



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 27, 2026

The Athletic

Why William Carrier — ‘strong as an ox’ — is a key cog in Hurricanes’ relentless style

By: Cory Lavalette

There was no point awarded to Carrier — there often isn’t for a forward who has never exceeded 25 points in a season in his decade-long NHL career — but his teammates acknowledged his pivotal role in a play that allowed Carolina to secure a point in the standings and earn another in overtime.

“Will did a great job getting on the wall there, keeping it in,” said linemate Jordan Martinook, whose net-front presence on the play resulted in the puck bouncing in off him.

If coach Rod Brind’Amour has the physique of an award-winning bodybuilder and Andrei Svechnikov the chiseled body of a Greek statue, Carrier is the brawny foot soldier — square jaw, steely glare and the resolve to always keep pushing forward, shift after shift, game after game.

“I think anytime Will’s out there, you notice him,” Brind’Amour said recently of Carrier. “He’s one of the more physically imposing players around. And I guess at the end of the day, no matter how many shifts he has, you seem to notice every one of them for that reason. It’s a guy knowing his game and really excelling at it.”

The 31-year-old Montreal native, who has six goals and five assists in 41 games this season, has carved out an NHL career as the type of crash-and-bang forward defensemen hate playing against. He’s 6-foot-2 and 214 pounds, but that doesn’t fully illustrate what a handful Carrier is on the ice.

“He’s the strongest guy I’ve ever played with,” said Mark Jankowski, who has been centering Carrier on Carolina’s fourth line of late. “When he has the puck or any sort of battle — stick battle, anything — it’s incredible. Just in practice, when you’re going to battle against him, in my career so far, he’s the hardest guy to go against.”

Carrier’s strength is complemented by the consistency in his play. While his point totals throughout his career are modest — he’s cracked double digits in goals once and eclipsed 20 points twice — his north-south play and determined effort make him someone his coaches and teammates can count on regardless of where he is in the lineup.

“He’s a guy that comes to work ready to go and takes care of himself and works hard and follows our identity to a ‘T,’” Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. “Just hard-working, forechecking, hard to play against, being smart at the right times and just constantly putting the pressure on. He’s been a great addition.”

That addition came two summers ago, when Carrier signed a six-year, \$12 million contract to leave Vegas and come to Raleigh.

“He’s just very consistent, and his game does not waver,” Brind’Amour said of the reasons the team targeted Carrier at the opening of 2024 free agency. “And that’s something we really value in our team, and it’s also hard to play against. That guy is hard to play against and very effective. So that’s a pretty easy signing on our part.”

One would think the security of a long-term deal for a bottom-six player was the driving force behind Carrier’s decision to sign with Carolina. Not true.

“I wanted to win,” said Carrier, who won the Stanley Cup with Vegas in 2023. “They’ve had a great team here since five, six years. They win 50 games a year. And there’s a reason for it. And we could tell by the way they play. You want to pick a team that plays the way you want to play. It needs to fit with it, and I think it was a perfect fit.”

The wear and tear of playing for a Western Conference team also made moving east attractive to Carrier and his young family.

“I’m home a lot more, I’ll be honest with you, with the family and less travel,” he said. “Guys here screw around about the travel and stuff. It’s nothing like that out west. Out west, it’s terrible. You’re gone for two weeks every two weeks, right?”

“So it’s great. I’ve been home, and the family’s enjoying it and it’s not that far. My parents can watch every game. I’ve been loving it, to be honest with you, and the wife is happy. So it makes a happy life around here.”

Even without the grind of more grueling travel, Carrier has continued to battle the injury bug in his first season and a half with the Hurricanes. Carrier has played more than 70 games just once in his career, and no more than 56 in the last three seasons. That included playing 43 games during last year’s regular season, though he did play in all 15 of Carolina’s playoff games.

“He’s been banged up a little,” Brind’Amour said. “I think that’s plagued him a little bit over his career, but it’s the way he plays. He knows one way to play, and that’s what we love about him.”

Carrier’s 98 hits are tops on the Hurricanes, and his willingness to punish opposing defensemen leads to turnovers and scoring chances for his linemates.

“They’re kind of checking their shoulders to see if it’s him coming back,” Jankowski said of defensemen facing Carrier on the forecheck. “Or even if they don’t have time to check their shoulder, they’re just already looking to get the puck away and just maybe throw it away or make a bad play or something like that. So once you get that implanted in their mind, which he does, it’s beneficial to us.”



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Which is why his teammates love playing with him. While Carrier has been playing primarily with Jankowski of late, he's spent nearly 600 of the 900-plus five-on-five minutes he's played since joining the Hurricanes alongside Staal and Martinook.

"He's simple and direct and strong as an ox," Martinook said. "When he gets people on his back, you can't really get him off the puck. And I think that's what works so well with me and Jordan. When our line's going well, we're playing in the O zone, we're wearing teams down, and he's as good as anybody at doing it. He's conscious defensively, so we can play against really anybody."

Adding Carrier also meant bringing another player into the room who has won the Cup — "the more the merrier," Staal said.

"I've lost one, I've won one," Carrier said of his two trips to the Stanley Cup Final. "Big moments — in playoffs, it's a whole different game, right? So you've got to show up and every detail counts. One screwup, and it's in your net. So it's all about detail, and my games kind of dialed in for that."

He's also an addition that reinforces the Hurricanes' culture of hard work and determination, something that can be passed on to the next wave of Carolina players.

That includes defenseman Charles Alexis Legault, a Montreal native who is nine years younger and grew up blocks from Carrier's home. Carrier said Legault "played it cool" when talking to a player he looked up to in his youth.

"I guess my name was kind of big right when he grew up," Carrier said. "He told me that, 'When I grew up, your name was all over.' We grew up in the same little — we're from Montreal, but these little towns and a couple streets down."

Carrier already ranks third since relocation among Quebec-born players with 84 regular-season games played with the Hurricanes, trailing only Martin Gelinias (348) and Kevin Dineen (121). If he can stay healthy, he could surpass Gelinias by the time his contract expires in 2030.

It's not something he's concerning himself with, instead focusing on keeping the Hurricanes near the top of the standings.

"And try to win another Cup," he said. "I mean, it's always the goal year after year."



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Tulsky talks contracts, trades, Hurricanes' goaltending | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

In Part 1 of his interview with North State Journal, Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsky discussed his team seasons, and the integration of new and young players into Carolina's lineup. In the latter half of the discussion, Tulsky talked about contract negotiations with key players, the team's goaltending, Jesperi Kotkaniemi's status and what moves he might look to do before the trade deadline.

Have there been any contract extension talks with Alexander Nikishin and his representation?

We talked about it before the season, but given that he had just gotten here, it made sense to wait a little bit.

Jesperi Kotkaniemi has been a frequent healthy scratch this season and has been mentioned in trade rumors. What's his status?

Just as a point of order: A lot of the missed games were because we were being cautious with the timeline as he came back from an injury. But he has had some scratches, which has led to teams calling to see what our plan was with him. We have a really deep team, which makes ice time hard to come by — almost everyone on our team could play a bigger role somewhere else. If there's something that makes sense, then of course we'll look at it, but the first priority is trying to win a Cup, and having this kind of depth is part of our path.

Do you view a possible trade as an opportunity to give him a fresh start, and if you are able to trade him, do you think his contract allows for you to get something of value in return?

I don't really want to get into hypotheticals. As you know, we never stop looking for ways to improve our team, but of course everyone understands that we aren't going to make a move just to make a move.

You certainly must consider yourself lucky to have ended up with Brandon Bussi given the season he's having. That said, there was work put in to identify him as a target for the team. Can you give a peek into how long the team has had an eye on him? Did you approach him when he was a free agent in the summer?

Our goalie group watched him a lot in college and liked him then. We followed his time in Providence closely. We didn't really talk to him this summer because the timing didn't work — we had already signed (Amir) Miftakhov and traded for (Cayden) Primeau before free agency opened. But while I can't claim that we knew he would do this, we did see him as someone who had talent and should get a chance somewhere.

How would you characterize current contract negotiations with Bussi and his team? Are you confident the two sides will be able to agree to an extension?

We've been talking to his agent about what an extension might look like since very early in the season. It's obviously an unusual situation, but we've had some really good conversations about how to approach it.

Are you prepared to make a long-term commitment to him given his relatively small sample size?

You're right to ask about the sample size. We've shown over the years that we're willing to gamble on early signings when the deal is right, but sometimes the sweet spot for both sides is a shorter deal. We've talked about a lot of options here.

Are you confident with your overall goaltending and the depth at that position?

Yes, absolutely. Obviously, it hurt to lose (Pyotr) Kochetkov. But Bussi has helped us cover for that and put us back in roughly the situation we had entering the year. I know there is a lot of discussion out there about (Frederik) Andersen, but he's been playing a lot better than what his basic NHL.com stats would say.

If you go through the video, there are a lot of goals where a passing sequence left him hung out to dry or where he was well positioned but the shot was perfectly tucked under the bar or inside the post, and you just have to tip your cap to the shooter. It's natural for people to say, "Sometimes you just have to make a save," but he's given us some saves and not gotten rewarded for it.

In the second Florida game, he made a huge save on a 2-on-0, but then a shot that was going 6 feet wide of the net hit a defender's skate and went in. Which reminds me: In Freddie's games in the month of December, our skaters put more goals into our own net than into the other team's net. It's tough for him to collect wins when that's happening, so I don't think his record tells the whole story here.

You often say the team can always get better until you have the 20 best players in the world on the ice for you. What would you say is your team's biggest need ahead of the trade deadline?

Truthfully, I don't think there is a clear need. We have one of the deepest teams in the league; I don't think there's a single spot in our lineup that's a must-fix crisis. But as you say, there are always opportunities out there to get better, so we're spending a lot of time right now exploring options and making sure we don't miss an opportunity to improve.



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You have a lot of players with some type of no-trade clause. Does that make any potential trades more difficult?

Not really. I mean, I don't think we're really trying to move players out right now; we're trying to win a Cup. But even if we did, a lot of those clauses still give us plenty of flexibility — letting a player rule out a handful of places he really doesn't like usually wouldn't prevent you from getting a deal done.

The 9-1 win over the Panthers early this month seemed like a catharsis for the players and coaching staff. How important do you think it was to make a statement against a team that has beaten you twice in the conference final and rallied for two wins earlier in the year?

You're going to hate my answer because it's not good media content. The business team will hate it too, for that matter, so maybe I'm supposed to be a good soldier and just talk about it like a big regular season game is a mini Cup. But truthfully, I think a big regular season game is still just a game. You get a little more hyped up for it and maybe the play is a hair more intense, but in the end, when it's over, we move on and the next game is the new most important game of the season.

Do you think this year's team offers the best chance to win a Stanley Cup since Tom Dundon bought the franchise?///

It's hard to say because with all the injuries, I feel like I still haven't really seen this year's team play. But it certainly has that potential if things come together.

Hurricanes' Tulsy reflects on season so far | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes have seen their usual lineup of players miss more than 100 games to injuries this season, most notably Jaccob Slavin being out 40 games due to a pair of ailments.

Despite that, Carolina finds itself right where it normally is: atop the Metropolitan Division standings with one of the NHL's best records at 32-15-5.

In the first part of a two-part interview with North State Journal, Tulsy discussed the first 52 games of the season.

How would you assess the season so far?

There are a lot of ways we could be better. That said, we have dealt with the kind of injury trouble that can absolutely wreck a season, but we still sit in a tie for first in the conference and have a six-point lead in the division (Note: It's now eight points after Saturday's win in Ottawa). I can't wait to someday see what this team looks like when it is healthy.

What improvement has this season's team shown compared to what you saw from last year's team?

The depth has really stood out this year. Last year, we were so tight against the cap that we had to run a very lean roster, and we were lucky to stay healthy for most of the year. But when we lost a couple of players in the playoffs, we really felt it. This year, we've had stretches where we were missing six or seven players and, well, of course we still felt it, but we were more equipped to get through it.

How do you think your two biggest offseason additions, Nikolaj Ehlers and K'Andre Miller, have fit in on and off the ice in their first months with the team?

They've been great. Coming to a new team and adapting is harder than people might think. A player can go over video and understand what we want them to do in certain situations, but hockey is an extremely fast game, and it takes time to get to the point where those decisions are instinctive and immediate. Both players had the physical tools to do what we need, and they have the mental drive to contribute

at the highest level they can, and now you can see it in their game. And you asked about off-ice fit — they're both just really good people who have fit well into our family.

The team was labeled as "boring" by some last season. I know those statements didn't impact how the team wants to play, however, it does seem you rely more on rush chances this season than in previous years. What led to the shift from being a primarily dump-and-chase team to one that is perhaps leaning more on high-end skill?

That label always struck me as crazy. We pressure all over the ice and constantly attack, and I think that makes the game much more exciting than when a team just packs it in defensively and waits for a mistake. As for the play off the rush, we've just been steadily adding skill to the roster over the years. (Jordan) Staal and (Jordan) Martinook are still playing the same game they always have, but as we've added forwards like Ehlers and (Taylor) Hall and (Jackson) Blake and (Logan) Stankoven to the mix, we've become more and more dangerous off the rush.

Depth has been important this season with the number of injuries on your roster. How much of a focus last summer was getting deeper with signings like Mike Reilly and Cayden Primeau?

Yeah, that was a real goal for us last summer. Our cap situation left us room to have a little more depth than last year, when we spent most of the first half of the year with just 12 and six on the roster. We wanted to take advantage of that flexibility to add a little more veteran depth — we knew we had prospects like (Joel) Nystrom, (Charles Alexis) Legault, (Bradly) Nadeau and (Justin) Robidas who would be in the mix, but it is good to be able to ease them into the transition to the NHL.

Have you been surprised by the impact made by some of your young players who were perhaps not expected to make a big impact this soon, particularly your young defensemen?

Yes and no. I know Nystrom's impact came as a big surprise to a lot of people, but internally we knew this was a possibility. Even going back to last year, if he hadn't gotten hurt, he would have been in the conversation to play games



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when we had injuries in the playoffs. So I guess I'd say that we hoped he could step in and play like this, but it's a positive to see things play out the way we hoped. And I'd say the same for Legault looking comfortable in early action before his injury.

Speaking of young defensemen, expectations were high for Alexander Nikishin. How do you feel he's handled his first full NHL season?

He's been very good. You make an interesting comparison about expectations. The public wasn't talking about Nystrom much, and people who didn't know much about him were surprised at how good he's been. Expectations for Nikishin were sky-high, and even going back to last year, I've been trying to caution people that the expectations are fair, but the timeline might not be what they thought. There was a lot for him to learn — not just understand on paper, but like we said about Ehlers and Miller, it had to get built into his instincts so he can make decisions without hesitation. That takes time, especially for a rookie who's learning so much about the way

we play. He's made a lot of progress in the first half of the year, and we just expect that to continue.

What's your assessment of how the coaching staff has handled Nikishin's development and how the player has reacted to that?

Coaches see a lot about the game that fans don't see. There are always going to be things that you won't pick up if you don't know what to look for. On our first goal against Buffalo the other day, maybe you noticed (Sean) Walker stepping up in the neutral zone to break up an exit and create the chance for us. But if his gap is a little bit looser there and he can't jump the pass, I don't think many people will notice something like that. It just looks like a routine exit by Buffalo that you don't think twice about. But the coaches would notice and would be talking to him about it and trying to help him improve. That's not being unnecessarily hard on a player; it's doing their job. We all know his potential is extremely high, and coaching him on the details of the game is part of how they help him reach his potential.

Hurricanes acquire Neuchev from Buffalo for Bayreuther | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes made a minor trade on the one-year anniversary of the Mikko Rantanen blockbuster, dealing veteran defenseman Gavin Bayreuther to Buffalo in exchange for 22-year-old forward Viktor Neuchev.

Neuchev, a third round pick out of Chelyabinsk, Russia, has six goals and 16 points in 34 games with the AHL's Rochester Americans this season. He's played the last 2½ seasons with Buffalo's top affiliate, totaling 24 goals and 66 points in 130 games. Neuchev will join the AHL's Chicago Wolves.

