



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 3, 2026

The News & Observer

Hurricanes can't hold lead but beat Kings on Sebastian Aho goal in OT

By: Chip Alexander

On a snowy day in the Triangle, another sheet of ice provided some heated action.

The Carolina Hurricanes and Los Angeles Kings went at it Sunday at the Lenovo Center in a game decided more on hustle, grit, defense and goaltending than speedy transition plays or dazzling individual moves.

It took overtime to decide it.

Sebastian Aho's goal at 1:25 of the OT lifted the Canes to a 3-2 victory. The Canes never gave up possession of the puck in overtime, Seth Jarvis nearly ended it and Aho then did with a shot from the top of the slot for his 18th career OT goal.

A day after a dismal overtime road loss to the Washington Capitals, when the Canes couldn't hold a three-goal lead, they had a two-goal lead slip away against the Kings in the final seven minutes of regulation. But they extended their point streak to eight games with two games remaining before the Olympic break.

"Obviously yesterday's game was not good enough and we lost the game, as well, so it was a good bounceback, and it feels good to win this one at home," Aho said.

Goaltender Brandon Bussi again was the winner in net, as he has been in 21 of his 25 games, facing just 13 shots as the Canes (34-15-6) were active in their defensive zone. Kings goalie Anton Forsberg saw a lot more action, facing 34 shots and seeing 17 more attempts that zipped past the cage.

"That was a great 60-minute plus effort by us," Bussi said. "We did a great job of kind of slowing down what they're good at and taking away a lot of their chances. They were a little opportunistic at the end of the third but overall it was a great game of us."

Jordan Staal's power-play goal in the first period staked the Canes to a 1-0 lead that would carry into the third period.

Staal won the faceoff to start the power play, then went to the net to redirect a shot by Andrei Svechnikov for his 13th goal of the season at 6:25 of the period. That took four seconds.

With Bussi and Forsberg both dialed in, there was no further scoring until Alexander Nikshin's goal made it a 2-0 game with 7:03 left in regulation. Nikshin ripped one past Forsberg after Jackson Blake's nifty stickhandling, the puck popping free and the defenseman unloading.

Twenty-four seconds later, it was a one-goal game again as center Samuel Helenius finally beat Bussi, the Kings' fourth line scoring on the bump-up shift. The Kings then tied it with 3:11 left in regulation on a Quinton Byfield goal.

"I thought we were playing a perfect game, exactly how we wanted to do it," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I

thought we had the better looks. Obviously, we were in a good spot and they got a couple.

"But I loved the way we just kept playing. I thought it was a great game by us."

The game began with Canes winger Jordan Martinook crunching defenseman Mikey Anderson into the boards – Anderson soon leaving the game and not returning. The second period began with Martinook dropping the gloves for a go with Corey Perry in more of a wrestling match of two veterans than a fist-throwing fight.

There would be near fights. Blake took umbrage with Joel Edmundson sending him sprawling into and over Forsberg, then putting a cross-check in his back after he fell. Blake quickly hopped up, going face to face with the big D-man.

Nor was Martinook through. He tangled with defenseman Brandt Clarke late in the second period, both drawing roughing penalties.

This was a game of little open ice and two teams trying to make plays in tight spaces. The Kings had four shots in each of the first two periods, although Bussi did make a timely stop on Adrian Kempe in the second.

In the first period, Kings captain Anze Kopitar got behind the defense and had a partial breakaway. But Jarvis hustled back to knock the puck away on the back check to deny him.

"I was ready for it. Maybe next time 'Jarv' will let me have the save," Bussi said, smiling, "I mean, that's what we were doing all night. Even if we did get caught out of position the extra effort was there. Our ability to get stick on pucks in crucial areas, from our D corps to our forwards, the effort was there."

Forsberg, who once played a few games for the Canes, did all he could. He made a key stop on Taylor Hall in the second period, then survived a wild sequence later in the second that had Aho, Svechnikov and Jarvis looking at a lot of net but unable to find it while Kings defenseman Drew Doughty gave his goalie support in the crease.

The Kings (23-17-14), in a wild-card playoff position in the Western Conference, played Saturday in Philadelphia. With a 3-2 win over the Flyers, they had a 3-1 record on their five-game road trip..

It was the last regular-season game in Raleigh for the Kings' Kopitar, who has announced he will retire after the season. The Canes lined up after the game for handshakes with the 20-year veteran, who has won two Stanley Cups with the Kings.

"An unbelievable player and human being," Aho said. "He's one of the guys I looked up to growing up and still do. It was an honor to compete against a guy like that."

Despite the snowy conditions, a large crowd gathered at Lenovo to see it.



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"Hopefully we can put on an entertaining game for them,"
Brind'Amour said before the game.

The Canes did, especially the ending.



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The Athletic

NHL weekend rankings: It's not too early to imagine a dream first playoff round

By: Sean McIndoe

We're just hitting the two-thirds mark of the regular season. The Olympic break is days away, the trade deadline is still over a month away, and a million things can change between now and April.

Is it too early to start thinking about the playoffs?

Probably. But like a little kid noticing the Christmas decorations starting to go up in November, it's OK to start looking ahead just a bit. And that feels especially true right now, when a peek at the standings hints at a first round that could be especially intriguing.

Most years, I end up writing a full column sometime in March on the best potential matchups that are realistically in play. That's still the plan this year, unless I forget, which is always a solid possibility. But this week, let's fire off a preemptive strike with a look at five of the best first-round matchups we could be headed towards.

Bonus five: First-round matchups I'm already getting hyped for

5. Islanders vs. Penguins – Two teams that apparently missed the memo that they weren't supposed to be here. Two No. 1 picks at opposite ends of their careers, with Matthew Schaefer's first playoff run vs. Sidney Crosby in what could be his last. And lots of history, with the ghosts of David Volek lurking.

4. Sharks or Ducks vs. Avalanche – The Avs will be massive favorites over whichever team snags the West's second wild-card spot. Given that, a matchup against the Kings or Kraken doesn't exactly get the blood pumping (although there is some recent history with Seattle). The Mammoth could be interesting, but they seem headed towards a higher seed. But a team like the Ducks or the Sharks, playing the role of the feisty underdog that's too inexperienced to know they don't have a chance? There'd be at least a whiff of the 2019 Lightning vs. Blue Jackets matchup there. And even if the series was over quickly, it would still be fun to see Macklin Celebrini or Leo Carlsson match up against Nathan MacKinnon and friends.

3. Panthers vs. Lightning – This one is going to take some work on the Florida side. But even with the Panthers still eight points out, I've yet to meet anyone who seems to honestly believe they're missing the playoffs. Maybe we're all in collective denial; it wouldn't be the first time. But if the Panthers do flip the switch and make the late push everyone is waiting for, they'd very likely find the first-place Lightning waiting for them in round one. These two teams hate each other in preseason, so you can imagine what another playoff matchup would look like.

2. Sabres vs. Red Wings – The two longest postseason droughts in the league are both on pace to end this year, and there's a good chance it will result in a head-to-head meeting. If it happens, the narratives will write themselves, both buildings will be shaking and one of these teams will win a round for the first time in forever.

1. Wild vs. Stars – Obvious pick is obvious, but we don't need to get cute. While both teams have cooled off a bit since the days when they felt like the clear picks as the league's second- and third-best teams, they're still elite. And because of the league's insistence on sticking with a division-based playoff format, they've been all but locked into a first-round meeting since November. We'll take seven games, please.

We'll check back after the deadline to see how many of these matchups are still in play, and whether any other strong pairings have emerged. For now, let's head to the rankings...

Road to the Cup

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

The red-hot Pittsburgh Penguins celebrated the tenth anniversary of their 2016 Cup win, and it got a little dusty in there for Sidney Crosby. Uh-oh, maybe it's not great for the rest of the league to remind him how much he enjoys winning championships.

5. Minnesota Wild (32-14-10, +24 true goals differential*) – I've spent the last few weeks with the Golden Knights in this spot, because I figured the Pacific needed a rep. But this week somebody pointed out that first-place Vegas have the same number of wins as the last-place Leafs, and I'm really not sure what to do with that information. So we're back to three Central teams while I figure out what's going on.

It doesn't hurt that the Wild looked impressive going into Edmonton and beating the Oilers, like they always do.

4. Dallas Stars (32-14-9, +30) – They won four straight one-goal games, and have a good chance of carrying that winning streak into the Olympic break with the Winnipeg Jets and St. Louis Blues up next.

3. Carolina Hurricanes (34-15-6, +30) – They just keep putting points in the bank, with yesterday's overtime win in Los Angeles marking their eighth straight game with at least a point. They need them all, too, with the Penguins stalking them like a horror movie villain.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (35-14-4, +51) – OUTDOOR GOALIE FIGHT!

Also, Jon Cooper: Sure, why not.



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1. Colorado Avalanche (36-8-9, +78) – They're as cold as they've been all season, with last week bringing their fourth set of back-to-back losses since the start of January. But then they go into Detroit and flex on a very good team, so maybe this is less of a cold streak and more of a team that's already locked into first place having trouble keeping their foot on the gas. Either way, they get a rematch with the Wings tonight, this time on home ice.

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

Not ranked: Columbus Blue Jackets and Buffalo Sabres – I'm starting to think NHL teams should be doing more firing.

That sounds harsh; you never like to see somebody lose their job, and all that. But it's been a remarkably stable year around the league so far, with only one head coach and one GM relieved of their duties so far.

The first was Kevyn Adams, dismissed as Sabres GM on Dec. 15. On the day of the firing, the Sabres were tied for last place in the Eastern Conference.

The second was Dean Evason, let go by the Blue Jackets on Jan. 12. On the day of the firing, the Blue Jackets were tied for last place in the Eastern Conference.

Today? Well... who's up for a Sabres/Blue Jackets conference final?

OK, we're getting ahead of ourselves. But the Sabres have been the league's hottest team since the change, going 17-4-1 and kicking down the door to the playoff spot that's eluded them for 14 years. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets are 8-1-0 under Rick Bowness, working their way back into the Eastern conversation while passing seven teams in the standings in less than three weeks.

None of that means Adams and Evason were holding their teams back, and in fact you could argue that both deserve substantial credit for the surges we're seeing. For his part, Evason didn't see the change coming and said he felt like his team was on the verge of a turnaround. He's been proven right, just not the way he thought.

And while Adams had largely become a punchline over his five years in Buffalo, he's the guy who built the current team; Jarmo Kekäläinen hasn't made a significant roster move since taking over. Did the change do something to shift the vibes in Buffalo? It sure seems like it. But Adams also deserves some belated credit (and don't be shocked when his former colleagues toss him a GM of the Year vote or two).

The point is it all adds up to a weird dynamic. You have two teams that pulled the trigger on a big change, and both have been steamrolling the league ever since. Meanwhile, the other 30 teams are apparently content to sit tight. Many of those teams don't need a change, obviously. But at least a few of them could sure use a second-half boost. And you have to suspect that some decision-makers around the league are watching what's happening in Columbus and Buffalo and wondering how much patience is too much.

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last, the best lottery odds for the top pick in this year's draft and a shot at Gavin McKenna or Ivar Stenberg.

It was great to see Linus Ullmark back in goal for the Senators on Saturday, and especially to see him playing well and getting a nice ovation from the fans.

5. Chicago Blackhawks (21-25-9, -28) – They hovered around the playoff bubble for longer than anyone expected, but five straight losses probably spell the end of that. The good news is stuff like this is more important than wins and losses this year. The better news is that we finally get to see them play the Sharks tonight.

4. Calgary Flames (22-26-6, -26) – It's getting crowded around the bottom of the standings, and that reasonably solid December could end up costing Calgary what would be their first top-three pick in franchise history. The bigger question is how many more veterans Craig Conroy can find new homes for; there were two Flames in the top ten of our latest trade board.

3. St. Louis Blues (20-26-9, -52) – In that trade board piece, CJ says that "Nothing is off the table in St. Louis," and he has Robert Thomas listed fifth. And his recent surgery apparently won't change his status as trade bait, according to a Hockey Night in Canada report on Saturday.

2. New York Rangers (22-28-6, -29) – The players seem to have taken Chris Drury's message to heart, with six regulation losses in their last seven. Meanwhile, Artemi Panarin apparently won't play between now and the Olympics, and reports say he could be using his no-trade protection as leverage to get an extension out of any move. You can't blame him, but it will be interesting to see if his contract demands push down the value of a potential deal.

1. Vancouver Canucks (18-31-6, -56) – An interesting observation from Drance over the weekend: For a big bad Canadian market, the Vancouver fan base seems to be handling the dregs of a rebuild just fine. Meanwhile, Peter marked the one-year anniversary of the trade that sent J.T. Miller from Vancouver to New York and why it looks like a win for... Pittsburgh.

Not ranked: Toronto Maple Leafs – We'll do this quickly because, whether you're a fan of this team or not, you're completely sick of hearing about them these days. But I know that if I don't address this now, the comment section will fill up with readers asking why the Leafs aren't in the bottom five. I've already seen it a few times in recent weeks. So let's nip this in the bud.

There are two important reasons that the Leafs can't be in the bottom five. First, keep in mind what we're doing here. This isn't about which teams are in the worst shape right now, or slumping the hardest, or generating the most embarrassing stories. If that was what this section was about, then sure, the Leafs would have a case for the one-spot.

But it's not — this is about predicting what the bottom of the standings will look like by the end of the year. As the season goes on, our list should slowly but surely start to mimic the overall standings. And as bad as the Leafs have been, their brief midseason renaissance means they're still eight points out of the bottom five, with five teams to pass.

And sure, some of you will say, "We've seen 18-wheelers go off the cliff before in Toronto, so you never say never." Except we pretty much can say never, because of an important factor some of you are overlooking: The Leafs traded a top-five



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protected pick to the Bruins at last year's deadline. Do we really think that this cursed franchise is going to be able to recoup that asset, even temporarily, and turn it into a high pick and an elite prospect? Is this your first day here?

The only scenario that makes logical sense would be the Leafs spiraling all the way to fourth- or fifth-last overall, then getting bumped back down to the sixth pick in the lottery and

handing that pick to a division rival, who would, of course, use it to draft their next franchise player.

That feels like it could happen. But we're still a few weeks away from it being likely. So for now, the Leafs are safe from a bottom-five appearance.

Now let's never speak of them again.



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Aho's overtime goal lifts Hurricanes to 3-2 win over Kings

By: AP

RALEIGH, N.C. — RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Sebastian Aho scored early in overtime to lead the Carolina Hurricanes to a 3-2 win over the Los Angeles Kings on Sunday.

Brandon Bussi made 11 saves to continue his dominant rookie season, while Jordan Staal and Alexander Nikishin also scored for the Hurricanes, who have earned at least a point in eight straight games (6-0-2).

Samuel Hoenius and Quinton Byfield scored for the Kings and Anton Forsberg made 31 saves. The Kings wrapped up their road trip with a 3-1-1 record with one game (last Monday at Columbus) postponed due to severe winter weather.

A winter storm dumped snow all around North Carolina but Raleigh was mostly spared, which made it easier for about 14,000 fans to make it to the arena for the afternoon start.

A day after squandering a three-goal lead in a 4-3 overtime loss at Washington, Aho made sure the Hurricanes didn't blow

a 2-0 lead against the Kings. He beat Forsberg 1:25 into the overtime period after the Kings' goalie had made two tough saves on Seth Jarvis.

