



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 24, 2026

The News & Observer

Hurricanes to play two games in Finland in 2026-27. Who they'll play, and when

By: Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes are going on the road — to Finland.

The NHL announced Monday the Hurricanes would face the Seattle Kraken in a pair of regular-season games in Helsinki as part of the 2026 NHL Global Series Finland.

The games will be played Thursday, Nov. 12 and Saturday Nov. 14, 2026, at Velkkaus Arena.

The Canes last visited Finland in October 2010, facing the Minnesota Wild in two games as part of the Compuware NHL Premiere Games. The Canes won both games to begin the 2010-11 regular season.

Watching from the stands was Canes center Sebastian Aho, then 13. The Hurricanes in 2010 had Finns Tuomo Ruutu, Joni Pitkanen and Jussi Jokinen in the lineup.

The 2026 NHL Global Series games in Finland and Germany will mark the fifth straight season — and 13th overall — that the NHL has played regular-season games in Europe.



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The Athletic

If the NHL playoffs started today: Projecting and analyzing each potential matchup

By: Julian McKenzie

The NHL playoffs begin on April 18, and a handful of teams continue to jostle for playoff spots in each conference, including teams on the outside looking in that are surging.

The Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars are the only teams to have clinched a playoff spot.

Entering Tuesday's games, four teams are within six points of the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. Two of those teams have positive, double-digit goal differentials (Ottawa Senators and Washington Capitals). Four teams are within five points of the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

If the postseason began today, the Eastern Conference would have five new teams (Buffalo Sabres, New York Islanders, Pittsburgh Penguins, Columbus Blue Jackets and Boston Bruins) in the playoffs compared to last year. The West would have three new teams (Anaheim Ducks, Utah Mammoth and Nashville Predators).

Four of the six best teams (Winnipeg Jets, Washington Capitals, Toronto Maple Leafs and Los Angeles Kings) from last season are currently out of this year's playoffs. Three of those teams won their division last season.

Here's how the playoff bracket would look as of Tuesday morning, followed by analysis of each potential series.

Avalanche C1 Avalanche

Predators W2 Predators

Stars C2 Stars

Wild C3 Wild

Ducks P1 Ducks

Mammoth W1 Mammoth

Golden Knights P2 Golden Knights

Oilers P3 Oilers

Sabres A1 Sabres

Bruins W1 Bruins

Lightning A2 Lightning

Canadiens A3 Canadiens

Hurricanes M1 Hurricanes

Islanders W2 Islanders

Penguins M2 Penguins

Blue Jackets M3 Blue Jackets

Eastern Conference

Carolina Hurricanes (Metro 1) vs. New York Islanders (Wild-card 2)

The Hurricanes have been in the Eastern Conference final in two of the last four seasons. And with the Florida Panthers all but officially out of the playoff picture, this might be the Canes' best chance of making the Stanley Cup Final for the first time since 2006. Rod Brind'Amour was captaining, not coaching, the Hurricanes to the Stanley Cup 20 years ago. The Canes remain analytical darlings based off Corsi, and expected goals and projections still have them with the fourth-best chance to make, and win, the Final according to Dom Luszczyzyn's model. But because of the surging Buffalo Sabres, who we'll get to in a minute, there's no guarantee Carolina will end the season as the East's top seed.

The final wild-card spot is a revolving door. The Islanders, with Matthew Schaefer blocking shots like he's Ryan Pulock, vaulted into the final wild-card spot with a win over the Columbus Blue Jackets on Sunday. Let's not forget about Ilya Sorokin, who made back-to-back starts this weekend and got the job done on Sunday. But that final playoff spot could easily go back to Columbus, which is tied on points but is third in the Metropolitan Division thanks to points percentage. Detroit, Ottawa, Philadelphia and even Washington aren't too far behind.

Remaining schedules:

Hurricanes (12 games): at Montreal (Tuesday), vs. New Jersey (Saturday), vs. Montreal (March 29), at Columbus (March 31), vs. Columbus (April 2), vs. New York Islanders (April 4), at Ottawa (April 5), vs. Boston (April 7), at Chicago (April 9), at Utah (April 11), at Philadelphia (April 13), at New York Islanders (April 14).

Islanders (11 games): vs. Chicago (Tuesday), vs. Dallas (Thursday), vs. Florida (Saturday), vs. Pittsburgh (March 30), at Buffalo (March 31), vs. Philadelphia (April 3), at Carolina (April 4), vs. Toronto (April 9), vs. Ottawa (April 11), vs. Montreal (April 12), vs. Carolina (April 14).

Pittsburgh Penguins (Metro 2) vs. Columbus Blue Jackets (Metro 3)

The Penguins began this season as the likely landing spot for Gavin McKenna in the draft. Barring a season-ending catastrophe, Sidney Crosby and the Pens will return to the postseason for the first time in four years. Can we also take a moment and shout out Erik Karlsson, who's also turning back the clock with 10 points in his last four games (and 19



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points in his last 12)? It's an admirable turnaround for the Pens, who went from crumbling empire to playoff dark horse under first-year head coach Dan Muse. And thanks to their draft-pick stockpile — 15 picks in the first three rounds over the next three years — they could be building a promising future.

If the playoffs started today, how would Pittsburgh fare against Columbus, another dark horse-in waiting? Rick Bowness has rejuvenated a Blue Jackets squad that looked destined for another lost season. Since Bowness took over on Jan. 12, the Jackets are 18-3-4. Only the Sabres (20-5-3) have been better since Bowness returned to the NHL. One big plus for the Blue Jackets: Jet Greaves looks like a starting goalie. He's 9-1-2 in his last 12 appearances.

Remaining schedules:

Penguins (12 games): vs. Colorado (Tuesday), at Ottawa (Thursday), vs. Dallas (Saturday), at New York Islanders (March 30), vs. Detroit (March 31), at Tampa Bay (April 2), vs. Florida (April 4), vs. Florida (April 5), at New Jersey (April 9), vs. Washington (April 11), at Washington (April 12), at St. Louis (April 14).

Blue Jackets (12 games): at Philadelphia (Tuesday), at Montreal (Thursday), vs. San Jose (Saturday), vs. Boston (March 29), vs. Carolina (March 31), at Carolina (April 2), vs. Winnipeg (April 4), at Detroit (April 7), at Buffalo (April 9), at Montreal (April 11), vs. Boston (April 12), vs. Washington (April 14).

Buffalo Sabres (Atlantic 1) vs. Boston Bruins (Wild-card 1)

Sabres fans, hopefully you don't mind your bandwagon filling up. Everyone is just happy you've become a virtual lock for the playoffs. We haven't seen you in the playoffs since 2011.

The Sabres' playoff chances were once as low as 10.2 percent in December. Since Dec. 9, the Sabres are 33-6-3. Now they're making a getaway with the Atlantic Division lead, having won 12 of their last 13 games, and their best players are leading the way — as many thought they would, with all the potential they'd accumulated over the years. Even journeyman goalie Alex Lyon has been a revelation, posting some of the best numbers of his career. The Tampa Bay Lightning are trailing them by four points, but there's a very real chance the Sabres will begin the postseason with home-ice advantage.

And then you have the Bruins, who are in a wild-card spot while having the league's best home record at 26-9-1. A big reason why is the play of Jeremy Swayman, who has the second-best goals-saved above expected rate behind Washington's Logan Thompson. Boston will need all the home fortune they can muster, since they have only five home games remaining among their final 12 games.

Remaining schedules:

Sabres (11 games): vs. Boston (Wednesday), vs. Detroit (Friday), vs. Seattle (Saturday), vs. New York Islanders (March 31), at Ottawa (April 2), at Washington (April 4), vs. Tampa Bay (April 6), at New York Rangers (April 8), vs. Columbus (April 9), at Chicago (April 13), vs. Dallas (April 15).

Bruins (12 games): vs. Toronto (Tuesday), at Buffalo (Wednesday), vs. Minnesota (Saturday), at Columbus

(March 29), vs. Dallas (March 31), at Florida (April 2), at Tampa Bay (April 4), at Philadelphia (April 5), at Carolina (April 7), vs. Tampa Bay (April 11), at Columbus (April 12), vs. New Jersey (April 14).

Tampa Bay Lightning (Atlantic 2) vs. Montreal Canadiens (Atlantic 3)

Tampa Bay might not win its division, thanks to Buffalo. But when the playoffs begin, don't be surprised if the Lightning are still considered the favorites. The Lightning have the highest odds to make the Final and win this year, according to The Athletic's model. Of course, they're led by Hart Trophy candidate Nikita Kucherov and Vezina Trophy candidate Andrei Vasilevskiy, and have arguably the best coach in the league in Jon Cooper plus a veteran-heavy supporting cast. But remember, the Lightning haven't gotten out of the first round since 2021-2022, when they advanced to the Final. They had Corey Perry on that team. No wonder they brought him back.

The Canadiens could return to the playoffs under coach Martin St. Louis, who might relish the opportunity to coach against the team he won a Stanley Cup with two decades ago. What's also funny — or infuriating, depending on which team you support — is that the Canadiens were locked in a rebuild the last time the Lightning were in the Final four years ago. Now the Canadiens are ascending with Cole Caufield scoring on Hockey Night in Canada and Nick Suzuki creeping toward the 100-point plateau. But questions about their goaltending, their center depth and team health will surround them once they enter the postseason.

Remaining schedules:

Lightning (13 games): vs. Minnesota (Tuesday), vs. Seattle (Thursday), vs. Ottawa (Saturday), vs. Nashville (March 29), vs. Montreal (March 31), vs. Pittsburgh (April 2), vs. Boston (April 4), at Buffalo (April 6), at Ottawa (April 7), at Montreal (April 9), at Boston (April 11), vs. Detroit (April 13), vs. New York Rangers (April 15).

Canadiens (13 games): vs. Carolina (Tuesday), vs. Columbus (Thursday), at Nashville (Saturday), at Carolina (March 29), at Tampa Bay (March 31), at New York Rangers (April 2), at New Jersey (April 4), vs. New Jersey (April 5), vs. Florida (April 7), vs. Tampa Bay (April 9), vs. Columbus (April 11), at New York Islanders (April 12), at Philadelphia (April 14).

Other playoff candidates

Detroit Red Wings (84 points, one point out), Ottawa Senators (83 points), Philadelphia Flyers (80 points), Washington Capitals (79 points)

Western Conference

Colorado Avalanche (Central 1) vs. Nashville Predators (Wild-card 2)

The Avalanche are the first team to reach 100 points this season, and it's a squad that's been dominant since the beginning of the season. You're more than familiar with marquee names Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar. But the Avs also have the league's best goaltender in goals-against average and save percentage in Scott Wedgewood. For those who value goals saved above expected more, Wedgewood has the 11th-best GSx rate. Colorado has the



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best offense (3.68 goals per game) and defense (2.45 goals allowed per game), and a top-three penalty kill (82.8 percent). Why didn't we mention the power play? We'd rather not. (It's the third-worst in the league at 16.5 percent.)

Nashville's surge is more recent. A four-game win streak has them in a playoff spot. These are the same Predators who sold pieces at the deadline while keeping veterans Ryan O'Reilly, Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault. If you're wondering about their chances of staying afloat in the playoff chase, they're still an arm's length from the Winnipeg Jets and also must fend off underachieving Pacific Division teams. Still, Dom's model says the Preds have better odds of making the playoffs than Seattle, Winnipeg and San Jose.

Remaining schedules:

Avalanche (13 games): at Pittsburgh (Tuesday), at Winnipeg (Thursday), vs. Winnipeg (Saturday), vs. Calgary (March 30), vs. Vancouver (April 1), at Dallas (April 4), vs. St. Louis (April 5), at St. Louis (April 7), vs. Calgary (April 9), vs. Vegas (April 11), at Edmonton (April 13), at Calgary (April 14), vs. Seattle (April 16).

Predators (12 games): vs. San Jose (Tuesday), vs. New Jersey (Thursday), vs. Montreal (Saturday), at Tampa Bay (March 29), at Los Angeles (April 2), at San Jose (April 4), at Los Angeles (April 6), at Anaheim (April 7), at Utah (April 9), vs. Minnesota (April 11), vs. San Jose (April 13), vs. Anaheim (April 16).

Dallas Stars (Central 2) vs. Minnesota Wild (Central 3)

Thanks to the current playoff format, two of the NHL's top five teams are on a collision course to face each other in the opening round. As entertaining a series as Dallas-Minnesota would be, wouldn't it be more fun to see them play each other in the second or third round? Commissioner Gary Bettman doesn't think so!

The Stars hope to return to the Western Conference final for the fourth consecutive year. With a new coach behind the bench in Glen Gulutzan, they pose a significant threat with Mikko Rantanen, Wyatt Johnston, Jason Robertson, Miro Heiskanen and Jake Oettinger. Dallas has a top-10 offense and allows the second-fewest goals in the league. They haven't lost their luster as Cup contenders, but a big decision awaits them this offseason with Robertson headed toward restricted free agency and captain Jamie Benn's contract expiring this summer. The time to strike is now.

That motto has also rung true in Minnesota. Last September, the Wild signed Kirill Kaprizov to a lengthy extension. Months later, they swung for the fences and acquired superstar defenseman Quinn Hughes from Vancouver. They made ancillary tweaks at the deadline, landing pieces such as Nick Foligno, Michael McCarron, Bobby Brink and Jeff Petry. Should they have landed a center such as Vincent Trocheck? Maybe. But this is a strong Wild team armed with a strong goaltending tandem of Filip Gustavsson and Jesper Wallstedt. This would be the strongest matchup of the opening round if the postseason began today.

Remaining schedules:

Stars (12 games): vs. New Jersey (Tuesday), at New York Islanders (Thursday), at Pittsburgh (Saturday), at Philadelphia (March 29), at Boston (March 31), vs. Winnipeg (April 2), vs. Colorado (April 4), vs. Calgary (April 7), vs.

Minnesota (April 9), vs. New York Rangers (April 11), at Toronto (April 13), at Buffalo (April 15).

Wild (11 games): at Tampa Bay (Tuesday), at Florida (Thursday), at Boston (Saturday), vs. Vancouver (April 2), at Ottawa (April 4), at Detroit (April 5), vs. Seattle (April 7), at Dallas (April 9), at Nashville (April 11), at St. Louis (April 13), vs. Anaheim (April 14).

Anaheim Ducks (Pacific 1) vs. Utah Mammoth (Wild-card 1)

Thanks to uninspiring play from Vegas and Edmonton, which is clearly missing Leon Draisaitl, the upstart Ducks are in the driver's seat for the Pacific Division title. If the NHL used the 1-16 playoff format, the Ducks would be the conference's only Pacific Division representative. But what's great for the Ducks is that their youth — especially Cutter Gauthier, Leo Carlsson and Beckett Sennecke — is leading the way while being insulated by veterans. They even added John Carlson from the Capitals for a well-deserved playoff push.

The Mammoth have been building toward playoff contention for some time, even when they were still the Arizona Coyotes, thanks to the youth they assembled. At the trade deadline, the front office rewarded their efforts by adding MacKenzie Weegar. Thanks to their underlying metrics — their expected goals and Corsi have them rubbing shoulders with Cup-contending teams — it's worth wondering if the Mammoth might do more than just hang around in the first round of the playoffs. And that's regardless of who they face.

Remaining schedules:

Ducks (12 games): at Vancouver (Tuesday), at Calgary (Thursday), at Edmonton (Saturday), vs. Toronto (March 30), at San Jose (April 1), vs. St. Louis (April 3), vs. Calgary (April 4), vs. Nashville (April 7), vs. San Jose (April 9), vs. Vancouver (April 12), at Minnesota (April 14), at Nashville (April 16).

Mammoth (11 games): vs. Edmonton (Tuesday), vs. Washington (Thursday), at Los Angeles (Saturday), at Seattle (April 2), at Vancouver (April 4), vs. Edmonton (April 7), vs. Nashville (April 9), vs. Carolina (April 11), at Calgary (April 12), vs. Winnipeg (April 14), vs. St. Louis (April 16).

Vegas Golden Knights (Pacific 2) vs. Edmonton Oilers (Pacific 3)

In previous years, we'd salivate at a Vegas-Edmonton matchup, with two of the league's best teams trading paint. Intrigue remains, but it's focused a bit more on why things haven't gone exactly as planned in a weak Pacific Division. Connor McDavid recently likened the division to a "pillow fight."

The Golden Knights made the big splash for Mitch Marner last offseason. He's a point-per-game player, but that's still a drop from his career-best 102-point season last year with the Maple Leafs. And the spotlight will remain on him to deliver in the playoffs. Vegas made another splash for Rasmus Andersson this season, and he's fallen short of expectations with seven points in 22 games since joining Vegas. And for some reason, Vegas hasn't been able to consistently knock off playoff teams in the regular season. Vegas would have home-ice advantage against Edmonton in this scenario, but they wouldn't be the overwhelming favorite to defeat the reigning West champion.



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Meanwhile, Edmonton is just trying to hold the fort until Draisaitl comes back for the playoffs. McDavid can only do so much. The Oilers have only had six wins in their last 16 games. Connor Ingram will likely get the lion's share of starts in goal because Tristan Jarry just hasn't worked out as a sufficient replacement for Stuart Skinner. That said, the Oilers should have enough horsepower to hold off Los Angeles, Seattle and San Jose below them.

Remaining schedules:

Golden Knights (11 games): at Winnipeg (Tuesday), vs. Edmonton (Thursday), vs. Washington (Saturday), vs. Vancouver (March 30), vs. Calgary (April 2), at Edmonton (April 4), at Vancouver (April 7), at Seattle (April 9), at

Colorado (April 11), vs. Winnipeg (April 13), vs. Seattle (April 15).

Oilers (11 games): at Utah (Tuesday), at Vegas (Thursday), vs. Anaheim (Saturday), vs. Seattle (March 31), vs. Chicago (April 2), vs. Vegas (April 4), at Utah (April 7), at San Jose (April 8), at Los Angeles (April 11), vs. Colorado (April 13), vs. Vancouver (April 16).

Other playoff candidates

Los Angeles Kings (73 points, two points out), Seattle Kraken (71 points), San Jose Sharks (70 points), Winnipeg Jets (70 points)



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Preview: March 24 at Montreal

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes eye a fourth consecutive win as they face the Habs for the first of two times in six days

MONTREAL - The Carolina Hurricanes close out a three-game road trip against the Montreal Canadiens on Tuesday.

When: Tuesday, March 24

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch: FanDuel Sports Network South, FanDuel Sports Network App | [Learn More](#)

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 45-19-6 (96 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 5-1 Win over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Sunday, March 22

Canadiens Record: 38-21-10 (86 Points, T-3rd - Atlantic Division)

Canadiens Last Game: 7-3 Win over the New York Islanders on Sunday, March 22

Last Time Out...

Using three power play goals, the Canes cruised past the Penguins by a score of 5-1 on Sunday.

Putting on a clinic against the league's top penalty kill, Seth Jarvis led the charge with a goal and two assists.

Frederik Andersen won his fifth consecutive start in net, turning away 18 shots.

Season Series vs. MON...

Jan. 1: Puck management problems cost the Canes in a 7-5 loss at Lenovo Center.

Jarv's Jumpin'...

Coming off his fourth three-point performance of the season, Seth Jarvis enters tonight's contest on a three-game point streak (1G, 5A).

Jarvis scored on Sunday and leads the team with 29 goals on the season — one shy of his third consecutive 30-goal campaign, a feat only five players in franchise history have pulled off.

In Net...

The Canes have rolled a consistent rotation between Frederik Andersen and Brandon Bussi since returning to play from the Olympic break. Should that pattern hold, Bussi would be in line to start.

Snapping a personal three-game skid on Friday against Toronto, the 27-year-old made 23 saves to improve to 26-6-1.

On The Other Side...

One of the highest-scoring teams in the league this season, Montreal's 3.51 goals per game ranks third among all NHL clubs.

As his team put up seven against the Islanders on Sunday afternoon, Cole Caufield drove the bus with a hat trick and two assists, upping his point total on the season to 74 in 68 games. His 43 goals on the season trail only Nathan MacKinnon (45).

Hanging tough in the Eastern Conference playoff race, there aren't many flaws to Martin St. Louis' side, but one area of concern is the team's penalty kill. Owning the sixth-worst kill rate in the league (76.5%) on the year, two of the three goals the Habs conceded in their last outing came on the power play.

Injury Updates...

Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere (lower-body injury) left during the team's Mar. 6 win in Edmonton and did not return. Rod Brind'Amour said on Mar. 10 that he would likely miss a couple of games.

Goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov (hip surgery) was declared "probably out for the year" by Rod Brind'Amour on Dec. 29.

What Are We Wearing?

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

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes will fly home immediately post-game. They are scheduled to practice on Wednesday, be off on Thursday, practice again on Friday, and then return to game action on Saturday against the Devils.

Next Home Game: Saturday, March 28 vs. New Jersey | 5:00 p.m. ET | [FDSNSO](#) | [Tickets](#) | [Parking](#)



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Hurricanes, Kraken to face off in 2026 Global Series Finland

By: NHL.com

The NHL will be returning to Helsinki, Finland, next season when the Carolina Hurricanes and Seattle Kraken play two regular-season games in the 2026 NHL Global Series Finland.