Neuchev had season-ending shoulder surgery last year but returned healthy this season. Neuchev was considered a rising prospect in the Sabres system in 2024, with then-Amerks coach and current Buffalo assistant Seth Appert

praising his work ethic. The 5-foot-11, 172-pound winger is in the final year of his entry-level contract and will be a restricted free agent without arbitration rights this summer.

Bayreuther, 31, was signed by Carolina in the offseason to provide depth and recalled twice by the Hurricanes this season, though he did not play in any games. The left-handed Bayreuther has 122 games of NHL experience, totaling three goals and 28 points with Dallas and Columbus. Bayreuther was assigned to the Americans.

The emergence of Joel Nystrom and Charles Alexis-Legault returning to practice in a yellow no-contact jersey Thursday pushed Bayreuther further down Carolina's defensive depth chart, and Buffalo has a need for more depth on the blue line after it placed Jacob Bryson on injured reserve with an upper-body injury.



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Hurricanes beat Senators 4-1 to take the Eastern Conference lead

By: AP

OTTAWA, Ontario — OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — William Carrier, Seth Jarvis and Taylor Hall scored in the first period and the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Ottawa Senators 4-1 on Saturday night to take the Eastern Conference lead.

Rookie goalie Brandon Bussi 35 saves for the victory.

Jalen Chatfield's cross-ice pass sprung Mark Jankowski on an odd-man rush, where he fed Carrier cross-slot for an easy backhand tap-in to open the scoring just four minutes into the

game. Only two minutes later, Jarvis beat James Reimer cleanly with a top-corner snipe from the faceoff circle.

Andrei Svechnikov made it 4-0 in the second.

Tim Stutzle scored for Ottawa.

Before the game, the Senators honored former coach Jacques Martin for his induction into the Senators' Ring of Honor.

Hurricanes: Host Utah on Thursday night.

Senators: Host Vegas on Sunday.



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Recap: First-Period Frenzy Sparks Canes Past Sens

By: Peter Dewar

Carolina nets three goals in the opening 20 minutes en route to victory in Ottawa

OTTAWA, Ont. - Nine skaters registered at least a point and Brandon Bussi turned in a 34-save effort as the Carolina Hurricanes thumped the Ottawa Senators 4-1 at Canadian Tire Centre on Saturday.

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Despite trailing 14-8 in shots through 20 minutes, the Canes made their chances count and held a 3-0 lead when the first buzzer sounded. William Carrier got the visitors off on the right foot with a tap-in of Mark Jankowski's centering feed on a rush chance, followed just 1:43 later by a Seth Jarvis laser from the right circle made possible by a perfect saucer setup from Alexander Nikishin.

Weathering a Senators storm late in the frame, Carolina landed one more counterpunch in the final two minutes, with Taylor Hall sending a seeing-eye shot underneath James Reimer to push the Canes' lead to three.

Amid a more back-and-forth middle frame, Andrei Svechnikov netted Carolina's fourth consecutive goal just before the midway point with the help of a friendly bounce, banking a pass off an Ottawa defenseman that snuck through Reimer. Shortly afterward, though, the Senators answered the onslaught with a Tim Stützle tally to break Bussi's shutout bid.

Down by three, Ottawa poured on the pressure in the third, firing 14 shots while limiting Carolina to a season-low-tying three. But Bussi and the Canes' defense held strong to see out the victory, with the first-year backstop picking up his 19th win in 23 starts.

Stats & Standouts

Forward Seth Jarvis logged multiple points (1G, 1A) for the second time in his last five games. Since returning from injury on Jan. 5, Jarvis has points in seven of his 10 outings, registering two or more in three of those contests.

Defenseman Jalen Chatfield also collected a pair of points (2A), his second multi-point performance of the season and one shy of his career-high mark of three, set in each of his last two campaigns.

Goaltender Brandon Bussi picked up his first victory when facing 30+ shots, turning aside 34 of 35 Ottawa bids to post the second-highest single-game save total of his career.

Forward Andrei Svechnikov notched his league-leading sixth goal since Jan. 16 (5 GP) to boost his total to 18 on the year — two shy of his sixth 20-goal campaign in eight NHL seasons.

Forward Taylor Hall tallied his 12th of the season and now boasts points in back-to-back games. The 34-year-old has found the scoresheet in seven of his last 12 outings, producing 10 points in that span.

Forward William Carrier opened the scoring with his sixth goal of the season in his 41st game, two more than he potted in 43 contests last season.

With Saturday's outburst, the Hurricanes have now scored 56 goals in first periods this season, which is tied for third-most in the league at the time of publishing.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour offering his overall thoughts on the game...

"That's tough... You get out to an early lead, and then it's just human nature a little bit to let off the gas, and we let off the whole rest of the night. But our goalie won us the game, so we'll take the two points and move on."

Taylor Hall on the contest...

"Bussi was really good. I don't think they had a lot of second-chance rebound opportunities, but he was really good on the first save... (Ottawa is) a good team, they've had some goaltending issues, but they carry play well, they play hard, they finish checks all night and they made it hard on us. I don't know if it's the schedule or whatever, but we didn't have that energy to match it. But some nights you need to get bailed out, some nights you win games that maybe you shouldn't, but I feel like it all evens out in the end."

Rod Brind'Amour on Brandon Bussi's continued progression in the Canes' crease...

"It's getting better and better, which is great. I think early, he was good, but now he seems to be settling in. That's two points that he got for our group; there wasn't much else going on there tonight. You need that. You need that when you don't have your best game, you need your goalie to come up big, and he did."

Brandon Bussi on the game and what's made his season special...

"I think it's just our group. [It] finds a way to keep plugging away, whether it's our best night or not. I thought our compete was really high... I think our D corps was really



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strong, battled really hard. The net-front battles are kind of where games are won and lost against them, and I thought that was a good effort."

Seth Jarvis on finishing strong through the five remaining games before the Olympic break...

"I think any time you win games, no matter how, it's big for the group. So just keep the positivity, keep the momentum going and carry it into next game."

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to return to Raleigh immediately following the game, ahead of their longest non-Olympic stretch without games. They'll return to game action on Thursday against Utah for Whalers Night presented by Sandbagger.

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



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes drop drowning Senators, 4-1

By: Al Hood

The Ottawa Senators outshot the Carolina Hurricanes, but that's about all they did well as their goaltending issues cropped up again, meanwhile Brandon Bussi made 33 saves once again looking stellar in net, and the Canes won their 14th on the road by defeating the Senators 4-1. It was the fifth straight game with a point for Carolina and their fourth regulation win out of those five games. It was also Bussi's 19th win in 23 starts.

The first period honestly looked as if it were a Canes home game—in that the team on the ice in black jerseys carried the play, outshot the team in white uniforms, but the goalie was the difference on both sides. The start was delayed as once again an opponent for the Hurricanes had a ceremony honoring a past great—this time Jacques Martin. So, a listed start of 7 PM eastern didn't really get going until 7:30 PM, and as can be expected the Senators looked like the better team from the jump. An early Power Play for the Hurricanes was completely lifeless, but before Ottawa could take advantage Jalen Chatfield threaded a beautiful pass up to Mark Jankowski, which created a 2-on-1 that was basically a 2-on-0. Jankowski popped it over to Will Carrier, taking advantage of starter James Reimer committing to the shot, and Carrier easily bounced it past Reimer to help the Canes take a 1-0 lead.

Less than two minutes later the Canes were back in the offensive zone with the puck going deep into the corner. Somehow Alexander Nikishin was able to not only get to the puck, but then zip along a perfect pass to Seth Jarvis who banged home the one-timer past Reimer to give Carolina a 2-0 lead.

From there Ottawa really carried play for the rest of the period, and that's where Bussi would shine. Ottawa would get a Power Play thanks to a Nikishin slash, but the combination of having Jaccob Slavin out on the ice and Bussi in net shut it down. The Senators took that positive momentum and poured it on in the end, outshooting Carolina 14-8 in the first, but none got by Bussi, and then near the end of the first Taylor Hall took in a great pass from Jackson

Blake, and Hall just shot it on net. The shot seemed to confuse Reimer who let it in, giving the Canes their 3-0 lead.

Things evened out in terms of play in the second, but the Canes were able to put a real hammerlock on the game. After successfully killing a power play from a Sean Walker knee to Tim Stütze, the Canes once again were on the man advantage thanks to a high stick on Sebastian Aho. It got off to a rough start, until Claude Giroux tripped Jarvis, creating a 5-on-3. Ottawa got it off to a great start, denying Carolina any chance to set up in the offensive zone, but then Andrei Svechnikov was finally able to get a good entry, drawing all three Senators to him. He tried to feather a pass that instead bounced off Tyler Kleven and past Reimer to give the Canes a 4-0 lead.

Bussi would lose the shutout bid a few minutes later as the rest of the Power Play fizzled, and Ottawa went into desperation mode, trying to turn the tables after giving up a 3-0 lead on Thursday Night to Nashville. Stütze would receive a pass and while falling down, wristed a shot past Bussi to let the Senators at least salvage something. The second would end at that 4-1.

The Canes played the type of third period that they needed to play having a three goal lead. Ottawa would put up some shots, and near the end of the third would get a Power Play thanks to a trip by Walker. However, Bussi would make all the saves he needed to, and Ottawa never had any really easy shots. Ottawa even tried pulling Reimer during that fruitless power play, but the Canes would preserve the lead.

Carolina will now try to get home before the worst of the winter weather hits the Raleigh area—or just hang out in Ottawa until it's safe to travel back as they don't play again until Whalers Night on Thursday. The four days off will be good news for everyone, including Shayne Gostisbehere who still hasn't come back into the lineup with his lingering injury. The game Thursday starts the final push before the Olympic Break with five games in eight days, including a back-to-back next Saturday and Sunday. It also includes a return trip to Ottawa. Expect the Canes to take full advantage of the break to be able to go into the Olympics with the similar eight point cushion in the Metro that they have now.



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Hurricanes strike early, shut down Senators 4-1

By: Haley O'Neill

The Carolina Hurricanes shut down the Ottawa Senators with a dominating performance throughout the first 20 minutes, netting three goals and leaving the Senators with no opportunity to take the lead.

The Canes (32-15-5), even being outshot by the Senators (23-21-7), left the ice with a 4-1 win and extended their conference lead to eight points. Nine different Canes players tallied a point against former teammate and Senator goaltender James Reimer.

Early in the first period, center Seth Jarvis recorded the game-winning goal and doubled the lead for Carolina. Center Sebastian Aho fought for possession of the puck and passed it to defenseman Alexander Nikishin. The Russian used his stick-handling skills to keep the puck in his possession and got the puck to Jarvis, who had time to settle and find the back of the net from right outside the paint.

Three minutes prior, wingers Mark Jankowski and William Carrier had a 2-on-1 opportunity heading into the Senators' zone. Deceiving the goalie with his eyes, Jankowski passed the puck to Carrier, who easily slipped it past the goal line and put his team on the board.

"They play a smart game," Carrier said. "They go out there and get hard in the forecheck. [Kotkaniemi] and [Jankowski]

have some skills, so when they have a chance to make a play, it's time to make a play, and when it's time to play deep, just play deep."

With two Ottawa players in the box halfway through the second period, Carolina kicked up the intensity and capitalized on the powerplay. With the help of his linemates, winger Andrei Svechnikov took the puck deep in their offensive zone and skated around the net. Sending the puck into the crowded paint and hoping for a lucky bounce, the puck found its way into the net after hitting off the skate of defenseman Tyler Kleven.

"[Nikishin and I] were just speaking about the power play," Svechnikov said. "We have to calm down a little bit, find each other, look for each other and support each other."

A little over halfway through the second period, the Canes had a defensive breakdown and left center Tim Stütze unmarked, allowing him to receive a long pass from defenseman Jake Sanderson. Standing near the face-off circle, Stütze let off a swift wrist shot into the netting, putting his team on the board and preventing Bussi from getting his second shutout.

The Hurricanes have a four-day break before they host the Utah Mammoth on Thursday, Jan. 29, with a 7 p.m. puck drop.



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The Hockey News

'Our Goalie Won Us The Game': Rod Brind'Amour, Brandon Bussi, Taylor Hall On Win In Ottawa

By: Ryan Henkel

Goalie steals the show in a tight game. Hear from Brind'Amour, Bussi, and Hall as the Hurricanes snatch a win against Ottawa.

The Carolina Hurricanes came away with a 4-1 win over the Ottawa Senators on Saturday, despite getting outshot by nearly double.

Carolina struck often and early to build a lead and then Brandon Bussi did the rest at the other end, stopping 35 shots.

After the game, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour along with Bussi and Taylor Hall spoke with the media in Ottawa. Here's what they had to say:

Rod Brind'Amour#

On the game: That was tough. You get out to an early lead and then it's just human nature a little bit to let off the gas and we let off of it the whole rest of the night. But our goalie won us the game. We'll take the two points and move on.

On Brandon Bussi: He's been getting better and better, which is great. Early, he was good, but now he seems to just be settling in. That's two points that he got for our group. Wasn't much else going on tonight. We need that when we don't have our best game. You need the goalie to come up big and he did.

On Taylor Hall: He's been really good, really, from the get go. It's an adjustment for him to come here and kind of, not take a lesser role, but we don't have a guy. Everyone just needs to contribute and everything we've asked him to do, he's done it. That was a big goal for us because it did give us a cushion.

On if he feels the team has been more dialed in over the last 10 games: Up until tonight. I mean, tonight was not good, but I think all the games up to that point, even the other night we didn't win, but we played well enough to win. Tonight, the goalie got us the two points and you need that.

Brandon Bussi#

On the game: I think our group just finds a way to keep plugging away. Whether it's our best night or not. I thought

our compete was really high. We know that Ottawa is very good at putting it behind you and being physical down low and so I think our D corps was really strong and battled really hard. The net-front battles are where games are kind of won or lost against them and it was a good effort.

On the team's support in front of him: I could see the puck. That's the most important thing. So really good box outs. And if I didn't see it, obviously it probably got blocked. Good effort by them.

Taylor Hall#

On the game: Bussi was really good. I don't think they had a lot of second chances, like rebound opportunities, but he was really good on the first saves. For us, they're a good team. They've had some goaltending issues, but they carry play well and they play hard, finish checks all night. They made it hard on us and I don't know if it's the schedule or whatever, but we didn't have the energy to match it. But some nights you need to get bailed out. Some nights you win games you shouldn't. I feel like it all evens out in the end.

On Brandon Bussi: It's cool to see someone that really enjoys the game of hockey. Sometimes guys get called up and you can tell just by their preparation that they haven't been in the league for a long time. Bussi treats himself like a pro and like he's been around for a while. The way he talks and conducts himself, I think he's been ready for this. That's been cool to see. I think he enjoys every day, which is awesome to be around.

On the team starting to get on a roll: We've been going well. I think sometime after the new year, we've kind of had a couple meetings where it's just like, we've gotten away from the way we need to play and we straightened it out, but it was only for a couple of games at a time. Then finally, after the new year, I'd probably say like 10 games ago, we've just been dialed in how we need to do things, how we need to play. Tonight wasn't the best example of that, but for the most part, all four lines, if you look at the video, are playing the same way, with the same intensity and with the same attention to detail. That wins in this league, especially as the games pile up and you have less and less practice time. The way that you play as a team is very important.

Carolina Flips Depth Defender For Forward Prospect In Trade With Buffalo

By: Ryan Henkel

Carolina lands forward prospect Viktor Neuchev, sending veteran defenseman Gavin Bayreuther to Buffalo seeking NHL minutes.

The Carolina Hurricanes have traded defenseman Gavin Bayreuther to the Buffalo Sabres in exchange for forward Viktor Neuchev, the team announced on Saturday.



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Bayreuther, 31, signed a one-year, two-way deal with Carolina this offseason to return to North America and had played solely in the AHL this season.

He appeared in 33 games with the Chicago Wolves, registering four goals and 13 points.

With injury issues hitting the Sabres' blueline, this gives Bayreuther a potential chance to once again play NHL games.

Neuchev, 22, was a third-round pick by the Sabres in the 2022 draft and he has spent the last three seasons in AHL with the Rochester Americans.

