



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

The Athletic

What we got right, and wrong, in our NHL bold predictions. Revisiting one for all 32 teams

By: The Athletic NHL Staff

We can admit it. We were wrong.

Well, mostly wrong. When The Athletic first asked its NHL staff for its bold predictions, it was a different time. One week into the season, we heard about everything from blockbuster trades to breakout players and more.

Now, with less than three weeks of the regular season remaining, some are holding up well, while others look to have been a bit too bold.

This week, our staff revisited its 2025-26 NHL season bold predictions. Which ones get a pass, fail or incomplete?

Fail

Philadelphia Flyers

They will trade for Quinn Hughes

This is at least half-right, isn't it? Hughes was indeed traded as Vancouver quickly plummeted in the standings, but it just wasn't to the Flyers. While the Flyers were interested, the Canucks had no interest in dealing him to Philadelphia to reunite with Rick Tocchet, per multiple Flyers team sources, and it's unlikely they would have been able to put a package together that was as strong as Minnesota's, anyway. — Kevin Kurz

Winnipeg Jets

Jonathan Toews will play exactly 57 regular-season games

Forget about load management; Toews is on pace to play in all 82 Jets games. This prediction was always a shot in the dark — 57 GP is too specific to hit — but my idea that Winnipeg might ease Toews into his role, sparing him back-to-backs, and otherwise not immediately treat him as its second-line center was flat-out wrong. The Jets started dropping Toews' workload late in the season, but he's still a second-line player in terms of his average TOI for the year. — Murat Ates

Detroit Red Wings

Lucas Raymond will hit 90 points

Raymond was tracking toward 90 late into January, but he's fallen off the pace since, and would need a Nikita Kucherov-like finish to hit that mark. Considering he appears to be playing hurt — missing practice for maintenance — that looks unlikely. But the Red Wings will be much less worried about the round number and more focused on whether he can help them find a way into the playoffs. He's shown a penchant for big goals in the past, and Detroit will need some over the season's final weeks. — Max Bultman

Ottawa Senators

Jake Sanderson will win the Norris Trophy

Sanderson definitely took steps forward as his team's No. 1 defenseman, soaking up increased ice time and playing at a pace that should've resulted in career-best numbers while being elite at both ends. Sanderson was even on Team USA's gold-medal-winning team. Sanderson being injured recently hurts his Norris campaign. But he was already in tough with Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes, Zach Werenski, Evan Bouchard, Rasmus Dahlin and more making significant cases for the Norris. Maybe next year. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Alexander Nikishin will win the Calder Trophy

Nikishin has an outside shot of being a finalist for the Calder Trophy and should make the All-Rookie team, but no one is surpassing emerging Islanders star Matthew Schaefer as this season's top rookie. Still, Nikishin has had a record-breaking campaign, scoring the most goals (10) by a rookie defenseman in franchise history while establishing himself as a physical force on Carolina's blue line. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Sam Rinzel will win the Calder Trophy

Rinzel didn't come close to having that type of season. While he started the season with high expectations after a strong finish last season, he couldn't maintain that consistency going through his first full pro year. His game and confidence took a hit, and eventually, he was sent to the AHL for a stint. He's back in the NHL and has been regaining his form. But overall, it wasn't the year many thought he could have as a potential top-pairing defenseman and power-play quarterback. — Scott Powers

Vancouver Canucks

Filip Chytil will be the team's second most valuable forward this season

This was looking good a week into the season, but fell apart when Chytil sustained a concussion on a Tom Wilson hit. Then, after returning to the lineup and not looking like himself for a brief stint ahead of the Olympic break, Chytil sustained a fractured orbital bone on a freak practice accident. This was an L for us. — Thomas Drance

Seattle Kraken

Shane Wright will break out

Wright hasn't built on his 44-point 2024-25 campaign. His usage has been flat, as new Kraken coach Lane Lambert has instead increased Chandler Stephenson's role (and



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

defensive responsibility), and Wright's production has trended down. Meanwhile, there have been whispers that he's dissatisfied with his role and would welcome a change of scenery. This is a swing and a miss from me on the Wright breakout. — Thomas Drance

Toronto Maple Leafs

Matthew Knies will lead the NHL in short-handed goals

Woof. Bold apparently equals bad. Not only is Knies not going to lead the NHL in short-handed goals, but he also just scored his first short-handed goal of the season (and his career) this week! What's gone wrong? One part is opportunity: Knies has only been a secondary contributor on the Leafs penalty kill this season, particularly before the trade deadline. We also know that Knies played through injury this season. I still see a future where he can become a menace on the penalty kill. — Jonas Siegel

Vegas Golden Knights

Jack Eichel will score the most goals in franchise history

This was a total whiff. With the addition of Mitch Marner, I thought Eichel would be on the receiving end of more passes. Instead, William Karlsson missed nearly the entire season, Marner was bumped to the center position, away from the top line, and Eichel spent the vast majority of his time as a passer. He doesn't have a single goal on the power play for the first time in his 11 NHL seasons, and has his fewest goals as a Golden Knight. — Jesse Granger

Florida Panthers

They will make a blockbuster trade to replace Aleksander Barkov

After three consecutive trips to the final and two straight Cup titles, all of that hockey finally caught up with the Panthers. Not only were they not able to attempt to replace Barkov using that cap space, but they're also going to miss the playoffs, with his absence a big reason why. Expect Florida to reload in the offseason — including possibly with a high pick — and try to take another run at things next year. — James Mirtle

Minnesota Wild

Matt Boldy will rack up 50 goals and 50 assists

Boldy has tailed off a bit, but Joe Smith was close. Boldy has 38 goals and 38 assists in 69 games — a pace of 45.2 goals and 45.2 assists over an 82-game season. He missed four games, though, so unless he catches fire, it ain't happening. Still, what a year for Boldy, who blossomed into a star and won gold at the Olympics. Still, I knew I should have done the submission, not Joe. I told Joe in October, "The Wild will trade for Quinn Hughes," but he ignored me. — Michael Russo

Dallas Stars

Thomas Harley will be a Norris Trophy finalist

Harley reached a new tier of stardom last year during Miro Heiskanen's injury absence, but has taken a small step back this season. His production has dropped off, and he's been basically an even player at five-on-five. He's still a good player, of course, but he certainly hasn't bullied his way into

the Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes, Zach Werenski, Matthew Schaefer conversation. Not yet, at least. — Mark Lazerus

Buffalo Sabres

Zach Benson will break out with 60 points

Entering play Friday, Benson is playing at roughly a 52-point pace, but he's missed 17 games this season due to injuries. He has 10 goals and 25 assists, but is also plus-25, and the Sabres have 53 percent of the expected goals during his five-on-five minutes. He continues to make a major impact, even if the point production hasn't been there. He's still only 20, and the underlying metrics suggest a surge in points is coming. — Matthew Fairburn

Los Angeles Kings

Brandt Clarke will break out with 50 points

Clarke has 38 points in his 72 games. I can't see him getting 12 more in the remaining 10 contests. But that's not his fault. The 23-year-old has been one of the few bright lights for the Kings, who've been slow to understand he is their best defenseman. He didn't get a steady dose of 20-plus minutes until January and is finally quarterbacking their top power-play unit. He can play NHL-level defense. Don't blame me for getting this wrong. — Eric Stephens

Utah Mammoth

Dylan Guenther will finish top five in the league for goals

Guenther is tied for ninth in league goal scoring and is on pace to hit 42, so I wasn't off by much, but he's four goals back of a top-five finish, which seems insurmountable this late in the season. The 22-year-old sniper has still had a terrific year, especially when you consider how much time his usual center, Logan Cooley, missed with injury. — Harman Dayal

Incomplete

Calgary Flames

Matthew Coronato will lead the team in goals

With 16 goals, Coronato is one goal off the team lead held by Blake Coleman and Morgan Frost, and is tied with two other teammates. He may fall short of his 24-goal output last year, but he could still conceivably end the season as Calgary's goals leader. Even if fans will patiently wait for Coronato to take a step forward, they can't be too upset to see Coronato near the top of the team's goal-scoring leaders. — Julian McKenzie

St. Louis Blues

They will give up the fewest six-on-five goals in the NHL

This prediction was made in the aftermath of the Blues' Game 7 collapse against Winnipeg last season, when they allowed two six-on-five goals in the final two minutes of regulation and fell 4-3 in double OT. They allowed 15 six-on-five goals in 2024-25, including the playoffs, which was the most in the NHL. They haven't allowed the fewest six-on-five goals this season (five, tied for the 11th-fewest through Thursday), but they have been better. — Jeremy Rutherford

New Jersey Devils



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Arseny Gritsyuk will finish in the top five of Calder Trophy voting

Gritsyuk probably won't be top five in Calder Trophy voting, but he likely will receive some down-ballot votes. He's had a strong rookie season; his 31 points rank ninth in the NHL among rookies. He's been a promising part of an otherwise disappointing season. He's also 12th among rookies with 13 goals. — Peter Baugh

San Jose Sharks

They will re-sign John Klingberg

The Sharks haven't determined Klingberg's fate. The 33-year-old has evolved into a serviceable right-handed puck mover, though the swings in his play this season have bordered on the dramatic. He's a pending UFA, but San Jose's patchwork blue line is still in need of a serious upgrade. The better play is to move on, which seems likely. — Eric Stephens

Tampa Bay Lightning

They will go to the Stanley Cup Final

The Lightning still have to get through the regular season and three playoff rounds to live up to this bold prediction ... but the odds are in their favor. According to Dom's model, Tampa Bay has the best chance of reaching the Stanley Cup Final (49 percent) and a league-high 32 percent chance to win it all. There can always be upsets in the chaos of the NHL playoffs, but this team looks like a real contender to do some damage this spring. — Shayna Goldman

New York Islanders

Mathew Barzal will put up 90 points

If only I had gone for something actually bold, such as Mathew Schaefer emerging as one of the greatest 18-year-olds of all time. Who would have thought! Instead, the bet was on Barzal, who probably won't hit the 90-point mark. He has 65 points in 72 games, which puts him on pace for 73 points. Sure, he could go on a tear down the stretch to better the Isles' playoff chances, but 25 points is a lot to ask for in just nine games. — Shayna Goldman

Washington Capitals

Tom Wilson will lead the team in goals

This was bolder than you might think; other than in 2016-17, when Alex Ovechkin and T.J. Oshie each had 33 goals, the last non-Ovechkin player to lead the Capitals was Robert Lang in 2003-04. I was feeling pretty good about it Wednesday afternoon — shortly before Ovechkin put up a hat trick against Utah, giving him 29 goals and a four-goal lead over Wilson. It'll be an uphill battle. — Sean Gentille

Pass

Nashville Predators

Andrew Brunette will still be the team's coach at the end of the season

Barry Trotz was indeed patient with Brunette, probably more so than many general managers in this league would have been given the team's dreadful start. Brunette has again hung in and turned around the Preds' season, as he did two years ago. He deserves credit for that. And consideration

from whoever ends up succeeding Trotz in the offseason. — Joe Rexrode

Colorado Avalanche

Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood will win the William M. Jennings Trophy

Hey, I nailed one! The Avalanche have allowed 19 fewer goals than the next-closest team (Dallas). The combination of Wedgewood and Blackwood has been one of the most dominant tandems in the NHL, which isn't how most viewed it entering the season. The team in front of the duo has obviously played a big role, but the goalies have been sensational, especially Wedgewood. If they hold on, it will be only the second time Colorado has won the Jennings (Patrick Roy in 2002). — Jesse Granger

Montreal Canadiens

Juraj Slafkovský will score 30 goals

Slafkovský scored his 28th goal of the season this week, so barring a massive drought over the Canadiens' final 11 games or an injury, he should clear this bar quite easily. And with the way he's been driving play and becoming one of the more lethal power-play weapons in the league this season, Slafkovský might be setting his new floor as opposed to hitting a ceiling. — Arpon Basu

Columbus Blue Jackets

Jet Greaves will take off

I haven't danced like this in years! I didn't just pass, I earned an A+ for one of the few times in my life. Greaves has, in fact, "taken off" this season, taking the No. 1 job away from Elvis Merzlikins (45 starts vs. 27) and thriving in his first full NHL season. Among goalies with at least 25 games, Greaves is 14th in wins (24), 11th in save percentage (.910), and, according to MoneyPuck, seventh in goals saved above expected (+17.4). Yep, he's one of the best stories in the league this season. — Aaron Portzline

Boston Bruins

Jeremy Swayman will enter the Olympic conversation

Swayman has regressed to his standard form. He indeed was named to the U.S. Olympic team and even stole a start from reigning Hart Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck during the tournament. He is also leading the Bruins to the playoffs, with a 28-15-4 record, 2.72 goals-against average and .908 save percentage — after going 22-29-7 with a 3.11 GAA and .892 save percentage last season. — Fluto Shinzawa

New York Rangers

They will have six players who are 23 or younger in their lineup by February

The Rangers haven't had six 23-and-under players every night, but they did at least once by February. On Jan. 31, they had six: Will Cuyllé (who turned 24 shortly after), Noah Laba, Scott Morrow, Matt Rempe, Gabe Perreault and the now-traded Brennan Othmann. The team has certainly made a shift to young players, most recently bringing up 21-year-old Adam Sýkora. — Peter Baugh

Pittsburgh Penguins

Bryan Rust will not be traded



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Rust indeed remains a member of the Penguins. Many believed Rust was as good as gone when his no-movement power expired last July. Kyle Dubas, though, values everything Rust brings to the table far too much to move him. He's having yet another exceptional season. — Josh Yohe

Edmonton Oilers

Evan Bouchard will be a Norris Trophy finalist

Bouchard has delivered a phenomenal season for the Oilers and earned Norris consideration. He leads all NHL defensemen in points and, as of Wednesday, is the owner of a 55 percent goal share at five-on-five (Edmonton is 42 percent without him). He plays the toughest minutes on the team and thrives in all game states. Despite some defensive

lapses, he's an impact player and would be a worthy Norris finalist. His much-criticized \$10.5 million AAV contract is a value deal. — Allan Mitchell

Anaheim Ducks

They will make the playoffs

This was their mission statement after hiring Joel Quenneville as their head coach. While a nine-game losing streak threatened to derail this level-up season, the Ducks have responded by going 20-6-1 over a 27-game stretch. It has helped them move to the top of the Pacific, where they are in a good position to claim their first division title since 2016-17. But what about that negative goal differential? Details, details. — Eric Stephens



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026



Preview: March 28 vs. New Jersey

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

An important Metro matchup kicks off at a special start time at Lenovo Center

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes are back in action after a rare three-day break between games, kicking off a weekend back-to-back set against the New Jersey Devils.

