



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 18, 2026

The Athletic

Which NHL playoff teams might have an edge because of goalie play?

By: Jesse Granger

Minnesota Wild coach John Hynes shocked many by announcing on Friday that he would start rookie goaltender Jesper Wallstedt in Game 1 of the first-round series against the Dallas Stars on Saturday.

It's a bold move to play Wallstedt, who will make his playoff debut, over Filip Gustavsson, who has been entrenched as Minnesota's starter for years. It carries risk, but it also makes sense — not just because Wallstedt has outperformed Gustavsson down the stretch, but because his specific strengths as a goalie are a better matchup for how the Stars attack.

We'll get into those details shortly. The exercise here is to look at how the goalies for each playoff team performed down the stretch of the regular season to gauge what type of form they're in. We'll also look at how each has performed against their playoff opponent, and how they match up stylistically.

Ottawa Senators

NHL

3:00 PM

Today

Carolina Hurricanes

35% Picked

441 votes

65% Picked

Goaltending is likely to play a disproportionate role in the fates of the 16 teams in this tournament. Several coaches face difficult decisions in the crease, while others are locked into their workhorse starter from here out. Here's how each matchup sets up in the crease.

Minnesota Wild vs Dallas Stars

Starting Wallstedt is a gutsy decision, but there's plenty of data that says it's the correct one. Gustavsson has been the 1A of the tandem all season. He's the veteran, has started the majority of the games and has playoff experience. However, Wallstedt has been much better since the Olympic break.

Since Feb. 25

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Filip Gustavsson

8-6-0

.895

-3.05

Jesper Wallstedt

4-4-2

.919

6.97

Gustavsson's -3.05 goals saved above average since the Olympics rank 55th in the NHL during that span. Meanwhile, Wallstedt has been excellent. He won four of his last five starts and had a save percentage north of .900 in his last six.

Gustavsson played all four games against Dallas this season for the Wild, going 2-2-0 with a .879 save percentage. In his career, he has won seven of 12 starts against Dallas with a .926 save percentage (his sixth-highest against any opponent). Wallstedt has played against the Stars only once, and allowed seven goals on 34 shots.

But perhaps more importantly, stylistically, Wallstedt is better equipped to combat how the Stars score most of their goals.

No team in the NHL scored more from the high-danger area (within 29 feet of the goal in the slot) than the Dallas Stars. Their roster is overflowing with the combination of size and skill it takes to get the puck into those areas and convert at an exceptional rate. The biggest challenge for Minnesota's talented but undersized blue line will be protecting that area, and it won't be easy.

That's where Wallstedt comes in. He has an .830 save percentage on high-danger shots this season, ranking just outside of the top-10 league-wide, while Gustavsson's .811 save percentage on those shots is right at the league average. Wallstedt's patience on his edges and ability to win in one-on-one situations with shooters could come up big



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against a team that is elite at generating chances from in tight.

On the other end, things are pretty simple. Jake Oettinger didn't have his strongest season for the Stars, but he should play every minute of this postseason, and he will if coach Glen Gulutzan learned anything from the end of Pete DeBoer's tenure in Dallas.

Oettinger ranked 23rd in save percentage (.899) and 22nd in GSAX (8.98) this season, but played better than those stats suggest. Specifically, Oettinger had a knack for making huge saves near the end of close games, and won the third-most games in the NHL because of it.

This season, Oettinger went 2-1-1 against the Wild with a .915 save percentage. He has enjoyed success against Minnesota over the entirety of his career, going 9-1-4 in the regular season with a .920 save percentage.

In his lone playoff series against the Wild, in 2023, Oettinger was great. He finished the six games with a .929 save percentage, including a 27-save shutout in the pivotal Game 5 that swung the series in Dallas' favor.

Vegas Golden Knights vs Utah Mammoth

Perhaps the biggest change coach John Tortorella made after taking over the Golden Knights with eight games remaining in the regular season was naming Carter Hart the starting goalie. Hart started six of the eight games under Tortorella, and won all six with a .930 save percentage and 3.75 GSAX.

It was a rocky season for Adin Hill, who missed time with a lower-body injury and ranked near the bottom of the league in nearly every metric.

Hill has the playoff experience, including backstopping Vegas to the Stanley Cup in 2023, when he finished third in voting for the Conn Smythe Trophy, but Hart is in better form at the moment. In Hill's lone start against Utah this season, he allowed goals on each of the first three shots of the game and was replaced by Akira Schmid.

Hart has never played a game against the Mammoth since their relocation, but his style could be a better fit against a Utah squad that plays fast and makes a lot of lateral passes. Hart is a good skater with the athleticism and explosion to make the types of backdoor saves often needed against Utah.

On the other end, Karel Vejmelka continues to prove himself as one of the league's true workhorses. He led the league with 63 starts and finished second behind only the Vezina Trophy favorite, Andrei Vasilevskiy, with 38 wins.

Vejmelka is a big goalie who understands angles well. He's tough to beat clean with shots from distance, but isn't the most agile on plays around the front of the net. The Golden Knights scored the third-most goals from that area this season, so perhaps they can take advantage of that.

Vejmelka was outstanding against Vegas this season, going 2-1-0 with a .947 save percentage, a 1.67 goals against average and a shutout on March 19.

Colorado Avalanche vs Los Angeles Kings

How good has Scott Wedgewood been for the Avalanche this season? He accomplished something that even Patrick Roy never did in Colorado, leading the NHL in both save percentage (.921) and goals against average (2.02).

Wedgewood's numbers have been even better since the Olympic break. Whether it's simply a new environment, playing behind the most talented team in hockey, or something clicking in his game, he's one of the NHL's best at the moment. His feet are fast, he gets to his spots early and sets his feet to make saves look easy.

Even more terrifying for the Kings: If Wedgewood does somehow falter, the Avalanche have the ultra-talented Mackenzie Blackwood waiting on the bench. He hasn't been quite as good as Wedgewood this year, but plenty of playoff teams would be happy with him as their starter. Here's how they each fared against the Kings this season:

2025-26 vs Los Angeles

Goalie Record Save % GAA

Scott Wedgewood

1-0-0

.960

1.00

Mackenzie Blackwood

2-0-0

.913

2.00

Los Angeles coach D.J. Smith has an interesting goalie decision on his hands. Does he start Darcy Kuemper against the team he won the Cup with in 2022, or does he give 33-year-old Anton Forsberg the first playoff action of his NHL career?

Kuemper is having a down year and especially struggled down the stretch. Meanwhile, Forsberg came on strong after the Olympic break, started five of the last six games for Los Angeles, and made a good argument to be their starter in the postseason.

Since Feb. 25

Goalie Record Save % GSAX

Darcy Kuemper

5-3-6

.867



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-7.52

Anton Forsberg

7-5-0

.914

2.00

Neither goalie fared well against Colorado this season. Few goalies have, but Forsberg's .850 save percentage on high-danger shots (which ranks second in the NHL behind only Ilya Sorokin) could play a factor against an offense as good as Colorado's.

Edmonton Oilers vs Anaheim Ducks

It seems the Oilers have settled on Connor Ingram as their starter, giving him the net in 13 of the last 16 games. He hasn't been great, but has certainly outperformed Tristan Jarry, who has the worst save percentage in the NHL since he was traded to Edmonton on Dec. 12. Ingram also fared much better against Anaheim this season.

Vs Anaheim

Goalie Record Save % GAA

Connor Ingram

1-1-0

.919

2.48

Tristan Jarry

1-1-0

.851

4.71

Ingram has been better on shots from the point this season, which the Ducks create a lot of. Anaheim took the third-most shots from long range this season. The Ducks also ranked third in the total number of slap shots they took, and fifth in shots by defensemen. The Ducks have four defensemen (Jacob Trouba, Jackson LaCombe, John Carlson and Olen Zellweger) with more than 100 shots on goal.

Ingram's biggest strength statistically is how he's fared on those shots. His .972 save percentage against long-range shots is well above league average, and significantly better

than Jarry's (.934). He allowed only four goals on 142 long-range shots.

On the other end, Lukáš Dostál will be facing a barrage of high-danger chances, but that's nothing new. He faced the seventh-most high-danger shots this season (452), and posted a save percentage above league average on them (.816).

Dostál is great at anticipating passes, especially in transition, and he will have to be at the top of his game to slow down Connor McDavid and Co. If the Ducks win the series, it will likely be because of their advantage in net.

Tampa Bay Lightning vs Montreal Canadiens

Similar to Dallas, the Lightning are elite at creating scoring chances in front of the net. Fortunately for the Canadiens, both of their young netminders – Jakub Dobeš and Jacob Fowler – have excelled at stopping those shots this season.

Dobeš is a big goalie who maximizes that by playing with more aggressive depth than you'd expect for someone his size. His quick feet allow him to play that style, and his long legs are great at stretching for backdoor saves – which explains his strong numbers against high-danger shots.

Dobeš also enters the playoffs in great form, leading all goalies with 13.36 goals saved above expected since March 16. That stretch included two wins over the Lightning, in which he stopped a combined 53 of 55 shots (.964 save percentage).

As good as Dobeš has been, he will need to elevate his play in his first postseason action to match the goalie on the other end of the ice, who is a heavy favorite to win his second Vezina Trophy.

Vasilevskiy led all goalies in wins, and saved 23.57 goals above expected this season. The Big Cat is looking for playoff redemption, coming off three straight postseasons with a save percentage below .900. There isn't much to say about Vasilevskiy's style. He's massive, but has the skating, athleticism and explosion of a much smaller goalie. It's tough to find a weakness in his game.

While Vasilevskiy did lose both of his matchups with Montreal this season, he has been great against the Canadiens over the course of his career, with a 16-5-2 record and a save percentage of .929.

Boston Bruins vs Buffalo Sabres

Both of these teams exceeded expectations this season, largely on the back of strong goaltending.

Jeremy Swayman saved more goals above expected (26.5) than any goalie in the playoffs. His quiet, technical style is a perfect match for the chaos that often unfolds in front of him, and with how the Sabres' offense has looked, it will be needed in this series. Swayman is great at maintaining his balance and structure, which allows him to make saves on rebounds better than just about anyone. It's why Boston allowed the third-most rebound attempts in the NHL this season, but the fourth-fewest goals on rebounds.

Swayman has also been a Sabre-killer throughout his career, going an impressive 8-1-1 against Buffalo with a .925 save percentage and 1.87 GAA. In the lone matchup this season,



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Swayman stopped 21 of 22 shots in a 3-1 win back in October.

It could be because he's exceptional at stopping mid-range shots (29 to 43 feet from the net, in the slot), which is the area Buffalo attacks most from. The Sabres took the eighth-most mid-range shots this season, and scored the third-most goals in the NHL from that area. Meanwhile, Swayman's .928 save percentage on those shots ranks second in the NHL.

On the other end, it appears Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will begin the series, with Alex Lyon just returning to the ice from a lower-body injury. The good news for Buffalo is that Luukkonen is in excellent form. His 7.88 GSx since the Olympic break rank eighth in the NHL.

Both over his career and this season, Luukkonen has been average against the Bruins. Something worth noting – especially with how hot the Bruins' power play can get at times – is that Luukkonen had the fourth-highest save percentage in the NHL this season while killing penalties.

Carolina Hurricanes vs Ottawa Senators

One of the biggest questions entering this postseason is whether or not Carolina's breakout star, Brandon Bussi, can recapture the magic that he had over the first half of the season. Just look at his number before and after the Olympic break.

	Record	Save %	GSx
Pre-Olympics	23-3-1	.906	9.66
Post-Olympics	8-3-1	.865	-6.85

If Bussi can return to form, the Hurricanes are a threat to win it all. If he doesn't, they're destined for yet another early playoff exit.

This matchup is fascinating from a stylistic point of view. Few teams generate more havoc in front of the net than the Ottawa Senators, and few goalies play as aggressively when the puck is in tight as Bussi. There won't be much space between he and the traffic, which could lead to chaos, and dare I say it ... goalie interference reviews.

On the other end, Linus Ullmark turned things around and finished the season strong after a slow start, but there are

major concerns with this specific matchup. As a big, blocking goalie who isn't the fleetest of foot, it will be interesting to see how Ullmark handles the consistent pressure Carolina brings.

No team spends more time in the offensive zone or fires more shots than the Hurricanes. They take a lot of shots from distance, and Ullmark is outstanding from that range. He allowed only three goals on 238 long-range shots this season. The biggest question will be how he handles the follow-up opportunities. Carolina thrives off rebounds and second chances, and for all of Ullmark's strengths in reading the play and eliminating shooting angles, he doesn't have the quickest recoveries. His ability to make athletic saves on off-schedule shots could be the difference in the series.

Pittsburgh Penguins vs Philadelphia Flyers

The Penguins are another team with a goalie decision to make, and head coach Dan Muse has yet to announce who will start between Stuart Skinner and Artūrs Šilovs. Skinner has improved over his time with Pittsburgh, while Šilovs cooled off over the second half of the season after a hot start. Here's how they've each fared since the Olympic break.

Since Feb. 25

Goalie Record Save % GSx

Stuart Skinner

4-5-4

.884

4.01

Arturs Silovs

8-5-0

.871

-7.35

Skinner has the edge in form and playoff experience after backstopping Edmonton to back-to-back trips to the Cup Final, and should be the starter – at least to begin the series. This is also a great matchup for Skinner, who is a big goalie who relies on positioning to take away angles, but who struggles with plays in tight because he's not the most athletic.

Philadelphia scored the second-fewest high-danger goals in the NHL this season, so the Flyers aren't built to exploit Skinner's biggest weakness. They rely much more on shots from further out, with the eighth-most goals scored from mid-range. Skinner's mid-range save percentage (.889) isn't just his strongest area this season; it's consistently been his best



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metric (in relation to the rest of the league) throughout his career.

On the other end, Dan Vladař is arguably the biggest reason the Flyers are in the playoffs. The 6-foot-5 Czech netminder saved 11.42 goals above expected this season, and was at his best when Philadelphia needed him most.

In his final two starts of the season, with the Flyers still desperate for points to clinch a playoff berth, Vladař stopped

51 of 54 shots (.944 save percentage) to lead Philadelphia to two crucial wins.

Unlike the Flyers, the Penguins do the majority of their damage offensively from close to the net. They led the NHL with 740 shots from inside 29 feet this season, and should pose a stiff test for Vladař, whose .822 high-danger save percentage was well above league average.

Shot location data via NHL Edge, Goals saved above expected data from HockeyStats.com



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Category 5: Hurricanes, Senators gear up for Game 1 | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The grind is over. It's also just beginning.

The Hurricanes and Senators meet for Game 1 of their first round playoff series Saturday at 3 p.m. at Lenovo Center, a matchup of two teams that mirror each other in many ways.

The last few days of analysis, stat-crunching and comparisons go out the window once the puck drops.

1. Every series comes down to goaltending, but this one should be particularly spicy.

Carolina has options: Frederik Andersen is the battle-tested-yet-uncrowned veteran, while Brandon Bussi's glass slipper might still have some sparkle in it. And then Pyotr Kochetkov is lurking in the background, an option the Hurricanes can go to if things get desperate.

Coach Rod Brind'Amour appears to first be going with Andersen, who was in the starter's crease the final two days of practice before Game 1. Not that he was outright saying when I asked him with the final question of Friday's press conference whether he had definitively chosen his Game 1 starter.

"Actually, this is the truth. I was just trying to get ahold of (goalie coach Paul Schonfelder) because I knew — I give you guys credit, you didn't ask that out of the gate, but I didn't get to see him because he was having lunch," the coach said to a chorus of chuckles from the media. "So you guys are going to have to sit on that."

Andersen, stoic as ever, said he's confident in how he's playing given his struggles earlier this season.

"I like where my game's at," he said after Thursday's practice. "Just try to build every day and continue to work in good habits. I know what it feels like when I'm feeling well — just continue to search for that every day."

2. It won't hurt Andersen — or any of Carolina's goalies — to have a healthy Jacob Slavin defending in front of them. Slavin played 39 games — and six in the Olympics — this season due to an undisclosed lower-body injury, and he admitted Thursday to feeling "fresh" heading into the postseason.

"I didn't play half the season, right?" he said. "And so my body feels good right now, legs — I feel fresh. I feel like I've only played half a season. ... You just don't have the wear and tear you have on your body like you do when you play 82 games in a year."

Brind'Amour would never choose to be without Slavin for half the year, but there is a benefit to his shutdown defender not having as much tread worn off his tires heading into the postseason.

"If you told me at the start of the year that we were going to miss him 40 games, that's not how you want to draw it up," Brind'Amour said.

The Hurricanes were 28-7-4 with Slavin in the lineup this season — a 126-point pace. That includes a 17-2-1 record at Lenovo Center when Brind'Amour had final change.

3. I was hoping to catch up with Warren Foegele before the series, but the Senators opted to practice in Ottawa on Friday and then fly to Raleigh. With the afternoon start, neither team will skate in the morning.

Foegele was with Carolina when the turnaround happened. T.J. Oshie, now retired and a broadcaster, still seems to hold a grudge that Foegele knocked him out of the 2019 first round series between the Hurricanes and Capitals with a questionable shove from behind in Game 4. Carolina won that series on Brock McGinn's double-overtime goal in Game 7, ending Washington's reign as champions.

That feels like forever ago. Only five players — Staal, Slavin, Jordan Martinook, Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov — remain from the team that went to the Eastern Conference final in Brind'Amour's first year as coach.

Foegele was traded to Edmonton in exchange for defenseman Ethan Bear in the summer of 2021. After three seasons with the Oilers, Foegele signed with the Kings, scoring 24 goals last season in his first year in Los Angeles. But he struggled this season and was shipped to Ottawa, where he performed well down the stretch for the Senators.

Svechnikov was pretty tight with Foegele back in the day, a friendship that has since drifted apart as time — seven years since that magical win over the Capitals — passed and players moved on.

"We talked for a few years after that but don't really talk anymore," Svechnikov said. "Last probably couple years, we don't really talk. It's fine — obviously we played together and were close together, but I just feel at this point, it doesn't matter. I don't really have friends on that team. And that's how it is. You go to the playoffs, you've only got your boys, your family, and you don't really have friends out there."

Brind'Amour echoed that.

"When guys kind of started with you, you're always rooting for him a little bit," he said. "Not going to be rooting for him this time around."



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4. The other link Svechnikov has to the Senators is Brady Tkachuk. Svechnikov was the second overall pick in the 2018 draft, and Ottawa selected Tkachuk two choices later at No. 4.

They're two of the sport's few remaining power forwards, players who can impact the game with scoring and physicality.

Their career numbers are pretty similar, with Tkachuk holding a slight edge. In 572 regular season games, the Senators captain has 213 goals, 463 points and 821 penalty minutes. Svechnikov has 182 goals, 434 points and 493 PIMs in 557 games. Svechnikov, however, has played 11 times as many playoff games (66) as Tkachuk (6).

The duo will likely always be compared, and that should ramp up with this series, but Svechnikov isn't concerned with that storyline.

"I don't really care about this stuff," Svechnikov said. "We've been in a league for eight years, and we've got our roles with the teams. I wouldn't really compare us. But obviously it's going to be a good series. They play physical. He plays physical. And we're going to bring that as well, and I'm going to bring that as well."

The biggest difference between the two in the aforementioned stats is penalty minutes, and much of that comes from fighting. Svechnikov has three major penalties in his career, while Tkachuk has 41. That's nearly a 200-PIMs swing on its own, and Tkachuk also has 18 misconducts to Svechnikov's one.

