



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

The News & Observer

Winter storm has NC under state of emergency. How that affects sports schedules

By: Chip Alexander

The Big Storm is on the way, bringing snow, ice and bitter cold temperatures with it.

That's what most meteorologists, local and national, are forecasting for the weekend as a big blast of Arctic air is set to collide with warm moisture from the South to create what could be extremely hazardous wintry conditions in the East and Southeast.

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Preview: January 22 vs. Chicago

By: Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

Canes seeking fourth straight win as they host Blackhawks

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes are back on national television as they host the Chicago Blackhawks on Thursday.

When: Thursday, January 22

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch: ESPN+, Hulu | [Learn More](#)

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 31-15-4 (66 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 2-1 Win over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday, Jan. 19

Blackhawks Record: 20-22-7 (47 Points, 6th - Central Division)

Blackhawks Last Game: 2-0 Win over to the Winnipeg Jets on Monday, Jan. 19

Last Time Out...

The Canes picked up their third win in a row with a hard-fought 2-1 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday.

Andrei Svechnikov scored for the third straight game, while Seth Jarvis bagged the game-winner in the third period.

Brandon Bussi turned in another stellar effort, including several highlight-reel stops, to backstop his NHL-record 18th win in 22 starts.

It Takes Two...

There aren't many hotter duos in the NHL than Andrei Svechnikov and Sebastian Aho right now. Co-leading the Canes with seven points apiece over the last three games — a total that trails only Ryan O'Reilly among all NHLers — Aho has helped set up each of Svechnikov's five goals in that span.

Those two have now factored on the same goal 152 times in their careers, tying Ron Francis and Jeff O'Neill for the fourth-highest total by a pair of teammates in franchise history. The top three are rounded out by Aho and Teuvo Teravainen (214x), Francis and Kevin Dineen (171x), and Andrew Cassels and Geoff Sanderson (163x).

In Net...

With two full days since their last game, the Canes will be able to choose between Brandon Bussi and Frederik Andersen between the pipes this evening.

As mentioned above, Bussi's historic start to life in the NHL continued with his 18th win on Monday, the most by any goaltender in NHL history through 22 career starts. Allowing just one goal in each of his last two starts, Bussi's 2.20 GAA ranks fourth among league goaltenders this season.

Should Andersen get the nod, he'll look to keep rolling after playing a key role in last Saturday's 4-1 win over the Devils. After a tough run to end 2025, Andersen is 2-0-1 in his last three outings.

On The Other Side...

Chicago snapped a three-game skid in shutout fashion on Monday, blanking the Jets 2-0, but their 47 total points are tied for the fourth-fewest in the league this season.

Third-year forward Connor Bedard leads the club in scoring with 48 points (20G, 28A) in just 36 games, producing at a 1.33 P/GP clip that's good for ninth in the league. Bedard recently missed time with an injury, but has registered four points in four games since returning to action.

In net, Spencer Knight has seen the majority of starts with 33 to Arvid Soderblom's 15. Picking up four wins in his last six outings, Knight's .913 SV% ranks T-9th in the league.

Injury Updates...

Forward Eric Robinson suffered an upper-body injury on Jan. 19. He did not practice on Wednesday, and Rod Brind'Amour told the media afterward that Robinson will be "out for an extended period."

Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere (lower-body injury) last participated in game action on Jan. 13 and is considered day-to-day.

Forward Noah Philp entered concussion protocol on Jan. 6 and has not played a game since then.

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

What Are We Wearing?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

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 Friday before flying to Ottawa for Saturday's matchup against the Senators.

Next Game: Saturday, January 24 at Ottawa | 7:00 p.m.
ET | FDSNSO

Next Home Game: Thursday, January 29 vs. Utah | 7:00
p.m. ET | FDSNSO | Whalers Night | Tickets | Parking



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

The Hockey News

10 Questions With Rookie Phenom Brandon Bussi

By: Ryan Henkel

Rookie goalie Brandon Bussi reveals his favorite comedies, dream European escapes, and who inspired his NHL dominance. Get to know the Carolina Hurricanes' rising star.

Carolina Hurricanes rookie goaltender Brandon Bussi is setting all kinds records in his first ever NHL season.

The 27-year-old netminder has been one of the league's top goalies this season, with a 18-3-1 record, as he's helped keep Carolina as one of the league's top teams.

So I sat down with Bussi for a short Q&A to help give fans a little more insight into the rookie phenom.

Bussi's heroic saves powered the Hurricanes to a gritty victory, overcoming a physical contest and a fast Sabres attack with game-altering stops.

thehockeynews.com Brandon Bussi Puts On A Show As Hurricanes Best Sabres In Heated, Physical Contest Bussi's heroic saves powered the Hurricanes to a gritty victory, overcoming a physical contest and a fast Sabres attack with game-altering stops.

1. Favorite Movie, Book or Musical Artist?

I'll go movie. I'm into... I don't even know if you want to call them classics, but like the older comedies like Wedding Crashers, Step Brothers. Those are some of my favorites. Will Farrell, Vince Vaughn, Adam Sandler. Any of those kinds of movies I tend to lean toward that direction.

2. If You Weren't a Hockey Player, What Would You Want To Do As a Career?

I think a lot of people would answer golf. I'm obviously not good enough for that, but golf would be a lot of fun. When I was going to school, I was also studying to be an accountant, so I think I probably would have went that route (Bussi still has one year of college left to finish out his degree).

3. Favorite Spots In Raleigh?

Brier Creek. That Epic Chophouse is really good and in that shopping center, there's a few really good restaurants there. That's a good place, but still exploring a little bit.

4. Dream Vacation Destination?

Probably somewhere in Europe. Italy, Greece, Spain, France. One of those would be pretty cool.

Are you more of an explorer than a relaxer?

I like to think I'm a relaxer, but I think as a dream vacation, that'd be really cool to go something there.

5. Favorite Food/M meal?

I love steak, I love sushi, pasta — I'm Italian, so — but it depends on the day of the week.

Do you cook at all?

I do. I'm pretty meat and potatoes — no pun intended there. Like steak, a carb and a veggie. My fiancée is big with the crockpot and more the bigger meals, but I think we both bring a little bit to the table.

6. How Do You Decompress After A Game?

Watch Netflix. Chill. I'm pretty chill once I leave the rink. It's kind of out of my mind whether it's good or bad. I savor it in the moment and then I go home and I'm just an average person.

7. Favorite Player to Watch Growing Up?

Henrik Lundqvist was my guy. I was a Rangers fan growing up and so my prime years of growing up, he was the king of New York.

Did you model your game after him?

I wouldn't say I did anyone specific, maybe a little bit of Price when he was in his prime just with how controlled he was and stuff, but I think I kind of bring a little bit of multiple guys. In a sense, my own game.

8. Who Has The Hardest Shot You've Ever Faced?

Obviously we have a bunch of guys here on the team that can rip it, but I won't say anyone here just so no one gets upset. A teammate of mine at Western Michigan, Ethen Frank who's with the Capitals, he's got one of those heavy shots. I'll also give two more shoutouts to some Western guys: Ronnie Attard and Michael Joyaux were two guys who could bring the heat from the point. But Frankie being a forward, he was in Ovi's spot on the power play, obviously not doing it like that, but still.

9. What Goes Through Your Mind When You're Backing Up In a Game?

I try to watch the game. Obviously if something happens and I have to go in, then I can quickly dial in, but I try to stay pretty relaxed. There'd be a lot to harp on or a lot of unnecessary energy used if I'm staying too invested, but I'm pretty chill. I try to be laid back and supportive of the boys.

10. Favorite Hockey Memory?

I feel like it's probably got to be this year. My first game. I think it's something you work really hard for to have that opportunity to do that. There's a lot of cool moments along the way in terms of milestones like playing in the USHL, college and all that stuff, but I think it all builds up to that moment.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

LINKS

<https://www.newsobserver.com/sports/article314385776.html>

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-january-22-vs-chicago>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/players/10-questions-with-rookie-phenom-brandon-bussi>

SportScan

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

1376637 Carolina Hurricanes

Winter storm has NC under state of emergency. How that affects sports schedules

Chip Alexander

6-8 minutes 20/01/2026

Raleigh

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News Observer LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376638 Carolina Hurricanes

How Hurricanes forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi is handling a challenging NHL season

Chip Alexander

7-9 minutes 21/01/2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Carolina Hurricanes forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi agreed to an interview, but first wanted to see teammate Jackson Blake do a TV spot.

Kotkaniemi leaned in, close enough to hear each answer.

"Good content," he said in a low tone, smiling at Blake.

That came after a Canes practice last week at Invisalign Arena. It came as Kotkaniemi's name continues to be linked — both on social media and by traditional media sources — to possible trades. The chatter is of his value to the Canes, his contract, his season, his relationship with Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour.

Kotkaniemi, who is in his fifth season with the Canes, took time in his own interview to explain his season, how he has tried to handle this season.

"Ah, it's been tough, for sure," he said. "But, you know, it's not about me, really. The team's playing well.

"We're all here for the same reason, trying to win. You put the best lineup out there and so far it's been working. So, it's hard to complain at this point."

But it has been, in many ways, the most challenging of his eight NHL seasons, Kotkaniemi agreed.

"Yeah, I'd probably say so," he said. "I think overall it has not been my best year, but the hope is to have a good end."

'Inconsistency to his play'

Kotkaniemi, 25, went into this season again intent on being among the Hurricanes' top-six forwards, of handling the second-line center spot. That hasn't happened. Logan Stankoven was moved from wing to center and took over that role. Kotkaniemi has been used at fourth-line center, and as a fourth-line wing.

Or he's had to sit. Kotkaniemi has been out of the lineup in 23 games. He has seven points — two goals, five assists — in the 29 games he has played, averaging a little more than 11 minutes in ice time per game.

"There's been a little inconsistency to his play, for sure," Brind'Amour recently said. "There's obviously no production. We're not really looking for that. We need some other things to jump off the page (and) we'll see how it goes moving forward."

Kotkaniemi, in turn, said he has gotten little feedback from the head coach.

"Not much," he said. "We both know what's going on. And the team's winning. So not much talk."

Outside noise

There has been a lot of outside noise. Elliott Freidman of Sportsnet and others in the NHL media have reported Canes general manager Eric Tulsy was looking for potential trade partners for Kotkaniemi, who has four years remaining on a contract that pays \$4.82 million a year.

Kotkaniemi said he does spend some free time checking social media, what's being said, all the scuttlebutt. Maybe a little too much time.

"I think I scroll that too much when I try to go to bed and try to get a good sleep," he said, smiling and chuckling. "I don't really look at messages. There's a lot of stuff going on in there. I try to stay out of that."

Kotkaniemi was in the lineup for the four games prior to Carolina's Monday game against Buffalo, with forwards William Carrier and Noah Philp, a waiver-wire pickup, sidelined with injuries. He had an assist Friday in the Canes' 9-1 blasting of the Florida Panthers, and followed with a solid-enough outing Saturday in the 4-1 road win against New Jersey.

He was back in the press box Monday, with Carrier back in uniform.

Carolina Hurricanes center Jesperi Kotkaniemi (82) reacts after a goal by teammate Shaye Gostisbehere (04) in the first period, to take a 1-0 lead against the Washington Capitals during Game 4 of their series on Monday, May 12, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes center Jesperi Kotkaniemi (82) reacts after a goal by teammate Shaye Gostisbehere (04) in the first period, to take a 1-0 lead against the Washington Capitals during Game 4 of their series on Monday, May 12, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

'You've got to decide to be better'

Asked what he believes has held him back this season, Kotkaniemi shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "That's what I'm trying to figure out right now. I'm just trying to work hard and bring a good spirit every day and hope that will lift me out of this one."

Kotkaniemi had a lot of family members from Finland, including his parents, join him during the Christmas break. That lifted his spirits. Everyone had a good time, he said, including his good friend and teammate, Seth Jarvis.

"Oh, Jarvy came over like he always does. He's part of the pack," he said. "It was a full house."

Then it was back to business. Kotkaniemi was in the lineup for the first five games after Christmas, then was a scratch in the next four. It has been like that all season, it seems. In, out.

"You've got to decide to be better," Kotkaniemi said. "That's the only way to come out of it. You can't be mad and sad all the time. That isn't going to help. Just focus on the main goal and that's our team. You always keep that in the back of your mind when you come here every day."

Put another way, Kotkaniemi said his goal simply would be: "Try to be good for my teammates and try to help myself, as well."

News Observer LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376748 Websites

The Athletic / Which NHL players might miss the Olympics due to injury?

By Sean Gentille

Jan. 21, 2026

NHL players are returning to the Olympics for the first time since 2014, but for some, the timing is unfortunate because they're dealing with injuries. Time is getting short, with the NHL shutting down after Feb. 5 to prepare for the tournament in Milan-Cortina.

But there's still time for injured players on the Olympic rosters to return — and time for more issues to pop up ahead of the men's tournament, which starts on Feb. 11.

This tracker includes NHL players who were on the initial set of rosters — not those injured before roster announcements, such as Aleksander Barkov — and currently are out of the lineup with a reported injury. It will be updated as further injury/roster news is confirmed.

United States

Matt Boldy, Minnesota Wild winger: One of the leading American goal-scorers in the league this season — behind Dallas' Jason Robertson, who was left off the initial roster — Boldy is on injured reserve with a lower-body injury and is set to miss at least one more game (Thursday



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

vs. Detroit). He last played on Jan. 15 against Winnipeg but should be ready for Milan, a team source told The Athletic's Michael Russo

Seth Jones, Florida Panthers defenseman: Wednesday brought some tough news for Jones, who was officially removed from the roster and replaced by Jackson LaCombe of the Anaheim Ducks. Jones hasn't played since taking a puck to the shoulder in the Winter Classic on Jan. 1 and was recently shifted to long-term injured reserve to make room on Florida's roster for Matthew Tkachuk, who made his season debut on Jan. 19 after surgery on a sports hernia and torn adductor muscle.

Canada

Anthony Cirelli, Tampa Bay Lightning center: On the Canadian roster to eat tough matchup minutes, Cirelli left Tampa Bay's win over San Jose on Tuesday in the third period, when a shot by teammate (and fellow Olympian) Brandon Hagel struck him in the upper body. He should return to the Lightning lineup on Friday, The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun reported.

Bo Horvat, New York Islanders forward: On Jan. 1, a day after officially pushing his way onto the team — he was not part of Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster — Horvat suffered a lower-body injury. He hasn't played since but could return on Jan. 24, general manager Mathieu Darche said last week. The Islanders expect him back before the break, regardless.