When: Saturday, March 28

Puck Drop: 5:00 p.m. ET

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

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 45-20-6 (96 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 5-2 Loss to the Montreal Canadiens on Tuesday, March 24

Devils Record: 37-32-2 (76 Points, 7th - Metropolitan Division)

Devils Last Game: 4-2 Win over the Nashville Predators on Thursday, March 26

The Canes scored twice in the opening 7:07 on Tuesday in Montreal, but five unanswered goals from the Canadiens snapped Carolina's three-game win streak.

Nikolaj Ehlers' early power play marker made it six goals in the last four contests for the man advantage, and Jordan Staal scored his 18th of the season.

Frederik Andersen's personal five-game win streak was put to an end, allowing four goals on 18 shots.

Previous Meetings This Season vs. NJD...

Oct. 9: K'Andre Miller and Seth Jarvis each scored twice as the Canes opened the 2025-26 campaign with a 6-3 win over New Jersey.

Jan. 4: A multi-point game from Taylor Hall led the Canes to a 3-1 victory at Prudential Center.

Jan. 17: Andrei Svechnikov's hat trick led Carolina to a 4-1 victory in Newark.

Seeing Ghosts...

After missing over three weeks due to a lower-body injury, defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere could be in line to return this evening.

A full participant in yesterday's practice at Lenovo Center, he was once again paired with Alexander Nikishin at five-on-

five and operating as the quarterback for the first power play unit.

Although he has missed 26 games this year, Gostisbehere's 43 points lead the blue line, and his 0.96 points per game rank tied for seventh among all NHL defensemen (min. 10 games played).

Brandon Bussi was in the day before starter's crease at Friday's practice, likely signaling he's in line to get the nod tonight.

The 27-year-old snapped a personal three-game skid in his last outing, a 23-save win over the Maple Leafs last Friday.

Should the Canes elect to save Bussi for Sunday against Montreal, Frederik Andersen will be looking to bounce back after he had his five-game win streak snapped on Tuesday in Montreal. 6-2 since the Olympic break, the veteran has started the team's two most recent contests.

On The Other Side...

Wrapping up a five-game road trip today, the Devils come to town 5-1 in their last six.

Averaging 4.5 goals during the run, gold-medal game hero Jack Hughes has been stellar, producing 12 points in the team's six most recent outings. The team's recent improvement is a drastic change from their 2.72 goals per game that they average this season, which ranks 27th among all NHL clubs.

Despite their seemingly season-long scoring troubles, the Devils are one of just four teams in the league that average 30 shots on goal per game. The Canes are one of the other three, joining the Avalanche and Ducks.

Injury Updates...

Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere (lower-body injury) has been out of action since Mar. 6. He returned to practice with the team on Mar. 27. Rod Brind'Amour didn't fully commit to him returning tonight, but said he was "hopeful."

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

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

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are right back in action on home ice tomorrow, facing the Canadiens for the second time in six days.

Next Game: Sunday, March 29 vs. Montreal | 5:00 p.m. ET | [FDSNSO](#) | [Tickets](#) | [Parking](#)



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026



NHL playoff watch: Guide to all 15 games on Showdown Saturday - ESPN

By: ESPN staff

There are just three weeks until the start of the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs. As chaotic as the standings have been the past few weeks, it's only going to get wilder now that the pressure is ramped up.

NHL fans are in for a treat on what's been dubbed Showdown Saturday, with 15 games throughout the course of the day.

And instead of the usual "eight games starting at 7 p.m. ET" trick, the start times have been staggered earlier in the day, too!

So without any further preamble, let's dive right into the storylines ahead of each contest in regards to playoff positioning, the draft lottery and more:

Ottawa Senators at Tampa Bay Lightning

1 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

The Senators were in a playoff spot earlier this week, and are pushing to get there again. They enter play a point behind the Islanders and two behind the Bruins for the wild-card spots; importantly, Ottawa holds the regulation-wins tiebreaker over both of those clubs. On the other side, the Lightning still have designs on an Atlantic Division title; they are two points and two regulation wins behind the Sabres, with two games in hand.

Florida Panthers at New York Islanders

1 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Well, we knew the Panthers might be a little out of sorts this season after two straight Cups (and a Cup Final appearance the year before that), and their playoff hopes are closing in on zero. However, they are in line for a top-10 draft pick, currently sitting No. 8 in the lottery standings. The Islanders are hanging on to a playoff spot by a thread; getting wins in games like this one against a non-playoff team are crucial.

Anaheim Ducks at Edmonton Oilers

3:30 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

If you'd told a hockey fan prior to the season that this game would pit a team with a five-point Pacific Division lead against one battling it out for the No. 2 or 3 seed, they'd likely have replied, "Wow, good for the Ducks to eke their way in!" Instead, it's Connor McDavid and friends whose playoff lives are in a bit more peril. A win here by Anaheim would put it seven points ahead of Edmonton, while a decision the other way would drop the Ducks' lead to three.

Minnesota Wild at Boston Bruins

5 p.m. ET (NHL Network)

This will be the final meeting of the season between U.S. Olympic teammates Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman (Bruins) with Quinn Hughes, Matt Boldy and Brock Faber (Wild) -- unless they meet again in the Cup Final. The Wild are on the cusp of clinching a spot, with a magic number of two; the Bruins have quite a bit more work to do, with the Senators and Red Wings nipping at their heels. Also of note: the B's are just two points back of the Canadiens for the No. 3 spot in the Atlantic.

Dallas Stars at Pittsburgh Penguins

5 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Another green vs. yellow matchup! The Stars have clinched a postseason spot and are likely to be paired up with the Wild in Round 1, as they enter Saturday nine points back of the Avalanche for first in the Central. Pittsburgh has been swapping spots with the Blue Jackets and Islanders recently. As it stands heading into this one, the Penguins are the Metro's No. 2 seed, one point and two regulation wins ahead of both Columbus and New York.

New Jersey Devils at Carolina Hurricanes

5 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

The Hurricanes appear destined to win another Metro crown, with an eight-point lead over the Penguins. What remains to be won is the Eastern Conference's No. 1 seed; Carolina enters the day tied in the standings with Buffalo, but ahead on the games played tiebreaker. Of note, they have five fewer regulation wins than the Sabres. As for the Devils, a late-season surge has been encouraging for 2026-27, but a playoff spot would require an extraordinary amount of help from opponents of the teams ahead of them. New Jersey sits No. 12 in the draft lottery standings.

San Jose Sharks at Columbus Blue Jackets

5 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Last season, the Blue Jackets remained in the playoff race until the final week of the season, ultimately just missing the cut by two points. This season, the Hockey Gods appear to be on their side, as they hold the Metro's No. 3 spot heading into Saturday. They are a point behind the Penguins for second, and a tiebreaker ahead of the Islanders. San Jose finished 44 points out of a playoff spot in 2024-25, so the fact that they have any chance at all at this stage is a vast improvement. But if they are going to make it, they'll need to start earning points more regularly; the Predators hold the second Western wild card six points ahead of the Sharks, and the Golden Knights are eight points ahead in the battle for third in the Pacific.

Seattle Kraken at Buffalo Sabres

5:30 p.m. ET (ESPN+)



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

The Kraken are even closer to the playoff mix than the Sharks -- three points behind Nashville, five behind Vegas -- but face an even more challenging opponent Saturday. The Sabres are on an epic run; as a result, they hold a two-point lead in the Atlantic Division, and are a tiebreaker behind Carolina for first overall in the East.

Toronto Maple Leafs at St. Louis Blues

7 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

This is the first matchup of the slate featuring two lottery-bound teams; unfortunately for the Leafs, their pick belongs to Boston unless it falls in the top five. As of now, Toronto is 10th in the lotto standings, in the middle of a cluster of eight teams between 71 and 76 points. One of the teams at the end of that cluster is the St. Louis Blues, who hold the No. 5 position with 71 points.

Montreal Canadiens at Nashville Predators

7 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Is it a bigger surprise that the Canadiens are on pace for 104 points, or that the Predators are in line to earn a playoff spot after how dreadful last season (and the start of this one) went? Montreal is four points (and seven regulation wins) back of Tampa Bay for second in the Atlantic, and has a two-point edge on Boston to retain their No. 3 position. Nashville is just a point ahead of Los Angeles for the second Western wild card, and three points behind Utah for the first.

Winnipeg Jets at Colorado Avalanche

7 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

The NHL awards the Presidents' Trophy to the team with the best regular-season record. In 2024-25, that team was the Jets. In 2025-26, that team will likely be the Avalanche. Sadly for the wonderful fans of Winnipeg, the Jets' success last season didn't carry over into this one, and they enter Saturday five points back of Nashville for the wild card. Maybe the club will have some lottery luck, and it enters the day in seventh in the draft standings.

Philadelphia Flyers at Detroit Red Wings

8 p.m. ET (ABC)

Time is running out for both of these teams to vault into a playoff spot. As play begins Saturday, the Red Wings are one point back of the second wild card, two back of the first, and four back of Montreal for the Atlantic's No. 3 seed. The

Flyers have four additional points to make up -- although their pathway in the Metro is slightly easier, with the Blue Jackets five points ahead in the No. 3 spot and the Penguins six ahead for second.

Utah Mammoth at Los Angeles Kings

9 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

As the end of Anze Kopitar's career comes into sight, the Kings remain alive for a playoff berth, but must surpass the Predators for a wild card (they are one point back), the Golden Knights for No. 3 in the Pacific (they are three points behind) ... or the Mammoth themselves, who are four points ahead. One wrinkle: Los Angeles will almost certainly need to get ahead of teams on standings points, as they are well behind everyone else in the regulation wins column.

Vancouver Canucks at Calgary Flames

10 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Here's our other draft lottery positioning game of the day -- although it's exceedingly unlikely that any team "catches" the Canucks, who are 15 points clear of anyone else in the No. 1 position in the draft lottery standings. Calgary enters the day in fourth in the lottery standings, one point behind the Blackhawks and three behind the Rangers.

Washington Capitals at Vegas Golden Knights

10:30 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Will this be Alex Ovechkin's final visit to Las Vegas as a member of the Capitals? If so, his team could really use the points as it looks to chase down even a wild-card spot. As the slate begins, the Caps are six points back of the Isles and Blue Jackets, although if they do get back in the mix, their regulation-wins total (currently 31) might well beat out anyone if it comes down to tiebreakers. As for the hosts, the Golden Knights appear much more likely to return to the playoffs -- largely because of the relative weakness of the Pacific Division -- but could certainly use any additional points they can get to bolster their chances.

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.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026



2026 NHL playoff picture: Standings, schedule, bracket, seedings as Stanley Cup Playoff race heats up

By: Austin Nivison

The 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs are almost here, but there are still plenty of questions about which teams will qualify and which matchups we will see in the postseason. The Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars have already clinched playoff spots, but other teams have a lot more work to do over the final dozen games.

In both conferences, the wild card races are incredibly tight. The Boston Bruins sit in the first spot but are only two points ahead of the Ottawa Senators, the first team outside the postseason. The Sens suffered a gut-wrenching shootout loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday as the Pens climbed above the Columbus Blue Jackets for second place in the Metro Division.

Out West, Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers have taken possession of the second-place spot in the Pacific Division as they chase down the Anaheim Ducks, which have been holding down first place. The reeling Vegas Golden Knights still hold down third place, but the Los Angeles Kings are just three points behind them.

The Western Conference wild card race has recently shifted in a big way. The Nashville Predators have made a strong push and currently occupy the final wild card spot with 77 points, but just five points separate the four teams vying for that final playoff position.

Reminder: Here's how the NHL playoff seeding works

The top three teams in each division automatically qualify for the playoffs.

Each conference has two wild card spots.

The top division winner in each conference will play the second wild card team, and the other division winner will play the first wild card team.

The second and third-place teams in each division will match up with one another in the first round.

Regulation wins are the first tiebreaker.

Regulation plus OT wins are the second tiebreaker

(X) denotes clinched playoff berth; (Y) denotes clinched division; (Z) denotes clinched conference; (P) denotes clinched Presidents' Trophy

