



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 28, 2026

The News & Observer

Hurricanes veteran forward Taylor Hall still driven by one overarching NHL goal

By: Chip Alexander

Raleigh

Taylor Hall was a few days shy of his 19th birthday the first time he came to Raleigh, a little sleepy eyed during an interview at The Umstead Hotel.

Hall was the first overall pick of the 2010 NHL draft, taken by the Edmonton Oilers. Much was expected of the slick, skilled forward, who had twice won the Memorial Cup with the Windsor Spitfires and enjoyed teen-idol status in Canada.

"Definitely there are expectations, but that comes from playing in a Canadian market," Hall said in November 2010 before playing the Carolina Hurricanes. "I think you can take it personally, or you can take it with a grain of salt and make sure you're playing your game and having fun every day you come to the rink."

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Taylor Hall (71) reacts after scoring on Washington Capitals goalie Logan Thompson (48) to take a 4-2 lead in the third period during Game 4 of their series on Monday, May 12, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Flash forward to 2026.

Hall is 34 years old, married and a father. He has played nearly 1,000 NHL games, been traded five times, has been named the NHL's most valuable player, and now is with the Hurricanes, his seventh NHL team.

"There is one thing left, basically the only thing I want to accomplish," Hall said last week.

The Stanley Cup.

Carolina calling

Now in his 16th year in the league, Hall said he still has fun coming to the rink. And especially with the Hurricanes, who have made him feel part of the group and a welcomed addition since his trade to Carolina on Jan. 24, 2025.

Hall was on the undercard of the mega trade that reverberated about the NHL. The Colorado Avalanche sent star forward Mikko Rantanen to Carolina for forwards Martin Necas and Jack Drury, with draft picks also changing hands.

Another part of the deal, and almost overlooked: the Chicago Blackhawks sent Hall to the Hurricanes in the three-team transaction while retaining half of Rantanen's salary.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Taylor Hall (71) moves the puck during practice as they prepare for their Stanley Cup series against the Washington Capitals on Friday, May 2, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

"Taylor brings a lot of skill and some size and some speed, and we think he's going to fit and upgrade our scoring punch also," Canes general manager Eric Tulsky said after the trade.

Rantanen, visibly disgruntled in his 13 games with the Canes, was quickly sent on to the Dallas Stars, where he appears to be happy enough. Forward Logan Stankoven was sent to Carolina. And Hall has proven to be an upgrade with his speed, versatility and offensive skills.

"He's been great," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said last week. "It's not easy sometimes for anyone to come into a new lineup, but for a former MVP I think he's done a great job of whatever you ask him to do, and however minutes, and who he'll play with and what situations, he's been really good.

"And I think this year he probably feels more comfortable in everything we're doing. I think his play has been very solid."

Carolina's Taylor Hall (71) keeps his eyes on the puck as Panthers' Seth Jones (3) hits the boards during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

'Whatever it takes'

Hall, who signed a three-year, \$9.5 million contract with Carolina late last season, has been used on the wing on all the forward lines and on the power play. He has 12 goals and 27 points in 52 games this season, getting his 12th goal Saturday in the Canes' 4-1 road win at Ottawa built around the 34 saves of goalie Brandon Bussi.

Hall had a few words with a referee after the Senators' Dylan Cozens drove him head-first into the boards in the second period. No penalty was called and Hall expressed his displeasure in some profane terms, resulting in a two-minute unsportsmanlike penalty and then a 10-minute misconduct penalty.

After leaving the ice, Hall stood in the tunnel behind the Canes bench, glaring, more than heated.

But it's that competitiveness, that fire, that continues to help drive him, keeping him productive deep in his career. It's noticeable to his teammates.

Carolina's Taylor Hall (71) keeps his eyes on the puck as Panthers' Seth Jones (3) hits the boards during the first period of the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Final at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, May 22, 2025.

"He's been around a long time," forward Seth Jarvis said. "He came in really young, won a Hart Trophy. He's got a lot



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of knowledge. And just watching the way he approaches every day, and the way he takes care of his body and being able to be effective up and down the lineup, that's the biggest thing that's stuck out for me. That and his ability to adapt to whatever role he's given.

"He's willing to do whatever it takes to win."

And off the ice?

"He's hilarious," Jarvis said. "Yeah, he can be quiet, but he has this dry humor that gets me laughing a lot. I love him."

One goal: the Stanley Cup

Hall comes across as one of the most thoughtful of the Hurricanes players. He speaks in measured tones in media interviews, fully digesting a question before answering.

Hall, in an N&O interview last week, was asked about first coming into the NHL, about being the first pick of the draft and all that brought with it, leading to this response:

"I never thought I was generational and I never put that pressure on myself, that I needed to be one of the top three players in the league by my third year. Growing up playing hockey, I wasn't like the best player all the time. I just had a pretty quick ascent once I started playing junior. To go No. 1, obviously everything happened so quickly. You're still processing everything. You go from being in Grade 12 to a year later playing with men that go home to their families. I think there's just a lot to process on and off the ice, trying to

be the best player I can be and getting used to living on my own and paying bills and doing laundry. And it's definitely a hard league. You learn that right off the bat."

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind A'mour works with left wing Taylor Hall (71) in the third period on Tuesday, January 6, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Hall's hockey odyssey took him from Edmonton to the New Jersey Devils, where he won the Hart in 2017-18, to Arizona, Buffalo and Boston before Chicago. And now he's with the Hurricanes, trying to help make them the best team in that hard league.

"We're all good skaters in here and we're all good players who have a good motor and a high work ethic," Hall said. "I like to think I fit well with that type of play."

"We have younger guys, but it's an older group, with a lot of guys with kids. We're going through the same things off the ice, and we all want the same thing on the ice."

The Stanley Cup. Only a few of the Canes players have won it. Hall wants to be part of that select group.

"I think we have a fantastic chance and that's a big part of what I wanted to be here," he said. "This team has had playoff success and seen what it takes. That's the reason I'm still playing and want to keep playing."



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SPORTSNET™

Seven potential replacements if injured Canadian Brayden Point misses Olympics

By: Josh Beneteau

Team Canada is holding its breath on a key forward.

With less than two weeks to go before boarding the plane to Italy for Milano Cortina 2026, Brayden Point's Olympic status remains in doubt.

The Tampa Bay Lightning superstar has been out most of January with a lower-body injury. At the time he was hurt, Lightning and Canada head coach Jon Cooper said Point's season "was not over," but added that his recovery timeline was week-to-week. He has missed eight games so far.

While Canada hasn't officially ruled Point out yet, he's running out of time to get ready for the Olympics. Canada will travel to Italy late next week and open the tournament on Feb. 12 against Czechia.

Point is hard to replace as a high-scoring, two-way centre, but Canada's roster might be the deepest in the tournament. In fact, you could make a pretty competitive team just out of the players Canada will leave at home.

As we await word on Point's status, here are seven other players who could jump in to take his place:

Hyman missed the first two months of the season after wrist surgery, but since returning on Nov. 15, he's been one of the hottest scorers in the NHL with 21 tucks in 35 games — a 49-goal pace over 82 contests. Much of Hyman's success comes from skating alongside Connor McDavid, and if he were to make Team Canada, the duo would presumably get a chance to continue that chemistry on the Olympic stage.

The Jets are enduring a down season, but Scheifele remains a scoring threat any time he hits the ice. In fact, he sits fourth among all Canadian skaters with 61 points, trailing only McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Macklin Celebrini. Scheifele is a centre, like Point, but Team Canada's coaches would need to decide whether they can trust him to defend as well as he scores.

Bedard is in the midst of a breakout season at age 20, with 20 goals and 48 points in just 39 games. However, his offence was slowed by a shoulder injury in late December. Bedard returned on Jan. 9, but he owns just one goal and four points in eight appearances since. Even if Bedard doesn't get the call this time, he's likely to be playing a role on the national team sooner rather than later.

Bennett was a star for Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off last year before going on to win the Conn Smythe as the Panthers defended their Stanley Cup title. Those performances helped him earn an eight-year, \$64 million contract — but they weren't enough to push him onto the Olympic team as Canada opted for Tom Wilson to fill his hard-nosed role instead. Unlike Wilson, though, Bennett plays centre and Canada might tap him to fill a spot in the middle of the fourth line if he winds up in Italy.

Stamkos is a future Hall of Famer, but the one thing missing from his resume is an Olympic medal. The 600-goal man missed out on playing for Canada in 2014 due to a broken leg and has had to wait 12 years to get another chance. He'll be 36 by the time the Olympic tournament starts, but Stamkos has seemingly turned back the clock in recent weeks. Since Dec. 1, Stamkos' 19 goals are tied for third-most in the NHL.

One of the brightest youngsters in the game, Johnston figures to be a Team Canada staple soon, even if he's not on the roster this time around. The 22-year-old has 27 goals and 56 points in 52 games. With two 30-goal seasons already in his young career, Johnston continues to raise his offensive ceiling.

Jarvis cracked Canada's roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off but missed the cut for the Olympics. While injuries have disrupted his season, he remains nearly a point-per-game player with 23 goals and 16 assists in 44 games. Jarvis plays both special teams for the Hurricanes and would be comfortable on any of Canada's forward lines.



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NHL power ratings: Avalanche show signs of slipping but still in front as they enter Week 17 of 2025-26 season

By: Scott Erskine

The NHL is less than two weeks away from its 19-day break for the 2026 Winter Olympics. With the way January has gone for the Colorado Avalanche, the respite can't come soon enough.

Colorado steamrolled over the rest of the league during the first three months of the 2025-26 NHL season, going 7-1-4 in October, 11-0-2 in November and 12-1-1 in December. The team hasn't been nearly as dominant since the new calendar year began, however, as it has lost six of its 11 games -- including four in regulation, which is twice as many outings it came away without a point over its first 40 contests.

The Avalanche (35-6-9) have five games remaining before the league's lengthy Olympic hiatus, three of which take place in January. Those three contests are all on the road, where the club has suffered four of its six regulation losses this campaign.

Colorado, which owns a nine-point lead over the Tampa Bay Lightning in the race for the Presidents' Trophy and is 11 points ahead of the Minnesota Wild for the top spot in the Western Conference, went 1-1-1 in Week 16. Six teams finished the week without a regulation loss, with the Buffalo Sabres, Florida Panthers and Pittsburgh Penguins all going 3-0-0 and the Los Angeles Kings winning a pair of contests before their scheduled game against the Blue Jackets in Columbus on Monday was postponed due to a major winter storm.

Only three clubs failed to get in the win column last week, as the Calgary Flames, St. Louis Blues and Toronto Maple Leafs all posted 0-2-1 records.

Each week during the season I'll rank the league's top 10 teams based on both the previous week's performances and overall body of work in 2025-26. I'll also give brief synopsis for each club that explains why they're ranked where they are.

Let's dive into the power ratings entering Week 17 of the 2025-26 NHL season and highlight a few of the teams' notable accomplishments.

NHL Week 17 power ratings

1. Colorado Avalanche (1-1-1 in Week 16; 35-6-9 overall)

Despite having gone 4-4-2 over its last 10 contests, Colorado joined the 1943-44 Montreal Canadiens, 1975-76 Canadiens and 1979-80 Philadelphia Flyers as the only teams in NHL history with fewer than seven regulation losses over their first 50 games of a season. The Avalanche began Week 16 at home with a shootout loss to the Anaheim Ducks and a 7-3

setback against the Flyers before ending it with a 4-1 triumph over the Toronto Maple Leafs in the opener of their four-game road trip. Brock Nelson registered his fifth career hat trick in that victory to give him 27 goals, one more than he registered in 80 games last season. The 34-year-old center has netted 13 tallies over his last 13 contests. Nelson has been equally effective this campaign, scoring 14 times at home and 13 on the road. Nathan MacKinnon produced only three assists last week and now trails Edmonton Oilers superstar Connor McDavid (92) by four points for the league lead but still is first with 38 goals, even though he's converted in only one of his last seven outings.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (3-1-0; 33-14-4)

The Lightning have been one of the NHL's hottest teams since mid-December, going 15-1-1 over their last 17 games. The club won three of its four contests in Week 16 and has allowed fewer than two goals in each of its past six victories. The quartet of Nikita Kucherov (two goals, eight assists), Jake Guentzel (three, three), Brandon Hagel (two, four) and Anthony Cirelli (three, four) led Tampa Bay last week, producing 10 of the team's 12 goals. Darren Raddysh netted the other two tallies, converting in each of the last two games to give him 14 goals in 45 games this season. The 29-year-old defenseman amassed 13 tallies in 176 contests over his first four NHL campaigns. Kucherov has landed on the scoresheet in 16 of his last 17 outings, collecting 13 goals and 25 assists over that span, and hasn't gone back-to-back games without a point since Nov. 8 and 12.

3. Carolina Hurricanes (1-0-1; 32-15-5)

The Hurricanes only played twice last week, losing to the Chicago Blackhawks in a shootout before cruising past the Ottawa Senators 4-1. The team scored a total of seven goals, with seven different players converting. Jackson Blake, Seth Jarvis and Taylor Hall each recorded a tally and an assist in Week 16, while defenseman Jalen Chatfield set up a pair of scores. Sebastian Aho did not factor in the team's scoring in Week 16 after collecting seven assists over his previous three games but leads Carolina with 52 points. Brandon Bussi, who was in the crease against Ottawa, has allowed just one goal in each of his last three starts and is third in the NHL with a 3.15 goals-against average.

4. Detroit Red Wings (2-0-1; 32-16-5)

Detroit enters Week 17 with a five-game point streak (4-0-1) and eight wins in its last 10 contests. Last week, the club sandwiched triumphs over Toronto and the Winnipeg Jets around an overtime loss to Minnesota. Lucas Raymond, who leads the Red Wings in both assists (40) and points (58), has posted back-to-back multi-point performances and is riding a



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five-game point streak during which he has collected three goals and five assists. The 23-year-old Swedish left wing has landed on the scoresheet in 14 of his last 17 outings. Alex DeBrincat netted his 27th tally of the campaign in the victory against Winnipeg, marking the eighth time he has reached that mark in his nine NHL seasons.

5. Minnesota Wild (1-1-1; 29-14-10)

Each of the Wild's three games in Week 16 had a final score of 4-3, with the team defeating Detroit in overtime while losing to Montreal in regulation and Florida in OT. Kirill Kaprizov had a big offensive week, recording three goals and four assists, while Mats Zuccarello netted two tallies and set up four others. The 38-year-old Zuccarello is in the midst of a five-game point streak during which he has notched three goals and six assists. Kaprizov also has gotten on the scoresheet in five straight contests, posting a multi-point performance in each outing. Defenseman Quinn Hughes is riding a five-game point streak as well, amassing a goal and eight assists during his run. Matt Boldy returned from a four-game absence due to a lower-body injury on Saturday and made his presence felt as he had a goal and an assist against the Panthers.

6. Dallas Stars (2-1-0; 29-14-9)

After a difficult Week 15 in which they lost all three of their games while scoring just one goal in each, the Stars won two of their three contests last week. Leading scorer Mikko Rantanen (63 points) missed two of those games with an illness, but Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston picked up the slack by combining for five goals and two assists in Dallas' victories. Robertson is third in the NHL with 30 tallies while Johnston is tied for eighth with 27. Miro Heiskanen collected four assists over the team's three contests and ranks seventh in the league with 33.

7. Buffalo Sabres (3-0-0; 29-17-5)

The Sabres have been just as hot as the Lightning as they are 18-3-1 since Dec. 9 after having won all three of their games last week. Those three victories came on the road, with Buffalo scoring at least four goals in each. Veteran left wing Jason Zucker has scored three goals over his last two contests after tallying just twice in his previous 11 outings. Peyton Krebs also broke out of an offensive slump as he collected two goals and two assists in three games last week after netting one tally and setting up two others over his previous 10 contests. Konsta Helenius made his NHL debut in Week 15 and was kept off the scoresheet by the Carolina Hurricanes, but the 19-year-old Finnish center had a goal and two assists in Buffalo's 5-3 triumph over the Nashville Predators last Tuesday and set up a tally in a 4-2 victory against Montreal two days later.

