



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 9, 2026



Carolina Hurricanes playoff tickets go on sale Thursday

By: WRAL/AP

The Carolina Hurricanes are gearing up for the Stanley Cup Playoffs and fans hoping to grab tickets will have a chance when single-game playoff tickets go on sale to the general public starting Thursday.

Tickets go on sale for Carolina Hurricanes playoff home games

The Carolina Hurricanes are gearing up for the Stanley Cup Playoffs and fans hoping to grab tickets will have a chance when single-game playoff tickets go on sale to the general public starting Thursday.

Tickets for the general public go on sale at 12 p.m. on Thursday, April 9.

Season-ticket holders got first chance at tickets with a special presale starting Wednesday.

People can get text updates about playoff tickets by texting "TICKETS26" to 919-705-0896.

The Canes just claimed their fourth Metropolitan Division title in six years.

The team will be home for the Stanley Cup playoffs as the Metropolitan champions for the third time under coach Rod Brind'Amour. They also won the Central Division in the shortened, reconfigured 2020-21 season.

The Stanley Cup Playoffs begin April 18. It has not been announced who the Canes will play in the series. They will have at least two playoff games at the Lenovo Center.

Sixteen NHL teams qualify for the playoffs. Each of the four rounds is a best-of-seven-game series, meaning the first team to win four games advances to the next round.



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Preview: April 9 at Chicago

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes aim to take a step closer to clinching Eastern Conference's top seed

CHICAGO - The Carolina Hurricanes start a regular-season-ending four-game road trip in the Windy City on Thursday, taking on the Chicago Blackhawks.

When: Thursday, April 9

Puck Drop: 8:30 p.m. ET

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

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 50-22-6 (106 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 6-5 Win over the Boston Bruins on Tuesday, April 7

Blackhawks Record: 28-36-14 (70 Points, 8th - Central Division)

Blackhawks Last Game: 3-2 Loss to the San Jose Sharks on Monday, April 6

Last Time Out...

Jacob Slavin's first goal of the season served as the overtime winner on Tuesday, allowing the Canes to hold off the Bruins, 6-5.

Andrei Svechnikov joined the 30-goal club for the second time in his career, and Logan Stankoven scored for the fifth time in five games.

Brandon Bussi won a fifth straight start, giving him 30 victories in his first NHL season.

Season Series vs. CHI...

Jan. 24: Joel Nystrom recorded his first NHL goal, and Alexander Nikishin had his first NHL fight, but the Canes fell to the Blackhawks in a shootout, 4-3.

Right Place, Right Time...

Owning the luxury of having their division clinched and playing in the same city as their American Hockey League affiliate, the Canes recalled four players from the Chicago Wolves last night.

Skyler Brind'Amour, Charles Alexis Legault, Bradly Nadeau, and Josiah Slavin are expected to be in the lineup

tonight, allowing several key players to heal undisclosed injuries closer to 100%.

For Slavin, Jacob's younger brother, it will mark his regular-season Hurricanes debut. Captain of the Wolves, the 27-year-old was drafted by the Blackhawks in 2018 and played 15 games with the team during the 2021-22 season.

Brind'Amour, Rod's son, made his NHL debut last April and scored his first goal in his second game. His 16 goals with Chicago (AHL) this season sit third on the team, behind only Nadeau and the injured Justin Robidas.

Legault returns to the big club at full health after recovering from hand surgery in November. Resuming game action in mid-February, the 2023 fifth-round draft pick has played in 20 games since returning. He made his NHL debut earlier this season and recorded his first goal on Nov. 8.

Nadeau, has had two short stints with the Canes already this season. Scoring his first NHL goal on Oct. 30, the 20-year-old has once again been one of the best goal-scorers in the AHL this season. Despite missing 15 games this season due to injuries and recalls, his 25 goals with Chicago rank tied for 15th among all league skaters.

In Net...

With Brandon Bussi having played on Tuesday in Raleigh, should the Canes continue their rotation between the pipes, Frederik Andersen would be in line to start tonight.

Eyeing his 15th win of the season, Andersen is 7-4 since returning from the Winter Olympics.

Conversely, should the team elect to go back to Bussi, he's won five straight starts and became the first netminder to win 30 games for the team since Andersen did in his first season with the club (2021-22; 35).

On The Other Side...

Eliminated from playoff contention already, the Blackhawks have shifted their focus to welcoming some young talent into the fold, with a handful of highly-touted prospects making their debut in recent weeks.

Anton Frondell (3rd overall, 2025) and Sascha Boisvert (18th overall, 2024) are among the highlights, coming over from Sweden and the NCAA, respectively, and each scored his first career goal in the team's last four games.

Frondell and Boisvert join a roster already stacked with U22 talent like Connor Bedard, who boasts a career-high 30 goals and 72 points this season, as well as Frank Nazar, who is up 15 points from his rookie campaign in 2024-25.



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Not to mention names like Oliver Moore, Artyom Levshunov, and others, who will also look to herald a bright future in the Second City.

Injury Updates...

Goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov (hip surgery) has been out since Dec. 20. He resumed skating with teammates on Apr. 4.

What Are We Wearing?

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

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes will fly to Utah post-game and are scheduled to practice on Friday. They'll return to game action on Saturday against the Mammoth.

Next Game: Saturday, April 11 at Utah | 5:00 p.m. ET | FDSNSO

Next Home Game: Round 1, Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Playoffs | TIME TBD | TV TBD | Tickets | Parking



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NHL Power Rankings: Flyers soaring toward Stanley Cup Playoffs behind Trevor Zegras, Dan Vladar

By: Austin Nivison

It's all coming together at the right time in Philly

The Philadelphia Flyers are rolling. They've won three straight games and vaulted themselves into the playoffs -- and near the top 10 of the NHL Power Rankings.

For much of the season, the Flyers looked like a team destined to be one of the first ones left out of the playoffs when the regular season concluded. However, they've taken their game to the next level over the last five weeks.

Since March 1, Philadelphia is 13-5-1, which is the third-best record in the NHL over that stretch. The underlying numbers, a 53.3% expected goals share and a plus-11 goal differential at five-on-five, indicate that there is something very real and sustainable about this hot streak.

If you're looking for individual contributors to credit, look no further than Trevor Zegras, who has revived his career with the Flyers. The 25-year-old center has thrived under coach Rick Tocchet, setting a new career high in goals (25) and equalling his career high in points (65).

Goaltender Dan Vladar, a career backup until this season, has also been a standout for the Flyers all year. He ranks 12th in the NHL with 13.4 goals saved above average, and his .837 high-danger save percentage is eye-popping.

Did I mention that last summer's No. 6 overall pick, Porter Martone, recently made his NHL debut and has four points in five games?

For all the hand-wringing about the disappointing sophomore season of Matvei Michkov -- and the team's Jekyll and Hyde play at times -- the Flyers have managed to pull themselves together down the home stretch. Now we might get the Battle of Pennsylvania in the first round of the playoffs.

As Philadelphia continues to soar, here are the updated NHL Power Rankings.

Expected goals and goals saved above average data courtesy of Natural Stat Trick.

Biggest Movers

6 Penguins

7 Islanders

Avalanche The Avalanche have a goaltender controversy on their hands heading into the playoffs. Since March 1, Scott Wedgewood has outplayed Mackenzie Blackwood by a wide margin with a gap of 19.5 goals saved above average between them. The issue is that the 42 games Wedgewood has played are far and away the most

action he's seen as a 33-year-old journeyman backup.

-- 51-16-10

2

Canadiens Lane Hutson is having an exceptional sophomore season with the Canadiens. In addition to his 75 points, the Habs own a plus-33 goal differential at five-on-five. Montreal also generates expected goals at an extremely high rate with Hutson on the ice. 1 46-22-10

3

Hurricanes A good sign for the Hurricanes' Stanley Cup chances: Andrei Svechnikov is producing at a high level right now. The Russian winger has nine goals and nine assists in 19 games since the start of March. That's what Carolina needs out of its dynamic offensive weapon in the postseason. 2 50-22-6

4

Lightning Ilya Sorokin would get my Vezina Trophy vote today, but Andrei Vasilevskiy certainly deserves consideration. The veteran is fourth with 21.3 goals saved above average while also posting a .850 high-danger save percentage. Now in his 12th season, Vasilevskiy isn't slowing down at all. -- 48-24-6

5

Sabres They've done it! The Sabres are going to the playoffs for the first time since 2011, and they might even win the Atlantic Division. The fans gave the team a hero's welcome back in Buffalo on Monday night, and KeyBank Center will be electric this spring. I can't wait to see it. 3 48-23-8

6

Wild Quinn Hughes has only played 45 games with the Wild. Despite that, he's already tied the franchise's single-season record for points by a defenseman with 51. Ryan Suter hit that number twice (in 2015-16 and 2017-18).

1 45-21-12

7

Stars It's pretty evident that the Stars' depth defense will once again be an issue in the postseason. The top pairing of Esa Lindell and Miro Heiskanen has been dominant, but everyone else has been anywhere from pedestrian to bad at five-on-five. That includes Thomas Harley, who has taken a slight step back this season. 1 46-20-12

8

Bruins Morgan Geekie finally ended his 17-game goal drought with a hat trick against the Hurricanes on Tuesday



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night. That was great news for Boston, even in a loss, because the team needs Geekie's scoring. -- 43-26-10

9

Senators How much gas does Claude Giroux have left in the tank? Now 38 years old, Giroux's offensive game has fallen off quite a bit, but his defensive game is as strong as ever. Ottawa surrenders just 2.25 xGA/60 when Giroux is in the game at five-on-five. 1 41-27-10

10

Penguins Since returning from injury on March 18, Sidney Crosby has two goals and 11 assists in 10 games. There was no rust to shake off for the two-time Hart Trophy winner, and he has the Penguins cruising toward the playoffs. 6 40-22-16

11

Flyers I think the Flyers might actually be going to the playoffs. They just keep winning close games, and the team defense has been stingy for most of the season. Rick Tocchet deserves a lot of credit for what he's done with a roster that lacks true starpower. 3 40-26-12

12

Mammoth It's taken longer than I thought it might this season, but my Logan Cooley stock is really yielding major dividends now. The 21-year-old center now has six goals and three assists in his last five games, and he will make the Mammoth a trendy upset pick in the first round of the playoffs. 3 41-30-6

13

Oilers The Oilers have reclaimed the top spot in the Pacific Division, and they've done so with little production from Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. He has just two goals and two assists in his last 12 games. Edmonton can get by with that for now, but the team will need more from him in the postseason. -- 40-29-10

14

Golden Knights I guess the Golden Knights did just need a vibe change behind the bench. They're 4-0-0 under John Tortorella, and they've averaged 4.25 goals per game over this mini run. How awesome would it be for John Tortorella to get another Cup ring after coaching around 30 games? 3 36-26-16

15

Ducks There's been a lot to like about the Ducks this season, but one of the most discouraging aspects of the season has been the lack of development from Mason McTavish. He has just 36 points in 17 games, and his defensive impacts are bad at five-on-five -- even judging by the leaky standards of this Anaheim team. 4 41-32-5

16

Islanders Patrick Roy got the hook with just four games left in the regular season, and the Islanders replaced him with Peter DeBoer. I have to assume this move was simply about getting ahead of the coaching carousel

because DeBoer can't implement any meaningful changes until the offseason. 7 42-31-5

17

Blue Jackets Zach Werenski had been cold offensively ... until he notched a goal, an assist and the shootout winner over the Red Wings on Tuesday night. The Jackets will need more of that from Werenski if they're going to make the playoffs. 5 39-27-12

18

Red Wings How much patience remains for Steve Yzerman? His rebuild has yielded few meaningful results, and the Red Wings are careening toward a 10-season playoff drought after a few brutal losses. -- 40-29-9

19

Blues With the trio of Jimmy Snuggerud, Robert Thomas and Dylan Holloway on the ice at five-on-five, the Blues have outscored opponents 17-0. To say that line has been clicking would be an understatement. 2 33-32-12

20

Capitals Ryan Leonard's rookie season has left a bit to be desired. He does have 41 points, but the former No. 8 overall pick has struggled at five-on-five. With Leonard on the ice in those situations, Washington owns a 44.5% expected goals share. That's the lowest number on the team. 1 40-30-9

21

Predators If there's something Nashville can take from this season -- regardless of whether it makes the playoffs -- is that former first-round pick Matthew Wood has shown some real progress. He's up to 16 goals, and he hasn't looked too overwhelmed at center. 1 37-31-10

22

Devils Since March 1, the Devils are 11-6-1 with a five-on-five expected goals share of 53.2%, which is among the best in the NHL over that span. If New Jersey hadn't dug such a deep hole before the Olympic break, it would look like a dangerous playoff team. 2 40-35-3

23

Kings Adrian Kempe has gotten hot for the Kings, and that streak couldn't have come at a better time. Kempe has six goals and four assists in his last six games, and that has helped L.A. muster enough offense to climb back into playoff position. 1 32-26-19

24

Jets Kyle Connor is doing everything he can to keep the Jets on the fringe of the playoff race. He's been filling the net of late with seven goals in his last seven games. It may not be enough, but it's been an admirable effort nonetheless. 1 34-31-12

25

Sharks 19-year-old Macklin Celebrini has ONE HUNDRED SEVEN (107) points. The next closest Shark is Will Smith at



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55 points. If I hadn't been robbed of a Hart Trophy vote for the 33rd consecutive year, he would be at the top of my ballot, above Nikita Kucherov and Nathan MacKinnon.

-- 37-33-7

26

Flames The Flames have exactly one 20-goal scorer in Morgan Frost (21). Joel Farabee did get his 19th goal of the season, so maybe Calgary will have another one in its lineup soon.

1 32-36-9

27

Rangers New York is 5-1-0 with a goal differential of plus-19 over its last six games. Don't let the Rangers get hot!

3 33-37-9

28

Maple Leafs John Tavares is in the midst of a fantastic run right now with seven goals and six assists in his last eight games. Now what does Tavares' future in Toronto look like with three years left on his contract at \$4.38 million per season? How will he fit with the next general manager's vision?

-- 32-32-14

29

Panthers The Panthers don't have a single player who's appeared in every game this season, and the combination of Aleksander Barkov, Matthew Tkachuk, Brad Marchand, Sam Reinhart and Seth Jones have missed a combined 188 games.

-- 37-37-4

30

Kraken Seattle has crashed out of playoff position in spectacular fashion. Since March 17, the Kraken are 1-8-2 with a minus-24 goal differential. They're now two games below .500.

4 32-34-11

31

Blackhawks It's still way too early to get concerned about rookie defenseman Artyom Levshunov, but this has not been a banner season for him. The former No. 4 overall pick owns a 40.7% expected goals share and a minus-27 goal differential at five-on-five.

-- 28-36-14

32

Canucks The Canucks have clinched the best odds in the NHL Draft Lottery. Now it's time for them to hope the ping pong balls bounce their way.

-- 22-47-8



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Hurricanes clinch division title in 6-5 win against Bruins

By: Haley O'Neill

Defenseman Jaccob Slavin looks out on the ice during the game versus the Ottawa Senators at the Lenovo Center on Tuesday, Feb. 3rd, 2026. This was the final home game before the Olympic break in which Slavin will be representing the U.S.A. The Canes beat the Senators 4-3.

Defenseman Jaccob Slavin looks out on the ice during the game versus the Ottawa Senators at the Lenovo Center on Tuesday, Feb. 3rd, 2026. This was the final home game before the Olympic break in which Slavin will be representing the U.S.A. The Canes beat the Senators 4-3.

An early overtime goal led to the Carolina Hurricanes' 50th win of the season, securing the team's fourth Metropolitan Division in the last six seasons.

The Hurricanes (50-22-6) ultimately defeated the Boston Bruins (43-26-10) after a back-and-forth contest through the first 60 minutes. They emerged victorious from a brief overtime period 6-5.

A playoff-style battle between the two teams led to a tie at the end of regulation. Carolina only needed an extra 73 seconds to seal the game and take the extra point. Center Sebastian Aho grabbed the puck from winger Andrei Svechnikov and found an open lane to the far corner of the net. Defenseman Jaccob Slavin was waiting for the pass and scored a one-timer to not only end the game but tally his first goal of the season.

Getting shut out in the third period, the game-tying goal from the Canes came about halfway through the second. A counter-attack beginning near Carolina's goal went from end to end, steering clear of Boston players. With a single pass from every Canes player, Taylor Hall got a clean shot off in the offensive zone. He missed the first chance but netted the rebound to score on goaltender Jeremy Swayman.

After the fifth goal from the Canes, halfway through the game, head coach Marco Sturm pulled Swayman and sent

him to the locker room. Goaltender Joonas Korpisalo was put in goal and allowed only a single goal for the remainder of the game, sitting at a .941 save percentage.

Boston started with high intensity but was overpowered as the game went on. Center Elias Lindholm scored on the first shot of the game, but couldn't keep the lead for long. Towards the end of the period center Morgan Geekie tallied two goals against the Canes — his former team— to overtake the lead.

With less than two minutes left in the second, Geekie positioned himself in front of goaltender Brandon Bussi and got a tip-in off a shot from defenseman Nikita Zadorov, recording a hat-trick.

"They have some really skilled guys that know how to put the puck in the net," Walker said. "You want to limit time and space. Overall, I think we did a pretty good job, but again, limit their chances and go play our game."

The Canes, also coming out with high energy, scored halfway through the period. Svechnikov skated the puck into the zone, wrapped around the back of the net, and attempted to pass the puck across the paint. Getting a lucky bounce off the pads of Swayman, the puck found the back of the net for Svechnikov's 30th goal of the season. Less than two minutes later, center Jordan Staal won the face-off to the left of the goal and immediately got the puck to defenseman K'Andre Miller, who sent it past Swayman.

"[Staal] has been doing that all year," Miller said. "[Taking] big face-offs on the power play in the zone. Being that guy you can count on and rely on in any situation, he's been a great captain and just a great guy."

The Hurricanes begin their four-game road trip in Chicago and suit up against the Blackhawks on Thursday, April 9, with an 8:30 p.m. puck drop.



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The Hockey News

3 Takeaways: Hurricanes Defeat Bruins In OT, Claim Metro Title

By: Ryan Henkel

Overtime thriller clinches Metro title! Discover key takeaways on a dramatic win, goalie concerns, and player milestones.

The Carolina Hurricanes picked up their 50th win of the season, defeating the Boston Bruins 6-5 in overtime Tuesday night at Lenovo Center.

It was a wild, back-and-forth game, but Carolina managed to outscore their problems in the end.

Here are three takeaways from the win:

1. Division Locked Up

The Canes only needed one point to clinch the top spot in the Metropolitan Division last night, but I guess they'll settle for two.