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

1. Buffalo Sabres | 44-20-8 | 96 points

Points percentage: .667

Regulation wins: 37

Regulation plus OT wins: 40

Current first-round matchup: Boston Bruins

2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 44-21-6 | 94 points

Points percentage: .662

Regulation wins: 35

Regulation plus OT wins: 40

Current first-round matchup: Montreal Canadiens

3. Montreal Canadiens | 40-21-10 | 90 points

Points percentage: .634

Regulation wins: 28

Regulation plus OT wins: 38

Current first-round matchup: Tampa Bay Lightning
Metropolitan Division

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 45-20-6 | 96 points

Points percentage: .676

Regulation wins: 32

Regulation plus OT wins: 40

Current first-round matchup: New York Islanders

2. Pittsburgh Penguins | 36-20-16 | 88 points

Points percentage: .606

Regulation wins: 29

Regulation plus OT wins: 33

Current first-round matchup: Columbus Blue Jackets

3. Columbus Blue Jackets | 38-23-11 | 87 points

Points percentage: .604

Regulation wins: 27

Regulation plus OT wins: 32

Current first-round matchup: Pittsburgh Penguins

Wild Card

WC1. Boston Bruins | 40-24-8 | 88 points

Points percentage: .611

Regulation wins: 29

Regulation plus OT wins: 37

Current first-round matchup: Buffalo Sabres

WC2. New York Islanders | 41-27-5 | 87 points

Points percentage: .596



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Regulation wins: 27

Regulation plus OT wins: 37

Current first-round matchup: Carolina Hurricanes

In the hunt

Ottawa Senators | 38-24-10 | 86 points

Points percentage: .597

Regulation wins: 32

Regulation plus OT wins: 35

Detroit Red Wings | 38-25-8 | 84 points

Points percentage: .592

Regulation wins: 27

Regulation plus OT wins: 36

Philadelphia Flyers | 35-24-12 | 82 points

Points percentage: .577

Regulation wins: 22

Regulation plus OT wins: 26

Washington Capitals | 36-28-9 | 81 points

Points percentage: .555

Regulation wins: 31

Regulation plus OT wins: 35

Western Conference

Central Division

1. Colorado Avalanche | 48-13-10 | 106 points (X)

Points percentage: .746

Regulation wins: 42

Regulation plus OT wins: 45

Current first-round matchup: Nashville Predators

2. Dallas Stars | 43-18-11 | 97 points (X)

Points percentage: .674

Regulation wins: 33

Regulation plus OT wins: 38

Current first-round matchup: Minnesota Wild

3. Minnesota Wild | 41-20-12 | 94 points

Points percentage: .644

Regulation wins: 26

Regulation plus OT wins: 37

Current first-round matchup: Dallas Stars

Pacific Division

1. Anaheim Ducks | 41-27-4 | 86 points

Points percentage: .597

Regulation wins: 24

Regulation plus OT wins: 33

Current first-round matchup: Utah Mammoth

2. Edmonton Oilers | 36-28-9 | 81 points

Points percentage: .555

Regulation wins: 27

Regulation plus OT wins: 36

Current first-round matchup: Vegas Golden Knights

3. Vegas Golden Knights | 32-26-15 | 79 points

Points percentage: .541

Regulation wins: 24

Regulation plus OT wins: 31

Current first-round matchup: Edmonton Oilers

Wild Card

WC1. Utah Mammoth | 37-30-6 | 80 points

Points percentage: .548

Regulation wins: 28

Regulation plus OT wins: 37

Current first-round matchup: Anaheim Ducks

WC2. Nashville Predators | 34-29-9 | 77 points

Points percentage: .535

Regulation wins: 25

Regulation plus OT wins: 30

Current first-round matchup: Colorado Avalanche

In the hunt

Los Angeles Kings | 29-25-18 | 76 points

Points percentage: .528

Regulation wins: 19

Regulation plus OT wins: 25

Seattle Kraken | 32-29-10 | 74 points

Points percentage: .521

Regulation wins: 25

Regulation plus OT wins: 31

Winnipeg Jets | 30-30-12 | 70 points

Points percentage: .500

Regulation wins: 24

Regulation plus OT wins: 28

San Jose Sharks | 32-31-7 | 71 points

Points percentage: .507

Regulation wins: 20

Regulation plus OT wins: 30



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

The Hockey News

Shayne Gostisbehere 'Hopefully' To Be Back In Lineup Against New Jersey

By: Ryan Henkel

A veteran defenseman rejoins practice after injury layoff. His dynamic offensive presence, crucial for the power play, could soon bolster Carolina's lineup.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere could be back in the lineup for Saturday's game against the New Jersey Devils.

The veteran blueliner was back at practice on Friday for the first time since suffering an injury in Edmonton on March 6.

Shayne Gostisbere likely to be back in Hurricanes lineup

The defenseman was injured in the first period of that game and Gostisbehere wouldn't return and would then miss the team's next nine games, with the Canes going 5-4-0 in that span.

But now it looks like he's finally ready to return.

"Hopefully," said Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour when asked if Gostisbehere would be good to go for Saturday's game. "We'll know tomorrow. I can't commit yet because I don't know."

Brind'Amour had stated when Gostisbehere was injured that he was "assuming it wasn't gonna be too long," but it did end up turning into a longer ordeal.

"Nowadays with injuries, I just kind of wait until they say they're ready to go," Brind'Amour said. "Right now with the way things are, you're not putting guys in there that are iffy."

It's been a tough season for Gostisbehere in terms of health, as he's missed 26 games in total due to a variety of different ailments.

However, when he's played, he's been one of the best blueliners in the entire league.

Gostisbehere has 11 goals and 43 points in 45 games this year, while also playing a solid two-way game.

He quarterback's Carolina's top power play and his presence is definitely one that's been missed.

"He's a big part of what we're doing, especially on offense, the power play," Brind'Amour said.

Hopefully he'll be ready to go and can get back up to speed quickly as the playoffs are just around the corner.

LINKS

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7152491/2026/03/28/nhl-bold-predictions-all-32-revisited/>

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-march-28-vs-new-jersey>

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<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/shayne-gostisbehere-hopefully-to-be-back-in-lineup>



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

SportScan

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

1384530 Carolina Hurricanes

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

Cory Lavalette 11-14 minutes 27/03/2026

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.

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 HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

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 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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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

The Athletic / The NHL playoff races heat up. PLUS: Another trophy for MacKinnon?

By James Mirtle

March 27, 2026

Good morning, hockey folks. Another busy one with 13 games last night, so let's get you up to date on what's happening around the league as the regular season winds down.

Who's up and who's down in the stretch run?

It's hard to believe, but there are only 22 days left until the postseason. Even that close to the finish line, there is a lot of spots up for grabs, with nearly half the league still vying to make it in.

Here are the teams I think we can likely call at this point, based on the probabilities:

Nine locks to make the playoffs (94% chance or higher)

East: Carolina, Tampa Bay, Buffalo, Montreal

West: Colorado, Dallas, Minnesota, Anaheim, Edmonton

Eight locks to miss the playoffs (6% chance or lower)

East: Toronto, N.Y. Rangers, Florida, New Jersey

West: Vancouver, Calgary, Chicago, St. Louis

That leaves another 15 teams still in play, including 13 that were in action last night (Boston and Detroit being idle). Excluding the 17 locks I mentioned above, here are the teams trying to make a playoff push that shifted their odds last night:

East

Pittsburgh 80% 85%

Columbus 91% 82%

Ottawa 76% 72%

N.Y. Islanders 37% 48%

Washington 6% 7%

The Penguins' 4-3 shootout win over the beat-up Senators was one of the night's biggest results, especially with how many teams are after what looks like four open spots in the East.

That was five openings until the Canadiens toppled red-hot Columbus 2-1 on Zachary Bolduc's third-period goal, lifting Montreal to 90 points with 11 games to go.

The Islanders and Capitals, meanwhile, pulled out really impressive wins over strong West teams Dallas and Utah, beating them 2-1 and 7-4, to improve their playoff chances.

West

Utah 95% 91%

Los Angeles 58% 68%

Nashville 39% 27%

Seattle 5% 10%

Winnipeg 16% 9%

San Jose 11% 9%

Utah would have been firmly in the playoff lock category with a win, but allowed four third-period goals at home against Washington. Edmonton,

meanwhile, jumped into the lock group with a 4-3 overtime win over struggling Vegas (five losses in its last six).

The Kings made short work of the last-place Canucks in a 4-0 win that improved them to 5-3-4 in their last 12 games, enough to boost them in the West's wild-card turtle derby in part thanks to newcomer Artemi Panarin's 15 points in that span.

Three can't-miss stories this week

We may be in this odd in-between time after the trade deadline and before the playoffs get going, but my colleagues have certainly pumped out the gold of late.

If you're born before 1990, this one will make you feel extra old.

Key quote: "A decade ago when a guy was growing up through youth hockey and college or junior, they learned how to play the game. Hockey sense was taught early, and skills were taught late — and now hockey sense is taught late."

An interesting look at why so many formerly good goalies with big contracts have bad numbers.

Key quote: "Interestingly, there is zero statistical correlation between how much each team spends on its goaltending tandem this season and the club's overall goaltending results."

Is your team a dark horse to do damage in the playoffs, even as a lower seed? Here are some numbers that could back that up.

Key quote: "Stanley Cup champions tend to be elite five-on-five teams. All but one Cup champion going back to 2007-08 won those minutes during the regular season before its championship."

Let's move on ...

This week's MirTrivia: Alex Ovechkin hit a bit of a weird milestone earlier this week when he became the second player to ever net 1,000 goals, regular season and playoffs combined. (Wayne Gretzky has the record with 1,016.)

We don't often look at combined stats like this in the NHL. But our trivia today gets into three players who highlight how different regular season and playoff production can be:

Which player with 600-plus regular-season goals in their career has scored the fewest playoff goals (only 21)?

Which two players in the all-time top 10 in career playoff goals failed to get to the 500-goal mark in the regular season?

Answers at the bottom.

Should MacKinnon be up for the Selke, too?

Our graphman, Dom Luszczyszyn, has been busy this week breaking down a few interesting awards-related trends, including the rise of the MVP defenseman and the need for a defensive defenseman award (and who should win it this year).

I'm on board with both of those, including the idea that a blueliner should be winning the Hart more than once every 54 years. (Only Chris Pronger has since Bobby Orr in 1972.)

Dom also served up his regular awards watch column, and it highlighted just how tight things are going to be for league MVP, the Norris, the Vezina and the Art Ross. In fact, basically everything except the Calder — where Isles wunderkind Matthew Schaefer is running away with things — could be tight.

The biggest mystery, however, is what's going to happen with the Selke for the top defensive forward. The threesome of Aleksander Barkov, Patrice Bergeron and Anze Kopitar has won it 10 of the last 12 years, but



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

with one injured, one retired and the third playing out his final season, the field is wide open for someone from the new guard.

Dom's leading candidate is Montreal's Nick Suzuki, who's one of the league's top scorers this year (86 points) and has finished 13th in Selke voting the past two years. After Suzuki, however, it's an eclectic list, including several pure checkers who haven't topped 40 points. (No one who fits that description has won the Selke since Kris Draper in 2004.)

Dom calls this particular race "weird" given the absence of Barkov and other star-level competition for Suzuki. But one really interesting candidate is Nathan MacKinnon, who has put together a terrific all-around season with one of the highest defensive ratings among all forwards. What he doesn't do is kill penalties for the Avs, which could leave him off many writers' ballots.

"I'm going to stay consistent with how I've always voted, which is that there needs to be some penalty killing to qualify," Dom says. "But it's definitely a discussion worth having because there are some players – Auston Matthews five years ago or Leon Draisaitl last season – who were strong enough to warrant merit based on their five-on-five play but were too important (to their teams) offensively to waste time in a PK role.

"Perhaps an exception can be made. Sometimes not being used on the PK is telling, but there are times where it's not born out of ability, but optimization."

Doug Gilmour and Sergei Fedorov (twice) won the Selke during 100-point campaigns, so it's not unheard of. Food for thought.

Coast to Coast

Sidney Crosby left last night's game against the Senators with an injury, which would be a crushing loss for a Penguins team on the verge of a shocking playoff berth.

Harman Dayal provides his annual look at the most disappointing players this season. Surprisingly, it's not all Maple Leafs.

We're out of the bottom half in Scott Wheeler's 2026 NHL prospect pool rankings, and the now-mighty-again Anaheim Ducks are No. 14. Maybe Goldberg makes it next year.

This year's PWHL draft rankings are heavy on U.S. talent, with the top Canadian all the way down in ninth.

On a special edition of The Athletic Hockey Show Prospect Series, we preview the CHL playoffs and the NCAA men's hockey championship, including a debate on whether Gavin McKenna or Canadiens prospect Michael Hage is the best college player heading into the tournament.

MirTrivia Answer

Let's see how well you know your hockey history.

The 600-goal scorer with the fewest career playoff goals is Marcel Dionne, who piled up 731 regular-season goals but scored just 21 times in 49 postseason games. (Jarome Iginla is second with 37 playoff goals.)

And the two top 10 playoff scorers who didn't make it to the 500-goal club? Glenn Anderson (498 regular-season goals and 92 in the playoffs) and Claude Lemieux (379 and 80).

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The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: A focus for every team as playoffs approach

By Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn

March 27, 2026

The NHL playoff picture remains as murky as ever: a dogfight in the East and a pillow fight in the West. Some things are settled, but many still aren't, and that's left a lot to worry about over the season's final 10 games.

Maybe "worry" isn't the right word. Some teams will be worried, no doubt, but for many it's a time to focus and hone in on some weaknesses heading into the postseason. And for the non-playoff teams, there's an eye toward the future that will be the primary focal point, no matter how much of a slog the last few games may be.

Here's one thing that teams will have to focus on over the last few weeks.

1. Colorado Avalanche, 48-13-10

Last week: 1

Sean: 1

Dom: 1

Usually, we'd call out Colorado's power play as the primary focal point, but to the likely dismay of many, that looks to have woken up. Since the trade deadline, the Avalanche have had a top-10 power play.

So, now what for the NHL's best team? That would probably be getting Mackenzie Blackwood rolling again. He came into the season as the team's presumed starter, but has struggled since the break with a GSAX of minus-3.4 in nine games. That's a bottom-10 mark. Against Winnipeg, Blackwood got the win, but was just average in doing so.

2. Dallas Stars, 43-18-11

Last week: 2

Sean: 2

Dom: 2

Good as the Stars are, they also had two glaring needs once deadline season arrived: middle-six scoring and, as always, a right-side defenseman. To that end, they did well to acquire Michael Bunting and Tyler Myers, but both have gotten off to brutal starts.

Bunting has one goal, the Stars have been outscored 7-2 with him on the ice and his expected goal share isn't much better. Dallas scratched him against the Islanders on Thursday. Myers, meanwhile, is getting third-pair minutes with Lian Bichsel, and the Stars are losing them.

3. Buffalo Sabres, 44-20-8

Last week: 3

Sean: 3

Dom: 3

Fun fact: the almighty Sabres are 29-6-3 without Conor Timmins in the lineup and 15-14-5 with him. Sure, that's not entirely his fault, but Timmins' Net Rating per 82 this season of minus-12 doesn't speak to a player who's helping. Zach Metsa was just sent down to the AHL, Luke Schenn isn't any better and Michael Kesselring hasn't jelled with the team amid an injury-plagued season. Buffalo has 10 games to figure out who its Game 1 right defenseman is on the third pair, and the options aren't ideal.

4. Carolina Hurricanes, 45-20-6

Last week: 4

Sean: 4

Dom: 4



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

As great a story as goaltender Brandon Bussi was for the Hurricanes earlier this season, he's been a problem for weeks. In 10 starts since Jan. 24, Bussi has posted a sub-.900 save percentage nine times. In that span, he's at .860 overall with nearly six goals allowed above expected; only Edmonton's Tristan Jarry has been worse. Credit to Carolina for going 7-3-0 in those games, but something has to give.

5. Tampa Bay Lightning, 44-21-6

Last week: 5

Sean: 5

Dom: 5

After stumbling out of the post-Olympic break, the Lightning are back on track as the favorite to come out of the East. But there's still one major red flag with the team's recent play and that's the penalty kill. The 11.9 GA/60 the Lightning have allowed since the deadline is the league's worst mark.

6. Minnesota Wild, 41-20-12

Last week: 6

Sean: 6

Dom: 6

We're going to assume that Filip Gustavsson will start Game 1 for the Wild, wherever it may be (probably in Dallas). He was solid in a 2-1 win over the Stars earlier this week, making 28 saves. It's worth noting, though, that Jesper Wallstedt has regained some of his early-season form, putting up a .918 save percentage and saving nearly four goals above expected since the trade deadline. That at least makes the debate a bit more interesting.