Darcy Kuemper, Los Angeles Kings goaltender: Likely to be Canada's third goalie, behind Jordan Binnington and Logan Thompson, Kuemper left the Kings' win over the New York Rangers on Tuesday with an upper-body injury after a collision in the crease. There was no positive postgame update from coach Jim Hiller, leaving Kuemper's status for the Kings' upcoming road trip in doubt.

Brad Marchand, Florida Panthers winger: At 37 years old, Marchand was on pace to score nearly 50 goals when he left the Panthers' lineup on Jan. 6 with an upper-body injury. He's missed six games and counting but has been skating with the team and, coach Paul Maurice said, should return soon.

Brayden Point, Tampa Bay Lightning center: No Canadian player is in greater danger of missing the tournament. Point, 29, needed to be helped off the ice on Jan. 12 after Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Cam York fell onto his right leg. His status for Milan is likely to "come down to the wire," The Athletic's Chris Johnston reported on Jan. 16, and his absence would mean an open spot on Canada's top six.

Devon Toews, Colorado Avalanche defenseman: Cale Makar's defensive partner is trending upward after an upper-body injury on Jan. 3, but he's unlikely to return during the Avs' two-game homestand, coach Jared Bednar said on Friday.

Sweden

Jonas Brodin, Minnesota Wild defenseman: Brodin will miss the tournament due to a nagging lower-body injury, Russo reported. That's a blow to Sweden's defensive group, but they do have depth at the position; expect him to be replaced by the Edmonton Oilers' Mattias Ekholm, who played for the team at the 4 Nations Face-Off, the Boston Bruins' Hampus Lindholm or the Detroit Red Wings' Simon Edvinsson.

Leo Carlsson, Anaheim Ducks center: Sweden also expects to be without their 21-year-old star, coach Sam Hallam told reporters on Tuesday. He had a procedure to treat a thigh injury on Jan. 16 and was initially given a three-to-five week return timetable. Carlsson's early-season breakout was a major story for both the Ducks and the Swedish team, but his play had dipped before the procedure.

Joel Eriksson Ek, Minnesota Wild center: A do-everything, top-six fulcrum for the Wild, Eriksson is eligible to return from a lower-body injury that has kept him out of the lineup since Jan. 8. He should be ready for the tournament, Russo reported.

Victor Hedman, Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman: The cornerstone of Sweden's impressive blue line, Hedman hasn't played since an elbow injury on Dec. 9 that necessitated surgery, but he's expected to be ready for Milan.

Erik Karlsson, Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman: Karlsson (lower body) hasn't played since Jan. 11, but he accompanied the Penguins on their trip to Western Canada and will be reassessed over the next few days. He told reporters on Wednesday that the issue was "nothing major," and Sweden expects him to be available.

Gabriel Landeskog, Colorado Avalanche winger: Avs coach Jared Bednar said on Wednesday that Landeskog is still "a ways out" from returning from an upper-body injury he sustained when he crashed into the goal on Jan. 6, but Hallam told reporters that hopeful that Landeskog will return in time for the tournament.

William Nylander, Toronto Maple Leafs winger: Sweden's most gifted offensive player has missed two games and counting with a recurrence of a groin injury that originally took place in late December. Hallam is hopeful about Nylander's status, as well; his absence would deal another huge blow to Sweden's gold-medal hopes.

Oliver Ekman-Larsson, Toronto Maple Leafs defenseman: In the most recent potential hit to Sweden's blue-line depth, Ekman-Larsson left Toronto's Wednesday game against the Red Wings with a lower-body injury. A 2012 Olympian, the 34-year-old had played his way back onto the national team after being left off the 4 Nations Face-Off roster.

Finland

Joel Kiviranta, Colorado Avalanche forward: A solid bottom-sixer, Kiviranta (lower body) could return on Friday against the Ducks, Bednar said. He hasn't played since Dec. 19.

Rasmus Ristolainen, Philadelphia Flyers defenseman: Ristolainen (upper body) hasn't played since Jan. 14 and was placed on injured reserve on Jan. 17. The earliest he can return to the lineup is Jan. 26 against the Islanders.

Teuvo Teravainen, Chicago Blackhawks forward: Teravainen left Chicago's game against Edmonton on Jan. 12 with an upper-body injury and skated on Wednesday in a non-contact jersey.

Czechia

Dan Vladar, Philadelphia Flyers goalie: Vladar hasn't played since Jan. 14 with an undisclosed issue, but he did join the Flyers for part of their Tuesday practice in Utah, The Athletic's Kevin Kurz reported.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376749 Websites

The Athletic / Commissioners of NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB to meet with Trump over America 250 plans

By Adam Crafton

Jan. 21, 2026

The commissioners of four major U.S. sports leagues are in conversations over being present at the Oval Office next week when President Donald Trump unveils the latest plans regarding the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the United States.

Four people briefed on the planning, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the matter, confirmed to The Athletic that the NFL's Roger Goodell, the NBA's



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Adam Silver, the NHL's Gary Bettman and MLB's Rob Manfred are currently set to attend the event. The exact date may be subject to change in accordance with the president's schedule and the schedules of those expected to be in attendance. The White House and the four major leagues did not respond to requests for comment.

Trump previously announced in December that the White House will host the "Patriot Games," a four-day athletic event with high school athletes from across the country, as part of the celebration of the United States' 250th anniversary. In a video announcement from the newly formed Freedom 250 initiative, Trump said the event would feature "one young man and one young woman from each state and territory."

Trump has also announced a UFC fight on the South Lawn of the White House to take place on June 14. UFC CEO Dana White has said the event will feature official weigh-ins at the Lincoln Memorial and that fighters would walk to the Octagon from the Oval Office.

America's 250th birthday also coincides with the FIFA World Cup, which takes place in June and July this summer. The Athletic revealed in December that a White House task force facilitated a proposal for World Cup host cities in the United States to house vast 'Freedom' trailer-trucks with U.S. flags at official Fan Festivals in celebration of the country's 250th anniversary.

The NFL announced in November that it will participate in the 250th anniversary, via on-field promotions, including special commemorative footballs featuring the America 250 logo to be predominantly utilized in games. Playoff games will also see "America 250" stenciled on the sidelines and officials will use America 250 branded coins for the coin toss.

Trump has been a frequent presence at major sports events in the United States since returning to office in January 2025, attending the U.S. Open, the Ryder Cup, the FIFA Club World Cup final, the Super Bowl and this week's College Football Playoff National Championship game between Indiana Hoosiers and Miami Hurricanes at Hard Rock Stadium.

The currently planned appearance in the White House will likely include a news briefing. During Trump's second term, there have been instances where sports figures have landed in awkward positions at events when Trump begins discussing broader policy and global events.

In June, on the day of a FIFA Club World Cup game in Washington D.C., FIFA President Gianni Infantino joined the owner of Italian team Juventus, as well as their CEO, General Manager and a cohort of players in the Oval Office. At one point, Trump turned to the visitors from Juventus and encouraged them to give a view on the involvement of transgender women in women's sports. Over the course of a 16-minute appearance, the group — including U.S. Men's National Team duo Weston McKennie and Timothy Weah — stood by as Trump discussed a possible attack on Iran, whether the U.S. Civil War could have been avoided and his administration's travel bans.

In November, Trump floated the possibility of relocating this summer's World Cup out of cities he deems unsafe, all in front of Infantino. Trump also said he would be prepared to launch "strikes" in 2026 World Cup co-host Mexico due to concerns about drug trafficking.

Trump has previously been critical of MLB, specifically over whether the late Pete Rose should be included in baseball's Hall of Fame.

Manfred appeared to acknowledge in May that President Trump had some influence on his decision to reinstate Rose. Manfred took Rose off MLB's permanently ineligible list in April, which made Rose eligible for election into the Hall of Fame. Manfred had met with Trump in Washington in April.

"The president was one of a number of voices that was supportive of the idea that this was the right decision," Manfred said. "Obviously, I have

respect for the office and the advice that he gave. I paid attention to (it). But I had a lot of other people that were weighing in on the topic as well."

Rose, baseball's career hits leader, died at age 83 in September 2024. He had been on MLB's permanently ineligible list since 1989 for betting on baseball.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

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The Athletic / Jackson LaCombe named to Team USA for Olympics, replaces injured Seth Jones

By Eric Stephens

Jan. 21, 2026

Anaheim Ducks defenseman Jackson LaCombe was named to the United States men's hockey Olympic team Wednesday, USA Hockey announced.

LaCombe will join Team USA as an injury replacement selection for Florida Panthers defenseman Seth Jones, who is injured and was declared unable to participate in the upcoming men's tournament, which begins Feb. 11. Team USA opens group play against Team Latvia Feb. 12.

Jones has not played for the Panthers since Jan. 2 after being struck in the collarbone by a shot from the New York Rangers' Alexis Lafreniere during the Winter Classic.

Jones was one of the original eight who made up Team USA's defense corps for the 2026 Winter Olympics in northern Italy. Now his spot will be filled by LaCombe, a native of Eden Prairie, Minn., who has become a rising star in the U.S. ranks.

LaCombe said Team USA men's general manager Bill Guerin called him with the news Tuesday night.

"Obviously, you never want to see something like that happen to someone," LaCombe said of Jones. "But on my end, I was just super excited, and I didn't really know what to say."

The 25-year-old LaCombe signed an eight-year, \$72 million contract extension with the Ducks in October after a breakout 2024-25, when he became their No. 1 defenseman. A terrific skater and strong puck mover with some size, the 6-foot-2, 208-pound LaCombe has six goals and leads Anaheim's blue line with 31 points while averaging more than 24 minutes of ice time.

LaCombe played for Team USA in last year's world championships, scoring twice and adding three assists in 10 games for the Americans, who won gold in the event for the first time since 1933. The second-round pick of the Ducks in 2019 was also part of the gold medal-winning U.S. world junior club in 2021 while playing at the University of Minnesota.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

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The Athletic / How one junior hockey team sprang into action to help prevent a possible tragedy



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

By Scott Wheeler

Jan. 21, 2026

On Saturday night at the accesso ShoWare Center in Kent, Wash., Seattle Thunderbirds defenseman Joe Gramer was unconscious for more than two minutes after a hit sent him crashing head-first into the boards.

In a moment, a group of people in the arena sprang into action to prevent a tragedy. In recent days, members of the Thunderbirds staff walked The Athletic through the scary moment from multiple vantage points.

Gramer is doing OK and is now in the WHL's concussion protocol. He's expected to make a full recovery.

The reaction of those around him was a testament to their collective preparedness.

Tom Orr was watching Gramer advance the puck up the left boards and into the neutral zone from his usual spot on the Thunderbirds' bench. He had a clear vantage point as Portland Winterhawks forward Carsyn Dyck lined up a hit at center ice and pushed Gramer off balance, sending him crashing head-first into the boards.

Initially, he couldn't tell that Gramer was unconscious, but he'd seen enough to know that he needed to race out across the ice "right away" for a potential head and neck injury. And as a scrum formed around Gramer, he knew he had to get there fast for "an extra layer of protection" and to make sure he didn't get stepped on.

Orr, the Thunderbirds' athletic trainer, was across the ice and to Gramer's side 13 seconds after the hit was delivered, pushing a Winterhawks player and Thunderbirds rookie Brock England's swinging stick out of his path on his way in. Three seconds after he'd gone down to one knee to check on Gramer, his fist was already in the air; the WHL's universal signal used by its athletic trainers to call for emergency help.

In those three seconds, he'd identified that Gramer was unconscious and checked his breathing to find an "agonal breathing pattern," which the Cleveland Clinic describes as an unconscious reflex and "near-death condition where a person gasps and moans (and) their face may grimace as if they're in pain."

After clenching his fist, he saw the Thunderbirds' ice guy run off from the Zamboni door, and he knew that he was headed to alert paramedics. Another 13 seconds later, Winterhawks athletic trainer Rich Campbell was also by his side, helping him roll Gramer onto his back.

Before a minute had passed following the hit, they'd started chest compressions in an effort to ensure blood circulation to the brain.

"They are performing CPR. Oh my goodness. They're doing chest compressions on Joe Gramer right now at center ice," Thunderbirds play-by-play announcer Thom Beuning said on the broadcast.

As it happened, the Thunderbirds' cameras panned wide to avoid the picture as both teams' players rested on one knee, Gramer's Seattle teammates with their heads in their hands and then eventually their arms around each other.

Behind them on the Thunderbirds bench, head coach Matt O'Dette hadn't seen the hit because he was writing something down on his game card. But he'd heard the crash and lifted his head to see the scrum forming and Gramer "crumpled up on the ice in a fetal position" below it. He didn't see Orr's fist go up in the commotion of the scrum either. His first thought, because of the position he was in, was that it was his shoulder. But when Campbell arrived, and O'Dette could see the pair of trainers listening for breathing and then a pulse, he knew that it was a dire, "potentially lifesaving situation."

Paramedics arrived within a minute, and after the two athletic trainers found a pulse, they shifted their focus to getting him onto a backboard and stretchered him off into the tunnel.

They were met there by Gramer's dad, Rob, who happened to be in the building for the game, and began to panic and work his way down the ice when he saw them doing chest compressions. Though staff work to make sure parents don't go on the ice in emergency situations, Rob was allowed to be with him in the tunnel as they did further tests, checking his neck, extremities, sensations and movement control.

Halfway off the ice on the stretcher, Gramer finally came to, according to Orr, nearly three minutes after the hit had been delivered. ("He was unconscious that entire span," Orr said.)

Though he was disoriented, he was responsive and told the two trainers, "I'm fine, I just want to play, get me back out there," which they took as a positive.

With 2:13 left in the second period, the players were sent to the dressing room, and Dyck was assessed a five-minute major for boarding and a game misconduct.

While Orr, Campbell and the EMTs helped get Gramer loaded into the ambulance, O'Dette and Thunderbirds team president Colin Campbell updated general manager Bill La Forge, who was scouting a U15 AAA event and watching it all unfold online.

Meanwhile, WHL senior director of officiating and facilities Kevin Muench was also in the building for the game, so he met with the two teams' staff to decide on the next steps.

Once O'Dette learned that Gramer was responsive, he returned to the room to update the players.

"It's a very scary situation, Joe's going to be OK, we know this really hits home because it's a teammate and something you never want to see, what do you want to do?" he asked them.

After the players discussed it, knowing that Gramer was going to be OK, they were adamant they wanted to finish and get the win for Gramer.

Typically, a member of the team's staff would have gone with Gramer to the hospital, but because his dad was there, Rob went with him in the ambulance.

Seattle won 5-3, and Gramer was released from the hospital around midnight.