The games will be played at Veikkaus Arena on Nov. 12 and Nov. 14.

The Hurricanes currently have two players born in Finland, with forwards Sebastian Aho (Rauma) and Jesperi Kotkaniemi (Pori) on Carolina, while Seattle has three in forwards Kaapo Kakko (Turku), Eeli Tolvanen (Vihti) and Jani Nyman (Valkeakoski).

"It's super-exciting to get to play in Finland," Aho said. "I think it's very important growing the game. Little kids all over the world get to see the highest level of hockey."

Although this will be the first time Aho plays an NHL game in his home country, it's not the first one he will attend.

In 2010, five years before he was selected by Carolina in the second round (No. 35) of the 2015 NHL Draft, he saw the Hurricanes play the Minnesota Wild in the Premier Series at Veikkaus Arena in Helsinki, which was called Hartwall Arena at the time.

"This is a long time ago," Aho said. "It was such a cool moment."

The 2026 Global Series marks a return to Helsinki for the first time since the Florida Panthers and Winnipeg Jets split their two-game series in 2018. The Panthers and Dallas Stars played two games in Tampere, Finland, last season. In the 2022-23 season, the Colorado Avalanche and Columbus Blue Jackets played two games in Tampere.

The NHL announced on March 13 there will be two regular-season games in Dusseldorf next season between the Chicago Blackhawks and Ottawa Senators in the 2026 NHL Global Series Germany.

The 2026 NHL Global Series games in Finland and Germany will mark the 13th season, and fifth consecutive year, that the NHL has traveled to Europe to play regular-season games. These games reward the legions of loyal and passionate fans in Europe that enjoy live NHL games available via international broadcast and media partners, the NHL's

streaming service, NHL.TV and NHL.TV on DAZN. The NHL's biggest star players are also featured across numerous social media platforms, and on NHL.com in seven languages, for the League's international fans.

Of the 48 previous regular-season games played outside North America, there have been 11 played in Finland, of which seven have taken place in Helsinki, and one has been played in Germany.

The Kraken will play a regular-season game in Europe for the first time, becoming the 27th NHL team to do so. The Hurricanes last played two games in Helsinki against the Wild in the Premiere Series in 2010, winning 4-3 and 2-1.

"It's my first time being able to go and play there, so it will be nice to play in front of my family and friends," said Kakko. "Hockey is big over there; they love hockey over there. It can be hard to watch the NHL because of the time difference, but it is a big hockey culture. ... I think they are going to love it."

Aho is in his 10th season with Carolina. The 28-year-old has 72 points (25 goals, 47 assists) in 70 games this season.

Kotkaniemi is in his eighth NHL season and fifth with Carolina. The 25-year-old was selected by the Montreal Canadiens with the third pick in the 2018 NHL Draft. He has nine points (two goals, seven assists) in 37 games this season.

Kakko, 25, is in his second season with Seattle. He was selected by the New York Rangers with the No. 2 pick in the 2019 NHL Draft.

He played six seasons with the Rangers and was acquired by the Kraken in a trade for forward Will Borgen and a third- and sixth-round pick in the 2025 NHL Draft, on Dec. 18, 2024. He has 30 points (11 goals, 19 assists) in 52 games this season.

Tolvanen is in his ninth NHL season and fourth with Seattle. The 26-year-old was selected by the Nashville Predators with the No. 30 pick in the 2017 NHL Draft.

He played parts of five seasons in Nashville before claimed off waivers by Seattle on Dec. 12, 2022. He has 35 points (12 goals, 23 assists) in 66 games this season.

"It's going to be a really cool thing, being able to play an NHL game in Finland," Tolvanen said. "I have family and friends



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over there, so to be able to play in front of them there will be really cool.

“It’s going to be huge. I remember as a kid when NHL games were over there, they were massive. Everyone is really excited about it. Hockey is a big part of the culture; they are really passionate about hockey and the national team. I think

it’s going to be really nice to be able to go and play in front of Finnish people.”

Nyman, 21, has six points (four goals, two assists) in 26 games this season.

Tickets for all four 2026 NHL Global Series games go on sale later this month.



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Ranking each NHL team's top prospect: Hagens, Iginla, more - ESPN

By: Rachel Kryshak

Every NHL franchise has a prospect pool. Some, usually the perennial contenders, have thinner prospect pools because of a lack of draft capital. However, each team usually has one guy about whom the organization and fan base are excited.

Some of those players are polished and NHL-ready, producing at high rates in other leagues, while others are early in their development with a high ceiling. Each represents hope, a possible answer to a roster hole, or, in the best-case scenario, a foundational piece of a Stanley Cup contender.

To be considered a prospect for this list, the player must be under 23 and not an established NHL player. Generally, that means fewer than 50 games in the current season. But in the case of someone like Michael Misa, who has played only 30 games but very clearly has an established roster spot with the Sharks, those players would be ineligible for this list.

Here is a look at the top prospect in each team's pipeline, what they do well, where they need to grow, and a look at reasonable NHL timelines and expectations.

Anaheim Ducks

Roger McQueen, F

McQueen is a 6-foot-5, right-shot center with the handling skill of a first-line playmaker, a sniper's release, and defensive instincts among the best outside the NHL. The toolkit is undeniable and has been tested against tougher competition this season at Providence College.

McQueen attacks with a wonderful skating posture, full-wingspan dekes that bait defenders before beating them, cross-body wristers, and passes through layers to teammates in space. All of this from a player who throws hits on the forecheck and battles with genuine aggression.

After a wonderful freshman season at Providence, McQueen earned Hockey East Rookie of the Year honors with 11 goals and 16 assists, and he continued to demonstrate projectable two-way play. If McQueen stays healthy and continues to develop the way he has in his first college season, he has a real chance to be a star in the NHL.

Boston Bruins

James Hagens, F

The Bruins have their center of the future in the Boston College sophomore.

He plays at high pace and has a game built on elite processing and edge work. He floats through neutral-zone traffic with effortless crossovers and weight shifts, creating

time and space. He's a dual-threat offensive center, with high-end playmaking and a shot that has taken a real step forward this season, doubling his goal output and winning the Hockey East scoring title.

What separates Hagens from other undersized pivots is the professional detail in his two-way game. He patrols passing lanes, anticipates breakouts and supports the puck in positions that allow for quick-strike offense without cheating the defensive side.

Hagen's motor, intelligence and ability to drive play project him as a legitimate top-six center in Boston as soon as next season. The B's signed him to an AHL deal Monday.

Buffalo Sabres

Radim Mrtka, D

Mrtka is going to fit perfectly on Buffalo's talented blue line.

The physical profile alone is rare, standing 6-foot-6, 216 pounds, and being a right-handed shot. But what makes Mrtka special is how well he moves around the ice with that frame. His first step is quick, his pivots are clean and he escapes pressure with poise. Defensively, his reach allows him to funnel attackers wide, kill plays in transition and maneuver with high-end awareness. With the puck, Mrtka is a transporter, joining the rush with purpose and threading passes to the middle of the ice off retrievals.

The offensive ceiling has room to grow, but the defensive floor is already high. Buffalo will have a minutes-eating defender with a combination of size, skating, and high-end defensive capability who will likely be ready for the 2027-28 season. As a righty, Mrtka also helps an imbalanced Buffalo blue line and should allow either Owen Power or Rasmus Dahlin to move back to their natural side.

Calgary Flames

Zayne Parekh, D

This was a lost season for Parekh, and he would benefit from playing a major role in the AHL, where he can run the power play. His offensive toolkit remains arguably the best among all defensive prospects in the game.

Parekh's entire game is built on deception, four-way mobility, elite edgework, head fakes, look-offs and a release that catches goalies by surprise. The professional reality has been harder, which isn't surprising for a 19-year-old defenseman. Parekh has yet to find his offensive game in the NHL while playing sheltered minutes on Calgary's third pairing, a far cry from the dynamic offensive creator who put up 107 points in the OHL. The offensive instincts have yet to translate, with Parekh giving up more high-danger chances than he creates.



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The IIHF World Junior Championship offered a reminder of his capabilities, with five goals and 13 points, shattering the Canadian record for points by a defenseman at the event. The ceiling remains a power-play quarterback and top-four dynamo who can be a game changer. But the Flames cannot afford to keep mismanaging his development the way they did this season.

Carolina Hurricanes

Bradly Nadeau, F

Nadeau is built to be a scoring winger at the NHL level. His shot is a combination of power, deception and accuracy, combined with a release that goalies have trouble picking up. That shot has seen him average more than half a goal per game in his first two seasons in the AHL with the Chicago Wolves.

Adding to his threatening offensive profile is his high-end awareness. He picks apart defensive structures, scans the ice and exploits passing lanes. His two-way game has taken a massive developmental step forward, and he has become a consistent penalty killer and is trusted in high-leverage situations.

At 5-foot-10, 172 pounds, the physical limitations see him lose board battles and get muscled off 50/50 pucks, and he lacks net-front presence against bigger defenders.

The good news is Carolina doesn't need him to be a power forward; they need a difference-making goal scorer. If he continues to develop his two-way game and find the open space in the offensive zone, Nadeau projects as a top-six scoring winger -- exactly the type of player the Hurricanes need -- as soon as the 2026 playoffs.

Chicago Blackhawks

Anton Frondell, F

Get ready, Chicago!

Frondell is built like a tank and shoots like a sniper. At 6-foot-1, 205 pounds, he is physically mature for his age (he'll turn 19 in May), leaning on opponents, throwing reverse hits, and winning position at the net front with a physicality that will serve him well in the NHL.

He's a quality off-puck player, which has only improved with his experience in the SHL, Sweden's top league. He reads the play, pushes pace to beat defensemen to rebounds and deflections and gets himself to the quiet areas, where he only needs a moment to beat goaltenders. His shot is versatile, blending power, accuracy, a good one-timer from the flank and impressive hand-eye coordination for tip-ins.

Frondell scored 20 goals for Djurgårdens IF in 43 SHL games as an 18-year-old, which is fourth all time for a player at that age. After a dominant performance at the World Juniors, he made significant development strides offensively, scoring 10 goals in his final 18 SHL games and showing improved playmaking ability.

He played mostly on the wing, which is the best spot for him to start in the NHL while his skating develops. Frondell is not particularly explosive or elusive, and adding that will give him more space to make plays. At his floor, he's a top-six scoring winger and power-play weapon who rides shotgun with Connor Bedard. At his ceiling, he's a force up the middle of

the ice in Chicago's top six and takes the rebuild to the next level.

Colorado Avalanche

Gavin Brindley, F

Brindley is 5-foot-9 -- and plays like he doesn't know it or doesn't care.

His motor is relentless, his forechecking eliminates space, and his defensive engagement is the kind that makes coaches trust a 21-year-old in an NHL lineup. The offensive numbers don't jump off the page, but the impact transcends the scoresheet. Brindley is exceptional at pressuring puck carriers and winning races to loose pucks, and he is reliable in his own end. His skating and agility are strengths because of quick feet and good edge work, and he has the ability to make plays under duress in tight spaces.

He's unlikely to become a top-six driver, but the tenacity, two-way detail, and compete level project a middle-six, all-situations forward who elevates every line on which he plays. In a league that increasingly values players who do the hard things right, Brindley's game translates, though he'll likely be a fourth-line player at least to start.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Sergei Ivanov, G

We could've picked a number of Blue Jackets prospects here, but it is rare that a 21-year-old goaltender puts up the numbers that Ivanov is registering in the KHL. He has exceptional post-to-post movement, a quick glove hand and an unconventional "just make the save" competitiveness blended with modern technique.

After posting a .911 save percentage with HC Sochi last season, Ivanov moved to SKA St. Petersburg this season and has taken another step. He posted a .927 save percentage and three shutouts across 29 games and was named to the KHL All-Star Game at 21 years old.

Ivanov studies Igor Shesterkin and Sergei Bobrovsky, and if you're going to emulate goaltenders, there are certainly worse ones than those two.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell said the organization believes Ivanov is ready, and he confirmed his intention to come to North America when his KHL contract expires after this season. His size (6-foot) will always invite skepticism, but Ivanov covers ground he has no business reaching via anticipation and sheer will. He has genuine starting potential in the NHL once he adjusts to the North American game.

Dallas Stars

Emil Hemming, F

At 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, Hemming plays a prototypical power forward's game. He drives the net, absorbs contact, links up with linemates on breakouts and backchecks with purpose rather than going through the motions.

Hemming's shot is high-end, with the ability to fire off either leg and the ability to shoot through defenders' triangles off the rush. Dallas gave him a brief AHL look to open the season before reassigning him to Barrie, where the OHL version of Hemming reemerged immediately. He produced 62 points in 45 games, with his shot volume jumping to



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nearly four shots per game and his playmaking emerging as a secondary weapon.

The Stars' pipeline is thin due to limited draft capital, which makes Hemming's development all the more critical. He represents their best chance at a homegrown middle-six forward if the shot translates as expected and the two-way habits keep maturing.

Detroit Red Wings

Nate Danielson, F

Danielson is one of the better skaters among center prospects in the NHL pipeline. He possesses a long, smooth stride with good edgework and agility.

His two-way play is the foundation of his game. He competes hard everywhere, supports the play, reads passing lanes and has been effective on both the penalty kill and power play with the Grand Rapids Griffins in the AHL. Danielson is a smart, connective playmaker rather than a dynamic one, and his impact tends to show up in the details of his game.

The offensive ceiling is the biggest question, but his statistical profile projects him to become a middle-six forward whose two-way play sees him play tough matchups. There's a path to becoming a legitimate second-line center who anchors both ends of the ice and makes the players around him better. He has the skating ability to become an offensive play driver.

Edmonton Oilers

Isaac Howard, F

The Hobey Baker winner parlayed his dominant college career into a trade from Tampa Bay to Edmonton, where the Oilers' development staff immediately identified what makes him special: the ability to find soft ice in the offensive zone and finish.

Howard has split this season between the NHL (five points in 28 games) and AHL Bakersfield (38 points in 36 games), showing the kind of shoot-first mentality and transitional intelligence that suggest he can be a 30-goal scorer with the Oilers. Howard's skating helps him get to spots to shoot, especially with his ability to deftly stickhandle at full speed.

The concern is defensive responsibility, but if Howard can show he deserves a role next to Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl, he will be buoyed by their play. His puck skills are high-end, his creativity at speed is rare, and his willingness to try things other players wouldn't attempt makes him a dynamic offensive weapon. The adjustment to NHL pace is ongoing, but he's exactly the type of winger who should be given time to develop chemistry with one of Edmonton's elite centers.

Florida Panthers

Jack Devine, F

Devine has spent his entire development arc proving that the teams who drafted 220 players ahead of him in 2022 missed something.

At the University of Denver, he was one of the most productive players in college hockey, winning the national scoring title as a senior with 57 points in 44 games, and he helped the Pioneers win two NCAA championships. His

ability to adapt to his linemates has translated seamlessly to pro hockey, immediately becoming an impact AHL scorer with the Charlotte Checkers.

He drives play with tenacious playmaking, keeps plays alive and wins battles. He hangs on to pucks between checks, blending effort with above-average skill and has developed into a dual-threat passer and shooter. His motor is relentless, his reads are high-end and his speed has improved to complement his game.

At 5-foot-10, he's still not viewed as a surefire NHL forward, but his feel for the game and hockey sense are there. It is more likely than not that Devine figures it out and becomes an everyday NHL contributor who outworks opponents and makes a difference in the bottom six.

Los Angeles Kings

Carter George, G

George is the most intriguing goaltending prospect in the Kings' pipeline, and that's saying something for an organization that has three netminders with legitimate NHL futures.

At 6-foot-1, George doesn't have the imposing frame of a modern goaltender, but his crease movement is quick and poised, his positioning is mature and his puckhandling is as confident as that of any goalie prospect in the game. He reads the play early, tracks through traffic easily and fills the net with an upright stance that maximizes his coverage.

After making his AHL debut with the Ontario Reign last spring -- winning both of his starts, including a shutout -- George returned to the OHL this season and posted a .908 save percentage across 45 games including four shutouts and 23 wins. George's anticipation, lateral quickness and ability to launch breakouts with stretch passes project him as a starting-caliber goaltender at the NHL level. He and Hampton Slukynsky could become L.A.'s future tandem in goal.

Minnesota Wild

Charlie Stramel, F

Stramel is a 6-foot-3, 216-pound center who has finally started looking like the player Minnesota believed it was drafting 21st in 2023.

After a quiet first two college seasons, Stramel broke out as a junior after transferring to Michigan State. He's physically imposing and plays like it, punishing forecheckers, containing cycles and using his reach to cut off skating lanes and read passing options. The skating stride remains awkward, and his first step lacks explosiveness, but his top-end speed is legitimate and his balance through contact is a real asset at his size.

The offensive development has been the revelation. Soft hands, improved playmaking vision and the confidence to hold on to pucks and attack make him a scoring threat. Stramel's floor is a reliable bottom-six center who wins battles and defends well. His ceiling, if the offensive game keeps trending, is a second-line, two-way force, something Minnesota really needs.

play



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0:23

Charlie Stramel scores goal

Charlie Stramel scores goal

Montreal Canadiens

Michael Hage, F

Simply put, Hage is a well-rounded player without a glaring flaw. His sophomore season at Michigan has been spectacular; he's among the NCAA scoring leaders and firmly in the Hobey Baker conversation.

He's a dynamic rush attacker who drives the middle and processes the play at lightning-quick pace, allowing him to make give-and-go plays at full speed to leave defenders scrambling. Hage reads defensive coverage, creates passing lanes and delivers pucks in prime scoring areas. A dual threat, his shot fools goaltenders with a toe drag snap that catches them on their heels. He's creative, intelligent and has no significant weaknesses, and he's capable of elevating a line.

Hage's two-way game has matured; he's a 200-foot player with the strength to win battles against tough competition. His development trajectory suggests he may be ready to play behind Nick Suzuki as a potential second-line center as soon as next season. If Hage signs his entry-level deal this spring, he could step in and play meaningful playoff minutes, too.

Nashville Predators

Brady Martin, F

Martin is a one-of-a-kind blend of manipulative playmaking and bone-crushing physicality, a forward who can fake a pass on his first touch, thread a no-look feed across the slot, and then immediately try to send someone through the boards. His motor is relentless, his hits are punishing and devastatingly timed and his forechecking generates more turnovers than many forwards I can remember.

Nashville saw enough to give him an NHL look out of training camp, and he was impactful for Canada at the World Juniors. Unfortunately, he has struggled since returning from injury in February.

The skating needs to take another step, but the intelligence, physicality and scoring tools are all top-six caliber. If his speed and pace of play improve, Martin becomes a unique power playmaker who elevates when the games matter most. If it doesn't, he's still a middle-six player whom teams will hate to play against.

New Jersey Devils

Anton Silayev, D

Silayev is a physical anomaly. At 6-foot-7, 207 pounds, he's a mammoth right-shot defenseman with the skating ability to cross the neutral zone in three or four strides; he moves like a player who has no right to be that big and that fluid simultaneously.

His defensive game is built on reach, aggression and an ability to close gaps, making opposing forwards feel like the ice is shrinking. His decisions with the puck are quick and sound. Becoming a shutdown defender who thrives in physical battles and denies space with suffocating range is

the floor. The ceiling, if the offensive game develops, is a minutes-munching, top-four presence who can move pucks, kill plays and physically dominate.

Silayev's KHL contract with Torpedo Nizhny Novgorod runs through May, at which point he's expected to come to North America and be ready for NHL action next season.

New York Islanders

Victor Eklund, F

Eklund is the kind of prospect who people point to and say, "Size does not matter when the skill and motor are that good."

At 5-foot-11, 170 pounds, he has no business winning board battles against men who outweigh him by 40 pounds, but he does so consistently by attacking their hands, getting underneath and leveraging his body to gain a positioning advantage. His forechecking is elite and is going to be a nightmare for every defenseman he plays against. The skating isn't a standout tool on its own, but paired with that seemingly bottomless motor, it creates a pace that suffocates defenders and drives transition.

Playing full-time for Djurgårdens IF (the same team as the Blackhawks' Frondell), he scored 24 points in 43 SHL games as a teenager. He has been on a tear of late and owns a statistical profile that lends very well to an NHL player. He's not going to be an elite offensive creator in the NHL, but his vision below the goal line, his ability to turn steals off the forecheck into chances and his willingness to do everything the hard way will endear himself to any coach.

Eklund projects as a top-six winger who elevates every line he plays on. The Isles got a real good one 16th overall last summer, and there is a good chance other teams will regret passing on him.

New York Rangers

Liam Greentree, F

Greentree solves problems with the puck on his stick. At 6-foot-3, 215 pounds, he has an NHL-ready frame and uses it to power through checks, protect possession and navigate traffic. He manipulates space off the rush with look-offs and give-and-goes, while forcing defenders and goalies to respect a high-end shot.

Greentree has been on a 14-goal, 25-point tear for the OHL's Windsor Spitfires since being acquired by the Rangers as the centerpiece of the Artemi Panarin trade. He's a crafty, powerful forward who racks up points through playmaking and finishing in equal measure.