Bussi, a 27-year-old rookie claimed off waivers four days before the season started, continues to be a revelation. He has won 21 of his 25 starts (21-3-1) to help the Hurricanes to first place in the Metropolitan Division.

Nikishin put the Hurricanes up 2-0 with 7:03 to play in the third period. Hoenius responded 24 seconds later to cut the lead to 2-1. Byfield finished a beautiful pass from Adrian Kempe with 3:11 left in regulation to tie the game at 2-2.

Staal tipped in Andrei Svechnikov's pass for his third power-play goal of the season at 6:25 of the first period. Staal has matched last year's scoring output with 13 goals but in 23 fewer games.

Kings: Host Seattle on Wednesday night.

Hurricanes: Host Ottawa on Tuesday night.



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Recap: Canes Hold Off Kings In Overtime

By: Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

Aho's 18th career OT tally seals two points for Carolina

RALEIGH, N.C. - After his team saw its two-goal lead evaporate in the third, Sebastian Aho scored 1:25 into overtime to help the Carolina Hurricanes top the Los Angeles Kings 3-2 at Lenovo Center on Sunday.

[GAME SUMMARY](#) | [BOX SCORE](#) | [BUY TICKETS](#)

A physical first frame yielded one power play for each side, and after killing off LA's early look, Carolina needed just three seconds of its own 5-on-4 opportunity to take the lead. Jordan Staal continued his power-play renaissance, tipping home his third man-advantage marker of the year to finish off a slick set play with Andrei Svechnikov and Shayne Gostisbehere.

Carrying its slim lead through an eventful middle 20 minutes, Carolina couldn't pad its advantage despite a handful of near-misses. Just past the midway point of the third, ample offensive zone time finally produced a goal, with Alexander Nikishin firing a seeing-eye shot through traffic to make it 2-0.

From there, though, things took a turn in LA's favor. A quick response to Nikishin's marker halved the deficit just 24 seconds later, then Adrian Kempe connected with Quinton Byfield to knot things up with 3:11 to play, forcing overtime.

Fewer than 24 hours after a lost lead cost them a point in Washington, the Canes bounced back with the only three shots of the extra frame, turning to their franchise leader in post-regulation goals for the decider. After regrouping beyond the blue line, Aho skated through the high slot and sent a shot that skipped off a Kings stick before careening past Anton Forsberg to wrap up the win for the Hurricanes.

Brandon Bussi was credited with 11 saves on 13 shots as the team in front of him stifled LA's opportunities for much of the affair.

Stats & Standouts

Forward Sebastian Aho struck in overtime for the 18th time in his career — no other player in franchise history has scored more than nine. Since Aho's debut in 2016-17, only Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl (20) has scored more overtime goals.

Forward Jordan Staal opened the scoring with his third goal in the last five games. Now with 13 on the year, Staal matched last season's output in 23 fewer games, and sits just seven tucks shy of his single-season high as a Hurricane (20, 2015-16).

Staal's goal marked Carolina's 27th power-play goal in its last 29 games, which leads all teams since Dec. 6. Only Edmonton (30.1%) and Boston (28.6%) have produced at a higher rate on the power play than Carolina (28.4%) in that span.

Defenseman Alexander Nikishin scored his seventh goal of the season, moving within one of tying Justin Faulk for the single-season franchise record for goals by a rookie defenseman.

Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere logged a pair of assists, finding the scoresheet for the third straight game since returning from injury, with six points in that span.

Goaltender Brandon Bussi won his fifth straight start, improving to 14-1-0 at Lenovo Center this season and tying Utah's Karel Vejmelka for the most home victories by a goaltender this season.

Forward William Carrier played his 500th career game (87th as a Hurricane) on Sunday.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour giving his assessment of the win...

"I thought we were playing the perfect game, exactly how we wanted to do it. We had to be patient, but I thought we had the better looks. We were in a good spot, they got a couple, but I love the way we just kept playing... I thought it was a great game by us."

Sebastian Aho applauding the defensive nature of the game and his group's ability to stay with it to the end...

"Two teams who I thought played pretty disciplined, defensive hockey... We still had chances to score, but neither generated too much; kudos to both defenses. You've got to just stick with it, and we were able to win this one tonight."

Brandon Bussi giving his point of view...

"I think that was a great 60-plus minute effort by us tonight. I think we did a great job of kind of slowing down what they're good at, taking away a lot of their chances. They were a little opportunistic there at the end of the third, but overall, (it was) a really great game for us."

Sebastian Aho describing his overtime winner...

"I actually liked a couple of other plays before the goal better. We had a couple of looks, but then the last one was a bit of a lucky one. It's a good thing to always shoot the puck, and that was the case on that one, too. It just kind of went off their stick



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or skate or something that changed the direction, and we were able to sneak that one in."

Brandon Bussi on staying engaged despite the low workload...

"My job is to be ready whenever my name is called upon. I would rather have less shots than be getting 50 per game. I think the team made my job pretty easy tonight."

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to be off tomorrow and will return to game action on Tuesday against the Ottawa Senators.

Next Game: Tuesday, Feb. 3 vs. Ottawa | 7:00 p.m. ET | FDSNSO | Tickets | Parking



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes blow 2-0 lead but beat Kings 3-2 in Overtime

By: Al Hood

It's become more apparent than ever that we've hit the time of year where the Canes can feel a little more secure in their positioning for the playoffs, and they underestimate the opponent that is fighting for their playoff lives. It was a problem against Washington on Saturday and it reared its head again against the Los Angeles Kings on Sunday. Carolina dominated play in a chippy game, had a 2-0 lead and almost immediately surrendered it despite being the better team. Despite that, however, they were able to win it in overtime as the march to the Olympic Break continues.

The first period reflected two teams that had played the night before. After giving up 19 shots to the Washington Capitals in the first on Saturday, the Hurricanes gave up just four to the Kings. Most of the play in the period was in the neutral zone, with little offensive zone time for either team. The period did start spicy, though, as Jordan Martinook was called for boarding Mikey Anderson just 30 seconds in. The Penalty Kill unit though easily dispatched of the two minutes, but the Kings tried to get even with a scrum started by Jeff Malott cross-checking Alexander Nikishin.

The scrum didn't result in any penalties, but shortly after Jackson Blake was slashed by Kevin Fiala to give the Canes their first Power Play chance. Carolina took full advantage—Jordan Staal won the faceoff back to Shayne Gostisbehere, who passed across ice to a red-hot Andrei Svechnikov. Svechnikov did not hesitate to shoot it with the Kings still trying to get set, and the puck found Jordan Staal for his second straight home goal via a deflected shot.

There was one scary moment when Adrian Kempe went down with what looked like a slash from Sebastian Aho's stick. He had to be helped off the ice, but fortunately it was to the team bench and he didn't miss a shift. Anderson also came back from the locker pretty quickly after the boarding penalty, but didn't return after the first.

The second period was scoreless but it wasn't boring. The Kings decided they needed to avenge the hit on Anderson, and Corey Perry tried to engage Martinook in a fight on the opening faceoff. It appeared he declined the fight, but that didn't stop Perry. It resulted in an extra minor to Perry, and later on in the period Joel Edmundson just pushed over Jackson Blake as he went in on goal. Neither penalty resulted

in a converted Power Play goal, and while the Canes dominated play in that period—outshooting the Kings 14-4—the period ended with another scrum involving Martinook and the score still 1-0 Carolina.

The third period opened with more 4-on-4 play and urgency from the Kings as they are in a dogfight for position in the West and needed every point. Despite that, Carolina was able to tilt the ice in their favor and after several misses, they were able to finally finish. Chaos in front of the net led to a few more shots on Anton Forsberg, eventually the puck squirted right in front of Alexander Nikishin who snapped it by Forsberg to give Carolina a 2-0 lead.

With the way the Canes had played, 2-0 seemed insurmountable—however as has plagued the team in recent days, they also seemed to think 2-0 was insurmountable. Right off the faceoff the Kings attacked in front of their bench, forcing a Jesperi Kotkaniemi turnover. It created a quick 4-0-2 for the Kings that they were able to convert with a goal by Samuel Helenius just 24 seconds after Nikishin's goal. LA continued to push, and before they could even pull the goalie, Quinton Byfield cashed in on a pass from a skating Adrian Kempe to knot the goal at two. Carolina was able to hold on the rest of the period despite some scary moments, and force overtime.

It was the second overtime in a row for both teams, but once the puck dropped Carolina controlled the action. LA had one chance at the puck early on, but Carolina controlled it and never gave it up. Eventually Carolina was able to cash in. It started as Shayne Gostisbehere learned from Will Carrier's mistake earlier in the season, and despite getting held, saw the puck was going out of the zone and skated across the blue line. Sebastian Aho was able to secure it, then he asked the official about the missed call. Play continued as Aho went unencumbered into the zone and snapped a shot past Forsberg to give the Canes the 3-2 win.

Brandon Bussi only had to make eleven saves on thirteen shots, as the Canes played the type of game that Rod Brind'Amour had been hoping for after the disappointment the night before. Forsberg made 30 saves in the overtime loss.

Carolina has just two games remaining before the Olympic Break—at home Tuesday against Ottawa and then up in New York against the Rangers on Thursday.



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Hurricanes fight through late collapse, secure 3-2 win in overtime

By: Haley O'Neill

Centers Seth Jarvis and Jordan Staal celebrate after a goal scored by Staal during the game versus the Los Angeles Kings at the Lenovo Center on Sunday, Feb. 1, 2026. Staal scored one goal for the Hurricanes. The Hurricanes beat the Kings 3-2 in overtime.

Centers Seth Jarvis and Jordan Staal celebrate after a goal scored by Staal during the game versus the Los Angeles Kings at the Lenovo Center on Sunday, Feb. 1, 2026. Staal scored one goal for the Hurricanes. The Hurricanes beat the Kings 3-2 in overtime.

The Hurricanes, after losing the lead late in the third, fought through their second overtime in two days, finding a different outcome than the day before and walking away with the win.

The Canes (34-15-6), allowing two goals with less than seven minutes to play and blowing their 2-0 lead, secured a 3-2 win over the Kings (23-27-24) early in overtime. Finding the net a little over a minute in, the Canes came out on top and extended their home point streak to eight games.

Regulation and overtime held a similar theme as the Canes took possession and skated circles around the Kings for the majority of the both, but the decisive play came during 3-on-3 action. After fumbling the puck, center Seth Jarvis held it at his stick and found center Sebastian Aho in the neutral zone. Aho skated the puck through the defenders and let off a rocket outside of the paint, finding the back of the net and securing the win.

Before blowing the lead late, the Canes looked the part as an Eastern Conference frontrunner. The opening goal, and the only goal of the first two periods, came from center Jordan Staal on the power play. A slashing call to winger Kevin Fiala sent him to the box and put the Canes up a player. Wasting no time, the Canes won the face-off and got the puck to winger Andrei Svechnikov, who was waiting at the top of the zone. Sending the puck in, Staal got a deflection and nicked the puck past goaltender Anton Forsberg just three seconds into the power play.

"We talked about it before; that was the biggest thing," Staal said. "Having a plan is always big, and that was kind of a play that we were thinking of running, and it worked. It doesn't always work, but if you execute it well, you're going to get a good chance, and tonight it went in."

Unable to execute, the Kings didn't get on the board till late in the third. Twenty-four seconds after defenseman Alexander Nikishin put the Canes up by two, the Kings capitalized on a counter-attack and found center Samuel Helenius out wide. Helenius, left wide open by the Canes, fired the puck into the back of the net, cutting the Canes' lead in half.

With less than five minutes left in regulation, the Kings won the face-off to the right of goaltender Brandon Bussi and skated it around the back of the net. Passing through the paint, winger Quinton Byfield crashed in and zipped the puck past Bussi, giving his team a chance to take it to overtime and helping the Kings walk away with a single point.

The Hurricanes host the Ottawa Senators at the Lenovo Center on Tuesday, Feb. 3, with a 7 p.m. puck drop.



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The Hockey News

Hurricanes Top Prospect Named Player of the Month In AHL

By: Ryan Henkel

Nadeau ignites January with an explosion of goals and points, solidifying his elite prospect status.

Carolina Hurricanes prospect Bradly Nadeau has been named the AHL's Player of the Month for January.

The 20-year-old sniper had eight goals and 18 points in 13 games with the Chicago Wolves last month, with five multi-point games and a seven-game goal streak.

Nadeau is now up to 18 goals and 40 points in 32 games in the AHL this season, a better pace than his tremendous rookie season where he became just the fifth teenager in AHL history to register 30 goals in a year.

The 2023 first-round pick netted his first career NHL goal this season too against the New York Islanders on Oct. 30.

Nadeau spent a good chunk of time with the Canes this year, appearing in eight games while the team dealt with injury issues early in the season.

Congrats to Bradly!

Hurricanes Defenseman Back Following Gruesome Injury

By: Ryan Henkel

Sliced hand, swift recovery. Charles Alexis Legault returns to the ice, defying expectations and bolstering AHL Chicago's playoff hopes.

Defenseman Charles Alexis Legault has been activated off of injured reserve and reassigned to the Chicago Wolves the Carolina Hurricanes announced on Monday.

After getting his hand sliced open from a skate blade on Nov. 9 following a fight in Toronto, Legault had surgery to repair the extensor tendons on his right hand and was given a three to four month recovery timeline.

However, it looks like he was a quick healer as he'll returning to the ice just a week before the three-month mark.

Legault, 22, played in eight games with the Hurricanes this season after a plethora of injuries depleted the team's blueline.

He made the most of his opportunity and even scored his first NHL goal as well.

Legault has played in 65 AHL games throughout his career, with three goals and 14 total points in that span, since being drafted in the fifth round of the 2023 draft.

The 6-foot-4 defender will be a big boost for the Chicago Wolves as they battle to secure a spot in the postseason.

LINKS

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SportScan

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

1378404 Websites

The Athletic / Three junior hockey players killed in motor vehicle crash south of Calgary

By Eric Stephens

Three junior hockey players from the Southern Alberta Mustangs were killed in a motor vehicle crash while traveling to a practice Monday, the team said in a statement.

"There are no words that can adequately express the depth of our grief," the statement read. "These young men were more than hockey players — they were teammates, sons, brothers, friends, and deeply loved members of our Mustangs family and the communities we call home.

"Our hearts are with the families, friends, billet families, teammates, coaches and everyone who loved them. We ask that their families be given privacy and compassion as they navigate this devastating loss."

In a message of condolence on X, Danielle Smith, the Alberta premier, identified the players as JJ Wright, Cameron Casorso and Caden Fine.

The Mustangs play in the United States Premier Hockey League and are based in Stavely, Alta., which is 72 miles (117 kilometers) south of Calgary. More than 150 junior teams in multiple divisions across the U.S. and Canada compete in the USPHL.

The Southern Alberta club last played on Thursday, besting the Diamond Valley Rockies in a shootout. The next game is scheduled for Sunday against the Calgary Bandits. The Mustangs said they are working with authorities, "and will support our players, staff, and families in every way possible during this incredibly difficult time."

In closing, the team said, "We are a family and today, our family is hurting."

My heart breaks for the families of the three young hockey players killed in a car accident near Stavely, Alberta.

Canadians are keeping the entire Southern Alberta Mustangs community in our thoughts as they face this unimaginable grief.