Rob extended his stay to Wednesday so that he could be with him, and the next day, when the players arrived back at the rink to get onto the bus for a road trip to Wenatchee, Wash., Gramer, still in his hospital clothes because his phone and clothes had been left at the rink, showed up and spoke briefly with the team.

A few days have now passed, and those in the Thunderbirds organization are still wrapping their heads around the events of Saturday night.

"I couldn't imagine the feeling of him watching that in the building," O'Dette said of what Rob's experience must have been like. "But I think it was good that he was there, and I can't imagine watching that from afar on TV and having that helpless feeling. He was there to help comfort Joe."

Beuning knew firsthand that Gramer was in good hands because earlier this season, while getting off the Thunderbirds' team bus at the border on a trip back from Penticton, British Columbia, he collapsed and fell unconscious, and Orr had also performed emergency CPR on him.

"It's all too real for us," O'Dette said. "Our players and all of us saw that emergency situation (with Beuning). So that was two times in a short span, stuff that you don't want to see."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Orr knew Gramer was in good hands with Campbell's additional help, too, because Orr had actually been a student of Campbell's in grad school and they'd practiced for moments like this in August at the WHL's bi-annual first response training in Calgary.

"Credit to Tom and Rich and (the) on-site staff that was ready to react immediately. That's Tom doing his thing," O'Dette said. "Tom's a heck of a trainer, and he was quick to react twice to perform CPR. We're lucky to have him. He's running out there, he's pushing guys out of the way to get to our player — it gives us peace of mind knowing that he's at the ready as quickly as someone can be. Everyone reacted so quickly and calmly and was there to help Joe."

Orr is proud of the way everyone reacted, too.

"We're more than just massage therapists and taping ankles. We're jacks of all trades who have wide skill sets," he said of his fraternity of athletic trainers.

All of La Forge, O'Dette and Orr are also cognizant of the fact that, on top of the scare, this has also been a whirlwind couple of weeks for Gramer.

He signed with the Thunderbirds just 10 days before the hit, leaving the NCAA and the University of Nebraska Omaha to fill Seattle's last 20-year-old slot — four years after he'd attended their training camp as a 16-year-old and they'd tried to sign him, but he wanted to go the college path. The game was just his fifth with the team.

"He has been a really big add for us. We were comfortable with the family, they were comfortable with us, and it was a pretty smooth transition. And on the ice, he's a mature kid that has added a lot of stability to our back end," La Forge said of Gramer. "We're a very young team, so bringing a veteran 20-year-old in who has played college hockey is really a stabilizing force for us. We've been really impressed, and we look forward to him coming back when he's healthy and helping us for the remainder of the year."

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376752 Websites

The Athletic / Which NHL goalie can build the best roster of players who scored their first goal on him?

By Sean McIndoe

Jan. 21, 2026

Today, we're going to play a roster-building game based on a relatively straightforward question: Which goalie can make the best six-man team out of players who scored their first career goal against them?

That's it. Nice and simple. But first, a few ground rules™:

- Each squad will be made up of three forwards, two defensemen and a goalie. Other than that, position won't matter.
- The forwards and defensemen must have all scored their first career goals against the same goaltender. That goalie will then complete the roster, joining the guys who scored on him.
- Once they're on the team, you're getting the peak version of that player.

Before we start, let's all tap sticks for reader Billy G., who not only sent me this idea but also included a massive spreadsheet of relevant research. Folks, I can't emphasize this strongly enough: My favorite readers are the ones who do a big chunk of the work for me. Way to go, Billy. You're like the anti-Bryce.

We're going to crank up Stathead's goal finder and build out rosters for a dozen goalies, and then turn it over to you in the comments to see if you can beat them.

Team Marc-Andre Fleury

In theory, Fleury seems like a great option to start with, for two reasons. He's going to be a Hall of Famer, which gives our squad a strong foundation. And he played forever, meaning you'd expect to see plenty of guys who got their first goal against him.

And sure enough, we have an impressive 44 names to choose from. Can we find a mini All-Star team in there? Let's find out ...

Goalie: Marc-Andre Fleury

Defense: Bowen Byram, Morgan Rielly

Forwards: John Tavares, Seth Jarvis, Brandon Dubinsky

That's not bad. And it could have been even better, because Cale Makar got his first regular-season goal against Fleury back in 2019. But Makar is the rare case of a guy who scored his first NHL goal in the playoffs, so technically he doesn't count. (I don't think any of those playoff-first guys slipped into any of the teams below, but apologies in advance if they did.)

We still get some solid star power, ranging from Dubinsky in 2007 to Jarvis and Byram a few weeks apart in 2021. Team Fleury is a good one, but we can do better.

Team Henrik Lundqvist

Lundqvist didn't stick around quite as long as Fleury, but he still gives us 29 names to choose from. And right off the bat, we can find some legitimate star power in Nikita Kucherov, who got his first of many against Lundqvist so long ago that he was wearing the number 56 when he did it, and the announcer thought his name was Dmitri.

Kucherov is only the beginning, as our forwards are so loaded that we don't even need to use Mathew Barzal or Brayden Schenn. Other than the second blue-line spot, we're pretty loaded.

Goalie: Henrik Lundqvist

Defense: Kris Letang, Erik Gudbranson

Forwards: Nikita Kucherov, Artemi Panarin, Nikolaj Ehlers

This strategy of using elite goalies who played for a long time is working. Let's try it one more time.

Team Carey Price

Price gives us 38 names to work with, one of whom is Paul Bissonnette. So ... 37 names to work with.

Goalie: Carey Price

Defense: Jakob Chychrun, Alec Martinez

Forwards: Mark Stone, Ryan O'Reilly, Timo Meier

You could also swap in Alex DeBrincat if you prefer. Either way, we've got three solid forwards, a defenseman having a career year right now, and a second blueliner who we know can score big goals. Still, I don't think this squad can compete with Team Lundqvist.

Let's mix things up by switching our strategy. We'll start with a great offensive player and see if we can build around him.

Team Pete Peeters

My first thought was to try Wayne Gretzky as our anchor, but his first goal came against Glen Hanlon, who doesn't give us much else to work with (with apologies to Ken Baumgartner). But the second name that came to mind works a little better.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Goalie: Pete Peeters

Defense: Viacheslav Fetisov, Sylvain Côté

Forwards: Mario Lemieux, Joe Nieuwendyk, Scott Mellanby

It's hard to beat Mario as your starting point, and we find two more Hall of Famers in Nieuwendyk and Fetisov, but this roster leaves me wanting a bit more. I won't criticize it too much, though, since they also have access to Chris Nilan and Tie Domi.

But hey, if building around one generational center from the 1980s is good, then two would be even better. And there happen to be two superstars who both got their first against a pretty good goaltender ...

Team Rogie Vachon

So yeah, Mark Messier and Bryan Trottier both scored their first goals against the same goalie. What I hadn't realized is that so did one of the greatest defensemen ever.

Goalie: Rogie Vachon

Defense: Larry Robinson, Barry Ashbee

Forwards: Bryan Trottier, Mark Messier, Rick Vaive

As is often the case with these things, we fall just short of filling every spot with a superstar, although Vaive had three 50-goal seasons and Ashbee was a second-team All-Star once. Still, I think this is my favorite team we've built so far.

Now let's all enjoy Messier's highlight-reel first goal. Just like they drew it up.

Hey, you want to see a ridiculously good first line?

Team Sean Burke

The bad news: Burke was a good goaltender, but hardly a franchise guy, and the blue line is just OK. The good news: That stuff won't matter, because with these three forwards, we'll never let the other team have the puck.

Goalie: Sean Burke

Defense: Kimmo Timonen, Ed Jovanovski

Forwards: Joe Sakic, Sergei Fedorov, Marián Hossa

It's not a deep roster. Our next best option up front would probably be Marc Savard, who makes for decent depth but won't be allowed to coach our power play. But we only need six guys, and these six are pretty good.

OK, time to go back a bit further into the history books ...

Team Ed Giacomin

The Rangers Hall of Famer gives us a great start. And with his heyday syncing up perfectly with the start of the expansion era (and the high scoring that came with it), we should get some goal scorers to choose from. Let's see if it works.

Goalie: Ed Giacomin

Defense: Denis Potvin, Barry Gibbs

Forwards: Bobby Clarke, Jacques Lemaire, Ken Hodges

Not too shabby, with Giacomin giving us three more Hall of Famers plus two solid veterans. Not the very best top-to-bottom roster we've seen, but good enough that we should try one more old-timer.

Team Gump Worsley

Some of you oldies are already sitting up, because you know that in addition to being a legend in his own right, Worsley gave up the first goal of Bobby Orr's NHL career. We have 30 other skaters to sort through,

and while none of them will be at Orr's level, I was hoping to find some star power. It's fair to say my hopes were met.

Goalie: Gump Worsley

Defense: Bobby Orr, Al Arbour

Forwards: Stan Mikita, Johnny Bucyk, Henri Richard

I'd say that's a decent lineup. The forwards are fantastic, obviously, and Orr was unstoppable. The only weak spot is the second blueliner, where I went with Arbour over Bob Watson or Reggie Fleming. Three reasons there: Arbour was cool, he wore glasses, and his goal (one of just two he ever scored in three seasons with the Wings) was assisted by Gordie Howe and Ted Lindsay.

OK, just a few more teams to build. Let's shift back to the modern era so you kids out there don't get bored and start looking at your phones.

Team Kari Lehtonen

Lehtonen was one of the highest-drafted goalies ever, going second overall in 2002. He went on to win 310 games, and more importantly for our purposes, he gave up the first goals for a pair of centers who've gotten to know each other pretty well in recent years.

Goalie: Kari Lehtonen

Defense: Jaccob Slavin, Johnny Oduya

Forwards: Connor McDavid, Aleksander Barkov, Blake Coleman

This one is admittedly a little top-heavy, to say the least. Still, we'll put McDavid in the offensive zone, Slavin on the defensive side, Barkov playing all 200 feet and let everyone else play a supporting role. I think it works.

Team Craig Anderson

Anderson was a better goalie than you probably remember, winning 319 games and leading the league in GAA (1.69) and save percentage (.941) in 2013. He also had an up-close seat to arguably the greatest debut of all time.

Goalie: Craig Anderson

Defense: Shea Theodore, Simon Benoit

Forwards: Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel, Nico Hischier

That's a heck of a first line, featuring three high picks. And we could run out a second line of Sam Bennett, Sean Couturier and Artturi Lehkonen. It's the second blue-line spot that trips us up yet again, though; other than Theodore, we have eight more defensemen to choose from, but Benoit is the only one who's played more than 100 NHL games, and only he and Kyle Capobianco are even still in the league.

For our final two goalies, let's reach back to the '80s and '90s for a couple of well-traveled Hall of Famers.

Team Grant Fuhr

Fuhr only gets two Hall of Famers to join him here, but it's not a bad duo to build around. And the rest of the bunch is pretty good too. (Remember, before he was the coach with the funny mustache, Paul MacLean scored 40 goals three times.)

Goalie: Grant Fuhr

Defense: Brian Leetch, Jyrki Lumme

Forwards: Peter Forsberg, Theo Fleury, Paul MacLean

By the way, I did make sure to check the big three of Martin Brodeur, Patrick Roy and Dominik Hasek, but none had much to offer. Hasek peaks with Sergei Zubov, Roy's best option is probably Brian Rolston,



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

and Brodeur (despite giving up first goals to 54 different players) can only get us Evgeni Malkin and Chris Kreider.

So instead, let's wrap this up with a guy who wasn't quite on that tier, but played a long time for a lot of teams on his way to an eventual call from the Hall.

Team Tom Barrasso

OK, I'm going to be honest with you. You could make a pretty decent team out of Barrasso's first goals, one that would include Eric Lindros and Pavel Datsyuk as well as Claude Lemieux.

But I'm not going to do that. Instead, let's build the one lineup that absolutely none of these other teams want any part of playing against.

Yeah, I have no idea what's going on here. But when Claude Lemieux isn't even close to being your dirtiest player, you've got yourself a terrifying lineup. No wonder Barrasso was so cranky all the time.

Well, that's disappointing. And sure, we could technically use our goalie spot on Ron Hextall or Ilya Sorokin or any other goal-scoring goalie, but that would go against the spirit of the thing. So we're left with this not-so-imposing crew, which I guess proves that nobody wants to get their first career goal on a cheap empty-netter.

So who you got?

You probably have to go with Team Gump, or maybe Team Rogie. Among the more recent entries, it's hard to argue with Team Hank. But I'm open to your suggestions down in the comments. If you've got a Stathead account and want to try to make your own teams, you can start here. Or you could just drop by to say thanks to Billy G. for putting the wheels in motion. Just be nice about it, or else Team Barrasso will show up in a dark alley and have a little chat with you about manners.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376753 Websites

The Athletic / Ten times a late-season injury has changed a team's fortunes across sports

By Devon Henderson

Jan. 21, 2026

For the Denver Broncos, irrepressible optimism was replaced by exorbitant doubt in a matter of moments.

The Broncos will have to continue their journey through the AFC Championship Game, and potentially beyond, without starting quarterback Bo Nix. It was announced shortly after Denver's 33-30 AFC divisional-round win over the Buffalo Bills that Nix had broken his ankle on one of the game's final plays.

The injury means backup quarterback Jarrett Stidham will be asked to start at home against the New England Patriots with a Super Bowl berth on the line. Denver entered the postseason as the AFC's No. 1 seed and owns an 8-1 home record this season. But the sudden change at quarterback has made the Patriots 5.5-point favorites and dramatically shifted the outlook of the Broncos' season.

It is not the first time across sports that a late-season injury to a key player has significantly altered championship hopes. In some cases, backups stepped in and saved the day.

In Week 14 of the 2017 NFL season, Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Nick Foles came in for injured MVP candidate Carson Wentz and finished the journey through a Super Bowl win over the New England Patriots.

Stidham wouldn't be the first backup quarterback to enter midseason and lead his team to a championship.

In 1990, Jeff Hostetler took over for New York Giants starting quarterback Phil Simms, who broke his foot in Week 15. Five wins and one precariously wide-right kick from Buffalo Bills kicker Scott Norwood later, Hostetler and the Giants were Super Bowl champions.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out. Here are 10 examples across sports in which a major injury changed a team's fortune. Let us know in the comments which ones we missed.

Kevin Durant and Klay Thompson, 2019 Golden State Warriors

The Golden State Warriors suffered a double whammy in the 2019 NBA Finals. With the Warriors trailing the series 3-1 entering Game 5, Durant tore his Achilles after just 12 minutes of court time. Golden State managed to win the game to stay alive, but then Klay Thompson tore his ACL in Game 6. Without the team's second- and third-leading scorers that season, the Warriors lost the finals 4-2 to the Toronto Raptors.

