



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 17, 2026

The News & Observer

Goalie controversy, or embarrassment of riches? Carolina Hurricanes must decide

By: Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes open the Stanley Cup playoffs against the Ottawa Senators on Saturday with a 3 p.m. game at Lenovo Center.

The NHL made that official Thursday and released the rest of the league's playoff schedule early Friday morning. Game 2 of the Canes-Senators first-round series is set for Monday at 7:30 p.m., before the best-of-seven series shifts to Ottawa for Games 3 and 4 on Thursday and Saturday.

The biggest question for the Hurricanes remains who the starting goaltender will be in the playoff opener, and Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour did not provide an answer after a Thursday practice at Invisalign Arena.

"We'll get to that when we have to. We've got another practice day here, and we'll figure it out after that," he said.

The Hurricanes have veteran Frederik Andersen and Brandon Bussi both ready and willing to jump in net. Pyotr Kochetkov, who has returned from lower-body surgery quicker than some expected, could become a third option as the playoffs unfold.

Andersen has the edge in playoff experience. But Bussi has become one of the NHL's best feel-good stories this season and finished off the regular season looking sharp in back-to-back road games at Philadelphia and then against the New York Islanders.

"We have a decision to make," Brind'Amour said. "Is it likely you'll see both? Probably."

Kochetkov, who has not played an NHL game since Dec. 20, was in for a total of three periods in parts of two games in a conditioning stint with the Chicago Wolves of the AHL. He was recalled by the Canes and scheduled to start Tuesday against the Isles, taking the ice at UBS arena for pregame warmups.

He then quickly exited because of what the team called a "roster technicality" and Brind'Amour said was a "little mishap," leaving Bussi to start and the emergency goaltender to serve as his backup with Andersen unavailable. Bussi, a Long Island native who had a lot of family at the game, stopped 28 of 29 shots in the 2-1 win.

On the Kochetkov snafu, Brind'Amour said: "He was called up and, I don't know, missed a form that you're supposed to fill out, from what I understood. The league wasn't going to give you a pass on that. ... It was a tough spot to put 'Bus' in, and he did a great job."

Brind'Amour noted the Canes were hoping to see how Kochetkov handled the start and get a better gauge on his form heading into the playoffs.

"He's certainly healthy, but I wouldn't call him an option, yet," Brind'Amour said "But it looks like we could if we have to."

Andersen, 36, has 85 games of playoff experience with the Anaheim Ducks, Toronto Maple Leafs and the past three seasons with the Canes. He has been in 32 games with Carolina, posting a 19-12 record as Carolina twice reached the Eastern Conference Final.

"Every game is a time to leave it all out there," Andersen said Thursday of the playoff mindset.

For Bussi, 27, it's all new and different, just as his first NHL season has been. Claimed off waivers from the Florida Panthers just before the season began, he made his NHL debut with the Canes on Oct. 14 against San Jose, became the fastest goalie in NHL history to reach 25 wins and finished the regular season with a 30-6-2 record.

"He's been incredible, coming in like that and playing as well as he had, and not just a flash in the pan but the whole season," winger Seth Jarvis said Thursday. "It's been awesome."

Bussi said Thursday neither the season workload nor playing the back-to-back set to end it were that taxing on him.

"I feel good," he said. "Physically, feel good. Body feels good. Playing wise, I feel good, too."

Bussi may or may not be the starter in Game 1 against the Senators, who he beat twice in the regular season, stopping 59 of 63 shots. But no complaints. It's the playoffs.

"That is what you dream about, having a chance to play for a Stanley Cup," he said. "I'm excited."

Hurricanes-Senators playoff schedule

Game 1: Saturday, 3 pm, Lenovo Center (FanDuel Sports Network, ESPN).

Game 2: Monday, April 20, 7: 30 pm, Lenovo Center (FDSN, ESPN2).

Game 3: Thursday, April 23, 7:30 pm, Canadian Tire Centre, Ottawa, (FDSN, TBS, HBO MAX).

Game 4: Saturday, April 25, 3 p.m, Canadian Tire Centre, Ottawa, (FDSN, TBS, truTV, HBO MAX).

(If necessary, times TBD)

Game 5: Monday, April 27, Lenovo Center, Raleigh.

Game 6: Thursday, April 30, Canadian Tire Centre, Ottawa.

Game 7: Saturday, May 2, Lenovo Center, Raleigh.



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The Athletic

NHL report cards: Grading every team's 2025-26 regular season

By: The Athletic NHL Staff

A quarter of the way through the 2025-26 season, and then again at the midpoint, The Athletic's NHL staff broke out their red pens and handed out grades for every team.

Now that the regular season is behind us and all 32 clubs get set for the playoffs or offseason, there's no better time to reflect on every team's season as a whole.

That's exactly what The Athletic did this week when it asked its NHL staff to assign a grade to every team's entire 2025-26 regular season with expectations in mind. You'll definitely be proud to show some of these to your parents (or general managers). Others ... maybe not so much.

Anaheim Ducks: B+

The Ducks ended a seven-year playoff drought and have an exciting club in Joel Quenneville's first season. Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier and Jackson LaCombe have blossomed into front-line players. Beckett Sennecke is one of the NHL's top rookies. But a leaky defense, erratic special teams and streakiness keep them from an A grade. Run-and-gun hockey made for lots of comebacks during the season, but it usually isn't a winning postseason formula. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins: A+

Even if the Bruins get swept in Round 1, 2025-26 was an excellent step in the organizational turnaround. Jeremy Swayman is back. David Pastrnak and Charlie McAvoy are elite. Fraser Minten, Marat Khushnutdinov and James Hagens could grow into long-term chain-pullers. "Lot of doubters," coach Marco Sturm said. "Starting when we started training camp. We proved everyone wrong." — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres: A+

Despite being in last place in the Eastern Conference on Dec. 9, the Sabres stormed all the way back and won the Atlantic Division by playing like the best team in the NHL for the last four months. Ending the playoff drought would have earned them an "A" alone, but doing so by winning a rugged division is worthy of an "A+." — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames: D+

After the Flames' scoring issues and injuries, this won't go down as a banner season. But they took a step in the right direction by offloading key veterans while accumulating picks and prospects for their rebuild. The Flames ending their season near the bottom of the standings should also help them as they finally take themselves out of the mushy middle. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes: A

The Hurricanes overcame injuries — including being without Jacob Slavin for more than half of their games — to put together arguably the most impressive season of the Rod Brind'Amour era. Carolina finished with 113 points, second only to Colorado in the NHL, and will have home-ice advantage through at least the Eastern Conference final. Nikolaj Ehlers and K'Andre Miller fit in seamlessly, and Brandon Bussi put together a memorable first NHL season. Next up: Round 1 against the Senators. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks: C

It's difficult to give a 31st-placed team too high a mark. But the Blackhawks were better than previous seasons, and, most importantly, their best player became one of the league's best players. Connor Bedard's development into a star had to happen eventually for the rebuild to work. Now, they need their other young players to take similar steps. One late-season positive sign for the Blackhawks has been Anton Frondell's all-around play since coming over from Sweden. He looks like a top-six center. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche: A+

Colorado won the Presidents' Trophy. It's the third time the Avalanche have finished a season with at least 118 points. In the other two (2000-01 and 2021-22), they went on to win the Stanley Cup. This was about as dominant a regular season as a team can have. Colorado's +99 goal differential didn't just lead the league; it was 40 goals clear of second place (Tampa Bay at +59). — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets: D+

The players were clear that if they didn't make the playoffs this season, it should be considered a "failure." So maybe a D+ is being kind. The Blue Jackets' incredible run (19-3-4) from mid-January to late March was only a tease. They melted down the stretch when the pace of play picked up, losing nine of their final 12 to miss the playoffs for a sixth straight season. Worse, they ended on a six-game home losing streak. The rebuild has now stagnated, and the Blue Jackets head into an uncertain summer. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars: A

For the fourth straight season, the Stars are one of the very best teams in the NHL. No complaints about another 100-point-plus campaign. But after falling in the Western Conference final the first three times, it won't mean anything if they can't get to the Stanley Cup Final this time. At this point, the regular season has become a formality for the Stars, an obligation, a necessary evil. The only measure of success that matters is still to come. — Mark Lazerus

The Red Wings hold the NHL's longest active playoff drought at 10 years. (Rick Osestoski / Imagn Images)



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Detroit Red Wings: D+

Standings-wise, the Red Wings had their best regular season in a decade. But they once again failed to reach the playoffs, giving them the NHL's longest active postseason drought. Worse than that, they hit the same late-season wall they have in past seasons, making you question just how much progress is really being made. While the team itself is the best it's been under Steve Yzerman, the expectations have gone up, and Detroit isn't meeting them. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers: B-

The Oilers had a difficult time problem-solving in 2025-26. Rarely able to string a few wins together, the goaltending and defensive coverage were primary issues. The top players (Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Evan Bouchard) shone, but the depth pairings and lines were expansion-level. The trade for goalie Connor Ingram, plus three deadline acquisitions from the Blackhawks, were key. In the final few games of the season, the defense and goaltending finally tightened up. — Allan Mitchell

Florida Panthers: D

It's hard to fail a franchise coming off winning the Stanley Cup twice and making three consecutive trips to the final, but this has truly been a miserable season for the Panthers, who plummeted all the way to 25th in the league. The good news is the first-rounder they traded is top-10 protected, which means Florida will add a high-end young player and presumably be much healthier a year from now with Aleksander Barkov back in the fold. A rebound to form as a contender feels highly plausible. — James Mirtle

Los Angeles Kings: C

Can you really give a good grade to a team that went 35-27-20? The Kings somehow made the postseason for the fifth straight time despite underachieving much of the way. Playoffs were supposed to be the minimum coming off a 105-point season. But we'll give them some credit for a late-season surge. D.J. Smith has them playing more aggressive hockey, Adrian Kempe has been red hot, Quinton Byfield is at his best right now and Anton Forsberg has deservedly grabbed the net. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild: B+

Despite finishing with the third-most points in the West, the Wild cost themselves home ice because they dropped too many home games, especially against average teams. But many predicted they'd miss the playoffs and instead they made it for the 12th time in 14 years. And at least they're not expansion cousin Columbus (six playoff appearances, one series win in 25 years). Minnesota traded for Quinn Hughes. Kirill Kaprizov and Matt Boldy were studly. Special teams and goaltending were solid. Never shut out! Now, can they win a round? — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens: A

The goal for the still-rebuilding Canadiens was to return to the playoffs. The fact that they remained in the hunt to win the Atlantic Division or have home ice in the first round right to the end exceeded those expectations by a mile. Are they a perfect team? No, far from it. But any doubt as to how bright

their future is should be put to rest, as they've done this as the second-youngest team in the league. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators: C

Is "C" too high for a team that didn't make the postseason? No one expected the Preds to do so, and they were earning an "F" after a quarter of the season. The resilience to get back into the mix was commendable, especially after a soft sell at the deadline. Steven Stamkos, Filip Forsberg and Ryan O'Reilly did the heavy lifting to make it possible. Now it's time for a new GM and, perhaps, major changes. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils: D-

The Devils entered this season with expectations to be not only a playoff team but one that could do damage. All was going to plan after a hot start, but the team's lack of depth got exposed in the aftermath of Jack Hughes' freak hand injury. It was a noisy season — from Quinn Hughes rumors to Dougie Hamilton's scratch — and the results were poor, leading to Tom Fitzgerald's departure. Talent remains on the roster, but changes are coming, starting with new GM Sunny Mehta. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders: B

The Islanders were in the thick of the playoff race for most of the season, thanks to rookie phenom Matthew Schaefer and Ilya Sorokin's excellence. It was impressive for a retooling team, but this team deviated from the plan with a few iffy trades despite defensive issues that were prevalent all year; those eventually spiraled and knocked them out of the race. — Shayna Goldman

New York Rangers: D

The bulk of the season warranted an "F," with the Rangers exposed as a poorly constructed team that doesn't have the skill, speed or depth to keep up in today's NHL. But finishing last in the Eastern Conference was a necessary evil in the name of improving draft odds and replenishing a depleted prospect pool, while a handful of young players showed up late to raise a failing grade and offer at least a sliver of hope for the future. — Vincent Z. Mercogliano

Ottawa Senators: B+

A heroic run of play from Jan. 12 onward (23-8-5) saved Ottawa's season. But under the hood, the Senators were supposed to be a playoff team because of the way they limit chances and generate offense. Thankfully, improved goaltending and penalty killing have helped. And it has turned the Senators into a veritable dark horse contender this spring. Coach Travis Green could also get consideration for the Jack Adams Award. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers: A-

Not many would have figured the Flyers would reach 98 points this season. But on the strength of strong defensive play, a stellar season from goalie Dan Vladar, and an offense that came around just in time with help from newcomers such as Trevor Zegras, Christian Dvorak and rookie Porter Martone, they snuck into the playoffs as one of the league's most unlikely participants. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins: A



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The Penguins were among the favorites to land Gavin McKenna when the season began. Now, they are going to be favored to advance to the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. It's been one of the more extraordinary seasons in Penguins history. And it doesn't feel like a fluke. This is a very good, very deep team capable of outscoring just about anyone. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks: A

The push for a playoff berth fell short, but this season went beyond anyone's realistic expectations. The Sharks went from an NHL-low 52 points to 86 this season, the largest year-over-year jump for any team. They were in the wild-card race until the final week. Macklin Celebrini had one of the greatest age-19 seasons in NHL history. Other youngsters began to make a name for themselves. Expectations will rise now, but this was a feel-good season that brought life back into SAP Center. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken: C-

The Kraken faded down the stretch and missed the playoffs for a third consecutive year. That's tough, especially in a crowded Seattle sports market in which the Kraken are still searching to gain a foothold five years into their existence. It wasn't all bad, though. Lane Lambert's first season behind the bench at least established a set identity for the club as a robust defensive side. The Kraken, however, continue to lack elite talent, and there are no easy answers for that issue. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues: D

Too little, too late. The Blues have had slow starts in recent years and stressed the need to change that in 2025-26. Instead, they opened 3-7-2. Their top players were AWOL, and it wasn't until the return from the Olympics that everyone put it together. Now, despite having the NHL's second-highest points-percentage since late February (.729), they're paying for another sluggish first few months of the season. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning: A

Between Nikita Kucherov and Andrei Vasilevskiy's elite seasons, plus breakouts from J.J. Moser and Darren Raddysh and a next-man-up mentality to navigate injuries, there's a lot to like. But the season isn't over yet, and what happens next will define the Lightning's year. It comes down to how they maximize on those core performances, as the clock starts ticking on their playoff window. — Shayna Goldman

The Maple Leafs finished fifth-worst in the league this season. (Richard A. Whittaker / Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

Toronto Maple Leafs: F

This wasn't just a bad season for the Leafs. It was the worst — by far — in recent memory and arguably one of the worst

in franchise history given expectations. The Leafs were supposed to still be Stanley Cup contenders and, at minimum, shoo-ins to make the playoffs. Not only did they fail to qualify for the first time since 2016, but they were also out of it well before game 82. The repercussions are ongoing and will change the franchise, for better or worse. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Mammoth: B

The Mammoth's young core broke through and made the playoffs, which was the main goal for this season. I don't think they hit their ceiling case — a low 90s point total is fairly modest — but it's a job well done, especially considering how much time Logan Cooley missed with injury. — Harman Dayal

Vancouver Canucks: F

The Canucks won fewer games this season than in any other season in the franchise's history — that includes the expansion era teams from the early 1970s and the performance of Canucks teams in every lockout or pandemic-abbreviated season. This was a season where the bottom fell out. Where the rebuild became a fact. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights: B-

At the end of the day, a seat at the table is all you need to win the Cup, and the Golden Knights earned that. The Pacific Division's status as one of the worst overall divisions in recent history certainly played its part. Vegas underperformed in relation to preseason expectations, and it cost Bruce Cassidy his job. The team has looked much better since that coaching change, but the truth is the Golden Knights' season will be judged by their performance in the playoffs, as it always is. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals: D+

On some level, this might seem harsh for a team that was, quite literally, a few bounces away from making the postseason. On the other hand, the Capitals went from a 111-point team to a non-qualifier. Things went well — Logan Thompson was great, Jakob Chychrun emerged as a first-pair, offensive force and Alex Ovechkin scored 32 goals in what could be his final NHL season — but ultimately, Washington had far greater aims than its grasp and deserves a grade that reflects as much. — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets: F

Winnipeg set a preseason goal of competing for the Stanley Cup and missed the playoffs. There is no way to give that result a passing grade. There were mitigating factors, including Connor Hellebuyck and Adam Lowry's surgeries, injuries to Dylan Samberg and Cole Perfetti and more, but too many Jets underperformed this season — and it started with the front office last year. — Murat Ates



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Series preview: Hurricanes face Senators in Round 1 | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour was asked Thursday if the path to the Stanley Cup — with two-time defending champion Florida not in the playoffs and Carolina the Eastern Conference's No. 1 seed — was cleared for his team, especially the way the bracket has been laid out for them.

"I think that might have been the toughest matchup that you could ask for," Brind'Amour said.

That's not coach speak. If there was one possible first round matchup that could be deemed least favorable for Carolina, it was against Ottawa.

The Hurricanes-Senators matchup can be summed up in one meme: two Spider-Men pointing at each other.

Carolina and Ottawa aren't mirror images of each other, but they're pretty darn close.

The Hurricanes' top scorer is center Sebastian Aho, with 80 points. The Senators' No. 1 center, Tim Stutzle, led the way for them at 83. Carolina had two players with 70 or more points and six in all with at least 50. Ottawa has one at 71 points, and Claude Giroux was one point shy of being the team's sixth with 50.

The Senators' top six defensemen have totaled 181 points this year. The Hurricanes' D corps is at 176 (though Jaccob Slavin played only 39 games).

Neither team has a goaltender who posted a .900 save percentage for the season, and there are question marks everywhere when it comes to the six goalies — Linus Ullmark, James Reimer and Leevi Merilainen for Ottawa; Frederik Andersen, Brandon Bussi and Pyotr Kochetkov — who could wind up in net at some point in the postseason.

Even the coaches are similar — two hard-nosed former players from the same era who played a combined 34 NHL seasons before transitioning behind the bench.

If a new hockey fan wanted to see what possession-driven hockey looks like, starting with Carolina or Ottawa is an ideal place.

When they go head to head? Who knows how their first round series will look, but we at least know they won't be wearing the same superhero costume when on the ice together.

The forwards

As mentioned, these two teams mirror each other in plenty of ways, and that includes up front. The top two scoring lines

feature loads of skill. Stutzle and Aho anchor the top lines, while power forwards Brady Tkachuk and Andrei Svechnikov each bring scoring and thump to the top six. There are also two veterans looking for the last jewel in their careers: Taylor Hall and Claude Giroux.

The most significant difference is size. Outside of Giroux, all of Ottawa's top six forwards are more than 6 feet tall, while Seth Jarvis, Jackson Blake and Logan Stankoven are all under that benchmark. Still, plenty have doubted those three Hurricanes and have quickly found there are few players who better combine skill and determination.

Where things tilt is in the bottom six. Having Nikolaj Ehlers opposite Jordan Martinook on a line centered by Jordan Staal gives Carolina's checking line some big-time oomph.

It will be interesting to see how Warren Foegele, acquired by the Senators ahead of the trade deadline, will perform against the team that drafted and developed him — and traded him away.

Advantage: Slight edge to Carolina

The defensemen

Ottawa's Jake Sanderson has emerged as a Norris Trophy candidate, and Thomas Chabot's speedy recovery from a broken arm gives the Senators a boost on a back end that's pretty battered.

Tyler Kleven, who hasn't played since April 2 due to an upper-body injury, could return during the series but probably won't be available for Game 1. Nick Jensen suffered a knee injury in March and is expected to miss the entirety of the postseason.

That puts a dent in the Senators' defense since Nikolas Matinpalo and Lassi Thomson will instead be pressed into action. Matinpalo — who won a bronze medal with Aho and Finland at the Olympics — played 50 games this season for Ottawa, but Thomson played just 11 games in the NHL this season.

The Hurricanes, meanwhile, rested players down the stretch and look to be ready to go with their normal top six. Jalen Chatfield has been banged up much of the season, and Jaccob Slavin may not be 100%, but everyone is playing with bumps and bruises this time of year.

Advantage: Pretty even if everyone was healthy, but edge Carolina

The goalies

Here is where things get interesting. Brind'Amour seems to be leaning toward Frederik Andersen as his Game 1 starter,



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but he was coy about that and his plan for the series. The Hurricanes have rotated goalies for much of the season, and it's hard to overlook Brandon Bussi's 31-6-2 record should Carolina go that way.

The Senators, meanwhile, have a red-hot Linus Ullmark to lean on. He enters the postseason on a four-game winning streak, having allowed just six goals during that run. But while Andersen — due to his time as the scapegoat-of-the-moment in Toronto earlier in his career — is often viewed as someone who has struggled in the postseason (he really hasn't), Ullmark certainly has.

He's 5-10 during the playoffs with a 3.28 goals-against average and .885 save percentage. He's allowed three or more goals in 11 of his 16 appearances. He's also faced the Hurricanes twice in the postseason, in 2022, and allowed four goals in both starts.

Still, Andersen's regular season (16-14-5, .874 save percentage) and Bussi's inexperience should give anyone pause.

Advantage: Slight edge to Ottawa

Special teams

Both teams have solid power plays, with Carolina entering the postseason at No. 4 in the league (24.9%), while Ottawa ranks eighth at 24.0%.

The Hurricanes hold a small advantage there, but it's even bigger on the penalty kill. Carolina has been one of the league's best kills during Brind'Amour's tenure, but this season the team ranks No. 11 at 80.5%. The good news for the Hurricanes is that since Slavin returned to the lineup in mid-January, their PK has been third in the league.

Ottawa's penalty kill, meanwhile, is near the bottom of the NHL at 75.7%, good for 29th. Being without Kleven, who is fourth among Senators defensemen in shorthanded ice time per game, is another ding against Ottawa.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

Overview

This has all the makings of a fun series. Stutzle is a budding star, Tkachuk is a menace around the net, and Sanderson is entering elite defenseman territory.

All that said, it feels like the Senators are just a step behind the Hurricanes in their progression toward contention. Carolina has a few more horses, more playoff experience, home-ice advantage and a healthier lineup. Ottawa dragged the Maple Leafs to six games last year, losing twice in overtime and once on a late third period goal, and the Senators should be better for that experience.

But not good enough to overcome the loaded Hurricanes.

Prediction: Hurricanes in 6



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Round 1 Preview: Canes vs. Senators

By: Walt Ruff

Taking a deeper look inside the series before Saturday's start

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes' road to a Stanley Cup begins with a first-round matchup against the Ottawa Senators.

It will be uncharted territory, as it's the first time that these two organizations will meet in the postseason.

Carolina arrives at the series after a 53-22-7 regular season, finishing atop the Eastern Conference. Their eighth consecutive playoff berth will begin with home-ice advantage for the sixth time in a row.

Ottawa comes to Raleigh as the second Wild Card seed in the Eastern Conference, which they earned with a 44-27-11 record. In his second year with the team, bench boss Travis Green has led the team back to the playoffs after a first-round loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs last year.

[GAME 1 INFO](#) | [PURCHASE ROUND 1 TICKETS](#) | [VIEW PLAYOFF HUB](#)

Revisiting The Regular-Season Meetings...

January 24: Nine Hurricanes registered a point as a hot start helped Carolina top the Sens 4-2 in Ottawa.

February 3: Sebastian Aho had three points and Seth Jarvis notched two goals as the Canes took a 4-3 victory at Lenovo Center.

April 5: Carolina struck first, but three consecutive goals in the final 40 minutes lifted the Senators to a 6-3 win at Canadian Tire Centre.

Facing off three times in 71 days during the 2026 portion of the regular-season schedule, the Canes earned a pair of wins before dropping the final meeting. It's worth noting that the third contest was the day after the Canes clinched their playoff berth and began resting players, including Jordan Martinook and Jordan Staal.

Seth Jarvis led the Canes with four points in the three games, including a goal and an assist in the January 24 meeting, and then a double-dip in the goal column on February 3.

Brandon Bussi was victorious in the first two battles, turning away 36 and 24, respectively. His 36-save win in Ottawa in January was one of the best performances in his storybook season.

On The Other Side...

One of the best teams in the NHL since the calendar flipped to 2026, the Sens went 26-12-6 post Jan. 1, accumulating 58 points in the standings (T-3rd, NHL).

Averaging 3.48 goals per game (T-7th) and allowing just 2.75 (T-2nd) during that time, Brady Tkachuk and the gang have been a handful for anyone they've been matched up with.

Playing a heavy style, no team has produced more hits than Travis Green's bunch in 2026 (1,050). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, center Dylan Cozens leads the way with 215 this season.

And where the Senators really give their opposition fits is in the faceoff dot. Winning 54.5%, that number ties them with the New York Rangers for the best in the league this season. 38-year-old Claude Giroux won a whopping 63.1%, the best among all forwards who took at least 500 draws this year.

As for potential weaknesses to exploit, two things that stand out are Ottawa's penalty kill and its goaltending.

Killing off just 75.7% of infractions, the Senators finished 29th out of all teams this season. That's music to the ears of a Canes team that finished with the league's fourth-best power play (24.9%).

When it comes to their last line of defense, Linus Ullmark has been the horse for the team when available. But his .891 save percentage this year is the lowest in his 11-year career. He played in just one of three regular-season meetings between the two sides, picking up the win earlier this month.

Get your Raleigh towels ready 🧻

— x - Ottawa Senators (@Senators) April 15, 2026

Special Teams During The Regular Season...

Carolina's Power Play: 24.9% (4th)

Carolina's Penalty Kill: 80.5% (11th)

In years past, Carolina's penalty kill has been the dominant half of its special teams. While the Canes still sit just outside the league's top ten, this time around, it's their man advantage that should have Ottawa fearful.

Dating back to the Dec. 2 inclusion of Jordan Staal, the units have been 50-for-168 (29.8%), second among all NHL teams. More recently, they have had 16 conversions in their last 15 games.



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Oh, and they can score while down a man, too, leading the league with 12 shorthanded goals.

Ottawa's Power Play: 24.0% (8th)

Ottawa's Penalty Kill: 75.7% (29th)

Ottawa's power play has been consistently good all season long. Dylan Cozens and Drake Batherson lead the way with 13 goals each.

On the other side of the coin, the Sens have had a tough time killing off penalties. Only the Los Angeles Kings (74.7%), the Vancouver Canucks (72.0%), and Seattle Kraken (71.7%) had worse regular seasons.

In Net...

Carolina: Frederik Andersen, Brandon Bussi, and Pyotr Kochetkov

Another year of playoffs, another year of wondering who the Game 1 starter will be until the day of.

The case for Andersen begins with his postseason experience. Playing in 85 games over the course of his career, he's backstopped 32 for the Canes over the last three years. His .909 save percentage in those contests is fourth-best among all NHL netminders who have played in at least 20 games during that time. It also helps that he's played his best hockey of the season since returning from the Winter Olympics.

As for Bussi, there's a reason he was selected as the team's MVP by the Carolina Professional Hockey Writers Association. Where would the team be without the early-October waiver claim? Winning 31 of his first 39 starts in the league, the only word to describe his season is historic. However, he hasn't had the experience of the Stanley Cup Playoffs yet. How much does that weigh in the decision?

Then, there's the wild card, Kochetkov. Expected to be out for the year after undergoing a pair of lower-body surgeries around the turn of the new year, the 26-year-old defied the odds and pushed his way back into action. Practicing with the team for most of this month and making a pair of rehab appearances with the Chicago Wolves (AHL) last weekend, he was slated to start on Tuesday on Long Island, before a last-second "roster technicality" negated the would-have-been moment. So, now what? He has played at least one game in all four of the team's most recent postseasons, but he hasn't played a full NHL game since Dec. 20. How does he factor in?

Ottawa: Linus Ullmark and James Reimer

Even with a midseason leave of absence, Ullmark played 49 of Ottawa's 82 games this season. Winning 28 of them, unquestionably, he's the go-to guy. His 12 wins post-Winter Olympics are tied for the most by any goaltender in the league. However, as mentioned earlier, his season-long .891 save percentage is the lowest of his now 11-year career.

It would be shocking if Ullmark isn't the guy every game of the series, but if injury troubles arise, or Travis Green has to look elsewhere, former Hurricane James Reimer, who was signed mid-season, is the second option.

Rod Brind'Amour isn't ready to name a Game 1 goalie just yet.

He said there's a likelihood we see both Freddie Andersen and Brandon Bussi in the series.

"They both played really well down the stretch."

He also said Pyotr Kochetkov isn't an option right now, but he is healthy. pic.twitter.com/etUWGR8yp9

— Walt Ruff (@WaltRuff) April 16, 2026

Players To Watch...

Carolina: Nikolaj Ehlers

The first-year Hurricane has been as advertised and then some for his new team. The lone member of the roster to play all 82 games, "Fly" is arriving at the best time of the year with a hot hand as well.

Ehlers set a new career-high with 71 points this season, 10 of which have come in the team's last nine games. One of the team's seven 20-goal scorers, 18 of his 26 this year have come since Jan. 1.

What type of impact will he have in his first postseason with the group?

Ottawa: Tim Stutzle

Ottawa's leading scorer got his first taste of the postseason last year and followed it up with 83 points in 80 games.

Averaging over 20 minutes per night, the 24-year-old German had the best season of his career in the faceoff dot, winning 53% of his tries. With all the skill in the world, Carolina will have to be mindful when the 2020 third-overall pick is on the ice.

How They See It...

Rod Brind'Amour as his team turns the page to the postseason...