His skating is the legitimate concern; his first step and acceleration need meaningful improvement to project as more than a middle-six contributor at the NHL level. The offensive intelligence, size and production profile suggest a player who will find ways to score even if the footspeed never becomes a strength. New York got a prospect with middle-six tools and a frame built for playoff hockey.

Ottawa Senators

Carter Yakemchuk, D

Yakemchuk's offensive instincts from the back end are rare, and he's producing at a high-end rate on the Senators' AHL



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squad (Belleville). He jumps into rushes aggressively, gets shots through from the point and has the power to score from range.

At 6-3, right-handed, with a booming point shot and dynamic puck skills, the power-play upside is clearly there. The majority of his growth has been on the defensive side, including improved gap control, better consistency in the corners, and a willingness to play within structure that Ottawa's development staff has prioritized.

The forward skating is strong, but lateral and backward mobility remain hurdles to full-time NHL play. If the defensive details keep trending upward alongside the offensive firepower, Yakemchuk projects as a middle-pair defenseman who can anchor a power play and change games with his shot. Ottawa is rightfully being patient, and giving Yakemchuk a steady defensive partner when he steps into the NHL will help him.

Philadelphia Flyers

Porter Martone, F

Martone is one of the smartest prospects in an NHL pipeline. He constantly scans, anticipates defenders' movements, manipulates coverage and delivers passes that are translatable to the NHL. His dual-threat shot is a violent power transfer through his entire body, and he also has the deception to rip a no-look short-side wrister that freezes goaltenders.

After moving to Michigan State, Martone performed well against bigger, stronger competition, and his skating continued to improve. Questions remain around pace of play and physical engagement, as he's currently a soft-skill player in a power forward's body.

But if his skating and willingness to use his powerful body continue to improve, at 6-3, 208 pounds, Philadelphia has a potential top-line winger and elite power-play weapon. Philadelphia is the perfect place for a power forward to thrive, and Martone has all the tools to be a dominant NHL winger.

play

0:41

Porter Martone finds the back of the net

Porter Martone scores goal

Pittsburgh Penguins

Will Horcoff, F

Horcoff towers over most everyone on the ice. At 6-5, 200 pounds, the son of longtime NHLer Shawn has an NHL frame, and he has developed offensively during his sophomore season at Michigan.

Horcoff's defensive play is a real asset. He's fueled by proactive reads, physical disruption and a backcheck that suffocates puck carriers with his range and positioning. The playmaking has emerged as a legitimate weapon, including one-touch passes, area feeds, deft wall plays and delays for teammates to jump into lanes.

His ability to be a play driver remains a question, largely related to his skating. His edge work needs work, and he can

slow the game down too much when he's hunting the perfect play. If the pace and mobility improve as the body fills out, Horcoff has the hockey sense, defensive detail and skill to become more than a bottom-six center. His ability to become a play driver and support the play will ultimately determine how high he plays in the lineup.

San Jose Sharks

Igor Chernyshov, F

Chernyshov's combination of size, skating and skill makes him one of the more intriguing young wingers. At 6-2 with pro-caliber speed and high-end puck handling, he has been a reliable point producer at every level. With the Barracuda, he produced 33 points in 41 AHL games, and when San Jose recalled him, Chernyshov didn't look out of place, posting 22 points in 31 NHL games while skating alongside Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith.

His playmaking is more refined than the power-forward archetype suggests. He sees the ice well, shows poise with the puck and is creative with his rush play. Chernyshov is a dynamic transition threat with the size, speed and skill to become a top-six winger who can score and facilitate.

San Jose's rebuild has a centerpiece forward group forming, and Chernyshov looks like a core piece of it.

Seattle Kraken

Jake O'Brien, F

Passing is O'Brien's first, second and third play, which is a major reason he is the owner of the most points in Brantford Bulldogs history. When he can't find a lane, he creates one by shifting defenders or selling a shot fake before slipping a feed through multiple defenders. He passes through sticks, under skates, behind his own back, and spots teammates at the far post before anyone recognizes the threat.

He's a forward who is likely to be a quarterback for an NHL power play because of his vision, deceptive releases and cross-slot passing. Back with Brantford this season as captain, O'Brien led the OHL in assists and scored 1.75 points per game, answering questions about whether he can drive a team on his own.

He needs to fill out his frame, but at 6-foot-2 and 177 pounds, the physical runway is enormous, and the playmaking ceiling makes the bet worthwhile. If the skating and strength develop alongside the creativity, Seattle has a top-line, play-driving center. At worst, O'Brien is a play-driving winger in the top six who will pile up the assists.

St. Louis Blues

Justin Carbonneau, F

The 6-foot-1 winger can fly while keeping tight control over the puck, slipping it around skates, under sticks and behind defenders. His scoring tools are elite, with an excellent release he can fire from uncomfortable positions, deceptive passing that draws multiple defenders before threading feeds through coverage and the off-puck instincts to time himself into pockets to catch-and-release.

The decision-making remains the primary area of development. When everything clicks, he looks like a first-line play driver; when it doesn't, the turnovers multiply and



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his impact vanishes. Those turnovers will hold him back from earning trust at the NHL level right now. However, the tools, self-confidence and adaptability suggest the processing will catch up. Carbonneau's ceiling is a first-line, dual-threat winger.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Conor Geekie, F

The younger brother of Boston's Morgan Geekie, the 21-year-old is the most complete prospect in Tampa Bay's system -- and the foundation for whatever comes after the Golden Years.

At 6-4, his combination of size, reach, hands and offensive IQ is rare. He handles pucks through tight spaces, protects possession and is a dual-threat playmaker and shooter with a release that punishes goalies who cheat to his passing lanes.

Tampa Bay sent him to Syracuse this season with a specific prescription: play as the first-line center, on the top power play and the penalty kill. He has responded with 54 points in 40 AHL games.

The skating remains the primary development requirement. His stride is upright and lacks explosiveness out of turns; at the NHL level, that limits his ability to separate and win races he should win with that frame. But his defensive play is already strong, he tracks well in transition and takes good routes to the puck.

If the skating improves to even league-average level, Geekie has the toolkit of a 60-point, two-way center. If it doesn't, he's a bottom-six guy who can contribute offensively.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Ben Danford, D

With the graduation of Easton Cowan, Danford reigns as the top Leafs prospect.

For all the talk about the Leafs needing to add some physicality and a mean streak to their lineup, Danford has no shortage of either. He delivers thunderous body checks, is reliable in the defensive zone, wins the majority of his puck battles and plays in key situations. His skating is slightly above average, allowing him to have good gap control and disrupt passes with a well-placed stick.

His offensive capabilities have grown over the past couple of seasons, beating the first layer of pressure and getting shots through. He's unlikely to be an offensive producer in the NHL, as his strengths are suited to a shutdown role with heavy penalty-killing minutes. Danford makes a good first pass under pressure and has shown more patience.

His decision making and execution with the puck will determine whether he becomes a middle-pairing defender or a bottom-pair player.

Utah Mammoth

Tij Iginla, F

Iginla is a tour de force and seems destined to become a top-six point producer in the NHL.

Through 47 WHL games this season, he led the league in points per game (1.93) while driving a Kelowna team preparing to host the Memorial Cup.

His shot is his calling card. It is quick and deceptive, and when combined with the ability to create his own time and space, it is a game changer. Iginla's details are well-rounded. His wall game is high-end, and he wins the vast majority of puck battles. His habits away from the puck are an equal strength, with constant threat identification, an active stick and hard-nosed backchecking.

Simply put, he's one of the best prospects outside the NHL. The dual-threat offensive ability, the compete level, and the rapidly improving all-around game project a player who can impact an NHL lineup in every situation and make impactful plays in the playoffs.

In Iginla, Utah has the type of player that many in the industry say "you win with."

Vancouver Canucks

Braeden Cootes, F

Cootes is a one-man forechecking machine who already looks like an NHL player at age 19. His motor and energy are undeniably elite. His feet never stop moving, and he makes plays while absorbing hits, which separates him from other prospects.

Vancouver believed enough to put him on their opening night roster this season, before sending him back to the WHL to develop. Now with Prince Albert after a midseason trade, Cootes is leading the Raiders in scoring and driving a Memorial Cup contender. His playmaking is above average and his rush game is dynamic. He dangles with his feet moving, attacks the middle and skates through back pressure.

Cootes' defensive detail is already projectable, which is largely why he got to the NHL look to start the season. Vancouver -- perhaps more than any other franchise -- is starved for centers, and Cootes' floor is a high-energy, third-line pivot. The ceiling is a matchup second-line center with 65-point upside. He'd benefit from a full AHL season, where he can further develop both sides of his game and adjust to the speed of professional hockey.

Vegas Golden Knights

Trevor Connelly, F

Connelly is a brilliantly skilled forward with the creativity and pace to score and make plays at the NHL level.

His skating is among the fastest and most agile outside of the NHL, making him a monster in transition. He has the ability to change direction at full speed, leaving defenders flat-footed. Combine that with quick hands, jaw-dropping deception and the ability to make difficult plays look easy, and the offensive toolkit is undeniable.

Connelly made his AHL debut with Henderson this season, and quickly showed why Vegas believes in the top-six projection. The development path requires patience as his decision-making consistency needs to improve. When the processing catches up to the raw offensive tools, Connelly has the ceiling of a dynamic, top-six winger who makes everyone around him more dangerous.



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Washington Capitals

Cole Hutson, D

The emergence of Cole Hutson is likely why the Capitals moved off John Carlson at the trade deadline -- and the freshly signed 19-year-old scored his first NHL goal into an empty net last week.

His offensive creativity from the blue line is otherworldly, and already impactful in the NHL. His edgework is elite; a combination of lateral slides, hesitation moves, and the kind of confidence while carrying the puck that lets him walk the line and break defensive coverage.

In his sophomore season at Boston University, Hutson led the Terriers in scoring with 32 points in 35 games and averaged over 25 minutes of ice time per game, earning All-Hockey East First Team honors for a second consecutive season. The offensive toolkit, a combination of skating, shot, and playmaking, projects him as a power-play quarterback and transition weapon. The defensive game will develop as he plays more in the NHL, including gap control, defending against the cycle and shoulder checking for threats.

Washington didn't use the No. 43 overall pick in 2024 on him to be a shutdown defender; they drafted him to be an offensive catalyst. If the defensive details sharpen, the offensive upside makes him a legitimate top-four option with game-breaking ability.

play

0:47

Cole Hutson lights the lamp

Cole Hutson tallies goal vs. Senators

Winnipeg Jets

Brayden Yager, F

Yager is one of the smartest players at the AHL level. His shot is his offensive calling card, whether he's ripping a wrister or loading up a one-timer; it's NHL-caliber already.

Yager provides defensive value across all three zones, competes on retrievals, supports the play and does not cheat for offense. In his first professional season with Manitoba, he's earned middle-six center duties and time on both the power play and penalty kill. He is producing at a respectable clip while adjusting to the AHL's pace and physicality. The hockey sense and puck skills are evident.

The areas for growth are strength and quickness. Yager still has time to develop on both sides of the puck, but the foundation of a middle-six secondary point producer who brings reliable two-way play is there. He is the kind of center Winnipeg can slide onto their third line once the physical tools catch up to the hockey IQ.



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Hurricanes finish off season series against Penguins with 5-1 win

By: Haley O'Neill

The Carolina Hurricanes, making the most of every opportunity, capitalized on all three of their power plays in the first two periods to secure their 20th road win of the season.

The Hurricanes' (44-19-6) three-goal period in the second led to a 5-1 victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins (35-18-16). A late defensive lapse in the third allowed the Penguins to capitalize and prevented the Canes from getting the shutout, but the win was effectively already in the books.

Winger Nikolaj Ehlers, with a standout performance, netted the second goal and the game-winner early in the second period. After defenseman Samuel Girard was sent to the box for a cross-checking penalty, the Canes went to work. A series of passes throughout the zone kept the defense moving and opened up lanes. Center Seth Jarvis sent the puck near the top of the zone to Ehlers, who fired a one-timer past goaltender Stuart Skinner.

Getting things moving for Carolina, center Sebastian Aho jumped to catch the puck and keep it alive in their offensive zone. After settling it and passing to Jarvis, he repositioned himself away from the defense to create a clear lane to the net. Reading Aho's movement, Jarvis found him at the top of the zone, where Aho fired a rocket into the back of the net to score the opening goal.

"[Aho's] hops, he might've touched 15 inches there," Jarvis said. "He got up there pretty good and kept the play alive.

From there, we talked about trying to get the middle, especially the guy that's at the top. I just tried to get as far as I could to open up enough space, and I don't know how it quite went in, but we'll take it."

After the goal from Ehlers, winger Mark Jankowski kept the momentum rolling and tried to tally a goal from out wide. Kicked away by Skinner, winger Eric Robinson collected the puck in the corner and passed to defenseman Jaylen Chatfield up top. With plenty of space, Chatfield slapped it into the net, scoring the first even-strength goal.

"I saw a lot of guys in front," Chatfield said. "Our guys got in front and are doing a good job. That's what you need. You need bodies in front to screen the goalie, and we have that mentality on the back end. If you have a lane, get it to the net. That's all I was thinking, just get it on net."

Just over five minutes away from a shutout, the Canes made a soft pass that center Sidney Crosby cut off and took possession of. He quickly moved the puck to winger Bryan Rust, who skated it towards the net. Winger Egor Chinakhov crashed the paint and finished the play with a one-timer underneath the pads of goaltender Frederik Andersen.

Finishing off the scoring for the Canes, Jankowski received the puck from winger Jackson Blake and slipped it into an empty net.

The Hurricanes finish off their three-game road trip in Montreal on Tuesday, March 24, at 7 p.m. against the Canadiens.



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Hurricanes Finish Season Series With Big Win Over Penguins

By: Ryan Henkel

Hurricanes dominate Penguins with stellar power play and Frederik Andersen's rebound performance, securing a decisive victory.

The Carolina Hurricanes finished out their season series against the Pittsburgh Penguins with their third-straight win, taking a 5-1 decision Sunday afternoon at PPG Paints Arena.

The Hurricanes dominated the Penguins for 60 minutes, scoring less than a minute into the game and then just never looked back.

Here are three takeaways from the win:

1. Power Play Production

Sunday afternoon's game was the best the power play has performed since the team's 9-1 win over the Florida Panthers earlier in the year (where they scored four times on five opportunities).

Carolina scored three goals on the man advantage, with two goals on the very first two power play shots.

"We were working, executing the passes, executing the shots," said Sebastian Aho. "That pretty much summarizes a good power play."

Special teams is huge in today's game and while you're not always going to convert at that rate, it's still promising to see the team is capable of it.

The first goal was a bit of a lucky break, with Aho's shot from the high slot deflecting off of a stick in front, but it was his heads up play to knock down a clearing attempt that made the goal possible.

However, the second and third power play tallies were much cleaner.

Nikolaj Ehlers uncorked a big one-timer from the point in the second period, beating Stuart Skinner between the glove and blocker.

Ehlers then displayed his elite playmaking skills a bit later, waiting out Pittsburgh's defense until they eventually bit toward him below the goal line before lacing a pass right to Seth Jarvis' stick in the slot.

"Even the one we didn't score on at the end, we had a ton of chances," Ehlers said. "So I think going in with that attacking mindset and getting pucks to the net, that will create some

chaos and get them running around a little bit and that's where you sometimes score the goals. I think we've done a good job with just keeping the attack mindset."

2. Frederik Andersen Back On Top

After a tough start to the year, Frederik Andersen has bounced back in a big way since returning from representing his country at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

Since then, Andersen is 6-1-0 and has now won each of his last five starts, including an impressive outing yesterday in Pittsburgh.

Andersen was tremendous all game long, turning aside 18 shots and saving 1.68 goals above expected in the win.

In fact, the only shot that beat him was a late breakaway tally from Egor Chinakhov who had slipped behind the Canes' defense.

But even beyond the stops, Andersen was really good with his puckhandling, allowing the Hurricanes' defense to break the puck out easier and alleviate the pressure from the Penguins' forecheck.

"He just did a nice job handling the puck on the forechecks," said Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour. "He did a real good job there and that really helps out so much when you can relieve the stress. Then when he had to make a few saves, he did. That's what you ask of from your goalie."

Many people wouldn't have expected this turn around from the Danish veteran, but he's firmly put himself back into the number one slot for the Canes.

3. Multiple Career Milestones Within Reach

With an assist in the win, Andrei Svechnikov is now just four assists away from matching his career best (39). He also reached the 60-point marker for just the second time in his career. His career high is 69 points.

Nikolaj Ehlers is also now just five points back of his career high (63) after a two-point outing in Pittsburgh.

Seth Jarvis scored yesterday, putting him just one goal away from reaching the 30-goal milestone for the third straight season. His career high in goals is 33.

Logan Stankoven had an assist in the win, moving him within five assists of his career high (24) and five points away from his career high (38).



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Jackson Blake is now just six points away from having a 50-point season.

Alexander Nikishin is two points shy of tying Chris Pronger for the third most points by a rookie defenseman in franchise history. He is seven points back of Brad Shaw who is the all-time leader (35).

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

1224170 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes to play two games in Finland in 2026-27. Who they'll play, and when

Chip Alexander 2-3 minutes 23/03/2026

The Carolina Hurricanes are going on the road — to Finland.

The NHL announced Monday the Hurricanes would face the Seattle Kraken in a pair of regular-season games in Helsinki as part of the 2026 NHL Global Series Finland.

The games will be played Thursday, Nov. 12 and Saturday Nov. 14, 2026, at Velkkaus Arena.

The Canes last visited Finland in October 2010, facing the Minnesota Wild in two games as part of the Compuware NHL Premiere Games. The Canes won both games to begin the 2010-11 regular season.

Watching from the stands was Canes center Sebastian Aho, then 13. The Hurricanes in 2010 had Finns Tuomo Ruutu, Joni Pitkanen and Jussi Jokinen in the lineup.

The 2026 NHL Global Series games in Finland and Germany will mark the fifth straight season — and 13th overall — that the NHL has played regular-season games in Europe.

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Profile Image of Chip Alexander

In more than 40 years at The N&O, Chip Alexander has covered the N.C. State, UNC, Duke and East Carolina beats, and now is in his 15th

season on the Carolina Hurricanes beat. Alexander, who has won numerous writing awards at the state and national level, covered the Hurricanes' move to North Carolina in 1997 and was a part of The N&O's coverage of the Canes' 2006 Stanley Cup run.

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The Athletic / Mika Zibanejad and the lasting moments of a 1,000-game NHL journey

By Peter Baugh

NEW YORK — Irma Helin Zibanejad knows how an athlete's mind operates. She played soccer in Sweden's top league, appeared in a national team game and now works as an analyst on Swedish television. As someone who's been through the all-encompassing nature of competition, she's well aware it's hard for an athlete to pause mid-career and feel proud.

Yet, that's exactly what she wants her husband, New York Rangers center Mika Zibanejad, to do Monday when he plays his 1,000th NHL regular-season game, a major accomplishment in NHL circles.

"Everything is about winning and Stanley Cups, and that's obviously his biggest goal," she says. "But I really hope for him to just stop and breathe and take everything in."

Fittingly, Zibanejad's milestone comes against the Ottawa Senators, the team that drafted him with the No. 6 pick in 2011 and the only other club for which he's played. The Rangers will treat him to an on-ice pregame ceremony and present him and his family with gifts.



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As Zibanejad accepts the praise, Irma wants him to think back to his days growing up in Stockholm, where his parents worked multiple jobs so he and his brother could play hockey. She hopes he can picture the little boy who maybe didn't have the highest-quality stick and know that now he's a member of an exclusive NHL club. To, in her words, "be very, very present and be able to say 'Good job, Mika. You did this.'"

Zibanejad's achievement is an opportunity to reflect on the moments that led him to this point, from his early days in Ottawa to his peak with the Rangers and current status as the team's longest-tenured player. All of it has impacted who he is now as a 32-year-old veteran: a thoughtful presence and skilled, two-way skater who, considering his resurgence this season, appears to have plenty more good games ahead of him.

Games played: 1

Oct. 7, 2011

Zibanejad arrived at Senators rookie camp in September 2011, his 18-year-old face young and his hair not yet grown into the shoulder-length style he sports today. Quickly, Ottawa coach Paul MacLean sensed confidence under his quiet demeanor. He pulled him aside and gave him a challenge: Be a leader among the rookies.

The center proceeded to have "one of the best rookie camps we'd had (since) before I got there," MacLean says now. At full-team training camp, he earned a spot on the Senators' opening night roster. His first game came at a historic venue — Detroit's Joe Louis Arena — against a Red Wings roster full of Swedish players Zibanejad admired. Late in the third period, Zibanejad managed to keep a puck away from Hall of Fame defenseman Nicklas Lidström and cycled it in the offensive zone, leading to his first NHL point: a secondary assist on defenseman Filip Kuba's goal. The entire experience, he says, felt surreal.

After nine NHL games, the Senators reassigned Zibanejad to Djurgårdens IF, his hometown club in Sweden, for further development. But his NHL cameo gave him a taste of the high level of play and a hockey-loving market that would soon feel like home.

Games played: 11

Jan. 30, 2013

MacLean's words echoed in Zibanejad's head as he took the ice with the Senators' second power-play unit against the Montreal Canadiens. "Shoot, shoot, shoot," the coach had told him on the bench. So, in his second NHL game of the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season, Zibanejad wound up for a slap shot from above the left faceoff circle. Time on the power play was expiring, and Zibanejad was far from the net. Canadiens goalie Peter Budaj looked straight at him.