It's the third time that the Hurricanes have finished the regular season as Metro champs and first since 2022-23.

In total though, it's the eighth time in franchise history in which they have won their division and the fourth time under head coach Rod Brind'Amour.

Carolina also sits four points up in the Eastern Conference and with just four games to go, they are in a great position to lock up home ice advantage for at least the first three rounds of the playoffs.

"That's the first thing, win your division," said coach Rod Brind'Amour. "Now if we can win the conference, great, but when that ends, we flip the page and we get the opportunity to fight for what everyone's been trying to get at for a long time."

2. Struggles In Net

As the postseason inches closer and closer, the question on who will be the Hurricanes' Game 1 starter continues to linger.

While Frederik Andersen is a proven veteran, he hasn't had a strong season, while Brandon Bussi has overall had a better body of work for the year.

However, neither goalie is covering themselves in glory as we get down the stretch.

Bussi has struggled especially so and last night's game against Boston might have been one of his worst performances.

The 27 year old gave up five goals on 21 shots and had a goals saved above expected of negative 2.74.

The rookie goaltender didn't look comfortable right from the start of the game, giving up a goal on the first shot he faced.

Bussi has been so composed for most of the season and has been at his best to when he's making saves and reads with confidence.

We haven't seen that version of him as of late, but the Canes certainly need one of their netminders to elevate their game here soon or it may not be a long postseason.

3. Milestones Galore

With six total goals scored against the Bruins, the Canes had plenty of opportunities for reaching new career milestones.

Here's some of the notable markers:

Sebastian Aho - tied career high in assists (53)

Jackson Blake - reached 50 point milestone

Brandon Bussi - reached 30 wins (sixth goaltender in franchise history)

William Carrier - snapped 25 game goal drought

Alexander Nikishin - set team record for points by a rookie defenseman (31)

Jacob Slavin - scored first goal of season

Logan Stankoven - new career high in points (39)

Andrei Svechnikov - tied career highs in goals (30), assists (39) and points (69)

Sean Walker - new career high in assists (21)

LINKS

<https://www.wral.com/sports/carolina-hurricanes-playoffs--tickets-stanley-cup-april-2026/>

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/preview-april-9-at-chicago>

<https://www.cbssports.com/nhl/news/nhl-power-rankings-philadelphia-flyers-trevor-zegras-dan-vladar/>

<https://technicianonline.com/159120/sports/hockey/hurricanes-clinch-division-title-in-6-5-win-against-bruins/>

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/game-day/3-takeaways-hurricanes-defeat-bruins-in-ot-claim-metro-title>



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SportScan

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

1386172 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes' Taylor Hall among nominees for the NHL's Masterton Trophy

Chip Alexander6-7 minutes 08/04/2026

Taylor Hall's 16th season in the NHL has been among his most rewarding, he said Tuesday, and it's far from over.

Playing for the Carolina Hurricanes, Hall is on a team that could contend for the Stanley Cup. Playing on the Canes' second line with center Logan Stankoven and right wing Jackson Blake, the veteran forward has been buoyed by their youth and energy, and been productive, recently scoring his 300th career goal.

"It's been a really good ride," Hall said Tuesday.

Hall, 34, has been named the Hurricanes' nominee for the 2026 Bill Masterton Trophy, given annually to the NHL player who exemplifies perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. Hall was nominated by members of the Carolina chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

After a recent game, Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour noted Hall's play was reminiscent of a decade ago, a comment that made the winger, a former NHL MVP, smile Tuesday when it was repeated.

"Sometimes, not every day," he said. "But some days you feel pretty good and you go there and rip it. I think it's just a comfort thing for me, as the year's gone on."

Hall came to the Canes from the Chicago Blackhawks in the mega-trade last season that had the Colorado Avalanche send star forward Mikko Rantanen to Carolina for forwards Martin Necas and Jack Drury. The Blackhawks, as part of the three-team arrangement that also involved draft picks, agreed to absorb 50% of Rantanen's salary while sending Hall to Carolina.

Hall played 31 regular-season games and 15 in the playoffs for the Canes, who were ousted by the Florida Panthers in the 2025 Eastern Conference final. He signed a three-year, \$9.5 million contract extension last April as general manager Eric Tulsy called him a "veteran presence in the locker room and difference-maker on the ice."

In 77 games this season, Hall has 16 goals, 28 assists and 44 points. While he has been slowed by knee issues during his career, he has shown the speed and explosiveness at times that helped make him a five-time NHL All-Star.

"There's an added element of emotion when you join a team that's in a race and building for something more," Hall said Tuesday. "When you don't have that, when you're at the bottom of the standings, there's just a weird situation, and you almost play for yourself a little bit instead of putting the team first."

"I love it here, I love the group. I love everything they've built. I've tried to come in and be a part of that. I feel like as the year's gone on I've gotten a bigger and bigger role. It's been a lot of fun."

Hall's thoughtful responses to media questions throughout the season also earned him another selection from the Carolina PHWA chapter: the Joseph Vasicek Award for his cooperation with the local media.

Brandon Bussi, who went from waiver-wire pickup to the Canes' No. 1 goalie this season, has been chosen the team MVP for the 2025-26 season by the PHWA chapter.

Team MVPs since 2018

2026 — Brandon Bussi

2025 — Seth Jarvis

2024 — Sebastian Aho

2023 — Sebastian Aho

2022 - Frederik Andersen

2021 — Sebastian Aho

2020 — Sebastian Aho

2019 — Sebastian Aho

2018 — Sebastian Aho

Vasicek Award recipients since 2018

2026 — Taylor Hall

2025 — Sebastian Aho

2024 — Seth Jarvis

2023 — Antti Raanta

2022 - Andrei Svechnikov

2021 — Alex Nedeljkovic

2020 — Jordan Martinook

2019 — Justin Williams

2018 — Jordan Staal

Hurricanes Masterton nominees since 2018

2026 — Taylor Hall

2025 — Jordan Staal

2024 — Frederik Andersen

2023 — Jordan Martinook

2022 - Antti Raanta

2021 — Jordan Staal

2020 — James Reimer



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2019 — Curtis McElhinney

2018 — Jordan Staal (NHL finalist)

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

In more than 40 years at The N&O, Chip Alexander has covered the N.C. State, UNC, Duke and East Carolina beats, and now is in his 15th season on the Carolina Hurricanes beat. Alexander, who has won numerous writing awards at the state and national level, covered the Hurricanes' move to North Carolina in 1997 and was a part of The N&O's coverage of the Canes' 2006 Stanley Cup run.

News Observer LOADED: 04.09.2026

1386173 Carolina Hurricanes

What's next for Hurricanes after edging Boston, clinching Metro Division title

Chip Alexander 4-5 minutes 08/04/2026

The next time the Carolina Hurricanes play at the Lenovo Center, the stakes will be a lot higher.

The Hurricanes will host the first two games of the opening round of the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs, with the opponent still to be determined. The building will really be rocking then.

But things were pretty loud Tuesday. The Canes, in their last home regular-season game, earned a 6-5 overtime win over the Boston Bruins and clinched the Metropolitan Division title on Jaccob Slavin's goal.

Yes, Slavin. It was his first of the season, coming in the defenseman's 38th game.

Coming off the bench, Slavin streaked to the far post past Bruins forward Pavel Zacha and redirected a perfect pass from Sebastian Aho past goalie Joonas Korpisalo for the winner at 1:13 of overtime.

"I just jumped on and saw the play developing on the other side and decided, 'I'll go there,' and 'Fish' made an unbelievable pass," Slavin said. "It was good to get that first one."

As for winning the Metro, Slavin said, "I mean, it's good. We put in a lot of work this season and to do that is still a big accomplishment. But that's just one step along the way.

"Does it feel good? Yeah. But at the same time that's not the goal that we want."

Former Canes forward Morgan Geekie had a hat trick for the Bruins, ending a 17-game goalless streak and giving him 37 for the season. He also took a hard spill late in regulation after a big hit from Jordan Martinook.

Canes forward Andrei Svechnikov scored his 30th of the season and added an assist, and Taylor Hall also had a goal and assist as Carolina (50-22-6) used a three-goal second period to take a lead into the third.

The Bruins tied it 5-5 with 7:25 left in regulation on Zacha's 30th goal. That came not long after Canes center Logan Stankoven took a stick in the face with no call and no Bruins penalty, leaving Canes fans howling mad.

In a game that had some playoff-like animosity attached to it, the lead bounced back and forth and bodies bounced off the boards.

"It was physical. It was like a playoff game right now," Svechnikov said.

Canes winger Seth Jarvis went down late in the second period after a jarring hit from defenseman Nikita Zadorov. As Zadorov skated back to his bench, he had a few words with the Canes bench, including forward Nicolas Deslauriers, who was in no mood for it.

Until allowing a late goal, the second period was all about the Canes, who have struggled in the middle frame in several games this season.

Stankoven tied the score 3-3 with a power-play goal — Carolina's 11th in the past 14 games — and Will Carrier pushed the Canes ahead with his seventh of the season. When Taylor Hall scored off the rush, after a sharp setup pass from Jackson Blake, the Canes had a 5-3 lead as the Stankoven line again drove play and produced.

That was it for Boston goalie Jeremy Swayman. Korpisalo played well in relief.

Geekie completed his hat trick with 1:10 left in the second after the Canes failed to clear their zone. Zadorov had the primary assist and soon had Canes fans loudly booing after his hit on Jarvis.

Canes goalie Brandon Bussi picked up his 30th win of the season but had some shaky moments, allowing five goals on 21 shots. The Canes had 40 shots — five each from Svechnikov and defenseman K'Andre Miller, who scored in the first.

"I thought we played really well," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We had some breakdowns, and we had a couple where they made us pay. But I liked the way our group responded on everything. Overall, it was real positive."

One downside for the Canes: defenseman Jalen Chatfield left the game with an injury; Brind'Amour had no update after the game.

The Canes now end the regular season with four road games. Then, it's on. The playoffs.

This story was originally

News Observer LOADED: 04.09.2026

1386303 Websites

The Athletic / Frozen Four 2026 viewing guide: Start times, schedule, TV channels and streaming options

By Steven Louis Goldstein

April 9, 2026

This year's Frozen Four is the bluest of blue bloods, the iciest of the icy. Just four Division I programs have six or more NCAA titles in men's ice hockey: Denver, Michigan, North Dakota and Wisconsin, the 2026 semifinalists.

Denver is going for a third national championship in five seasons, while Michigan seeks its first triumph of the 21st century. Wisconsin skates in off a frenzied overtime upset; North Dakota has yet to allow a single postseason goal. Thursday's winners will advance to Saturday's title game. Here's what to know and when to tune in for the semifinals.

Men's Frozen Four schedule, semifinals

Date: Thursday, April 9

Venue: T-Mobile Arena — Las Vegas

Watching in person? Get tickets on StubHub.

Wisconsin vs. North Dakota



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Denver vs. Michigan

8:30 p.m.

ESPN2

Fubo (Watch Now)

ESPN programs are also available with an ESPN Unlimited subscription.

What to know about the broadcast

John Buccigross is on the mic for play-by-play. He's been with ESPN since 1996. Colby Cohen joins for analysis. The former Boston University star scored the championship-winning OT goal in 2009. Quint Kessenich reports from the rink. This trio gets the call for both Frozen Four matchups and Saturday's finale.

The network's studio coverage comprises Zubin Mehenti, Andrew Raycroft and Paul Caponigri.

Wisconsin vs. No. 2 North Dakota

The Badgers broke through to the Frozen Four by stunning No. 3 Michigan State. Trailing 3-1 with less than five minutes left, Wisconsin scored two goals across 34 seconds of heat. Overtime lasted a mere 24 seconds — senior defenseman Ben Dexheimer netted the game winner off a deflection.

In the opening round, Wisconsin beat Dartmouth by a 5-1 final. Simon Tassy notched two goals on eight shots, while Quinn Finley had a goal and two assists. Mike Hastings coaches the nation's fifth-best scoring offense with the fifth-best faceoff win percentage.

North Dakota is right above the Badgers, third in scoring and fourth on faceoffs. Thus far, the Fighting Hawks have put together a tournament shutout behind goalie Jan Špunar — 3-0 over Merrimack, then 5-0 over Quinnipiac. Up front, forwards Cody Croal and Dylan James have goals in each of the two tournament wins.

Dane Jackson has been in Grand Forks for the last two decades, but this is his first season as head coach.

Freshman defenseman Keaton Verhoeff is No. 5 in The Athletic's updated NHL Draft rankings. Scott Wheeler praises the Canadian's ability to anchor the blue line and run the power play.

MORE ON VERHOEFF

Meet Keaton Verhoeff, the former goalie who became the 2026 NHL Draft's top defense prospect

The biggest reason Verhoeff made the jump from the CHL to North Dakota was to test himself in his draft year.

National championships

Wisconsin: 6 (1973, 1977, 1981, 1983, 1990, 2006)

North Dakota: 8 (1959, 1963, 1980, 1982, 1987, 1997, 2000, 2016)

Denver vs. No. 1 Michigan

With trophy lifts in 2022 and 2024, Denver has overtaken Michigan for the most NCAA titles. This year's Pioneers skate into the Frozen Four after eliminating No. 4 Western Michigan, the reigning champ, in a surprise 6-2 blowout. Denver scored four goals in the opening period to reach its seventh semifinal in the last 10 tournaments.

Freshman goaltender Johnny Hicks leads Division I in save percentage (a crisp .958 mark) and goals-against average (1.125). Hicks shut out Cornell in a 5-0 cruise in the regional semis, and the win over Western Michigan improved his starting record to an unbelievable 14-0-1. Kieran Cebrian and Sam Harris have goals in both tourney wins. Denver is led by David Carle, the youngest coach to win multiple NCAA championships.

Despite its No. 1 billing, Michigan has the longest championship drought of the remaining quartet. The Wolverines' last Frozen Four win came under Red Berenson in 2011. They haven't won it all since 1998, also under Berenson.

With current coach Brandon Naurato, the maize and blue missed the tournament outright last year, only to bounce back as the bracket's top overall seed. Senior forward T.J. Hughes is third in points per game, with sophomore Michael Hage close behind at seventh. Goalie Jack Ivankovic is 11th in save percentage at .923. As a team, Michigan is No. 1 in scoring offense, power-play percentage and margin of victory.

The Wolverines shredded past Bentley 5-1 in the opening round. The regional final was an unexpected pressure point, though. After scoring three goals in the first period, they allowed Minnesota Duluth to get three back in the third. The defense ultimately held tough for a 4-3 finish.

Like its opponent, Michigan has a standout freshman in Adam Valentini. The Athletic's draft rankings list him at No. 46, with Wheeler highlighting the Canadian's playmaking and feel for the game.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.09.2026

1386304 Websites

The Athletic / NHL prospect pool rankings 2026: Scott Wheeler's evaluations of all 32 teams' systems

By Scott Wheeler

April 8, 2026

Welcome to the 2026 edition of my ranking of the NHL's 32 prospect pools, which features the Chicago Blackhawks at No. 1 and the San Jose Sharks at No. 2. The full list can be found below.

This 31-day project included evaluations of roughly 500 prospects (each club's top 15 plus worthy honorable mentions). It will conclude next week with my annual top 100 drafted skaters and top 20 drafted goalie rankings.

Each team's ranking includes reports on every ranked prospect, projections, timelines and team-specific tiers, as well as video and insight from sources where relevant. The evaluations and rankings are the byproduct of countless viewings (both on tape and in person) spanning years.

I've placed emphasis on upside more than proximity to the NHL. A player with top-half-of-the-lineup potential may rank higher than a player with NHL experience who projects lower, even sometimes in cases where the former is less likely to reach his ceiling than the latter. Teams that have consistently prioritized upside instead of playing it safe tend to grade higher overall. I believe that over time, teams that draft and develop for ceiling instead of floor will distinguish themselves in a hard-cap league built on parity. The league's most precious resource is homegrown talent capable of making more than a marginal impact while cost-controlled, particularly when depth pieces are so readily available through trades and free agency. My rankings reflect that.

For more insight into my experience, my process, the things I look for and my potential biases and limitations, check out my guide to scouting.

Criteria

Skaters: To be considered a prospect, a skater must be under 23 and not fully established with his NHL club. The latter qualifier is arbitrary. There, I trust my judgment for whether a player should be considered fully graduated more than any predetermined games-played cutoff.



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Preference for inclusion as an NHL prospect is more likely to be given to teenagers than 21- or 22-year-olds.

Goalies: To be considered a prospect, a goalie must be under 25 and not fully established as an NHL goalie. This age criteria is more reflective of the typical goalie trajectory, allowing for the continued consideration of a small number of 23- and 24-year-old goalies.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.09.2026

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The Athletic / The best season a player from each NHL team had while missing the playoffs

By Sean McIndoe

April 8, 2026

If your team misses the playoffs, the season was a failure and there's nothing to celebrate.

Or at least, that's typically what fans are told, especially at this time of year. And often, it's true enough. But not always, because even a season that doesn't lead to a playoff run can still have its highlights. Like, for example, a player who puts together a season for the ages, despite all the losing.

That sort of success seems worth recognizing. So today's assignment is simple: Let's go through all 32 teams and highlight the single best season any player has ever had in a year where they still didn't make the playoffs.

Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks have had two players hit the 50-goal mark in a non-playoff season, and you can probably guess who they are. Paul Kariya had 50 in 1995-96, which was all the more impressive for being just his second NHL season. But I'm going to go with Teemu Selanne and his 52-goal campaign in 1997-98, which still stands as the franchise's single-season record. It was so impressive that Selanne was a finalist for the Hart despite the (Mighty) Ducks missing the playoffs by 13 points.

Boston Bruins

Despite having a ton of history to draw from, we don't have to go very far back to find a Bruins candidate. That would be David Pastrnak, who had 43 goals and 106 points last year, while also being one of the only Bruins to make it through the whole season without being traded.

Buffalo Sabres

We've got lots of options to choose from here, including multiple Rasmus Dahlin seasons and Rick Martin's 52 goals in 1973-74. But as with most attempts to find a "best" of just about anything with the Sabres, this one ends with everyone looking up at Dominik Hasek. Specifically, his 1995-96 season in which he led the league with both a .920 save percentage and 43.3 goals saved above average. Note that this was considered a bad year by Hasek's standards; it was the only season in a six-year stretch where he didn't both win the Vezina and be a Hart finalist. What a bum.