The 5-foot-11 winger has 130 games of AHL experience under his belt with 24 goals and 66 points to show for it.

The Russian is in the final year of his ELC.



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Greatest Show on Ice: Showtime With the Carolina Hurricanes

By: David Menconi

Note: Authored by David Menconi, this piece has been produced in partnership with Raleigh Arts. Menconi's latest book, "Oh, Didn't They Ramble: Rounder Records and the Transformation of American Roots Music," was published by University of North Carolina Press. His podcast, *Carolina Calling*, explores the history of the Tar Heel State through music.

There are a lot of different possible titles for what Christine Williams does during hockey games at Raleigh's Lenovo Center, as director of event presentation for the Carolina Hurricanes. You could liken her to a producer, show caller, orchestra conductor or "overseer of everything, more or less," as she herself puts it. But one function stands out above all others.

"I hit the bullhorn," she says with a smile. "Which as we all know is the most important part."

Indeed, that bullhorn is the sound that announces a Hurricanes goal during the game, and victory at the end when the home team wins. Williams has been hitting it plenty this season, as the Hurricanes are in the midst of another great season—head coach Rod Brind'Amour's team has put together one of the best regular-season won-loss records in the National Hockey League (tied for the most points in the Eastern Conference as of Jan. 26).

Carolina Hurricanes

That success is translating off the ice, too, in the form of a long streak of sellout crowds. The streak stood at 117 straight games coming into the 2025-26 season, and it has continued unbroken this year. Along with the team's success, a big reason crowds keep turning out is that the Hurricanes put on a capital-S Show every game with video screens, special effects, music and in-game lights, camera, action.

Perhaps the most impressive part of the show comes just before the Hurricanes take to the ice in the final pre-game sequence, with a sound and 3D light display that uses the ice rink as another video screen. It rivals anything you might see at a full-on arena-rock spectacle by the likes of Trans-Siberian Orchestra. Putting it all together and pulling it off takes a crew of around three-dozen people, with Williams at the helm.

Carolina Hurricanes

"Either on headset, text or radio, I am in communication with the director of the show, lighting and audio operators, deejay, PA announcer, NHL officials, marketing team, mascot and everyone else to make sure everything goes off on time," says Williams. "The script is laid out, all planned down to the

second. We have to make sure everything happens on time, and make quick decisions in the moment. It gets less scripted as you get into the game, more free-flowing."

Preparation begins well in advance of the tightly sequenced button-pushing that goes on during the game—not just before games but before the season even starts. It starts with pre-season brainstorming sessions about each season's lineup of theme nights, as well as an overall season concept.

Carolina Hurricanes

"Each season we create a campaign with a tagline to represent the identity of the team," says Cato Cataldo, senior director of creative services for the Hurricanes. "This year's campaign is 'Carolina Culture,' we start building story from that with different storylines, activating different opportunities."

Upcoming theme nights this year include Whalers Night on Jan. 29, in which the Hurricanes revisit their pre-North Carolina identity as the Hartford Whalers; the Olympics Send-Off Game on Feb. 3, right before this year's mid-season break for the Winter Olympics; Military Appreciation Night on March 29; and Grateful Dead Night on April 2.

Music is an integral part of every game, assembled and played by DJ Mistta Illz (Marcus Ward) from his stage above Section 229 in the Lenovo Center.

Carolina Hurricanes

"He does a great changing up the flavor from game to game," says Williams. "He can play up to 200 songs a night, and he's a big believer in not playing a song more than once. Theme nights like Whalers Night, he'll use music to change up the feeling and the vibe based on '80s or early '90s music to make it feel like a different time."

After Williams hits the bullhorn to signify a Hurricanes goal, Ward will play rapper Petey Pablo's 2001 North Carolina roll call "Raise Up," which has been the home team's goal song since 2018 (following periods when the goal song was Britpop band Blur's "Song 2" and techno deejay Avicii's "The Nights").

And as it has been since the team first came to North Carolina in 1997, "Rock You Like a Hurricane" by German heavy-metal band The Scorpions remains the Hurricanes' introductory theme song.

Carolina Hurricanes

"Our job is to feed off the crowd as well as the team," says Williams. "We obviously hope the games are always entertaining enough to stand on their own. What we try to do is enhance the experience whether you're a fan there to just



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watch hockey, or coming for the first time not knowing anything about the game. Regardless, we want you to have a good time and come back.”

“We take pride in the fact that it’s not your traditional NHL experience,” adds Cato. “The energy that happens here,

especially during the playoffs, makes us the loudest house in the league—and that’s from outsiders, not an internal claim. It’s a testament to our fans. I think it’s because this is a collegiate area without another pro team in the market. So the Hurricanes bring everybody in the Triangle together. State, Duke and Carolina fans all embrace the Canes.”

LINKS

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SportScan

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

1377296 Carolina Hurricanes

Tulsky talks contracts, trades, Hurricanes’ goaltending

Cory Lavalette6-8 minutes 26/01/2026

In Part 1 of his interview with North State Journal, Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsky discussed his team seasons, and the integration of new and young players into Carolina’s lineup. In the latter half of the discussion, Tulsky talked about contract negotiations with key players, the team’s goaltending, Jesperi Kotkaniemi’s status and what moves he might look to do before the trade deadline.

Have there been any contract extension talks with Alexander Nikishin and his representation?

We talked about it before the season, but given that he had just gotten here, it made sense to wait a little bit.

Jesperi Kotkaniemi has been a frequent healthy scratch this season and has been mentioned in trade rumors. What’s his status?

Just as a point of order: A lot of the missed games were because we were being cautious with the timeline as he came back from an injury. But he has had some scratches, which has led to teams calling to see what our plan was with him. We have a really deep team, which makes ice time hard to come by — almost everyone on our team could play a bigger role somewhere else. If there’s something that makes sense, then

of course we’ll look at it, but the first priority is trying to win a Cup, and having this kind of depth is part of our path.

Do you view a possible trade as an opportunity to give him a fresh start, and if you are able to trade him, do you think his contract allows for you to get something of value in return?

I don’t really want to get into hypotheticals. As you know, we never stop looking for ways to improve our team, but of course everyone understands that we aren’t going to make a move just to make a move.

You certainly must consider yourself lucky to have ended up with Brandon Bussi given the season he’s having. That said, there was work put in to identify him as a target for the team. Can you give a peek into how long the team has had an eye on him? Did you approach him when he was a free agent in the summer?

Our goalie group watched him a lot in college and liked him then. We followed his time in Providence closely. We didn’t really talk to him this summer because the timing didn’t work — we had already signed (Amir) Miftakhov and traded for (Cayden) Primeau before free agency opened. But while I can’t claim that we knew he would do this, we did see him as someone who had talent and should get a chance somewhere.

How would you characterize current contract negotiations with Bussi and his team? Are you confident the two sides will be able to agree to an extension?

We’ve been talking to his agent about what an extension might look like since very early in the season. It’s obviously an unusual situation, but we’ve had some really good conversations about how to approach it.



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Are you prepared to make a long-term commitment to him given his relatively small sample size?

You're right to ask about the sample size. We've shown over the years that we're willing to gamble on early signings when the deal is right, but sometimes the sweet spot for both sides is a shorter deal. We've talked about a lot of options here.

Are you confident with your overall goaltending and the depth at that position?

Yes, absolutely. Obviously, it hurt to lose (Pyotr) Kochetkov. But Bussi has helped us cover for that and put us back in roughly the situation we had entering the year. I know there is a lot of discussion out there about (Frederik) Andersen, but he's been playing a lot better than what his basic NHL.com stats would say.

If you go through the video, there are a lot of goals where a passing sequence left him hung out to dry or where he was well positioned but the shot was perfectly tucked under the bar or inside the post, and you just have to tip your cap to the shooter. It's natural for people to say, "Sometimes you just have to make a save," but he's given us some saves and not gotten rewarded for it.

In the second Florida game, he made a huge save on a 2-on-0, but then a shot that was going 6 feet wide of the net hit a defender's skate and went in. Which reminds me: In Freddie's games in the month of December, our skaters put more goals into our own net than into the other team's net. It's tough for him to collect wins when that's happening, so I don't think his record tells the whole story here.

You often say the team can always get better until you have the 20 best players in the world on the ice for you. What would you say is your team's biggest need ahead of the trade deadline?

Truthfully, I don't think there is a clear need. We have one of the deepest teams in the league; I don't think there's a single spot in our lineup that's a must-fix crisis. But as you say, there are always opportunities out there to get better, so we're spending a lot of time right now exploring options and making sure we don't miss an opportunity to improve.

You have a lot of players with some type of no-trade clause. Does that make any potential trades more difficult?

Not really. I mean, I don't think we're really trying to move players out right now; we're trying to win a Cup. But even if we did, a lot of those clauses still give us plenty of flexibility — letting a player rule out a handful of places he really doesn't like usually wouldn't prevent you from getting a deal done.

The 9-1 win over the Panthers early this month seemed like a catharsis for the players and coaching staff. How important do you think it was to make a statement against a team that has beaten you twice in the conference final and rallied for two wins earlier in the year?

You're going to hate my answer because it's not good media content. The business team will hate it too, for that matter, so maybe I'm supposed to be a good soldier and just talk about it like a big regular season game is a mini Cup. But truthfully, I think a big regular season game is still just a game. You get a little more hyped up for it and maybe the play is a hair more intense, but in the end, when it's over, we move on and the next game is the new most important game of the season.

Do you think this year's team offers the best chance to win a Stanley Cup since Tom Dundon bought the franchise?///

It's hard to say because with all the injuries, I feel like I still haven't really seen this year's team play. But it certainly has that potential if things come together.

The North State Journal LOADED: 01.27.2026

1377297 Carolina Hurricanes

Why William Carrier — 'strong as an ox' — is a key cog in Hurricanes' relentless style

Cory Lavalette 8-10 minutes 26/01/2026

Carolina Hurricanes forward William Carrier beat New York Rangers forward Alexis Lafreniere to a puck in the neutral zone and pushed it into the Rangers' zone. New York defenseman Braden Schneider denied Carrier's effort to push the puck deeper into the zone, but Carrier again outmuscled Lafreniere and won the puck back to K'Andre Miller.

A pass, a shot and a fortunate bounce later, the puck was past the seemingly impenetrable goalie Igor Shesterkin and in the net, the tying goal for the Hurricanes in the third period of their overtime win over the Rangers on Dec. 29.

There was no point awarded to Carrier — there often isn't for a forward who has never exceeded 25 points in a season in his decade-long NHL career — but his teammates acknowledged his pivotal role in a play that allowed Carolina to secure a point in the standings and earn another in overtime.

"Will did a great job getting on the wall there, keeping it in," said linemate Jordan Martinook, whose net-front presence on the play resulted in the puck bouncing in off him.

If coach Rod Brind'Amour has the physique of an award-winning bodybuilder and Andrei Svechnikov the chiseled body of a Greek statue, Carrier is the brawny foot soldier — square jaw, steely glare and the resolve to always keep pushing forward, shift after shift, game after game.

"I think anytime Will's out there, you notice him," Brind'Amour said recently of Carrier. "He's one of the more physically imposing players around. And I guess at the end of the day, no matter how many shifts he has, you seem to notice every one of them for that reason. It's a guy knowing his game and really excelling at it."

The 31-year-old Montreal native, who has six goals and five assists in 41 games this season, has carved out an NHL career as the type of crash-and-bang forward defensemen hate playing against. He's 6-foot-2 and 214 pounds, but that doesn't fully illustrate what a handful Carrier is on the ice.

"He's the strongest guy I've ever played with," said Mark Jankowski, who has been centering Carrier on Carolina's fourth line of late. "When he has the puck or any sort of battle — stick battle, anything — it's incredible. Just in practice, when you're going to battle against him, in my career so far, he's the hardest guy to go against."

Carrier's strength is complemented by the consistency in his play. While his point totals throughout his career are modest — he's cracked double digits in goals once and eclipsed 20 points twice — his north-south play and determined effort make him someone his coaches and teammates can count on regardless of where he is in the lineup.

"He's a guy that comes to work ready to go and takes care of himself and works hard and follows our identity to a 'T,'" Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "Just hard-working, forechecking, hard to play against, being smart at the right times and just constantly putting the pressure on. He's been a great addition."

That addition came two summers ago, when Carrier signed a six-year, \$12 million contract to leave Vegas and come to Raleigh.



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"He's just very consistent, and his game does not waver," Brind'Amour said of the reasons the team targeted Carrier at the opening of 2024 free agency. "And that's something we really value in our team, and it's also hard to play against. That guy is hard to play against and very effective. So that's a pretty easy signing on our part."

One would think the security of a long-term deal for a bottom-six player was the driving force behind Carrier's decision to sign with Carolina. Not true.

"I wanted to win," said Carrier, who won the Stanley Cup with Vegas in 2023. "They've had a great team here since five, six years. They win 50 games a year. And there's a reason for it. And we could tell by the way they play. You want to pick a team that plays the way you want to play. It needs to fit with it, and I think it was a perfect fit."

The wear and tear of playing for a Western Conference team also made moving east attractive to Carrier and his young family.

"I'm home a lot more, I'll be honest with you, with the family and less travel," he said. "Guys here screw around about the travel and stuff. It's nothing like that out west. Out west, it's terrible. You're gone for two weeks every two weeks, right?"

"So it's great. I've been home, and the family's enjoying it and it's not that far. My parents can watch every game. I've been loving it, to be honest with you, and the wife is happy. So it makes a happy life around here."

Even without the grind of more grueling travel, Carrier has continued to battle the injury bug in his first season and a half with the Hurricanes. Carrier has played more than 70 games just once in his career, and no more than 56 in the last three seasons. That included playing 43 games during last year's regular season, though he did play in all 15 of Carolina's playoff games.

"He's been banged up a little," Brind'Amour said. "I think that's plagued him a little bit over his career, but it's the way he plays. He knows one way to play, and that's what we love about him."

Carrier's 98 hits are tops on the Hurricanes, and his willingness to punish opposing defensemen leads to turnovers and scoring chances for his linemates.

"They're kind of checking their shoulders to see if it's him coming back," Jankowski said of defensemen facing Carrier on the forecheck. "Or even if they don't have time to check their shoulder, they're just already looking to get the puck away and just maybe throw it away or make a bad play or something like that. So once you get that implanted in their mind, which he does, it's beneficial to us."

Which is why his teammates love playing with him. While Carrier has been playing primarily with Jankowski of late, he's spent nearly 600 of the 900-plus five-on-five minutes he's played since joining the Hurricanes alongside Staal and Martinook.

"He's simple and direct and strong as an ox," Martinook said. "When he gets people on his back, you can't really get him off the puck. And I think that's what works so well with me and Jordan. When our line's going well, we're playing in the O zone, we're wearing teams down, and he's as good as anybody at doing it. He's conscious defensively, so we can play against really anybody."

Adding Carrier also meant bringing another player into the room who has won the Cup — "the more the merrier," Staal said.

"I've lost one, I've won one," Carrier said of his two trips to the Stanley Cup Final. "Big moments — in playoffs, it's a whole different game, right? So you've got to show up and every detail counts. One screwup, and it's in your net. So it's all about detail, and my games kind of dialed in for that."

He's also an addition that reinforces the Hurricanes' culture of hard work and determination, something that can be passed on to the next wave of Carolina players.

That includes defenseman Charles Alexis Legault, a Montreal native who is nine years younger and grew up blocks from Carrier's home. Carrier said Legault "played it cool" when talking to a player he looked up to in his youth.

"I guess my name was kind of big right when he grew up," Carrier said. "He told me that, 'When I grew up, your name was all over.' We grew up in the same little — we're from Montreal, but these little towns and a couple streets down."

Carrier already ranks third since relocation among Quebec-born players with 84 regular-season games played with the Hurricanes, trailing only Martin Gelinias (348) and Kevin Dineen (121). If he can stay healthy, he could surpass Gelinias by the time his contract expires in 2030.

It's not something he's concerning himself with, instead focusing on keeping the Hurricanes near the top of the standings.

"And try to win another Cup," he said. "I mean, it's always the goal year after year."