7. Montreal Canadiens, 40-21-10

Last week: 9

Sean: 7

Dom: 7

Since the Olympic break, only one team has allowed more xGA/60 while penalty killing than Montreal's 9.33: the New York Rangers. That's far from ideal company and something the Canadiens need to clean up in a hurry. A potential date against Tampa Bay's power play in the first two rounds would be a scary sight.

8. Columbus Blue Jackets, 38-23-11

Last week: 7

Sean: 8

Dom: 8

All eyes in Columbus are on a playoff spot, something the Blue Jackets still have a high chance of securing despite a narrow loss to Montreal on Tuesday. Few teams have been playing better hockey than Columbus, but special teams could use some work. The Blue Jackets have allowed a ton of chances lately on the penalty kill and the power play has been below average.

9. Pittsburgh Penguins, 36-20-16

Last week: 8

Sean: 9

Dom: 9

The Penguins' 4-3 shootout win over Ottawa on Thursday night was huge for plenty of reasons. The biggest: it kept them ahead of both Columbus and the Islanders in the Metropolitan Division.

Ben Kindel's play was a highlight, as well — the 18-year-old forward put up an assist and solid five-on-five play before scoring the shootout winner. His play had dipped in his 15 post-Olympic games (five points, actual and expected goal shares in the low 40s). Pittsburgh will need the upswing to continue.

10. Ottawa Senators, 38-24-10

Last week: 11

Sean: 10

Dom: 10

Ottawa's blue line has been decimated. First Jake Sanderson, now Thomas Chabot? Ouch.

The Senators' primary objective will be surviving their massive injury troubles on the back end. But born from that is one bright spot: getting to see what Carter Yakemchuk can do in the big leagues. So far, so good with two points in his debut.

11. Boston Bruins, 40-24-8

Last week: 10

Sean: 11

Dom: 12

Boston has 10 games remaining. Seven are against teams currently in playoff position, and another is against the Florida Panthers. It's the toughest schedule in the league. Godspeed.

12. Anaheim Ducks, 41-27-4

Last week: 15

Sean: 12

Dom: 11

With the Ducks, it's always going to be about defending. We thought new coach Joel Quenneville would right that ship, but that hasn't been the case with a 2.81 xGA/60 on the season. For context, that's worse than the Leafs. Things have only gotten leakier since the break, with a league-worst 3.25 xGA/60.

13. New York Islanders, 41-27-5

Last week: 12

Sean: 10

Dom: 13

Ilya Sorokin certainly looked like himself in a 26-save, 2-1 win over the Stars on Thursday night, and the Isles will need more of that going forward; they'd gotten bottom-10 goaltending since the Olympic break (.899 save percentage). Backup David Rittich was the primary culprit, but Sorokin hadn't been great, either.

14. Detroit Red Wings, 38-25-8

Last week: 13

Sean: 14

Dom: 14

March Madness: college basketball tournament or the annual state of Red Wings fans as they watch their team crash out of a playoff spot? The Red Wings, out on points percentage, will be in a fight to make it with tough competition ahead. It's time to bear down and make sure this simply doesn't happen. Cleaning up a penalty kill that has sunk the team since the break would be a good start.

15. Philadelphia Flyers, 35-24-12



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Last week: 18

Sean: 15

Dom: 15

We'll go broad here: generating offense. Philadelphia's expected goals per 60 since the break is 2.15 — worst in the NHL. The Flyers also have the second-worst power play. That they're 7-2-1 in their last 10 and still on the periphery of the playoff race is wild.

16. Edmonton Oilers, 36-28-9

Last week: 16

Sean: 17

Dom: 16

Since the break, Connor Ingram has put up an .883 save percentage, 14 points below the league average, and a negative GSax. He remains, by a country mile, Edmonton's best option in net. It's goaltending. It's always goaltending.

17. Utah Mammoth, 37-30-6

Last week: 14

Sean: 17

Dom: 18

The Mammoth came back from the break as a mediocre five-on-five team; since then, they're 21st in expected goals and 22nd in actual ones. Production from somebody other than Dylan Guenther and Clayton Keller would be nice.

18. Washington Capitals, 36-28-9

Last week: 19

Sean: 19

Dom: 17

Since the trade deadline, the Capitals have a bottom-five power play that's scored just 4.2 goals per 60. It's been a problem all year, and it's only become worse of late. A potential solution? Let's see what Cole Hutson can do on the top unit.

19. Vegas Golden Knights, 32-26-15

Last week: 17

Sean: 18

Dom: 19

A lot of folks would say Vegas needs to focus on protecting its goaltenders better, given how porous Adin Hill et al have been. But an even bigger problem has emerged, and that's the team's scoring completely drying up since the break. That's not for a lack of chances; the Golden Knights are generating 2.99 xGF/60, but have just 1.86 GF/60 to show for it. That's the third-worst mark in the league, driven by a league-worst shooting percentage of 6.5 percent. It's time to put some pucks in the net.

20. Nashville Predators, 34-29-9

Last week: 23

Sean: 20

Dom: 21

The wild-card race in the West is so brutal that the Predators have stumbled into the final spot despite a minus-22 goal differential. In what is shaping up to be a real pillow fight, why not the Predators? One thing

they need to do in order to maintain that spot, though, is control the puck more. Since the break, the Predators have a 44 percent xG rate, the league's third-worst mark.

21. New Jersey Devils, 37-32-2

Last week: 21

Sean: 21

Dom: 20

New Jersey's season is already lost, but some hope has started to emerge over the last month. The focus to close the season: how much of that can translate to next season?

To start, Jack Hughes looks like himself again with 21 points in his last 13 games. That's a huge plus. A bigger story, though, might be the development of Luke Hughes and Simon Nemec, who are finally looking like the blue line cornerstones they were billed as at the draft. Luke has an average Game Score of 1.14 since the break, while Nemec is at a respectable 0.68.

22. Los Angeles Kings, 29-25-18

Last week: 20

Sean: 22

Dom: 22

Since the break, only Detroit has rolled a less effective penalty kill than the Kings, who are allowing 11.5 short-handed goals against per 60. Credit to them for spending relatively minimal time in the box, but sheesh. If they're going to stay involved, that'll have to change.

23. Seattle Kraken, 32-29-10

Last week: 24

Sean: 23

Dom: 23

It took a bit, but the real Kraken have shown up; red flags that have existed all year, combined with freshly poor goaltending, have led to a 4-9-1 record since the break. It's probably best to steer into the skid and try to add another premium prospect, but the damage on that front might have already been done — they're still 22nd in points percentage.

24. Florida Panthers, 35-33-3

Last week: 25

Sean: 24

Dom: 24

The smart teams put top-10 pick protection to hedge on draft picks more than one year out, and the Panthers are showing exactly why. Florida has played more games than any team over the last three seasons and has been decimated by injuries; the Panthers could use the year off. Now they need to make this vacation count by locking in a spot in the league's bottom 10 in order to get their 2026 pick back from the Blackhawks. Not every team has that foresight.

25. St. Louis Blues, 30-30-11

Last week: 26

Sean: 25

Dom: 25

Their power play has been the worst in the league since the break, which is putting a bit of a damper on Jimmy Snuggerud's attempt to hit the 20-goal mark in his first full NHL season. That'd be nice.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

26. San Jose Sharks, 32-31-7

Last week: 22

Sean: 26

Dom: 26

We love what we've gotten from Macklin Celebrini and the Sharks. They should feel great about themselves. Respectfully, though: keep stacking those losses. A few more will put them back in the bottom five and further secure another shot at a top draft pick. We're not concerned about their confidence cratering down the stretch, either. They've banked plenty of that.

27. Winnipeg Jets, 30-30-12

Last week: 27

Sean: 27

Dom: 27

Before the Olympics, Connor Hellebuyck was playing his worst hockey in years. Then he played the greatest game of his life to win gold. Since, he's been pure mid. Given the state of the West wild-card race, it's a shame that Hellebuyck couldn't rise to his usual level. The Jets are 8-4-4 since the break, and while that's fine, prime Hellebuyck definitely would've squeaked a few more points out of that stretch to get them closer to the second wild-card spot.

28. Toronto Maple Leafs, 31-29-13

Last week: 29

Sean: 28

Dom: 28

Must-win game? That's a loss. Must-lose game? That's a win. No matter which direction the pressure points, the Leafs have an uncanny ability to disappoint a majority of their fan base. The quest for the bottom five isn't over yet, but the Leafs face another must-lose game on Saturday against St. Louis. Can this team finally rise to the occasion?

29. Chicago Blackhawks, 27-32-13

Last week: 28

Sean: 29

Dom: 29

The Blackhawks are by no means a finished product, but Anton Frondell's arrival in the lineup signals something: their best shot yet at finding an elite talent to pair, long-term, with Connor Bedard. The two connected for a quasi-fluky goal on Thursday night, when Frondell's wrap-around attempt wound up on Bedard's stick.

30. New York Rangers, 28-35-9

Last week: 30

Sean: 31

Dom: 31

J.T. Miller hasn't scored a goal since Jan. 26. A season-ending surge would probably only annoy Rangers fans, but he isn't going anywhere. Might as well try to finish things on some sort of positive note.

31. Calgary Flames, 30-34-8

Last week: 31

Sean: 31

Dom: 31

We've got one just question for this final stretch of Flames hockey: who exactly is a core piece for this team's future? Zayne Parekh is an obvious one, and he's been fine as a rookie. Dustin Wolf should still be the guy in net, too. But, uh, is anyone else going to step up and show they're a part of this team's future?

32. Vancouver Canucks, 21-42-8

Last week: 32

Sean: 32

Dom: 32

We're going to echo what Thomas Drance said about the Canucks earlier this week: if a lost season offers anything, it's low-stakes opportunities for players to test their ceilings. Zeev Buium and Tom Willander, Vancouver's best young defensemen, should be in that mode for the rest of the schedule — and the results, thus far, have been mixed.

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The Athletic / The NHL's 9 most disappointing players of 2025-26, from failed swings to unexpected slumps

By Harman Dayal

March 27, 2026

The NHL is a harsh, results-focused business.

What a player did in the past doesn't matter; it's all about how they're performing right now. Contracts also play a massive role in setting expectations for players in a cap world.

Earlier this year, we highlighted some positive surprises by analyzing the league's most improved players. Now, here are the NHL's 10 biggest disappointments this season, in no particular order. Note that we won't be repeating players who appeared on last year's biggest disappointments list, so no Tristan Jarry and Elias Pettersson, among others.

J.T. Miller, New York Rangers

Last year, the Rangers made a controversial, high-risk swing on J.T. Miller to extend their competitive window. New York was already outside of a wild-card spot at the time and had an aging, expensive core, but GM Chris Drury believed Miller would revitalize the top-six attack as their new No. 1 center.

Miller averaged 89 points per 82 games between 2021 and 2025, but there was a significant risk that his best days were behind him — he was well into his 30s and in the middle of a down year in Vancouver, where he looked more like a declining point producer with defensive issues rather than an elite player to build around. The Rangers also slapped the "C" on Miller's jersey ahead of this season, which was a strange decision to say the least.

I covered Miller closely for six years in Vancouver, and while I have a ton of respect for his game and understand the value of having a fiery, throwback locker room personality, it seemed reckless for New York to give the captaincy to a polarizing personality who had such an ugly feud with co-star Elias Pettersson that it necessitated a trade.

Miller's second tour of duty in Manhattan has been rocky. The 33-year-old has scored 42 points in 58 games (59 points per 82 games pace) in a year where he's been laboring through injuries. Miller's skating has



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

looked sluggish, and the inconsistency of his aggressive, physical play is a clear sign that he isn't right physically.

To make matters worse, Miller has been on the ice for 3.18 goals against per 60 at five-on-five, which is by far the worst rate among all Rangers forwards. He isn't driving play with any level of authority. His motor and urgency to move his feet without the puck are inconsistent, which has frustrated Rangers fans. He's looked visibly defeated and out of answers in multiple post-game media scrums that have gone viral, as New York has plummeted to the worst record in the Eastern Conference.

Miller has four years left after this season at an \$8 million cap hit. However, I'd argue Drury deserves more blame than Miller does, because the signs were evident at the time of the trade that this move was likely to age poorly.

Trent Frederic, Edmonton Oilers

With Evan Bouchard due for a new contract, the Oilers entered last summer with limited cap flexibility. They were forced to trade Evander Kane and Viktor Arvidsson as salary cap dumps. With the free-agency departures of Corey Perry and Connor Brown, two of Edmonton's key contributors in the playoffs, and the Oilers essentially lost four middle-six forwards.

Edmonton turned around and invested \$7.45 million of its cap room on signing Andrew Mangiapane and extending Trent Frederic. Yikes. The Mangiapane bet at least seemed like a decent fit at the time, but the Frederic contract — an eight-year deal at \$3.85 million AAV — was a needlessly risky gamble from the moment it was signed.

Frederic was a non-factor during the playoffs last year, scoring just one goal in 22 games, while averaging only 11:24 per game. He was clearly hampered by a high-ankle sprain, though, so the hope was he'd be healthier and more impactful this season. That bounce-back hasn't happened — Frederic has scored just six points in 67 games, and the Oilers have been outscored 29-14 with him on the ice at five-on-five.

Frederic has performed noticeably better since the Olympic break; he's been more energetic, physical and disruptive. Perhaps this is a Connor Brown-like situation in which a player takes longer than expected to get back up to speed after a serious injury but eventually rediscovers his top form. Ultimately, though, Frederic is still playing a limited role — he's been under 10 minutes of ice time in six of his last eight games — and the opportunity cost of his contract, which has another seven years left after this season, looms large.

Linus Ullmark, Ottawa Senators

If Ottawa's goaltending lived up to expectations, we'd be talking about the Senators as a bona fide Stanley Cup contender. Instead, they're having to fight tooth and nail just to qualify for the playoffs.

Ottawa is dominant at controlling puck possession and driving play. Their 55.9 percent expected goal share at five-on-five ranks second-best in the NHL behind the Colorado Avalanche. The Senators have found a new gear offensively — they're scoring five-on-five goals at the fifth-highest rate in the NHL — and they've been a top-end defensive team since Travis Green took over as head coach last year.

The Senators have been held back by unreliable goaltending: Ottawa's goalies have combined for a league-worst minus-29.8 goals saved above expected. This is especially frustrating because every available analytic metric indicates the team defends very well in front of their goalies; it's not like the Oilers, where part of their goaltending woes stems from their careless defensive play.