— Mark Carney (@MarkJCarney) February 3, 2026

Canada Prime Minister Mark Carney addressed the news in a post on X, writing that his heart broke "for the families of the three young hockey players," who were killed. "Canadians are keeping the entire Southern Alberta Mustangs community in our thoughts as they face this unimaginable grief," he wrote.

Our deepest condolences go out to the family, friends, and teammates of the three Southern Alberta Mustangs players who tragically passed away in a motor vehicle accident.

Our thoughts and prayers are with everyone who knew them ❤️

— Calgary Flames (@NHLFlames) February 3, 2026

The Calgary Flames offered their condolences on X to the "family, friends and teammates of the three Southern Alberta Mustangs players who tragically passed away in a motor vehicle accident.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with everyone who knew them."

The Flames also held a moment of silence ahead of their game versus the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday.

The tragedy comes days after a snowplow from the Colorado Department of Transportation collided with a van carrying members of the Santa Clarita Lady Flyers 12AA girls hockey team from California, killing the van's driver and injuring eight of the nine passengers in the van. One suffered critical injuries, according to the Colorado State Patrol.

The driver, according to widespread media reports, was the father of one of the players. The Lady Flyers continued to play and won the Western Girls Hockey Championship in Littleton, Colo.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

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The Athletic / Cale Makar, Nathan MacKinnon ready to bring the NHL's greatest show to hockey's biggest stage

By Pierre LeBrun

"Joooooooooooooooooooo Sakic!" was the call from the late, great Bob Cole.

It was Sakic's second goal and fourth point to cap a 5-2 win over Team USA as Team Canada ended its 50-year gold medal drought in Olympic hockey in fine form at Salt Lake City 24 years ago.

Inside the arena, with my media seat just 10 or so rows up at center ice, I could hear Jarome Iginla scream in joy as Sakic's breakaway goal cemented the gold medal.

Sakic would be named Olympic tournament MVP in Salt Lake City. The two-time Stanley Cup champion and former Conn Smythe Trophy and Hart Trophy winner has a treasure chest full of hockey honors, but the Olympic triumph holds a unique place in all of that.

"Oh, 100 percent," Sakic told The Athletic recently.

And the funny thing is, although not surprising for those who know how humble he is, what Sakic immediately recalled about his three Olympic experiences had more to do with everything he soaked in around it.

"Playing in an Olympic Games, you represent your country," he said.

"You get to experience it, be part of the Olympic village, the whole Olympic atmosphere. You go check out other events on off days. You're training with the other athletes. It was just an amazing experience to be part of that."



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His genuine tone was a reminder of why the NHL is back in the Olympics after a 12-year hiatus — and why it's so important for this generation of players to finally have a shot at experiencing it.

Sakic, the president of hockey operations for the Colorado Avalanche, will see his twin superstars, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar, as well as Cale's defensive partner Devon Toews, put on the Olympic Maple Leaf. For many around the world who don't tune in to watch hockey regularly, it will be a chance to see the brilliance that the Avalanche and NHL fans have watched for several years.

MacKinnon, having a Hart Trophy-worthy season, is coming off being named MVP at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February.

"Everybody knows how great Nate is — what a great competitor he is," Sakic said. "He's a winner. The Olympics are the showcase for the world, and the rest of the world will see how great a hockey player he is. Same for Cale. And all the players there. The NHL hasn't been there in 12 years. There will be a whole new generation of kids around the world that get to see how good these players are."

Makar was 11 years old when Sidney Crosby produced the Golden Goal in Vancouver.

"I remember exactly. Just watching at home. I have a vivid memory of it," Makar said of the overtime winner that ignited a party across the nation. "Being from Calgary, being a huge fan of Jarome Iginla growing up, so him assisting on that, was obviously a very cool moment as a kid."

MacKinnon remembered where he was for it, too.

"I was 15, traveling home from boarding school, got snowed in, and I was at a friend's house in Chicago," he said with a smile. "Yeah, it was a cool memory."

Having grown up playing his minor hockey in Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, following in Crosby's footsteps, now the two superstar pals get to share an Olympic ice sheet with fellow Nova Scotian Brad Marchand.

"It's going to be great," MacKinnon said. "It will feel similar to 4 Nations. We've spent so much time together on the ice (training every summer) that I don't know how crazy it's going to feel, but obviously we're very proud, and I'm sure the province will be very proud."

The 4 Nations wasn't just amazing for MacKinnon and Makar because Team Canada won, but also because the first best-on-best event in nine years gave those players a true sense of what the pace is like at that level.

Hard and heavy and 100 miles per hour. No free ice.

"The fastest hockey I've ever played," Makar said, his eyes widening as he recalled it. "It was honestly awesome. There's no real time and space anywhere. So many skilled guys, and so many guys that can skate so well. It was a lot of fun. I think it's only to be elevated in Milan."

MacKinnon certainly looked comfortable at the 4 Nations, but it's just as much the day-to-day team logistics of it all that gives him comfort getting ready for his first Olympics.

"It's nice, the level of comfortability with everybody — the coaching staff, with how things work, with how they run things," MacKinnon said. "It's awesome we have the same staff back, and a lot of the same team is back. It'll be pretty nice in that sense of having less wondering. Obviously, the Olympics are a different animal, but I think it'll be similar with the team in the day-to-day sense."

MacKinnon and Makar have developed a level of on-ice chemistry one rarely sees between center and defenseman — the way they find each other with seam passes all over the ice makes it so difficult for the opposing team to plan for them defensively. Makar is almost impossible to account for when he goes in rover mode in the offensive zone.

Team Canada coach Jon Cooper has picked the brain of Avs head coach Jared Bednar on how to best tap into that MacKinnon-Makar chemistry.

"I've talked to him sporadically about our guys and how they're playing and a little bit about how we deploy them," Bednar said. "You can watch the video and pick up a lot of that. I don't think it's too different from a lot of teams. If you get in offensive situations, you want your best players on the ice, and often that leads to Mack's line and Cale and his partner getting out there on the ice, especially in O-zone situations."

"We play with them apart at times, depending on matchups and throughout the game. But at key points in a game, when we need one, I like to get them out together. And (Cooper) has reached out a little bit and sort of talked through that. He's got a lot of weapons on (Team Canada). I'm going to be interested to watch them play."

Play MacKinnon and Makar together as often as possible? Well, duh.

"Well, they both have so much vision, so much speed, so much creativity, I mean, why wouldn't you put them out there together?" Sakic said with a chuckle. "Especially third periods and when you need goals. Not even that, just if you need momentum — put them out there, and they're going to create a lot of momentum. But yeah, they see each other, they look for each other. Just two incredible hockey players, and we're lucky we get to see them on our team and see them every game."

Still, it's really something to behold when they're both clicking.

"Seeing these guys up close every day and how much they put into it, you appreciate how good they are," Team USA forward Brock Nelson said of his Avs teammates. "They're better than most people think. So, a tough challenge for anybody who plays against those guys. They're as dynamic as they come."

"It's crazy how they find new ways to find each other and create space and create chances at any point in the game. They can make what looks like nothing for a lot of guys into something and extremely dangerous. They're just playing at a different level. It's fun to be part of right now. It's a nightmare when you play against them."

There's a sense of anticipation between Makar and MacKinnon that's completely baked in now.

"It just grows with each year," Makar said. "Nate just does a great job getting himself open and in spaces where I can find him, and I like to think I can put myself in spots where it opens up ice for him, where he can either shoot it or pass it. It's all about reading off one another. I think we find each other maybe in those weird spots where other guys don't, but that's just the connection we've built up over the years and the trust we have that he's going to look there and vice-versa."

Now they've got a chance to bring that show on a whole new stage. Makar said he hasn't gone there in his mind when I asked if he has allowed himself to envision a gold medal around his neck while the Canadian anthem plays at the end of the Olympic tournament. But he does vividly recall some sweet moments from last February.

"I still think the craziest moment I've ever been a part of was when Mario Lemieux walked out on the ice for that first game (in Montreal)," Makar said. "I've never heard anything like that in my life from a stadium or a rink. That's something you'll cherish the rest of your life."

It is an opportunity they've been waiting for their whole careers.

"Yeah, I'm excited," MacKinnon said.

I'm not sure I've ever covered an NHL superstar who gets wound up as tightly as MacKinnon. His intensity is through the roof. It obviously works for him. But I think it's about how much pressure he puts on himself to meet his own standard. So come Milan, controlling his inner critic will probably be the biggest challenge.

What does he expect?



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"Hockey is hockey," MacKinnon said. "I've been in big games. Big moments. I know what it feels like. I know the magnitude of big hockey games. So I think I'll be ready for hopefully big moments and big-pressure games."

If the 4 Nations Face-Off was any indicator, the sport itself will be the big winner in Milan. It's been too long.

"Hopefully, that whole energy from Canada-U.S. and 4 Nations carries over to Milan, because I think it's a pretty cool experience we have in front of us here and cool for us to be part of the Olympics again," Makar said.

The pressure on MacKinnon and Makar will be at a level they've maybe never felt before. It's gold or else in hockey-crazed Canada.

"We ended up winning in Salt Lake, which was amazing," Sakic said. "You feel the tension and the pressure and, in Canada, the expectations. It was amazing to come out with that gold medal there."

Sakic paused, before adding:

"I'm still so proud that I was able to go to the Olympic Games and represent my country. There's something different about the Olympics compared to any other event."

As his Avalanche twin superstars are about to find out.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

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The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: It's not too early to imagine a dream first playoff round

By Sean McIndoe

We're just hitting the two-thirds mark of the regular season. The Olympic break is days away, the trade deadline is still over a month away, and a million things can change between now and April.

Is it too early to start thinking about the playoffs?

Probably. But like a little kid noticing the Christmas decorations starting to go up in November, it's OK to start looking ahead just a bit. And that feels especially true right now, when a peek at the standings hints at a first round that could be especially intriguing.

Most years, I end up writing a full column sometime in March on the best potential matchups that are realistically in play. That's still the plan this year, unless I forget, which is always a solid possibility. But this week, let's fire off a preemptive strike with a look at five of the best first-round matchups we could be headed towards.

Bonus five: First-round matchups I'm already getting hyped for

5. Islanders vs. Penguins – Two teams that apparently missed the memo that they weren't supposed to be here. Two No. 1 picks at opposite ends of their careers, with Matthew Schaefer's first playoff run vs. Sidney Crosby in what could be his last. And lots of history, with the ghosts of David Volek lurking.

4. Sharks or Ducks vs. Avalanche – The Avs will be massive favorites over whichever team snags the West's second wild-card spot. Given that, a matchup against the Kings or Kraken doesn't exactly get the blood pumping (although there is some recent history with Seattle). The Mammoth could be interesting, but they seem headed towards a higher seed. But a team like the Ducks or the Sharks, playing the role of the feisty underdog that's too inexperienced to know they don't have a

chance? There'd be at least a whiff of the 2019 Lightning vs. Blue Jackets matchup there. And even if the series was over quickly, it would still be fun to see Macklin Celebrini or Leo Carlsson match up against Nathan MacKinnon and friends.

3. Panthers vs. Lightning – This one is going to take some work on the Florida side. But even with the Panthers still eight points out, I've yet to meet anyone who seems to honestly believe they're missing the playoffs. Maybe we're all in collective denial; it wouldn't be the first time. But if the Panthers do flip the switch and make the late push everyone is waiting for, they'd very likely find the first-place Lightning waiting for them in round one. These two teams hate each other in preseason, so you can imagine what another playoff matchup would look like.

2. Sabres vs. Red Wings – The two longest postseason droughts in the league are both on pace to end this year, and there's a good chance it will result in a head-to-head meeting. If it happens, the narratives will write themselves, both buildings will be shaking and one of these teams will win a round for the first time in forever.

1. Wild vs. Stars – Obvious pick is obvious, but we don't need to get cute. While both teams have cooled off a bit since the days when they felt like the clear picks as the league's second- and third-best teams, they're still elite. And because of the league's insistence on sticking with a division-based playoff format, they've been all but locked into a first-round meeting since November. We'll take seven games, please.

We'll check back after the deadline to see how many of these matchups are still in play, and whether any other strong pairings have emerged. For now, let's head to the rankings...

Road to the Cup

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

The red-hot Pittsburgh Penguins celebrated the tenth anniversary of their 2016 Cup win, and it got a little dusty in there for Sidney Crosby. Uh-oh, maybe it's not great for the rest of the league to remind him how much he enjoys winning championships.

5. Minnesota Wild (32-14-10, +24 true goals differential*) – I've spent the last few weeks with the Golden Knights in this spot, because I figured the Pacific needed a rep. But this week somebody pointed out that first-place Vegas have the same number of wins as the last-place Leafs, and I'm really not sure what to do with that information. So we're back to three Central teams while I figure out what's going on.

It doesn't hurt that the Wild looked impressive going into Edmonton and beating the Oilers, like they always do.

4. Dallas Stars (32-14-9, +30) – They won four straight one-goal games, and have a good chance of carrying that winning streak into the Olympic break with the Winnipeg Jets and St. Louis Blues up next.

3. Carolina Hurricanes (34-15-6, +30) – They just keep putting points in the bank, with yesterday's overtime win in Los Angeles marking their eighth straight game with at least a point. They need them all, too, with the Penguins stalking them like a horror movie villain.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (35-14-4, +51) – OUTDOOR GOALIE FIGHT!

Also, Jon Cooper: Sure, why not.

1. Colorado Avalanche (36-8-9, +78) – They're as cold as they've been all season, with last week bringing their fourth set of back-to-back losses since the start of January. But then they go into Detroit and flex on a very good team, so maybe this is less of a cold streak and more of a team that's already locked into first place having trouble keeping their foot on the gas. Either way, they get a rematch with the Wings tonight, this time on home ice.

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



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Not ranked: Columbus Blue Jackets and Buffalo Sabres – I'm starting to think NHL teams should be doing more firing.

That sounds harsh; you never like to see somebody lose their job, and all that. But it's been a remarkably stable year around the league so far, with only one head coach and one GM relieved of their duties so far.

The first was Kevyn Adams, dismissed as Sabres GM on Dec. 15. On the day of the firing, the Sabres were tied for last place in the Eastern Conference.

The second was Dean Evason, let go by the Blue Jackets on Jan. 12. On the day of the firing, the Blue Jackets were tied for last place in the Eastern Conference.

Today? Well... who's up for a Sabres/Blue Jackets conference final?

OK, we're getting ahead of ourselves. But the Sabres have been the league's hottest team since the change, going 17-4-1 and kicking down the door to the playoff spot that's eluded them for 14 years. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets are 8-1-0 under Rick Bowness, working their way back into the Eastern conversation while passing seven teams in the standings in less than three weeks.

None of that means Adams and Evason were holding their teams back, and in fact you could argue that both deserve substantial credit for the surges we're seeing. For his part, Evason didn't see the change coming and said he felt like his team was on the verge of a turnaround. He's been proven right, just not the way he thought.

And while Adams had largely become a punchline over his five years in Buffalo, he's the guy who built the current team; Jarmo Kekäläinen hasn't made a significant roster move since taking over. Did the change do something to shift the vibes in Buffalo? It sure seems like it. But Adams also deserves some belated credit (and don't be shocked when his former colleagues toss him a GM of the Year vote or two).