With all that swept out of the way, Tkachuk has 39 more minors (276 to 237) than Svechnikov. For as much as

Svechnikov has been criticized for his discipline, Tkachuk has had an even tougher time staying out of the box.

"It's very important," Svechnikov said of balancing physically with discipline. "It's probably the hardest thing. You play physical, you're going to get penalties at some point, but you've just got to be disciplined. It's very important, especially against those guys. They've got a good power play, and we're going to have to be disciplined."

5. That brings us to the penalty kill. Ottawa's isn't great — 29th in the league for the season — but has been more respectable down the stretch.

So has Carolina's.

The Hurricanes' PK didn't reach the depths of the Senators' unit, but it hovered near the middle of the pack when Slavin was on the shelf.

"It's rounding into form," Slavin said of a penalty kill that's been fourth best in the league since he returned to the lineup full time in mid-January. "We're going up against a good test here in Ottawa. They've got a really dynamic power play. So I think first and foremost, we've got to stay out of the penalty box."

Both teams have good power plays, so remaining disciplined, staying out of the penalty box and getting kills when you do end up down a man will be essential to winning the series.

"When we do take penalties, we've got to get the job done," Slavin said. "That's what (assistant coach Tim Gleason) talks about all the time. We've got the right personnel, the right method to do that. We've just got to go out and execute."



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Preview: Round 1, Game 1 vs. Ottawa

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes, Sens square off in the first game of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes begin their postseason journey on home ice, as they start their series against the Ottawa Senators at Lenovo Center.

When: Saturday, April 18

Puck Drop: 3:00 p.m. ET

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

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Regular-Season Record: 53-22-7 (113 Points, 1st - Metropolitan Division; 1st - Eastern Conference)

Canes Last Game: 2-1 Win over the New York Islanders on Tuesday, April 14

Senators Regular-Season Record: 44-27-11 (99 Points, 5th - Atlantic Division; WC2 - Eastern Conference)

Senators Last Game: 3-1 Win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday, April 15

Last Time Out...

Long Island native Brandon Bussi turned in a fantastic performance on Tuesday, turning away 27 out of 28 shots faced to backstop the Canes to a 2-1 win over the Islanders.

Nikolaj Ehlers, the lone member of the team to play in all 82 games, opened the scoring, and Mark Jankowski won it for the team late in the third.

The Canes had six players from the Chicago Wolves (AHL) in the lineup, including Ronan Seeley and Felix Unger Sorum making their NHL debuts.

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.

From A Marathon To A Sprint...

With 82 games in the rearview, the Canes will hit the ice for their franchise-record eighth consecutive trip to the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

In another franchise first, they'll do so as the Eastern Conference's top seed after recording 53 wins in a season for just the second time

In Net...

Rod Brind'Amour was noncommittal when asked about his Game 1 starter on Friday, but noted on Thursday that it's likely both Frederik Andersen and Brandon Bussi will see time between the pipes in Round 1.

Andersen operated in the typical starter's crease at Friday's practice, indicating a strong probability that the veteran will get the first bite of the apple in the postseason. Steadying the ship after a bumpy start to the season, the Dane went 9-4-0 on this side of the Olympic break and finished the season with wins in three of his last four starts, including a pair of gems in Chicago and Utah.

Bussi, meanwhile, also wrapped up the regular season on a heater, following up his first set of consecutive losses (0-3-0) with a 6-0-1 run and allowing two or fewer goals in four of those wins.

Pyotr Kochetkov's surprising return could add a new dimension to the Canes' crease as the playoffs roll on, but Brind'Amour indicated that, while he is healthy, the Russian backstop was not yet a viable starting option as he works his way back from lower-body surgery.

On The Other Side...

Despite their WC2 ranking, the Senators are a "tough matchup" for Rod Brind'Amour's crew, having put their potential on display in a 6-3 win over the Canes two weeks ago.

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).

One area of weakness? Ottawa's penalty kill. Surviving just 75.7% of infractions this season, the Senators finished 29th in the NHL. That's music to the ears of a Canes team that finished with the league's fourth-best power play (24.9%).



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Linus Ullmark has been Ottawa's go-to in net when available. However, his .891 save percentage this year is the lowest in his 11-year career. He played in just one of three regular-season meetings against Carolina but came out on top, picking up the aforementioned win earlier this month.

⚠️ Traffic Alert ⚠️ Delays are expected on Saturday, April 18 due to a capacity crowd for Game 1 of the First Round between the @Canes and Senators, as well as events at the NC State Fairgrounds.

🚗 Guests are encouraged to carpool if possible and arrive early! Plan accordingly... pic.twitter.com/WkGBZg2ugi

— Lenovo Center (@LenovoCenter) April 17, 2026

Injury Updates...

The Canes currently do not have any injuries to report.

What Are We Wearing?

The Canes will wear their BLACK uniforms for the contest. They will wear black for every home game in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to practice on Sunday and will return to action for Game 2 of the series on Monday.

Next Game: Monday, April 20 | Round 1, Game 2 vs. Ottawa | 7:30 p.m. | FDSN, ESPN2 | Tickets | Parking



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Wyshynski's complete 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs bracket - ESPN

By: Greg Wyshynski

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs are here. And they're weird.

The Florida Panthers, back-to-back Stanley Cup champions, aren't here. The Buffalo Sabres, who last made the playoffs when "Fast Five" was in theaters, are here.

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The Toronto Maple Leafs, who appeared in nine straight NHL postseasons, aren't here. The Utah Mammoth, who didn't exist three years ago, are here.

But that's why the Stanley Cup tournament is the greatest postseason in sports: the unpredictability. How a bad bounce or a hot goalie can turn a series around in an instant. Which, admittedly, makes the whole "predicting every series" thing a bit fraught, but hey, here we are.

Here is how the Stanley Cup playoffs will play out, from the opening round through the last game of the Stanley Cup Final. I apologize in advance for spoiling the next two months for you, as obviously all of this is going to happen exactly to script and none of these picks will be incorrect.

Let's drop the puck, shall we?

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[Lapsed fan's guide](#)

[Stanley Cup odds](#)

[Flaws for each team](#)

[Eastern Conference first round](#)

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[Sabres](#)

[vs.](#)

[WC1 Boston](#)

[Bruins](#)

If there's one true question mark looming over the first-place Sabres entering the Stanley Cup playoffs -- a sentence 14 seasons in the making! -- it's the lack of postseason experience for most of their roster. As many preparatory yams that Alex Tuch can spin about lengthy playoff runs with the Golden Knights, nothing prepares a player for how the game changes in the postseason.

I think the experience gap is less of a concern against the Bruins than some other teams in the Eastern Conference draw. Heck, Boston might ice a line of Fraser Minten, Marat

Khusnutdinov and James Hagens that have a sum total of zero playoff appearances between them. The Sabres can let that home-ice advantage and youthful exuberance continue to power their playoff wagon, because I don't think the Bruins are good enough to knock the wheels off.

Sure, squint hard enough and this is a series. Jeremy Swayman was easily one of the top-five goalies in the league this season, with 28.8 goals saved above expected. David Pastrnak (100 points) and Morgan Geekie (39 goals) continued their offensive magic, and while Buffalo has the depth advantage here, Boston did seem to find something to work with in Pavel Zacha's line with Casey Mittelstadt and Viktor Arvidsson. A veteran defense corps led by Charlie McAvoy, Hampus Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov could slow down the Sabres' attack -- although they're just as liable to hand Buffalo a power play, too.

I don't think the Bruins defend well enough to pull an upset here: They're 26th in the NHL in expected goals against per 60 minutes since the Olympic break. For the season, their expected goals percentage was 46.7%, nestled in between the San Jose Sharks and Toronto Maple Leafs, which is not the neighborhood you want to be as a playoff team.

Bruins coach Marco Sturm said this week that "we are bigger, stronger, and we are more physical." Even if that were true -- and a glance at the rosters says it isn't -- the Sabres showed in their epic regular-season battles against the Lightning that they can take a punch, wipe their mouths and score the next goal. Despite their postseason pedigree, they're ready for this.

Winner: Sabres eliminate the Bruins in five games.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

vs.

A3 Montreal

Canadiens

Montreal might have the best line in the NHL: Nick Suzuki centering Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky. The trio finished with a preposterous 69.9% goals-for percentage, thanks in part to Caufield's 51 goals and Suzuki's first 100-point campaign in his seven-year NHL career. (Slafkovský was no slouch, hitting 30 goals for the first time.) They were just as dynamic defensively, as Suzuki is poised to win the Selke Trophy for the first time in his career. (True to form for the award for best defensive forward, it'll come in his best offensive season.)



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The key to this series is whether coach Marty St. Louis uses them, how he uses them and what the rest of the lineup does when they're not on the ice.

Will the Habs run Suzuki against the Lightning's top line with Nikita Kucherov, the NHL's leader in points per game (1.71) this season? One of the reasons why the Florida Panthers ran through the Lightning in consecutive postseasons was keeping Kucherov in check at 5-on-5, as he generated just seven assists at even strength in 10 total games. Can Suzuki's line limit him in the same way, or will Kucherov pop off without having Aleksander Barkov or Sam Bennett on the other side of the playoff ice for once?

Beyond the top line, the Lightning have depth at forward and the Canadiens, until proven otherwise, do not. Sure, one can expect Ivan Demidov -- the second-best rookie in the league this season -- to do more than he did last season, which was nothing. But the bottom six for Montreal don't match the quality of Tampa Bay's, and not just because they don't have playoff X factor Corey Perry.

Speaking of Perry: It would be shocking if coach Jon Cooper's game plan wasn't to physically maul players like Caufield and star defenseman Lane Hutson at every opportunity. The Lightning can be guilty of running around a little too much, sacrificing some of their identity as an offensive juggernaut (3.49 goals per game), but that's exactly what's necessary against the Habs.

The status of defenseman Victor Hedman, who took leave from the team for personal reasons last month, and the overall health of the Lightning lineup is a concern -- although Montreal has its own injury concerns with defenseman Noah Dobson. But for the reasons stated above, and their advantage in goal with Andrei Vasilevskiy, the Lightning power through a Canadiens team that's probably one year and a couple of players away from real Cup contention.

Winner: Lightning eliminate the Canadiens in six games.

M1 Carolina

Hurricanes

vs.

WC2 Ottawa

Senators

Sometimes you hear things during a season that stick with you. Like when one NHL team executive told me the team they wanted to avoid in the playoffs would be the Senators, whose underlying numbers reveal an extremely difficult team to play against if their play was supported by quality goaltending.

They got enough of it to make the playoff cut, as Linus Ullmark went 12-4-3 with a .902 save percentage since the Olympic break. But the issue I had with Ottawa casting its lot with Ullmark as a franchise goalie was his postseason numbers, which are a horror show: .885 save percentage and a 3.28 goals-against average in 16 games. Last season, in six games for Ottawa, he had a .880 save percentage.

Look, goalies with bad playoff numbers can finally find their games and great success -- looking at you, Marc-Andre Fleury. But I can't trust it enough with Ullmark to put Ottawa over Carolina, although more than a few people do.

These teams play a similar style and are fairly well matched. They both have a balanced scoring attack. They both have outstanding defensive forwards, with Shane Pinto and Michael Amadio vs. the likes of Jordan Staal. Both teams have some offensive pop from the blue line, although I'm a little concerned about the health status of Jake Sanderson and Thomas Chabot for Ottawa. And they both have their questions in goal: For Carolina, it's "who's starting Game 1?" between single-season sensation Brandon Bussi and playoff veteran Frederik Andersen.

You know what coach Rod Brind'Amour does best, besides embarrassing his players in the weight room? Winning in the opening round of the playoffs. His teams have never lost an opening-round series, counting their qualifying round win against the Rangers in the 2020 COVID postseason. That streak won't stop here, despite the Senators' best efforts.

Winner: Hurricanes eliminate the Senators in seven games.

M2 Pittsburgh

Penguins

vs.

M3 Philadelphia

Flyers

This rivalry series is a study in contrasts, and not just "Sheetz vs. Wawa."

The Penguins are one of the NHL's top offensive powers this season under first-year coach Dan Muse, finishing third in the NHL in goals per game (3.54). They like to pass the puck. The Flyers are one of the NHL's stingiest defensive teams, with especially impressive underlying numbers under first-year coach Rick Tocchet. They like to prevent you from passing the puck.

The Penguins are third in the NHL at inner slot shots at 5-on-5 (11.6 per 60 minutes). The Flyers are third best at preventing them (8.5 per 60). The Penguins are fourth in expected goals (2.9 per 60). The Flyers are third in expected goals against (2.4). To use the old wrestling cliché, it's the irresistible force vs. the immovable object.

Look, getting Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin back into the playoffs is a delight. We've missed you. You make things much more interesting. And so one becomes compelled to rubber-stamp a series win against the Flyers, who seem like the inferior team on paper. But I'm swerving here. I like the Flyers.

Defense wins championships, and Philadelphia is easily the superior defensive team in this series. That includes goaltending, where Dan Vladar (13.8 goals saved above expected) ended up on my Hart Trophy ballot for fixing the most glaring weakness on this roster. Meanwhile, the Penguins have Stuart Skinner and Arturs Silovs in goal, whose postseason experiences could put most roller coasters to shame.

My lack of faith in the Penguins' goaltending leaves open the possibility that the Flyers can score enough here to get by Pittsburgh. I think they have enough elite offensive talent -- the resurgent Trevor Zegras, the defiant Matvei Michkov and Porter Martone, the NCAA import with 10 points in his first nine NHL games -- to prey on Penguin mistakes for transition



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goals. They also have a healthy Tyson Foerster, their glue guy, as Philly has gone 18-9-2 with him in the lineup.

But they don't have Sidney Crosby, which is the reason I'm not exactly oozing with confidence making this pick. But nonetheless, the pick is made.

Winner: Flyers eliminate the Penguins in six games.

play

2:19

Sidney Crosby explains why Penguins' rivalry with the Flyers is so special

Sidney Crosby joins "The Pat McAfee Show" to preview the Penguins' playoff matchup against the Flyers.

Eastern Conference second round

A1 Buffalo

Sabres

vs.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

On March 8, these two teams met in Buffalo and produced an instant classic with 15 goals and 102 penalty minutes. But more importantly, it was a proof-of-concept game for the Sabres. The Lightning wanted to come in and brutalize their divisional opponent. Buffalo took the punishment, dished out some of its own and grew from the experience.

Buffalo went 3-0-1 against the Lightning in the regular season. Now, we all know the past isn't prologue in the Stanley Cup playoffs, but that's important to note when one of the keys to the series is intimidation, either through depth of talent or superstar players or championship pedigree. The Sabres will have banked a playoff series win and hung with the Lightning -- albeit a team that had its share of significant lineup absences -- this season.

So this is going to be a long series. If Buffalo is, in fact, the next version of the 2019 St. Louis Blues -- a team that finds itself within the regular season, transforms into a wagon and can't be stopped -- it has the talent and the mindset to advance past the Lightning.

But ultimately, I lean Tampa Bay here. Its collection of two-way players, lineup depth and elite scoring talent gives it an advantage, as does Andrei Vasilevskiy. I'll take Jon Cooper and his staff figuring out how to grind down the Sabres' "pond hockey" offense. Bonus points if Cooper wears his Stadium Series outfit.

Winner: Lightning eliminate the Sabres in seven games.

M1 Carolina

Hurricanes

vs.

M3 Philadelphia

Flyers

Just an absolute grind of a series. Watching a Rick Tocchet team against a Rod Brind'Amour team is like watching someone try to saw an oak tree with a nail file.

To paraphrase Batman villain Bane: "I was born flooding the defensive zone with bodies and then counterpunching offensively to win one-goal games ... you merely adopted it."

The Flyers are built to beat a team like the Penguins. I don't think they have the maturation as a contender -- or the scoring depth -- to take out this Hurricanes team.

Winner: Hurricanes eliminate the Flyers in five games.

Eastern Conference finals

M1 Carolina

Hurricanes

vs.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

The Hurricanes finally avoid having to play the Panthers and run smack-dab into Florida's other powerhouse.

I picked Carolina to win the East before the season, and I'm sticking with that. What has held the Hurricanes back in previous seasons was their inability to score a key goal at a key juncture of a series. So they went big-name hunting for players like Jake Guentzel (at the 2024 trade deadline) and Mikko Rantanen, who obviously didn't stick around. Though they don't have that kind of star on this roster, they might have the most offensive depth of any Rod Brind'Amour-coached team.

Taylor Hall and Logan Stankoven were both involved in Rantanen-related trades. Nikolaj Ehlers was a tremendous offseason signing, and best of all played 82 games. Jackson Blake took a leap forward this season with an increased role. Players like K'Andre Miller and Alexander Nikishin are delivering offense from the back end.

Assuming the goaltending doesn't cost them against the Lightning, I like Carolina to finally break through the Eastern Conference ceiling. Those fans deserve a banner.

Winner: Hurricanes eliminate the Lightning in six games.

Western Conference first round

C1 Colorado

Avalanche

vs.

WC2 Los Angeles

Kings

Congratulations to the Kings for avoiding a fifth straight elimination at the hands of the Oilers. Condolences to the Kings for having to play the Presidents' Trophy-winning Avalanche instead.

Look, the Kings aren't terrible. They had the 12th best goals-for percentage and 10th best expected goals percentage since the Olympic break. They have impactful offensive stars like Adrian Kempe (36 goals), Quinton Byfield (24 goals) and Artemi Panarin, who has 27 points in 26 games with his new



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team. If they can get Kevin Fiala back from his horrific injury at the Olympics, even better. Interim coach D.J. Smith has presided over a pretty good defensive team since the Olympic break. They're not a bad hockey team. They're just not the Avalanche.

The Kings have one real advantage in this series and it's supernatural. Since 1985-86, there have been 39 teams to finish with the NHL's best record and win the Presidents' Trophy. Only eight of them went on to win the Stanley Cup -- and an equal number of them lost in the opening round of the playoffs.

In any event: Fare thee well in retirement, Anze Kopitar.

Winner: Avalanche eliminate the Kings in five games.

C2 Dallas

Stars

vs.

C3 Minnesota

Wild

I know we're all tired of this lament, but once more with feeling: After 82 games, the No. 3 team in the NHL has to face the No. 7 team in the NHL, playing for the right to face the No. 1 team in the second round.

What are we even doing here?

That established: What an absolutely awesome series this could end up becoming.

The Stars have made the Western Conference finals for three straight seasons. Their inability to break through led Dallas to part ways with coach Peter DeBoer -- well, that and some goalie controversy -- and hire Glen Gulutzan for his second tour of duty with the franchise.

The Stars weren't a team that blew the doors off you analytically in the regular season, ranking 12th in expected goals percentage at 5-on-5 (50.9%). Their quality over quantity approach to offense actually left them 27th in shot attempt percentage (47.5%), just ahead of the San Jose Sharks. But you can afford to be picky at 5-on-5 when you're shooting 10.8% as Dallas did. Combine that with a blistering power play (28.6%), and the Stars boasted some grandiose offensive numbers from players like Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston (45 goals apiece) and Mikko Rantanen (77 points in 64 games).

The Wild's season can be marked by what happened on Dec. 12, when they swung that blockbuster for defenseman Quinn Hughes from the Canucks. Pre-Hughes, the Wild averaged 2.81 goals per game and had a .629 points percentage in the standings; with Hughes, they averaged 3.55 goals per game with a .637 points percentage.