8. Pittsburgh Penguins (3-0-0; 26-14-11)

The Penguins won all three of their contests in Week 16 to wrap up a 4-0-0 road trip and extend their point streak to seven games (5-0-2). Pittsburgh allowed fewer than three goals in each outing last week and have done so in seven of their last 10 contests. Evgeni Malkin, who tallied in every Week 16 game and added a pair of assists, has landed on the scoresheet in 10 of his last 12 outings. Anthony Mantha had a two-goal performance in last Thursday's 6-2 victory against Edmonton and rookie Ben Kindel recorded one of his own two days later in a 3-2 triumph over the Vancouver Canucks. Defenseman Jack St. Ivany got involved offensively last week, posting back-to-back two-assist efforts against the Calgary Flames and Oilers after having set up only three goals in his first 14 games this season.

9. Boston Bruins (2-1-1; 30-20-3)

The Bruins' six-game slide (0-4-2) in late December has become a distant memory as the team has earned points in 11 of its 13 contests since (10-2-1). Boston began last week with a 6-2 setback against the Stars in Dallas that ended its six-game winning streak but rebounded with triumphs over the Vegas Golden Knights and Canadiens before squandering a third-period lead versus the New York Rangers on Monday and settling for one point in a 4-3 overtime loss. Morgan Geekie scored four goals in Week 16 to increase his season total to a team-leading 29, four shy of the career high he set last campaign, and added a pair of assists while Elias Lindholm netted three tallies and set up two others. David Pastrnak collected a goal and seven assists as he extended his point streak to seven games. The 29-year-old Czech right wing has notched at least one point in 12 of his last 13 contests, amassing six tallies and 20 assists over that span. Defenseman Charlie McAvoy picked up a goal and four assists in Week 16 and has landed on the scoresheet in 11 of his last 13 outings.

10. Florida Panthers (3-0-0; 28-20-3)

Florida is coming off a perfect week as it got past Winnipeg 2-1 in a shootout, edged Minnesota 4-3 in overtime and manhandled Chicago 5-1. Brad Marchand returned from a seven-game absence due to an undisclosed injury to record two goals -- including the overtime winner -- and an assist against the Wild. Sam Bennett and Sam Reinhart also scored twice in Week 16, with the latter also notching an assist, while defenseman Tobias Bjornfot netted a pair of tallies versus the Blackhawks -- his first two since recording his first NHL goal in 2020-21 while with the Los Angeles Kings.



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The Hockey News

Hurricanes Blueline Highlights Importance of Development, Opportunity

By: Ryan Henkel

Undrafted gems and late-round steals fuel a dominant blueline. Discover how smart scouting and player development create overlooked defensive stars.

Despite being one of the stronger bluelines in the league, the Carolina Hurricanes' defensive group isn't composed of a bunch of former blue chip prospects.

In fact, of the 10 players to have suited up on the Canes' blueline this year, only one player was drafted higher than the third round.

K'Andre Miller - First Round (22)

Alexander Nikishin - Third Round (69)

Shayne Gostisbehere - Third Round (78)

Domenick Fensore - Third Round (90)

Mike Reilly - Fourth Round (98)

Jacob Slavin - Fourth Round (120)

Charles Alexis Legault - Fifth Round (139)

Joel Nystrom - Seventh Round (219)

Sean Walker - Undrafted

Jalen Chatfield - Undrafted

For the most part, the Canes' defensive group is comprised of smart bets and underrated players who have proven to be more than they were once projected, which is a testament to multiple facets of the organization.

From the amateur scouts and development coaches growing prospects into pros to the pro scouts finding underrated bets, it's been a group effort to keep the team well stocked on talent at one of the most important positions in the game.

In terms of the best examples of guys running with opportunity are players like Jalen Chatfield and Sean Walker.

Both went undrafted but managed to work their way into the league and are now key pieces of a Stanley Cup contender.

The Hurricanes identified both players as having complementary skill sets — strong skating, good instincts — and after each spent time in a third-pairing role, both have proven to then be capable of playing top-four minutes.

Another guy making the most of more opportunity is Shayne Gostisbehere.

After reviving his career in Arizona, the Hurricanes brought him in as a power play specialist playing sheltered, third-pair minutes. He played that same role last year after rejoining the team as a free agent but now, he's been one of the team's best two-way players and a 5v5 staple.

Then you have the guys like Jacob Slavin, Charles Alexis Legault and Joel Nystrom who were late round picks, but once given the opportunity to prove themselves, never looked back.

It also can't be overstated how important pure talent like that of K'Andre Miller and Alexander Nikishin are for pushing the group to another level, but they're just a part of a greater whole.

The team's defensive group is also nearly entirely built upon their own drafted players or free agent signings.

The Canes have used five players they themselves have drafted this year, four who were signed as free agents and one they acquired in a trade

And again, Miller is the lone exception being that he was acquired through a trade with the New York Rangers.

It just shows that where a player is drafted doesn't define their career. Hard work, fit and opportunity matter just as much and the Canes' blueline is a prime example of that.

Who Are The Fastest, Hardest Shooting Carolina Hurricanes Per NHL EDGE?

By: Ryan Henkel

Uncover which Hurricanes boast the league's highest speeds and the most powerful shots, according to NHL EDGE data.

The NHL has improved its data tracking year over year and introduced some new data to the public just a few seasons ago with NHL EDGE.

With the new data, we now know how fast skaters are going and how hard their shots are as well as a few other various data points.

So who are the top Carolina Hurricanes in these categories?

Hardest Shot#

We all know that Alexander Nikishin has a bomb of a shot, but did you know he has far and away the hardest shot on the team?

Nikishin has registered the top three hardest shots by a Hurricane this season, with his hardest coming on Oct. 14 against the San Jose Sharks, where he uncorked a 98.97mph rocket.



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Overall, Nikishin has six of the team's 10 hardest shots of the year and is the 98th percentile for the league in terms of shots between 90-100mph with 24 such shots.

The next best is Andrei Svechnikov, who had a 96.06mph one-timer against the Buffalo Sabres on Jan. 19.

Top 5

- Alexander Nikishin (98.97)
- Andrei Svechnikov (96.06)
- Sean Walker (95.36)
- Jalen Chatfield (94.62)
- Shayne Gostisbehere (93.64)

Fastest Skater#

The fastest single burst for a skater this year was Seth Jarvis, who got up to 23.38mph on Dec. 19 against the Florida Panthers... which was when he got tripped into the goal post causing him to miss eight games with injury.

Overall though, Jarvis has been the team's speediest skater, with four out of the 10 quickest bursts on the team.

Jarvis is in the 95th percentile for top speed, 95th percentile again for bursts over 22mph (11) and 88th percentile for bursts between 20-22mph (101).

Eric Robinson is just behind the young star in terms of top speed, with a 23.30mph burst recorded on Dec. 17 against the Nashville Predators.

Top 5

- Seth Jarvis (23.38)
- Eric Robinson (23.30)
- K'Andre Miller (23.22)
- Nikolaj Ehlers (23.05)
- Andrei Svechnikov (23.01)

Hurricanes Top Prospect Named AHL Player of the Week

By: Ryan Henkel

Hurricanes prospect Bradly Nadeau dominated offensively, snatching Player of the Week honors with clutch goals and seven points in three thrilling games.

The American Hockey League has named Chicago Wolves forward and Carolina Hurricanes prospect Bradly Nadeau as the Player of the Week for the period ending on Jan. 25.

Nadeau had four goals and seven points in three games for the Wolves this past week helping them to a 2-0-1 record.

The 20-year-old winger helped AHL Chicago climb out of two four-goal deficits in consecutive nights, resulting in a 6-5 overtime win and a 7-6 overtime loss and his goal scoring abilities have just continued to impress.

This season, Nadeau has 17 goals and 38 points in 30 games with the Wolves.

Even while having to navigate multiple callups — he appeared in eight NHL games this season as well, scoring twice — Nadeau hasn't seen a slip in his production, which bodes well for his development

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The Athletic / NHL trade grades: Devils clear cap space with Palat trade, Islanders get depth, draft capital

By James Mirtle and Harman Dayal

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 9:16 pm EST

The trade

New York Islanders get: Ondrej Palat, 2026 third-round pick, 2027 sixth-round pick

New Jersey Devils get: Maxim Tsyplov

Harman Dayal: The Devils desperately needed to clear some cap space, and by offloading the full freight of Palat's contract, which had another year remaining at a \$6 million AAV, they accomplished exactly that.

Palat, 34, is a hard-working, defensively reliable winger with commendable veteran leadership qualities, but his offensive game has fallen off a cliff compared to his days with the Tampa Bay Lightning. He mustered just four goals and six assists in 51 games this season, despite getting plum opportunities with talented, skilled linemates for most of the year. Palat's \$6 million AAV felt like an anchor relative to his on-ice impact, so the fact that the Devils got out of the deal without retaining any salary is a big win.

Sure, New Jersey had to pay sweeteners with a couple of picks and take back the struggling Tsyplov's contract (\$2.25 million AAV through next season), but the cost was modest for a crucial \$3.75 million gain in cap flexibility. It may be too late for the Devils to salvage this season, but those cap savings will be important for bolstering the team's supporting cast ahead of next season. There's even a chance that Tsyplov, a big, heavy 27-year-old winger whose production has cratered after scoring 35 points as a rookie last season, can bounce back with a fresh start.

From the Islanders' perspective, I'm not very confident that Palat will bounce back, but I do understand the logic behind this move.

New York gains a third-round pick, which is useful because the club didn't own a 2026 second-rounder and had traded away its own 2026 third-round pick in the Carson Soucy move. Tsyplov was a contract they wanted to get rid of anyway. Palat, while limited in his on-ice utility, should be a useful mentor with his playoff experience and championship pedigree. The \$3.75 million in extra cap commitment they took on is notable, but the Isles probably weren't going to go big-game hunting in the offseason anyway, so the opportunity cost of taking on extra salary for next season probably isn't that high.

Furthermore, if Palat does somehow rebound, the Islanders can always retain 50 percent on his contract and recoup another draft pick by selling him as a deadline rental next year.

On the other hand, if Palat looks completely washed through the remainder of this season, the Isles have the option to buy him out this summer as well. Palat has no signing bonuses left, so New York could buy him out on favorable terms — he'd only count for \$2.7 million against the cap in 2026-27 and \$1.65 million in 2027-28 if they went down the buyout route.

In other words, while Palat is unlikely to meaningfully bounce back, the Isles still did fine in this trade by replenishing their missing 2026 third-round pick for the extra \$3.75 million they incurred against the cap.

Devils grade: A-

Islanders grade: B-

James Mirtle: The ol' problem for a problem trade. Among two rivals, no less!

The Devils have been looking to dump salary most of the season, but after Luke Hughes went down with an injury, it made more sense for Palat to be the cut rather than Dougie Hamilton (who probably fits better as an offseason trade anyway).

I'm somewhat surprised/impressed it was this painless to move him, given Palat has a \$6 million cap hit remaining both this season and next. In the old frozen cap world, that might have necessitated some serious salary retention or a higher pick, but with the cap projected to hit at least \$104 million next season, a lot of teams are feeling flush, and even a struggling player like Palat can have more value.

He's about to turn 35 and has just 10 points on the season, but Isles general manager Mathieu Darche is banking on him being a veteran playoff performer after watching Palat excel when Darche was an exec in Tampa all those years. And the Islanders could use more depth as they attempt to lock in a playoff spot, given they've been dealing with a number of injuries.

Tsyplov was playing just nine minutes a night on the Island, having clearly fallen out of favor with coach Patrick Roy, but he had a promising rookie campaign last season and makes sense as a reclamation project given his age, size and potential offensive ability. It's possible he has more success in a sheltered scoring role in a different system.

We'll see what New Jersey GM Tom Fitzgerald does with the nearly \$4 million cap space he gained here, as that's the wild card in the deal. But this has the potential to work out for both teams, given the two players are likely to be better fits in the other organization.

Devils grade: B+

Islanders grade: C+

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377550 Websites

The Athletic / Devon Levi, Rochester resident? Sabres prospect goes viral for TV news appearance

By Matthew Fairburn

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 7:21 pm EST

Devon Levi got a taste of what it feels like to be a local over the weekend.

Levi, a Buffalo Sabres prospect and member of the AHL's Rochester Americans, was interviewed by a local Rochester television station over the weekend to give his thoughts on the winter storm hitting the region. Unaware of who he is, the reporter labeled Levi simply as a "Rochester resident."

"Stay home," Levi said of his advice to locals during the storm. "Enjoy the time with your family. Stay safe. Stay warm."

On Tuesday, Levi posted a weather update on his Instagram account that read, "Still cold. Stay safe."

Rochester resident Devon Levi provided a weather update this morning. <https://t.co/3VVkTafQEtpic.twitter.com/odNagNhhqUC>

— Let's Go Amerks! (@LGA585) January 27, 2026



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As of training camp, Levi wasn't actually a Rochester resident. Ever since he signed with the Sabres out of college, Levi has kept an apartment in Buffalo. He was commuting back and forth as of last season.

"It's super meditative," Levi said of the drive between Rochester and Buffalo. "It's an hour and 15 minutes and I get to kind of just be alone. There's no electronic device I'm looking at. You're hitting the road and it's an opportunity to be with your thoughts, clear your mind, see what's going on inside, check in and also an opportunity to put a little podcast on or something."

The news reporter, mistaking Levi for an average man on the street, is hardly alone in this type of situation. A Buffalo reporter who saw the video pointed out that she unknowingly interviewed Sabres forward Alex Tuch for a story about infants taking swim lessons in the Buffalo area. And hockey fans might remember Blackhawks general manager Kyle Davidson delivering a man-on-the-street style interview at the 2023 NHL Draft in Nashville hours before he selected Connor Bedard with the No. 1 pick in the draft.

Levi is hoping he won't be a Rochester resident too much longer. The 24-year-old goalie has now played 109 AHL games between the regular season and playoffs over the last three seasons. He has a .907 save percentage and 2.69 goals-against average this season in Rochester. However, the Sabres' NHL crease is crowded with Alex Lyon, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Colten Ellis making up the three-goalie depth chart in Buffalo.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377551 Websites

The Athletic / NHL's Department of Player Safety will now handle all player discipline calls

By Eric Stephens and Chris Johnston

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 7:13 pm EST

The NHL Department of Player Safety is streamlining its operations and will now determine supplemental player discipline for violations of all league rules in addition to handling physical infractions, league sources told The Athletic's Chris Johnston.

ESPN's Greg Wyshynski was the first to report the change.

The first example of the new policy was Toronto Maple Leafs star William Nylander being fined \$5,000 for raising his middle finger at a TSN camera as it panned up to the press box where Nylander and other Leafs players were watching Sunday's 4-1 loss to the Colorado Avalanche. Nylander later apologized, citing his frustration with being unable to play.

Previously, punishments for players who had violated league policies — such as the gesture Nylander made, the usage of inappropriate language or abuse of officials — were handled by NHL executive vice president and director of hockey operations Colin Campbell.

Player Safety, which is led by NHL senior vice president George Parros, will now determine most discipline decisions. Campbell is expected to continue handling rules violations that involve coaches or team executives. League commissioner Gary Bettman will still determine punishment for any significant off-ice violation involving player conduct.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377552 Websites

The Athletic / Sweden adds Marcus Johansson, Hampus Lindholm to Olympic hockey roster as injury replacements

By Rob Rossi

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 6:28 pm EST

Sweden is the latest team to announce injury replacements for its men's hockey roster for the upcoming Winter Olympics.

Forward Marcus Johansson and defenseman Hampus Lindholm are headed to Milan, replacing Leo Carlsson and Jonas Brodin, the Swedish Ice Hockey Association announced Tuesday.

Johansson, 35, has 13 goals and 34 points over 48 games for the Minnesota Wild. Lindholm, 32, has three goals and 16 points for the Boston Bruins but is handling heavy minutes, with 22:04 of average ice time per game.

The Anaheim Ducks' Carlsson is recovering from thigh surgery that took place Jan. 16. He is expected to miss three to five weeks. The Wild's Brodin is out with a lower-body injury.

Sweden is seeking its first Olympic gold medal in men's hockey since 2006. It opens the tournament against Italy on Feb. 11.

Check out this tracker for the latest updates on each country's men's tournament roster, including injury replacements, at the Winter Olympics.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377553 Websites

The Athletic / How the NHL standings would look without overtime points

By Sean McIndoe

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 5:14 pm EST

Good morning to everyone except whoever invented snow. You suck, Dave Snow, or whatever your name is. The rest of you are cool, though.