Calgary Flames

There are two strong candidates from the 1991-92 team, with Gary Roberts scoring 53 goals while Al MacInnis added 20 from the blue line. But there's no surprise over who I'm going with here: One of my all-time favorites, Jarome Iginla. This will, of course, be his 2001-02 campaign, which saw him put up 52 goals and 96 points to win both the Rocket

Richard and the Art Ross. But not, somehow, the Hart — he finished tied for first with Jose Theodore, who won on the tie breaker. Why yes, I do plan to die mad about that, thanks for checking.

Carolina Hurricanes

If we're counting the Whalers years, we could go with Blaine Stoughton's 52 goals, or maybe somebody such as Brendan Shanahan or Geoff Sanderson, or even Zarley Zalapski. But we'll keep it in Carolina, which means I think we give the nod to Cam Ward back in 2010-11, when he led the league in games, minutes, shots and saves and somehow still had the energy to put up a .923 season and finish a career-best seventh in Vezina voting.

Chicago Blackhawks

I'm not sure what's weirder: that we have a Hart Trophy winner available to us, or that he's barely in the running. That would be Al Rollins, the beleaguered goalie on the 1953-54 team that finished last while hanging him out to dry so badly that he got the Hart in one of the weirdest pity votes in sports history. Instead, we'll go with Bobby Hull, whose 58 goals didn't just lead the league in 1968-69, but stood as the most any player had ever had in NHL history to that point.

Colorado Avalanche

The offensive ranks are dominated by Nordiques, including 100-plus point seasons by Joe Sakic, Peter Stastny and Michel Goulet. I'll give the nod to Joe Sakic, but we'll make it the 2006-07 version, who had 100 points on the nose at the age of 36 in what would turn out to be the last full season of his career.

Columbus Blue Jackets

We'll pause here so you can all get your "isn't every year of Blue Jackets history a non-playoff year" jokes off, because Columbus actually serves up three very strong candidates. We could go with Rick Nash's 2003-04 season, in which he earned a share of the Rocket Richard with the genuinely hilarious stat line of 41 goals and 16 assists. There's last year's Zach Werenski campaign (and maybe this year's too). But I'm going to go with Sergei Bobrovsky in 2012-13, in which he made his Blue Jackets debut by winning his first of two Vezinas.

Dallas Stars

We've got lots of North Stars history to choose from, including some impressive seasons from Dino Ciccarelli, Brian Bellows and Bill Goldsworthy. Dallas doesn't give us quite as much to work with, which means we probably have no choice but to go with Jamie Benn and his 2014-15 season that saw him lead the league in scoring. That's right, an Art Ross despite a playoff miss. Impressive, right? Please don't ask how many points he had.

Detroit Red Wings

With all due respect to DGB favorite Reed Larson, who managed 60-plus points from the blue line while missing the playoffs five different times, this one ends up being easy. With a nod to Marcel Dionne's 121 points in 1974-75, it has to be Steve Yzerman and his 62 goals and 127 points in 1989-90.

Edmonton Oilers

The Gretzky-era Oilers never missed the playoffs, and the decade of darkness doesn't offer us much beyond the occasional solid season from Sheldon Souray or Devan Dubnyk, so this is going to come down to Connor McDavid vs. Leon Draisaitl. While Draisaitl can boast a 50-goal season in 2018-19, I'll go with Connor McDavid and his 108-point Art Ross win in 2017-18.

Florida Panthers



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A funny thing about Panthers history is that it's chock full of goaltenders having excellent seasons and missing the playoffs anyway. On most teams, Roberto Luongo's 2003-04 season would be an easy pick, given he led the league in goals saved above average while finishing as a Vezina finalist. But I think he's narrowly beaten out by John Vanbiesbrouck in 1993-94, as the former Ranger stood on his head for a brand-new expansion team, finishing as Vezina runner-up and a Hart finalist. (Bronze goes to Pavel Bure's 59 goals in 2000-01.)

Los Angeles Kings

It's another tough break for Marcel Dionne, whose 56 goals and 107 points in 1982-83 would top most teams. Not the Kings, though, as the first ever career playoff miss by Wayne Gretzky in 1993-94 came with a league-leading 92 assists and an Art Ross-winning 130 points.

Minnesota Wild

Don't sleep on Niklas Backstrom's 2008-09, Dwayne Roloson's 2003-04 or even Manny Fernandez's 2005-06. But we don't have to overthink this one, and can hand the honors to Kirill Kaprizov and his 96 points two years ago.

Montreal Canadiens

As you'd expect, there are plenty of excellent goaltending seasons to choose from, including Carey Price in 2018-19. And nobody has ever had more points in a Montreal playoff miss than Nick Suzuki's 77 two years ago, which narrowly beats out Saku Koivu's 75 in 2006-07. But if you give me access to this much history, you know I'm going to use it, so let's go all the way back to Newsy Lalonde and his league-leading 43 points in just 24 games in 1920-21. He didn't win the Art Ross or the Hart because neither award even existed yet, but he does get bonus points for being named "Newsy."

Nashville Predators

It occurs to me that I must be a modern-day Hart voter because I've been ignoring defensemen so far. If any team can change that, it has to be the Predators, so let's go with a 23-goal season from Shea Weber. That only narrows it down to two years, 2008-09 or 2013-14. I'll go with the latter, which saw a more grizzled version of Weber named a Norris finalist.

New Jersey Devils

Unlike other teams, we already know we won't have any 50-goal or 100-point seasons to choose from, because it's the Devils. I'm tempted to go with defenseman Tom Kurvers, racking up 66 points in 1988-89, which is the sort of season that convinces dumb teams to trade for you the following year. But this is just going to end up being a Martin Brodeur season, and we might as well accept that. We'll go with his 1995-96 season, in which a 23-year-old Brodeur played 77 games and posted a (for the time excellent) 2.34 goals against average and .911 save percentage while finishing fourth in Vezina voting.

New York Islanders

The right answer here is probably Ilya Sorokin's 2021-22 season, which saw him post a career-best .925 save percentage. But just for fun, I'm going to go with one of my favorite Hall of Very-Good guys: Ziggy Palffy, and his 48 goals and 90 points from the 1996-97 fishstick squad.

New York Rangers

We could make John Vanbiesbrouck our first two-time winner, or go with Henrik Lundqvist or maybe Brian Leetch in 2000-01. But I think this one has to be Andy Bathgate, who scored 40 goals to win his only Hart despite a playoff miss in 1958-59.

Ottawa Senators

Another easy call, with apologies to that 90-point Tim Stützle season. The only question is which Erik Karlsson season you want to go with. I'll

take 2015-16, in which he led the league in assists with 66 on his way to 82 points and a Norris runner-up finish.

Philadelphia Flyers

We're going back to the '90s for this one, and you could make a fantastic case that it should be Mark Recchi, who had 53 goals and 123 points in 1992-93. But so did everyone else, which is why it remains the greatest season in NHL history. I'm going to jump ahead a year and go with Eric Lindros in 1993-94. When you weren't using him to crush one-timers on your little brother in NHL '94, he was scoring 44 goals and 97 points while dominating the game physically in a way we'd never quite seen before. But yeah, mostly the NHL '94 thing.

Pittsburgh Penguins

With all due respect to Paul Coffey's 103 points from the blue line in 1989-90, this one's easy. It is, of course, going to be Mario Lemieux, and specifically his 70-goal, 168-point season in 1987-88. It's the single greatest year by a non-playoff player ever, so good that he won the Hart Trophy nearly unanimously despite the Penguins missing the playoffs by a single point on the final night of the season. Along with Rollins and Bathgate, it's the third and to this day still last time MVP voters honored a playoff miss.

San Jose Sharks

And here's our first two-time winner. Only one player in franchise history can beat Timo Meier's 76 points in 2021-22, and it's a defenseman. Come on back, Erik Karlsson, as your 101-point Norris win from 2022-23 laps the field and then some.

Seattle Kraken

So here's a fun thing I learned: Excluding their lone playoff appearance in 2022-23, the Kraken have only had one player in their history receive any postseason award votes at all that weren't for the Lady Byng. If you knew that was Joey Daccord getting two third-team all-star votes in 2023-24 then ... well, I'm guessing you're Joey Daccord.

St. Louis Blues

Here's a cool trivia question about Brett Hull: Not counting his aborted five-game comeback with the Coyotes after the lockout, he played 18 full NHL seasons, starting in 1986-87 with the Flames and ending in 2003-04 with the Red Wings. How many postseason appearances did he make? The answer is ... 19, because he actually debuted with a pair of games in the 1986 playoffs. In other words, our pick will not be Brett Hull, for the Blues, or anyone else. Let's go with Alex Pietrangolo, who had a career-best 54 points in 2017-18.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Another easy one, as Steven Stamkos actually offers us a pair of Rocket Richard seasons. I'll take his 60-goal season in 2011-12. It's one of only four times in NHL history that a player has had 60 goals while missing the postseason. We've met two of the others, Lemieux and Yzerman. The fourth hasn't been mentioned ... yet. Can you figure out who it is before we get to him?

Toronto Maple Leafs

We have a pair of 50-goal seasons from Rick Vaive, plus 90-point seasons from Mats Sundin and Eddie Olczyk and whole bunch of Phil Kessel. But I'll reach back to 1967-68, when the Leafs followed up their most recent Cup win with a playoff miss despite getting .934 goaltending from not one but two goalies. In this house, we respect Bruce Gamble, but I'm still going with 43-year-old Johnny Bower.

Utah Mammoth

If we're counting the Coyotes, it's probably Sean Burke from 2000-01. If we're also counting the original Jets (which we should not), then it's Dale



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Hawerchuk in 1988-89. But since the league insists that this is a brand new franchise, we only have last year to work with. And that's OK, because Clayton Keller quietly racked up 90 points.

Vancouver Canucks

We've got three excellent Quinn Hughes seasons to choose from here, plus the 102-point Elias Pettersson year that convinced us all that he'd be an elite superstar forever. But I'm still salty about having to skip Pavel Bure from some goalies in the Panthers section, so his 51 goals and 90 points for the 1997-98 team get the nod here. Don't argue with me, Canucks fans, I could have picked someone else from that team.

Vegas Golden Knights

They've only missed the playoffs once, in 2021-22, and all the members of that team were immediately invited to a gathering at Kelly McCrimmon's house and then never seen again. Let's give the nod to Jonathan Marchessault for his 30-goal season and move on.

Washington Capitals

Here's a twist: We've arrived at that fourth and final 60-goal scorer, and it's not Alexander Ovechkin. Instead, we're going to go with Dennis Maruk, who had an eye-popping 60 goals and 136 points for the 1981-82 team that mustered just 65 points while missing the playoffs for the eighth time in eight seasons.

Winnipeg Jets

Ilya Kovalchuk had a pair of 52-goal seasons from the Thrashers days, but you know we're not using those. We could turn to a personal favorite in Dustin Byfuglien, who had 20 goals for the 2013-14 edition of the Jets. But the simpler answer here is probably the right one, so we'll finish our list with Kyle Connor and his 47 goals and 93 points from 2021-22.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.09.2026

1386306 Websites

The Athletic / The X account making NHL players rethink social media: 'It's pretty invasive'

By Joshua Kloke

April 8, 2026

Olen Zellweger was up early.

The 22-year-old Anaheim Ducks defenseman had woken just before 5 a.m. PT on Feb. 22 to join the rest of the hockey world in watching the men's Olympic gold medal game.

A few hours later, the "passionate" Canadian watched as American Jack Hughes scored in overtime to give the United States its first men's hockey gold in 46 years.

"I was pissed that Canada lost," Zellweger said. "Especially against the U.S."

Later that day, Zellweger joined teammates for a Ducks-organized event at Disneyland. A day of rides and a parade couldn't get his mind off the bitter loss. In moments of downtime, he scrolled through videos of Team USA celebrating. In the middle of the theme park, Zellweger let out his frustration — on Instagram.

One by one, he unfollowed four of the most prominent American players: Jack Hughes, Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel and Clayton Keller. Harmless, he thought.

"A little housekeeping," Zellweger said. "It's not like I don't like those guys. I started following them when I was a kid. Like, 12."

When he arrived at Ducks practice the next day, Zellweger heard three words that would make many young players quiver.

"You've gone viral," a team media relations representative told him.

Zellweger, an affable player still on his entry-level contract, said he didn't intend for anyone to notice his social media moves.

It turns out, he didn't have a choice.

Three months earlier, an X account launched with little fanfare. Named NHL Follow Tracker (@NHLFollowTrack), the account began posting multiple updates every hour on who NHL players and teams followed and unfollowed on Instagram, one of the world's most popular social media platforms.

As Team USA's celebrations turned political and sparked controversy, the post took off. It has since garnered well over 1,000 re-posts and dozens of replies.

"Oh he was CHEESED lmao what a patriot," one user wrote.

"Olen Zellweger woke? This is a joke," said another.

"I was shocked that it went viral," Zellweger said. "Those guys don't know me."

That did not matter to the online world.

Zellweger, depending on how you see it, was one of the first casualties or beneficiaries of an X account that has offered a revealing look at NHL player interests, including potential romantic connections and political leanings.

The account is growing — closing in on 17,300 followers. And its ability to gain significant attention in certain moments has been noticed.

"The whole league knows about it," said Toronto Maple Leafs defenseman Troy Stecher, shaking his head. "It's pretty invasive."

Fuat Aras had never watched a full NHL game when he first landed on Vancouver Island last year. He'd never even been to Canada before when he traveled from his native Istanbul, Turkey, to study for his MBA at Vancouver Island University.

After a few days in his new home, the inquisitive student learned Canadians followed hockey with the same fervency with which he supported his favorite Istanbul-based soccer team, Fenerbahce.

"I thought I needed to learn about hockey to integrate into Canadian culture," Aras said.

Aras liked what he saw. The pace, the physicality. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen.

He quickly became "addicted" to hockey after watching his first few Vancouver Canucks games, regardless of their place at the bottom of the NHL's standings. And the game itself only whetted his appetite for more information.

Aras comes from a place where sports media can be more aggressive than in Canada. Any crumb of information about players is quickly baked into full-blown stories, for better or worse. If a player leaves a comment on another player's Instagram account, it will likely become a story in Europe.

Aras was simultaneously working on a different coding project that involved scraping real-time data from Instagram.

"Information is money these days, as you know," Aras said.

In the middle of watching a game, he had the idea: What if I created a bot to track the Instagram activity of NHL players?



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"But I wasn't sure it was interesting, or that it would catch interesting things," he said.

As Zellweger can attest, Aras was wrong.

He started by scouring NHL rosters online and manually searching for over 700 NHL player and team accounts.

"And that was very hard," Aras said. "I put the information into my bot and that bot scans every player's account."

The Instagram accounts players and teams follow and unfollow is then fed, via Aras's program, into the X feed. Each player or team who makes an addition or subtraction receives an X post, sometimes highlighting multiple follows and unfollows.

"I have checked and there isn't anything like this for the NFL or soccer," he said. "Maybe I will start something similar for the NFL?"

Aras warns before he speaks that English is not his native language and that he might make grammatical errors.

There is still an almost naïve charm to how Aras speaks about hockey, his new obsession. He accidentally calls the Toronto Maple Leafs the "Toronto Maples." He mispronounces the names of prominent NHL players he now tracks daily. Having only begun watching the NHL over the last year, Aras is still unaware of which players are bona fide celebrities and which are not.

He did not know why his post about Zellweger went viral. Nor did he know that Johnny Gaudreau, one of the players his account tracked and posted about, tragically died before last season. Aras stopped tracking Gaudreau's Instagram account in March.

Aras said he averages about three hours a day working on his account. As of March, he said the account gains anywhere between 50 and a few hundred new followers a day. He believes his posts are viewed over one million times a day.

Aras shared insights about his account via screenshots reviewed by The Athletic: the majority of fans (52 percent) who view the account are female. The most prominent age group of viewers is 18- to 24-year-olds.

"At first, it was just a hobby," Aras said. "But then I saw that people loved it, probably because of the gossip that comes from it."

NHL teams were some of the first to take note.

The Boston Bruins purposely unfollowed every other NHL team's Instagram account, which NHL Follow Tracker revealed. The Winnipeg Jets began following multiple Jets-themed accounts. When NHL Follow Tracker revealed the Edmonton Oilers began following new acquisition Connor Murphy, the Oilers X account acknowledged it with an emoji.

"The evolution was: How can we have fun with this? Fans are smart enough to know that we were doing things to interact with them indirectly," said one administrator of a prominent NHL team's social media account, who was not authorized to speak publicly.

It's not all fun, though. Perceived controversy moves the needle, too.

After Jeff Skinner was placed on waivers by the San Jose Sharks for the purpose of contract termination in March, both the player and the team unfollowed each other. Those respective posts combined for nearly 4,000 likes.

Teams know they need to be careful.

An administrator of one NHL team's social media accounts said they recently noticed the team's Instagram account was still following a high-profile player who departed the organization. The administrator's instinct was to unfollow the player. Instead, they hesitated, believing that if they were to unfollow the player now, NHL Follow Tracker would bring

heightened attention to a simple action. The team account still follows the former player.

It's not just roster movement that teams need to worry about. Who exactly their players follow can now bring scrutiny.

Nazem Kadri received attention in early March when NHL Follow Tracker revealed he followed right-wing commentator Tucker Carlson. Less than two weeks later another X post blew up when Kadri followed actress Megan Fox.

Teams say they won't be telling players who and who not to follow on their personal accounts, but they are thinking about education.

A media relations staff member of an NHL team, who was not authorized to speak publicly, said NHL Follow Tracker would be part of social media training ahead of next season. The staffer suggested their team would warn players not just to be mindful of what they post on their personal social media accounts, but who they follow on those accounts.

For players, NHL Follow Tracker has led to feelings of intrigue, confusion and, largely, unease.

Multiple players who asked not to be named suggested NHL Follow Tracker has become a source of frustration for single NHLers, who use Instagram to meet people for romantic purposes.

And it opens up a forum for discussion of players' personal lives and relationships.

When Maple Leafs and Team USA captain Auston Matthews followed Vanessa Piunno on March 3, there was confusion on X as Matthews was believed to have been in a relationship with Piunno for months.

"It's watching all the time," Zellweger said.

"It's two-headed. It's kind of bulls—, like stay out of people's business," said Maple Leafs goalie Joseph Woll. "But the other side is, you're on a public social media site and people subscribe to it."

While Woll put a diplomatic touch on his thoughts, Stecher was more cutting.

"Get a life," Stecher said. "It's just really weird."

"To have an account just for that is odd," added Philadelphia Flyers forward Noah Cates.

"It's crazy that someone is taking the time out of their day to do this," Buffalo Sabres defenseman Owen Power said. "It's a little bit of an invasion of privacy. But I'm also not doing anything on there that I have to hide."