Linus Ullmark wears the brunt of that burden. The 32-year-old's \$8.25 million cap hit pays him to be an elite netminder, yet his save percentage has dropped from .910 last year to an underwhelming .887. Ullmark has played far steadier since coming back from the Olympic break, which coincides with the club's charge back into a playoff spot. That definitely

provides some reason for optimism; all will be forgiven if Ullmark heats up down the stretch and, critically, can overcome his past playoff struggles, where he has an .885 save percentage in 16 career postseason games.

Jonathan Drouin, New York Islanders/St. Louis Blues

When the Islanders signed Jonathan Drouin to a two-year, \$4 million AAV contract in the summer, they were betting that he could produce away from Nathan MacKinnon. I'm sure they didn't expect him to maintain the borderline first-line-caliber rate he was scoring at in Colorado — he scored 93 points in 122 games, a 63 points per 82 games rate, across two seasons in Denver — but New York was hoping he could add legitimate punch to its middle-six offense.

It never happened.

Drouin mustered just three goals in 55 games with the Islanders despite averaging over 17 minutes per game. He even got a fair bit of opportunity alongside Mathew Barzal (277 five-on-five minutes together), so you can't say he didn't get a chance to play with the team's top-tier forwards. Drouin scored just 0.86 points per 60 at five-on-five, which ranks 363rd among 390 forwards who've played at least 400 minutes this season.

Beneath the surface, Drouin's microstats show he was doing very little to drive play or create chances.

Morgan Rielly, Toronto Maple Leafs

It'd be foolish to blame just one player for the Leafs' downfall. Toronto has problems in the front office, behind the bench and all over the lineup. With that said, Morgan Rielly's deteriorating play — and the four years he has left after this season at a \$7.5 million cap hit — is a major concern for a slow, aging blue line that lacks quality puck movers.

Rielly has always been inconsistent defensively, and those warts without the puck are becoming more pronounced. He's been on the ice for 3.62 goals against per 60 at five-on-five, which is the second-worst rate among all NHL defensemen this season (minimum 500 minutes). Rielly's defensive numbers in limiting shots and scoring chances are almost equally concerning.

Historically, part of the Leafs' issue is that they haven't had a true No. 1 defender to play ahead of Rielly in the lineup. However, this year, Toronto has actually been intentional about not putting too much on Rielly's plate.

Rielly's defensive matchups have been softened, as he's only spent 28.8 percent of his minutes against elite competition, which ranks fifth among Leafs blueliners. He leads all NHL defensemen in offensive zone starts at five-on-five, and he's had 133 fewer defensive zone starts than teammate Jake McCabe. In other words, Rielly's defensive struggles this season look even worse because his matchups and assignments haven't actually been that difficult.

Watching Rielly play over the years, his gap control and rush defense have always been suspect. He's become less agile in recent years, which has exacerbated the issue; his numbers for denying possession entries rank near the bottom of the NHL (6th percentile) according to the All Three Zones tracking project. Rielly's in-zone defending has also been an issue at times, as he's prone to mistakes with his reads and a lack of awareness.

The Leafs' ability to control puck possession has cratered under Craig Berube. Hopefully, Toronto can become a better possession team with a new coach next year, which would play to Rielly's strengths and perhaps fuel a bounce-back.

Quinton Byfield, Los Angeles Kings

Byfield looked like he was on the cusp of stardom at the end of last year.

The 2020 No. 2 pick scored 31 points in the final 32 games of the season. He was evolving into a game-breaker, and his line with Kevin



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Fiala seemed unstoppable — the duo earned a dominant 59 percent of scoring chances and 63 percent of goals in nearly 500 five-on-five minutes together. With Byfield's line roaring, a buzzing power-play and a new Adrian Kempe-Andrei Kuzmenko-Anze Kopitar line also clicking, the Kings were the sixth-highest scoring team in the NHL from Feb. 1 until the end of last season. Led by Byfield's breakout, the Kings finally appeared to have a dangerous offense to go along with their stifling defensive play.

None of that second-half success has carried over to this season. The Kings have been limited to scoring two or fewer goals in regulation a staggering 38 times this season. They're one of the league's worst offensive teams, and there's a good chance that weakness could cost them a playoff spot.

L.A. is generally deficient in elite talent — these offensive woes can't just be pinned on one player — but if Byfield had built on last year's strong finish, this would probably be a much different situation. Instead, Byfield has not only failed to break out, he's on pace for only 48 points, which is a step back compared to the 55-point range he's been in the past two seasons. To make matters worse, Byfield's defensive impact has also slipped; he's allowing five-on-five scoring chances and goals against at the worst rate of his career, leading to a minus-nine goal differential during his five-on-five shifts.

The stagnation in Byfield's game is especially frustrating because he has such a rare combination of jumbo size and elite speed, and has teased high-end skill/creativity in the past, but all the Kings have gotten this year are inconsistent flashes. He's only 23, so there is still time for him to put everything together and reach a higher offensive level, but the clock is ticking.

Walman has long been a gifted skater and puck-mover, and when closely watching Edmonton's 2024 playoff run, it was clear the second pair kept getting hemmed in defensively because Darnell Nurse and Cody Ceci couldn't break the puck out against heavy forechecking teams. Walman's speed and puck transportation skill legitimately moved the needle for the Oilers last year — he drove a 57 percent share of five-on-five shots and 54 percent of goals in the postseason, chipped in with critical secondary offense (10 points in 22 games), and averaged over 20 minutes per night. Walman's excellent top-four impact was critical to Edmonton's deep playoff run despite Mattias Ekholm's injury.

Unfortunately, he's been a shadow of that player this season.

The 30-year-old has had a nightmare campaign defensively. He's been on the ice for a league-worst 3.71 goals against per 60 at five-on-five. The Oilers have earned only 42.8 percent of scoring chances with Walman on the ice, the worst among all Oilers defenders (note as well how dramatic the drop-off is from Ekholm/Evan Bouchard to the next Edmonton defenseman).

Nurse deservedly gets a lot of flak in the market for his defensive play, but I've seen just as many brutal breakdowns from Walman this season, whether it be bad net-front defense, lack of positional awareness, or ill-timed pinches. This porous net-front defensive effort is why it's felt like Edmonton's goalies have been left out to dry at times.

In fairness to Walman, there are a couple of critical factors that provide context for his underwhelming play. First, he's been asked to play his off side a lot; hopefully, with the acquisition of right-shot Connor Murphy, Walman can play his natural left side more consistently. Secondly, he missed time due to an injury earlier this season and appears to be far from 100 percent healthy.

I'm still a big believer in Walman's talent, but the Oilers need way steadier, more consistent two-way play from him.

Adin Hill, Vegas Golden Knights

Cracks are beginning to show that the Golden Knights aren't as threatening as expected. For starters, they've won only 32 of their 72 games, a mediocre .444 win percentage. Vegas also has a dreadful 9-19-9 record against teams in playoff position this season.

Here's a fascinating question, though: How many of the team's issues trace back to a goaltending problem? It's certainly not the Golden Knights' only flaw — their offense has dried up considerably — but their netminding has been every bit as bad as that of teams like Edmonton and Ottawa, yet it hasn't gotten nearly as much media coverage. Vegas owns a league-worst .885 save percentage at five-on-five.

Adin Hill has an ugly .868 save percentage through 23 games, which is the third-worst mark among all goaltenders this season. He's been plagued by injuries, which are increasingly a concern for him; he only played 35 games in the 2023-24 season as well. Hill is only in year one of a hefty six-year contract at a \$6.25 million cap hit.

Similar to Ottawa, the Golden Knights' goaltending woes are especially frustrating because they have a stingy, goalie-friendly defensive environment. Vegas is the NHL's leader at limiting five-on-five shots against and owns the second-best expected goals against per 60 rate.

Frank Vatrano, Anaheim Ducks

Frank Vatrano capitalized on having a bigger role during some of Anaheim's lean rebuilding years, averaging 27 goals per season from 2022 to 2025. A year ago, that earned him a three-year, \$18 million extension that carries a \$4.57 million cap hit due to deferred salary.

However, with Anaheim's recent infusion of high-end forward talent — Beckett Sennecke, Cutter Gauthier and Leo Carlsson have all broken out, and Chris Kreider and Mikael Granlund are new middle-six arrivals as well — Vatrano has plunged down the depth chart.

Vatrano's reduced opportunity isn't entirely surprising, as he was never a prolific play-driver and isn't as valuable as the team's current top-six forwards. But still, nobody could have predicted how severe the decline in his production would be. He's slumped to just four goals and four assists in 44 games this season. He's racked up just 72 shots on goal, which is a far cry from the 234 he registered last season.

The 32-year-old's average ice time has collapsed from 17:33 last year to 11:59, and he's gone from averaging 2:38 on the power play last year to just 47 seconds per game this season. It'd probably be in the best interests of both sides to explore a move for him in the summer, though his contract may not be easy to move.

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The Athletic / Ranking the 10 best NHL first-round playoff matchups that are still realistically in play

By Sean McIndoe

March 27, 2026

Did you catch another subtle sign of spring from the last few days? The NHL standings page added an "If Playoffs Started Today" link at the top of the page. And it doesn't just go to a page that says "... it would be way too early, calm down."

That's because we're almost there. There are just three weeks left in the NHL season, and while that's plenty of time for teams to shift around the standings, it's close enough to the playoffs that we can start thinking



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

ahead to potential matchups. And as always, some are better than others.

Today, let's have a look at some of those first-round matchups that are realistically in play, with a ranking of the 10 best. We'll use the numbers from HockeyStats.com and limit our list to matchups with at least a 10 percent chance of happening (heading into last night's games).

We'll count them down, working our way to the best possible matchups — most of which, of course, will not happen because we'll have jinxed it. We'll get there, but let's take this from the top ...

No. 10: Utah Mammoth vs. Anaheim Ducks

The odds: 61.0 percent, one of the highest we'll see on this list, so we might as well try to sell it.

The history: None, given this will be the Mammoth's first postseason appearance, although the Ducks did face the Arizona Coyotes in one playoff series way back in 1997.

Why it could be great: Most of the usual stuff we look for in a great matchup isn't here, but that's OK because there's something to be said for novelty. And it would be oddly fun to see the Ducks be the old established franchise staring down the punk kids with the weird name. Beyond that, these are two up-and-coming teams who've spent most of the year silencing doubters. And while the Ducks would probably be slight favorites thanks to home ice, it's a winnable matchup for the Mammoth, which keeps the door open for our dream of seeing them hang a banner for winning a division they're not in.

No. 9: Nashville Predators vs. Colorado Avalanche

The odds: 40.5 percent, by far the most likely of several possible matchups for the Avs.

The history: They've split two meetings, a Preds win in 2018 and an Avalanche sweep in 2022.

Why it could be great: Whether it's Nashville, Utah, the Los Angeles Kings or someone else, the narrative for Colorado's first round will be the same — the overwhelming favorite against the scrappy underdog nobody thinks has a real chance. Given that, the Predators are probably the best casting choice for the role of David going up against Goliath. They're not even supposed to be a playoff team, and sure seemed to be selling at the deadline just a few weeks ago. But they've emerged as the favorite to grab the last spot in the West, and they didn't even need Bono this time.

Could they beat the Avalanche? It wouldn't make one bit of sense if they did. And given how this season is going, that means there's a good chance it happens.

No. 8: Buffalo Sabres vs. Boston Bruins

The odds: 21.2 percent. By the way, there's going to be a lot of the Sabres in this post. You've been warned.

The history: There's a ton, as they've met eight times in the postseason, most of them in the Adams Division days. The most recent came in 2010, a series the Bruins won and maybe wish they hadn't.

Why it could be great: This matchup would feature two of the season's most surprising teams, so any attempt at predicting how it would go would seem pointless. It's probably the most interesting matchup available for the Bruins now that their odds of drawing the Montreal Canadiens are close to zero.

You'd get the dynamic of a rookie head coach against a guy who's been doing it forever, a goaltending matchup that would favor the underdog, and a ton of playoff debuts (probably including James Hagens). We could all do a lot worse.

And the winner moves on to the second round, meaning their playoff run would get to see a few May days.

No. 7: Detroit Red Wings vs. Tampa Bay Lightning

The odds: 11.4 percent, which is a lot more than the "zero" you might expect based on Tuesday night.

The history: They faced off in back-to-back years in surprisingly feisty series in 2015 and 2016, with the Lightning winning both. Those are the two most recent playoff series the Red Wings have played.

Why it could be great: It would be an interesting battle between a youngish team trying to build something and an old one trying to squeeze as much as they can out of a diminishing contention window. But the real fun here would be the Steve Yzerman factor, as the Wings GM could claim partial credit for building both teams. He was hailed as a genius when he left Tampa and eventually came home to Detroit; that reputation has been tarnished by the lack of results so far. No better way to flip that narrative than beating your old team, right? Maybe, but Julien BriseBois might not agree.

(By the way, speaking of Tampa homecomings: Honorable mention honors go to the Lightning facing Martin St. Louis and the Habs in what would be a rematch of a recent Stanley Cup Final, something you don't often get to say about divisional rivals.)

No. 6: Montreal Canadiens vs. Buffalo Sabres

The odds: 37.2 percent, with two paths to get there — either the Canadiens drop to a wild-card, or the Sabres drop to second in the division.

The history: They were rivals in the classic Adams Division days and have faced each other seven times in the postseason, although the most recent was back in 1998.

Why it could be great: Do you like exciting young teams? How about offense? Can I interest you in two crazy loud buildings? Cool, you're in, because this would be fantastic.

Really, this one pretty much sells itself. I'm not sure the ceiling is quite as high as some other matchups, but the floor feels like a six-game classic at minimum.

No. 5: Ottawa Senators vs. Buffalo Sabres

The odds: 23.6 percent, nestled in between the Hurricanes and Lightning as the Senators' second most likely matchup.

The history: Way more than you probably think, although you have to go back a ways. They faced each other twice in the pre-cap days, including the Senators' very first playoff appearance back in 1997, which ended with a Game 7 overtime winner ripping through Ron Tugnutt's glove. They split meetings in 2006 and 2007, including this all-time Team Chaos classic. Mix in some regular-season nastiness along the way, and this is one of those underrated rivalries that wouldn't need a ton of heat to start simmering again.

