



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 27, 2026

The Athletic

Who would the Hurricanes most (and least) like to play in the playoffs' first round?

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes look poised to reclaim the Metropolitan Division title and could take the top spot in the Eastern Conference. Carolina is all but assured to have home ice in the first round, and likely would have it for another round or two after that.

One thing the Hurricanes don't know? Who they will be hosting when the playoffs begin in the third week in April. That's not uncommon — there is plenty of shuffling and jockeying for position in the season's final 20 games. But the uncertainty of how the playoff seeding will shake out means Carolina could face any of seven (sorry, Philadelphia) teams in Round 1, Game 1 at Lenovo Center.

Here's a rundown of the seven teams, the pros and cons of the Hurricanes' matchup with each, and who Carolina should most want to face — from the best first-round fit to the worst — when the puck drops on the playoffs.

Detroit Red Wings

Head-to-head this season: Hurricanes 2-0-1 advantage.

Overview: Carolina has a pair of 5-2 home wins sandwiching a 4-3 overtime loss in Detroit. Shayne Gostisbehere had seven points against his former team in three games, and Jackson Blake scored in each of the games. Alex DeBrincat had four points in the three games.

Pros of playing the Red Wings: The Wings have the third-worst five-on-five shooting percentage in the league, and their underlying numbers are middle of the road. Carolina hammered Detroit in the three meetings, taking more than 67 percent of the five-on-five shot attempts and outscoring the Wings 8-4 at full strength. Detroit has been mediocre on special teams.

Cons of playing the Red Wings: Moritz Seider is getting Norris Trophy buzz, and DeBrincat and Lucas Raymond are nice complements to Dylan Larkin. John Gibson is closing in on 30 wins in his first season in Motown, and Little Caesars Arena will be rocking when it finally hosts its first playoff games.

Verdict: Detroit is in the fight for its life down the stretch, so if the Red Wings get in, they'll be battle-tested. The addition of Justin Faulk gives them some experience on the back end, but the blue line beyond Seider would be in for a rough time against the Hurricanes. Furthermore, Gibson has had a difficult March — though if he doesn't improve, Detroit probably isn't ending its postseason drought anyway.

Difficulty rating: 2 of 10

Pittsburgh Penguins

Head-to-head this season: Hurricanes 3-1-0 advantage

Overview: The teams split a pair of 5-1 games, and Carolina won both March meetings with overtime and shootout wins. Bryan Rust and Erik Karlsson have seven points each in the four meetings, while Ehlers has six points in the season series. Three of Mark Jankowski's eight goals are against the Pens.

Pros of playing the Penguins: The Hurricanes have beaten the Penguins 10 consecutive times at Lenovo Center, a streak that started in 2019. Evgeni Malkin hasn't scored anywhere against Carolina since 2020 and has been limited to two assists in his last 15 games. Goaltending is a giant question mark for the Pens and may cost them a playoff spot altogether.

Cons of playing the Penguins: No one expected Pittsburgh to be in the race for a playoff spot, but here we are. Karlsson has had a bounce-back season, and Sidney Crosby, if healthy, is still dangerous. The Penguins' special teams are very good, and the team has done a nice job of filling out the bottom of its lineup with capable depth players who can contribute.

Verdict: It will be a victory for the Penguins if they can reach the postseason, but their stay shouldn't be long. I would never fully count out Crosby, but Jordan Staal's ability to neutralize Malkin and Carolina's depth feel like way too much. Toss in the goaltending uncertainty and this feels like a nice way for the Hurricanes to ease into the playoffs.

Difficulty rating: 2 of 10

Boston Bruins

Head-to-head this season: 1-1-0; series finale April 7 in Raleigh

Overview: The Hurricanes played two low-scoring games in Boston over 17 days in November, a 3-1 win and 2-1 loss. The top producers for both teams did little in both games: Carolina's Sebastian Aho, Seth Jarvis and Andrei Svechnikov, and Boston's David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie were all held off the scoresheet. Goaltender Jeremy Swayman started both games for the Bruins, stopping 57 of 61 shots in earning a split.

Pros of playing the Bruins: Boston's underlying numbers are not great, and while Charlie McAvoy is an elite defenseman, injuries have slowed Hampus Lindholm and the rest of the defense is mediocre at best. The Bruins are near the bottom of the league in shots allowed and on the penalty kill — which is not great since they've taken the second-most penalties in the league.



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Cons of playing the Bruins: There's scoring balance up and down the lineup, Geekie is a breakout performer and Pastrnak is a superstar who can win games on his own. So can Swayman, who has had a bounce-back season and could get Vezina consideration. Boston's power play is in the top 10, and the Bruins have the ability to drag teams into a dogfight with heavy players such as Nikita Zadorov and Tanner Jeannot.

Verdict: Pastrnak is going to get his, and Swayman is a threat. Still, Carolina would be heavily favored against the Bruins. Boston would need contributions throughout the lineup to knock off the Hurricanes, and Carolina doesn't exactly struggle with depth. The Bruins could make it interesting, but the Hurricanes have a big edge.

Difficulty rating: 3 of 10

New York Islanders

Head-to-head this season: Hurricanes 1-0-0 advantage; games remaining April 4 in Raleigh and April 14 on Long Island

Overview: The teams have met only once so far, a 6-2 Carolina home rout in late October. The Hurricanes could very well have a say in whether the Islanders reach the postseason, with two more meetings to come. New York was eliminated by the Hurricanes in their last two postseason appearances, in 2023 and 2024.

Pros of playing the Islanders: When the Hurricanes get beat in the playoffs, the other team's power play usually plays a big part. The Islanders have been dreadful on the PP. Carolina has also handled New York pretty easily in their three series in the past seven seasons, winning 12 of 15 games.

Cons of playing the Islanders: Two words: Ilya Sorokin. The Islanders goalie is arguably the best in the league, and the past (2-5-0 in the postseason vs. Carolina) won't matter if the teams meet again. And then there's Matthew Schaefer, who has turbocharged the Isles in his rookie season.

Verdict: No one will want to face Sorokin, but the Hurricanes have been too much for the Islanders in the past and likely would be again. New York's top-end talent is intriguing, but the bottom half of the lineup is full of aging players with their best days in the past. Carolina is a possession monster, while the Isles are decidedly not.

Difficulty rating: 3 of 10

Columbus Blue Jackets

Head-to-head this season: 1-1-0; home-and-home games on March 31 and April 2 remaining

Overview: The teams have split their two games this season, with Carolina getting a 4-1 win at home in December before Columbus evened the series with a 5-1 win this month on home ice. Charlie Coyle had a four-point game in the Jackets' win in Ohio. Andrei Svechnikov has three points in the first two games between the teams.

Pros of playing the Blue Jackets: Zach Werenski leads the team in scoring by nearly 20 points despite missing seven games this season, and the Hurricanes have four forwards with as many or more points than the Jackets' top producer up front (Kirill Marchenko, 59). Columbus is in the bottom

half of the league on the power play and penalty kill. The defense is top-heavy and the offense lacks punch.

Cons of playing the Blue Jackets: Midseason coaching savior Rick Bowness has Columbus as hot as any team since his hiring. Under the hood, the Blue Jackets have held their own on possession and scoring chances. Marchenko is a Hurricanes killer — nine goals in 12 career games against them — and Conor Garland and Mason Marchment have been nice midseason additions. Goaltender Jet Greaves has quietly put together a nice season.

Verdict: Having "meh" special teams isn't usually a recipe for success, and Columbus' top scorer on the power play, Dmitri Voronkov (seven goals), has fallen out of favor with Bowness. Werenski helps in that aspect, and Adam Fantilli has tantalizing skill that makes one believe he could become a superstar at any moment. But a lot would need to go right for the Jackets to topple Carolina.

Difficulty rating: 4 of 10

Ottawa Senators

Head-to-head this season: Hurricanes 2-0-0 advantage; series finale April 5 in Ottawa

Overview: The Hurricanes had 4-1 and 4-3 wins this season, with one more game on deck. Seth Jarvis totaled three goals and an assist, and Aho had a three-point night in the game in Raleigh. Jake Sanderson leads the Senators with three points against Carolina.

Pros of playing the Senators: Ottawa is banged up, especially on defense. That includes Thomas Chabot, who is out with a broken arm and seems unlikely for an opening-round series. The penalty kill is near the bottom of the league, and much of the team is still green when it comes to playoff experience. It's anyone's guess what kind of goaltending performance the Senators will get.

Cons of playing the Senators: The Senators are Carolina Lite. Their underlying numbers are fantastic, including in the two meetings with the Hurricanes. Brady Tkachuk is going to take a bite out of any team he faces, win or lose, and Tim Stutzle is one of the game's most underrated players. Warren Foegele has been reborn since coming to Ottawa at the deadline, and Linus Ullmark, when he's on, can steal games.

Verdict: The Senators tilt the ice in their favor most nights, but they need saves to win. Ullmark has been winning in March, but he's still under a .900 save percentage for the month, as he was in four of the previous five months — and he played just once in January, when he wasn't. He's also won five of 16 games in the playoffs in his career. This wouldn't be an easy series, but Ottawa's question marks in net and Carolina's depth feel like too much for an upset.

Difficulty rating: 4 of 10

Montreal Canadiens

Head-to-head this season: Canadiens 2-0-0 advantage; series finale Sunday in Raleigh

Overview: Montreal has 12 goals in two games against Carolina, picking up 7-5 and 5-2 wins. The Canadiens have nine players with multiple points through the first two games of the series, while Aho has five points and Nikolaj Ehlers



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has four. The Hurricanes get one more crack at the Habs on Sunday in Raleigh.

Pros of playing the Canadiens: The Canadiens are fun with a capital F, but the team is very young and who will play in goal is anyone's guess. Aho has feasted on Montreal throughout his career. While the two Habs wins look lopsided, Carolina actually had the better of possession in the two games. Montreal's PK is in the bottom quarter of the league.

Cons of playing the Canadiens: The Canadiens' young guns might not care that they'll be underdogs. Montreal is on the rise and is explosive, plus it boasts a good power play. Lane Hutson is a game-altering defenseman, and top goalie

prospect Jacob Fowler has the talent to be special, and maybe soon.

Verdict: This wouldn't be an alluring first-round matchup for the Hurricanes. Montreal has won both games this season, and the Canadiens have talent that can alter a game with one play. The Habs aren't quite there yet as a legitimate Stanley Cup contender, but they're not far off. Of the teams on this list, Montreal is maybe the most dangerous. Carolina would have the upper hand on paper, but games aren't played on paper.

Difficulty rating: 7 of 10



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NHL playoff standings: Projecting the Red Wings' chances - ESPN

By: ESPN staff

The Buffalo Sabres have the NHL's longest postseason drought, with the club last appearing in a postseason game in the 2011 Stanley Cup playoffs.

It appears that Buffalo will not only make the playoffs this season -- the Sabres might go in as one of the top seeds in the Eastern Conference.

The NHL's second-longest postseason drought belongs to the Detroit Red Wings, whose last appearance was in the 2016 Stanley Cup playoffs. Will their playoff-less streak also end in 2026?

Coincidentally, the two teams meet Friday (7 p.m. ET, NHL Network) for the final time this season. Given the current standings, one of the two teams needs a win a bit more than the other.

The Red Wings enter the game with 84 points and 27 regulation wins through 71 games. That puts them one point and five RW behind the Ottawa Senators for the second wild card, as well as four points and two RW behind the Boston Bruins for the first.

Detroit does not have any games remaining against Ottawa or Boston, so the Red Wings can't directly beat the teams they are chasing.

Of the Red Wings' final 10 games, just four are against teams currently in the playoffs; oddly, three of the remaining 10 are against the Philadelphia Flyers, who are also on the playoff bubble.

How does that compare with the teams Detroit is chasing? Ottawa has 10 games remaining, including five against current playoff teams, while Boston's final 10 games include seven games against teams in playoff position.

Stathletes gives the Red Wings a 34.7% chance of qualifying for a playoff spot, which trails the Senators (79.7%) and Bruins (66.9%).

Every team has around 10 games remaining before the regular season concludes April 16, and we'll help you keep track of it all here on the NHL playoff watch every day. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races -- along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2026 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Stathletes.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Today's schedule

Last night's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Buffalo Sabres vs. WC1 Boston Bruins

A2 Tampa Bay Lightning vs. A3 Montreal Canadiens

M1 Carolina Hurricanes vs. WC2 New York Islanders

M2 Pittsburgh Penguins vs. M3 Columbus Blue Jackets

Western Conference

C1 Colorado Avalanche vs. WC2 Nashville Predators

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Minnesota Wild

P1 Anaheim Ducks vs. WC1 Utah Mammoth

P2 Edmonton Oilers vs. P3 Vegas Golden Knights

Today's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

Detroit Red Wings at Buffalo Sabres, 7 p.m. (NHLN)

Chicago Blackhawks at New York Rangers, 7 p.m.