Like the Stars, they had a ripping good power play (25.2%) and a few elite players carrying the goal-scoring load in Kirill Kaprizov (45 goals) and Matt Boldy (42 goals).

I lean Dallas here, with one significant caveat: the health of defenseman Miro Heiskanen and forward Roope Hintz. It sounds like Heiskanen will answer the bell for this series. Hintz is going to miss at least the first two games. (Forward Tyler Seguin is done for the season.) Both of those players

are vital to the Stars' success. Even if they come back, how effective will they be?

But ultimately, it's the difference-makers with the postseason bona fides that have me seeing Stars. Mikko Rantanen has shown he can win a series on his own. Wyatt Johnston has something to prove after last season's playoff stats regression. Jake Oettinger's ability to steal a series has been overstated for years, but he can still be the difference in a tight game.

Winner: Stars eliminate the Wild in seven games.

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

vs.

WC1 Utah

Mammoth

One of the classic Stanley Cup tropes is seeing a young, high-flying, offensively talented team get a harsh education in its first postseason sojourn when it realizes how hockey is a completely different sport in the playoffs. This usually coincides with meeting a stout defensive team.

Which brings us to the Mammoth vs. the Golden Knights. Utah was tied for 10th in the NHL offensively, with young stars like Dylan Guenther (40 goals), JJ Peterka (25 goals) and Logan Cooley (43 points in 54 games) as well as veterans Clayton Keller (1.07 points per game) and Nick Schmaltz (33 goals) powering the Mammoth.

Vegas knew what was headed its way in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Whether it was Utah or Edmonton or Anaheim, the Golden Knights needed to get their act together defensively after having averaged 3.18 goals against per game from the Olympic break to March 29. So they fired Bruce Cassidy and hired John Tortorella with eight games remaining in the season in an attempt to give their players a swift kick to the backside and realign the team's defense.

It worked. The Knights averaged 1.71 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 in those games, going 6-0-1 in the process to win the Pacific.

Getting to the playoffs in Year 2 and having fans in Salt Lake City experience postseason home games is a great accomplishment -- and it may even result in a win or two against Vegas in this series. But most of all, this is going to be a harsh but necessary education about what works and what doesn't against a team of cagey defensive pros in the postseason. And Utah will be better for it.

Winner: Golden Knights eliminate Mammoth in six games.

P2 Edmonton

Oilers

vs.

P3 Anaheim

Ducks

The only way the Ducks were going to be serious playoff contenders this season was if the young team's defensive



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metrics improved steadily as the season went on. That didn't happen: From the Olympic break to the end of the season, Anaheim was 29th in expected goals against (3.2 per 60 minutes). In the previous 56 games, they had an xGA of 2.8. So things actually got worse defensively.

Being a defensive sieve and praying that Lukas Dostal can steal a series is not exactly a recipe for success against Connor McDavid. That's especially true when Dostal, who had been a safety net for coach Joel Quenneville's team during much of the season, had a .868 save percentage and a 3.46 goals-against average in 18 games after the Olympic break.

Is it possible the Kings would have given Edmonton a tougher challenge in the fifth straight edition of their playoff series? We'll never know.

Winner: Oilers eliminate the Ducks in four games.

Western Conference second round

C1 Colorado

Avalanche

vs.

C2 Dallas

Stars

This is what it looks like when the Western Conference finals is a second-round series. Of course, these two teams famously met in the first round last season, as Mikko Rantanen faced his old mates and torched them for 12 points in seven games.

What's different this time could be the Avalanche goaltending. Mackenzie Blackwood started all seven games against Dallas last postseason, sporting a .892 save percentage. The primary starter for the Avalanche this season, and one of the key factors behind them finishing first overall, was Scott Wedgewood. The former Stars goalie had a career year, with 22.1 goals saved above expected.

Also different: the incredible center depth the Avalanche now have with Nazem Kadri and Nicolas Roy joining Nathan MacKinnon, Brock Nelson and Jack Drury up the gut. Florida might be the only team that boasted that kind of quality in the middle in recent years. And we know where that got them.

Winner: Avalanche eliminate the Stars in seven games.

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

vs.

P2 Edmonton

Oilers

Back when the NHL expanded in the 1967-68 season, it put all the new teams in one division and had the Original Six in their own division. Which is why the St. Louis Blues played for the Stanley Cup in three straight seasons and got swept three straight times: Someone had to emerge from the inferior division to face the powerhouses for the championship.

I've jokingly referred to the Pacific Division as the "67 Blues Division" this season, because someone had to emerge from that ooze to face a Central Division titan in the conference finals. That's obviously disparaging to the Golden Knights and Oilers, two good hockey teams that nonetheless finished behind the Washington Capitals in points percentage, a team that didn't make the playoffs in the Eastern Conference.

The Oilers have made some lineup tweaks since last playoff run. Some of them worked, like adding Matt Savoie to Connor McDavid's wing and acquiring Connor Murphy for their second defense pairing. Some of them are less than effective. GM Stan Bowman addressed his goaltending with the disastrous swap of Stuart Skinner for Tristan Jarry, and by acquiring the much better Connor Ingram from Utah.

Besides John Tortorella, the Golden Knights made their biggest swing last summer when they acquired Mitch Marner on a long-term deal. He had a Marner-esque season, with 80 points in 81 games and dynamic defense. The big question: What does his playoff output look like away from the searing Toronto spotlight and having taken away lessons from those painful disappointments?

Speaking of painful disappointments: McDavid sees his season end well short of a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final.

Winner: Golden Knights eliminate the Oilers in seven games.

Western Conference finals

C1 Colorado

Avalanche

vs.

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

The two division champs meet for the chance to play for the Stanley Cup.

This is where the Avalanche really flex their depth. If players like Mitch Marner, Jack Eichel and Mark Stone manage to keep Nathan MacKinnon and Martin Necas in check, it falls to players like Valeri Nichushkin (49 points) or Parker Kelly (21 goals) or Ross Colton or Nazem Kadri to play the hero.

In the end, Colorado has just too many of them for John Tortorella and his players to contain.

Winner: Avalanche eliminate the Golden Knights in six games.

Stanley Cup Final

C1 Colorado

Avalanche

vs.

M1 Carolina

Hurricanes

I didn't get a lot correct in my preseason standings predictions. (He says, wincing at the Leafs, Panthers, Devils, Rangers and Canucks all making the playoff cut!)



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But my Stanley Cup Final back in September was the Avalanche vs. the Hurricanes, and by golly I'm sticking to that.

Which means I'm also sticking with my 2025-26 Stanley Cup champions: The Colorado Avalanche in five games.

Provided they don't blow it in the first round. Presidents' Trophy curse and all ...



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Hurricanes vs Senators - Some Comparisons

By: Bob Wage

The Carolina Hurricanes and the Ottawa Senators face each other in an interesting matchup for round one of the playoffs.

While the Canes have earned the highest number of points in the East, (113 to 99), both teams have been among the league's hottest since the Olympic break.

The clubs have been compared as being similar and they both play a similar game. Both are puck possessive and put a lot of pressure on the puck.

I would like to compare each line and the defensive pairings, player by player.

Goals Points

Svechnikov 31 70

Aho 27 80

Jarvis 32 66

Goals Points

Batherson 33 71

Stutzle 34 83

Giroux 14 49

These first lines seem pretty even point-wise. The Canes might have a slight advantage because of Jarvis, but Giroux has the advantage in experience. Push

Hall 18 48

Stankoven 21 44

Blake 22 53

Tkachuk 22 59

Cozens 28 59

Greig 13 35

Here is where the Sens have the advantage, but the Canes will do their best to match up the Staal line here. Advantage Senators

Martinook 12 17

Staal 20 36

Ehlers 26 71

Cousins 9 23

Pinto 23 46

Amadio 15 35

Hurricanes have the advantage here because of Ehlers, although as mentioned earlier the Staal line will probably be matched up against Ottawa's second line. Still, Carolina's second line should hold up well here.

Robinson 12 18

Jankowski 11 21

Carrier 7 18

Foegele 13 17

Eller 5 15

Zetterlund 17 33

Again, looks like another push.

Chatfield 2 17



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Slavin 1 8

Sanderson 14 54

Zub 5 30

Slavin is the best defenseman of the bunch but Chatfield is over-slotted here, (in my opinion). I give the Sens the nod here.

Miller 8 37

Walker 9 31

Chabot 7 31

Spence 7 31

I give Carolina the edge here.

Gostisbehere 13 50

Nikishin 11 33

Matinpalo 0 5

Thomson 0 3

Huge advantage to Carolina here.

GAA SV%

Andersen 3.05 0.874

Bussi 2.47 0.895

GAA SV%

Ullmark 2.73 0.891

Reimer 2.42 0.886

Andersen has the worst numbers of the bunch but has played better since the Olympic break. Bussi was named as Carolina's most valuable player this season as he basically saved the season when Andersen had big time issues and Kochetkov went down to injury. After some struggling after the break, he has come on strong in recent games.

Brind'Amour is playing coy naming a starter but my guess would be Andersen because of his playoff experience.

Linus Ullmark also had a slow start and took a leave of absence for personal reasons in December. He has played very well since his return posting a 14-3-4 record in his last 21 games with a GAA of 2.54 and save percentage of .900.

We all know that goaltending is voodoo so it is hard to pick a favorite of this bunch. But Ullmark has a lofty \$8.25 million annual salary to live up to, perhaps the pressure is on him.

Will the Sens prevail because they chose to spend money on goaltending, or will the Canes philosophy of going cheap in goal pay off?

Overall, the Hurricanes have scored 296 goals, good for first in the East and second in the league, (behind only Colorado). They have allowed 240 for a differential of 56, among the tops in the league.

Ottawa has scored 278 and allowed 246 for a difference of 32.

We could compare various stats all day long but bottom line, it will depend upon who is hot and who is not. Who wins the most individual battles, who performs in the clutch, and who wants it, just a bit more than the next guy.

It should be a great series. Buckle up Caniacs!



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The Hockey News

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Ottawa Senators Game 1: Lineups, Game Preview and How to Watch

By: Ryan Henkel

Top-seeded Hurricanes face a surging Senators squad. Get projected lineups, key matchups, and how to catch all the playoff action.

What - Round 1, Game 1

When - 3 p.m., Saturday, April 18

Where - Lenovo Center; Raleigh, NC

How to Watch - FanDuel Sports Network South, ESPN, Sportsnet, TVAS

The Carolina Hurricanes will kick off the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs this afternoon as they host the Ottawa Senators for their first round matchup.

The Eastern Conference's top team heads into their eighth straight postseason appearance after finished the year with a 53-22-7 record, good for second best in the league and also the second best in franchise history.

Carolina got to this point thanks to a wealth of scoring depth (they led the league with seven 20+ goal scorers and had the best power play in the league since the start of the new year) and a talented blueline featuring several proven veterans.

They've adapted their game to feature more rush-based offense, but they're still able to grind away teams and play that gritty, playoff style.

It's this adaptability that they hope will give them an extra edge this year.

However, Ottawa is not your typical WC2 team, as they've been one of the NHL's best since the back of the year.

The Senators are amongst the best 5v5 teams in the league, good at both scoring and suppressing chances, and their power play has been red hot to boot.

They're a big, physical team and so even though they might be inexperienced, they're going to be a tough out for Carolina, especially if goaltender Linus Ullmark plays well.

It should be a fun series between two teams who look and play a very similar brand of hockey.

Streaks

Logan Stankoven (7g, 4a) has points in eight straight games.

Andrei Svechnikov (6g, 2a) has points in seven straight games.

Sean Walker (2g, 5a) has points in six straight games.

Nikolaj Ehlers (2g, 4a) has points in four straight games.

Sebastian Aho (1g, 1a) has points in back-to-back games.

Milestone Watch

K'Andre Miller, Nikolaj Ehlers, Nicolas Deslauriers, Mike Reilly and Brandon Bussi could all make their Carolina Hurricanes playoff debuts today.

Game Notes

This is the first time the Canes and Senators have faced off in the playoffs.

This year, Carolina went 2-1-0 against Ottawa in the regular season, outscoring them 11-10.

For their careers, Sebastian Aho (9g, 26pts in 25gp) and Nikolaj Ehlers (12g, 30pts in 26gp) are point-per-game players against the Senators.

Ottawa holds a few connections to the Hurricanes franchise as Ridly Greig's father, Mark, played for the Hartford Whalers from 1990-94; Jake Sanderson's father, Geoff, played for the Whalers and Hurricanes from 1991-97; James Reimer played for Carolina from 2019-21; and goaltending coach Justin Peters played for Carolina from 2010-14.

Hurricanes assistant coach Tim Gleason was drafted by the Senators in the first round of the 2001 draft.

Key Matchups

Projected Starting Goalies

Frederik Andersen This Season: 16-14-5; 0.874 Sv%; 3.05 GAACareer Playoffs: 46-35; 0.914 Sv%; 2.40 GAA

Linus Ullmark This Season: 28-12-8; 0.891 Sv%; 2.73 GAACareer Playoffs: 5-10; 0.885; 3.28 GAA

Leading Scorers

Goals - Seth Jarvis (32) / Tim Stutzle (34)

Points - Sebastian Aho (80) / Tim Stutzle (83)

Power Play

Carolina - 24.9% (4th)

Ottawa - 24% (8th)

Penalty Kill

Carolina - 80.5% (11th)

Ottawa - 75.7% (29th)

Hurricanes Projected Lineup

Andrei Svechnikov - Sebastian Aho - Seth Jarvis

Taylor Hall - Logan Stankoven - Jackson Blake



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Nikolaj Ehlers - Jordan Staal - Jordan Martinook

William Carrier - Mark Jankowski - Eric Robinson

Jacob Slavin - Jalen Chatfield

K'Andre Miller - Sean Walker

Shayne Gostisbehere - Alexander Nikishin

Frederik Andersen

Brandon Bussi

Injuries and Scratches: Mike Reilly, Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Pyotr Kochetkov (hip)

Senators Projected Lineup

Drake Batherson - Tim Stutzle - Claude Giroux

Brady Tkachuk - Dylan Cozens - Ridly Greig

Nick Cousins - Shane Pinto - Michael Amadio

Warren Foegele - Lars Eller - Fabian Zetterlund

Jake Sanderson - Artem Zub

Thomas Chabot - Jordan Spence

Dennis Gilbert - Nikolas Matinpalo

Linus Ullmark

James Reimer

Injuries and Scratches: Cameron Crotty, Stephen Halliday, Hayden Hodgson, Kurtis MacDermid, Lassi Thomson, Leevi Merilainen, Nick Jensen (LBI), Tyler Kleven (UBI)

LINKS

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7206622/2026/04/18/2026-nhl-playoffs-goalies/>

<https://nsjonline.com/article/2026/04/category-5-hurricanes-senators-gear-up-for-game-1/>

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SportScan

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

1387675 Carolina Hurricanes

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

Chip Alexander

8-9 minutes 17/04/2026

Morrisville

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



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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.”

News Observer LOADED: 04.18.2026

1387821 Websites

The Athletic / NHL playoff matchups and schedules are set. Here’s your cheat sheet

By James Mirtle

April 17, 2026 Updated 12:08 pm EDT

Good morning, hockey folks. The regular season is in the bag, the playoffs start in, oh, about 28ish hours, and The Athletic will be at every single game. Right off the bat, here’s the schedule. Now, let’s set it all up for you.

Matchups

Quick takes on every series

It came right down to the wire, with three late-night games last night deciding the final two matchups. Here’s how those played out:

1. With the Oilers beating the last-place Canucks 6-1, they secured second in the Pacific Division and home-ice advantage in Round 1 with a measly 93 points.

2. With the Ducks rallying to take out the eliminated Predators 5-4, they secured third in the division with a measlier 92 points — and a date with the Oilers.

3. The Kings, meanwhile, ultimately had nothing to play for by the time they lost 3-1 to the Flames, as their point total didn’t matter given Anaheim had the tiebreak (regulation wins). As a result, L.A. draws the short straw and will play the powerhouse Avalanche in Round 1. (At least the Kings won’t lose to the Oilers again?)

That leaves us with a ton of great matchups — with the full playoff schedule here. Don’t have a horse in the race? Check out our bandwagoner’s guide to the playoffs.

Now for two quick thoughts about each series, with league ranking in parentheses:

Eastern Conference

Buffalo (4) vs. Boston (8)

Playoff hockey is back in Buffalo, finally, where it belongs — and against a rival, to boot. The Sabres are the NHL’s top team since Jan. 1, but the Bruins were third; this one could very well go seven games. » Can the Sabres go the distance?

Tampa Bay (5) vs. Montreal (6)

Since going to the final three years in a row, the Lightning have now lost in the first round three consecutive seasons, so they have some pride on the line. But the Habs are going to be a tough out if their young goalies hold up. » Who will win this matchup between past and future?

Carolina (2) vs. Ottawa (9)

What a tough matchup for the Canes after a massive, 113-point season. To me, this one comes down to goaltending, as all four netminders come with question marks — and could play in the series. » Maybe a new rivalry will form in this first-time playoff matchup.

Pittsburgh (10) vs. Philadelphia (11)

The Penguins have received a lot of love for their underdog story, but new Flyers coach Rick Tocchet has been excellent, and they deserve similar kudos. We’ll see if Philly’s low-scoring, defense-first ways (and goaltender Dan Vladar) can hold up in what should be another entertaining battle between these intrastate rivals. » This unexpected series could produce fireworks.

Western Conference

Colorado (1) vs. Los Angeles (20)

The Avalanche finished the campaign as the NHL’s highest-scoring and best defensive team, so they’ll be a handful for anyone. This has the makings of a short series, barring something wacky. » Still, it’s amazing the Kings are here at all.

Dallas (3) vs. Minnesota (7)

Two of the NHL’s best teams facing off in Round 1 doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but it’ll be appointment viewing for sure. Can Quinn Hughes be the difference for the Wild, who haven’t advanced past Round 1 since 2015? » Who will be bounced early? The odds are 50-50.

Vegas (13) vs. Utah (15)



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The Golden Knights, the NHL's oldest team, go up against the plucky Mammoth, who have several young players appearing in some of their first meaningful games. Utah was one of the league's best teams in the second half, so I like the Mammoth to make this one close. » This series could be special.

Edmonton (14) vs. Anaheim (18)

I'm seeing a lot of buzz for the Oilers of late, even though they lost a bunch of games to playoff teams down the stretch. But their goaltending situation makes me nervous, especially against Anaheim's firepower. » The Oilers have some important lineup decisions to make.

🤖 Are you ready? Great, now you can enter Sean McIndoe's "easy" playoff prediction contest, if you dare.

😊 MirTrivia Question

A simple question for you, but a toughie ...

Over the past 10 postseasons, only 10 players have more than 85 points. That includes two Oilers (Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl), three Lightning (Nikita Kucherov, Victor Hedman and Brayden Point), plus three other stars also headed back to the playoffs this year (Mikko Rantanen, Nathan MacKinnon and David Pastrňák).

But who are the two unnamed players in that top 10 who won't be in the playoffs this year? (Hint: They're the oldest players on this list — and one retired in 2024.)

Answers at the bottom.

Pick 'ems

Dark horses, champs, chumps

A casualty of the NHL having only one dark day between the regular season and playoffs? Our ace preview writers, Shayna Goldman, Dom Luszczyzyn and Sean Gentile, are working overtime to crank out great analysis ahead of tomorrow's games.