By the start of the next season, Durant was with the Brooklyn Nets. Thompson would miss the entire season, and Stephen Curry played only five games after breaking his left hand.

Kenyon Martin, 1999-2000 Cincinnati Bearcats

The Bearcats were 28-2, ranked No. 1, and in Martin had the national player of the year and eventual No. 1 NBA Draft pick by the New Jersey Nets. But the big man broke his fibula in the Conference USA Tournament. UC was dropped to a No. 2 seed, then lost in the second round of the 2000 NCAA Tournament, 69-61, to Tulsa.

Martin had led the conference in scoring (18.9 points per game) and blocks (3.5), while adding 9.7 rebounds. Without Martin, the Bearcats were outrebounded 39-34 in their tournament loss to the Golden Hurricane.

Kyrie Irving, 2015 Cleveland Cavaliers

The Cavs' All-Star point guard fractured his kneecap in Game 1 of the 2015 NBA Finals, the first of four straight finals matchups between the Cavaliers and Warriors.

In the prior series, Kevin Love suffered a severe left shoulder injury against the Boston Celtics that knocked him out of the finals as well. Though LeBron James tried to carry the load alone, the absence of the team's second- and third-leading scorers and leading rebounder was too much even for James to overcome.

The Warriors went on to win the series in six games, their first of four titles in the Steph Curry-Steve Kerr era.

Tyrese Haliburton, 2025 Indiana Pacers

Haliburton was the Pacers' best player in the 2025 playoffs, taking Indiana to Game 7 of the NBA Finals against the favored Oklahoma City Thunder.

But he was playing with a strained right calf that he suffered in Game 5, and it proved to be a ticking time bomb. After catching fire and hitting three triples in the first seven minutes of Game 7, his calf gave out on a drive, and he tore his Achilles.

As Haliburton left the court in tears, the Pacers were trailing only 18-16. Oklahoma City went on to win 103-91 to take the series.

Colt McCoy, 2009-10 Texas Longhorns



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Texas' starting quarterback, a first-team All-American, suffered a pinched nerve in his throwing shoulder in the first quarter of the 2010 national championship game against Alabama.

McCoy had finished third in Heisman voting that season, but freshman Garrett Gilbert had to replace him, and Texas lost 37-21 to a Crimson Tide squad led by Heisman winner Mark Ingram.

Juju Watkins, 2025 USC Trojans

USC was a No. 1 seed in the 2025 NCAA Women's Tournament when Watkins tore her ACL against Mississippi State in the second round. Watkins was fourth in the nation in scoring that season, averaging 23.9 points per game. She won AP player of the year and was named a first-team AP All-American after leading USC to a Big Ten title.

Without her, the Trojans managed to dispatch the Bulldogs 96-59 and advanced to the Elite Eight, where they lost to eventual champion UConn, 78-64.

Jim Rice, 1975 Boston Red Sox

The Red Sox had two leading contenders for AL Rookie of the Year in 1975, future Hall of Famer Jim Rice and outfielder Fred Lynn. Lynn took home rookie of the year and AL MVP, the first to win both in the same year, but Rice was stellar that season as well. He hit 22 home runs with a .309 batting average, .350 on-base and .491 slugging percentage.

In late September, Rice broke his hand after being hit by a pitch against the Detroit Tigers. He missed the rest of the season, including the entire postseason. In his absence, the Red Sox made the Fall Classic, but lost to the Cincinnati Reds in an exhilarating seven-game series coined "the series that saved baseball."

The defeat also furthered the "Curse of the Bambino," as Boston had remained without a championship since selling Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees following the 1919 season. The Red Sox could not break the curse until 2004.

Brock Purdy, 2022-23 San Francisco 49ers

Purdy's improbable rookie season ended at the worst time, with a UCL injury in the first quarter of the 2023 NFC Championship Game against the Eagles, which the 49ers lost 31-7. The Mr. Irrelevant pick, taken last in the 2022 NFL Draft, had fought his way up from the practice squad to take over starting duties that season in Week 13 after Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo suffered major injuries.

Purdy had won seven consecutive games, including the first two rounds of the playoffs, before being forced to exit the NFC Championship Game. Josh Johnson was tabbed to finish the game but suffered a concussion in the third quarter, which, for a brief moment, had running back Christian McCaffrey readying a helmet with a radio before Purdy returned. Purdy was unable to throw, however, and simply had to hand the ball off for the remainder of the game.

Carey Price, 2013-14 Montreal Canadiens

The Canadiens goaltender suffered a knee injury when New York Rangers forward Chris Kreider crashed into him in Game 1 of the 2014 Eastern Conference final. Price was out for the rest of the series, and the Canadiens lost the series 4-2.

Price had career bests in games played (59), wins (34), goals-against average (2.32) and save percentage (.927) that season. Without him for much of the series, the Rangers peppered the Montreal net for 20 goals over six games, an average of 3.33 per contest.

Derrick Rose, 2011-12 Chicago Bulls

Chicago's point guard was on top of the basketball world entering the 2012 NBA playoffs. Chicago was the No. 1 seed, and Rose was one year removed from being the youngest MVP in NBA history.

But he tore his ACL in Game 1 of the first-round series against the eighth-seeded Philadelphia 76ers. Without its MVP, Chicago lost the series 4-2, and Rose's career never fully recovered. Since then, the Bulls have only been to the playoffs five times and have only won two playoff series.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.22.2026

1376754 Websites

The Athletic / Why Italy didn't name heritage players to its Olympic hockey team, and why it thinks it can surprise

By Chris Johnston

Jan. 21, 2026

The only team that will arrive at next month's Milan Cortina Olympics without an NHL player on its roster is Italy, but the hosts aren't planning to wave the white flag in the face of more accomplished competition.

There were eight Canadian-born players included among the 25-man roster unveiled Tuesday, plus two Americans, one Swede and one Brit. However, each of those players is a dual Italian citizen and has previously represented the country in some capacity.

The Italian federation could have sought NHL players with family heritage and looked to stretch the IIHF's eligibility rules to produce a roster dotted with more recognizable names. There were discussions with senior NHL executives about that possibility as far back as 2024, according to league sources, but ultimately the team elected to draw from the pool of players who have already been carrying the country's flag, including earning promotion back to the top level of the IIHF World Hockey Championship last spring.

"For me, it was clear already after last season," Italy coach Jukka Jalonen told The Athletic. "I actually told players after the World Championship in May that we don't invite any NHL players. It wouldn't be fair for the guys who have played for Italy all of their life and some double-passport guys who have played for years. If someone from NHL would come to represent Italy, we didn't need that before. If they've never played for an Italian club team or national team, it wouldn't be fair.

"For us, it's not like we only want to win a medal; it's a little bit different competition for us."

Underdogs though they may be, the Italians have chosen to remain true to themselves heading into their first Olympic appearance since hosting the 2006 tournament in Turin. They finished 11th out of 12 teams there with three losses and two ties.

Italy's biggest import this time around is actually Jalonen, who coached his native Finland to Olympic gold at the Beijing Games four years ago. The 63-year-old also has three World Championship titles and a World Juniors gold on his extensive resume and was initially contacted by Italian officials in 2024 to help recruit a Finnish coach before ultimately putting his own name forward for the job.

"Hockey, it's in my blood," he said.

This challenge is unique from those that came before it. The Italians will face Sweden, Finland and Slovakia in Pool B play — opponents carrying 25, 24 and seven NHL players, respectively.

By contrast, Italy only has one player currently affiliated with the world's top hockey league, and 21-year-old goaltender Damian Clara — a second-round pick of the Anaheim Ducks in 2023 — is now on loan to Brynäs in Sweden. Fifteen players on the Italian roster currently play out



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

of the Austrian-led ICE Hockey League, while others are employed by club teams in Switzerland, Germany and Czechia.

The roster features grizzled international team players with 100-plus games of experience wearing Italian colors, like 35-year-old defenseman Thomas Larkin and 33-year-old forward Diego Kostner, and also a trio of 21-year-old forwards: Tommaso De Luca, Alessandro Segafredo and Tommy Purdeller.

On paper, anyway, they will be big underdogs in every game they play.

"Of course, it's a different kind of challenge for us because we are playing actually against NHL players," said Jalonon. "The difference will be pretty huge."

They are still far more established as a hockey nation than China, which hosted the 2022 Olympics. That Chinese team lost the four games it played in Beijing by a cumulative score of 23-4 despite recruiting 14 North Americans and a Russian and not facing any active NHL players as opponents.

The bar has been set much higher for Italy in 2026. Jalonon says he's been "positively surprised" by how professional the setup is among the country's team staff and sees a potential path to a quarterfinal appearance because of the tournament format.

"For us, it's a great system actually," Jalonon said. "You can lose all of those group-stage games — three games in four days — (and) you can still advance to a qualification game. It's a fourth game, and if you will win that game, any team that will win that qualification game will go into the quarterfinal. One win at the right time and you will be there in the top eight."

"That will be our game — that fourth game in the tournament. For sure, we will be underdogs in that game, but in one game, anything can happen. Of course, we have to play extremely well, but in that game we can beat anybody."

Truth be told, they have nothing to lose as the 18th-ranked nation by the IIHF.

Jalonon was in attendance for the test event played at Santagiulia Arena in Milan earlier this month and will gather his players for a training camp that commences a week before the NHLers even board a flight to Europe. Italy will play an exhibition game against Germany on Feb. 4 and then spend a week at the main Olympic venue getting acclimated before opening the tournament against Sweden on Feb. 11.

"I think we can maybe surprise somebody how well we can play together as a team," said Jalonon. "Five guys together, five guys (focused on) defense. We won't be an easy team to beat."

"When we go on the ice, we want to win any game against anybody. We want to make our country proud — being able to represent Italy and play with a big heart and good energy. No matter what the score is, we don't want to quit, and we want to play hard until the last buzzer."

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1376755 Websites

ESPN / Ranking the top 50 players in the Olympic hockey tournament – ESPN

Neil Paine

The 2026 Winter Olympics are a celebration of international hockey at its peak again. For the first time since 2014, NHL players will be

participating in the event next month in Milan, Italy -- and for most of the players headed to the Games, that means they'll be making their Olympic debuts as well. The tournament's two weeks will be a career highlight for everyone involved.

And with the league's top stars returning to the Olympic stage, what better way to judge which players might be the biggest difference-makers in Milan Cortina than to rank them off of their recent production in the NHL?

That's where adjusted Goals Above Replacement (GAR) comes in, my evolved spin on earlier all-in-one value stats such as Tom Awad's Goals Versus Threshold and Hockey-Reference's Point Shares. The core idea of GAR is to measure a player's total impact -- in offense, defense or goaltending -- above what a generic "replacement-level" player might provide at the same position. It also strives to ensure the league's value is better balanced by position, reflecting how top hockey talent actually gets paid: 60% of leaguewide GAR is distributed to forwards, 30% to defensemen and 10% to goaltenders. Then, the adjusted part prorates every player's production to an 82-game schedule.

Finally, to turn that into a measure of who has been the most productive in recent NHL seasons, I plugged GAR into a system inspired by Bill James' concept of an "Established Level" of performance; in this case, a weighted average of each player's GAR over the past three regular seasons. Specifically, we assign a weight of 3 to 2025-26, 2 to 2024-25 and 1 to 2023-24, then divide by 6 to get each player's overall average.

To keep the metric from undervaluing recent risers, we also apply a safeguard: No player's Established Level can be lower than 75% of his most recent season's GAR. And in a special modification to make sure inactive and/or injured players -- such as Matthew Tkachuk -- don't take too much of a value hit, I also applied the same 75% rule to last season's output if a player logged too few games (fewer than 12 for skaters or seven for goalies) in 2025-26 to date.

The result is a blend of peak, recent and sustained performance, which tells us who has been the most productive for their NHL teams recently -- and perhaps who will carry that over to their national teams as well. With that in mind, here are the top 50 NHL skaters and goaltenders participating in the Olympics, according to their three-year Established Level of recent value:

Note: All stats are as of Jan. 17.

1. Nathan MacKinnon, C, Canada (COL)

GAR: 2025-26: 39.0 | 2024-25: 24.2 | 2023-24: 31.0

Three-year avg.: O: 26.1 | D: 6.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 32.7

MacKinnon has been on a real tear since the holiday break, averaging 2.1 points per game over his past 10 games, adding to his lead over Connor McDavid on the GAR leaderboard. That's a place he has occupied before -- back when he won MVP in 2023-24 -- and it's not hard to build a case for the Avs' star as the best player in the world ahead of the Olympics.

Of course, that might not translate to a spot as C1 in the Canadian lineup, but given the rapport he built centering a line with Sidney Crosby and Sam Reinhart at the 4 Nations Face-Off (MacKinnon led all tournament goal scorers with four in four games), there probably won't be many complaints coming from MacKinnon in Milan Cortina, either.

2. Cale Makar, D, Canada (COL)

GAR: 2025-26: 27.7 | 2024-25: 30.1 | 2023-24: 22.9

Three-year avg.: O: 19.8 | D: 7.9 | G: 0.0 | Total: 27.7

Joining MacKinnon on Team Canada to continue one of the game's greatest-ever forward-defenseman combos into the Olympics, Makar ranks so highly here because of his reliably elite production. He's



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

currently tracking to set a new career high in adjusted points -- with 93, the second highest by a defenseman since Paul Coffey in 1994-95 -- for the third consecutive season, and he continues to log nearly 25 minutes per game on the blue line for a Colorado team that ranks sixth in fewest expected goals allowed per 60 minutes.

No defenseman has come close to consistently challenging Makar's performance in recent years.

3. Connor McDavid, C, Canada (EDM)

GAR: 2025-26: 31.2 | 2024-25: 20.2 | 2023-24: 27.4

Three-year avg.: O: 22.3 | D: 4.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 26.9

McDavid would be neck-and-neck with MacKinnon for No. 1 if he hadn't missed 15 games last season, leading to a "down" season by his standards. Of course, a down season for McDavid still meant hitting the century mark in adjusted points for a ninth straight season and ranking 14th in the league in GAR. We should all hope our "down years" are so good!

This season, McDavid is back to the business of dominating, tracking for his most adjusted goals, points and GAR since winning MVP -- and notching his first 50-goal season -- in 2022-23. The fact that Canada has each of the three most productive NHL players at the Olympics speaks to the incredible talent it is sending to Italy next month.

4. Leon Draisaitl, C, Germany (EDM)

GAR: 2025-26: 25.2 | 2024-25: 27.1 | 2023-24: 23.3

Three-year avg.: O: 20.5 | D: 5.1 | G: 0.0 | Total: 25.5

If we're going to hail Makar for his consistency from the blue line, we have to extend the same praise to Draisaitl, whose metronomic ability to produce a new version of the same great season year after year is nothing short of astounding.