The point is it all adds up to a weird dynamic. You have two teams that pulled the trigger on a big change, and both have been steamrolling the league ever since. Meanwhile, the other 30 teams are apparently content to sit tight. Many of those teams don't need a change, obviously. But at least a few of them could sure use a second-half boost. And you have to suspect that some decision-makers around the league are watching what's happening in Columbus and Buffalo and wondering how much patience is too much.

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last, the best lottery odds for the top pick in this year's draft and a shot at Gavin McKenna or Ivar Stenberg.

It was great to see Linus Ullmark back in goal for the Senators on Saturday, and especially to see him playing well and getting a nice ovation from the fans.

5. Chicago Blackhawks (21-25-9, -28) – They hovered around the playoff bubble for longer than anyone expected, but five straight losses probably spell the end of that. The good news is stuff like this is more important than wins and losses this year. The better news is that we finally get to see them play the Sharks tonight.

4. Calgary Flames (22-26-6, -26) – It's getting crowded around the bottom of the standings, and that reasonably solid December could end up costing Calgary what would be their first top-three pick in franchise history. The bigger question is how many more veterans Craig Conroy can find new homes for; there were two Flames in the top ten of our latest trade board.

3. St. Louis Blues (20-26-9, -52) – In that trade board piece, CJ says that "Nothing is off the table in St. Louis," and he has Robert Thomas listed fifth. And his recent surgery apparently won't change his status as trade bait, according to a Hockey Night in Canada report on Saturday.

2. New York Rangers (22-28-6, -29) – The players seem to have taken Chris Drury's message to heart, with six regulation losses in their last seven. Meanwhile, Artemi Panarin apparently won't play between now and the Olympics, and reports say he could be using his no-trade protection as leverage to get an extension out of any move. You can't blame him, but it will be interesting to see if his contract demands push down the value of a potential deal.

1. Vancouver Canucks (18-31-6, -56) – An interesting observation from Drance over the weekend: For a big bad Canadian market, the Vancouver fan base seems to be handling the dregs of a rebuild just fine. Meanwhile, Peter marked the one-year anniversary of the trade that sent J.T. Miller from Vancouver to New York and why it looks like a win for... Pittsburgh.

Not ranked: Toronto Maple Leafs – We'll do this quickly because, whether you're a fan of this team or not, you're completely sick of hearing about them these days. But I know that if I don't address this now, the comment section will fill up with readers asking why the Leafs aren't in the bottom five. I've already seen it a few times in recent weeks. So let's nip this in the bud.

There are two important reasons that the Leafs can't be in the bottom five. First, keep in mind what we're doing here. This isn't about which teams are in the worst shape right now, or slumping the hardest, or generating the most embarrassing stories. If that was what this section was about, then sure, the Leafs would have a case for the one-spot.

But it's not — this is about predicting what the bottom of the standings will look like by the end of the year. As the season goes on, our list should slowly but surely start to mimic the overall standings. And as bad as the Leafs have been, their brief midseason renaissance means they're still eight points out of the bottom five, with five teams to pass.

And sure, some of you will say, "We've seen 18-wheelers go off the cliff before in Toronto, so you never say never." Except we pretty much can say never, because of an important factor some of you are overlooking: The Leafs traded a top-five protected pick to the Bruins at last year's deadline. Do we really think that this cursed franchise is going to be able to recoup that asset, even temporarily, and turn it into a high pick and an elite prospect? Is this your first day here?

The only scenario that makes logical sense would be the Leafs spiraling all the way to fourth- or fifth-last overall, then getting bumped back down to the sixth pick in the lottery and handing that pick to a division rival, who would, of course, use it to draft their next franchise player.

That feels like it could happen. But we're still a few weeks away from it being likely. So for now, the Leafs are safe from a bottom-five appearance.

Now let's never speak of them again.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

1378407 Websites

The Athletic / The origin story of the Columbus Blue Jackets' loved, loathed and loud arena cannon

By Aaron Portzline

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Much like with their play on the ice, the Columbus Blue Jackets stumbled out of the starting gate in 2000 when it came to marketing the franchise — not just to locals, who were new to the NHL, but the rest of the hockey world, which was unfamiliar with Columbus.



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The team nickname was always rooted in the Civil War. Ohio was a major force for the Union Army, and the blue jackets worn in battle by Union soldiers were sewn and stitched in Columbus, close to where Nationwide Arena now sits. But some at the top of the Blue Jackets organization were worried about trivializing war, even one that occurred nearly 150 years earlier. So the true meaning of the nickname didn't register with some fans, even in central Ohio.

It took nearly a decade before the Blue Jackets decided to fully embrace their Civil War connection, and it coincided with the arrival of a Civil War-obsessed coach. But why just tweak your brand, when you can blast your way to a new identity?

Since 2007, the Blue Jackets have celebrated the start of every game, the scoring of every Blue Jackets goal and every win in Nationwide Arena by blasting a Civil War-era cannon — an 1857 Napoleon Field Gun, to be exact.

It rattles the rafters. It scares the hell out of opposing players and unsuspecting fans. It is loved by Blue Jackets fans and loathed by almost everybody else in the NHL. But it's the first thing every fan looks for when they first visit Nationwide Arena. Lengthy lines form each game for pictures.

The cannon quickly found its way onto the Blue Jackets' jersey, and not just on their unique third sweater but with a permanent patch on the shoulder of their regular homes and aways. There are "cannon" trinkets, T-shirts and tattoos.

When the Blue Jackets played the Detroit Red Wings in an NHL Stadium Series game one year ago, the cannon was brought with great ceremony a few miles away to Ohio Stadium, where 94,751 fans couldn't wait to hear its boom resonate in that Gothic masterpiece stadium built in 1922.

The Blue Jackets have never had much success on the ice, winning just one playoff series in their history. They've been called the most irrelevant franchise among the four major pro sports in the U.S., and as offensive as that is for some in Columbus to hear, it's hard to argue.

But everybody knows the cannon. It's the boom that makes your ears ring and the blast that has become a signature part of the Blue Jackets franchise.

Legendary NHL coach Ken Hitchcock has more life passions than just the puck. He is a proud Canadian, but has been fascinated by the Civil War ever since he coached in Philadelphia, just a few hours drive from numerous battlefields.

When the Blue Jackets committed to the Union Army branding, their coach, "Ol' Hitch" — his nickname in the Civil War re-enactment community — knew exactly where to point them: toward a man in Pontoon Beach, Ill., just 15 minutes outside St. Louis, who was an avid collector, refurbisher and artisan, and made replica items from the war.

Mike Todd, the Blue Jackets' in-arena host and goodwill ambassador, made the trip from Columbus with Kimberly Kershaw, then the club's director of game operations, to check out the replica cannon.

"We pull off the road, and turn into the place, and it looks like a classic small-town service center," Todd told *The Athletic*, "and there's a man waiting on us who, I have to say, looked like a Civil War soldier himself."

Todd and Kershaw connected with members of the Columbus front office on speakerphone and the cannon, which weighs 1,564 pounds, was wheeled out into a field to be fired.

"He loaded it first with gunpowder and it let off a decent bang, but nothing special," Todd said. "And then he said, 'You wanna try cannon powder.'"

"We probably should have known something big was coming, because by that point, a bunch of neighbors had come by to watch, too. When this thing went off, every filling in my mouth rattled. It was like God stomped his foot on the ground."

The message sent back from the Blue Jackets: "Get that thing to Columbus."

After a brief negotiation, the Blue Jackets had their cannon. But there were other obvious hurdles that, while already confronted, needed to be refined. Not least of which was: How can you fire a cannon indoors?

Hitchcock recalled a day during the summer of 2007 when the cannon, now on its caisson and a moveable platform, was tested on the event level of Nationwide Arena, just beyond the ice-resurfer entrance. Obviously, blanks were used, but the concussive blast of the cannon needed to be regulated.

"We knew we couldn't do a full charge," Hitchcock said. Then he started laughing.

"But we thought we'd be good with a half-charge to start," he said, laughing again. "And we let that go and, my God."

Hitchcock said even the local county fire marshal was alarmed. A member of the arena maintenance crew, riding a burnisher a fair distance away, was nearly knocked off the machine. The foundation of the building was checked for damage.

"Yeah, we needed to dial it down," Hitchcock said.

The cannon was placed above Section 111, but the only ammunition it is loaded with is a fake smoke charge that "poofs" whenever it fires. There's a plastic shield in front of the cannon to put worried minds at ease.

The concussive blasts — which are the equivalent of 1/16 charge — are actually placed in the roof, which is why the cannon is so much louder in the upper reaches of Nationwide Arena than it is for those sitting next to it.

On Oct. 5, 2007, the cannon fired as the Blue Jackets took the ice for their season opener against Anaheim. The first player to set it off, appropriately, was the franchise's Mr. Everything, Rick Nash, who scored 6:44 into the game off assists from Sergei Fedorov and David Vyborný.

A new era dawned with the franchise, which still had never made the playoffs. The denizens of Nationwide Arena were enthralled, and parents started bringing headphones for their young children, as if they were attending an AC/DC concert.

Within three seasons, the cannon made its way onto the Blue Jackets sweater when the club created a new third jersey with the cannon as the main crest, resting on its caisson and pointing upward to the right of the sweater. It was universally hailed as a strong third jersey.

But there also was a misstep — or a stroke of genius, depending on your position — that coincided with the "cannon" third jersey.

The Blue Jackets' original mascot is Stinger, a neon-headed, bug-eye insect that looks like a yellow jacket or a hornet, etc.

It was Stinger, both as a mascot and a shoulder patch on the original sweater, that steered fans toward believing that the Blue Jackets' nickname was based on a mythological insect, and it was widely panned. This, of course, is why the cannon was necessary.

When the Blue Jackets began thinking about using the cannon on the third jersey, they also conceived a second mascot — not to push Stinger aside (we don't think), but to help drive home the Civil War theme.

That led to Boomer, an upright, inflatable cannon with furrowed brows, a puffy mustache and wheels on each side. There was a hole at the top of his head where Boomer could launch T-shirts at the crowd. But when Boomer was unveiled on Nov. 24, 2010, the mascot's — well, distinctive — shape drew all of the attention. It spawned a week's worth of local and national stories, which the club first tried to defuse and eventually came to embrace.



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Sadly, Boomer hasn't been seen since, except on shirts, bumper stickers, online memes, etc. Like several other players through the years, Boomer spent one night in the NHL and hasn't been seen or heard from since. There are rumors whenever a big event comes to Columbus — the NHL All-Star Game, the Stanley Cup playoffs, the outdoor game in Ohio Stadium, etc. — that Boomer is going to make a surprise appearance, but it hasn't happened yet. The costume remains in storage in an undisclosed location in Nationwide Arena.

By 2015, the cannon had made its way to every sweater the Blue Jackets wear. In addition to the third jersey, it was now a shoulder patch on both the home and away sweaters. It was also the focal point of the Blue Jackets' outdoor game sweater.

The cannon's biggest night, however, was the 2015 All-Star Game held in Nationwide Arena. Perhaps as proof that the hockey gods look kindly upon the cannon (if not the franchise), it was the highest-scoring All-Star Game in history, a 17-12 final.

The Blue Jackets opted not to blast it after every goal, just every goal scored by the club that was selected and captained by Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno. That meant 12 blasts, although it failed to launch after one goal, so players got a reprieve.

During that weekend, T.J. Oshie, then playing for the St. Louis Blues, made his feelings clear: "It's the worst thing in hockey,"

Goaltender Roberto Luongo, who was in net for four of those goals allowed, joked that "it got so bad in the second and third period, and guys were so tired of hearing the cannon go off, that they were actually back-checking and defending ... in an All-Star Game."

And on it goes...

"I hate the cannon," said Claude Giroux, when he was in Columbus with the Philadelphia Flyers.

"I do not like it; I don't think anyone does," said Los Angeles Kings defenseman Drew Doughty. "It's not good when we come here. It scares me still."

But when players join the Blue Jackets via trade or free agency, it's often a different story.

"It was always like a double whammy," said Blue Jackets center Charlie Coyle, who played with Minnesota, Boston and Colorado before he was traded to Columbus last summer. "When you're on the other team and you hear it, it means you just got scored on, and now you have to hear that stupid cannon, and it's so loud, just like right in your face."

"Now it's great. Now you look forward to it, and you're like, 'Let's get that cannon going as much as we can.' It's a lot better now. It's good now."

When the Blue Jackets played a nationally televised game on Wednesday, TNT's Paul Bissonnette asked Columbus coach Rick Bowness, who was hired this month, if he had gotten used to the cannon.

"Yes, we shot it off eight times the last game (an 8-5 win over Tampa Bay), and man did I love that," Bowness said. "We're not going to do that every night, but man it is hard on the ears, even behind the bench."

"The more I hear that cannon go off, I'm thrilled."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

1378408 Websites

The Athletic / What we learned around the NHL in January: Consistency is king, but don't discount rebounds

By Shayna Goldman

If a team is going to retool successfully, it has to take a proactive approach. When the situation is dire, like it is for the New York Rangers — who sit in last place in the East as the only team in the Conference below .500, with a minus-27 goal differential, and without a strong prospect pipeline or developmental system to rely on — that proactive approach is going to take a lot of work.

Trading Artemi Panarin, Vincent Trocheck and Carson Soucy alone may not bring back enough needle-movers to truly turn things around. And that's what makes Braden Schneider a potential trade option.

Schneider's young enough to help a retooling team like the Rangers, but also has qualities that most general managers look for: size, right-handedness, physical edge and ability to absorb big minutes. And with prices spiking on the defensive market last summer, Schneider's next contract should come on the lower end of the spectrum, which makes him an attractive option.

Add in a trade board that includes righties like Luke Schenn, Connor Murphy and Andrew Peeke, and there could be even more juice here.

The problem is, as much as Schneider has the tools to be a solid defenseman at this level, he hasn't found consistency in New York. He has fallen below break-even in xG in all five of his NHL seasons and has struggled to take on more challenging minutes over the last year. And in January, he earned one of the worst average Game Scores in the league at a minus-1.06.

His surroundings have something to do with that, with three NHL coaches across his five seasons and some really damaging defensive instruction along the way. While there is still a path to becoming the next Jake McCabe, other comps paint a more concerning picture: Michael Stone, Luca Sbisa, Luke Schenn and Cam Barker, among others. So any interested team has to project whether he is a product of his surroundings, or if he can become the best version of himself outside of New York.

It's a gamble, but it's one teams have been willing to take in seasons past — trades involving younger defenders like Jordan Spence, Jamie Drysdale and Rasmus Sandin prove that. So if the market is there (and the return is enticing), the Rangers may want to take this type of risk before diminishing Schneider's trade stock any further.

The Lightning's stout play

Despite key absences in January, including Ryan McDonagh and Victor Hedman, the Lightning have been one of the best teams in the East — especially back in their own zone. Andrei Vasilevskiy has been fantastic with a 0.940 save percentage in 10 starts, with 14 goals saved above expected in all situations. And the defense has been incredibly stingy at five-on-five, with Tampa Bay giving up a league-low rate of 2.18 expected goals against per 60 in 13 games. The penalty kill has been stout, too.

J.J. Moser and Darren Raddysch have stepped up as difference-makers, while Syracuse call-ups like Charle-Edouard D'Astous and Dominic James have made an impact and embraced a next-man-up mentality. With McDonagh and Hedman officially back, it'll be interesting to see what that next level could look like — especially if shutdown center Anthony Cirelli is sidelined after leaving Sunday's game early.