Thankfully, Dom and Shayna took some time to answer my four burning 🔥 questions, including the top series to watch, which teams could surprise and the favorites to win it all. (Sean is preparing to cover Oilers-Ducks, so he gets an excused absence.)

What will be the closest series?

🗨️ Dom: "Stars and Wild, without question. Two of the league's best teams, right there in the contender tier, with the better team potentially missing one of its top centers for a few games. That Roope Hintz absence for the Stars pushes the series into the thick of 50-50 territory."

What will be the most lopsided series? (Non-Avs division!)

🗨️ Shayna: "Going purely based on vibes, let's go with Oilers-Ducks. Anaheim's return to the playoffs is a fun story this year, but its defense has been a wreck in the second half of the season. As much as the Ducks have the firepower to outscore their problems, plus a great goaltender, the Oilers know that game even better. Edmonton's returning forwards, improved defense and overall experience of amping it up when the playoffs roll around could crush the young Ducks."

Who is the biggest dark horse team that could go far?

🗨️ Dom: "Is it still a dark horse team if everyone recognizes them as such? Ottawa has been red-hot down the stretch thanks to the team's stingy defensive structure, which is finally excelling with Linus Ullmark looking closer to his usual self. Carolina has goaltending vulnerabilities of its own, and if the Senators can get past the Hurricanes, the next series against the Penguins or Flyers shouldn't be too much of a test for them. They're a top-half playoff team."

🗨️ Shayna: "To be different, the Penguins are my pick. They may be the favorite in Round 1, but this team has only a 7 percent chance of going the distance and reaching the Cup Final. It's giving Last Dance vibes for the Penguins' Big Three of Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang, and the first two of those three are still absolutely cooking. As are Erik Karlsson and a bunch of reclamation projects added over the last year."

Who is your Stanley Cup favorite?

🗨️ Dom: "Personally, I think it's Colorado's to lose, but the path in the West looks more daunting with more legitimate threats along the way. The East is more open with more flawed teams, which is one key reason the Lightning have been the favourite for much of the year. Call that a heart and a robot pick ... and also a cop out to pick the two best teams."

🗨️ Shayna: "It's hard to go against the Avs — especially if this pick means Colorado will face a Round 2 exit — but I have to go with Dallas. If Hintz can return during Round 1 and Miro Heiskanen is good to go early, this is one of the deepest teams in the league. If coach Glen Gulutzan can be a bit more adaptable and keep the Stars offense rolling in later rounds, this is the team to beat."

Coast to Coast

🏆 Playoff hockey's return to Buffalo means business is booming in the city, and Matt Fairburn captures the euphoria and the opportunity.

📅 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. Our staff assigned a grade to every team's entire 2025-26 regular season with expectations in mind. Avert your eyes, Canucks fans.

📰 Speaking of the Canucks, they fired GM Patrik Allvin this morning, so they'll lean on a new perspective as they attempt to turn things around.

📺 Our deep dive into the stunning fall of the Maple Leafs involves chaos, dysfunction and even AI. The entire mess has left star center Auston Matthews still believing in his teammates but noncommittal about whether he'll stick around: "I can't predict the future," Matthews said yesterday.

🌟 And in fresh Leafs news this morning, Toronto will interview Mats Sundin, its all-time leading scorer, about a potential, yet-to-be-defined front-office role. PLUS: What does Mike Gillis' legacy in Vancouver tell us about whether he's a good candidate to run the Leafs? We know they won't be hiring 48-year-old Sunny Mehta, who was a top GM candidate for Toronto until he landed the Devils job yesterday.

👤 The venerable Aaron Portzline weighs in on Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness' rant heard 'round the hockey world.

📍 Where on earth do the Red Wings go from here after another awful finish to their season?

📍 I spent some time in Seattle earlier this season with owner Samantha Holloway to get a handle on the struggling Kraken at the five-year mark.

👤 Is Connor Bedard ready to step into the captain's role for the Blackhawks next season? "It'd be extremely special," he said yesterday.

📺 On the latest "The Athletic Hockey Show," we have previews of all of the playoff series by conference, with the East yesterday and a live breakdown of the West scheduled for 11:30 a.m. ET today. Watch or listen to both here.

MirTrivia Answer

Which mystery players from the top 10 in scoring the last 10 playoffs won't be there this year?



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The first is Brad Marchand, whose Panthers missed the postseason after winning the Stanley Cup last year — thanks in part to picking up the former Bruins captain at the trade deadline.

The second is Joe Pavelski, who was a big-time producer when it counted with the Sharks and Stars and retired at age 40 after the 2023-24 season.

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1387822 Websites

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

By The Athletic NHL Staff

April 17, 2026 6:00 am EDT

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 Jaccob 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 Lavallete

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

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



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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

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

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Sharks fade in NHL playoff race, but bright future ahead for Celebrini and company

The Sharks will likely fall short of the postseason in 2025-26. But they went further than almost anyone could have expected.

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



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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 Raddysch 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

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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ESPN / 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs: Lapsed fan's guide to NHL postseason - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

As a service to fans who have a general interest in the National Hockey League but have no idea what has happened since the Florida Panthers raised the Stanley Cup by defeating the Edmonton Oilers in June 2025, we're happy to provide this FAQ as a guide to the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs.

And for you die-hard puckheads: Here is your official refresher before the games begin with a tripleheader on Saturday. Enjoy!

Player, coach, GM predictions

Wait, where are the Florida Panthers?

It's still kind of amazing that a franchise that went 25 years between playoff series wins is now not only assumed to be in the postseason -- but playing for the Stanley Cup.

The Panthers were seeking their third straight championship -- winning back-to-back Cups against the Oilers in 2024 and 2025 -- but finished 15 points out of a playoff spot this season.

Florida entered the season as a Stanley Cup favorite again, having resigned three key players before free agency in forwards Brad Marchand and Sam Bennett as well as defenseman Aaron Ekblad. But the threepeat campaign was short-circuited by two significant injuries. Star captain Aleksander Barkov tore the ACL and MCL in his right knee in the preseason, and missed all 82 games. Star winger Matthew Tkachuk had offseason surgery to fix a torn adductor muscle and sports hernia. By the time he returned to the Panthers on Jan. 19, they were outside of a playoff seed.

But mostly, these Panthers had just played a lot of hockey over the past three seasons -- please recall they lost in the Stanley Cup Final to Vegas in 2023 before their consecutive championship runs. There will still be raucous parties at the Elbo Room in Fort Lauderdale this June. They'll just have significant less hockey hardware this time.

Other playoff teams last season that lost their invitations to this season's party: the Toronto Maple Leafs and New Jersey Devils, who both fired their general managers this season; the Washington Capitals, in what could be Alex Ovechkin's last season; and the St. Louis Blues and Winnipeg Jets in the Western Conference.

With Florida out, who is the Stanley Cup favorite?

The Colorado Avalanche have been an absolute juggernaut this season.

They boasted the best record in franchise history (.738 points percentage) while finishing first overall in the NHL. They led the NHL in most goals per game, thanks to Nathan MacKinnon's league-leading 53 goals, winger Martin Necas (38 goals), center Brock Nelson (33 goals) and the continued dominance of star defenseman Cale Makar (1.05 points per game). They also had the fewest goals-against per game in the NHL, including the league's best penalty kill and team save percentage thanks to goalies Scott Wedgewood and Mackenzie Blackwood.

An elite team got even better at the trade deadline, as Colorado added center Nicolas Roy from Toronto and old friend Nazem Kadri from Calgary, a key center on their 2022 Stanley Cup team.



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The Avalanche are the favorite to win the Stanley Cup entering the postseason at +300 on Draft Kings, ahead of the Carolina Hurricanes (+475). But to win the Cup, the Avalanche will have to overcome one of the NHL's most reliable hexes: the Presidents' Trophy curse. Since 1985-86, there have been 39 teams to finish with the NHL's best record. Only eight of them went on to win the Stanley Cup -- and an equal number of them lost in the opening round of the playoffs. Spooky.

Colorado draws the Los Angeles Kings in the first round. The Kings do avoid having to play the Oilers for the fifth straight first round, having lost the previous four series. But drawing the Avalanche might leave them not sighing for relief but gasping for air.

Can Connor McDavid make it back to the Cup Final?

McDavid and fellow superstar Leon Draisaitl carried the Oilers to back-to-back Stanley Cup Final appearances, losing both times to the Panthers. Last October, McDavid gave the Oilers a clear window to win with him still on the roster, foregoing potential free agency to sign a two-year contract extension through 2027-28.

It could be argued that this season's Oilers aren't as good as the two teams that played for the Cup. Edmonton finished with a .567 points percentage, their lowest since 2018-19, but the Oilers were without Draisaitl (65 games) and McDavid's winger Zach Hyman (58 games) for large portions of the season. GM Stan Bowman sought to improve their goaltending -- the Achilles heel of those Cup finals teams -- by acquiring Tristan Jarry from the Penguins and Connor Ingram from Utah, the latter move having worked out better than the former.

The Oilers open with the Anaheim Ducks, who returned to the playoffs for the first time since 2018 thanks to first-year head coach Joel Quenneville. If they get past the Ducks, the Oilers could face the Pacific Division-leading Vegas Golden Knights ... and the coach they hired with eight games left in the season.

John Tortorella is coaching Vegas now?

The Golden Knights shocked the hockey world by firing head coach Bruce Cassidy with just eight games left in the regular season. The Knights were spiraling after the Winter Olympic break, posting the league's second-worst record ahead of only the moribund Vancouver Canucks.

As usual, expectations within the organization were astronomical, especially after Vegas landed winger Mitch Marner, the prize of last offseason, and veteran defenseman Rasmus Andersson, acquired in-season from Calgary. Management felt the team needed a kick in the pants. Few are better at delivering one than Tortorella.

"Torts," who won a Stanley Cup with Tampa Bay in 2004, last coached the Philadelphia Flyers for three seasons (2022-2025) before rejoining ESPN as a studio analyst. This is his first playoff appearance since taking Columbus to the postseason in 2020. The Knights are Tortorella's sixth NHL team, in a coaching career that spans all the way back to 2000.

Vegas went 7-0-1 in those eight games and looked like a Tortorella team, leading the NHL in that span with a 1.88 goals-against average. He has agreed to coach the remainder of the season -- someone hired for the present, for a team that needed a short-term boost.

(Please note that Vegas might have started a trend here, as the New York Islanders replaced coach Patrick Roy with Peter DeBoer with just four games left in their season. Alas, it was too late to get the Islanders into the postseason.)

The Golden Knights open the first round with the Utah Mammoth.

We're getting playoff hockey in Salt Lake City?

Indeed. In just the second season for the NHL's newest franchise, the Mammoth qualified for the Stanley Cup playoffs as the first wild card in the Western Conference. Coach André Tourigny's team improved just

three points in the standings season over season, but Utah feels like a different team -- and not just because they have an actual mascot instead of being referred to as the "Hockey Club."

Young stars like Dylan Guenther (40 goals), Logan Cooley (0.80 points per game) and JJ Peterka (25 goals) will get their first tastes of playoff action. Veterans like Clayton Keller (88 points) and Nick Schmaltz (33 goals) return after long playoff absences. Backstopping all of it is goalie Karel Vejmelka, who appeared in an NHL-high 64 games this season for Utah.

The future is bright in Salt Lake City, as the Mammoth have one of the NHL's robust prospect pipelines. But they're acting like the future is now, having acquired high-profile defenseman MacKenzie Weegar from the Flames at the trade deadline.

What's the most anticipated playoff matchup?

It's easily the Central Division opening-round slugfest between the Dallas Stars and the Minnesota Wild.

It's the kind of series that stokes debate about the fairness of the current playoff system: Should the No. 3 team in the entire NHL (Dallas) be forced to play the seventh-best team (Minnesota) after all that regular-season success they had? And their reward is to potentially play the No. 1 team in the league? However, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman believes the playoff format is successful precisely because it delivers matchups like this in the early rounds.

The Stars have reached the Western Conference finals for three consecutive seasons, losing to Vegas once and then the Oilers twice. This time they have a new head coach in Glen Gulutzan but much of the same cast as last year's run. That includes two 45-goal scorers in winger Jason Robertson and center Wyatt Johnston, as well as star winger Mikko Rantanen (1.20 points per game) who was winning playoff series seemingly on his own last season.

The Wild, meanwhile, took the season's biggest swing on the trade market: landing Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks in a December blockbuster. Hughes had a transformative effect on the Wild, who went 17-5-5 heading into the Olympic break -- where Team USA, constructed by Minnesota GM Bill Guerin and featuring a handful of his players, won Olympic men's gold for the first time since 1980.

While Hughes generates offense from the back end, the Wild were led by a pair of star scoring wingers up front: Kirill Kaprizov, who scored 45 goals after signing a record-setting \$136 million contract last September; and Matt Boldy, who was right behind him with 42 goals this season.

Whether or not it's "fair" that they meet, these two titans will clash in Round 1 to earn the right to potentially play Colorado in Round 2.

Meanwhile, in the East: Are the Buffalo Sabres for real?

The Sabres snapped their NHL-record 14-season playoff drought with one of their best regular seasons in franchise history: a .665 points percentage that earned Buffalo its first division title since the 2009-10 season, a team also coached by current Sabres bench boss Lindy Ruff in a previous stint.

The turning point in Buffalo's season, coincidental or not, was when the team replaced general manager Kevyn Adams with senior advisor Jarmo Kekalainen, who was previously the general manager of the Columbus Blue Jackets. From that moment in December until the end of the season, the Sabres had the NHL's best record (36-9-5) and were second overall in team offense and defense.

There are reasons to believe this is not a fluke. Buffalo has balanced scoring, led by star center Tage Thompson (40 goals) and forward Alex Tuch (33 goals), a pending free agent. The Sabres have one of the league's top defensemen in Rasmus Dahlin, and they finished tied for



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third in the NHL in team save percentage (.899) thanks to goalies Alex Lyon and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

That said, some of their underlying numbers have been troubling this season and their roster lacks the playoff experience their opponents, like the Boston Bruins, have. But as one NHL coach told ESPN recently about the Sabres: "Who knows? Sometimes it's good to be young and dumb."

Sabres win first division title in 16 years

Tage Thompson scores twice as the Sabres defeat the Blackhawks to claim the Atlantic Division title.

Can the Bruins make a run?

It's possible. Boston is a well-balanced team under first-year head coach Marco Sturum. Superstar winger David Pastrnak (100 points), and centers Morgan Geekie (39 goals) and Pavel Zacha (30 goals) have provided top-end offense, but Boston had 10 players in double-digits in goals.

However, it's their defensive foundation that could make the Bruins tough to beat. Charlie McAvoy brings his win-at-any-costs mentality to a blue line that features veterans like Hampus Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov.

In goal, Jeremy Swayman has been one of the best in the NHL, finishing second overall in goals saved above expected (28.8). The Bruins are dangerous as they seek a return to glory, having last made the Stanley Cup Final in 2019.

Speaking of returns to glory, is the Tampa Bay hype legit?

In theory, yes.

The Lightning were the fourth-best offensive team in the NHL, powered by MVP favorite Nikita Kucherov, who led the league with a 1.71 points-per-game average; as well as goal-scoring aces like Jake Guentzel (38 goals) and Brandon Hagel (35). They even found a new scoring force on the blue line, as fifth-year pro Darren Raddysh had obliterated his career highs with goals (22) and points (70) this season – which, to the surprise of no one, is a contract year.

They're also the league's third-best defensive team thanks to star goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, who led the NHL in wins (39) and is the favorite to win his second Vezina Trophy as the league's top netminder.

But there are question marks. The Lightning were hit hard by injuries all season: How many of them are still lingering? Most of all, what's the status of defenseman Victor Hedman, who took leave of the team for personal reasons after Tampa's March 19 game? The Lightning will need him to challenge for the Cup (after winning in 2020 and 2021) – if they can get past Montreal.

Is Montreal's Juraj Slafkovsky, Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield the best line in hockey?

When it comes to a combination of offense and defense, this line is the NHL's top trio when coach Marty St. Louis decides it's time to put them together.

In close to 534 minutes together this season, Slafkovsky, Suzuki and Caufield have a goals-for percentage of 69.9% at 5-on-5. That's thanks in part to a stellar 1.6 goals-against per 60 minutes. Credit there should go to center Suzuki, whose strong defensive play has him as the favorite to win the Selke Trophy as the NHL's best defensive forward.

But they also average 3.7 goals per 60 minutes together, and full marks to Caufield here: He scored 51 goals for Montreal in the regular season, second only to MacKinnon's 53.

What's scary about the Habs is that they're not a one-line team. Rookies Ivan Demidov and Oliver Kapanen have helped fill out the team offensive, while Lane Hutson (78 points in 82 games) continues to thrive from the back end.

Will Rod Brind'Amour finally coach in the Final?

Brind'Amour is in his eighth season coaching the Hurricanes. They've qualified for the playoffs in all eight seasons. But they've never broken through to play for the Stanley Cup, losing in the conference finals three times, including twice to the Panthers who, as a reminder, failed to make the postseason this year.

Why they could play for the Cup: Despite not having a star game-changing offensive player like Jake Guentzel or Mikko Rantonen – to name two players Carolina acquired in the past few seasons – this might be the deepest goal-scoring roster that Brind'Amour has had. The usual suspects remain atop the team scoring list, like Sebastian Aho (80 points), Andrei Svechnikov (31 goals) and Seth Jarvis (32). But players like Jackson Blake (22 goals), Logan Stankov (44 points), K'Andre Miller (37 points) and Alexander Nikishin (33 points) have all contributed.

But do they have enough goaltending? Brandon Bussi was a revelation for the Canes for most of the season, but struggled a bit after the Olympic break. Frederik Andersen has been inconsistent. Pyotr Kochetkov has gotten playoff time in the past, but never found his stride. Brind'Amour has yet to name his Game 1 starter against the Ottawa Senators, perhaps for good reason.

A word on Ottawa: They're quite good. From the Olympic break through the end of the season, the Senators had the third-best record in the NHL (.720 points percentage). Players like Tim Stutzle (83 points) have torn it up.

One NHL executive told ESPN earlier this season that if there's one team you don't want to face in the playoffs, it might be Ottawa, considering their underlying numbers and structure. That is, as long as they get their goaltending, and Linus Ullmark is 12-4-3 since the Olympic break. Beware, Carolina...

The Battle of Pennsylvania is on again?

The last time the Pittsburgh Penguins and Philadelphia Flyers engaged in The War of Sheetz vs. Wawa was back in 2017-18, with the Penguins winning to tie the all-time series at 4-4. That they're meeting again this postseason is a surprise on several levels.

Not many people had the Penguins returning to the playoffs this season for the first time since 2022. Most of the conjecture about Pittsburgh before the season surrounded whether veteran stars like Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Erik Karlsson would even be Penguins by the end of the season. Instead, all three players helped lead a young roster to the postseason, thanks in no small part to rookie head coach Dan Muse's strong structure, and the shrewd roster management of GM Kyle Dubas.

Even fewer people thought that first-year coach Rick Tocchet, a former Flyers star player who took over their bench after parting ways with Vancouver, would navigate this Philadelphia team into the playoffs. There have been fantastic developments, like young star Trevor Zegras recapturing the magic after arriving from Anaheim via trade last offseason; there have also been frustrations, such as the challenging relationship between Tocchet and young star Matvei Michkov, whose scoring fell by a dozen points year over year.