😏 What If?

There were just four NHL games last night, although that Lightning-Mammoth battle had some real intensity and we got another Ilya Sorokin shutout. We also had a trade between ... the Rangers and Islanders? Unacceptable. Dogs and cats, things of that nature.

Hey, who wants to shake up the standings?

Regulation rules 🕒

Regular-season overtime is fake.

Oh, it's fun. At least some of the time, when players aren't turning around to "regroup," which is a hockey term meaning "beg your mean coach to let you do something fun for once instead of playing dump-and-chase until everyone falls asleep." Every fan knows the feeling when three-on-three tips into that flow state of back-and-forth rushes. It's pretty awesome.



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It's also fake. So is the shootout, which doesn't even have the benefit of being fun. Basically, anything that happens after 60 minutes of five-on-five regulation is only quasi-hockey. Entertaining sometimes, and necessary to get a winner if you can't handle ties. But ALSO: fake.

It's important to know that, because as you may have noticed, three-on-three OT and shootouts end when the playoffs start. So, if you're trying to figure out which teams are most likely to have postseason success, one line of logic goes, you should ditch the gimmicks and focus on real hockey.

OK, let's do that. The standings page over at Hockey-Reference is kind enough to include a few extra columns that play with the NHL records in interesting ways. One of them gives us each team's points percentage in regulation only, not counting anything that happens after 60 minutes. Games that go into overtime are considered ties, with each team getting a point but no third point in play.

A caveat: We have to be careful about reading too much into those numbers, because in today's NHL, getting a close game to overtime is basic strategy, and some teams do it better than others. We can't just invent a better system and then say, "Here's how the standings would look," because changing the rules would fundamentally change how teams play. But with that in mind, we can still take a look and see if we can find anything interesting.

- For example, the best team in the league by regulation record is ... OK, it's the Avalanche. No surprise there. The Lightning are second, and the Stars are third, same as the regular standings. But after that, we start to see some movement, as there's a team that slides up ahead of the Hurricanes, Wild and Red Wings. Would you believe ... the Penguins, whose regulation-only percentage of .578 ranks fourth-best in the league even though their real record is only tied for seventh? The Panthers move from sixth in the Atlantic into a tie for fourth, passing the Canadiens. The Capitals go from fifth in the Metro to third. And the Kraken would move up from sixth in the Pacific to third, albeit at just .480.

NHL regulation points standings

1. Avalanche
.760
2. Lightning
.618
3. Stars
.606
4. Penguins
.578
5. Hurricanes
.577

(Data via hockey-reference.com)

- On the other hand, there's bad news for fans of the Sharks, who drop from an impressive .550 under the current system all the way down to .440. Apparently there's something in the water in California, because the Ducks also plummet .100, and the Kings drop .080.

- Those California teams all see their records drop below .500 under this change, but they're hardly alone. Other teams to drop under water include the Maple Leafs, Flyers, Senators, Devils, Blue Jackets, Kraken and Predators. Wait, a league where half the teams are under .500? What a concept!

- Finally, one team stands out for not standing out at all. That would be the Blues, who have the smallest change of anyone. All 32 teams see their percentage drop under the regulation system (because there are

fewer points in play), but the Blues drop a measly 10 points, from .452 to .442, thanks to having won only one of their 10 overtime games this season. Good news, Blues fans, your team is built for the playoffs. The bad news is ... well, you already know.

So, there you go. That's what life could look like in a world where the NHL didn't hand out extra points seemingly at random while encouraging dull and conservative play, all so that their wimpy GMs can pretend they have a better record than they actually do.

Wow, I just bummed myself out. Quick, somebody think of something cool a Toronto Maple Leaf did to cheer me up ...

Sittler's big night turns 50 (kind of) 🎉📢

The Maple Leafs will mark the 50th anniversary of one of the NHL's greatest records tonight when they celebrate the only 10-point game in the league's long history.

The actual anniversary of the record-breaking game isn't until Feb. 7, but this is the Leafs' last home game before the Olympic break. Given how things are going in Toronto, the Leafs probably also wanted to give their fans something to do besides booing, throwing waffles and wondering what's up with Craig Berube's head.

Either way, it's certainly a night worth remembering. There was nothing especially remarkable heading into the game, a Saturday "Hockey Night in Canada" at Maple Leaf Gardens between the Leafs and Bruins. Maple Leafs star Darryl Sittler was having a solid year, as usual, but nothing historic, and the Leafs were barely .500. In hindsight, the big news was on the Boston side, as the red-hot Bruins had just announced the return of goalie Gerry Cheevers from the WHA. That was great news, but Cheevers wasn't ready to play quite yet, and Boston coach Don Cherry wanted to save his debut for a hometown crowd. That meant that Bruins goalie Dave Reece essentially had no backup that night. He'd turn out to need one.

The game didn't start out especially unusually, with Sittler getting a pair of assists and the Leafs heading to the first intermission with a 2-1 lead. But things blew up in the second, with Toronto scoring seven times and Sittler recording a hat trick and two more assists along the way. That left him at seven points heading into the third, one short of the NHL record of eight, held by a pair of Montreal Canadiens, Rocket Richard and Bert Olmstead.

Sittler tied the record early in the third with a power-play goal, leaving himself with almost a full period to get the record-breaker. He'd need about half that, scoring again midway through the period for his ninth point. Then he added yet another goal, his sixth of the night, to get his points into double digits.

And through it all, poor Dave Reece stayed in net, forced to endure the embarrassment in front of a national TV audience. To make matters even worse, he was sent down to the minors after the game and never played in the NHL again. Sittler's big night was Reece's last appearance in the big leagues.

If you'd like, you can watch Sittler's 10 points in this YouTube clip from Sportsnet:

There's also a retrospective from Sportsline that I broke down in a 2020 Grab Bag. Fair warning: If you're a goaltender, or somebody who knows a goaltender, or somebody with a vague concept of what goaltending is supposed to look like, 1970s NHL highlights may not be for you.

Somewhat amazingly, the record still stands to this day, having held up through the high-scoring 1980s and the primes of guys like Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux. Sittler's six goals also remains tied for the modern single-game record; that mark also hasn't been touched since.



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Will anyone ever get to double-digit points again? You'd have to think so. But (almost) five decades is a long time, and maybe some records really aren't made to be broken.

💡 Trivia Time

Sittler got to 10 points. The list of players who've gotten as close as eight is a weird one, including legends such as Wayne Gretzky (twice) and Mario Lemieux (three times), but also names like Patrik Sundstrom, Tom Bladon and Sam Gagner.

But how many players can you name who have scored exactly nine points in an NHL game?

Answer below.

Coast to Coast

👉 Really interesting stuff here from Joe Smith, who takes a deep dive into how the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program works.

😬 Corey Pronman has a look at all of the best prospects the contenders are about to trade to your favorite team for that washed-up fourth-liner the fan base turned on three months ago.

🔄 Another angle on the trade market, this time from Shayna Goldman: Who could be this year's Blake Coleman, the utility player who fills a need on a contender?

👉 Have you been following the William Nylander scandal? After flipping a middle finger in the direction of a TSN camera on Sunday, the injured Leafs winger has apologized and been fined \$5,000. Let the healing begin.

🗣️ On the Monday edition of "The Athletic Hockey Show": The eight true Stanley Cup contenders this season, in tiers. (Plus a few teams that could join them with a strong deadline.) Listen here.

What to Watch

It's a busy one tonight, with 10 games on tap. Don't be late, because our picks for the best games are all from the early slot.

📺 Golden Knights @ Canadiens

7 p.m. ET on ESPN+ / TSN2 / RDS

A fun thing about Golden Knights history is that Nick Suzuki the best draft pick in franchise history, and it's not even close. Second place would go to ... who, Pavel Dorofeyev? Nicolas Hague? It's no contest, Suzuki is the undisputed champ of Vegas draft history. And he never played so much as a game for them.

📺 Mammoth @ Panthers

7 p.m. ET on ESPN+

Two hot teams in the playoff hunt meet in Florida. Utah had won five straight before last night's nail-biter in Tampa. The Panthers have won three straight since the goalie fight game and look like they might finally be ready to stop slapping the snooze button and take their rightful place in the Eastern race.

📺 Sabres @ Maple Leafs

7 p.m. ET on ESPN+ / TSN4

This will be a crucial battle with major playoff implications, and the Sabres come in with all the momentum. Will their suddenly invigorated fans take over the building the way Leafs fans usually do in Buffalo? Man, do we ever need a playoff series between these two teams someday.

Full NHL schedule here. Try streaming games like these for free on Fubo.

No Dumb Questions

We believe that in hockey, as in life, there are no dumb questions. So if you have something you've always wondered about the sport, ask away by emailing us at redlight@theathletic.com.

Where are the shootout goalie swaps?

As a Penguins fan, I cringe every time one of their games goes to a shootout, especially when Artūrs Šilovs is in net. Would it be legal for a coach to change goalies between the end of the overtime period and the beginning of the shootout (assuming it's not an injury situation)? And if so, has a coach ever actually done this? — Brian W.

OK, first of all, Artūrs Šilovs has a .350 save percentage in the shootout this year, based on 20 attempts. That would have him in the running for a batting title most years, so let's go easy on the kid.

But to answer Brian's first question: Yes, a team could switch goalies right before the shootout if it wanted to. It's no different than any other time in the game, and there's no rule against it. So, if the Penguins got to the end of overtime and wanted to replace Šilovs with a more effective shootout option, like Stuart Skinner or a pile of wet laundry, they could do that.

Has it ever happened? Yes, actually. Just not very often.

The first time I remember seeing it was when Ron Wilson was coaching the Maple Leafs. After a scoreless overtime against the Ducks in 2008, Wilson told a rinkside TV reporter "watch this" and then removed Vesa Toskala in favor of Curtis Joseph. I'm not sure if this was the very first time any coach had tried the move, but if not it was close. In this case, it didn't work; Joseph gave up two goals and the Leafs lost the shootout.

So yes, it can be done. And I'm guessing that leads to another question: Why doesn't anyone ever do it, at least anymore?

I think there are a few answers there. The main one is that the new goalie would be coming in cold, having sat through 65 minutes of play without much to do. He wouldn't even get a warmup. That's a less-than-ideal scenario for a goalie coming into a regular game, where they may or may not be called on to make a big save early. When you know you're going to face a breakaway or three right away? That's a tough ask.

But I think there's another reason, and it's simple: It didn't work when guys like Wilson tried it. And as the Leafs coach found out, making a move like that and losing means you get the blame instead of the players. Here's an article from 2008 expressing confusion over Wilson's strategy. Wilson never tried the move again, presumably because he realized that if Leaf fans are mad about Vesa Toskala coming out of a game, something weird is going on.

If Wilson's move had worked, maybe a few more coaches would've tried it too. And if it worked for them, maybe it would've become a thing around the league. But it didn't work, so a pre-shootout goalie swap took its place next to "calling for a stick measurement" in the category of Things That Coaches Can Do But Don't Because Reasons.

😬 Trivia Answer

If you came up empty on naming the NHL's nine-point players, congratulations: You got today's question right. No player in NHL history has ever finished a game with nine points.

Sittler is the only one to ever hit that mark, and he went on to cap off the night with a 10th point. There have been 15 eight-point nights in NHL history, including two (by Sundstrom and Lemieux) in the playoffs. Two brothers, Peter and Anton Stastny, did it in the same game. But only Gagner's random explosion in 2012 has reached the mark since 1989. And in the 108-year history of the league, nobody other than Sittler has ever made it to nine.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026



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1377554 Websites

The Athletic / Mattias Ekholm's hat trick leads Oilers defensemen to historic game vs. Ducks

Mattias Ekholm capped a historic night for Oilers defensemen by scoring into an empty net to complete his first career hat trick. Perry Nelson / USA Today via

By Rob Rossi

Jan. 27, 2026 Updated 1:24 pm EST

It's not often that Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are upstaged on the scoresheet in Edmonton. They probably don't mind that it was Oilers' defensemen taking turns stealing the spotlight Monday night.

In an entertaining 7-4 victory over the Anaheim Ducks at Rogers Place, the Oilers made history on multiple occasions.

Trailing 2-1 early in the second period, the Oilers took control with four consecutive goals by defensemen in a span of 3:49. That was notable for many reasons:

- It was the fastest four goals by defensemen in league history
- It was only the sixth time four consecutive goals were scored by defensemen in a period
- It was the first four-goal period for defensemen since the St. Louis Blues did it on Dec. 29, 2000

Mattias Ekholm, Darnell Nurse and Spencer Stastney combined for the fastest four goals by defensemen in NHL history and propelled the @EdmontonOilers to victory. #NHLStats: <https://t.co/g7nIDMapuA> pic.twitter.com/YdmpTDUgSM

— NHL Public Relations (@NHLPR) January 27, 2026

Spencer Stastney started things with a goal at 4:36. Mattias Ekholm — more on him in a bit — tallied at 6:28. Darnell Nurse chipped in at 7:34, followed by Ekholm again at 8:25.

"He's a great player all around," Draisaitl said of Ekholm after the game. "He knows when to jump in the rush. He's extremely smart. Obviously, he's got a bomb of a shot, and he knows when to use it, and his placement is elite."

Ekholm completed his first career hat trick by scoring into an empty net with 11 seconds remaining in regulation.

Surprisingly, it was only the second hat trick by an Oilers defenseman — the same franchise that retired blueliner Paul Coffey's No. 7. Given all the scoring the Oilers have done in their Wayne Gretzky and McDavid eras, it's hard to believe that a defenseman hadn't notched three goals in a single game until Evan Bouchard's three goals way back on (checks notes) ... oh right, this past Saturday.

After waiting their entire NHL existence for a defenseman to score a hat trick, the Oilers now stand as the only franchise with defensemen who scored hat tricks in consecutive games.

"Some nights the bounces go your way. I will try to enjoy this one because it will probably be my last."

After registering his first career hat trick in tonight's #Oilers win, Mattias Ekholm chats with the media. @Enterprise | #LetsGoOilers pic.twitter.com/Q6SSbYar5X

— Edmonton Oilers (@EdmontonOilers) January 27, 2026

Let's not forget Zach Hyman, whose goal in the first period flipped the switch for the five-goal night by the Oilers' defensemen.

Don't feel too bad for McDavid and Draisaitl, by the way. The former scored an empty-net goal (before Ekholm's empty-netter), assisted by the latter, and the duo still combined for six points.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377555 Websites

The Athletic / How the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program works, from consultation to treatment to release

By Joe Smith

Jan. 27, 2026 6:00 am EST

In a recent TSN interview, Ottawa Senators goalie Linus Ullmark addressed mental health issues he's been dealing with since his trade to the team in June 2024, saying it all came to a head during a Dec. 27 game in Toronto.

Ullmark said he experienced anxiety and panic before the first period and intermission. After the game, he called Dr. Joel Gold with the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program before taking a leave of absence.

"I'm f—ed up," Ullmark recalled telling Gold. "I need help."

Ullmark is far from alone. The program has been around for 30 years, since NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and the Players' Association took a page from the NBA's playbook and created it as a resource for players dealing with substance abuse, mental-health and other off-ice issues.

There's not a lot known publicly about how it functions. That, of course, is by design.

"It's all about confidentiality," said Edmonton Oilers goalie Connor Ingram, who has been through the program twice. "Rarely do you see guys talk openly about the program."

Confidentiality is a fundamental part of the program, both to ensure players' right to privacy and as a means of encouraging participation.

But it can also create a stigma.

"Fans are mad that they lose their favorite player for a couple months," Ingram said. "Well, your favorite player might be going through therapy for six months and you had no idea. ... I think a lot of people forget that athletes are just human beings. You know, I'm the same guy as your brother, your uncle. I just have a different job."

NHLPA executive director Marty Walsh said he thinks the league and the NHLPA need to do a better job of educating fans, teams and players about the program. He believes minimizing the stigma can help players see what the program could mean to them in a time of need.

Walsh, a recovering alcoholic, knows from experience how a program like this can change a life. He was the mayor of Boston and Secretary of Labor under President Joe Biden before moving into his current job in 2023. None of that happens, he said, if he doesn't get help.

"It's not a career-ending experience when you go to the program," Walsh said. "It's actually a life-changing experience. We've got to do a better job of getting the word out. As a whole society, we've got to work on the stigma."