Last night's scoreboard

Montreal Canadiens 2, Columbus Blue Jackets 1

Pittsburgh Penguins 4, Ottawa Senators 3 (SO)

Seattle Kraken 4, Tampa Bay Lightning 3 (OT)

Minnesota Wild 3, Florida Panthers 2

New York Islanders 2, Dallas Stars 1

Philadelphia Flyers 5, Chicago Blackhawks 1

St. Louis Blues 2, San Jose Sharks 1 (OT)

New Jersey Devils 4, Nashville Predators 2

Colorado Avalanche 3, Winnipeg Jets 2

Washington Capitals 7, Utah Mammoth 4

Anaheim Ducks 3, Calgary Flames 2 (OT)

Edmonton Oilers 5, Vegas Golden Knights 3 (OT)

Los Angeles Kings 4, Vancouver Canucks 0

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division



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Buffalo Sabres

Points: 96

Regulation wins: 37

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 10

Points pace: 109.3

Next game: vs. DET (Friday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Magic number: 10

Tragic number: N/A

Tampa Bay Lightning

Points: 94

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 11

Points pace: 108.6

Next game: vs. OTT (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Magic number: 12

Tragic number: N/A

Montreal Canadiens

Points: 90

Regulation wins: 28

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 11

Points pace: 103.9

Next game: @ NSH (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 93%

Magic number: 16

Tragic number: N/A

Boston Bruins

Points: 88

Regulation wins: 29

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 10

Points pace: 100.2

Next game: vs. MIN (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 66.9%

Magic number: 18

Tragic number: N/A

Ottawa Senators

Points: 86

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 10

Points pace: 97.9

Next game: @ TB (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 79.7%

Magic number: N/A

Tragic number: 19

Detroit Red Wings

Points: 84

Regulation wins: 27

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11

Points pace: 97.0

Next game: @ BUF (Friday)

Playoff chances: 34.7%

Magic number: N/A

Tragic number: 19

Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 9

Points pace: 84.3

Next game: @ STL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Magic number: N/A

Tragic number: 6

Florida Panthers

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 27

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11

Points pace: 84.3

Next game: @ NYI (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Magic number: N/A

Tragic number: 8

Metro Division

Carolina Hurricanes



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Points: 96
Regulation wins: 32
Playoff position: M1
Games left: 11
Points pace: 110.9
Next game: vs. NJ (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Magic number: 10
Tragic number: N/A
Pittsburgh Penguins
Points: 88
Regulation wins: 29
Playoff position: M2
Games left: 10
Points pace: 100.2
Next game: vs. DAL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 80%
Magic number: 18
Tragic number: N/A
Columbus Blue Jackets
Points: 87
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: M3
Games left: 10
Points pace: 99.1
Next game: vs. SJ (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 91.7%
Magic number: 19
Tragic number: N/A
New York Islanders
Points: 87
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 9
Points pace: 97.7
Next game: vs. FLA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 43.7%
Magic number: 19
Tragic number: N/A
Philadelphia Flyers
Points: 82

Regulation wins: 22
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 94.7
Next game: @ DET (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 7.1%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 17
Washington Capitals
Points: 81
Regulation wins: 31
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 9
Points pace: 91.0
Next game: @ VGK (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 3%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 12
New Jersey Devils
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 25
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 87.8
Next game: @ CAR (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.3%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 11
e - New York Rangers
Points: 65
Regulation wins: 19
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 10
Points pace: 74.0
Next game: vs. CHI (Friday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: OUT
Central Division
x - Colorado Avalanche
Points: 106



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Regulation wins: 42
Playoff position: C1
Games left: 11
Points pace: 122.4
Next game: vs. WPG (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Magic number: IN
Tragic number: N/A
x - Dallas Stars
Points: 97
Regulation wins: 33
Playoff position: C2
Games left: 10
Points pace: 110.5
Next game: @ PIT (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Magic number: IN
Tragic number: N/A
Minnesota Wild
Points: 94
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: C3
Games left: 9
Points pace: 105.6
Next game: @ BOS (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Magic number: 2
Tragic number: N/A
Utah Mammoth
Points: 80
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: WC1
Games left: 9
Points pace: 89.9
Next game: @ LA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 98%
Magic number: 16
Tragic number: N/A
Nashville Predators
Points: 77
Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 10
Points pace: 88.0
Next game: vs. MTL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 46.9%
Magic number: 19
Tragic number: N/A
Winnipeg Jets
Points: 72
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 10
Points pace: 82.0
Next game: @ COL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 5.1%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 15
St. Louis Blues
Points: 71
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 82.0
Next game: vs. TOR (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 7.8%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 16
Chicago Blackhawks
Points: 67
Regulation wins: 20
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 10
Points pace: 76.3
Next game: @ NYR (Friday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 10
Pacific Division
Anaheim Ducks
Points: 86
Regulation wins: 24



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Playoff position: P1
Games left: 10
Points pace: 97.9
Next game: @ EDM (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Magic number: 10
Tragic number: N/A
Edmonton Oilers
Points: 81
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: P2
Games left: 9
Points pace: 91.0
Next game: vs. ANA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 88.4%
Magic number: 15
Tragic number: N/A
Vegas Golden Knights
Points: 79
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: P3
Games left: 9
Points pace: 88.7
Next game: vs. WSH (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 97.9%
Magic number: 17
Tragic number: N/A
Los Angeles Kings
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 19
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 10
Points pace: 86.6
Next game: vs. UTA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 36.7%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 19
Seattle Kraken
Points: 74
Regulation wins: 25
Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11
Points pace: 85.5
Next game: @ BUF (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 2.3%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 19
San Jose Sharks
Points: 71
Regulation wins: 20
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 12
Points pace: 83.2
Next game: @ CBJ (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 16.9%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 18
Calgary Flames
Points: 68
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 10
Points pace: 77.4
Next game: vs. VAN (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: 11
e - Vancouver Canucks
Points: 50
Regulation wins: 14
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 57.8
Next game: @ CGY (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Magic number: N/A
Tragic number: OUT

Note: An "x" with a team's name means the club has clinched a playoff spot. An "e" means that the club has been mathematically eliminated.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not



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guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the draw for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process can be found here. Atop draft boards for this summer is Gavin McKenna, a forward for Penn State.

1. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 50

Regulation wins: 14

2. New York Rangers

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 19

3. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 67

Regulation wins: 20

4. Calgary Flames

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 23

5. St. Louis Blues

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 26

6. San Jose Sharks

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 20

7. Winnipeg Jets

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 24

8. Florida Panthers

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 27

9. Seattle Kraken

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 25

10. Toronto Maple Leafs*

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 23

11. Los Angeles Kings

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 19

12. New Jersey Devils

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 25

13. Washington Capitals

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 31

14. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 82

Regulation wins: 22

15. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 84

Regulation wins: 27

16. Ottawa Senators

Points: 86

Regulation wins: 32

*Note: The Maple Leafs' pick belongs to the Bruins, unless it lands in the top five.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

The Curious Case of Jesperi Kotkaniemi

By: Bob Wage

Just a couple of years ago, Jesperi Kotkaniemi was a promising prospect who was on the rise.

Now? He is a regular healthy scratch who is currently the 14th forward on the Hurricanes, one spot behind the newly acquired Nicolas Deslauriers who is best known for being a pugilist.

There is talk around the team about trying to find playing time for the newbie, but nothing is mentioned about finding playing time for the Finn.

Has the coaching staff totally given up on him? It seems so.

Kotkaniemi has an interesting history with the Hurricanes.

Three years after Montreal selected the center with their third overall pick in the NHL Entry Draft, Carolina signed him to an offer sheet worth \$6.1 million. Montreal refused to match the offer, so the Canes sent them their first and third round picks in the 2022 entry draft as compensation.

This was the first offer sheet in the NHL that was not matched by the affected team since 2007, so these are rare.

Montreal had tried to offer sheet Sebastian Aho two years previous, but the Canes easily matched that offer. It seemed that the offer sheet for Kotkaniemi might have been in retaliation for the Habs attempt previously. The most recent offer sheet included a \$20 dollar signing bonus, which of course is Aho's number.

Carolina owner Tom Dundon was quoted afterward saying that it was "entertainment".

Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon told Sportsnet radio in Toronto this month that it was "silly" to assume the offer sheet was tendered for revenge. But he defended Carolina poking fun at the move through social media, including references to the \$20 signing bonus.

"We're all in the entertainment business, and we don't have a league if people aren't entertained by it," Dundon said. "So when it worked out the way it did, our philosophy organizationally on the business side is have as much fun, get as much attention as you can."

Aho also agreed.

To be honest, it's pretty funny to see a \$20 signing bonus," Aho told ESPN on Thursday, at the NHL Player Media Tour. "All jokes aside, we got a pretty good player."

The first year, the newly acquired center had a so-so season. He played in 66 games and averaged 12 minutes a game. He scored 12 goals, 17 assists and won 51% of his faceoffs.

In March of 2022, the Canes signed him to a long term 8 year contract worth over \$4.8 million per year.

The following season was his best. He had 18 goals, 25 assists and averaged 14:44 of ice time, his highest with the team.

The next two seasons his ice time went down as well as his production. He had 12 goals and 27 points in 2024 and 12 goals and 33 points in 2025.

Up to this season, he has had a steady 51% faceoff percentage. This season he is at 49%.

It would seem the center is physical enough. In 2023, he had 105 hits, the highest of his career. In his five seasons with the Hurricanes, he has a total of 359 hits.

Compare this to Mark Jankowski's total over the same time frame of 117 hits.

He also is lifetime "plus 20" (+/-) with Carolina. It seems lack of defense is not a problem.

Obviously, hits are not the entire story and neither are goals and/or assists. But something has happened with this player. Why has his production dropped off a cliff?

He might be the most expensive healthy scratch in the NHL right now and it is a waste of assets to allow this to keep going on.

Does he not fit in Brind'Amour's system? He would not be the first.

Does he not work out enough? Does he not practice well? He obviously had some skills at one point, but it seems his confidence is gone, perhaps understandably so.

When a player regresses like this, the brunt of the blame should fall on the player. He needs to figure it out.

But the coaching staff should take some responsibility as well. It is their job to get the most out their players, and for whatever reasons they certainly failed in this case.

Kotkaniemi is definitely not a Carolina success story. Not yet, anyway.

The end of last season finished on a downer and many thought the forward would be traded during the offseason. For whatever reasons, that never happened.

This season has been a disaster. First of all, he was injured to begin with. But he has never been able to get his game going. He has 2 goals and 7 assists in 36 games with a career low 10:50 a game of average ice time.

Everyone thought that he would be traded during this most recent trade deadline, but again, for whatever reason that never happened. It seems that the front office feels that the



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player could be used as insurance in case of an injury going forward and has some value.

But is the coaching staff in line with the front office on this?

It would also seem that Kotkaniemi would need to play a bit in order to find his game, so that he could provide that insurance, if needed. He has not played since March 4th and before that it was February 5th.

On March 7th, the day after the trade deadline, Brind'Amour gave him an "honorary" T shirt and said the following.

"Hey we're going to need you Buddy, I know it hasn't been the greatest year, but starting today, starting today."

This outreach from the head coach seems like it would be a good motivational start for Kotkaniemi, especially with his teammates loud reaction, but the forward has yet to play in a single game since this moment.

"Starting today" has yet to take affect.

To an outsider, it seems like another somewhat confusing and weird interaction with the player.

What will happen in the future? Your humble narrator has no clue, but it is certainly a waste of cap space to continue things as they are on to next season. There are less expensive insurance policies out there.

Does he still have any trade value on the open market?

Here is at least one analyst who feels the center could be a good gamble.

Will he return to the lineup and find his game? We will be watching.



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The Hockey News

How Soon Could We See Bradly Nadeau Back Up With Carolina?

By: Ryan Henkel

With Carolina closing in on locking up a playoff spot, keep an eye on top prospect Bradly Nadeau making a return to the NHL, fueled by AHL dominance and developing talent.

The NHL regular season is winding down and the Carolina Hurricanes have firmly planted themselves as essentially postseason locks.

The Canes currently sit tied for the top spot in the Eastern Conference, and are well ahead in the Metro Division too, with 96 points under their belt.

The Hockey News: The Big Show

They sit nine points ahead of the second place Columbus Blue Jackets and are 11 points ahead of the playoff line with a potential of 22 points still earnable.

Based off the current league standings, the Canes' magic number to clinch a playoff spot is 10, meaning any combination of points earned by the team or lost by the teams just outside of the playoff picture.

To win the division, that number is 14.

So essentially what that means, is that seven wins will guarantee the Canes the division and five will guarantee the team a playoff spot.

Obviously losses by trailing teams will shrink that number, but that's the cleanest way of thinking about it.

And with the Hurricanes getting closer to clinching, odds are we see them resting players down the line much like we've seen in previous years.

If guys are sitting, the Canes will definitely be looking to get top prospect Bradly Nadeau more ice time at the NHL level.

The 20-year-old sniper has continued to build from his record-breaking first AHL season, now with 25 goals and 51 points in 46 games with the Chicago Wolves.

He already spent a bit of time up with Carolina this year, scoring two goals across his eight games, but he might get a bit more preferential deployment once he's recalled this time.

Nadeau has been one of the AHL's best players and his two-way, all-around game is continuing to develop as well, something the organization has been looking for him to round out in his game.

He's currently out of the lineup with an injury, but it isn't anticipated to be a long absence, so he should be available once the Canes start locking things up.

I could see the Hurricanes starting to rest select guys as early as the first week of April, where they are at home for three out of four games, but the big callup will probably come in the final four games which will all be on the road.

Outside of Nadeau, I could also see Charles Alexis Legault and Joel Nystrom making a return to the lineup on the blueline.

Felix Unger Sorum has also potentially earned a recall as well with a big bounce back, sophomore season that's seen him nearly triple his first North American season (12g, 54pts in 61gp).

LINKS

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7151027/2026/03/27/carolina-hurricanes-playoffs-opponent/>

https://www.espn.com/nhl/story/_/id/48313966/nhl-playoffs-bracket-standings-2026-wild-card-bracket-games-matchups

<https://www.canescountry.com/general/53194/the-curious-case-of-jesper-kotkanieni>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/how-soon-could-we-see-bradly-nadeau-back-up-with-carolina>



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SportScan

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

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The Athletic / If the NHL playoffs started today: Projecting all 8 matchups and analyzing the teams

By Julian McKenzie

March 27, 2026 12:39 am EDT

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 New York Islanders jumped back into a wild-card spot on Thursday after their victory and a shootout loss by the Ottawa Senators.