What has kept the Flyers on steady ground? Goalie Dan Vladar. Signed last summer as a free agent from the Calgary Flames, Vladar has nearly 14 goals saved above expected in 52 games this season, providing a remedy for the Flyers' biggest weakness in net.

The Flyers are young and talented, having added NCAA star Porter Martone after his season was done. The Penguins have a veteran core desperate for one last sip from the Cup together. All of that plays out in a series between two hated, heated rivals. That's the playoffs, baby.

Who are some of the other players worth watching in the Stanley Cup Playoffs?



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Brent Burns. The Colorado Avalanche defenseman is the NHL's top "old guy without a Cup," having now played 1,579 games without lifting the Chalice.

Jackson LaCombe. He replaced Seth Jones on the Team USA Olympic roster, and had the hockey highlight of his life in Milan as they won gold. The 25-year-old Ducks defenseman might be the most underrated blueliner in the NHL. He'll have the spotlight on him against the Oilers' attack in that series.

Jake Oettinger. Please recall when the Stars were eliminated by the Oilers in last year's conference finals, and the Dallas goalie was not only pulled in the first period of Game 5 but called out by former coach Pete DeBoer for his inability to beat the Oilers in the playoffs. Oettinger enters this postseason with a chance to lead his team deeper than his former coach ever could.

Brady Tkachuk. He had a strong season with 0.98 points per game, but the Ottawa captain has been in a weird spot this season -- and not just because he's an American gold medalist playing in a Canadian capitol.

He came under fire when his father Keith Tkachuk complained about Brady's ice time, and called out Ullmark for deciding to rest in a key game during an appearance on the Tkachuk brothers' "Wingmen" podcast. As usual, trade rumors swirl around the only Tkachuk in the playoffs this season, even as he has vowed loyalty to the franchise.

All the players on Canadian teams. Finally, will Edmonton or Montreal or Ottawa finally break through to win the first Stanley Cup for a Canadian team since 1993?

Let's all find out, now that the games are set to begin.

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Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Power Rankings: Who's hot and who's not

Ryan Dixon

Congratulations to the Colorado Avalanche for claiming the Presidents' Trophy based on their league-best 121 points. Now, all the Avs must do to make this season feel like an actual success is accomplish something we haven't seen in nearly 20 years.

The last team to win the Stanley Cup after finishing first overall in an 82-game season was the 2008 Detroit Red Wings. (The Chicago Blackhawks topped a 48-game slate in 2013, then went all the way that spring.)

Although other sports feature some version of the dynamic we see in hockey, the regular season/post-season divide certainly isn't as pronounced in baseball, football or basketball.

Heck, the past two NBA campaigns have wrapped with the 82-game champs doubling as Larry O'Brien winners. The Boston Celtics took both crowns in 2024 before Canadian hooper Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Oklahoma City Thunder to the best record and championship banner in 2025.

The NFL is a different beast with its 17-game schedule and one-game playoff format, but three teams had 14 wins last year and two of them — Seattle and New England — met in the Super Bowl won by Seattle two months ago. Three years ago, Kansas City topped Philadelphia in a championship game that featured the only 14-win clubs in the league.

Even baseball — which features players on playoff clubs clad in hoodies that say some variation of "Anything can happen in October!" every fall — has seen the powerhouse Los Angeles Dodgers win the summer and autumn in 2024, while the 2018 Boston Red Sox were the best team wire-to-wire. (L.A. also did it in the bizarre COVID summer/fall of 2020.)

Hockey, as we all know though, is a different beast.

Even when teams really go off, as the Avalanche did this year, it's no guarantee of success. Just the opposite, in fact.

Colorado is just the 13th club to record 120 points or more in NHL history and, of the previous 12 to do it, the only ones that validated the success by hanging a banner were four Montreal Canadiens outfits from the franchise's incredible 1970s run. Every other team fell short of the ultimate goal. And just to put a finer point on it, three of the last four teams to do it — Boston (135 points in 2023), Tampa in (128 in 2019) and Detroit (124 in 2006) — lost in the first round. The fourth club, the 122-point Panthers from 2022, fell in the second.

Can Colorado buck the trend?

When you look at it, there are some similarities between the Avs and those 2008 Presidents' Trophy-winning Wings who went all the way. Both clubs have championship know-how, with Colorado being four seasons removed from a 2022 Cup win, while Detroit was five seasons removed from winning the 2002 title (remember, there was a horrible spring in there with no Cup winner, in 2005).

The Red Wings had not one but two all-world world centres in Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg at the top of the lineup, while Nicklas Lidstrom was basically peerless as a defenceman at that time.

There's certainly some overlap there with an Avs squad that has megastar Nathan MacKinnon as a 1C, supported by the playoff-hardened likes of Gabriel Landeskog, Nazem Kadri and Artturi Lehkonen up front.

Cale Makar might not be a perfect comp for Lidstrom (Norris Trophy 7x, kids), but he's inarguably one of the best in the game at his position.

In the crease, veterans Dominik Hasek and Chris Osgood basically split the duties 50/50 while winning the 2008 Jennings Trophy for the league's lowest goals-against average (Osgood went on to be the man in the playoffs). It was essentially the exact same rollout in Denver this season, as Scott Wedgewood (45 games) and Mackenzie Blackwood (39) shared duties as a Jennings-winning tandem.

With home-ice advantage as far as the road goes, all the Avalanche can do is suit up and show the world what they've got.

Colorado's Cup chase begins on Sunday, one day after the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs begin with three Game 1s on Saturday. As such, we present our pre-tournament power rankings of the 16 teams that made the derby. To be clear, these are not Cup odds; we're not taking into account the vicious 2-3 matchups in the Central and Atlantic that will see two of Tampa, Montreal, Minnesota and Dallas bounced in Round 1. This is a straight ranking of the teams as we embark on the best time of the NHL year.

1. Colorado Avalanche (55-16-11) Nothing fewer than 16 wins is going to satisfy this club. Colorado has good-to-great everything.
2. Tampa Bay Lightning (50-26-6) We don't know when/if Victor Hedman will rejoin the club after taking a personal leave of absence in late March. If Hedman is unable to return, that puts a ceiling on the Bolts. That said, Tampa — banged-up all year — is finally healthy everywhere else, and if the squad gets its captain back sometime during the early stages of the post-season, there's a run to be made.
3. Dallas Stars (50-20-12) The Stars are obviously hoping defenceman Miro Heiskanen and centre Roope Hintz — both listed as day-to-day — are ready to go very early on in what should be a killer series with Minnesota. After three straight trips to the West final under Pete DeBoer,



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let's see if first-year Stars coach Glen Gulutzan can mix up an over-the-top formula.

4. Carolina Hurricanes (53-22-7) As far WC2s go, Carolina is getting a tough draw in the Senators in Round 1. But if the Canes can top Ottawa, they've got a very clear path to an Eastern Conference finals, where they'd have home-ice advantage. Twenty years after Eric Stall and Co. won Carolina's only Cup, captain Jordan Staal and the 2026 Hurricanes have a real kick at it.

5. Buffalo Sabres (50-23-9) The Sabres have been saying for months that they're not just aiming to end a 14-year drought with a playoff appearance; they want to do damage once there. Well, boys of Buffalo, now's your chance.

6. Minnesota Wild (46-24-12) You trade golden futures for Quinn Hughes so you can have him play 50 per cent of the games that really matter. It's go time for Minny.

7. Edmonton Oilers (41-30-11) Even with the usual questions plaguing this team, Edmonton has earned the benefit of the doubt this time of year. Taking nothing for granted, it would be massive for the Oilers if they can slip by Anaheim in fewer than six games and get Leon Draisaitl — who is nearing a return, but surely isn't 100 per cent healthy — another chunk of rest before Round 2.

8. Montreal Canadiens (48-24-10) It's funny how two opposite outcomes seem in play for Montreal. It wouldn't be shocking to see the Canadiens, with their youth and relative lack of depth, get rolled by a savvy Lightning bunch. On the other hand, the Canadiens have serious difference-makers at every position, especially if goalie Jakub Dobes carries his strong play into the playoffs.

9. Vegas Golden Knights (39-26-17) Late-season developments have really changed the complexion of Vegas' outlook. The team finished 7-0-1 under replacement coach John Tortorella and Carter Hart — who hadn't played since early January — went 6-0-0 in April with a .930 save percentage.

10. Ottawa Senators (44-27-11) At this point, when you're talking about Eastern Conference dark horses, you almost have to caveat it with, "and you can't say 'Ottawa.'" There's a reason so many people believe the Sens can make a run, namely the team's fantastic, season-long underlying numbers. Get some saves and this club can win any series.

11. Boston Bruins (45-27-10) The Bruins have the third-best points percentage in the league since Jan. 1 (.683). That's a big sample size of being one of the top clubs in the league. The potential problem for the Bruins is, neither their power play nor their penalty-killing has been very good during that stretch and, at some point, you need special teams to step up for you in the second season.

12. Utah Mammoth (43-33-6) The Mammoth might have the best first-round vibes of anywhere in the league this side of Buffalo. Utah finished a fairly flat 16-13-2, but it is in and should be playing weightless hockey to start the first round.

13. Pittsburgh Penguins (41-25-16) It's downright shocking to see the Penguins in the playoffs, given where most observers believed the franchise was at eight months ago. Now, not only is Pittsburgh in the post-season, the Pens have a path paved with home-ice advantage to the second round.

14. Philadelphia Flyers (43-27-12) See above, minus the home-ice part. Only two teams in the East had a worse points percentage than Philly after the Olympic break. Now, goalie Dan Vladar could give them a decisive advantage in the Keystone State clash.

15. Los Angeles Kings (35-27-20) Yeah, the Kings might be the first team out of the playoffs based on drawing Colorado, but this squad is comfortable in tight-checking affairs and has a game-breaker, Artemi Panarin, that it lacked during all those first-round losses to Edmonton.

16. Anaheim Ducks (43-33-6) A few teams — Utah, Pittsburgh, Philly — have a house-money feel heading into the playoffs, and Anaheim might top the list. This young core will gain all kinds of experience by virtue of playing even one playoff series. Should the Ducks see more than one, it'll be back-flip time in Orange County.

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Sportsnet.ca / Rutherford says Canucks 'should be OK' as GM job opens, duties shift

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — Authority, like water, flows downward.

In the history of the National Hockey League, a general manager has never fired a president.

Sometimes an owner may fire both. But since Luigi Aquilini's family, which owns the Vancouver Canucks, still trusts Jim Rutherford to preside over the entirety of hockey operations, there was an inevitability to Thursday's dismissal of general manager Patrik Allvin after one of the worst National Hockey League seasons in franchise history.

Widely varying insider reports in recent weeks had the Canucks poised to fire everybody — or nobody. But as the team burned to the ground in mid-winter, the most likely scenario was always that Rutherford, the Hockey Hall-of-Famer, would stay, and Allvin, his hand-picked, first-time GM, would go.

Head coach Adam Foote? Well, Rutherford said during his enthralling press conference Friday that the next general manager will eventually decide on the coaching staff — and almost everything else in hockey-ops.

Assistant general manager Ryan Johnson, a holdover from previous GM Jim Benning's regime who impressed Rutherford long before Johnson built the Canucks' minor-league team into a Calder Cup champion, is the frontrunner to replace Allvin.

As with the probable dismissal of Allvin, the potential promotion of Johnson has been whispered about for months.

Rutherford told reporters the Canucks did not refuse the Nashville Predators' permission to interview Johnson for their own vacant GM job. Because they never asked.

"Somebody made that story up," he said.

And no, the Canucks won't grant permission for Johnson to talk to other teams until Rutherford concludes his own GM search.

In the meantime, Rutherford told Allvin, highly respected around the NHL for his scouting and player-development chops, that he is welcome to stay with the Canucks in a lesser capacity.

"I'll give him a little time to make that decision," Rutherford said. "It's very emotional now."

Other than the marketing impossibility of bringing back everyone after a 58-point season in which the Canucks won nine of 41 home games for their season-ticket holders, there wasn't any one reason to fire Allvin.

Even if you aggregated the reasons, listing all of management's biggest errors over the last four years, it would still be difficult to separate Allvin from Rutherford for blame.

This reality was not lost on Rutherford Friday.



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"I think that's a fair comment," Rutherford said. "In my position, I do have to make some decisions, but he was in charge of most of the things in hockey, making the trades and deciding who's getting called up and down, and working with the coach and all those things. (But) I take full responsibility for the season. I head up the hockey department, but I don't make decisions for other people. And Patrik had the opportunity to make his own decisions."

Asked near the end of his 33-minute press conference to grade himself, Rutherford said: "I'm not going to put a letter on it. I'm telling you that I'm disappointed. And, you know, I'm disappointed that I couldn't have done a better job in some areas and made this work a little bit quicker. But I will say we've dealt with some situations over the last couple of years that I did not expect to deal with when I came here, and we've worked our way through it. They're behind us now, and I don't foresee any of those big issues to deal with going forward. So the team should be OK."

Interestingly, the 77-year-old president also made it clear he will be less involved in hockey decisions with the next GM. Rutherford mentored and promoted Allvin, 51, when he was managing the Pittsburgh Penguins to a pair of Stanley Cups a decade ago.

And four years ago, shortly after Canucks managing owner Francesco Aquilini showed up on Rutherford's doorstep in Raleigh, N.C., and convinced him to come out of "retirement," Rutherford poached Allvin from the Penguins and made him the first Swedish general manager in the NHL.

"He's a friend of mine," Rutherford said. "I think Patrik's a great hockey guy, but we felt it was time to make a change and give somebody else the opportunity to sit in that chair."

"Quite frankly, I had a lot of sleepless nights, and I thought a lot about this in many different ways. It wasn't easy, and it took me a long time to get to this point."

As for the working dynamics Rutherford envisions with his next GM, he said: "I'm available for somebody, to anybody, in the organization to ask me questions, ask me for help. But I want the new GM to make all hockey decisions. Now, he may not make decisions about the practice rink because nobody wants to make that decision... or where training camp is or some of the things that a president would do. But as for hockey... he will make those decisions."

Candid and unvarnished as always, Rutherford dropped a bunch of news grenades during his press conference.

- On \$92.8-million centre Elias Pettersson, who just had his second straight 15-goal season: "It's the same as anything people do in life; preparation is the key to success. And I don't believe he's put enough preparation in at this point to be the player he needs to be. But he's young enough, he's capable of doing it, and if he does the things he's told to do, he has a chance to succeed here. But if he doesn't, you know, the GM is going to have to make a decision."

- Discussing the urgency to trade Quinn Hughes in December, which turned the organization sharply towards a rebuild, Rutherford effectively fed the former captain into a wood-chipper: "Some people think Quinn left here because the team wasn't any good; he was leaving anyways, OK? The best example I can give you is Matthew Tkachuk. He was in Calgary. They had a good team. He wanted to go back to the U.S. and he went. And this is not going to be the last guy, Quinn Hughes, that decides he's going to leave. And I think I'm close to him; I really like him. I respect what he did in Vancouver. He put on a good show for a lot of years. But guys work towards free agency, and we should respect the fact that he had that option."

- Rutherford reiterated how poor the Canucks' dressing-room culture had been, and praised the new one forming since the team came together after the March 6 trade deadline: "It was really bad. The chemistry and the culture in the Canucks dressing room over the last five weeks is the

best it's been since I've been here. This team has a chance to move forward, and let every player enjoy coming to the rink and not have to worry about somebody barking at them in practice or picking on them in the room or whatnot. This group is tightly knit. (There are) good veterans left here, good mentors, very good young character players, we've got a number of good young players coming. So this team is going in the right direction."

Rutherford expressed gratitude to Canucks fans, who seem to have embraced the early stages of the rebuild and kept Rogers Arena full most nights despite the 25-win season.

He said there will be "no shortcuts" on the rebuild.

Someone else will have to take over the transition Allvin began, and Rutherford may not be around when it is finished.

"Despite the way things look right now... I believe this organization's in a very good place to move forward," Rutherford said. "I feel that I haven't done as good a job as I would have liked to, and I would have wished we were in a stronger place by now. But look, where I'm at in my life now, I can do whatever I want and be very comfortable. And I like this franchise a lot, and I want to do what's right for them. So if I feel comfortable that when we have a good, strong person in place and maybe even potentially two people over time, I would feel comfortable making a decision to leave."

It is the Canucks first rebuild this century, coming 15 years after the team's last run to a Stanley Cup Final.

Even before news of Allvin's firing came overnight from a report in Sweden, Friday was scheduled for player exits. There were six formal press conferences involving waves of Canuck players, many thousands of words spoken.

"I think it's really important to learn from this year," veteran goalie Kevin Lankinen said. "We can't just wrap this thing and move on. We have to sit down and learn -- older guys, younger guys, doesn't matter -- because these are the kind of experiences that if you turn them the right way, you can bring fuel for not just next year but for your whole career. Because this is obviously something that we don't want to go through again."

"You know, the best time to start a change was probably 15 years ago. But the next best time is right now."

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1387826 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers get blast from past in first-round series against Ducks

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — "We have this little red box of things. Uh... It's going to sound corny..."

Todd McLellan was taking his 2016-17 Edmonton Oilers into the playoffs for the first time after 10 long years of missing the big dance.

The Decade of Darkness was over in Edmonton. Connor McDavid had arrived, with his first 100-point season. There was this big German kid who'd scored 29 goals. Might turn into a player.

After six years in the NHL, Jordan Eberle would get his first taste of playoff hockey. Milan Lucic, Pat Maroon and Zack Kassian were timing out their circles during warmups, each skating a few feet into the



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opponent's zone — one after another, after another — an intimidation routine that set the table for mayhem. Or, at least, the prospect of it.

But McLellan had cut his coaching teeth in Detroit. He knew that the Anaheim Ducks in Round 2 were an entirely different animal than the San Jose Sharks team that Edmonton had defeated in Round 1.

So he went to his "little red box," sketched on the white board in the Oilers dressing room. And it included exactly what...?

"(Things that) make a difference in winning and losing," he explained that spring. "It's not about the reverse on the breakout; it's not about the faceoff play that you run in the offensive zone.

"It's about game management. It's about shift management. It's about momentum, discipline, commitment level... All those catch-words that coaches use to fill those boxes. And there aren't very many analytic guys out there that can chart them."

A near-decade later, it's the Anaheim Ducks who are on Year 8 of a rebuild and making their first playoff appearance, finally.

The season after they defeated the Oilers in seven games in that 2017 series, the Ducks had 101 points, made the playoffs and lost in Round 1. They haven't returned since.

Now, finally, they're back in and matched up against an Oilers team that has won six rounds in the past two seasons. It's a veteran-laden, experienced Oilers roster that — just like those 2017 Ducks — has forgotten more playoff lessons than the young Ducks have learned.

"It'll be a focus of us to be hard on them, not give them anything easy," explained 1,000-game veteran Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, who broke his own playoff maiden back in '17. "We know, in general, they just they want to play a fast game. They want to play (run-'n-gun hockey), and that's not how we want to play."

Nugent-Hopkins, 33 and now with two children, remembers looking at that Anaheim roster, with names like Corey Perry, Ryan Getzlaf, Ryan Kesler and John Gibson. Some of them had won a Cup in 2007. They were accomplished playoff vets.

It's got to be exactly what today's Ducks see when they peruse Edmonton's lineup.