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"I'd never judge a person going in. I'd say, 'Keep trying. Keep trying.' When I do educational (talks) to players, I say, 'It's not meant to be a penalty. It's meant to be a life-saver.'"

To help fans understand how the program works, Walsh and several players agreed to share their perspective and experience with The Athletic, as did some others who are involved in the program under the condition of anonymity to avoid revealing locations or connections.

How players enter the program

At the start of training camp every year, a video explainer of the program is presented to each team. Players are given contact information for the two program administrators, one of whom is in attendance for each session. Both are doctors, one appointed by the NHLPA, the other by the NHL. There's also a hotline available.

From there, there are two primary entry points.

One is voluntary. Players or their representatives (agents, teams) reach out to these administrators and tell them why they want to enter the program. The administrators determine next steps with the players.

"You just need to ask for help," Ingram said.

The other entry point is mandatory. If a player is arrested, for example, for driving under the influence, possession of drugs or domestic violence, he'll have a required check-in with an administrator, who will decide whether the player needs to enter the program.

If a player tests positive at a dangerously high level for what the union and NHL have identified as a "drug of abuse" (not a performance-enhancing drug, which is part of another program), that also triggers a mandatory consultation with the program administrator.

These triggers aren't in the CBA but rather an amendment that was part of the joint agreement in creating the program. With either potential entry point, the player's team doesn't have to be notified unless the player is going to enter the program. Ullmark, for example, consulted with Gold but did not enter the program.

The NHLPA wouldn't disclose how often these consultations happen because the talks remain confidential unless the player does enter.

The league and NHLPA do announce when a player enters. There's no set rule for the timing of that announcement, but if the player is going to check into a facility for treatment, the announcement typically comes when the player is en route or has arrived. As soon as the player enters the program, he's ineligible to play in games or practice with his team.

Where players go

The Nashville Predators' Michael McCarron, Colorado Avalanche's Sam Girard and Ingram all said they went to facilities in the Malibu area in California. They were with many patients, not just athletes or celebrities.

"You go to a (place) with a bunch of other people that don't necessarily have the same issues as you," said McCarron, who entered the program in December 2022 for help with substance abuse. "Sometimes, their (issues) are harder, worse. You're surrounded by people that are really in it. It's kind of scary in a way. But it was great for me."

The program's administrators have a network of clinicians and facilities around North America. Where a player ends up is largely based on the initial evaluation, factoring in what kind of help he needs and where he lives. Often, treatments are done virtually, with a player staying in the city he lives and plays in. Depending on the treatment plan, there could be a combination of both: a stay at a facility with follow-up virtual visits.

The facilities have all been vetted by the program's administrators.

The program has a booking agency that arranges travel, when needed, and a program consultant meets the player in his city to accompany him. Administrators stay in touch with players while they're in the facility.

Ingram first went into the program in 2021 while with the Predators, dealing with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and anxiety. That's when he spent time in a Malibu facility. He re-entered in March 2025 following the death of his mother and got help locally. Ingram said his therapist was just down the street and he'd visit him two or three times a week. He also saw a nearby neurologist.

Ingram said the program saved his hockey career — and maybe his life.

"I probably wasn't going to make it unless I did it," he said.

Who works with the players?

The medical professionals are provided through the network established by the program administrators. In many cases, they have worked with the program for years. They have a variety of areas of expertise: medical doctors, social workers, counselors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists — whatever the players might need.

"There's a mixture of different providers and treatments and plans because the player's situation is going to be unique and it has to be tailored to him," a program source said. "So I can't say that a player with a mental health issue gets treated like X and the substance abuse issue gets treated like X. It's about putting the right plan in place based on the unique circumstances of the player."

Dr. Dave Lewis and Dr. Brian Shaw formed the program in 1996. Shaw is no longer involved. Gold, a clinical psychiatrist in New York, is the NHLPA's current administrator. He's been part of the program for more than five years. The NHL's administrator is Justin Stamschorr, a psychiatrist based in Washington.

What's the program like?

Treatment plans are different for each player, tailored to what he's dealing with.

Ingram's experience in 2021, for example, was different than a player dealing with substance abuse. He found it to be flexible, especially when it came to the day-to-day.

"Day goes from 9 (a.m.) until 6 p.m.," he said. "There's a day where you have one-on-one therapy sessions, a psychiatrist or psychologist."

Being treated for OCD, Ingram's treatment focused on a healthy approach to activities through exposure therapy.

McCarron said he would go to a handful of meetings every day, all lasting around 30 minutes to an hour. They gave him tips and tricks on how to "live a healthy lifestyle."

For example, every few days, a yoga instructor would come in. "They're trying to give you new hobbies and just (help you) live a normal life," McCarron said.

Ingram's 42-day 2021 stay in the Malibu facility came during COVID-19-related restrictions, so patients were fully masked and weren't allowed to go out and about. His phone was also taken away temporarily.

When a player is in a treatment facility, he can typically have contact with immediate family and his agent. But the level of contact is determined by circumstances. There may be people it's not in his best interest to talk to.

Family is also sometimes encouraged or required to be included in the player's treatment plan. McCarron said his sister visited him a few times.

"I pretty much shut off communication," McCarron said. "I'd call my parents every day. I feel bad for my parents; they took the brunt of it. I'm sure they were thinking every day, 'Is he OK? What is he going to do today?' My mom probably had a few gray hairs from that time in her life."



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But it was needed. At some point, everyone is going to need help in certain situations in their life.

"It happens that I needed it at that time. I was lucky I was in the best league in the world and they were able to help me."

Who pays?

The NHLPA and NHL share the cost of administering the program.

That covers, among other things, the program administrators' fees and expenses incurred for travel and treatment.

Fees for providers and residential treatment are covered medical expenses for players under their NHL player self-funded insurance plan. None of it comes out of pocket.

How does a player exit the program?

The concept of being "out of" the player assistance program is a misnomer.

There's generally a continuity of care that doesn't end when a news release goes out saying, "Player X is returning to Team X after a stay in the player assistance program."

But at some point, a determination is made to release a player from residential treatment by care providers at the treatment facility and the program administrators.

"You play by the rules when you're there," Ingram said. "It's for the best. It's what they do for a living. They decide when they think you're ready."

When a player is reinstated by the league, he still may have follow-up appointments, counseling and therapy. And he will still have access to program resources.

"It's all about you," said Girard, who entered the program in November 2023 to address alcohol abuse stemming from anxiety and depression. "For the 30 days you're there, they're going to help. But I can just go out and go drink again. It's all about you. Are you willing to do the stuff for the best?"

Program consultants determine an after-care plan with the program administrators and will follow up daily or weekly, depending on the situation.

"If you're going to use the program, you have to do the program," Ingram said. "That's the hardest part."

What's next?

During Walsh's first tour of the league's teams as NHLPA executive director in late 2023 and early '24, he gave an introductory talk to each team.

He'd bring up his political career, his passion for sports and, within the first few minutes, he'd open up.

"I'm an alcoholic."

Walsh noticed eyes perk up. It got players' attention.

It also helps him connect to them.

Walsh got sober at age 28, in 1995. It was out of necessity. His "rock bottom" came after a series of bad nights — "blackouts and stuff like that," he said.

"There was personal fear," he said. "You feel like you're broke. You keep up the facade on the outside. You don't want people knowing. Inside, you're like, 'S—, I did it again. I blacked out again. I got in trouble again.'"

His boss at a local labor union strongly suggested he get help and gave him a number for Alcoholics Anonymous. Walsh started begrudgingly. He wanted to keep working, advancing his career. But in his first AA meeting,

he heard a man talk about his struggles, and it hit home — made him feel less alone.

Walsh said AA ended up being "the greatest thing I did in my life." He hasn't had a drink since entering.

And it shapes how he feels about the player assistance program — how he wants it to grow. When he brought up his alcoholism with players, Walsh said there were several who came up to him and told him they were in recovery too.

"If someone is struggling out there, I know their life can get better," Walsh said. "Every time I talk to a player who is entering the program, I tell them, 'It's about recovering your life first. Don't worry about hockey.'"

The NHLPA continues to add programs around other areas of players' health, including First Line, an education and leadership program developed to strengthen players' mental health knowledge and skills. There's also recently been a concussion committee established, seeking to help players understand CTE.

Education and awareness remain the highest priority.

"This can be a wake-up call for guys and our sport," said a former NHL defenseman who participated in the player assistance program. "It's still kind of a stigma to have an issue or to have something going on. Hockey players are supposed to show up and do our jobs. But to have guys in our corner to make sure we're not alone with whatever you're doing — that there's a whole community of former and current players that are all going through some of the same stuff — it's a support system of current and former players that's really huge for guys to know they're not alone.

"They're going to be helped out in the time of need. And not buried underneath some issue."

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377556 Websites

The Athletic / Behind the Senators' 'Heated Rivalry' jerseys that are flying off the shelves

By Julian McKenzie

Jan. 27, 2026 6:00 am EST

OTTAWA — Anna Altann entered the Ottawa Senators' team store on a frigid Saturday night, the latest stop on a multi-city hockey arena tour. She was in search of a hockey jersey, but not just any jersey.

As a native of Germany, it wouldn't have been far-fetched for her to seek out a jersey featuring the last name of her countryman Tim Stütze, the team's superstar center. Instead, she sought a red, gold and black jersey bearing the number 81 and the name "Rozanov" on the back. Four players have worn No. 81 in the Senators' team history. None of them were named Rozanov.

Had it not been for the rise in popularity of a Canadian-made TV show, Altann wouldn't have even purchased a Senators jersey.

"It's a show that means a lot to me," Altann said, "and it's a very easy way to find friends."

The Senators are the latest NHL team to hop on the growing success story that is "Heated Rivalry," a TV show on Crave and HBO Max featuring two fictional male hockey players, Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, fostering a secret romance while playing on rival Boston- and



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Montreal-based teams. Since mid-January, the Senators have been selling jerseys with the main characters' last names and advertising jerseys in-store and during games.

The Senators describe their Rozanov jersey, which is black and red, as a "vision of pure intimidation," while Hollander's is "clean, professional and built for the spotlight."

Since the Senators are only using the characters' last names, there are no copyright concerns for the NHL franchise.

"You can go into any store and get any name you want printed on a jersey," Senators vice president of marketing Peter Shier said. "... So, we just did what our fans were doing anyway and just made it a little bit easier for them."

Those jerseys aren't cheap, with a \$325 CAD price tag. But buying one in person might be the best way to get them. If you live outside of Ottawa and are hoping to buy one online, they're out of stock — again.

"We thought these would be popular — but we didn't expect this!" is written on each of the descriptions for the four jerseys (there are "Hollander" and "Rozanov" jerseys available in the Senators' home and red alternate color schemes) available for purchase online.

In the show's final episode of its first season, Rozanov decides to join the local Ottawa team to be closer to Hollander, who plays in Montreal. That ending, according to Shier, spurred on fans to demand team jerseys with Hollander and Rozanov's names on the back. It also spurred a meeting between Shier and a marketing coordinator on a sleepy Friday afternoon — one day before the Senators were scheduled to host the Montreal Canadiens at the Canadian Tire Centre.

Shier needed anyone and everyone who could help with this task: having 20 Senators jerseys heat-pressed and ready, with Rozanov and Hollander's names available for sale the very next day.

"(The marketing coordinator) looked at me like I had two heads," Shier said. "But we did it."

"Rozanov" and "Hollander" jerseys hang in the Senators' team store and can be purchased for \$325.00 CAD each. (Julian McKenzie / For The Athletic)

Sure enough, their limited stock was gone by the end of the first period. The Senators have since worked quickly to restock them and have sold more jerseys online, reaching out to fans as far out as Kazakhstan and Brazil. Altann said the Senators' store, however, does not ship to Germany.

During a conversation with The Athletic on Saturday, Shier said the Senators have produced 400 jerseys since the Saturday prior.

"And we have another 400 people waiting in line right now because we're trying to get more material as fast as we can," Shier said.

If fans aren't buying the jerseys outright, they're at least posing for photos next to them. The jerseys have clearly appealed to fans, some of whom are using the show as an entry point into the sport.

"My best friend lives in Seattle," said Shannon Warkentin, in town from Vancouver, who snapped a photo of the jersey. "I've been trying to get her into hockey for years. And just now she saw the show, and she's all over me now, trying to get me to come down for a Kraken game."

Net profits from jersey sales will go toward Ottawa Pride Hockey, a local queer hockey group founded by queer and trans people in 2020. The group organizes leagues and games featuring participants from the LGBTQ+ community in Ottawa.

But the Senators' most recent gesture took OPH by surprise. The Senators' idea snowballed so quickly that OPH members only learned they were involved through social media.

One representative, Jayce L. (who asked to be identified only by their first name out of concern for their privacy), discovered that OPH would be the beneficiary of the Senators' initiative just before they went to bed that Saturday night, when the jerseys first started selling.

"There definitely was a few hours of us trying to figure out whether or not that was indeed a thing," Jayce said. "In the day and age of AI and not being able to trust what you see on the internet."

In an ensuing statement, OHP expressed gratitude to the Senators for their generosity, while also hoping to hold the Senators and the NHL "accountable when actions fall short of community expectations."

The statement specifically referenced the Senators signing goaltender James Reimer, who in 2023, while playing for the San Jose Sharks, did not participate in the team's Pride night, citing his faith as the reason.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Ottawa Pride Hockey (@ottawapridehockey)

"There's also a lot of guarded feelings that I think a lot of queer people have," Jayce L. said. "We do know that it maybe hasn't been a space that we can be our full selves and then feel welcome in. And it's not a diverse culture, hockey culture, in general. So, while there is excitement, there's also a little bit of hesitation to feel that excitement as well. Because we know what people are coming into."

It remains to be seen how much OPH will stand to make from this initiative. But that number will grow as long as the Senators keep selling those jerseys and attracting fans thanks to "Heated Rivalry" and its popularity.

"It's wonderful," Shier said. "It's a great story. It's a wonderful love story. The times we're living in, I think everybody could use a little bit of this."

But OPH hopes the cause will serve a larger purpose, bringing awareness for LGBTQ+ people who want to feel seen and safe in a sport they love.

"I feel like we're kind of losing the plot a bit about why this show is so important," fellow OPH representative Kat F. (who also asked to be identified only by their first name out of concern for their privacy) said. "Doing a novelty jersey for a great cause is fun, and we're very thankful. But I really want the conversation to switch back to those personal stories, stories of our players, other players that have left hockey because they didn't feel safe, or felt or never played hockey because they didn't feel safe in that environment."

"If any culture has to make people choose between something they love and being themselves," Jayce L. said, "then that's something that needs to be addressed."

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377557 Websites

The Athletic / 2026 NHL Draft ranking: Keaton Verhoeff, Ivar Stenberg top Pronman's midseason board

Corey Pronman

Jan. 27, 2026 6:00 am EST

At the midway point of the hockey season, the 2026 NHL Draft has steadily started to look better, and I've upgraded it closer to an average



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draft class. There's no star No. 1 prospect like Matthew Schaefer, but there are 8-9 very exciting players at the top. For example, I would rather be picking in the 3-5 range this season compared to last year. The top nine players for me are mostly indistinguishable. You could arrange them in close to any order, and I would find it reasonable.

Tier 1

Tier: Bubble NHL Star and top of the lineup player

1

Keaton Verhoeff

North Dakota

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 3.5"

Weight:

208 lbs

DOB:

19-Jun-08

TIER 1

D

NCAA (NCHC)

2

Ivar Stenberg

Frolunda

Shoots:

L

Height:

5' 11"

Weight:

183 lbs

DOB:

30-Sep-07

TIER 1

LW

SWEDEN

3

Chase Reid

Sault Ste. Marie

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 2.25"

Weight:

188 lbs

DOB:

30-Dec-07

TIER 1

D

OHL

4

Gavin McKenna

Penn State

Shoots:

L

Height:

5' 11"

Weight:

170 lbs

DOB:

20-Dec-07

TIER 1

LW

NCAA (BIG10)

Tier 2

Tier: Top of the lineup player

5

Tynan Lawrence

Boston University

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 0.5"

Weight:

185 lbs

DOB:

03-Aug-08

TIER 2

C

NCAA (H-EAST)

6

Carson Carels

Prince George

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 1.5"



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Weight:

202 lbs

DOB:

23-Jun-08

TIER 2

D

WHL

7

Caleb Malhotra

Brantford

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 1.25"

Weight:

182 lbs

DOB:

2-Jun-08

TIER 2

C

OHL

8

Alberts Smits

Jukurit

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 3"

Weight:

205 lbs

DOB:

02-Dec-07

TIER 2

D

FINLAND

9

Ethan Belchetz

Windsor

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 5"

Weight:

228 lbs

DOB:

30-Mar-08

TIER 2

LW

OHL

Tier 3

Tier: Bubble top and middle of the lineup player

10

Daxon Rudolph

Prince Albert

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 2.25"

Weight:

206 lbs

DOB:

6-Mar-08

TIER 3

D

WHL

11

JP Hurlbert

Kamloops

Shoots:

R

Height:

5' 11.75"

Weight:

185 lbs

DOB:

11-Apr-08

TIER 3

LW

WHL

12

Marcus Nordmark

Djurgarden Jr.