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

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 three 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. 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 remains 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 Dallas on Thursday. Let's not forget about goalie Ilya Sorokin. But that final playoff spot could easily go to any number of teams.

Remaining schedules:

Hurricanes (11 games): 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 (9 games): 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)

These teams traded spots again on Thursday, after doing so on Tuesday, as Pittsburgh beat Ottawa while Columbus lost to Montreal.

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. 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 19-4-4. One big plus for the Blue Jackets: Jet Greaves looks like a starting goalie. He's 10-2-2 in his last 13 appearances.

Remaining schedules:

Penguins (10 games): 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 (10 games): 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.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

The Buffalo Sabres might be the greatest bandwagon team ever. Do their fans want this?

This year's Sabres aren't just the season's best bandwagon team; they might be the single greatest bandwagon team of all time.

The Sabres' playoff chances were once as low as 10.2 percent in December. Now they're leading the Atlantic Division 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 two 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 a strong home record (26-10-1). 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 four home games remaining among their final 10 games.

Remaining schedules:

Sabres (10 games): vs. Detroit (Friday), vs. Seattle (Saturday), vs. New York Islanders (March 31), at Ottawa (April 2), at Washington (April 4),



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vs. Tampa Bay (April 6), at New York Rangers (April 8), vs. Columbus (April 9), at Chicago (April 13), vs. Dallas (April 15).

Bruins (10 games): 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 (11 games): 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 (11 games): 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

Ottawa Senators (86 points, one behind Islanders) Detroit Red Wings (84 points), Philadelphia Flyers (82 points), Washington Capitals (81 points)

Western Conference

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

The Avalanche were 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. Colorado has the best offense (3.70 goals per game) and defense (2.44 goals allowed per game), and the second-ranked penalty kill (83.5 percent). Why didn't we mention the power play? We'd rather not. (It's the sixth-worst in the league at 16.9 percent.)

Nashville's surge is more recent. They had a five-game winning streak ended with a loss to New Jersey on Thursday. 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.

Remaining schedules:

Avalanche (11 games): 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 (10 games): 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!

This week's three-day NHL general manager meetings wrapped up on Wednesday in South Florida.

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 (10 games): 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 (9 games): 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.



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Remaining schedules:

Ducks (10 games): 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 (9 games): 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).

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

Edmonton, which jumped over Vegas on Tuesday night, then beat the Golden Knights on Thursday, is just trying to hold the fort until Draisaitl comes back for the playoffs. McDavid can only do so much. 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 the teams below them.

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 since joining Vegas. And for some reason, Vegas hasn't been able to consistently knock off playoff teams in the regular season.

Remaining schedules:

Oilers (9 games): 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).

Golden Knights (9 games): 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).

Other playoff candidates

Los Angeles Kings (76 points, one point behind Nashville), Seattle Kraken (74 points), Winnipeg Jets (72 points), San Jose Sharks (71 points)

The Athletic LOADED: 03.27.2026

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The Athletic / How bad can an NHL team be at five-on-five and still compete for the Stanley Cup?

By Murat Ates and Shayna Goldman

March 26, 2026 Updated 8:56 am EDT

Want to win a Stanley Cup? You need to control five-on-five play.

Over 80 percent of playoff hockey gets played with five skaters a side. Goal scoring follows suit: power plays generate more goals per minute,

but the huge volume of even-strength minutes means roughly two out of every three playoff goals are scored at five-on-five.

Usually, goal differential is used as a temperature check of sorts for playoff teams. In the last 17 years, of the 25 teams that reached the postseason in the negatives, 20 were eliminated in Round 1.

So yes, power plays are important, and may even increase in frequency early in the postseason. Yes, it's important to know how to find the line in terms of physicality — playoff hockey is intense — and to know how to avoid crossing it.

But Stanley Cup champions tend to be elite five-on-five teams. All but one Cup champion in the modern era, going back to 2007-08, won those minutes during the regular season before its championship. The only one to fall below break-even in shots and expected goals? The 2018 Washington Capitals — and they scored (and saved) enough to win those minutes all the same.

Does this mean that the 2026 Boston Bruins, Anaheim Ducks or Montreal Canadiens should be worried? Can a mediocre five-on-five team win the Stanley Cup — and if they can, what's their best route?

Let's dig into recent NHL history for clues.

Since 2008, 296 teams have qualified for the playoffs (including the 2020 play-in round). Of those 296 teams, 70 reached the playoffs after falling below the break-even mark in five-on-five expected goals according to Evolving-Hockey's model. Only nine went on to do real playoff damage, with at least a conference final appearance: the 2018 championship Capitals, 2024 New York Rangers, 2022 Rangers, 2020 New York Islanders, 2017 Ottawa Senators, 2014 Canadiens, 2012 Arizona Coyotes, 2010 Canadiens and 2008 Philadelphia Flyers.

What happens across an 82-game regular season matters, but one collective number obviously can't reflect the ebbs and flows that happen across a full year. It doesn't always capture the context of a team's situation, either — dramatic trends, trades or injuries can contribute to the final result. Sometimes, a team just coasts in the regular season and knows how to turn it up when it matters most.

So it's also worth looking into which of those below-break-even teams upped their five-on-five game when the postseason started. Twenty-eight of the 70 teams with sub-50 percent xG rates in the regular season saw their numbers tick up in the playoffs. But even with about a third of those teams improving in the playoffs, 49 of 70 teams still stayed below that 50 percent mark. And most were subsequently eliminated early: three in the 2020 play-in, another 31 in Round 1, and eight in Round 2.

Only six teams made it to the Conference Final: the 2008 Flyers, 2010 Canadiens, 2012 Coyotes, 2014 Canadiens, 2017 Senators, and the Rangers in both 2022 and 2024. Those teams show it can be possible to go on a deep run, regardless of what happened in the regular season. What's the key?

Each team and playoff path is different, so there is no perfect blueprint. Sometimes it depends on the luck of the draw and strength of opponent. Some years, though, teams like the 2017 Senators can find ways to carve their own path to the third round. Their run was fueled by Erik Karlsson's excellence, supported by an underdog mentality, deep scoring approach and some surprise playoff heroes like Jean-Gabriel Pageau.

Goaltending can go a long way to make up for what a team lacks in front of the blue paint, too. Mike Smith's 2012 heater helped push the Coyotes forward. Igor Shesterkin was elite for New York in both 2022 and 2024; he saved a combined 39 goals above expected in 36 playoff games. His stellar netminding, plus a high-end power play, helped elevate New York above expectations until their five-on-five shortcomings ultimately bit them against the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers.

The 2020 Islanders, on the other hand, made a handful of improvements to go on a deep run. Semyon Varlamov and Thomas Greiss combined for



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a .920 team save percentage, but the key was stingier defense, at both five-on-five (which kicked up the team's xG rate) and in short-handed situations. The Islanders, under Barry Trotz, were built for traditional playoff hockey.

Another Trotz-led team, the 2018 Capitals, were the other regular-season outlier to amp things up in the playoffs, with a 51.6 percent xG rate and an even more sparkling 58.8 percent goal rate. That year, Washington actually had a pretty quiet deadline, only adding defenseman Michal Kempny. Instead, the Caps' success was thanks to across-the-board improvements made on the fly, as the team only got stronger as the postseason rolled on.

Aside from Washington, 16 of the last 17 champions all stayed about that 50 percent mark in expected goals in their respective regular seasons. Some teams like the 2009 Pittsburgh Penguins, 2011 Bruins, and 2015 Chicago Blackhawks only hovered above that mark; others, including the 2008 Detroit Red Wings and 2025 Panthers, shined in the regular season. And 15 of the last 17 champs carried those five-on-five strengths into the playoffs on their way to the Stanley Cup.

Passing the regular-season vibe check doesn't always amount to playoff success — the Carolina Hurricanes would probably have a few trophies by now if that were the case. And while Dawson Springs of the Avalanche has shown that expected goals are a better predictive measure of future scoring, taking a step back in xG doesn't mean a team is destined to fail, either.

The 2017 Penguins and 2019 St. Louis Blues were the two champs to fall below 50 percent in the playoffs. In both cases, it was because neither team's scoring chance generation was as strong below the surface. Still, these teams made the most of their chances and outscored expectations, and played a stingy enough defense to power forward.

Outside of the obvious contenders, which of this year's playoff teams are controlling the flow of play in a way that traditionally leads to postseason success? And which are most likely to pull off an outliers' run deep in the playoffs like the Penguins, Blues and others before them?

The Bruins may hold a coveted wild-card seed, but they have red flags — specifically, a 46 percent xG rate that ranks 29th in the league. Defense is the issue there, and it's only gotten worse since the Olympic break. Could Boston be an outlier, despite their five-on-five woes? Maybe if Jeremy Swayman (who is putting up Vezina-caliber play), David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie have something to say about it. As outliers in seasons past have shown, that could be enough to shake up the playoff picture. But most teams in Boston's position at five-on-five don't make it past the first round.

It's a different story for the Buffalo Sabres, who haven't been perfect season-wide at five-on-five. But Buffalo has only added more substance since returning to play, and it's a big reason why this team has held onto first place in the Atlantic. At this rate, the Sabres should be able to move past break-even by playoff time.

The Islanders, who currently sit on the outside looking in, have had some recent downturns at five-on-five. A leakier defense, especially in transition, has brought them down to a 47 percent xG rate through 72 games. Rookie phenom Matthew Schaefer's star power and Ilya Sorokin's brilliance in net could make this team an outlier, but there's a lot of competition for a few playoff seeds.

The Canadiens are only around break-even in xG this season, but their scoring chance creation and goal scoring have helped make up for defensive lapses. Montreal's power-play scoring since the break only adds to their offense, while the Red Wings have been pretty middle-of-the-road at five-on-five, without the goals to show for it. It's going to be an uphill climb for Detroit at this point.

Whether teams like the Bruins, Red Wings and Islanders can take their five-on-five play up a notch, on both ends, could determine where they

ultimately slot in a few weeks — especially with the Blue Jackets and Senators going on heaters recently.

Rick Bowness' impact in Columbus could lead the Blue Jackets from second-last in the Eastern Conference all the way into the playoffs. Since Bowness was hired on Jan. 12, Columbus is tied with Buffalo and Anaheim for the most wins in the NHL, climbing all the way to second in the Metropolitan Division. The stunning turnaround in five-on-five play is at the heart of their turnaround: Bowness' Blue Jackets are inside the top 10 in expected goals percentage and fourth in their shot share at five-on-five. It's not by accident.

In his first meeting with his new team, Bowness shared his goals for the Blue Jackets' five-on-five metrics, putting Columbus' poor rush shot, slot shot and five-on-five statistics on the board. He told his team they couldn't realistically make the playoffs without improving across the board — and now that they've bought in, committing to the hard parts of NHL defense, the Blue Jackets are more than a threat to make the playoffs. They're a legitimate threat to win a round — or more — based almost entirely on real, demonstrated improvement to team defense.

But there's another team in the East with a stunning improvement to its five-on-five game. Maybe we should be taking the Senators as a more serious threat?

Ottawa's 59 percent of expected goals since the Olympic break is No. 1 in the NHL, and it's coming from improvements at both ends of the rink. The Senators have generated the third-most expected goals and are the best five-on-five xG suppressors in the entire league since the break.

They're simply not giving up shots. The Senators' forecheck has been a force, with active sticks all the way up the ice, and the team's third and fourth lines have contributed to team success even after trading David Perron. Maybe it's no surprise that the Senators are finally getting saved: they're protecting the guts of the ice more effectively than anyone else in the NHL.

Not only could that give Columbus and Ottawa the edge in the playoff race, that five-on-five foundation should help their chances of going on a real run.

Shifting west, Anaheim is a fascinating division leader. The Ducks' 47.5 percent xG since the Olympics pairs with a substantially negative goal differential — minus-24 at five-on-five — to add some down-filled pillows to the Pacific Division fight. The Ducks could sneak through their own division, if the team's up-tempo game and goaltending from Lukas Dostal can overpower some defensive concerns that hold back their five-on-five metrics. But if this team suffers an early exit, it would likely be because the Utah Mammoth's numbers are better across the board, making them the favorites from the wild-card seed if the playoffs started today.

The race for the second wild-card spot has turned into something of a pillow fight, too, with the Nashville Predators three points ahead of a Los Angeles Kings team whose five-on-five metrics are better than the Predators, Kraken, Sharks or Jets. That's not an insurmountable lead, but L.A.'s big bet on Artemi Panarin, its quality goaltender in Darcy Kuemper, and the easily bandwagonable story of Anze Kopitar are all at risk of missing the playoffs despite being the WC2 seed's best chance of creating an upset.

Winnipeg's five-on-five numbers have dropped from exemplary in its Presidents' Trophy-winning season to below 50 percent this year. The Jets' modest, late-season resurgence, which comes partly from better performances (and health) from key veterans and partly from young players like Elias Salomonsson, is not likely to be enough to earn a playoff spot. And even if this team did somehow make it, the odds are against it going the distance.

Seattle has a game in hand on the Jets and the same five-point spread between itself and Nashville in a wild-card spot, but the Kraken's five-on-five numbers are even worse than Winnipeg's. It's hard to find a route for



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a team with 46.0 percent of expected goals against the league as a whole surviving the Avalanche, even with improved goaltending via Philipp Grubauer's resurgence. There's just no reason to believe Seattle could win the five-on-five battle against the West's top teams, even their last playoff matchup in mind.