The complaints don't seem overly concerning to Aras. He said he receives emails expressing frustration and raising privacy issues over his account.

"It's public information," he said. "If you don't want to be seen on social media, you can just close your account. Or can make it private so no one will see you. That's my answer if someone asks me about privacy."

Aras said if a player's Instagram account is private, he will not try to determine who they follow and unfollow.

"If someone wants to keep their information private, I have to respect that," Aras said.

He also said he'd likely stop following individual players if they reached out directly.

"If a player specifically contacts me about their account and asks me to delete it from the system, probably I will delete it," he said. "But I didn't talk with anyone because it's not a big deal for me."

Some players find the account intriguing.



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Leafs forward Jacob Quillan has always had an interest in business. He believes NHL Follow Tracker has the potential to become monetized, which piqued his imagination when he saw the account.

Zellweger saw the potential, too.

"Let's say it was an app, and someone wanted to purchase the app and then have access to that data, maybe that's fine. But now it's just ... out there," Zellweger said.

Aras is a step ahead.

On March 7, he made his data available via an app for both iOS and Android.

If users are interested in getting real-time updates on the actions of specific players, they would have to pay \$4 a month. As of April 7, Aras said the app has been downloaded "around 400" times.

"I wasn't getting any money from this," Aras said. "As an MBA student, my class and assignment schedule is busy."

The X account and app are making players reconsider their online behavior.

Quillan, eager to land a full-time NHL job in Toronto, understands everything he does will be viewed under a microscope. And so NHL Follow Tracker would "for sure" make him stop and consider who he is following and unfollowing.

Some might consider, as Aras suggests, turning their accounts private — a move that could limit their ability to further their own business interests and brands.

"I realize some players have turned their account from public to private after I have started my Twitter account," Aras said. "It's not a normal thing, but when they realize someone is tracking their activity they change their account from public to private."

It has players thinking about the time they spend on social media, too.

"It's more reason to do less on Instagram and be more private," Cates said.

Power said he enjoys learning about different approaches to health on Instagram, but also admits the endless scrolling on the app "does me more harm than good."

"It's ... 75 percent garbage," Power said.

He's set a restriction on his phone to limit the amount of time he spends on the app. There are times when he has considered leaving altogether.

And NHL Follow Tracker, he admits, is one of the many elements nudging him in that direction.

"People jump to a lot of conclusions," he said of how players are perceived through their social media activity.

If anyone knows that, it's Zellweger.

He received messages after he went viral, questioning whether his decision to unfollow American players was out of a distaste for MAGA politics.

Zellweger shakes his head at how a simple action of unfollowing people he doesn't know on Instagram led to such a response.

"Everyone knows about this account now. I can understand the perspective of trying to develop something," Zellweger said of NHL Follow Tracker, before pausing, choosing his next words carefully.

"But it's still," he said, "a little excessive."

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The Athletic / Which NHL top defense pairs have been the best and worst in the 2025-26 season?

By Harman Dayal

April 8, 2026

Any NHL team with Stanley Cup contention aspirations needs its top players to be firing on all cylinders. If a contender has an elite top line and first pair, that foundation can often mask flaws and weaknesses further down the lineup.

Four weeks ago, we analyzed how every NHL team's top line was producing. This time, we're turning our attention to each club's first pairs. The goal is the same as it was with the forwards: Identify which teams have top pairs that are dominating and which ones are significantly trailing the competition.

Let's begin by laying out our criteria for defining a "top pair" and then explaining our methodology for tracking performance.

My initial thought was to take each team's No. 1 defenseman and then look at that player's results with their most frequent partner (e.g., Cale Makar is the Avalanche's No. 1 defender and his most common partner is Devon Toews, so let's break down the Toews-Makar pair's numbers). That approach is great in theory, but the problem is that many teams haven't had a consistent two-man top pair this season. Many teams have a No. 1 defender as the anchor of the top pair, with a rotating cast of partners.

The next-best thing we can do is use the defenseman who has most consistently played on the first pair as a proxy for the top-pair results. Here's a chart showing which top-pair defender was used as each team's proxy (injuries and games played affected who was picked), plus a breakdown of who their partner(s) have been this season. Note that because Carolina has been hammered by blue-line injuries, it hasn't had a defender consistently on the top pair, so we combined the results for when Jaccob Slavin's been healthy, with K'Andre Miller's numbers for the games where Slavin was hurt (Miller stepped up onto the top pair when Slavin was out).

John Carlson (498 mins), Matt Roy (245 mins), Rasmus Sandin (200 mins)

We'll look at the goals for and against differential when that top pair is on the ice as a simple measure of performance. Goal differential obviously isn't a perfect instrument because of environmental factors (it can be skewed by the quality of the forwards that the pair shares the ice with, shooting/goaltending luck and overall team quality). But if we apply context by also looking at the pair's play-driving numbers (which we'll mention for a team if it's particularly relevant), we'll get a decent 200-foot view.

Here are the numbers so far, sorted by each pair's five-on-five goal differential rate. Note that all stats were compiled via Natural Stat Trick on April 6.

NHL First Pairs' 5v5 Goal Differential

Colorado Avalanche

Cale Makar and Devon Toews driving elite results together is the most predictable outcome possible. They're a well-oiled machine that transitions play up the ice, generates offense and shuts the door defensively (1.94 goals against per 60 rate, which is the second-best mark among all first pairs) like no other duo in the NHL.



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We've also seen Makar and Toews forced to drive their own pairs for brief stretches this season because of each player's respective injuries — Toews missed 13 games earlier in the season, and Makar has been absent recently — and the small sample size numbers are very fascinating. Lately, Toews has been playing with the underrated Sam Malinski, and together, they've earned a whopping 68 percent of high-danger chances and outscored opponents 16-8 in 184 five-on-five minutes together.

When Makar returns and the playoffs begin, you'd imagine Colorado will turn back to the tried and true Toews-Makar combination. However, the recent success of the new-look Toews-Malinski pair gives Jared Bednar some interesting Plan B or C options for the playoffs if he ever needs to throw a curveball to counter an opposing team's game plan against the default Toews-Makar combo.

Montreal Canadiens

Lane Hutson has followed up an exceptional Calder Trophy-winning campaign by solidifying himself as a bona fide superstar in Year 2. Winning the Norris seems like a long shot because of how ridiculously stacked the competition is this year, but Hutson probably deserves some down-ballot votes.

Hutson ranks second among all defensemen in five-on-five points, and the evolution of his defensive game is an underrated storyline, as his 2.57 expected goals against per 60 rate ranks No. 1 among all Canadiens defensemen. I see similarities to Quinn Hughes in how Hutson leverages his quickness and agility to defend the rush well. While he isn't going to outmuscle players down low defensively, Hutson has a knack for quick, timely stick lifts to snatch possession back.

It's important to note that the Mike Matheson-Noah Dobson second pair takes on the toughest defensive matchups, which frees Hutson's assignments up to some degree. However, that advantage is probably offset by the rotating carousel of partners he's played with, including all the time he's spent on his off side playing with a subpar partner in Jayden Struble.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Is J.J. Moser the most underrated defenseman in the NHL right now? It's a fair question to ask because, quietly, there's been a change of guard on Tampa Bay's blue line.

Victor Hedman has been a shell of himself this year — he's been limited to 33 games because of injuries, and his performance when healthy has significantly deteriorated. He's averaged just 18:52 per game this season and was even lining up for some games on the third pair before his most recent injury in mid-March.

Tampa Bay's top pair has been dominant despite Hedman's fall-off, thanks to Moser's emergence as an elite shutdown defenseman. Moser's pair has earned almost 59 percent of scoring chances and surrendered only 1.82 goals against per 60 at five-on-five, which is the best mark in the NHL. He doesn't have many flashy elements in his game, but his IQ is off the charts, and he's been exceptional at breaking up plays. This breakout has also likely been aided by a shift back to his strong side (in previous years, he often played the right side because Tampa had many left-side defensive options).

Darren Raddysh, meanwhile, has been the perfect complement to Moser's pair, adding offensive spice. Raddysh is top-10 among all NHL defenders in points this season, with his bomb of a shot, in particular, emerging as a terrifying weapon. There's some evidence that his production is inflated by all the time he's spent with Nikita Kucherov, but no one can deny that the club has found lightning in a bottle with this Moser-Raddysh combination.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Erik Karlsson has looked like a completely different player under Dan Muse this year. The 35-year-old future Hall of Famer has clicked at a 72-point pace, and his play-driving numbers are the best they've ever been in Pittsburgh.

Parker Wotherspoon deserves his flowers as the underappreciated defensive safety net of this pair as well. Wotherspoon, a journeyman defender, has been an outstanding bargain-bin acquisition, as he's been a lock next to Karlsson all season long. He doesn't show up on the scoresheet often and isn't going to end up on many highlight reels, but his steady, mistake-free presence has been invaluable.

Winnipeg Jets

Josh Morrissey's pair isn't driving play as decisively as last year — they're controlling 50.5 percent of high-danger chances, compared to 57.8 percent in 2024-25 — and they are benefitting from an overheated 12.3 on-ice shooting percentage that is inflating their goal differential. Still, it's impressive that Winnipeg's top pair is handily winning its minutes, given how difficult the team's season has been overall.

Morrissey should get more credit for driving these kinds of results without a true top-pair caliber partner; Dylan DeMelo is a solid player, but he'd probably be a No. 4/5 on most good teams.

Boston Bruins

Charlie McAvoy has put together a strong bounce-back campaign. He's notched a career-high 58 points in just 66 games, and he's one of only two Bruins' defensemen (the other is Hampus Lindholm) who have driven a positive scoring chance differential this season. Boston's top pair is generating 3.48 goals for per 60, which ranks fourth-best among all first pairs.

Jonathan Aspirot's unexpected rise to a steady partner for McAvoy should also be mentioned. Aspirot, a 26-year-old undrafted first-year NHLer, doesn't play big minutes (he's averaged 17:49 since the Olympic break), but he's been McAvoy's most frequent partner this season and has done a serviceable job.

Boston's top pair does give up a lot of high-danger chances — they're surrendering 2.93 expected goals against per 60, which ranks 27th among first pairs — but they've been bailed out by strong goaltending, which is inflating their overall goal differential.

Buffalo Sabres

Rasmus Dahlin will draw most of the headlines when we think about the success of Buffalo's top pair, but Mattias Samuelsson's shocking turnaround is the bigger story. Samuelsson was a promising, up-and-coming defensive stopper early in his career, but injuries and inconsistent play hurt his reputation to the point where he was a buyout candidate last summer and booed by Sabres fans during the home opener.

Samuelsson has completely turned his game around and reached a level we've never seen before. Playing next to Dahlin, Samuelsson is tied for 12th among all defensemen in five-on-five points in addition to making an excellent defensive impact. He's the unsung hero behind Buffalo's rise this season.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Zach Werenski's pair is scoring 3.25 goals per 60 minutes, which is the sixth-best mark among all top pairs. Werenski has probably been the best solo offensive driver of all defensemen this season — he narrowly trails Evan Bouchard for most points-per-game, but Werenski has accomplished it without the help of Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. And while Columbus' top pair doesn't have elite defensive numbers, they still take care of their own zone pretty well, as they're suppressing quality scoring chances better than the average first pair.

Columbus' top-four has also generally hit a higher level this year because of Denton Mateychuk's breakout and Damon Severson's bounce back.



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Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers' top pair was outscored 14-6 through the first 16 games of the season, a stretch that featured some ugly defensive sequences for Evan Bouchard. Since then, though, the Bouchard/Mattias Ekholm duo has been one of the best defense pairs in the NHL, earning nearly 60 percent of high-danger chances and driving a plus-23 goal differential.

Bouchard's pair is bleeding goals against at the sixth-worst rate among first pairs, but it's fair to wonder how much of that is exacerbated by bad goaltending because their expected goals against rate ranks 16th, which is respectable. When I've watched the Oilers in recent months, Darnell Nurse and Jake Walman have been responsible for far more defensive breakdowns than Bouchard or Ekholm.

This pair's offensive impact is best-in-class. Bouchard has been producing at a 106-point pace since early November, and he's been on the ice for an impressive 3.32 goals for per hour in his non-McDavid minutes, which is proof that he isn't just riding McDavid's coattails.

Detroit Red Wings

Moritz Seider and Simon Edvinsson are arguably the best shutdown pairs in the NHL. It's a nightmare for opposing forwards to match up against Seider and Edvinsson because they're athletic beasts with their massive size, strength, wing span and powerful skating ability. They eliminate attackers' time and space and kill plays so quickly and authoritatively.

Detroit's top pair has surrendered only 2.24 expected goals against per 60, the second-best rate among all first pairs and their actual goals-against rate ranks third-best. If they had more elite offensive firepower up front to play with and finish off scoring chances, there's a good chance that the pair would be on the ice for a higher rate of goals offensively, which means their current numbers might even be underestimating how high their ceiling as a pairing could be.

New York Islanders

What more can you say about Matthew Schaefer? At 18, he's completely transformed the Islanders' blue line. Schaefer is elite at breaking out the puck, has had an exceptional offensive impact (22 goals and 58 points in 78 games), and his defensive game is very mature and steady for a teenage defender.

Since the Olympic break, Schaefer has hit a new level with his two-way play-driving, earning nearly 56 percent of expected goals.

Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas' first pair of Shea Theodore and Brayden McNabb has had tremendous defensive success. They're giving up only 2.07 goals against per 60, which ranks fourth-best among all first pairs, and their expected goal differential ranks sixth-best. There's certainly room for them to find a higher gear offensively — the pair has only been on the ice for 2.67 goals for per 60, which ranks 20th — but it's hard to complain when they're still decisively winning their minutes.

Dallas Stars

Over the last two years, the Stars weren't afraid to load up Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley together on the same pair at times. Their play together was special: Heiskanen and Harley controlled over 60 percent of scoring chances, and they outscored teams by a margin similar to that of the Makar-Toews duo.

First-year head coach Glen Gulutzan has opted for a more balanced top-four approach this season, though, splitting Heiskanen and Harley for almost the entire season. Heiskanen has been stapled to Esa Lindell in a tough defensive matchups role, and their defensive results are sparkling, as they've allowed goals against at the fifth-best rate of all first pairs.

Ottawa Senators

Jake Sanderson and Artem Zub are an excellent lockdown pair defensively. Together, they've given the Senators a 57.6 percent control of high-danger chances and are elite at suppressing quality scoring chances, as they own the best expected goals against rate among all NHL first pairs. Ottawa's first pair is the backbone behind the team's enviable structure and elite analytical profile.

Minnesota Wild

It's surprising that Minnesota's top pair didn't rank higher, but it reflects a couple of factors.

First, Brock Faber's underlying numbers early in the season, before the Quinn Hughes acquisition, were underwhelming: Faber controlled only 47 percent of scoring chances and had a minus-one goal differential away from Hughes.

Second, Faber and Hughes had some bad luck defensively. Hughes and Faber are limiting scoring chances well, as their 2.49 expected goals against per 60 is a very respectable rate. They've been tagged for a lot of goals against, though (3.23 goals against per 60) in some part because they haven't been getting enough saves, as their goalies have combined for a poor .888 save percentage when this new-look first pair is on the ice at five-on-five.

Faber and Hughes have dominated puck possession and two-way scoring chance results, earning 57 percent of expected goals. They're lighting the lamp offensively too, with the Wild scoring 3.97 goals for per 60 during Faber and Hughes' minutes.

All of this is a long-winded way of saying that Hughes and Faber are one of the best top pairs in the NHL, despite Minnesota's middle-of-the-pack goal differential for the season.

Philadelphia Flyers

You'd expect the Flyers to rank lower in this exercise when you consider that they lack a true No. 1 defenseman. Philly's top pair has been anchored by Travis Sanheim, and he's been caddied by middling partners such as Cam York and Rasmus Ristolainen, which seems underwhelming on paper.

Defensemen always seem to thrive on Rick Tocchet-coached teams, though, and Philly's blue line is punching above its talent level: Jamie Drysdale has enjoyed a solid breakout on the second pair, and the top pair has held its own well relative to how weak the personnel looks on paper.

Philly's top pair predictably struggles to generate offense, but their defensive metrics are sturdy, including a 2.37 expected goals against per 60 rate, which is tied for sixth-best among NHL first pairs.

St. Louis Blues

Philip Broberg's continued development into a premier top-pair defenseman has been one of the few silver linings in an otherwise disappointing season for the Blues. Sure, St. Louis' top pair lags a bit offensively, with both its on-ice expected and actual goals scored rate ranking bottom-third among all first pairs, but they're rock-solid defensively at limiting scoring chances and keeping the puck out of their own net.

Logan Mailloux, who has stabilized his game after an awful start to the season, has been getting some reps next to Broberg lately, with Colton Parayko sliding down to the second pair.

Washington Capitals

The Capitals have iced two balanced top-four pairs this season. Jakob Chychrun is Washington's No. 1 defenseman and is having a stellar campaign, but for most of the season, the John Carlson/Martin Fehervary duo took line rushes as the team's "top pair," so I've zeroed in on their results.



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Carlson and Fehervary were excellent together, driving 53 percent of scoring chances and a plus-15 goal differential. Washington's top pair with Fehervary has suffered mightily since Carlson's trade, though, earning a dreadful 39 percent of expected goals and being outscored 12-7.

Los Angeles Kings

L.A.'s top pair of Drew Doughty and Mikey Anderson is a microcosm of the team as a whole: They're lackluster offensively, but they're still competitive because of how well they defend.

This pair doesn't have enough offensive pop because 36-year-old Doughty, who's only on pace to hit 27 points, isn't as dynamic as he once was. They're manufacturing only 2.12 goals per hour, which ranks in the bottom five among all first pairs. Doughty and Anderson still shine as shutdown options, though, as their expected and actual goals against rates both rank in the top 10.

Seattle Kraken

Seattle has two balanced top-four pairs, one run by Vince Dunn and the other by Brandon Montour. The Dunn/Adam Larsson pair is holding up OK on the scoreboard, but their underlying process is very concerning and has been masked to some degree by strong goaltending. Seattle has been outshot and outchanced by wide margins with its top pair on the ice, earning an ugly 43.3 percent expected goal share that ranks second-worst among all NHL first pairs.

Utah Mammoth

Mikhail Sergachev's overall game has taken a step back compared to last year.

He isn't driving play as authoritatively — Sergachev was the only Utah defender who didn't have an expected goal share of at least 50 percent heading into the Olympic break. He's been leaky defensively, as the Mammoth's top pair ranks bottom-10 in both expected and actual goals against rate.

Lately, Sergachev has been paired with newcomer MacKenzie Weegar. So far, the numbers indicate that this new-look combination has been decent but unspectacular, though it's too early to make a firm judgment.