"We've been eager for this for a long time. Once we knew it was official, and we were in a pretty good spot all year, we've got to turn the page now. It goes to being a sprint. We know the season's a marathon, and now all of a sudden you've got to be ready right from the get-go and put your best foot forward."

Sebastian Aho talking about getting ready to head into the Stanley Cup Playoffs once again, with the ultimate carrot dangling in front of them...

"Obviously, there's that hunger and that fire inside of this group that we definitely need to use. Hopefully, we can use it to our advantage."

Mark Jankowski describing what changes now that the team goes into postseason mode...

"We've got to keep our foot on the gas. Playoff hockey, it's like nothing else. You can't really explain it. Every play matters, every single puck battle, every little hit, everything's amplified so much more. The crowd's into it right from the get-go. We're just really excited to get going."

Rod Brind'Amour on the Ottawa Senators...

"That's a tough matchup. They all are at this time of year moving forward, but that's one of the better teams, in my opinion, in the NHL. They had kind of a tough start to their



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season, and some interesting things go on, but they've got it covered, top to bottom. It's going to be a huge challenge."

Seth Jarvis continuing on Ottawa...

"Their power play is really good. Penalties are going to happen, but it's the stupid ones you want to avoid, because they can definitely get you there. They have a lot of skill, a lot of good defensemen, and a lot of skill up front. They're dangerous..."

Mark Jankowski giving his scouting report on the Senators...

"They're a good team. They play hard. They earned their spot in the playoffs. It's going to be a great series for us. We

know what we're up against. I'm sure in the next few days we'll look at them a little more in-depth. They're a good matchup, for sure."

Where To Watch Every Game...

Can't make it to Lenovo Center, or looking for a place to watch the road games in the series? Visit any Carolina Ale House in the state to watch the Canes all throughout the playoffs.

FanDuel Sports Network South will also broadcast every game of Round 1. View the complete schedule and broadcast info here.



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2026 Stanley Cup playoffs: Preview, X factors, predictions - ESPN

By: Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs are here!

The Eastern Conference bracket was set earlier this week, including the Carolina Hurricanes and Buffalo Sabres as division champions. For Carolina, it's more of the same, as the Canes have become perennial contenders; for the Sabres, this season ended the longest playoff drought in North American pro sports.

In the West, the final three seeds in the Pacific Division came right down to the wire. Due to the results of Thursday night, the Edmonton Oilers and Anaheim Ducks will face off as the Nos. 2 and 3 seeds, while the Los Angeles Kings will play the Avalanche as the second wild card.

Things weren't as close in the Central, with the Colorado Avalanche clinching the Presidents' Trophy as the NHL's overall top seed April 10, while the Dallas Stars and Minnesota Wild were the first pairing to be clinched as a first-round matchup.

We've got all the angles covered to get you ready for the playoffs as ESPN hockey reporters Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton take a look at each of the 16 postseason teams, offering the reasons each team could win it all, along with the biggest X factor, players to watch and a bold prediction for every team.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metropolitan playoff brackets were written by Shilton, while Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific clubs. Also note that wild-card teams are listed according to the playoff bracket in which they're playing (so the Ottawa Senators are in the Metro, Kings are in the Central, and the Utah Mammoth are in the Pacific).

Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey.

Read more: [Full schedule](#)

[Stanley Cup Playoffs Central](#)

[Bracket, schedule](#)

[Contender flaws](#)

[Atlantic Division](#)

[Buffalo Sabres](#)

[Record: 50-23-9, 109 points](#)

[First-round opponent: Bruins](#)

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Buffalo finally figured out how to pull it all together, and it resulted in the franchise's first playoff berth in 14 years. The Sabres aren't a one-trick pony. They have an elite core of skaters up front and on the back end who can stack up against any team in the league. Tage

Thompson is a point-per-game goal-scoring phenom; Rasmus Dahlin is an exceptional offensive defenseman; Alex Tuch is a 30-plus scorer; and a slew of complementary skaters from Josh Doan to Jack Quinn to Owen Power (and on, and on) gives Buffalo exceptional depth.

The Sabres were top 10 in scoring throughout the season and showed strong defensive details too. Their goaltending has also been a strong point following some early stumbles - whether it's been Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen or Alex Lyon in the crease, Buffalo has responded well and given both a defensive effort worthy of their high-end contributions.

X factor: Can the Sabres' defense keep pace in the postseason, especially with the team's general lack of NHL playoff experience? There's no questioning Buffalo's talent or ability to score. But the postseason won't provide the same amount of open ice the Sabres are accustomed to. That will be new to most of the roster, and getting the offense rolling early could be an issue. That's when defense truly comes under the microscope. It'll take a five-man effort from Buffalo to both retain its offensive prowess and not get into a track meet it can't win. While Dahlin and Power have been excellent this season, Bowen Byram and Mattias Samuelsson must pull their weight too.

Player to watch: Jack Quinn. The Sabres were patient with Quinn as he developed slowly after being selected eighth overall in the 2020 draft. This season, Quinn found his way, approaching the 20-goal mark and notching career-best numbers in every offensive category. It's a common occurrence in the postseason that each team's best players cancel each other out. That's where secondary skaters like Quinn are meant to thrive. He's not known as a physical presence, and how Quinn reacts to the tighter-checking playoff shifts will be a quick indicator as to whether he's up to the task of being a difference-maker.

Bold prediction: Buffalo blitzes its way through the first round past Boston and takes a 3-0 series lead in the second. The Sabres then suddenly go cold and drop four straight to be stunningly cut from the postseason field one win shy of the conference finals.

[Tampa Bay Lightning](#)

[Record: 50-26-6, 106 points](#)

[First-round opponent: Canadiens](#)

[Case for a Stanley Cup run: Easy. It's Nikita Kucherov.](#)

Tampa Bay's potent offense (ranking among the league's best, with 3.52 goals per game) has been spearheaded via another otherworldly performance from Kucherov, who had 44 goals and 130 points in 76 games. The Lightning's ability to overwhelm opponents with their speed and skill makes them a championship favorite for a reason.



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Beyond that, Tampa Bay is experienced, resilient and unflappable. Its team defense is excellent -- giving up the third-fewest goals in the league -- and its penalty kill is third best. The Lightning's goaltending has been spectacular as usual; Andrei Vasilevskiy is second only to Scott Wedgewood in save percentage (.912) and goals-against average (2.32) among goalies who made 40-plus starts. And with Jon Cooper pushing all the right buttons behind the bench, it's easy to see how the Lightning can crush the competition for a third Cup title in six years.

X factor: The Lightning do so much so well, but their power play is a notable red flag. Tampa Bay ranks 14th overall (21.1%) with the extra man, but since returning from the Olympic break, the Lightning are 24th (19.2%). It's an oddity considering all their firepower that they can't capitalize more often on their opportunities. That's a critical part of any successful playoff stint -- to which the Lightning can certainly attest. There's still time for the Lightning to tinker so that they have two solid units that can both contribute -- something their second group hasn't been doing consistently. Kucherov might be the center of attention, but the Lightning must elevate their urgency.

Player to watch: Corey Perry. If there's one thing Perry knows how to do, it's be part of a team that reaches the Cup Final. He has done it in five of the past six seasons -- and lost each time. Perry was a true difference-maker for Edmonton last year, collecting 10 goals and 14 points in 22 games. Not too shabby for a guy who was playing 15 minutes per game as a 39-year-old. What can Perry do this time around? He's been solid since arriving at the trade deadline -- with five goals and eight points in 19 games. When the Lightning were back-to-back champions, it was in large part because of their depth. Perry will be a key part of that this time around.

Bold prediction: Kucherov is goalless in the first round and an unsung hero bails the Lightning out to escape another early exit. Tampa Bay finds its groove and powers its way back to another Cup Final on the back of Vasilevskiy's stellar play.

Montreal Canadiens

Record: 48-24-10, 33 points

First-round opponent: Lightning

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Montreal had a historically good season offensively, including captain Nick Suzuki eclipsing the 100-point mark. He was the first Canadiens player to do that in 40 years, just one indication of Montreal's potent attack up front. Not to be outdone, Cole Caufield collected over 50 goals in the regular season, and Juraj Slafkovsky tossed in 30 more.

On the back end, Lane Hutson and Noah Dobson were strong contributors on the scoresheet. The Canadiens were top 10 in league scoring and on the power play, and they improved collectively on defense as the season went on.

Jakub Dobes has had stretches of good success in the crease and continues to look more confident as a starter. Head coach Martin St. Louis has guided this team to a second consecutive playoff appearance, and this time around Montreal has the experience to anticipate what's ahead.

X factor: How will the Canadiens adjust without Dobson? Montreal's second-best defenseman suffered an upper-body injury April 11, and the team said he'd be reevaluated in two weeks. That all but guarantees Dobson will miss at least a couple of games in the first round, and there's no telling if the ailment will hold him out longer.

Montreal immediately recalled David Reinbacher -- the fifth overall pick in 2023 -- from the American Hockey League to make his NHL debut. While Reinbacher did notch a point in his initial outing, he'll hardly be a replacement for Dobson. Adam Engstrom had been previously promoted, but he has played fewer than 20 NHL games and is a left-handed shot (although he has logged time on the right, where Dobson's absence will be felt).

The Canadiens will have to work together surviving this stretch without a key skater, and possibly also without blueliner Alexandre Carrier available (he's been out with an injury but is a possibility to start the playoffs).

Player to watch: Jakub Dobes. It's a given that goaltending is critical to playoff success. But Dobes' netminding will be under increased scrutiny now that Dobson is out. Montreal has reason to believe he's up to the challenge. Dobes has been sensational since the Olympic break, with the third-best save percentage (.920) among starting goaltenders in that span. Having Dobes on a hot streak heading into the postseason should put to rest concerns about his playoff performance last year, where he went 1-2-0 with an .881 SV% and 2.91 GAA.

The Canadiens were a middle-of-the-pack team defensively all season, allowing just over three goals per game -- and that was with a relatively healthy D corps. It will take an elevated effort from everyone to see Montreal past the opening round, and Dobes starting strong could build momentum for the Canadiens surging forward from there.

Bold prediction: Montreal's offense goes cold as Suzuki and Caufield struggle against tighter checking. The top pairing of Mike Matheson and Hutson holds the line in front of a stellar showing from Dobes, and the Canadiens escape to the second round.

Boston Bruins

Record: 45-27-10, 100 points

First-round opponent: Sabres

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Boston had to show fortitude early this season just to secure its postseason berth. The Bruins were a below-average club before bursting through January with one of the league's best records. Boston has been blessed with excellent goaltending from Jeremy Swayman -- with a career-high 30 wins -- who points to his own recent past of ups and downs as another example of how this Bruins team has persevered to its current placement.

While Boston is always relying on top-end talents like David Pastrnak to deliver -- and he will again be a focal point of the offense on the heels of a superb regular season -- it's the Bruins' second line that has helped them thrive. Led by the emergence of Casey Mittelstadt moving from center to wing beside Pavel Zacha, Boston's top six is noticeably stronger. Charlie McAvoy anchors the back end, and his ability to



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contribute offensively will be key for Boston at 5-on-5 and on special teams.

X factor: Marco Sturm is a rookie NHL head coach heading into his first playoff appearance. It can be just as challenging for freshman coaches to get their feet wet in the postseason as for players, and Sturm has some tough personnel decisions to make.

That starts with how Sturm intends to maximize the Bruins' scoring depth. They have high-end talent through those top two lines, but that's rarely enough to sustain a long playoff run. Since late February, the majority of the Bruins' scoring has come from four players (Zacha, Viktor Arvidsson, Pastrnak and McAvoy). The Bruins need more contributors. Morgan Geekie getting back on track is helpful, and 2025 first-rounder James Hagens getting some playing time in the regular season was positive for his potential impact. It will be a serious problem for Boston if its offense is too one-dimensional.

Player to watch: Jeremy Swayman. It's not an exaggeration to say Swayman will make or break the Bruins' playoff opportunity. Swayman has proved his postseason mettle in the past -- he had a .933 SV% in 12 starts in the 2024 playoffs.

This time, there isn't a playoff-worthy backup waiting to take over if Swayman can't hold the line -- Joonas Korpisalo had a tough season supporting Swayman, who carried the lion's share of the team's workload. Will that spell fatigue for Swayman at this all-important time on the calendar? Or will the added pressure and responsibility bring out the best in him again and provide Boston with a chance to win every game?

Bold prediction: Boston dials in its defensive effort and ends up winning a series of one-goal games. Its scoring balance is restored when injuries force Mittelstadt back down the middle and he transitions easily into his former role.

Metropolitan Division

Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 53-22-7, 113 points

First-round opponent: Senators

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Carolina knows all too well about falling short of the promised land. That experience is (ironically) pivotal to why the Hurricanes are favored (again) to win the East.

The Hurricanes have a powerful offense (ranked second overall) fueled by elite skaters like Sebastian Aho, Seth Jarvis, Nikolaj Ehlers and Andrei Svechnikov. There is depth to spare in Carolina's lineup that will give coach Rod Brind'Amour flexibility to make adjustments on the fly. The Hurricanes are an exceptional puck possession team that's going to put consistent pressure on opponents, and the experienced defense is brimming with shutdown talents too.

Carolina's goaltending has been a strength all season thanks to Brandon Bussi and Frederik Andersen staying (comparatively) healthy and performing at a high level. Boasting a power play and a penalty kill sitting top 10 in the league rounds out all the ways Carolina can dominate in every phase.

X factor: This is Carolina's moment to finally fight its way back into the Cup Final. The Canes have every piece in place to do that -- but we've seen this story play out unfavorably for them in seasons past. While Carolina has said all the right things about leaving the past in the past -- and the Hurricanes haven't appeared too rattled by their heartbreaking defeats -- how will this team handle what could be its best opportunity yet to put it all together? Bussi had a terrific regular season, but he's still (technically) a rookie with no NHL playoff experience. The Hurricanes' defensive corps is a veteran group but could be worn down if the early-round series were to go the distance. And if Carolina does make it back to the conference finals, will those demons materialize again and make the formerly unstoppable Hurricanes appear pedestrian? Carolina's success hinges on not repeating old mistakes.

Player to watch: Nikolaj Ehlers. When the Hurricanes have faltered in the past, it was often due to dried-up depth scoring. GM Eric Tulsy went after Ehlers in the offseason to guard against that happening again. Regardless of Ehler's impressive numbers to date -- 25 goals and 70 points in 81 games -- it's all for naught if he can't produce in the postseason. That's been an issue for Ehlers in the past with Winnipeg, with last season's playoffs the only one in his career when the winger has managed more than two goals. He has appeared to fit seamlessly in with the Hurricanes though, likely in part because he doesn't have to carry the same offensive load he did with the Jets. Ehlers can be a true complementary piece, unburdened by extra pressures, and make Carolina dangerous when it counts.

Bold prediction: Bussi struggles in net to start the first round and Andersen replaces him in time to see Carolina advance. Andersen falters in the second round and the Hurricanes lose steam, dropping swiftly in a five-game series.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Record: 41-25-16, 98 points

First-round opponent: Flyers

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Pittsburgh is the ultimate sleeper team in these playoffs. GM Kyle Dubas started working his magic in June when he hired first-time NHL head coach Dan Muse -- an initially head-scratching choice that's been pitch perfect for the Penguins. Then, when injuries required it, Dubas got creative retooling Pittsburgh's roster -- his December acquisition of Egor Chinakhov was a home run, while trading for Elmer Soderblom at the deadline proved a strong move, too.

Pittsburgh has its veteran punch up front with future Hall of Famers Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, while Rickard Rakell, Anthony Mantha and Bryan Rust have been overachievers this season. On the back end, Erik Karlsson remains a viable offensive threat, and Kris Letang has admirably fought through injury to help Pittsburgh stay in the hunt. Plus, the Penguins have had excellent special teams -- particularly in the second half of the season -- when they showcased this club at its best overall.

X factor: If there's a question mark in Pittsburgh, it's between the pipes. Will the Penguins get the best out of Arturs Silovs and/or Stuart Skinner when neither goaltender was especially good in the regular season? Both Silovs and Skinner recorded sub-.900 save percentages, and while



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Silovs saw more action than Skinner, that doesn't mean that one player or the other won't be quickly replaced.

Pittsburgh ranked 11th in goals against per game during the regular season (3.10) -- the most by any Eastern Conference playoff team -- but tied for 13th fewest shots per game, suggesting it was the lack of timely saves (and not defensive breakdowns) causing problems. Silovs hasn't seen NHL playoff action since 2024 in Vancouver. Skinner appeared in back-to-back Cup Finals with Edmonton and lost both times.

How Pittsburgh handles its goaltending situation -- from who plays to how he performs to how long a leash he'll have -- will be a deciding factor in how long these Penguins stay in the mix.

Player to watch: Sidney Crosby. It's not as though Crosby could fly under the radar if he tried. But this is when the Penguins need their superstar captain to shine brightest. Since returning from a lower-body injury sustained at the 2026 Olympics, Crosby has just two goals in 12 games. There's no question he knows how to ramp it up in the postseason, as long as his body cooperates. Pittsburgh arguably has more depth to support Crosby and the club's other top skaters, but there's no denying this team will go further with Crosby at the forefront of its attack.

Bold prediction: Muse has the Penguins playing free-flowing hockey that silences the competition. Pittsburgh's goaltending is ultimately an asset, and a significant reason it gets back to the conference finals in true Cinderella fashion.

Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 43-27-12, 98 points

First-round opponent: Penguins

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Philadelphia was nine points out of the East's second wild-card spot on March 10, but it went 13-4-1 from there with a league-leading .750 points percentage to reach its first postseason since 2020. The Flyers have momentum, and they feel like they're playing with house money this spring.

Philly's young stars have overachieved to take the Flyers farther than anyone expected. Porter Martone has transitioned beautifully (in a small, late-season sample size) from the NCAA to the NHL, while Matvei Michkov overcame early struggles to be a true standout and Tyson Foerster is a timely scoring threat. Philadelphia is also basking in above-average goaltending from veteran Dan Vladar in the best season of his NHL career. The Flyers found their stride when it would have been easier to fold. Confidence should be sky-high.

X factor: The Flyers gave up the first goal in more games than almost any other team. That's difficult enough to overcome in the regular season, let alone in the increased intensity of the postseason. In the 18-game stretch that saw Philadelphia charge into the playoffs, it surrendered the first goal only seven times -- a relative improvement that has to continue into this next chapter.

Given the Flyers' general lack of postseason experience as it is, playing catchup against a veteran squad (like, say, Pittsburgh in the first round) will leave them uncomfortably exposed. And when Philadelphia does open the scoring, its

record is excellent (with 10 wins in 11 occurrences since March 10).

Player to watch: Trevor Zegras. The Flyers made several wise moves to put themselves back in a playoff spot. Trading for Zegras this past offseason was one of them. He has cemented himself in Philadelphia's top six, with 26 goals and 67 points in 81 games.

Zegras hasn't been in the playoffs before -- the Ducks were rebuilding throughout his tenure there -- but that could be the best thing for him and the Flyers. Zegras showed in the way he transitioned to Philadelphia that, when opportunity knocks, he's ready to answer. Zegras will be a focal point of course; the opposition is bound to make him initially uncomfortable. If he can showcase the sort of elite playmaking and scoring he brings when at his best, then Zegras could be what takes the Flyers from fun first-round ousters to legitimate contenders.

Bold prediction: Vladar's lack of past playoff reps is exposed early, and the Flyers can't counteract with enough goal support. Coach Rick Tocchet does his best to shuffle the deck and keep Philadelphia alive, but it gets swept in the opening round.

Ottawa Senators

Record: 44-27-11, 99 points

First-round opponent: Hurricanes

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Ottawa used a triumphant second half of the season to become a true playoff threat. The Senators were one of the league's best defensive teams at even strength following the Olympic break, and their 5-on-5 scoring was top 10 too. They soared to boast the third-best record in the league over the regular season's final eight weeks, with a potent power play and consistently stingy defense.

The Senators can lean on an impressive depth of talent up front, with Tim Stutzle and Drake Batherson (both 30-plus goal scorers), Dylan Cozens, Shane Pinto and of course the always dangerous Brady Tkachuk. Ottawa is going into this postseason with its eyes wide open -- the team's experience in the first round last year against Toronto provides now what it was missing then.

X factor: Does Ottawa have playoff-caliber goaltending? It's a fair question, and could decide the team's postseason outcome. Linus Ullmark has, like the rest of Ottawa, performed better lately than he did earlier in the season. But how much of Ullmark's improvement can be tied to the Senators' stronger defensive work in front of him?

Ullmark has never recorded a save percentage above .900 in any of the four postseasons in which he has appeared. And if Ullmark does stumble this time around, how will the Senators respond? Can James Reimer take over? Or if Ullmark is hurt, could a Reimer-Leevi Merilainen tandem suffice? It's obviously Ullmark's net to lose, and if the Senators defense stands tall and Ullmark remains available, the veteran should pull his own weight making timely saves. Whether Ullmark can deliver on that is a question Ottawa will have answered early in the playoffs.

Player to watch: Thomas Chabot. It's mind-blowing to think Chabot went from breaking his arm to being back in the



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Senators' lineup in just 17 days. But his return was instrumental in Ottawa clinching its playoff berth. How will Chabot hold up carrying over 22 minutes per game in what could be a physical first-round effort against a team that knows he's getting over an injury? Will he be at full strength, or will the Senators have to adjust to him being more tentative?

There are few players in Ottawa more critical to the team's success than Chabot has been year over year. It should be clear from the outset of the Senators' push how Chabot is truly feeling. Even though he managed to get back at the end of the regular season, everything is amplified in the playoffs. He knows that, and Ottawa will be a scary team if Chabot is no worse for wear with his newly healed arm.

Bold prediction: Ottawa falls flat early in the first round. The team rallies admirably, though, to force Game 7 -- where the Senators are ousted in a back-breaking, double-overtime finish.

Central Division

Colorado Avalanche

Record: 55-16-11, 121 points

First-round opponent: Kings

Case for a Stanley Cup run: All of the things that got in their way since their last Stanley Cup in 2022 no longer appear to be concerns. And, the Avalanche possess depth, in that they can count on all four lines, three defensive pairings and either one of their goaltenders. The Avs finished first in the NHL in scoring (3.65 goals per game) and also allowed the fewest goals per game (2.43).

At various points this season, they've not had their full complemented roster -- and still won. The way they've won while fending off the challenge from the Stars and Wild to win the Central Division title adds to the thought this could be the year for the Avs to add another championship to their previous Cups in 1996, 2001 and 2022.

X factor: Center depth beyond Nathan MacKinnon had been a problem in previous years. Now, it appears that their options down the middle could be their biggest strength.

Reacquiring Nazem Kadri at the trade deadline reunited them with the center who anchored their second line when they won the Cup in 2022. He joined fellow trade acquisition Nicolas Roy, further adding to a group that already had a proven second-line center in Brock Nelson along with Jack Drury as extra depth.

Player to watch: Scott Wedgewood. He has been a career backup who has been a crucial part of what might be the NHL's strongest tandem in the NHL this season, alongside Mackenzie Blackwood. Wedgewood is a first-time 30-game winner -- more than he has won in the past two seasons combined.

His postseason experience is limited to four games -- in which he came in to replace the starter. If Wedgewood does start for the Avs, can he parlay what he has done in the regular season into postseason success?

Bold prediction: The Avalanche's power play, which finished the regular season 26th in the NHL, will finish in the top five among Stanley Cup playoff teams.

Dallas Stars

Record: 50-20-12, 112 points

First-round opponent: Wild

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Little about the Stars is a mystery at this point. They've finished with more than 100 points for a fourth consecutive season. They've advanced to three straight Western Conference finals.

Figuring out what they must do to win the Western Conference and advance to the Stanley Cup Final is the riddle that's waiting to be solved. It's also why there's going to be so much attention on Glen Gulutzan.

The former Oilers assistant coach came back for a second stint in Dallas after the club moved on from Peter DeBoer last summer. In Gulutzan's first season, the Stars maintained the profile of a team in a championship window. Now, it's about taking it at least one step further.

X factor: Can Gulutzan find a Plan B? It's not that the Stars didn't make adjustments under DeBoer once they reached the conference finals. It's just that those adjustments didn't always work out as planned. That was the case last season when the Stars lost four straight, and scored only three times before losing to the Oilers in five games in the conference finals last season.

During Gulutzan's time in Edmonton, the coaching staff found ways to make the necessary adjustments whenever it faced some sort of postseason challenge against a Western Conference team. Is it possible that he can take what he learned with the Oilers and parlay it into success with the Stars?

Player to watch: Jake Oettinger. Perhaps the most defining aspect of the Stars' playoff run last season was seeing Oettinger benched in Game 5 against the Oilers. It led to DeBoer having to publicly explain his decision after the series was over, and the flood of questions that came with how coach and franchise goaltender could coexist going forward.

Instead, the Stars fired DeBoer, hired Gulutzan and have seen Oettinger win more than 30 games for a fifth straight season -- with the idea he will hopefully win 16 more in these playoffs.

Bold prediction: Jason Robertson picks up where he left off last postseason and grabs at least one point in every game through the first two rounds.

Minnesota Wild

Record: 46-24-12, 104 points

First-round opponent: Stars

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Last season, the Wild relied heavily on their defensive identity, only to be ousted in the first round against the Golden Knights. This season, they have become one of the strongest teams in the offensive zone -- tied for 11th in scoring -- while their goalie tandem of Filip Gustavsson and Jesper Wallstedt has made them one of the best teams in the league in goal suppression, finishing fourth at 2.87 goals against per game.

It's an approach that has enabled the Wild to challenge two of the best teams in the NHL -- the Avs and the Stars -- in



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the Central Division. It creates the belief for the Wild that beating one, if not both, will allow them to mount a serious challenge for the franchise's first Stanley Cup title.

X factor: Their offensive depth. Go back to what they were a year ago. The Wild were a team that relied heavily on a select group to create and/or score goals. It's part of the reason why they were among the lowest teams in terms of goals scored that qualified for the playoffs.

Matt Boldy and Kirill Kaprizov have received supplemental help this season, as the Wild have nine players that have scored 10 or more goals in 2025-26. That balance has also helped them finish with a top five power-play unit in the NHL.

Player to watch: Quinn Hughes. Wild general manager Bill Guerin traded quite a bit to get one of the NHL's best defensemen for moments like this. In Hughes' time with the Wild, he has averaged more than a point per game.

What he has provided already has made the Wild a more formidable team because of how he can pick teams apart as a facilitator. But what he did at the Olympics for the gold-medal-winning Team USA creates the expectation Hughes could be in store for an even bigger star turn once the playoffs begin.

Bold prediction: If the Wild advance beyond the first round -- for the first time since 2015 -- they'll win the Stanley Cup.

Los Angeles Kings

Record: 35-27-20, 90 points

First-round opponent: Avalanche

Case for a Stanley Cup run: The Kings have always been aware of what's at stake in past postseasons -- they won the Stanley Cup in 2012 and 2014. But what makes this postseason different is that quite a bit could change once it's all over.

Longtime captain Anze Kopitar is retiring. That means the Kings will need a new captain and top-line center that can replicate -- or come close to replicating -- what Kopitar did.

And if that's not enough, the Western Conference is starting to see teams that were once in the cellar begin to aim higher -- like their in-state rivals in Anaheim and San Jose -- while others who were playoff teams in 2025 but missed this year's edition will have an eye on next year's playoffs.

So yeah, the pressure is on in L.A., and that can be a good thing.

X factor: Did they learn from last year? Taking that 2-0 lead in the first round against the Oilers showed that the Kings can pose a serious challenge to one of the best teams in the NHL in a playoff environment. However, errors and mistakes after the 2-0 lead compounded in a way that became too difficult to overcome.

Finding a way to better navigate what they experienced last year could be the difference in reaching the second round or having their season end with another painful first-round exit.

Player to watch: Artemi Panarin. This is exactly why the Kings made the push to win the Panarin trade sweepstakes before the Olympic break. He gives them a dynamic forward who can score for himself and create for others.

What Panarin provided was already a necessity for the Kings, but it became further amplified once Kevin Fiala sustained a fractured leg at the Olympics. Panarin was averaging more than a point per game upon arriving in L.A., with the belief that his scoring ability can carry over into another crucial playoff appearance for the Kings.

Bold prediction: The Olympic version of Joel Armia returns! He averages more than a point per game in the playoffs.

Pacific Division

Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 39-26-17, 95 points

First-round opponent: Mammoth

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Challenging as the regular season may have been at times, the Stanley Cup playoffs are actually when the real assessment begins for the Golden Knights. That's why they fired Bruce Cassidy, the coach who guided them to their Stanley Cup title in 2023, and hired the coach they believe can bring them another: John Tortorella.

The Knights won seven of eight contests under their new coach, which has created the belief that the Golden Knights could be playing some of their most consistent hockey at the most important time of the year.

X factor: How Carter Hart has played since Tortorella's arrival. No team had a lower save percentage in 5-on-5 play than the Golden Knights this season. But that's what makes Tortorella's brief regular-season stint intriguing.

Hart finished with a .930 save percentage over his six starts in April. That could be seen as a potential sign of a turnaround, given Hart's .887 save percentage throughout an injury-riddled first campaign overall in Vegas.

Player to watch: Mitch Marner. Signing an eight-year deal worth \$12 million annually comes with expectations. Especially for a franchise that has been defined by its ability to win no matter the cost.

In two of Marner's past three postseasons, he has averaged either a point per game or more than a point per game. Getting that level of production -- along with his ability to play heavy minutes in the defensive zone -- places him in a position to be one of the most important players in the Golden Knights' bid for a second title.

Bold prediction: Vegas will have at least one round during the playoffs in which it will lead the NHL in team save percentage.

Edmonton Oilers

Record: 41-30-11, 93 points

First-round opponent: Ducks

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Few of the teams in this year's postseason landscape have gone through what the Oilers have experienced.