Could one of the most dominant two-way teenagers in NHL history accomplish what slower, veteran teams cannot? Almost every version of Macklin Celebrini's lines has outscored its opposition this season, but the Sharks have some of the worst five-on-five numbers among playoff hopefuls. They've improved since the Olympics, but San Jose's share of real goals hasn't kept pace. They may have Celebrini, but the rest of the Sharks' roster quality better resembles early Connor McDavid playoff teams than the ones that made it to back-to-back Cup finals.

Less dominant teams sneak into the postseason every year — and sometimes make surprising impacts. Maybe the Kraken's deep approach can take over down the stretch, the Ducks' young guns can make their mark in a weaker division, or Sorokin can steal a series for the Islanders. But the best bet to go on a deep run and end with a championship is to have a dominant team at five-on-five.

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The Athletic / NHL coaches to WATCH: Pending UFAs, the next class, and who's on the hot seat?

By Pierre LeBrun

March 26, 2026 6:00 am EDT

Two potential Jack Adams Award nominees also happen to be the only NHL head coaches on expiring contracts.

The Columbus Blue Jackets' Rick Bowness and the Buffalo Sabres' Lindy Ruff are both up at the end of the year.

Bowness took over for the fired Dean Evason on Jan. 6, and he and Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell agreed they would focus on the rest of this season and reconvene afterward — to see how it went and how Bowness felt. That remains the plan as of this week.

Bowness, 71, will want to see where he's at with the stress of NHL coaching back in his life after he retired two years ago. Bowness has said that the main reason he stepped away was health reasons — not just for himself but also for his wife Judy. Both are doing better now, and he couldn't resist the opportunity when the Jackets reached out in January. And I mean, wow, has he turned around the Jackets' season or what?

All things being equal, I think Bowness will want to come back, and I can't see a reason the Jackets wouldn't feel the same. But he needs a new contract.

Meanwhile, Jarmo Kekalainen inherited Ruff when he became Sabres GM. At the time, he said everyone in the organization was being evaluated. He then made a number of front-office changes. Obviously, the Sabres have taken off since. Kekalainen politely declined comment this week when I checked on the coaching status, reminding me he does not comment on things like that.

Ruff via text message said to me this week, "For me, I just take it one game at a time!!" — a good approach to life in general.

As long as Ruff feels up to it, though, it feels like he should be back, given that the Sabres have become the best story in the NHL.

The other team that needs to make an end-of-season coaching decision is the Los Angeles Kings. D.J. Smith was named interim head coach for the rest of the season, at which point GM Ken Holland will evaluate the fit. I think a new coaching hire is the most likely outcome unless the Kings make the playoffs and notch a first-round upset.

What about beyond this season? Here's our annual look around the league.

Coaches with one year left

Normally, coaches with a year left on their contracts might get extended in the offseason or early next season (as the Calgary Flames' Ryan Huska and Edmonton Oilers' Kris Knoblauch did last fall) so as not to have the distraction of being on an expiring deal next year.

These are coaches whose current deals expire after the 2026-27 season:

Joel Quenneville, Anaheim Ducks: It's easy to forget that Quenneville only signed a two-year deal last offseason. Things have gone as well as hoped for this season, with the young Ducks taking that next step. The playoffs await. The only thing to point out here is that Quenneville turns 68 in September, so any extension, one would imagine, would be short-term.

Jared Bednar, Colorado Avalanche: Man, time flies. This is Bednar's 10th season behind the Avs bench. A Stanley Cup champion in 2022, there were questions about the coach after a first-round loss to Dallas last spring. But there weren't any questions in the front office, which firmly believes in him.

"Jared's a great coach," Avs GM Chris MacFarland told The Athletic earlier this season. "We don't spend any time thinking about that. He has the support of the guys. We know it's a result-driven business, but he's hard-working, he's prepared, he's a quality person, and I think he has the respect of everybody. I know he does with ownership and myself and Joe (Sakic). But forget that — he's got the respect of our players, which is crucial."

Short of a first-round exit, all signs point to another extension for one of the league's top coaches.

John Hynes, Minnesota Wild: Hynes is in Year 2 of a three-year contract. He's in pretty darn good shape to get an extension at some point. I can pretty much guarantee that. The Wild under him have ascended as Cup contenders, aided by his GM's additions. There's a very tough first-round playoff matchup that awaits, likely with Dallas, but unless it's a sweep, I would find it hard to pin a loss on the coach. And of course, the Wild may win.

Martin St. Louis, Montreal Canadiens: It could be back-to-back playoff appearances for the youngest team in the league, which is a reflection of the way St. Louis develops young players, particularly on the offensive side of the puck. Improvement is needed on the structure on the defensive side, but again, it's a young team. It's been a pretty good report card for St. Louis behind the bench. Perhaps St. Louis needs to be harder on players at times, too. I can't imagine the Canadiens would want the coach entering next season on an expiring deal, though.

Andrew Brunette, Nashville Predators: Brunette has an option in his contract for the 2027-28 season, but as far as iron-clad years in his deal, next season is the last. The Predators need to hire a new GM at some point. That person will inherit Brunette and need to make a decision. But this late-season playoff push with a retooling team can only help Brunette's case.

Ryan Warsofsky, San Jose Sharks: Warsofsky is wrapping up Year 2 of a three-year deal. The Sharks are on the rise. The more important tell will be how GM Mike Grier feels the young core is developing under his coach. Will Grier feel Warsofsky is the man to hire this young team to the next step in its development? I'm guessing yes. Also, I don't think anyone in the San Jose market will make it a big deal if the coach enters



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the season on an expiring contract, so management has time on its side. The Sharks can let next season play out a little if they choose to before deciding on an extension.

Andre Tourigny, Utah Mammoth: Tourigny's in his fifth season with the organization and Year 2 of a three-year extension. The Mammoth are looking like they'll make the playoffs for the first time in their second season. As the Arizona Coyotes, the team hadn't made the playoffs since the wonky COVID-19 bubble in 2020 and in a normal season since making the conference final in 2012. So it's been a long journey between a painstaking rebuild and the drama of being rescued by owner Ryan Smith and moved to Salt Lake City. Tourigny followed the team in that move and has overseen its improved play. I was a bit worried for him earlier this season when the Mammoth slumped for a while, just because there's so much pressure on that franchise to make the postseason. But he survived that. Let's see what the playoffs bring.

Bruce Cassidy, Vegas Golden Knights: Cassidy's five-year deal expires after next season. He's already the longest-serving head coach in franchise history — Gerard Gallant lasted two and a half years, and Pete DeBoer just over two years — and guided the Golden Knights to a Stanley Cup championship in 2023, but Vegas has struggled to find a consistent footing in the second half of this season. Injuries are a part of that, of course. And the Knights are likely still playoff-bound in the mediocre Pacific Division. But I would have concerns. I don't have any intel here as Vegas management keeps things close to the vest. But a first-round playoff exit would probably at least invite a conversation about a coaching change.

Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals: Carbery is wrapping up Year 3 of a four-year deal — and went from Jack Adams Award winner last season to likely missing the playoffs this season. Such is life in the parity-filled NHL. But my understanding is that Carbery is still 100 percent management's guy, as he should be.

Scott Arniel, Winnipeg Jets: From President's Trophy to likely missing the playoffs, that's a rough fall. Arniel is wrapping up Year 2 of a three-year deal. I think the Jets will look at every aspect of the organization after the season in a detailed postmortem. But at the moment, if I had to guess, I think they still see Arniel as more part of the solution than the problem.

And finally ...

I didn't mention any head coaches who have term past next season. But obviously, there could be changes elsewhere despite coaches' contract security.

Let's see what the fallout is for the Toronto Maple Leafs, for example, with Craig Berube signed through the 2027-28 season. The first decision with the Leafs will concern the future of GM Brad Treliving, who has one year left on his deal. It's fair to say that all bets are off in Toronto after a massively disappointing season. It should be pointed out, though, that Berube has a very solid relationship with MLSE CEO Keith Pelley.

Then there's the Edmonton Oilers, having a widely disappointing season, with their top players not exactly hiding their feelings on it. Knoblauch signed a three-year extension on Oct. 3, which carries through the 2028-29 season. He's the same coach who guided the Oilers to back-to-back Stanley Cup Finals, so I'm not sure he got dumb overnight. But there is some obvious discontent, and who knows what the fallout of a first-round playoff exit might be. Then again, the Oilers could surprise everyone with another deep run. Stranger things have happened.

As always, there are other potential situations that could arise, whether it's because of what happens in the playoffs or because a coach suddenly becomes available. DeBoer remains a free agent. He most likely won't be when the puck drops next season.

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The Athletic / Moritz Seider is the NHL's best defensive defenseman. It's time for an award to honor that

By Dom Luszczyszyn

March 26, 2026 6:00 am EDT

The Norris Trophy race has rarely, if ever, been more crowded than it has this season as the value of top-end defensemen continues to rise. A lot of worthy defensemen are going to finish their year unrecognized for their elite contributions and it's high time that changes with a new award: one for the best defensive defenseman in hockey.

The idea of adding a trophy for defensive excellence on the back-end is far from a new one. Defensemen are the only position class without two awards and it feels especially unjust that forwards have a designated award for their off-puck ability while the position that drives it most doesn't. Considering how often the Norris is lamented as an offensive defenseman award, it should be important to create some equilibrium with an honor that would recognize those who excel in their own end.

All of that feels especially prudent this year for two specific players: Moritz Seider and Jake Sanderson. The rising stars are putting up Norris-caliber seasons in terms of total value, but are unlikely to be recognized with so much as a top-five finish in the Norris race due to lesser production than their contemporaries.

That's not a new problem; defensive defenders haven't been getting their fair share of recognition in the Norris race for decades. Jacob Slavin can certainly attest to that of late, and it feels especially disheartening this season with how strong Seider and Sanderson have been, specifically because of their defensive game. Our tools for assessing and analyzing defensive ability have become better and better over the last few years, enough to bridge the narrative stronghold that production still carries in the Norris race. But if that debate continues to be driven by offense first and foremost, the league needs to introduce an award that can finally bring some balance to the discussion.

If there's room for the Selke Trophy, there's room for the same version of the trophy for defensemen. If such an award existed, here's what my ballot would look like, along with the usual top 10 sorted by Defensive Rating from a set criteria, just like the Selke.

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

Criteria: Defensemen who play over 20 minutes per game, receive 20 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face top-line competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

My ballot

1. Moritz Seider

The 2025-26 season should be viewed as Seider's coronation as one of the game's great unicorns from the back end. He's become a one-of-one talent delivering do-it-all two-way ability like few before him in a mean package: a unique franchise defenseman who should be a Norris finalist this season.

But we all know how these votes sometimes go and Seider finishing the season with roughly 55 points, while others score 80 or more, unfortunately makes him a tougher Norris sell to some. That will be especially true if the Detroit Red Wings miss the playoffs, to no fault of Seider's.

The season Seider is putting up is special and there should be a place in the game to celebrate it; an award for best defensive defenseman would



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do just that. In some of the league's most difficult minutes, Seider has become an absolute force, allowing just 2.34 expected goals against per 60 and 1.94 goals against per 60 this season, some of the best marks in the league despite the degree of difficulty.

What makes that more special is how utterly lost the Red Wings have been whenever he's not on the ice, where they allow 0.37 more xGA and 0.39 more actual goals per 60. That combination is better than any other defender on this list and while this would be a defensive award, the context that Seider hasn't had to be a specialist to achieve those feats makes what he's doing even more special. That his focal point stretches all 200 feet makes his off-puck contributions all the more compelling — not sacrificing much offense to deliver this level of defense is unheard-of.

Awards are meant to build reputations and cement legacies, and it's a shame there currently isn't one to signal Seider's arrival as arguably the game's best shutdown defenseman.

2. Esa Lindell

The leader in Defensive Rating this season would be second on my imaginary ballot for a fake award. That's no shot at what Esa Lindell is doing, it's just respect for Seider. When two players are as close as these two are (just 0.7 goals separate the two), it's always worth digging a little deeper.

For Lindell, his five-on-five impact in both xG and actual goals is just a shade behind Seider's and playing almost every minute with Miro Heiskanen is certainly worth considering. Seider, in comparison, has spent 221 minutes with Ben Chiarot this season — and won them. That five-on-five impact with less help is the main thing giving Seider the edge, but Lindell would still make this theoretical race extremely close.

The two being so close at five-on-five while Lindell faces some of the toughest competition in the league is part of that. But it's also Lindell's impact on the penalty kill, where he plays 3.9 minutes per game or 77 percent (!) of Dallas' short-handed minutes. He's basically out there for the whole thing, and the only other defender above 70 percent is Mike Matheson. That's one area of Seider's game that doesn't stack up well with the competition.

The other factor is what we'll call the Slavin Principle. It's one thing to defend well, it's another to defend cleanly, thereby limiting the other team from power-play chances. Lindell has just nine penalties this year to Seider's 25, a sizeable difference that has some indirect say on a player's defensive impact.

It's a race that would've been great to see happen in real life. While it would've meant a lot to Seider's legacy if he won, it also would've been a big deal for Lindell's already-sterling defensive reputation, too. He's an unsung hero on the Dallas Stars' blue line.

3. Jake Sanderson

Ottawa's identity this season has been its defensive might, leading the league with just 2.31 xGA/60. Goaltending has gotten in the way of that reputation, but make no mistake, the Senators have been a defensive powerhouse and Sanderson is the man powering that. He's been on for 2.25 xGA/60 this season, one of the lowest marks in the league. Doing that while taking on tough matchups night after night is huge. He also has the results to back it up with 2.16 GA/60; in a year where the team has been sewered by goaltending often, that matters.