The Athletic LOADED: 01.27.2026

1377388 Websites

The Athletic / White House event with Trump, sports commissioners is delayed by snow: Sources

By Adam Crafton and Joe Vardon

A White House event in which commissioners from five major sports leagues were to appear alongside President Donald Trump as he unveiled the latest plans for the celebration of the United States' 250th anniversary has been postponed due to adverse weather conditions, according to four people familiar with planning for the event.

The event was scheduled for Tuesday, but remained subject to change due to the weather and the president's schedule. According to the people familiar with the event plans, who spoke on condition of anonymity Monday because they were not authorized to discuss the event publicly, the White House is seeking to reschedule the event, which it would prefer to do ahead of the Super Bowl. That may prove difficult, however, due to the continuing low temperatures and the challenge of ensuring all of those involved in the event can make it to the Oval Office at the same time on the same day.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Athletic reported last week that the NFL's Roger Goodell, the NBA's Adam Silver, the NHL's Gary Bettman, MLB's Rob Manfred and MLS' Don Garber were all set to attend the event in the Oval Office, while UFC CEO and president Dana White was also among the invitees. The event was expected to involve a presentation of the administration's plans to use sports to help mark America's 250th birthday, as well as a news briefing.

Snowstorms brought a foot or more of snow in at least 20 U.S. states throughout the weekend, according to the National Weather Service. Most flights were cancelled on Sunday in and out of the Washington D.C. area, and federal offices were closed on Monday, with employees asked to work remotely amid treacherous travel conditions.



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The event would also have come days after several players and coaches criticized the Trump administration following the fatal shooting of a Minneapolis man by federal agents on Saturday.

The day after the shooting, teams in Minnesota joined other major state-based companies in signing an open letter that called for "an immediate de-escalation of tensions and for state, local and federal officials to work together to find real solutions." The letter was signed by the Vikings, Wild, Timberwolves, Lynx, Twins and Minnesota United FC.

The shooting, in which 37-year-old Alex Pretti was killed, came a day after thousands marched through the city of Minneapolis to protest the administration's immigration enforcement activities in the region. Pretti was the second Minnesota resident to be killed by federal agents this month, following the shooting of Renee Good by a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent on Jan. 7.

The NBA postponed Saturday night's game between the Minnesota Timberwolves and Golden State Warriors at Target Center hours after the fatal shooting of Pretti in south Minneapolis. The league said the decision was made to "prioritize the safety and security of the Minneapolis community."

Several athletes and coaches spoke out about the shooting over the weekend. In a post on social media, former Timberwolves star Karl-Anthony Towns wrote that it was "heartbreaking to witness" what is happening in the city he used to call home.

"These events have cost lives and shaken families — and we must call for accountability, transparency, and protections for all people," Towns wrote. "This moment demands that we reflect honestly on what our values truly are. My thoughts, prayers, and deepest condolences are with the families of Renée Good and Alex Pretti."

The National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) released a statement on Sunday, saying that "NBA players can no longer remain silent."

It added: "Now more than ever, we must defend the right to freedom of speech and stand in solidarity with the people in Minnesota protesting and risking their lives to demand justice. The fraternity of NBA players, like the United States itself, is a community enriched by its global citizens, and we refuse to let the flames of division threaten the civil liberties that are meant to protect us all."

Trump posted on social media Monday that he had "a very good call" with Tim Walz, Minnesota's Democratic governor, and that they "seemed to be on a similar wavelength." He also said he would have Tom Homan, his border czar, who he has sent to Minneapolis to oversee federal operations, connect with Walz to coordinate.

Trump also criticized the NFL over the past weekend for selecting Bad Bunny and Green Day to perform at the Super Bowl on Feb. 8. "I'm anti-them," Trump told The New York Post. "I think it's a terrible choice. All it does is sow hatred. Terrible."

He added that he would not be attending the game, saying that the location at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif., was "too far away."

The Trump administration has previously outlined some plans to mark America's 250th. Trump announced in December that the White House would host the "Patriot Games," a four-day athletic event with high school athletes from across the country, as part of the celebration. 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 June 14, which would take place on the South Lawn of the White House. 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.

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 used predominantly in games. The "America 250" logo will be stenciled on the sidelines for playoff games, and officials will use America 250-branded coins for the coin toss.

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The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: Yo-yo Penguins, soaring Sharks and an ugly weekend in Toronto

By Sean McIndoe

The eyes of the hockey world were on Toronto this weekend. That's not unusual, because it's the home of the league's most important team and whenever they're not on screen, all the other teams should be asking "Where are the Maple Leafs?" But this time, there were a few specific reasons.

The first was Mitch Marner, finally returning to Toronto on Friday for the first time since his summer departure to Las Vegas. On Sunday, it was a rare afternoon game, this one featuring a visit from the league's best team. And both games took place against a backdrop of a season fading away, as the Leafs stumble their way toward an uninspiring playoff miss.

That's four losses in a row for the Maple Leafs, who fall to 1-4-2 in their last seven games.

They haven't won in regulation since Jan. 10.

The losing streak they couldn't afford to go on has happened.

— James Mirtle (@mirtle.bsky.social) January 25, 2026 at 4:04 PM

So how'd it go? I'm going to use my bonus five this week on an in-depth analysis of all the most important news from the Leafs' weekend.

Bonus five: Thoughts on a lost weekend in Toronto

5. Can we please get Craig Berube a hat? – The Leafs coach showed up on Friday with a nasty gash across his forehead, apparently from a gym accident. It looked bad when he unveiled it to the media.

Leafs HC Craig Berube had an accident in the gym, leaving him with discolouring in his face and a massive gash across his head. 😬

[image or embed]

— TSN (@tsnofficial.bsky.social) January 23, 2026 at 11:56 AM

But somehow, that didn't prepare us for what it would look like under the bright lights behind the bench. Look, I'm as much a traditionalist as anyone, and I get that coaches are expected to go formal these days. But surely we can make an exception here for a few days, right? Sure we can.

4. No, really, cover that up – The guy looks like the secret child of Frankenstein's monster and Abdullah the Butcher. Give the man a cap. Or a toque. Or a Claude Julien-style outdoor game derby. Or a sulky teenager's hoodie. Or a guardian cap from the NFL. Or a lampshade. Or a lucha mask. Or one of Roger Neilson's unused paper bags. Literally anything. Please, we're begging you.



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3. Speaking of ugly things nobody should have to look at – Breaking: The Maple Leafs are bad again. Friday was the biggest regular-season game of the year, and they barely seemed interested. And on Sunday, a slumping Avalanche team that had lost two straight came into Toronto and almost looked bored, toying with the Leafs for a few hours without breaking much of a sweat on the way to a win that was never in doubt.

2. Wait, am I working out wrong? – I'm no gym rat, but I try to get there a few times a week, and I'm not sure I could figure out a way to gash my head like that if you paid me to. I thought we were still all lifting weights and shaking those rope things. Have the rest of you moved on to juggling chainsaws? I'm concerned about this.

1. Oh right, the Marner game – After all the hype, we got ... that. Not sure what to say except that this guy gets it.

Ah well, at least William Nylander is having fun. That's the important part.

(That, and getting Berube a hat. Mainly the hat thing.)

On to this week's rankings, which do not feature the Maple Leafs...

Road to the Cup

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

Wait, what?

Six teams currently have a better record than the Buffalo Sabres.

Colorado, Tampa Bay, Carolina, Dallas, Detroit and Minnesota.
<https://t.co/C35B1kJvhx>

— Julian McKenzie (@jkmckenzie) January 24, 2026

No, I didn't put the Sabres in the top five this week, but ... are we getting close to having to consider it? Is this really happening? Somebody hold me.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (25-14-2, +14 true goals differential*) – What the heck was that yesterday in Ottawa? That's three regulation losses out of four, and Montreal up next tomorrow. But so far, the Oilers haven't really been gaining any ground.

4. Dallas Stars (29-14-9, +28) – This week's 1-0 loss to the Blue Jackets was the fourth time in six that the Stars have been limited to one goal or fewer. That shouldn't be possible with this much firepower, but every team goes cold at some point. They get the Golden Knights and the Mammoth this week, which should be fun. They also get the Blues, which should be a Blues game.

3. Carolina Hurricanes (32-15-5, +29) – I loved this breakdown from Jesse Granger, which goes a long way toward answering one of the season's biggest questions: Who's this Brandon Bussi guy, and why is he suddenly so good?

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (32-14-4, +46) – Big news in the Other Rankings, where they've moved the Lightning into top spot. I can't argue much, even if they're still technically a point back of the Red Wings for top spot in the Atlantic. (Tampa has three games in hand.)

1. Colorado Avalanche (35-6-9, +80) – They've had three losing streaks since the start of January. Each has only lasted two games, so this isn't a free-fall. But the Avalanche look like an NHL team again, not one that belongs in some higher super-league. They've got the Senators and Canadiens back-to-back this week, and then a home-and-home with Detroit that could be the biggest games between these former rivals in decades.

Also, Pierre LeBrun had an update on Gabriel Landeskog. It sounds like his Olympics are still very much up in the air.

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

Not ranked: Pittsburgh Penguins – You know, I'm starting to think Sidney Crosby isn't getting traded at the deadline.

Sure, odds are he never was. But it was fun to pretend, or at least fun if you weren't a Penguins fan. And it almost felt like the humane thing to wish for, since the only alternative was a brilliant career ending in one of the saddest ways possible. We needed Crosby back in the playoffs, one more time.

Well, get ready, because it sure looks like that playoff appearance is going to happen ... in Pittsburgh, which wasn't supposed to be an option this year.

Maybe we should pump the brakes just a bit, because this is a very weird team. Yesterday's win over the Canucks was their fourth straight, the third time this year they've had a streak at least that long. But they've also mixed in an eight-game losing streak back in December, not to mention the stretch of four losses in five games just a few weeks ago. Mirtle has them among the league's most compelling teams, and you can't really argue. But in a league where we love to tell teams to pick a lane, the Penguins are just wildly swerving down the middle of the road to the playoffs.

So who gets the credit? Crosby is the obvious candidate, as he's once again playing Hart-worthy hockey. Evgeni Malkin has been a great story. Dan Muse, a hire that had a few of us scratching our heads, now seems like the perfect choice.

And then there's our old pal Kyle Dubas. Josh Yohe had a great column over the weekend looking at the various decisions the GM had to make leading up to this season, and the list features a lot more hits than misses. Dubas tends to be a divisive name among fans around the league, and it wasn't that long ago that the Penguins' playoff misses were being held up as evidence that he was an overrated fraud. That's an awfully tough argument to make these days.

If the season ended today, the Penguins wouldn't just be in the playoffs, they'd hold home ice in the first round. And in a weak Metro, they'd be likely to face a fellow surprise team like the Philadelphia Flyers or New York Islanders in what would be a winnable matchup. In fact, catching the Hurricanes for top spot isn't completely out of the question, especially with a three-game homestand this week that brings the Blackhawks, Rangers and Senators. That could be three more wins. It probably should be.

Or maybe they yank the steering wheel in the other direction, yet again. I don't know, and neither do you. It doesn't feel like we can know much about this team with any certainty. (Except for the part about Crosby not being traded to your favorite team. That's not happening.)

The bottom five

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

Scott's latest draft rankings dropped last week, and Gavin McKenna wasn't in the top spot. That seems to be the way this is going, although McKenna may have something to say about that down the stretch.

5. Winnipeg Jets (20-24-7, -8) – I went back and forth on whether to include the Jets this week, but Scott Arniel talked me into it.

4. New York Rangers (21-25-6, -25) – The California trip yielded three regulation losses, and the pre-deadline dog days are well and truly here. That home-and-home with the Islanders this week could sting. Meanwhile, I enjoyed Vincent Mercogliano's look back at the weird path this team has been on over the last eight years, from retool to Presidents' Trophy and back.

3. St. Louis Blues (19-24-9, -50) – I'm on record doubting the Robert Thomas trade talks will go anywhere. But Jeremy Rutherford and Shayna



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Goldman took a deeper look into what that deal might look like if it ever happened.

2. Calgary Flames (21-25-6, -24) – Pierre has the scoop on how the Rasmus Andersson trade came together, and who might be next on the block.

1. Vancouver Canucks (17-29-5, -54) – According to Kevin Weekes, Evander Kane might be the next name on the trade block, with the Stars and Avs in the running. Harman Dayal has more on what the return could look like.

Not ranked: San Jose Sharks – Back in the very first rankings of the season, I was wondering about something.

“The big question in the Bottom Five this year: Will any team other than Chicago or San Jose ever get a chance to hold down the one-spot?” The Sharks were holding down the two-spot that day, but they’d move up to number one a week later. Nobody argued, because at 0-3-2, the Sharks were the league’s only winless team. They kept the bottom spot in week three, and it was another obvious pick, because they were 1-5-2 and their season was already over.

Well, about that.

It turns out that slow start was indeed a big story, but not because it was ending the bottom-five race before it began. (In case you’re wondering, three different teams other than San Jose and Chicago have already held down the bottom spot, because I’m dumb.) Instead, it now looks like those three weeks of wheel-spinning could be the only thing keeping a Western playoff spot in play.

Or maybe not. The Sharks have gone 25-16-1 since those first eight games, which is a 100-point pace. That has them in the wild-card mix, but if they can keep accumulating points at that rate in the second half, this isn’t going to be close.

Imagine going back to those early days of the season and telling someone that by late January, the Sharks would have as many wins as the Oilers (in three fewer games). Or that after losing their first six, they’d only lose back-to-back games on three other occasions. Or that they’d be running away with the “most fun to watch” title.

OK, maybe that last one would have made sense. Very often, this league’s young teams are fun teams, because they haven’t had time to have all the creativity and joy beaten out of their game. But it’s supposed to be an empty-calorie sort of fun, where they crank up the entertainment value and then lose 6-5. Making the playoffs? Not so fast. You can have fun, or you can have a postseason spot. You don’t get both.

And sure, there are more than a few important caveats here. There’s a long way to go. Their odds are still well under 50 percent, according to our projections. They’re an unsustainable 11-3 in games that go past regulation, meaning they’re just 15-21 in games settled by real hockey. Their goals differential is worse than teams like the Jets, Senators and Blue Jackets. In terms of expected goals at five-on-five, they’re one of the very worst teams in the league.

Cool, cool. Do you want to know the terrifying truth, or do you want to watch Macklin Celebrini and friends sock some dingers?

Celebrini has been the big story in San Jose, so much so that if they make the playoffs he might follow in the footsteps of names like McDavid and Crosby by winning the MVP in his second season. And deservedly so, because when you look at the Sharks’ stats, they get almost silly. Celebrini has 74 points, which puts him six ahead of second place, which is held by (checks notes) Tyler Toffoli and Alexander Wennberg combined. Huh. Both of those guys are at 34 points on the season, meaning Celebrini leads his own team by 40. There are five teams in the league — the Kraken, Canucks, Blues, Kings and Devils — whose leading scorer doesn’t have 40 points yet. What are we doing here?

Having fun, that’s what. Will it turn into a playoff spot? We should all hope so, because imagine a well-oiled machine like the Avalanche having to go up against a Sharks team that’s apparently too young to realize they’re not supposed to be good. Celebrini vs. MacKinnon in round one? Yes please, hockey gods.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. For now, let’s just enjoy the ride. For Sharks fans, this is the fun year, where the ratio of success to expectations is tilted so far in one direction that there are basically no bad outcomes. Don’t worry, the fun wears off eventually, and you’ll get to be miserable like the rest of us soon enough. But for now, just enjoy it. And save room on the bandwagon, because you’re going to need it.

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The Athletic / Who is the NHL’s next Blake Coleman? This year’s utility players to watch

By Shayna Goldman

The NHL trade deadline is not the time to build a playoff-caliber roster. Ideally, it’s an opportunity to find a missing piece that solidifies a team’s contender status.

Artturi Lehkonen was that piece for the Colorado Avalanche in 2022. And in 2020, it was Blake Coleman and Barclay Goodrow for the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Unlike Lehkonen, Coleman and Goodrow hit the free-agent market after their back-to-back Stanley Cups. While some teams paid up for their championship-caliber service, others have tried to look under the radar for their own versions of this archetype.