They've fallen into two-game deficits at the start of a series only to come back and win. They've made numerous lineup adjustments that have led to some of their more unheralded players showing up in significant moments. They've even found ways to navigate their goaltending issues in ways that allowed them to reach consecutive Cup Finals.



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And this year, the Florida Panthers won't be waiting for them in the Cup Final.

X factor: It's their supporting cast. The challenge for the Oilers the last two years hasn't been what they'll receive from Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid. It has been what they can receive from either other members of their core or the rest of their supporting cast. Especially when members from previous postseasons like Connor Brown, Evander Kane, Brett Kulak, John Klingberg and Corey Perry, among others, are elsewhere.

That supporting cast is even more important as Draisaitl's availability remains in question after a regular-season-ending, lower-body injury sustained in March. He has resumed practicing but has not been confirmed to start the series for Edmonton.

Player to watch: Connor Ingram. One of the biggest issues facing the Oilers over the past two postseasons has been their inconsistencies in net. That's why they made the decision to trade Stuart Skinner in exchange for Tristan Jarry ... only to watch Jarry struggle.

Ingram, who was promoted from the AHL, has emerged into the Oilers' most consistent goalie, but he has just four games of postseason experience, back in 2022 with the Predators.

Bold prediction: Ingram will get through at least one series without being replaced for performance reasons.

Anaheim Ducks

Record: 43-33-6, 92 points

First-round opponent: Oilers

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Part of the strategy the Ducks have used to build their roster has centered around insulating their young players with veterans. The reason for that is to establish a culture, while also providing their roster with those who have playoff experience.

Now that the Ducks are in the postseason? It further reinforces how the decision to bring in veterans with significant playoff résumés like John Carlson, Mikael Granlund, Radko Gudas, Alex Killorn, Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba could once again benefit the franchise.

X factor: Coach Joel Quenneville. This will be his first playoff since he was banned by the NHL in connection with the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault investigation.

Quenneville's on-ice accomplishments have made him one of the greatest bench bosses in the history of the sport. He has won more than 1,000 games, is a three-time Stanley Cup winner with Chicago, and also has a title from his time as an assistant with the Avalanche in 1996.

Player to watch: Leo Carlsson. There was a point this season at which Carlsson was receiving Hart Trophy consideration, before he sustained a left thigh injury in January that forced him to miss the Olympics. The 21-year-old has proved he can handle the demands of being a trusted two-way, top-line center in the NHL.

What now stands before him is a chance to further cement his place as someone who could become a long-term playoff fixture in the Western Conference.

Bold prediction: John Carlson continues what he did since being traded -- and leads all defensemen in points after the first round.

Utah Mammoth

Record: 43-32-6, 92 points

First-round opponent: Golden Knights

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Depth is everything in the playoffs. Especially for those teams that can rely upon numerous players to score goals. The Mammoth have used their depth to help win games all season.

Utah has six players that scored 20 or more goals, along with 10 players altogether who have reached double figures. Couple that with the fact that the Mammoth are among the top 10 teams in the NHL in fewest shots allowed and scoring chances allowed, and it could make the Mammoth a threat in their first playoff appearance as a franchise.

X factor: The decision to bring in veterans with Stanley Cup experience. Every team with a young core has made it a point to add veterans for moments such as this.

Utah has players like that in Ian Cole, Nate Schmidt, Mikhail Sergachev, Brandon Tanev and Vitek Vanecek. Four of those five have won Stanley Cups, and Tanev has appeared in 59 postseason games.

That's a contrast compared with six of the players who lead the team in points: Lawson Crouse, Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz have combined to appear in 21 playoff games, and Logan Cooley, Dylan Guenther and JJ Peterka will be making their playoff debuts this week.

Player to watch: Clayton Keller. So much of his progress -- and that of the franchise he captains -- has been intertwined.

His personal growth, which has allowed him to finish with more than 80 points in three of the past four seasons, has come as the Mammoth have sought to evolve into a playoff team.

How will it work out for Keller and the Mammoth now that they're both at their desired destination of the playoffs?

Bold prediction: Inexperience will be pushed aside and Dylan Guenther will lead the playoffs in goals after the first round.



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Friday Four: Biggest questions ahead of Stanley Cup Playoffs

By: Michael Amato

One more sleep.

It's the most wonderful time of the year if you're a hockey fan — and perhaps the most stressful if your favourite team is participating in the festivities that are the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The regular season is a long grind, and even if you're one of the top 16 teams that qualify for the post-season, just about everyone has flaws at this point of the year. If you plan to go on a long run deep into the spring, you have to be able to hide, and oftentimes overcome, those flaws.

Take the Pittsburgh Penguins as an example. The Pens lost No. 1 defenceman Kris Letang just before the 2017 playoffs, but rallied to a Stanley Cup victory on the back of a blue line that was missing its top performer anyway.

Injuries are one of the biggest issues at this time of year, but they aren't the only challenge teams are facing. Maybe one of your key players is struggling mightily heading into the post-season? What if you have to rely on an inexperienced skater for key minutes? Everyone will try to mask any issues they are dealing with and will hope to answer any questions when the puck drops on Saturday.

Let's look at four major questions heading into this year's post-season.

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These Ottawa Senators are a good representation of the importance of goaltending.

For a good stretch of the season, it appeared the Sens were destined to miss the playoffs because they couldn't get a save. Despite having good underlying numbers, Ottawa was tied for last in the Eastern Conference on Jan. 12 thanks to some subpar goaltending. For the season, Ullmark has an .891 save percentage and ranks 89th among 96 goalies in goals saved above expected this season.

The veteran netminder also had a save percentage below .900 in every month except April, which unsurprisingly coincided with Ottawa's march up the standings. Ullmark has been stellar this month, posting a .926 save percentage and eight quality starts in his past 13 outings. Thanks to Ullmark's improved play, the Senators were one of the hottest teams down the stretch, losing just five times in regulation over their past 22 games. That's going to make them a tough matchup

for the Carolina Hurricanes in the first round if Ullmark can keep rolling.

When Ullmark has struggled, though, it's been really bad. Even with his improved play of late, the Sens still rank 31st in the league in save percentage. Only the last-place Vancouver Canucks were worse. And during this hot stretch, Ullmark still proved he's capable of a bad outing. He gave up five goals in the first period in a late-March game against the Florida Panthers and was promptly pulled. Games like that are magnified come playoff time, and a similar outing against the Canes at the wrong time in Round 1 could be too much for the Sens to come back from.

One thing Ottawa has done well is support Ullmark between the pipes. The Senators have allowed the second-fewest shots per game this season at 24.4, as Ullmark has faced fewer than 25 shots 11 times over the final two months of the season. If Ullmark plays the way he did down the stretch, the Sens are capable of beating anybody. But if he slips back into inconsistency, their stay in the playoffs could be a short one.

Do the Oilers have enough depth to get back to the Cup Final?

Make no mistake, the Edmonton Oilers are only going to go as far as Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl take them. But despite incredible performances from both over the past two post-seasons, the Oilers have fallen just short of their ultimate goal. That means they're going to need more contributions from the rest of the roster.

Evan Bouchard has really stepped up this year, finishing with 95 points. Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins also provide good secondary scoring, but what about after that? Corey Perry, Connor Brown and Evander Kane, who combined for 21 goals in last year's playoffs, have all departed. They've been replaced by the likes of Trent Frederic and Curtis Lazar, who have struggled to do anything offensively all season, combining for just eight goals and 13 points. Then there's Adam Henrique, who has just one goal in his past 57 games. Jack Roslovic was an excellent acquisition, so there's going to be a lot of pressure on him, as well as on 22-year-old Matt Savoie, to step up and deliver this spring.

Compounding matters is the fact that Draisaitl has missed the past few weeks with an injury and could miss the start of the Oilers' opening-round series. Even if he is ready, Draisaitl may not be 100 per cent. Not only that, but the goaltending is again a major concern, as the Tristan Jarry trade failed to solve Edmonton's issues between the pipes. Connor Ingram has taken over and stabilized things a bit of late as the Oilers have allowed two goals or less in eight of their past 11 games.



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If Edmonton starts having issues keeping the puck out of its net again, it's going to be a lot tougher to outscore its problems this time around with a lack of secondary offence.

There's never a good time for an injury, but it's especially problematic right before the playoffs.

That's what the Montreal Canadiens are dealing with when it comes to Dobson, who very well could miss their first-round series versus the Tampa Bay Lightning with an injury.

Dobson is a massive loss for the Habs, as he's one of the league's best shot blockers and a pillar on the right side of the Canadiens defence. He also plays more than two minutes per game on the Montreal penalty kill.

Dobson isn't the only right-handed shot blue liner that's been sidelined. Alexandre Carrier has been on the shelf as well, though it does appear like he'll be ready for Game 1. With Dobson ailing, we could see the inexperienced David Reinbacher make an appearance at some point in the series. Reinbacher is a talented prospect and a former fifth-overall pick, but he only has two career games to his credit. It wouldn't be ideal for Reinbacher to be getting acclimated to the NHL with Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Jake Guentzel and company barreling down on him on a nightly basis.

Without Dobson, there's also going to be more pressure on the shoulders of Lane Hutson, Mike Matheson and Kaiden Guhle, as well as even more responsibility for someone like Nick Suzuki in the defensive zone. The Canadiens will all have to be dialled into the details, as Tampa can make you pay and exploit any weaknesses in your defensive coverage.

Will the Hurricanes finally get over the hump?

If there is one team breathing the biggest sigh of relief not seeing the Florida Panthers in the playoffs this year, it's the Hurricanes.

The Canes have been taken down by the Panthers in two of the past three conference finals, winning just one game total.

Carolina could be a heavy favourite to come out of the East this year without Florida participating. The Hurricanes have seven different 20-goal scorers, another six in double digits and four players who have exceeded 60 points. Few teams can rival the way they spread out their offence.

One of those talents up front includes Nik Ehlers, who posted a career-high 71 points. There was some concern about whether Ehlers would be able to excel offensively in Carolina, a team that's very structured and spreads out its ice time. Instead, Ehlers has made the most of his 16:36 per game and has given the Canes an added dynamic they've been missing in the past.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL Insider Elliotte Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

Latest episode

If there's one Achilles heel Carolina will have to overcome, it's goaltending. The Canes have a combined .886 save percentage this season, just 26th in the league. Frederik Andersen is having the worst statistical season of his career and Brandon Bussi is still very inexperienced. Meanwhile, Pyotr Kochetkov, who was once thought lost for the season, is trying to work his way back from a hip injury and remains a question mark.

Just because the roadblock that is the Panthers won't be there this time around doesn't mean it's going to be easy for the Canes. If their goalies get outplayed by Ullmark in the opening round, they could run into major issues with a Senators team that's primed for an upset.



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It might be now or never for the Hurricanes' current core to make a Stanley Cup run

By: briandaguanno

The Carolina Hurricanes are potentially approaching a crossroads entering the 2026 playoffs. On one end, they have been undoubtedly one of the most dominant teams in the NHL over the better part of the last 10 years. On the other end, though, they don't have much to show for it.

Since 2018, Carolina is fourth in regular season wins with 414 and sixth in playoff wins with 47 according to StatMuse.

Four of the top five teams in regular season wins have made a Stanley Cup within that time frame, with three of the four having gone on to win it. The Canes are the only ones who haven't made an appearance. Of the top eight teams in playoff wins since 2018, the Canes are also the only team to not make a Stanley Cup.

This should be the year that changes, but if not, the Canes might not get a better chance.

One big reason for that is their potential path to the Stanley Cup, as this is may be the easiest route they have had.

The Florida Panthers and New York Rangers, who have knocked Carolina out of the playoffs each of the last four seasons, both aren't in. While the Buffalo Sabres have shot on to the scene, they have no playoff experience. And the Tampa Bay Lightning should be past their glory days.

Not only that, the Canes will avoid facing either the Sabres or Lightning until the Eastern Conference Finals at the earliest.

It's been eight straight years of playoff hockey and multiple years of being a true Stanley Cup contender for the Canes, with no success past the second round.

They have done everything to make this core work. Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Jaccob Slavin have all been difference makers over the past eight seasons. They traded for Jake Guentzel at the 2024 deadline. They traded for Mikko Rantanen in 2025. They signed the biggest UFA deal of the offseason to add Nikolaj Ehlers and traded for K'Andre Miller before the season.

This needs to be the year it all comes together, with the Canes possibly having the strongest roster they've had over the past eight seasons combined with the easiest path to the Stanley Cup.

If it doesn't work this year in the playoffs, meaning the Canes don't at least go six or seven games in the Eastern Conference Finals, something will have to change towards the top.

Whether it's shaking up the coaching staff or trying to land a true superstar talent or acquiring a franchise goaltender, it's almost inconceivable to keep running it back with the same core expecting different results.

All it takes is one run to win a Cup, and this Canes team has proven they have the talent to do so. It's just about putting it all together when the lights shine brightest — something they haven't shown the ability to do yet.

Right now, Carolina should be the favorite to represent the East in the Stanley Cup. But if they don't, and fall short unconvincingly again, big changes might have to be made.



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The Hockey News

Hurricanes Supposedly Undecided On Starting Goalie As Game 1 Nears

By: Ryan Henkel

With Game 1 imminent, Hurricanes' starting goalie remains a mystery. Veteran presence or rookie surge? The decision looms large for Carolina.

Carolina to face Ottawa in first round of 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs

Game 1 of the Carolina Hurricanes first round series against the Ottawa Senators is set to take place in less than 48 hours, but so far, it looks like the Canes aren't quite yet decided on who'll start in net.

At least, that's what Carolina head coach Rod Brind'Amour told the media at Thursday's practice.

"We'll get to that when we have to," Brind'Amour said. "We have another practice and then we'll figure everything out after that. They both played really well in the last stretch there. Gave us exactly what we wanted and so we have a decision to make."

It should be noted though that Frederik Andersen had a crease to himself on Thursday — the prototypical starter's net — and if I were to make a bet, I'd say he has the best odds of starting Saturday.

Despite weak regular season numbers, the veteran netminder is an experienced goaltender who's proven that he can deliver in the postseason.

The Danish goalie is heading into his 10th year of playoff hockey and over the course of his career, he's been pretty reliable, with a career postseason record of 46-35 along with a 0.914 save percentage, 2.40 goals against average and five shutouts.

Andersen also looked much more like himself in the final weeks of the regular season, a promising sign.

"I like where my game's at," Andersen said on Thursday. "I've just been trying to build every day and continue to work on good habits. I know what it feels like when I'm playing well, so I'm just continuing to stretch for that every day."

And even if Andersen starts Game 1, there's no guarantee that he's the guy all the way.

"There's a likelihood that you'll see both, probably," Brind'Amour said.

Rookie netminder Brandon Bussi has had quite the year in Carolina, putting together the best numbers out of any Hurricanes goalie.

Bussi started the most games for the Canes this year, posting an outstanding 31-6-2 record.

However, he had just a 0.894 save percentage, a number that started to really slip post Olympic break.

Heading into the Olympics, Bussi had a 0.906 save percentage and looked to be the guy for Carolina. However, he struggled out of the break, posting just a 0.864 save percentage in that span.

But as Brind'Amour pointed out, Bussi had a good close to the year, stopping 50 out of the 53 shots he faced in back-to-back games, and overall, he probably has the higher ceiling between the two goaltenders at this point.

"I feel good," Bussi said. "I think over the course of the year, I've learned a lot. I've also learned that there's a lot about my game that I like. When I do those things right, I have success."

And even though he hasn't ever experienced NHL playoff hockey, he isn't a stranger to high-stakes games.

"I'm just really excited," Bussi said. "Obviously it's a little new, first time in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, but I've been in the American Hockey League playoffs, junior hockey playoffs, college, the one-and-done environments, so I'm not gonna say I'm used to it, it's going to be a little different, but I feel pretty prepared for situations like this."

Many fans have also been curious about the possibility of even seeing Pyotr Kochetkov in net, but it doesn't sound like the team is really considering him at this point.

The Russian netminder hasn't seen NHL action since Dec. 20 and has only seen 60 minutes of total game action of any kind following his surgeries thanks to a short conditioning stint down in the AHL earlier this month.

"We were hoping to get him in for that last game, but we had that little mishap there and weren't able to see where he's at," Brind'Amour said. "He's certainly healthy, but I wouldn't call him an option yet. But it looks like he could if we had to. You never know if you're gonna need that, but it's nice to know that if you get into a jam and guys do get hurt, we have some options."

So it's going to be between Andersen and Bussi and we probably aren't going to get any confirmation on that until Saturday.

"You'll get one of those two guys, I'll guarantee that," Brind'Amour said with a smirk.



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1387455 Carolina Hurricanes

How a Fly helped add to the buzz of the Carolina Hurricanes' NHL playoff push

Chip Alexander6-8 minutes 16/04/2026

After 10 years with the Winnipeg Jets, Nikolaj Ehlers came to the Carolina Hurricanes before this NHL season with eyes wide open, making a new start with a new team in a different conference.

It wasn't so much a leap of faith for Ehlers. The forward was a highly sought free agent and agreed to a six-year, \$51 million contract. It also allowed him to join an old friend from Denmark, goalie Frederik Andersen. So how's it gone?

"I think he's been great," said Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour, who chooses his words carefully.

Ehlers, called "Fly" by his teammates and coaches, has 26 goals and has set career highs in assists (45) and points (71) after being a consistently productive player with the Jets. He has played every game on a team that won the Metropolitan Division and finished first in the Eastern Conference with 113 points.

"I think overall, for myself, it has been challenging but in a fun way, just getting settled in, new city, new team, new teammates, new system," Ehlers said in an N&O interview. "The way we play, it's all about skating and playing fast and that's my biggest strength, my skating."

Ehlers finds his line

Ehlers opened the season on Sebastian Aho's line with Seth Jarvis. He later was playing on Logan Stankoven's line with winger Jackson Blake when Brind'Amour made an intriguing change: Ehlers to Jordan Staal's line opposite Jordan Martinook.

That raised some eyebrows at the time — the swift winger with two of the Canes' best checking forwards. Turns out, it was a good combination, but ...

"It could have gone horribly, you know what I mean?" Ehlers said, quickly smiling. "But it hasn't. You look to find different ways to improve the team, and I think at that time they were looking for something a little bit

different. 'Blakey' and 'Stank' and I played well together and created a lot and didn't give up much, and those two were super fun to play with, but I think with 'Jordo' and 'Marty' that gives us a different look on that line.

"Those two guys, the way they play the game, they play it right and they play it hard every single game. For me, it's been fun to play with them. They create a lot of room, a lot of space for me to use my strengths."

Adjusting on the ... fly

With the Canes resting several regulars Monday against the Flyers, Ehlers was on Jesperi Kotkaniemi's line with winger Bradly Nadeau. He set up Nadeau for a first-period goal with a no-look pass from behind the net, then scored with a quick-release shot from a sharp angle.

The Canes couldn't hold the 2-0 lead but earned a point in the 3-2 shootout loss to clinch first place in the Eastern Conference heading into the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"You play with 'Fly' and you're going to get some opportunities," Brind'Amour said after the game. "He's such a creative player."

But there was another play in the game that Brind'Amour also had to like, showing Ehlers' commitment to playing both ends of the ice.

In the second period, after the Flyers scored twice for a 2-2 tie, there was a faceoff in the Canes zone that led to a scramble for the puck in the corner. Ehlers was positioned near the top of the slot, shadowing Flyers defenseman Jamie Drysdale when he saw Flyers forward Matvei Michkov alone in front of goalie Brandon Bussi.

Ehlers quickly skated in to get his stick on a centering pass to Michkov, who had scored Philly's first goal. Ehlers corralled the puck along the boards and skated it to the blue line, where he cleared the zone.

"We already knew the offense was there. But that other end of the rink, he certainly has shown is a priority," Brind'Amour said. "Veteran players that are really good players, they know they can make adjustments. It's just a willingness to change their game a little. But he's been great about it and it shows in his play."

It's an adjustment, Ehlers said, that has continued throughout the season and still continues as he learned the Canes' strain-and-stress style of tight-checking defense.

"It's definitely something new," Ehlers said. "With my skating, that part wasn't so difficult to adapt to. It's more the timing of it. And just getting to



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know your teammates out on the ice, where they're going to be, how they play the game, how they read the game.

"So I'm still getting used to it, without a doubt. It's not as easy as just moving to a different team when you've been with the same team for 10 years."

Unfinished business

Ehlers scored again Tuesday as the Canes closed out the regular season with a 2-1 road win over the New York Islanders. It was his 82nd game, making him the only player to be in the lineup every game — defenseman Sean Walker played 81, sitting out the last game as Brind'Amour gave him the night off.

With the regular season completed, the Canes are preparing to face the Ottawa Senators in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Ehlers is eager to enter the playoffs with his new team, eager to contribute, be a difference-maker.

It has been a good season. The Canes have won, set team records. Ehlers, 30, enjoyed joining Andersen in competing for Denmark in the 2026 Milan Winter Olympics — "A super proud moment," he said.

Ehlers played his 700th career game this season. He notched his sixth and seventh hat tricks. It has been memorable.

What's missing? It's still out there to be won.

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1387456 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Ottawa Senators 2026 NHL Stanley Cup playoffs preview

Shayna Goldman, Sean Gentile, Dom Luszczyszyn 13-17 minutes 16/04/2026

The NHL's playoff format, quite deliberately, is set up for series repeats. In some instances, that's a good thing; imagine a world in which Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin didn't spend their primes battling it out each spring. In other instances — and this where we glance in the direction of Los Angeles and Edmonton — it is, perhaps, less of a good thing.

Sometimes, though, a fresh matchup breaks through. That's what we're getting from the Carolina Hurricanes and Ottawa Senators: Two teams that have never met in the postseason. Let's start some rivalries, shall we?

The odds

Carolina has won five straight first-round series, the longest streak in the NHL. That shouldn't come as a huge shock given how the Hurricanes entered many of those series: as sizable favorites. Last year, they had a 67-percent chance to knock out the Devils, and the year before that, it was 80 percent against the Islanders.

This year is different; these Senators are no joke as one of the few teams that can go pound-for-pound against Carolina's stingy possession game. The Hurricanes are still rightly favored as the East's No. 1 seed, but it's a lot closer than some might expect for a dance with the second wild-card team.

The Senators have all the makings of a dark-horse team coming together at the right time. This is no typical wild card, and that could give this matchup some real drama.

The numbers

There are two ways to look at this by the numbers: The Hurricanes are a stronger version of the Senators, or the Senators are on track to become the next Hurricanes.

Both teams have solid back end foundations — the Canes come into this series with a plus-24 Defensive Rating, while the Sens are even higher at a plus-31.

Carolina has been the better shot suppressor, especially since the Olympic break. But both teams are top-10 in xG suppression over that time. The Canes are stingy, but Ottawa has had more favorable goaltending for support.

That's been true in short-handed situations, too. The Senators have given up slightly more shots and scoring chances, but have only allowed 5.81 goals per 60. Carolina has been the better defensive team, and has had pretty steady goaltending, just not to the same degree.

What really separates them is offense: With 27 goals between their respective ratings.

Roster strength and on-ice differences help explain that. The Canes have the deeper forward group, and despite both sitting top-five in xG since the Olympics, Carolina scores more. But based on the shot volume and quality the Canes roll out, they should have a lot more scoring. So should the Sens. Despite all that they create, both teams struggle to convert on their chances.

Carolina, at least, does on the power play; its power play is top-five in scoring this year, and has been especially hot down the stretch. The Senators aren't too far back, but still don't have enough scoring to show for all of their scoring chance efforts.

The big question

Does Ottawa have the arsenal to beat Carolina at its own game?

The narrative that follows the Hurricanes is based, largely, on truth. In the regular season, they dominate the puck, choke out their opponents, create tons of chances and score enough goals to live at the top of the standings. When someone says "Hurricanes hockey," that's what they mean.

This season, they've lived up to their reputation. At five-on-five, the Hurricanes are first in the league in expected goals for and eighth in expected goals against, putting them behind only Colorado in overall expected goal share. They're second in shots for and shots against, putting them in second place in overall shot share. And they allow just 45 attempts per 60, fewest in the league by about six. In terms of actual goals, they're good enough (2.77 per 60, ninth in the NHL). In terms of goaltending ... we'll get to that later.

"Hurricanes hockey," as a bit of shorthand, also has come to have something of a negative connotation, at least as it relates to the Stanley Cup playoffs. For all of their gifts, they've spent the last several years getting tripped up by a combo of opposing goaltenders who can weather the barrage and, at least compared to high-end contenders, a relative lack of elite talent at the top of the roster. In a short series, it's easier for the Aleksander Barkovs of the world to negate the soundest of processes. As such, if the Hurricanes fall short of the Stanley Cup, we can reasonably guess how it'll look.

That brings us to the Senators. Give them credit for the season they've assembled, especially down the stretch; they're eighth in the league in expected goals for and first in goals against, putting them third in overall expected goal share; they're eighth in shots for and third in shots against, putting them in third place in overall shot share; and they allow 51 attempts per 60, second in the league. In terms of actual goals, they're good enough (2.99 per 60, seventh in the NHL).

If that all sounds similar, it should. The Senators — right down to the lack of tippy-top talent and potentially questionable goaltending — are, at the



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moment, profiling like a good team that's a worse version of their opponent. It's fair to doubt Carolina as a true Cup contender, given that they, as constituted, have absorbed a lopsided loss in their only trip to the Eastern Conference final. What they haven't done is drop a series to a team that plays like a less evolved version of themselves. That's the Senators' task here, and it's tall.

The X-factor

What is Carolina going to do between the pipes?

Carolina has a conundrum on its hands: Who starts in net?

Is it Brandon Bussi? He surprisingly started 39 games, but has gone ice-cold after a blazing start to his career. Since the Olympic break, Bussi has an .864 save percentage while allowing 6.9 goals above expected, the seventh-worst mark in the league.

Is it Frederik Andersen? He was the team's starter in the 2025 playoffs, but has been notably mid this season by GSAx (0.7) and genuinely poor by save percentage (.874). It's hard to be sure how legit that GSAx number is when Andersen's expected save percentage on the same team is significantly lower than Bussi's (.873 compared to .890) in a similar number of contests.

Is it Pyotr Kochetkov? He's shown some promise in the past, but folded in four playoff starts last spring and has been out of action for three months. Even in the games he has started, he's been slightly below par.

It's varying levels of "pick your poison" with the model not seeing much separation between the three, leaning slightly towards Andersen for his track record. But at his current level, that feels like a gamble.

The Hurricanes don't need goaltending to win, given their structure and possession game. But it's still an Achilles' heel that could easily be the reason they lose.

The rosters

Jacob Slavin is a key reason why the Canes' identity has stayed so consistent despite roster turnover over the years. He plays an elite shutdown game while shouldering a heavy workload.

The next most valuable defenseman on the depth chart is, basically, his opposite: Shayne Gostisbehere. Gostisbehere has never been a defensive ace, but he moves the needle offensively — exactly what this team needs. Between Slavin and Gostisbehere, K'Andre Miller is the two-way bridge that can drive play at both ends of the ice.

Despite having all the raw tools to be a high-end top-four defenseman, Miller never reached his potential in New York. New surroundings have helped him stabilize his game. His top comps after last season were Brady Skjei, Mike Matheson and Joel Edmundson. But his growth over the last year has pushed the bar higher, putting him on a path more similar to Hampus Lindholm, Erik Johnson and Mattias Ekholm.

With Sean Walker, Miller has earned a 56.5 percent xG rate, thanks to this pair's strengths on both ends of the ice. The scoresheet hasn't been as kind, but a lower on-ice shooting percentage, and some shaky goaltending are behind that.

Rookie Alex Nikishin gives this blue line a little more dimension, with his playoff-style of hockey. He got a taste of that environment last spring, and now has a chance to build on it.

Up front, Aho leads the way as a center who does all the little things right in all three zones. But sometimes, a contender needs to have someone who consistently brings the Big Moments and Big-Time Scoring. As important as Aho is to the Canes — and he is as a cornerstone up front — it helps that this team has depth to make up for his lesser scoring punch. Relatively speaking, of course; the bar is high for franchise forwards.

Jarvis contributes a little bit of everything. He is a pesky forechecker who leans into the Canes' identity, but he also helps boost this team's rush-based attack to add a little more dimension. Plus he is a true shutdown threat, which has allowed the coaches to lighten Jordan Staal's workload, maximizing Staal's game in the bottom-six.

It obviously helps to have players who embody Canes hockey, like Jarvis and Logan Stankoven. But every team needs a little versatility. Nikolaj Ehlers goes against the grain, with his dynamic, puck-moving game. He is one of the best at generating scoring chances in transition with the Canes, but still has to kick his game up a notch to be a true contender-caliber No. 1 winger.

With Ehlers in the fold, there's less pressure on Andrei Svechnikov. He has played to his strengths this year, with his high-danger passing, play-driving, and scoring all trending in the right direction. Jackson Blake has shown promise in the top nine in a complementary role.

It makes for a deep forward group that Ottawa has to compete with. Like the Canes, there are some relative shortcomings at the top.

Brady Tkachuk is an absolute energizer who lives for the Big Moments. His play at 4 Nations was a preview of what he could do in a playoff environment, and he stepped up for Ottawa last spring when the team craved scoring.

As much as he drives play and creates a ton of scoring chances from the dangerous areas of the ice, there is just too wide of a gap between his xG and actual scoring. In a perfect world, there would be one game-breaker ahead of him in the lineup to slot him into a more favorable role.

Tim Stützle took some strides this year. He was more active in transition and created more scoring chances off the rush, picked up his shot volume (and quality), and scored at a slightly higher pace than last year. But he's more passable than ideal for a 1C on a contender given he's only barely won his minutes at five-on-five — and that's with Shane Pinto's line doing the heavy lifting. He, along with Michael Amadio, have become real defensive weapons in tough minutes putting up Selke-calibre numbers together, but lack offensive punch. That's something sorely missing in the bottom six.