"A bad shot to take, really," Zibanejad says.

But he followed his coach's orders. The shot hit Canadiens defenseman Alexei Emelin, bounced off the ice and ricocheted over Budaj's right shoulder, giving Zibanejad his first NHL goal. A bit lucky? Sure. But a memorable moment in his early Senators years.

Zibanejad says he learned "a lesson every day" spending time around the Ottawa veterans. Captain Daniel Alfredsson, a fellow Swede, helped him with his one-timer technique, and Jason Spezza was a good example at center. Longtime winger Chris Neil provided Zibanejad with guidance in the gym, then played him in fiery ping-pong matches after workouts. They'd play best-of-three sets, Neil remembers, and the winner got to whack a ping-pong ball at the loser's back.

Zibanejad also grew close with Erik Karlsson, only three years his senior. Weeks into Zibanejad's NHL career, the ascending defenseman joined in a joint Halloween costume with Zibanejad and fellow Swedish rookie David Rundblad. The three Swedes donned wigs, painted their faces and went as members of the rock band Kiss. Karlsson still looks at the picture sometimes and laughs.

Games played: 108

March 16, 2014

Zibanejad didn't crack a smile after scoring on Colorado Avalanche goalie Semyon Varlamov. There were only six seconds left in the third period, and Ottawa was still down 3-1. His one-time blast from the blue line was impressive, but the game was already lost.

Still, the goal stands out in Zibanejad's mind. Four days earlier, at the Senators' skills competition in front of fans, he had won the hardest shot competition with a 106 mph blast. He didn't fully trust the radar gun, but now he had successfully used his power in a game. The one-timer was becoming a threat.

Over the next 12 years, the blistering shot would become Zibanejad's signature. Fifty-six of his 344 career goals have come off slap shots, per NHL Stats. Since the start of the 2019-20 season, only Steven Stamkos, Alex Ovechkin and David Pastrňák have scored more on that type of shot than Zibanejad (44 goals).

"Nice to have his one-timer in my Rangers life," says former teammate Artemi Panarin, who has assisted more Zibanejad goals (90) than any other player.

Zibanejad watched Ovechkin — the master of the one-timer — as a kid, and he began working on the shot in junior hockey. Coming to the NHL helped him perfect it, in part because he had access to any type of stick he wanted. He experimented with different curves and flexes, searching for the design that best helped the puck explode off his stick.

"You go from having six sticks for the whole season (in Sweden) to being able to go (through) three, four sticks a game," he says.

It all contributed to him discovering one of the most dangerous shots in the sport.

"The puck comes off his stick differently than most," Rangers coach Mike Sullivan says. "That, to me, is the sign of a true goal scorer."

Games played: 281

July 18, 2016

Zibanejad knows his limits, and one thing he can't do is sing. So, he's found a way to make music without relying on his voice: DJing. He performed a set at an Ottawa club in 2013 and, 10 years later, took the stage at Lollapalooza Stockholm.

At one point during Zibanejad's Senators tenure, MacLean had a conversation with him about his side passion. The coach wanted to ensure his prized prospect wasn't going to be up all night DJing in clubs over the summer. Zibanejad explained to him why he finds it fulfilling.

"It's an hour and a half, two hours of my life that I get to do something different, and I get to express it in music," Zibanejad says.

By the end of the conversation, MacLean apologized for feeling suspicious.

"It was never an issue," the coach says.

On a summer day after his fifth season, Zibanejad was working on some tunes in his newly purchased Ottawa house. When he took a break to grab his phone, which was charging in the kitchen, he was greeted with a surprise: His lock screen showed four missed calls, four messages and four emails, all from his agent.

When Zibanejad called back, he learned news that caught him fully off-guard: He'd been traded. The Rangers had acquired him and a second-round pick for Derick Brassard and a seventh-round pick.

"I wasn't sure how to react," he says.



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So he called Karlsson, who was golfing nearby. The defenseman didn't believe his friend; surely, he told Zibanejad, the news was not correct.

But it was. Karlsson cut his golf round short and rushed to Zibanejad's house. They sat together, processing. Zibanejad found it weird that his family members were congratulating him, though he understands it more in retrospect now that he has a sense of the Rangers' history. As the news settled in, he began to feel excited.

"All in all, maybe it was the best thing for him in the end," Karlsson says.

The trade turned into one of the most successful Rangers transactions ever. In Zibanejad, they got a future No. 1 center: someone who would become part of their core for years to come.

Games played: 283

Oct. 15, 2016

In the first period of his second game with the Rangers, a loose puck bounced to Zibanejad in front of the St. Louis Blues' net. He backhanded it into the slot, where winger Chris Kreider found it and whipped a shot past Carter Hutton.

With that, a connection was born. A Zibanejad assist on a Kreider goal happened 105 more times in their nine seasons as teammates. During that span, which ended when the Rangers traded Kreider to the Anaheim Ducks in June, they developed a bond on and off the ice that Kreider says is "borderline familial."

Kreider describes Zibanejad as warm and sensitive, but he quickly saw how fiery his friend can get in competitive situations. The two played the FIFA video game during a trip early in the 2016-17 season, and Kreider — the worse player of the two — scored first. He then turned to stall tactics, taking advantage of the lack of icing calls in soccer and constantly booting the ball to the other end of the field. A furious Zibanejad was never able to find a tying goal.

"He had no business beating me in FIFA," he says, a note of defiance creeping into his voice years later.

The two had lockers next to each other at the MSG Training Center, and Zibanejad still has a Kreider hockey card in his stall. When Kreider got married in 2023, Zibanejad was his best man.

On the ice, they became frequent linemates. Their production peaked in 2021-22, when Kreider had a 52-goal season and Zibanejad was a point-per-game player. The connection extended to the power play and penalty kill, too. The Rangers were an elite special teams club from 2021-22 through 2023-24, and Zibanejad credits Kreider's net-front screens with helping plenty of his slapshots beat goalies. Zibanejad is the franchise record holder in power-play goals (122), and Kreider is tied for second (116).

Kreider laced up for 585 regular-season games with Zibanejad, more than 100 clear of the next-closest player (Panarin, 467).

Zibanejad's 2-year-old daughter, Ella — who loves going to games at Madison Square Garden — hasn't realized that her dad's longtime teammate is gone. While at games, she sometimes points to a player on the ice and shouts, "There's Chris!"

Irma doesn't correct her.

"I don't want to break her heart yet," she says.

Games played: 337 (Postseason games played: 21)

April 20, 2017

With the Rangers' 2017 first-round series against Montreal deadlocked 2-2, Game 5 went to overtime. Late in the extra period, Kreider found Zibanejad with a cross-ice pass on a rush. Zibanejad finished past

superstar goalie Carey Price, then jumped up and down in front of the glass.

Zibanejad calls it one of his favorite goals. It's his only playoff overtime winner to date, though he's had other notable postseason moments, including a late, game-tying goal in Game 7 of the 2022 first round against the Pittsburgh Penguins and appearances in two conference finals. In total, Zibanejad has appeared in 74 playoff games (16 with the Senators and 58 with the Rangers) and ranks sixth in New York history with 55 playoff points.

Games played: 545

March 5, 2020

Zibanejad was in a suit in March 2020, ready to leave his Midtown apartment for a walk to Madison Square Garden. His dad, Mehrdad, was visiting from Sweden and wished Mika luck as he headed toward the door.

"I've never seen you score a hat trick live, and today's a good day for it," Mehrdad said.

This wasn't a frequent request. Mika said he'd oblige, not knowing the night would turn into arguably the best of his career.

Less than a minute into the third period, Zibanejad made good on the pregame promise, finishing a Pavel Buchnevich pass from behind the net for his third goal. In the family section in the Garden's lower bowl, Irma and Mehrdad looked at each other and screamed. Fans chucked hats — as well as a scarf, pillow, rainbow wig and beachball — onto the ice.

"Then he just continued," Irma says.

He potted a rebound off a Kaapo Kakko shot for a go-ahead goal in the final two minutes of regulation. The Washington Capitals tied the score 59 seconds later, but what appeared like a setback was really just a chance for an overtime coronation. In the extra period, Zibanejad beat goalie Ilya Samsonov on a breakaway, giving him his fifth goal of the night.

After the goal, which tied a Rangers single-game record, Zibanejad came to a stop at the corner of the ice. He pulled both of his elbows into his chest and unleashed a scream. A grin never left his face as his teammates mobbed him. It was a special scene: a reminder that a random Thursday game can become history. When Irma saw her now-husband after the game, all she could do was laugh in disbelief.

Zibanejad finished that season, which was shortened by COVID-19, with 41 goals in 57 games, leading the league in goals-per-game rate among qualified skaters. He was assertive every time he stepped onto the ice, attacking dangerous areas with long strides, and appeared on Selke Trophy ballots for his two-way play. It was his game at its best.

Games played: 972

Jan. 2, 2026

Zibanejad enjoyed about as good a regular-season day as an NHL player can have. In the morning, he found out he'd made Sweden's Olympic team. At night, playing in the Winter Classic at loanDepot Park in Miami, he had one of the best outdoor games in NHL history, leading the Rangers to a 5-1 win. He scored the first-ever hat trick at a Winter Classic and set an NHL record with five points in an outdoor game.

The Rangers have had a disappointing season as a team. They entered the year with playoff hopes, especially after hiring two-time Stanley Cup-winning coach Mike Sullivan, and have instead fallen to last place in the Eastern Conference. In a year of limited positives, Zibanejad has been a major bright spot.



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"He's quietly had a really strong season for us," said Sullivan, who kick-started a strong relationship with Zibanejad by visiting him in Stockholm over the summer.

Zibanejad has 30 goals and 67 points in 69 games, his best scoring rate since 2022-23. He's remained defensively responsible, and he's helped mentor younger teammates, including current linemates Alexis Lafrenière and Gabe Perreault. His game isn't at its 2019-20 level, but he's showing he can still be a strong top-six center.

That didn't necessarily feel like a guarantee during the 2024-25 season, especially during the first half. Zibanejad struggled, scoring only six goals and 21 points through the team's first 36 games. Physically, he felt fine. Mentally, he didn't. His confidence was down, and he was overthinking: an occasional side effect of his cerebral nature. He describes the lack of results as draining.

He managed to salvage the second half of the season, then won a bronze medal at the 2025 World Championships. He carried the momentum into 2025-26, during which he's appreciated the trust of Sullivan and the coaching staff.

"I feel more like myself," he says. "Back to my old ways."

"To develop and grow from that instead of the opposite makes me really proud of him," Irma adds. "He's had even better seasons, but this (year has) made me the most proud of him."

Games played: 999

March 22, 2026

Zibanejad felt more nervous than usual heading into Sunday's Rangers versus Winnipeg Jets game. A long list of family and friends had already made the trip to New York in anticipation of Game No. 1,000, so he wanted to make sure to avoid injury. He was successful, playing 23:29 and scoring a power-play goal on his trademark one-timer. After the Rangers' 3-2 shootout loss, teammate Lafrenière mentioned the impending accomplishment to Zibanejad. He'd made it.

"The jitters start now," Zibanejad said.

His milestone comes at a precarious time for the Rangers. In a letter to fans in January, president and general manager Chris Drury announced the team was entering a retool. Shortly after, he traded Panarin, and more changes will likely follow this offseason. Zibanejad says his understanding is that Drury's retool will differ from a full rebuild, which he experienced with the Rangers starting in 2018 and included the team trading multiple core players for picks and prospects.

Zibanejad's \$8.5 million average annual value contract runs through 2029-30, and he has a no-movement clause. He and the team's players with full trade protection can evaluate the team's landscape this summer, but as long as they want to stay in New York, they can.

Reflecting on his time with the Rangers, Zibanejad is grateful for the opportunities the team has given him, be it his position as alternate captain or the big-money contract trusting him to play for a historic club.

"I feel like I thrive in that (environment)," he says. "I'm happy for that opportunity. Each year (has) just been growing to love this place and love this city."

The Rangers face an uncertain future, but Zibanejad doesn't have to focus on that on Monday. He can instead look back at his journey to the 1,000 game milestone and bathe in the adulation that comes with it.

"We should all appreciate him for what he's done, what he's doing, what he will do," Kreider says. "He's one of a kind."

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1224253 Websites

The Athletic / NHL awards WATCH: Nikita Kucherov, Zach Werenski make strong push against Avalanche's top duo

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Throughout the season, I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers, of course, aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players that may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

Welcome to the fourth edition of this year's NHL Awards watch. With roughly 10 to 12 games to go, a lot of races look like they'll be headed down to the wire and it's worth checking in on things before one final update near the end of the season.

While the Calder and Selke look like safe races, the Hart and Norris continue to look spicy, where it's become difficult to argue that either has a clear frontrunner.

Everything can still change over the final stretch, but for now, we've got a lot of interesting things to watch across the board. Based on my interpretation of the numbers, here's how each of the key races currently shakes out.

Data as of March 22

Hart Trophy

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

Criteria: The best players on each team, ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

With each passing game with yet another ludicrous stat line, Nikita Kucherov inches closer and closer to the top of the Net Rating leaderboard. Last week, he passed Connor McDavid, and on a per-82 basis, he's now neck-and-neck with Nathan MacKinnon. With respect to the best player in the world who has not been as other-worldly at five-on-five this season as his competition, he's probably the clear third choice. This is now shaping up to be a two-horse race.

The case for Nikita Kucherov

Tampa Bay Lightning fans have long lamented Kucherov's placement within the Hart Trophy race, according to Net Rating. Despite winning back-to-back Art Ross trophies, Kucherov wasn't the frontrunner in either season. My consistent position is that the Hart Trophy is not a trophy for production; that already exists and Kucherov won that award each year. That was the story of his season, and while there is often overlap between the two awards, it should be important to keep each award distinct.

Points are important, but they are not the total embodiment of a player's value. That should be obvious by the fact that I have Moritz Seider on this list (among other defenders), and it's not a slight against Kucherov alone. It's been a constant practice here, going back to Leon Draisaitl's Hart win despite a shoddy defensive effort that season. There's more to hockey than putting up points, and that's usually been the argument against Kucherov, whose offense always put him close enough, but not at the top.

In prior seasons, it was Kucherov's weaker defensive game or lesser ability to drive play at five-on-five compared to MacKinnon or McDavid in



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those seasons. Any gap in production was made up elsewhere, but that is not the case this season. While Kucherov's defense is not at the same level as MacKinnon's, his offensive game has become so transcendent that it's made up for the difference.

The difference in what Kucherov has done at five-on-five over the last three seasons is telling, where Kucherov is putting up close to career-best numbers at five-on-five.

2023-24

xG: 52.6%

Goals: 51.6%

2024-25

xG: 54.3%

Goals: 63.0%

2025-26

xG: 57.7%

Goals: 66.4%

Offensively, Kucherov's xGF/60 is up from 3.1 to 3.8 while his GF/60 is up from 3.9 to 5.0. That last mark could be only the first time a player has been on the ice for over five goals-per-60 at five-on-five over a full season (Sidney Crosby was at 5.16 in 2012-13, a year where he was absolutely robbed of the Hart, by the way).

All of that has led to him lapping the field in points with 118 in 64 games, 99 of which have come over the last 46 games, where the only past comparable for him is either Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux. It's special stuff that is in many ways a clear leap from Kucherov's last two seasons

The case for Nathan MacKinnon

The main argument for MacKinnon, the front-runner all season, is a more complete game at five-on-five that manifests on the scoreboard. MacKinnon's point rate is slightly behind Kucherov's, but he's outscoring opposing teams 87-31 at five-on-five, two goals shy of Johnny Gaudreau's plus-58 in 2021-22.

There will be those who bemoan that MacKinnon's goal impact is doing a lot of the heavy lifting here over his expected goal impact (plus-17.4, third among forwards). While it's important to be careful with on-ice goal data, I don't believe it's worth ignoring completely, especially when telling the story of MacKinnon's season.

It may regress in the future, but it's still something he was a part of this year, where he has been the primary driver of the Colorado Avalanche's incredible might at five-on-five. The Avalanche are plus-77 at five-on-five this season, eight goals back of the 2022-23 Boston Bruins for most in the analytics era, and that's largely thanks to MacKinnon. Within the context of the model, the balance between his expected and actual goal differential comes out to plus-27.4, a bit ahead of Kucherov's plus-25.7 but with a more defensive slant.

That's while playing the toughest minutes on Colorado, something Kucherov is comparatively shielded from with the Lightning, thanks to their shutdown line led by Selke hopeful Yannick Gourde. When the pace ramps up against tough competition at the top of the lineup, being able to tilt the score with that much dominance is a massive deal and something always worth considering.

On top of that, the hierarchy of production is also in MacKinnon's favor, where having five more goals than Kucherov, who has seven more secondary assists, does matter to an extent.

Both have been phenomenal this season, and while my current lean is toward Kucherov, it should be a tight race down to the very finish.

McDavid making things interesting without Draisaitl is still on the table, too.

After a very clear top three, there's a bit of a drop-off. This has been a terrific season for defensemen leading their team, and I would love to see some of the best occupy more ballots this year. Lane Hutson, Seider, Zach Werenski, Rasmus Dahlin and Quinn Hughes all deserve it. Logan Thompson between the pipes is a worthy choice, though some may disqualify him for not being on a playoff team.

Among forwards, there really is a massive gap between McDavid in third and then the rest. Jason Robertson is next at plus-17.6 and has been great, but he hasn't generated much buzz. Macklin Celebrini is a more obvious choice given what he's done relative to his teammates this year; a plus-16.0 Net Rating with the next best San Jose Shark at plus-3.7. That's worthy enough to get some attention and will be an easy sell for the "most valuable to his team" people.

Personally, I've always believed the most valuable meant the most value added. That makes the significant gap between him and McDavid in third a bit tough to overlook for consideration within the top three, though he'll definitely be an option for the fourth or fifth slots.

Norris Trophy

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-around ability in the position.

Criteria: Defensemen ranked by Net Rating.

This is, without question, the best Norris trophy race in recent memory. There have never been this many elite defensemen dominating to this degree all at once, and it signals a real league-wide shift at the position. Of these 10, eight have a legitimate case to be made (apologies to the injured Jake Sanderson and the still hard-to-believe Darren Raddysh).

Cale Makar has been the front-runner all season, and the best way I can describe his case is that he's the jack-of-all-trades option. He's not the most productive (Evan Bouchard), he's not the best individual driver (Werenski), he's not the best defensively (Seider) and he's not the best if you ignore the Vancouver Canucks' existence (Hughes). But he is perhaps the best combination of every facet, with a higher Defensive Rating than the other offensive standouts, and a higher Offensive Rating than the shutdown types. Dahlin is a terrific choice in a similar facet, and you can surprisingly make the same argument for Hutson, even if he doesn't play a matchup role like the rest of the list.

The primary argument against Makar is how much his numbers are influenced by playing with MacKinnon. While I account for that to a decent extent, there is enough to give some pause with such a strong field — though Makar's drop in xG without MacKinnon has been more muted this season (56 percent without compared to 50 percent last year). I don't want to ignore what he does with MacKinnon or give MacKinnon 100 percent of the credit for that, nor do I want to ignore the context of why that happens (MacKinnon changing early, Makar taking on tough minutes in a more defensive posture). But it is something worth considering. To his biggest detractors, suggesting he's just a MacKinnon merchant, though, his microstats clearly show just how involved Makar is with and without the puck. Entries, exits, retrievals, scoring chance contributions — Makar is elite in every facet. He's a major reason the Avalanche are such a powerhouse and is still probably the best all-around option.

But if it ends up being really close between him and Werenski, it's extremely hard to ignore how good Werenski is as the primary driver on the Columbus Blue Jackets. Werenski's defensive game is a little weaker, but offensively, he's done so much as the focal point. The raw Net Rating also doesn't reflect that Werenski has been a shade better per-game with a Net Rating per 82 of plus-25.5 (Makar is at plus-25.2). A few games missed shouldn't be the deciding factor between the two, an argument



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that's been in Makar's favor a few times during his career. At the moment, I would lean toward Werenski as my top choice for that reason.

On the defensive-driver front, the group of eligible players has never been better, though it's a shame Sanderson had to get injured. Miro Heiskanen is putting up a tremendous two-way season, but it's Seider who continues to be the standout. It may be really difficult for voters to overlook the lesser scoring, but what Seider has done at both ends of the ice in difficult minutes has been just as impactful. He's been Detroit's best player all season, and the gap between what the Red Wings have been with and without him is of an exceptional magnitude. Few defenseman have ever posted a plus-10 Defensive Rating, and none have ever added a plus-10 Offensive Rating on top of it. Seider is one of one in that regard, and that deserves recognition. If there was ever a time for voters to prove that the Norris isn't just the defenseman Art Ross and to vote for a true two-way workhorse with an immense defensive impact, that time is now.