"Obviously you know who's on the other side, and how experienced there they are," Nugent-Hopkins recalled. "We had a lot of young guys leading the way, and we just played fast and worried about our own game. We also had some big boys who would run around. It was a good first experience, but we've come a long way since then, for sure."

This Ducks team has made a season out of falling behind, then storming back in the third period to grab wins. They've been must-watch, not unlike those emerging Oilers were.

But comebacks are hard to find against experienced, playoff-hardened opponents like Edmonton. In the last five years, the Oilers' 79 playoff games are second in the NHL only to Florida (84).

If you fall behind this team every day, you're unlikely to come back more than once in a series. Then, you're not known as the sexy comeback team — you're just the team that kept falling behind all series.

The Oilers, as contenders tend to do, have steeled their game since the Olympic break.

Connor Ingram is giving them above-average goaltending. Connor Murphy and Darnell Nurse have formed a formidable shutdown pair, two surly six-foot-four shot-blockers and play stoppers who allow the top pair of Mattias Ekholm and Evan Bouchard the freedom to furnish the star forwards with the kinds of pucks that breed offence.

Since March 15, Edmonton is a top-five defensive team in the NHL, allowing 2.47 goals per game. That's more than a goal ahead of 25th-

ranked Anaheim (3.63), as the Ducks have found the art of scoring their way out of their troubles an elusive trait as February turned to March and April.

So Round 1 turns out to be a matchup of the 2026 Oilers versus their younger selves. A firewagon group that has learned the hard way that defence is important against a run-'n-gun Ducks outfit that is strutting into class for the first time, with a shiny new lunch kit and a fresh haircut.

"Playoff hockey is always tight. We're comfortable in those games," promised Connor McDavid. "They're a very skilled young team that plays with a lot of energy and creates a lot. We're going to have our hands full and it's our job to slow them down a little bit."

McDavid would never say the important part out loud, of course.

The part about how it's an entirely different game that the Ducks are about to experience. About how, after a decade of playoff hockey, it turns out that the game that wins here isn't much like the game that got you here at all.

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

"But we're excited too."

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1387827 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Conroy insists long-term vision will dictate Flames' summer moves

Eric Francis

CALGARY — It took just over two minutes into his season-ending presser for Craig Conroy to utter the words some fans have been waiting over a decade to hear.

"It is about the long term," said Conroy when asked several different ways about the approach he'll take this summer.

"It's not about getting into the playoffs one year, not in the next, in one year, then out. We want to be there consistently."

Sure, the Calgary Flames would like to make the playoffs next season, as echoed by almost every player who addressed the media following Friday's exit meetings.

The lads are paid to say that, and as Kevin Bahl suggested, there'd be no point in showing up with your hockey bag every fall if you didn't have spring hockey as a goal.

Management and ownership would cherish post-season hockey, too.

But the most important thing about how Conroy conducts himself this summer is that he follows through with the lane he picked at the trade deadline, when he traded two aging pillars for a boatload of picks and prospects: the long road ahead.

Conroy said the plan, as of now, is to make all 11 picks in this summer's draft, including both first-rounders and four seconds.

However, the GM hedged his bets aplenty by adding that the plan can easily be altered a tinge if he can move up in the draft or find a trade partner looking to shake up their roster.



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"If there is an opportunity to make a trade for a player that we feel is someone that can help us now and in the future, absolutely we'd grab that player," said Conroy.

"We will leave no stone unturned."

He's already been out scouting most of the top six prospects, a window in which the Flames are guaranteed to pick regardless of how the May 5 draft lottery goes.

Would he make a trade to move into the top three if the lottery balls fall in a manner that keeps them in fourth spot, or drop a slot or two?

Absolutely, said Conroy. But he's excited about the fact that regardless of which of those half dozen prospects he ends up with, it's going to be an impact player – something his organization is woefully short of.

"Of course, we want to pick No. 1, but no matter who we pick in there, I think the people here are going to be very happy," he said.

"Matthew Tkachuk was No. 6, Sean Monahan was No. 6. You know, I'd take those guys any day, so I'm not stressed about it."

With very few top players available anymore via free agency, the only way to up their ability to add high-end skill is to do it via the draft – a route Conroy is poised to lean heavily into again this summer.

"We're going to go and try to do whatever we can to help the team and make it better, but a lot of it is going to come from within," he said of the internal growth the organization will count on for the next few years from emerging young pillars like Matvei Gridin, Matt Coronato, Zayne Parekh and Hunter Brzustewicz.

"We don't want to rush the players. Definitely, there was talk about signing some of the guys we drafted a few years ago (like college hotshots Cole Reschny or Ethan Wytenbach), and maybe get them to turn pro. But we want to do the best for them long term. It's not about just getting guys in here for one year and turning this thing around. We want to do it the right way for the next 10 years."

Which brings us to the captain, Mikael Backlund, who was asked how quickly he thinks his 29th-place team can return to challenge for a playoff spot.

And while an acceptable response would be, "how long is a piece of string?" Backlund and the veterans want it to be next season.

"It's also up to management," he said.

"We've got a lot of prospects and picks, and it's up to them, 'what do you want to do?' - if they want to keep collecting, or if they want to make some trades, make things happen.

"It's an exciting summer for the organization, for sure, with one high pick and lots of other picks and prospects. It's an exciting future for the organization, and we want to turn it around quickly."

Not everyone wants that.

"The million-dollar question is what do we improve, and how do we get to that next level," said another veteran, Blake Coleman, whose future with the club will also say plenty about the long-term vision.

"I think obviously our high-end production leaves a little bit to be desired. I think the leading scorer is in the 40-point range and it's hard to go too far with that."

Sure is, but that's OK for a team willing to be patient and develop their next scoring leaders from within.

"It's one of those things that takes time, you've got to draft well and let guys grow in-house, and maybe make some moves in the off-season," said Coleman, who told Conroy he'd be happy to return in the fall with an eye on maintaining a healthy culture, but wants an extension if so.

"I know everyone is doing everything they can to keep improving, and go up from here. I think that's the plan as far as I understand it. If everything trends in that direction, there's a lot to look forward to."

But it has to be done right, which means exhibiting newfound patience - something this organization hasn't had since the '80s.

We'll find out in the next few months just how committed they are to it.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Martin St. Louis prepared to adapt and adjust vs. Lightning

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — It was at the start of the third period in the second half of a back-to-back, home-and-home series against the New Jersey Devils that Martin St. Louis took his first line out of a matchup it was decisively losing.

And while it seemed obvious enough that getting Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky away from Jack Hughes, Jesper Bratt and Connor Brown would be paramount to enabling a Montreal Canadiens comeback, doing so was also counterintuitive for a coach who'd always trusted his top players to find solutions to their own problems.

The change ultimately didn't work, and the Canadiens lost 3-0 to halt a season-best winning streak at eight games. But what mattered most was that St. Louis was willing to make it while the Canadiens were only down two goals and well within striking distance with 20 minutes left on the clock.

He made a lot of other unexpected adjustments down the stretch of the season that suggested he's prepared to have an itchier trigger finger when he'll need one. And he will definitely need one — especially against a master bench boss in Jon Cooper, a two-time Stanley Cup winner who's coached 150 more playoff games than St. Louis has — in Montreal's first-round series against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"I'm going to focus on my team," St. Louis said after Canadiens practice Thursday. "I'm not going to focus on the coach behind the bench over there."

That's the right approach, because St. Louis can't change the experience gap between him and Cooper, but he can change the outcome of each game by making the right decisions both before and during them.

The 50-year-old has had no problem making his decisions with conviction throughout his four-plus years behind Montreal's bench, enabling the Canadiens to steadily rise from bottom-feeder to contender. St. Louis stuck his guns to great success to not only nurture the talent possessed by Suzuki, Caufield, Slafkovsky and the others, but also harmonize it.

He taught everyone to play together in a collective game that generated an unexpected playoff berth last season, earning him a nod as one of the three finalists for the Jack Adams Award. And the lessons he took from the team's five-game loss to the Washington Capitals last spring were applied over 106-point winter that should have him in consideration for that honour once again.

"It helped me," said St. Louis said of his first series behind the bench.

Seeing him help the Canadiens master coming back in games earlier this season was evidence of the fact.



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But seeing St. Louis press buttons in-game to help them figure out how to close out leads post-Olympics was perhaps the most telling sign he's evolved and is prepared for what's in front of him.

The playoffs require cold, calculated decisions that must oftentimes be made without a second's hesitation, and St. Louis has assured he's willing to make them.

"I for sure have a clear idea ahead of Game 1," he said, "but things can change quickly."

That means quickly undoing a line of Kapanen, Zach Bolduc and Kirby Dach — a trio of players who struggled with consistency throughout the season — if it doesn't play to its intended identity of being a hard-forechecking, offensive-zone-possession-extending line. It means turning to Brendan Gallagher and Joe Veleno in Game 2 if as many as two players on that line don't pull their weight in Game 1.

"We know we have great options," St. Louis said on Friday.

He can't hesitate to use them this time around.

Last time, St. Louis only turned to Arber Xhekaj after two losses in which the Canadiens were bullied by the Capitals.

This time it appears as though he'll start with Xhekaj after extending him the runway to ramp up over the final games of this season so he could take off in the playoffs.

That leash can easily be pulled on if Xhekaj falters, with David Reinbacher and Adam Engstrom sitting as options he can plug in if he must.

Within the games themselves St. Louis will face other interesting decisions, and all the things he tested throughout the season will enable him to act without hesitation.

If he has to pull starting goaltender Jakub Dobes at some point, he knows he can depend on Jacob Fowler.

And though St. Louis likely won't rush to move his top line out of a matchup, he likely won't wait before it's too late if it can't self-correct.

St. Louis could also choose the nuclear option of splitting his top line if the team needs a different look at some point.

He boldly did that for 30-odd games earlier this season — moving Slafkovsky with Ivan Demidov and Oliver Kapanen while using one of Dach or Alex Texier with Caufield and Suzuki in his place — and it brought Slafkovsky to a new level and varied the team's attack.

That was a move that also provided the coach valuable information ahead of the playoffs.

"I think it gives Marty something that he knows can work," said Suzuki. "The beauty of our team is guys have played with a lot of different guys and are able to continue to produce, so it gives us a good opportunity to change lines if we need to."

If they do, St. Louis has shown he's better prepared to adapt and adjust.

That was a critical development for the coach this season.

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1387829 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs first-round predictions: Multiple Game 7s brewing

Justin Bourne

There are a million ways to tease apart a playoff series. You can cherry-pick fancy stats (which I've done!), but the reality is, you're guessing about what's going to be most important. Will it come down to puck possession? Forecheck chances? Or maybe the penalty kill? Goaltending or toughness? Which ultimate strength perseveres over time?

There's pressure, experience and a whole host of other factors that can impact the outcome, including injuries.

In the end, we can't know for sure what will win the day. But as we dive into each playoff series — after the teams involved have played 82 games apiece — we've got an idea which trends are meaningful.

Using those, I'm here to offer what are flat-out opinions on what will happen in Round 1 of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs. Below are my picks, with a paragraph or two on what influenced my thinking most.

Pick: Hurricanes in seven

Why: The vast majority of people have been picking Ottawa here, and I get that, they've been red hot. But I instinctively get my back up at the idea that the team that steadily built 113 points with solid underlying numbers is being treated as the underdog. I'm suspicious of the argument that the thing that submarined the Senators this season (goaltending) is somehow a solved problem come playoffs because Linus Ullmark had a good two weeks. I also have trouble buying that the things that lifted the Canes to the league's third-best goal differential have gone away.

The Sens have had an awesome year as a team and can definitely win this series — I love their D and their depth up front — but Carolina is a handful, every line skates, their D makes plays and defends, and I just think it's going to be super tight. Yes, the Canes have goaltending questions of their own and many think the Sens can out-grit them, but the Canes have ample playoff experience and home-ice advantage could matter. If the Sens win Round 1, all bets are off. But Round 1? It's gonna be a nailbiter.

Pittsburgh Penguins vs. Philadelphia Flyers

Pick: Penguins in six

Why: Sometimes a group just isn't ready. When I look at the Flyers, I see important pieces on the upswing that are still so young, like Matvei Michkov and Porter Martone and Trevor Zegras and Jamie Drysdale. This is going to be great experience for them. In the Penguins, I still see Sid and Geno, still see Letang and Karlsson.

Of course, there's so much more to it than the advantages of age and experience, as the Flyers have Travis Konecny and Travis Sanheim and a goalie, in Dan Vladar, who can be great, while the Pens have their own question marks (goaltending) and youth. But I just think to win, you need your most important people ready for the big moments, and I don't think the Flyers are quite there yet.

Pick: Lightning in seven

Why: This pick should be taken as praise for a Tampa Bay team with proven stars who've been through it, and not a commentary on the Canadiens. I picked seven for a reason.

If it's going to be close (and I think it is), there has to be some advantage in knowing what to expect, knowing what matters, and the Bolts have been through it over the past decade. Montreal has the chance to be New Tampa Bay, with lasting stars at every position, and this experience is gonna be a test on both sides.

Will one of Montreal's young goalies catch fire and outplay Andrei Vasilevskiy? It's possible. If Montreal wins this series, could they go on a deep run and win it all? Also possible.



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I really believe in the core of talent the Habs have. But I've seen this Tampa team in the playoffs for years and I know how steady and solid they push. It just feels like with a few advantages — like their Vezina contender; and Hart contender, in Kucherov — they could be the group to sneak through to Round 2. Like Ottawa, though, I think if Montreal wins a round, they could be a problem past that.

Buffalo Sabres vs. Boston Bruins

Pick: Sabres in seven

Why: The Sabres' success is built on a backend that can move the puck. They can skate, they're long, and they just set the forwards up so well. But I also think the Sabres have a host of underrated players, from Josh Doan to Beck Malenstyn to Zach Benson.

Now, the Bruins are a particularly tough draw for the Sabres, because they're just going to pound them (look out for Nikita Zadorov and Tanner Jeannot), and they've got elite goaltending and true game-breakers. But the Sabres runaway success hasn't been an accident and, at the end of the day, I tend to believe talent prevails. The Sabres D alone brings so much that it's just impossible for me to pick against them. So, provided they get good goaltending, they should find a way to score enough to squeak by the physical Bruins.

Colorado Avalanche vs. Los Angeles Kings

Pick: Avalanche in four

Why: Well now, let's not overthink this. The Avs were the best team in the NHL when they traded for Nazem Kadri and Nicolas Roy, two centres who can operate in very different spaces for them. They've got offensive superstars covered; and Kadri can supplement that, but he also provides the other stylistic layers like grit and tenacity. Roy can alleviate some of the defensive burden to free everyone else up to be at their best, as he did as a third-line centre for Vegas when they won their Cup.

Maybe the Kings get a game; I suppose if everything broke their way, they could get two. If they got more than that, I'd be SHOCKED.

Dallas Stars vs. Minnesota Wild

Pick: Stars in six

Why: I write this assuming Dallas gets Roope Hintz back at some point, because with him, the Stars just have an awful big pile of elite players. Mikko Rantanen is the beast of all playoff beasts, while Wyatt Johnston, Jason Robertson, Miro Heiskanen, and Thomas Harley are all top-end talents.

As much as I love Kirill Kaprizov, Matt Boldy and Quinn Hughes, they're all going to have to be awesome, because I'm just not sure the Wild are strong enough down the middle. They're loaded, and a great team, and it's a shame this series has to happen in Round 1. But with both teams having capable goaltending and some great D, it could be at centre — Ryan Hartman, Joel Eriksson Ek, Daniila Yurov, and Michael McCarron — where the Wild lose some ground. This is why Hintz's return time matters, as Johnston, Hintz, Duchene and Faksa is an advantage. But without him, it's pretty dead even.

Pick: Oilers in five

Why: To me, the Oilers are a proven playoff team that's getting back Zach Hyman and Leon Draisaitl at just the right time, so I won't linger here. Edmonton has shored up their defending and are getting decent goaltending, but mostly they just create so damn much offensively they're a nightmare.

The Ducks soft spot? They don't defend particularly well, which doesn't line up great. With a lot of big, offensive talent in their first NHL playoff series, I expect those defensive issues to get exposed, and for the very good Lukas Dostal to be handed a massive ask in Round 1.

Vegas Golden Knights vs. Utah Mammoth

Pick: Golden Knights in six

Why: If I believed that Vegas is who Vegas was by the numbers and standings this year, I'd be tempted to pick an upset here. But I don't. This is a team that was loaded with talent (and expectations, as a result) and struggled to figure out how the puzzle pieces fit. But since John Tortorella showed up, it's all started to click, and they suddenly look like who we expected them to be, which makes them scary.

Utah has unbelievably good underlying numbers — they show up in a cluster with Tampa Bay and Carolina among the league's best by expected goals for and against — but they don't have the experience or star power to get through when the going gets tough. By those aforementioned expected goals, nobody is stingier than Vegas, and with Carter Hart suddenly the starter and carrying a .930 in April, Utah's in very tough.

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1387830 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Avalanche vs. Kings

Emily Sadler

Good news, Kings fans: No longer must you dread yet another first-round series against the Edmonton Oilers. Four straight first-round meetings against McDavid & Co., resulting in four straight early exits, had L.A. stuck in an all-too-familiar nightmare.

Now, for the bad news: The Kings get Colorado, instead.

It's the matchup nobody wanted — and for good reason. The 2025-26 Presidents' Trophy winners, fresh off setting a new franchise points record with 121, have looked unstoppable all season long, and they've got the jaw-dropping numbers to back it up.

The Avalanche finished the regular season 31 points ahead of the Kings in the second wild-card spot. They boast an otherworldly plus-99 goal differential, suffered just 16 regulation losses, boast three 30-plus goal-scorers, and are led by two players with 100-plus points (led, of course, by Nathan MacKinnon's 127).

But there's something to be said for momentum, and the Kings have just that thanks to their sprint into the playoffs that saw an underachieving squad for much of the year finally click down the stretch. It started with the acquisition of Artemi Panarin. What followed was a series of deadline moves that took Kings fans on a week-long roller-coaster ride following the Olympic break. GM Ken Holland fired Jim Hiller and replaced him with D.J. Smith as interim, traded away Corey Perry, then brought in Scott Laughton in a bargain deadline deal, handed the crease to backup Anton Forsberg, and buckled up for a high-speed chase for a playoff spot to make sure Anze Kopitar's last season wouldn't end with the regular season.

Pillow fight or not, it was still an impressive feat.

What comes next is a mountain of a challenge, which will require the Kings' best defensive play and the hot hand of the man in net if they're to take down the mighty Avalanche.

It's been more than two decades since these squads matched up in the playoffs. They met in back-to-back post-seasons in 2001 and 2002, with both series won by Colorado in seven games.



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Here's what you need to know about the series ahead.

Avalanche

HEAD TO HEAD RECORD

Avalanche: 3-0-0

56.69 (2)

Kings: 0-3-0

Avalanche X-Factor: Nazem Kadri

62.79 (1)

The 2022 Stanley Cup champ is back, thanks to a deadline trade that felt like a win for everybody. Kadri's first stint with the Avalanche saw him reach hero status when, after tallying a career-high 87 points in 71 games, he came up clutch in the playoffs despite suffering a broken thumb in the Cup Final.

56.39 (1)

.922 (1)

In a strange and unfortunate turn of events, Kadri was sidelined for the final few games of Colorado's season this spring with a finger injury — his first time missing games since that thumb issue.