This season, the Sens do have a better secondary layer of offense to add support behind Tkachuk and Stützle. Dylan Cozens looked more like the breakout version of himself from 2022-23 thanks to some upticks in transition, and improved play in his own zone. Drake Batherson's scoring and forechecking amps up the top six, too. But overall, it still pales in comparison to that of other elite teams, including Carolina.

Ottawa relies heavily on its defensive structure, and it helps to have a strong top four to facilitate that with a strong mix of puck-moving prowess and off-puck ability. One of Jake Sanderson's best strengths is his ability to retrieve pucks and break out with control; his efficiency in shifting from defense to offense is in a class of its own, according to AllThreeZones' tracking. That puck-moving play pairs perfectly with Artem Zub's defensive style. In almost 900 five-on-five minutes together, this duo has earned a 56.8 percent xG rate, driven by their incredibly stingy play.

That pair's ability to absorb minutes against top competition has allowed the coaches to maximize Thomas Chabot on the second pair, and off-season add Jordan Spence on the third. Chabot's defense is still risky, but his offense outpaces it. Spence, on the other hand, has been a real bright spot since getting traded from LA. While he is still sheltered, the Senators have trusted him to play more this season, and have been rewarded with some really solid two-way play.

What ties it all together is Linus Ullmark's series-stealing potential in goal. Yes, he started really slow. But since returning from a personal leave, Ullmark has a .904 save percentage and ranks 16th in GSAx. For an Ottawa team with defensive might, that was more than enough to surge to the playoffs and is one of the team's edges in this series. We'll see if it's enough against a Hurricanes team that has a bit more to offer.



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The key matchup

Jacob Slavin vs. Jake Sanderson

There are many who regard Slavin as the league's best defensive defenseman, and that's for good reason. This season, he posted a plus-5.7 Defensive Rating over 39 games, a pace that would've led the league.

But on the other side of the ice, there's a prime example of the position evolving — a defenseman who can match what Slavin does without the puck while not sacrificing anything with it. Sanderson's completeness in all three zones sets him apart from Slavin, whose game has become a bit more one-dimensional with age.

Sanderson's growth into one of the game's best defensemen this season has been a guiding light for the Senators. He's the most valuable player in this series and if the Senators pull off an upset, Sanderson will likely be a big reason. In a matchup where the Senators don't have a lot of advantages, this is a potentially big one.

The bottom line

Good as the Senators have been, it's tough to pick them in a series against a team that plays their style of game at a higher level. Goaltending, as ever, is a potential equalizing factor here, but Carolina still holds a clear overall edge.

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1387630 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Stanley Cup playoff schedule: The dates, times and TV networks for the first round

By Jesse Granger

April 17, 2026 Updated 1:58 am EDT

The NHL playoff bracket got finalized Thursday night, the final night of the regular season, when the Edmonton Oilers easily beat the Vancouver Canucks 6-1 to clinch second place in the Pacific Division and a first-round matchup against the Anaheim Ducks, which will start on Monday.

The postseason will begin Saturday in Raleigh, N.C., where the Eastern Conference's top seed, the Carolina Hurricanes, host the Ottawa Senators. That will be followed by the marquee first-round matchup between the Minnesota Wild and the Dallas Stars, two of the top three teams in the Western Conference standings. The teams split the regular-season series 2-2, with the Stars winning the most recent matchup, a 5-4 thriller on April 9.

Saturday's playoff slate wraps up with an intrastate clash between the Philadelphia Flyers and Pittsburgh Penguins, who are meeting in the postseason for the first time since 2018 (and for the eighth time ever).

The Presidents' Trophy-winning Colorado Avalanche will host the Los Angeles Kings on Sunday. The Avalanche set a franchise record with 121 points this season. In their previous best season, they went on to win it all in 2021-22.

The Tampa Bay Lightning and Montreal Canadiens will also play Game 1 on Sunday in what should be a physical series. The last time the teams met on April 9, there were 126 combined penalty minutes. Later on Sunday, the Buffalo Sabres will host their first playoff game in 14 years, against the Boston Bruins, and the Pacific Division-winning Vegas Golden Knights will host the Utah Mammoth in their first playoff game since relocating.

Here's the full schedule for all eight series.

You can watch the NHL playoffs live on Fubo. (Stream Free Now!)

Eastern Conference

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Ottawa Senators

Game 1: Senators at Hurricanes, Saturday, April 18, 3 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, OMNI, TVAS

Game 2: Senators at Hurricanes, Monday, April 20, 7:30 p.m. ET; ESPN2, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 3: Hurricanes at Senators, Thursday, April 23, 7:30 p.m. ET; TBS/HBO Max, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 4: Hurricanes at Senators, Saturday, April 25, 3 p.m. ET; TBS/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS, OMNI

*Game 5: Senators at Hurricanes, Monday, April 27, TBD

*Game 6: Hurricanes at Senators, Thursday, April 30, TBD

*Game 7: Senators at Hurricanes, Saturday, May 2, TBD

Pittsburgh Penguins vs. Philadelphia Flyers

Game 1: Flyers at Penguins, Saturday, April 18, 8 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, TVAS

Game 2: Flyers at Penguins, Monday, April 20, 7 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 3: Penguins at Flyers, Wednesday, April 22, 7 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 4: Penguins at Flyers, Saturday, April 25, 8 p.m. ET; TBS/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS

*Game 5: Flyers at Penguins, Monday, April 27, TBD

*Game 6: Penguins at Flyers, Wednesday, April 29, TBD

*Game 7: Flyers at Penguins, Saturday, May 2, TBD

Buffalo Sabres vs. Boston Bruins

Game 1: Bruins at Sabres, Sunday, April 19, 7:30 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 2: Bruins at Sabres, Tuesday, April 21, 7:30 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 3: Sabres at Bruins, Thursday, April 23, 7 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 4: Sabres at Bruins, Sunday, April 26, 2 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS

*Game 5: Bruins at Sabres, Tuesday, April 28, TBD

*Game 6: Sabres at Bruins, Friday, May 1, TBD

*Game 7: Bruins at Sabres, Sunday, May 3, TBD

Tampa Bay Lightning vs. Montreal Canadiens

Game 1: Canadiens at Lightning, Sunday, April 19, 5:45 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 2: Canadiens at Lightning, Tuesday, April 21, 7 p.m. ET; ESPN2, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 3: Lightning at Canadiens, Friday, April 24, 7 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 4: Lightning at Canadiens, Sunday, April 26, 7 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS



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*Game 5: Canadiens at Lightning, Wednesday, April 29, TBD

*Game 6: Lightning at Canadiens, Friday, May 1, TBD

*Game 7: Canadiens at Lightning, Sunday, May 3, TBD

Western Conference

Colorado Avalanche vs. Los Angeles Kings

Game 1: Kings at Avalanche, Sunday, April 19, 3 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS

Game 2: Kings at Avalanche, Tuesday, April 21, 10 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 3: Avalanche at Kings, Thursday, April 23, 10 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 4: Avalanche at Kings, Sunday, April 26, 4:30 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, Sportsnet360, TVAS

*Game 5: Kings at Avalanche, Wednesday, April 29, TBD

*Game 6: Avalanche at Kings, Friday, May 1, TBD

*Game 7: Kings at Avalanche, Sunday, May 3, TBD

Dallas Stars vs. Minnesota Wild

Game 1: Wild at Stars, Saturday, April 18, 5:30 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, TVAS

Game 2: Wild at Stars, Monday, April 20, 9:30 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 3: Stars at Wild, Wednesday, April 22, 9:30 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS

Game 4: Stars at Wild, Saturday, April 25, 5:30 p.m. ET; TBS/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, TVAS

*Game 5: Wild at Stars, Tuesday, April 28, TBD

*Game 6: Stars at Wild, Thursday, April 30, TBD

*Game 7: Wild at Stars, Saturday, May 2, TBD

Vegas Golden Knights vs. Utah Mammoth

Game 1: Mammoth at Golden Knights, Sunday, April 19, 10 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 2: Mammoth at Golden Knights, Tuesday, April 21, 9:30 p.m. ET; ESPN2, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 3: Golden Knights at Mammoth, Friday, April 24, 9:30 p.m. ET; TBS/HBO Max, Sportsnet360, TVAS

Game 4: Golden Knights at Mammoth, Monday, April 27, TBD; ESPN

*Game 5: Mammoth at Golden Knights, Wednesday, April 29, TBD

*Game 6: Golden Knights at Mammoth, Friday, May 1, TBD

*Game 7: Mammoth at Golden Knights, Sunday, May 3, TBD

Edmonton Oilers vs. Anaheim Ducks

Game 1: Ducks at Oilers, Monday, April 20, 10 p.m. ET; ESPN2, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 2: Ducks at Oilers, Wednesday, April 22, 10 p.m. ET; TBS/HBO Max, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 3: Oilers at Ducks, Friday, April 24, 10 p.m. ET; TNT/truTV/HBO Max, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

Game 4: Oilers at Ducks, Sunday, April 26, 9:30 p.m. ET; ESPN, Sportsnet, CBC, TVAS

*Game 5: Ducks at Oilers, Tuesday, April 28, TBD

*Game 6: Oilers at Ducks, Thursday, April 30, TBD

*Game 7: Ducks at Oilers, Saturday, May 2, TBD

*if necessary

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1387631 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Central Scouting releases final 2026 draft rankings: Gavin McKenna, Ivar Stenberg top lists

By Scott Wheeler

April 16, 2026 Updated 12:49 pm EDT

NHL Central Scouting released its final rankings for the 2026 NHL Draft class Thursday.

Penn State winger Gavin McKenna tops its list of North American skaters, while Frölunda winger Ivar Stenberg ranks first on the list of international skaters.

Here are the top 10 players on both rankings, plus some thoughts from our draft expert Scott Wheeler.

North American skaters final rankings

Gavin McKenna, LW, Penn State University

Chase Reid, RHD, Soo Greyhounds

Carson Carels, LHD, Prince George Cougars

Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, University of North Dakota

Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Prince Albert Raiders

Caleb Malhotra, C, Brantford Bulldogs

Tynan Lawrence, C, Boston University

Nikita Klepov, RW, Saginaw Spirit

Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor Spitfires

Ilya Morozov, C, Miami University

Find the full list here.

International skaters final rankings

Ivar Stenberg, RW, Frölunda HC

Alberts Smits, LHD, EHC Munchen

Oliver Suvanto, C, Tappara

Viggo Björck, C, Djurgården

Elton Hermansson, RW, MoDo

Juho Piiparinen, RHD, Tappara

Malte Gustafsson, LHD, HV71

Marcus Nordmark, LW, Djurgården

Gleb Pugachyov, RW, Nizhny Novgorod

Simas Ignatavicius, RW, Geneve-Servette

Find the full list here.



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Reid takes over as top D in North America

On NHL Central Scouting's midterm rankings, Keaton Verhoeff was the No. 1-ranked D in North America. Now that's Chase Reid, and Verhoeff has fallen to fourth on the list and third among D behind Reid and Carson Carels.

That reflects my upcoming list and the view of most scouts I've talked to about those three recently. The college game revealed some weaknesses in Verhoeff's game (particularly in his boots and decision-making), while Reid has built momentum over the last two years with continued development defensively around his impressive offensive package.

Risers

I was happy to see Nikita Klepov, who led the OHL in scoring this season, rise from No. 16 in North America on NHL Central Scouting's midterm rankings to No. 8. He's a favorite of mine and possesses top-six talent. He has gone from late-first/second-round pick to top-20 candidate.

Shifty NTDP standout Wyatt Cullen and 2024 Q No. 1 pick Maddox Dagenais have also strengthened their first-round cases over the course of this season, and they're No. 13 and No. 15, respectively, on NHL Central Scouting's final ranking for North America.

The Ruck twins also both rose, with Liam moving from No. 26 to No. 20 in North America and Markus rising from No. 31 to No. 23. Scouts are partial to Liam's scoring tilt, but Markus led the CHL in scoring this year with 108 points. They're 5-foot-11 forwards who work but lack the skating that teams prioritize in players of that size. They're both going to be top-two-round picks, but where still feels up in the air. They're in the midst of the WHL playoffs with Medicine Hat.

The sub-6-foot D

There has been a lot of talk about the trio of 5-foot-11-and-change CHL D this year, and NHL Central Scouting has them back-to-back-to-back on the North American list like this:

16. Ryan Lin, RHD, Vancouver Giants

17. Tommy Bleyl, RHD, Moncton Wildcats

18. Xavier Villeneuve, LHD, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada

Bleyl has debatably been the best D in the QMJHL this year, and his blend of consistency, playmaking, vision, feel, hockey sense and skating has deservedly pushed him into the conversation with Lin and Villeneuve, who've been names to watch for a couple of years.

The talented but 5-foot-10 Axel Elofsson landed all the way down at No. 29 on the international skaters list.

I still think Lin is the first one taken, but Bleyl might be the second.

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1387632 Websites

The Athletic / Can a ring of gelatin measure crowd reaction at an NHL game?

By Sean Gentile

April 16, 2026 6:00 am EDT

There are things you expect to see in the stands at an NHL arena. No longer absent from the list: a red ring of gelatin, perched on a three-foot, electronic platform built with proprietary, "jiggle"-measuring technology.

On April 3, at UBS Arena in Uniondale, N.Y., the New York Islanders and Philadelphia Flyers played the first game with the Jell-Ometer in the building.

The device is being pushed by Kraft Heinz, Jell-O's parent company, as a "visual representation" of the atmosphere in sports venues, chief marketing officer Todd Kaplan told The Athletic. Decibel meters — the kind we've seen on video boards for decades — measure sound, but not the seismic activity that often accompanies fan celebrations. That left an opening for the 129-year-old brand to exploit.

"There's something fun innately about seeing a plate of Jell-O and getting loud enough to see it responding to the noise you're making," Kaplan said. "There's a lot of crowds that say, 'We have the loudest arena in sports. We have the Sixth Man, the 12th Man sits here. ... Think of a world where you have a consistent way, potentially, to measure that impact.'"

To that end, Jell-Ometer (with the second syllable pronounced "law") offers "jiggle" read-outs on a 10-point scale. A "3" is like a running hairdryer. A "5" is like a subway train. A "7" is like a revving motorcycle. A "10" is earthquake-level chaos.

When Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored the Islanders' only goal in their 4-1 loss to Philadelphia, the meter, which had been moved rink-side after starting the game on the upper concourse, hit 8.4 — somewhere between "crack of thunder" and "rocket launch" on Kraft Heinz's scale.

It took about seven months for the meter to go from a brainstorm idea to an actual piece of equipment, complete with what Kaplan referred to as "proprietary technology" and a plan, after the pilot test on Long Island, to bring it to other sporting events. The plan is to roll it out at other NHL games, and other sporting events, in the near future.

If it sounds silly, that's the part of the point.

"It's almost like (the silliness) is what makes it interesting. Everyone knows what a jiggle is, and watching it jiggle is kind of funny. But because it's so simple, and because you can (now) quantify the jiggle into an actual scientific term, it gets really interesting," Kaplan said. "Man, we got to 8.6 jiggles."

The science largely checks out, according to Sam Underwood, an instructor at the University of Nebraska's Durham School of Architectural Engineering and Construction.

"Sound is the vibration of air," Underwood said. "When we think of sound, like me talking right now, my vocal cords are vibrating, and it creates these little pressure disturbances."

"As you get louder, those pressure disturbances become even greater. You could think of pressure acting on a surface — Jell-O, a wall — where those pressure disturbances could actually exert enough force enough to move lightweight objects."

The device, Kraft Heinz said, picks up atmospheric sound pressure across a calibrated range of 70 to 130 decibels — roughly the gap between a loud television and the roar of a jet engine. That acoustic data runs through a "proprietary signal processing pipeline" that converts sound intensity into proportional mechanical vibration on the platform where the Jell-O sits.

What a "jiggle" could measure more than anything, Underwood said, are physical vibrations caused by fans jumping and applauding. Jell-O, for its part, has tried to account for that possibility, including in the design what they called "custom dampening architecture built around spring suspension and acoustic isolation materials that makes sure the jiggle you're seeing is a faithful, real time reflection of the crowd's actual energy, not just structural noise."

Either way, Underwood said, there's value in the attempt. Decibel meters, for example, only measure the loudness of an event; a dentist's drill



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might have the same read-out as a cheering crowd, despite evoking a different emotion.

"I appreciated that (Kraft Heinz) came up with different ways to describe an experience in space, like what the energy feels like, based on more than our typical metrics," Underwood said. "That's an active area of acoustics research — new ways to describe how people feel in a space."

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1387633 Websites

The Athletic / What's at stake for NHL playoff teams on the final day of the regular season?

By Jesse Granger

April 16, 2026 6:00 am EDT

The Vegas Golden Knights beat the Seattle Kraken on Wednesday night to win the Pacific Division "pillow fight," as Connor McDavid termed it in March.

The victory gave Vegas 95 points, the fewest to win a division since the NHL realigned to a four-division format in 2013-14. It's the Golden Knights' fifth division title in nine years, the most of any team in the NHL since they entered the league in 2017-18. They will face the wild-card Utah Mammoth in the first round.

The Pacific was the final division title up for grabs, and it remains the only unsettled division entering Thursday, the final day of the regular season. The entire Eastern Conference bracket is set: Carolina vs. Ottawa, Pittsburgh vs. Philadelphia, Buffalo vs. Boston and Tampa Bay vs. Montreal. In the West, things are halfway decided, as Dallas (second place in the Central Division) will face third-place Minnesota.

That leaves the Pacific to finish things off. While Vegas is into the top spot, Edmonton, Anaheim, and Los Angeles all still can finish as high as second place and earn home-ice advantage in the first round, or fall to the second wild-card spot in the West (and a first-round matchup against the Central Division-winning Colorado Avalanche).

Here's how the Pacific standings look entering the final day:

Vegas Golden Knights

39

26

17

95

30

Edmonton Oilers

40

30

11

91

31

Anaheim Ducks

42

33

6

90

25

Los Angeles Kings

35

26

20

90

22

The Oilers hold a one-point edge over the Ducks and Kings, and have already clinched the tiebreaker over both teams thanks to their 31 regulation wins. If the Ducks and Kings tie on points, Anaheim would have the edge in regulation wins.

Here's what each team needs on Thursday in order to finish second in the division:

- Edmonton: at least one point vs. Vancouver, or losses of any kind by both Anaheim and Los Angeles.

- Anaheim: a win vs. Nashville and an Edmonton regulation loss to Vancouver.

- Los Angeles: a win against Calgary, an Edmonton regulation loss to Vancouver, and an Anaheim loss of any kind to Nashville.

It's simple for the Oilers. They just need one point against the Canucks, and earned at least one point in each of the teams' previous three meetings this season. Edmonton beat Vancouver 3-1 on Oct. 11. The Canucks won 4-3 in overtime in Vancouver on Oct. 26, and the Oilers won a 6-0 blowout in the most recent meeting, on Jan. 17.

If Edmonton loses in regulation, it could fall all the way into the wild-card spot if both Anaheim and Los Angeles win.

The Ducks need help from the Canucks in order to finish second, but control their own destiny to stay out of the wild-card spot, which is important considering that means a matchup with the Presidents' Trophy-winning Avalanche. Anaheim just needs to match Los Angeles' result on Thursday night to stay ahead of the Kings.

The Kings can still finish as high as second, but will need plenty of help to get there. If Edmonton and Anaheim both win, the Kings are destined for a matchup with Colorado. If not, there's a real possibility that Los Angeles will face Edmonton in the first round for the fifth consecutive year.

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The Athletic / The race to sell Seattle hockey: Inside the Kraken's 5-year struggle as NBA looms

By James Mirtle

April 16, 2026 5:45 am EDT

SEATTLE — Last week, having watched his team lose 10 of 11 games to crash out of the NHL playoff race, Seattle Kraken chief executive officer Tod Leiweke held a brutally honest news conference.



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Speaking to local media, he revealed team president Ron Francis would be stepping down at the end of the season, and promised a “full, independent audit” of the franchise’s hockey operations to address these on-ice failings.

“We have not delivered on the promise of the team ... and it’s not acceptable,” Leiweke said.

Unlike NHL expansion cousins in Las Vegas, where the Golden Knights hoisted the Stanley Cup in their sixth season, Seattle appears to be stalling out. With one meaningless game left on their 2025-26 schedule, the Kraken are set to miss the playoffs for the fourth time in five years and join the rebuilding Chicago Blackhawks as the only NHL teams to finish in the league’s bottom eight for a third straight season.

Greater strides have been made in the stands, as Climate Pledge Arena is consistently filled to capacity. On average, 2,000 members of each sellout crowd are attending their first Kraken game, a reminder that Seattle remains a relatively green hockey city. And the organization has cut season ticket prices for two years in a row while introducing smaller, more affordable packages, reflective of a desire to appease and grow a fledgling fan base.

The market offers some innate challenges. The NFL’s Seahawks are coming off a win in Super Bowl LX. The MLB’s Mariners reached the 2025 American League Championship Series. Add in the Storm (four-time WNBA champions), the Sounders (two-time MLS Cup winners), the PWHL’s expansion Torrent and the extremely popular University of Washington teams, and it’s clear Seattle is already one of the United States’ most jam-packed sports hubs for its size.

Now, with the NBA’s Board of Governors recently voting to explore expansion bids in Seattle and Las Vegas, the Kraken are facing even more urgency to finally deliver on the ice. Eighteen years ago, the beloved SuperSonics relocated to Oklahoma City, depriving local fans of a major-league rooting interest between football and baseball seasons. If the Sonics are resurrected, it’s fair to wonder how the superstar-less Kraken will handle the challenge.

Especially as they struggle to win.

Since entering the league in 2017-18, the Golden Knights have set the bar for new NHL franchises to heady levels, passing 90 points in every 82-game season of their existence and reaching the playoffs in eight of nine overall. The Kraken’s lone playoff appearance pales in comparison.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman believes Seattle faced an early disadvantage after Vegas “schooled” the rest of the league in its 2017 expansion draft, making other GMs skittish to deal with them as a result.

The Kraken also made mistakes in selecting their initial roster. Then, their outlier trip to the second round in Year 2 appeared to prematurely accelerate the mindset of Seattle’s front office — then run by Francis — beyond a draft-and-develop mandate.

Though the Kraken have a hopeful future, with a prospect pool that grades out among the best in the league and two first-round picks in each of the next two drafts, they lack current star power. A bold attempt to acquire Artemi Panarin before the trade deadline — including offering a massive \$14-million-a-season extension — was thwarted when he chose Los Angeles instead. Seattle sits 26th in the NHL in goals per game as of Wednesday, and their top producer, Jordan Eberle, is tied for 101st in points.

They signed defenseman Brandon Montour and center Chandler Stephenson to big deals in the summer of 2024, but they’ve yet to land a marquee free agent.

“It’s still an education,” Kraken GM Jason Botterill said of Seattle becoming a destination for players. “That’s what we’re trying to do; that’s why we’re working with our own players and making sure they’re as comfortable as possible. The fact that it is out here (in the Pacific

Northwest), it might not be the spot where everyone thinks of or has been out in Seattle all that much.”

“I think we’ve done OK from a free-agent standpoint ... but we all know what’s the biggest draw: success. If you get to that point, you’re on the radar for a lot of different players.”

Until then, the Vegas comparisons are clearly a source of frustration for the organization.

“Vegas is a completely different city than Seattle,” said Kraken majority owner Samantha Holloway. “It’s just a different animal. They’ve had different success and we’ve had community success in different ways and we’re still building our team. Kudos to them. And kudos to us for what we’ve done. ...

“Do I wish that we were a perennial playoff team at this moment? Yes. I think that it’s a different landscape to get there right now, and we’re working hard to do it. But I can’t be a fan every night or it’s difficult. There’s lots of ups and downs, and it’s very emotional. You’ve got to stay steady.”

Seattle Kraken owner Samantha Holloway talks with captain Jordan Eberle. (Travis Gillett / Seattle Kraken)

After five years in the city, the Kraken’s fan base remains a curious mix of transplants who used to cheer for other teams and those completely new to the sport. On many game nights, Climate Pledge Arena is split evenly between the two groups, with many of the newer fans bringing a rowdy atmosphere in the pricier lower-bowl seats.

“The fan base is kind of a hybrid of the hardcore hockey fans and brand new fans,” explained John Barr, a Day 1 season-ticket holder who led a grassroots push for a team via his website NHLtoSeattle.com. “We still have fans yelling ‘shoot!’ all the time.”

While players said they never get recognized around town, they do receive curious questions from neighbors and friends, making them ambassadors of the team in a different way than the city’s other athletes.

“When we got here, no one really knew what hockey was,” defenseman Vince Dunn said. “Quickly, just being such a good sports town, everyone jumped on board and we built ourselves a really good fan base. It definitely translates into kind of like a football atmosphere. I think our arena’s probably one of the louder ones for sure, and I think that probably comes from the culture and the environment in the city.

“It’s been cool to see the younger kids getting into hockey. A lot of my neighbors are getting into hockey, embracing a new sport in the town. We enjoy answering questions and helping people out.”

The Kraken have tried to broaden their appeal in other ways, including freeing their television broadcast from a pricey cable package and instead showing games on over-the-air channels and Amazon Prime. As with many things the Kraken have done, they’ve spared no expense. Their broadcast consistently ranks among the best in the league.

But the crown jewel of the team’s community outreach efforts is the Kraken Community Iceplex, the first new arena complex built in Seattle proper in decades. It’s a \$90 million facility jammed from 6 a.m. until midnight, seven days a week, with 1 million annual visitors.

The Kraken and Torrent both call it home, and it’s likely the best practice facility in both leagues. Located seven miles from downtown Seattle, it also offers everything from kids’ birthday parties to introductory beer leagues to figure skating lessons.

“This has been a great market so far,” Holloway said. “You could be losing here and at the end (of the game), people are still in their seats, cheering and having a really good time. So we’re doing something right and giving people a great experience that they still want to be part of.”



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After her billionaire father, David Bonderman, died in December 2024, Holloway became the face of the Kraken's unusual ownership group alongside a number of minority partners, including Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy, former Seahawks star Marshawn Lynch and rapper Macklemore. Leiweke, another minority owner, has also been heavily involved, tapping his experience as a high-level executive with the Seahawks, Minnesota Wild and Tampa Bay Lightning.

With a master's degree in forensic psychology, an MBA focused on marketing and experience as a founder in the startup world, Holloway brings a diverse background to Seattle. The NHL's youngest primary governor and only woman serving in that role, she has also quickly established a strong relationship with the league commissioner, who describes her as a "very special person."

"She really is completely immersed in the community in Seattle, in hockey, and the team," Bettman added. "She's really smart, she's really energetic, she is really creative, and she really has strong values and everything is pushed in that direction."

"She may not be as vocal as some at the Board (of Governors') meetings, but she and I have an open line of communication, and she never hesitates to ask questions. And when she feels strongly about something, (she) expresses her opinion."

One such opinion: The Kraken can coexist and thrive alongside an NBA franchise in Seattle.

Questions persist about what the NBA's return could mean for the Kraken. Basketball fans here have been in mourning ever since the Sonics moved in 2008; their rebirth will be an unprecedented love-in that could be hard for the new franchise to match.

And, unlike with the Seahawks and Mariners, their seasons will almost fully overlap.

"If done the right way, (an NBA team) is additive," Holloway said. "It's been important that we've had enough time to build the Kraken brand and get to where we want to be. There's always room to grow, but it's a great time to add basketball, and they're complementary if done correctly."

The hope internally is that by the time the Sonics hit the court two or three years from now, the Kraken are firmly entrenched enough to avoid getting crowded out. But part of that calculus is contingent on winning more games and introducing new fans to playoff hockey to cement their love of the sport.

"I'm a huge basketball fan," Holloway said. "At the moment, my heart is in hockey and I'm really proud of what we've built here, but we've shown we can bring an expansion team to Seattle and that the market is big and sports-focused. And there's plenty of appetite for another team as well. We're excited at the possibility."

The NHL is similarly unconcerned. According to Bettman, Seattle has already been a significant success, with strong economic underpinnings and a well-heeled ownership group. One of the key reasons the NBA is courting a return to the market, he argues, is that they can see how well expansion has worked in his league.

"What do they say? Imitation is the highest form of flattery?" Bettman said of the fact that the NBA appears ready to follow the NHL into Vegas and Seattle. "I think both franchises have established a really strong foothold. They have become essential elements of their communities."

"I don't worry about our franchises at all. They're going to more than hold their own."

Those who know Holloway well, meanwhile, believe she is up to the challenge of turning around the Kraken and bringing back the

SuperSonics because they've seen her thrive in unfamiliar territory before.

"We were able to go win these really big Fortune 500 accounts and have them use our software," said Matt Talbot, who co-founded the data collection software firm GoSpotCheck with Holloway. "I don't think that would have happened without Sam's magic in working with people."

From a young age, Holloway set out on a path to differentiate herself from her father, a former minority owner of the Boston Celtics who also held investment stakes in Continental Airlines and J. Crew, among other holdings. Talbot chuckles when he reflects on their startup days, recalling how Holloway lived in a modest home and drove around in a beat-up Nissan Pathfinder with a broken taillight.

"It was important to me to live my own life and do my own thing," Holloway said. "But I think sports is really interesting in the state of the world that we're in. It's this thing that brings everyone together. There's this pure joy associated with it and this unique ability to do things for the community that you can only do in this kind of industry."

The Kraken Community Iceplex is one of the perks that has players raving about the experience of playing here. (Travis Gillett / Seattle Kraken)

It's a cold, wet afternoon deep into the season, and Eberle is hustling through the Kraken Community Iceplex.

As a Zamboni covered in a large Starbucks logo smooths over the rink that his team just tore up, the Kraken captain is headed to another sheet to watch his 5-year-old daughter skate with her youth team, one of 39 Jr. Kraken clubs that have sprung up since the NHL arrived in 2021.