Lastly, there are the offensive drivers. Bouchard's production is obviously off-the-charts good, even within the context of playing with McDavid. He leads all defenders in Offensive Rating and is on pace to clear 90 points. But the defensive issues are a lot more real this season, where he's the only defenseman with a negative Defensive Rating in the top 10. This year, he's been on the ice for 0.54 more xGA/60 compared to last season. In terms of pure offense, Hughes is probably the better choice, especially depending on how much one ignores his tenure in Vancouver. Since arriving in Minnesota, he has a plus-14.3 Net rating over 39 games — a plus-30 pace. That's frontrunner material.

All of that makes the Norris feel like a uniquely impossible decision this year, where the bar has been raised considerably. No matter which five make the ballot, some really amazing seasons are going to be left off.

Selke Trophy

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

Criteria: Forwards who play over 16 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face top-line forward competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

Nick Suzuki remains the Selke favorite as he continues to excel at both ends of the ice this season. Suzuki plays the toughest matchups, takes on a heavy load and churns out elite defensive results anyway. With him on the ice, the Montreal Canadiens allow 0.19 fewer expected goals and 0.35 fewer actual goals per 60.

There are also not a lot of go-to candidates threatening him. Sam Reinhart has been great, but not his usual self without his Batman. Nico Hischier, a popular preseason pick, has struggled to limit chances. Auston Matthews has been saddled by a poor system and Max Domi. Mitch Marner is close but doesn't fit the criteria as well as Jack Eichel, whose results are only strong within the context of his minutes and not in spite of them like Suzuki's. And there are no usual Carolina Hurricanes either.

Then there's Gourde, who is taking on Anthony Cirelli's usual role as the matchup center with fantastic results, but with nowhere near the same fanfare. Gourde should be firmly in the mix, but there's a chance that his vote is cannibalized by Cirelli, who is playing easier minutes and has still been on for 0.86 (!!!) more expected goals against per 60.

Perhaps there's some love for the Ottawa Senators' shutdown line, as both Michael Amadio and Shane Pinto have been excellent at asserting Ottawa's defensive identity this season. Noah Cates has been a defensive star for the Philadelphia Flyers, and Charlie Coyle remains in the mix. Maybe even someone from the Avalanche, whether that's Mackinnon, Artturi Lehkonen, Brock Nelson, or even Jack Drury in the bottom six.

But without many household names really challenging Suzuki, a trophy often awarded with reputation in mind, will surely be his to lose.

Other candidates who didn't match the criteria

Doesn't play enough

Mathieu Olivier: +3.8 Defensive Rating (14.4 minutes per game)

Doesn't kill penalties

Nathan MacKinnon: +4.5 Defensive Rating (0 PK minutes per game)

Doesn't get matchups

Mitch Marner: +3.6 Defensive Rating (72% usage)

Calder Trophy

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

Criteria: Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

The Calder is still Matthew Schaefer's to lose, and he's put an exclamation point on the whole thing since the Olympic break.

Schaefer has been a point-per-game defender while boasting a near 60 percent xG rate in tough minutes. That's created a substantial eight-goal gap between him and the next most valuable rookie. This race isn't even close. For even further context, Schaefer is on pace for a plus-13.8 Net Rating season, which trails only Makar's plus-15.7 from his rookie season among defensemen. Given the three-year age difference, Schaefer has a case for the most impressive rookie defenseman season in the salary cap era (and maybe ever).

Filling out the ballot behind Schaefer (who should be unanimous, he's been that good) is a little trickier. Ivan Demidov and Beckett Sennecke are the obvious choices given their scoring, but defensive question marks do lessen their value slightly. Alexander Nikishin pulls out slightly ahead for his ability to drive play with the Hurricanes, but doing that in a sheltered role on that specific team definitely warrants some skepticism. Justin Sourdif won't be a sexy pick, but his defensive acumen as a rookie looks legit. Add the two rookie goalies, and it becomes a tough list to whittle down.

Vezina Trophy

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

Criteria: Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving Hockey, Hockey Stats and MoneyPuck.

It probably won't be Thompson, but it should be Thompson who has pulled ahead of Ilya Sorokin considerably since the Olympic break. His 11.2 GSx since returning is third in the league, while Sorokin has slowed to just average, giving Thompson a five-goal cushion over second place.

For the season, Thompson leads the league in GSx via all three xG sources, and by that rubric has been the league's best goalie. Yes, the Washington Capitals are unlikely to make the playoffs, but it's starting to look like the New York Islanders won't either. That's far from either goalie's fault, considering how superb they've been at stopping pucks despite the high danger allowed. Both Thompson and Sorokin have the lowest expected save percentage here, but it's Thompson's actual save percentage of .915 that edges out Sorokin's .911.

The lack of playoffs may shift some consideration toward Andrei Vasilevskiy and Jeremy Swayman instead. While Vasilevskiy deserves to be on ballots, it may be for the wrong reasons (wins), with Tampa Bay's defense making things a lot easier for him compared to his contemporaries. That's true of Thompson and Sorokin, but also of



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Swayman, whose .907 trails Vasilevskiy's .911, but is more impressive behind a leakier Bruins group.

The big surprise on this list has to be Alex Lyon, who has been a major story for the Buffalo Sabres during their epic streak. Since Dec. 9 in particular, Lyon has a league-leading .925 and has saved 16.1 goals above expected in just 19 games.

Art Ross Trophy

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

Kucherov's Gretzkian run over the last 45 or so games has put him in the driver's seat for his third straight Art Ross trophy. Considering his competition during that time, that's an incredibly impressive feat. Kucherov is currently two points up on McDavid, but has three team games in hand and should be able to maintain his current lead — especially with Draisaitl out for the regular season.

Rocket Richard Trophy

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

Cole Caufield has made the race a little spicier after the Olympic break, especially after a Saturday night hat trick that pulled him within two of MacKinnon. That has him flirting with his first 50-goal season, though MacKinnon is still projected to hold on to this one.

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1224254 Websites

The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: The Pacific Division stinks, and other emerging storylines

By Sean McIndoe

It was an unusually busy weekend in the NHL, with 20 games. That gives us plenty to dig into, including some storylines that are getting hard to ignore.

Bonus Five: Storylines that stood out from a busy weekend

5. The Pacific is a mess — You may have seen this stat floating around about all six Pacific teams in action on Saturday losing by multiple goals, which on the surface doesn't tell us a ton about the division, but certainly fits with the overall narrative. You almost definitely heard Connor McDavid's sound bite about the playoff race being a "pillow fight." You may even have noticed that the division's "best" team, Anaheim, has fewer points on the year than the Red Wings, who are in danger of missing the Eastern playoffs entirely.

Yeah, it's bad. And it's going to draw even more ire toward the NHL's playoff format and Gary Bettman's insistence that nothing should ever change.

And while the whole division is in tough shape, one team stands out ...

4. I'm no longer sure the Golden Knights are good — They might still be good enough, at least by Pacific standards. And they were good enough to beat the Stars last night. But with three straight losses before that, during which they've managed to score just one goal, the Knights have been spiraling. And this isn't a case of a dominant team taking its foot off the gas over the course of a long season. The Knights have now won 32

out of 71 games. That's fewer than teams such as the Devils, Panthers and Predators.

Vegas is still in the running for the Pacific title, thanks to 14 loser points and the fact that, again, the division stinks. But this no longer looks like a team that we should assume will be able to flip a switch in April. On too many nights, they've looked flat-out bad.

3. We may have been too quick to write off the Flyers — Everyone expected them to struggle this year, and while they were a nice early story, they'd slipped out of the race for good by midseason. Or so it seemed, because they're back in play. After sweeping their California trip, they've now won nine of 12 and moved within five points of a playoff spot. They're still long shots, but they're in the fight. And they play the Red Wings three more times before the end of the season.

2. The Islanders needed that win last night — It had been shaping up as a disastrous week. They'd blown at least a point in a buzzer-beater loss to the Senators, then collapsed and been overpowered in Montreal. A loss to the red-hot Blue Jackets would have felt disastrous. Instead, they got an Ilya Sorokin shutout and a 1-0 win that may have saved the season. Remember this one when Sorokin shows up on Hart ballots.

1. The Predators might actually do this — Somebody has to grab that last Western playoff spot, and none of the Pacific teams seem to want it. That leaves Nashville, which won twice over the weekend to run its streak to four. Not bad for a team that was selling at the deadline. Outgoing GM Barry Trotz raised some eyebrows with that approach, which saw him move out depth pieces for picks without touching his veteran core. Now it seems like he may have played it exactly right.

On to this week's rankings ...

Road to the Cup

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

He did it. Alex Ovechkin has scored 1,000 goals in the NHL, counting playoffs and regular season. He hit the mark yesterday against the Avalanche on a play that looked just slightly familiar.

5. Tampa Bay Lightning (43-21-5, +57*) — The Nikita Kucherov MVP campaign seems to be picking up steam, and rightly so. He has 13 points in his last four games, which feels like video game numbers. He's now passed McDavid for the scoring lead, putting him on pace to win his fourth Art Ross (and third straight). Is it possible for a guy to have more scoring titles than Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Leon Draisaitl combined and still be underrated? Actually, yeah, it might be.

4. Buffalo Sabres (44-20-7, +40) — The votes are in, and Sabres fans have spoken. And the bandwagon is ... open for business, by a pretty overwhelming majority in the range of 80 percent. That's what I'd figured, because Sabres fans are cool. But if you were looking forward to this particular field trip, consider your permission form signed.

Also, this guy gets it.

3. Carolina Hurricanes (45-19-6, +42) — Two wins over the Penguins pretty much wrap up the Metro, and leave them just one win back of the Avalanche for the most in the league.

2. Dallas Stars (43-16-11, +49) — Well, we had a few days where it looked like they might catch the Avs. That was fun, right? Regardless, they still got an "X" on the standings page Sunday, which brings us to ...

1. Colorado Avalanche (46-13-10, +85) — A sure sign of spring: We had our first "X" on the standings page earlier, as the Avs officially clinched a playoff spot. Breathe easy, Colorado fans, I know you were all on the edge of your seats about making it.

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



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Not ranked: Minnesota Wild — This is the first time in a while that the Wild aren't in our top five, a spot they've held down consistently since making their debut on Dec. 15. Not coincidentally, that happened to be the first weekend rankings after the Quinn Hughes blockbuster, a trade that singlehandedly transformed the Wild from a solid sleeper to an elite contender.

Or did it? Four months later and with the season winding down, are the Wild starting to fade?

Their recent record says so. Since going into the Olympic break on a five-game heater, the Wild are a pedestrian 6-5-2. That record includes regulation losses to also-rans such as the Rangers, Blues, Leafs and Hawks, which is tricky — it could be the sign of a team in trouble, or merely one that's already looking past the dregs and ahead to the playoffs. But either way, the slump has been enough to end any faint hope of the Wild moving into the top spot in the Central. They're now locked into a brutal first-round matchup against the Stars, one they'll almost certainly start on the road. And if they do manage to beat them, they'll almost certainly have to do it all over again in Round 2 against Colorado.

So, can you be a Cup favorite when you're going to be an underdog in each of the first two rounds?

One side of the coin says no, obviously not. The other says you could be, but only if you're a truly great team that would emerge from those first two rounds as the clear favorite the rest of the way. Do the Wild fit into that category?

We've spent most of the year assuming they did, which is why they've been in almost every top five since the Hughes trade. But we're getting down to the wire here, and the standings are starting to lock into place. Even a month ago, the Wild's playoff path was a problem we could kick down the road. Not anymore.

They did beat the Stars on Saturday, although it took overtime. That was an impressive statement, and it gives them a little bit of momentum heading into tomorrow's matchup with the Lightning. But barring a Dallas collapse, the Wild are going to finish third in the Central, even if they also finish third overall. And given that, I'm just not sure I see a way to keep them in the top five.

I'm open to arguments, though. Wild fans, if you want to make the case that your team still deserves its spot, have at it in the comments. And if so, be sure to let me know if you think that spot should come at the expense of another Central team, or if we should have room for all three.

The bottom five

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

All the best to Ryan Reaves, who was hurt in a fight on Saturday and looks likely to miss time. If this is it for the 39-year-old, you can't say he didn't make the absolute most of his skill set over a 16-year career. We won't see many more like him.

5. St. Louis Blues (28-30-11, -41) — Great piece here on Jake Neighbours.

4. Calgary Flames (29-34-7, -40) — We're at the point of a tank lottery-focused stretch run where schedule matters. On that note, it's worth mentioning that the Flames have just one of their last 12 games against a team that isn't either holding down a playoff spot or in a tight race for one. That lone game is next Saturday against the Canucks; other than that, it's all teams that, in theory, should have plenty to play for.

3. Chicago Blackhawks (26-31-13, -40) — Hawks fans, are we at all concerned about Connor Bedard's production since he returned from injury? He's scoring at around a 70-point pace, which is good for a young

player on a bad team. But it's well off the 116-point pace he was on before he got hurt, one that had him firmly in the Team Canada conversation alongside Macklin Celebrini. Since then, Celebrini has only burned brighter, while Bedard has come back to the pack a little. He's not a bust, but are we back to wondering if he's going to be a franchise difference-maker?

2. New York Rangers (28-33-9, -28) — Rangers fans will find some good stuff on Igor Shesterkin in this Granger piece about the league's most consistent goalies.

1. Vancouver Canucks (21-40-8, -81) — This goes well beyond the Canucks, but I was fascinated by Drance's take on how the rising cap could change the way we view long-term contracts. In short, if cap space is no longer scarce, does that mean teams should move away from the "max length, low cap hit" approach that's become the leaguewide standard, and start paying up for better term? And if so, which teams will be the first to figure that out?

Not ranked: Utah Mammoth — Here's what we know about the Mammoth after 71 games.

First, they're making the playoffs. Second, they're going to be a wild card. And third, they're going to cross over to the Pacific Division.

That last one was at least a little bit in play until last night's win over the Kings, but we can probably set it in stone now.

Otherwise, all of that feels like it's been locked in for a while now, to the extent that you wonder if it's had any impact on how the team has been playing. It's rare for a playoff-bound team to have next-to-nothing to play for down the stretch — not seeding, not home ice, not much of anything. Just stay healthy, clean up some details and finish strong enough to bring a little bit of momentum with you.

The question is whether there's going to be more to the story once the playoffs arrive. In theory, the Mammoth will be heading over to a very winnable side of the Western bracket, while avoiding the Central mess. They could play the Ducks in Round 1, a young team that's talented but could have a playoff learning curve. Utah would too — the Coyotes' last playoff appearance was in 2020 — but I'd be willing to bet that the expert picks on a Ducks/Mammoth series would be close, and maybe even lean to Utah.

(Note that while it's very possible that the Mammoth could enter the playoffs with the best record among "Pacific" teams, they wouldn't have home ice. They'd be the division's fourth seed no matter what.)

If they faced and beat the Ducks, then up next would be whichever team emerged from an Oilers/Knights matchup. That team would be favored, but also potentially beat up after a tough round. There's a path here for the Mammoth, one that would lead them to become the first team in the NHL's crossover format era to win a division they're not even in.

If that happened, we can all agree on two things: They absolutely have to hang a "Pacific Champions" banner, and nobody would be picking them to beat the Avs, Stars or Wild. But then again, we've all been wrong before.

Given the new-car smell still lingering over a Utah team, it's easy to start getting excited about where this could all lead. Then again, this is a team that was 8-2-0 after 10 games and only 29-26-6 since. Their underlying numbers are good, but not so much so that they feel like a hidden contender, such as the Blue Jackets or Senators. Instead, it feels like the Mammoth are good but not great, at least not yet.

Is "good" good enough? In the Pacific, it might be, although the most likely scenario still feels like the Oilers and/or Knights finally finding a gear. The Mammoth might be the trendy long-shot pick of the postseason. They might also be a predictable early out.



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Just as long as we all agree about the banner. Get to work on that now, Utah, just in case.

Finally, the hockey community suffered a terrible tragedy over the weekend. Let's all send our support and good thoughts to the family and friends of Jessi Pierce, and to the many people she touched through her love of the game.

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1224255 Websites

ESPN / Inside Jack Hughes' first month as USA Olympic hockey hero - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

NEWARK, NJ -- Jack Hughes estimates that he has watched his overtime goal against Canada about 50 times, the one that delivered Olympic gold to the U.S. men's hockey team for the first time since 1980. He notices new aspects of the play with each viewing, along with an undercurrent of existential dread.

"I just get nervous watching it. Like, what if it doesn't go in this time?" he told ESPN last week, seated inside a suite at Prudential Center, home to his club, the New Jersey Devils.

But on every viewing, the puck always flies past goalie Jordan Binnington and gets wedged near the in-net camera. Hughes didn't realize it was a goal until he saw his longtime friend Dylan Larkin deliriously sprinting at him for a celebration 46 years in the making, the last time Team USA won Olympic gold.

In the deluge of congratulatory messages that Hughes received, one stood out as the most surreal: actor Kurt Russell, who played coaching legend Herb Brooks in the movie "Miracle," underscoring the 2026 team's historic win.

"It changed all of our lives. We're champions. We're Olympic gold medalists. To break that streak and win a gold medal, it bonds us forever," Hughes said after returning from Milan. "It'll never be about one person. It's all about the USA Hockey brotherhood. We're just such a team."

At every turn, Hughes has tried to redirect praise for his "golden goal" to his teammates. In the postgame interview immediately after the gold medal win over Canada, Hughes gushed about the "ballsy, gutsy" win by his teammates. The first player he mentioned was goalie Connor Hellebuyck, who made 41 saves, as "our best player tonight by a mile."

"It'll never be about the 'golden goal.' It'll be about our three weeks at the Olympics, that we're champions, and what a special time it was," Hughes said.

But try as Hughes might, it has very much been about the "golden goal" since the team returned from Milan.

That's unavoidable. Think about the "Miracle on Ice" 1980 team: Goalie Jim Craig is credited with being the backbone for the win over Russia and subsequent gold medal victory against Finland. But Mike Eruzione is the American sports legend for scoring the winner against the Russians, his name becoming synonymous with the "Miracle" and still earning him appearance fees 46 years later.

People who don't talk about hockey are talking about Jack Hughes. He has landed on morning talk shows and late-night comedy shows. His words carry significantly more consequence, whether they're about the controversies born out of Team USA's gold medal celebrations or his

desire to own the "golden goal" puck instead of the Hockey Hall of Fame. In the NHL, he's getting cheers in places where he has been traditionally jeered. In one month, he has moved from hockey star to sports icon.

Look no further than the photo snapped by Elsa Garrison at the Olympics: Jack Hughes draped in an American flag, his right fist raised in celebration, his jubilant smile dotted with blood-soaked broken teeth. It's an instant poster. It's a T-shirt worn by ESPN's Pat McAfee while interviewing Hughes. New York Yankees star Aaron Judge said the photo was sent around the World Baseball Classic group chat as shorthand for American athletic excellence.

"I don't even like that photo. I just look like an idiot with no teeth," Hughes said, self-deprecatingly. "But obviously, it's a really cool picture. I know it's gotten a lot of love."

The past month since the "golden goal" has been a lot. Agent Pat Brisson believes no one on Team USA was more prepared or enthusiastic about this star-making moment than Jack Hughes.

"It couldn't have been a better person, in that sense. He's not just a hockey player. He's very smart, well-read. Hockey is his passion, but he also has a lot of interest about the world, understanding different cultures and understanding his generation," said Brisson, who has known Hughes since the latter was 10 years old.

"So, when this moment happened -- I called it 'the tsunami' because no one expects it's coming and then like boom it hits -- Jack is equipped to handle it," he said. "Not everyone's equipped. There's a lot of great players who would've taken the moment and done a great job, but he's taken it to another level."

Look no further than the whirlwind tour of high-profile appearances Hughes made in the wake of the "golden goal."

Feb. 27: "The Pat McAfee Show"

Pat McAfee was one of Team USA's biggest fans before he became the players' wealthy benefactor.

When the players arrived back in the U.S., the gold medal celebration began in Miami. The players strolled a red carpet into E11EVEN, the all-night party spot that has hosted championship celebrations for the Florida Panthers and the Indiana Hoosiers football team.

During the festivities, McAfee appeared in a video in an American flag tank top to tell the players that their drinks that night were on him, E11EVEN, and "the rest of the United States of America" -- and considering that the champagne tab alone was \$150,000, according to the club, it was a significant gift.

Hughes said that McAfee had been in touch with the team throughout its journey in Milan to offer support.

"Then obviously after we won, he was probably on the FaceTime list for all the boys," Hughes said.

Hughes was booked on McAfee's ESPN afternoon show at a geographically advantageous time. The Devils played in Pittsburgh on Feb. 26 and were headed to St. Louis for a game on Feb. 28. The McAfee show was on site at the NFL combine in Indianapolis.

The candid, half-hour conversation covered everything from Hughes' missing teeth ("I don't have a dental plan yet") to the USA vs. Canada rivalry ("It's very intense right now."). At the end, McAfee surprised Hughes with a shooting challenge: fire a street-hockey ball into a large round hole on a trash-bin-sized pillar and get \$100,000 for the charity of Hughes' choice.

Easy, right?

"That was the most nervous I'd been in the two weeks since the Olympics," Hughes said. "We were just hanging out and chopping it up



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and then the next thing you know ... they never mentioned that to me, and then they're like, "We're doing a \$100,000 shot."

play

1:36

Jack Hughes always dreamed of his gold medal moment

Jack Hughes tells Pat McAfee what it was like scoring the game winner for the U.S. men's hockey team.