Shoots:

L



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Height:

6' 1.5"

Weight:

180 lbs

DOB:

04-May-08

TIER 3

LW

SWEDEN-JR.

13

Viggo Bjorck

Djurgarden

Shoots:

R

Height:

5' 9"

Weight:

177 lbs

DOB:

12-Mar-08

TIER 3

C

SWEDEN

14

Oliver Suvanto

Tappara

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 2.75"

Weight:

207 lbs

DOB:

3-Sep-08

TIER 3

C

FINLAND

15

Adam Novotny

Peterborough

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 1"

Weight:

204 lbs

DOB:

13-Nov-07

TIER 3

LW

OHL

16

Brooks Rogowski

Oshawa

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 7"

Weight:

232 lbs

DOB:

24-Jun-08

TIER 3

C

OHL

17

Ilia Morozov

Miami

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 2.5"

Weight:

197 lbs

DOB:

03-Aug-08

TIER 3

C

NCAA (NCHC)

18

Elton Hermansson

Modo

Shoots:

R



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Height:
6' 1"
Weight:
181 lbs
DOB:
5-Feb-08
TIER 3
RW
SWEDEN-2
Tier 4
Tier: Middle of the lineup player
19
Malte Gustafsson
HV71 Jr.
Shoots:
L
Height:
6' 4.25"
Weight:
200 lbs
DOB:
11-Jun-08
TIER 4
D
SWEDEN-JR.
20
William Hakansson
Lulea
Shoots:
L
Height:
6' 4.5"
Weight:
207 lbs
DOB:
8-Oct-07
TIER 4
D
SWEDEN
21
Oscar Hemming
Boston College

Shoots:
L
Height:
6' 3.5"
Weight:
193 lbs
DOB:
13-Aug-08
TIER 4
LW
NCAA (H-EAST)
22
Xavier Villeneuve
Blainville-Boisbriand
Shoots:
L
Height:
5' 11"
Weight:
162 lbs
DOB:
29-Sep-07
TIER 4
D
QMJHL
23
Ryan Lin
Vancouver
Shoots:
R
Height:
5' 11.0"
Weight:
177 lbs
DOB:
18-Apr-08
TIER 4
D
WHL
24
Jakub Vanecek
Tri-City



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 1.5"

Weight:

191 lbs

DOB:

25-Feb-08

TIER 4

D

WHL

25

Adam Goljer

Trencin

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 3"

Weight:

194 lbs

DOB:

07-Jun-08

TIER 4

D

SLOVAKIA

26

Niklas Aaram-Olsen

Orebro Jr.

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 0.0"

Weight:

184 lbs

DOB:

19-Apr-08

TIER 4

LW

SWEDEN-JR.

27

Chase Harrington

Spokane

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 0.5"

Weight:

195 lbs

DOB:

30-Oct-07

TIER 4

LW

WHL

28

Simas Ignatavicius

Geneve

Shoots:

R

Height:

6' 3"

Weight:

198 lbs

DOB:

22-Oct-07

TIER 4

C

SWISS

29

Gleb Pugachyov

Nizhny Novgorod Jr.

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 3.0"

Weight:

198 lbs

DOB:

25-Mar-08

TIER 4

RW

RUSSIA-JR.

30

Egor Shilov

Victoriaville



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 0.5"

Weight:

177 lbs

DOB:

30-Apr-08

TIER 4

C

QMJHL

31

Nikita Klepov

Saginaw

Shoots:

L

Height:

5' 11.5"

Weight:

178 lbs

DOB:

27-Jun-08

TIER 4

RW

OHL

32

Ryan Roobroeck

Niagara

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 2.75"

Weight:

215 lbs

DOB:

25-Sep-07

TIER 4

LW

OHL

33

Tobias Trejbal

Youngstown

Catches:

R

Height:

6' 3.75"

Weight:

188 lbs

DOB:

9-Nov-07

TIER 4

G

USHL

34

Maddox Dagenais

Quebec

Shoots:

L

Height:

6' 3.75"

Weight:

196 lbs

DOB:

27-Mar-08

TIER 4

C

QMJHL

35

Axel Elofsson

Orebro Jr.

Shoots:

R

Height:

5' 10.0"

Weight:

164 lbs

DOB:

3-Jun-08

TIER 4

D

SWEDEN-JR.

36

Liam Ruck

Medicine Hat



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Shoots:

R

Height:

5' 11.75"

Weight:

176 lbs

DOB:

21-Feb-08

TIER 4

RW

WHL

The Athletic LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377558 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' brutal homestand signals time to sell

Luke Fox

TORONTO — From must-win to must-sell.

The 2025-26 Toronto Maple Leafs may not yet be mathematically eliminated from Stanley Cup contention, but with only 10 games till trade deadline and 29 till tee off, this collection of hockey players has already waved the white flag.

Even if Brad Treliving denied surrender during his most recent appearance, which was a little more than month ago, the roster constructed by the general manager has done more than enough talking for him.

Scraping and clawing for their playoff lives, the Maple Leafs approached their recent five-game homestand with the same zest an eight-year-old tackles household chores.

All dragged feet and sullen faces, they fell behind early, gave up late and still expected to get paid.

The Leafs went 0-4-1 and got outscored by a combined total of 25-12 by Minnesota, Detroit, Vegas, Colorado, and now — thanks to Tuesday's 7-4 drubbing by the surging Sabres — Buffalo.

They were the second-best team dressing the second-best goalie and, at best, second-best star player in each of those games.

Not since 1984-85 have the Maple Leafs endured a homestand so long and so unproductive. That edition finished dead last, knocked out by the ol' Chuck Norris.

Only one Eastern Conference franchise has fewer wins (24) than this version of the Leafs, and that team's GM has already written a letter to fans explaining that they're giving up and will be busying taking trade calls on their most dynamic player.

It's time for Treliving and his boss, Keith Pelley, to crumple their original blueprint as bargain buyers and decide how deep of an incision to make on this corpse.

When a veteran team led by a \$13.25-million superstar and a Cup-winning coach can't summon the requisite urgency for critical games involving divisional rivals, or featuring a star that spurned them, or, in Tuesday's case, preceded by a leadership meeting and a motivational chat by Leafs icon Darryl Sittler, well, maybe they just don't have it.

For the second game in a row, hats hit in Scotiabank Arena's ice in celebration of an opponent's hat trick (Brock Nelson's Sunday and defenceman Rasmus Dahlin's first-ever Tuesday, just part of his five-point show).

Something else was doffed and chucked after the buzzer, though.

As half-hearted boos rained on the Maple Leafs by a half-filled home crowd, a replica sweater was discarded by a fan in disgust.

Stripped captain John Tavares silently scooped the stripped jersey with his stick and carried it off to the shadows. Trying to clean up a mess.

"It's a tough one to explain," Tavares said. "Once again, I don't think we executed as well. They seem to be really quick and just getting to their game better than we did."

Which begs the question: What is the Maple Leafs' game anyway?

After a 53-game sample, what has coach Craig Berube identified as their identity?

"We look at scoring as everything — and it's not everything," Berube said post-game. He sounded fed up. "You're not going to consistently win this league by focusing on just scoring goals. You got to play the full rink. And right now, we're not doing a good enough job without the puck."

Part of that is execution. Zone exits are a burden. Puck management is a chronic issue.

Part of that is personnel. Puck-transporting game-breaker William Nylander and expert retriever Chris Tanev have been holed up in the press box with the Drumsticks and George Parros decisions.

Part of that is goaltending. Joseph Woll has lost a career-worst five straight. Anthony Stolarz is rusty. And Dennis Hildeby's breakout season got pushed down to the farm in the name of roster management.

Part of that is on Treliving, for not building a defence corps fast or mobile enough to keep pace with a league speeding past Toronto's contention window.

What did Berube learn about his team over this stretch?

"We got to learn to keep the puck out of our net is what I learned," Berube said. "Until we decide to do things right and keep the puck out of our net — and that's the goalies included — this is what you're going to get. We scored enough goals on this homestead to win games, but we didn't keep the puck out of our net."

"No more than that. I don't want to talk about it anymore. That's all it is. I don't need to learn anything about our team. I know our team, and they're capable of doing it."

Added Matthew Knies: "We have a ton of skill and a ton of talent in his locker room. I think there's a ton of confidence. I think it's just putting it all together."

Our takeaway from Toronto's past five efforts in particular and first 53 as a whole: A rejig is in order. Either there isn't enough talent, or they've wasted too much time to bother using it.

Engage in hard conversations with pending free agents Troy Stecher, Bobby McMann, Scott Laughton, Matias Maccelli, and Nick Robertson.

If the players wish to re-sign at reasonable rates and term, go for it. You need role players, and they all bring something. If they are noncommittal or ask for a windfall, trade them to restock those barren cupboards.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Get creative. You won't be trading them all, of course, but a refresh is necessary.

Develop a plan. Recoup assets.

Reload and try again in October.

Because, sadly, this Maple Leafs campaign is not worth investing any more assets.

"Disappointing, no doubt," said Tavares, addressing the homestand. "You know, there's a lot of hockey left here, and nothing's been determined."

Unfortunately, it's the 2025-26 Toronto Maple Leafs who haven't been determined.

But we hope the decision-makers have seen enough to at least terminate their fate.

Fox's Fast Five

- Pretty awesome how Sittler was reunited with his original, game-worn sweater from that historic 10-point night 50 years ago.

Together with friend and teammate Tiger Williams (who was dash-2 in that 11-4 win, Sittler reminds), the Leafs legend gave a pep talk to the current team at morning skate and showed off his 50-year-old sweater.

"Talking about how he had to throw the fight strap on for the Broad Street Bullies, it's a testament to the type of hockey they were playing at that time," McMann said. "You can see how weathered the jersey is and how many stitches it has. You know he was playing a hard game."

Sittler and Williams, Toronto's all-time leader in penalty minutes, shared tales from their heyday, attempting to rile up the lads.

"The message I said to the players was, you don't achieve anything without your teammates," Sittler relays. "You don't have (success) on your own. It's you as a group. It's important to realize that."

- Matthews on Sittler's big show in 1976: "Ten points? Like, two hat tricks he had. It's really hard to wrap your head around that. Yeah, I don't think that's getting touched anytime soon."

Sittler himself said he thought '80s-era Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux were the best bets to join him in the Double-Digit Club. He's breathing a little easier now.

No one has even hit nine points.

Edmonton's Sam Gagner (2012) is the only player since 1988 to score eight points in one game.

- Yeah, the Sabres ain't trading Alex Tuch.

- The Maple Leafs have won 19 consecutive offside coach's challenges.

- Knies opened the scoring and snapped a 10-game goal drought, the winger's longest since his rookie days.

The 23-year-old is labouring though a lower-body injury that is screaming for time off.

"The (Olympic) break is going to be pretty valuable for me to heal up and rest and try to come back as a different player," he said. "One that's at 100 per cent and playing to his full abilities."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 01.28.2026

1377559 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Strong showing in Canadiens' win earns Dobes long-awaited opportunity

Eric Engels

MONTREAL — When Jakub Dobes slid across his crease and got his toe on a shot from a player who had scored goals in 11 of his last 15 games, he delivered much more than just a highlight-reel save.

What Dobes gave his Montreal Canadiens was a save on Mark Stone when they needed it most. What he offered them was the kind of save they haven't gotten often enough at critical points of too many other games this season. And what he ultimately presented was at least some assurance he might just be prepared for what's directly in front of him—a fresh opportunity to become their starting goaltender.

If the decision were just based on results, Dobes would've been appointed well before making that save on Stone as part of a 32-stop stand in this 3-2 overtime win for the Canadiens over the Vegas Golden Knights.

He had won 15 of his 23 games coming into this one, including each of his last three starts and five of his last six (with the only loss coming in overtime).

But the performances were erratic, and nowhere near as convincing as the one Dobes offered on this night.

In his last one—a 4-3 win over the Minnesota Wild one week ago—Dobes appeared distracted. After this one, he said, "I was in my flow state."

That was apparent roughly three hours earlier.

If you didn't have that sense from his nine first-period saves, you could definitely start feeling it in the second period, when the Ostrava, Czechia, native made his first highlight-reel stop to keep the game knotted just two minutes after Phillip Danault got the Canadiens on the board.

They were all over the Golden Knights before play swung the other way.

That's when Mitch Marner got the puck and threw it across the crease to Pavel Dorofeyev.

Dobes robbed him just like he did Stone in the third.

He made two more stops in succession on Vegas' only scorer in the game, just like he made two more on Stone to preserve a 2-1 Canadiens lead while the Golden Knights were on the power play.

They were excellent saves, but also the type of timely ones the Canadiens have needed but haven't gotten at times.

The latest example came in Boston this past Saturday, in a game in which Cole Caufield scored a hat trick and the team played well enough to be up 3-2 in the final minutes.

They found themselves down 4-3 in a matter of 12 seconds because Samuel Montembeault couldn't make those timely saves.

He struggled to make them through October, November and most of December, and, after coming up with them through the start of the new year, he faltered once again.

That opened the door to Dobes, and he was ready.

The goaltender did his homework.

"Mark Stone is really good around the net and we had a pre-scout and knew that they like to make those plays," the 24-year-old said. "So it's just something that you keep in mind that they probably won't shoot it from that side of the net and they'd probably just go back door."

Other than that, Dobes kept his mind free and let his ability take over.



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He appeared unfazed by the goal Dorofeyev scored with 3:08 remaining in regulation to make it 2-2, and he was totally locked in for the last stop he made—on Jack Eichel—before Jake Evans scored the overtime winner.

It capped a performance Dobes needs to build on.

"He's a super confident guy," said Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki. "I feel like he really believes in himself. He really wants to be in the moment and make those big stops, and he did a good job tonight to give us a chance to win."

It's what the Canadiens need every night, with their overall game in a relatively good place and the standings presenting them almost no margin for error.

It's a tall task for a goaltender with just 40 games of NHL experience, but it's also the opportunity Dobes has been working towards since he arrived at the end of 2024.

"I think for every young guy, you come to this league and it's the hardest league to play in physically, mentally. And I think our young guys are learning to be pros, and I think he's done that," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis. "I think he's been ready for his starts and he's been battling every day and trying to keep improving. And tonight, he gets the start and goes out there and he's a battler. Dobes is a battler. I think he's been a pro through it all."

It's earned Dobes the opportunity to play more.

If he takes advantage of it, he'll be giving the Canadiens much more of what they need.

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Sportsnet.ca / Floor collapsing under Canucks with yet another dismal loss

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — The Vancouver Canucks' great free-agent auction attracted scouts or managers from 14 other National Hockey League teams on Tuesday night. But it wasn't exactly an easy sell from Canuck players at Rogers Arena.

We wonder if the trade emissaries saw much of anything they liked from Vancouver, although they'd probably love to be able to bid on the improving San Jose Sharks, who won easily, 5-2.

With the rebuilding Canucks trying to sell off their impending unrestricted free agents ahead of the National Hockey League's March 6 trade deadline — and listening to offers on other players — the team put on another dismal performance, surrendering three goals in four minutes early in the first period and rarely threatening the speedier Sharks after that.

Thirty-four-year-old Evander Kane, the playoffs-hardened winger who moved to the top of the Canucks' trade block with last week's exit of Kiefer Sherwood to the Sharks, did make himself noticeable in a second-period fight.

But dropping Sharks defenceman Timothy Liljegren with a punch was a dubious achievement as Kane's opponent had never had a fighting major in five NHL seasons.