"It's convenient, that's for sure," Eberle said, adding that his 3-year-old son also participates in a popular learn-to-skate program at the facility. "I've just got to walk across the rink to watch them play. There's a couple guys that have that."

"When the (expansion) draft happened, this place wasn't built yet, but they walked us through the plans and everything. Honestly, I have nothing but great things to say about this organization and the way we get treated. It's first-class here; ownership has put a lot of money and time into it."

Shortly after that conversation, Eberle signed a two-year extension with Seattle, a deal that could take the 35-year-old to the end of his playing days. He's far from the only player who raves about what it's like to play here, even though there have been challenges on the ice and a revolving door of coaches behind the bench.

Holloway, 45, is significantly closer in age to the players than most NHL owners, something she believes allows her to take a different approach with those relationships. Multiple members of the Kraken said they and their wives consider Holloway and her husband, Greg — a local beer league player who's originally from Minnesota — to be something closer to friends than ivory-tower owners.

"I've never really had someone who cares so much about the organization and being so hands-on," defenseman Vince Dunn said. "Just knowing she's really invested, I think the support gives us a boost. Seeing her around shows that she's all in."

"From what I know, she doesn't come from a huge hockey background, but she's really adapted well to the culture and is building a really good business and a really good team. It's cool to see her and be able to talk to her. You're not intimidated by her, which is a really good feeling. It's more of a personal relationship than looking at her just as an owner; she's very humble and brings herself down to a level where everyone can relate to her."

Added Adam Larsson, a 15-year NHL veteran who signed a four-year extension to stay in Seattle last season, "We're very well taken care of



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here. They really care about the families. ... And she wants input from the players, too. It's a lot of small things that I think will keep pushing this organization to where it wants to get to. They've done a really good job so far."

Bettman believes that approach exemplifies how the Kraken are succeeding quietly behind the scenes, winning over players and fans one by one with a personal, community-focused approach that's unusual in the NHL.

"There's a unique ability to really lean into: 'What can we do that's different to make sure that players and their families feel great in Seattle and want to be here?'" Holloway said. "We're trying to authentically make sure that's a thing. Because we're going to need to recruit people."

Holloway addresses the Kraken at the beginning of each season, and Eberle explained that part of what she focuses on in those talks is that their mission goes beyond scoring goals and winning games. They're also part of building a hockey culture and growing the game in a city where the sport has often been on the fringes, despite its close proximity to the Canadian border.

Minor hockey growth has been modest so far, with the number of players aged 10 and under in the state of Washington rising from 2,600 before the Kraken arrived to 3,100 last season. One thing that holds those numbers back is a lack of ice time in a metro area of four million people, something the Kraken are trying to alleviate as they build more arenas in the suburbs.

Seattle is still seeking its first homegrown star, as the area has produced almost no notable NHL players outside of the retired T.J. Oshie, a native of nearby Everett.

"I've seen hockey grow here — no question," Eberle said. "I don't think it was the biggest hockey town coming in. ... I'd love to see more rinks come up and the game continue to grow."

It's a long-game approach that should win the Kraken more converts in the decades to come, as the sport catches on. For now, however, the organization knows they need to win more games in order for the NHL club to have sustained success here.

"There's judgments that are rendered like this is a 60-minute game," Bettman said of the criticisms the Kraken receive. "This is a franchise that was built from scratch for the long haul and they wanna do everything right and whether or not they make the playoffs in their first five years or they go to the Stanley Cup Final, what's more important is that this franchise is firmly entrenched in the community and it's built for the long term. That's what their commitment was to Seattle."

"Winning is really important to us," Holloway added. "We built this in the right way from the ground up and winning consistently is starting to come and will come ..."

"We have to start consistently winning and the organization is working towards that. It's always more fun to win."

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ESPN / Stanley Cup contender flaws: Top issues for NHL playoff teams – ESPN

Rachel Kryshak

Rachel Kryshak is a professional data consultant specializing in data communication and modelling. She's worked in the NHL and

consulted for professional teams across North American and Europe. She hosts the Staff & Graph Podcast and discusses sports from a data-driven perspective.

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs are upon us, and more so than in years prior, the playoff format is under fire from fans.

The Central and Atlantic Division teams remain the "teams being penalized for being too good." We have all marked the Dallas Stars-Minnesota Wild series down as the best of the first round, but it's a shame that two of the top seven teams in the NHL should be playing each other right off the bat.

Meanwhile, the winner of the Pacific Division might finish with fewer points than the Washington Capitals, who didn't qualify for the playoffs in the East. So, the biggest flaw of the playoffs in general might be the seeding system.

Drilling down to the team level, every team that makes the postseason has a chance to win it all, but not every team is a true contender. This year, there are some teams that grossly outperformed preseason expectations -- looking at you, Pittsburgh Penguins and Buffalo Sabres. They were significant beneficiaries from teams that fell off a cliff -- looking at you, back-to-back Cup champion Florida Panthers and reigning Atlantic Division champion Toronto Maple Leafs. Can teams like the Pens and Sabres continue to overperform expectations? Or will the clock strike midnight on their Cinderella seasons?

Every team has a fatal flaw -- an issue that is likely to be its undoing. The team that best mitigates its fatal flaw -- and gets some luck -- is likely to lift the Stanley Cup. Given how wide open the field is this year, it feels like 13 or 14 teams can make a run to the Cup Final. Obviously, only two will get there, so here's a look at a weakness for each team set to begin its postseason journey this weekend.

Jump to a team:

ANA | BOS | BUF | CAR

COL | DAL | EDM | LA

MIN | MTL | OTT | PHI

PIT | TB | UTA | VGG

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Carolina Hurricanes

Seed: Metro No. 1

Stop me if you've heard this before: Carolina could be undone this postseason by faulty goaltending and an inability to produce offense at critical times.

The Canes have been the model of consistency for more than half a decade. Under head coach Rod Brind'Amour, Carolina has won at least one playoff series every year. There are fan bases that would give anything for that. (See: Buffalo.)

However, the Canes have failed to make a Stanley Cup Final because, consistently, their goal scoring gets colder as the weather gets warmer. This season, the Canes have scored more goals than they have in any regular season in their history, but their finishing ability ranks near the bottom of the league. The Canes' pace of play ranks third in the NHL, with the expected goal share ranking first, according to Betalytics.

Given that pace of play, they'll likely need to average more than three goals per game, while giving up less than 2.5. Teams with the most success score ~0.6 more goals per game than they give up. The Canes' regular-season mark hovers in that area, which is a positive sign over last season's performance. If they can sort out their finishing woes and this goal differential holds, they have a better chance to reach the conference finals and beyond.



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Pittsburgh Penguins

Seed: Metro No. 2

Hands up if you thought the Penguins were going to the playoffs this year. No one? Thought so. The Penguins were penciled in for the draft lottery this season -- not for second in the Metro Division. But this season has seen players overperforming their previous outputs and Hall of Famers performing at levels that are closer to their primes than the back nine of their careers.

Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin? Over a point-per-game pace. Erik Karlsson, nearly 0.9 points per game. Kris Letang, playing passable defense and a key member of a top-10 penalty kill unit. The Penguins are one of the best offensive teams in the NHL, creating scoring chances throughout their lineup and capitalizing on them.

However, the Penguins' defensive play is not strong. Given that their first-round opponent is cross-state rival Philadelphia -- which has been an excellent defensive team down the stretch -- and their second-round opponent would likely be Carolina, which is the most overwhelming shot-volume team -- that could be problematic.

The ability to lock it down in the playoffs has been critical to success. Philly can do it, and now it has young offensive legs to take advantage of scoring opportunities. The Penguins might struggle to create against the Flyers and might not have the defensive capability in a tight, low-scoring series. Should they beat Philly, the Canes' ability to overwhelm opponents with their shot volume might be too much for an aging defense core that is not particularly staunch.

Philadelphia Flyers

Seed: Metro No. 3

The Flyers skyrocketed up the standings since the NHL's return from the Olympics on the back of some excellent defensive play. An 18-6-1 record in their past 25 games makes them one of the top teams in the league heading into the playoffs.

Philly is dedicated to strong defense, preventing scoring chances and being a general nightmare to play against. The team lacked scoring punch, but the addition of Porter Martone after he signed on March 29 has changed things. He has come in on the top line, found chemistry, driven offense and allowed everyone else to slot into positions that are better suited to their capabilities. Defense wins championships, and if the Flyers continue to play staunch defensive hockey and get offensive contributions from their young players, they can make a run.

The biggest roadblock is not the lack of offense anymore. Playoff success requires elite special teams. The Flyers' special teams are the worst of the playoff field. Their power play finished dead last in the entire league, at 15.7%, and their penalty kill ranked in the bottom 10, at 77.6%. Underperforming on either of those in the playoffs has sunk teams before; it would be unheard of for a team to make a run with both units struggling.

The Flyers are good enough to win their series against the Penguins, but without improved special teams, they will find themselves in trouble.

Buffalo Sabres

Seed: Atlantic No. 1

There is no team buoyed by vibes more than the Sabres -- and the vibes have not been this high in Buffalo for nearly 20 years.

Outside of vibes, the Sabres' journey back to the playoffs has been due to one of the luckiest runs in years: far better goaltending than expected, more short-handed goals than all but two teams, and overperforming on both sides of the expected goals ledger. That is the type of luck that can power a team to a Stanley Cup win.

Make no mistake, the Sabres are very much the Cinderella of the NHL this year. They are the story everyone loves, the team many outside fans root for, the improbable run to overcome tremendous mental obstacles, and the team that overperforms any expectations. Some picked the Sabres to make the playoffs; they didn't pick them to win the division or make a Cup run.

But the thing about Cinderella is, the clock always strikes midnight. Can the Sabres stave off a goaltending fall back to Earth, a power play that does not produce, or finishing that dries up when scoring chances are more difficult to come by? If they can, the glass slipper might fit. But the moment things start to falter, it will likely be the end of one of the most magical seasons in Sabres history.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Seed: Atlantic No. 2

The Lightning are one the most well-coached teams in the NHL and arguably the best-coached team over the past decade. Year after year, we await the fall of the Lightning -- and Jon Cooper keeps laughing at us. They most certainly will not be outcoached this spring.

However, the veteran-laden Lightning are another year older and are battling some significant injuries. Given the younger teams they are likely to face during their playoff run (Buffalo, Montreal, Ottawa), that attrition is most likely to be their undoing.

Let's face it: Andrei Vasilevskiy is once again among the Vezina Trophy contenders this season, so he is unlikely to be outplayed by any of the goaltenders in the Atlantic Division outside of potentially Jeremy Swayman. Nikita Kucherov is in Hart Trophy form and turns up the nasty in the playoffs. He's unlikely to be outplayed by anyone in the Eastern Conference, period.

There is no playoff team in the East that comes close to Tampa Bay's winning résumé. The Lightning are unlikely to be outfoxed by a younger, inexperienced team. But Victor Hedman, Brandon Hagel and Darren Raddysh are key players who have been battling injuries of various severity. They are critical components of success for Tampa Bay, and this team does not have the same depth it did years ago. The Lightning cannot afford to be without those players. If they are, that might be too much even for the elite talent and coaching to overcome.

Montreal Canadiens

Seed: Atlantic No. 3

There is nothing like a Saturday night playoff game in Montreal. There is no atmosphere that measures up to the one created in Montreal when the Canadiens are in the playoffs. Whether the Habs are built for playoff success is another conversation entirely.

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard someone say you have to be big to succeed in the playoffs, I would own an NHL team. To some degree, that is true. Many of hockey's smaller players get pushed out in the playoffs when the games get meaner. And given that two of Montreal's brightest stars are very small by any NHL average, that might pose a problem.

Cole Caufield reached the 50-goal mark this season and scored around 18 goals above expected. Although it is unwise to doubt players of that skill level, it would not be the first time a player who overperformed his metrics in the regular season fell back to Earth in the playoffs.

Lane Hutson is a Norris Trophy contender after winning the Calder last season, but we have yet to see how he fares when every forechecker is finishing their check and trying to run him through the boards into the third row. Will he still have the confidence to make the plays he does? Can he withstand or escape the physical nature that comes with heavy minutes in the NHL playoffs? I don't doubt that he is capable of it -- but that hypothesis has not been tested.



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Simply put: The Canadiens will go as far as their young superstars can take them.

Ottawa Senators

Seed: Wild card No. 2

In keeping with a theme you're seeing with a lot of these teams, we're focusing on the goal-suppression department here. And there is no club that is made or undone by its goaltending more than the Senators.

The Senators were the best defensive team in the NHL this season. They limited scoring chances and suffocated everyone's ability to create offense. Allowing 25 shots on their goal was considered a bad game. That is the type of hockey that wins in the playoffs. Ottawa is the most dangerous team this spring because of its ability to defend. There is no team in the East that can lock it down the way the Sens can.

But locking it down means nothing if a meatball is going in from 60 feet. When the Sens get anything close to league-average goaltending, they win games. They can afford slightly below average because they give up such little quality -- the best team by expected goals against, according to Betalytics, at 2.69 per game in all situations. Conversely, they average 3.32 goals for per game, a differential that begets success.

The Senators are dangerous because of how they play, and if their run is going to end prematurely, it will likely be because their goaltending let them down. If Linus Ullmark catches lightning in a bottle, Ottawa has the "it" factor to make a deep run this spring.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Colorado Avalanche

Seed: Central No. 1

The Avalanche have felt like the Stanley Cup favorites all season long, but they haven't been fantastic since the turn of the calendar. The Avs play Dallas very well and lose sometimes, and we know Mikko Rantanen is capable of ending things for his former team on his own. Knowing you can play well and still lose can play with your mind.

Like several other teams this season, the goaltending is a question mark. However, with a Mackenzie Blackwood-Scott Wedgewood tandem that has proved to be good enough all season, that feels like a less-than-fatal flaw.

However, Colorado's defensive depth is concerning, which is why Cale Makar's status looms like a dark cloud. The Avalanche cannot get through the gauntlet of the Central Division without him.

Let's assume he is healthy -- or healthy enough to go. Nick Blankenburg has struggled in the role of seventh defenseman, and the Avalanche do not have an eighth defenseman who has been reliable this season. Given that teams usually need eight or nine blueliners in rotation en route to winning the Stanley Cup, this feels like a major issue.

The Avs' top six on D is among the NHL's best, but it's unlikely Colorado wins the Stanley Cup without the need to use some defensive depth. The Central Division is physically punishing, and there is every reason to believe the playoffs will be no different. If the Avs end up having to play Blankenburg and/or another defenseman for more than a week because one of their top six is lost to injury, it could be the difference.

Dallas Stars

Seed: Central No. 2

Without a doubt, the Stars are going to play in the toughest series of the first round, against the Wild. There are Norris Trophy-level defensemen on both teams. Both teams turn up the nasty dial to 11 when the playoffs hit, too.

To win, the Stars need Miro Heiskanen to not only be healthy but be at his absolute best. If he cannot play in the first round, that might swing the pendulum in favor of the Wild.

Thomas Harley has capably filled in for Heiskanen throughout the season, but depth is everything in a tight playoff series. Heiskanen is likely to play upward of 25 minutes per game against Wild superstar Kirill Kaprizov. Having the ability to play Harley against Matt Boldy balances out Dallas' defense core, which is not deep.

If the Stars have to play the struggling Tyler Myers in a matchup role, that is unlikely to go well against two of the best offensive talents in the league. Similar to Colorado, Dallas' defensive depth is severely lacking, and if Heiskanen cannot play heavy matchup minutes, the Stars are in deep trouble.

Minnesota Wild

Seed: Central No. 3

The Wild might go out in the first round. But they also might make the conference finals. The Central Division is a nightmare, and similar to the Avs and Stars, one of the major fatal flaws in the Wild's path is the playoff format.

Their superstars -- Kirill Kaprizov and Quinn Hughes -- will be the best players on the ice in their series against Dallas. They have the best defensive core in the Central, with the depth to withstand a couple of injuries, something neither Colorado nor Dallas has. There is also an argument that the Wild have the best goaltending tandem in the West in Filip Gustavsson and Jesper Wallstedt, which can be a great equalizer in the playoffs.

Outside of that, the Wild have a clear weakness up the middle. Joel Eriksson Ek, Ryan Hartman and Danila Yurov do not stack up well against their counterparts in Colorado (Nathan MacKinnon, Brock Nelson, Nazem Kadri) or Dallas (Roope Hintz, Wyatt Johnston, Matt Duchene).

Eriksson Ek is a fantastic shutdown forward, Hartman has produced in line with a midtier second-line center since the Olympic break, and Yurov is a developing third-line center. But it is not a stretch to say that the Wild's best center would play the third-line center role for their opponents.

And if the Wild get out of the Central, they are likely to meet Edmonton or Vegas, where Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Jack Eichel and Tomas Hertl await. Successful playoff teams are deep at center. The Wild are not, and that could be their undoing.

Utah Mammoth

Seed: Wild card No. 1

The Mammoth have the luxury of playing against the Pacific Division champ, which will be either the Golden Knights or the Oilers. Based on the regular season, the Mammoth will be on a level playing field with their opponents. Utah's best players are young and entering their first playoff run, and there is surely a lot of learning experience to be gained against seasoned teams like Vegas and Edmonton.

But there are two things that might undo Utah outside of lack of experience.

Utah's stars are small compared with players in the bigger, heavier Western Conference. Logan Cooley, Clayton Keller and Dylan Guenther each weigh less than 195 pounds, which is more than 10 pounds lighter than their star counterparts on other teams. The playoffs are a different, physical beast, and it is fair to wonder if Utah's young guns will be able to withstand that style of play until they prove that they can.

More importantly, Utah's forward depth is where the falloff happens. Granted, the Oilers' depth isn't great, either, but Utah doesn't have



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Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl to equalize that shortcoming. The team has a distinct need for another middle-six forward, which would allow for the likes of Michael Carcone and Lawson Crouse to provide high-end depth options instead of slotting in top offensive roles. The falloff from the elite players to the depth is stark, and it might be too much to overcome against the West's elite teams.

Vegas Golden Knights

Seed: Pacific No. 1

The same thing that was nearly their undoing in the regular season could come back to haunt the Golden Knights in the playoffs: the goaltending.

Putrid is probably a kind description of the quality of netminding received this season relative to expectation. Not a single goaltender in the organization has a positive goals saved above expected -- meaning not a single goalie has performed to a level he should reasonably be expected to perform. Making matters worse, rotational starters Adin Hill and Carter Hart have been the two worst goalies in the organization by that metric this season, with Akira Schmid being the top performer.

You cannot win a Stanley Cup with a team save percentage below .880. The Oilers can tell that story from the past two seasons, and Edmonton at least has the superstars to outscore poor goaltending on most evenings.

Defensively, Vegas is one of the best teams in the NHL. Defense wins in the NHL, and Vegas' defensive system has been suffocating all season -- only Ottawa was better. So, to be clear: The Golden Knights don't need their goaltending to be spectacular. If they can get .900 goaltending from their goalies throughout the playoffs, they have the makeup of a team that can win. But with the level of their current goaltending, they'll be lucky to get out of the first round.

The back-to-back Stanley Cup runners-up are in a different situation this year. Their goaltending is somehow worse.

They are also potentially without one of the best playoff performers of the modern era in Leon Draisaitl. Without Draisaitl, the Oilers are probably toast. He returned to practice this week, but his playoff status remains unclear.

Connor McDavid is capable of carrying them through a round or two, but the Oilers are unlikely to beat a team from the Central Division without Draisaitl. It is fortunate that for the first two rounds they will stay in the "pillow fight" that is the Pacific Division, as McDavid called it, and give Draisaitl time to get back in the mix.

The Oilers have been able to escape subpar playoff goaltending for a couple of years, largely on the backs of their top players. In the past, the stars have played well enough for the goaltending to regain confidence and round into form. When you score more than 3.5 goals per game and your power play clicks at around 27.5%, you can afford to play in more high-scoring affairs.

The Oilers need two things: their perennial playoff performer Draisaitl to return in elite form and their goaltending to not let in backbreakers. They have the team to make a run if they can get those two things. Without both, they are in a lot of trouble.

McDavid feeds Draisaitl for another Oilers goal

Connor McDavid passes to Leon Draisaitl, who finds the back of the net as the Oilers score their sixth goal of the game.

The omissions

You might have noticed there are three teams missing from the above list of contenders, as they are a bit behind when it comes to their legit Cup chances.

The Los Angeles Kings have fewer regulation wins than the New York Rangers and Toronto Maple Leafs, who have some of the best draft lottery odds in the league. Their making the playoffs is a product of a weak Western Conference outside of the top four Central Division teams.

Ditto for the Anaheim Ducks, who admittedly are extremely fun and should be a perennial playoff team moving forward given their young talent. The Ducks aren't ready to seriously contend yet. Their loosey-goosey play style is entertaining, but their special teams, defensive play and play control are not up to the caliber of other playoff teams. They might win a round because of the weakness of their division, but they are a year or two from Cup contender status.

Finally, the Boston Bruins have overperformed their expected goals for and against by significant margins this season. Their finishing is the best in the NHL, and they have been the recipient of Vezina Trophy-caliber goaltending from Jeremy Swayman. Though that is enough to win a round, the underlying metrics tell a completely different story: a team that has been extraordinarily lucky for far too long.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' romp of Canucks sets up Round 1 matchup with Ducks: 'We're excited'

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — Fans will celebrate No Kings Day in Edmonton on Friday, and instead, the Oilers will draw their 2017 selves in a Round 1 series against the Anaheim Ducks.

It took four years and 82 games, but an Anaheim win in Nashville, and an Oilers romp over a tragic version of the Vancouver Canucks helped to avoid a fifth straight Round 1 series against the Los Angeles Kings.

"I like winning," said defenceman Mattias Ekholm, when asked about the Kings. "But a change of scenery will be nice."

Playing their best hockey of the season at the most important time, Edmonton flexed with a dominant 6-1 win, outshooting the Canucks 35-12. The Oilers scored just 1:58 in, and led by Connor McDavid's four assists, they never allowed the Canucks even the slightest kernel of belief that they may have a chance to win.

"They came out ready to play and secured their spot in the playoffs on home ice," said Vancouver defenceman Filip Hronek. "We were not ready for it."

If there was ever any doubt about the Oilers' ability to deliver a decisive victory on cue, they dispelled that notion with a 60-minute, wire-to-wire boot stomp of a Canucks team that did

"It was 60 minutes of a good hockey game," said Darnell Nurse. "We checked well — we've been checking well for a little bit now — and were able to produce the offence. I think for our group it was good overall."

Edmonton has allowed one regulation goal against in each of its past three games. In six of their past eight, they've allowed two or less.

They're dialled in and gave the Canucks absolutely nothing, other than a miscue with the score 2-0. Edmonton native and former Sherwood Park Crusader Ty Mueller scored his first NHL goal on a breakaway in front of family and friends. It was the only time of the evening when Vancouver appeared competitive.



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"We came out and looked like we were assertive in every way possible, and weren't going to let this one slip," Ekholm said. "Kudos to us for having a professional performance against a team that looked like they kind of wanted to go on their break."

McDavid, as expected, came out right from puck drop with a demeanor that said, "We're winning tonight, and there is no other option." He assisted on four of the Oilers' six goals.

After Josh Samanski banked a pass in off a skate at the 1:58 mark, one of two goals for the fourth line, McDavid went to work, assisting on all three goals of a Matt Savoie hat trick in Period 1. Savoie closes out his rookie season with 18 goals and 37 points, most of the damage done since Jan. 1.

He's found a spot on the left wing with McDavid and Zach Hyman that's beginning to look permanent. Savoie is fast, young and has great hands — a nice set of tools on a team that is getting long in the tooth.

"I'm tenacious and I think I'm getting better working to areas to be able to finish," he said. "I think the looks have been there especially over the last seven, eight games. I'm starting to finish more and looking to continue with the confidence."

With the regular season complete, McDavid wins his sixth Art Ross Trophy with 138 points (48 goals). He will have an excellent shot at collecting his fourth Hart Trophy after a late-season run that produced 27 points in the final 15 games of the season.

With a four-point night Thursday, the Oilers captain moved past the great Montreal Canadien Jean Beliveau in all-time scoring with 1,220 points. By the end of next season, he will likely reel in the likes of Norm Ullman, Peter Stastny, Jarome Iginla and Gilbert Perreault on the NHL's all-time scoring list.

Crazy how time flies, isn't it?

Now, Edmonton will play a Ducks team making its first post-season appearance in eight seasons. Much like in 2017, when McDavid made his first NHL playoff journey — one that was ended by a veteran-laden Ducks team in seven games.

"They're a young team," he said of Anaheim. "It's their first time in the playoffs and they'll be excited as they should be. They've earned their spot and they'll be excited. But we're excited too."

OIL SPILLS — Colton Dach notched his first Gordie Howe hat trick Saturday, and a viable fourth line has emerged just in time for playoffs, when depth is so important ... With three assists, Evan Bouchard closes his season with 95 points — just the 10th defenceman ever to hit that mark.

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1387637 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' demise punctuated by one last humiliation against Oilers

Iain MacIntyre

EDMONTON — Two years ago, the Vancouver Canucks won 50 games. Thursday, they finished the 2025-26 season with 25 wins — and 49 regulation losses.

No matter how accustomed we have become to the team's historic retreat this season, the numbers are still halting.

How much has changed for Vancouver in the National Hockey League was reinforced by its final-game 6-1 humiliation against the Edmonton Oilers, the Stanley Cup contenders the Canucks forced to Game 7 in the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs just 23 months ago.

The Canucks did not come close to competing Thursday in the same building where they nearly took down the Oilers in 2024.

"I was thinking about that," longest-serving Canuck Brock Boeser said after the team's funeral march finally ended. "It's hard to imagine. I don't even know what to say, really, right now. It sucks. I've still kind of got to get my thoughts together about everything that happened."

"But this is obviously a direction we had to go with the moves that were made. We've got to restart."

Shots Thursday were 35-12 for the Oilers, who needed a point to guarantee themselves a home-ice start to this year's playoffs. That urgency was exemplified by Connor McDavid, who seemed to make it his mission not to let the last-place Canucks steal a game that would make it harder for Edmonton to begin another journey towards a third straight Stanley Cup Final.

McDavid carved open the Canucks with four assists and sculpted a first-period hat trick for lucky linemate Matt Savoie. Edmonton's dominant victory ended an improbable three-game Vancouver winning streak and the Canucks' worst season this century — arguably, their most disappointing one ever.

"They came out ready to play. . . and we were not ready for it," Canucks defenceman Filip Hronek said.

The Canucks' final landing spot, last by a mile in the NHL for the first time in franchise history, is disillusioning but hardly a shock considering this ending could be glimpsed almost from the beginning of the season.

Their fall from a peak of 4-2-0 began in October when injuries to Filip Chytil and Teddy Blueger exposed the organization's failure to bolster its centre depth last summer. Highest-paid player Elias Pettersson started slowly, again, and goalie Thatcher Demko got hurt, again. And everyone knew it was over for the Canucks on Dec. 12 when president Jim Rutherford, fearing he might be forced to sell Quinn Hughes at a severe loss if he didn't act quickly, traded the best player in franchise history to the Minnesota Wild for some elite prospects and a first-round pick.

As the Canucks veered dramatically into a rebuild, everything that happened after that Friday night in December, except perhaps the four-game winning streak that immediately followed the trade, was predictable, albeit difficult to believe in real time.

Finishing at 25-49-8, the Canucks suffered their worst single-year regression since they entered the NHL 55 seasons ago.

Their 58 points were 32 less than the 90 scrounged last year amid the internal dysfunction and injury epidemic of Rick Tocchet's final season, before the coach leapt into a life raft that carried him away to the Philadelphia Flyers.

It's like Tocchet knew what was coming.

The previous record season-over-season freefall for the Canucks was 26 points in 2015-16.

Vancouver finishes with a goal-differential of minus-100, an almost unfathomable 83-goal disintegration since last season.

The team won only nine of 41 home games, and just 15 times in regulation. Only once has it lost more games in one season.

Again, these numbers are horrifying, but not shocking based on everything we've seen this last six months.

So what happens now?



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"You show up to work regardless," veteran defenceman Marcus Pettersson said. "There's so many games — 84 games next year — there's going to be more highs and lows. Keep a steady mindset and learn from each day. You've just got to understand the situation we're in and strive to get better every year. That's all we can do. It's easy to slip and it's easy to kind of get ahead of yourselves. If you win a game ... it's like, yeah, if you don't follow it up, it doesn't mean anything, right? So have that mindset every day."

The only positive thing about Game 82, other than that it temporarily ends the suffering in Canucks Nation, is that minor-league callup Ty Mueller scored a beautiful breakaway goal for his first in the NHL.

He was one of seven players under the age of 24 in Vancouver's lineup, one of nine who has spent significant time this season or last in the American Hockey League.

"We have so many young guys," Boeser said. "I think just their maturity and, you know, growing up and learning how to play the right way, it definitely takes time. And I thought they did a lot better job towards the end of the year. Everyone needs to have the right mindset coming to the rink every day. Guys can't be satisfied. They've got to figure out a way to be better, work harder and play as a team."

"Of course, it's disappointing where we are," goalie Kevin Lankinen said, the last player out of the visitors' dressing room at Rogers Place. "Just looking at the standings, that's not acceptable. But I want to believe that the future is bright. We've got some pieces that we can build on, and I trust that the coaching staff and the management are making the right decisions. And we're going to be more competitive in the future."

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Sportsnet.ca / Auston Matthews takes wait-and-see approach to future with Maple Leafs

Luke Fox

TORONTO — What Auston Matthews did not say is as important as what he did say.