It's a reminder of one of the Lightning's greatest strengths as an organization: the ability to maximize players within the system. The Crunch have become a reliable source of NHL-caliber talent, despite a lack of first-rounders in recent years. The Lightning have only drafted once in the first round in the last six seasons, and that player (Isaac Howard) ultimately signed elsewhere. Not only is the developmental system clearly a strength, so is Jon Cooper's direction at the NHL level. This has to be the year he finally gets some Jack Adams hype as coach of the year.



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Jack Hughes' injury status

The Devils have said Jack Hughes' injury isn't too serious and that he is only day-to-day. But what happens if he can't suit up for Team USA at the Olympics? The question really isn't far-fetched for two reasons: 1) the Devils need him to stay healthy if the team has any chance of making the playoffs, and 2) the number of injury replacements already needed across the board.

Because USA Hockey is deep at center, between Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews, Dylan Larkin, Brock Nelson, Trocheck, Tage Thompson, and J.T. Miller, the team could add a winger. And that's where things get interesting, considering the high-octane snubs available.

That list obviously starts with Jason Robertson, who is one of the best American wingers in the game. Two short kings are also making their respective cases; Alex DeBrincat has nine goals and 16 points since being left off Team USA, and Cole Caufield is second in goal scoring since being snubbed with 12 goals and 17 points — and that includes a clutch performance against Team USA GM Bill Guerin and the Wild.

There are only three right-handed forwards on USA in Eichel, Thompson and Trocheck. And now, with Seth Jones replaced by Jackson LaCombe, the team drops from six righties overall to five. Handedness isn't everything, but it does still matter, so it only betters Caufield and DeBrincat's cases as a way to boost USA's offensive versatility.

Nelson's excellence

Speaking of Team USA's depth at center, Nelson is a key part of it. It may seem like a surprise after his underwhelming 4 Nations performance last winter; with zero points and a minus-0.39 Net Rating, he was in the bottom 20 players of the tournament. This season's a completely different story, though.

Nelson's strengths have gone under the radar over the years, but he has been an elite 2C for some time between his clutch scoring, playmaking, puck retrievals that lead to exits and overall reliability in his own zone. It took him some time to get fully up to speed post-deadline last year, and this year, he is absolutely excelling in Colorado.

Nelson has taken a quality over quantity approach with his shooting this year, which has converted to 1.65 goals per 60 in all situations, the second-highest rate of his career. And since being named to Team USA, he has scored a league-high 12 goals in 14 games (bringing him up to 28 on the season). While a high shooting percentage is one potential red flag, the fact that he does most of his damage at five-on-five is encouraging. It's even more impressive considering his usage; the Avs generally start him in the defensive zone against top offensive competition (sharing the burden with the Nathan MacKinnon line). Despite that, Colorado is in control in his minutes with a 59 percent expected goals rate.

So not only is his play worthy of a utility role as an all-around, all-situations threat, it could get him some attention in the Selke conversation. And it should help the Avs go on a deeper run this spring; last postseason, the next-best scorer behind MacKinnon's 11 points was Logan O'Connor with six. Nelson should help fill that gap and provide real secondary support.

Hyman's rebound

After only putting up 44 points in 73 games last season, Zach Hyman has found his scoring touch this season. His pace is up by 0.98 points per 60, which is one of the best year-to-year improvements around the league.

The reality is he was never going to repeat his 54-goal outburst from 2023-24 as a player whose actual scoring tends to trail his xG. But the repeatable element of that season, and the year prior, was how much he boosted his scoring chance creation. Playing with Connor McDavid can have that effect; Hyman was already a relentless forechecker who had a

nose for the net, but pairing him with one of the best puck movers and overall offensive creators in the league took that to the next level.

Hyman's xG was 50 goals in 2022-23 and 57 the following year. Last season, that dipped down to about 42. This season, to compare, he is already at 31 expected goals in 37 games, which shakes out to around 53 across a 63-game season. That bodes well for him to keep building on his 22-goal season, and get back to that new level he found over the last few years. That's great news for the Oilers, whose secondary scoring was seriously strained by Hyman's slower pace last season.

Gibson's resurgence

The first few months of the season looked like more of the same John Gibson the league has come to expect over the years: inconsistent results, hampered by injury woes.

But in December, he started to turn things around, saving 8.16 goals above expected in 10 outings. Then, when the calendar turned to 2026, he upped his GSAx to 11.6 and 0.920 save percentage in 12 appearances.

All together, it adds up to 14.3 goals saved above expected, which ranks 23rd in the league. As things stand, it should be Gibson's second straight year finishing above average relative to his workload. The difference is that he is putting up these numbers in a starting capacity, when he seriously struggled with that workload in five seasons prior.

Now the test is sustaining this level (and workload) in the second half.

Gibson handled the chaos in Anaheim relatively well in the early-goings of the season until he inevitably hit a wall and crumbled. His surroundings are different now; his workload is down to 43 unblocked shots against per 60 and 3.14 xG, the lowest marks since 2021-22. Detroit's defense is far from perfect, especially when Moritz Seider is on the bench, but the team doesn't bleed high-danger passes like the Ducks of seasons past did. So this is a chance to prove that the resurgence is real and help the Red Wings finally return to the playoffs.

Marnier's shift to center

With injuries at center, the Vegas Golden Knights made an adjustment on Dec. 19: Moving Mitch Marnier from wing to center. While he doesn't have experience at the position at the NHL level, his overall playing style and defensive acumen both made the flip possible. Plus, it gives the second line a stronger puck-moving presence up the middle, opposite Eichel on the top line.

Since primarily shifting positions, Marnier scored four goals and 11 points at five-on-five. Below the surface, the results are somewhat mixed; Vegas is generating chances (and goals) with the winger playing center, but the team defense has been a little leakier.

It seems to be less about the positional flip and more about finding the right wingers for Marnier in this new role. Flanked by Mark Stone and Ivan Barbashev, the second line's offense was hot, but the trio allowed 4.29 xG against per 60 in 51.5 minutes of play. Vegas has allowed less with Marnier skating between Pavel Dorofeyev and Reilly Smith, but that line's offense has been muted. So now Vegas is experimenting with the best of those two combos: Stone and Dorofeyev around Marnier to try and balance out this line's two-way game.

If Vegas can find a way to maximize Marnier at center, it should help this team navigate William Karlsson's absence. If not, a top-heavy approach has to help carry this team to the deadline.

Nikita Kucherov has come into the new year hot, with nine goals and 31 points in January. In those 13 games, the Lightning outright dominated play in his minutes with a 68 percent xG rate and outscored opponents 17-6 at five-on-five. And with four points against the Boston Bruins on Sunday night, he is already starting February strong.



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David Pastrnak's shot rightfully gets a lot of hype, but his playmaking is such a dangerous part of his attack. And in January, it added up to 17 primary assists and three secondaries, on his way to 25 points in 14 games. He does a lot with a little and helped the Bruins go up 19-6 in scoring in his five-on-five minutes.

Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield both have earned nods in the third-star conversation. So has the Utah Mammoth's John Marino, after going up 18-2 in his five-on-five minutes. Mattias Samuelsson's glow-up in Buffalo has been clutch, too. But it's Ilya Sorokin's Vezina-caliber (and Hart Trophy-worthy) play that steals the show, with 17 goals saved above expected in nine games and a 0.931 save percentage for the New York Islanders.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

1378409 Websites

The Athletic / Bruins outdoors are the same as inside: Completely and utterly undisciplined

By Fluto Shinzawa

TAMPA, Fla. — In overtime, Marat Khusnutdinov scooped the puck off the boards. As Jeremy Swayman turned to his left to watch Khusnutdinov, he saw referee Pierre Lambert with his right arm raised. When Lambert let Khusnutdinov skate the puck up the ice, Swayman figured a call was coming on the Tampa Bay Lightning.

So Swayman skated toward the bench. Khusnutdinov gave the puck to David Pastrnak.

The right wing faked a slapper, then pumped a wrist shot past Andrei Vasilevskiy. Pastrnak thought he had given the Boston Bruins a 6-5 overtime win in Sunday's Stadium Series game.

Instead, Lambert sent Pastrnak off for slashing J.J. Moser on the previous rush.

"I have no clue what happened, honestly," Pastrnak said after the 6-5 shootout loss. "It's a freaking turnover, we got a two-on-one. Referee has his arm up. He's letting it go. Sway's going to the bench. We finish the play, score a goal. All of a sudden I'm in the penalty box. Joke. I don't understand. I've never seen something like that. To me, it was a joke. I don't care if that's a bad answer, but that's how I feel. It's weird. Score a goal and end up in the penalty box. Whatever. We gave them two points and that's what matters."

Jake Guentzel scored the only goal in the shootout. Pastrnak, the Bruins' final shooter, pinged his attempt off the right post. What should have been a sure two points — the Bruins had a 5-1 lead halfway through the second period — ended up being one.

"Oh man. That hurts," Charlie McAvoy said. "It hurts a lot. The way we lost it is just brutal."

The Bruins lost the game well before Guentzel's shootout wrister over Swayman's glove. They did it in a way they've mastered: by taking too many penalties.

"We spent half the game in the penalty box," McAvoy said.

The Bruins took 10 minor penalties. They are up to 238. They are best in show.

They have spent 340:02 killing penalties. It is also the most of any team.

It was not just a matter of being careless with sticks or arms. McAvoy was called for roughing after taking exception to rough stuff by Zemgus

Girgensons in the second period. Later in the second, Mark Kastelic was sent off for roughing after taking a run at Oliver Bjorkstrand.

"We didn't have our composure, I would say," said Boston head coach Marco Sturm. "It started with Charlie's penalty there. They were just better than us after the whistle. I don't think they were better than us today hockey-wise. But they were better than us after the whistle. They're not tougher than us. But they did a good job. We just lost our composure a little bit."

There was more to come.

Nobody minded Swayman's second-period fight with Vasilevskiy. But after the scrap, Swayman triggered a run of penalties by sending the puck over the glass at 14:03. Thirteen seconds later, Tanner Jeannot was nabbed for interference. Then while Tampa was on a five-on-three power play, Sean Kuraly closed his hand on a puck.

The Lightning are perpetual PP punishers. It begins and ends with their wizard: Nikita Kucherov. Nobody works the right-side half-wall better than No. 86. He is the perfect mix of skill, deception and anticipation. Even his knack for pulling pucks off the wall is elite.

Kucherov becomes even more dangerous when the Lightning have two more skaters on the ice than their opponent. It becomes just a matter of time before Kucherov makes the opposition pay.

"If you give a guy like Kucherov 10 minutes on the power play," said Sturm, "you did something wrong."

At 15:50, after Kucherov placed a perfect puck in his wheelhouse, Darren Raddysh hammered a five-on-three one-timer past Swayman. Then at 16:13, with Jeannot and Kuraly still in the box, Nick Paul blasted home a net-front goal. It was thanks again to Kucherov. After faking a slap shot, Kucherov had sent a pass down to Guentzel. Swayman, down in reverse vertical-horizontal to take away Guentzel's shot, couldn't get over in time to stop Paul. The Bruins' 5-1 lead was down to one goal.

"We could complain all day and night about the calls that were made," said Morgan Geekie (two goals). "But at the end of the day, there wasn't too many of them that weren't penalties. It's just unfortunate we kept putting ourselves in the box, knowing what they have on the other side when it comes to special teams. We just look ourselves in the mirror. It's been an issue all year, so it's not like it's a one-off thing."

In the third, Kucherov finished his business. After accepting a cross-ice pass from Ryan McDonagh, Kucherov smacked a one-timer from outside the right faceoff dot over Swayman's glove, tying the score at 5-5.

Kucherov's final line: one five-on-five goal, one five-on-five assist, two PP helpers, a game-high eight shots. Tampa went 3 for 8 on the power play.

"It just killed our momentum," McAvoy said of giving Tampa 1:57 of five-on-three time. "It just killed the game. It was a good game before that. Then we're in the box for that whole period. Obviously the goalie fight's fun. That was really cool for Sway and us. But after that, we just kept taking penalties. We had complete control of the game. Then you give a team with that kind of power play a five-on-three for I don't even know how long, you're just asking for it."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.03.2026

1378410 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Kirby Dach giving Canadiens what they need in playoff-style games

Eric Engels



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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This was Kirby Dach doing exactly what the Montreal Canadiens needed from him, driving the net they hadn't previously established enough of a presence in front of, scoring a goal to give them a lead in a building they hadn't won in since 2011, and showing what he can bring in a playoff simulation.

That Dach did it for a third straight game of this nature provided the type of valuable information that Canadiens president of hockey operations Jeff Gorton and general manager Kent Hughes need ahead of the March 6 trade deadline.

They acquired Dach at the 2022 Draft because they believed he could fill out that six-foot-four frame and fulfill the potential he showed to be taken third overall by the Chicago Blackhawks in 2019. They hoped he'd become a top-six forward, and they were willing to wait for him to develop into one.

What neither Gorton nor Hughes signed up for, though, was Dach going through a rash of devastating injuries that put all that into question.

After consecutive seasons cut drastically short by reconstructive knee surgery—and after a broken foot stole away positive momentum he had built up through the first 14 games of this season—Dach has recently been put to the test in a way he hadn't been through any other portion of his time with the Canadiens.

It started with their 4-3 win over the Wild on Jan. 20. And by the end of their 4-3 overtime loss in Minnesota on Monday, Dach had shown enough for Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis to affirm, "He's giving us good hockey."

"You look at the stat sheet, and you can measure that," said St. Louis to reporters at Grand Casino Arena. "But I find he's giving us good hockey on things that are maybe difficult to measure."

Dach did a number of them against the Wild 13 days ago. And though he lagged slightly in games against the Buffalo Sabres and Boston Bruins that directly followed, he started to gain steam at the start of the most important sequence of the season to date—with the Canadiens trying to keep pace with the top teams in the Atlantic Division while aiming to establish a winning record against the best teams in the league in the chase to the Olympic break.

Dach played hard and heavy from the fourth line in wins over the Vegas Golden Knights and Colorado Avalanche last week, with a goal, an assist and a plus-three rating against the league-leading Avalanche as a reward for his efforts.

But to see the 25-year-old build on those performances in the two hardest games of the season—to see him come up with decisive plays from the top line with Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield—was to know there's still hope he can play to the high potential he once held.

In a 4-2 win in Buffalo Saturday, Dach was doing exactly what he needed to do throughout the night, with his play to set up what turned out to be the deciding goal serving as the perfect example of it.

Dach won his corner battle on a hard forecheck, pitched-forked the puck free, and made a quick pass to Suzuki, who gave it to Caufield to finish. His timing was perfect, and his commitment to the dirty work Suzuki and Caufield need from a linemate was unwavering.

Dach made one of the biggest plays of the season in the biggest game to date, and Dach's drive down the gut of the ice 12 seconds into the third in Minnesota was another one.

It helped the Canadiens earn a point against the Wild.

It was a point that kept them ahead of the Sabres in the standings. And if they want to build on that lead with a win over the Winnipeg Jets Wednesday, they'll need more contributions from Dach.