Why it could be great: Our third and final Sabres pick isn't the best possible matchup for Buffalo. That would be a battle of the bandwagons against the Blue Jackets, aka "Jarmo-geddon." But that one's hanging on by a thread, clocking in under 1 percent as a first-round meeting, and we promised we'd stay in the realm of the realistic.

Still, the Senators wouldn't be a bad fallback. They're a sneaky great team that would give the Sabres all they could handle. And if you think the Sabres' bandwagon is full now, wait until Brady Tkachuk and friends are embracing the heel role.

No. 4: Montreal Canadiens vs. Carolina Hurricanes

The odds: 16.5 percent, which is higher than you'd think given it would require Ottawa or Boston passing Montreal on the standings and knocking them down to a wild-card.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

The history: They faced each other twice, in 2002 and 2006, with Carolina winning both. But the real history here is more recent, with the whole offer sheet kerfuffle around Sebastian Aho and later Jesperi Kotkaniemi. Granted, that all happened under Marc Bergevin and Don Waddell, but some of the bad blood lingers, especially between the fan bases.

Why it could be great: Even putting aside the offer sheet stuff, this would be a fun matchup with serious upset potential. The Canadiens have played the Hurricanes twice this year and won both while scoring 12 times, which isn't what you want to see if you're a Carolina fan worried the goaltending could be a postseason weak link. (The two teams play again on Sunday.) Both teams have potent offenses and question marks in net, and the whole thing could even end up being a battle between Brandon Bussi and Jacob Fowler, two pure rookies who give off some serious Steve Penney vibes.

Also, if you combined Martin St. Louis' thighs with Rod Brind'Amour's upper body, you'd create the perfect human form. I'm not sure why this matters but I think it might.

No. 3: Columbus Blue Jackets vs. Pittsburgh Penguins

The odds: 67.0 percent

The history: They've faced each other twice, in 2014 and 2017, with the Penguins winning both.

Why it could be great: First of all, because it involves Columbus. While the Sabres may be the greatest bandwagon team of all time, this year's Blue Jackets aren't all that far behind. They've only won one seven-game series in franchise history, so they've got the lovable underdog thing sewn up. But they've also been one of the best teams in the league since making a coaching change in January, so this could turn into a real run.

Standing in their way? Only the Penguins, the other half of what might be the most one-sided rivalry in the league. For Columbus fans, the Pens are the bullies who always show up to kick sand in their faces. But that animosity really only goes one way, with Pittsburgh fans focusing their ire on teams like the Capitals and Flyers. On this week's podcast, Sean Gentile described it as the hockey version of that Don Draper meme, and he's not wrong.

There's one way to change that, and it's with the Blue Jackets finally slaying the dragon. The storyline would write itself, especially if Columbus ends up hosting Game 1 for the first time ever. You'd have Dan Muse at 43 years old against Rick Bowness, who's been coaching almost that long. Oh, and did we mention it could be Sidney Crosby's last playoff run? Where's Brandon Dubinsky when you need him. This series would absolutely rock.

No. 2: Vegas Golden Knights vs. Edmonton Oilers

The odds: 49.6 percent, which feels like it should be higher until you remember that both teams could still drop out of the playoffs entirely.

The history: Two meetings, with the Knights winning in 2023 and the Oilers getting payback last year.

Why it could be great: There would be a ton of star power, including 2015 draft cousins Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel crossing paths yet again. There'd be even more pressure, since a first-round exit would have to be viewed as utterly disastrous for both teams, almost certainly costing some people their jobs. And given the goaltending on both sides, it's possible every game would finish 11-10.

Also, seeing Mitch Marner and Zach Hyman trade playoff goals would make Toronto Maple Leafs fans sad. OK, even sadder. What more could you want?

No. 1: Minnesota Wild vs. Dallas Stars

The odds: 98 percent, and it feels like it's been that way since December.

The history: The Stars have beaten the Wild twice, in 2016 and 2023, both times in six games. But more importantly, Norm Green Sucks.

Why it could be great: Because while this is the obvious pick, it's still the right one. These are arguably two of the three best teams in the league. And look, we all realize they shouldn't be facing each other in round one. The playoff format is not ideal, and this is one of those years where it's really going to yield some really unfortunate results.

That stinks. But also, it kind of rules, at least if you're a neutral fan who just wants to watch an epic matchup in round one. Is it fair that one of these teams will be out right away? Not remotely. But it's also true that winning a Cup means eventually going through the best of the best. That's not an argument in favor of the current format, but it is a reason to give yourself permission to enjoy it anyway.

So sit back, forget about fairness and just enjoy two monsters going toe-to-toe. It would be just about the most star-studded opening round matchup we've ever seen. And there'd be no shortage of pressure — remember, the Wild haven't won a playoff round since 2015 while the Stars fired their coach last year for losing in the conference final. The stakes couldn't be higher, and it would be disappointing if we didn't get seven games and multiple overtimes. You're morally obligated to pretend to be outraged about the whole thing, but you're still going to love every second of it.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.28.2026

1384625 Websites

ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: New 1-32 poll, playoff points leaders – ESPN

Arda Ocal

Mar 27, 2026

We're in the final weeks of the 2025-26 NHL regular season. Teams are battling for positioning and playoff spots. And while those teams prepare for what they hope are long playoff runs, some players could add to their playoff point totals.

Players generally don't prioritize individual accomplishments while in the playoffs, but hockey fans love to compare the numbers for all-time greats.

So, who are the leading playoff scorers for every NHL team?

Diehard fans will probably know a lot of the franchise leaders, but there are several surprises throughout.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday.

1. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 74.6%

Joe Sakic: 188. For those wondering, Nathan MacKinnon has 122 playoff points, so he needs a few to go before catching Burnaby Joe, who is the Avs' president of hockey operations.

2. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 67.4%



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Mike Modano: 145. No surprise here for the legend who was recently honored with a statue outside American Airlines Center. What's more surprising is picturing Modano with the Red Wings, who had him for 42 games, because of how connected he is with the Stars/North Stars (though Modano grew up in Michigan).

3. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 66.7%

Gilbert Perrault: 103. Maybe we are embarking on an era when Tage Thompson will threaten this mark in the next decade, but right now, one of the most iconic Sabres of all time has the postseason record.

4. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 67.6%

Sebastian Aho: 85. The iconic pose in Hurricanes history is of now-head coach Rod Brind'Amour raising the Cup as a player in 2006, but Aho has the Canes' playoff points lead, one he'll be adding to this spring.

5. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 66.2%

Nikita Kucherov: 171. Kucherov is leading the points race after spending much of the season well out of it. He has scored 75 points in a recent 33-game stretch, the first player to do that since Mario Lemieux in 1996. Incredible.

6. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 64.4%

Zach Parise: 37. With all due respect to Parise, if there's one record that's for the taking on this list, it's this one. Kirill Kaprizov and Quinn Hughes will have something to say about this in the years to come.

7. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 63.4%

Jean Beliveau: 176. "Le Gros Bill" remains one of the classiest leaders in sports history, along with one of the best hockey players ever. A role model's role model.

8. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 60.4%

Cam Atkinson: 26. Atkinson's 26 points in 35 games does the trick, but hopefully, that changes in the future for CBJ. I'd love to see the city of Columbus enjoy long playoff runs with that exciting young core.

9. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 59.7%

Daniel Alfredsson: 100. Alfredsson remains with the Senators as an assistant coach. Similar to Mike Modano, he also has the "I played my entire career with one team ... aside from my very last season with the Red Wings" arc.

10. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 61.1%

Sidney Crosby: 201. Mario Lemieux had 172 points in 107 playoff games. It feels like Sid will hold this record for a long time.

11. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 61.1%

Ray Bourque: 161. Though the most iconic moment of No. 77's career was receiving the Stanley Cup from Joe Sakic while with the Avs in 2001, Ray Bourque is a Bruins legend. He even brought the Cup to Boston after winning it as an Av, with thousands attending the ceremony.

12. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 59.7%

Ryan Getzlaf: 120. Anaheim's longest-serving captain spent his entire career with the Ducks and won a Cup early in his career, along with two Olympic gold medals. Is he a future Hockey Hall of Famer?

13. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 59.6%

Bryan Trottier: 168. A (maybe not so) bold prediction: Matthew Schaefer is the one to break this. He's the heartbeat of the Isles for this generation. He could become the greatest thing to happen on Long Island since the '80s dynasty, and is already racking up points as an 18-year-old.

Next seven days: vs. FLA (March 28), vs. PIT (March 30), @ BUF (March 31)

14. Utah Mammoth

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 54.8%

N/A. Because the Mammoth are technically a new NHL team (not an expansion franchise), the career playoff points leader will officially be whoever gets the first Mammoth playoff points, whether that's this spring or in the future. Dylan Guenther maybe? But if we're looking at the Coyotes/Jets 1.0 lineage, that record belongs to Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk, with 49 playoff points.

Next seven days: @ LA (March 28), @ SEA (April 2)

15. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 59.2%

Steve Yzerman: 185. Gordie Howe had 158 points in 154 playoff games for Detroit. Yzerman played in 196, also with more rounds and playoff games available to play -- and in an era when the Red Wings making the playoffs was pretty much automatic.

16. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 55.5%

Wayne Gretzky: 252. No surprise here as No. 99 is also the only player on this list to top two franchises (spoiler alert), and has the most points in league playoff history with 380; Mark Messier is second with 294.

17. Vegas Golden Knights



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 54.1%

Jonathan Marchessault: 75. Marchessault also won the Conn Smythe trophy in 2023, when Vegas won the Cup. With him no longer with the team, this record is also up for grabs. Will it belong to Jack Eichel (43 in 40 games) someday?

Next seven days: vs. WSH (March 28), vs. VAN (March 30), vs. CGY (April 2)

18. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 57.7%

19. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 55.5%

Alex Ovechkin: 147. The big question is, will this be the final number for Ovechkin? The Caps are down but not out; will they make the playoffs this year? If not, does Ovi return for another season? There are lots of questions surrounding the Great 8.

20. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 53.5%

Filip Forsberg: 59. There was a point, even a couple of months ago, when I thought the current player with the greatest moustache in the NHL wouldn't add to this total for the foreseeable future. Yet, here we are, with the Preds in a wild-card spot as we approach the final weeks.

21. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 53.5%

Patrik Elias: 125. I once asked Elias on the official Devils podcast if he saw Jason Arnott on that famous Stanley Cup-clinching pass in 2000. He said no, but he knew Arnott would be there. And he was. And they raised the Cup.

22. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 52.8%

Wayne Gretzky: 94. No. 99 needed only five seasons to establish his franchise record with L.A., bringing the Kings to the Stanley Cup Final in 1993 (with the great Barry Melrose behind the bench).

23. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 51.4%

Aleksander Barkov: 81. Barkov's absence this season has been felt greatly by the Cats, who will likely miss the playoffs for the first time since 2019 after repeating as Cup champs in 2024 and 2025.

24. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 52.1%

Yanni Gourde: 13. Another record that is ripe to be taken because Gourde is with the Lightning. Those 13 points came in the 2013 postseason with Seattle.

25. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 50.0%

Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele: 49. Our only tie on the list! This includes only the Atlanta Thrashers/current Jets lineage. The 1.0 Jets (1972-1996) fall under the Coyotes, who were referenced in the Mammoth entry.

26. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 50.7%

Patrick Marleau: 120. Joe Thornton played in 12 Sharks postseasons, along with one each with the Leafs and Panthers; before the Sharks, he skated in five with the Bruins. Marleau played in 17 of them with San Jose. He will probably also hold the record for most NHL regular-season games played (1,779) for a long time.

27. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 51.4%

Doug Gilmour: 77. This was one of the more surprising entries; I would have guessed Mats Sundin or someone from the era of Cup-winning Leafs teams. But, Gilmour it is; he finished with 77 points in 52 playoff games; Sundin had 70 in 77 postseason contests, and Dave Keon had 67 in 89.

28. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 50.0%

Brett Hull: 117. Hull spent the bulk of his career in St. Louis, but won his Stanley Cups in Dallas (1999) and Detroit (2022). Remember him as a Coyote?

29. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 47.2%

Al MacInnis: 102. The man responsible for one of the most powerful slap shots in NHL history. MacInnis made the Cup Final twice, both with the Flames, winning it in 1989. He then spent the second half of his career in St. Louis, where he is also a legend.

30. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 46.5%

Stan Mikita: 150. It's all the more impressive when you see a legend from half a century ago on this list -- 150 points in 155 playoff games! A more recent star, Patrick Kane, had 132 in 136 with Chicago.

31. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 45.1%

Brian Leetch: 89. Just like Mike Modano with the Wings, Brian Leetch has a couple of "do you remember him on that team?" moments; do you



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

remember Brian Leetch with the Toronto Maple Leafs, or Brian Leetch with the Boston Bruins?

32. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 35.2%

Trevor Linden: 95. Legendary player and a heartbeat in Vancouver, despite parting ways with the Canucks in 2018. But do you remember when he also had brief stints with the Canadiens, Capitals and Islanders?

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1384626 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Lack of a clear plan has defined Maple Leafs' poor season

Justin Bourne

TORONTO — When Brad Treliving took over the Toronto Maple Leafs, the organization had come to a fork in the road, and he tried to go straight.

He was handed a tough quandary, admittedly.

On Day 1, coming off years of regular-season success and post-season failures, he was staring at: Are you going to stick with this core, including Mitch Marner, or are you going to scrap it, start fresh, and try to chart a new course? As we now know, he didn't trade the expiring winger before his trade protection kicked in, he didn't re-sign him either, he hoped that the team would win big or lose bad and make the decision for him.

That didn't happen.

They were again good in the regular season, and again petered out early in playoffs, again as the big dogs folded tent in the final few games of a series. The decision didn't make itself and so it never got made, and they lost a prime-aged star for very little.

Over the past two seasons, you can argue that that's been the defining trait of the organization: often seeming to muddle tough decisions so as not to incite backlash, with a level of fear and caution permeating just about every department.

Hell, when the team decided it wanted to move on from the old goal song — then associated with too little success — the Maple Leafs somehow ended up with six (yes, that silly detail started during Brendan Shanahan's time, but never got cleared up). This inability to just hammer a clear direction on anything is killing them.

Contrary to the belief of some, in today's NHL you don't have to have the best plan, you don't have to have the most unique or insightful vision, but you do have to have at least some kind of a plan, and you have to be confident in it, and all your decisions have to adhere to it.

It can't be piecemeal, you can't fly by the seat of your pants, and without putting too fine a point on it, I hope, you can't come out the back-end of a trade deadline and say, "We will have a plan."