Upon conclusion of a season blessed with national triumph and cursed with local embarrassment, the captain of the Toronto Maple Leafs was offered multiple opportunities to assure the city's fans that he was down for the long haul, that he only envisions himself playing hockey in one NHL sweater.

Instead, Matthews pled the fifth.

"I can't predict the future. There are steps that have to take place. They've got to hire new leadership in management. I don't really know. I can't really predict the future," Matthews told reporters Thursday morning, the earliest locker cleanout day of his 10-year career.

"There is always noise and chatter. Personally, I really don't pay attention to all of that. I really just focus on myself, this team, and trying to be a part of the solution," he replied.

No doubt, it's unusual for all this consternation over a superstar still under contract for two-plus years.

But Matthews and the Maple Leafs began preliminary discussions on his desire to re-sign two off-seasons prior to his first impending UFA summer. The 2026-27 campaign is Matthews's critical "Quinn Hughes" year, the season before the contract season.

And with talents and salaries of this magnitude, franchises must be proactive.

Hughes's exit from Vancouver is fresh. As is Toronto's Mitch Marner masterclass in asset mismanagement. The Leafs want Matthews in the fold; the Leafs cannot let him walk for nothing.

So, the top priority for Keith Pelley's hired head of hockey operations is to find out: Is our guy willing to stick here through thick and thin? Or does he have a wandering eye?

The irony here is that Matthews, armed with a full no-move clause, absolutely can predict his near future. He could orchestrate a move to a team he believes has a better shot at the team success he desires. Or he could dig in and lead the Leafs for two more seasons minimum.

Don't underestimate the power of the star athlete in a top-heavy league.

What would the player like to hear from the next boss?

"I don't know if there is anything specific. Those conversations are going to be personal and private. We aren't even at that point yet," Matthews said. "When the time comes, those conversations will just happen organically."

Our take: Matthews struck a noncommittal tone because — after the Leafs fell to 28th place in the standings, 31st in goals against, and 32nd in immediately having their captain's back — the man needs to know what, exactly, he's committing to.

Does training camp open with Craig Berube trying, once again, to get the troops to buy in to a chip-and-charge, clutter-the-crease attack? Does GM TBD find that elusive playmaking winger missing from Toronto's top six? Is everyone healthy? Is the vision inspiring?

Those things, to be fair, Matthews cannot predict.

To a man, everyone wearing a Maple Leafs logo on the last day of school asserted their belief that 2025-26 could merely be a hiccup, that they have the personnel and conviction to summon a Bruins-esque bounce-back to the 2027 post-season.

"Absolutely," Berube asserted, the Maple Leafs can win a Stanley Cup with Matthews and William Nylander. "Cause I watch them play, and I know what kind of people they are."

Stay with that a moment, though.

Watching Matthews play this season was underwhelming, to be kind.

The centreman carried the second-highest cap hit in the sport (\$13.25 million) yet finished 67th in points per game (0.88) among skaters who played 20 games minimum.

His 27 goals and 53 points are both career lows. And while his defensive commitment and matchup game is strong, Matthews finished a dash-4.

Matthews will be 29 when the puck drops next, and now he has a surgically repaired left knee ("I think you know how I feel about the hit," he said) to add to an injury history that includes a concussion, a separated shoulder, a twice-repaired wrist, and a wonky back.

Still, outside of some admitted Olympic-celebration jetlag, Matthews maintained that until Radko Gudas forced him into the brace he's wearing, he had felt fine physically this season and will be raring to go come training camp.

Matthews stated that he loves being a Leaf and that he shares fans' frustration and that he and his teammates must own this failure.

Less than 12 hours after the Maple Leafs' 50th loss of the season, Matthews still believes he can win in this town.



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"I believe in the guys in this room and the people we have here," he said. "We are going to hire new leadership and management. There will be changes. That is just the way things go."

But if we peer into the future, and the winning doesn't come — or doesn't come quick enough — Matthews cracked a door into a world where he could be part of those changes.

That's just the way things go.

Fox's Fast Five

- Does Berube expect to coach the Maple Leafs in 2026-27?

"Yes," he replied.

While he has been no indication otherwise from up top, Berube did acknowledge that new management would make that call.

- When Brad Treliving dangled Matthew Knies at the trade deadline, his ask was for one of three packages in a return, according to Nick Kyriakos: two first-round picks and a high-end prospect; or one first-round pick and two high-end prospects; or three high-end prospects.

Did Knies take such a hefty ask as a compliment?

"I wouldn't want to look at it as a compliment. I'd look at it as a crappy thing. I don't want to leave this group of guys," he said. "It doesn't really matter what it was. I wouldn't want to leave here."

"I want to stay here. I want to play here."

- John Tavares intends to play for Team Canada at next month's world championships in Switzerland. He loves the game, especially in winner-take-all intensity, and finds he always learns and improves playing with different teammates under different coaches in different settings.

"It can only benefit me," Tavares said.

- Chris Tanev, beauty that he is, said he feels he "let a lot of people down" by only suiting up for 11 games.

Every doctor he visited suggested season-ending groin surgery, but Tanev wanted to try to rehab without going under the knife. Only once the Leafs played themselves out of contention did he relent.

The 36-year-old defenceman's rehabilitation is on track, and he vows to come back on time and in return-to-form condition.

"I work harder than anybody," Tanev said.

- Anthony Stolarz was the first to notice something was amiss this season, publicly calling out the team's defensive and togetherness issues way back in October.

"I think most definitely could have been handled in the room. But I think sometimes that what we need is tough love," Stolarz reflected. "The guys understood where I was coming from. There was no animosity."

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1387639 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 'Underdog' Kings face tough first round after loss to Flames caps regular season

Eric Francis

CALGARY — It's been four years since Darryl Sutter so famously said, "It's going to be a waste of eight days" for whoever played the Colorado Avalanche in the first round.

How perfectly appropriate then that Sutter sat in the Saddledome stands for Thursday's regular-season finale between the last two teams he coached, the Flames and Kings.

He was there in support of one of his most beloved players, Anze Kopitar, whose Kings are very likely in line for the type of fate Sutter spoke of years earlier.

And when the Flames punctuated their 3-1 win over Los Angeles with a handshake line for the soon-to-be-retired Kings captain, it seemed like a precursor to what could be on tap four games later when the Avalanche are heavily favoured to put the punchless Kings out of their misery.

Count eight days from Sunday afternoon's opener in Denver to figure out when the Kings' season is likely to end.

Although wins by the Oilers and Ducks earlier in the evening solidified the West's second wild-card spot for the Kings, the loss to the Flames served to punctuate a season marked by a late coaching change, a popgun offence and spotty goaltending.

"The best team in the league, but you know, playoffs," said Kopitar, when asked after the game about a date with the Avs.

"I'm not gonna say anything can happen, but we'll go in, and we'll play hard, and we'll see where that takes us."

The Kings enter the series against the Presidents' Trophy winner with the dubious distinction of entering the playoffs with just 22 regulation wins — an NHL record.

Despite facing an undermanned Flames squad whose long list of rookies included Arsenii Sergeev making his NHL debut, the Kings couldn't solve the Russian netminder despite throwing 28 shots on net.

Playing in front of a crowd conflicted by the desire to remain 30th in the standings while also cheering for Sergeev, the Flames passed the Rangers in the standings and will now have the fourth-best odds of winning the draft lottery at 9.5 per cent.

With six minutes to go in a 1-1 game, Zayne Parekh put on a clinic along the wall, shielding the puck from Brandt Clarke before turning on a dime to face Anton Forsberg and rip the game-winner into the far corner. Joel Farabee's 20th of the season found the empty net to cap the Flames' fourth-straight season out of the playoffs.

The Kings enter the post-season with points in eight of their last ten, which was needed for them to stave off late pushes from several other teams.

"I guess the second half of March into April we were pretty good to put ourselves in a position to be in the playoffs, and now this is a whole different animal," said Kopitar, who received a standing ovation early in the evening when the Flames honoured him with a Jumbotron salute.

"The intensity ramps up. Everything ramps up. Every mistake, every little play magnifies now, and we're gonna have to go out there and compete and just work our asses off."

Coach DJ Smith, who replaced Jim Hiller on an interim basis Mar. 1, knows the task at hand is a large one.

"For us, I don't think it matters whoever we're going to play, we'd be the underdog," said Smith, who said his players were all aware that going into the third period tied 1-1, their playoff matchup had already been set.

"We know there's going to be spurts where they're going to be really, really good, but we're going to have to look at it and manage those times. They have five, six, seven of the best players in the world over there. But the one thing we've always been able to do is play defence. So we're going to have to defend real hard, and then when we get opportunities, we're going to have to sting them."



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Smith said he'd convene with his staff before deciding whether he'd go with the experience of Darcy Kuemper for Game 1, or the hotter hand of Forsberg.

"I think at some point we're going to need everybody, whether it's guys that are in the lineup, out of the lineup, or both goalies," he said.

"We're going to go with who we think is ready to win Game 1, and then we'll readjust after that."

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1387640 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Hurricanes vs. Senators

Rory Boylen

If you were to poll a general collection of NHL fans a week ago, and ask them which team was most capable of pulling off a first-round playoff upset, the most popular answer would probably have been the Ottawa Senators.

If they could just get good goaltending, the Senators were effectively a wagon of a team for many weeks, with underlying numbers that would rival the best in the league. That goaltending did come around just in time to deliver a playoff appearance, but how does Ottawa feel as an upset candidate now that we know who their first-round opponent is?

While Buffalo is a great story, perhaps they play too loosely defensively and would have been ripe to be upset by the Senators. If it were Montreal, perhaps Ottawa was set up with the better four-line, three-defence pairs depth chart to run a smaller, less physical team out of the rink. Tampa Bay came with some injury questions, a star goalie who has had three consecutive "meh" playoff performances, and a missing No. 1 defenceman.

But Carolina? They're basically the more experienced, more polished version of the Senators.

For as solid an upset bet as Ottawa looked to be (again, if they got the goaltending), the Hurricanes present the toughest potential matchup they could have drawn. The Canes are similar in style, slightly better by the numbers, and have had a relatively solid eight-year run under head coach Rod Brind'Amour, who has gotten them to multiple conference finals. Carolina hasn't gotten over the hump yet and is in danger of becoming this generation's San Jose Sharks, but their disappointment tends to come in the later rounds.

Still, this is a highly intriguing matchup, close on paper and similar in the areas of the roster that are concerning.

This will be the first time these two teams have ever met in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and it's set up to be one heck of a series. Can Ottawa take last year's playoff return, first-round elimination, and build off it? Can Carolina make its way through a wide-open Eastern Conference and finally make it to the Stanley Cup Final that's eluded them?

Here's a look at our Round 1 preview.

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Hurricanes: 1-1-0

Senators: 1-1-0

Hurricanes X-Factor: Bussi, or Andersen... or Kochetkov?

What a strange year it's been in Carolina's net, and after 82 games, the picture is murkier than ever. Brandon Bussi began the season as the No. 3, but when an injury befell Pyotr Kochetkov (suspected to be season-ending) and poor play caught up with Frederik Andersen, Bussi was given his shot, and by mid-February, he had run up a 23-3-1 record. He even earned a contract extension mid-way through the season and looked to be taking over as the No. 1.

However, Bussi's play post-Olympics has cratered to an .865 save percentage, among the worst in the league. Andersen hadn't been that much better, and, in a shocking development given the earlier indications of his injury, Kochetkov returned to practice with the team, got an AHL stint, and was even lined up to play Carolina's final regular-season game before he was a late scratch due to a "roster technicality." He may yet play himself into this equation.

All told, Carolina has a great depth of three goaltenders, but none of the healthy ones had been playing all that well down the stretch, and the other is coming off a major injury. For as strong as Carolina's underlying numbers are and as much playoff experience as they have, will one of these goaltenders stand up and meet the moment?

Senators X-Factor: Do they have enough offensive finishers?

It's funny when you compare the Senators and Hurricanes by the numbers to see how similar they are. They are both strong defensively and also create a lot of offence. You'll see both teams among the best in the league in goals and expected goals in the 2026 portion of the season, as well as among the best in shots against and expected goals against.

But in just about every case, Carolina is just a little bit better than Ottawa. You could easily make the case that the Senators are the mini version of the Hurricanes, structurally strong on defence, and dangerous attacking on offence.

Over the years, as Carolina has had continued playoff success, in that they've won several rounds, ultimately, they've fallen short every time, often because they haven't had the game breakers to lift them past other tight-checking teams. And that's what we wonder about this year's Senators. Tim Stutzle and Drake Batherson were their top two scorers last season, but the two combined for three goals between them in last year's six-game series loss to Toronto. Brady Tkachuk is the spiritual leader of the club and managed 22 goals in 60 games, but that total was far below his "expected" goals of 31.03. Dylan Cozens, Shane Pinto and Fabian Zetterlund round out Ottawa's top six scorers from last season, and those three players also combined for only two playoff goals last spring.

So, against the tough-checking Canes, who can match and exceed what Ottawa throws at it, will the Senators be able to bury the puck enough to get through?

ADVANCED STATS

(5-on-5 totals from Natural Stat Trick)

TEAM

CF%

GF%

xGF%

SV%



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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SH%	2.88 (7)
Hurricanes	Senators

59.78 (1)	24.0 (8)
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53.49 (8)	75.7 (29)
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55.89 (2)	3.35 (8)
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.895 (26)	2.99 (13)
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CAROLINA STORYLINES

8.89 (24)	1. Can they keep their streak of first-round series wins going?
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Senators	This will be Carolina's eighth playoff appearance in a row, all under head coach Rod Brind'Amour, and they've gotten past the first round in each of the previous seven. They've made it to three of the past seven Eastern Conference finals, and so have been just on the verge of making it into the Stanley Cup Final. However, in reality, every time they've reached the third round, they've been blown away. In those three appearances, Carolina has won just a single game.
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52.85 (5)	
53.49 (8)	

54.54 (3)	Of the 10 series the Hurricanes have won under Brind'Amour, eight came against Metropolitan Division teams, and just one was against an Atlantic team (the other was against Nashville in the re-aligned pandemic season). This year, they're playing an Atlantic team right out of the gate, and despite finishing first in the conference, Carolina is not drawing a soft opponent. This will be their biggest test yet in the opening round.
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.893 (27)	2. Will enough offensive difference makers step up this year?
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9.96 (12)	We labelled this as the X-Factor for Ottawa, and for Carolina, it's just a yearly narrative now that tends to catch up to them. Can it be different this time? Usually, Carolina's lack of a game breaker — a true superstar — nips them in the later rounds, but given how similar this opponent is to their own game, the Canes might be tested in this area of relative weakness earlier in this year's playoffs.
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REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

PP%	One addition to this year's team has a chance to make a huge difference. Nikolaj Ehlers was, for years, an underused, very productive player in Winnipeg, and he delivered them five goals in eight post-season games last year. With Carolina, Ehlers set new career-highs in assists and points and was used just about everywhere in the lineup, finally ending up on the third line with two of Carolina's best checking forwards.
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PK%	
GF/G	So, Carolina will be looking to the usual players on the top lines — Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov, Seth Jarvis — to carry the offence, but perhaps having their second-highest point getter on the third line can help with the spread. Yes, Carolina can create offence, but they had the worst shooting percentage (re: finishing) among all Eastern Conference playoff teams.

GA/G	
Hurricanes	3. Will they be able to put up with, and fight through, Ottawa's physical game?

24.9 (4)	The Senators had more recorded hits than any other playoff team this season, and so we know they will bring the physicality to Carolina. We know Tkachuk won't be shy to lean into this style of game, and neither will Nick Cousins or Dylan Cozens, and Fabian Zetterlund isn't afraid to get his body involved. The Senators will be looking to wear down Carolina, and while the Hurricanes have toppled "physical" teams in the past, again, this opponent is also the most skilled they've seen in the first
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80.5 (11)	
3.55 (2)	



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round, so the combination will be unlike anything the Canes have gotten used to playing against so early in the tournament.

OTTAWA STORYLINES

1. Can Linus Ullmark deliver an upset?

The Senators spent a lot of money to bring in Vezina Trophy winner Ullmark to their team last year with the expectation he'd settle their crease and be the final piece of an emerging roster. In Year 1, he delivered on that promise in the regular season. And while Year 2 was certainly more bumpy — the goaltending was keeping Ottawa out of the playoffs for the longest time — he finished with a .926 save percentage in six April starts. Post-Olympics, Ullmark went 12-4-3 with a .902 SV% and 2.51 GAA, so perhaps he's coming around at just the right time.

2. Will this be Jake Sanderson's break out performance to a national audience?

You don't need to tell Senators fans how great Sanderson is. Every night, Sanderson plays against top competition, leads Ottawa's blue line in average minutes at even strength, on the power play, and on the penalty kill, and in 67 games played, he posted 54 points. That 0.81 points per game mark ranked 14th among all NHL defencemen.

He and partner Artem Zub have formed one of the best — perhaps underrated — top pairings in the NHL. With Sanderson on the ice at 5-on-5, the Sens control the run of play and earn nearly 57 per cent of all shots taken and outscore the competition by 12 goals. Zub, in fact, was Ottawa's plus-minus leader this season.

But how aware is the rest of the league, and other teams' fans, of Sanderson's capabilities? Against Carolina, Sanderson will play opposite Jaccob Slavin, who was long one of the more underrated defensive defencemen and is now one of the most recognized for what he does well. If Sanderson can tip the scales in Ottawa's favour when he's sharing the ice with Slavin, the Senators will be in a great position.

3. The third line's ability to stall Carolina's attack

In such a tight series statistically, and against an opponent that on paper has a lot of lines that will attack you in waves, we have to wonder where the Senators could slow down the Hurricanes. And for that, we turn to the third line, specifically the Shane Pinto and Michael Amadio duo.

Pinto scored 20 goals for his third full season in a row, while Amadio was not far behind and put up a career-best 35 points at 29 years of age. But the real strength these two bring to the team is their defensive play, which drew a little attention for Selke consideration this season.

Often challenged in the shutdown role, when Amadio and Pinto shared the ice together at 5-on-5 this season, the Sens outshot opponents 319-266 and outscored them by three, an advantage that might be the difference in this opening-round series.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Sabres vs. Bruins

Ryan Dixon

From 2012 through 2025, when the Sabres played a grand total of zero playoff games, the Bruins posted the second-most post-season victories (69) of any team in the NHL.

But as any hockey fan in Western New York can tell you, not only is the drought over, but the Sabres have also won their division for the first time since 2010.

The team that knocked them out of the playoffs in Round 1 as a lower seed that year? Yep, these same Bruins.

From Rick Jeanneret's famous "May Day" call 33 years ago — celebrating Buffalo's shocking four-game sweep of the favoured Bruins that concluded with an all-time OT marker by Brad May — to another series-ending strike 10 years before that, when Boston's Brad Park sent the Sabres packing with a Game 7, overtime goal in 1983, these clubs have combined for some memorable playoff moments.

Of course, the Sabres are creating a meaningful memory for a new generation of fans simply by making the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs after a 14-year absence.

And, really, saying Buffalo has "made" the post-season is underselling it; the Sabres are charging into the derby as one of the best teams in the league. In fact, since the calendar flipped to 2026, Buffalo's .733 points percentage is the top number in the NHL.

Less celebrated, though, is the fact the third-best mark belongs to Boston (.683).

The Bruins were never going to win a narrative battle with Buffalo given the protracted heartache there, but Boston's quick turnaround from a team that finished 28th overall last year to one that immediately returned to the playoffs — on 100 points, no less — is very impressive.

Now, whether you're a young Sabres fan who's never seen your team in the playoffs or a spoiled Bruins backer who thinks one spring away was too long, you can look forward to a Boston-Buffalo series with the potential to create another classic moment.

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Sabres: 1-1-2

Bruins: 3-1-0

Sabres X-Factor: Home-ice advantage

The atmosphere at KeyBank Center for Game 1 is going to be unhinged and the Sabres have to hope they can ride the wave of a crowd that will be going out of its mind. If ever there was a time to put stock in something as unquantifiable as "vibes," this is it.

Bruins X-Factor: The newest young player

James Hagens may not even draw into the Bruins lineup for Game 1 of the series, but the seventh-overall pick from 2025 is an interesting new toy for coach Marco Sturm to consider. Hagens, once projected to be the top pick in his draft class, could provide a spark of offence on the third line if the B's need it. He's looked capable in the two games he suited up for after jumping to the NHL following his sophomore year at Boston College.

ADVANCED STATS

(5-on-5 totals from Natural Stat Trick)

TEAM

CF%

GF%



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xGF% 81.9 (4)

SV% 3.45 (5)

SH% 2.93 (11)

Sabres Bruins

49.28 (17) 23.4 (9)

55.30 (3) 77.0 (24)

49.95 (18) 3.27 (11)

.914 (8) 3.01 (14)

BUFFALO STORYLINES

10.65 (5) 1. Playoff newbies

Bruins

As exciting as all this is for the Sabres, it goes without saying that this team is not long on playoff experience. From Tage Thompson to Rasmus Dahlin to Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, just about all the key players on Buffalo will be making their NHL playoff debut. Of course, the counter to that is the steady hand at the rudder, Lindy Ruff. The veteran has been behind the bench for 132 career post-season contests, more than every coach in the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs save Anaheim's Joel Quenneville (225) and Tampa's Jon Cooper (155).

48.92 (19)

The Sabres play a go-for-it brand of hockey and it will be interesting to see how that translates to the second season, when things tend to clamp up a bit. That said, where Buffalo does profile as a team that's built for spring is on the scale. The Sabres are a heavy squad that can lean on opponents and the defence corps, in particular, is loaded with tall bodies gripping long sticks that can make it seem like there's nowhere for attackers to maneuver.

54.98 (5)

Expect Boston's bruising fourth line of Sean Kuraly between Tanner Jeannot and Mark Kastelic to try and soften up the big Buffalo blue line.

46.66 (27)

.917 (4)

2. Power outage

The Sabres are one of the higher-scoring clubs in the league, but Buffalo's power play really struggled down the stretch. Since March 10, the Sabres rank 30th in the NHL with a PP conversion rate of just 14 per cent. Much of that is driven by an awful end to the season, which saw Buffalo go 0-for-22 in its final seven outings. Goals can obviously be harder to come by in the post-season and this squad is going to have to generate a timely PPG here and there to keep pace.

10.62 (6)

REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

3. Local boy done good

Alex Tuch is a unique presence on the team, not only because he's a Western New York native who grew up cheering for the Sabres, but because he's the rare player on the club who brings a host of experience to the table thanks to his time with the Vegas Golden Knights. Combine playoff know-how with his big frame and soft touch, and it's easy to see why Tuch could be a vital player for the squad. Of course, all this comes against the backdrop of the reality that, as a pending-UFA, his future with the Sabres is up in the air. Nobody is going to be more hyped for the return of playoff hockey to Buffalo than Tuch.

PP%

PK%

GF/G

GA/G

Sabres

19.5 (21)

BOSTON STORYLINES

1. Sway the series



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Jeremy Swayman was one of the top stoppers in hockey this year. Among goalies with at least 35 appearances, Swayman had the highest goals saved above expected/60 of any goalie in the league. Two years ago, Swayman was a huge reason Boston ousted Toronto in the first round of the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs, posting a .950 SV% in six games versus the Leafs and finishing that post-season with a .933 mark in a dozen contests. If Boston wins this series, it's easy to imagine Swayman being the No. 1 difference-maker.

2. Scoring balance

David Pastrnak is the 100-point megastar and fellow top-liner Morgan Geekie validated a breakout from last year with a monster 39-goal season this time out. But for the Bruins to do anything against Buffalo, the B's need the second line of Pavel Zacha between former Sabre Casey Mittelstadt and Viktor Arvidsson to keep firing. Zacha's 15 goals since March 1 are more than everyone in the league except Montreal's Cole Caufield (16), and Arvidsson — acquired from the Oilers in a salary dump for a fifth-rounder — has 24 points in 22 outings during that span.

On the back end, Charlie McAvoy is producing at a higher rate than at any other point in his career, averaging a point-per-game in the back half of the season. Overall, where Buffalo lacks experience, the likes of McAvoy, Pastrnak and, to a lesser degree, Swayman — Boston's most important players — have tons of playoff experience to draw on.

3. Home cookin'

Every team that starts the playoffs on the road is happy to return home with a split, but if the Bruins can make it back to Boston with a win from the first two games in Buffalo, the B's will be feeling extra confident about their chances. The Bruins were extremely tough to beat at TD Garden this season, finishing the year with a .720 points percentage on home ice that was second only to the Carolina Hurricanes (.732). Boston was the stingiest team in the league playing in friendly confines, surrendering just 2.54 goals per game. If they can grind out one road victory, the B's may feel as though they can take care of the rest at home.

However, it should be noted that the Sabres were also tough to beat in their own building, posting the fourth-best home-ice points percentage at .695.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Penguins vs. Flyers

Sonny Sachdeva

It was worth the wait.

For the two clubs on either side of Pennsylvania, it's been a rough few years. The Pittsburgh Penguins have waded through three seasons without playoff hockey. For the Philadelphia Flyers, it's been a half-decade. But here, in 2026, the longtime rivals have made it back, have clawed their way to the post-season spotlight once more, and will renew hostilities in the first Battle of Pennsylvania since 2018.

Pens-Flyers. The vets versus the kids. Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and a Penguins club that awoke like a hand shooting out of a grave; Trevor Zegras, Owen Tippett, and a young, hungry Flyers squad forging a new identity on Broad Street. What more could we ask for?

For both of these clubs, it will be a pivotal series.

The Pens arrive at Game 1 in the twilight of the Crosby-Malkin era, the franchise's legends nearing the end of their illustrious careers. For a spell there, it seemed like we might never get to see them play post-season hockey again. We've been given one more chance. Whether we get another is anyone's guess. But you can be certain Nos. 87 and 71 understand just how fleeting this opportunity is, and will be looking to make the most of it.

The Flyers' core finds itself at the opposite end of that timeline. Though a few veterans with playoff experience remain, for the club's new blood, the 2026 post-season will be their introduction to playoff hockey. It will mark a clear step forward for a Philly side that's been wallowing in the division's basement of late, their future uncertain. And it will give the likes of Zegras, Tippett and Matvei Michkov a chance to begin building their legacies on the game's biggest stage.

But it won't come easy. The man leading the Flyers into this battle knows it, having been on the other side back when the Penguins were at their best.

"You know, I've won a couple Cups with Crosby, Malkin and Letang. These guys, they don't die," head coach Rick Tocchet said earlier this week. "These guys are just warriors. We're going to have our hands full. We're going to have to have some game-planning here this week. But those guys don't die.

"It's going to be a tough series. And we're going to have to go after those guys."

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Penguins: 2-0-2

Flyers: 2-2-0

Penguins X-Factor: Anthony Mantha and the Pens' third line

Among all the shrewd swings taken by Kyle Dubas as he's retooled the Pens over the past few years, Anthony Mantha no doubt sits among the clearest wins for the Penguins president and GM. The 31-year-old arrived in Pittsburgh fresh off a couple tumultuous seasons split between Washington, Vegas and Calgary, and caught fire in black and gold. A career year from the winger saw Mantha finish the campaign with a team-leading 33 goals and a personal-best 64 points. But the key is where in the lineup those contributions are coming from.

The last time the Penguins truly made waves in the playoffs — during their back-to-back Cup runs in 2016 and 2017 — they found success on the back of their offensive depth. Most notably, the first of those two runs saw the fan-favourite 'HBK line' dominate the post-season, the Pens' third-line trio of Carl Hagelin, Nick Bonino, and Phil Kessel all finishing among the club's top five playoff scorers. Now, for the first time in years — and with Bonino coincidentally back in Pittsburgh as an assistant coach — the Pens' third line has some juice once again, led by Mantha, fellow big man Justin Brazeau, and teenage wunderkind Ben Kindel.

The three newcomers, who all arrived this past summer, combined for 67 goals in the regular season. While much will still rest on the performances of veterans Crosby, Malkin and Erik Karlsson — and there are other new arrivals who will be pivotal too, like Egor Chinakhov — all eyes will be on Pittsburgh's new third line making waves in Round 1.

Philly's youth movement has been a crucial part of their success of late. There's 2023 No. 1 pick Matvei Michkov, who found his game in the latter half of his sophomore campaign, leading the Flyers in scoring since the Olympic break. There's Zegras, who's turned in a career year since joining the club in June, and others like Jamie Drysdale and Tyson Foerster continuing to progress, too. But the Flyers might not be in the playoffs in 2026 without the late addition of 19-year-old Porter Martone.

Drafted sixth overall by the Flyers last June, Martone joined the big club in late March after a sterling season at Michigan State that saw him stack



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25 goals and 50 points over 35 games. In the two weeks since, Martone's been a revelation for Philly, emerging as one of the club's most dangerous offensive weapons. The winger put up four goals and 10 points over his nine regular-season games down the stretch — the highest and second-highest sums on the team since he joined, respectively — while pacing the club with 32 shots in that span. It's not just the production though, it's the approach. The six-foot-three, 210-pound winger has looked quintessentially Flyer-like since he donned those Philly threads, establishing himself in the top six alongside veterans Christian Dvorak and Travis Konecny.

The Pens need no reminder of just how crucial young, hungry talent can be in the post-season. The club hung Stanley Cup banners with some key performances from rookies like Jake Guentzel and Bryan Rust a decade ago. Philly won't be dreaming that big just yet, but there's little doubt Martone will be a key part of whatever the post-season future brings for the Flyers.