With time and space as sparse as they've been all season, and with the officials pocketing their whistles, he pressed and pushed until he scored against the Wild. In a matchup against arguably the toughest shutdown line in the league—Matt Boldy, Joel Eriksson Ek and Marcus Johansson—Dach held his own. And if the Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., native can keep doing that against top competition in playoff-style games from here to the deadline, it'll reassure Gorton and Hughes.

They may not view Dach as a long-term solution with Suzuki and Caufield, no matter how well he plays in the four games before we get there, but he could render the need for a top-six forward far less desperate.

And if the Canadiens acquire a better option for Suzuki and Caufield, the jam Dach is playing with can fill another need lower down the lineup.

Either way, he's proving useful.

And it looks like Dach's game is revving up.

"I've felt confident," he said. "I think it's just about making sure I'm checking off all the little details in my game and doing what the team needs of me in that given moment."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 02.03.2026

1378411 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Real Kypreos's Trade Board 3.0: How deep will Toronto's changes go?

Nick Kypreos

TORONTO — The trade board took a dramatic turn last week when the Toronto Maple Leafs' 18-wheeler really started skidding. It's not yet going "right off a cliff," as former GM Brian Burke once described the team back in 2012, but it's certainly closer to disaster than anyone expected.

If we look at the standings going into this week, the Leafs are on the outside looking in, no different than Florida or Ottawa, two teams that aren't throwing in the towel yet. If Florida and Ottawa think they're still in it, Toronto will too.

Now, if the Leafs finish with a couple more losses this week, there will be some tough conversations to have through the Olympic break. But when they come back, Toronto will have more big games against Florida and Ottawa as well. If they lose all, or most, of those points, that's when we'll start seeing some bigger names on my trade board.

With that in mind, I'm adding Bobby McMann to this trade board, as he becomes the first significant Leafs skater we hear is already out there as GM Brad Treliving gauges the market before the trade freeze begins Wednesday at 3 p.m. ET / noon PT. Barring an immediate hot streak out of the Olympics, we'll surely hear more names after the Olympic trade freeze is lifted on Feb. 23.

One of those players might end up being Oliver Ekman-Larsson, who will represent Sweden at the Olympics. Toronto is not in position to trade him yet because he's been its best defenceman, but that calculation might change before the March 6 trade deadline.

Beyond the Leafs, Robert Thomas is the newest big name I'm adding to my trade board. I'm not sure how realistic it is that he'll be wearing a new jersey by March 6 because the asking price is very high — higher than what Mikko Rantanen fetched in a trade last year. However, GM Doug Armstrong is serious about exploring all avenues for the Blues.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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I'm not putting any Philadelphia Flyers on the board quite yet, but I'm hearing they are willing to swing big, if not now, then certainly this summer. When that comes to pass, the biggest pieces they could move out in a blockbuster are Owen Tippett and Travis Konecny.

As far as the Nashville Predators go, the Barry Trotz news puts the organization in a greater state of flux but, for now, all the usual suspects remain on my list.

This week's trade board also includes additions Patrik Laine in Montreal, Jesper Wallstedt in Minnesota, and a couple of Seattle Kraken in Shane Wright and Matty Beniers.

For our last check-in on trade potential before the Olympics, here is my latest list.

Dougie Hamilton, D, New Jersey Devils: 7 G | 14 A | 21 PTS | 50 GP

The Devils are second-last in the East, but just seven points out of third in the Metropolitan Division, and there is pressure on GM Tom Fitzgerald to try to hang in there. I think they're a lot like the Maple Leafs in that they're not yet ready to wave the white flag.

Luke Hughes has been out since Jan. 19 and since the team is still trying to stay in the race, I'm not sure how eager Fitzgerald is to move Hamilton without Hughes there. The latter is out through the Olympic break, after which we'll have more information that might influence what the Devils decide to do.

Artemi Panarin, LW, New York Rangers: 19 G | 38 A | 57 PTS | 52 GP

If Panarin is traded — and with a no-move clause, he's in complete control — he'd prefer to have an extension with the new team. There has been a link to Los Angeles here, among others, but the issue is that he wants an extension to be worth something in the vicinity of \$50 million, depending on the term. The asking price to get him from New York is steep and the signing price is steep, but Panarin can still bring it and can help take a team to the next level. He's being scratched from New York's starting lineup until a move is made or the deadline passes.

Washington is all over him. There's a sense he could be a good replacement for Alexander Ovechkin if Ovechkin does in fact decide to shut down his brilliant career after this season. Washington seems to be one of the few teams willing to spend the \$40 million to \$50 million he's looking for, but will Panarin want to go there?

Where he might want to go is Florida, though it's hard to imagine how the Panthers would make that work. But, since he has a no-movement clause, he could manipulate the situation much like Brad Marchand did last year from Boston. Don't put anything past Panthers GM Bill Zito.

Jesper Wallstedt, G, Minnesota Wild: 14-5-4 | 2.62 GAA | .914 SV%

Making a case for himself to be included in the Calder Trophy conversation, Wallstedt is having such a good season as Minnesota's No. 2 goalie and is still considered a top prospect at 23 years old, now with NHL experience. But with Filip Gustavsson also performing well as the team's No. 1 goalie, trading Wallstedt might be GM Bill Guerin's best way to find top-six scoring without significantly hurting his roster.

Having to play through such a tough division in the playoffs, the Wild have to maximize every position, and with Gustavsson under contract through 2031, Wallstedt has become a luxury.

Anthony Stolarz, G, Toronto Maple Leafs: 6-7-1 | 3.67 GAA | .876 SV%

The Leafs feel they have a luxury in net like Minnesota does and could get an asset for Stolarz, but he hasn't played well enough for that yet. A strong showing before the trade deadline might push his value up enough and the Leafs will search the market. Toronto is trying to manage its goaltending assets, and having Joseph Woll and Dennis Hildeby playing so well in the NHL (and Artur Akhymov in the minors), you have to think they'd feel most comfortable moving Stolarz right now. But the

return will still have to be worth it and the team has to feel it's getting an upgrade to the roster.

Bobby McMann, LW, Toronto Maple Leafs: 17 G | 13 A | 30 PTS | 54 GP

On pace for a career-best season, McMann is garnering the most interest among Maple Leafs players. If the Leafs are going to attempt a retool on the fly so they can try to make the playoffs again next year, they may not be comfortable keeping McMann, who could be looking for about \$5 million AAV. In the meantime, they could maybe get a couple pieces for him, a second-round pick plus.

In many ways, he could be one of the most sought-after wingers at the deadline because he's the easiest to fit in with a \$1.35-million cap hit, something every contender could manage, from Colorado to Florida, Anaheim, Ottawa ... you name it.

Brayden Schenn, C, St. Louis Blues: 12 G | 12 A | 24 PTS | 55 GP

Armstrong is taking calls on for the valued centre for the second deadline season in a row. Schenn still has a couple more seasons left on his deal and has some say in where he goes (15-team no-trade list), and the rumours continue that he and brother Luke are hoping to come together in a new destination. For teams looking at a centre, Schenn is a slightly cheaper option than Nazem Kadri and has one less season left on his contract.

Robert Thomas, C, St. Louis Blues: 11 G | 22 A | 33 PTS | 42 GP

There is no question that the Blues' leading scorer is being shopped, but this could also be about Armstrong sending a message that any player could be available from this roster. The price is astronomical, in the vicinity of something equivalent to three top-15 first-round picks. He's looking for cache in prospects and picks. I don't know what team would do that, given he's not exactly a 100-point player (Thomas has 33 points in 42 games this season). In my opinion, he's more in the mould of a second-line centre on a Stanley Cup-contending team. Currently sidelined due to a "minor leg procedure" and out until after the Olympics, I appreciate the noise that is around Thomas.

Jordan Kyrou, RW, St. Louis Blues: 12 G | 15 A | 27 PTS | 45 GP

If the Blues do make a big change up front, Kyrou is more likely to get dealt than Thomas. Last week, Armstrong told KSDK News that the Blues are "embarrassed" to be where they are near the bottom of the standings and that "it's been a really poor year." He's sent these kinds of messages to his team before and often it has led to a turnaround, including last year, when the Blues wound up in the playoffs. But this year they're in a big hole (11 points out) and it's Armstrong's last deadline in the GM chair.

Jordan Binnington, G, St. Louis Blues: 8-16-6 | 3.60 GAA | .866 SV%

Binnington remains on the list because if the right deal comes along, St. Louis will consider almost anything. However, Binnington has not come through with a stretch of strong play at any point this season, so he's no longer seen as an obvious upgrade around the league. A strong showing in the Olympics might revive a market for him and remind teams that Binnington does step up in big moments. However, as far as NHL performance and the goalie market goes, Binnington is now taking a back seat to Wallstedt.

Steven Stamkos, RW, Nashville Predators: 25 G | 14 A | 39 PTS | 54 GP

It's believed there have not been any discussions about a possible move between Stamkos' camp and the Predators. If Stamkos would consider waiving his no-move clause for anything, at this point it would only be to a contending team that's also a good place for his family. It's highly unlikely that plays out between now and March 6, given both he and the team are playing well again and in playoff contention. It's more likely a new head of hockey operations will have to make this decision, whenever



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that person arrives. For now, though, I'm keeping him on the list because this team is in flux. This may end up getting revisited in the summer.

Jonathan Marchessault, RW, Nashville Predators: 9 G | 5 A | 14 PTS | 35 GP

Despite a much better run of play recently and crawling back to within four points of a playoff spot, the Predators will look over their options. Marchessault falls into a similar camp as Stamkos in that he also has a no-movement clause, though he isn't playing as well. Will the Predators find the right package and will Marchessault agree to a move? Or will this situation wait for Trotz's replacement to come in and make a call? It's hard to say, but the Predators do want to get younger.

Ryan O'Reilly, C, Nashville Predators: 18 G | 33 A | 51 PTS | 54 GP

O'Reilly is definitely garnering the most attention of anyone in Nashville because centres are at such a premium and he's having a strong year, leading the Predators in scoring. It's hard to imagine O'Reilly's value will ever be higher than it is now, and he doesn't have any trade protection. Trotz has to ask if now is the time to maximize a premium asset.

Elias Pettersson, C, Vancouver Canucks: 13 G | 21 A | 34 PTS | 47 GP

As I mentioned on my last trade board, the Canucks are rebuilding and everything is on the table. How deep those changes will go before March 6 remains to be seen, but all options will be considered. Including Pettersson, their leading scorer this season.

A Pettersson trade will be complex for a few reasons. One, is that he has a sky-high cap hit and still has six years remaining on his contract. Two, is that his production has not improved much this season and so it's not obvious if he'd be as significant an upgrade to another team. And, three, is that the asking price needs to be high enough to help push the Canucks forward and, likely, need to include a centre as Vancouver is thin at the position. A tough trade to make in-season, but Pettersson is very much out there and the interest from Carolina is not going away.

Jake DeBrusk, RW, Vancouver Canucks: 13 G | 15 A | 28 PTS | 54 GP

DeBrusk remains on my trade board as he struggles to produce in his second year with Vancouver. He's just one year removed from scoring 28 goals, and the \$5.5 million he makes against the cap isn't too much for a player who should provide complementary scoring and has 86 career games under his belt.

Vincent Trocheck, C, New York Rangers: 12 G | 24 A | 36 PTS | 42 GP

Like O'Reilly, Trocheck is at an age (32) where his trade value may never be higher. I think Minnesota GM Bill Guerin will be watching Trocheck closely over the Olympics with Team USA to see if he's a fit with the Wild. Trocheck is a real asset that the Rangers know they can't hold on to.

Blake Coleman, LW, Calgary Flames: 13 G | 8 A | 21 PTS | 44 GP

Out through the Olympics with an upper-body injury, Coleman still has plenty of potential suitors and is the player Calgary is getting called most about. He's a two-time Stanley Cup winner and is under contract for another season, so should return more to the Flames than a traditional rental package.

Nazem Kadri, C, Calgary Flames: 9 G | 26 A | 35 PTS | 54 GP

Since Kadri has so many seasons remaining on his contract, there hasn't been great urgency to move him yet and even some talk of keeping him. However, he has informed Calgary that he'd like to move, and the Flames know his wish is to try to win a Stanley Cup this year.

The market still has to be right for the Flames to trade him, and some teams are cautious about making this trade because of his age and the fact he still has another three years left on his contract.

Shane Wright, C, Seattle Kraken: 9 G | 11 A | 20 PTS | 54 GP

Picked fourth overall in 2022, Wright has been unable to build on and break out from a 44-point effort last season. He has nine goals and 20 points in 53 games, but he's still just 22 years old and has a solid pedigree. There are teams seeking youth that will find him intriguing. Seattle is in a heated playoff push but need to add scoring, so we will see if they can use Wright to get that immediate roster upgrade.

Matty Beniers, C, Seattle Kraken: 14 G | 23 A | 37 PTS | 54 GP

The second-overall pick of the 2021 draft, Beniers has been a solid player for the Kraken — a first-line centre who's tied for the team scoring lead, at 37 points.

While trade conversations with the Kraken might start with Wright, they could turn to Beniers as well if Seattle can get its much-needed scoring upgrade that way. But a team would need to pay for his upside, which has not yet fully surfaced. It would be tough to move him and Beniers isn't the most likely player to be traded off this roster. He's on this list because if the return is a franchise-changing blockbuster for the Kraken, they'll consider it. I'm not sure if GM Jason Botterill is ready for that, but teams will try.

Patrik Laine, LW, Montreal Canadiens: 0 G | 1 A | 1 PTS | 5 GP

Laine hasn't played since October, when he was shut down to have surgery to repair a core muscle. That return timeline was initially three-to-four months and he passed the three-month mark last week. Laine has practised with the Canadiens, but a return to the lineup isn't imminent, though he's ready to play again.

Montreal is looking to move out his money and might be willing to spend an asset to do that. The Canadiens are prepared to retain a good chunk (even up to 50 per cent) of his deal, considering they haven't used any retention slots and because Laine's contract expires at the end of the season anyway. I wonder if this kind of move could help Montreal open space to do something bigger, and there is interest in Laine because he'll be coming on an expiring contract. He would be a freebie with upside, whether for a playoff team hoping to find a cheap-to-acquire scorer, or for a non-playoff team like Calgary to get a free look at him before considering him long-term.

Edmonton's Andrew Mangiapane is also on my list and it makes me wonder if a Montreal-Edmonton match might be found here.

Ryan Strome, C, Anaheim Ducks: 3 G | 5 A | 8 PTS | 32 GP

I think Anaheim is a team to keep an eye on just before the Olympics. Though they have plenty of cap space, the Ducks would love to shed some money and a Ryan Strome trade could accomplish that. As for the market of teams that need a centre, Strome represents the cheapest cost of acquisition compared to Schenn, Kadri or O'Reilly.

Braden Schneider, D, New York Rangers: 2 G | 9 A | 11 PTS | 56 GP

Just about any option is on the table in New York outside of Igor Shesterkin. Schneider, a 24-year-old pending RFA who's been getting top-pair minutes, is one player the Rangers are taking calls on. Schneider is young enough and under contract control long enough to appeal to a wide range of teams, plus he's a valued right shot.

Evander Kane, LW, Vancouver Canucks: 9 G | 16 A | 25 PTS | 54 GP

If the Canucks can trade Kane, they will, but it's been a slow market to develop. Kane's agent, Dan Milstein, has been given permission by the team to try to find a trade partner. No doubt, Vancouver would be willing to use one of its two remaining salary-retention slots on Kane to make him a more appealing asset. The Los Angeles Kings are one team with some level of interest.