Anaheim Ducks

Jackson LaCombe has continued his rise as an upper-echelon top-pair defender, but his pair's goal differential has lagged slightly for a couple of reasons.

For starters, LaCombe hasn't had a true first-pairing caliber partner all year. Jacob Trouba has had a solid, respectable season, but he's closer to a second-pairing quality player than he is a bona fide first-pair solution. John Carlson, acquired ahead of the trade deadline, has been a terrific fit on Anaheim's blue line, but he's played on a separate pairing from LaCombe, which makes sense as the Ducks try to spread out their two marquee puck-moving offensive defensemen.

LaCombe's pair is high-event: It ranks top-10 at generating expected goals offensively, but bottom-10 at suppressing expected goals defensively. Anaheim's top pair has been a little bit unlucky finishing-wise, otherwise their actual goal differential would be closer to ranking middle of the pack.

Calgary Flames

With the Flames trading away both MacKenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson, the organization doesn't have any established, top-pair caliber defensemen. Calgary will be hoping that Zayne Parekh can take those reins one day, but for now, Kevin Bahl has taken on an even bigger role.

Bahl has developed nicely into a steady, physical defensive defenseman, and his main partner, Zach Whitecloud, has exceeded expectations. They clearly wouldn't be top-pairing defensemen on contending teams, and the numbers aren't pretty: Calgary's top pair ranks 30th in expected goal differential. But overall, they haven't looked as outmatched as you'd expect, given how heavy and difficult their usage is.

New York Rangers

Adam Fox's health — he's only played 51 games this season — is the only reason the Rangers rank this low. When Fox has been healthy, he and Vladislav Gavrikov have been terrific, generating 64 percent of high-danger chances and just shy of 56 percent of goals.

Without Fox, the top pair has catastrophically crumbled: Gavrikov has driven only 40.2 percent of expected goals and had a minus-16 goal differential in nearly 700 minutes away from Fox. Those numbers shouldn't be viewed as a knock on Gavrikov, who has been a strong fit as a No. 2 option next to Fox. It's just unfair to expect him to drive play like a No. 1 when Fox is unavailable, especially because his alternative partner, Braden Schneider, was overmatched.

Florida Panthers

Gustav Forsling and Aaron Ekblad have had a down year relative to their elite standards. They're normally one of the stingiest shutdown pairs in the league, but their defensive numbers have fallen hard this season: Their expected goals against rate has dipped to the middle of the pack, and their 3.06 goals against per 60 rate ranks 29th among all NHL first pairs.

However, their statistical decline probably has more to do with factors outside their control than with their individual play. Aleksander Barkov's injury was, of course, a crushing blow considering how often he's matched with the Forsling-Ekblad pair in a tough matchups role.

Second, the Panthers' top pair was tanked by disappointing goaltending: Florida's netminders combined for an ugly .882 save percentage with Forsling on the ice, which is a massive drop-off compared to previous seasons.

Forsling's pair still generated more shots and chances than they gave up this season, so I'd expect them to rebound next year with a healthy Barkov and better goaltending.

Vancouver Canucks

The Canucks had a stretch from 2023 to 2025 in which the Quinn Hughes-Filip Hronek pair drove the NHL's best goal differential for two seasons. The goal differential for Vancouver's top pair has deteriorated significantly without Hughes, but it's important to clarify that this has nothing to do with Hronek's performance.

Hronek has been the Canucks' best player this year and his two-way play has stayed remarkably steady despite Hughes' departure. However, the team's overall structure/environment and talent level are so bleak, and Hronek's been partnered with struggling, mistake-prone defenders such as Zeev Buium and Elias Pettersson (the defenseman), so that's dragging down the first pair's statistical results.

Carolina Hurricanes

We shouldn't read too much into Carolina's disappointing first-pair results because there have been so many moving parts.

The most obvious factor is health, as Jacob Slavin has only suited up for 37 games this season. K'Andre Miller was forced to handle top-pair duties for large stretches when Slavin was hurt, and while I love Miller as a second-pair driver, the results weren't pretty with him in a No. 1 role, with the Miller-led first pair outscored 31-22 at five-on-five during the games Slavin missed. The top pair's results when Slavin was out are the main factor dragging down their goal differential — now that he's healthy again, those concerns should be assuaged.



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When Slavin has been available, Carolina's top pair has performed well, though there's still room for them to hit a higher level. Slavin's pair is still dominating all possession and scoring-chance metrics in classic Hurricanes fashion, including very stingy defensive results. However, Slavin is only driving a modest plus-two goal differential at five-on-five this season because of their sluggish offensive numbers: Slavin's only been on the ice for 2.37 goals for per 60, which is a low mark, and he's only scored six points in 37 games.

He and Jalen Chatfield, another defensive-minded player, are new partners this season — Slavin previously played with Brent Burns, and Chatfield with Dmitry Orlov. Slavin and Chatfield are an elite defensive duo, but it's fair to wonder whether they can drive enough offense together.

Toronto Maple Leafs

The Leafs haven't really had a true top pair this year.

Chris Tanev, arguably their best all-around defenseman last year, has missed all but 11 games. Jake McCabe has handled the most five-on-five defensive zone starts of all NHL defensemen and the toughest matchups. Some would consider McCabe's pair as Toronto's "first pair," but Morgan Rielly still takes line rushes as the top pair and is their highest-paid defenseman, so others would consider that the "top pair."

Rielly's pair — which we've counted as the "top pair" for this exercise — has had a much rougher ride than McCabe's pair, allowing a league-worst 3.58 goals against per 60. That's especially concerning because they've received much more favorable zone starts and matchups compared to McCabe's pair.

Nashville Predators

Roman Josi is still an excellent player, but at 35, he's showing signs of slowing down. Josi can still drive offense at a high level, but his pair concedes many Grade-A scoring chances, which is characteristic of the team as a whole. Nashville's top pair is giving up 3.16 goals against per 60, the third-worst mark among first pairs.

This is the second year in a row that Josi's pair has given up more than 3.00 goals against per game, which is notable because, before last season, Josi had an excellent defensive track record, with his pair surrendering fewer than 2.5 goals against per 60 for 10 consecutive seasons.

Chicago Blackhawks

Chicago's back end is exceptionally young, promising and inexperienced. The Blackhawks will have a nice blue line once some of those high-pedigree defensemen hit their prime, but for now, there isn't a lot in the way of established, high-end talent.

Alex Vlasic is the de facto No. 1. Vlasic is a legitimately solid player with his size, skating, and shutdown ability, but his pair has been overmatched on most nights, as they're getting crushed on the shot clock, have the worst expected goal differential among first pairs and have been outscored by a fairly wide margin.

New Jersey Devils

The Devils boast a deep crop of serviceable NHL defensemen, but they lack a true No. 1 to drive a first pairing. Jonas Siegenthaler and Dougie Hamilton have most frequently taken line rushes as the "top pair" and absorb the toughest matchups on the blue line. Together, they're actually driving a positive share of shots and scoring chances, but they've been snakebitten by a low on-ice shooting percentage (6.2 percent), and so they've only scored 1.87 goals per 60.

Where the numbers get really ugly is Siegenthaler's results away from Hamilton: He's earned just a 41.9 percent share of shots and 34 percent of goals in just under 500 minutes without Hamilton.

San Jose Sharks

It shouldn't be a surprise to see the Sharks' top pair rank this low. San Jose's forward group is exciting and has a lot of intriguing talent beyond just Macklin Celebrini, but its defensive core from No. 1 to No. 6 is arguably the worst in the NHL.

Dmitry Orlov and John Klingberg have been decent pick-ups on reasonable contracts, and their shot and scoring chance metrics aren't actually that bad, but they simply aren't top-pair caliber players at this stage in their careers.

Recently, San Jose has had to use journeyman Vincent Desharnais on the top pair because of Klingberg's injury, which speaks volumes about the team's need to bolster its back end this offseason.

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The Athletic / The Miracle on Ice U.S. hockey team felt pressure. Just not when you might think

By Elise Devlin

April 8, 2026

This article is part of our Asking Under Pressure series, which looks at how duos performed together in a highly competitive situation.

The Miracle on Ice U.S. men's hockey team carried a shared, unrelenting pressure for months, and experienced it in different ways.

Under head coach Herb Brooks, players were pushed to their limits in practice, enduring the most grueling conditioning of their lives. They arrived as underdogs at the 1980 Olympics, and with each upset win, expectations grew.

The strain forged something essential: trust. By the time they reached their most famous moment in Lake Placid, the semifinal against the heavily favored Soviet Union, the players had learned not just how to endure pressure but how to depend on one another within it.

The upset sent the U.S. to the gold medal game two days later against Finland. Late into the second period of that game, the Americans trailed.

Yet, in what should have been the most overwhelming moment of their athletic lives, they were once again composed and in sync, ultimately winning the game and the gold.

In the decades since, interest in the Miracle on Ice team has remained, but it picked up again in a big way this year, both with a new Netflix documentary and after the U.S. men's hockey team won gold for the first time since 1980.

I spoke with two key players from the 1980 team, Mike Eruzione, the captain and emotional leader, and Ken Morrow, a calm and steady defenseman who went on to win four Stanley Cups with the New York Islanders. Their roles and personalities couldn't have been more different years ago in Lake Placid, but they combined their skills and came together to help secure the gold medal.

To them, the formula to handle pressure is all very simple.

First, can you both walk me through the last 10 minutes of the Soviet Union game? Mike, you scored, and then you're all trying to hold on to that lead in those last couple of minutes. What was that like?

Eruzione: Well, I'll go first. I hate to answer it this way, but I didn't feel any pressure. I just wanted to keep playing and doing the things that we were



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already doing. You can't all of a sudden change what you're doing. One of the great things about Herb as a coach is we were playing in these important games and in important moments, and he's just on the bench, constantly saying, "Play your game, play your game." And my mind at that time said, "Yeah, let them worry about us."

Morrow: I looked up at the clock, and there was exactly 10 minutes to go, and I'm thinking to myself, "This is going to be the longest 10 minutes of your life."

But going into it, I don't think we felt much pressure at all, truthfully, because the expectations were that we were going to get blown out, you know?

When you're the underdog, you can play a looser style of hockey. To me, the pressure really came for our team later against Finland. That's where the pressure built up.

Eruzione: You play so hard, you play so well — now, the last 20 minutes of the game against Finland, we're down a goal. But then the best 20 minutes of hockey we played all year were those final 20 minutes.

Morrow: I've said it for 45 years: The proudest moment for me with our team from those two weeks in Lake Placid was the third period of the Finland game, and it was because we were down a goal. That's where the pressure was on, and we played by far our best period.

What made the difference in those moments? Mike, like you said, if you didn't necessarily feel all the pressure, why do you think that is? How did you get to that point?

Eruzione: I just think it was the confidence we had in all our abilities. One of the things you have to have is trust. If you trust your teammates, if you trust your coach, that takes a lot of pressure off you.

Because if everybody's doing what they're supposed to do, and you trust them to do that, it kind of eliminates any pressure.

Morrow: That whole year, we were under pressure. Whether it was from the way Herb was coaching, threatening to cut guys, to playing for five months, all just to lead up to those first two games that if we don't win, we don't make the medal round and our Olympics are done.

When you're put in those kinds of pressure situations, it helps you when you do actually get into a game against Russia and a game against Finland. You've been there.

What do you think you learned in those first few games that ended up translating later on in the Finland game and the Soviet Union game?

Morrow: I know guys talk about it a lot, but you don't want to let the guys next to you down, whether it's in the locker room or on the bench. And that's what should drive you as a player.

You have a bond and you're all working together, but there are still different personalities, and people handle things differently, especially pressure. Did each of you deal with these big games differently?

Morrow: I think you really need to have a team of different personalities. You can't have 20 of the same type of guys. You can't have 20 workers; you can't have 20 highly skilled guys. I think Herb knew that. You have to have different personalities.

Eruzione: And understand what your role is. Kenny's role was to steady the defensive corps by the way he played. My role might have been an emotional role or to be the vocal guy in a locker room. So I think everybody, when the puzzle was finally finished, everybody had a little piece of it. And when you see that and everybody is doing what their role is, it does, in a crazy way, get the pressure off of you.

Morrow: I've always tried to break leadership down into two really simple terms. For me, there are two types of leaders in those moments.

There are guys that go out and lead by example. They may not be the vocal guys, but they're the guys that, when they step on the ice, they lead by the way they play, how hard they play. And then you have the guys who are the vocal guys that will stand up. Those are the two types of leaders, and we had that.

It's funny because I think you're one of each. Ken, you're the one type, and Mike, you're the other, right?

Morrow: Absolutely. Yeah, I was very quiet. And Mike would stand up and obviously was a great captain for our team.

Eruzione: I remember when Kenny scored the goal in the Stanley Cup playoff run to win the game, and all he did was raise his stick and turned around and just went off the ice. I'd have been jumping up and down!

Morrow: Mike, I like how in the documentary, when you watched your celebration after you scored the goal, you were like, "Hmm, I don't know where that came from. I never did that."

Also, as Mike said, I was a guy that just stood in the background, and I just wanted to be playing my game, and Herb knew that, so he left me alone. He knew he couldn't ride me as hard as he rode other guys because I wouldn't respond to that.

Eruzione: Herb knew whose buttons to push in those moments. You yell at me, I get mad and I'll work harder. You can yell at Phil Verchota. You can yell at Buzzy (Buzz Schneider). You can yell at Jack O'Callahan. You're not going to yell at Mark Johnson. You're not going to yell at Kenny. So then, by screaming at certain players, that really sent the message to the team.

Mike, you said you'd look over at Ken in the big moments and say, "Well, he's our steady guy. He's going to be able to handle it." I think it also goes to show you, too, that when someone's working really hard alongside you for months, when it comes down to it, of course you're going to trust them, because you've seen how much they've given and all the work they put in up close.

Eruzione: I think sometimes people overthink leadership. They overthink what it takes for a team to be leaders. Don't complicate it. Being a leader is being a good teammate, being a good friend, being a good person.

If you have that, you have teammates that really respect each other and trust each other — now you have a team of leaders. And then, without even thinking about it, now you're not feeling any pressure because look who's in that room. Look at the guys that you're playing with.

That eliminates the pressure. You have players in that room that support you and want to be with you and want to help you. That eliminates pressure.

Morrow: Well said, Mike.

What's the most important thing that you guys took away from playing together in these big moments at the Olympics?

Eruzione: It's really just those silly little things, like a team bus trip or hotel room or something like that.

Well, now, I'd argue those silly little things aren't so silly and little because that's what bonds you together and gives you that trust that you need in the big moments, like you said.

Morrow: That's a good point, Elise.

Eruzione: I remember flying home after we won the gold medal. We were on the plane going from Washington to Boston, and me, Silky (Dave Silk) and Jack O'Callahan were on the plane going home. I looked at Dave, and he kind of had these tears in his eyes, and I said, "Silky, what's wrong?" He looked at me and said, "It's over. We will never play together again." And I was like, "Oh my God, you're right." It hits you that you don't often get to have that bond and love and friendship like we had.



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Morrow: The other thing is conditioning. I played 10 years in the NHL, and I was never, ever in better condition than I was with Herb's team. Just the fact that he was able to push me and everybody else beyond what you ever thought you could do.

That's almost the method to that madness, right? That kind of ridiculously challenging conditioning, I'm sure, showed you what you were capable of.

Eruzione: Yes. And we just dig too deep into pressure. I think you can handle pressure by being surrounded by great players, great people and hard workers. That is what takes pressure off.

Morrow: Exactly.

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Sportsnet.ca / Otherworldly McDavid helps Oilers bolster lead in Pacific Division

Mark Spector

Total command. Absolute control.

We could be talking about Connor McDavid's five-point night in a 5-2 win at San Jose. Or perhaps it was an Edmonton Oilers power play that entered the game on a two-for-20 run, but scored on all three opportunities versus the Sharks.

Or we could be referencing Edmonton's defensive play, surrendering just 14 Sharks shots on goal — including only four in the third period, when Tristan Jarry came on in relief of an injured Connor Ingram.

"Finding a way to get three on the power play should win a lot of nights," offered McDavid, who notched his 15th career hat trick. "But everyone defended. We checked hard. They've got some special players over there, one in particular. So I thought we did a good job defending."

It was a game that San Jose absolutely needed, using up one of their two games in hand while still trailing Nashville by three points for the final wild-card spot. And Edmonton played the night before in Utah, getting to their hotel rooms at around 1:30 a.m.

But it was the Oilers who were on point and detail-oriented. And it was McDavid not Macklin Celebrini (one goal) who brought the fans out of their seats in this one.

"I've grown to like back-to-backs a lot this year," McDavid said. "There's just something about them that I've been feeling really, really good in them. Feel on right away. And tonight, that was really the case."

McDavid was otherworldly in this one, pulling six points clear of Nikita Kucherov in the chase for his sixth Art Ross Trophy. Ever since Leon Draisaitl went down he's taken it upon himself to provide, and on this back-to-back he was in on seven of Edmonton's 10 goals.

"He knows that our team needed to win, and also we're playing a little shorthanded," head coach Kris Knoblauch said. "Who needs to pick us up? You know he's going to be the guy."

"Every shift, he was really dialled in. Played extremely well. I've seen him play a lot of good games, and that was one of his best."

With five points McDavid passed the great Bobby Clarke to move into 50th place on the NHL's all-time scoring list, with 1,215 points. Next up is Jeremy Roenick (1,216), Larry Murphy (1,217) and the esteemed Jean Beliveau (1,219).

He's also got 47 goals, and needs a goal-per-game pace in Edmonton's final three games to reach 50 for just the second time in his NHL career.

On a night this one, what goes through Evan Bouchard's mind?

"Just get him the puck," chuckled Bouchard, who was excellent at both ends of the rink after an off night against Utah.

The Oilers scored 10 goals in this back-to-back — minus injured snipers Draisaitl and Zach Hyman — and collected three of four points.

They are 5-1-2 in their last eight road games and 6-1-1 in their past eight overall, with three games left to play: Saturday in Los Angeles, and at home next week against Colorado and Vancouver.

Edmonton hasn't won their division in the regular season since the 1986-87 season, the longest current drought in the entire NHL. Now, they've won two Stanley Cups in the interim and been a Cup finalist three other times, but Edmonton won their third Stanley Cup in the spring of 1987 — so that's not nothing.

Uh oh...

Much to everyone's surprise, Jarry took the Oilers' net for the third period, after Ingram had stopped eight of the 10 shots he faced through 40 minutes.