Sanderson's best asset is his puck-moving ability, which has allowed the Senators to escape from trouble quickly and defend less. But even when he has to, he's been a stud alongside his usual partner, Artem Zub, who also makes an appearance in the Defensive Rating top 10. As fantastic as Zub also is as a shutdown guy, his xGA/60 rising considerably in Sanderson's absence means we know who the driver is there.

4. Jonas Brodin

If this award had existed over the last decade, Jonas Brodin would've been a frequent finalist. Since entering the league in 2012-13, Brodin has finished top 10 in Defensive Rating on seven occasions. That's the most in the analytics era, narrowly nudging Zdeno Chara, Chris Tanev, Ryan Suter and Niklas Hjälmarsson with six. (Jaccob Slavin would be at six this year if not for injury.)

This season, Brodin finds himself just on the cusp of the top five, though that's mostly a result of playing fewer games than those above him. Brodin has been on the ice for 2.39 xGA/60 this season, 0.31 fewer than when he's on the bench, which is right there with Seider and Lindell. Doing that while only taking seven penalties all season is extra impressive.

5. J.J. Moser

There's room for one of the teammates from two of the defensemen above (Heiskanen would no doubt be a popular choice), but my pick is J.J. Moser to limit it to one guy per team. How he was able to step in and step up within Tampa Bay's blue line amidst a plethora of injuries was incredibly impressive this season.

With Moser on the ice, the Lightning have given up 2.49 xGA/60 and 1.75 GA/60 while taking on the team's toughest minutes. It speaks volumes that Moser's impact has been so immense that it not only pushed Victor Hedman down the lineup, it also shifted Ryan McDonagh toward secondary matchups. He's also been a big part of Tampa Bay's top-10 penalty kill.

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Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Goaltender interference — two plays, two outcomes

Elliotte Friedman

Like many of you, I was confused by two similar video-review challenges from last weekend: Morgan Barron's 2-1 goal during Saturday's Winnipeg/Pittsburgh game, followed by Anders Lee's disallowed score from Sunday's Columbus/Islanders tilt.

The playoffs may not officially be underway, but for any team close to the outline, they've already begun. You feel the intensity and the passion. There's so much at stake. Part of my job is explaining these decisions. The people in the Situation Room watch more hockey than I do, so if there's nuance I'm missing, I'd like to know about it.

Thursday evening, minutes before a heavy 13-game schedule, I got on a zoom call with six of them. We walked through the two plays, and they explained to me why one was a goal and one wasn't. It should also be mentioned that one former official is in the room with Hockey Operations. Last weekend, it was Dan O'Halloran, who refereed in the NHL from 1995-2020.

My goal here is to explain. What did they see? Why did they rule this way? And, inform everyone so we hopefully have a better understanding of what we are looking for.

The Penguins are up 2-0 when Barron scores the disputed goal. Keys: the puck is in front of Barron, and he doesn't change his path in an obvious attempt to wipe out the goalie. His only interest is getting in position to score, and the contact occurs immediately after he makes contact with the puck.

Watch from the camera above and behind Arturs Silovs. Erik Karlsson makes an incredible attempt to disrupt this play, coming a long way to



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both Brad Lambert before spinning to get his stick on Barron's effort. (I didn't appreciate how hard Karlsson competed here until I saw this angle.) The Situation Room feels Karlsson's own momentum plays the biggest part in the ensuing contact, since he's spinning into Barron's path.

When referee Kelly Sutherland says it is a goal "due to the initial contact by the Pittsburgh defenceman," he's referring to Karlsson and Barron, not Karlsson and Silovs. That added to the confusion.

The Penguins hilariously distributed the rule to media in attendance at that game, but Hockey Operations, which admits not all rulings have unanimous internal agreement, said there wasn't much dispute on this one. (To be honest, I was surprised at how many people said this to me, too. When I saw it live, I thought for sure no goal.) They did not feel Barron pushed, shoved or fouled Karlsson. They felt this was a battle Barron won.

I was playing cards Sunday night when my phone blew up about this one. I was shocked the Blue Jackets challenged, because no way I would have after Barron's goal. But their video coaches knew something, because the goal was overturned.

Right away, I'm shown one major difference between the two plays: puck location. On Barron's goal, the puck is between him and the net, either on the ice or in the air. When Lee collides with Jet Greaves, it is behind him — not in the crease. As the Islanders captain goes to the net, Mathieu Olivier deflects it away from his stick, and it doesn't move towards the goal until it hits Olivier's skate. That's Lee's biggest problem. He takes out Greaves with no puck in the crease, and the carnage prevents the goalie from recovering before it goes in off Olivier.

The big question here is obvious: doesn't Olivier push Lee? As we were discussing this play, that's what I had the toughest time reconciling. I freely admit the ex-players in Hockey Operations have much more on-ice experience than I do, so they see things I don't.

Lee is no softie, but the Columbus winger is one of the NHL's toughest, most physical players. On the side-angle view, they point out how Lee smartly manoeuvres around Olivier before the latter recovers to knock the puck away, and doesn't fall on Lee until after everyone's in the crease. The majority of the Situation Room staff feels this was more about Lee's own momentum.

At the end of our conversation, I told them they should be putting out these videos themselves. Maybe I don't agree with everything, but, at the very least, the walk-through opened my eyes to critical factors.

Number one: where is the puck? Barron's goal, it was in front of him. Lee's was behind him, and he clearly beat the puck into the crease. That matters. And it was the first thing mentioned in both cases. This is something all of us should be watching on any disputed play.

Number two: who creates the contact? This is more judgemental, but it's a factor. We might not always see it the same way, but we have to look for it.

Of course, while I was writing, the Penguins lost another challenge. But in both of these they lost, they won the game. (So did the Islanders.) We plan, God laughs.

32 THOUGHTS

1. Tuesday, led by intrepid Sportsnet Features producer Jeremy McElhanney, we drove to Buffalo. The Sabres are playoff-bound, so we taped a few pieces. The best thing about Buffalo right now is you feel the energy. Reporters covering practice were excited. It's an awesome fan base, extremely deserving of late-April hockey. Josh Norris said that, during the first post-Olympic home game, he and Tage Thompson were next to each other on the bench. The crowd was so loud they couldn't have a conversation. They started laughing, marvelling at the enthusiasm.

2. One of the most fascinating things about the Sabres' season is that it went from zero-to-100 at F1 speeds. There was no build, no climb — just an immediate charge from the bottom of the Eastern Conference to the top. It's obvious: everyone believes the 4-3 overtime victory in Edmonton on Dec. 9 is Buffalo's pivotal moment. A collision knocked out Colten Ellis in the first period, but in front of Alex Lyon, they played 40 great minutes and led 3-0. Then, Edmonton scored 10 seconds into the third and tied it with two seconds remaining in regulation. The Oilers are a nightmare in three-on-three overtime, and the Sabres stared at a fourth-straight loss. But Alex Tuch scored at 0:33 and a 10-game win streak was born.

"That could have been the game that broke our back," head coach Lindy Ruff said. "Lots of excuses that could've led to a loss, but we made it a big win."

3. Heading into Thursday's games, Buffalo was tied atop the East with Carolina, also holding the top tiebreaker — 37 regulation wins. (Tampa Bay is second with 35.) Every team has its slogans — everyone remembers John Tortorella's "Safe is Death" — and Ruff was nice enough to share four themes surrounding the Sabres in 2025-26:

"Everybody Ropes, Everybody Rides."

Self-explanatory. I assumed Ruff, a good Alberta boy, authored this one, but he wouldn't take credit. "The players probably didn't know this and I didn't tell them, but when I went to Dallas, somebody else brought this in." (Another Western Canadian, he said.)

"Share the Morning Coffee."

"Talk to your teammates. Get to know them. When you walk in the building, your teammates sit in there. Enjoy something with them."

"Grab a Guy."

"Means a lot of things in hockey. There might be something going on on the ice. You're going to have to grab a guy." Nowhere did the Sabres better illustrate this than during their wild, fight-filled 8-7 win two weeks ago over the Lightning.

Or, "There might be a guy that's struggling off the ice or with his play, that means just grab the guy, help him out. That can go a lot of different directions and a lot of these are stuff the players and our group came up with before the season."

"(Bleeping) Give-r."

"When you put the skates on, it's 100 per cent plus." Not too many nights Buffalo's given anything less since that northern Alberta night last December. Chippewa Street in the playoffs is going to nuts. About time.

4. Ruff played for the Rangers; coached the Stars and Devils. But Sabre blood flows through his veins. He's been so close, particularly in 1999 and 2006 — the phenomenal series against Carolina where a puck-over-glass penalty overcame their injury-depleted blue line. He loves this group. I asked him if he still thinks about erasing all of that.

"Well, it's a shot to get done what I haven't been able to get done," he answered. "In my eyes, I'm not going to quit trying." Does that mean you're back next year? (His contract expires June 30.) "The thing we've kind of wrapped our arms around as a coaching staff has been, 'Let's just win one more game.' We keep saying, 'Just one more.' That's it. And we get to tomorrow, and we'll say, 'Just one more.'" Then, he smiled. "When we get to that 'Just one more,' we'll see if it's just one."

5. Nashville is shrinking its list of GM contenders. I don't believe any external candidate has interviewed in-person. Not sure of the timeline, but that's going to change in the near future. In addition to the already reported names, others who have been spoken to include St. Louis Vice-President of Hockey Operations Peter Chiarelli and an intriguing fresh name, Edmonton assistant GM Bill Scott. It's a wide net and we're still figuring out who else is involved.



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6. The Predators' late-season push is exciting, but hasn't changed their long-term outlook. As someone joked with me this week, "birth certificates are still the berth certificates." They will need to continue developing and injecting youth.

7. One former Nashvillian will be closely watched as the games heat up. That's Michael McCarron. The Predators and player had a sizeable gap during negotiations. A few team executives said that's because he'll have a strong market. Nothing ridiculous, manageable for most, but there's a scarcity and he's a physical, competitive sizeable centre.

8. I wouldn't rush to assume anything about Auston Matthews' intentions. There is much to play out before we get a true understanding of how he feels. While there are changes coming in Toronto, we don't yet know what they will be.

9. Connor Ingram after Edmonton's thrilling 4-3 Thursday night victory over Vegas: "We've found a way to play that's given us success. Now it's not being stubborn and sticking with it. Playing simple. We're a good enough hockey club we're going to get our chances. As long as we don't give them that many, we're going to be just fine."

The Oilers' penalty kill, ranked 26th, had three huge kills, including one in overtime. During Tuesday's win over Utah, the Oilers had some way-above-average defensive metrics for them (per Sportlogiq), including blocking almost double the amount of even-strength shots as usual and a much stingier defence of their blueline. Baby steps, but big performances.

10. Alexander Ovechkin took his first defensive-zone five-on-five faceoff of the season Thursday in Utah — a night he scored a hat trick in a 7-4 win. Part of me thinks it would have been tremendous to go 82 games without one. I've also wondered if he does play next year, does he also get something unheard-of for the NHL: a lengthy multi-city sendoff.

11. For much of this season, the Jets felt this year was a blip — not a true indication of who they are, especially due to Connor Hellebuyck's early-season injury. But there has to be disappointment post-Olympics they got within striking distance of a playoff position and haven't made a better push.

12. In the debate about playoff format, someone made a thoughtful point: that Commissioner Gary Bettman wants things this way because it protects time zones. There's reason to believe this. Bettman has said he will never go away from every team having All-Star Game representation because you give a market incentive not to watch. Not everyone makes the playoffs, but this way you get the best shot at multiple teams from every region. Every division has its down cycle. Before the Pillow Pacific, remember the SouthLeast? I do wish there was a way to give Central teams (and fans) better start times.

13. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said this week the NBA will have a special Board of Governors meeting this May to enact tougher anti-tanking rules. Leagues watch each other, so I'm curious to see what Silver comes up with.

The NHL adjusted its draft a few years ago, with teams blocked from rising more than 10 spots and falling more than two — but that was because the worst teams felt they were consistently getting clobbered in the lottery (Detroit). Silver made it very clear this is a problem that needs to be solved at the ownership level. The first team out of the playoffs in the East is nine-and-a-half back. In the West it is 10.5. That's a drama-free few weeks, everybody's nightmare. Fortunately, hockey doesn't have the same issue this season, thanks to some awesome races. But the NHL will watch what the NBA does, just in case.

14. A few Canucks said Filip Hronek is quietly trying to exert more influence in a positive way. As the Canucks chart a new path, Hronek's discussed everything from practice habits to how workouts are done to punctuality to attire in an attempt to sharpen things. Lots of talk he'll be the new captain. Whether or not that's true, he's definitely acting as one.

15. Vegas is notoriously private about injuries but there is expectation Carter Hart will return before the end of the regular season.

16. It's now or never for the Kings. One point out, seven in a row at home, two of them against Nashville. Have to overcome a terrible tiebreaker, though.

17. We'll see how things progress with James Hagens, but I don't believe returning to Boston College is a realistic outcome. What's interesting is that several advisors and executives wanted him to try if he doesn't sign this spring with the Bruins, just to see how the NCAA handles it. While there is educated guesswork Hagens wouldn't be eligible now that he's appeared in the AHL, the fact a couple of players have returned to college after playing professional hockey has others wondering if he could be stopped. In this case, however, the question appears moot.