Hes had between 41 and 53 adjusted goals and between 104 and 128 adjusted points every single season from 2018-19 through 2025-26 -- a level of output by which you can set your watch. Now making his first Olympic appearance, Draisaitl will anchor Germany's scoring attack as they try to approach their silver medal heights of 2018.

5. David Pastrnak, RW, Czechia (BOS)

GAR: 2025-26: 18.2 | 2024-25: 22.2 | 2023-24: 24.9

Three-year avg.: O: 18.3 | D: 2.4 | G: 0.0 | Total: 20.7

Over the past three seasons, only Nikita Kucherov, McDavid, MacKinnon and Draisaitl have averaged more points per game than Pastrnak, the Bruins' offensive engine. While he hasn't been quite as prolific as usual so far this season -- his 96 adjusted points would be the fewest he has posted in a season since 2021-22, and he ranks just 32nd in adjusted GAR -- Pastrnak gets boosted here by top-10 GAR showings in each of the previous two seasons.

With Kucherov not participating in the Olympics due to Russia's IIHF ban, it's probably fair to call Pastrnak the most dangerous offensive winger in this year's Games.

6. Connor Hellebuyck, G, United States (WPG)

GAR: 2025-26: 10.8 | 2024-25: 31.1 | 2023-24: 28.1

Three-year avg.: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 20.5 | Total: 20.5

It's been a rough season at the NHL level for Hellebuyck, who missed a month with a knee injury -- then has struggled (.887 SV%) since returning -- and whose Jets are in the midst of suffering one of the worst year-over-year declines in NHL history, with just a 28% chance to make the playoffs a year after winning the Presidents' Trophy.

Having said all that, though, few netminders in the game can compete with Hellebuyck's overall résumé, which included an MVP win and the league's top GAR finish last season, and that track record still lifts him up here.

7. Zach Werenski, D, United States (CBJ)

GAR: 2025-26: 23.2 | 2024-25: 20.5 | 2023-24: 10.4

Three-year avg.: O: 16.9 | D: 3.3 | G: 0.0 | Total: 20.2

Though he didn't score a single goal in the tournament, the points leader at last year's 4 Nations Face-Off was none other than Werenski, one of the standard-bearers for the modern golden age of defensemen.

Werenski made a huge statistical leap last season -- improving upon his career high for adjusted points by 50% -- and he has continued to improve his individual production this season to near-Makar levels of offensive output, something he'll bring to whichever pairing to which he's assigned in Milan Cortina.

8. Martin Necas, C, Czechia (COL)

GAR: 2025-26: 25.7 | 2024-25: 16.8 | 2023-24: 9.9

Three-year avg.: O: 14.9 | D: 5.2 | G: 0.0 | Total: 20.1

The Avs' big 3 of MacKinnon, Makar and Necas has been historically productive together this season -- now they'll all be at the Olympics together, though not all on the same side.

With his teammates playing for Canada, Necas will slot into the Czech lineup with Pastrnak, Tomas Hertl and more NHL talent, and they'll have a good chance to not only improve upon their ninth-place finish last Olympics, but also perhaps match (or better) their trip to the bronze medal game in 2018. Necas is finally getting his due in the midst of a career year in Colorado, so anything he does here will add another chapter to his breakout story.

9. Mikko Rantanen, RW, Finland (DAL)

GAR: 2025-26: 20.7 | 2024-25: 18.0 | 2023-24: 21.5

Three-year avg.: O: 16.2 | D: 3.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.9

It is a cosmic coincidence that Rantanen is directly next to Necas in the three-year production rankings, as the two will forever be linked by the trade that sent the latter to Carolina and the former to Colorado last January.

For Necas, that's an impressive placement given his previous production, particularly before the trade, when he had never eclipsed 68 adjusted points in a season. For Rantanen, it's bit a downgrade -- as he's averaging fewer adjusted GAR this season and last (19.4) than he had in any of the previous four seasons with Colorado -- but the Finn remains a dangerous offensive threat on the wing.

He'll also have good chemistry with his top Olympic linemates (Mikael Granlund, Roope Hintz) from their time in Dallas together.

10. Macklin Celebrini, F, Canada (SJ)

GAR: 2025-26: 26.4 | 2024-25: 7.5 | 2023-24: 0.0

Three-year avg.: O: 16.8 | D: 3.0 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.8

For all of the established star power on Team Canada, the most buzzed-about player on the roster might just be Celebrini, the 19-year-old phenom making a remarkable MVP bid in just his second NHL season.

After finishing third in Rookie of the Year voting last year, the former No. 1 overall pick has leveled up his game even further this season, ranking 12th in goals, second in assists, third in points and fourth in GAR despite being one of the youngest players in the league.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

At the same time, Celebrini's Sharks have gone from the NHL's worst record to being in the thick of a playoff race. It's an amazing story -- and as long as NHL players are allowed at the Olympics going forward, Celebrini will be adding chapters to his tale on this stage as well.

11. Jack Eichel, C, United States (VGK)

GAR: 2025-26: 21.5 | 2024-25: 20.2 | 2023-24: 13.7

Three-year avg.: O: 14.9 | D: 4.9 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.8

With Jack Hughes and Matthew Tkachuk's ratings limited here by injuries, Eichel goes into the Olympics as arguably Team USA's most proven recent producer at forward.

Though he has also missed seven games with a lower-body injury, Eichel is still on pace for new single-season career highs in adjusted points (96) and adjusted GAR (21.5) with the Golden Knights, and his experience at the 4 Nations bookended on a line with the Tkachuk brothers (Brady and Matthew), the trio of whom combined for five goals and 10 points in that tournament, will make Eichel a center of attention in Milan Cortina as well.

12. Kyle Connor, LW, United States (WPG)

GAR: 2025-26: 20.0 | 2024-25: 21.8 | 2023-24: 12.3

Three-year avg.: O: 15.8 | D: 3.5 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.3

Of all the factors leading to Winnipeg's huge year-over-year drop-off, Connor's play isn't really one of them. He's tracking for almost identical adjusted scoring numbers -- 39 goals and 96 points, versus 41 and 97 a year ago -- and his GAR has held steady enough to remain among the top 25 players in the league.

Sometimes Connor has had a tendency to fly under the radar during his career, but he was voted the best LW in the league last season, and it would be nice to see him get more playing time than the 12:27 per game he had in three contests at the 4 Nations a year ago.

13. Josh Morrissey, D, Canada (WPG)

GAR: 2025-26: 19.8 | 2024-25: 18.1 | 2023-24: 19.1

Three-year avg.: O: 11.2 | D: 7.9 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.1

Another Jets player shows up highly in the rankings, with Morrissey continuing to place among the league's most productive handful of defensemen in spite of Winnipeg's struggles.

He's on pace this season for career highs in adjusted goals (16) and GAR (19.8), despite averaging his fewest shots per game since 2018-19. Morrissey brings just about every element there is to the art of playing defenseman, from his puck-moving and scoring to blocking shots and logging time both on the power play and penalty kill. He'll be one of the anchors of Canada's blue line.

14. Logan Thompson, G, Canada (WSH)

GAR: 2025-26: 25.4 | 2024-25: 14.3 | 2023-24: 9.3

Three-year avg.: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 19.0 | Total: 19.0

After a good debut with Washington in 2024-25, Thompson has been even better this season, with a save percentage 17% better than league average and the NHL's best Goals Saved Above Average mark (+16.6).

It's unclear whether that will be enough to earn Thompson Canada's starting nod in net, as Jordan Binnington had a tremendous performance in the 4 Nations final a year ago. But if the decision was based on NHL stats between Thompson and Binnington, who has been one of the league's worst goalies this season, it would be no decision at all.

15. Brandon Hagel, LW, Canada (TB)

GAR: 2025-26: 20.0 | 2024-25: 20.0 | 2023-24: 13.4

Three-year avg.: O: 13.8 | D: 5.0 | G: 0.0 | Total: 18.9

Hagel has traded passing for goal scoring this season, falling from 55 to 35 adjusted assists, but rising from 35 to 39 adjusted goals while further improving his association with strong puck possession for Tampa Bay when on the ice. The result has been the exact same adjusted GAR production (20.0 both seasons), part of a good run of years for a player reaching his peak.

He was also already a huge part of Canada's emotional core after fighting Matthew Tkachuk immediately after puck drop in their matchup against Team USA last year.

16. Sidney Crosby, C, Canada (PIT)

GAR: 2025-26: 20.1 | 2024-25: 15.4 | 2023-24: 19.5

Three-year avg.: 18.5

17. William Nylander, C, Sweden (TOR)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.8 | 2024-25: 19.3 | 2023-24: 20.2

Three-year avg.: 18.2

18. Sam Reinhart, C, Canada (FLA)

GAR: 2025-26: 15.6 | 2024-25: 18 | 2023-24: 25.1

Three-year avg.: 17.9

19. Jake Guentzel, C, United States (TB)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.4 | 2024-25: 18.6 | 2023-24: 16.8

Three-year avg.: 17.7

20. Mitch Mamer, RW, Canada (VGK)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.9 | 2024-25: 19.2 | 2023-24: 17.1

Three-year avg.: 17.7

21. Auston Matthews, C, United States (TOR)

GAR: 2025-26: 14.3 | 2024-25: 16.7 | 2023-24: 29.4

Three-year avg.: 17.6

22. Filip Gustavsson, G, Sweden (MIN)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.4 | 2024-25: 24.3 | 2023-24: 4.8

Three-year avg.: 17.6

23. Quinn Hughes, D, United States (MIN)

GAR: 2025-26: 11.7 | 2024-25: 20.6 | 2023-24: 26.5

Three-year avg.: 17.1

24. Sebastian Aho, C, Finland (CAR)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.8 | 2024-25: 15.3 | 2023-24: 21.6

Three-year avg.: 17.1

25. Nick Suzuki, C, Canada (MTL)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.1 | 2024-25: 17.5 | 2023-24: 11.4

Three-year avg.: 16.3

26. Matt Boldy, LW, United States (MIN)

GAR: 2025-26: 19.9 | 2024-25: 12.3 | 2023-24: 13.1

Three-year avg.: 16.2

27. Tage Thompson, C, United States (BUF)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.4 | 2024-25: 16.3 | 2023-24: 11.2



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Three-year avg.: 16

28. Mark Stone, RW, Canada (VGK)

GAR: 2025-26: 19.8 | 2024-25: 13.6 | 2023-24: 8.8

Three-year avg.: 15.9

29. Lucas Raymond, LW, Sweden (DET)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.8 | 2024-25: 13.7 | 2023-24: 12.2

Three-year avg.: 15

30. Brayden Point, C, Canada (TB)

GAR: 2025-26: 10.3 | 2024-25: 19.5 | 2023-24: 18.7

Three-year avg.: 14.7

31. Clayton Keller, C, United States (UTA)

GAR: 2025-26: 14.6 | 2024-25: 15.8 | 2023-24: 12.7

Three-year avg.: 14.7

32. Jake Sanderson, D, United States (OTT)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.4 | 2024-25: 12.5 | 2023-24: 9.8

Three-year avg.: 14.5

33. Shea Theodore, D, Canada (VGK)

GAR: 2025-26: 15.1 | 2024-25: 16 | 2023-24: 9.7

Three-year avg.: 14.5

34. Dylan Larkin, C, United States (DET)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.2 | 2024-25: 11.8 | 2023-24: 13.9

Three-year avg.: 14.4

35. Tim Stutzle, LW, Germany (OTT)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.5 | 2024-25: 13.7 | 2023-24: 8.9

Three-year avg.: 14.3

36. Tom Wilson, RW, Canada (WSH)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.5 | 2024-25: 14.8 | 2023-24: 3

Three-year avg.: 14.2

37. Adrian Kempe, LW, Sweden (LA)

GAR: 2025-26: 11.6 | 2024-25: 16.7 | 2023-24: 15.4

Three-year avg.: 13.9

38. Roope Hintz, LW, Finland (DAL)

GAR: 2025-26: 13.3 | 2024-25: 14 | 2023-24: 14.9

Three-year avg.: 13.8

39. Brock Nelson, C, United States (COL)

GAR: 2025-26: 16.6 | 2024-25: 10.1 | 2023-24: 12

Three-year avg.: 13.7

40. Jesper Wallstedt, G, Sweden (MIN)

GAR: 2025-26: 18.2 | 2024-25: -1.6 | 2023-24: -0.2

Three-year avg.: 13.6

41. Brad Marchand, LW, Canada (FLA)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.4 | 2024-25: 8.5 | 2023-24: 12.1

Three-year avg.: 13.6

42. Nikolaj Ehlers, LW, Denmark (CAR)

GAR: 2025-26: 13.5 | 2024-25: 13.9 | 2023-24: 12.9

Three-year avg.: 13.5

43. Jake Oettinger, G, United States (DAL)

GAR: 2025-26: 12.6 | 2024-25: 17.3 | 2023-24: 8.3

Three-year avg.: 13.4

44. Philipp Grubauer, G, Germany (SEA)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.6 | 2024-25: -6.5 | 2023-24: 1.4

Three-year avg.: 13.2

45. Jeremy Swayman, G, United States (BOS)

GAR: 2025-26: 17.5 | 2024-25: 2.4 | 2023-24: 15.9

Three-year avg.: 13.1

46. Rasmus Dahlin, D, Sweden (BUF)

GAR: 2025-26: 9.3 | 2024-25: 17.1 | 2023-24: 15.6

Three-year avg.: 13

47. Darcy Kuemper, G, Canada (LA)

GAR: 2025-26: 12.4 | 2024-25: 20.7 | 2023-24: -1.7

Three-year avg.: 12.8

48. Tomas Hertl, C, Czechia (VGK)

GAR: 2025-26: 15.9 | 2024-25: 13.2 | 2023-24: 2.5

Three-year avg.: 12.8

49. Filip Forsberg, C, Sweden (NSH)

GAR: 2025-26: 9.7 | 2024-25: 12.7 | 2023-24: 21.3

Three-year avg.: 12.6

50. Moritz Seider, D, Germany (DET)

GAR: 2025-26: 15.8 | 2024-25: 10.3 | 2023-24: 7.3

Three-year avg.: 12.5

Other notables

These name-brand players might be surprisingly low on the list, but they reside here mostly due to injuries limiting their playing time -- or, in some cases, underperformance limiting their value -- in recent seasons.