Jarry had played the night before in Utah, surrendering all six goals in a 6-5 overtime loss. On Wednesday he gave the Oilers the saves they needed to close this one out, stopping all four shots he faced behind an Oilers defensive front that gave up virtually nothing to the Sharks.

As for Ingram, it sounds like he tweaked something. It was not bad enough, however, for the Oilers to have requested the EBUG in San Jose. Ingram served as the backup for the third period, skating out on the ice to stretch during TV timeouts.

"With about six minutes left, the last TV timeout in the second period, he felt a little discomfort," Knoblauch said. "He got tested out in the training room (in the intermission), and then we felt it was best for him, and obviously our team, to not push it and make something worse."

Edmonton has a day off in L.A. Thursday. The Bakersfield Condors are at home this weekend, so if Ingram is anywhere less than 100 per cent, we'd expect Calvin Pickard to drive down from Bako for Friday's practice and to back up Jarry on Saturday versus the Kings.

OIL SPILLS — With two assists Evan Bouchard crested the 90-point plateau for the first time in his career, with 91. Paul Coffey (four times) is the only other Oilers D-man to reach 90 points in a season. He also joins Coffey as the only defencemen in franchise history to register 70 assists in a season, something Coffey did three times ... Bouchard becomes only the 13th D-man in NHL history to score 90 points in a season ... With 795 career games, Darnell Nurse ties Kelly Buchberger for the eighth spot in games played in franchise history (credit to X user 50Oilers).

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Scary to see him go down': Stolarz's durability a major concern for Maple Leafs



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Luke Fox

TORONTO — The pad save looked routine. Yet it caused Anthony Stolarz to ditch his mask and wince face down in his crease in agony.

Toronto Maple Leafs trainer Paul Ayotte raced out on foot to speak with the injured goaltender, who eventually slung one arm over the shoulder of Bo Groulx and another over that of Simon Benoit. They guided the six-foot-three, 243-pound goaltender to the matted corridor.

Stolarz couldn't put weight on his left leg as he departed what should be his final game of the team's nightmarish season.

"Honestly, the first thing is you worry for him," said backup Joseph Woll, forced into action before Wednesday's 4-0 loss to the Washington Capitals was three minutes old. "It's kind of scary to see him go down like that. Like, he's a pretty tough dude."

"Just tough to watch," Benoit echoed.

For better or worse, this is the topsy-turvy Anthony Stolarz Toronto Experience.

When available and at his best, the largest Leaf can look like a confident world-beater, all glimmering masks and blockers to the face.

But Stolarz's long injury history just added another page and further evidence that the 32-year-old goaltender was smart to push for the richest contract extension of his life (four years, \$15 million) with then-GM Brad Treliving before the puck dropped on his spotty campaign.

That deal hasn't even kicked in.

"He's the one that brought me here," Stolarz said of Treliving last week, upon the executive's firing. "I appreciate everything he did for me and my family."

A mid-season "nerve issue" in his neck sidelined Stolarz for three months. A scary warmup puck off the throat sent him to an Ottawa hospital last month. And now a guy who has already rehabbed from multiple knee surgeries, including one in 2025, is off for another MRI.

"It's unfortunate," coach Craig Berube said. "He's been hurt a few times this year."

Stolarz positioned himself for his juicy raise by playing a career-high 34 games last season; he was only available for 26 in 2025-26.

Stolarz's 16-team no-trade list kicks in on July 1. And while Toronto is believed to be open to trading a veteran goalie to make room for the good ones on the farm, buyers will rightly be skeptical about the athlete's durability.

Even though Stolarz has outplayed his counterpart, Woll, lately. Woll gave up a career-high seven goals in L.A. Saturday and three on 17 Capitals shots Wednesday, dropping his save percentage to a career-low .901. Woll (15-15-7) will finish with more losses than wins for the first time in his career.

"I mean, for me, it's just going out there and taking it day by day, doing my business and doing what I can to contribute to this team and this organization," Stolarz said.

"At the end of the day, I got a four-year deal. So, for me, it's finish the year out strong and then go into the summer and train and start getting ready for next year."

The severity of Stolarz's latest ailment is unknown, but rehab might need to precede training.

The solution for now is prospect Artur Akhtyamov, who will make his first NHL start Thursday in New York against Peter DeBoer's Islanders.

Both Woll and third-stringer Dennis Hildeby played Tuesday, and Akhtyamov is hungry.

"Liked him right from camp," Berube said. "He backed up a couple times this year. He's got a great personality. He's played well down there (20-12-4, .903 in the AHL). He's a competitor, and he's really got fast reflexes.

"He's competitive as hell, man. I mean, I like the kid a lot."

Thursday's game will feature two more Marlies callups, as both forward Luke Haymes and defenceman William Villeneuve should make their big-league debuts.

That's, in part, because Brandon Carlo (lower body) and Dakota Joshua (upper body) also got injured against Washington. Moreover, centre Bo Groulx's emergency recall has expired, and he must rejoin the Marlies to abide by waiver rules.

We suppose getting a peek at what's inside the cupboards is a silver lining of sorts.

But another injury to the injury-prone starting goalie?

As Woll said: "It's not ideal."

Fox's Fast Five

- During warmups, Ovechkin made a point to scoop up a couple of pucks. They landed in the hands of Capitals head equipment manager Brock Myles, who stuffed them in his pocket for safekeeping.

Washington is expecting a swarm of media on Sunday for its final home game of the season, versus Sidney Crosby's Penguins, and has already announced that the captain will be appearing in their interview room following the matinee.

Yes, Ovechkin says his future is undecided.

- Licking his chops, Caps coach Spencer Carbery unleashed a monstrous checking line of Tom Wilson, Aliaksei Protas, and younger brother Ilya Protas, who was called up for his NHL debut.

Combined, the forwards stand 19 feet, four inches tall and weigh 700 pounds.

"That's like 15 of myself," Rasmus Sandin deadpanned.

Craig Berube quipped that he would have to "suit up" on Wednesday to deal with them.

"I think it's going to be the heaviest line in the league," Ovechkin smiled. "So... good luck."

- Funny seeing Rasmus Sandin, Timothy Liljegren, and David Kämpf all taking morning skate at SBA like old times. The latter two were scratched, but lefty Sandin is skating right side on the top pair with John Carlson gone.

Sandin was recently reminiscing about his Toronto days with his family, who attended a bunch of Leafs games all decked out in blue and white.

"Since I was 10, I've been moving around a lot in Sweden and then coming here. Before that, I was in Sault Ste. Marie, and now Washington. So, I think since I was 10 years old, this is the place where I've lived the longest in one stretch," Sandin says.

"I know the city very well. Obviously, I got the Nylanders here, so it's a special feeling coming back."

What happened to all those Maple Leafs sweaters and hats?

"Keep that to ourselves," he smiles coyly. "Maybe we tossed them, maybe we didn't. I mean, they haven't been worn since, I'll tell you that."

- With their 4-3 win over Utica, the Toronto Marlies qualified for the playoffs for a fourth consecutive spring.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Leafs rookie Easton Cowan is eligible to rejoin them for the post-season. He should.

• Scott Laughton describes Saturday's win over the Maple Leafs as one of the worst games of his career. Facing his former team after having them over to his place on the beach felt "weird," and too soon after getting traded to L.A. less than a month prior.

When Laughton went after a chirping Matthew Knies after a Leafs power-play goal that night, it raised eyebrows.

"Knies ain't paying for anything, I'll tell you that right now. He ain't the guy paying for anything," Laughton chuckled, during an interview with a Toronto radio station.

"Nah, he didn't even say anything bad, but that was the second power-play goal they scored. I was on for both, so I was a little upset. Gave him a light cross-check. I thought it was a weaker call, but definitely not the smartest on my part."

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Sportsnet.ca / Tough decisions loom for Canadiens' St. Louis, including what to do with Hage

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — It's been a lingering question, with the college season almost complete and Michael Hage appearing NHL-ready, and we're not closer to having it answered.

Albeit not definitively. Because even if Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis showed an unexpected level of flexibility with his lineup for Tuesday's 4-3 shootout win over the Florida Panthers, it's impossible to say for sure what he'll do with Hage if/when management signs the 21st-overall pick in the 2024 draft to an entry-level contract before the end of the regular season.

With four games remaining, the Canadiens are four points out of first place in the Eastern Conference and in a three-way tie for top spot in the Atlantic Division and St. Louis already said twice in the last 48 hours that the top priority is to win games and accomplish those goals.

But changes he made to Montreal's lineup Tuesday made it clear it's not the only priority.

That St. Louis made so many of them to test different players in different situations suggested he might be open to making more, and Hage could be his biggest one yet.

The dynamic, 19-year-old forward, who's posted 26 goals and 85 points over 71 games spread over the last two years with the Michigan Wolverines, is headed to the Frozen Four. He could win a national championship Saturday, but he could also be available to the Canadiens by then if the Wolverines lose to the Denver Pioneers in the second semifinal on Thursday.

With playoff positioning and home-ice advantage still at play, it felt questionable St. Louis would pop Hage into his lineup for even one game before the end of the season — Hage would likely only be available for one if he plays in Saturday's championship game — and that was still the case Tuesday morning.

The coach was asked then about changes and didn't guarantee any of them, despite Joe Veleno's unclear status for the game. He was also

asked about what he'd like to see from the Canadiens' second line and never gave any indication he intended on tweaking it.

Then came Tuesday night.

Scratching Brendan Gallagher to get Kirby Dach back in after Dach missed 11 games with an upper-body injury wasn't much of a surprise, but bringing Alex Texier in off his seven-game absence with a lower-body injury for Veleno (sick) and placing him in Oliver Kapanen's place on Montreal's second line was.

Kapanen, who has 22 goals this season, moved to the fourth line with Phillip Danault and Josh Anderson, making it the first game he'd played away from Ivan Demidov this season.

The result was strong enough to suggest it won't be the last one.

Texier did what Kapanen hasn't been able to do as much of, making a new combination with Demidov particularly compelling.

St. Louis said earlier in the day that Texier's ability to extend offensive-zone time and play in possession was key no matter where he slotted in.

And then he said after the game, over which Demidov was Montreal's most threatening player opposite Texier, "When you extend and the other team gets a little tired, now (Demidov) gets a touch and he's got a little bit of space, he's tough to handle. We've got to get it to that, we've got to create more instances for him."

Alex Newhook's speed and versatility between Texier and Demidov — not to mention his improved faceoff percentage of late — made him a good fit to balance out the line.

But those are the elements that make Newhook a good fit anywhere in this lineup, potentially making way for Hage to step in and have a chance to showcase his ability from the place he'd fit best — with Texier and Demidov — for at least a game.

"I think (Hage is) a dynamic skater, really good hockey mind," said Canadiens defenceman Lane Hutson, who came out of college and jumped into NHL games in April of 2024.

"I think he's just got a really high hockey IQ," Hutson continued. "He competes and is a lot of fun to watch. Tons of skill."

Throwing Hage in at this stage of the season still represents a difficult decision for St. Louis, though.

The coach will have many more to make before the Canadiens are through playing hockey this spring.

Take Veleno, for instance: He was missing for a valid reason Tuesday night, and now could find himself as a healthy scratch again before long, despite playing so well that St. Louis was praising him up and down Tuesday morning.

"He's playing with some jam, and he's playing with a lot of details defensively," the coach said of the player who ranks third on the Canadiens in hits (149) and has been a key cog on an improved penalty kill of late.

"He's been very noticeable, disruptive, and he's been really good," St. Louis added on Veleno.

If Gallagher hasn't been as effective through the second half of this season, he still has a body of work in the playoffs that suggests he'll be needed.

Scratching Gallagher for the odd regular-season game is one thing, but doing so for a playoff game is another. The 33-year-old has the most playoff experience of anyone on the team and he plays the brand of hockey that prevails at that time.

Kapanen, who's played so mature that it's easy to forget he's a rookie, has yet to show he does.



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Part of that is he has only three games of playoff experience.

The Finn has been a great complementary piece in the top six for most of the season, though, and he has enough variety in his game to make him effective anywhere.

Still, St. Louis will have to watch Kapanen play more games in the bottom six and ask himself just how much more effective he'll be than Veleno or Gallagher — not to mention Dach — in such a role come playoff time.

As St. Louis mentioned after Wednesday's practice, he hasn't had to weigh so many different factors in his decisions to date.

He must balance factors of age and experience with youth, talent and energy. He must consider roles of each of his players. He must also find ways to keep everyone engaged and prepared to give the Canadiens what they'll need at any given moment.

"How do I do it?" St. Louis asked.

"I don't know, but I'll do my best doing it," he responded.

There's still time before the decisions he makes become that much more consequential, with the playoffs more than a week away.

How St. Louis made decisions Tuesday suggested he's willing to experiment, though, for now. Even with playoff positioning and home-ice advantage still on the line.

That could open the door to Hage as soon as he's available to play.

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Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: The top 32 prospects not yet in the NHL

Jason Bukala

As the NHL regular season winds down, some teams will have their focus on the Stanley Cup Playoffs and chasing down the ultimate prize at the end of it. Others will be thinking ahead to the off-season, how to fill holes in their rosters, and plan for the draft in June.

Regardless of where a team fits into that range, this time of season also puts NHL affiliated prospects in focus. Those players may be involved in high stakes playoff games, or they may be signing pro contracts as their seasons end and moving up a level.

It's with that in mind Sportsnet scout Jason Bukala set out to rank the top 32 NHL affiliated prospects -- whether drafted or signed out of college -- who have not yet played a game in the world's top league. Some of the players listed below have seen AHL action, while others have yet to make the leap up into pro hockey. But Bukala identifies and ranks which of these players project to have the best NHL careers in time.

You may even see some of them make their NHL debuts in the coming days.

It's important to note that these rankings do not include anyone eligible for the upcoming 2026 draft as we rank those players separately all season. And also, any player who has seen even one game of NHL action does not qualify for this list.

On to Bukala and his analysis...

SCOUT'S ANALYSIS

Ranking developing prospects who are competing at different levels throughout the world isn't an exact science. But I've come up with 32

players who have my full attention at this stage of their journey towards becoming an NHL player.

Here's a brief update on some of the top players who are trending towards earning time in the NHL in the near future:

No. 1: James Hagens, left shot centre, Boston Bruins

Hagens recently signed a tryout agreement with the Bruins' AHL affiliate in Providence. He projects as a top-six NHL forward. Hagens' most elite element is clearly his offensive upside. The former Boston College standout completed his sophomore season this year and finished 10th in the overall NCAA scoring race with 23G-24A in 34 games played.

No. 2: Alexander Zharovsky, left shot winger, Montreal Canadiens

Zharovsky has a chance to become the steal of the 2025 draft. The Canadiens selected the uber-talented forward in the second-round (34th overall) last year in Los Angeles. Zharovsky will need to continue to add strength to his frame, but he produced 16G-26A in the KHL this season playing for Salavat Yulaev Ufa.

No. 3: Michael Hage, right shot centre, Montreal Canadiens

Hage projects to be the Habs' second-line centre of the future -- and that future could arrive as soon as this weekend after his season ends at the NCAA Frozen Four in Las Vegas. Hage is completing his sophomore season with the Michigan Wolverines. He finished tied for fourth in NCAA scoring this year (13G-38A) and has contributed 26G-59A total over his first two college campaigns.

No. 4: Tij Iginla, left shot winger, Utah Mammoth

Iginla had a fantastic regular season playing for the Memorial Cup host Kelowna Rockets. He's a big-time shooter who produced 41G-49A in only 48 regular season games. In Kelowna's first-round victory over Kamloops in the WHL playoffs he contributed 5G-5A in the four-game sweep. Iginla is the kind of player who elevates his overall game at the hardest time of the year. The apple didn't fall far from the tree when comparing him to his father, former NHL star Jarome Iginla.

No. 5: Caleb Desnoyers, left shot centre, Utah Mammoth

Utah, like Montreal, is a team on the rise. They have an embarrassment of depth in their prospect pool. Desnoyers projects as a top-six centre who can be deployed in a variety of roles. He produces offence (22G-56A in 45 games this season) without sacrificing detail defensively. Desnoyers finished the regular season plus-36, which speaks to his commitment in all three zones.

No. 6: Ilya Protas, left shot winger, Washington Capitals

Protas, like Zharovsky, is a shining example of a prospect who was selected later than others on this list, but is tracking towards an impactful NHL career. The Caps selected Protas in the third round (75th overall) in 2024. They already had Ilya's brother Aliaksei in the fold and have to be excited about Ilya's development to date. The 6-foot-5, 201-pound winger has contributed 28G-34A at the AHL level playing for Hershey this year after ending his OHL career with the Windsor Spitfires and producing 50G-74A in 2025. He makes this list just in time, as his NHL debut is expected to happen against Toronto Wednesday night.

No. 7: Yegor Surin, left shot centre, Nashville Predators

The Predators have a top-flight prospect on the horizon in Surin. His combination of size (6-foot-2, 198 pounds) and skill project him as a potential top-six centre. It should be noted Surin can also play the wing, so Nashville has flexibility in how to slot him into their lineup. He's skilled and hard to play against. Surin contributed 15G-22A playing for Lokomotiv Yaroslavl in the KHL this season.

No. 8: Trey Augustine, left catching goaltender, Detroit Red Wings



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Augustine was arguably the most dominant goalie in the NCAA during his three years at Michigan State. The Red Wings recently signed Augustine to his entry-level contract -- beginning next season -- after his junior year ended and he's in line to compete to become their future No. 1 puck-stopper. Augustine is a finalist for the Mike Richter Award (top goalie in the NCAA) after posting a 24-9-1 record, 2.08 GAA and .922 save percentage.

No. 9: Victor Eklund, right shot winger, New York Islanders

Eklund has made his way over to North America after his season ended playing in Sweden's top league with Djurgardens. He's a relentless competitor who always seems to be around the play. His combination of speed, skill and work ethic project Eklund as a top-six winger at the NHL level. In his first four games playing for Bridgeport at the AHL level he's contributed six assists.

No. 10: Max Plante, left shot winger, Detroit Red Wings

Plante is another prospect on this list who was selected outside the first round, the Wings calling his name 47th overall at the 2024 draft. Plante plays the game fast. He's a threat off the rush and is very competitive. As of now it appears Plante will be heading back to Minnesota-Duluth for his junior season next year. He produced 25G-27A in 40 this past season and is one of three finalists for the Hobey Baker Award.

No. 11: Kashawn Aitcheson, left shot defenceman, New York Islanders

Aitcheson's combination of size (6-foot-2, 196 pounds), toughness and skill are intriguing. He's currently playing for the Barrie Colts in the OHL playoffs after producing 28gG-42A in the regular season. Aitcheson logs over 25 minutes per game in all situations at the junior level. He's one of the hardest checking players in all of junior hockey and backs it up by dropping the mitts when required.