Andrew Mangiapane, LW, Edmonton Oilers: 6 G | 6 A | 12 PTS | 47 GP

Though it just hasn't worked out in Edmonton and he's not the player he was with Calgary, the Oilers continue to work the market for Mangiapane



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and should be able to find a partner by March 6, though the return isn't likely to be anything major. The biggest hurdle might be Mangiapane's no-trade clause, though it does seem like he'd be willing to waive it to try to find a better fit elsewhere.

Jesper Kotkaniemi, C, Carolina Hurricanes: 2 G | 7 A | 9 PTS | 34 GP

The Hurricanes are in on several players as they seek to upgrade the roster and finally get over the playoff hump with this group. Though Kotkaniemi has not delivered on the promise he had when he first arrived in Carolina via offer sheet, he's still just 25 years old and a centre, so there may be a team out there willing to take a chance that he'll rebound.

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Sportsnet.ca / League-defining stars all over the map at upcoming Olympics

Ryan Dixon

OK, this is really the best.

One year ago, best-on-best, big-boy hockey came back into our lives with the 4 Nations Face-Off. As the name suggested, though, this wasn't a full representation of what the hockey world has to offer because only Canada, the United States, Finland and Sweden were involved.

Now, at last, it's full go time.

On Thursday, the NHL will hit pause so the brightest stars in the game can travel to Italy for the Olympic Games. It's the first time NHLers have participated in the Olympics since 2014, and even when we had a World Cup of Hockey in 2016, the likes of Slovakia, Switzerland and Germany were rolled into Team Europe.

Finally, everybody is set to don the most meaningful crest on their chest again.

To understand the degree to which the composition of the NHL has changed since '14, look no further than how some international megastars from countries other than the Big 4 are performing right now.

Roman Josi recorded a 1-1-2 during the Nashville Predators' 4-3 win over the New York Islanders on Saturday. The Swiss D-man — who was just recently celebrated for playing his 1,000th career NHL contest — has a whopping 15 points in his past 10 outings to remind everyone he's one of the most lethal blue-liners in the game. In 2020, Josi became just the second defenceman from a country other than Canada, the U.S. or Sweden to win the Norris Trophy. (Slovakian Zdeno Chara is the other, having claimed the award in 2009).

On Sunday, David Pastrnak participated in a positively wild outdoor game at Tampa's Raymond James Stadium that saw his Boston Bruins gag up a 5-1 lead and fall 6-5 in a shootout to the Lightning. Pastrnak — who was understandably irritated that his native Czechia was not invited to participate in 2025's 4 Nations Face-Off — still recorded an assist in the game, one day after he was named the second star of January by the league for his 25 points in 14 games during that month. While Czechia obviously has a rich hockey heritage, Pastrnak is a guiding light for a country that went through some dark times for a large portion of this century. When the Bruins stole Pastrnak at 25th overall in the 2014 draft, it marked just the fourth time in seven years a Czech player had been taken in the first round. And when Pastrnak won the 2020 Rocket Richard, he became the first Czech player to win a major award since Jaromir Jagr and Dominik Hasek — co-founders of the generation that

won gold for the Czechs at the first Olympics to feature NHLers in 1998 — were both winning major hardware in the late 1990s.

Of course, we should note that the first star of January, Nikita Kucherov — who had four points during Tampa's huge comeback win under the lights on Sunday — won't be at the Olympics because Russia is banned from competition by the IIHF due to the war in Ukraine.

Slovakia, meanwhile, will most definitely be there four years after winning a bronze in China — the country's first-ever hockey medal — that touched off celebrations around the country. About four months after that happened, Juraj Slafkovsky became the first Slovakian selected first overall in the NHL draft, one spot ahead of countryman Simon Nemec of the Devils in what was a monumental event for the country.

Slafkovsky scored for the Montreal Canadiens in a crucial 4-2 win in Buffalo on Saturday and — with 35 points in his past 35 contests — is becoming every bit the player Montreal envisioned when he headlined the 2022 class.

The Canadiens' archrivals in Ottawa are sparked offensively by German Tim Stutzle, who had a goal and a helper in the Sens' vital 4-1 win over New Jersey on Saturday. Stutzle went third overall in 2020, one year after fellow German Moritz Seider — who's going to win a Norris Trophy sometime soon in Detroit — went sixth overall. Before Leon Draisaitl — the only Hart Trophy winner born and raised outside a country that is not Canada, America, Sweden, Czechia or Russia — was taken third overall by Edmonton in 2014, Marco Sturm was the only German-trained player to be selected in the first round of the modern NHL draft.

We're talking about league-defining stars taking their incredible talent to an international tournament where one-game elimination scenarios bring a lot of upset potential into play. You can bet every one of them is dying to put forth a performance that provides a concrete reminder that this sport truly has game-breakers from all over the map now.

Weekend Takeaways

- No NHL team has been streakier than the Seattle Kraken this year. The Kraken topped Vegas 3-2 in Nevada on Saturday night for their fourth straight win. Seattle's season since Nov. 23 is as follows: 1-9-1 crash followed by an 8-0-1 surge leading to a 2-5-2 hiccup that preceded the current four-game winning streak. This run right now represents the Kraken's third four-game winning streak of the campaign, while the club has also put together two four-game losing streaks and one run of dropping six straight.

However they got here, the Kraken sit third in the Pacific Division.

- Artemi Panarin may be a regular "roster management" scratch by the Rangers until he's traded, but another Blueshirt in the middle of rumours — centre Vincent Trocheck — is on the ice performing. Trocheck, who'll head to Italy as part of Team USA this week, had a goal and three points in New York's 6-5 loss in Pittsburgh on Saturday. Will he finish this month as a member of the Rangers?

- How bad could things get in Jersey if the Devils completely fall apart? New Jersey lost 4-1 in Ottawa on Saturday for its third setback in four games, as the playoffs drift further and further away. Tuesday's home game versus the Blue Jackets — who beat St. Louis 5-3 on Saturday for their ninth win in 10 tries as they attempt to surge back into the post-season picture under new coach Rick Bowness — is an absolute must-have for the Devils.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (31-17-7) What a run for Cole Caufield, who had two more goals in Montreal's 4-2 victory in Buffalo on Saturday. The winger has 15 tallies in his past 19 outings, tied with Nikita Kucherov for most in the NHL since Dec. 23.



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2. Edmonton Oilers (28-20-8) Four goalies have played at least 10 games for the Oilers this season, and the best save percentage among them is Connor Ingram's .901. Tristan Jarry started Saturday's 7-3 loss to Minnesota and was chased after five goals.

3. Ottawa Senators (26-21-7) The Sens are eight points out of the playoffs, but with Linus Ullmark back — he made a triumphant return in Saturday's 4-1 win at home versus New Jersey — you sure wonder if Ottawa can get hot and wedge itself right back in the thick of things.

4. Toronto Maple Leafs (25-21-9) Early in the year, it seemed like Nick Robertson might be moved out to return immediate help. With the Leafs positioned as sellers now, though, could he finally get the opportunity he's been after in Toronto if some bodies go out the door? Robertson picked up an assist in Saturday's 3-2 shootout win over Vancouver, giving him a goal and a helper in his past two outings.

5. Winnipeg Jets (22-25-7) What a season for Mark Scheifele, who bagged the third-period GWG in Winnipeg's come-from-behind 2-1 victory in Florida on Saturday. The Jets' top-line centre is on pace for a career-best 99 points, though all he likely cares about is his team's disappointing performance and the fact he somehow couldn't squeeze onto Team Canada for the Olympics.

6. Calgary Flames (22-26-6) The Flames will host two all-Canadian matchups before the Olympic break, with the Leafs stopping by Monday night and Edmonton in town for a Battle of Alberta on Wednesday. Zach Whitecloud has been a very busy Flame so far, as the guy who was seeing less than 19 minutes per night in Vegas is averaging 23:18 since joining his new team six games ago. The only player on Calgary skating more during that stretch is Kevin Bahl (24:35)

7. Vancouver Canucks (18-31-6) With a future-focussed team, fans can at least enjoy nights like Saturday where Vancouver's goal-scorers were two recent first-round picks in winger Jonathan Lekkerimaki and defenceman Tom Willander. The latter, who turns 21 on Feb. 9, has two goals and a couple more assists for four points in his past five contests.

The Week Ahead

- The NHL is sending us into the Olympic break with some fantastic head-to-head matchups involving the brightest stars in the league. On Monday, Macklin Celebrini and the Sharks will be in Chicago to battle Connor Beddard and the Blackhawks; Auston Matthews leads the Leafs into Edmonton to visit Connor McDavid's Oilers on Tuesday and Celebrini will see his Team Canada teammates Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar of the Avalanche in Denver on Wednesday.

- The NHL Olympic trade freeze will kick in on Wednesday at 3 p.m. ET.

- Thursday marks the final night of NHL action for 19 days. The Penguins are in Buffalo for a tilt with Eastern Conference playoff implications, while Ondrej Palat visits the Devils team that recently traded him when the Islanders make the short trip to the Prudential Center. There's also a battle of Florida between the Bolts and Cats in Sunrise, while the Kings and Golden Knights will close out the night with a showdown in Vegas.

- The women's Olympic tournament kicks off on Thursday in Italy, with the defending champions from Canada facing Finland at 3:10 p.m. ET. Team USA, meanwhile, will kick off its tournament that same day at 10:40 a.m. ET versus Czechia. Morning sports!

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Love the guy': Why Pickard's demotion is hitting Oilers hard

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — The people who reside inside these dressing rooms — the players, specifically — build monuments for teammates like Calvin Pickard.

Meanwhile, the people who never set foot inside — namely, fans — can at times eschew the value of a beloved teammate. Someone who always knew just the right moment when a subtle one-liner was required to cut through the tension of a Stanley Cup Final intermission, or when someone needed a shot of "we kid because we love" when their game had run into some bad luck.

So at time like this, when the Edmonton Oilers are breaking eggs to re-make their Stanley Cup omelette — one that has lacked just the slightest dash of spice, the most tangential ingredient to get them over the top — it falls to those of us who live among the fans, yet walk in and out of these dressing rooms after all the blood has been cleaned up and the team bonding has ceased, to try to explain it all.

Here's what we've learned about good guys and backup goalies over the years:

- One, if you can't play — if you can't help the team win — no joke you crack or cheer you lead will help you last. The players know who can help and who can't, and they don't have any time for the latter.

- Two, if you CAN play, a backup doesn't get enough ice time that he can just turn off his responsibilities when he's not standing between the pipes in a game. You take extra shots before and after practice; you support your starter through thick and thin (See: Skinner, Stuart); you figure out what role, which emotion, or what intangible gap needs filling among the other 19 guys inside that dressing room, and you provide it.

"Honestly, I think he helped a lot of guys in here, just taking some pressure off in big moments," Matias Ekholm said, about 10 minutes before we learned that Pickard was not claimed on waivers Monday. "It's not like he's saying something every night. It's just him being him:

"He's a nice, loose guy, who isn't afraid," Ekholm said. "Whether it's a Stanley Cup Final or Game 47 (of the season) — he'll be joking around the room. He'll just be making you less tense.

"Love the guy. He's been nothing but awesome for us."

We don't know the following to be true, but we sense it is: In a hockey room, the bottom-of-the-roster guys are more important than they are in a baseball clubhouse, an NBA locker room, or on an NFL team where the backup corner only gets snaps in garbage time, barring injury.

Pickard started 31 games last season and appeared in 36. He bailed out a struggling Skinner, helping the Oilers to advance through Rounds 1 and 2 with a starter that likely would not have, posting a 7-1 playoff record.

So, for general manager Stan Bowman, removing a Pickard — or a Troy Stecher, the D-man equivalent — is a move made at his own peril.

Alas, it's a move he makes because the greater good demanded a change in the goaltending landscape here.

"We can't win with Pickard as our backup," said nobody, ever.

But when you shake up the jujube jar, sometimes you pull out different colours than you thought you would. The Oilers' nets belong to Tristan Jarry and Connor Ingram now, and the rest of the guys just have to suck it up and deal with it.

"I can't shut off the emotions. He's one of my best friends — I'm going to miss him no matter what," Leon Draisaitl said of Pickard. "But at the end of the day, like, I've got to continue to do what I do ... whether Picks is here or not."



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As a guy who has played enough NHL games this season, Pickard qualifies to get the Olympic break off. After that, he may go to AHL Bakersfield, where the Condors went 10-2-2 in January, and Connor Ungar posted five wins and a .956 save percentage.

Or perhaps, with too many 'tendies in the system, Bowman can find another AHL team that needs a netminder on loan.

Either way, there will be a period of mourning in this Oilers' room, and a flurry of texts.

"I think I speak for everyone in here," Draisaitl said. "He's one of the greatest teammates all of us have had. He played a lot of big games, had a lot of big wins."

We asked Draisaitl about the whole brotherhood thing, and why it matters so much inside the walls of a hockey room.

"When you go through stretches like the last two years, you build friendships," said an assistant captain of a team that's gone to the final NHL game played for two seasons now, then collapsed in a room that housed no champagne, no shiny Cup, and no celebrating family members. "It's probably easier to get really tight when you go that far. You really have to dig in, and you really find out who you can go to war with. We've been close; we've been really deep and far.

"You find out a lot about human beings and the way they are in stressful situations," he said, before adding, "but building friendships in this world, at some point, comes to an end.

"Not the friendship, but the being together."

As it turned out, Pickard remains Oilers property. Which means, well, you never know, right?

"He's gonna be OK," Draisaitl said. "He's a great goalie, a great human being — we love him in here.

"And who knows? Maybe, down the stretch, he's going to be back and playing big games for us."

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' struggling Morgan Rielly could benefit from unplanned break

Luke Fox

CALGARY — It's game day, and Morgan Rielly is walking around the bowels of Scotiabank Saddledome in a team-issue hoodie while the rest of the Toronto Maple Leafs take part in morning skate.

The defenceman has been sidelined by an undisclosed upper-body injury, a lingering issue that got aggravated midway through Toronto's comeback victory in Rielly's hometown of Vancouver Saturday.

Rielly's injury still needs more evaluation.

It won't be Monday in Calgary or Tuesday in Edmonton. The team isn't certain when he'll play again.

The NHL's Olympic pause will be welcome.

"The break will obviously do him a lot of good, getting a reset here and getting back and healthy and fresh going forward here," coach Craig Berube said Monday.

"It's a loss for the team, him not being there tonight."

Rielly's critics — a growing subset of Leafs Nation these days — will note how well Toronto tilted the ice against the Canucks in a dominant third period with Rielly getting treated in the back.

The 31-year-old defenceman has put up 31 points in 54 games, but his own-zone struggles have been well documented.

No NHLer has been on the ice for more even-strength goals against (73) than the Leafs' highest-paid defender, who is locked up through 2029-30 with full trade protection. (Calgary's MacKenzie Weegar has been on for the second most, 65.)

"Well, I think anytime you have some sort of lingering injury — I'm not even calling an injury because he was playing — it affects your play, for sure," Berube said.

"Listen, I know we talk about his play a lot. But I think if you look at our team's play during that stretch where we weren't doing very well, he's just part of it."

As the Maple Leafs begin accepting their status as trade deadline sellers, questions over a deeper change to the core have risen to the surface.