54. Jack Hughes, C, United States (NJ)

GAR: 2025-26: 9.5 | 2024-25: 15.4 | 2023-24: 13.5

Three-year avg.: 12.1

60. Victor Hedman, D, Sweden (TB)

GAR: 2025-26: 4.2 | 2024-25: 17.6 | 2023-24: 20.3

Three-year avg.: 11.4

68. Mika Zibanejad, C, Sweden (NYR)

GAR: 2025-26: 10.9 | 2024-25: 7 | 2023-24: 13.9

Three-year avg.: 10.1

69. Brady Tkachuk, LW, United States (OTT)

GAR: 2025-26: 7.8 | 2024-25: 11.2 | 2023-24: 14.8



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Three-year avg.: 10.1

80. Matthew Tkachuk, LW, United States (FLA)

GAR: 2025-26: 0 | 2024-25: 11.8 | 2023-24: 17.8

Three-year avg.: 8.9

96. Jaccob Slavin, D, United States (CAR)

GAR: 2025-26: -0.3 | 2024-25: 9.5 | 2023-24: 13

Three-year avg.: 7.1

103. Gabriel Landeskog, LW, Sweden (COL)

GAR: 2025-26: 7.5 | 2024-25: 0 | 2023-24: 0

Three-year avg.: 5.6

145. Jordan Binnington, G, Canada (STL)

GAR: 2025-26: -12.2 | 2024-25: 7.7 | 2023-24: 19.8

Three-year avg.: -0.3

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1376756 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 'Overpowered' Maple Leafs hurting from lack of dynamic defencemen

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Overpowered.

That's the word coach Craig Berube used to describe the clock-freezing play that cost his Toronto Maple Leafs an extra point and a season sweep to the long-dormant Detroit Red Wings.

But it wasn't just rookie Easton Cowan getting bullied off the puck by the sturdier and hungrier Moritz Seider in the hard-fought contest's 64th minute that showed which side is stronger — and which Atlantic franchise is now nine points clear of the other.

In what Joseph Woll, one of the evening's two dialled-in goaltenders, described as a divisional battle with a "playoff-type feel," it was the Red Wings who appeared more suited for springtime hockey in crunch time and were deserving of their 2-1 overtime comeback win.

After the rivals traded first-period goals, Wednesday's tight-checking affair was knotted at one goal apiece for more than 43 minutes.

Yet, ironically, it was the more desperate Maple Leafs who were busy clinging to a tie late, hoping to secure one point, then cross their fingers for a bonus.

Detroit outshot Toronto to the tune of 19-5 in the third period plus a fourth, where the Leafs didn't put one on John Gibson's net.

The Leafs' showing was emblematic of their place in the race: competitive but a half step behind. Too much "just hang in there" and not enough "take it to 'em."

After nine years as an Atlantic punching bag, the Red Wings — who ripped off a 4-0-0 record against the Leafs this season and improved to 17-2-4 in one-goal decisions — finally appear to be the more organized, determined, and balanced of the two outfits.

"They forecheck hard. They kind of are on top of you at different moments when you're trying to break the puck out. You know, their

defencemen are on top of you, on top of our forwards," Leafs defenceman Brandon Carlo said.

"They're playing a little bit more of an assertive game. And I think that's benefiting them."

That assertion stems from Detroit's all-world top defensive pairing of Seider and Simon Edvinsson, who skated 55:21 combined and stomped their boot prints all over this result.

Edvinsson jumped in the rush to score the visitors' first goal. Seider gave Berube a glimpse of the worst-case scenario of relying too much on a 20-year-old come playoff time — if the Leafs make it.

"He does good things, and there's things he has to do better. Typical young player," Berube said of Cowan. "It's normal, young guy, where he's at. Gotta get stronger. Better decisions at times."

To these eyes, it's the Maple Leafs' personnel, not their decision-making, that has raised a red flag this week.

Be it Quinn Hughes–Brock Faber on Monday or Edvinsson–Seider Wednesday, Toronto's dump-and-chase has had a rough ride against legit, puck-moving defence pairs. (Fun fact: Seider didn't have a single hit in the win. Didn't need one.)

"They're both big bodies. They move well — that's the thing. And they're good with the puck," Scott Laughton said of the D's big D. "When you have that, it's hard to forecheck."

Conversely, the Leafs are operating with patchwork pairs, as Chris Tanev's return remains doubtful and a Dougie Hamilton trade remains, at least, discussion-worthy.

Milking any more from competitors Jake McCabe (28:09!) and Troy Stecher (25:13) at this point is reaching blood-from-a-stone extremes.

And, uh-oh, Oliver Ekman-Larsson, the team's best all-around blueliner, just went down with another lower-body injury (more below).

The effort is intact, but that might not be enough.

"The bruises don't really have time to heal. You just got to play through it, man," said an elevated and engaged Simon Benoit, after throwing a team-high five hits.

"We get paid to do what we love, and that's my game, so I just got to do it every night."

Any time missed by the durable Ekman-Larsson would be a significant blow.

"You've seen him just raise his game to a whole another level," Carlo said. "You know, his playmaking ability, his calmness. Just in the defensive zone, he's got an amazing stick. He's somebody I definitely look up to and like to learn from, for sure. But his game is fantastic, and his composure definitely keeps things a little bit more calm for us."

Keep calm and carry on. Because defensive reinforcements aren't coming anytime soon.

And a legit top pair that can break out, attack, and defend? Well, you gotta pay up or draft high to find one of those.

In the meantime, the Leafs can't get overpowered when one point could mean the difference between wild card berth and post-season streak death.

"Every point is important. That's why we have that playoff mentality, playoff feeling. We can't go a couple of games in a row without any points," Benoit said.

"You don't want to get too far from the lead dogs."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

As the Red Wings celebrated their first season sweep of the Leafs since the mid-'90s, The Outfield's "Your Love" barked from the Scotiabank Arena's visitors' room.

Nowhere to run when I'm in trouble / You know I'd do anything for you...

"That's what it comes down to at this time of year. This is how tight it's going to be," Laughton said.

"Got a point, but it wasn't good enough tonight."

Fox's Fast Five

- Ekman-Larsson suffered (another) lower-body injury early in the first period during an awkward collision with Lucas Raymond and did not return. He needs further evaluation.

The Olympics-bound Swede leads all Toronto D-men in scoring (31 points) and, despite leaving multiple nights banged up, is the only Leafs blueliner to appear in all 50 games.

- Max Domi loves himself some Patrick Kane.

"He's the best," Domi said. "I look up to him like an older brother. He gets mad at me for saying it, but I always looked up to him as a kid."

Kane had a laugh recalling the first time he learned Domi was a stan. The two shared a ride during a New York City thunderstorm.

"We went to the US Open, the tennis, myself and my agent. We couldn't find a ride after," Kane said. "It was raining pretty hard, and we jumped in with Tie and Max. Tie was in the front seat just kind of giving it to Max, like, 'Tell Kaner how much you loved him when you were younger.'"

Domi describes playing with Kane in Chicago as "a highlight of my whole career." Domi enjoyed his most productive campaign in the past nine years (18 goals, 49 points) in 2022-23 as a Blackhawk.

- Tanev is still weighing whether to undergo groin surgery.

Our understanding is that surgery would essentially end his season, whereas nonsurgical rehabilitation might give him a chance to play sometime after the Olympic break.

The risk of reinjury, especially when physicality escalates in the post-season, must be concerning. Tanev has also dealt with a head/neck injury this season, too.

It's the player's call.

- Laughton was excellent Wednesday: a goal, a steal, three shots, two hits, and some nice work on Toronto's 2-for-2 penalty kill.

But, boy, would he love a mulligan on the shorthanded penalty shot he earned in the second period.

Going full clapper would've been electric. Did Laughton consider it?

"I was too tired," he replied. "I should have faked a broken stick and let Matthews go or somethin'."

- Has Seider thought about what it'd be like to be in the Norris conversation?

"Zero times, to be honest," the dynamic defenceman replies. "There's so much other stuff going on. I got plenty of work to do on the ice. I don't read any comments. I don't even read the standings. It's just too much noise from the outside."

C'mon. You don't know where the Red Wings are in the standings?

"If I would check the standings, I would see teams switching back and forth every single minute," he says. "So, it's not worth it. And it's definitely not worth listening to any outsiders, because I know what's going on in this locker room — and it's very special. I'm just very proud to be a part of that team."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks use resilience, strict focus to snap 11-game losing streak

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER – Hey, winning is fun. Players on the ice for the Three Stars, sticks handed over the glass to fans, music in the dressing room, even smiles for the media.

And that jet-engine noise? That was the sound of relief Wednesday from the Vancouver Canucks.

On the 21st day of January, the Canucks won their first game of 2026, beating the Washington Capitals 4-3 to end an 11-game winless streak that was the franchise's longest in 37 National Hockey League seasons.

It was just the fifth home victory this season for Vancouver. The last time the Canucks won at Rogers Arena, they beat the Minnesota Wild and Quinn Hughes was still playing for Vancouver. That was Dec. 6, six days before the biggest trade in franchise history.

So much has happened to the Canucks since then. Most of it bad.

"Obviously, we're in this business to win hockey games, and we're not winning," Canuck goalie Kevin Lankinen said after a strong 29-save performance. "We've got to find solutions, and that's been my mindset, too: I want to be part of the solution and not the problem. So I'm just happy that we got the result today, but we have a long season ahead, and we've got to keep building here."

"I hope this helps quite a bit, just a bit of positivity," centre Teddy Blugere said after playing his first game in three months. "Some positive energy. I thought we competed well tonight, so it's just something to build on for us. You know, we played for each other, our details were pretty good, and Lanks made some big saves."

What was most impressive about the Canucks' win, other than the rarity of the occurrence, is that the team stuck to its game plan and rallied back from an early 2-0 deficit built by a Washington Capitals' five-on-three power play that was largely fabricated on a missed call.

This came one game after Vancouver coach Adam Foote blasted his veterans as "the ones that feel defeated first" when a call or play doesn't go their way.

Canuck Max Sasson was penalized for holding Hendrix Lapierre, although it was Lapierre who dropped his stick and stole Sasson's as a substitute. Naturally, Sasson felt entitled to cling to the stick with his name stamped on the shaft. Lapierre thought Sasson's blue twig was his, and apparently so did referee T.J. Luxmore.

"Yeah, I thought it was one of the weirder calls," Sasson said. "He (Lapierre) actually was holding my stick, and then he had my stick. The ref kind of apologized later."

Luxmore made up for his flub by bestowing Vancouver a two-man advantage in the second period, on which the Canucks failed to capitalize.

The point of this Sasson/Luxmore five-on-three subplot is that the Canucks did not let frustration or dejection set in. Rather than lose the plot, the Canucks stuck to their script and poured four straight goals past Capitals netminder Logan Thompson to take their first multi-goal lead since a 4-1 road win against the New York Islanders on Dec. 19.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

"That's just the relentless mindset that we have to have," Lankinen said. "No matter what happens on the ice, we just keep hammering our own game. Sometimes there's stuff that you can't control, so you don't want to put too much energy on that. Only thing you can control is your own performance, your mindset. So I was happy that we turned the game around."

It was like the path to victory — the Canucks' strict focus and resilience — was conjured as a response to Foote lighting up his senior players for negativity during Monday's 4-3 loss to the New York Islanders.

"Yeah, I think it's really important," winger Brock Boeser said of the response. "And, I mean, it's the truth. We can't have that bad body language and, you know, the negative attitude on the bench. We can't show that to the young guys. We've got to be good leaders and good role models and be positive. And I thought we were tonight. And I felt that helped us play a better hockey game."

"I think the best part about it was how our bench was after being down 2-0," Foote said. "It was really calm, and you've got to give a lot of credit to the guys for not getting rattled. T.J., the ref, came up to us after the first and he said he missed that call. I could see why he missed it. You don't see that happen too often. Maybe it was meant to be to give a test to our guys."

After Dylan Strome scored for Washington at 8:25 on the five-on-three power play, and Justin Sourdif at 9:43 on the five-on-four (with Canuck defenceman Marcus Pettersson following Sasson to the penalty box for high-sticking), the Canucks rallied back before the first period was over.

In a span of 16 minutes, centre David Kampf increased his season points total by 50 per cent, making nice plays into the slot to set up quick goals for Boeser and Drew O'Connor. Between them, Evander Kane had banked a centring pass in off Washington defenceman Matt Roy to make it 2-2 at 18:22 of the opening period.

Filip Hronek beautifully finished from Jake DeBrusk's pass on a two-on-one to make it 4-2 at 11:43 of the second period as the teams skated four against four. The Canucks defended well after that, yielding only a six-on-five goal to Strome with 3:23 remaining.

"When the clock was winding down, it felt really good to finally put that streak behind us," Sasson said. "Hopefully we'll start a new streak on the right track. But yeah, it feels really good."

With five games remaining in their longest homestand of the season, the Canucks play the New Jersey Devils on Saturday.

ICE CHIPS – While the Canucks remain a distant last in the NHL at 17-28-5, Blueger is a perfect 3-0 this season. "Small sample size," he said. The 31-year-old centre, badly missed on the Vancouver's penalty kill and in the dressing room, logged 18:24 in his first game since being injured in Washington on Oct. 19. The Canucks have won all three games that Blueger has played. . . Evander Kane, whose physical presence this season has been intermittent at best, engaged Ryan Leonard away from the play and popped the Capital in the mouth after he knocked down Canuck Elias Pettersson in the second period. Managing the game at that point, referees Luxmore and Riley Brace called offsetting penalties, which preceded Hronek's winning goal.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Penguins' Kindel gave young fan a sense of belonging in hockey

Eric Francis

CALGARY — Sidney Crosby gave her a puck.

Ben Kindel gave her a sense of belonging.

And that's why 11-year-old Katherine Haskey stood at the glass in a Penguins jersey two days in a row, waiting for the 18-year-old Penguins rookie who has done so much to make her feel like she truly fits in this game.

Crosby's gesture at Tuesday's practice was appreciated, but not nearly as much as the tap on the glass Kindel gave her while she stood rinkside before Wednesday's game at the Dome with a sign anointing her his No. 1 fan.

"Crosby is just 'the puck guy' to her," laughed her mom, Tanis.

"She doesn't care about any of the other guys, except that one guy."

That guy is Kindel, the Hitmen alum whose meteoric rise to the NHL has been matched only by the depth of his bond with a young girl proud to call him a friend.

He sees her as a hockey player, not a diagnosis.

Katherine has Down syndrome, and it was four years ago that she first summoned the courage to join the Heros program, a volunteer-driven charity that gives kids with cognitive and physical challenges a chance to play the game, learn life skills and give them a community to call their own.

Sensory challenges make new things hard for her, so it took six weeks just to get her onto the ice when she started.

Now she's the first one at the rink every week.