No. 12: Anton Silayev, left shot defenceman, New Jersey Devils

Silayev is easily defined. The towering (6-foot-7, 211-pound) defenceman is an outstanding skater who takes away time and space with his length. The Devils selected the two-way defender 10th overall in 2024. He doesn't produce much offensively, but he kills plays defensively and launches the attack with accurate outlets. Silayev leans top-four shutdown defenceman at the NHL level.

No. 13: Jackson Smith, left shot defenceman, Columbus Blue Jackets

Smith made the move to the NCAA last summer, after being selected 14th overall out of the WHL's Tri-City Americans, and grew as a prospect playing at Penn State in 2025-26. He's an excellent skater and capable of quarterbacking the power play. Defensively, he uses his size (6-foot-4, 205 pounds) and small area quickness to intercept plays. Smith is unsigned and headed back to Penn State for his sophomore year in the fall.

No. 14: Jake O'Brien, right shot centre, Seattle Kraken

O'Brien is currently competing in the OHL playoffs with the Brantford Bulldogs. The Kraken selected O'Brien eighth overall at last year's draft. He's the captain in Brantford and logs a ton of ice time in all situations. O'Brien's most elite element is offence. Over the course of the past two seasons he's recorded 60G-131A.

No. 15: Cole Reschny, left shot centre, Calgary Flames

What I appreciate most about Reschny's overall approach is he comes prepared with an "A" and "B" game. When he isn't producing offence he can be relied upon in key defensive scenarios, including killing penalties. Having said that, he contributed 6G-29A in his freshman season at North Dakota (NCAA) and he's a big reason why the Fighting Hawks are competing for a national championship at the Frozen Four this weekend in Las Vegas. Calgary selected Reschny 18th overall in 2025.

No. 16: Roger McQueen, right shot centre, Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks selected McQueen 10th overall last year. He's a massive centre (6-foot-6 198 pounds) who produced 11G-16A playing for Providence College this season. McQueen is a solid skater with a skill type that projects him as a top-six centre at the NHL level. Anaheim values big, strong, skilled players. McQueen ticks off all those boxes.

No. 17: Will Horcoff, left shot forward, Pittsburgh Penguins

Horcoff is another towering forward on this ranking. He's listed at 6-foot-5, 203 pounds and projects as a power-forward goal scorer. Horcoff, like Reschny, is competing at the NCAA Frozen Four this weekend for the University of Michigan. Horcoff produced 25G-13A in the regular season.

No. 18: Jack Pridham, right shot winger, Chicago Blackhawks

Pridham has come into his own playing for the Kitchener Rangers in the OHL. The Hawks drafted Pridham in the third round (92nd overall) in 2024. He leans shooter more than natural playmaker. Pridham produced 46G-44A in 65 regular season games this year. His combination of size (6-foot-2 185 pounds) and commitment to detail (plus-38) is noteworthy.

No. 19: Andrew Cristall, left shot winger, Washington Capitals

Cristall is a gregarious personality and proven offensive catalyst. The Caps did well drafting Cristall 40th overall in 2023. After contributing 155G-252A at the junior level he has hit the ground running in his first AHL season. Cristall continues to play to his identity. He's produced 19G-38A for the Caps' top affiliate, the Hershey Bears, in his rookie season. It's impossible to teach the skill Cristall has. Some teams have doubted his skating ability in the past, but those same teams might regret overlooking Cristall in the coming years.

No. 20: Quentin Musty, left shot winger, San Jose Sharks

Musty will need to continue to evolve defensively, but his offensive upside is attractive. He's a proven goal scorer who produced 111G-159A over parts of four seasons playing for the Sudbury Wolves (OHL) before joining San Jose's AHL affiliate, the Barracuda, this year. Musty has contributed 19G-21A in his rookie pro season. He's off to a solid start with his pro career and could end up slotting into a top-six role with the Sharks in time.

No. 21: Oliver Bonk, right shot defenceman, Philadelphia Flyers

Right-shot defenders are worth their weight in gold as prospects and Bonk fits the category. The 6-foot-2, 198-pound defenceman needs some time to adjust to the pro game, but he's exceptionally competitive, skates very well and can be thrust into a variety of roles. The two-way defenceman started the year nursing an injury, but has gone on to produce 6G-13A in 42 games with the Flyers' AHL affiliate, the Lehigh Valley Phantoms.

No. 22: Carter Bear, left shot forward, Detroit Red Wings

The Wings selected Bear 13th overall last June. He's an intriguing prospect who plays aggressively and has a nose for the net. Bear finishes his checks, works to extend plays in the hard areas and contributed 36G-41A in 53 games playing for Everett in the WHL this season.

No. 23: Ilya Nabokov, left catching goaltender, Colorado Avalanche

Nabokov is a solid NHL goalie prospect who was selected 38th overall by the Avs in 2024. Although he is playing for Magnitogorsk in the KHL, he has signed his entry-level contract with Colorado and could end up in North America as early as next season. He's a relatively compact goaltender (6-foot-1, 179 pounds) who possesses great feet and crease quickness.

No. 24: Vaclav Nestrail, right shot winger, Chicago Blackhawks

The Hawks nabbed Nestrail with the 25th overall selection last June. He too is a towering forward. Nestrail is listed at 6-foot-6, 190 pounds and



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playing for UMass at the NCAA level. Nestrasil uses his length as an advantage digging out pucks along the boards, setting screens, and looking for rebounds around his opponent's crease. His skating has to develop a bit, but his effort on and off the puck this year was obvious. Nestrasil produced 13G-18A in his freshman season.

No. 25: Justin Carbonneau, right shot winger, St. Louis Blues

Carbonneau reminds me of a younger David Perron. He isn't a burner in open ice, but Carbonneau possesses incredible puck touch and the ability to make plays in a phone booth. It's rare to see him mishandle a puck in high danger scoring areas. With that in mind, Carbonneau projects to have top-six scoring upside at the NHL level. He's especially dangerous on the power play. Carbonneau produced 51G-29A in 60 games playing for Blainville-Boisbriand in the QMJHL this season. He's contributed 3G-4A in the Armada's first four playoff games.

No. 26: Liam Greentree, left shot winger, New York Rangers

Greentree is a dual threat forward. He's deployed in all situations playing for the Windsor Spitfires in the OHL. On balance, the 6-foot-3, 216-pound forward leans shooter more than playmaker, but he has solid vision in the offensive zone and the size to extend plays in the trenches. The LA Kings originally selected Greentree 26th overall in 2024, but he was part of the trade package Los Angeles sent to the Rangers to get Artemi Panarin. Greentree produced 38G-36A in 52 regular season games this year and he's off to a great start in the OHL playoffs (4G-3A in four games).

No. 27: Radim Mrtka, right shot defenceman, Buffalo Sabres

Mrtka was selected ninth overall by the Sabres last year. Like most prospects on my list, he has a huge physical presence. Mrtka is listed at 6-foot-6 and 218 pounds. He's a two-way defenceman who has enough skill to quarterback a power play, but I'm projecting him as more of a shutdown defender at the NHL level.

No. 28: Adam Jiricek, right shot defenceman, St. Louis Blues

Jiricek is an intriguing prospect playing for the OHL's Brantford Bulldogs. His entire game is on the rise. Early in his development Jiricek battled injury, but the 6-foot-2, 185-pound defenceman has added strength to his frame and displays creative skill offensively. He's deployed in all situations at the junior level and contributed 19G-40A in the regular season.

No. 29: Jack Ivankovic, left catching goaltender, Nashville Predators

I'm comfortable stating that the Preds envision Ivankovic developing into the next version of Juuse Saros for their organization. He has a similar stature (5-foot-11, 179 pounds) and is equally athletic. Ivankovic played almost every minute for the University of Michigan this season and posted a 25-7-1 record, 2.13 GAA and .923 save percentage.

No. 30: Charlie Stramel, right shot centre, Minnesota Wild

The Wild had to be patient with Stramel developing at the NCAA level. He started his college career at Wisconsin before transferring to Michigan State in his junior season. Stramel blossomed at MSU. He was a big part of their team's success the past two years, contributing 28G-43A. The 6-foot-3, 216-pound forward suffered an injury in the NCAA tournament that has forced him out of the lineup for the remainder of the season, but the Wild have their 2023 first-round selection (21st overall) under contract for next year.

No. 31: Dean Letourneau, right shot forward, Boston Bruins

Letourneau needs time to develop further at the NCAA level, but he took a massive step forward this season playing at Boston College. Letourneau figured out how to use his size (6-foot-7, 230 pounds) to his advantage and it led to a productive season offensively (22G-17A). Everything about this burgeoning power forward/goal scorer is on the rise. The Bruins first-round selection (25th overall in 2024) was the most improved player at the college level for me this season.

No. 32: Joshua Ravensbergen, right catching goaltender, San Jose Sharks

I've always appreciated Ravensbergen's athletic ability. He's very coordinated for his size (6-foot-5, 191 pounds). His crease composure has improved this year as well. Ravensbergen plays between his posts more consistently at this stage of his development and the results speak for themselves (2.51 GAA, .919 SV%). The 30th overall selection from last year's draft is trending up overall. His combination of size, and the fact he catches with his right-hand, gives shooters a different look and forces them into making some adjustments directing pucks his way.

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Sportsnet.ca / Devin Cooley's perseverance worthy of Masterton Trophy

Eric Francis

CALGARY — There were nights in Michigan, long before the NHL dream hardened into anything real, when Devin Cooley sat alone and rehearsed the hardest conversation he could imagine having with his father.

He was 19, a Californian fish out of water in the USHL, and by his own blunt assessment, "the worst goalie in the league."

He didn't fit in. It wasn't working.

"I didn't have many friends on the team, I was probably just a little weirdo," said the Flames netminder.

"It was a huge culture shock going from California to Michigan and playing with a bunch of guys from Canada and the Midwest. It was just so different. I didn't really know how to handle it and then you add that on top of not being able to perform well. Then you're like, 'well, maybe I'm not really cut out for this.'"

He spent half that year trying to script the words: Dad, I don't want to play anymore.

Enter Joey Daccord.

"He said, 'Hey dude, you should come to my dad's goalie camp,'" Cooley remembers of his USHL teammate, who now tends twine for the Seattle Kraken.

"I went there for two weeks, and I fell in love with the game again. I was like, 'oh my god, this is amazing. I'm having so much fun. I love hockey again.'"

It didn't just save his career, it saved his relationship with the game.

It also set the tone for a journey so improbable, so winding, so emotionally fraught, that the Calgary chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association saw fit to name Cooley as the Flames' nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy on Wednesday. The award, for perseverance and dedication to the game, is all about honouring journeys like Cooley's.

His path has never been linear. It's barely been logical.

He was cut from three USHL camps. He bounced between the NAHL and BCHL. He walked on at the University of Denver and didn't even travel with the team his first year. He spent five years as a minor-league depth goalie, including two stints in the ECHL. His NHL resume before arriving in Calgary consisted of six games in San Jose, several of them nightmarish.



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And then came last season, the one that was supposed to be his breakthrough.

Finally armed with the structure to complement his size and athleticism, he became an AHL All-Star with the Wranglers. He was finally a starter, finally playing to his potential.

Then came the concussion. The derailment. The darkness.

"When I came back nothing worked anymore," he said. "It was like I was a totally different person. I felt like I was just like a ghost haunting the earth."

For a player who had already questioned his place in the sport more times than he can count, this was the kind of setback that ends careers.

Instead, he turned it into a study.

"I spent an entire off-season working on the mental side of the game and working on understanding the brain, understanding neuroscience, psychology, performance, and everything I possibly could," said the personable netminder, who often addresses the media with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a counsellor telling campfire tales.

"Because I did that, now the mental side of things is probably the strongest it's ever been in my entire life."

Like most of his setbacks, it made him stronger, more enthusiastic, if that's even possible.

At 28, an age when most goalies have long since been labeled what they are, Cooley opened this season as Dustin Wolf's backup, with no guarantees.

He now platoons with one of the league's most exciting young pillars and sits among the league leaders in save percentage and goals-against average, earning him a two-year extension. He's become one of the Flames' most reliable players and one of their most endearing personalities.

He found out about his Masterton nomination while reading on the couch with his relatively famous rabbit, Tito.

"That's not even a lie," he grinned. "I was like, 'Oh, no way.' It's so exciting."

As the PHWA sorts through all 32 nominees to determine a winner, a story like his will be hard to ignore.

Cooley is the epitome of resilience: undrafted, overlooked, cut, concussed, displaced, doubted. And yet, always, he kept going.

Even when he didn't want to.

"Yeah, a few times," he admitted when asked if he ever considered quitting.

"Especially after a really bad day, I would sit there and be like, 'I don't know how much longer I can do this.' Then the next day I would wake up and I was like, 'I will quit when I'm dead.' I will never quit."

On the back of Cooley's helmet are four letters: IIAS.

It comes from a Dirty South song, but for Cooley it's become a philosophy.

"It says, 'if it all stops, could you say that you tried?'" he explained.

"Basically, I just wanted to give it my all every single day, and if it didn't work out, then at least I could say I tried."

The Masterton Trophy isn't about stats, though Cooley has those now.

It's about spirit. It's about the players who refuse to let go of the rope, even when their hands are bleeding.

Cooley didn't just hold on, he kept climbing.

From the worst goalie in the USHL to one of the NHL's best stories, his journey is a reminder that perseverance isn't pretty. It's lonely. It's painful. It's uncertain.

But it's also powerful.

And in Calgary, it's finally paying off.

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Sportsnet.ca / Alex Ovechkin savouring potential final game in Canada

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The greatest goal scorer who ever lived has no interest in hyping up what may well be his final professional hockey game in Canada.

"I don't know if it's the end or not," Alex Ovechkin said Wednesday morning at Toronto Scotiabank Arena. "I'm still enjoy it. I'm still have fun. I'm still happy to be with the boys."

But the boys have access to the standings, and they show the Washington Capitals — the franchise Ovechkin made great — four teams and five points out of a playoff spot with only four games to go.

Quite possibly in a colourful, charismatic, calamitous career unlike any we've seen or will witness again.

"It's just healthwise, you know?" Ovechkin said. "If I was 35 or 25, it's one thing, but when you're 40, you have to think for future."

Ovechkin, a free agent on July 1, said he'll have discussions with his family and general manager Chris Patrick and would like to make his decision by the first day of summer.

"Game's changed almost every year," Ovechkin said. "More faces come into the league, and you can see how fast they are, how skilled they are. And obviously you have to adjust yourself, your body, your mind. And, yeah... you know, it's life."

Ovechkin was noncommittal on the popular theory that he'd return to playing in the KHL once he felt the NHL has speeded past him, and he brushed off the notion of chasing Wayne Gretzky's combined regular-season and playoff goal record (1,016), a mark he'd surely pass with one-year contract, as Ovechkin has already racked up 1,005 total.

"Of course, people talk about it," Ovechkin said, "but I'm concentrated right now on different things."

Like helping the only North American team he's known gather a couple of points in Toronto, a town he's already torched for 25 goals over 30 games and one that inspires his A game.

"Yeah, it's history," Ovechkin said. "Fans, you guys... it's always nice to play when it's sold out and people know about hockey."

If you're seeking clues, wondering if this is indeed Ovechkin's swan song, Dylan Strome provides a big one.

Ovechkin, his centreman says, isn't interested in a Derek Jeter-like farewell tour.

Maybe because he already soaked in one during last season's Gr8 Chase™. The Capitals were a travelling circus for months. Hordes of media, constant attention, demands on time.



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The team's accomplishments, while impressive, were secondary to the individual's.

"It was really cool to be a part of," Strome said. "I don't think he wants to do that again, to be honest. I'm not gonna put words in his mouth, but he did say he doesn't want the big sendoff."

"He deserves whatever he would want. So, as a teammate, you're just trying to be there for him and enjoy the time to get to play with him."

If this is the end — and it feels like it may be — Ovechkin is going out with a blast, registering his 20th 30-goal campaign as the third-oldest player on the circuit.

True, he's starting an insane 90.8 per cent of his shifts in the offensive zone and is a prominent feature of PP1 and PP2, but 26 of his 31 goals are at even-strength and he has still launched 128 hits.

"Anything you don't think Alex Ovechkin can't do, you're sorely mistaken," coach Spencer Carbery. "It happened last year. It happened this year, where you think maybe the goals have dried up. And all of a sudden, he scores nine goals in 12 games. Next thing you know, you look at the stat pack, and he's got 30 goals on the season. He's 40 years old, and you just shake your head."

"He defies all logic when it comes to as fast as the league has gotten, as good as the league's gotten, he's still productive at this point in his career."

And still wholly engaged.

Goalie Logan Thompson says if Ovechkin throws out the Bat-signal to go for beers, teammates come running.

"No one's more excited when other guys score goal than he is," Strome adds. "I think you can learn a lot from that."

Ex-Capital and current Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube relays an anecdote about Ovechkin's adaptability.

A teammate was feeding No. 8 pucks at practice so he could work on his trademark one-timer from the flank. Ovechkin asked his passer to quit sending him flat pucks in his wheelhouse. He'd rather them imperfect, rolling and slithering and dusty. Like in real life.

"He knows in a game he's not going to get it on the tape all the time," Berube says. "I mean, his shot was... you know, I don't know if there's anybody that could shoot a puck like that."

Strome recalls his very first day in Washington, prior to training camp in 2022. There was a buzz in the gym that the captain was coming back into town. And as Ovechkin walked into the trainers' room, the jokes began flying. He gave every single man a big hug, including Strome.

They'd never met.

"Immediately when he walks into the room, the room lights up. And everyone just seems to be happier — because he's usually yelling something first thing when he walks in," Strome says. "He never takes the game for granted and just loves every day in the NHL. And I think that's something we can all learn from."

The 44-year-old Carbery's own playing career, as a left wing no less, came and went, and he started a fresh one in coaching as Ovechkin's has endured. Carbery focuses on guiding the team, but he'll still reflect once in a while on his part in Ovechkin's history. Pinch-me moments along a ride that may finally come to a halt next week.

Without proclamation or ceremony.

Heck, the next time Ovechkin rolls into Toronto for a hockey event, it might be up the street, at the Hall of Fame.

"However he wanted to go out, he's earned that right," Carbery said. "Whether he's back next year, he'll be welcomed with open arms."

"And if this is it, we'll support him that way. And I'll celebrate him and give him a big hug and have a cold beer with him."

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers lose to motivated Mammoth in possible playoff preview

Mark Spector

As it turns out, in a game the Edmonton Oilers led for all but 11 seconds, they were lucky to escape Salt Lake City with a point in a 6-5 overtime loss.