Hughes had seen "a million" editions of McAfee's football kicking challenge on "ESPN College GameDay," and now understood the emotional dynamics of those moments. "I'm on the ramp. It's live TV. I was just like, 'I'm nervous as hell,'" he said.

It might not have been taking a shot to win Olympic gold in overtime, but Hughes still came through in the clutch, sinking the ball in the target before a celebratory embrace with McAfee.

One of the charities benefiting from Hughes' shot: the Gaudreau Family Foundation, which honors the legacies of the late Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

Feb. 28: "Saturday Night Live"

The week leading up to a new episode of "Saturday Night Live" gives the cast and its guest host time to get familiar with the material. That includes a full dress rehearsal show in front of a live audience on the same night as the live edition that airs later at 11:30 p.m. ET.

Jack's brother Quinn Hughes, the Minnesota Wild defenseman and Team USA star, attended "dress" and practiced the opening monologue bit that featured the Hughes brothers being joined on stage by U.S. women's Olympic gold medalists Megan Keller and Hilary Knight. Jack Hughes was playing for the Devils in St. Louis around that time, and barely made it to the live show in a whirlwind of air travel.

Jack and Luke Hughes, his younger brother and Devils teammate, were given a police escort from Enterprise Center to a small airfield where a private jet awaited them. Among the passengers were Devils owners David and Allison Blitzer. The flight landed at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, then it was a helicopter ride across the river to Manhattan, followed by a swift car ride with another police escort to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, arriving at the SNL studios with less than an hour before the show went live.

"I was just lucky I made it on time. The big winners were my owners, the Blitzer family. They were such beauties getting me there," Jack Hughes said. "It was unbelievable to travel from St. Louis to New York. I didn't even think about the show until I was walking up on stage because I was just like, 'I played a game, and I don't know if I'm even going to get there on time.'

"Once we got there on time, we're gearing up to do it. I see my lines once, and then that's it. But then, I just go up, and there's cue cards. And I'm looking around, but I forget that I have to look at the cue cards. It was so, so fun."

Being part of the show gave Hughes entry to one of New York's most exclusive traditions: the SNL afterparty, which The Athletic reported was held at Mermaid Oyster Bar. Jack, Quinn, Luke and their family spent much of it hanging out with SNL creator Lorne Michaels.

"He's from Toronto. Big sports fan. Big hockey fan," Hughes said of Michaels. "The three of us were kind of grilling him because he's been a part of the New York scene for forever, and he just had so many amazing stories for us."

That episode of SNL brought together two of the most famous hockey players in pop culture: Jack Hughes of Olympic heroism and Ilya

Rozanov of "Heated Rivalry," aka host Connor Storrie. The HBO Max sensation was inevitably going to be a topic in the monologue.

Jack Hughes: "I got my teeth knocked out in the finals. Does that happen on your show?"

Connor Storrie: "Metaphorically."

Hughes still hasn't seen "Heated Rivalry," but was left impressed by its star.

"He was a super nice guy. I was really impressed with him. Just a really cool, normal, gracious guy," he said of Storrie.

March 3: "The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon"

It was announced before the unexpected SNL drop-in that Jack, Quinn and Hilary Knight would all appear on "The Tonight Show" together to celebrate Team USA's double gold. A surreal month got even more surreal when host Jimmy Fallon brought actress -- and noted Nashville Predators supporter -- Nicole Kidman to meet the Hughes brothers in their dressing room before the show.

Jack Hughes said it was a less intense atmosphere than SNL, thanks in part to the host.

"We were just a small part of SNL. It's a skit, and it's so cool to be a part of that," he said. "And then you're on this other legendary show with Fallon doing a sit-down interview. And he's such an easy guy. So much energy, and he makes it really easy for us."

Even if the host of "The Tonight Show" is a fan of the Devils' most hated rival.

"I think he is a big Rangers fan. That's fine, though. He's a New York legend, so that was cool to be a part of," Hughes said.

Of course, Hughes and Rangers fans have a different relationship thanks to Olympic gold. The same could be said for a lot of other hockey fans, whose views on Hughes have changed -- for better or worse.

DEVILS HOME GAMES against the Rangers are always a house divided: red jerseys next to blue jerseys, with both teams getting cheered and booed.

But when Jack Hughes scored the second goal of his hat trick against New York on March 7, the Prudential Center crowd erupted with a "U-S-A!" chant to honor him.

"After the Olympics, I've got Rangers fans cheering for me," he said. "It's an unbelievable fan base, but in the past, they used to say something nice and then say, 'Go Rangers!' Now, we're all Americans. It's really cool that that happened."

In the Devils' first game against the Rangers at Madison Square Garden after the Olympic break, a large sign dotted the stands near the Devils' bench that read "RED, WHITE AND HUGHES." When New Jersey visited the Pittsburgh Penguins, Hughes heard cheers.

"I always felt like when I go on the road that I see a ton of Hughes jerseys on the glass for warmups and stuff, but it's definitely at a different level now. And it's really fun for me getting cheered by Rangers fans, just because the Devils-Rangers rivalry is so unreal," he said.

"So many Devils fans live in New York. So many Rangers fans live in New Jersey. So you're always bumping into people and you don't know if they're going to say 'Go Rangers!' or 'Go Devils!' but it doesn't matter who it's been. They've all been pretty fired up as of late."

play

0:32

Jack Hughes gets an ovation from the Pittsburgh crowd



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Devils forward Jack Hughes, who scored the winning goal for USA hockey team, gets a rousing ovation from Pittsburgh fans.

Of course, some people have been "fired up" about Hughes and his teammates for dramatically different reasons after they won gold.

During the team's locker room celebration in Milan, which featured FBI director Kash Patel as a guest, President Donald Trump invited the players to visit the White House and attend the State of the Union address.

As Patel held the phone, Trump said, "I must tell you, we're going to have to bring the women's team, you do know that," adding jokingly that if he didn't also invite the women's team, "I do believe I probably would be impeached."

Some U.S. players laughed at the comments, a reaction that drew harsh criticism when the video went viral.

"You're in the moment, the president calls, we're blaring the music. It is what it is now, but we have so much respect for the women's team. They have so much respect for us. We're all just proud Americans, and we're happy we swept the Olympics," Hughes said after returning from the Olympics.

The U.S. women's hockey team, which won gold for the third time since the Olympics added the women's competition in 1998, declined an invitation from Trump to attend the State of the Union, citing logistics and scheduling concerns. The men's team, except for five players who cited scheduling considerations, met Trump and members of his administration at the White House. The majority of the team, including Jack and Quinn Hughes, attended the State of the Union as honored guests.

Their decision was met with derision. ESPN radio host Peter Rosenberg called the players "sad little pawns." Said Mary Clarke of USA Today: "With hockey at the peak of its popularity in the pop culture zeitgeist, the United States men's team failed to meet the moment."

After attending the State of the Union, Hughes responded to the criticism by saying, "You got to remember we're just hockey players," and "we were so proud to be back in the U.S. and celebrating with our teammates."

The weeks after the gold medal win were overshadowed by these controversies. Jack and Quinn Hughes were asked about them on "Good Morning America." Jack Hughes addressed them on the red carpet at E11EVEN, saying, "No matter what your views are, we're super excited to go to the White House and be a part of that."

The Hughes brothers' cameo on SNL was even impacted by the controversy. According to The Athletic, the original plan was to have Jack and Quinn Hughes appear during the monologue, but in the wake of Trump's joke and the backlash, SNL suggested that Keller and Knight be added, which everyone signed off on. Knight joked during the monologue that "It was going to be just us, but we thought we'd invite the guys, too."

play

1:58

Jack Hughes praises U.S. men's and women's hockey teams winning gold

Jack Hughes receives a tribute in return to the Devils, with U.S. teammate Tage Thompson joining in, and praises the U.S. men's and women's hockey teams.

Social media was filled with harsh rebukes of Team USA players. Some of the sentiment around Hughes had shifted, too.

ESPN reported last week that Hughes wanted his "golden goal" puck to gift to his father, saying it was "bulls--- that the Hockey Hall of Fame has it, in my opinion." The Hall of Fame told ESPN that "it was never Jack's

puck to own," citing a preexisting agreement where the International Ice Hockey Federation donates historic items from the Olympic tournament to the Toronto-based Hall of Fame, a nonprofit.

Critics were vocal online, with some calling Hughes "entitled" and citing Sidney Crosby having never sought his "golden goal" from the 2010 Olympics, a puck that is also owned by the Hall of Fame, as a point of comparison.

"I heard so many comments. People started attacking Jack," said Brisson, who said Hughes is fine with the Hall of Fame owning the puck now that he's aware of the IIHF's protocols.

Brisson said the backlash against Team USA and Hughes was indicative of "the world we're navigating," both politically and on social media.

"You're never going to bat a thousand. Everything is magnified, a hundred miles an hour coming at you. Everyone's a Monday morning quarterback," he said. "It's how you deal with what's presented in front of you. With the political climates, [Jack] stayed away from it. He's very smart. He probably has opinions, but he's a very intelligent, equipped ambassador."

All of this illustrates the higher level of awareness Hughes has achieved, not just in the past month but the past several months. Hughes had become celebrity tabloid fodder, having been photographed spending time with pop star Tate McRae around New York City and having her attend a Devils game. But the "golden goal" sent his fame into the stratosphere, as reflected by the offers Brisson is receiving for Hughes post-Olympics.

"Jack always had the 'it' factor. Now, we have more options to do," Brisson said. "He gets to decide much quicker now how this painting's going to look in a few years."

Things have changed for Hughes off the ice after his Olympic heroism. What about on the ice?

"Have you ever found Jack to be short on swagger since the day he stepped in the league?" Devils coach Sheldon Keefe asked.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE for Jack Hughes from a hockey perspective has been his health. He missed 18 games for the Devils after what he called a "freak accident" at a Chicago restaurant in which he sliced his right hand on broken glass, resulting in surgery. He also battled a lower-body injury before leaving for the Olympics.

"Even as he came back, for the stretch of games leading into the Olympics, he's playing essentially with one hand. He's not himself," Keefe said. "And just prior to the Olympics, the brace comes off and he's getting full use of his hand, and he gets that experience that he has in the Olympics, and he comes back and just keeps building his game."

Expectations weren't high for Hughes in Milan. He had what many felt was an underwhelming 4 Nations Face-Off for Team USA, generating one assist while playing out of position on the wing -- although Hughes believes that criticism was misplaced.

"Honestly, I loved my game at 4 Nations. I stand by that. I think a lot of people don't watch the games that closely. It's easy to look at the stats. I fall for it, too," he said. "I was never wavering in my [belief] that I could play in those monster games and make a big impact."

In the Olympics, Hughes had four goals and three assists in six games, skating to a plus-8. He began on the wing of the team's fourth line and played his way up the lineup, eventually ending the tournament with his overtime goal against Canada.

"He's a very special player," said J.T. Miller, the New York Rangers captain who won gold with Hughes on Team USA.

Miller knew Quinn Hughes from their days together on the Vancouver Canucks and got to know Jack in Milan.



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"I have a lot of respect for him as a player. Now, I have more respect for him as a person," Miller said. "I spent a lot of time with him over there. He's got a great heart. He loves America and loves his team."

In his first 12 games with the Devils after the Olympics, Hughes had 19 points (six goals, 13 assists), helping New Jersey to seven wins. But his team noticed something had changed for Hughes attitudinally.

"I think he's definitely sure of himself and maybe a bit more assertive in the way he feels that we should play," said Connor Brown, Hughes' linemate. "He's a leader in this room. I think when you have a guy like that, it can be inspiring down the lineup. And I think that's kind of what you're seeing."

Hughes was surrounded by stars, leaders and captains on Team USA. He said the experience had a considerable impact on him.

"I know I'm a great leader in my own right, but when you get to pick people's brains, you want to bring it back here and just establish that in our room," he said.

Keefe acknowledged that Hughes has been more vocal and assertive after the Olympics. Keefe has been most impressed with how his young star handled the most surreal month of his life.

"He went through a gauntlet when he came back here from the Olympics in terms of our schedule combined with his media obligations that he fulfilled, but he still really helped get our team feeling good and rolling," Keefe said. "Capitalizing on that good energy that he brought back."

play

0:43

Jack Hughes lights the lamp

Jack Hughes tallies goal vs. Rangers

No matter what Hughes does down the stretch, the Devils are likely in another lost season -- as of Sunday, they had a 0.1% chance of making the playoffs, per Money Puck. He has appeared in the playoffs once during his seven-year NHL career, having missed their series against the Carolina Hurricanes last postseason because of injury.

His pro career has been defined by incredible offensive achievement -- his 0.98 points-per-game average ranks 19th among active players (min. 400 games) -- and unfortunately, an unending parade of injuries, as Hughes has played over 70 games just once in his career.

"He's an unbelievable player. He's had a lot of adversity these past couple of years," Luke Hughes said.

The "golden goal" gave Jack Hughes a lot of things -- some wanted, some unwanted -- but perhaps most of all, it gave him something his career needed badly: a win.

"I feel like pro sports are so funny. People are so hot on you and then they're so cold on you. It's like the constant game where they're all about you, then they're off on you, then they're back on you. Obviously, I've had some big years. Then, I've had a bunch of injuries," Hughes said.

"A gold medal, in general, just establishes you as a winner. So, for every guy on our team to win, it just changes USA Hockey. And then, on a personal note, I'm on the fourth line. I have to play through things -- different role, different minutes. I'm only playing 10 minutes a night and still having to find a way to produce and do my thing. So, looking back at that whole experience, if I just look at what I'm most proud of for myself, what I did with what I was given. The amount I accomplished is something I'm proud of."

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ESPN / Ranking best possible Stanley Cup playoff first-round matchups - ESPN

Arda Ocal

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs are right around the corner, and if things stay the way they are right now, we will have a ton of turnover from last season.

The Toronto Maple Leafs, Florida Panthers, Washington Capitals, Ottawa Senators, New Jersey Devils, Winnipeg Jets, Los Angeles Kings and St. Louis Blues are all on the outside looking in at the moment. Meanwhile, the Buffalo Sabres, Pittsburgh Penguins, Columbus Blue Jackets, Boston Bruins, Detroit Red Wings, Anaheim Ducks, Utah Mammoth and Nashville Predators are all ready for the postseason.

Things can and will change before the final day of the regular season April 16, but there should be a lot of fresh faces in this year's Cup chase (hello, Buffalo). With that in mind, what would be the five most exciting first-round matchups that are reasonably possible based on the current standings?

I took every category into consideration, but my No. 1 concern is entertainment value. Which seven-game series would be the most fun between two teams that could plausibly meet in the first round?

Without further ado, here are my five top possible first-round matchups:

The 2-3 matchup in the Central

I'm going to leave the debate about switching to a No. 1-8 seeding aside for this one. There's no denying that, purely in terms of excitement in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs, seeing two of the top five teams in the league battle it out with a Western Conference finals aura is dynamite.

It felt that way last year with the Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars. It also produced one of the most impressive feats in playoff history: Mikko Rantanen's Game 7, third-period hat trick that secured the series victory for Dallas.

The likeliest potential version of it this year is Stars vs. Minnesota Wild, but with Dallas only three points behind the Avs, it could also be Colorado vs. Minnesota. Either of those matchups would be extremely entertaining, and probably the best of the first round in 2026.

Colorado

Avalanche vs.

San Jose

Sharks

I'm not going to hide my excitement about a potential Macklin Celebrini playoff run. He was dynamite at the Olympics, and one of the bright spots of the Team Canada roster. He rose to the occasion, and he certainly could in the postseason. Celebrini vs. Nathan MacKinnon would be appointment viewing.

The Sharks are a lot of people's second-favorite team in the NHL, and Celebrini is a big reason why. I love the way both teams skate with pace and flare, and this could be poetry on a sheet of ice.

Buffalo

Sabres vs.

Montreal



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Canadiens

If the Sabres fall to second in the Atlantic and the Habs remain in third, or if the Habs fall to a wild-card spot that matches Buffalo's standing as No. 1 or No. 2 in the conference, this matchup would be possible.

Just imagine the fan bases for this one. Sabres fans are absolutely starving for postseason hockey, and they will finally get it after a 14-year wait. Montreal is on the Mount Rushmore of greatest hockey towns. This one would be thrilling for the fans and for the atmosphere alone. There would be an absurd amount of talent on the ice, including Cole Caufield, Lane Hutson, Tage Thompson and Rasmus Dahlin. What a treat.

This one also has a statistical edge against other possible matchups. According to Stathletes, a potential matchup between the Sabres and Canadiens would produce the second-highest projected goals per game of any possible first-round matchup -- second only to the Habs against the Tampa Bay Lightning:

Edmonton

Oilers vs.

Los Angeles

Kings

I need this one for the social media reaction. The memes would be flying if L.A. and Edmonton met in the first round for an incredible fifth consecutive season -- of which the Oilers won the previous four.

For the completionists out there, the span currently goes:

2022: 4-3 Oilers win

2023: 4-2 Oilers win

2024: 4-1 Oilers win

2025: 4-2 Oilers win

Therefore, it must be a 4-3 Oilers series win to complete the circle.

Anaheim

Ducks vs.

Nashville

Predators

I love the idea that two teams that weren't in the playoffs last year would face off this year -- especially ones that were so far down the standings in 2024-25.

Last season, these two teams had a combined minus-102 goal differential. This season ... they are still currently at a combined minus-32. It's rare for a team with a negative goal differential to get into the playoffs, let alone two of them facing off in Round 1.

But this feels like a series that would see a lot of scoring. Anaheim is 12th in the league in goals, and both are in the top six in most goals against. Saddle up!

Jump ahead:

Games of the week

What I loved this weekend

Hart Trophy candidates

Social post of the week

Stick taps

Biggest games of the week

All eyes are on the Atlantic Division this week, with many key games on the schedule.

The Sabres are absolutely flying, going 9-1-0 in their past 10 and have only eight regulation losses since December.

The Lightning are 5-5-0 in their past 10 and have a decent hold on second place. The Habs are clinging to third but are tied in points with the Bruins, who are also in the first wild-card spot, two points ahead of the Red Wings (who have the second wild card).

And the Sabres play both the Bruins (Wednesday) and Red Wings (Friday) this week.

Detroit also faces another Atlantic team Tuesday, the Senators, who are three points back, as well as another team fighting for a wild-card spot, the Flyers, on Saturday.

Montreal takes on a pair of Metro Division playoff teams -- Carolina twice and Columbus once -- in addition to the current second West wild card, the Predators, on Saturday.

Hart Trophy contenders if the season ended today

Congratulations Nikita Kucherov, you have unseated Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon to lead the NHL scoring race.

Kucherov scored his 112th point Thursday, pushing MacKinnon to third (even temporarily), which was the first time since Nov. 7 that MacKinnon wasn't in a top-two spot in points in the NHL this season. On Saturday, Kucherov's four-point night vaulted him to the top of the list.

But McDavid remains in first for the Hart, though the race is air-tight now. McDavid is second in the points race with 116 points, with "only" six points in his past five games, with the Oilers in second place in the Pacific.

Kucherov has 119 points after another banger of a week, and a whopping 14 points in his past five games. As noted above, Kucherov's Lightning remain in second in the Atlantic.

MacKinnon -- whose Avalanche were the first team to clinch a playoff ticket -- has 10 points in his past five.

What I loved this weekend

There were a few equipment managers who celebrated milestones this week, one of them being Sabres assistant equipment manager George Babcock.

It's nice to see teams publicly acknowledge these folks, because they work very hard behind the scenes without fanfare. I especially love that Bowen Byram gave Babcock a little congratulatory shower:

Calgary Sun and Herald reporter Danny Austin asked Blake Coleman about the routine.

"We're just dumb. We've got a few things going on," Coleman said. "They kind of remind me of Harry and Lloyd, and I just wanted to be a part of it."

Stick taps

Congratulations to Hall High School varsity hockey (West Hartford, Connecticut) for winning the DIII Connecticut state championship this week.

Hall defeated E.O. Smith 2-1 in overtime in the final, as sophomore Matthew McDermott was credited with the winner after a scrum in front of the net.

Senior goalie Matthew Bonner, son of former ESPN anchor Michelle Bonner, became the program's all-time leader in saves (1,718), wins (37) and minutes played.



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Meanwhile, forward Connor McHugh set career records in points (141), goals (66), and assists (76), and established a new single-season goals mark (31).

This is the second state championship in Hall High School's history, the other coming in 1993.

A personal tribute to Jessi Pierce

Tragedy struck the hockey world this weekend as dear friend, Minnesota Wild reporter Jessi Pierce and her three young children died in a house fire.

Pierce, a great friend, ally and supporter in the hockey space, was a ray of sunshine and a bright light. Often, when you needed it the most and least expected it, there was Jessi with words of encouragement and something to lift you up and boost you forward.

We spent plenty of time talking about hockey, our kids, family and just life. Those were the best conversations. I swear she had an extra hour in the day just to like all of our Instagram stories and posts, just so we felt a little joy from seeing her name pop up. When I hosted Wild games, I would drop a "Bardown Beauties" reference just to make her laugh. I'd often get a couple of emojis via text during the next commercial break.