18. Someone asked me if the Bruins don't want to burn the first year of his contract so a new one is needed in three years instead of two. Only Boston can answer that, but one thing I've learned is some clubs aren't scared of this because it can actually hurt a player's comparables due to lower counting stats. I mean, if Hagens does what he can do, it's not going to matter. But some agents and teams will tell you burning a year with no huge numbers can help a club's negotiation/arbitration case.

19. As part of the being-worked-on NHL/CHL/AHL eligibility rules, there will be a date prior to the CHL trade deadline (second week of January) for 19-year-olds to rejoin their junior clubs rather than stay. Past that date, they can't go back.

20. Originally, the plan was for one 19-year-old per NHL team to be loaned, but that's been amended to any first-round selection. Teams with multiple picks argued they shouldn't have to create problems with players, families and/or agents by choosing between eligible players. As I've written, I don't think this means we will see a flood of players headed there. NHLPA must still approve.

21. Loved Travis Green saying "get ready to win" when asked what he was going to do against Detroit with a depleted defence. It's all about attitude, although I admit it didn't hurt that Linus Ullmark played one of his best games of the season. Also excellent that Carter Yakemchuk scored two points in an emergency NHL debut. He's only 20, long way to go, but the pressure builds for impact when you're a first-rounder. For both player and for a scouting staff under new management.

22. The only north-of-the-49th team not to host an outdoor game is Montreal. The issue is not "want," but "where?" The Canadiens are trying to solve that. TVA's Renaud Lavoie reported Wednesday the plan is to build a temporary stadium where summer music festivals are held at Parc Jean-Drapeau, near the Canadian Grand Prix site. I've heard 42,000 seats (Renaud said 40-45K) with a target of the 2028-29 season. A women's game would be part of the festivities. Would be awesome, and we need an outdoor game in that city.

23. Don't overcomplicate things: make Toronto the opponent.

24. Speaking of Montreal, a few executives who saw Alexander Zharovsky recently said the Canadiens got away with grand larceny picking him 34th in last year's draft. Apparently, that selection in that spot is a discussion point in scouting circles.

25. A couple post-Olympic thoughts still in my notebook. After the Bronze Medal Game, I asked several Finns and Slovaks who they thought would win gold. Mikael Granlund answered, "I have my thoughts, but I'm not going to say them yet." I haven't forgotten Mikael, and some day I'm going to get it out of you.

26. American-born Shane Pinto said the more Canada couldn't score, the more he began to believe "we were actually going to win." I heard this from a few different people.

27. Vincent Trocheck said when he checked his phone after the win, there was a text from one of his best friends with the on-ice video of



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Trocheck saying, "I am going to get (bleeped) up tonight." He was laughing about that this week, saying the other text that stood out was a congratulatory message from Patrick Kane. They became pretty close during the future Hall-of-Famer's Ranger tenure.

28. Don Granato will be coaching Team USA at the World Championships. His Buffalo contract is expiring. Enjoyed working with him at Sportsnet and no doubt this will be a good opportunity to remind everyone of his availability.

29. Kevin Maxwell, AHL Springfield's GM, may be leaving the Blues as they enter the Alex Steen era. Prior to that, he worked for the Rangers for 15 years. Possible reunion?

30. To make the whole goalie interference situation even more muddled, when it briefly came up at the GM meetings, one manager complained about the netminders embellishing, too.

31. Not my expertise, but I've been reading this week about PWHL salary disclosure in The Hockey News. It's a controversial topic, because this information is supposed to be private and not all players and/or reporters are thrilled about it. (No doubt the league isn't happy.) I'd just say this: full salary disclosure was great for the NHL players. A friend is taking his kids to the Takeover Tour game this weekend in Detroit (New York Sirens vs Montreal Victoire) and they are pumped.

32. Just wanted to send the best to Victor Hedman, one of my favourites. Respect his privacy, but hope whatever he needs to take care of solves itself quickly and positively.

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1384510 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers beat Golden Knights in OT as winning elements begin to arrive

Mark Spector

LAS VEGAS — Slowly, and we're not yet ready to say surely, all the elements of a good hockey team are beginning to arrive for the Edmonton Oilers.

With six wins and 13 points in their past 10 games — and a couple of losses that you can live with — the game Northern Alberta has waited all season for is emerging like a springtime perennial, a solid nine games and three weeks before the first playoff game.

"It's been only two games," cautioned Mattias Ekholm after Edmonton capped a perfect two-game road trip with a 4-3 overtime win at Vegas, "but I think that there's been a trend in the last 10 that the wins we've gotten haven't been lucky. They've been well earned.

"We're getting solid goaltending. The D pairs are gelling, all three of them. Our lines are coming together and we know more what we're supposed to do out there. We look more like a machine that is maybe a little bit more well-oiled. A little more well-working."

On a steamy Thursday night just off The Strip, Edmonton led by a goal three separate times over Vegas. The Golden Knights have trailed more minutes this season than any other NHL club, and never led for a second Thursday.

In the end, however, there were two key moments that allowed for Evan Bouchard's eventual overtime winner:

After ten-and-a-half minutes without a shot, Connor Ingram robbed a wide-open Noah Hanifin with a blocker save with 3:00 to play, to get his

team to OT. There, with Zach Hyman in the penalty box, the Oilers penalty killing unit of Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Darnell Nurse and Connor Murphy gutted out the entire two minutes of a four-on-three, keeping the game alive for Bouchard to win it on the ensuing shift.

Bouchard's bullet wrist shot went top cheese, his 20th goal of the season. He had a five-point road trip (1-4-5) and went plus-6 in Vegas and Utah, passing Kevin Lowe on the Oilers goal scoring list among D-men while becoming just the fourth Oilers defenceman to post a 20-goal season (Paul Coffey, Sheldon Souray and Charlie Huddy).

But the penalty kill was what got the biggest raves post-game.

"That's just three guys getting it done. Nose down, going to work," marvelled Ingram, who was excellent in this one as well. "These guys were out there for two full minutes and you couldn't really tell. That's something you can't coach, you can't teach. Just three vets who know how to go to work and get the job done."

This was Edmonton's fifth consecutive win at T-Mobile Arena, and eighth in their past 11 regular-season visits. They've also won four of the past six playoff games here, and with a Round 1 series between these teams more than likely, you'd think that would be a concern for Vegas head coach Bruce Cassidy.

But he's got bigger fish to fry these days.

"We're just trying to... get in. It's been a battle for us since the Olympic break," admitted Cassidy, whose team has four wins in its last 15 games.

"If it is Edmonton (in Round 1), I'll say, 'Yes.' But that's the furthest thing from my mind right now. We've got other things to take care of."

You can't say Vegas doesn't have time to turn its season around. Heck, the Oilers waited until about Game 65 before they hunkered down.

"It's a great road trip. Two massive wins against two potential playoff opponents," said Zach Hyman, who hit the 30-goal mark for the third time in five seasons as an Oiler. The other two years he had 27 goals, a free agent signing that just keeps on giving in Edmonton.

"We have to string more wins together before we start pump ourselves up," Hyman said, "but every year everybody doubts what we can do. We have the team that, when we commit to playing the right way, it's hard to score against us.

"It's hard to play against a team that defends and on the other side we have guys who can break a game open."

A power play that has not scored in four games is now 1-for-11 since Leon Draisaitl was injured.

With Draisaitl's stature as an annual 50-goal centreman, and the power play good for one a night when he's on it, it's fair to say that losing Draisaitl costs Edmonton a goal per game. But rather than just trying to score their way out of that problem, Draisaitl's absence has been a catalyst to play a stingier defensive game.

"Sometimes, when you lose one of your top players, it just allows everyone to step up to their game and play a little differently," Knoblauch said. "Obviously we miss Leon, and we can't wait to have him back. But our team's done a pretty good job of rising to the occasion."

A head coach who has been asking his team for some focus for most of 60-some games can finally see a product he can win with. If the Oilers have finally found their traction, after about 10 false starts this season — and when Draisaitl returns — teams won't be lining up to face them in Round 1.

"We're looking more like we're playing a playoff game. Like things matter," Knoblauch said. "Attention to detail — we're simplifying our game. Yeah, it's nice to see. Everyone seems like they're dialled in."

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1384511 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Bolduc delivers season-best performance in crucial win

Eric Engels

MONTREAL— It's late in the game when Zachary Bolduc has the shift that confirms that everything he's been working on has come together.

His Montreal Canadiens are already leading the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 thanks to goals he set up and scored, and now he's helping them keep this relentless opponent as far away from his own net as possible, with prescient reads and perfectly-timed hits guiding him all over the ice.

As Josh Anderson barrels in on the forecheck, Bolduc is in the exact right place to scoop up the puck as the second forechecker. He cycles it up high to the point and refills the lane down the boards, arriving right on time to pound Damon Severson into the glass and force the Blue Jackets defenceman to turn the puck over. The Canadiens retrieve it and dive down low as Bolduc comes back to high ice to cover his two linemates. Then the Blue Jackets finally put an end to the 75-second sequence by intercepting the puck and icing it.

It rubberstamped Bolduc's best game of the season.

"It feels good," the 23-year-old said after the Canadiens held on for the 2-1 win. "It's been up and down through the year and now I feel very comfortable on the ice and in the system."

He didn't come here under ideal circumstances to immediately find his best self.

You think about every young player who arrived in Montreal through the first three years of the Canadiens' rebuild, and they were extended the runway to make their mistakes and learn on the fly. But Bolduc came two months after the team was dispatched from its first playoff series, after expectations had already risen, after the days of development trumping results were authoritatively parked in the rearview mirror.

Add in the layers of him being Quebecois, of having scoring pedigree at every other level, of having early success as a rookie in St. Louis, and the pressure on him to immediately hit was considerable.

It only mounted when Bolduc scored in each of his first three games of the season, while he was still fumbling around in the dark for his bearings.

He didn't exactly find them over his next 34 games — even if he scored seven more goals over that stretch — and the search only began to really bear fruit deep into his more recent 31-game slump without a goal.

But over the last few weeks, Bolduc slowly started looking more and more like a player who was thinking much less about what he needed to do and just doing it, making a game like Thursday's win inevitable for him.

He was in the right place at the right time to capitalize on Lane Hutson's work by feeding defenceman Jayden Struble his first goal of the season to make it 1-0 Canadiens. And he made great reads at both ends of the ice before potting what proved to be the winner — his first goal since Dec. 23.

"I think when you play simple, you stop second-guessing yourself, which he's been doing," said Jake Evans, who fed Bolduc the pass for his goal.

"He's just making the right plays," Evans added.

It's been a slow burn to this point, which was understandable for a player who arrived under the white-hot spotlight in Montreal with just 97 games of NHL experience.

Bolduc was labeled a core piece before he even played for the Canadiens, with memories of 50- and 55-goal seasons in Quebec City, for Patrick Roy's Remparts, resonating.

"He didn't score his whole life because he didn't have great offensive reads," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis before offering a reminder of how much more goes into being successful at the NHL level.

"To create more instances, you've gotta understand the collective game defensively, whether it's forecheck, tracking back, D-zone, whatever it is," St. Louis continued. "I feel like as the year progressed, and I would say the last month, he's really put it all together off the puck, I would say."

It's what has enabled Bolduc to keep his edge in the internal competition, which was bolstered by healthy post-Olympic returns for Alex Teulier and Alex Newhook.

Playing with Evans helped.

"I just tell him to play straightforward hockey and direct," Evans said. "Once we do that, we start to understand where each other are going and get pucks back, and then you gain a little more confidence when you touch the puck more."

You could really see it ramping up in the 5-2 win the Canadiens earned over the Carolina Hurricanes Tuesday, and it finally paid off in Thursday's win over the Blue Jackets.

In between, Teulier suffered a lower-body injury, leaving a hole for Josh Anderson to fill next to Bolduc and Evans.

But neither player was affected by the change.

Evans was himself, and Bolduc was the best version of himself.

"I wish he would get rewarded more often, but you can tell it's coming," said St. Louis. "And for me, that's exciting."

It's important.

On a rare night on which the Canadiens' top line missed the score sheet, unlikely sources of offence came through. Budding confidence for support players was bolstered at a time of the season it needed to be — with 11 games to go in a playoff chase bound to come down to the wire.

"I feel really good," said Bolduc, though his performance had already confirmed that much.

It showed everything he's been working on has come together, and not just on the scoring plays.

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1384512 Websites

Canucks failing at baseline goal to be competitive

Iain MacIntyre 6-8 minutes 3/27/2026

VANCOUVER – When the Vancouver Canucks returned home three weeks ago, a distant last in the National Hockey League and with three wins in 25 games, we wondered how they were going to make it through an eight-game homestand.

The answer: with two more wins.



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This is not the darkest or most vulnerable time in franchise history, but it is one of the most discouraging periods in the last 35 years.

The Canucks' 4-0 loss Thursday against the middle-of-the-pack Los Angeles Kings, who were outshooting the home team 32-12 early in the third period, was Vancouver's fourth straight in regulation and left it with a 2-6-0 record during March's reality check. One of the two wins was in a shootout.

Their aggregate deficit over the final four contests was 18-6. The Canucks were shut out twice and generated 22 or fewer shots in five of the eight games.

Again, everyone understands the harsh reality of a rebuild, but the Canucks are failing at their baseline goal to be competitive.

"I mean, it's hard on everybody right now," veteran defenceman Filip Hronek said. "It's not easy. But we have to learn from this. No one else is going to help us. We have to, like, keep grinding."

"I think we have to be better everywhere. We have to win more edge battles, like on the faceoffs. We have to win more battles in the D-zone. We have to execute the plays. Like, everything."

After four straight losses of their own, albeit three with loser points, the Kings are desperately trying to re-take a playoff spot in the Pacific Division playoff crawl. Their lineup, beyond their top four forwards, is not especially impressive.