A big reason for that transformation is Kindel and his former Hitmen teammates, who've done wonders to make her feel seen, safe, and valued.

Kevin Hodgson, who runs the Heros program and billeted Kindel during his two seasons with the Hitmen, has watched the relationship evolve up close.

"Seventeen thousand people are there to see Sid, and she's only there to see No. 81," said Hodgson before Wednesday's 4-1 Penguins win.

"He'll tap the glass in warmup, like he always does, and she's good the rest of the game."

That tap is their ritual. Their signal. Their reminder that no matter how big the stage gets, some connections stay simple.

"She's there for Ben," added Hodgson. "He has her back, so this is how she has his."

Kindel's rise to the NHL hasn't changed a thing about how he treats Katherine.

Twenty minutes after being drafted 11th overall last summer, the talented middleman met up with Hodgson and his wife and said, "I have to send Katherine a video."

He did. And she watched it over and over.

Few in the hockey world, including Kindel, believed he could crack the Penguins' opening night roster, which is why he showed up at camp with just one suit and enough clothes for a short camp.

With eight goals and 20 points, he sits top-10 amongst NHL rookies despite being the NHL's youngest forward, and one of only three 2025 draft picks in the league.

No one has ranked higher in Katherine's eyes, especially after the Christmas surprise she received.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

"It took until early November until they started selling Kindel jerseys, and Ben called me and said he'd like to send one for Katherine for Christmas," said Hodgson.

"It's all Ben."

Actually, two jerseys arrived: one for her wall, one to wear. Both No. 81.

On the back, he wrote: To Katherine; my favourite hockey player.

"It just showed up," Tanis said, still shaking her head.

"You hear of these guys doing things like this, but you never think it will happen to your kid."

Katherine wears No. 11 in her own games, honouring the number Kindel wore with the Hitmen. She's already hoping to change it to 81 next season.

"She typically wears hearing protection, but she wanted them off for her picture with him because she felt safe with him," said Hodgson.

That's not a small thing. That's trust.

And it's why Hodgson believes stories like this matter.

"There are enough stories about how players get it wrong," he said.

"So we have to talk about it when they get it right."

Kindel, he says, gets it right.

Every time.

"It makes Katherine and her family feel they belong," Hodgson said. "He makes her feel like she's valued and important, and when a family sees that, it strengthens them."

Then he added the line that best captures the heart of this story:

"Ben doesn't define her by her disability, he defines her as a hockey player."

Kindel's character isn't limited to his relationship with Katherine.

"He came over for dinner last night and afterwards he did the dishes with me like he always did," said Hodgson.

"Then he whipped my wife (Kristie) in cards, and chirped her like he always did. There's no doubt he'll wear a letter on that team, will probably be a captain, and will still be the same person 15 years from now. He sits next to Crosby in the locker room and picks up everything from him."

Kindel, for his part, deflects every bit of praise.

"I can't be more grateful for them," he said of the Hodgsons. "They're unbelievable people, just how selfless they are, not just with billeting me, but also in the community with their Heros program. It's very special to have them as part of my life."

He's grateful he met Katherine through them.

"Katherine has been in my billet house's life for a long time. My older billet brother, Sean (Tschigerl) was very good friends with her. Once he moved out, I kind of tried to take over, and she's now part of my life as well.

"It's so great to see her here."

The feeling, without question, is mutual.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'I get it': Pickard the odd man out as Jarry-Ingram tandem revives Oilers

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — Let's start with the pertinent numbers:

The Stuart Skinner-Calvin Pickard tandem posted a middle-of-the-pack save percentage of .894 last season, and prior to Skinner being dealt to Pittsburgh this season for Tristan Jarry, they had a woeful .873.

That ranked 31st in the 32-team NHL. Blech!

So the Oilers made their move on Dec. 12.

Since then, the Jarry-Connor Ingram duo — with five Pickard starts salted in during Jarry's injury — has a save percentage of .906, albeit behind a much better goaltending environment. That's good for eighth in the NHL.

To what do we owe this uptick?

"The team has played a little bit more soundly, I would say," offered captain Connor McDavid. "Goaltending kind of goes with how the team goes."

But McDavid buried his lede. He had one more thought:

"There was obviously some room to make a difference," he added, "and they've done that."

The Pittsburgh Penguins are in town Thursday night, and Stuart Skinner is almost certain to back up. He's a great guy who most folks in Edmonton will be happy to see.

Even more so in a Penguins uniform.

We all knew that the Oilers, after icing the second-best goalie in consecutive Stanley Cup Finals, would conduct some level of makeover in their crease. "There was obviously some room to make a difference," and it was up to general manager Stan Bowman to find those few extra saves that could have been the difference between a Western Conference banner and a Stanley Cup banner being raised at one of the past two home openers.

We knew Bowman was in the market. We did not know, however, that he would change out his entire goaltending department by the midway point of the season, which is exactly what has happened here in Edmonton.

"(Goaltending was) definitely something that we talked about in the summer," began head coach Kris Knoblauch. "On changing it, what were our options. And there really weren't any options at that time.

"As the season went on, we just felt that we had to find something. We had to do something."

Jarry has been hurt twice this season. Thus, the reticence to put Pickard on waivers.

Ingram was acquired for nothing from Utah, had been held out of the Mammoth's training camp, and was coming out of the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program.

He was as wild as a wildcard can be, and has since turned into perhaps the sneaky best trade in the NHL this season.

"He was playing in (Bakersfield) and was average at best there," said Knoblauch. "Now he gets an opportunity and he's been phenomenal (.917 per cent). For a so-called backup goalie? I'm not sure there's many backup goalies that are playing as well as he is right now."

And where does all of this leave the trusty Pickard? Sadly, he's drawn the shortest straw of them all.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

For a guy who started and won a game in the Stanley Cup Final last year, his current situation is the roughest of them all.

"Yeah, it's been tough," he said. "It's been painful, for sure."

The beloved and competent backup is the current No. 3 in Edmonton. He's not even dressing for games these days, a certified practice goalie who may not play another game here, barring injury to Jarry or Ingram.

"You know, it hasn't been my best season. I don't love how it got to this point, but I get it," he said. "I can't be boiling mad coming to the rink every day, because that'll just be counterproductive for what I need to do.

"I don't like it. I'm not having fun with it, but I'm still coming to work every day, working hard... Because you never know what's going to happen. I have to be ready for my next opportunity."

Pro sports can be a kick in the nards sometimes.

The Oilers likely don't get through Vancouver two springs ago, or Los Angeles and Vegas last spring, without Pickard jumping in to make competitive playoff starts when Skinner faltered.

Yet today, Jarry and Ingram are the two new dogs, and Pickard is tied to a post out back, waiting for a walk that's likely never going to come.

"I have conversations with the coaching staff and different things, maybe a little bit more stern. But as a teammate, nothing changes for me," he said. "A guy in my position — lower contract, not very long of a contract — as a general manager, you're always probably looking to the future. It's tough for me. I've played a lot of good hockey here. You never know what the future holds.

"You never know — I could be right back in there at some point here soon. But yeah, it does suck, for sure," he said. "But don't feel bad for me. I've been through it before. I'm going to be 34 soon, and I've seen all these kinds of situations.

"Yeah, it's been painful for me."

The goaltending carousel has turned 360 degrees in Edmonton, and it's always the same when it does.

Someone is on it, having the ride of their life. And someone is under it, getting ground into the dirt.

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Sportsnet.ca / What's at stake for Maple Leafs over next two weeks

Justin Bourne

TORONTO — In roughly two weeks, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the rest of the NHL will break for the Olympics, with the last games being on Feb. 5, and the return to action coming Feb. 25.

The Leafs are done even sooner than that, though, with their own schedule wrapping up Feb. 3 against the Edmonton Oilers, which is just 13 days away.

Over those 13 days, the Leafs — who are already talking about being tired and rundown and battling injuries — play a staggering eight games. To say they'll limp into the Olympic break is an understatement; they might get pushed there on a gurney.

What compounds the burden of the schedule, though, is that these games are massive, and can't be shrugged away. On the other side of

the break, they play just four games before the trade deadline, and decisions on direction will surely be made before then.

The Leafs wake up Wednesday just two points behind the Boston Bruins for the final playoff spot, with one game in hand. They're three behind the Sabres with the same games played. By points percentage, they're also ninth in the East, just ahead of the Philadelphia Flyers, but the Florida Panthers, Washington Capitals, Ottawa Senators and New Jersey Devils are right there, just a breath behind them. It's tight.

With eight games worth of points to be handed out over these 13 days, the Leafs have the potential to greatly alter their standing here and, in turn, their direction, potentially for years to come.

The hard part is that there's so many teams in that mix, that there are really only two outcomes now: You win quite a bit and stay in the fight, or you collect about half the available points (or fewer), and someone, likely multiple someones, plays at a better pace than that and passes you. There's just too many teams in that pile to lose half the time and stay afloat.

To reiterate, it's win and keep pace, or lose and fall out.

If the Leafs win some — let's say they win at their current winning percentage (.571) — that would mean taking nine or 10 of the possible 16 points. That would probably be enough to stay in the fight, and probably enough for the Leafs management to say, "OK, well, we can't be sellers here, let's add to the group."

No team — particularly one with prime-aged stars such as Auston Matthews and William Nylander — who have made playoffs nine straight years, would suddenly pull the ripcord and parachute themselves out of the race. It just wouldn't happen, that's not the point of sports, let alone the point of selling sports tickets.

So that's the bar. Nine points is the absolute floor, and they probably fall a bit behind with just nine. At 10, they tread water (or improve slightly) and at 11 they start making up ground.

Pull that off, and they buy at the deadline. They'll add a D, though it won't be one that delights the fanbase too much. Maybe they'll track down a scorer of some variety. In the end, it would be mostly thrift shopping, hope to unearth some overlooked gem that fits their needs perfectly.

I suppose they could also be great over this stretch, get 12 points or more and feel really good about themselves as Nylander comes back with Matthew Knies about to get some rest, and they swing a little bigger.

But there's also the very real, very concerning option that they don't fare well coming up here. That one, unfortunately, is not tough to imagine. They just played Minnesota without Nylander and with Knies hobbling around after a tough road trip, and got their lunch fed to them, and followed it up by talking about being tired.

Well, what's going to change over the upcoming stretch? Isn't that going to be the same group they'll be rolling out?

And who they're playing over this stretch, well, this is what you get when you squander a generous early portion of the schedule.

They've got the Detroit Red Wings, who are second in the Atlantic (and 7-2-1 in their last 10), followed by the Golden Knights, who are first in the Pacific (7-2-1 last 10), followed by the Avalanche, who are first in the entire NHL. They'll see the red-hot Buffalo Sabres and the aforementioned Oilers over this stretch of eight games, too.

Hell, if they lose to Detroit, Vegas and Colorado over their next three games, the whole "buyers or sellers?" debate could be all but over by Sunday night.

You can see the stakes at play in the coming days, and particularly this Wednesday night.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

It seems like the Atlantic should get five teams in the playoffs, but tell me which three teams will miss out?

Ottawa, which is above .500 at 23-19-7 and tied with Florida at 53 points, feels like is in the most disarray. But the Senators' underlying numbers are so good, you also feel like if they just got some saves for a run of a few weeks, they'd climb the standings quick, and they're a whopping three whole points behind the Leafs. Like, they're "last," and they're right there.

It feels like Detroit and Montreal, particularly Montreal, aren't going to fade enough to drop out. The Bruins are 8-2-0 in their last 10. It feels like Buffalo wins every night.

So, who? Three, maybe four of these teams will fall short. There's not much room for error here.

For the Leafs, like many teams, there's the fantasy version of their season that plays out like this: They thrive over the next two weeks and become buyers. They add someone like Dougie Hamilton, and maybe a scoring forward, somehow. Nylander comes back, Knies gets healthy, Anthony Stolarz gets hot, and hell, maybe Chris Tanev even comes back in the playoffs. (Yes, there's a salary cap in the playoffs, but it's just for your dressed players, so you can exceed what you'd usually have on the roster some.)

The Atlantic has lots of good teams, but no one is spectacular, and if it all comes together at the right time for the Leafs, they're among the teams going "You never know" about their best-case outcome.

On the other end of the spectrum, if the tired, injured Leafs go up against the league's best teams and go ice-cold, it could be a full pivot.

What would Oliver Ekman-Larsson be worth to a playoff team, with his exceptional season, term and cheap contract? How about Scott Laughton, or even Bobby McMann, if they wanted to really sell? Fans don't want to see those guys go, but if they're likely to miss the playoffs, they can't really afford to let good assets leave for nothing.

That sort of selling could impact the team for next year and beyond, as they'd then have new assets to spend but a worse roster, with GM Brad Treliving deciding how to try to improve in the off-season. There's just no telling the long-term impact that could have on this group, which could impact Matthews' next contract decision.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the next two weeks of the Leafs season will have a big impact on where they go from here.

Wednesday against the Red Wings (Sportsnet, Sportsnet+, 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT), well, there's no changes to their Monday lineup. Joseph Woll will start again. They've got a fresh crack at a Wings team that's had their number this year, in a game they almost have to have.

Yes, those are the more dramatic possible outcomes for this team, and the likely one probably falls somewhere in the middle. But make no mistake about it: It may not be the playoffs, but I'm not sure the stakes would be higher even if it were.

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1376761 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Eight things we want to see from the Senators before the Olympic break

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — After last year's playoff push, playoff hopes were supposed to be reasonable in the nation's capital this season. Instead, the Ottawa Senators are another bad week away from planning their golf trips.

Here are eight things we want to see from the Senators in the eight games remaining before the Olympic break to get them into the post-season.

When I'm not writing about the Senators, I work as a mental health professional. You quickly learn that anyone — even the people you think have it all — can suffer mightily because of their mental health.

Earlier this week, Linus Ullmark addressed his personal leave in a TSN interview that revealed something of his battle with anxiety and depression, where he felt he lost himself, was broken and needed help. It led to bouts of severe anxiety in the Senators' game against Toronto on Dec. 27, which resulted in him seeking help. The interview was a powerful display of vulnerability, describing his bouts of depression while playing in the NHL: the strife, the unfounded rumours about his marriage that he was furious about and how Victor Hedman helped him on his journey to a more tranquil mind. Maybe the most fascinating part of his interview was his assertion that the unsupported rumours that swirled about his leave of absence are exactly why professional athletes aren't speaking about their own emotions and mental health.

As hockey fans, we love sports. Sometimes we have to remember that our favourite teams or players aren't robots or content on PuckPedia roster boards. They are human, just like us.

Cut back on PK turnovers

The last team with the worst penalty kill in the league to make the playoffs was the 2023-24 Islanders.