Jessi, you were immensely loved. It's obvious from the outpouring of support after this unfathomable news. You spent your last day at the rink and then buying your kids ice cream. The ideal day. We will miss you dearly.

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Sportsnet.ca / What McDavid's praise for Cooper means for Knoblauch, Oilers

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — Did Connor McDavid throw shade at his head coach after the Tampa game?

Or was he innocently paying respect to his Olympic coach, Jon Cooper, who no one would disagree is one of the very best in the business?

Well, all I can do is tell you what I've learned after 30-some years prowling through NHL dressing rooms.

One, McDavid is the face of the NHL. He knows how heavy his words are.

He weighs them and disperses them with purpose. He knew how he would be interpreted, and he repeated his praise of Cooper — just in case anyone missed it the first time.

Why?

Another tip I'd give any young hockey reporter: If you're looking for some quotes from your team on a guy who plays for some other team, don't ask them after that guy's team just kicked your team's butt.

I've received plenty of short, not-so-polite answers from players over the years when trying to gather quotes for a piece on some hot shot who walked into Edmonton and blew the Oilers out of their barn.

But the Oilers' captain broke that rule, issuing unsolicited quotes about Tampa being "perfectly coached," and "extremely well-coached" moments after a 5-2 loss on Saturday, in the midst of a playoff race.

Was it some residue of playing for Cooper on Team Canada? Undoubtedly.

Does it work when he's not your coach anymore, and your own coach has spent the entire season trying to get the Oilers to play up to par? Not so much.

In our experience, there are certain things that aren't spoken about in "a good dressing room." On the record, that is.

1. Any perceived weakness your team has (eg., bad goaltending).
2. Any particular teammate whose game is below where it should be. Say only things that will build him up.
3. The coach's decisions on lines, goalies, or anything, really. As a player once said, "The coach is always right."

Show me a dressing room where players are gushing praise for the team that just whipped their behinds, and I'll show you a team that doesn't mind losing.

But clearly the Oilers room is not that. I'm in there almost every day. There are no leaks, no bad eggs, and not one player who is happy with their team game this season.

Nobody is pulling the reporter aside and denigrating a teammate.

They're proven winners, these Oilers. Not Cup winners, but a team that's reeled off series after series over the past five years.

McDavid has grown into an excellent captain. His room runs the right way.

But he has learned, over the years, how his words carry. So why the unsolicited love for Cooper — not once, but twice — after the Lightning win in Edmonton on Saturday?

And what does it mean when we couple it with Leon Draisaitl's parting shots, after a 4-3 loss in Calgary that sent the Oilers stumbling into their Olympic break on a three-game losing streak?

"We're a different team. We're not the same team," an exasperated Draisaitl said that night. "We're not as good (as last season) right now. We're not even close. We need to understand that."

Where do the changes start, we asked him?

"It starts with the coaches," he said. "Everybody. You're never going to win if you have four or five guys going, and it starts at the top. Our leaders can be better."

On Saturday, eyebrows raised as McDavid gushed over Cooper.

"They have a great system, they're perfectly coached. They all know what they're doing all over the ice. It's impressive. They're a great team," he said.

"They're extremely well-coached, they're extremely well-organized. They're very rehearsed in everything they do. It's very impressive. And when you do break them down, they have a heck of a goalie to backstop them.

"We've been playing together a long time," he said of his Oilers, "and we feel like we're somewhat rehearsed and organized. Not today, though."

So, as Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch runs a Monday practice, then hops on the charter for a two-game road trip through Utah and Vegas this week, how do you think he is feeling?

It's clearly a luxury, having a superstar like McDavid to send over the boards every night. But that luxury comes with a cost.

For instance: Knoblauch coaches a team that just acquired shutdown centre Jason Dickinson, yet against Tampa, Knoblauch deployed McDavid's line against Tampa's top unit. McDavid's line got caved in, and



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one might wonder why you even acquired Dickinson if not to relieve McDavid of some defensive pressure?

Well, it's not that simple in Edmonton.

Here, coaches don't simply pull McDavid off the ice when the opponent's best player hops over the boards. Todd McLellan never did it, nor did Dave Tippett, Jay Woodcroft or even Ken Hitchcock during his short stint.

But this season, while fellow Art Ross running mates Nikita Kucherov and Nathan MacKinnon have even-strength goal differentials of plus-66 and plus-48, respectively, McDavid's number is plus-11.

He has 116 points, and he's plus-11 at evens. Yes, the goaltending and team defence are factors. But this has not been a stellar year defensively for McDavid.

You've got Dickinson. Is McDavid the guy who should be playing head-to-head with the other team's top producer?

So, it's a complicated space, that runway behind the Edmonton Oilers bench, where one gets an excruciatingly good view of the NHL's 31st-best goaltending department, with an .886 save percentage at five-on-five.

There, No. 97 looks over his shoulder when he feels like he has languished on the bench for too long. No words, just a look from the greatest player on earth, two piercing eyes that inform of his readiness to be called upon.

And every once in a while, like after the Tampa game, there are a few words.

Either way, spoken or merely implied, the coach hears them.

Loud and clear.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs notebook: Carlo blocking criticism of Minten trade

Luke Fox

BOSTON — There was a time, not so long ago, when springtime showdown between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Boston Bruins at TD Garden would mean something.

A Round 1 playoff preview perhaps. A measuring stick for two Eastern Conference titans. A civic referendum on hockey culture. Something grander than 60 minutes of entertainment as the frost evaporated off the Causeway's flying Bobby Orr statue.

A couple of storied and good teams puffing their chests to see who's better.

In 2024-25, you may recall, the Maple Leafs and Bruins were co-owners of the NHL's longest active post-season streak at eight years.

Well, Boston ceded that title Toronto last March, and now the floundering Maple Leafs have spiked their own impressive playoff run, selling at the trade deadline and hoping for a Bruins-like rebound to relevance in 2026-27.

To that end, a top-five draft pick in 2026 would bless Leafs Nation with much-needed hope.

A prospect drafted between No. 6 and No. 10 overall that funnels into Boston's system?

That's a major yikes. And it would only further reflect poorly on GM Brad Treliving's 2025 deadline deal for defenceman Brandon Carlo, which cost Toronto 21-year-old Fraser Minten and a 2026 first-round pick that is only protected through the top five.

Team Tank would prefer the Maple Leafs extend their losing skid Tuesday, when Treliving's most criticized move will be on full display.

Whip-smart Minten has bulked up. He is in the throes of a breakout campaign, his first full one in the show. His 70 games, 16 goals, and 31 points are all career highs.

Minten's plus-22 rating leads all Bruins forwards. And he's now centring playoff-bound Boston's top line. David Pastrnak is on the man's wing.

Boston coach Marco Sturm has likened Minten to another two-way pivot, L.A.'s Quinton Byfield, in the way the centre thinks the game.

"There are a lot of things you can't teach," Sturm told reporters of Minten's hockey IQ, which was also raved about in Toronto. "That's why he's ahead of some other guys. He already had it. Even the teaching part, he gets it right away. He just has it. He's lucky enough to be born with it."

The flip side of the Minten trade, Carlo, has heard the criticism and admitted to reporters in Toronto on Monday that the fan base's angst over move has been "a little bit" tough on him.

"If you're gonna be in the NHL environment, there's gonna be a lot of things you need to tune out throughout your career," Carlo said. "Just put it in the category with most of those things and continue forward."

Could the prospect-light Maple Leafs, who recently traded away depth centres Nicolas Roy and Scott Laughton, benefit from the service of the emerging Minten? No doubt.

To be fair, Carlo has battled a foot injury this season and has consistently professed his appreciation and desire to be a Leaf. He's also under contract for a team-friendly \$3.49-million cap hit next season, which makes him a valuable contributor if they get back in the mix and a valuable trade asset if they don't.

And then there's this nugget, which may surprise some: The Maple Leafs, at minus-29, have the worst goal differential in the Eastern Conference. Carlo (plus-9) is the only Leafs defenceman (minimum 12 games played) who has been on the ice for as many more goals for as goals against (36-36), despite starting only 45 per cent of his shifts in the offensive zone.

Carlo hasn't hurt his new team.

The catch is that where the Maple Leafs find themselves now — in search of picks, young impact players and centre depth — Carlo's best game can't make up for all of that.

Carlo is the rare player who has seen both sides of the Toronto-Boston rivalry. He predicts a competitive affair Tuesday, standings be damned.

"You know it's going to be physical," Carlo said.

And, because of their link, you know both Carlo and Minten will be scrutinized in this one.

Stolarz rebounds from Nylander scare

Despite Saturday's unplanned visit to an Ottawa hospital and Monday's recall of third-stringer Dennis Hildeby on an emergency basis, Anthony Stolarz is expected to start one half of this week's back-to-back. (Coach Craig Berube hasn't declared whether that'll be in Boston, site of Stolarz's original neck injury this season, or Wednesday at home versus the New York Rangers.)



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An errant William Nylander warm-up shot caught the goaltender in the throat, making it difficult for him to breathe or talk for 30 or 40 minutes.

Stolarz, who recovered from a nerve issue in his neck shortly before the Olympic break, went for imaging to make sure blood vessels weren't damaged. He was cleared by the buzzer and traveled home with the club.

"I'm fine," Stolarz told reporters in Toronto, after practising with some new neck protection. "It's an occupational hazard. You get pucks coming at you anywhere from 70 to 100 miles an hour, they're gonna catch you in a bad spot once in a while. Just kinda shock."

Nylander checked in on Stolarz immediately after his mistake and followed up with text messages before leaving Canadian Tire Centre on Saturday.

"I have certain spots where I shoot it, so they know where I'm shooting it all the time," says Nylander, who was aiming glove. "Except for maybe the last shot we do in the half-moon, maybe you try to score. But other than that, I'm always doing the same shot."

"I feel really bad for that."

Accidents happen. No real harm done.

"He's good. It's a one-off," Stolarz said, shaking off the incident with a smile.

During the broadcast, Sportsnet analyst Craig Simpson suggested the onus is on Nylander to control his aim. A couple goaltenders we spoke to, though, suggested that goalies must never let their neck be exposed during shooting drills.

Soccer players cover their most sensitive bits when building a wall to block free kicks.

Auston Matthews even gave Stolarz a bit of advice: "Next time, keep your chin tucked."

One-Timers: Morgan Rielly missed Saturday's game in Ottawa due to a lower-body injury but returned to practice Monday and was a full participant.... Oliver Ekman-Larsson left practice early because "something was bugging him," according to Berube. The coach assures the durable defenceman will be fine to play Tuesday.... Joseph Woll says he never took so many pucks in the head as he did Saturday in Ottawa: three. "My poor mask was taking a beating," he chuckled. "It broke. We fixed it. It broke again. Check my brain after that game. That's the most I've gotten hit in the head for sure."... The Maple Leafs mentors' trip is going down in Boston.

Maple Leafs' projected lineup Tuesday in Boston:

Forwards

Cowan – Tavares – Nylander

Knies – Domi – Robertson

Maccelli – Groulx – Joshua

Lorentz – Quillan – Järnkrok

Defence

Rielly – Carlo

McCabe – Stecher

Benoit – Myers

Goalies

Stolarz

Woll

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Sportsnet.ca / Led by young core, Canadiens' entertainment era is just getting started

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — As the Montreal Canadiens exploded for seven goals in their win over the New York Islanders Saturday, as Cole Caufield buried the last of his three on the night to get within two of NHL leader Nathan MacKinnon, as Juraj Slafkovsky potted four points to break the 60-point barrier for the first time in his young career and as Nick Suzuki registered four assists to put himself on pace to finish with 101 points this season, I thought of Charlie Flicker.

I ran into Flicker, an old friend, three days earlier in the Montreal airport. I was returning from the NHL GM meetings, he was coming back from a business trip, and as we stood waiting for luggage we shouldn't have checked, he asked me to identify the member of the Canadiens core I felt had the most promise.

"I think within five years, Ivan Demidov has the ability to establish himself as a top-10 player in the world," I said.

"You could say that about Lane Hutson, too," Flicker responded.

Considering the sophomore defenceman had surpassed the 66 points he put up in 82 games of his Calder Trophy-winning rookie season by Game 65 this season, there was no debating it.

We also concurred there was an argument to be made that Suzuki's already there, he moved up the top 10 list Saturday, that Caufield might be the best goal scorer in hockey, that the soon-to-be 22-year-old Slafkovsky was on his way to becoming the league's best power forward and that we were likely on the precipice of the most exciting Canadiens era of our lifetime.

It was my 43rd birthday Wednesday, and maybe the conversation with Flicker resonated a bit more with me than ones I have with other Canadiens fans because we're of the same vintage. He was born in 1979, in the last year of the last Canadiens dynasty, making both of us too young to really appreciate the 1986 Stanley Cup run.

We were old enough in 1989 to know the team that returned to the final didn't hold a candle to the Islanders and Edmonton Oilers of the decade, let alone the Cup-winning Calgary Flames that year. And we both have fond memories of 1993, which felt like a fever dream compared to everything else we saw from the Canadiens before and after that.

The team we watched through the back half of the '90s and through more than the first half of the first decade of the new millennium could've been the poster child for the Dead Puck Era and the one I covered from 2007 through last season wasn't much more exciting, even if it produced much better results in some of those years.

I didn't need to ask Flicker if he felt a bit detached from them. I could feel it as he talked about how excited he was to watch every game this current team plays.

"They're just getting started," I said.

Then we went our separate ways.

Three nights later, as the wave at the Bell Centre hit its crescendo, as hats began littering the ice and as the Canadiens were putting the finishing touches on a 7-3 win that kept them ahead in a playoff race



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they've been well positioned in — but still anything but secure in — since the start of the season, I thought of the end of that conversation with Flicker.

He's not the only one who's excited about this young core, which has propelled the Canadiens to being the third-most offensively prolific team in the league in 2025-26 — after it was the third-least offensively-prolific team from 2015-2025.

"I'm excited," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis on Monday. "I'm a fan. They're fun to watch. They're workers. I'm not surprised. They're good people, they're workers, and they love coming to the rink. And I think we have an environment to help them progress, and they've all done that. And they're a big part of our success, no doubt. It's exciting."

After becoming the first Canadien to score 40 goals since Vincent Damphousse did it in 1994, Caufield could be the first to score 50 since Stephane Richer had 51 in 1990. He's also got a chance to be the first Canadien to win the Rocket Richard Trophy, and the first one to lead the league in goals since Guy Lafleur did it in 1978.

Slafkovsky, who was taken first overall in 2022, recently became the first under-22-year-old in the franchise's 116-year history to notch three consecutive seasons of at least 50 points. The big Slovak, who was named to the Olympic all-star team in February, is on pace for 32 goals and 40 assists through mid-April, running numbers he'd be expected to hit three years from now — as a fully developed player.

Hutson, 22, ranks 29th in scoring, though he's tied for the 17th-most points in the league, and only Evan Bouchard, Zach Werenski and Cale Makar stand as defencemen who have produced more than his 69 points to date.

Meanwhile, Suzuki, who had a career-high 89 points in 82 games last season, ranks eighth in the league with 85 points in 69 games this season.

And, yeah, the captain has a sense for how long fans like Flicker have waited for all of this.

"Someone said that Carey (Price) had only one 80-point guy his whole career," Suzuki said.

He was referring to Alex Kovalev, who scored 84 points for the 2007-08 Canadiens, which was the last edition of the team to finish in the top three in the league in goals for.

That was Price's second season in the NHL.

Imagine if he had Demidov for the ones that followed?

"Demi's so dynamic," said core-defenceman Kaiden Guhle, "and what is he, 20?"

The Russian star, taken fifth overall in 2024, has been 20 for all of three months. He had led the rookie scoring race for most the season, though, with 52 points, he currently ranks second to Anaheim's Beckett Sennecke's 54 in one more game than Demidov's played. So I'll stand by my prediction that he could be the best among all the core members of the team, on his way to potentially becoming a top-10 player in the world within five years.

Guhle's right, Demdov is so dynamic. He also possesses the same type of talent Kovalev had, though he already applies it more consistently than Kovalev did for every season with the Canadiens but that one that saw him score 84 points. He also plays on the inside, with intensity on the forecheck and backcheck, and with the right intentions — like the rest of the core Canadiens.

"I feel like we try to play the game the way it should be played," said St. Louis. "And I know people maybe think of me as, 'Oh, he's an offensive guy, he's going to be an offensive coach.' Yeah, I teach a lot of offensive principles and offensive concepts, but I think what excites me the most is

these offensive guys are actually buying in and playing defensively, too, and we teach that, too.

"You can't just play offence. You've got to play the whole game, but we have a group that plays offence as soon as we win the puck in our zone, and I feel like they're bought in and playing defence as soon as we lose the puck in the other team's zone. So, that excites me — when you have guys that with that much talent, young, that are buying into playing the whole game. But I know we look very entertaining when we get going offensively, and it's fun to watch."

Fans like Flicker tell me every day, and those conversations stay with me.

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Sportsnet.ca / Quiet consistency has Hurricanes positioned for playoff run

Ryan Dixon

The way things have gone this season, there are a lot of places to put your Eastern Conference attention other than the Carolina Hurricanes. But while more ink has been spilled over other teams — good and bad — the Canes have quietly clipped along, positioning themselves to make the playoff run that would validate years of regular-season excellence.

The Hurricanes having basically locked up the Metropolitan Division title simply doesn't qualify as big news in a conference where Buffalo and Columbus have been shockingly good for months now, while previous playoff fixtures like Florida and Toronto have fallen off the map.

There's been so much flip-flopping in terms of who's up and down in the East that it feels as though we've barely touched on the defending Metro champs from Washington being poised to miss the second season one year after a 111-point campaign.

It's certainly hard to get worked up about a Carolina club that, after getting an overtime win in Toronto on Friday and a resounding 5-1 W in Pittsburgh on Sunday, is going to open the playoffs with home-ice advantage for the sixth straight season.

Of course, the problem in Raleigh is that — despite competing in 89 playoff games since 2019, more than every team save Dallas and Tampa Bay — the Hurricanes have failed to make the Stanley Cup Final in that time.

Can they change that fact in a few months?

The Hurricanes, winners of three straight games and owners of a 21-5-3 mark in their past 29 outings, have the third-best points percentage in the NHL at .686. and possesses very strong underlying numbers in terms of expected goals for percentage (56.34 per cent on Money puck, second-best behind only Colorado).

Both of those facts are in line with what we've seen from previous iterations of the Canes.

What could be changing, though, is how balanced and potent the Carolina attack is. The top line of Sebastian Aho between Seth Jarvis and Andrei Svechnikov has the seventh-most goals of any trio in the NHL that has played at least 300 minutes together, and the second line of Logan Stankoven between Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake is right behind them at No. 9.



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That's fantastic top-six balance, helping the Canes rank fourth in the NHL with 3.50 goals per game and third in the league since the calendar flipped to 2026 with 3.84.

Granted, Carolina has shown it can score during the regular season in past campaigns, while always coming up a goal or two short in the post-season. The hope this year, though, must be that — even though there's still not a true game-breaker on this club — the score-by-committee approach that's failed before can succeed now with an uptick in dangerous board members.

Nikolaj Ehlers, the team's big UFA signing last summer, had 1-1-2 in the victory over Pittsburgh and is up to 34 points in his past 33 outings.

Right now, Ehlers is a third-liner in Carolina.

The top unit of Aho, Jarvis and Svechnikov are all point-per-game players in the second half of the season, which is an uptick from past campaigns for everyone in that group except Aho. And when you're getting what Carolina is behind the first line, it sure seems like there's a path to enough scoring no matter what time of year it is.

Everything in Carolina that can be quantified is thanks to an analytically driven management group headed by general manager Eric Tulsky. If we slide into the realm of less tangible considerations, though, you do wonder if a quiet consistency this year has helped the Canes one season after Tulsky made a huge swing to get Mikko Rantanen from Colorado and wound up being forced to deal him away to Dallas at the 2025 deadline when it became clear he wasn't ready to ink long-term in Carolina.

That's a lot of upheaval to endure, even for the steadiest of organizations.

Hall and Stankoven — two-thirds of that strong second line — are both enjoying just their first full season in Carolina and you have to wonder if the 23-year-old Stankoven, in particular, is finally feeling comfortable and confident as an NHLer after being part of the Rantanen return last spring. All of the Hurricanes' monster moves — signing Ehlers and trading for defenceman K'Andre Miller — came in the off-season this time out, giving everyone a full training camp and regular-season runup to find their place ahead of the playoffs.

While goaltending remains a question mark — the tandem of Brandon Bussi and Frederik Andersen has provided the 23rd-ranked team save percentage in the second half at .881 — the Canes are deep and dangerous.

Maybe their time to hog the headlines is still on the horizon.

Weekend Takeaways

- Nikita Kucherov's scoring exploits are worthy of all the praise he gets, as the Bolts' madman netted five more points in two weekend outings to give him 28 points in 14 games since NHL play resumed after the Olympic break. If there's one player breathing the same air as Kucherov since the hiatus, though, it's Martin Necas. The Avs winger also had himself a five-point weekend, going 1-2-3 during a 4-1 win in Chicago on Friday and snagging two apples — including one on the OT winner by Brock Nelson — during Sunday's 3-2 victory in Washington. Those numbers pump Necas to 10 goals and 24 points in 14 games since he returned from representing Czechia in Italy.