The basic framework is someone who can drive play up the ice, contribute offensively and be defensively responsible. The best-case scenario has this player capable of absorbing matchup minutes and playing in all situations, but it all depends on team need (and the market). In seasons past, that has looked like deadline additions Andrew Copp, Tyler Motte, Vlad Namestnikov, Brandon Hagel, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde, among others.

Figuring out this year’s version of that player is tricky because the playoff picture is still in flux. In the West, there are three confirmed sellers so far: the St. Louis Blues, Calgary Flames and Vancouver Canucks. In the Eastern Conference, only one team (the New York Rangers) has officially bowed out of the postseason picture. So while there are Blake Coleman-lites for contenders to consider, between the playoff fringes and bottom of the standings, it all comes down to which teams ultimately step back and sell in the next few weeks.

Rentals

Kiefer Sherwood, a pending unrestricted free agent who brings a lot of grit, physicality, and goal scoring to a lineup, was already traded to the San Jose Sharks in exchange for two second-rounders and a prospect. There are bound to be other rental options on the move over the next few weeks.

The Columbus Blue Jackets are 5-1-0 since Rick Bowness took over behind the bench. But if a coaching change isn’t enough to push this team into the postseason picture, Columbus has at least two veterans to flip: Boone Jenner and Charlie Coyle.

Jenner sits No. 17 on the trade board as a hard-nosed option for playoff teams. He is a versatile player who can slot anywhere in a lineup, in any situation, against any opponent. Jenner hasn’t been as strong



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defensively relative to his teammates over the last two years, but has picked up the pace offensively to offset that. On the Blue Jackets, he can be found in the top six; on a contender, he should slot into a more fitting middle-six capacity.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

NHL trade board 4.0: The sprint to the Feb. 4 Olympic trade freeze is officially on

The Flames made the first of what could be multiple big deals on Sunday, and the Rangers have put up a "For Sale" sign. Who's next to move?

Coyle, on the other hand, has been extremely sound in his own zone this year. Last year's trade to Colorado helped get his game back on track after a tough start to 2024-25 in Boston. But he has really kicked his game up a notch in Columbus this season. The Blue Jackets are generating more quality chances (and converting on them) in his minutes. But what stands out even more is how little the team is giving up, despite playing some of the most challenging usage in the league; Coyle's plus-3.6 Defensive Rating ranks 11th among all forwards. That shutdown play and production could help stabilize a contender's center depth.

The Boston Bruins are actually in the playoff picture, but are in a slightly different position as a team that kicked off a retool last spring. The big question is whether management will continue that process or buy based on the team's better-than-expected first half.

So if Boston slides out of a playoff seed or decides to sell anyway, Viktor Arvidsson is a player to watch. He was a reclamation project for the Bruins after a down year in Edmonton. While he isn't getting as many puck touches in his own zone this season, he has been a lot more effective offensively between his rush game, forechecking and overall ability to generate scoring chances. So while he doesn't have the same defensive chops as a Coyle or even a Jenner, a contender could view him as a disruptive winger who can float around a top nine.

While the Bruins and Blue Jackets weren't exactly expected to be contenders this year, the Maple Leafs were, and their 11th-place standing in the East adds a bit of a curveball to the deadline. The chances are slim, but say management recognizes how low this team is on trade assets and takes a proactive approach. Someone like Bobby McMann could generate interest for teams looking for some middle-six help.

Shift west, and there is a former Maple Leaf on the trade board in Michael Bunting. He isn't quite of the Coleman mold, since he isn't stout defensively or an all-situations threat. But if none of the aforementioned players end up available, a thin market could force teams to get more creative. If Bunting can channel some of last season's forechecking, this year's scoring and his ability to jump up and complement top-line players, the Nashville Predators winger could be of value at the deadline.

Another forward in the \$4 million range is Ilya Mikheyev in Chicago. While he could never live up to the hype of the four-year contract the Canucks signed him to back in 2022, he did rebound with the Blackhawks over the last two years. Mikheyev is the kind of player who could slot onto a playoff team's third line and help facilitate play. He brings an element of speed, which helps him break out of his own zone with control to spark offensive sequences. He can speed into the offensive end to recover dumps-ins, forecheck and chip in secondary scoring. Plus, he can be trusted to limit scoring chances against on the penalty kill.

Two playoff runs

One of the most valuable parts of the Coleman trade in 2020? The fact that the Lightning invested in two playoff runs with him (which ended in two championships).

And that opportunity is there again, if anyone can offer the Flames a deal that moves the needle enough. Cost is going to be a big part of the

conversation, because a 34-year-old Coleman likely won't bring back the same as a 28-year-old Coleman (unless the market inflates with too many buyers and too few sellers) and the Flames can always punt this to next deadline.

Six years later, he is still an ideal option despite a pricier cap hit (\$4.9 million) this time. Coleman can go head-to-head with the opponents' best and put up positive results; the Flames generate more chances and allow less back with him on the ice at even strength, and trust him to play on their top penalty-kill unit. And despite that workload, his scoring rate is slightly above his career average. The third line is likely still the sweet spot for Coleman on a contender, but he has the chops to jump up and play wherever asked.

Like the Flames, the Blues are positioned to sell at the deadline to start reloading for next season. Pius Suter should generate some interest as a center who can contribute to two playoff runs.

Before getting sidelined with injury, the scoring wasn't as potent for Suter this season for two reasons: he isn't shooting 18 percent anymore, and the team isn't converting on their chances in his minutes at five-on-five. The Blues are shooting less than seven percent with Suter on the ice, which explains the gap between his expected goals rate of 3.17 per 60 and scoring pace of 1.99 goals per 60. But the substance is there below the surface on both ends of the ice; Suter's teams generally allow fewer quality chances against in his minutes, and that extends to short-handed situations. So while he isn't flashy or a big puck-mover, he is a stabilizer who could help solidify a team when the pressure rises.

Playoff teams that don't need a penalty killer, or don't want to pay up for a center, could turn to Nino Niederreiter. The Winnipeg Jets' playoff odds have absolutely plummeted this year, so management may want to start thinking about next season early. With a utility player like Alex Lafallo under contract for another two seasons, that could give the team reason to flip Niederreiter. His scoring may be down, but his year-to-year consistency is still a standout; he can shoulder a tough workload and help move the needle on both ends of the ice. Niederreiter can skate the puck out of his own end and can be counted on to make little plays that extend offensive zone time.

Michael Amadio is another player of that mold: A third-liner who can help transition his team out of danger while facing off against the opponents' best. While he hasn't contributed as much to the Ottawa Senators' scoring chances this year, he 1) has a pretty solid track record from the last few years in both Ottawa and Vegas, and 2) has a more team-friendly \$2.6 million cap hit that may not require as much work to fit.

That's if the Senators sell; as low as their playoff chances may be, this team isn't in as dire a playoff window, with as loud a ticking clock — unlike the Los Angeles Kings.

The Kings have an 82 percent chance of reaching the playoffs, but another Round 1 appearance (and exit) can't be the goal anymore. Between playing in a weak Pacific Division and this being Anze Kopitar's last season, they have motivation to stay in the race. But it wouldn't hurt for management to shake things up, either. If that became the direction, then someone like Warren Foegele could have some trade value; the 29-year-old has a manageable \$3.5 million cap hit for another year.

That said, an acquiring team would have to hope that a change in environment would help Foegele bounce back. It's more than just a scoring dip that raises some red flags: his speed bursts are down and so is his transition game. Those are both key parts of his attack; Foegele generally can be counted on to help shift his team from defense to offense. And once in the offensive end, he can pressure opponents to keep the play in the zone. His forechecking ability hasn't faded, which is promising. Maybe away from the Kings, he can get back to his speedy strengths to provide true third-line value again or jump up higher as needed.



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Most contenders aren't in the market for a mid-season reclamation project, even if this one could bring back immediate returns with Foegle's track record in mind. But it's a reminder of how slim the options could be, depending on how the playoff picture unfolds over the next few weeks.

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The Athletic / NHL trade targets: Rating the best young players contenders could make available

By Corey Pronman

The 2026 NHL trade deadline is fast approaching. According to our insider Chris Johnston, the primary buyers this season are Carolina, Colorado, Dallas, Detroit, Edmonton, Minnesota, Tampa Bay and Vegas, with Montreal acting as a soft buyer.

What follows is a seller's guide to the top young assets who could be made available by those teams. Young players in prominent roles are excluded. What's clear is that Detroit and Montreal are in the driver's seat when it comes to assets to move, but whether they want to push the chips in this season is something their management will have to determine.

Tier 1: Premium young assets

Michael Brandsegg-Nygård, RW, Detroit Red Wings: Brandsegg-Nygård is a heavy winger with good offensive skills and a great shot. He projects as a middle-six forward who coaches will love.

Nate Danielson, C, Detroit Red Wings: Danielson is a quality two-way center with a legit combination of size, speed and hands. His scoring has been inconsistent, although he's been quite good at the AHL level this season.

Michael Hage, C, Montreal Canadiens: Hage has been a top player this season in college and at the World Juniors. His skating and playmaking grade out at a top-six NHL level, making him a premium trade chip given he can play the middle as well.

Alexander Zharovsky, RW, Montreal Canadiens: The biggest riser on the board. After being selected 34th in 2025, Zharovsky has exploded in the KHL. He's a high-end skill forward with legit tools to project into a top six.

Tier 2: Strong B-level assets

Carter Bear, C/W, Detroit Red Wings: Detroit's 2025 first-round pick (13th) is a competitive winger with good feet and offensive skills and has been a prominent junior scorer with a game that should translate to the pros.

Sebastian Cossa, G, Detroit Red Wings: Cossa has been a top goalie in the AHL this season. He's a huge goalie who can move, and while he's been quite inconsistent over the years, if Detroit decides to dangle one of him or Trey Augustine, the 2021 No. 15 pick's toolkit will be highly intriguing to teams.

Conor Geekie, C, Tampa Bay Lightning: Geekie has been very good at the AHL level this season. He's a big, highly skilled center who can play in traffic, but his foot speed is an issue. He's the clear best trade asset that Tampa has.

Eddie Genborg, LW, Detroit Red Wings: Genborg has been quite good in the SHL as an 18-year-old. He's a tall, highly physical winger whose offense has surprised even some of his biggest backers.

David Reinbacher, RHD, Montreal Canadiens: I'd be quite surprised to see Montreal move their No. 5 pick from 2023, but his development since then has been up and down. He's still a desirable piece as a 6-foot-2 right shot who can skate, make stops and move pucks, but the offense may not be top-end.

Charlie Stramel, C, Minnesota Wild: Stramel has been one of the very best players in college this season. A big, physical center with good feet and hands, Stramel projects as a hard-to-play-against middle-six center in the NHL.

Draft picks: Detroit and Montreal still have their 2026 first-round picks.

Tier 3: B-grade assets

Trey Augustine, G, Detroit Red Wings: Augustine, like Cossa, is a quality goalie prospect in the Wings system. He's been great in college and has high-end hockey sense, but his pure tools don't jump out at you.

Jacob Fowler, G, Montreal Canadiens: Fowler has been excellent as a rookie pro following a great collegiate career. He's a super smart and polished goaltender, although he doesn't have truly high-end athletic traits.

Matt Savoie, C/W, Edmonton Oilers: Savoie is a worker with excellent speed and skill. He's quite small, though, and projects more as a secondary scorer in the NHL.

Bradly Nadeau, RW, Carolina Hurricanes: Possessing an NHL-elite shot, Nadeau is a talented scorer who could project to help a middle six and power play one day.

Ike Howard, LW, Edmonton Oilers: Howard is a talented scorer who has put up strong numbers for years, although his frame and off-puck play will be concerning for teams.

Max Curran, C, Colorado Avalanche: Curran has developed quite well for the Avs and was a top player for Czechia at the recent World Juniors. He's a big pivot who can skate. His puck play is fine, but it's good enough to project to help an NHL team.

Draft picks: Carolina, Colorado, Dallas, Detroit, Edmonton, Minnesota and Montreal have their 2027 first-round picks.

Tier 4: Quality trade chips

Trevor Connelly, LW, Vegas Golden Knights

Adam Engstrom, LHD, Montreal Canadiens

Max Plante, LW, Detroit Red Wings

Emil Hemming, RW, Dallas Stars

Ben Danford, RHD, Toronto Maple Leafs

Sam O'Reilly, C, Tampa Bay Lightning

Benjamin Rautiainen, LW, Tampa Bay Lightning

Draft picks: Edmonton, Dallas, Detroit, Montreal, Tampa Bay and Vegas have their 2026 second-round picks

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ESPN / The two sides of Mitch Marner's return home to Toronto - ESPN

Arda Ocal



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Mitch Marner spent nine seasons with the Toronto Maple Leafs. There were some very good times. He established himself as the greatest Maple Leafs player born in the Greater Toronto area. "Mit chy Magic" was often in full force at Scotiabank Arena.

But the relationship turned sour. After years of playoff heartbreaks and early exits, the fan base put Marner in its crosshairs. According to the fans, he was one of the reasons the team wasn't able to finally capture another Stanley Cup and break the "1967" curse. Safety concerns began to mount. Marner's car was stolen, and his address was leaked online. He needed private security for his family.

The fan scrutiny in one of the largest and most intense hockey markets in the world didn't stop. Social media comments and trolls were relentless. A fresh start for the star player seemed inevitable and needed. So, Marner left his hometown team and joined the Vegas Golden Knights via trade, inking an eight-year deal at \$12 million in average annual value.

Marner got two very different reactions in his return to Toronto on Friday.

For the first time in his NHL career, the Toronto native was the visitor, donning the Golden Knights' sweater. The first time he touched the puck, the Leafs faithful let him have it, showering him with boos.

"That was fine," Marner told reporters after the game. "I knew it was going to come." Marner noted that the Leafs have a passionate fan base and that he still has "a lot of love for these fans."

Leafs fans brought the heat Friday: "Benedict Marn-old" one sign read. "Thanks for 9 great regular seasons" another read. And yes, Marner was booed throughout the game whenever he touched the puck, save for some cheers on his two helpers as the Golden Knights beat the Leafs 6-3.

But it was all classy when Marner's tribute video aired during the first TV timeout. The video included highlights of his incredible plays wearing the blue and white, and the fans applauded. When the video ended with a message of "Welcome Back Mitch," the fans gave Marner a standing ovation while he skated around center ice acknowledging the crowd. After the game, Marner spotted a fan wearing his jersey in the crowd and gave them his stick.

This is a formula I would love to see become tradition. The fans have every right to boo a player who left them. This is sports. You paid for a ticket. Boo to your heart's content. These athletes are getting paid millions of dollars to play at the highest levels and win championships -- trolling and booing come with the territory.

But when that tribute video hits, the hate gets put aside and you give a moment of respect for the contributions of that player. That's your moment to say thanks. Toronto got it right in that regard Friday night. Now you can boo him however long you want during games.

It should be assumed and not needed to be said, but doxing, bodily harm and theft are absolutely not OK. Athletes are also human beings.

Who knows how long it will last for Marner? New York Islanders fans still boo John Tavares -- but hey, at least they don't throw rubber snakes on the ice anymore.

Jump ahead:

Games of the week

What I loved this weekend

Hart Trophy candidates

Social post of the week

Stick taps

Biggest games of the week

Boston

Bruins at

Tampa Bay

Lightning

6:30 p.m. ET | ESPN

Obviously, the biggest game this week will be the Stadium Series on Sunday from Raymond James Stadium. I can't wait for the atmosphere, the game itself in that environment, but also all the fun surrounding it. Disney World is a short drive away, and the Gasparilla Pirate Festival will be happening around the same time. It should be an absolute party.

Also, don't forget about the second half of the Stadium Series doubleheader on Sunday night after the Bolts-Bruins game. Marner and his Golden Knights teammates will be heading to Southern California to take on the Anaheim Ducks (9:30 p.m. ET, ESPN).