ADVANCED STATS

(5-on-5 totals from Natural Stat Trick)

TEAM

CF%

GF%

xGF%

SV%

SH%

Penguins

50.17 (13)

53.74 (7)

51.52 (7)

.901 (21)

11.13 (2)

Flyers

47.74 (26)

51.94 (13)

50.71 (13)

.905 (18)

10.24 (10)

REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

PP%

PK%

GF/G

GA/G

Penguins

24.1 (7)

81.4 (6)

3.54 (3)

3.15 (22)

Flyers

15.7 (32)

77.6 (22)

2.93 (21)

2.91 (10)

PITTSBURGH STORYLINES

1. Another chapter for Sidney Crosby's legacy against Philly

There are few clubs No. 87 seems to enjoy tormenting more than the Philadelphia Flyers. The captain's battles with the Pens' longtime rival have been a key part of his lore in Pittsburgh. Over the past two decades, he's potted more goals against Philly than any other NHL club — an absurd 60 over 93 regular-season games. His 139 points against the club rank as the most any single NHL player has posted against the franchise. In the post-season, he's been no less lethal. Crosby's suited up for four playoff series against Philly over the years, in 2008, 2009,



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2012, and 2018 — in that span, the future Hall of Famer's amassed 15 goals and 36 points, and emerged with three series wins.

You can run down the list of reasons the Penguins' leader is certain to be motivated come Game 1. His first taste of playoff hockey in four years. The uncertainty of how many more chances he'll get on the post-season stage. The fresh memory of a disappointing Olympic tournament, cut short by injury. If it were possible for anything to add more fuel to that fire, Game 1 with the Flyers on the other side of the sheet might just be it.

2. Vintage Karlsson, Malkin return to playoff stage

For all the new blood driving Pittsburgh's success this season, the resurgence of the club's vets has been just as pivotal to their revival — two vets in particular. A glance at Malkin's numbers might not make clear just how dominant the future Hall of Famer has been in 2025-26. Limited by injuries once again, Malkin put up 19 goals and 61 points over 56 games for the Pens. But go back through the film and you'll see a clear difference in No. 71's play this season compared to last year. Amid reports that the Pens were planning to part ways with the franchise legend after his contract concludes this season, the 39-year-old has seemed a man on a mission all year, attacking with the type of all-world dynamism that defined his best campaigns in Pittsburgh.

And then there's Karlsson. The veteran rearguard hasn't just improved his play in 2025-26, he's become the crucial cog the Penguins expected him to be when they brought him to town in 2023. The 35-year-old approaches Game 1 playing undoubtedly his best hockey in a Penguins sweater — over the final two months of the campaign, he was not only Pittsburgh's leading scorer, but among the top 10 scorers league-wide, putting up 31 points in 24 games since mid-February. Game 1 against Philly will mark Karlsson's first taste of playoff hockey since 2019 — a run that saw him help lead San Jose to the conference finals. A meaningful run for the black-and-gold in 2026 will require a similar level from No. 65, and continued vintage performances from No. 71, too.

3. Time for the new-look goalie tandem to shine

The last three playoff series Pittsburgh played ended with Tristan Jarry in the cage for the deciding game. That won't be the case this time around, as the Penguins arrive at the 2026 post-season with a new-look tandem built over the past year. Since Stuart Skinner landed in Pittsburgh in December, he and Arturs Silovs have split goaltending duties, starting 27 and 25 games, respectively. They've performed relatively equally too, neither looking lights out in the cage, but both coming up with key moments en route to the Pens' post-season return.

If there's reason for the Penguins faithful to have hope in the pair, it's what they've managed to do past Game 82. Skinner returns to the playoffs fresh off back-to-back runs to the Stanley Cup Final in Edmonton. Silovs has a promising stretch under his own belt from the 2024 playoffs with Vancouver, and is a season removed from leading the Canucks' AHL affiliate to a championship — a run that saw him named Calder Cup MVP. That in mind, all eyes will be on who gets the cage in Game 1, whether they hold on to it for the series, and whether it's enough to send the black-and-gold on to Round 2.

PHILADELPHIA STORYLINES

1. Momentum carrying red-hot Flyers into post-season

There are few truths that hold in the chaos of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, except this one: momentum is crucial. And while much will depend on the game-to-game swings that come once the series is underway, the Flyers arrive with some positive momentum already in their corner — since the league returned from the Olympic break, the Broad Street squad has been among the most unbeatable outfits in the league. Philly sat tied for third-last in the East before that February break in play — after the regular season resumed, no team won more games than the Flyers, who tied Buffalo with 18 wins in their final 26 games.

Perhaps most promising in terms of the chances of that success carrying over into the post-season is the way in which they won those games.

Joining the club this past off-season himself, Tocchet has worked to instill a stronger defensive identity in this young Flyers group, an approach that proved crucial over the home stretch as the club clinched their post-season ticket. Over the final months of the campaign, post-Olympics, Philly's 2.38 goals-against per game ranked as the second-best mark in the league, while the club's 25 shots-against per game ranked top five. Against a Penguins squad that's been among the most prolific offensive outfits in the league all season, that defensive prowess will be pivotal.

2. Vladar looks to continue career year with stiff playoff test

The under-the-radar addition of netminder Dan Vladar this past summer played no small role in that late-season success. The 28-year-old was brought to Philly after four years as a steady backup in Calgary, with Sam Ersson returning as the Flyers' presumed starter. But Vladar upended those plans, wresting away the No. 1 role, turning in a career year, and emerging as perhaps the Flyers' most important player. Through 52 games in his first season in a starting role, the Czech netminder posted a .906 save percentage and a 2.42 goals-against average. But a deeper look at his performance makes clear just how crucial he's been to the Flyers' cause.

Per Natural Stat Trick, at 5-on-5, Vladar's .926 save percentage ranks tied for tops among regular starters. His 20.98 goals saved above average at 5-on-5 ranks fourth-best among all NHL netminders, and his .850 high-danger save percentage at 5-on-5 ranks top 10 among those who've started more than a handful of games. There's no doubt he's been an essential piece for Philly to this point. But he'll face a stiff test against Pittsburgh, who have no shortage of elite offensive options to throw at the Flyers. How well Vladar holds up against the barrage likely determines how far the Flyers go in their return to the dance.

3. First taste of playoff hockey for hungry, revitalized Zegras

There's plenty of promise dotted among this young Flyers lineup. And after building throughout the 2025-26 campaign, fighting to earn their place in the playoffs, and finally cementing their return, the kids now have their first shot at building their post-season legacies. Perhaps the most interesting among that group is Zegras. Once heralded as a foundational piece in Anaheim, and the leader of a wave of highly-skilled young stars, Zegras arrived in Philadelphia last June after a rollercoaster two-year stretch with the Ducks. Injuries and inconsistent play soured his relationship with the club that drafted him ninth overall back in 2019. GM Daniel Briere capitalized, and took a swing — nearly a year later, Zegras has found his top form, putting up a career-best 26 goals and 67 points for the Flyers this season.

But it's the bigger picture that's the true key here. Zegras's raw skill has never been questioned. It was the application of that skill over a full campaign. It was how it might hold up when the pressure and the stakes increase. Now comes the young pivot's chance to prove his doubters wrong. The former Duck has been vocal about the fact that he's playing with a chip on his shoulder, that he's intent on proving his worth after being traded away. A return to the post-season, with Crosby and Co. on the other side of the sheet, brings a chance to prove just how valuable he can be for a franchise with playoff dreams.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Lightning vs. Canadiens



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 17, 2026

Ryan Dixon

The first round of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs features a rematch from the 2021 Stanley Cup Final.

GF%

Weird, right?

xGF%

Odd as it might be to recall, a pandemic-impacted, 56-game season concluded with the defending-champion Tampa Bay Lightning downing the Montreal Canadiens — the worst team, by record, to make the 2021 playoffs — in five games to claim a second straight title.

SV%

The two teams took drastically different routes to this next encounter, with Tampa remaining on Excellence Street, while the Canadiens — who ostensibly lost Shea Weber and Carey Price forever after that trip to the final — executed a full-scale rebuild that's already producing a second straight playoff appearance.

SH%

Lightning

As for Tampa, while the club has remained one of the league's best, the Bolts haven't won a playoff round since advancing to their third straight final in 2022. It's unfair to say we're at now-or-never time for this core, but some fingers and toes must be anxiously tapping in T-Bay as coach Jon Cooper and Co. try to find a way back to the top of the mountain.

53.30 (3)

56.20 (2)

Or, at least, to a much higher elevation than they've been scaling the past three springs.

54.19 (4)

While these two teams have been in wildly different spots the past handful of years, they put together similarly impressive campaigns in 2025-26. In fact, this clash — the 2-3 battle in the Atlantic, with Tampa holding home-ice advantage — is a meeting of clubs with the fifth- and sixth-best records in the entire NHL.

.908 (12)

So, despite a wide gap in terms of playoff pedigree between the squads, the young Habs — coached by Bolts legend Martin St. Louis — and savvy Lightning could produce an extremely close first-round series.

11.09 (3)

Canadiens

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

48.64 (23)

Tampa Bay: 2-2-0

Montreal: 2-1-1

53.49 (9)

Lightning X-factor: Health

Are they finally healthy, at just the right time? Key Bolts like Anthony Cirelli, Brayden Point, Brandon Hagel and Darren Raddysh all missed at least 10 games this year, while defenceman Ryan McDonagh missed close to half the schedule. Captain Victor Hedman, who's been on personal leave since late March, played well under half the season.

48.59 (23)

.906 (14)

Even if Hedman is unable to return for Game 1, Tampa's roster is in a much better spot than it has been for large chunks of the season.

11.3 (1)

Canadiens X-factor: Depth of scoring

Regular Season Stats

How much offence can Montreal get from lines that aren't the top one?

TEAM

The second line, in particular, has struggled to produce when Juraj Slafkovsky joins Nick Suzuki and 50-goal man Cole Caufield on the top trio. Really, the only guy who's been on the second line all year is Ivan Demidov and, good as he is, Demidov is a rookie who needs support. If Alex Newhook — who missed a huge chunk of time with a fractured ankle — can continue his strong late-season play as a speedy 2C, maybe Montreal can hit on something that supports the big boys.

PP%

ADVANCED STATS

PK%

(5-on-5 totals from Natural Stat Trick)

GF/G

TEAM

GA/G

CF%

Lightning



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20.7 (17)

82.6 (3)

3.49 (4)

2.79 (3)

Canadiens

23.1 (10)

78.2 (18)

3.40 (7)

3.06 (16)

TAMPA BAY STORYLINES

1. Tampa tough guys

Quick, which team led the league in penalty minutes this season? Certainly not the Lightning team which has built a winning legacy this century with skill and smarts, right?

As you've surely guessed by now, there's more backstreet brawler to the Bolts than you might initially imagine, with Tampa racking up more PIMs than any team in the league this year. Hey, when you face — and lose to — the notoriously unpleasant Florida Panthers as the Lightning have in each of the past two first rounds, eventually you develop some pugilistic tendencies of your own.

If Tampa was already inclined to enter the post-season prepared to put their thumb in someone's eye, playing the Canadiens might stoke the instinct to make this a street fight. Montreal, of course, is nobody's idea of a mean team and the Lightning may think they can have their way with small stars like Caufield and Lane Hutson.

2. Vasi-level up-skiy

Andrei Vasilevskiy is a slam-dunk Hall-of-Famer. That said, he's 4-12 in his past three series with an .882 save percentage. That's a long way from the Conn Smythe performance "Vasy" threw down the year Tampa beat Montreal in the final, when he had a .937 SV% in 23 games. In fact, during the team's three consecutive runs to the final from '20 to '22, Vasilevskiy had a .928 in 71 post-season contests. He doesn't have to be that good, but the big Russian needs to improve on what we've seen in each of the past three springs.

3. Opportunity Knocks

This is a preview of a series between Tampa and Montreal, but we're going to bring up the Panthers one more time. It's hard to shake the feeling there's a lane here for Tampa to make a run with Florida — almost sure to return, rested and mean as ever next spring — not in the mix this year. Again, it's not as though the clock is about to strike midnight on this iteration of the Bolts, but they've got a kick at it here with Nikita Kucherov still at the sky-high top of his offensive game and a bunch of key players aged about 28 to 32. Put it this way; if the first-round exits at the hands of Florida the past two springs hurt, losing an opening-round series to a

club that — good as it is — likely won't peak for a couple years would be a severe gut punch.

MONTREAL STORYLINES

1. Untested tenders

The Canadiens rookie battery of Jakub Dobes and Jacob Fowler have roughly 145 minutes of career NHL playoff experience, with all of them belonging to Dobes from last year's five-game loss to the Washington Capitals. Goaltending became a big subplot for Montreal this season when incumbent starter Sam Montembeault completely lost his game and never got it back.

However, since play resumed after the Olympic break, Dobes' .916 save percentage is the third-best mark in the league among goalies with 15 appearances and he was especially stellar in March and early April, posting a .925 SV% in a dozen outings while the Canadiens solidified their playoff spot in a tough Eastern Conference fight. If Dobes, 24, falters, Fowler is the rare 21-year-old who might be able to handle the post-season heat. One of the top young goalies in hockey, Fowler has shown himself to be a capable, calm stopper when given the chance this season.

2. Lineup decisions

Coach Martin St. Louis has interesting decisions to make at forward and defence, albeit for different reasons. On the back end, the Canadiens were dealt a tough blow when Noah Dobson — a vital, right-shot defenceman for the team — got injured blocking a shot with his hand in Game No. 80. While there could be some gamesmanship given it's playoff time, Montreal said last weekend that he'd be re-evaluated after two weeks, which basically takes the team through four playoff contests. Assuming another righty, Alexandre Carrier, can return for Game 1, that leaves St. Louis looking at the likes of Arber Xhekaj, recent AHL callup David Reinbacher and maybe even Adam Engstrom for a final spot on the blue line. Everyone brings something different, so the coach will have to decide which way to play it.

Up front, a handful of guys — Brendan Gallagher, Joe Veleno, Zach Bolduc and Alexandre Texier — have all taken turns being scratched from the lineup. Maybe the series will tell St. Louis how to fill out his lineup card, but the coach has some tough calls to make and could throw different looks at Tampa as the battle wages on.

3. What constitutes progress for Montreal?

As noted, the Canadiens have now made the post-season in two straight years and that fact alone could be seen as a win for a squad that still seemed elbow-deep in a rebuild about 15 months ago. Does Montreal, in its second spring fling, need to win a series to show progress? Alternatively, maybe a tight six- or seven-game loss to a heavyweight like Tampa would suffice as a sign this club continues to move in the right direction.

What it really might come down to for the Canadiens is evaluating if the team, as currently constructed, has what it takes to thrive when the physicality takes a leap. Win or lose, will management leave the series thinking the core has what it takes to eventually make it work at this time of year or will they be left contemplating debilitating holes in the blueprint?

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Sportsnet.ca / Slafkovsky, young Canadiens steeled by last year's playoff experience



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Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — Juraj Slafkovsky stood stunned, with his voice trembling and his eyes locked in a 1000-yard stare.

"We just have to play better, and we will," Slafkovsky kept saying after sobering losses to the Washington Capitals last April.

His demeanour betrayed the confidence he wanted to portray following the first two games of his Stanley Cup Playoff career.

It was clear the experience shook Slafkovsky.

But by the time five games were played and a promising season had come to its abrupt end, it also became clear it had transformed him.

Countryman Eric Cernak saw that transformation as soon as Slafkovsky returned to Slovakia and joined him for their summer routine.

The Tampa Bay Lightning defenceman, who will face a much more hardened Slafkovsky than the one who got tenderized by the Capitals last spring, said the change was unmistakable.

"We have the same strength coach, so we work out and skate together, and I could see the difference right away when he was working hard and going for every single workout and skate with a different intensity," Cernak told us prior to a 4-1 win for the Canadiens over his Lightning on Mar. 31.

"He clearly came prepared," Cernak continued. "The way he's played, the confidence he's played with, it's been amazing."

It led Slafkovsky through the best of his four NHL seasons. He set career highs with 31 goals and 74 points, emerging as a dominant power forward three years ahead of schedule—in his 22nd year on the planet—and carrying himself with the swagger he had only hoped to have but couldn't find with the Canadiens' backs pinned to the wall in that Washington series.

An all-star performance at the Olympics in between prepared the 2022 No. 1 overall pick for what's coming next.

It was in Milan that Slafkovsky started every game as a marked man and finished it as an assassin. He posted four goals and eight points in six games and willed Slovakia to the semifinals.

In the process, he proved to himself what he wasn't able to prove to himself last spring.

"I was able to see that I can actually go out there and do what I want and need to do in meaningful games against the world's best players," Slafkovsky said, "and now I know I can bring the same energy to playoff games."

His voice was steady as he said it. His demeanour was confident, relaxed, and revealed the value of experience gained.

Seeing that from Slafkovsky and other members of this Canadiens team—ahead of a matchup with the most playoff-hardened team of the 16 challenging for this year's Cup—made it easier to believe they can rise to the challenge in front of them.

You think of Lane Hutson and Ivan Demidov, among other young players who went green into last year's playoffs and emerged from them black and blue, and you know they'll also be much more ready for Sunday's Game 1 in Tampa.

The lessons have sunk in.

"I was maybe a little less assertive as I wanted to be as a player," Hutson said. "I feel more assertive in trying to help any way I can."

Demidov came over from Russia last April and arguably would've gotten enough out of the two regular-season games he played while the Canadiens were trying to clinch a playoff berth if that was all he was exposed to before this season.

But getting in the five games he played against Washington had a massive influence on how he trained over the summer to author the most productive rookie campaign of any first-year player in the league.

To see Demidov score 19 goals and post 62 points was one thing, but Hutson feels he also offered evidence he can level up when it matters most—now.

"You can tell down the stretch, these last couple games, he's hungry," Hutson said. "We talk about the playoffs all the time, how exciting it is here and what we want to do to help us win, and he's so hungry to do whatever it takes to win, and it's definitely fun to see."

The Canadiens are hoping that what they'll get from Arber Xhekaj, Jayden Struble and Kaiden Guhle will be anything but fun for the Lightning to see.

The bruising back-enders also had their first experiences in the playoffs last spring, and they also took their hits like the rest of the Canadiens.

But Struble was more assertive down the stretch of this season than he was at any point last season—he was at his most aggressive in last week's 2-1 win over the Lightning at the Bell Centre—and Xhekaj has recently found a better balance between asserting himself physically and managing the other key elements of play.

"I find he's playing good hockey," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis. "He's playing physical, playing to his identity, and he got some good reps down the stretch... I like what I saw."

Results for Guhle were just as reassuring. Especially to his teammates.

"Guhles is going to be awesome for us," said Kirby Dach. "Big, rangy defenceman who plays hard and physical in front of his own net. He can eat big minutes, he's a bit of a pain in the ass to play against, so we're definitely lucky to have him."

Experience has brought Guhle and the rest of the Canadiens to another level, and that showed during this 106-point season.

"There's ups and downs through a playoff series, there's ups and downs through a game, there's emotion that comes with it," said St. Louis, "so having gone through it, I think it helps you."

It may not have felt that way to Slafkovsky in the moment, but it certainly feels that way to him now in hindsight.

"Honestly, I grew a lot from that," he said. "It was really hard. On TV, you can just watch and see all the plays developing, and everyone can figure it out on TV. Me too. I see what should happen. But on the ice, it's way different. There's a lot of physicality, and it's way faster."

"But I realized it's the type of game I love. It's what I play for."

Cernak knows that.

He saw it first-hand at the Olympics, and he knows Slafkovsky is just one of the young Canadiens more prepared for this year's playoffs.

"Even if they have a young team, those guys have been there for a few years and have gone through stuff together," he said. "It was only a matter of time before it started clicking, and everybody was playing winning hockey. That's what they've done. Marty, as the head coach, has experience. Even if they're young, they know how to manage winning those hard games, and I think that's important."

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs notebook: Rielly, Knies reiterate desire to stay in Toronto

Sonny Sachdeva

The long, painful journey to the final game of this lost Toronto Maple Leafs season has come to an end. Now comes the truly difficult part — pinning down how exactly it all went off the rails, and finding a way to get the organization back on track.

Thursday marked the first step in that process, as the Maple Leafs spoke to the media at the club's training facility in Etobicoke, Ont., reflecting on the first campaign in a decade that ended without playoff hockey. Much remains uncertain about the future of the club, about its front office and the players who don its sweater — the only thing that is clear is that changes are coming.

Morgan Rielly's worn the Maple Leafs crest longer than any other player currently in the building, has seen the franchise at rock bottom and at dizzying heights. And as the team's trajectory aims downward once again, he finds his name at the centre of chatter about the changes needed.

On Thursday, the 32-year-old was asked how he would feel if asked to waive the no-move clause granted to him when he inked his eight-year, \$60-million extension in 2021.

"It's a challenging thing to answer when those conversations haven't happened yet," Rielly said. "But after a year like this — after any year, but especially one that [was] very disappointing — change is bound to happen. So, I think as an athlete, you have to be prepared for that.

"It's not the first time that it's crossed my mind. It's not something anyone believes that they're not open to. So when that conversation happens, we'll deal with it accordingly."

The defender — who's played 13 seasons for the Maple Leafs, including four that saw him top the 50-point plateau, and one that saw him put up a career-best 20 goals and 72 points back in 2018-19 — reiterated his affinity for the organization that drafted him fifth-overall back in 2012.

"I've always loved being in Toronto and being a part of this organization. It's very meaningful to me, and I've enjoyed every minute of it," he said. "I've always wanted to stay. I still want to stay. I love playing here, I love being a Maple Leaf, and this organization means a lot to me."

That said, Rielly also made clear that the path back to post-season relevancy after this rollercoaster campaign will be a hard journey.

"In this league, I don't think there are any easy fixes," he said. "The work that this team will have to put in to get back to where we want to be is extensive. Being outshot or playing too much time in our D-zone are things that we need to improve on. But you know, it's more than just that."

Tanev 'very confident' he'll be ready for training camp in September

The Maple Leafs' blue line was a central topic of conversation all season, as the club's struggles in their own zone started early and never went away. Key to those struggles was the loss of back-end stalwart Chris Tanev, who missed all but 11 games with injury in 2025-26 after establishing himself as a pivotal blue-line leader for Toronto a season prior.

Amid questions about whether the 36-year-old will be able to resume his career after his recent slate of injuries, the veteran said Thursday he believes he'll be back on the ice for the Maple Leafs next season.

"I'm doing well," Tanev said. "I was in New York Monday to see the doctor about my surgery and everything's going great, everything's on track."

The defender said he doesn't foresee any further surgeries being required following the core muscle procedure he underwent in March. Asked how confident he is in his ability to return to the ice next season, Tanev was adamant: "Very confident," he said. "I feel like I work harder than anyone, and I will continue to do that to get to where I need to be."

Originally injured in a late-December game against Detroit, Tanev said he delayed his surgery in the hopes of returning in the playoffs.

"Every doctor I saw said the exact same thing: 'You need surgery.' I chose to wait a little bit — I was hoping we were going to be in a playoff spot and I could try to come back and play in April," he said. "That was the goal. If that was the case, I would've had surgery after that.

"But coming out of the Olympic break, we didn't play as well as we wanted, so it gave me an opportunity to do it then, where I could have a bit of a runway to get ready for next season."

Asked what he saw as the fundamental reason his club found themselves unable to claw their way back, Tanev said there are a number of issues that need to be ironed out before 2026-27.

"When you watch the game up there, everyone thinks they're Wayne Gretzky. The game is so much slower from the press box than it is on the ice. So, it's tough for me to really critique when I only played 11 games," he said. "But I think we needed to execute our systems better, we needed to have some more pace. Depending on who you ask, there could be 20 different things.

"When things don't go as well as planned, or as well as they need to go, there's always issues that need to be addressed. I think whoever comes in at the top is going to have to look at that and see what the important issues that they see are, and then try to fix them."

Knies on seeing his name in trade reports: "That's not in my hands. I'd love to stay here."

One approach considered by the club's previous regime was moving out young power forward Matthew Knies, who found his name brought up in reported trade offers considered by former GM Brad Treliving and Co.

Signed to a six-year, \$46.5-million deal prior to this season, the 23-year-old managed 23 goals and 66 points in 2025-26. However, injuries hampered his ability to truly take a step for the club.

"It came up earlier in the year, I honestly don't even know what date — some time pretty early in the season," Knies said of his lower-body injury. "I think it was kind of blown out of proportion, I don't think it was as serious as it was [said to be]. It was obviously not comfortable to play with all year, but it didn't really hinder me being out of the lineup.

"I'm happy now that I can let it heal up and rest it a little bit, and try to come back and be 100 per cent for next season."

As for his name being considered in trade offers this season, and perhaps moving forward, Knies reiterated his desire to remain a Maple Leaf.

"It's not in my control," the winger said. "I can just focus on my attitude that I bring to the rink, the work ethic I bring to the rink. That's for the guys upstairs, that's not in my hands. I'd love to stay here. I want to play here. I think you're going to hear that from everyone in this locker room.

"It doesn't get to me, really, I've just got to focus on my game and trying to help the team win. That was my only thought this year."

Maple Leafs point to lack of consistency, injuries as key reasons for lost season

As the dust settles on a disastrous campaign that saw Toronto finish in the league's basement just one year after winning a division title, the



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Maple Leafs tried Thursday to sort through the wreckage of their disappointing season. The squad's overall lack of consistency was brought up repeatedly by the dejected group.

"We never really seemed to get quite on track the way we needed to," said John Tavares. "Our game obviously just didn't build, get to the level that it needs to be consistently to have success, to put yourself in a spot to be in the playoffs. ... We just didn't do a good enough job. I think we all understand the roles we play as players, and certainly myself, the expectation and the standards that we want to uphold. We didn't meet those."

Asked why that consistency wasn't there, despite the veteran experience in the group and the results they found last season, Tavares said the issues were plenty.

"It just didn't really come together. You know, I think it's always hard to pinpoint one thing. But certainly our level of execution, and just the challenge that it brings on a nightly basis in this league, the buy-in that everyone needs to have to be on the same page — and doing the things when they're the most difficult, when they're the most challenging, being able to sustain that. You know, having the fortitude needed to do what's required on a nightly basis.

"As our game went throughout the season, it obviously was a real challenge — just spending a lot of time in our own zone, not having the puck very much, and then we just didn't defend and execute, break out very well. That's on everyone, starting with myself."

Knies pointed to the club's defensive performances.

"We can't let in that many goals and expect to win games," he said. "I think our defensive play, to be honest, was very subpar. We left our goalies out to dry a lot of the games. I think that was a part of it. I think towards the end of the season, our ability to generate offence wasn't there. That kind of ties into consistency — not everything was there all the time.

"At parts I think we were good defensively, but the offence wasn't there, and then vice versa. We're going to have to put it together, all the pieces, next year, and completely buy into the system, show that it works."

For Stolarz, it was the lack of bite and competitiveness that sunk them — the type of intensity he saw his former club, the Florida Panthers, bring routinely.

"You know, you look at the response that we had late in the season after the Auston injury. I think that's something that, next year, starting at Game 1, that's the way we have to play," the netminder said. "We have to play like bastards. We have to play hard and we have to play heavy. There were times this year that we've shown it. We've played with some of the best teams in the league and were able to beat them. I think that was the toughest thing, was just the consistency. We hung with some of the best teams in the league, we beat some of the best teams in the league — it just wasn't there night in, night out."

William Nylander, who led the club with 79 points this season, chalked it up to the injury bug.

"I mean, a lot of injuries piled up," the winger said during a brief availability Thursday. "I think that maybe was a big factor, looking back at it."

Much was made of head coach Craig Berube's system, and what seemed to be a lack of buy-in from his players this season, an issue that appeared to snowball as the tumultuous campaign wore on. Asked Thursday for his thoughts on that critique, Berube said he and his staff did try to tweak the system throughout the season to find a solution.

"You know, we did modify it this year at times. And it ended up being the same result," the coach said. "It's not like we're not trying to work and

help the players and try to get them to a different level. Systems are systems. They have to be executed to be successful."

Berube — who said he hasn't heard anything yet about whether he'll be back next season — pointed to one area specifically when asked why his team fell off in 2025-26 after a successful 2024-25.

"Goals-against," the coach said, point blank. Still, Berube said he believes the club's current goalie tandem of Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz can find success again in Toronto.

"We did last year," Berube said Thursday when asked if he could live with the duo returning. "And they were solid. We had a nice tandem, and I believe that we can have that tandem again. You know, this year, whether it's a one-off or whatever, there was a lot of circumstances, with injuries and different things, that went on.

"It was a little chaotic in the goaltending department. But I do believe Stolarz and Woll are very good goalies, when they're healthy and ready to go. I believe they can come back next year and do the job again."

Tavares on belief Maple Leafs can bounce back next year: 'We have to earn that'

The crucial question for the Maple Leafs faithful is where things go from here — was this campaign a one-off, undone by injuries and a mismanaged roster? Or was it a sign that the Maple Leafs' window for contention has now slammed shut, and a new path must be charted?

Asked if they believe they can return to the playoffs Thursday, the Maple Leafs expectedly affirmed their belief in their group — but also noted it won't be a simple process.

"I think in moments you have doubt. If you look at the record and after games, you have feelings of doubt," admitted Rielly. "But ultimately I think that there's a strong belief in here with this team, in the big picture and over the long run, that this team will be able to get back to a position of strength and a chance to win."

"I think we have a ton of good players in here," added Tanev. "Obviously we didn't have a very good season at all. But we had — I'm not going to give excuses on injuries — but we had some guys that didn't play a lot of the year. I think we can learn a lot from this year, and the importance of having a really good start to the season. Falling behind the eight ball and learning and adapting to how we can get better. There's some amazing players in here, and I do believe that we can be a playoff team next year."

"With the talent and the personnel in this locker room, I think that that's definitely going to happen," said Knies, doubling down. "It sucks to say, but with a summer like this, there's time for guys to heal up and get prepared, just get as ready as possible for next season."

"We have some good players here — we have to make some adjustments, we have to make some moves to bring in maybe some different players or different people," said Berube. "But there's a good core here, good players, and good people. So I do believe we can bounce back."