The game was a step back for the Canucks, which seemed noteworthy considering how far adrift the team is already in the overall standings and how profoundly they have fallen in the last month.

"Very disappointing," veteran centre Teddy Blueger, another of the UFA-eligible Canucks, said after his fourth game back from injury. "We're off to a great start (leading 1-0). We should be feeding off that energy, and then we just kind of make some mistakes again. I think we got scored on the next shift. It's tough to explain, but it's unacceptable just the way it goes in waves like that.

"I mean, obviously they're going to push throughout the course of the game, but we've got to be able to withstand that. We shouldn't be giving up three goals at a time within those short spans like we have been. It felt like they were just like a step ahead. We weren't executing, weren't coming out of our end clean, and didn't have the same O-zone time we had the last couple of games."

The Canucks have lost 14 of their last 15 games and through 54 contests — nearly two-thirds of their regular season — have won 11 times in regulation. The franchise has never been that inept through 60 minutes to this point in a season, the previous bottom being 14 regulation wins through 54 games, which last occurred in 1997-98 — the infamous season of Mike Keenan chaos.

Tuesday was yet another example how one bad goal against seemed to dishearten the team and lead to another.

After North Vancouver's Macklin Celebrini wired a four-on-four one-timer past Canuck goalie Kevin Lankinen to tie it 1-1 at 1:51 — just 36 seconds after Tom Willander shot through Jake DeBrusk's screen to give the home team the lead — defenceman Filip Hronek's uncharacteristically awful turnover at his blue line allowed Adam Gaudette to rifle San Jose ahead at 4:43.

And just 1:12 after that, Vancouver failed again to defend the middle of the ice and Lankinen failed again to produce a save, as Tyler Toffoli whacked a shot under the goalie to make it 3-1.

The floor has collapsed under the Canucks, on the ice and, by extension, in the standings. They simply do not have the on-ice structure and execution to survive, well, almost anything.

"I mean, you're right," Blueger said of the collapse in structure. "It's hard to explain. A system in hockey shouldn't be crazy hard to understand; there's only a handful of templates, I guess, that teams play. We're just not executing, not sharp enough mentally.

"I think maybe sometimes the negativity of, you know, the losing, it's kind of discouraging. But I don't think that's an excuse for us to get sucked into that. You're right, we should have a basic foundation of just being hard to play against (and) defending well, at least. You might not be able to score all the time, but you should be able to do the basics well. We're just not doing it."

Top centre Elias Pettersson said: "I think there's a lot of things that need to be better. I think our structure can be better. I think when there's times to make a play, we need to make a play, and then that leads to the next play and the next play. If we're just fighting to defend and just throw it out, they get the puck again and then they keep us in the defensive zone all the time. We've just got to focus on what we can do better."

Which is pretty well everything.

Coach Adam Foote hooked Lankinen after three goals on six shots and less than six minutes of playing time.

Overused due to Thatcher Demko's season-ending injury, Lankinen started for the fifth straight game, and ninth time in 11, and saw his season save percentage dip farther to .881, which ranks 41st among 49 NHL goalies who have appeared in at least 20 games.



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Reliever Nikita Tolopilo was a little better in net, but didn't get much more help than Lankinen enjoyed. Shots halfway through the game were 22-13 for San Jose, which is on a 10-4-0 run and was driven as usual by Canadian Olympian and Hart Trophy candidate Celebrini.

The 19-year-old finished with a goal and three assists, giving him 78 points, nearly double his nearest teammate.

Celebrini's spectacular development since the Sharks drafted him first-overall in 2024 actually provides some hope to the Canucks, who almost certainly will have the best draft-lottery odds for June's sweepstakes.

But there is no one, alas, in this year's draft projected to match the quality of Celebrini or Connor Bedard or, perhaps, even Matthew Schaefer, last year's No. 1.

Still, the Canucks should get an elite player who can make a difference within a couple of years, and goodness knows they could use a couple of those.

San Jose eventually extended its lead to 5-1 before Hronek scored a power-play goal for Vancouver halfway through the third. But the Canuck power play still disappointed, failing on a five-on-three advantage for nearly two minutes late in the second period when the deficit was still just two goals.

"Every time we lose, it sucks," Pettersson said. "We've been on that side a lot this year. We've just got to find a way or it's going to be. . . it's hard to put into words. I mean, obviously we're trying. Coach is trying, we're all trying. We're not going out to just give up. But we have to be better."

Since returning from a 0-6-0 road trip, the Canucks are now 1-5-0 three-quarters of the way through their season-long eight-game homestand. The Anaheim Ducks visit Vancouver on Thursday.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Stanley Cup playoff races are shaping up

Rory Boylen

The NHL standings are as tight as ever and it might be having an effect on the trade market. With so few teams decidedly out of the running, the list of sellers is still rather short. Teams are hoping that will become more defined in the coming weeks.

What do we make of the NHL standings today? Here's our pass through each of the divisions, how the playoff races are shaping up, and what things might look like using an alternative points system.

Central Division is a great case for changing the playoff setup

The Colorado Avalanche have been dominant this season, losing just six games in regulation. But four of those losses have come in their last 10 games, so this qualifies as a cold stretch for the team.

And yet they're still 11 points clear of second place in the Central Division and nine points clear of the second-place team in the league.

The Minnesota Wild are No. 2 in the Central, with a 13-5-5 record since making the bold trade for Quinn Hughes, fourth in the league over that time. They have a team-save percentage of .904 that ranks second in the league, with Filip Gustavsson going strong and Jesper Wallstedt making a case for the Calder Trophy.

The Dallas Stars are third in the Central with a plus-28 goal differential that's fourth-best in the league, the No. 2 power play and three players within the top 20 scorers in the NHL.

All three teams have cooled off recently (they each have just four wins in their past 10 games) but in the overall NHL picture, these teams still rank first, fifth and sixth. In the West, they are the top three teams. And yet, because of the playoff setup, one of these teams will see its season end in Round 1, and only one would have a chance to reach the conference final.

Last year, Dallas and Colorado met in the first round after they finished fifth and eighth, respectively, in the regular season. In 2024, the Jets and Avs were first-round opponents after finishing fourth and eighth in the regular season.

This division is screaming for a change in the playoff format, so we wondered, what would the current Round 1 series look like if we returned to a 1-vs-8 system:

Eastern Conference:

1. Tampa Bay vs 8. New York Islanders
2. Carolina vs. 7. Boston
3. Detroit vs. 6. Montreal
4. Buffalo vs. 5. Pittsburgh

Western Conference:

1. Colorado vs. 8. San Jose
2. Minnesota vs. 7. Utah
3. Dallas vs. 6. Anaheim
4. Vegas vs. 5. Edmonton

(If division winners still were given a top-two seed, the Golden Knights would jump to No. 2.)

How hot and cold streaks will wildly swing the Atlantic Division

At the moment, five Atlantic Division teams are in a playoff spot, with another being the first team out. Since Dec. 1, about 30 per cent of a full season, the Atlantic houses five of the NHL's top 10 teams by points percentage.

But with so much time still to go this season, we have to caution: It is so hard to climb back in from even what appears to be a manageable distance.

On Dec. 1, the Leafs were coming off a stretch in which they had lost four times in five games, and they sat last in the Eastern Conference, with 25 points in 25 games. They were just six points out of a playoff berth.

Then, from Dec. 1 through Jan. 12, the Leafs got at least a point in 16 of 20 games and their 12-4-4 record in that span came to a .700 points percentage that ranked fourth in the league. It took them until the very last of those 20 games to climb back into a playoff spot.

Then, immediately after getting back into the wild card, Toronto has gone cold again, 1-4-2 in the past two weeks. And now the Leafs are back chasing again, six points out of a playoff spot and completing wiping out all the progress that was made in a month and a half.

The Buffalo Sabres and their fans know all about this. At the moment, the Sabres are one of the best stories going as the team tries to break its 14-year playoff drought. Third in the Atlantic with 63 points, this is the latest point in a season that Buffalo has been in a playoff spot since Feb. 24, 2023. So what happened in 2023?

After Feb. 24, those Sabres stumbled into a 3-8-2 run, and one month later, on March 24, they were six points out of the playoffs with 11 games



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left. Buffalo turned it on again, finishing 9-2-1 in those last 11 games and it still fell one point short of the post-season.

It's well established that the loser-point system makes it incredibly difficult to make up any sort of ground. A losing streak that lasts for even two weeks can become a season-ender at any point.

Of the toughest remaining schedules, six of the top 10 are Atlantic Division teams: Detroit (1), Ottawa (4), Montreal (5), Boston (6), Buffalo (7) and Tampa Bay (10). Toronto and Florida rank 21st and 22nd, respectively.

Who do we think can climb back in during the second half?

So, which team do we think has the best chance of climbing back in?

As noted above, the Florida Panthers have one of the easier remaining schedules at the moment and are four points out of a playoff spot with two games in hand of the Bruins ahead of them.

The back-to-back Stanley Cup champions have been hammered by injuries and figure to get those players back down the stretch. Even Aleksander Barkov has been seen on the ice and there is a non-zero chance he will factor into a playoff race.

But Sergei Bobrovsky is their x-factor. Perhaps because he's played so much hockey over the past three years, the 37-year-old has just an .875 save percentage and Florida, as a team, ranks 31st in the stat, ahead of only Ottawa. With an Olympic break on the horizon, can Bobrovsky come back fully charged and ready to lead a playoff push?

We should note that the Los Angeles Kings, San Jose Sharks and Anaheim Ducks have the three easiest remaining schedules. Two of them are in a playoff spot today by way of the tie-breaker. It's entirely possible these three teams will be competing for two playoff spots in the final months.

Which team in a playoff spot are we skeptical of?

The San Jose Sharks are one of the most fun teams out there to watch and it would certainly be nice to see Macklin Celebrini and Co. in the post-season. But there are some red flags.

First, on the season at five-on-five, San Jose is at or right near the bottom in some key indicators such as Corsi percentage, expected goals percentage and even actual goals percentage.

Second, at minus-18, the Sharks have the worst goal differential of any team in a playoff spot. Both their penalty kill and power play also rank outside the top half of the league. Maybe it's a pinch too soon for this group, but certainly adding instead of selling at the deadline could change this outlook.

What a 3-2-1 point-system standings would look like

The way the loser point system is set up, teams are incentivized to not risk much near the end of regulation in a tie game, so that they ensure at least one point and take their shots in the extra frame or in the shootout.

But what if teams were incentivized to win in regulation?

That's the 3-2-1 points system: three points for a regulation win, two for a win in overtime or the shootout, and one for an extra time loss. What would today's standings look like if that were the format?

TEAM

RW

OTW

L

OTL

Pts.

Tampa Bay

26

7

14

4

96

Detroit

22

10

16

5

91

Buffalo

23

6

17

5

86

The biggest change you see in the Atlantic is that Montreal slides out of the top three. Boston remains tied with Buffalo in points, but the Panthers are much more in the game, as you'll see in a moment.

TEAM



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| | |
|--------------------|--|
| RW | 80 |
| | Nothing changes in the order atop the Metropolitan Division, though the Penguins get a little more space because of their OT wins. |
| OTW | TEAM |
| L | RW |
| OTL | OTW |
| Pts. | L |
| Carolina | |
| 23 | OTL |
| 9 | Pts. |
| 15 | *Boston |
| 5 | 23 |
| 92 | 7 |
| Pittsburgh | 20 |
| 22 | 3 |
| 4 | 86 |
| 14 | *Florida |
| 11 | 23 |
| 85 | 5 |
| New York Islanders | 20 |
| 19 | 3 |
| 9 | 82 |
| 19 | Montreal |
| 5 | 18 |



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| | |
|--------------|------------|
| 10 | 17 |
| 17 | 7 |
| 7 | 19 |
| 81 | 9 |
| Washington | 74 |
| 22 | Ottawa |
| 3 | 19 |
| 21 | 5 |
| 7 | 21 |
| 79 | 7 |
| Philadelphia | 74 |
| 17 | Columbus |
| 7 | 15 |
| 18 | 9 |
| 9 | 20 |
| 74 | 7 |
| New Jersey | 70 |
| 18 | NY Rangers |
| 9 | 14 |
| 23 | 8 |
| 2 | 25 |
| 74 | 6 |
| Toronto | 64 |



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The biggest change in the East in a 3-2-1 system is that the Canadiens fall out of the playoffs and the Panthers are in. There's also the visual that this race doesn't seem as close as our current one, which is part of the reason the NHL prefers its current system. Whereas there are four teams within six points of a playoff spot in today's Eastern Conference standings, only two would fall in that range in a 3-2-1 system.

You just can't let your eyes fool you. A three-point win can help make up a lot of ground fast.

TEAM

RW

OTW

L

OTL

Pts.

Colorado

32

3

6

9

111

Dallas

25

4

14

9

92

Minnesota

19

10

14

10

87

Dallas moves back ahead Minnesota here, but the Central's top three are still all within the top six in the NHL.

TEAM

RW

OTW

L

OTL

Pts.

Edmonton

21

6

19

8

83

Vegas

18

7

14



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| | |
|--|-------------|
| 12 | 17 |
| 80 | 6 |
| Anaheim | 19 |
| 16 | 9 |
| 12 | 72 |
| 22 | San Jose |
| 3 | 15 |
| 75 | 11 |
| Edmonton moves ahead of Vegas in this scenario, but has played three more games than the Golden Knights. The more notable change is that Anaheim slides under the first wild-card team (Utah) in a 3-2-1 system and has played one more game than the Mammoth. | 21 |
| TEAM | 3 |
| | 70 |
| RW | Nashville |
| OTW | 17 |
| L | 7 |
| OTL | 23 |
| PTS | 4 |
| *Utah | 69 |
| 20 | Los Angeles |
| 7 | 13 |
| 21 | 8 |
| 4 | 16 |
| 78 | 13 |
| *Seattle | 68 |



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Chicago

65

16

Vancouver

5

11

23

6

8

30

66

5

Winnipeg

50

18

The Mammoth take a big step forward here and in a 3-2-1 system are a much more solid playoff team. San Jose falls out for Seattle, which has played one more game. Interestingly, the wild-card race still looks as tight in the West here as it does using the current system.

2

The shootout has long lost its lustre and three-on-three overtimes can often (with exceptions!) become a slow, puck-possession game looking for the quick strike. Perhaps it's time to shake it up again bring more desperation to the ending of third periods.

24

7

"Three points for regulation wins. Yes, I like that better," Flames forward Blake Coleman said earlier this season.

65

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St. Louis

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18

Sportsnet.ca / Ekholm's snub from Team Sweden more puzzling after hot stretch with Oilers

1

Mark Spector

24

9

EDMONTON — Have you ever had a friend, someone you really get along with, who just couldn't stand your other friend — someone you also really get along with?

65

That's what this Mattias Ekholm situation seems like with Swedish head coach Sam Hallam, who on Tuesday named Boston defenceman Hampus Lindholm to Sweden's Olympic roster as a replacement for the injured Jonas Brodin.

Calgary

17

Not Ekholm, who is fifth in scoring (6-20-26) and has the best plus/minus (plus-18) of any Swedish defenceman in the NHL this season. But Lindholm, who has three goals and 16 points on the season and is minus-10 with the Bruins.

4

We'd heard for months — ever since the 4 Nations Face-Off, when Ekholm was sick as a dog throughout — that Hallam was unlikely to choose Ekholm for the team. And that there was a disconnect between coach and player.

25

But after the Oilers' usual slumberous start, since Nov. 1, Ekholm's game has been exquisite. I guess it just seemed like good sense would prevail, and Ekholm would take his place among Sweden's top eight.

6



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To wit (all stats since Nov. 1):

- Ekholm is a plus-24. The next best Team Sweden D-man (Oliver Ekman-Larsson) is plus-five.
- He has five goals, 15 assists and 20 points (all fifth among Swedish defencemen in the NHL).
- Ekholm plays 21:12 per night, more than he'd likely get in Milan, but he logs those minutes for a top NHL team in Edmonton under the glare of a Canadian hockey spotlight. He plays all the most important minutes — other than first-unit power play time — and is battle-tested on the playoff journey to two straight Stanley Cup Finals.

He's 35, sure. But he's also six-foot-five and 225 pounds, and still moves well.

Without asking Hallam, we suspect he'd disagree on that last part, likely the critical area in a tournament that will be played at lightning pace.