Unfortunately for Senators fans, Ilya Sorokin isn't stopping the pucks that leak through Ottawa's penalty-kill diamond formation. Which means it's probably a good time to get yourself out of the shorthanded basement, if you're coach Travis Green and the Senators.

The biggest issue has been puck clearance. Last weekend, on three occasions, a Senator had the puck with time to clear but failed to get it out, leading directly to a goal against.

First, it was Claude Giroux against Montreal.

Then, Tyler Kleven and Tim Stutzle against Detroit.

Also, a historically bad league-worst goaltending issue only accentuates the penalty-kill problems. Some cleaner zone exits and paddle stops would do the trick.

The good news for Senators fans is that against Columbus on Tuesday, James Reimer was excellent while shorthanded. Goalies can make or break a penalty kill.

Dylan Cozens has to translate his offence to five-on-five

This season, Dylan Cozens has entered the upper echelon of power-play performers across the NHL. He's tied for 10th in power-play points, with 21. But at five-on-five, he has only 16 points. Quite the dichotomy.

"There's definitely more (offence needed from me at) five-on-five," Cozens told Sportsnet.ca. "For me, it's a different kind of play than I'm used to; we get a lot more O-zone time. And I'm used to, obviously, the run-and-gun, like odd-man rushes and stuff (from Buffalo).

"It's a part of my game that I want to develop more is O-zone (play)."

Cozens is fourth on the team in expected goals share at five-on-five; however, the Senators' shooting percentage drops to seven per cent with him on the ice, two percentage points lower than the league average. On Tuesday, Cozens made a great pass to Ridly Greig, who potted home a goal at five-on-five. The Senators need this good play-driving to lead to



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

tangible results. An uptick in five-on-five offence for Cozens is what the Senators sorely need from their second-line centre.

Tyler Kleven has to elevate his game

Last year's playoffs were a breakout party for Tyler Kleven. This season, however, clean breakouts from Kleven have been hard to come by. On the weekend, two failed clearances from Kleven, one on an icing when he had Drake Batherson wide open against Montreal, and another shorthanded in Detroit, resulted in opponents' goals seconds later.

However, since Jan. 8, when Kleven has been on the ice, the Senators have outscored opponents 6-1, with an excellent 58 per cent expected goal share. He's found a good partnership with Jordan Spence: both are capable of a brainfart but overall have been an excellent third pairing.

Kleven described the pairing as "peanut butter and jelly": Kleven's hulking size matched with Spence's diminutive stature. In Columbus, Kleven made a silky move to score his first goal in 61 games. If this trend leads to him earning some confidence, at his best, he makes the left side of the Senators' defence formidable, which is what they need to salvage their season.

Tkachuk has to play with force

There was growing worry from some in Sens Nation that Brady Tkachuk wasn't playing to his standards. But, recently, he's looked like one of the game's best power forwards, the one Sens fans have grown to love. Tkachuk has seven points in his last four games.

On Tuesday, Tim Stutzle graciously deferred to Tkachuk for an empty-net goal, likely to give Tkachuk some confidence.

His coach wasn't worried.

"He should be confident," Green said last week about Tkachuk.

"I think 80-some points would be pretty good for him, if there's any room for anyone to complain about his point total, to be honest. Brady brings a lot to the game, other than it's not about points, but he gets points."

Tkachuk has been revving his game up when his team desperately needs its captain.

"I don't think defencemen enjoy going back against him when he's on his game," said Green.

More saves needed

Ottawa needs saves, whether it's by Reimer, who has put up back-to-back strong performances, or a mentally refreshed Ullmark, who's closing in on a return.

Reimer has a .911 save percentage in two games, a level of performance that Ottawa needed. Those kinds of performances have been few and far between this season for the Senators, and he could be the solution, even when Ullmark returns.

One goaltender likely out of the mix is youngster Leevi Merilainen, who too many times looked overwhelmed at the NHL level, especially with Ullmark on the sidelines.

After Jake Sanderson's heat-of-the-moment "you gotta make more than 10 saves" comment about Merilainen's effort against Montreal, Sanderson apologized to his young tendy.

"First off, I'm pretty embarrassed," said Sanderson. "I think that's the situation where, after a game, you've got to take a few more minutes. Take a few deep breaths.

"I still feel really bad. Leevi's a great guy. And I think that's not what good teammates do. You don't tear each other down. You build each other up, especially after a game like that. I'm pretty embarrassed."

It was a remorseful gesture from Sanderson, who has kept Ottawa afloat this season. But the bottom line is the team needs more saves from its goalies to have a shot at the post-season.

Shane Pinto has to return to his pre-injury levels

Shane Pinto hasn't been the same since an injury in early December that kept him out for nearly four weeks. Pinto has two goals and seven points in 12 games since returning; he had 12 goals and 22 points in 27 games before his injury. He was on pace for 36 goals.

"I still think I could be so much better," Pinto told Sportsnet.ca. "(With the injury, obviously, I'm trying to get back and trying to feel like myself again.

"I struggled a little bit coming back to get my timing back, and rustiness. ... Took a couple games, but I'm starting to feel better with that."

The analytics also show a stark difference in Pinto's play, pre-injury versus post injury.

Most Sens fans know the trendline: the Senators are 77-17-10 when Pinto records a point.

Jake Sanderson is already one of the best defensive defencemen in the NHL at the young age of 23. He's on pace for career highs in every offensive statistical category. Sanderson is one goal away from matching his career high in goals. He has had 13 points in his last 12 games. Match that with Sanderson ranking fourth in expected goals allowed among defencemen who have played a minimum of 500 minutes. After Stutzle said Sanderson was a top-two defenceman in the league, the hyperbole started to look like a prediction.

"I definitely told him to say that," Sanderson said, joking.

"Get a little stir in the media," he added, laughing.

Sanderson is no laughing matter when it comes to the 2025-26 Norris Trophy consideration, and the Senators will be better for it if he continues his elite play.

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Sportsnet.ca / Patrick Kane throws support behind Canadian-born Brian Daboll as Bills' next coach

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Patrick Kane might not know football, but he knows who he likes.

The Buffalo native hadn't tweeted in more than two months, yet Wednesday morning, he felt compelled to endorse his pal Brian Daboll as the next head coach of his hometown Bills.

"Let's go bring him home!" Kane quote-tweeted Adam Schefter's report that Daboll was a candidate to replace the long-serving Sean McDermott, who was fired Monday.

Within a couple hours, Kane's tweet received more than 2,000 "likes."

"Try to act like I know what I'm talking about," said a smiling Kane Wednesday morning, following the Detroit Red Wings' morning skate in Toronto. His Red Wings face the Maple Leafs on Wednesday Night Hockey on Sportsnet and Sportsnet+, starting at 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT.

"Daboll, he's a good friend. He kind of grew up in the Buffalo area and went to school at Saint Francis, which is where some of my buddies went to school."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

Daboll, 50, was born in Welland, Ont., and raised by his grandparents in nearby West Seneca, N.Y. After attending Saint Francis High School, he attended the University of Rochester. He is not a Canadian citizen.

Kane explained that he met Daboll in New York, when the superstar winger was playing for the Rangers, and Daboll was coaching in the Giants.

"Just kinda crossed paths a little bit. So, ever since then, just kind of stay in touch," Kane said.

"I actually talked to him on the phone the other day about maybe becoming the next Bills head coach — and then saw he's getting an interview. So, I thought I'd throw that out there. But didn't really know what type of traction it would get. So, we'll see."

The Chicago Blackhawks icon kept a keen eye on his go-to NFL teams, the Bills and Bears, during last weekend's nail-biting playoff action.

"It's tough, right? I mean, I don't really know the rules or anything, but you hear one thing from one person, it makes you a little bit more angry with what's going on in the game, whether it's a catch, interception, pass interference, all that stuff," Kane said of the controversial calls surrounding the Bills' overtime loss to Denver.

"I'm not gonna stand here and act like I'm Bills Mafia jumping through tables or anything like that. But it's always nice to see the team do well, the city do well.

"Same thing with the Bears too, right? Like, I think it was awesome what they did. And seeing them win (their wild-card game) is just so good for the city, too. So it's always good to see the teams do well."

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TSN.CA / Kane hoping to make history in front of friends and family

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs and Detroit Red Wings held optional skates at Scotiabank Arena on Wednesday.

Patrick Kane is just two points away from tying Mike Modano for the most points ever recorded by an American-born player.

"Whenever it happens, it happens, but hopefully sooner rather than later," the Red Wings winger said. "Yeah, it'd be nice to get a couple tonight."

Kane, who has amassed 1,372 points in 1,337 games, is from Buffalo and is hoping to make history in front of some friends on Wednesday night when the Red Wings take on the Leafs at Scotiabank Arena.

"Couple buddies coming in," the 37-year-old confirmed with a grin. "You never know with my dad. I mean, he might show up, he might not."

Kane has eight multi-point games this season with his only three-point effort coming against the Leafs back in October.

"Body feels good, which is awesome," said Kane, who hit the 500-goal milestone earlier this month. "Feel good about my game. As a player, as an offensive player, you're always hoping for more production. I think there's definitely more of that to come. I feel like I've been a little unlucky with certain things."

Kane has racked up 29 points in 35 games this season. He has five points in the past six games and likes the chemistry on his line with Alex DeBrincat and Andrew Copp.

"The drive goes away from people later on in life," said Wings coach Todd McLellan. "It's hard to keep it up, but his drive has not diminished one bit. In fact, I think with some of these attainable goals, milestones if you will, his drive has actually increased and he's excited about being at the rink."

Kane always enjoys going up against Leafs centre Auston Matthews, who is second in scoring among active American players with 769 points in 672 games.

"One day he'll probably be in the shoes I am right now," Kane predicted. "That's the guy, right? That's the next guy for a lot of American kids that they're looking up to now. He's such a special player in a big market and scores goals as good as anyone pretty much in the league."

Matthews is heating up since Christmas with 11 goals in 12 games.

"Seems like he's been very driven lately," Kane noted. "He's kind of leading their team right now, so definitely a guy we gotta watch out for. But always fun to go up against him."

After a slow start production-wise, at least by his lofty standards, Matthews is looking more and more like the guy who scored 69 goals in the 2023-24 season.

"He's a 70-goal scorer," said McLellan. "Those don't grow on trees. And when you're hot and you're feeling good, you can score from just about anywhere on the ice. He's feeling it right now. He can take over a game just on his own. So, we'll have to be aware of that."

Leafs winger Max Domi lights up when asked about playing with Kane in Chicago during the 2022-23 season.

"He's the best," Domi said. "I look up to him like an older brother. He gets mad at me for saying it, but I always looked up to him as a kid."

Kane recalls hearing about that for the first time when the pair shared a ride together during a thunderstorm in New York.

"We went to the US Open, the tennis, myself and my agent, we couldn't find a ride after," Kane said. "It was raining pretty hard and we jumped in with Tie [Domi] and Max. Tie was in the front seat just kind of giving it to Max, like, 'Tell Kaner how much you loved him when you were younger.'"

"When I got to play with him, it was certainly a highlight of my whole career," Domi said.

Domi's love for passing the puck was cultivating by watching YouTube videos of Kane, among others, growing up. Domi is now passing along some of the lessons he picked up from Kane to Leafs rookie Easton Cowan.

Domi and Cowan worked on backhand saucer passes at the Leafs optional skate on Wednesday.

"Just how to keep them a bit flatter and follow through a bit more," said Cowan. "He's a great passer and one of the game's best, so just learning from him has helped me out a lot."

With the schedule so busy, most of the Leafs opted to stay off the ice on Wednesday morning. Cowan and Domi were among just five regulars to gear up.

"Love getting out there with this guy," said Domi while nodding towards Cowan, who sits beside him in the dressing room. "Obviously, just working at the game and then trying to keep the hands fresh."

Domi, Cowan and Kane are all alumni of the London Knights.

Craig Berube pulled Joseph Woll after the goalie allowed five goals on 29 shots in the first two periods of Monday's loss to the Minnesota Wild. But the coach will go back to Woll once again on Wednesday against the Wings.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 22, 2026

"Tough game," Berube said of Monday's loss. "With the travel [back from the West] and everything, our team wasn't at our best. I don't think we gave him the opportunity to be successful in that game. He's been our guy, so that's why I'm going with him."

The games are coming fast and furious, but Berube isn't concerned about Woll's workload.

"I'm not overly worried right now," Berube said. "I think he's in a good place. We rotated on the road. I feel he's fine in that department."

Woll and Dennis Hildeby split the four starts during the recent road trip with Hildeby picking up the win on Saturday in Winnipeg.

Woll has allowed 11 goals while losing his last two starts. Hildeby's save percentage (.912 in 19 games) is now better than Woll's (.910 in 20 games).

John Gibson (.902 save percentage in 30 games) gets the start for the Wings.

The Leafs, who are 2-2-1 in their last five games, enter Wednesday's game two points out of a playoff spot.

"Huge game," said Berube. "You gotta take a playoff-type approach to it. You don't want to get ahead of yourself. Just tonight's game, that's all that matters, but you gotta have that mindset, in my opinion, right now."

The Wings have won all three games against the Leafs and are eight points ahead of them in the Atlantic Division standings.

"We got to get back to our game," said defenceman Troy Stecher. "Kind of a one-off last game, and understanding the magnitude of tonight. Division rival and these points are crucial."

After missing Tuesday's practice for maintenance, Stecher skated on Wednesday morning and is ready to play.

The Wings have missed the playoffs in nine straight seasons, but look poised to end that drought this year.

Berube points to the development of Moritz Seider, 24, and Simon Edvinsson, 22, as a key part of the turnaround.

"There's a certain amount of games defencemen need to play in the NHL before they're at a real good level," Berube said. "And I think they're there. I think that pairing is excellent. It's big, skates, mobile, they do it all."

Seider is averaging 25 minutes and 16 seconds of ice time per game, which ranks fifth overall.

"He's a workhorse," said McLellan. "If we were rating our engines, he's the No. 1 engine on our team. He doesn't seem to tire. He doesn't wear down ... He'll come off for a 15-second rest and then it's like he's ready to go again."

McLellan notes that the respect for Seider is growing around the league. So, how much time does the German Olympian spend thinking about the potential to be in the Norris Trophy mix?

"Zero times, to be honest," Seider said. "There's so much other stuff going on. I got plenty of work to do on the ice. I don't read any comments. I don't even read the standings. It's just too much noise from the outside. We play so many games and if I would check the standings I would see teams switching back and forth every single minute. So, it's not worth it and it's definitely not worth listening to any outsiders, in my opinion, because I know what's going on in this locker room and it's very special. I'm just very proud to be a part of that team."

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