman. I mean, Travis plays 27 minutes a night (actually, a team-high 24:32). He plays hard minutes against the best players. He cheats in fantasy football, too. For the role he has, to do it every night and be such a good teammate, oh, he's great. And then same with Catesy. Catesy's the apples to apples on the offence. Like, every night he gets a tough matchup, and he's producing, and he's a great teammate. Those guys are special."

- Despite missing 10 games — his most in a single season due to injury — William Nylander still leads the Leafs in assists (27) and points (41).

Expect Nylander (lower-body) to practise with the club Friday. It's possible he returns to action Saturday versus Vancouver. If so, the star winger's "day-to-day" status will have lasted 14 days.

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