Asked if he's confident this group can return to the post-season after what just transpired in 2025-26, Tavares was more cautious with his optimism.

"Very. But we have to go out there and prove that and earn that," the former captain said. "Just like, you know, we had high expectations for this year, and we didn't come close. So, the challenge going forward for the group is to regroup, continue to work together to find the areas we have to be better. And then our level of play just has to be much, much higher."

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Sportsnet.ca / Beers, dinners and wins: How surging Sabres have become 'close-knit' group

Mike Koreen

BUFFALO — Less than two weeks after joining the Buffalo Sabres following a trade-deadline deal from the Winnipeg Jets, Luke Schenn quickly discovered there was a good feeling in the dressing room of his 11th NHL team.

On a trip through Las Vegas and California last month, the Sabres went for two team dinners — a telltale sign of a connected group in the veteran blue-liner's eyes.

"There were two team dinners in four games, and then guys were hanging out back in the hotel, playing poker, cards, watching more hockey," Schenn said before a recent home game. "Doing all sorts of stuff which teams do in the playoffs, and these guys are doing it during the regular season, which means you can't get enough of one another."

Schenn has been in his share of strong and, well, not-so-strong rooms after 1,100-plus NHL games

The Saskatoon native won Stanley Cups in 2020 and '21 with the Tampa Bay Lightning, but also waited until the sixth season of his NHL career to play a playoff game after four misses with the Toronto Maple Leafs and one with the Philadelphia Flyers.

So, Schenn also has a good idea of what it means to end a playoff drought — which the Sabres will do this weekend after a painful 14-season run of absences. His experience could come in handy for a team without any recent post-season history heading into a first-round series with the Boston Bruins.

"I think guys really care for one another. That's one of the things I experienced when I was in Tampa — how close the guys were off the ice," Schenn explained. "Guys wanted to be around each other, you're doing massive dinners instead of little groups and cliques. When you get back from dinner, guys are still wanting to hang out. Families are tight, wives and girlfriends are tight — which is a big part of it.

"Just the closer group you have, the easier it is to be in sync on the ice. That's something I sensed when I got here, was how close the group was. Guys truly love being around one another and there's lots of energy, lots of laughs ... I've been around some rooms where you don't have that and you don't really have a chance to have success on the ice. I think it starts with a close group, which we have."

Captain Rasmus Dahlin, preparing for his first career NHL playoff game, leads the Atlantic Division champs on and off the ice.

The Swedish defenceman has been through a gruelling year. His fiancée, Carolina, underwent an emergency heart transplant last summer while vacationing in France. Dahlin left the team in November, with permission, to spend time with her back home.

Since returning, Dahlin has excelled, along with the rest of the team. The Sabres made a huge push to the top of the Atlantic Division following the firing of general manager Kevyn Adams.

Carolina is now back in Buffalo, which has given the room a big boost.

"She's a big reason why the culture is so tight here, and the foundation of the team is so solid," Sabres forward Tage Thompson told Matthew Fairburn of The Athletic.

Dahlin's sense of humour also seems to have galvanized the team.

The 2018 first-overall pick told reporters last month the team had been working on "team chemistry and the brotherhood" all season.

The natural follow-up was how do you work on brotherhood.

"Drink beer," Dahlin said, smiling.

The simple answer was a hit. On a recent trip to a local tavern close to KeyBank Center for lunch, before Buffalo's grudge match against the Tampa Bay Lightning, a patron at the bar was spotted wearing a cap with the words 'Drink Beer' along with a Dominik Hasek Sabres jersey.

"Right from the beginning of the year, we set out to become a close-knit team and it's kind of been a focal point for us all year," rugged winger Jordan Greenway said. "It includes a lot of different things, ... whatever Dahls (Dahlin) said included. Everybody's willing to stick up for anyone else. The winning helps, a lot of things help. But I would definitely say we're a close-knit group."

Schenn understands the power of raising a glass with teammates at the right time.

"Go ask Pat Maroon over there how many beers we had together," Schenn chuckled prior to the game against Tampa. "I would agree with that. It started for us when we were in Tampa, Patty was good at getting the whole group together at the Global Series in Stockholm. That's when we became a team. You're in Stockholm for a week, you're having a few drinks together, getting to know one another."

The reaction of the fanbase has also added to the good vibes.

The Sabres sold out their last 18 games and had 24 full houses overall after just four last season, per the Buffalo News. They're up to 11,000 season tickets for next season after approximately 9,000 this year.

Buffalo may be a small market, but the town tends to go hockey crazy when the team puts a good product on the ice.

The Sabres' rise brings back memories of when the Buffalo Bills ended a 17-year playoff drought in 2017. Since then, the Bills have been one of the NFL's top teams, playing in front of rabid home fans craving a first title.

Maybe something similar is happening for the Sabres. Or maybe they can even overtake the Bills and give Buffalo an elusive big-four-sport title.

"(The fans) love it. It's been great to say. I'm excited for them," Greenway said. "It definitely helps when you've got the fans behind us, we're all feeling good. It makes things a lot easier."

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Sportsnet.ca / Time for seasoned Oilers to hit playoff gear against hapless Canucks

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — The Edmonton Oilers' second season as a recovering Stanley Cup finalist has been ... well, let's just say they've taken it one day at a time.

They've learned how to get to April 15 in a comfortable playoff position, without expending too much energy along the way. How to maintain the level in everyone's personal game to stay at or near the top of the Pacific, then find a team game when needed after the Olympic break — but not necessarily before.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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How to be good enough, while saving your best for last.

Because if there's one thing they know, it's that you can't play playoff hockey in December. Not if you plan on playing it in June.

"The expectations are to win the Stanley Cup," Zach Hyman said Wednesday. "We lose in the final, we lose in the first round — we're going to be pissed."

When you're in the middle of a Stanley Cup window, it's all about the 16 wins from April to June. The 82 games before that, they're crab cakes: the appetizer before the main course.

And the more playoff hockey you've played, the more that becomes ingrained in the DNA of an NHL team.

"Playoff experience," began Hyman. "When you don't have it, you don't really think it's that important. And when you do, you realize it is important."

Expound on that, could you?

"When you're a young kid and it's your first playoff game, you're taken aback. Everything's different," Hyman, who will be in the lineup Thursday against the Canucks (Sportnet and Sportsnet+, 7 p.m. MT), explained. "Players play differently. Everything's faster. Every play matters. It's just a different, different game."

"That's why you see teams like Florida, who had 98 points last year, and then they turned it on. They were the best team by quite a (distance) in the East."

And, in the end, two games better than these Oilers.

Edmonton has been a 100-plus point team for four straight seasons. As we arrive at Game 82 Thursday in Edmonton, a point earned against the hapless Vancouver Canucks — and with playoff seeding at stake, can you envisage a world in which Edmonton doesn't win by two or three? — the Oilers will close out the 2025-26 season with 92 or 93 points, good for (at least) second place in the pillow-fight Pacific.

Frankly, had Leon Draisaitl and then Hyman not been injured late in the season, the Oilers would likely have two or three more points and be home and cooled atop the division. But really, who cares?

"You want to put yourself in a position that you can be comfortable going into the playoffs, and obviously we're not," Hyman said. "We've got to win a game here. But at the same time, you still have the confidence that when you get in you can beat anybody."

I know this: from about 2008 to 2011, if those Canucks teams needed a late season victory over Edmonton to feather their playoff nest, we all would have bet the house that the Sedins et al would take both points from those inferior Oilers teams.

Today, the skate is on the other foot.

"We're pretty confident," Hyman said. "I mean, it's kind of how we've been the whole time. It's a big game for us. Every game we go into we're confident that we can win."

Thursday's game is, in fact, a chance to kick in a little muscle memory before the games start for real.

There is a chance, should Vegas somehow lose in regulation Wednesday, that a win could give Edmonton first place. More importantly, if the tumbler falls the right way, there's a chance a regulation loss could send Edmonton down to Colorado for Game 1, with a slog through the Central ahead even if they pull off an improbable upset over the Avalanche.

Simply winning and playing either Anaheim or Los Angeles makes the stakes high in Game 82, a nice rehearsal for the gut-wrenching games that lie ahead.

"For a lot of us, these last few years, we've played a lot of hockey," said veteran Darnell Nurse. "I wouldn't say (playoff hockey) is the same feeling as a regular-season game — it's more amplified, the context of the game. But there's a familiarity and comfort to it."

And they're closing in on that game, just in time for the games they've been waiting for all season.

"This last week, we haven't gotten all the results we wanted. But we played really well," assessed Nurse. "It's on us to bring that again against Vancouver — the full package. Be able to create some more offence for our team, but not at the expense of our defence."

If your game isn't at a point that makes a speed bump out of Vancouver — with this much on the line — then what's next doesn't really matter, does it?

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Sportsnet.ca / How Travis Green transformed the Senators into a contender

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — Being an NHL head coach can be a thankless job, getting blamed for every loss and rarely given any credit for the wins.

There are exceptions to the rule, and that's when you know a head coach is coaching.

As Travis Green told his Ottawa Senators recently after a game, "work your balls off."

Maybe he was speaking about himself.

In January, the smart money said the Senators were going nowhere as they sat at the bottom of the Eastern Conference. They were analytics darlings, outshooting and out-chancing opponents with one of the best defensive structures in the league but weren't getting saves or killing penalties.

That's when you need your coach to rally the troops, which happened as the Senators brushed off the outside noise to make the playoffs. In fact, the team's turnaround has rightfully put Green in the conversation for the Jack Adams Award for coach of the year. And he has his sights set on a Stanley Cup, no less.

Green's story — and not just for this season — is one of perseverance, learning from his mistakes and growing as a coach.

It started with the Vancouver Canucks, where Green was coach from 2017 to 2021. His record was 133-147-34. It wasn't sparkling, so when the Senators hired Green in May 2024, it raised eyebrows. But general manager Steve Staios saw something.

"That was that deep dive," Staios told Sportsnet.ca. "We went through their roster, wins and losses, but also how they performed. ... The easy way to do it would be wins and losses and Stanley Cups."

Interestingly, the Old Boys club played no part in Staios hiring Green: the two had met just once before the interview process.

At the time, a lot of Sens fans wanted to see Staios pick Craig Berube, a Cup winner in St. Louis. "One of the guys out there was a Stanley Cup champ, and what I really dug into was where my team was at and who's the right fit," said Staios.

"I'll never make a decision to win a headline.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"There's been a number of times where it would have been easy for me to make decisions that our fans would have been excited about, but I wouldn't be doing the right thing by the team."

Well, Green has become a positive headline this season, while Berube has not in Toronto.

When Staios looked under the hood, he saw that Green consistently outperformed with a poorly constructed and rebuilding Vancouver team. Green managed to get the Canucks to Game 7 of the second round of the playoffs with a young Quinn Hughes, Bo Horvat, Elias Petterson and J.T. Miller.

"We started to dig into the numbers," Staios said. "We went real in depth to try and figure out exactly (how) he got more out of teams on the defensive side. ... We talked about it a lot in Year 1, where we wanted to establish that foundational defensive game, and then build off of that."

Green told Sportsnet.ca that it was a learning experience coaching the Canucks.

"Head coaches have a lot of confidence in themselves, and when I went to Vancouver, I felt like I had a lot of things figured out. But you definitely learn a lot the more you do it," Green said.

"I would expect a guy that's a doctor or a lawyer is a much better lawyer after seven or eight years than he was his first year. And I think that's definitely the case right now. Even system-wise, I've changed a lot of my systems that I originally came into league with. I'd like to think I'm a little bit of a hockey nerd, as far as studying and listening and watching hockey, but also just handling players and going through different scenarios, different situations. When to push, when to have patience."

"Coaches are always better after their first job," said Staios.

Green's transformation of the Senators began with its defensive structure. From 2018 to 2024, the Senators were in the bottom half every season in goals against. Some of that was goaltending, but a lot of that was a mix of great talent but lack of structure in their game under coach D.J. Smith. Staios wanted a level of accountability for the team's youthful stars, namely Tim Stutzle, Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson, which they may not have had under Smith, the coach they had been weaned on. Don't forget Elias Petterson's best years were under Green.

From Day 1, in 2024, Green sought to suffocate opponents' transition games by dumping the puck in, which allowed Ottawa to be great defensively. And he got Stutzle, Tkachuk and Thomas Chabot — all poor defensive players at the time — to become good defensively, even great in Stutzle's case. The Senators are now second in expected goals allowed per game.

"They want coaching, they accept coaching, and it's not always rainbows and butterflies. Coaching is being honest, and the players aren't always hearing things that they want to hear," said Green.

For years, the young core played exciting but not winning hockey. They needed structure and a kick in the butt.

"Honestly, ever since Travis came, he just taught us the right way how to play hockey, the winning way," said Sanderson. "It's not fancy. May not be fun all the time. It's tiring, but he understands that. He gives us the rest when we need it, so we have the energy to go out and play that way every single time."

"Honestly, not enough nice things I can say. He's honest, but he's fair," Sanderson told Sportsnet.ca.

"I've tried to promise myself to never forget what it's like to be the player," said Green, who played 14 years in the NHL. "That's important for coaches."

Nick Cousins said the fact that Green puts himself in "our shoes" is a major reason the team has rallied and tuned into Green's voice. When

they "need that video session or to come in and scream and yell at us ... (he) knows what buttons to push."

In many ways, being a coach is as much about the human element as it is the Xs and Os.

"Sometimes, as a coach, you're like a father figure, you're a brother and you're a friend, and that changes from day to day," Green said "And I think if you can build a relationship with your team ... but also have authority on how they're going to play and when they're going to play."

"How I treat Shane Pinto is different than how I treat Ridly Greig."

Good coaches also learn from their mistakes.

Before the Senators went on a run at the end of January, their penalty kill was second worst in the league. Green switched out assistant coach Nolan Baumgartner for Mike Yeo to run the penalty kill. Since then, they've had the sixth-best unit.

"There's times where you look back and (think), 'Ah, maybe I should have handled that a little differently', and that only helps you the next time it comes up," said Green.

Green also realized his team could not play run-and-gun like others, so looked for a pragmatic defensive approach while growing the offensive side of the game. Ottawa now sits eighth in goals for this season.

"We don't have a team that has 50-goal scorers, 100-point guys, but we have a real team that has a lot of good players. And they're committed on both sides of the puck," said Green.

But maybe the hardest channel Green navigated this season was the so-called outside noise: the drama that surrounded Senators on Team USA, Tkachuk's dad's comments, Linus Ullmark's leave of absence and subsequent viral rumours about his personal life.

It was a lot.

But in December, with the team losing and with a ton of drama ahead, someone sent Green a note that became the mantra of the 2025-26 Senators.

"When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras, and I actually wrote it up on my board," said Green. "It just meant don't look for something that's not there."

A few weeks later, in January, when the team was in the basement of the Eastern Conference, Green made his famous speech caught on video following a 7-1 win over Vegas.

"Don't listen to the (expletive) white noise. Don't listen to people outside this (expletive) rink. Zero negativity," said Green. "Let's go on a (expletive) run."

We asked Green about his speech.

"That was around a time where there was a lot of noise around our team. Why were we not winning?" Green said.

"Especially in today's world with social media ... there's a lot of noise around the team ... (so it was about) not letting someone else's opinion get in the way of what we want to do."

It worked. The team launched into an impeccable 20-6-4 run all the way to the playoffs.

But Green isn't satisfied.

"My goal is to win the Stanley Cup," he said. "Plain simple, that's what I want to do. I never got to do it as a player. And I want to win a Cup as a coach. ... I firmly believe that this team has a chance."

The best time of the year starts for Green against Carolina in Round 1.

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TSN.CA / 'I can't predict the future': But Matthews still believes he can win with Leafs

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs held their end-of-season media availability at the Ford Performance Centre on Thursday.

In his first media session since suffering a season-ending injury on March 12, Auston Matthews was asked about his future in Toronto.

"I can't predict the future," the Leafs captain said. "Obviously there's steps that kind of have to take place. They're going to hire new leadership and management and stuff like that, so I don't really know."

MLSE parted ways with general manager Brad Treliving on March 29 as the Leafs stumbled down the stretch of a disastrous season that saw them finish 28th overall. A search is currently underway for a new head of hockey operations.

MLSE president and CEO Keith Pelley believes the team can quickly get back into contention because they have the foundational pieces in place, including Matthews.

Does a retool sound good to Matthews?

"I don't know," the 28-year-old said. "Like, I don't know what that means. You have to have a more clear understanding [of] what that means, retool, rebuild, whatever that is. That's something that's going to be up to the new management that we end up hiring and going from there."

Matthews did confirm he still believes he can win in Toronto and pointed out that the Boston Bruins rebounded from a 28th place finish to make the playoffs this season.

"I believe in the guys in this room and the people that we have here," the three time Rocket Richard Trophy winner said. "We're all hopeful that this is a one-off."

Matthews plans on having "organic conversations" with the new front office once it's in place.

In the meantime, the Arizona native was asked if he'd like to reject any suggestion that he won't play out the final two years of his current contract with the Leafs.

"All that stuff, I mean, there's always noise and there's always chatter," he said. "Personally, I really don't pay attention to all that. I just focus on myself, focus on this team, and try to be part of the solution."

In a statement before taking questions, Matthews did stress how much playing in Toronto means to him.

"I love being the captain of this team," he said. "I think it is an incredible honour to wake up every day and wear this jersey. That is not lost on me even despite the circumstances and the way this season went."

Behind the scenes, there is no panic about the future of the franchise cornerstone.

"My understanding is that privately some of the things that were discussed with Matthews were encouraging for the Leafs," said TSN Hockey Insider Chris Johnston. "Certainly no one is leaving here today thinking he's gone, but there's going to be a lot more conversation and a lot more for him to evaluate as time goes on."

"Matthews leaving" chant briefly starts in Ottawa

There were "Marner's leaving" chants during the playoffs last year @BarDown

— Mark Masters (@markmasters) April 16, 2026

Matthews sustained a Grade 3 MCL tear in his left knee courtesy a hit by Anaheim Ducks defenceman Radko Gudas on March 19. None of the Leafs players on the ice confronted Gudas in the immediate aftermath of the play.

"It was an unfortunate play," Matthews said. "I thought they responded in the third period, but it's an unfortunate play."

Toronto rallied to beat Anaheim during a penalty-filled final period. The Leafs then made standing up for each other a top priority down the stretch.

"You look at the response we had late in the season after the Auston injury and that's something that next year, starting in game one, that's the way we have to play," said goalie Anthony Stolarz. "We have to play like bastards. We have to play hard and we have to play heavy."

Matthews required surgery to repair his knee. The rehab is going "really good" and Matthews expects to be ready for next season.

"I'll have a pretty normal summer for the most part," he said. "I'm about a month down now so a couple more months before I can start to turn it up a little bit."

Matthews suggested the recovery is even a little bit ahead of schedule.

"I just got off crutches," he noted. "I didn't think I'd be standing here today so it's going well so far."

Gudas was only suspended five games, which led Matthews' agent Judd Moldaver to blast the NHL's department of player safety.

"I think you probably know how I feel about the hit," Matthews said with a grin on Thursday.

Matthews finished the season with 27 goals and 53 points in 60 games. His goals-per game (0.45) was well below his career average (0.62).

The Leafs dropped eight straight games out of the Olympic break, which sealed their fate and Matthews did not score in any of those games.

"Coming back from the Olympics it was tough," said Matthews, who captained the United States to a gold medal in Milan and visited President Donald Trump at the White House before rejoining the Leafs. "Riding a very big emotional high and then just trying to get back into it. From continuing to play, not really getting a break, travel and all that stuff, I found it kind of hard to get my game going back after the Olympics for a little bit."

Matthews snapped the goalless drought only minutes before the Gudas hit ended his season.

This is the first time in his career that Matthews will miss the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"This was a tough year and a frustrating year," he said as part of his opening statement. "We didn't meet the goals or the expectations that we set out at the start and ultimately that is on me. That's on us as players. We're the ones who have to go out there, compete, and play the game. We didn't do that well enough, consistently enough this year to put ourselves in a better spot. We love our fans. We appreciate our fans. I think we understand their frustration."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Why did the Leafs crash down the standings after finishing first in the Atlantic Division a year ago?

"That's a more complicated question than I can really answer," Matthews said. "I mean, I think just the level of consistency that we didn't play with hurt, because I thought we had really good stretches of hockey throughout the year and put together some good games... but just the consistency night after night wasn't there."

What does Morgan Rielly think about the potential of being asked to waive his no-move clause?

"It's a challenging thing to answer when those conversations haven't happened yet," the 32-year-old defenceman said. "But after a year like this, after any year, but especially one that can be very disappointing, change is bound to happen. So, I think as an athlete you have to be prepared for that. It's not the first time it's crossed my mind. It's not something that anyone believes that they're not open to so when that conversation happens we'll deal with it accordingly."

Rielly spoke as if it's a certainty the conversation will happen even though the team currently does not have a head of hockey operations. The longest-serving Leaf also spoke in the past tense at times during his media session.

"I've always loved being in Toronto and being a part of this organization," he said. "It's very meaningful to me and I've enjoyed every minute of it."

Rielly, who was the fifth overall pick in the 2012 draft, later added, "I've always wanted to stay. I still want to stay. I love playing here. I love being a Maple Leaf and this organization means a lot to me."

Rielly warned that a return to contention is not going to be a simple process for the Leafs.

"In this league I don't think there's any easy fixes," he said. "The work that this team will have to put in to get back to where we want to be is extensive. Being outshot and playing too much time in D-zone are things we need to improve on, but it's more than just that."

Does head coach Craig Berube expect to be back next season?

"Yes," the 60-year-old said.

Berube later clarified that he has not been given any assurances and will be awaiting a decision from the new head of hockey operations.

Berube was also succinct when diagnosing what went wrong for the team this season.

"Goals against," he said.

Only the last-place Vancouver Canucks allowed more goals than the Leafs. Toronto's goals-against per game plummeted to 3.6 from 2.79 in the first season under Berube.

"Systems are systems and they have to be executed to be successful," Berube said. "We have some good players here. We have to make some adjustments. We have to make some moves to bring in maybe some different players or different people, but there is a good core here, and good players, and good people. I do believe we can bounce back."

The team struggled to fill the void left by 100-point winger Mitch Marner, who was nominated for the Selke Trophy during his time in Toronto.

"You're going to miss a player of his calibre," Berube said. "Every team, if they lose a guy like that, will miss him. At the same time, that is not the reason this season happened."

William Nylander had a simple explanation for Toronto's troubles this year.

"A lot of injuries I think piled up and I think was maybe a big factor looking back at it," said the winger.

Nylander led the team in scoring with 79 points despite missing 17 games due to injury.

The biggest injury issue was on the blue line as shutdown defenceman Chris Tanev suited up in just 11 games. How confident is the 36-year-old that he can return to his top form next season?

"Very confident," Tanev said. "I feel like I work harder than anyone and I will continue to do that to get to where I need to be."

Tanev underwent core muscle surgery in early March. He had a check up in New York earlier this week and was told the recovery is going well.

Tanev initially sustained a groin injury on Dec. 28 at the end of a game in Detroit.

"I just took a step and felt a pop," he said. "Right when that happened I knew it wasn't good ... Every doctor I saw said the exact same thing that you need surgery. I chose to wait for a little bit. I was hoping we were going to be in a playoff spot and I could try to come back and play in April. That was the goal and if that was the case I would have surgery after that."

Tanev described his experience this season as "awful" and took some of the blame for Treliving's firing.

"Obviously I'm pretty hard on myself and disappointed how I was only able to play 11 games and sort of let a lot of people down."

Treliving signed Tanev to a six-year, \$27-million deal in the summer of 2024.

Instability in the crease also led to the goals against ballooning this season. Toronto's team save percentage dipped from .912 last year to .897.

Stolarz and Joseph Woll formed one of the best tandems in the NHL last season, but did not dress in the same game this season until Jan. 23.

Woll missed most of training camp and the first 18 games of the season due to personal leave. Stolarz struggled under the weight of the greater workload.

"It was the first time in my career where I kind of had the ball in my court and was able to run with it," the 32-year-old said. "I was trying to be this perfect goalie and strayed away from what made me successful. Looking back at it, probably if I would've had my normal mentality, my normal mindset, probably worked out a lot better."

Stolarz called out the team for a poor start to the season just six games in.

"I thought we had a decent response after that," the New Jersey native said. "I definitely didn't help. That was probably the worst stretch of my season there, so kind of didn't back up what I said."

Stolarz stressed that the controversial comments did not have a big impact on his play because teammates understood where he was coming from and showed support afterwards.

"It didn't weigh on me at all," he said. "I probably regret the way I went about it. It most definitely could have been handled in the room, but I think sometimes what we need is tough love."

Amid a slow start to the season, Stolarz then sustained a nerve-related neck injury on Nov. 11.



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After returning to the lineup just before the Olympic break, Stolarz seemed to regain the form that allowed him to lead the league in save percentage last year. But his season ended prematurely when he sustained a groin strain while making a routine save on April 8.

"It definitely sucks," he said. "It's a save I've made 500 times throughout the year between practice and games. I've been through injuries in my career so for me it's not going to deter anything. I'm going to hit the rehab process hard and do everything I can this summer and early this spring to ensure everything is good to go for next year."

Stolarz finished the season with an .893 save percentage in 26 games, which was down from .926 in 34 games last season.

Woll missed four games with his own groin injury in December.

"Someone once said availability is the best ability so that's definitely very important to me," the 27-year-old said. "I do think I've grown a lot in that sense of understanding what my body needs and getting better and better at that. And that will be a goal for the offseason too is getting my body ready to go a full season and to play the games I want to play."

Woll played 39 games this season, which was down from the career high of 42 he played last year. What's his goal in terms of games played?

"Trying to decide if I want to share," he said with a chuckle. "I'll probably keep my goals internal for the time being, but it's certainly more than 39 or 40. Yeah, I want to be a guy that plays night in, night out, that can stay healthy, that can be consistent."

Woll dropped eight of his final nine decisions and finished the season with a career-worst .899 save percentage.

"At the end of the day, if I look at the season as a whole, I feel like I've maybe had some stuff left on the table," he admitted. "I know what I'm capable of, what I've shown here before, and I don't think I properly lived up to what I know I'm capable of and that part of it is very disappointing for myself."

Dennis Hildeby actually posted the best numbers among Toronto's masked men this season. The team's top goaltending prospect produced a .914 save percentage over 20 games (14 starts).

"I think I proved I can play in this league which is a good first step and take it from there and keep on improving," the 24-year-old Swede said.

Hildeby is not waiver-exempt next season and believes he's ready to start in the NHL during the 2026-27 season.

"That's always the mindset and it's definitely going to be the mindset coming in next year," he said.

Goaltending and injuries were not the only issues that sank the Leafs. The skaters also struggled to stick to Berube's structure.

"Lack of execution, buy-in, emotion on everyone's part including myself," said winger Nick Robertson.

"I don't think buy-in was an issue," Berube stressed. "We're trying to play a certain way here and I don't think that we fully grabbed that buy-in that way."

Defencemen Jake McCabe and Brandon Carlo were the only two regulars who finished with a plus rating.

Matthew Knies recorded an ugly minus-30 rating, which was the worst mark on the team.

"I wasn't expecting to have the plus-minus I do, really," said Knies, who also posted a career high 66 points. "We just needed to be better defensively. We just didn't have that commitment to defending well and defending first before offence."

John Tavares finished minus-28, which was by far the worst rating of his career. He hasn't been this far below water since a minus-16 result as a second-year pro on Long Island.

"I just gotta be more consistent," said Tavares, who led the team with 31 goals. "I had some really good stretches of hockey. Obviously, I have to look at areas where I have to get better and the checking side of things, the defending side of things. [I was] just on for too many goals against. Those things obviously frustrate you, but you just continue to reflect on where you need to be better and improve and that's a major driving force. So, I obviously want to continue to be contributing like I am, but continue to push for more and expect a lot of myself to play at a high level. Everything I put into it, and still know and believe I can be a very impactful player for a while."

Tavares is the only Leafs player to dress in 82 games, but his season is apparently not done just yet. The 35-year-old centre plans to play for Canada at the upcoming World Championship in Switzerland.

"Obviously you want to be playing for the Stanley Cup, but any time you get the opportunity to represent your country, and certainly the stage I'm at, you don't take it lightly," said Tavares. "It could only benefit me to go play."

Treliving is leading Hockey Canada's management group alongside Pittsburgh Penguins assistant general manager Jason Spezza.

Tavares captained Canada at the 2024 World Championship.

It's possible Easton Cowan will also continue playing. The Leafs rookie winger is eligible to join the Toronto Marlies for their American Hockey League playoff run.

"I'd love to play more hockey, but it's not my decision," the 20-year-old said. "Whatever the management thinks is right, I'll agree with them."

Cowan spent most of the season in the NHL where he registered 11 goals and 18 assists in 66 games.

"I know I'm an NHL player and I feel comfortable, but I still have a lot more to give," said Cowan, who played two games with the Marlies in November. "I know I'll have a good summer and get bigger and faster."

Cowan, who stands 6-foot, 190 pounds, was pleased that he was able to remain healthy despite enduring the grind of the NHL schedule for the first time.

"He became way more confident throughout the season as the season went on," Berube observed. "He's learning at the same time at the NHL level. Good future ahead of him. He has a great IQ. He has ice water in his veins. He is a worker. There is a lot of upside there."

What's the next step?

"The next level is learning how to finish at this level," Berube said. "Keep working on the details of the game, the defensive side of the game, doing all of the right things, and managing the game."

Leafs lines in regular season finale:

Cowan - Tavares - Nylander

Knies - Domi - Robertson



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Maccelli - Haymes - Lorentz

Pezzetta - Quillan - Tverberg

Rielly - Stecher

Benoit - McCabe

Ekman-Larsson - Villeneuve

Hildeby starts

Woll

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