It's just such a puzzler for me, that a hockey coach would look at Ekholm — the person, the player — and decide, "No, we're better off without him on our team."

Then an injury occurs, and the sentiment doesn't shift an iota.

"Still can't make our top eight, sorry."

Let's step back.

I've not known Hallam for long. Met him a few times along the trail and always enjoyed our chats. Once, through a Swedish colleague, I had the pleasure of being seated around a table at a little Italian restaurant that included Hallam and a few others. And, yes, there might have been a beer afterward.

Here is what I gleaned:

He is uber smart. Great sense of humour, a doting father, and an up-and-coming young coach on the international scene. I fully expect him to be an NHL head coach one day.

He evaluates hockey players, as far as I could tell in our few hours together, much the same way I do.

Character is important, but less so if the player's game is deteriorating. Intangibles matter to Hallam, though. He respects and is advised by analytics, was my take, but he is not consumed or entirely directed by them.

I have great respect for Hallam. You'd have to ask him if he returns that sentiment.

Are we friends? We're friend-ly, how about that?

Then there is Ekholm.

I'd say I know him much better than Hallam, as I first (wisely, if I do say so) identified Ekholm's dressing room stall as the source of many sage and eloquent quotes/thoughts when I was covering teams that met the Nashville Predators in the playoffs roughly a decade ago.

Since then, Ekholm has come to Edmonton, where he has become — among other things, for the local media — "The Explainer." Ekholm knows how to let us — and by extension, you — into what's happening with the Oilers. Good or bad, without singling out a teammate or betraying confidence.

It's my educated guess that, on the bench or in the intermission dressing room, Ekholm is the first to identify when Edmonton begins to stray from their winning game, to the looser, more care-free approach that sometimes wins, sometimes loses.

He is, we'd be willing to bet, a big stakeholder of the Oilers' collective defensive conscience, alongside Darnell Nurse. Which is no small role on a Stanley Cup contender.

Ekholm has also become the perfect No. 2 for one of the game's most dynamic No. 1s in Evan Bouchard. It requires the ability to play an offensive level that does not constrict Bouchard's freedom, but also be there when Bouchard's high-wire act stumbles.

And if you're going to play 22 minutes a night in Edmonton as the pairing that plays the most with Connor McDavid's line, you can not simply stay at home and leave the offence to others. As such, he had a hat trick on Monday versus Anaheim.

"He's a great player, all-around," teammate Leon Draisaitl said. "He knows when to jump into the rush. He's extremely smart, he's got a bomb of a shot, he knows when to use it. ... And his (shot) placement is elite."

Here in Edmonton, Ekholm has become the Brent Seabrook to Bouchard's Duncan Keith. He is Paul Coffey's Charlie Huddy. The Don Sweeney to Ray Bourque. The Devon Toews to Cale Makar.

Alas, he will not be the Mattias Ekholm to an Erik Karlsson or Rasmus Andersson over in Milan, which is unfortunate.

This was to be his final hope to play in the Olympics, something Ekholm had never done.

It's a kick in the kroner, really.

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Sportsnet.ca / Seven potential replacements if injured Canadian Brayden Point misses Olympics

Josh BenetEAU

Team Canada is holding its breath on a key forward.

With less than two weeks to go before boarding the plane to Italy for Milano Cortina 2026, Brayden Point's Olympic status remains in doubt.

The Tampa Bay Lightning superstar has been out most of January with a lower-body injury. At the time he was hurt, Lightning and Canada head coach Jon Cooper said Point's season "was not over," but added that his recovery timeline was week-to-week. He has missed eight games so far.

While Canada hasn't officially ruled Point out yet, he's running out of time to get ready for the Olympics. Canada will travel to Italy late next week and open the tournament on Feb. 12 against Czechia.

Point is hard to replace as a high-scoring, two-way centre, but Canada's roster might be the deepest in the tournament. In fact, you could make a pretty competitive team just out of the players Canada will leave at home.

As we await word on Point's status, here are seven other players who could jump in to take his place:

Hyman missed the first two months of the season after wrist surgery, but since returning on Nov. 15, he's been one of the hottest scorers in the NHL with 21 tucks in 35 games — a 49-goal pace over 82 contests. Much of Hyman's success comes from skating alongside Connor McDavid, and if he were to make Team Canada, the duo would presumably get a chance to continue that chemistry on the Olympic stage.



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The Jets are enduring a down season, but Scheifele remains a scoring threat any time he hits the ice. In fact, he sits fourth among all Canadian skaters with 61 points, trailing only McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Macklin Celebrini. Scheifele is a centre, like Point, but Team Canada's coaches would need to decide whether they can trust him to defend as well as he scores.

Bedard is in the midst of a breakout season at age 20, with 20 goals and 48 points in just 39 games. However, his offence was slowed by a shoulder injury in late December. Bedard returned on Jan. 9, but he owns just one goal and four points in eight appearances since. Even if Bedard doesn't get the call this time, he's likely to be playing a role on the national team sooner rather than later.

Bennett was a star for Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off last year before going on to win the Conn Smythe as the Panthers defended their Stanley Cup title. Those performances helped him earn an eight-year, \$64 million contract — but they weren't enough to push him onto the Olympic team as Canada opted for Tom Wilson to fill his hard-nosed role instead. Unlike Wilson, though, Bennett plays centre and Canada might tap him to fill a spot in the middle of the fourth line if he winds up in Italy.

Stamkos is a future Hall of Famer, but the one thing missing from his resume is an Olympic medal. The 600-goal man missed out on playing for Canada in 2014 due to a broken leg and has had to wait 12 years to get another chance. He'll be 36 by the time the Olympic tournament starts, but Stamkos has seemingly turned back the clock in recent weeks. Since Dec. 1, Stamkos' 19 goals are tied for third-most in the NHL.

One of the brightest youngsters in the game, Johnston figures to be a Team Canada staple soon, even if he's not on the roster this time around. The 22-year-old has 27 goals and 56 points in 52 games. With two 30-goal seasons already in his young career, Johnston continues to raise his offensive ceiling.

Jarvis cracked Canada's roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off but missed the cut for the Olympics. While injuries have disrupted his season, he remains nearly a point-per-game player with 23 goals and 16 assists in 44 games. Jarvis plays both special teams for the Hurricanes and would be comfortable on any of Canada's forward lines.

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Sportsnet.ca / Notebook: Canucks backing Demko amid latest injury absence

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — Fans and reporters see a goalie who keeps getting hurt. The Vancouver Canucks see someone strong enough to keep coming back.

Thatcher Demko, who has endured six injuries in less than two years, faces another mighty test of resolve and recovery after the Canucks announced Tuesday that the 2024 Vezina Trophy runner-up will undergo hip surgery next week and won't play again this season.

The 30-year-old came out of the lineup for the third time this season after allowing three goals on six shots to the Maple Leafs in the first period of a 5-0 loss in Toronto on Jan. 10.

Demko has been restricted by injuries — including a rare tear of the popliteus muscle in his knee that caused him to miss the start of last

season — to just 43 National Hockey League games since his all-star, 35-win season in 2023-24. So Tuesday's news was not unexpected.

"You just feel for your teammate and hope that he takes all the time he needs," Canucks winger Jake DeBrusk said after skating ahead of Tuesday night's game against the San Jose Sharks. "He has tried to come back a couple times this year, and you just see the work he puts in to keep trying to come back.

"I don't know if it's necessarily under-appreciated; I just don't think it's understood what goes on in the human mind when you're injured. You're trying to come back and you're going through all these things that are painful. You're doing all these things every single day. You're up in the morning, getting ice on, doing all this stuff. Mentally, it takes a toll. And then you finally get back in, you're all excited, and then next thing you know, you have a setback and you've got to do it over again."

Just as injuries reach a critical mass in the arena, they can reach a critical mass with fans and reporters. Two of the toughest Canucks in history, defencemen Sami Salo and Chris Tanev, became the butt of jokes at times in Vancouver for the frequency of their injuries.

"You know, he's probably the most well-respected guy on this team," centre Teddy Blueger said of Demko. "When you see that criticism sometimes in the media (for getting injured), it's a little bit disappointing to see that kind of reaction because behind the scenes, you see how much time and effort he puts in.

"Demmer's very, very professional, probably one of the most professional, prepared players I've ever played with. And he puts in a ton of work and effort, and he plays through a lot, too. If something's bugging him, he goes until he can't move anymore, basically. So, yeah, guys in here respect him a ton."

"That's why I think he's such a big competitor," DeBrusk added. "Whatever's thrown at him, it doesn't really change how he is. As a goaltender, I think you're so used to just worrying about the next day, the next stop. I think it's something that's similar in terms of (overcoming injuries). I don't know if that's necessarily appreciated."

Demko was arguably the best goalie in the NHL in October when he won four of seven starts — the Canucks scored two goals in his three losses — stopped 92.6 per cent of shots and led the league in goals saved above expected.

But his game noticeably began to slip in early November and, after a couple of disconcerting "maintenance days," Demko came out of the lineup after the first period against the Winnipeg Jets on Remembrance Day.

Demko missed a month with that injury, believed to be related to his groin, and coach Adam Foote later revealed that the American goalie had been battling more than one medical issue.

"Yeah, it's tough," Foote said Tuesday. "I mean, to watch him go through what he's gone through, he's fought through it for a while now. When I had a long conversation with him, he knows (surgery is) the right thing for him to do, to give us his best and clean up (his injuries).

"You can tell it just gradually got to him where, you know, it jumps from compensating to a sore back to maybe a pulled groin, you're fighting through. It moves around. The cleanup in that area (around his hip) will take him out of that discomfort and, you know ... put him back in a place where he can play more ... than he's been playing the last couple years."

In a press release Tuesday morning, general manager Patrik Allvin said Demko's surgery will allow him to be ready for the start of training camp next season, when the goalie will be starting a three-year, \$25.5-million (USD) contract extension he signed last summer.

More injury news



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Foote confirmed that Canuck winger Brock Boeser is in concussion protocol after being shouldered in the head by Pittsburgh Penguin Bryan Rust at the buzzer of Sunday's 3-2 Vancouver loss. With no history of supplemental discipline during his 685-game career, Rust, 33, was suspended by the NHL for three games.

Boeser missed seven games and nearly three weeks with a concussion last season after a headshot by former Los Angeles King Tanner Jeannot, a multiple-offender who also was suspended three games.

"I talked to him yesterday," Foote said of Boeser. "He's in the protocol for probably a week, but he says he felt a lot better yesterday (than Sunday). He didn't feel that it affected his neck, which I wasn't sure. I was worried about his neck, but Brock's tough. It was good news to hear him speak and say, 'This isn't as bad as what I've had in the past.' So that's a good sign, but who knows, right?"

Foote also revealed that rookie defenceman Zeev Buium, the biggest piece acquired from the Minnesota Wild in last month's trade of Quinn Hughes, suffered a broken bone when struck by a puck near his cheek in the first period against Pittsburgh.

The 20-year-old finished the game in a full face shield, but will probably not play again until after February's Olympic break. Foote said surgery is not expected, but a second medical opinion is being sought.

"We just have to do the right thing," the coach said. "But what I like is his courage to play. It shows great things for the future."

Raising Kane's price

You know there are extra scouts in Rogers Arena when the Canucks' in-house media are being moved in with the general media on the right side of the press row, as is happening on Tuesday.

A lot of the scouting focus will be on Evander Kane, the free-agent eligible winger who moved to the top of Allvin's trade block with last week's move of Kiefer Sherwood to the Sharks. The Canucks have given Kane's agent permission to speak to other teams about the player's expectations for his next contract, which could increase his trade value.

The Edmonton Oilers made the 34-year-old a contract dump after last season, and the Canucks surrendered only a fourth-round pick to accommodate Kane's desire to play in his hometown of Vancouver.

The Canucks notified the 31 other NHL clubs in November that their UFA-eligible players were available. These still include Kane, Blueger and David Kampf.

"I think there's a lot of names that are out there," Kane told reporters about trade speculation. "And all of a sudden, just because a member of the Vancouver media decided to tweet it out, you know, I've got a big scrum today. So, yeah, it's part of the process. It's part of the way business is in the NHL."

Kane has had an uneven, mostly disappointing season, with nine goals and 24 points in 51 games. But he has been more noticeable recently, and what really interests other teams are the left winger's 97 career playoff games, which included runs to the Stanley Cup Final with the Oilers the last two seasons.

"I don't think anybody anticipated, from top to bottom, the season going the way it's gone," Kane said of his Canucks experience. "I think every single year with the team that's in last place, changes happen. I think everybody's disappointed with how the season has gone. Nobody wanted to be in last place."

Tuesday's lineup

With Boeser and Buium out, the Canucks have recalled top forward prospect Jonathan Lekkerimaki and defenceman Victor Mancini from the American Hockey League.

This is the way Canucks skated this morning:

Forwards

DeBrusk-Pettersson-Karlsson

O'Connor-Chytil-Lekkerimaki

Ohgren-Blueger-Garland

Hoglander-Raty-Kane

Defencemen

M. Pettersson-Willander

E. Pettersson (Jr)-Hronek

Joseph-Myers

Goalies

Lankinen

Topolilo

Expected scratches

Kampf, Sasson, Mancini

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs notebook: Berube meets with leaders ahead of must-win

Luke Fox

TORONTO — One of our greatest pet peeves in sports discourse is the jump to label any important game a "must win." Especially when the end of the regular season lies nearly three months down the road.

And yet, for these skidding, slumping Toronto Maple Leafs, a January tilt against the sports franchise with the second-longest active playoff drought (we see you, New York Jets) feels unusually critical.

A four-point swing the wrong way against the smokin'-hot Buffalo Sabres, and the Maple Leafs will fall eight points back of third place in the Atlantic Division (and the Sabres have a game in hand). They are at risk of extending their losing skid to five, going 0-fer on their homestand, and hitting the road with yet another punch to the confidence.

Tumble too far this week, and it could force GM Brad Treliving to rethink his trade deadline.

"We want to win. That's it. There's no other ... just, we want to win," Leafs defenceman Simon Benoit asserted Tuesday morning. "We have to win."

Dare we say it: They must.

Unlike Friday's Marnier Bowl, which was downplayed in the home room, no Leaf is trying to pass this tilt off as just another game.

"A big one. We know the magnitude of it," said Leafs forward Bobby McMann, who compares this season to last.

"It definitely is different. I feel like last year we were kinda feeling good all the way through the season. This year, we're fighting a little bit more.

"But sometimes that's good, because then you find a way to battle and really hone in the parts of your game that you need to be better at come



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playoff time. So, we're taking it as more of a challenge and something that's going to grow our game to be ready for the end of the year."

Young and skilled, the Sabres are performing at a level unseen this deep into winter in a decade. As a result, they have some say in the Maple Leafs even making it to playoff time.

"Seems like they've been figuring out their stuff," Benoit said.

The Sabres have won three straight and 18 of their past 22. Their plus-17 goal differential dwarfs Toronto's minus-six. They're deadly off the rush, and their team save percentage ranks top-eight.

"We're going to have our hands full here tonight," Leafs defenceman Morgan Rielly said. "There's really no reason for us not to be playing our best."

To drill that message home, coach Craig Berube met Monday with Toronto's leadership group. His captains and veterans are battling "a mental grind," Berube said, trying to dig out of first-period deficits multiple times last week.

"But we got to overcome it," Berube said. "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."

"Everybody just has to be better," the 28-year-old said. "When it's hard and you're going through adversity, it's bringing everybody up and pushing yourself to be better."

On fire coming out of the Christmas break, Matthews hasn't splashed the scoresheet in three games, and leading scorer William Nylander won't be available until the Leafs' upcoming road trip.

"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," Matthews said.

"It's just about getting back on the horse and just keep riding, keep working, and pulling yourself out of the hole."

Woll gets the net

Joseph Woll (0-2-2) has lost his past four starts and has surrendered 19 goals over his past five.

But there was little debate that he would get the nod over a rusty Anthony Stolarz for this one.

"Well, I really like the way he played last game" versus Colorado on Sunday, Berube said. "He's played pretty well since he's been back and given us an opportunity most nights to win hockey games."

On Friday versus Vegas, Stolarz gave up five in his first game since Nov. 11, and critics wondered if he should've warmed up with a game or two with the AHL Marlies before getting thrown into the fire.