Coach Craig Berube took over as the hard-line guy, but like on the ice, actions speak louder than words and his actions were middling at best. His early messages about doing things the right way were music to the ears of Leafs' fans, but it almost immediately became clear he wasn't even as hard on the guys as predecessor Sheldon Keefe. His initial confrontations with William Nylander led to him joining the "Willy is Willy" train, which meant an individual set of rules for him, with the coach mostly choosing to leave him alone.

The Leafs wanted to keep some skill but dump the puck, a double-dipping strategy that never bore fruit in part because of the stars' half-committed buy-in. They traded for a guy like Scott Laughton to shore up their bottom-six depth (no more Team A, Team B), then played him like a fourth-line scrub and continued to hand all the minutes to their few stars at the top. Eventually, there was a press conference about the "disconnect," as Treliving acknowledged early in this Leafs' season, that even when they won, they didn't outplay their opponents.

Last season, they won games atop a rickety scaffolding, getting out-shot and out-chanced almost every night, but they didn't use that to question the long-term feasibility of that playing style because they got saves and wins. It all felt like a fan who sits in the same spot on the couch with the same socks during a winning streak, not knowing why things were working but not wanting to mess with perceived success.

It didn't feel like there was a process, a direction.

One thing I've come around on over the years is that the lack of creativity in hockey — while something smart managers and coaches can take advantage of at times — is not a death sentence for an organization. Paul Maurice didn't reinvent how to play hockey for the Florida Panthers to go to three Cup Finals in a row. In fact, their playing style was just about impossible to distinguish from the Cups won by Darryl Sutter and the L.A. Kings in 2012 and 2014. In both cases, the teams had a roster built to fit their system, the players bought in and they executed better than other teams.

Rather than trying to use off-speed pitches and trickery, they said, "We know what we are, you know what we are, let's see if you can stop it."

Nobody could.

This isn't about toughness either. The Pittsburgh Penguins were 30th by average player weight in both 2016 and 2017 when they won their Stanley Cups, but they committed to moving the puck. They made plays all over the rink, skated, competed, and got scoring depth (who can forget the line of Carl Hagelin, Nick Bonino and Phil Kessel?). They had a plan and they executed it.

The Leafs would've been far better with a mediocre plan that they went all-in on, rather than trying to have it both ways.

You can't hire Berube, then equip him with Nick Robertson, Mattias Maccelli, Max Domi and Easton Cowan, four smallish wingers not known for defending. You don't want to have no skill on your team either, and small isn't all bad, but it's hard for those guys to have success in a system where they don't have possession. It's all played to the strength of nobody.

Years ago, many Leafs fans — including my co-hosts Nick Kypreos and Sam McKee — hated Keefe's possession-obsessed game, which often saw players regrouping with the puck, hanging on to it, and trying to create without having to win the puck back. But every guy on the team at least knew what the plan was, and it looked cohesive and they won a lot on the backs of executing that plan. Whether it was the right one or not, I don't know — not winning a Cup says no — but at least you had everyone on the same page.

As the Leafs walk the Green Mile to the end here, what's most clear is that this summer has to come with a defined plan, clear as day. Does it need a new voice and vision to execute that? Can Treliving put on the vehicle's blinker at the next fork in the road and commit to a direction? I suppose that depends on who's available, and how they assess the cause of this lost season. I wouldn't rule anything out.

But whatever happens next, even if everybody disagrees with the plan (and they will, regardless of what it is), one just needs to be laid out from the top to the bottom. Here's who we are and what we're trying to be, and that should make each decision from there a lot easier for those at the top too.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

Between the two paths they once had before them, the Leafs find themselves on the bumpy middle ground, with screws rattling loose from the frame. But when you get things cohesive and pick a direction, things plane out. Maybe it isn't clear if that path leads to the promised land, but at least you'll make clear progress toward a goal of your choosing.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.28.2026

1384627 Websites

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 cutline, 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 bother 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."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

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.

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



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

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 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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1384628 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How Devin Cooley's dad helped shape hockey's most fascinating interview

Eric Francis

And honestly, if he didn't keep telling us that, no one would believe it.

The man who has become the NHL's must-watch post-game interview, a goalie who can turn a routine scrum into a philosophy lecture, a comedy set, or a TED Talk, insists he's actually quiet, reserved, and happiest alone with a book.

But then the puck drops, the adrenaline spikes, and something inside him flips.

"I'm super introverted," said the Calgary Flames' 28-year-old goaltending revelation.

"But there's something about hockey, when I get the blood flowing I get such a huge burst of energy. All I want to do is talk. After a game, your energy level is like a 10 out of 10. Then you've got to go talk in front of a bunch of cameras, and I end up just rambling on and going like crazy. Sometimes I get home and don't even remember what I said. Then the next day it's going viral."

It's become a Calgary ritual: Win or lose, Cooley plays great, and the internet wakes up to another clip of the goalie explaining, say, why netminders should be allowed to smash their sticks after goals, or how his personal mantra — "Nothing matters, nobody cares, we're all going to die" — helps him stay calm in the crease.

It's quirky. It's refreshing. It's honest.

And it didn't come out of nowhere.

If you want to understand Devin Cooley, you have to understand his dad.

Scott Cooley is a Silicon Valley success story, a software entrepreneur who built companies, wrote columns, and even testified in front of Congress.

He's also, like his son, an introvert who had to learn how to come out of his shell.

"I always say I'm an introvert that had to learn to be extroverted," said Scott.

"A lot of technology CEOs are like that. You're forced into it. I did a lot of public speaking. In 2003 I predicted the housing crash, and said Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are all going to blow up and it's going to be the worst housing crash that we've ever had since the Great Depression. And then it happened."

Devin grew up watching his dad speak at San Jose State, at tech conferences, at events across the country. He watched him build companies like Contour Software and Ellie Mae. He watched him turn introversion into a skill rather than a limitation. He absorbed it all.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

"He's a natural introvert like me, but he knows that to get out of that, you've just got to do it — you've got to speak," he said.

"You've got to get through that. Now he's a great speaker."

So when Devin steps in front of the cameras, he's not performing. He's channeling a lifetime of watching his dad do the same thing, just with a little more caffeine and a lot more adrenaline.

The Cooley story is already improbable enough: a kid from Los Gatos, California becoming an NHL goalie.

"When he was five and six I coached him, but when he was seven it was over my head," said Scott.

"I built a hockey rink up on the hill (overlooking Silicon Valley). Artificial ice, you oil it up, pretty darn close to real ice. Nobody comes from northern California to play in the NHL. Now we have two goalies on the same team from here. I couldn't be happier"

They didn't know what AAA was. They didn't know what juniors were. They didn't know the path.

So they learned it together.

"Every tournament, every game, he'd go around the stands asking scouts, or parents, or coaches questions," said Devin.

"Not like, 'Hey, that's my son, watch him.' Just, 'What league are you from? What's the next path?' I was always excited because after every game he'd have new information. We just had no idea."

What Devin did know was this: if he worked, his dad would match it.

"He always told me and my two brothers, 'If you guys are willing to put in the effort, I'm going to put in the effort to match that,'" he smiled.

"That was so motivating. If I ever let my foot off the gas, he was going to let me know."

Like the summer Devin finished last in the USHL in goals-against average and save percentage.

"He asked my plan for training, I didn't have one," recalled Devin.

"He said, 'You're either going to get a job or you're going to find a goalie coach.' So I went to Boston for five months and revamped my game. That push was exactly what I needed.

"My dad was kind of like my role model with things, and just seeing how hard he worked, and how much he was willing to sacrifice for success, and how much he was willing to work for us."

Scott laughs when he hears his son's now-famous line.

"Nothing matters, nobody cares, we're all going to die.' That's all on his own," said Scott.

"It may sound nihilistic, but he's not that way. He studies philosophy, longevity, he's very bright. And honestly, when you're in that net dealing with pressure, it's a healthy way to look at it."

Scott sees the calm in his son now, the steadiness that wasn't always there as he battled through the ECHL and AHL the last five years.

"I've seen a difference this year," said Scott of a dream breakthrough into the NHL that has his son sitting amongst NHL leaders in GAA and save percentage.

"It doesn't matter what happens in the net, he's calm, cool and collected."

And he loves the interviews as much as anyone.

"I laugh with everybody else," said Scott.

"Goalies are unique, and not many are good at public speaking. I'm proud of him. I encouraged him to connect with the press. They'll be your best fans. And it's turned out exactly that."

Cooley's fan base is sure to grow even larger Saturday when he'll be Scott Oake's guest on After Hours, giving him a 30-minute canvas on which to share even more memorable takes.

And if it produces more video gold, Dad will be watching.

Laughing.

Proud.

And probably thinking, "Yeah... that's my kid."

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Sportsnet.ca / Goalie Linus Ullmark rebounding at pivotal time for Senators

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — All season, the Ottawa Senators have bailed out their goaltenders. But in the two most pivotal games, it was goalie Linus Ullmark who ensured points for his squad.

The Senators dropped a 4-3 shootout decision to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday in a game that easily could have been 6-2 for the Penguins by the second period. Instead, Ullmark gave his team a chance to win, even though it ultimately did not.

"Linus got us that point tonight," said Senators captain Brady Tkachuk. "He played unreal tonight. He made some huge saves at the right time and we got the point because of him."

In the second period, Pittsburgh had 12 high-danger chances. Ullmark stopped them all, part of a perfect 14-for-14 night in the category. He had a plus-1.48 goals saved above expected while making 35 total saves.

"It's not surprising to us. I've said it all year. He's a good goalie," said Senators head coach Travis Green. "You need your goalie to pick you up sometimes, and obviously (for) that 20 minutes, he did."

It was a similar showing on Tuesday in Detroit, when Ullmark stole Ottawa a 3-2 win in a 32-save performance.

The Swede's turnaround from his early-season stumble has become been a trend — not a blip. He has lost twice in regulation since Dec. 9 while going 13-2-4 in his last 20 games. Since Ullmark's return from personal leave due to mental-health struggles, he's posted a 9-2-3 record with a .904 save percentage and 6.95 goals saved above expected, according to Natural Stat Trick.

There was some warranted skepticism that Ullmark could turn things around, but he has found a way to win and has elevated his play tremendously. Even before his two recent performances, Ullmark has been Grant Fuhr-esque at times, finding ways to win or collect points despite less-than-sparkling numbers.

General manager Steve Staios could have added a goaltender at the deadline; instead, he believed in the netminder in whom he had invested a \$33-million contract and significant assets to acquire.

The gamble at the deadline has worked. If Ullmark elevates back to his Vezina-calibre self, there is no reason the Senators can't sneak into the playoffs. They sit just one point out, entering action Friday.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

However, Ullmark can still be his own harshest critic.

"As a goaltender, you go out there, you feel like you're top of the world," he said after the loss against the Penguins. "And then you go out and let in two goals in a shootout, and feel like the worst one out there."

Interestingly, the charismatic man has strong feelings about the shootout itself.

"I've always hated shootouts," he said. "I've been a big advocate of playing 10 minutes instead. And if there's no winner, you just get one point each. You go from there. You're tossing a coin, sometimes, or have a bit of a circus act."

"Guys have been battling for 65 minutes, really hard, (it's a) long season. I think there's a better way of deciding who's going to be the winner and who's not."

Regardless, no matter how the former Vezina Trophy winner feels about his performance on Thursday, the loss wasn't on him. On the season, the Senators have allowed the second-fewest shots and the fewest scoring chances and high-danger chances, all while holding the third-worst team save percentage.

That defensive stinginess wasn't there against the Penguins.

"Yeah, it's been a long time, so it was both fun and hectic and tiring," said Ullmark.

He might have to get used to it.

"Looked a little sloppy for a bit here," Green said of his team in front of Ullmark. "We've got five defencemen hurt; we're trying."

With the Senators' two best defencemen in Jake Sanderson and Thomas Chabot plus three others also out with injuries, Ullmark will have to stand tall and weather the storm. Good news is that Sanderson is travelling with the team on its upcoming road trip. You don't travel when you're far away from returning. And you don't travel if you don't think you could possibly play.

Sanderson's return would help offset Chabot's absence, who is out up to eight weeks after having surgery Thursday for a broken forearm. While Carter Yakemchuk showed great promise in his second game and Jorian Donovan was solid, the Senators need Sanderson ASAP to make the playoffs.

If Sanderson returns soon, his presence alongside Artem Zub will be monumental. The duo has become one of the best defensive top pairings in the NHL.

Ottawa's next eight opponents are formidable, which will test their backline. The Senators play both Tampa Bay and Florida twice, alongside Buffalo, Minnesota, Carolina and the New York Islanders. On the bright side, the Senators still control their own destiny.

As the quality of competition rises, it will test Ullmark and his team. They say you're only as good as your goaltender.

So if Ullmark can continue his recent elite form, then watch out. The Senators might be pretty damn good.

Milestone nights: Drake Batherson set a career high in goals with 29 after scoring twice on Thursday. Crazy enough, not only does Batherson have 10 goals in his last 14 games, but the 10 goals are made up of five two-goal efforts. The Nova Scotia native is known for his hot streaks, but this might be another level of scoring in bunches.

With an assist against Pittsburgh, Tim Stutzle reached 400 points, moving him to seventh all-time in points in franchise history.

Stutzle has already joined elite territory in Senators history; you wonder where he'll be on that list by the end of his current contract in 2031.

Nolan Baumgartner's challenge: "He's working overtime right now," said Green about assistant coach Nolan Baumgartner, who is running the defence.

Because the Senators are missing five defencemen and three of their top four, Baumgartner has been trying to guide youngsters Yakemchuk and Donovan, who have a combined four games of NHL experience.

"Lots of videos trying to fast-track (them both). Some of these young guys talked about maybe having them sleep over at his house," Green said.

Both youngsters' time on ice increased from their debut to their second game. Yakemchuk even got a shot in overtime. He also rang a shot off the bar in the third. Clearly, the 20-year-old has an element of offensive firepower possessed by few on this Senators roster.

"He made two big plays," Green said of his Tuesday debut. "This time of the year, sometimes you just need a play."

"The games are so close, and that's why players that have skill and play a team game are really important. Because they can make a play that can change a game. He made a couple, especially his goal was a play that a lot of defencemen don't have that natural instinct."

The seventh-overall pick in 2024 packs an offensive wallop. Moving into the playoffs and next season, the combined firepower of Sanderson, Chabot and Yakemchuk could lift the Senators into the upper echelon of offensive teams in the NHL.