9.84 (13)

Colorado's search for depth down the middle following Kadri's departure in free agency was well-documented. The team he re-joined in March looks a little different than the one he left because of it. The Avalanche brought in Brock Nelson as a second-line centre last year, and found a winger for MacKinnon in Martin Necas after trading away Mikko Rantanen. There's no doubting the top-six talent, led by MacKinnon and his league-best 53-goal output. And now the bottom six looks poised to do damage, too, thanks to Kadri slotting in as third-line centre. The rich got richer. Having a healthy Kadri back in the lineup opens up Jared Bednar's lineup options to an enviable degree.

52.22 (8)

52.05 (12)

Kings X-Factor: Artemi Panarin

52.19 (7)

L.A.'s acquisition of Artemi Panarin from the Rangers in February and subsequent two-year extension made clear the Kings' intentions not to fade into the background of the league but to contend, now.

.917 (2)

It worked. While the addition of Panarin didn't magically and singlehandedly turn things around, it served up a big boost on the scoresheet — he's tallied 27 points in 26 games with the Kings. Can he reach another gear in the playoffs?

8.41 (27)

REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

Considering the offensive firepower on the other side of this matchup, and the fact that the team is still without Kevin Fiala following his serious leg injury suffered during the Olympics, he's going to have to. A well-timed scoring surge for winger Quinton Byfield, who reached a career-high in goals (24), bodes well for a strong playoff run to come, but there's no doubt Panarin is the leader of this offensive force.

PP%

ADVANCED STATS

PK%

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

TEAM

GF/G

GA/G

CF%

Avalanche

GF%

17.1 (27)

xGF%

84.6 (1)

SV%

3.63 (1)

SH%

2.40 (1)



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Kings

17.0 (28)

74.6 (30)

2.68 (29)

2.90 (8)

COLORADO STORYLINES

1. Get ready for the MacKinnon-Makar show

Unless he's suiting up against your squad, watching Nathan MacKinnon in the playoffs is truly a beautiful thing. He consistently produces at more than a point-per-game pace in the post-season and can single-handedly take over a game. The thing about this roster, though, is that he doesn't need to do it alone.

It truly is an embarrassment of riches to have both MacKinnon and Cale Makar on the same roster. Makar, who was awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy when Colorado won the Cup in 2022, is made for playoff hockey. Should he get on a hot streak like he did during that 29-point run in '22, watch out.

2. Presidents' Trophy: boost, or burden?

Here's the thing about the Presidents' Trophy: It rarely leads a team to the Stanley Cup. "Curse" is surely too strong a word, but looking down the list of franchises to earn the honour of being the winningest team in the regular season shows a trend of playoff losses that's hard to deny.

The last team to hoist the Cup after winning the Presidents' Trophy was the 2012-13 Chicago Blackhawks. The last team to do so in a full, 82-game season was the 2007-08 Detroit Red Wings. The more recent handful of regular-season winners all ended in playoff disappointment — some more than others. Last year's Winnipeg Jets were ousted in Round 2. Before that, the Rangers fell just shy of the Cup Final. The 2022-23 Boston Bruins suffered the biggest upset, having set a league record for the best season ever, only to be taken down by the upstart Florida Panthers. The last time Colorado won the award was in 2020-21. They were eliminated by Vegas in Round 2, but went on to win the Stanley Cup the following year. Will this season change the narrative?

3. Which goalie takes the lead?

In Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood, the Avalanche boasted the best goalie tandem in the league this year. Wedgewood, the presumed backup to start the season, has the edge in starts (43) and stats (31 wins, a .921 SV%, 2.02 GAA) over Blackwood (36 starts, 23 wins, .904 SV% and 2.51 GAA) and was the busier netminder down the stretch, which points to him likely getting the nod for Game 1. How head coach Jared Bednar navigates the duo from there will be interesting to watch. Blackwood started all seven of Colorado's first-round games last year against Dallas, while Wedgewood has never started in the post-season.

LOS ANGELES STORYLINES

1. Who gets the crease? (And how long is his leash?)

Defence will be the top priority in an effort to shut down — or, at least slow down — Colorado's lethal attack. And if ever there was a time to harness the playoff power of a hot goalie, now would be it.

Right now, it's backup Anton Forsberg who appears likely to start Game 1. He backstopped the team down the stretch and really hit his stride, the team playing with confidence in front of him. He's never started a playoff game, but that seems like it's about to change.

Darcy Kuemper struggled mightily in his handful of starts as Forsberg took over, but his playoff experience speaks for itself — he backstopped the Avalanche to the Cup in 2022. Should an opportunity arise to stump his former squad, the script would write itself.

2. Kopitar's last run

It's the end of an era in L.A., as captain Anze Kopitar is set to hang up his skates at the end of the Kings' season. The team fought to extend his tenure at least a few extra games, and all eyes will be on the veteran centremen to see if he can add to what's been a prolific, Hall of Fame-worthy career.

And what a career it's been. Two Stanley Cups, a pair of Selke Trophies, three Lady Byngs, and a decade-long captaincy that set the standard for what it means to be a leader in this league. The farewell tour isn't quite closed yet.

3. Can the Kings find their footing on special teams?

Of all the eye-catching stats and accomplishments piled up by Colorado this year, perhaps the most surprising one is about their power play... because it's not all that good. It may, in fact, be the lone (relative) weakness on this Avalanche squad.

Unfortunately for the Kings, that doesn't appear to present a window of opportunity to exploit. L.A.'s penalty-kill unit has struggled all year and has actually worsened since Smith took over as coach. Considering the Kings' penchant for shutdown defending, it's a surprising weakness — and one that Colorado will surely look to exploit, if the Kings can't clean things up.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Mammoth vs. Golden Knights

Emily Sadler

In just their second season in Salt Lake City, the Utah Mammoth are playoff-bound. This quick success in their new home makes the Mammoth the latest new franchise to quickly jump into contention, and one of the best stories of a post-season field featuring plenty of new faces.

That the Mammoth's first trip to the playoffs sees them square off against Vegas feels fitting, considering the feat.

Playoff seeding tells us Utah is the underdog as they sit in the first wild card spot in the west. Experience, too, gives Vegas a clear upper hand. But this is no David-versus-Goliath matchup. The Golden Knights' fourth division title earns them home-ice advantage, but separates them from Utah in the overall standings by just three points. Utah finished the regular season with more wins (43, compared to Vegas' 39), a better goal differential (plus-28, which almost doubles Vegas' plus-15) and a point total that would place them third in the pillow-fighting Pacific.

Of course, that's not to say Utah's first trip to the post-season will be easy. Far from it. Vegas has built its foundation on post-season success, missing the dance just once, playing in the Cup Final twice, and winning it all just three years ago.



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Utah's roster is brimming with breakout players ready for their first shot at the playoffs. Vegas is as star-studded as they come, with this year's group boasting one of the top playmakers in the NHL in Mitch Marner as the former Maple Leaf gets his first taste of playoff hockey not in blue and white. The Golden Knights also enter these playoffs with a new voice behind the bench after the surprising firing of Bruce Cassidy and the hiring of John Tortorella in his place. A 7-0-1 sprint since Tortorella took over quickly quieted doubters.

CF%

Will that continue in the playoffs, or will Utah steal the show?

GF%

Here's what you need to know about this first-round series.

xGF%

Head-to-head record

SV%

Golden Knights: 1-2-0

SH%

Mammoth: 2-1-0

Vegas

Golden Knights X-Factor: Mitch Marner

While his old team toiled through a disastrous season in Toronto, star winger Marner's fresh start in the desert has him playoff bound.

52.31

Marner closed out the season fifth on the team in goals (24) and second in both assists (56) and points (80) behind Jack Eichel. Those numbers are drops across the board compared to his days in Toronto, where last year he set career-highs in assists while hitting the 100-point milestone for the first time in his career. This isn't a knock, but rather a statement on Marner's use up and down Vegas' lineup and across all three forward positions. He's had a rotating cast of linemates all year, and has spent the bulk of his season suiting up not on the wing but at centre. It's easy to see why, considering Marner's elite defensive skillset and crafty takeaway capabilities, but the adjustments have meant less time for the forward to gel with linemates like he did so well in Toronto.

50.29

54.02 (5)

.890 (31)

How Tortorella deploys Marner in the post-season will have a massive impact on his team's playoff fate. And, rightly or wrongly, it will also play into Marner's post-season legacy, which has seen a star playmaker struggle to score in the playoffs. A fresh slate with Vegas could be the perfect ticket to turn that around.

9.35 (18)

Utah

Mammoth X-Factor: Karel Vejmelka

53.14 (4)

Like much of this roster, Karel Vejmelka is about to get his first taste of playoff hockey. And there's no easing into it — the 29-year-old is about to face a daunting collection of goal-scorers who know what it takes to win it all.

53.16 (10)

Vejmelka's regular-season stats show a netminder who ranks second league-wide in wins (38) but has struggled with consistency. His .897 save percentage and 2.75 goals-against average have him ranked in the twenties among NHL goalies. The Mammoth's playing style lends itself well to limiting opponents' scoring chances, which has eased the pressure on Vejmelka at times. Play that way, and they give their goalie a chance to shine.

52.68 (6)

.901 (21)

10.32 (7)

That the Golden Knights have their own big questions in net actually gives Utah the edge in this goalie matchup.

REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

In three starts against the Golden Knights, Vejmelka's won twice, including a 28-save shutout in their final meeting on March 19. His .947 save percentage against Vegas is the second-best by a goalie with two or more starts against the club this season, as is his 1.67 goals-against average. He might just have their number... but can he do it consistently across a best-of-seven series?

PP%

ADVANCED STATS

PK%

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

TEAM

GF/G



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GA/G

Vegas

24.6 (6)

81.4 (7)

3.22 (14)

2.95 (12)

Utah

20.0 (18)

78.1 (19)

3.27 (12)

2.93 (11)

VEGAS STORYLINES

1. Goalie questions plentiful for Golden Knights

In three regular-season meetings with the Golden Knights, the Mammoth have faced three different goaltenders. They chased Adin Hill early with three goals on three shots in their last meeting in March before Akira Schmid shut the door in relief. They scored three against Carl Lindbom in late November in what was a four-goal outing for Logan Cooley (including two empty-netters), and nine days before that, they managed just a single marker against Schmid in a loss.

Now, they're most likely about to face a fourth different face on Sunday in Carter Hart. With Hill looking lost of late, the club has leaned on Hart down the stretch and the netminder rewarded his team with a string of wins. His season numbers are a bit deceiving (2.71 GAA, .891 SV%) considering how well he's played in April. His save percentage dipped below .900 just once through his six-game win streak to close out the campaign.

Similar to Utah's story in net, the Golden Knights probably don't need Hart to steal the series, considering how strong the blue line is. Falter, though, and the Golden Knights could be in trouble.

2. How far can the new-coach bump take them?

Amid a rare wave of late-season firings and hirings in front offices and behind benches across the league was the eyebrow-raising decision to replace Stanley Cup-winning coach Cassidy with Tortorella. Known for his fiery ways, Tortorella immediately sparked change in Vegas, and the team responded down the stretch to clinch the division's top spot.

The two-time Jack Adams Award winner, and Stanley Cup champ with the Lightning back in 2004, has helped harness Vegas' strong defence and clearly revived a team that was starting to look stale. Can Tortorella keep his foot on the gas in the post-season?

3. Vegas has the edge on special teams, but are the numbers deceiving?

There's a clear advantage when it comes to power play and penalty kill in this series, and it belongs to Vegas. The Golden Knights boast top-10 numbers in both categories, which should factor pretty heavily into this series if they can keep that up.

Only... it's not that simple. Utah's slow start with the man advantage dragged down their season averages. Since Jan. 1, the Mammoth rank eighth in power-play success rate (24.8), which is on par with Vegas' numbers in the same time frame. Narrow the window even smaller, and you'll see a Utah club that's truly clicked to the tune of a 30.6 per cent PP since March 1 while Vegas' went in the opposite direction.

Penalty killing, though, still favours Vegas. The team has been remarkably consistent on that front all year, while Utah has struggled to find its footing short-handed.

UTAH STORYLINES

1. Another new chapter begins in Utah

Two years ago, the Arizona Coyotes were bidding their fans farewell in a rink made for college hockey. After a whirlwind summer that saw the franchise's front office and players move north to Salt Lake City with new ownership and a clean slate all around, the team introduced themselves to their new home fans, who fell in love with them instantly. Now, they're rewarding hockey's newest fanbase with their first taste of the playoffs.

This is an experienced blue line (more on that, below) but look across the forward group and you'll see this franchise-first playoff appearance is also a first for several budding stars. Experience counts for a lot in the post-season, but we've seen newbies upset the order plenty in this league — Vegas knows that better than most.

No matter how this series goes, it's cause for celebration in Utah. And when the setting shifts to Salt Lake City for Games 3 and 4, it'll be a special sight to see.

2. Can Guenther build on breakout?

His first season in Utah brought a breakout year on the stat sheet. His second saw him become the franchise's first-ever 40-goal scorer. Now, Dylan Guenther has an opportunity to put his stamp on the post-season, too. Utah's leader in goals (he's third in points, behind captain Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz) has a shot tailor-made for playoff hockey, and looks ready for yet another breakout on yet another new stage.

The 23-year-old Edmontonian sat out for Utah's final game of the regular season on Thursday night for undisclosed reasons. Whether that's injury related or simply rest is unclear, but if he's ready to go Sunday against Vegas he'll have an opportunity to set the pace and make his mark in the post-season.

3. Weegar takes on big role as two former Flames go head-to-head

The Golden Knights' all-in approach to contention struck again in January when they landed Flames defenceman Rasmus Andersson in a pre-deadline trade. Utah joined the party shortly after when they, too, partnered up with Calgary on the trade market, bringing in Mackenzie Weegar. Now, the two former teammates and sometimes-partners on Calgary's blue line are about to go head-to-head in the playoffs. And they'll both be doing some heavy lifting as they do.

Of the two, Weegar has the potential to make the biggest impact for his side as he suits up on the top pair alongside Mikhail Sergachev and adds some much-needed stability to this group, especially amid uncertainty around the injury status of Sean Durzi. It's a group that boasts plenty of experience compared to the young guys starring up front. Sergachev and Ian Cole both have two Stanley Cup rings. Nate Schmidt won one with Florida last year and made long runs with the Capitals and Golden Knights before that. Weegar went to the playoffs with Florida three times before joining the Flames and falling short of the post-season, but his



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role as a leader in Calgary carries him into a similar position in Utah. That veteran experience will serve this young team well.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Stars vs. Wild

Emily Sadler

Among the many takeaways from last week's final regular-season showdown between the Dallas Stars and Minnesota Wild, a 60-minute first-round series preview with home-ice advantage on the line, the biggest was this:

Yeah, we'll take seven of those, please.

The Stars and Wild have been on a collision course for a first-round bout for most of the 2025-26 campaign. As the Colorado Avalanche built up the best record in the Central — undoubtedly the NHL's Group of Death this year — they left their foes in Dallas and Minnesota to battle it out amongst themselves. And what a battle it will be.

In one corner, we have a squad newly free from its self-imposed salary cap handcuffs and ready to declare — through the historic signing of top winger Kirill Kaprizov in September, then the pre-Christmas blockbuster for Quinn Hughes less than three months later — that they're a Cup contender that's here to stay. Previous playoff berths haven't had much staying power, the club unable to advance beyond Round 1 in seven attempts since their last trip to Round 2 in 2015.

In the other corner is a team that's been to three straight Western Conference Finals — and suffered three straight defeats. The 2020 Stanley Cup runners-up are purpose-built to hoist the Cup, but it won't be an easy path for Dallas.

There's no shortage of elite talent in this matchup, with four of the league's top 10 goal-scorers — including three 45-goal-scorers in Minnesota's Kaprizov and Dallas' Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston — going head-to-head. But it's not just about the dynamic duos up front. This series also boasts some of the finest blue liners in the league, headlined by Hughes and Miro Heiskanen — two perennial Norris Trophy candidates who can set the pace from the back end. Special teams are a strength for both sides, as is goaltending. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find two rosters as evenly matched as these.

The Stars and Wild have twice gone head-to-head in the post-season, matching up in the first round in 2016 and 2023, with the Stars winning both series in six games.

This time around, both teams appear capable of long post-season runs... if only they can emerge from their division, that is.

Here's what you need to know about this first-round series that has all the makings of a seven-game classic.

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Dallas: 2-1-1

Minnesota: 2-2

Stars X-Factor: Jason Robertson

After being injured in the regular-season finale last year and missing Round 1 of the Stars' playoff run, it took a little time for Robertson to fully get up to speed upon his return. A hot streak of four goals in three games against Edmonton wasn't enough to propel the banged-up Stars past the

Oilers in the Western Conference Final, but it certainly left us wondering how the top forward might've fared with a little more runway. Playoff "what ifs" are starting to follow Robertson, whose regular-season scoring pace of more than a point per game tends to drop in the post-season.

This year, expectations are different. Robertson led Dallas's deep offence in regular-season points, with 96, while sharing the team lead in goals with Johnston (45). His production had him widely projected to make the U.S. Olympic roster, but Wild and Team USA general manager Bill Guerin left him off. A nicely-timed revenge tour would serve the winger well, considering it's also a contract year for the pending RFA who's just one year away from unrestricted free agency.

All eyes will be on Robertson and Johnston in Dallas, with comparisons to Minnesota's own dynamic duo of Kaprizov and Matt Boldy expected to be a major talking point throughout the series.

Adding to the importance of Robertson's role is the fact Dallas enters the post-season with injury questions yet again. Roope Hintz, sidelined since early March with a lower-body injury, will miss at least the first two games of Round 1.

Wild X-Factor: Quinn Hughes

As if the signing of Kaprizov to an historic extension in September didn't already send a loud-and-clear message about how serious the Wild are about icing a winning roster, the acquisition of Hughes left zero doubt.

Hughes has been a resounding success since his first game in Minnesota, and if the Wild are to finally break through the first round, the Norris candidate will figure front-and-centre. Minnesota is full of elite playmakers up and down the roster, but a player like Hughes has the power to elevate all aspects of a game — and a series. In two playoff runs with Vancouver, Hughes put up 26 points in 30 games. He's the kind of player who's built for the post-season, from logging marathon minutes (his 27:44 per game is a full three minutes more than the next-highest in time-on-ice) to starring on special teams and everything in between.

In a Central Division filled with elite talent on the blue line, the Wild's decision to go out and get one for themselves might just prove to be the difference if they're to finally make a real playoff run.

ADVANCED STATS

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

TEAM

CF%

GF%

xGF%

SV%

SH%

Stars

47.46 (27)



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55.19 (4)

79.8 (16)

50.94 (12)

3.27 (12)

.916 (7)

2.87 (4)

10.82 (4)

DALLAS STORYLINES

Wild

1. Is Oettinger up to the task?

48.24 (24)

When he's hot, Jake Oettinger is one of the top goalies in the league. And while his 35 wins on the season ranks him third league-wide, his save percentage doesn't exactly match. For the first time in his career, Oettinger finished a regular season below .900 — albeit, just barely. It's hard to know what to make of his .899 save rate on the season, which bumps up to .911 in even strength and down to .844 versus the power play.