Other key games to watch

MONDAY

Utah

Mammoth at

Tampa

Bay Lightning

7 p.m. ET | ESPN+

New York

Islanders at

Philadelphia

Flyers

7 p.m. ET | ESPN+

Anaheim

Ducks at

Edmonton

Oilers

8:30 p.m. ET | ESPN+

TUESDAY

Vegas

Golden Knights at

Montreal

Canadiens

7 p.m. ET | ESPN+

WEDNESDAY

New York

Rangers at

New York

Islanders

7 p.m. ET | ESPN+

THURSDAY

Philadelphia

Flyers at



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Boston
Bruins
7 p.m. ET | ESPN+
Colorado
Avalanche at
Montreal
Canadiens
7 p.m. ET | ESPN+
Utah
Mammoth at
Carolina
Hurricanes
7 p.m. ET | ESPN+
Washington
Capitals at
Detroit
Red Wings
7:30 p.m. ET | ESPN+/Hulu
San Jose
Sharks at
Edmonton
Oilers
9 p.m. ET | ESPN+
Dallas
Stars at
Vegas
Golden Knights
10 p.m. ET | ESPN+
SATURDAY
Colorado
Avalanche at
Detroit
Red Wings
1 p.m. ET | ABC
New York
Rangers at
Pittsburgh
Penguins
3:30 p.m. ET | ABC
Carolina
Hurricanes at
Washington

Capitals
5 p.m. ET | ESPN+
Montreal
Canadiens at
Buffalo
Sabres
7 p.m. ET | NHL Network
Minnesota
Wild at
Edmonton
Oilers
10 p.m. ET | ESPN+
What I loved this weekend

The Shoresy Classic made a stop in Calgary recently, and the Flames are the favorite team of Jared Keeso, creator of the "Shoresy" comedy show and the actor who plays the title character.

Keeso's passion shone through when he addressed the crowd (and Flames alumni) before the game:

Holy, he set the tone 🙌 So glad to have you at the 'Dome, Jared!
pic.twitter.com/MXB3zEyeuh

— Calgary Flames (@NHLFlames) January 23, 2026

A fun thing I learned this weekend while covering the X Games: multiple-time ski big air gold medalist Mac Forehand is the cousin of Trevor Zegras, lives in Utah and attends Mammoth games. Forehand won another gold Friday night on an unreal 2160 jump -- six full rotations! -- for an impressive 96 score from the judges. He will also be competing for Team USA at the Olympics. Best of luck, Mac!

Hart Trophy candidates if the season ended today

Another week down and Nathan MacKinnon, Connor McDavid and Macklin Celebrini remain in the top three spots for NHL MVP.

MacKinnon's 88 points is two behind McDavid for the scoring lead, but MacKinnon's Avs remain 10 points clear of the next-best team atop the standings. Celebrini had a relatively quiet week by his standards, but the 19-year-old has 74 points through 50 games.

Here I thought I'd be simply ordering Mac, Mc and Mack in the Hart Trophy race for the rest of the season -- but a new contender is in hot pursuit.

That is Nikita Kucherov, who has 78 points through 46 games for the Eastern juggernaut Lightning. I'm sticking with my same three this week, but Kucherov is officially on watch because he could elbow Celebrini out of the running by going on a streak.

Social media post of the weekend

Is going to go off the board here and call out this excellent photo of two Mount Rushmore-caliber defensemen and a possible future one in Ray Bourque, Rob Blake and Cale Makar. Both because it's an iconic photo that should probably be somewhere in the Hall of Fame but also because Bourque is just like us, standing on his tippy-toes trying not to look too short in the picture (albeit with Makar in skates). All short kings do it, no shame in that!

— NHL (@NHL) January 24, 2026

And an honorable mention this week: How did NJ Devil make this catch?



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This will be a poster on your kids walls for years to come
pic.twitter.com/g5BKyx6ctb

— NJ Devil (@NJDevil00) January 23, 2026

Stick taps

On Thursday, the NHL, NHLPA and ESPN's Take Back Sports initiative held an innovation competition at ESPN Wide World of Sports in Orlando. Hundreds of undergrad and graduate college students in the state of Florida submitted ideas to help grow the game of hockey at the grassroots level and tackle this question: "How can we strengthen the future of hockey by expanding participation, improving safe access, and making the game more fun and engaging for families and communities?"

It came down to six teams that presented in front of judges and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

Two awards were given out: the Innovator Award (the most out-of-the-box and transformative idea) and the Change Maker Award (most feasible and ready-to-implement award).

Hockey Unidos (Claire Maloney, Emma Mussante, Kylie Hafner and Anthony Costanzo) from the University of South Florida won the Change Maker Award. Their idea involved a culturally tailored hockey pop-up designed to engage Latino communities through festivals, food, language and family-driven activations.

AI Hockey Hubs (Demetrius Walker and Adolfo Acevedo) from Florida A&M University won the Innovation Award. Their idea was a portable, tech-enabled micro-rink that can turn small spaces into hockey skill zones using AI-supported training experiences.

Each winning student also won \$2,000 and a VIP ticket experience to the 2026 NHL Stadium Series (or a Florida-based home game) along with VIP access to a special NHL, ESPN or Disney behind-the-scenes experience.

Congratulations to the winners!

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers provide blueprint for up-and-coming Ducks with crafty win

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — The Edmonton Oilers beat their 2017 selves Monday night, a look in the rearview mirror at an Anaheim Ducks team that presents very much the way these Oilers once did.

"Yeah, for sure," smiled Leon Draisaitl, who had four assists in a 7-4 Oilers win. "A lot of lot of fresh legs, a lot of enthusiasm. Lots of skill. A team that has a bright future for sure."

Edmonton had missed the playoffs for 10 consecutive springs when they broke out in 2017, beating San Jose in Round 1 to advance to a second-round series against the veteran Ducks.

Anaheim has missed the playoffs for seven straight years. At the 53-game mark they've only a four-point bulge on San Jose and Los Angeles, and a long stretch of meaningful games await, something the folks in Anaheim haven't experienced in most of a decade.

"It gets harder from here on out," warned Draisaitl. "And then you get into the playoffs and it gets really hard, right? That's where you measure yourself."

"No disrespect (to Anaheim) — it's good getting off to a good start and being in a playoff spot right now. But it's only going to get harder. We'll see if they're able to, I guess, handle that pressure. But they've got a bright future ahead for sure."

Remember when Todd McLellan's Oilers finally busted into the playoffs in 2017, beat San Jose in Round 1, and then ran right into Corey Perry, Ryan Getzlaf and the veteran Ducks?

Remember how Edmonton had Anaheim on the ropes in that second-round series? How the Ducks hung in there, somehow winning Game 5 at home, a game that the Oilers had led with three minutes to play, then gutted out a 2-1 win in Game 7?

That Oilers team that just didn't have the gamesmanship or attention to detail that Anaheim had forged over a decade as a Western power.

Well, isn't the skate on the other foot now?

"I think they can run and gun," said Mattias Ekholm, who had a rare hat trick on Monday (more on that later). "But I think when they dial in their defensive game, I think that they'll be... They're already a good hockey team, but they'll be a great hockey team."

You wouldn't think the distance between good and great would be such a journey. But ask around this Oilers room — it was one thing making the playoffs, and quite another thriving in them.

Edmonton missed the playoffs altogether in 2018 and 2019, before beginning a run that sees them as the two-time defending Western Conference champs.

On Monday, Anaheim rolled into Edmonton on a seven-game win streak, just a point behind the Oilers in the Pacific Division standings. They were without three key players in Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish and Troy Terry, and still poured 40 shots at Edmonton goalie Tristan Jarry, owning the third period before the Oilers popped two empty netters nail down the win.

Big blue-liner Jackson LaCombe, as physical as he is skilled, is a franchise defenceman if ever we've seen one. Beckett Sennecke has immense skill up front, leading a quick group of forwards who move a puck like it's on a string.

Vets like Mikael Granlund (who also had a hat trick), Radko Gudas, Jacob Trouba and Alex Killorn have a ton of leading to do here, but with followers like Carlson, McTavish and Cutter Gauthier it's only a matter of time that the Pacific torch gets passed from the Edmonton Oilers and Vegas' to Anaheim, and perhaps San Jose as well.

"Yeah, for sure we have a fast team and we know that," said LaCombe. "I think we just had moments (tonight) where we were a little loose and we kind of let them play to their strengths and that's not what we want to do. We just have to be better in the second period."

Like those old Oilers teams, when the bleeding started the Ducks couldn't find a tourniquet. Four goals in 3:49 by Oilers defencemen in the second period was an NHL record, as was the fact that Ekholm's hat trick followed up a hatty from Evan Bouchard the last time out.

Those crafty old Oilers, they've learned how to win a 2-1 game in April and May. But you want to play 10-goal hockey in January, they're all over that as well. They beat Washington 6-5 the last time out, two straight wins with a grand total of 22 goals scored.

"You've got to win in different ways every night, and sometimes it's two games in a row of ... finding a way to score more than the other team," Draisaitl said. "That's just the way this league works at times. (But it's) certainly not the standard or the mindset that we want to have each and every night."

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Sportsnet.ca / Quick Shifts: Nylander's gesture symbolic of Maple Leafs standard

Luke Fox

A quick mix of the things we gleaned from the week of hockey, serious and less so, and rolling four lines deep. The blog that drags on longer than a Jonathan Toews ovation.

1. In the middle of this disillusioned (and, potentially, death-blow) homestand for his Toronto Maple Leafs, Craig Berube summed up the mood of the organization when he said that their standard has slipped.

Whatever momentum the hockey team was riding after their emotional overtime win over the lousy Jets in Winnipeg last weekend has gone poof over a 0-3-1 homestand that inspires as much confidence as a diagnosis from Dr. Nick.

Figurative banana peels are scattered all over the Scotiabank Arena ice, like the literal hats doffed for visitor Brock Nelson's hat trick on Sunday.

The Maple Leafs are slipping all over the place, all over themselves.

Even way up in the press box, where an injured and smiling William Nylander flipped off the broadcast cameras. During the organization's kid-gear "Next Gen" match, a rare matinee geared to win over the children, no less.

Some take longer to grow up, though.

Alerted that his viral moment might not be a good look, Nylander said "sorry" on Instagram. The 29-year-old characterized his middle finger as a "moment of frustration." Video of the bird flip instead suggests a moment of "maybe this'll be funny."

Nylander owns one of the sport's most enviable skill sets. He also owns the richest contract in Leafs history and, surely, some of the finest tank tops on the market.

What he does not own is a letter on his sweater.

And Sunday's flippant approach served as a reminder of why that might be.

Are the Leafs treating this stretch of hockey as seriously as they should?

Don't be mistaken: We're not clutching pearls here. We're hardly aghast or offended. People of all ages do dumb things they regret.

We are, however, wondering about the adults in the room, whoever they are.

The Maple Leafs faced four real opponents over the past seven days, and they've made the home team look weak.

Minnesota, Detroit, Vegas and Colorado came into the Leafs' barn and ran their show to a combined score of 18-8. The Leafs have lost six of their past seven, while giving up six goals in four of those losses. Their most recent regulation win was 16 days ago, over the tanking Vancouver Canucks.

The Leafs downplay capital-M moments like Mitch Marner's return as "just another game," then come out with just-another-game energy.

Even when their opponent is flying in tired off a back-to-back (Vegas) or is asked to play at 11:30 a.m. body-clock time (Colorado), they have no issue dictating pace.

Toronto's captain is glumly trotting out gotta-be-better clichés as the inconsistent performances pile up, and their coach refuses to rip them too hard after another slow start. Probably because Berube understands he's dealing with a fragile group.

"You can tell we're not playing with a ton of confidence right now," defenceman Jake McCabe says.

The ol' new-assistant-coach bump is fading. So are the Leafs' playoff chances, down to 7.6 per cent, per MoneyPuck.com.

What's more concerning is the void of fightback on a bench that relies too heavily on a waiver pickup (Troy Stecher) and bottom-six forward (Scott Laughton) to provide heart.

"Right now, it's quiet," Berube says. "That's not going to help. You gotta cheer for your teammate. You gotta have energy, no matter what situation."

2. There is some (imperfect) precedent for punishing a middle finger, and the NHL is considering it in Nylander's case.

Boston's Andrew Ference was fined \$2,500 and given a game misconduct for giving the Montreal Canadiens fans the ungentlemanly salute in the 2011 playoffs. But that was during game action. (Note: Nylander was fined \$5,000 by the NHL Monday night.)

At the time, Ference tried to pass off his bird as a "glove malfunction," and somewhere Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake snickered and giggled.

"I can assure you, that's not part of my repertoire. I don't know if my glove got caught up, but I can assure you, that's not part of who I am," he told reporters post-game. "It looks awful, I admit it. I completely apologize as to how it looks, but you guys have covered me long enough to know that's not part of my repertoire. I was putting my fist in the air."

The player later came clean in a blog post titled "Things I Have Learned #1":

Accountability is lacking in our world. Just look at nuisance lawsuits, or the finger-pointing of politicians around the globe. I am guilty myself of trying to blame a middle-fingered celebration after a goal in Montreal on a glove malfunction. In round one of the playoffs between two of the fiercest rivals in our sport, I scored a tying goal in the enemy's building, only to have my fist pump turn into a sign language that crosses all borders. Facing the media and a possible suspension after the fact proved to be too much for my self-accountability. Self-preservation is a powerful thing. ... it is easier to place blame elsewhere and overlook your own responsibilities.

3. Our understanding is that, even five points and three teams away from a wild card, the Maple Leafs are not interested in turning into a deadline seller.

Between now and the trade deadline, GM Brad Treliving must figure out if he's re-signing impending UFAs Laughton, Stecher and Bobby McMann.

Asset management has been a problem in Toronto, and this roster isn't good enough to cross fingers on "own rentals," let alone invest more futures.

If you're not keeping them long-term, don't let them walk for nothing.

Tuesday's divisional match against red-hot Buffalo feels about as close to a "must-win" as you'll get in January.

4. Quote of the Week.

"I don't do fights. I score." — Filip Gustavsson, Minnesota Wild goaltender



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5. The Florida Panthers' record since future Hall of Famer Sergei Bobrovsky skated 200 feet and threw down with San Jose goaltender Alex Nedeljkovic: 3-0.

We love our narratives.

If the champs rally into the post-season, how often will the first goalie fight in six years be referenced as a turning point?

"Best goalie in the world is doing that, it's pretty incredible," a prescient Matthew Tkachuk said post-game. "When one of our best players is kinda going out of his comfort zone, any goalie's comfort zone, players should take that as a spark.

"We need to use that fire and that energy from our backbone, in Bob, on this next road trip because, to be honest, we're not in a good spot at all in the standings right now."

6. If the injured Brayden Point, whose Olympic availability remains in question, was slotted to play wing for Canada, Doug Armstrong must think long and hard about adding Zach Hyman as Point's replacement.

Hyman's relentless work ethic, two-way responsibility, special-teams acumen and built-in chemistry with Connor McDavid are all assets.

He's also the hot hand.

In Hyman's past 23 games, he has 18 goals, nine assists, 27 points and a plus-12 rating.

7. Todd McLellan's Detroit Red Wings wake up in first place in the Atlantic Division and, barring a collapse, should snap the franchise's nine-year post-season drought.

Remember when McLellan wasted no time ripping his players after their 5-1 loss to Montreal at the home opener?

There was risk of burning a card early, of making too big a deal over a 0-1 record. But the coach set a tone and nipped the slacking in the bud.

"Well, quite honestly, I drove home that night and it started with my son going, 'You lost your marbles.' I didn't think I did, but then the rest of the hockey world did," McLellan says.

"I didn't feel that at all. I felt our team needed to be reminded that we came out of a real good training camp, and that if we were going to settle into our ways of the past, it wouldn't work. I was really direct about it.

"I would have done that at Game 10 or Game 20, and I've done it since. Perhaps because it was after Game 1 (it made headlines), but our players reacted well. I knew they would. And they've been OK ever since."

8. Patrick Kane's next point will tie him with Mike Modano for the most by a U.S.-born player (1,374). Two points and he stands alone.

"You need talent, and it oozes out of them, not only physically but mentally. He's got an unreal hockey mind. But then the drive, it goes away from people later on in life. And whether it's a player or a coach or even the media people, it's hard to keep it up. But his drive is not diminished one bit," McLellan explains.