Did the Oilers hold leads of 3-1, 4-3 and (with seven minutes to play) 5-4? Yes they did.

Bur were they absolutely on their heels, pinned in their defensive zone for most of the third period, while the Utah Mammoth possessed the puck in Edmonton's zone? You bet they were.

"We obviously gave up too many chances," said defenceman Darnell Nurse. "When you're trying to score six to win a game, it's tough to get that done. So defensively, we can definitely up the details in our own zone."

Two days after Connor McDavid talked about playing low-event hockey against the offensively talented Mammoth, this game was anything but, with the Mammoth logging 12 high danger chances to Edmonton's eight.

In what could be a preview of a riveting Round 1 matchup between these teams, it was Utah that controlled the pace in the third period, while Edmonton was hanging on for dear life.

The good news? The Oilers managed to score five times with both Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman out of the lineup, and they received depth goals from Colton Dach and Curtis Lazar.

"It was nice to see the offence was there. We had the goals, but just too many chances against," lamented head coach Kris Knoblauch, whose team just couldn't break the puck out of their own zone with any consistency. "So many problems tonight started with just not being able to get the puck up ice and having to spend time in the defensive zone."

"If we get those breakouts, we're out of the zone. We're also not tired and getting run down in our zone. For me, that's the starting point."

The point leaves Edmonton exactly where they were when the night began: tied atop the Pacific and holding the tie-breaker, but with Vegas now, not Anaheim. With four games to play, the Pacific is wide open, with Anaheim losing 5-0 at home to Nashville Tuesday, while Vegas beat the moribund Vancouver Canucks 2-1, surrendering just 11 shots on goal.

Mammoth Opportunity

The franchise shift to Utah from Arizona has been one of Gary Bettman's great recoveries. After Bettman held his faith in a series of bad owners who left unpaid bills scattered across the desert, Utah owner Ryan Smith is as solid as solid can be in Salt Lake City — and his up-and-coming hockey team looks to be no different.

The Mammoth have become an exciting offensive machine, scoring six or more goals in each of their last four games. They've posted an 8-1-1 road record since March 1.

Slight problem though — Utah dragged a 1-5-1 home record since March 1 into Edmonton's visit, and the Mammoth play five of their final six



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games at the Delta Center as they cling to a wild card spot and this franchise's first playoff berth since the 2020 bubble.

If the Mammoth can qualify for the post-season this spring — they control their own destiny and have the first wild card spot all but wrapped up out West — it will be just the second time in 13 years that this franchise played past Game 82, after a lot of bad years in the Arizona desert.

McFeelin' It

How good was Connor McDavid on a Tuesday night in Salt Lake City? Oh boy...

He walked through the whole Mammoth penalty kill for this goal, a work of art for his 44th of the season.

After Nikita Kucherov pulled one point ahead in the Art Ross race earlier in the evening, McDavid had 1-1-2 in Salt Lake City. The Oilers captain has had at least two points in each of the six games he's played against Utah.

In fact, McDavid leads the NHL in more than just points, ranking first in rush chances, slot passes, controlled entries and end-to-end rushes. Whether or not he wins his fourth Hart Trophy will be up to the voters from the Professional Hockey Writers' Association, and that award is very much open for interpretation.

But there's no doubt who the best player in the game is, year in year out.

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1386316 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Overmatched Canucks stifled by Golden Knights: 'They play a heavy game'

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — If John Tortorella's team was always this good in Vancouver, he'd still be coaching the Canucks.

The Vegas Golden Knights improved to 4-0 since Tortorella replaced Bruce Cassidy as their coach, dominating the Canucks in a 2-1 win Tuesday that was a blowout everywhere but on the scoreboard.

It was a happier experience — and much better team — for Tortorella than his forgettable one-and-done season as the Canucks coach in 2013-14.

The win moved Vegas into a tie with the Edmonton Oilers for first place in the Pacific Division, one point ahead of the Anaheim Ducks, with four games to go.

The Golden Knights have everything to play for and the Canucks, who've padlocked themselves into last place in the National Hockey League, have nothing to play for as a team.

And that's how the game looked.

Thirty-six points behind the Knights in the National Hockey League standings, the overmatched Canucks tried to compete. But only Vancouver goalie Nikita Tolopilo kept his team in it as large swaths of the game were played in the Canucks' end.

"They're just a big, heavy team," Canucks coach Adam Foote said admiringly. "That's what we ran into: a big, heavy playoff team."

The Knights outshot the Canucks 7-0 through 13 minutes, 17-4 in the first half, and 28-11 for the game. Halfway through the third period, it looked

like Vancouver could match the franchise's all-time futility mark for fewest shots: eight in a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils 30 years ago.

Jacques Lemaire's Devils neutral-zone trapped the Canucks into a coma that night, but Tortorella's Knights crushed them with pressure.

On the winning goal generated by Vegas' fourth line, Cole Smith ran Canuck rookie Liam Ohgren off the puck along the boards, creating a turnover and three-on-two rush that Smith then finished from Nic Dowd's pass at 12:13 of the third period.

"I saw him last second," Ohgren said. "I just tried to get the puck up, but it's bad by me. I can't turn it over there, and then they score the game-winning goal."

"They did a good job keeping us on the outside. It was tough to get on the inside and create any high-danger chances. I don't know, it was just a tough game. They were on us right when we got the puck. They play a heavy game. They're big and strong and pretty fast, a tough team to play against."

Until a late, sketchy interference call against Vegas defenceman Rasmus Andersson allowed Vancouver to play six-against-four for the final 1:41, the Canucks had nine shots on Knights goalie Carter Hart. Their two shots in the first 18 minutes of the final period were from 43 and 57 feet. And their final sum of 11 shots was the second-lowest for a home game in franchise history.

Mitch Marner's six shots for the Knights were more than half of the Canucks' team total. Vegas skaters blocked 20 shots.

"I think we had a lot of looks where we didn't get shots on net," Canuck centre Teddy Blueger said. "You know, (Aatu) Raty hits the post at the back door in the first period, first shift of the second Jake (DeBrusk) has a great scoring chance, a Grade A."

"I think there's probably a couple more where we didn't get a shot on a decent scoring chance. They're obviously a good team, and sometimes, you know, we probably didn't put pucks on net enough, just trying to pass it around too much, looking for the perfect play."

Eleven shots on goal constitute an extreme event, but Vancouver has averaged only 24 shots per game since February, which ranks 31st in the NHL.

In March, they had 14 shots in a game against Dallas, 15 against St. Louis, 16 against Ottawa and 19 versus Los Angeles. The Canucks lost all of those games, too, scoring just two goals in total.

"When it's kind of going like that, and we're struggling to generate a little bit, I think, yeah, we need to simplify," Blueger said. "But I mean, I thought some of the other stuff was good (against Vegas). Like the battles and compete, we were good. You know, these are the type of games we want to be playing in and learning from and getting this type of experience."

After a handful of five-star saves by Tolopilo, the Canucks actually opened scoring at 12:50 of the second period when Max Sasson looked to make a pass on an outnumbered rush and instead hooked a shot that fooled Hart on the goalie's blocker side.

But the lead lasted less than three minutes when yet another offensive-zone shift for Vegas ended with a tying goal for Brayden McNabb at 15:46 on a short-side shot that appeared to ramp off Raty's stick after the Canuck puck-watched momentarily and was a step late closing down the Knights' defenceman.

Lightning nearly struck twice, as Vancouver could have led again going into the third period, but Elias Pettersson was unable to chip a point-blank rebound over Hart's right pad after Drew O'Connor's shot was stopped on a three-on-one rush. The two shots on that one play increased the Canucks' game total by 40 per cent.



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Tolpilo continued to make big saves in the third period, thwarting Pavel Dorofeyev and Brandon Saad on glorious chances to give the Canucks a hope.

But Vancouver's late power play (and two skater advantage) fizzled, as the Canucks failed to beat the Knights' perimeter pressure by moving the puck to the net front. Hart had to deal only with a Filip Hronek one-timer as the Canucks lost for the 32nd time in 40 home games, which was no longer thought possible in this NHL era.

"We've got to figure that out going into next year," Sasson said. "It feels, you know, everyone's a little more tense at home. I have no clue why or what it is. I'm sure that'll be talked about — you know, summer meetings and stuff and going into training camp. It feels, even in the locker room, it feels looser on the road for whatever reason."

The Canucks leave Wednesday for a three-game California trip in which all of their opponents are frantically trying to secure playoff spots.

Vancouver's final home game is next Tuesday against the Los Angeles Kings. The Canucks' disastrous season ends two nights later in Edmonton against the Oilers.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Senators' Ullmark saved his career by asking for help

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — You never know what someone is going through — even NHL stars can struggle.

Linus Ullmark's story is a reminder that we are all human and that seeking help is a noble endeavour.

Ullmark's journey this season, as he faced that challenge head-on, has earned him the Ottawa Senators' nomination for the Masterton Trophy. A nomination Ullmark calls "bittersweet."

"Don't really want (to be nominated), because that means you that you've gone through a lot of stuff," he said.

"Coming to the conclusion that you are broken and you need help fixing is very tough and very hard to do, but once you've taken the step and you can work towards something to becoming better, that's been the biggest part."

Ullmark's mental-health struggles have played out in the open, which adds an extra layer of challenge that many people don't experience. When he took a leave of absence for personal reasons earlier in the season, there were unsavoury rumours about his personal life that the Senators had to publicly denounce in a statement. The world is a cruel place.

Asked about the 'outside noise,' Ullmark said that, "We're used to it, nothing new."

Ullmark's leave was triggered by anxiety attacks suffered in a game on Dec. 27 in Toronto.

"I was doing work beforehand (on my mental health), and for me, it's just I needed more help. And at that point, it was scary at the moment as well, because I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't know how to fix it. You know, you're looking at a problem," he said.

As he spoke, Ullmark wore Victor Hedman's NoSolo hat from the mental health initiative that the Tampa Bay captain runs. It runs deep with Ullmark.

There's been a noticeable improvement in Ullmark's performance on the ice since returning from his leave of absence on Jan. 31, demonstrated by his 12-4-3 record in that time. He's a large part of why the Senators are on the precipice of a playoff spot. Ullmark was excellent playing on back-to-backs this weekend, then stopped 28 of 30 shots against the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday to move the Senators to an 83-per-cent chance of making the playoffs, according to MoneyPuck.com.

If you're struggling mentally, are you better at your job than when you're in a great headspace? Likely not.

Ullmark said he needed professional help.

"If you don't know how to do it yourself, you're looking for help from other people. And that goes through everything. If you're not a handyman, (you are) calling a contractor. And if you can't sew clothes, you're calling a tailor," he said. "It's amazing how much better and how much you play, and how you feel when you're taking care of the team and (they are) on (your) side of it, and you actually feel like yourself again."

"So... I'm not fully healed. I'm not going to be fully healed for a very long time either. I think the only difference is that I'm going to be able to deal with it better and better the longer we go and the older I get."

Ullmark continued, "But people have to think about it as well and realize that if I'm at 30 per cent that's not a very good Linus Ullmark playing at the moment. I rather have a guy that may be 70, 80, 90, 100 per cent at the time. So, it's very tricky."

In late March, Ullmark missed a game against the Lightning, which head coach Travis Green attributed to him needing rest. But it wasn't just that — he's still struggling despite playing on a consistent basis.

Ullmark explained what happened with that game.

"I'm broken, and still I'm not fully, completely healed. If, say, Chabby (Thomas Chabot) has an injury, no one's going to question that," he said. "(But) I've been playing and all of a sudden, I'm not available. People just started attacking me that 'he needs to play, he needs to be available.' And like, 'this is what we pay him for.'"

"Buddy, I am very much trying my very hardest every single day to be there, and I was not having the best of days leading up to the Tampa game."

It's a conundrum when professional sports meet mental health. Hockey players are known for playing through everything they can — just look at Chabot practising a week after surgery for a broken forearm. But mental health is invisible unless someone chooses to talk about it.

"As hockey players especially, we're not forced, but we're used to numbing things down because we're playing so many games, we're battling so hard every night," explained Ullmark.

There is no clear-cut way to view it, other than treating it with respect and dignity. At the same time, Ullmark is paid millions to play a game. It's a hard situation to make sense of.

Credit to Green for understanding.

"I want him to play every night. He's our No. 1 goalie," Green said of Ullmark's availability. "He's been playing well since he came back. But, in saying that, everyone in the room understands that it's been a bit of a rough year for him off the ice, on the ice and, I think, since he's come back from his leave."

The Swede was quick to clarify that ultimately Green calls the shots.

"I'm not making decisions with starting or not. That's going to be absolutely clear. I'm not the one making that decision," said Ullmark.



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Regardless, his teammates have respected their No. 1.

"They haven't treated me any different, which I don't want them to do either. I'm still the same person," he said.

For example, on Tuesday before yet another match against the Lightning, Ullmark missed morning skate but nonetheless started between the pipes. The team has made sure to give him ample rest despite a busy schedule — Ullmark has played a lot of hockey lately.

"There's certain moments in time where my battery is so low that I don't want to be with anyone. And when those times happen, and you're home and you have two kiddos, you have to be able to give them everything that you can. Is it 10 per cent, is it 30 per cent? Is it 50 per cent? I don't know," said Ullmark.

Sometimes the hardest part is being vulnerable with people in our lives, as he has been doing.

"I can only say, and that's what I've been trying to do as well during this whole period, is that I'm trying to be really honest about how I feel, how I'm doing. I'm the first one to say, 'I'm doing (expletive),' but I'm also the first one to say when I'm having a great day."

The Senators' netminder said earlier this year that he fell out of love with hockey during his struggles.

"I can just shut it down now and stop playing," Ullmark described his thought process when he was struggling. "Nothing's going to change. What can I gain from playing hockey? It just makes me feel bad and makes me feel all the emotions that you don't want to feel."

He detailed how hard it was for him to come back because he kept failing to meet his self-imposed expectations. But Ullmark says he knows when he's ready to play mentally, even as he tries to make sense of why he plays and what brought him back.

"(I) want to play hockey again ... my motivation for stepping on the ice. I'm not going to go into too much detail, but that's the biggest one: I had no eagerness, there was no love, there was no joy of even thinking about playing hockey," he said. "So, for me, it was first of all getting that joy in my everyday life back ... Fake it till you make it sort of a thing."

"I love hockey."

Uniquely, Ullmark doesn't watch much hockey on TV because he says it can drain him. His mind is swirling with contradictions, but that's an experience many of us have when we are struggling.

Hockey players don't have to live and breathe hockey when bigger challenges are at play.

"I've got other more important things in life right now, and so hockey is not No. 1 anymore, but it's certainly up there," Ullmark said.

We all love hockey. For those who watch, it's an escape from reality. For players, hockey is their reality, and their struggles are as real as our own.

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TSN.CA / Maple Leafs' Stolarz, Carlo, Joshua all hurt vs. Capitals

Mark Masters

Anthony Stolarz left Wednesday night's game against the Washington Capitals after suffering a lower-body injury in the first period. The Leafs goalie required help leaving the ice after flexing his leg to make a pad save just two minutes and 34 seconds into the first period.

"It was kind of scary to see him go down like that," said goalie Joseph Woll, who replaced Stolarz and took the loss as Toronto fell 4-0. "He's a pretty tough dude so he goes down, it's tough to see."

Toronto only has four games remaining, but coach Craig Berube refused to rule out Stolarz for the rest of the season.

"I don't know right now," Berube said. "Gotta get some imaging done."

Woll checked in on Stolarz after the game.

"Seems like he's doing alright," Woll noted. "I don't know the extent of the injury. It's not for me to say. But it looked like he was doing a bit better, just disappointed."

Stolarz, who will start a new four-year contract next season, appeared to be back in a groove lately after missing 33 games earlier in the season with a nerve-related injury. He has posted a .914 save percentage in 11 games since the start of February.

With Stolarz sidelined, the Leafs have called up Artur Akhtyamov, who will make his first career NHL start on Thursday in New York against the Islanders.

"I really liked him right from camp," said Berube. "He backed up a couple times this year and just has a great personality."

The 24-year-old Russian made his NHL debut with a relief appearance on Dec. 13, stopping all five shots he faced over 10 minutes and 32 seconds of playing time against the Edmonton Oilers.

Akhtyamov has recorded a .903 save percentage in 36 games with the Toronto Marlies this season and represented the team at the American Hockey League All-Star Game.

"He's played well down there," Berube said. "He's a competitor and he's really got fast reflexes. He's competitive as hell, man. I like the kid a lot."

Why did Akhtyamov, a fourth-round pick in the 2020 draft, get the call over Dennis Hildeby?

"Just want to see him," Berube said.

Hildeby impressed with a .912 save percentage in 19 games with the Leafs earlier this season, but has struggled to rediscover his top level since returning to the AHL where he owns an .897 save percentage in 20 games.

Hildeby picked up the win for the Marlies in Wednesday's game against the Utica Comets.

Winger Dakota Joshua (upper body) and defenceman Brandon Carlo (lower body) also sustained injuries on Wednesday night and will be unavailable for Thursday's game.

Forward Luke Haymes and defenceman William Villeneuve have been called up from the Marlies. Both players participated in Tuesday's practice with the Leafs with Berube hinting that they would get a look down the stretch.

"There's an opportunity to get them in," Berube said. "Haymes was coming up anyhow and playing tomorrow because [Bo] Groulx will be going down."

Haymes, 22, and Villeneuve, 24, have never played in the NHL before.

Haymes, who signed with the Leafs out of Dartmouth College last year, has recorded 17 goals and 15 assists in 64 games with the Marlies this season.

"He's got skill," said Berube. "He seems like an intelligent player to me. I haven't watched him a ton down there, but he's gotten better and better all year, I know that. He plays in all situations down there ... he's got ability. He's got skill and he's got a pretty good mind for the game."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Villeneuve, a fourth-round pick by the Leafs in the 2020 draft, has recorded 29 points in 59 games.

"He's definitely gaining more confidence," Marlies coach John Gruden told TSN this week. "And that's by being more predictable on his other parts of his game. We know he can make a play. We know he can run a power play, but if he can play 5-on-5 and be predictable and do the little things right to keep the puck out of the net, that gives him the best chance to get that opportunity [in the NHL]."

If Groulx, 26, plays another game for the Leafs, he will require waivers to return to the AHL. The team does not want to risk losing him and also wants him to be available to the Marlies for the Calder Cup playoffs.

"It's going to be my first time playing playoffs in pro hockey so very excited for it," Groulx said. "We have a really good team and a chemistry that people actually want to be there and want to win. We know we can do something special here."

The Marlies clinched a playoff spot on Wednesday.

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