But they completely overran the Canucks in the second period and dominated them physically.

Were it not for Vancouver goalie Kevin Lankinen and his goal posts, Los Angeles could have won by a lot more.

"We just couldn't get anything going tonight," rookie defenceman Zeev Buium said. "I think they pretty much dominated us for most of the game. So it just sucks."

Quinton Byfield had an empty-net goal, one assist and was plus-three for the Kings, and was the best player on the ice. Artemi Panarin, Trevor Moore and Scott Laughton also scored for Los Angeles. The Kings obliterated the Canucks in the faceoff circle, winning 31 of 42 draws, which is part of the reason Vancouver rarely had the puck.

Now 15 points adrift of the NHL's next worst team, the Canucks open a four-game road trip Saturday against the Calgary Flames.

A little fight

It was difficult to find much positive about the Canucks' game over the final two periods, but at least their kids refused to get pushed at the end during a late skirmish that saw Buium fight Brandt Clarke, while fellow rookies Linus Karlsson and Tom Willander pushed back against six-foot-five fourth-liner Jeff Malott.

"You lose like that, especially on home ice, it's never fun," Buium, 20, said. "And, you know, you see your teammates getting kind of jumped a little bit. They're up 4-0; I don't think that necessarily needs to happen. But I'm glad that we all stuck up for each other."

(Not) protecting the house

There are several factors that have worked against the Canucks this season that are understood to be largely beyond anyone's control. Like acts of God or forces of nature.

The list of these factors would be topped by:

1. The forced trade of Quinn Hughes due to his unlikely re-signing.
2. More injuries to goalie Thatcher Demko.
3. The floss-thin centre ice position, which was immediately exposed by long-term injuries to Filip Chytil and Teddy Blueger.

4. Mistakes on defence that are unavoidable when half of the blue line is composed of rookies Buium and Willander and sophomore Elias Pettersson (Junior).

5. The other Elias Pettersson.

OK, we added that fifth one because, well, it just seems after 25 months to be beyond anyone's control.

You can also argue about the other factors (except maybe Hughes) and whether these should have been left by management for the hockey gods to decide.

The inexperience on defence as a factor is inarguable. But veteran Marcus Pettersson has struggled, too, and the entire unit has generally looked overmatched physically on some nights. Like Thursday.

The Kings have a heavy, experienced team that plays a simple game by getting pucks and bodies to the net in volume. They ran into little resistance against the Canucks. It's like the Kings had a drive-thru lane to Lankinen.

Yes, the game has changed, and defencemen are no longer able to treat opposing forwards like loggers treat trees, but NHL referees still allow players to box out.

The Canucks sure miss the heft, length and disposition of the giant defence (Nikita Zadorov, Tyler Myers, Carson Soucy, Ian Cole) they iced just two years ago when there was seldom a free pass to the front of the net.

Whatever their limitations, the current defencemen have to be better at this.

"We've got to close quick, and then extend coverage from the corners," young Elias Pettersson, who has the size to be physical, said of the net-front coverage. "You can't let a guy beat you from the corner (to the net). We've got to hold on the right side of them."

Buium said: "We need to do a way better job of just getting guys out of the crease and just not letting them get there in the first place. I think we're trying to do that. And I think that's just the biggest thing — just playing a little bit harder and, I think, not panicking, too."

Shots (not) fired

A late flurry gave the Canucks 19 shots on Kings goalie Darcy Kuemper. Through two periods, they had 12 shots, which included a 21-minute span with two. Two games ago, the Canucks managed just 15 shots against St. Louis, and the homestand opened with 16 shots against Ottawa.

"Yeah, it's obviously not good enough," winger Brock Boeser said after failing to put a puck on net against L.A. "I mean, I don't know, I think we've just got to find a way to get more offensive zone time and put pucks to the net. I feel like we're passing up a lot of shots. Even tonight, I thought there was some chances where we could have put the puck to the net and we tried to make a cute play, and it doesn't work."

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1384513 Websites

Growing pains continue for Flames' Parekh as OT penalty ends win streak

Eric Francis 4-5 minutes 3/27/2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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CALGARY — Ryan Huska wasn't interested in shielding his young defenceman by making excuses or downplaying the impact of Zayne Parekh's late mistake.

In a game Huska said was lost because of penalties, it was a too-many-men call in the final minute of overtime that ended the Flames' four-game winning streak.

As the puck moved into the Ducks' offensive zone, Parekh jumped over the boards a handful of Mississippi before Zach Whitecloud reached the Flames bench.

The whistle blew quickly, and there was no argument from the bench, as everyone, including the 19-year-old, knew he'd made a mistake.

The Ducks made him pay with a power-play goal with one second left.

"Whether you're a young guy, old guy, the referees made the right call there," said a curt Huska, following a 3-2 loss.

"It's a bad change."

Asked if it was something he needed to talk to the team's top prospect about, Huska shrugged.

"No, that's talked about a lot," he said.

"We were just warned. Both teams were just warned right before."

The Flames didn't see fit to trot the youngster out after the game to fall on his sword, as he most certainly would have.

He's a smart young man who understands, in the grand scheme of things, that moments like these are all part of the growing pains a first-year player is bound to endure.

He's had his share of 'em this year, as part of a rookie season in which the club has only recently started to play him on a regular basis, playing regular minutes.

Progress is being made, but moments like these can be put in the two steps forward, one step back category.

This one was a mental lapse, as perhaps the excitement of joining the play in overtime got the better of a player who is hellbent on trying to prove he can be an offensive difference-maker at this level.

After Mikael Granlund completed his hat trick with one tick left on the clock, Parekh spent a prolonged period of time in the penalty box, essentially licking his wounds.

You can bet that once he reached the dressing room he was met with a steady stream of veterans trying to console him with a tap or quick word of support.

The whole idea of icing a team with as many youngsters as the Flames have comes with an understanding that rookie mistakes will be made.

This one cost them a point, which, ironically, will be appreciated by Flames fans who've been cringing throughout the team's season-high five-game point streak.

The Flames now sit fourth-last, moving one point ahead of Chicago.

Two nights after Parekh scored his first of the season to send the game to overtime, he spent most of Thursday night against Anaheim absorbing hit after hit in a punishing, 17-minute outing that saw him get one shot on net, while blocking four shots.

As far as encouraging signs, for the second game in a row, there he was, out on the ice in overtime, being trusted as part of a trio that included Matthew Coronato and Matvei Gridin, who scored earlier on.

Three future pillars, being given significant responsibilities they wouldn't have had if the team were still in a playoff race.

Given how his night ended, the optics of sitting him Saturday against Vancouver as part of load management would set the internet on fire.

We'll see if it comes to that.

With 10 games remaining, there's no debate he needs to keep playing, building confidence, shouldering heavier loads, and learning to bounce back from nights like these.

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1384514 Websites

NHL Power Rankings: Finding every team's Cy Young nominee

Ryan Dixon 8-10 minutes 3/26/2026

Baseball is back.

Wednesday night's 7-0 victory by the New York Yankees over the San Francisco Giants marked the beginning of the 2026 Major League Baseball season, and the campaign really gets underway on Thursday with Opening Day action across North America.

As NHL circles debate major trophy races that are coming down to the wire, MLB pundits are flooding the Internet with predictions for who will earn the major hardware at the end of 162 games.

Where's the overlap? The Cy Young, of course.

Hockey has appropriated a couple prizes from other sports over the years, working the Cy Young and Green Jacket into stick-and-puck lexicon. In terms of the latter, every golfer wants to post, say, a minus-12 to win the Green Jacket at The Masters — another sports event that's just around the corner — but no NHLer wants to be the wink-wink Green Jacket "winner" due to a league-worst plus/minus.

(Chicago Blackhawks rookie D-man Artyom Levshunov is your clubhouse leader at minus-36. Sorry, pal).

The Cy Young doesn't necessary carry a negative connotation; it's just an acknowledgement of an atypical stat line. When you record more goals than assists — usually it's the other way around — your line can read like some variation on a magical pitching season of, say, 21-8.

So, with big-league hurlers taking the bump across the Majors, we figured it'd be fun to use this week's Power Raking to identify a Cy Young contender or two for each of the NHL's 32 teams.

1. Colorado Avalanche (47-13-10) Brock Nelson — along with Nathan MacKinnon and Martin Necas — is one of three 30-goal guys on the Avs and his 32-26 line is a beauty. Third-liner Parker Kelly has doubled his previous career high for goals and sits at 16-11.
2. Dallas Stars (43-17-11) Wyatt Johnston has hit the 40-goal barrier for the first time in his career. The Stars have a fantastic player in the 22-year-old who's gone 40-38 this year.
3. Buffalo Sabres (44-20-8) Jason Zucker bagged a brace on Wednesday to bring his goal total up to 22 this year, giving him a 22-17 line.
4. Carolina Hurricanes (45-20-6) Jordan Stall came into the league nearly 20 years ago flashing Cy Young chops with a 29-13 as an 18-year-old in Pittsburgh. The 37-year-old Canes captain is still at it, going 18-13 this year. Big fourth-liner Eric Robinson is 12-6.
5. Tampa Bay Lightning (44-21-5) Pontus Holmberg has gone 11-11 in his first season with the Bolts.



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6. Columbus Blue Jackets (38-22-11) What an indispensable player tough guy Mathieu Olivier has become for the Jackets. He went 18-14 last season and is 15-11 this year, all while serving as the team's feared policeman. Big Russian winger Dmitri Voronkov is 17-15.

7. Minnesota Wild (40-20-12) Vladimir Tarasenko (21-21) has been a nice fit with the Wild, while Ryan Hartman is also even at 16-16.

8. Montreal Canadiens (39-21-10) At 44-32, Cole Caufield has a real shot to become the Canadiens' first 50-goal man since Stephane Richer 35 years ago. The Habs have the makings of quite the rotation, with rookie Oliver Kapanen going 21-14 and veteran Josh Anderson at 13-9.

9. Ottawa Senators (38-24-9) Shane Pinto has 20-15 and 21-16 lines in the past, but sits at 19-20 this year. Warren Foegele is an impressive 5-1 in 10 outings since joining the Sens at the trade deadline.

10. Boston Bruins (40-24-8) Morgan Geekie has entered the Cy Young conversation in a big way in recent years, going 33-24 during a breakout campaign last season and following that up with a 34-28 this year.

11. Anaheim Ducks (40-27-4) Cutter Gauthier is becoming everything the Ducks could have hoped for in his sophomore campaign, going 36-26 to lead the team in goals. First-year Duck Mikael Granlund is 16-15. Perennial Cy Young contender Chris Krieder has slightly flipped things this year, going 22-24. His past years include a 52-25 and last season's 22-8.

12. Pittsburgh Penguins (35-20-16) Ben Kindel is 17-15 as the second-youngest regular in the NHL after Matthew Schaefer. The Pens can also throw Justin Brazeau (16-14), Connor Dewar (14-13) and in-season acquisition Egor Chinakov (14-12 in just 33 games) at you.

13. New York Islanders (40-27-5) Bo Horvat has missed time due to injury, but — at 29-22 in 58 games — he's scoring at a 41-goal pace. Emil Heineman, acquired in the Noah Dobson deal with Montreal, has been a great addition, going 20-8 up front after netting 10 goals as a rookie last season.

14. Philadelphia Flyers (34-24-12) Owen Tippett is 24-18 and could well record his third season of either 27 or 28 goals in the past four campaigns. Tyson Foerster is 10-3 in 21 outings.

15. Detroit Red Wings (38-25-8) Veteran James van Riemsdyk is 15-13 and captain Dylan Larkin is 29-27. The Wings need both guys — and everybody else — going down the stretch to jump back into a playoff spot.

16. Nashville Predators (34-28-9) After all that trade talk, Steven Stamkos has scored more goals (27) than every player except Cole Caufield (28) since Dec. 11 and is 35-22 overall for a Nashville team that suddenly appears likely to make the playoffs. Filip Forsberg is 33-32.

17. Utah Mammoth (37-29-6) Lawson Crouse is 20-18 for his fourth 20-goal campaign in The Show. JJ Peterka is 22-20 in his first season with the Mammoth, Michael Carcone is 14-13 and Kailer Yamamoto is 10-8.

18. Washington Capitals (35-28-9) At 26-27, Alex Ovechkin could finish the year with more assists than goals for just the sixth time in his 21-season career. Anthony Beauvillier is 12-11.

19. Edmonton Oilers (35-28-9) Zach Hyman is 29-18 in 53 games, which means he's scoring at a 45-goal pace. Jack Roslovic has been a nice addition, posting a 19-12 and Vasily Podkolzin is 16-15.

20. New Jersey Devils (36-32-2) Timo Meier is 20-15 during a disappointing year, while Cody Glass is 15-7 to establish a new career high in goals.

21. Florida Panthers (35-32-3) Currently suspended A.J. Greer is 13-11 and probably in line for a decent payday as a potential UFA this summer.

22. Los Angeles Kings (28-25-18) Alex Laferriere is 18-17 and Andrei Kuzmenko is 13-12.

23. Toronto Maple Leafs (31-29-13) A knee injury ended Auston Matthews' season, leaving him with a 27-26 line. Assuming full health, where would you set the over/under for his goal total next year? 37.5? First-year Leaf Dakota Joshua is 10-6.

24. Seattle Kraken (31-29-10) Jared McCann, currently dinged-up, is 18-18 in 44 outings. That's a 34-goal pace in a full 82.