"In fact, with some of these attainable milestones, his drive has actually increased, and he's excited about being at the rink."

That was evident in Toronto Wednesday, when Kane held court for as long as reporters wished, happy to discuss any number of topics.

Kane has a reverence for his fellow American icons — rhyming off Chris Chelios, Pat LaFontaine, Phil Housley, Jeremy Roenick and Modano — but wants to snap the record "sooner rather than later" and become one of few who can place Modano in the rear view.

"Probably not a better guy to have your name up there with, as far as American players and what he did for the game, and his flair and his

ability to bring fans out of their seats, right?" Kane says. "He's an exciting player and a guy that I really enjoyed watching when I was younger."

McLellan describes Kane as a storyteller, a historian. Conversations with the veteran feel like sitting around a campfire or a family breakfast table, the coach says.

Kane is quick to acknowledge that his place atop the U.S. list may be short-lived, with 28-year-old Auston Matthews already stacking 769 points.

"One day he'll probably be in the shoes I am right now," Kane says. "So, that's the guy, right? That's the next guy for a lot of American kids that they're looking up to now."

9. No team in playoff position has anywhere close to as much cap space as the Red Wings: \$30.84 million.

Steve Yzerman must use some of that to reward his group.

10. No one has more takeaways (35) this season than Josh Doan, who signed what should be a team-friendly seven-year, \$48.65-million extension in Buffalo.

A couple of Nashville's proven stars, Ryan O'Reilly and Filip Forsberg, are tied, but they see more ice.

Fun fact: Doan (35 points) is outproducing Utah's JJ Peterka (34 points).

A nice little parting gift from Kevyn Adams?

11. Troy Stecher has built hundreds of Lego sets, and he keeps them all.

It's a "therapeutic" hobby the Maple Leafs defenceman uses to distract his mind, but he has had no time to kill playing every other day and living out of a Toronto hotel room.

"My parents never threw it away. When I signed in Vancouver out of North Dakota, I went to my mom's house, grabbed it all and brought it with me. So, I have hundreds and hundreds of sets. Like, I have a lot of Lego," Stecher chuckles.

The 31-year-old is quick to point out that building Lego isn't only a kids' hobby, and 45-year-old actor Macaulay Culkin professed his love for Lego on *Smartless* last week.

Stecher has devoted hours on off days to assembling sets, and his vast collection is spread between his rental place in Edmonton, his home in Scottsdale, and his mom's house.

He's not a big fan of Star Wars films but loves the franchise's Lego.

His most difficult project was clicking together a 7,800-piece Death Star.

"And then I've got a gunship, an AT-AT. I've got a bunch of them," Stecher says.

"Sometimes, I'll just binge it and finish (a set) in one sitting of six hours. And sometimes I'll leave it on the kitchen table for two months. So, a lot of it depends on the hockey schedule."

12. Tristan Jarry's eight appearances with Edmonton: 5-2-1, 3.12 GAA, .880 SV%.

Stuart Skinner's past eight appearances with Pittsburgh: 7-1-0, 1.63 GAA, .934 Sv%.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens wise to wait before activating Patrik Laine



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Eric Engels

That seems like the wise choice, even if Laine appears to be getting closer and closer to being able to return from the core-muscle surgery he had back on Oct. 25.

The timeline given for Laine's recovery that day was three to four months, and Canadiens general manager Kent Hughes said he was on schedule — and not ahead of it — when he was asked about it back on Jan. 6.

Ten days later, after skating for several days in a non-contact jersey, Laine appeared in his first full practice with the Canadiens in Kanata, Ont.

Ten days after that, on Monday, he was participating in his fourth practice — this time at the team's south-shore facility.

But Laine hasn't been given clearance to play for the Canadiens against the Vegas Golden Knights on Tuesday, and we don't see an incentive for the Canadiens to manipulate their lineup to get him in even once he does eventually receive clearance.

Martin St. Louis' comments on the subject — which came after Laine took alternate rushes on the team's first line Monday — did anything but alter that feeling.

When the coach was asked how he'd reintegrate Laine, St. Louis said, "When (head athletic therapist Jim) Ramsay tells me he's ready, we'll cross that bridge."

When asked about what Laine could bring to his lineup, St. Louis pointed to only one thing.

"His strength is his shot on the power play, so he can for sure bring that," he said.

St. Louis not mentioning anything else was even more telling.

It's hard to imagine him feeling assured that Laine can fit in the Canadiens' fast and connected brand of hockey at five-on-five because Laine hasn't offered up any evidence he can.

At least part of that's been due to injury.

Laine came to Montreal after an injury to his shoulder interfered with his off-ice training regimen in the summer of 2024. He was just starting to round back into form that fall when he sprained his left knee in his first pre-season game with the Canadiens and ended up missing a little over two months. And he went under the knife just nine days after Montreal's fifth game this season.

Before Laine played, St. Louis said the work the big Finn put in over the summer could bring out the best in him.

But had the coach seen that through training camp and the start of the season, he'd have found a way to use Laine for more than 13:45 in a single game.

What St. Louis saw using Laine as a power-play specialist over those first five also inspired little hope that inserting the player into that same role now would be worth pulling someone else out of theirs.

The 29-year-old didn't score. He registered only four shots in his 12:12 on the power play, and he was minus-3 in limited minutes at five-on-five.

Last season, Laine was minus-14, but the Canadiens wouldn't have made the playoffs without his 20 goals.

This season, the Canadiens haven't needed Laine's goals. They've produced 3.33 goals per game without him — sixth-most in the NHL — and they've also run the sixth-best power play in the league since Laine got hurt.

He's still a highly skilled player with unique tools — tools that saw him drafted second overall in 2016 and led him to remarkable success through his first four seasons with the Winnipeg Jets.

But Laine has only been more dangerous without the puck ever since, and his inability to offset that with the same volume of offence he produced with it in Winnipeg helped put him in the situation he's in now.

Injuries through Laine's four seasons with the Columbus Blue Jackets hampered what was already a limited skating stride, and that's hurt him in Montreal. His insistence on wanting to slow the game down at times when the Canadiens need him to speed it up has also hindered his ability to fit with them.

Not that the game doesn't permit a player with the rare ability to slow the game down to do so. As St. Louis was saying Monday, there are even circumstances — like on zone entries where you're given space and you're trying to use it to buy time for another teammate to catch up and give you a numerical advantage, or on zone exits, when you want to buy yourself time for a line change — that force such a player to take advantage of that skill.

"The game is so fast, though, now," St. Louis added before concluding that most teams are too good at applying pressure and not allowing you to slow it down.

The Golden Knights are one of those teams.

The Colorado Avalanche, Buffalo Sabres and Minnesota Wild are others — even if they all play different styles — and they're the next three on the Canadiens' schedule after Tuesday's game.

It's hard to envision Laine being inserted against any of them.

Barring an injury, the Canadiens couldn't put him in without trading a player for futures or sending one down to the American Hockey League to remain compliant with the 23-man roster limit, and only two of their players can go down right now without having to clear waivers first.

Jakub Dobeš is one of them, but the Canadiens aren't going to play without a backup goaltender.

And even if Zachary Bolduc hasn't scored a goal since Dec. 23 against the Bruins, it seems unlikely the Canadiens would choose to play without him right now.

Over the last week, St. Louis has done nothing but (justifiably) praise the 22-year-old's work in the role Laine would most likely occupy in his return — on the fourth line and second wave of the power play — and it's hard to imagine him pulling him, let alone pushing him to Laval.

Even harder to imagine would be Laine playing where he practised Monday, in rotations with top liners Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield. Those two have played almost all their five-on-five minutes either against the opposition's best forwards or their best checkers, and that doesn't sound like an optimal assignment for a slower player who hasn't played in over three months.

No assignment seems fitting for Laine with the Canadiens at the moment, which makes waiting all the more reasonable.

His earliest possible return, according to his timeline, would've been Tuesday.

"But I think they want to be sure," said Laine's teammate, Brendan Gallagher, Monday.

The Canadiens took extra time before recently activating Kaiden Guhle and Kirby Dach — even after both appeared ready to return from their respective injuries — and doing the same with Laine makes sense.

It buys him more time to get into game shape and buys them more time to figure out what to do with him once he's in it.



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Sportsnet.ca / Stumbling Senators are fading from playoff contention. Now what?

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — The Ottawa Senators were supposed to take the proverbial next step this season. Instead, they tripped over themselves, and woke up Monday morning seven points out of a playoff spot.

Sure, it's possible a touchdown scoreline on Sunday in a 7-1 thumping of Vegas will change the entire course of the season. Likely not.

So, how did we get here? And what's next?

Two very different questions — and both have equally unsatisfying answers.

The Senators' playoff odds dropped from 40 per cent last weekend to 21.3 now, according to MoneyPuck.com. It was a hellish week, including three multi-goal leads squandered, league-worst goaltending and putrid penalty killing.

Apathy has become an over-explored emotion for a Senators fanbase yearning for any sort of hope for the last decade. Oh yeah, Senators fans, you don't have your first-rounder this year either. Deep sighs. If the season ended today, they'd have to forfeit a top-10 pick...

The missing pick is simply the cherry on top of a misery sundae. Expectations breed disappointment.

These Senators will likely be remembered for both their lack of saves and a certain statement. Linus Ullmark will be front and centre, because of his performance but also his personal leave for mental health. He showed immense vulnerability to speak openly about how athletes struggle just like the rest of us.

Yet, unfortunately for his team, he has failed to bring the goaltending Ottawa desperately wanted when it traded significant assets and handed him a \$33 million contract extension last season. After not playing in a month, he returned as the backup on Sunday. When he's played, he's been second-last in goals saved above expected in the NHL, while youngster Leevi Merilainen — who took over for the Swede — sits third-last. The Senators currently own the third-worst save percentage of any team in the last 30 years.

The uncomfortable truth, however, is it's not all on the goaltending.

The second problem has been the penalty kill. The Senators sit third-last while short-handed, idling near the basement all season. On Saturday, head coach Travis Green put assistant Mike Yeo at the helm of his penalty-kill unit, replacing Nolan Baumgartner.

"A new voice might give a spark, give a different look, get a different voice," Green said.

Why make the change now? And not months ago?

"I think because there's been a lot of learning with our group," Green said.

"I have seen improvement in our penalty kill. We haven't got the results, but I've liked a lot of what we've seen, and I know there's also been a lot of talk."

Still, a change should have come sooner, and the Senators are worse off for it.

Another issue: Nick Jensen hasn't played like a top-four defenceman. Through 48 games, he's been on the ice for as many five-on-five goals allowed as he was in 71 contests last season. Jensen has been a stand-up professional, but the hole on the right side of the defence has taken another chunk out of the Senators' defensive armour.

Many fans want Green out, and we understand — it's been a really frustrating season — but it's not on him. The team has been good at five-on-five and on the power play. He bears some culpability, but he's not the main culprit.

It's above his pay grade.

The Senators' woes start with someone who doesn't work for the organization anymore: Pierre Dorion.

From 2018 to 2023, when Dorion was in charge, the Senators tore down the franchise for a rebuild.

Dorion traded away what would become the fourth overall pick in 2019 (Bowen Byram), and by improperly dealing Evgenii Dadonov, he lost a first-round pick as punishment — a debt coming due this spring.

Dorion coughed up second-round picks for Matt Murray and Derek Stepan. He signed Joonas Korpisalo to one of the worst goalie contracts in recent memory, short-sightedly dealt Filip Gustavsson for one season of Cam Talbot and left Joey Daccord unprotected. He drafted Tyler Boucher way higher than consensus.

Trading Mark Stone for Erik Brannstrom was one of the "proudest days" of his career, he said.

The current team is still feeling his most short-sighted trades for Alex DeBrincat and Jakob Chychrun, who combined to play two-and-a-half seasons in Ottawa in exchange for two first-round picks that landed at seventh (2022) and 12th (2023) overall.

There were bright spots, including drafting Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson above consensus — home-run selections — and the 2020 draft class expedited the Senators' rebuild. Dorion won the Erik Karlsson trade, netting two top centres in Tim Stutzle and Josh Norris. Plus, he signed Tkachuk, Stutzle and Sanderson to bargain contracts.

Regardless, his successor Steve Staios was left with some promise but not the stockpile of talent that should have had after a rebuild. Ottawa could have what other teams in the Atlantic do — Buffalo, Montreal and Detroit all own picks and prospects to augment their rebuilds.

Despite being left to work with one hand tied behind his back, Staios extracted a playoff team from the disarray.

Mission accomplished?

Nope.

The goal was sustainable success. Staios' recent comments that "we'll contend when we're ready to contend" were crushing.

We've had time to assess Staios.

The trade for Ullmark hasn't worked, and there's little chance he could be dealt away. Ullmark's play may well be the X-factor in determining whether the Senators can return to a playoff and contender status — perhaps, his mental-health hiatus will be the catalyst for improved play on the ice.

It'll be up to Staios also to find diamonds in the rough between the pipes the way Carolina found Brandon Bussi. Leevi Merilainen and Mads Sogaard hold promise, but zero certainty.

The wager that Josh Norris wouldn't stay healthy while Dylan Cozens would have proven true after the two were swapped at last year's deadline. Cozens hasn't missed a game as a Senator, scoring as many goals (22) as Norris has games played with the Sabres.



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It's a stat that explains away why Ottawa did the deal and won it (for now).

But while Cozens has become a power-play powerhouse (21 points), he's struggled at five-on-five (18 points).

Staios brought in Jensen and Fabian Zetterlund, neither of whom have worked out the way they were supposed to. Zetterlund has scored just 14 goals in 72 games as a Senator.

The Senators are paying Ullmark, David Perron, Zetterlund and Jensen slightly over \$20 million on the cap this season. That money could have been used way more effectively, which has held Ottawa back.

Looming over the team is the future of its hallmark star. Tkachuk may not be champing at the bit to sign on the dotted line in two summers if the Senators are not a contender next year. If there is any inkling he doesn't want to stay, it poses a conundrum: go all in for two years, or do a light retool around Sanderson and Stutzle.

The Senators have \$23 million in cap space next season, and their entire core is returning. There is a world where you figure out the goaltending, get a right-shot defenceman — whether that's prospect Carter Yakemchuk or someone else — and make some shrewd signings, turning the team back into a contender.

Every analytic tells you the Senators are an elite team, top-five in stats from expected goals to high-danger chance ratio.

In that way, the Senators feel close, but that won't last forever with Thomas Chabot, Drake Batherson and Tkachuk scheduled for free agency in the next two seasons. The time to win was supposed to be now.

The Atlantic Division will only be getting better in the years to come. Is it worth it to go all in for two seasons of Tkachuk when you aren't necessarily even going to make the playoffs? Hard to say.

We believe you've got to try to win when you can, but the Senators were supposed to be a playoff team and aren't. Does going all in for the next two seasons make sense? Is Ottawa that close?

It's unclear.

Or, should Staios entertain trading Tkachuk to expedite a retool?

It's been a crazy road for Ottawa, leading to what appears to be a lost season. Staios must plot a winning pathway in an uncertain future.

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Sportsnet.ca / Red-hot Sabres melting winter blues away one win at a time

Ryan Dixon

On a Monday morning where much of Canada and the United States is buried under snow, how can you not think of Buffalo?

This time of year, it's usually winter weather events or football — or the two things combined — that call our attention to Western New York. But with the Bills falling a couple rounds shy of the Super Bowl and well-seasoned shovelers in Buffalo rarely fazed by any dumping of the white stuff, the thing creating "Can you believe it!" conversation right now in the Queen City is the stunning play of the Sabres.

With its latest victory — a 5-0 whitewash of the Islanders in New York on Saturday afternoon — Buffalo has moved above the wild-card fray and

into third place in the Atlantic Division. Only three teams in the Eastern Conference — Tampa Bay, Carolina and Detroit — have a better points percentage than the Sabres' .618.