A 13-year veteran, Rielly has never started a greater portion of his shifts in the offensive zone (69.3 per cent). Yet he is a minus-17 this season, which was positioned to be a bounce-back from his dash-8 performance last season.

Ex-Leaf Nazem Kadri knows well how it feels to be the one taking heat under the Toronto magnifying glass.

"Hey, in a lot of Canadian markets, especially there, things can fluctuate a lot from week to week. So, I'm sure he's gonna be able to find his game. He's a great player, and I know he will," Kadri says of his friend.

"He's a great leader, great friend. Awesome guy. Fun to be around. Good in the room. You know, I think he's a heckuva defenceman, too. Been that way his whole career with Toronto. He's up there amongst the best in the franchise. So, he's a guy I respect."

Rielly and respect go hand in hand.

You won't find anyone in the league questioning his character, leadership, or love for the team that drafted him.

"Losing Mo, it's a big loss for us. Obviously, a big part of this team and organization. So, we need everybody in the back end to step up and fill those big minutes and that role," Oliver Ekman-Larsson said.

"Awesome guy. Awesome teammate. He takes a lot of pride in pulling that jersey on and being a good leader for us. And as a new guy coming in, he was one of those guys that helped me out, just to feel welcome and feel like home. Mo is unbelievable and an unbelievable player for us. He's been fun to play with."

Increasingly, though, he's been too fun to play against.

Rielly has lost a step on the ice. He's missed too many checks. And his power-play shot is not enough of a threat from the point.

How the Leafs perform without him, and how refreshed Rielly looks upon his much-needed reset and return, could inform where things go next season.

One-Timers: Marshall Rifai played less than 10 minutes Saturday in his season debut, and he's already back out of the lineup. Berube is going with Philippe Myers and Simon Benoit as his third pairing.... Rookie Easton Cowan will be scratched for a second straight game... Berube on his decision to start Joseph Woll: "I just like putting him back in there. He's got a little momentum. I think he's feeling good about his game."

Maple Leafs projected lineup Monday in Calgary:

McMann – Matthews – Domi



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Maccelli – Tavares – Nylander

Knies – Roy – Robertson

Lorentz – Laughton – Järnkrok

McCabe – Carlo

Ekman-Larsson – Stecher

Benoit – Myers

Extra: Rifai

Woll starts

Stolarz

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Sportsnet.ca / Barry Trotz to step down as GM of Nashville Predators

Elliotte Friedman

Barry Trotz announced Monday that he is stepping down as general manager of the Nashville Predators — although he will remain on the job until a successor is found.

The team held a media conference at noon central time to confirm the news that Trotz is retiring at the end of the regular season.

Most importantly, Trotz is healthy. This is a retirement; he is not interested in coaching. And, the team has hired CAA to run its search process.

After a rough start to the 2025-26 season, the Predators rallied to within four points of a playoff spot as of Sunday night. However, with just days remaining until the Olympic freeze and a month until the trade deadline, the team was also investigating all of its options.

Trotz is one of the greatest figures in Nashville hockey history, named as its inaugural head coach one year before the Predators dropped the puck. He stayed until April 2014, before moving to Washington (winning the Stanley Cup in 2018) and the Islanders.

He became the second GM in Predators history in 2023, replacing David Poile.

Trotz, 63, said Monday he informed majority owner Bill Haslam in December that he intended to step away when his contract expired at the end of the 2026-27 season.

"After some discussion, we elected to begin a search for my replacement now, but I am happy to work in my current role until we make a new hire, however long that might be," Trotz said.

Haslam aims to have a new GM in place by the draft in late June. He downplayed any disagreement between ownership and Trotz that led to this plan.

Trotz's second act with the Predators was much shorter than his first, when he coached them from their inception in 1998 through 2014, bringing respectability and relevancy to an expansion team playing in a so-called non-traditional market.

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Sportsnet.ca / Sunday Overreactions: Will Canada regret not taking Evan Bouchard?

Michael Amato

He's either a turnover machine you can't trust in his own end, or he's a power-play guru that is a catalyst for the Edmonton Oilers' attack. Bouchard is often dangerous at both ends of the ice and a very exciting player to watch, depending on your perspective.

Team Canada, however, appears to have fallen on the side that doesn't trust Bouchard, as he wasn't named to the squad that will be heading to Milan this month. The Canadians chose to take the same eight defencemen from the 4 Nations Face-Off, even if Bouchard is arguably playing better than a few of them this season. Thomas Harley is having a down year with only four goals, and Drew Doughty has only one point in 15 games since the team was announced, going minus-12 over that stretch.

You could argue players like Harley and Doughty possess other qualities that Bouchard doesn't, but it's hard to claim the Oilers blue-liner doesn't deserve a spot this time around based on the season he's having.

Canada made a mistake by not taking Bouchard

Bouchard may be having his best season yet. He's on pace for 88 points and is tied for the lead among defencemen in scoring, while really turning it on lately. The 26-year-old has 12 points in his past five games, thanks to an incredible six-point outing that included a hat trick last weekend. Bouchard already has 15 goals, which should allow him to smash his previous career high of 18.

One other thing about Bouchard is that he can play with high-end talent. Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid are two of the league's best, and Bouchard can think and play the game fast enough to help get the most out of them. We know McDavid is already heading to Milan, and having Bouchard there with built-in chemistry between the two could've also been a big advantage. Bouchard definitely has his flaws, but there was probably a way for Canada to use him selectively to its benefit at the Olympics.

Overreaction? No

One argument for taking Bouchard is his ability to quarterback a power play. Of course, Cale Makar will get the top unit duties, but what happens if there's an injury? Is there really another ideal option to quarterback the group after Makar? There certainly wouldn't be one better than Bouchard, and the fact that he can use his booming slap shot gives him an element that nobody else on the Canada roster really has.

Plus, because the team is so deep, you wouldn't have to lean on Bouchard too heavily if you're concerned about the defensive side of the puck. If you're down a goal late in the game, then get Bouchard out there at the same time as McDavid to try and generate some offence, and if you're leading by one or two, reduce his minutes and utilize a shutdown pair more.

Perhaps Bouchard will still find his way onto the roster if there's an injury, but not taking him over a couple of the other blue-liners feels like a move Canada may eventually regret. The good has far outweighed the bad this season.

The Tampa Bay Lightning goaltender is well on his way to being a Hall of Famer. With a pair of Stanley Cups to go along with a Vezina and a Conn Smythe, it would be tough to argue that Vasilevskiy isn't one of the best clutch goalies we've ever seen. He'll be 32 this summer, and with all the miles on his body from several long playoff runs, you'd think his best hockey was behind him. But Vasilevskiy is having another strong campaign.



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The Lightning netminder's save percentage of .921 is good enough for first in the league, and he's also tops when it comes to goals-against average at 2.04. He also only has seven regulation losses. Statistically, Vasilevskiy has had better seasons than this one, but given the circumstances he's dealt with, this might be his best work yet.

Overreaction? No

What makes this year so special for Vasilevskiy is that he's been doing it with a depleted defensive core in front of him. Victor Hedman, Ryan McDonagh and Erik Cernak have all missed substantial time, and you'd have a hard time identifying most of Tampa Bay's blue liners on any given night. Charle-Edouard D'Astous, Declan Carlile, Maxwell Crozier and Emil Lilleberg have all played at least 30 games, while the Lightning continue to thrive.

That's in large part thanks to Vasilevskiy, who's been nearly unbeatable of late. In his past 22 starts, Vasilevskiy owns a .937 save percentage and has saved 12.35 goals above expected — not to mention that in 18 of those games, he's allowed an incredible two goals or fewer, and in 12 of those, he's actually given up one goal or less. Give credit to that makeshift blue line Tampa has been utilizing, but there's no way the Lightning are battling for a division title without Vasilevskiy's play this year.

Steven Stamkos' resurgence will lead Nashville to a playoff spot

The start of the season could not have gone worse for the Nashville Predators and, for that matter, Steven Stamkos. Nashville won just five times in its first 18 games, and seemed destined to be a seller at the trade deadline with head coach Andrew Brunette was on very thin ice. A major part of those struggles was because Stamkos scored only one goal in his first 14 contests, but he's rebounded in a major way.

Stamkos now has 24 goals in the 39 games since, coinciding with Nashville climbing the standings. The Predators are still a few points below the playoff cutoff line, though they seem like a very legitimate threat to climb all the way back to the post-season.

Overreaction? Yes

As incredible as the Predators' turnaround has been, there are still a lot of flaws to their game. Nashville is struggling to get saves and ranks 27th in goals against per game and 22nd in team save percentage. The Preds have actually done a decent job of limiting high-danger chances, sitting fifth in the NHL in that category, but Juuse Saros has a save percentage below .900 for the second straight season.

Nashville's special teams are also very mediocre, and it sits in the bottom third of the league when it comes to goal scoring, so it isn't good enough to compensate for the puck entering the net with regularity. Stamkos is a huge reason the Preds are back in the mix, but ultimately, I think they will fall short of catching teams like San Jose, Los Angeles, Seattle and Utah.

Shane Wright would be the perfect target for a retooling team

Things haven't exactly gone swimmingly for Shane Wright since he arrived in the NHL. After falling to No. 4 in the 2022 NHL draft, Wright hasn't made a massive impact for the Seattle Kraken. He had a decent season a year ago with 19 goals and 44 points, but his numbers have slipped to just nine tallies and 20 points this season. That's sparked some rumblings that the Kraken may be interested in shopping Wright leading up to the deadline for a fresh start if they can get a decent return. Seattle is missing an impact player for its playoff push, and there could be a team soft-selling who may dangle one in exchange for a package that includes Wright.

Overreaction? No

If I were one of those Eastern Conference teams in the mushy middle that is considering selling a piece or two to retool for next season, I'd take

a long look at Wright. He's still only 22 years of age and his development is far from over, so there's a chance with a fresh start and being slotted into a good role, Wright can become a very serviceable.

Take Fraser Minten as an example from last year's trade deadline. The Toronto Maple Leafs perhaps weren't convinced that Minten was going to be an impact player, so they chose to move on from him to get Brandon Carlo, and now Minten is playing a key role on a rejuvenated Boston Bruins squad. Wright could potentially follow the same path, as he's a smart player who very well may turn into an effective two-way, middle-six centre.

Maybe Wright doesn't become a high-end talent, but that doesn't mean he can't carve out an important role for a team that is searching for more talent.

Avalanche are at risk of losing the Presidents' Trophy

There was a point this season where it appeared the Colorado Avalanche were going to lap the field. The Avs got off to a torrid start, only suffering their second regulation loss in early December and having two different 10-game winning streaks on the season.

Colorado has started to fall back toward the rest of the pack, though, as the condensed schedule appears to be catching up. The Avs have now won just three times in nine tries and have allowed seven goals on two different occasions over this stretch. Nathan MacKinnon and company are now on pace for 125 points this season after they were on track at one point to surpass the Boston Bruins' all-time record of 135 from a few years ago. Minnesota is now only seven points back of the Avalanche for the league's best record, with Dallas, Carolina and Tampa Bay just behind them. So, is there a chance someone could pass Colorado?

Overreaction? Yes

Even though a few teams have closed the gap, it's still very difficult to make up seven-plus points in the standings with less than 30 games left, especially with the loser point in play. Plus, the Avs have three games in hand on the Wild, and the Lightning play in the very difficult Atlantic division, so making up ground is going to be tough. It should also be noted that Colorado has dealt with some key injuries lately, too. Gabriel Landeskog and Devon Toews have missed time, and the Avs have even been without Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood for two separate stretches recently. Expect the Avalanche to get healthy following the Olympics and get rolling once again. Maybe they don't end up overtaking the Bruins' 135 points, but they should still easily cruise to the Presidents' Trophy.

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TSN.CA / The Sabres and Mammoth have come alive

Travis Yost

A National Hockey League regular season shaped by the Buffalo Sabres and Utah Mammoth?

Four months ago, that would've seemed unthinkable. Yet the winter of 2025-26 has been defined by two franchises with long histories of futility that are poised to reshape the playoff picture.

To say the Sabres and Mammoth have had a rough go of things over the past couple of decades would be a tremendous understatement.

Buffalo has not reached the playoffs in 14 consecutive seasons, a stunning show of futility in a league where half of the teams qualify for the



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postseason each year. It's been a persistent debacle of front office ineptitude and underperformance, culminating in what some Sabres fans have called an endless rebuild.

The Mammoth, of course, have a very short history in Utah, but predating their relocation to Salt Lake City was a run as the most mismanaged franchise in professional sports – a financially distressed organization that struggled to reach the salary cap floor each season. There were fleeting moments of success in Phoenix, but fiscal woes hovered over this team like Eeyore's dark cloud. Their last playoff appearance came in the 2019-20 season.

But my, have things changed. Buffalo and Utah (then Arizona's) annual futility meant a regular stockpiling of impressive young prospects and many of those young players have now developed into NHL-capable skaters. With strong goaltending behind them, both teams have morphed into genuine contenders.

In fact, one could argue they are the two hottest teams in the NHL. Both are now inside of the league's top eight in goal differential:

Yost1

We knew there were pockets of talent across both lineups to start the year. When we analyzed the depth charts of every roster this past off-season, we raved over Buffalo's deep blueline and Utah's forward group.

But sentiment around both teams was still relatively poor. Betting markets placed both teams below the playoff cut line, likely owing to two factors: a recent history of underperformance, and relatively young lineups. The Sabres (25.7) and Mammoth (27.8) have two of the younger lineups in the NHL, which is typical for franchises that have been actively rebuilding and pushing young talent up through the ranks.

But that young talent has positioned both teams for likely playoff qualification as we veer into February. The Sabres are around 70 per cent likely to qualify, the Mammoth an even more impressive 83 per cent.

One unifying theme between the two teams is that they are getting meaningful contributions throughout the lineup. What they may lack in extreme top-end skill on their first line or first defensive pairing they are making up for through real depth competency, with few lineup weaknesses observable in either lineup (note: "GAR" stands for Goals Above Replacement, a measurement that estimates the number of goals a player contributes to their team relative to a replacement-level player, across all game states):

Yost2

I would be remiss to not highlight how important goaltending has been for both teams.

The Sabres have been a competitive even-strength team for years offensively speaking, but only this season – primarily through the play of journeyman Alex Lyon, who has stopped 18 goals better than expected relative to the shot profile he has faced – have they been able to bolster the defensive side of the ice.

The Mammoth are getting a frankly dominant season from workhorse Karel Vejmelka, who has a real shot at ending the season as a Vezina Trophy finalist with those numbers.

Setting aside the impact this is having on the playoff picture, a second fascinating dynamic here is that two surprising contenders are entering the trade deadline fray with the requisite cap space to engineer some deals.

Buffalo's fiscal situation is tighter between the two, but cap estimates show they are carrying around \$3-million in cap space, with a sea of prospects and young rostered players that selling teams would likely covet.

And the Mammoth? Well, if they want to go big, they can. Cap estimates there show the Mammoth have in excess of \$14-million in space, capable of taking on one (or more) big contracts to upgrade their team.

This, frankly, is the good part of parity the NHL offers. The Sabres have been an afterthought for years, while the Coyotes organization was on life support for decades. Now both are positioned as real contenders heading into the stretch run, armed with the requisite flexibility to upgrade their lineups even further. A scary proposition for the rest of the field!

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