25. Winnipeg Jets (30-29-12) The closest thing the Jets have to Cy Young guy is Alex Lafallo at 12-14.

26. Vegas Golden Knights (32-26-14) Pavel Dorofeyev busted out with a 35-17 season last year and he's one goal away from equalling that total, posting a 34-24 this season. What a fantastic, third-round find.

27. St. Louis Blues (29-30-11) Jake Neighbours is 14-12 in 57 games. The Blues will be hoping the young winger looks more like a 25-30-goal guy again next year. Rookie Dalibor Dvorsky is 10-7 in 59 contests.

28. Calgary Flames (30-34-7) Blake Coleman is 16-13 and figures to be the subject of serious off-season trade speculation entering the final year of his contract. Joel Farabee is 16-15 and Yegor Sharangovich is 14-12, cementing the idea his 31-goal showing from a couple years ago was a complete anomaly.

29. San Jose Sharks (32-31-6) We might have to award Kiefer Sherwood the Cy Young at 21-8. He'll be doing his thing in San Jose for a while after inking a five-year extension to remain with the club that acquired him from Vancouver in January. Big Slovak Pavol Regenda is 9-1 in 22 contests and Adam Gaudette is 15-8 after scoring in his most recent showing.

30. Chicago Blackhawks (27-31-13) Tyler Bertuzzi is 29-23, one goal away from the second 30-goal showing of his career. Ryan Donato is a disappointing 14-13 after netting 31 last season.

31. New York Rangers (28-35-9) Will Cuyle is an even 16-16 on the season. Whatever happens during a Rangers retool, expect Cuyle to remain on Broadway.

32. Vancouver Canucks (21-41-8) Drew O'Connor is 17-10, while Max Sasseon is 11-4. O'Connor's 17 goals — believe it or not — tie him with Brock Boeser and Kiefer Sherwood (of the San Jose Sharks) for the team lead in goals. MLB teams are over the moon to get a 20-game winner and the Canucks might feel the same simply to have one 20-goal scorer this year.

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1384515 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs find brief reprieve with mentors-trip streak

Sonny Sachdeva 5-6 minutes 3/26/2026

TORONTO — It's been akin to digging for gold in the dark, this effort of trying to find bright spots in the final weeks of the Toronto Maple Leafs' campaign.

The weight of the big picture looms large over this group. The disappointment of a season gone sideways, the off-season of change that waits at the end of the line. But these past few days, with the Maple Leafs' loved ones by their side for the team's annual mentors trip, the club found a reprieve from the cloud that's been hanging over them since the Olympic break.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 27, 2026

Fresh off a win in Boston on Tuesday, the Maple Leafs returned home and closed out a back-to-back with a 4-3 victory over the New York Rangers under the Scotiabank Arena lights Wednesday — the team's first two-game win streak in nearly two months, and their second straight win with the mentors watching on.

"It was a fun couple games," veteran Jake McCabe said late Wednesday from the club's locker room — usually empty, this time packed with family and friends happily milling about. "You know, it's been tough sledding around here, so it's nice to collect some points over these last couple games."

The 32-year-old played a key role in spurring the eventual win, wiring home a rebound to pot Toronto's first goal of the night, his first tally since November.

"It's funny. My kids were giving me a hard time today — they said, 'Dad, you never score goals. When are you going to score a goal?'" McCabe recalled with a chuckle. "So, nice to get one, especially in the first period when I know they're still up watching. Looking forward to seeing them in the morning, their reaction."

Dakota Joshua assisted on the goal and picked up one of his own in the second period to put Toronto up 3-0. It meant a bit more, he said, with his younger brother Bishop in the building.

"It was nice to show out for him tonight," Joshua said. "Maybe a trip down memory lane, from when I was a lot younger and he used to come out and watch. So yeah, that was nice to get one for him."

The change in the atmosphere around the club these past few days has been palpable, the winger said — and welcome, given the particularly rocky few months the team's been wading through.

"It's been good energy, very upbeat all around. Everybody wants to make their person that they brought proud — it's been a great few days," he said. "Obviously, the season hasn't gone the way we wanted it to — personally, or as a team. But you know, it's important to build some momentum here towards the end and feel good about your performances at the end of the season."

"Obviously, it's been a grind for us, coming back from the break, and certainly where we're at," added John Tavares, whose own late goal wound up the eventual game-winner. "But you know, a different type of energy coming into the last couple days. To grind one out here after a good rivalry win yesterday, playing hard in front of our fans, and with the support of people who made a tremendous impact on our lives, has been great."

"It wasn't always pretty, but for the most part, the process of just being difficult to play against, doing what you have to do to put yourself in a good spot, was there."

It was an odd one for the home club, as many of the tilts in this building have been this season. The Maple Leafs built up a 3-0 lead heading into the midway point of the game, getting goals from McCabe, Joshua and Nick Robertson. Meanwhile, they also found themselves outshot 31-14 after two periods, Toronto managing only four shots in the middle frame.

A pair of power-play goals in the second period wobbled the hosts, and another late push in the third nearly saw the Rangers pull level, Mika Zibanejad scoring with seven minutes left to pull the visitors within one. But the blue-and-white held on, staved off the comeback attempt, and finished the mentors trip on a high.

"I could tell early on we were lacking a little juice tonight," head coach Craig Berube said after the dust settled on the win. "You know, travel, tough game in Boston, used all that energy up. And I felt like we weren't thinking very good out there tonight. That happens. But the guys worked, and competed, and our goalie was really good."

"We executed on some plays and scored, on a very good goalie. That's the difference in the game. ... Guys battled hard."

There are plenty outside of their locker room who would have these Maple Leafs lose every game from here on out, plummet down the standings in order to save face on draft day. But for those who have to take the ice for nine more games, that appears to be a tough sell. Though there will almost certainly be no playoff hockey coming at the end of the line here, no late redemption to be found, there is still pride to play for — all the more so on nights like these, with family and friends in the building.

And so the Maple Leafs are still playing, still trying to find something in this write-off campaign, if nothing more than a couple days of levity.

"You know, our mindset is to play as well as we can," said netminder Joseph Woll, who turned aside 40 shots in this one. "And give our team a chance every night."

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TSN.CA / Blue Jays buzz helps Leafs win back-to-back games

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs beat the New York Rangers 4-3 on Wednesday night at Scotiabank Arena. The team has a day off on Thursday.

Blue Jays players Ernie Clement and George Springer helped pump up the Leafs in the dressing room before Wednesday's game against the New York Rangers.

"It was unreal," said centre John Tavares, who scored the game-winning goal in Toronto's 4-3 victory. "It was a little different type of preparation, but cool to have them in before and certainly [after] to celebrate a win."

The Leafs are playing out the stretch in a disappointing season while the defending American League champion Jays are preparing for Friday's season opener.

"Regardless of the circumstances for us, I think it's great, the support for each other," said Tavares, who was in attendance for a few Jays playoff games last fall. "We love supporting them and it was unreal taking in their run. I know the excitement and probably the determination for them to go back out again and finish the job ... really cool to share the admiration for one another."

The group of Jays in attendance on Wednesday welcomed the Leafs back into the dressing room following the win.

"Pretty cool to have them in here after," said goalie Joseph Woll. "They mean a lot for this city and everyone was pretty dialled in watching [their run]. They were so close, so hopefully they get an opportunity to do it again."

"We are cheering them on and wishing them good luck," said coach Craig Berube. "It is great that they come to support and hang out a little bit. Really good guys."

The presence of the Jays injected a little extra juice into the dressing room and the building in general as the Leafs played for the second time in two nights.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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There was already a layer of added emotion, because Wednesday's game marked the second and final one of the team's Mentors Trip.

"Obviously it's been a grind for us coming back from the break and certainly where we're at," said Tavares, who invited his father-in-law as his special guest. "A different type of energy the last couple days."

The Leafs delivered an impressive performance in front of their mentors on Tuesday night at TD Garden where they beat the playoff-chasing Boston Bruins 4-2. It was the first time Toronto outshot a team in a win since Jan. 31 in Vancouver when they beat the NHL's worst team in a shootout.

"A fun couple games with having our mentors around," said defenceman Jake McCabe, who had his dad in the crowd. "It's been tough sledding around here, so it's nice to collect some points over these last couple games."

Craig Berube on Leafs Mentors Trip:

"One guy wanted a couple hockey cards signed by me, so that made me feel pretty good 😊. I was shocked"

It was Steven Lorentz's guest, his wife's grandfather, who asked for the autographs @BarDown

— Mark Masters (@markmasters) March 25, 2026

This is the first time since early February, just before the Olympic break, that the Leafs have posted back-to-back wins. The four points lifted Toronto to 21st in the overall standings and lessened the chances of the team retaining its first-round pick this year, which will go to the Bruins if it's not in the top five.

And while that may have some fans feeling down, the players are finally feeling up.

"We're not in the best place right now, but you wouldn't know it," Berube said. "It's still great to win games."

So, any chance the mentors will be kept around for Saturday's trip to St. Louis?

"We're going to bring them on the road!" Berube said to laughs.

The Leafs have gone 4-2-2 since March 12, which was the day captain Auston Matthews sustained a season-ending injury via a knee-on-knee hit by Radko Gudas. None of the other Leafs on the ice confronted the Anaheim Ducks defenceman after the initial hit, which led to a rebuke by Berube and some soul searching by the players.

"I just think we're playing a lot harder," said Woll. "Hopefully we carry that momentum."

Prior to March 12, the Leafs ranked 26th in penalty minutes. Since March 12, Toronto leads the NHL in penalty minutes and has racked up five fighting majors.

Dakota Joshua dropped the gloves with Nikita Zadorov on Tuesday night after the Bruins defenceman received a boarding major for a hit on Tavares. Rookie winger Easton Cowan received a roughing minor for jumping in immediately to confront Zadorov.

"You have 'Cowboy' jumping in on Zadorov the other night and that's the intensity you have to play with," Woll said. "Dak with the big fight. I just think we're playing a lot harder and it's awesome to see."

Joshua took a cross-checking penalty on Tye Kartye after the Rangers forward hit Matias Maccelli on Wednesday.

Toronto was shorthanded five times in Boston and four more times against New York.

"We have been taking too many penalties of late, for sure, but I think the guys are pretty tuned into getting involved, sticking up for each other, and getting in there, which is good," said Berube. "I've got no problem with it. We don't need to retaliate on some of the plays, but the guys getting in there and stepping up for each other is really important ... It goes a long way. It goes a long way with culture and team chemistry."

Joshua scored a goal, picked up an assist, and landed six hits in Wednesday's win.

"The season hasn't gone the way we wanted it to personally or as a team," Joshua acknowledged. "But it's important to build some momentum here towards the end and feel good about your performances going into the end of the season."

McCabe snapped a 50-game drought with a first-period goal on Wednesday.

"It's funny, my kids were giving me a hard time today," McCabe revealed post-game with a smile. "They said, 'Dad, you never score goals. When are you going to score a goal?' So, it's nice to get one, especially in the first period when I know they're still up watching. I'm looking forward to seeing their reaction."

McCabe's dad enjoyed seeing his son's fourth goal of the season.

"It's always nice to see the big hits, but I'd rather see him score," David McCabe told TSN.

His son is a gritty defender, who leads the NHL with 173 blocked shots this season.

"Always great when heart-and-soul guys like that come through and get rewarded," said Tavares.

McCabe, who leads the Leafs in ice time (22:28 TOI/G) and plus-minus (+14), received the player-of-the-game belt from Cowan.

"He has been a hell of a leader for us this year and last year," said Berube. "We're lucky to have him."

McCabe worked for his dad's construction company back home in Wisconsin at times during his youth. Does he get his hard-nosed style from his old man?

"I'd like to think it's from me," David McCabe said. "I always tried to teach him to play the body, so it must've worked. Jake was the youngest of the family. He's four years younger than his brother and sister. He tried to keep up with them and now he definitely is keeping up with them."

Woll picked up an assist on Joshua's goal.

"I didn't even know I got an assist," the 27-year-old goalie said with a big smile. "I got to rewatch it. I don't even know how it unfolded. I forget. Was it a save?"

Woll knocked down an attempted pass by Rangers rookie Gabe Perreault, which led to a Joshua rush up the ice.

The assist represented Woll's first career NHL point in his 113th game. Your humble correspondent wondered if the drought had been weighing on him.

"Oh yeah," Woll chuckled. "The lady out there told me it was my first point. I'm like, 'Geez, it's taking me long enough.' I would've thought I would've got something. Not a point guy."

That's fine by the Leafs, who appreciated Woll's 40-save performance on Wednesday.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"Great again," Tavares said. "Obviously a lot of shots. We were shorthanded too much again, so he just came up big and battled hard and continued to just be really strong. I thought he controlled a lot of pucks so there wasn't too many second and third opportunities. We tried to do the best job we can in and around him, but he's got a lot of control of that as well. He did a really good job of just swallowing things up and deflecting things away from the net. He's a true pro with the way he prepares and the way he goes about his business. It's been great to see him build his game."

Woll's strong outing came on the heels of a great effort from Anthony Stolarz in Boston.

Woll missed the start of the season due to personal leave while Stolarz missed significant time with a nerve injury. Now, finally, Toronto's tandem is looking like the force it was last season. A reporter asked if the goalies are looking to lay a foundation for the next season.

"Our mindset is to play as well as we can and give our team a chance every night," Woll said. "Obviously we both want to be here and we want to win here. Yeah, exactly like you said."

Lines to start Wednesday's game:

Cowan - Tavares - Nylander

Knies - Domi - Robertson

Maccelli - Groulx - Joshua

Lorentz - Quillan - Jarnkrok

Rielly - Carlo

McCabe - Ekman-Larsson

Benoit - Stecher

Woll

Stolarz

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