In case you stopped paying attention after the 10-game winning streak in December, Buffalo is 8-3-1 in January. The Sabres close out a five-game road trip on Tuesday in Toronto with a chance to end the journey 4-1-0. In all, over a 22-game stretch that started Dec. 9 and represents more than 25 per cent of an NHL schedule, the Sabres are 18-3-1. Buffalo's .841 points percentage in that time is an NHL-best, followed — if you can believe it — by two fellow Atlantic Division competitors in Tampa Bay (.810) and Detroit (.739).

Perhaps the most unexpected stat for the Sabres during this run is the 2.36 goals-against average that leads the NHL. That's built largely on the back of strong showings by no less than three goalies, with Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (.922 save percentage in 10 starts), Alex Lyon (.927 in eight starts, including Saturday's shutout on Long Island) and Colten Ellis (.913 in four starts) all standing tall in the crease.

That stinginess — even if not all the underlying numbers are encouraging — has to be heartening because while there have been times where Buffalo looks capable on the offensive side of the puck in recent years, we're talking about a club that, in the past three full seasons, surrendered more goals than all but five NHL teams.

Of course, when it comes to the attack, no Sabre is deadlier than Tage Thompson, and he indeed paces the team by a wide margin with 14 goals and 30 points since that Dec. 9 date. Still, this is about far more than one player and Buffalo is getting contributions up and down the lineup. In fact, seven players in addition to Thompson are scoring at a 20-goal clip during this incredible stretch of hockey for Buffalo. That includes young bright spots like Zach Benson (20 years old), Noah Ostlund (21) and 23-year-old Josh Doan, who kicked off his weekend by securing nearly \$50 million on a seven-year extension inked with the club on Thursday.

Yes, good-news stories are all around the Sabres these days, with fans hoping the next one could feature native Western New Yorker and pending-UFA Alex Tuch working out an extension to stay with the club.

Of course, the biggest question of all remains whether a 14-season playoff drought will end this spring. How wonderful it would be for Buffalo to have people paying attention to the city in that season again, too.

Weekend takeaways

- Check out the Anaheim Ducks season chopped up into four chunks: 11-3-1, 10-10-1, 0-8-1, 7-0-0. The Ducks' 4-3 OT win over Calgary Sunday night gave Anaheim its seventh straight victory on the heels of a nine-game losing streak. You expect ups and down out of a young team, but this has been an exceptionally high-or-low showing from the Ducks. It's probably worth noting four wins on their current hot streak have come in extra time. Whatever the case, Anaheim is now second in the Pacific Division by points percentage and has re-entered the playoff chat in a serious way.

- Beckett Sennecke sparked the Ducks' 'W' in Calgary with a hat trick, including the overtime winner. Sennecke now leads all rookies with 18 goals and is on pace for 28 this season. It was a good weekend for freshmen overall, with 18-year-old Ben Kindel — the youngest forward in the league — netting two goals against the Canucks on Sunday in a homecoming that saw the B.C. boy playing in front of, basically, an entire section of family and friends. That same day, six-foot-four Ottawa Senator Stephen Halliday netted two goals in just over seven minutes of work against Vegas. Meanwhile, Fraser Minten scored the game-tying goal for Boston in the third period of a 4-3 win over Montreal on Saturday. Minten is up to 13 goals this year, with seven of them coming in 11 January outings. Not only do we have some incredible high-end rookies this year — Sennecke, Matthew Schaefer, Ivan Demidov, Jesper Wallstedt — but the crop also features a very intriguing upper-middle



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class that could make this freshman crew one we remember for a long time.

- In addition to Sennecke, Colorado's Brock Nelson (hello, 21 goals in his past 26 games) also notched a hatty on Sunday in Toronto. That followed a Saturday when Edmonton's Evan Bouchard, Mason Marchment of the Jackets and Montreal's Cole Caufield all buried hat tricks. As it stands, the number of three-goal showings by players in January sits at a staggering 25. According to the league, that's the most hat tricks in a calendar month since March 1996 (26).

Red-and-white power rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (28-17-7): The Canadiens blew a 3-2 third-period lead in Boston on Saturday in a 4-3 setback versus the Bruins. Only three teams have a worse save percentage than the .878 posted by Canadiens goalies this season.
2. Edmonton Oilers (26-19-8): The Oilers have five games to go before the Olympic break and it feels like Connor McDavid will almost certainly head to Italy sitting on 100 points. He's got a league-best 90 following a five-point effort during Saturday's 6-5 OT win over the Capitals. Of course, that was still one shy of the six (3-3-6) posted by D-man Bouchard.
3. Toronto Maple Leafs (24-19-9): The struggling Leafs host the red-hot Sabres on Tuesday. After that, Toronto plays six straight games — and 11 of its next 15 — on the road.
4. Ottawa Senators (24-21-7): It still only counted for two points in the standings, but Ottawa's 7-1 slaughter of Vegas Sunday night felt cathartic for the Sens, especially with goalie Linus Ullmark returning to dress as Mads Sogaard's backup.
5. Calgary Flames (21-25-6): Stick tap to 21-year-old D-man Hunter Brzustewicz, who netted his first NHL goal Sunday night during a 4-3 loss to Anaheim.
6. Winnipeg Jets (20-24-7): It's obviously been a long year in Winnipeg, but Saturday's 5-1 beatdown on home ice at the hands of the Red Wings might represent a low point.
7. Vancouver Canucks (17-30-5): The Canucks welcome native son Macklin Celebrini to town for a match with the Sharks on Tuesday. In the midst of a lost season, it's important to remember the hope somebody like Celebrini represents for a rebuilding team. That might be a high bar, but Vancouver will add one heck of a prospect at some point in 2026.

The week ahead

- Two of the hottest teams in the league will meet Monday night in Tampa, as the surging Utah Mammoth — in search of a sixth straight victory — visit a Lightning squad that has just two losses in its past 16 outings.
- Patrick Kane is now just two points from passing Mike Modano as the highest-scoring U.S.-born player in NHL history. His next chance to move up the board comes Tuesday in Detroit, when the Wings host the L.A. Kings.
- Thursday brings a massive 15-game slate, with Connor Bedard in Pittsburgh to battle Sidney Crosby and the Penguins, while Celebrini's Sharks are in Edmonton to take on McDavid and the Oilers.
- The Bruins and Bolts will take it outside on Sunday afternoon. After Miami hosted the Rangers and Panthers in the first-ever NHL outdoor game waged in Florida on Jan. 2, Raymond James Stadium — home of the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers — will be the site of the second, an Atlantic clash between Boston and Tampa.

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TSN.CA / Nylander blames injury frustration for middle-finger moment

Mark Masters

The Leafs usually don't make injured players available to the media until they take part in practice, but Toronto made an exception for William Nylander on Monday. The star winger, who has been skating on his own while rehabbing a groin injury, formally apologized for flashing a middle finger at a camera while being shown in the press box during Sunday's TSN broadcast.

"First up, I just want to apologize for my actions yesterday," the 29-year-old said before taking questions. "It was out of frustration so I'm sorry about that."

Nylander insisted the gesture wasn't directed at anyone in particular.

Why was he frustrated?

"Just not playing," he said. "I want to be out there with the guys. Yeah, just frustrated."

Nylander, who last played on Jan. 15 when he aggravated the injury in Las Vegas, smiled and seemed to say something to injured defenceman Chris Tanev, who was seated beside him, before flashing his middle digit.

"I'm not really sure what he was doing," said winger Matthew Knies. "I think he was smiling after. I don't think he meant it in a threatening way at all and obviously apologized right after."

The NHL did not find it funny, though, fining Nylander \$5,000 on Monday.

"This serves as a reminder the code of conduct governing players extends throughout the arena at NHL games and in public game situations," NHL senior vice-president of player safety George Parros said in a statement.

"I didn't really think that it would get much traction," said Knies. "It definitely shows you how much publicity we get being on the Maple Leafs so you just have to be careful."

Nylander's phone buzzed almost immediately after he made the gesture.

"Sitting there I got a text message," Nylander recalled. "I was like, 'Oh, not a good idea. Not a good thing to do.' Like I said, I apologize about that."

The organization sees no reason to dwell on what happened.

"He owned up to it," said coach Craig Berube. "You know, things happen. People make mistakes. Players make mistakes. Coaches make mistakes. It happens ... He knows it's wrong and he owned up to it."

Nylander could only watch as the Leafs lost 4-1 to the Colorado Avalanche on Sunday. It was the team's fourth straight defeat (0-3-1). Toronto is clearly feeling the absence of Nylander.

"It's been frustrating," he reiterated. "I haven't missed this amount of time since I can remember."

Nylander will miss his 16th game of the season on Tuesday when the Leafs host the surging Buffalo Sabres. He has missed more time due to injury this year than in his other 10 NHL seasons combined.

"Willy's gone a long time in his career without missing games and it's been different this year for him so it's something new that he's going through," Berube pointed out. "He came back and then re-injured it again pretty quickly so it is frustrating."



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Toronto is 1-3-2 since Nylander aggravated the injury.

"Well, you don't fill that void," said Berube. "Your team's got to fill that void. Not one player is going to come in and be William Nylander. That's not realistic."

Despite missing the last five games, Nylander remains the Leafs scoring leader with 48 points.

"Hopefully will be back playing some time on the road trip so that's where I have my mind at," he said.

The Leafs head into the Olympic break with a four-game trip through Seattle and then Western Canada, which starts on Thursday night.

Nylander is hopeful that the injury will be fully resolved when he returns.

"I thought I was done dealing with it," he said, "but sometimes that happens and now maybe making sure it's 100 per cent."

Monday was supposed to be the team's annual community practice, which is usually held outdoors and open to the fans. But with the heavy snowfall on Sunday, the team cancelled the event.

The community practice is a practice in name only. In recent years it's been a 3-on-3 intra-squad tournament designed to entertain the fans. So, the schedule change allowed Berube to hold a much-needed regular practice. It was Toronto's first such practice since last Tuesday.

What was the focus?

"It's just about routes and positioning with our puck and our play with the puck," said Berube.

Berube highlighted puck play as an issue following Sunday's setback.

"We made two puck-play mistakes, and it was in our net," the coach noted. "Execution was the cause of a couple of the goals."

Berube also used Monday to reset the group mentally.

"Our homestand hasn't been very good," he said of the 0-3-1 run at Scotiabank Arena. "We got to move on from that and focus on tomorrow's game. The focus today was on tomorrow, the Buffalo Sabres, playing them and narrowing our focus. First period, let's have a good first period. Let's make good plays and be a little more patient in our game and not giving up early goals in the game the best we can."

Berube revealed he had a "good meeting" with the team's leadership group before practice. That group includes captain Auston Matthews, alternates John Tavares and Morgan Rielly, and a few other select players.

What was the feedback he received from them?

"We come home in this home stretch and, other than the Detroit game, we're down by two or three in the first period and that's a mental grind on everybody, including them," Berube relayed. "But we got to overcome it. We gotta fight through it. We gotta do a better job in first periods of limiting mistakes and playing a more simple game and being a little more patient in our game."

Asked how the leadership group can help lead the Leafs out of this slide, Matthews kept the focus on the team as a whole.

"Everybody just has to be better," the 28-year-old said. "Has to play better, has to do the little things just a little bit harder, a little bit better ... when you're going through a tough time, when it's hard and you're going through adversity, it's bringing everybody up and pushing yourself to be better."

For the first time since just before Christmas, Matthews has gone three straight games without a point.

"Yeah, I mean, you want to see the puck go in," he acknowledged. "Just try to be better in the other areas. I know that I'm getting the opportunities and that one's going to go in eventually. It's tough when it's not going in. It's tough when you're going through adversity, and you can't compound that with being negative or compound that with trying to do too much. It's just about getting back on the horse and just keep riding, keep working, and pulling yourself out of the hole."

Matthews landed seven shots on net on Sunday, which was his highest total since a nine-shot effort against the Ottawa Senators on Dec. 27.

The Leafs have trailed 2-0 in four of their last five games. How do they explain the slow starts?

"Wish I could," said defenceman Jake McCabe, who has been a minus player in eight straight outings. "Just need more urgency. Myself very much included."

McCabe made an errant pass, which led to Colorado's opening goal on Sunday by Brock Nelson.

"You can tell we're not playing with a ton of confidence right now," McCabe said. "It can be fleeting at times, so you got to generate it when you don't have it."

Knies also mentioned confidence as an issue when asked about his takeaway from Monday's practice.

"Just trying to get the energy back up," he said, "the confidence back up in here."

Although Berube downplayed the idea that the Leafs are dealing with a crisis of confidence.

"That's a choice," he said. "Like, come on. I mean, you're paid to play in the NHL. You got to go out and play ... Confidence comes from just hard work. Confidence comes from, you know, just playing the system, being direct. For me, confidence comes from work and compete."

Monday's practice was especially valuable for Anthony Stolarz, who is working his way back up to top speed following a lengthy injury layoff.

"It's huge," the 32-year-old goalie said. "Getting those reps, those game-like situations with a full team and being able to go up and down the ice with, you know, 3-on-2 drills and flow drills, for me, is probably the biggest thing right now ... I liked our pace. I liked our intensity today. It forced me to kind of raise my level as well."

On Friday night against Vegas, Stolarz played for the first time since Nov. 11. He allowed five goals on 30 shots.

"I feel good," the New Jersey native said. "Obviously that first game is always tough."

So, why didn't Stolarz play a game in the American Hockey League as part of a conditioning stint to shake off some of the understandable rust?

"I felt I was ready to go," he stressed. "I did this last year with the knee injury and just coming back and jumping right in the NHL. I've done it numerous times."

Stolarz won four straight games after returning from a knee injury last season.

"I think the best way to get back into it is to play in the NHL," he said. "You have to go and play against the best players in the world and try to get back up to speed. Obviously, the American League is not the NHL. I



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just felt that getting back into it here and being in a competitive environment with the boys would be the best thing for me.”

With Stolarz recovered from a nerve-related issue, Toronto's tandem from last year is finally back together. The last two games are the first time all season that Stolarz and Joseph Woll have both dressed in the same game.

“It's nice seeing him on the bench,” said Woll, who missed the start of the season for a personal leave. “He always keeps it light, and I think that helps me out. So, I appreciate him being there, and I hope the same for him. It's just nice being back next to him.”

The feeling is definitely mutual.

“Joe's an awesome human being and an awesome person,” Stolarz said. “I just love being his goalie partner and being out there with him. Just going to bench and being able to see him again has been great. Obviously, we still talk off the ice, but when you're in a game you can kind of chat a little bit and bounce some things off each other. It's good to be back and I'm looking forward to that first goalie hug.”

Stolarz hasn't celebrated a win since Nov. 5. He allowed five goals on 30 shots in his only previous game against the Sabres this season.

Woll is 0-2-2 in his last four starts. He has not faced Buffalo this season.

Knies is mired in a 10-game goalless drought, which is his longest dry spell since his rookie season.

“I would love to score more, like everyone would, but it's not really going in for me,” the winger said. “Hitting some posts and getting some chances and had some breakaways and hasn't been falling for me.”

There is a mitigating factor as Knies is playing through a nagging lower-body injury.

“Just trying to get through it right now and working my tail off to try and stay healthy,” the 23-year-old said. “The [Olympic] break is going to be pretty valuable for me to heal up and rest and try and come back as a different player, one that's at 100 per cent and playing to his full abilities.”

Although Knies refuses to use the injury as an excuse.

“I can't really have that be in the back of my head,” he said. “I try not to think about it. I try to help this team. I feel like all of us are pretty hard on each other or on ourselves as well.”

Knies has picked up five assists in the last 10 games and, in the process, established a new career high. He's up to 31 assists, which is two more than last season.

“I feel like I have the puck on my stick a little bit more,” he said. “I have a huge opportunity on the power play and play a lot of minutes so just getting those opportunities allows me to make more plays.”

Knies is averaging 19:11 of ice time per game this season, which is up from 18:31 last year.

Lines at Monday's practice:

McMann - Matthews - Domi

Maccelli - Tavares - Knies

Cowan - Roy - Robertson

Lorentz - Laughton - Jarnkrok

Quillan

McCabe - Ekman-Larsson

Rielly - Carlo

Benoit - Stecher

Thrun - Myers

Stolarz

Woll

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