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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



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

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 Tezier 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, Tezier 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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1384631 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."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

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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Sportsnet.ca / Friday Four: Nikita Kucherov's incredible season by the numbers

Michael Amato

Electric. Explosive. Dazzling.

These are some of the best words to describe Connor McDavid, but not so much the man who's tied with him for the league lead in scoring.

Nikita Kucherov is cerebral, clinical, efficient and effortless. He's a different type of elite talent than just about anything we've ever seen.

Kucherov's hockey IQ is off the charts and there are some nights where it looks like he barely breaks a sweat but then you go and check the boxscore and there are three points next to his name.

That has never been more true than this season, where Kucherov has been so productive and so consistent that you almost become numb to multi-point game after multi-point game. What's most impressive about this run is that Kucherov will turn 33 in June. When most players are starting to slow down, it feels like he's just getting started. Kucherov just might be playing the best hockey of his career.

After already matching his total from last season, the Tampa Bay Lightning forward needs 24 points in his final 11 games to set a new career high, a seemingly impossible task for most. But Kucherov has been scoring at such an incredible pace this season that it seems almost plausible. Three- and four-point games are a regular occurrence for Kucherov, and the Lightning are still competing for the top seed in the East, so they don't figure to be resting anyone down the stretch.

If Kucherov breaks his career-best mark of 144 points, it will be hard to not give him the Hart Trophy. Sure, Nathan MacKinnon, McDavid and Macklin Celebrini will make compelling cases, but Kucherov's resume is tough to ignore. Kucherov has played fewer games than all three and his ice time per game is significantly less than all of them. McDavid is playing nearly three minutes more per game than Kucherov, MacKinnon two minutes more and Celebrini about an additional minute and a half. If Kucherov can finish ahead of each of them in points and win the Art Ross, it would be difficult to make a case that he shouldn't win the Hart, too.

These are just a few of the impressive numbers Kucherov has delivered this season, but they aren't even his most jaw-dropping. With help from the fine folks at Sportsnet Stats, let's look at four of Kucherov's most ridiculous stats from this season.

One of the things that makes this Kucherov run so outstanding is that he started the season off rather pedestrian. In his first 14 games, Kucherov had 14 points and was held off the scoresheet six times. An 82-point pace is certainly nothing to sneeze at, but since then, he's completely taken off.

Kucherov has a whopping 107 points in his past 53 games, an average of more than two points per night. Most players have never even come close to a 100-point season in their career, but Kucherov has eclipsed it with ease in a little more than a half a season. This is a big reason that Kucherov getting 24 points in his past 11 games to set a new career mark doesn't seem that farfetched.

Over this 53-game stretch, Kucherov has essentially lapped his competition. The next closest player to his 107 points is McDavid with 96, a full 11 points back of Kucherov. MacKinnon has 85 points during this span, Leon Draisaitl 79 and Celebrini is at 70. No one is even close.

Kucherov's 107 points over his past 53 contests works out to be a 166-point pace over 82 games. To put that in perspective, there have been only nine seasons better than that in NHL history and the only players to have done it are named Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux. You can't have much more elite company than that.

We mentioned earlier that Kucherov was held without a point in six of his first 14 games, but he's been almost impossible to slow down ever since. This season, Kucherov has failed to pick up a point in just 13 games, which means over this 53-game stretch, specifically, he's had only seven scoreless outings.

Kucherov has actually had more games where he scored at least three points than he's been kept scoreless. This season, the 32-year-old has at least three points in 17 games, compared to just 13 scoreless games. It's an incredible feat that shows just how dominate Kucherov can be and how equally hard he is to stop.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

This doesn't even factor in the two-point games Kucherov has. You can add 19 of those to his credentials, which means Kucherov has multi-point outings in well over half his games this season. It's far more likely that Kucherov scores two points or more than it is he's going to be denied a point.

Nine games with four points or more

It's very rare for a player to get four or more points in a game, unless you're Kucherov. He has a staggering nine of them this season, which essentially works out to one out of every seven games. Kucherov is basically delivering a four-point game once every two weeks.

That's easily the most in the league this season and it's three more four-point games than MacKinnon has this season, and just one fewer than both McDavid and Draisaitl have, combined. As incredible as Celebrini has been, he has only four games with at least four points in 2025-26.

What's even more impressive? As this season wears on with a very condensed schedule, Kucherov has actually turned it up a notch down the stretch. Eight of his nine four-plus point games have come after Jan. 1, with three in March. Something tells me Kucherov still has one or two more left in him before this year is over as well.

You'd think on a team as talented as the Lightning, there would be a handful of players near the top of their scoring list. Kucherov, though, has separated himself from the pack and has 45 more points than Tampa Bay's second-leading scorer, Jake Guentzel. He's also 51 points up on Brandon Hagel, who sits third. Heading into Thursday night, Kucherov had accounted for 48.2 per cent of the Lightning's points this season, which is almost one percentage point more than McDavid has compiled with the Oilers.

Celebrini actually has a larger gap over San Jose Sharks second leading scorer Will Smith at 49 points, but that's a little more understandable. The Sharks roster isn't nearly as talented as Tampa's, especially up front. Given the season Celebrini is having, it's not that shocking to see him with that big of a lead on Smith, but Tampa is loaded with talent and experienced players. Hagel had 90 points a year ago, Brayden Point has topped 90 three times and Guentzel has finished at better than a point per game on two occasions. The fact that Kucherov has put so much distance between himself and that group is truly remarkable.

Having that wide of a gap among top scorers on a team is again something that only the game's elite players have shown. Kucherov and Celebrini are still far off the largest spread in NHL history, which belongs to Gretzky. In 1981-82, Gretzky was 107 points clear of Glenn Anderson to lead the Edmonton Oilers in scoring. Gretzky actually owns six of the seven largest scoring gaps among first and second leading scorers on a team in league history, with Lemieux occupying the other spot. Anytime you're having a season like Kucherov and getting mentioned with Gretzky and Lemieux multiple times, it's something pretty special.

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TSN.CA / 'Still an awful feeling': Nylander prefers to keep thoughts on Leafs collapse to himself

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs held a practice at Ford Performance Centre on Friday before travelling to St. Louis ahead of Saturday's game against the Blues.

Early in Friday's practice, Leafs coach Craig Berube barked at his players to shoot more. William Nylander wanted to make it clear he received the message.

During his next rep in the next drill, the star winger took a pass and shot a puck past Joseph Woll. Nylander then skated toward Berube with his glove to his ear. He got right up to Berube and started smiling. The coach kept his gaze on the players doing the next rep before turning toward the 29-year-old smiling Swede to share a few words.

"It was just fun and games," Nylander said with a grin. "He was yelling at guys to shoot it so then I shot it and I asked if he saw that I shot it. Yeah, it was good."

During a media session before last Friday's game against the Carolina Hurricanes, Berube revealed he had been prodding Nylander to shoot more. Nylander registered four shots that night, but has been limited to just one in two of the last three games.

What did Nylander show Berube with his display at practice?

"That he's not shooting enough," Berube said before breaking into a smile.

"We're having a little fun out there. It's good, yeah."

Nylander is only averaging 2.28 shots per game this season, which is down from his career average of 2.86.

Berube and Nylander, who leads the Leafs with 67 points this season, had a couple chats on the ice during Friday's workout.

"We just speak normally about everything," Nylander said when asked about the most unique conversation between the pair. "There's nothing in particular that I would say is anything different."

After the trade deadline, Nylander admitted that it's "really hard to stay optimistic" considering the Leafs situation. How is he dealing with it now?

"It has been really tough," Nylander noted. "But now it's been a little while where you've been able to digest it a little bit more and think about it so, I mean, it's still an awful feeling."

Nylander continues to produce, though, with four goals and nine points in 10 games since seeing teammates Scott Laughton, Bobby McMann and Nicolas Roy traded for draft picks.

"He's really passionate, honestly," said rookie winger Easton Cowan. "He's always in the gym working hard. He's biking hard after the game. Stuff like that, no one sees. He's a really hard worker, and he is a leader on this team."

Since captain Auston Matthews went down with a season-ending injury on March 12, Nylander has been wearing an 'A' for the team.

Nylander is playing his 10th full season in Toronto and this is the first time the Leafs will miss the playoffs. They sit 12 points out with nine games remaining.

"Obviously it's not a great situation for anybody, and he's not used to this situation for sure," said Berube. "But, at the same time, he understands that we've still got games to play. We have to do a good job with competing and playing the right way."

Lately the games have taken a backseat to questions about what went wrong for a team that finished first in the Atlantic Division last year and fancied itself a Stanley Cup contender.

"I have my thoughts about maybe some stuff," Nylander said. "But, I mean, that's something I'm going to keep to myself."

Cowan appreciates Nylander's ability to maintain focus despite playing in the intense spotlight in Toronto.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

"He handles the highs and lows very well, so you try to use that to help yourself," Cowan said. "Just teaches me a couple things, and that stuff goes a long way."

Cowan, who is the team's youngest player at 20-years-old, is proving to be a quick study.

"He's kind of like a sponge," goalie Anthony Stolarz observed. "He's willing to absorb criticism. He's willing to absorb praise, and he doesn't really let it affect him."

With the exception of a two-game stint in the American Hockey League in November, Cowan has spent the entire year with the Leafs.

"He's a guy that impresses me with his routine," Berube said. "He's one of the first guys at the rink every day. Off days, I see him at the rink. I mean, he's acting like a pro. He's got a good attitude every day. Same attitude the whole year. I haven't seen him come in and be down. Yeah, sure, he's disappointed in maybe the way he's played or the team or whatever, but he's always got a real good attitude."

The Leafs current situation has created more opportunity for Cowan, who has recently been promoted to the top line and top power-play unit. He logged more than 19 minutes in Wednesday's win over the New York Rangers.

Cowan is averaging 16 minutes and seven seconds of ice time per game since the trade deadline, which is fifth among Leafs forwards.

"I definitely feel like I'm just getting better," Cowan said. "My mindset the whole year is just keep getting better each day. That's what you've got to do to have a long career, so just trying to get better each and every day. I felt like I had a good practice today, so I'm just going to use that to help me tomorrow."

Like many young forwards who racked up points in junior hockey, Cowan is focused on improving in his own end.

What's a priority right now?

"Just getting in the [shooting] lanes," he said. "Even if the puck doesn't hit you, if it misses the net, that's a blocked shot. So just getting in the lanes and trying to have good defence, that will lead to the offence."

Cowan quickly caught the eye of Blue Jays players Ernie Clement and George Springer, who were mic'd up while attending Wednesday's game.

"Easton Cowan, that's my guy," Clement said.

"He's like 12," Springer said. "[He's] not afraid."

"He's a grinder," Clement added.

Cowan, who stands 6-foot, 190 pounds, impressed teammates by immediately confronting Nikita Zadorov on Tuesday night in Boston after the 6-foot-7, 255-pound Bruins blueliner knocked down John Tavares with an illegal hit.

"It takes a lot of balls to do that," Stolarz said. "He's obviously one of the heavier guys in the league and for 'Cowboy' just to kind of go in there without a second thought and be able to do that, I think that just goes to show you what kind of person he is, what kind of teammate he is, and everyone around the room is gonna appreciate that. And when something happens to him, he knows that we're gonna have his back."

Cowan and Zadorov are both alumni of the London Knights and actually lived with the same billet family during their days in the Ontario Hockey League. What did his billet parents have to say about what happened?

"They just kind of laughed about it," Cowan said. "It was kind of funny."

Knights general manager Mark Hunter also reached out via text.

"He just said, 'Good job,'" Cowan revealed. "So that was kind of nice to hear that."

Berube believes playing for coach Dale Hunter and his brother Mark in London has helped Cowan be ready for these types of moments.

"London obviously gets you ready for pros," Cowan agreed. "So just that culture there, everyone plays for each other, so it definitely helps me out a lot."

Cowan and other Leafs took heat following the game on March 12 because no one immediately confronted Radko Gudas after the Anaheim Ducks defenceman hurt Matthews with a knee-on-knee hit. Cowan vowed to learn from what happened and be better next time.

Stolarz started slow this season with an .884 save percentage in his first 13 games in October and November.

"I was trying to be too perfect," he said. "Just trying to go out there and make every save when that's an unrealistic expectation, and just overthinking some things."

Stolarz signed a four-year contract extension, which starts next season, during training camp. Did that create additional pressure?

"Not really," the 32-year-old insisted. "I mean, it doesn't matter how much you make ... I think when you start thinking like that, you start getting your own head a little bit."

Stolarz sustained a nerve-related injury on Nov. 12 and did not return until Jan. 23. The time away allowed him to start fresh in a way.

"When I came back, I was just able to just go out there and play, and play loose, play free," he said.

Stolarz allowed nine goals in losing his first two starts after returning from the injury. Then, in his third game back, he stopped 34 of 36 shots to win in Edmonton right before the Olympic break.

Stolarz has posted a .919 save percentage in seven games since the season resumed.

"That long practice period that we had, just was able to kind of reset, focus on some things with [goalie coach] Curtis [Sanford] and obviously my body was feeling a lot better," he said. "That Edmonton game right before was kind of the first time I ever felt like myself again. You start playing like that and, as a goalie, it's all confidence, and you kind of just continue to roll with it."

The Leafs sent Bo Groulx down to the AHL on Friday for roster-management purposes. If the 26-year-old centre had played one more game with the Leafs he would have required waivers to go back down to the Marlies. Toronto wants him to be available for the Calder Cup playoffs, but also doesn't want to risk losing him on waivers.

Did Berube have a message for Groulx before he left?

"None needed," the coach said. "He wanted to go down and help them and play. You know, that's testament to his character and what he believes in and how it all works and he understands it. So, yeah, he's good."

Groulx made his mark after being called up by the Leafs producing five points in nine games.

"I used him in a lot of different situations and I thought he handled himself well," Berube said.

Groulx, who leads the Marlies with 50 points in 54 games this season, could still rejoin the Leafs at some point this season, but it would have to be on an emergency recall in order to keep him waivers-exempt.

With two points in Boston, Nylander matched his father, Michael Nylander, with 679 career NHL points.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 28, 2026

"I had no clue," he said with a grin. "My sister [Jacqueline] told me, actually, at the game."

Nylander's sister was his guest on the team's Mentors Trip.

"I got a puck from Boston so I gave it to him, the tying one," Nylander said with a smile. "Hopefully we get a new one and I can give him the leading one."

Nylander reached the total in 140 fewer games than his old man, who played 15 seasons in the NHL.

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