Nobody is completely on Kucherov's level right now, but Necas — who was already having a great season — is certainly levelling up down the stretch.

- We just want to join the chorus of people in and around hockey extending deepest sympathies to the friends and family of Minnesota-based NHL.com writer Jessi Pierce, who — along with her three children — lost her life in unimaginable fashion on the weekend.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (38-21-10) Juraj Slafkovsky, who turns 22 in one week, is three goals away from his first 30-goal season after bagging a pair in a critical 7-3 win over the Islanders in Montreal on Saturday. The Canadiens' top line of Nick Suzuki between Slafkovsky and Cole Caufield — whose 43 goals are just two back of Nathan MacKinnon for the NHL lead — has been a menace of late, as the Habs push to try and pin down a playoff spot.

2. Ottawa Senators (36-24-9) Four of Ottawa's next five contests are on the road to close out March. If the Sens can manage a good showing through those games, they'll be in position for a big final post-season push, closing out the schedule with six of eight at home.

3. Edmonton Oilers (34-28-9) After losing to the Tampa Bay Lightning 5-2 on Saturday night, the Oilers are done facing the Eastern Conference for the rest of the regular season. Critically, the Oilers have two more games left with the Vegas Golden Knights as the turtle race for prime spots of the Pacific Division continues.

4. Winnipeg Jets (29-29-12) A shootout win on Sunday afternoon in Manhattan followed a shootout defeat 24 hours earlier in Pittsburgh. The Jets' playoff hopes are hanging by a thread, but — with five points between them and WC2 holder, Nashville — the Manitoba crew is at least still in the frame.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs (29-29-13) Easton Cowan factored into both Leafs goals during Saturday's loss in Ottawa with a 1-1-2 showing. It's been a tough year all around in Toronto and while Cowan's certainly had the ups and downs you'd expect for a rookie, he's undeniably shown flashes of the player the Buds hope he can be.

6. Calgary Flames (29-34-7) Ryan Strome scored the OT winner on Sunday night versus Tampa, netting his second goal in nine games with Calgary. The former Ducks centre had just three goals in 33 contests with Anaheim this season.

7. Vancouver Canucks (21-40-8) With the lone Canucks goal in a 3-1 loss to the Blues on Saturday, defenceman Filip Hronek collected his 39th point of the year to put him just two back of centre Elias Pettersson for the team lead. You know things are grim when...

The Week Ahead

- It's big week for milestones, with Kraken defenceman Adam Larsson and Rangers centre Mika Zibanejad both slated to skate in their 1,000th career games. Paul Maurice, meanwhile, is on tap to become just the second NHL coach to hit the 2,000-game mark, leaving him 141 shy of tying Scotty Bowman for the all-time record.

- Macklin Celebrini is four points shy of becoming the sixth teenager in league history to record a 100-point season. The Sharks play three road games this week beginning Tuesday in Nashville. That same night, Matthew Schaefer — who scored his 22nd goal of the season in Montreal on Saturday — can tie the rookie record for goals by a defenceman when the Islanders host Chicago. Brian Leetch put up 23 with the New York Rangers in 1988-89.

- Connor McDavid is one goal shy of 400 for his career and two back of registering his fifth 40-goal campaign. His first shot at both milestones comes Tuesday in Utah, when current Art Ross leader Nikita Kucherov — sitting on 397 career tallies — will also have 400 on his radar as Tampa hosts Minnesota.

- The week's second 15-game slate is set to pop off on Saturday. Pacific-leading Anaheim visits Edmonton in a big clash, the Jets have their work cut out for them with an all-Central battle against the Avs in Denver, and the Basement Bowl — all-Canadian version — goes off in Calgary when the Canucks come to town for a duel between two of the NHL's worst clubs.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames aiming to build winning culture with late-season heater

Eric Francis

The wrong results, at the wrong time, say many.

The fans want entertaining, pedal to the metal efforts, they want lots of offence, and they cherish close losses.

Ryan Strome has heard the narrative ever since he arrived at the trade deadline, but when asked after Sunday's win over Tampa why it is important in the room to win with regularity, he came up with an answer every bit as impactful as his overtime winner.

"I've been through this before, and it's really, really hard to snap your fingers and just become a winning hockey team," said the veteran of over 900 games.

"So I think if you throw these games away, you don't compete, you don't play hard, those habits leak into next year. Then all of a sudden you have a group that's like, 'okay, we've got to start winning,' and you don't have the characteristics. You don't have those qualities and the leadership and all those things that it takes."

He wasn't finished.

"Hypothetically it'd be great to have the first-overall pick, and you can guarantee this and that, but it's a team game, and there's a lot of guys in here playing for jobs and playing for their life, and that's important," he said.

"The team is trying to build a culture and a confidence moving forward, and having been a part of this before, I know that it's a huge piece of it. So I think the traits that we're showing now are great things that will bleed into next season."

The goal, as he crystallized, is to keep the culture strong.

As undermanned as it is, this team will most certainly lose more games than it'll win down the stretch run of a season in which the Flames are destined to finish in the bottom five.

Although unable to bottom out enough to fall below the shipwreck long steered into the rocks by a dysfunctional room in Vancouver, they'll have anywhere between 8.5 per cent and 13.5 per cent chance to win the draft lottery (Vancouver gets a 25 per cent chance).

After catching both the Rangers and Blackhawks with Sunday's win to sit in a three-way tie for second last (in which the Flames hold the tiebreaker), they'd enter the May 5 lottery with a 9.5 per cent chance to land Gavin McKenna, or whoever is chosen No. 1.

And while many fans cringe with every victory, the leadership of Mikel Backlund, Blake Coleman, Zach Whitecloud, and now Strome, continues to do a good job preserving and growing a culture in which hard work is non-negotiable.

Just listen to the game's best coach for further proof the Flames are moving in a healthy direction.

"Listen, Ryan (Huska) does a heck of a job here," said Jon Cooper, whose Lightning had just been stunned 4-3 by the Flames.

"I like the way they play, their structure. There's guys who played on other teams who weren't fits, like Strome. He is a hell of a player. He was just on a hell of a team in Anaheim.

"The Flames lost some big pieces here, but you get the hunger of some of these young guys that come in and want to make impressions this year, but also next. They've got a whole boatload of 'em out there. Good on them, they're a tough team to play against, and I like what they're doing."

There's plenty for an undermanned mishmash of young and old to be proud of right now.

The backbone of the team's win Sunday was Devin Cooley, whose 32-save performance was the difference in a game the Flames led 3-1 midway through.

After being scored on early, the Flames' first goal came from trade deadline throw-in, Victor Olofsson, followed by a sublime finish from Morgan Frost who seems hell bent on proving over the last dozen games he's capable of being the team's first-line centre moving forward.

Backlund's slapper beat Jonas Johansson high, short-side, before a Darren Raddysh point blast beat Cooley to make things interesting.

The Flames appeared to go up 4-2 later in the period when a nifty backhand feed from Backlund to Coleman got the crowd on their feet, only to have the goal overturned via offside on a coach's challenge.

It marked the fourth time in their last three games they've been so victimized.

Yet, despite that, and a late tying goal by Pontus Holmberg, the Flames managed to win in overtime, thanks to a brilliant play and centring pass by 19-year-old Matvei Gridin to Strome, who buried it.

A perfect illustration of how young and old are collaborating already.

"For a young guy to have that poise, to hold on to it in overtime and make a nice little slip play is impressive," said Strome, 32.

"He's got a lot of great tools. And you know, a lot of these young guys, you give them a little more open ice in three-on-three, they can make good plays. Backs won the (opening) face off, did his job (was replaced by Gridin), and Grids just put it on a platter for me.

"With these young guys, I think winning is important. To have some confidence and to keep pushing forward here to the end of the year."

The evening started with a focus on 23-year-old college signing Tyson Gross making his NHL debut in front of a Saddledome crowd he spent his youth sitting in.

It ended with a 19-year-old making the play of the night, capping a collaborative effort the whole team could feel good about.

Those in attendance got their money's worth, and the bold new direction the Flames have embarked on includes a healthy approach in which wins are coveted. They should be, as there won't be too many of them for the next little while.

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TSN.CA / Stolarz shakes off 'shock' from Nylander's neck shot and returns to Leafs practice

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs held a practice at Ford Performance Centre on Monday before travelling to Boston.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 24, 2026

What did Anthony Stolarz feel when an errant William Nylander shot struck him in the neck during warm-up on Saturday night?

"Just kind of shock," the Leafs goalie said. "It's something that happens. It's an occupational hazard. You get pucks coming at you anywhere from 70 to 100 miles per hour, they're going to catch you in a bad spot once in a while. So, just kind of shock. I kind of seized up. It was a little difficult to breathe and talk, but after about 30, 40 minutes it all started coming back to me."

Stolarz was sent to the hospital by medical staff as a precaution.

"Just did a quick scan to make sure there was no damaged blood vessels or anything," he said. "I did that and everything checked out so I was able to travel back with the team."

Stolarz dealt with some swelling but, all things considered, it could've been worse.

"It got me right between the seam where the neck and collarbone [meet], there's a little area and it just kind of caught me," he said. "I'm just fortunate it wasn't puck on skin, because that would've been definitely a lot worse."

The Leafs called up goalie Dennis Hildeby from the American Hockey League on an emergency basis, but Stolarz felt well enough to take part in Monday's practice.

Did he feel any lingering effects from Nylander's shot?

"I got to wear that dangler now just for a little more protection," he said of the plastic neck guard, which hung off his mask. "It's just a little precautionary thing. It is a little annoying to wear that as a goalie. You just hear that plastic clanging around against your mask, so I guess that's probably the only lingering effect."

Stolarz initially shed the dangler when he made the jump to junior hockey.

"My parents were always big on that and then once you turn 18 and start playing juniors it's not the best style," he said with a smile. "You always try and get away from it but, for the time being, it's good to wear. Good for the protection. I have one of those neck pieces that goes around your neck and into your collarbone, and I was fortunate that I was wearing that."

Following practice, Craig Berube said he had not decided who will start for the Leafs on Tuesday in Boston.

"But it's good that he's okay," the coach noted of Stolarz.

Stolarz is looking to get another shot at the Bruins after two ill-fated appearances against them early in the season. Stolarz allowed four goals on 19 shots before being pulled on Nov. 8. In the rematch on Nov. 11 at TD Garden, Stolarz allowed three goals on 11 shots before exiting with a mystery injury later revealed to be a nerve issue, which kept him sidelined until Jan. 23.

Stolarz, who has played just once in the last 16 days, is understandably eager to get back in. Has the lack of playing time lately bothered him?

"I'm competitive but, at this juncture, you just kind of roll with the punches," the 32-year-old said. "I've been a back-up, I've been a starter in this league, so my mindset every day is the same. Just come in, compete, work hard, push my goalie partner and push the guys who are shooting on you every day. I don't make those decisions, but I feel good where I'm at. I was supposed to play the other night and it was unfortunate, but my last couple starts here I feel good. For me it's about that consistency and finishing the year strong here."

Stolarz appears to be trending in the right direction. He is 1-2-2 with a .922 save percentage since returning from the Olympic break.

—

Nylander was apologetic after Saturday's game.

"I try to shoot, like, for the glove," he told reporters in Ottawa. "I'm always doing the same shot so, I mean, it just came off a little off on that shot. I feel really bad."

Stolarz told his teammate not to worry.

"I told him, 'It happens,'" Stolarz said. "It's been 160 games I've had with Willy through the last two years and watching him every game he always goes to the same spot and he always goes to that glove area and this one was just a riser. It's something that happens, puck bounces, pucks continue to fly up, so he's good. It's a one-off. I'm sure it will happen again whether it's him or someone else."

The team is already joking about what happened with injured captain Auston Matthews chiming in.

"Tone said, 'Next time just keep your chin tucked,'" Stolarz said with a smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Berube recalled catching his goalies up high during his playing days.

"Got chased down a couple of times," Berube said with a chuckle. "[Ron] Hextall didn't like it too much and [Olaf] Kolzig, they were guys that got a little pissed off."

Did Hextall ever catch him?

"Oh, buddy," Berube said with a grin. "He didn't want to catch me."

—

Joseph Woll also experienced an injury scare on Saturday night as he took a few shots off the head.

"My poor mask was taking a beating," he told reporters with a smile after the game. "It broke, we fixed it, and it broke again ... [Gotta] check my brain after that game. That's the most I've got hit in my head, for sure."

Those types of shots aren't always a bad thing, apparently.

"It's fine," the 27-year-old stressed. "Sometimes it wakes you up and jolts you back in, so it can be a good thing too."

Woll has started six of Toronto's last seven games and faced the most shots in the NHL (219) since the run began on March 10. Boston's Jeremy Swayman has faced the second most shots (171) during that time span.

"I just stick to my routine as best as I can and let everything else fall into place," Woll said of managing the workload.

—

The Leafs are holding their annual Mentors Trip this week with each player allowed to invite a guest to Boston.

"It could bring a little bit of juice and energy and a little bit of excitement into the locker room," said winger Matthew Knies.

"It always adds a little extra juice," Berube said.

Stolarz is bringing his big brother Todd, 43, who was also his guest last year.

"He's probably been the biggest influence to me in my career," the New Jersey native said. "Just driving me to the rink when I was younger when my parents had work. He was my goalie coach in PeeWee and Bantam. He's always watching my games and giving me little tidbits here and there."

Woll also brought his brother to Boston.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 24, 2026

The Leafs have won just five times in the last 23 games so the chance to bring some friendly faces on the road is a welcome boost

The Leafs current five wins in 23 games stretch is about as bad as it gets. They had only done this four times in the last 30 years:

Start of 2009-10 season

2011-12 "18 wheeler off cliff"

End of 2014-15 (Horachek)

End of 2015-16 tank year

— James Mirtle (@mirtle) March 23, 2026

Brandon Carlo is bringing his grandpa Ed Ristau.

"He was in the Air Force for a while and then afterwards, when he retired, settled down in Colorado Springs and that's where I'm from," the defenceman said. "He flew the tow planes in Colorado Springs for about 30 years with all the cadets at the Air Force Academy. He would pull them up and he would be in the tow plane and they would be in the glider, because gliders don't have an engine so he would have to pull them up and release them up there. He loved doing that job."

Carlo says he learned a lot about character from his grandfather.

"I'm very proud to be his grandson," the 29-year-old beamed.

Carlo's faced some criticism in Toronto recently, along with teammates, for not jumping in to defend Matthews after Ducks defenceman Radko Gudas injured the star centre with a knee-on-knee hit on March 12.

"It happened fast," said Carlo, who is the tallest (6-foot-5, equal with Philippe Myers) and heaviest defenceman (227 pounds) on the team. "Obviously, wish we would've been able to react differently."

Monday marked Carlo's first media scrum since the game against Anaheim.

"Once we saw it afterwards [it's] tough," he said. "But [the] onus is on us. I take accountability for that. I want to be there for my teammates. That was a mistake for sure but, overall, it did happen fast. But I'm not going sit here and discredit that we needed to do something there."

The Matthews injury is not the only reason Carlo has been in the spotlight lately. There's also the pending situation with Toronto's first-round pick in the upcoming draft.

At the trade deadline last year, the Leafs sent top prospect Fraser Minten and their first-round pick in the 2026 draft (top-five protected) to the Bruins in exchange for Carlo, who is under contract through next season. With the Leafs potentially now sending a high pick to their division rivals, the trade is a big talking point in Toronto.

Is that tough?

"A little bit," Carlo readily admits. "Try not to pay attention to it too much ... If you're in the NHL environment there's going to be a lot of things you need to tune out throughout your career so just put it in that category with most of those things and just continue forward."

The Leafs sit 25th overall heading into Tuesday's game in Boston.

Minten is currently skating on Boston's top line beside David Pastrnak. He has scored 15 goals on the season while Carlo, who dealt with a nagging foot injury that required surgery this year, is still searching for his first goal with the Leafs. He hasn't scored in the NHL since Oct. 14, 2014.

Despite being a defensive-minded defenceman, Carlo acknowledges that "for sure" the 127-game drought weighs on him.

"It's not necessarily the thing that I'm on the ice for but, overall, I'd like to contribute in that regard," he said. "Just keep shooting. Shooting more could help."

Carlo has seven assists in 48 games this season. He owns the second best plus-minus mark (plus-nine) on the team.

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Easton Cowan identified Ottawa's opening goal, which came on a first-period power play, as the turning point in Saturday's game.

"We started off pretty strong," the rookie winger told reporters in Ottawa. "They scored and I feel like it deflated us a bit."

Berube bristled when that comment was relayed to him.

"I don't know why they would be 'deflated' after we gave up a power-play goal," Berube told reporters. "We broke a stick, we're trying to get a stick, and they scored a goal, but big deal. We played a good first period."

The Senators outshot the Leafs 9-6 in the first period, but then tilted the shot clock 35-8 over the final 40 minutes.

"I don't understand the thought process that you don't follow it up and be ready to go in the second and know they're going to push," Berube said. "We don't respond well enough. I don't understand this 'deflated' stuff, to be honest with you. I think it's a cop out."

After Monday's workout, only the team's second full practice since games resumed following the Olympics, Berube appealed to his players' sense of pride.

"The X's and O's are the X's and O's, but it's about showing up every night and competing at a high level," he said. "That's what's important for me. Yes, there's mistakes and things that happen in the game, but where's your compete level? Where are you playing for the crest on the front of the jersey? That's what matters to me."

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Defenceman Oliver Ekman-Larsson departed practice midway through the session and did not return.

"Something was bugging him, so he left," Berube said. "That's it, really. He should be fine."

Berube chuckled.

"I really don't know," the coach continued. "I haven't talked to the trainers yet. I was just told he was fine so he should be fine tomorrow."

—

After missing Saturday's game with a lower-body injury, defenceman Morgan Rielly skated beside Carlo on his regular pairing at practice. He also took reps on the top power-play unit.

Lines at Monday's practice:

Cowan - Tavares - Nylander

Knies - Domi - Robertson

Maccelli - Groulx - Joshua

Lorentz - Quillan - Jarnkrok

Pezetta

Rielly - Carlo

McCabe - Stecher

Benoit - Myers

Woll

Stolarz

Power-play units at Monday's practice:



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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QB: Rielly

Flanks: Cowan, Nylander

Middle: Tavares

Net front: Knies

QB: McCabe

Flanks: Domi, Maccelli

Middle: Robertson

Net front: Joshua

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TSN.CA / Maple Leafs' season undone by porous defence

Travis Yost

The Toronto Maple Leafs have not missed the Stanley Cup Playoffs since the 2015-16 season – a year so miserable it culminated with the franchise winning the draft lottery and selecting Auston Matthews with the first-overall pick.

Since then, Toronto has been as reliable as any team in the NHL at taking care of business in the regular season.

That has not been the case this season. Watching this year's version of the Maple Leafs has been like watching a train wreck in slow motion. How blame is apportioned for this year's grim season is going to be subject to debate for months to come.

Some will look at the deterioration in top-end talent, be it the loss of Mitch Marner to the Vegas Golden Knights or the scoring slowdown from players like Matthews. Others will look towards the roster construction effort by the front office, including the performance from the depth players on the lineup.

Simply put, everything is on the table for this season's postmortem.

To that end, I wonder what head coach Craig Berube's fate will be. Berube is an impressively accomplished coach, but his calling card – and the key reason he was brought in by the Maple Leafs organization – was to shore up this team on the defensive end of the ice.

Perhaps the front office didn't give him the requisite players to fortify the defence; perhaps there really is an engagement or buy-in issue with the players. But one thing is for sure, Toronto's defensive play has only deteriorated under Berube, the exact opposite of what was expected:

Yost1

You'll notice expected goal rates surged this year along with real goals conceded, and that's important context. It's easy to look at the play of the Maple Leafs goaltending year-over-year and point to their performance as the reason for Toronto's struggles. One year ago, Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll were among the best tandems in the NHL, stopping 48 goals better than expected over the course of the year. It's hard to see poor defence when your goaltender room is playing like that.

But Toronto's goaltending has been solid this year, too. Stolarz may have taken a step back, but the combination of Woll and Dennis Hildeby have stopped 29 goals more than expected, carrying a 90.7 per cent stop rate in the process. The problem, of course, is they are facing many more

shots and from more dangerous areas of the ice. That will simply lead to more goals.

Consider this year's heat maps (via HockeyViz): of where Maple Leafs goaltenders are seeing shots. At both even strength and on the penalty kill, it's a lot of volume from the circles and the low slot, areas where shooting percentages surge:

Yost2

As it stands, with just a couple of weeks left in the season, the Maple Leafs are 30th in the league in goals against per 60 minutes (3.4), ahead of only the Vancouver Canucks and San Jose Sharks – one team eyeing the first-overall pick in the draft lottery, the other among the youngest teams in the league and still filling out its roster.

For an organization that had championship aspirations, this season has been a difficult pill to swallow. There will be feverish debate about how to return this team to contention status going forward, but understanding structurally why this team has become such a defensive sieve should be at the top of the analysis list.

You simply cannot be a contender in the modern NHL with a defence this porous, and it's the reason Toronto is going to be on the outside looking in come Game 83.

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