"I felt I was ready to go," Stolarz told reporters. "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 didn't miss a beat in 2024-25, winning four straight games upon his return from knee surgery.

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

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (.905) will start for the Sabres.

Nylander targets return as wallet takes a hit

The NHL slapped Nylander with a \$5,000 fine for flipping a broadcast camera the bird from the press box Sunday afternoon.

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

The Maple Leafs rarely make injured players available to media, but they made an exception for Nylander (groin) Monday so he could publicly apologize for an action he said was directed at no one in particular and was made "out of frustration" over not playing.

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

Nylander was alerted to his mistake via text message.

"I was like, 'Oh, not a good idea. Not a good thing to do,'" Nylander said. "Like I said, I apologize about that."

The organization sees no reason to dwell on what happened.

Berube chalked the gesture up to everyone makes mistakes, and they move on. Perhaps with a tad more caution.

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

Set to miss his 16th game of the season after aggravating his groin in Las Vegas, Nylander is targeting a return on the road later this week.

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

Maple Leafs' projected lineup Tuesday vs. Buffalo Sabres:

McMann – Matthews – Domi

Maccelli – Tavares – Knies

Cowan – Roy – Robertson

Lorentz – Laughton – Järnkrok

McCabe – Ekman-Larsson

Rielly – Carlo

Benoit – Stecher

Woll starts

Stolarz

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Sportsnet.ca / Frustration grows for Kadri as Flames' playoff hopes sink

Eric Francis

CALGARY — Nazem Kadri's frustration is evident.

But he insists a recent shattering of his stick on the bench was more situational than it was about the situation he's in.



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Infuriated by yet another fruitless shift, the seated veteran gritted his teeth and angrily snapped his twig on the dasher in front of him, smashing it repeatedly as his two young wingers looked on.

While it's only natural to believe it was symbolic of just how discouraging it must be for the 35-year-old to be a Flame these days, Kadri passed it off as a meltdown in the heat of the moment.

"I've been breaking sticks for years, since I've been in youth hockey," he smiled, injecting levity when asked if there was anything to read into his episode.

"My dad didn't like that so much, back when sticks were expensive to get. Now, at least, they're free.

"I think (the stick smash) symbolizes somebody who cares, and that's all the frustration comes from. I just want the team to do well, and I want us to do well."

Well, they aren't.

Sinking in the Western Conference standings with four losses in a row, the Flames now sit seven points behind the three teams tied for the final wild-card spot.

Two of those teams have two games in hand on Calgary, and only one team in the league has scored fewer goals than the Flames, who would have to leapfrog five teams to play this spring.

For the fourth straight season, playoff hockey likely won't be played at the Saddledome.

One season removed from a career-high 35 goals, Kadri is stuck at nine, with just one goal and three assists in his last 17 games.

Unable to generate anything of late with a rotating cast of youngsters on his wings, it's only natural to wonder how much longer Kadri is willing to endure life as a Flame.

Yes, he likes it in Calgary, as does his family.

But with time ticking away on his career, surely he'd prefer another shot at winning a Stanley Cup?

The timelines on a Flames rebuild don't jive with his career arc, making him one of the most obvious players in the league to put on the list of trade candidates.

The Flames are listening to offers on everyone, and with the recent trade of Rasmus Andersson, an increasing number of fans hope GM Craig Conroy is poised to lean into this lost season by cashing out on vets like Kadri and Blake Coleman.

With three years left on his seven-year, \$49 million deal, Kadri is not in complete control of his fate, as he has just 13 teams on his no-trade list.

While most contenders would be keen to add a gamer like Kadri, who was integral to Colorado's Stanley Cup win in 2022, the length remaining on his contract is problematic for many teams tight to the cap.

However, if he were to walk into Conroy's office and suggest it was indeed time to part ways, you can bet the GM would work feverishly to honour his wish.

To date, Kadri has not done that.

So, speculation will swirl, well past the Olympic break and into March.

Asked if he felt the noise surrounding his future was any different this year than years past, Kadri shrugged.

"It's relatively similar, I've been dealing with it for a little while," said Kadri, who sits at minus-23 despite leading the team with 35 points.

"But I mean, in terms of that, I think off the ice, that has kind of a mind of its own. When you show up to the rink, you understand you're still

professional, you have an obligation, and I care about the guys in the dressing room, and I want us to succeed. So that's the bottom line."

Kadri wasn't considered trade bait at last year's deadline, as the Flames were still battling for a playoff spot.

Plenty has changed, which only adds to the understandable disappointment of a competitor who signed in Calgary before the team started shedding core players.

"Naz is a guy that wants to impact the game every night, and when he's not, he gets mad at himself, and a lot of times that comes out with what you see sometimes on the bench," said Flames coach Ryan Huska, who recently reunited Kadri with Martin Pospisil and Connor Zary, with whom he had success last season.

"He's not happy with the way he's going, or the way the team is right now. So he wears that. Some guys can hide it well. He's not a guy that hides it well."

Huska doesn't believe the speculation surrounding Kadri has impacted him, as the first-rounder has been subjected to it throughout his high-profile career.

"I bet if you've looked from Naz's first year in Toronto, you'd see the same thing all the way along from him, how fiery he is at different times in his career," said Huska.

"I mean, you'd see that in October if he wasn't happy with the way things are going. That's Nas. That's the way he's built. It has nothing to do with speculation."

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

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."



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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 27-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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TSN.CA / Leafs enter 'must-win' mode with Sabres in town

Mark Masters

It's getting close to now-or-never time for the Leafs.

"We want to win," said defenceman Simon Benoit when asked about the mood around the team. "That's it ... We have to win."

The Leafs have dropped four straight games (0-3-1) to fall six points out of a playoff spot. On Tuesday, one of the teams they're chasing, the Buffalo Sabres, will visit Scotiabank Arena.

"It's a huge game," said defenceman Morgan Rielly. "We know it. Over the last little bit, we've all been looking at the standings and keeping an eye on it a little closer than earlier in the season. It's getting to be that time when these points are important and trying to make that push."

The Leafs are 1-4-2 in their last seven games. Toronto has not won a game in regulation since shutting out the Vancouver Canucks on Jan. 10.



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"It's a must-win," said Benoit ahead of Tuesday's tilt against Buffalo. "Every night is a must-win if you want to make the playoffs."

Tuesday is Toronto's final home game before heading out on a four-game trip, which includes stops in Seattle, Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton.

"It's a huge game, obviously," said coach Craig Berube. "We know that. All of them are. I mean, no different from the Colorado game [Sunday], but heading out on the road tonight, it'd be nice if we could get two points and head out with some confidence."

Considering the stakes, it will be important to manage the pressure of the moment.

"It's definitely a big one," said winger Bobby McMann. "We know the magnitude of it. It's something that we don't want to really focus on. We want to focus on playing our game more than anything, and coming out with a good start I think is the biggest thing."

Berube met with the team's leadership group on Monday to emphasize the significance of this moment in the season.

"Just an opportunity to kind of address where we're at and the importance of tonight and the importance of our games moving forward, and the things we need to work on," said Rielly, who is an alternate captain. "He has a good way of making that clear. I think, for our group, again, there's no reason for us to not be at our best tonight, be emotionally invested and to be aware of the points that are at stake, and what they mean."

What's the vibe like with the leaders on the team right now?

"They've been doing a great job," McMann said. "They've been staying positive, leading the group, pulling guys with them. There's nothing necessarily more you can ask of those guys. They've been great and it falls on everybody on this team to be ready to play and come with a good start."

Over their last two games combined, the Leafs were outscored by a 4-0 margin within the first 10 minutes of the first period.

Joseph Woll will make a second straight start for the Leafs on Tuesday.

"I really liked the way he played last game," Berube said. "I think he's played pretty well since he's been back and given us an opportunity most nights to win hockey games."

Woll stopped 33 of 36 shots in Sunday's loss to the Colorado Avalanche. He is 0-2-2 in his last four games.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is expected to start for the Sabres. He is 0-5-2 career record against the Leafs.

"They're getting really good goaltending," Berube said. "That's a big key for them. Their goaltending has been really good, and they have the ability to score goals. We all know that. They have a lot of talent, but they're playing a really good team game, that's how I see it."

Buffalo is a league-best 18-3-1 since Dec. 9.

"Just top to bottom everyone's doing their job, everyone's having fun out there," said Sabres winger Josh Doan. "We're playing fast. Playing fast is something that's allowed us to have success."

"We've been wearing on teams," said centre Tage Thompson. "Our identity as a team is our speed. When we're playing fast and moving the puck north is when we get a lot of our looks. I think for us the only thing that really gets us into trouble is managing the puck so that will be a big thing against Toronto."

The Leafs will honour Darryl Sittler and the 50th anniversary of his historic 10-point game before the game. Sittler and former Leafs teammate Tiger Williams met with the players on Tuesday morning.

"It's a cool opportunity for our guys to add some extra motivation, not that we need any, for tonight," said Rielly.

Sittler showed off the sweater he wore back in the 1975-76 season when he set the single-game record with a six-goal, four-assist effort in an 11-4 win against the Boston Bruins on Feb. 7, 1976.

McMann's eyes lit up when talking about seeing the old sweater, which Sittler will wear in the pre-game ceremony.

"Talking about how he had to throw the fight strap on for the Broad Street Bullies, it's a testament to the type of hockey they were playing at that time," McMann said. "You can see how weathered the jersey is and how many stitches it has. You know he was playing a hard game."

Berube felt Sittler's appearance injected "a little bit of juice" into the dressing room.

"I don't even have 10 points this year," said Benoit, who has recorded three assists through 45 games.

Sittler shared some stories from his playing days and attempted to fire up the group.

"The message I said to the players was you don't achieve anything without your teammates," Sittler said. "You don't have [success] on your own. It's you as a group. It's important to realize that."

Doan is tied for the NHL lead with 35 takeaways this season. What's the secret to his success?

"Just tracking back hard and not giving up on plays," said Doan. "I think it's something you're taught as a kid is getting over top of pucks and making sure you're back-checking hard. It's been something where you can catch guys from behind. Little things like that and then making sure you leave your stick in passing lanes."

"One of the best players I've seen at stripping pucks, causing turnovers," said centre Tage Thompson, "which is great for me playing with him because I just wait in pockets for him to turn it over and find me there."

Doan credits fellow Scottsdale, Ariz. native Auston Matthews for helping him refine his takeaway talent.

"Auston's a guy who has an unbelievable stick," the 23-year-old said. "Getting a chance to skate with him in the summertime [a few years ago] and experiencing what it's like to play against him and how frustrating it can be, I tried to take a thing or two from him."

Matthews leads the Leafs with 21 takeaways this season.

"He's one of the best in the league at it," said Thompson. "There's a reason the puck's always on his stick. It's not by accident. He's probably the best in the league at arriving in those pockets on time. He kind of gets lost behind you."

Matthews has had at least one point in each of his last 10 games against the Sabres (10 goals and five assists).

"He's so quick and strong," said Sabres defenceman Owen Power. "It's something where if you know he's trailing you, you gotta be aware and try to get the puck off your stick as quick as possible, honestly."

Projected Leafs lines for Tuesday's game:

McMann - Matthews - Domi

Maccelli - Tavares - Knies



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Cowan - Roy - Robertson

Lorentz - Laughton - Jarnkrok

McCabe - Ekman-Larsson

Rielly - Carlo

Benoit - Stecher

Woll starts

Stolarz

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TSN.CA / Clubs cast GTHL lawsuit as 'vindictive' battle for control of minor hockey

Rick Westhead

A week after the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL) launched a lawsuit accusing four member organizations of decades of fraud over the fees they charge for game ice, those clubs have responded with a public letter that reframes the case as a power struggle over who controls minor hockey in Canada's largest city.

The Vaughan Rangers, Vaughan Panthers, Markham Majors and Markham Islanders, represented by Toronto lawyer Michael Mazzuca, have called the GTHL's claim "entirely meritless" and "vindictive" and say it is designed to intimidate clubs that have begun challenging the league's authority.

In the letter circulated on Monday to TSN, players' families and other GTHL member organizations, Mazzuca accused the GTHL of using the courts as a "retaliatory measure and scare tactic" to preserve "unfettered and unchallenged control" over its members.

The GTHL's statement of claim, filed Jan. 12 in Ontario Superior Court in Toronto, alleged that the four clubs secretly charged "premiums" on game ice over a period stretching back more than a decade.

The league alleged the clubs misrepresented their actual costs, concealed markups from both the GTHL and families, and pocketed the difference in violation of league rules. The GTHL is seeking \$300,000 from the Rangers, \$150,000 from the Panthers, and a combined \$250,000 from the Majors and Islanders.

The clubs deny any wrongdoing and the GTHL's allegations have not been proven in court. The four organizations filed a notice of intent to defend the GTHL's lawsuit on Monday.

"One example of the false accusations in GTHL's court claim is the assertion that 'only the [Member Clubs] and the municipalities had access to ice rates,'" Mazzuca's letter stated. "In fact, all fees charged by the city/municipalities to the Member Clubs are publicly available."

The clubs say the roughly five per cent administrative fee they charged reflects operational costs associated with securing, managing, and regulating game ice. They argue that these charges were long known and accepted within the system, and that portraying them as secret "premiums" misrepresents both practice and history.

"This dispute raises broader issues affecting the hockey community at large, namely GTHL's insistence on maintaining unfettered and unchallenged control over its members, to the detriment of transparency

and accountability that families and clubs are entitled to expect," Mazzuca wrote.

In a statement on Monday, GTHL spokesperson Stephanie Coratti wrote the GTHL has a responsibility to ensure funds paid by participants "are used appropriately, transparently, and for the benefit of the communities they belong to. The Review Committee believes that certain recently discovered, undisclosed ice overcharges by Markham Islanders, Markham Majors, Vaughan Rangers, and Vaughan Panthers appear to be inconsistent with these principles."

Coratti wrote that the GTHL remains committed to resolving the matter constructively, either directly with the organizations involved or through the established hockey dispute resolution process.

"Litigation is not the GTHL's preferred option, however, to preserve the league's legal rights while those resolution efforts continue, the GTHL has filed a statement of claim broadly setting out its concerns," Coratti wrote. "The claim has not been served, and the GTHL Board has up to six months to determine whether it will be served."

The response of the four organizations casts the lawsuit as the culmination of a long-running conflict between the league and some of its largest organizations.

According to the clubs, they have been attempting since September 2024, to resolve disagreements over ice fees through internal GTHL processes. That effort, Mazzuca wrote, was "marred by institutional bias and procedural unfairness," resulting in more than \$250,000 in legal costs, "far exceeding the amounts in dispute."

Only when the matter moved into open court, Mazzuca wrote, did a path to a "fair and impartial outcome" emerge.

Mazzuca wrote that while municipal ice costs have risen by about 30 per cent over the past decade, average GTHL player registration fees paid by families have increased by roughly 95 per cent over the same period. He also alleged that the league marks up insurance by about 40 per cent above the Hockey Canada rate, describing the fee markup as an "assessment fee," and that significant portions of player registration revenue are now spent on salaries, legal costs and administration.

"In reality," the letter states, "the GTHL's regulation is heavy-handed, making it more difficult and costly for families to participate in the sport."

The GTHL has framed its lawsuit as an effort to protect parents and restore integrity. In its court filing, the league alleged families were led to believe their fees reflected actual ice costs, when in fact the clubs were collecting undisclosed premiums. The practice, the league said, undermined fairness across the system.

Mazzuca wrote that the court filing itself has damaged public trust by accusing community-based organizations of fraud before any evidence has been tested.

"Such spurious claims carry significant legal and reputational consequences," Mazzuca wrote, "which the member clubs intend to fully defend against."

What happens next will be determined not by rhetoric, but by documents: contracts with municipalities, historical fee schedules, internal league policies and the paper trail of how ice was priced and disclosed. The court will be asked to decide whether the administrative charges constituted deception, or whether they were an accepted and transparent part of how large clubs operate.

The GTHL is the largest minor hockey league in the world, with more than 50 member organizations and tens of thousands of players. It sits at the apex of youth hockey in Canada's most populous region.

"The timing and nature of this claim suggest it is being used as a retaliatory measure and scare tactic against the growing, good-faith efforts of clubs and families to ensure fair governance and restore



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balance to a system where the GTHL's authority has become disproportionate," Mazzuca wrote, adding that the league's own financial practices and its resort to litigation are what truly burden parents.

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