51.38 (15)

At face value, we see a mark that's below his usual output. But zoom in, and we see a netminder who fared well against Minnesota this year. Among goalies who started at least three games against the Wild, Oettinger ranked first in both save percentage (.915) and goals-against average (2.73). His numbers took a hit in their last meeting, which saw him allow four goals on 31 shots, but he still got the win. He knows this team well.

51.43 (10)

.917 (5)

The 27-year-old enters the post-season on a hot streak of five straight victories, his save percentage in those wins perfect twice and below .900 in the others. He was streaky last post-season, especially against Edmonton in the Western Conference Final, which ended on a sour note when he was pulled less than eight minutes into the game following two goals on two shots. If he can find a middle ground against Minnesota, the Stars should have no concerns in the crease.

9.06 (23)

REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

2. After three straight trips to the Western Conference Final with Peter DeBoer, can Glen Gulutzan get them over the hump?

PP%

Last year's playoff run ended in heartbreak for the third straight time, but also some controversy stemming from the way then-head coach Pete DeBoer pulled Oettinger early in Dallas' must-win Game 5. DeBoer was fired shortly after the series, and while the goalie controversy wasn't cited as a reason, an overall desire for a fresh voice was.

PK%

GF/G

GM Jim Nill found that fresh voice in Glen Gulutzan, a second-time Stars coach whose first stint with Dallas 13 years ago lasted two seasons and served up plenty of lessons.

GA/G

Stars

While most of this roster remains the same as last year's, we're about to find out if Gulutzan can be the difference at the helm.

28.6 (2)

3. The injury bug strikes again

80.3 (12)

One year ago, injuries were the biggest story for the Stars as they embarked on their third straight run to the Western Conference Final. They'll have to overcome the injury bug once again if they're to go even further this time.

3.33 (9)

While things aren't as dire as one year ago, when Robertson was injured on the final day of the regular season, there's reason for concern when it comes to the status of Hintz and Heiskanen. Hintz, who suffered a lower-body injury against Colorado in early March, will miss at least the first two games. Heiskanen missed the final few games of the season but is expected to be ready for Game 1. The Stars know all too well what it's like to be without their star puck-moving rearguard and against a Minnesota squad as deep as the one they're about to face, they cannot afford to experience that again.

2.71 (2)

Wild

25.2 (3)

MINNESOTA STORYLINES

1. Which goalie gets the Game 1 nod?



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Between Filip Gustavsson (28-15-6, 2.69 GAA, .904 SV% in 49 starts) and Jesper Wallstedt (18-9-6, 2.61 GAA, .916 SV% in 33 starts), the Wild posted the league's second-highest team save percentage (.903) in the regular season. One of their greatest strengths through 82 games now becomes one of the biggest storylines ahead of game No. 83 — and during a pre-travel practice earlier this week, head coach John Hynes didn't tip his hand about who he'll tab to open the post-season.

The most likely scenario is that Gustavsson starts the series. The 27-year-old was the 1A option in the tandem throughout the regular season, and has had strong post-season showings. In 11 playoff starts, all with Minnesota, Gustavsson posted a solid 2.53 GAA and .917 SV%. Wallstedt, a rookie, has yet to appear in a playoff game. But while Gustavsson has the edge when it comes to experience, momentum may side with Wallstedt. He's allowed more than two goals just twice in 10 starts since returning from the NHL's Olympic break (where he suited up alongside Gustavsson for Team Sweden). Gustavsson, meanwhile, has put up uncharacteristic numbers down the stretch. He was playing some of his best hockey after returning home from Milan, but in the past month has posted save percentages below .900 nine times — including his final three starts of the regular season.

2. Take it away, Kaprizov

Hughes is our X-Factor, but Kaprizov holds the keys when it comes to our excitement about this series. We saw last year just how effectively he can grab hold of a playoff game. Against Vegas in the first round last spring, Kaprizov potted five goals and nine points in six games. That his campaign was cut short by the Golden Knights' claiming of the series felt like a loss for hockey fans everywhere, eager to see him continue to heat up.

While Kaprizov is far from the only offensive superstar in this series, he's the biggest offensive driver out there. He's also undoubtedly the highest paid, once his historic extension is on the books this summer. In the meantime, he's got a prime opportunity to show everyone why he's worth every penny of that new deal as he ushers the Wild into their next chapter of contention.

3. Can Minnesota power-play its way through Dallas?

When you have two teams as evenly matched as the Stars and Wild, special teams could be all the difference. But even those are nearly identical: Dallas and Minnesota rank second and third, respectively, in power play percentage this season, with penalty-kill numbers also not offering up much difference.

The addition of Hughes bodes well for Minnesota's ability to harness some PP magic in the post-season. We've already seen just that, with the defender helping raise the club's success rate up to 28 per cent from Jan. 1 onwards.

Against Dallas this season, Minnesota's power play has had a success rate of 35.7 per cent, compared to the Stars' 44.4 per cent against the Wild. Considering how rough things got in these clubs' final regular-season showdown, and the mutual dislike already long brewing between these franchises, we could see the series won or lost on the power of the man advantage.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Series Preview: Oilers vs. Ducks

Rory Boylen

While hockey fans at large are breathing a sigh of relief to not have to see a first-round series between Edmonton and Los Angeles for a fifth straight season, we can't help but wonder if that would have been the easier matchup than the one the Oilers ended up with.

The Anaheim Ducks have been rebuilding for years and are just now getting back into the playoffs led by the young group of players they've been developing. The front office has done well to surround those early-20s players with many veterans, and Joel Quenneville's coaching has turned Anaheim into one of the more dynamic offences in the league, and the Ducks into a team you want to watch play.

Maybe it's still early in Anaheim's timeline for them to pull out an upset of such a significant Stanley Cup contender, but they won't be a pushover either. In some ways, this version of the Ducks is a reminder of what the Oilers used to be the last time these two teams met in the playoffs.

In 2017 the Ducks won the regular season Pacific Division title, and in Round 2 knocked out Edmonton, the Pacific's runner-up, in a tense seven-game series. At the time the Ducks still had championship hopes and were still led by the old core of Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry. The Oilers, on the other hand, had sophomore Connor McDavid and third-year NHLer Leon Draisaitl leading them.

Now the Oilers are the older team in a must-win mentality, while the young Ducks have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Here's how their first-round series breaks down.

Head-to-head record

Edmonton: 2-1-0

Anaheim: 1-2-0

Oilers X-Factor: When will Leon Draisaitl be ready?

With two of the NHL's top five players on their roster, the Oilers have been carried by Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl to back-to-back Stanley Cup Finals. In the past two playoffs, Draisaitl's 64 points in 47 post-season games is second only to McDavid's 75, but the German has been Edmonton's top producer on the power play in that time. In last year's final, Draisaitl was Edmonton's leader in points (8) and goals (4) in the six-game defeat.

But his availability for the start of this year's playoffs is still, as of this writing, a mystery. Draisaitl missed the last 14 games of Edmonton's regular season (they went 8-4-2 without him, 3-3-2 against playoff teams) and though he has been on the ice skating again, coach Kris Knoblauch still called him "day-to-day" but that he anticipated Draisaitl joining them some time in Round 1.

One of the biggest challenges Edmonton has had with getting through the playoffs and, especially, against the Panthers the past two years, was finding enough scoring from the rest of the forward group. The big two forwards can be counted on for their individual contributions, and they tend to also help their line mates produce as well. But past that, depth scoring has been a challenge.

Without Draisaitl, that reliable depth gets a little thinner and will put more pressure on his line mates to produce without him. If he returns for Game 1 this might be a non-issue -- though we'll see how banged up he still might be -- but the longer this series goes without Draisaitl, the more of an advantage it could be for the Ducks.

Ducks X-Factor: Will size play a difference?

Yes, the Ducks have a disadvantage when it comes to experience as a unit compared to the Oilers. This is a team that hasn't played a post-season game since 2018 and they have a very young core group -- none of their top five scorers have a single game of playoff experience.



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But this is a team that won't get pushed around. There are some very physical veteran players here, from Chris Kreider to Alex Killorn, Jacob Trouba and Radko Gudas, but even their younger players have a lot of mass. Cutter Gauthier, Leo Carlsson and Beckett Sennecke are all six-foot-two or six-foot-three and will be a handful. As a team, the Ducks were the second-heaviest group in the NHL this season, and 10th in average height.

They play very fast and frantic hockey, which lends itself to a "fun-to-watch" offensive style, but the size they have allows them to get through to the hard areas of the ice for scoring chances, a key component to playoff success. At five-on-five this season, the Ducks created the fourth-most high danger chances, per Natural Stat Trick.

In talking with our scout Jason Bukala, he believes this size factor could be a potentially dangerous one for the Oilers to handle in this series. While Anaheim's loose defence might be exposed by Edmonton's offence, the Ducks might have the bodies to wear down the Oilers, too. Sennecke, Gauthier and Carlsson lead a young, big and strong group of power forward types, and they'll be hungry to establish themselves on the playoff stage.

ADVANCED STATS

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

TEAM

CF%

GF%

xGF%

SV%

SH%

Oilers

50.28 (12)

48.07 (20)

51.36 (11)

.890 (32)

9.18 (21)

Ducks

52.35 (6)

47.37 (23)

50.77 (13)

.893 (29)

8.88 (25)

Regular Season Stats

TEAM

PP%

PK%

GF/G

GA/G

Oilers

30.6 (1)

77.8 (20)

3.44 (6)

3.23 (25)

Ducks

18.6 (23)

76.4 (26)

3.23 (13)

3.51 (29)

EDMONTON STORYLINES

1. Is Connor Ingram going to deliver consistent, No. 1 goalie performances?

Stuart Skinner got the lion's share of starts in the past two years as Edmonton went to back-to-back finals, but he was also inconsistent and had to be spelled by backup Calvin Pickard more times than the Oilers would have preferred. GM Stan Bowman looked at upgrading the position last summer and couldn't find anything, but the one small move



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(at the time) he did make was to acquire Connor Ingram from Utah in a salary dump.

Ingram was not in the plans at the start of the season, beginning in the AHL as the organization's third-stringer. He was still not in the plans when Edmonton traded away Skinner and acquired Tristan Jarry to be his replacement. But an injury to Jarry first opened up an opportunity for Ingram in December and January, and Jarry's on-ice struggles afterwards put Ingram in a position to take the No. 1 job. By the time the Olympic break had ended, Ingram was atop the depth chart.

So, this is where we are. Edmonton's pre-season third-string goalie is now their playoff No. 1. Ingram has a .901 save percentage since late February with a 2.55 GAA and in his last seven regular season starts he allowed more than two goals against just once. Ingram's only playoff experience was with the Predators in 2022 in the "waste of seven days" series against Colorado in which he went 0-3 in three starts.

Can he help the Oilers finish what Skinner couldn't?

2. Could Evan Bouchard win the Norris and Conn Smythe?

Evan Bouchard has been a beast of a playoff player for the Oilers the past two springs. In 2024 his 26 assists set a new record for a defenceman in a single playoff run, and he was second among all scorers with 32 points. Last season he was again better than a point per game player in the post-season. Now we expect him to have a monster playoff again.

This regular season Bouchard led all NHL defenceman with 95 points, finishing 14 points clear of No. 2 Zach Werenski. That will certainly put Bouchard in consideration for the Norris Trophy, which is full of great candidates this year. Voting on that award will be completed before the playoffs start.

If Edmonton does make it to a third straight Stanley Cup Final, Bouchard will have to be a big part of that, and we could be talking about him as a Conn Smythe candidate two months from now. Could he become the fourth defenceman to win the Norris and Conn Smythe in the same season?

3. Connor McDavid's legacy and Oilers future

Edmonton's captain has made it clear what his desires are, and it's pretty simple: he wants to be winning Stanley Cups. He and the Oilers nearly did that in 2024 and 2025, but now have to start that demanding journey all over again and if they don't get all the way through this time, the clock will be ticking on his contract, and the questions will be asked all over again: Does he think he can win in Edmonton, and will he stick around past the end of his current contract?

McDavid is currently in the last year of his eight-year contract, but signed a two-year extension in October that could keep him in place through the 2026-27 and 2027-28 seasons. But there is no guarantee he'll make it through that. While Edmonton has been oh so close to winning, if there are steps back this season and next, the Oilers might have to begin thinking about an exit plan. That would be the underlying concern here.

But, let's not worry for now. While the regular season had its ups and downs and the path through the Western Conference is not so easy, the Oilers can at least know the team that beat them in the past two finals will not be waiting for them again in 2026. Edmonton seemed to be getting better all-around play as the regular season wound down and might be hitting their peak at the right time. McDavid will be as motivated as ever with how close he's come two years in a row, and with Olympic disappointment fresh in his mind. Could we be about to experience an all-time playoff from this generation's greatest player, and at the end of it will Edmonton be celebrating his crowning moment?

ANAHEIM STORYLINES

1. Can Lukas Dostal steal a series?

There is going to be a lot of pressure on Anaheim's goalie in this series. Not only are the defensively-loose Ducks running against a good five-on-five offence, they're also facing the league's best power play. In all situations this season, the Ducks ranked 29th in expected goals against and 27th in high danger chances allowed, per Natural Stat Trick. While Dostal does have the potential to steal games, can he steal an entire series against such a polished opponent?

In his last six regular-season starts Dostal allowed 23 goals and had an .836 save percentage -- and only one of those opponents was a playoff team. This will also be his first taste of Stanley Cup Playoffs action.

2. Is special teams going to be too much of a problem?

Keying in further on the Ducks' penalty kill vs. Edmonton's power play, this could be a real sore spot for Anaheim as they had the third-worst PK among all playoff teams. Meantime, Edmonton became just the second team since 1980 to finish a regular season with a power-play percentage of at least 30. The only other team to do it in that time? The 2022-23 Oilers, whose 32.4 per cent success rate set a new all-time record.

The Ducks like to play with some edge, too, but that can come at a cost. Only three other NHL teams were shorthanded more times than the Ducks this season and while playing on that line is welcomed in the playoffs, crossing it too many times could undo Anaheim in this matchup.

3. The Radko Gudas effect

In the headlines for two injury-inducing hits this season -- one on Sidney Crosby at the Olympics, and one that ended Auston Matthews' season in NHL play -- Gudas is a player to take note of when he's on the ice. In the playoffs, he might get away with a little more than in the regular season, and even if it came to another suspension, those also tend to be shorter in the playoffs. But he doesn't need to go that far to have an impact.

Gudas will be noticeably physical and one knock could turn this series on a dime. Will he be a major storyline in this series, or can the Oilers work around him enough to nullify his impact?

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1387834 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.



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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%

SH%

Hurricanes

59.78 (1)

53.49 (8)

55.89 (2)

.895 (26)

8.89 (24)

Senators

52.85 (5)

53.49 (8)

54.54 (3)

.893 (27)

9.96 (12)



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REGULAR SEASON STATS

TEAM

PP%

PK%

GF/G

GA/G

Hurricanes

24.9 (4)

80.5 (11)

3.55 (2)

2.88 (7)

Senators

24.0 (8)

75.7 (29)

3.35 (8)

2.99 (13)

CAROLINA STORYLINES

1. Can they keep their streak of first-round series wins going?

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.

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.

2. Will enough offensive difference makers step up this year?

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.

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.

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.

3. Will they be able to put up with, and fight through, Ottawa's physical game?

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 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



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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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1387835 Websites

TSN.CA / NHL playoff preview: First round in the Western Conference

Travis Yost

The Stanley Cup Playoffs have arrived, and with that comes eight incredible first-round matchups to analyze in this space.

We previewed the Eastern Conference action on Wednesday. Today, we turn to the Western Conference, which took until the final day of the regular season to wrap up.

[1] Colorado Avalanche vs. [WC2] Los Angeles Kings

Yost1 Yost

What to Know: The Colorado Avalanche coasted through another stress-free regular season, tearing up the Western Conference en route to another Presidents' Trophy. A roster teeming with star power, the Avalanche are unquestionably in "Stanley Cup or bust" mode and will begin their quest for a fourth Stanley Cup against a Los Angeles Kings team with heaps of playoff experience – and heaps of problems across the lineup.

The Colorado advantage: You can look at this two ways. The first is that any optimism on the Kings' side really is about one month of hockey because this Kings team struggled all season long. We are talking about a team that ended the year with a -22 goal differential and just 22 regulation wins, tied with the Chicago Blackhawks for 30th in the NHL. But more compelling is the reality of what this Avalanche team is, and that's a hockey juggernaut. It's a freakish combination of top-end star power through guys like Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar, backstopped by incredible depth, that allows the Avalanche to comfortably roll four lines and three pairings and makes Jared Bednar's team so deadly. The average Colorado game saw them winning by 1.2 goals; six players (including MacKinnon and Makar, plus Martin Necas, Brock Nelson, Artturi Lehkonen, and Parker Kelly) scored 20 or more goals; the Avalanche goaltending group finished with a 90.8 stop rate, easily best in the NHL. There are no shortage of metrics that highlight how daunting of a matchup this will be for the Kings, and it's why oddsmakers have priced Colorado as an 84 per cent favourite to advance in Round 1, way ahead of any other favourite.

The Los Angeles advantage: It's important to recognize this Kings team is not the same team we saw in the earlier parts of the year. Since turfing head coach Jim Hillier on March 1, Los Angeles is sixth in even-strength goal differential (56 per cent goal share), and it's in large part due to a coaching decision made by D.J. Smith to load up his top line. Since acquiring Artemi Panarin from the New York Rangers in early February, Panarin, Kempe, and Kopitar have played 330 minutes together at even strength, and to devastating effect. From a talent perspective, it is on the

short list of one of the best lines you will find in hockey – elite defensive play down the middle of the ice by way of Kopitar, with two wingers in Panarin and Kempe who are wizards at generating offence from between the circles. Colorado will have its hand full with this group.

Player to WATCH: This may not have been goaltender Darcy Kuemper's best season, but he is exactly the type of veteran goalie you want in a series where you know you are undermanned. And he's a goalie Colorado knows well – it was Kuemper who manned the net for the Stanley Cup-winning Avalanche in 2022, stopping 90.2 per cent of shots faced over the 16-game run.

Pick: This Kings team may be a bit better than what their full-season numbers indicate, but I think they're in a world of trouble in this matchup. Of note, the aggregate score during their regular-season matchups was 13-5 in favour of Colorado. Avalanche in five.

[1] Vegas Golden Knights vs. [WC1] Utah Mammoth

Yost2 Yost

What to know: The Vegas Golden Knights won the Pacific Division title for the fifth time in nine seasons in what can only be described as a "down year" for the organization, which even included a shocking late-season coaching firing. Vegas has been one of the most reliably dominant teams since entering the league in the 2017-18 season through the expansion draft, and their roster is absolutely loaded with playoff experience. They'll be put to the test in the opening round, drawing a dangerous upstart Utah Mammoth club.

The Vegas advantage: There is an argument Vegas has the best special teams in the NHL; it's what kept them afloat in an otherwise trying regular season. On the power play, you have three players with hockey IQ pouring out of their ears – Jack Eichel, Mark Stone, and Mitch Marner are on the short list of best playmakers in the game, combining for a whopping 64 assists there. But you also need finishers, and they have two of them in Pavel Dorofeyev and Tomas Hertl, who combined for 33 goals on the man advantage. Marner, Stone, and Eichel just so happen to be elite defensive players as well. You'll see them regularly on the penalty kill, typically backstopped by Brayden McNabb and Noah Hanifin. Given the personnel, their outperformance on special teams is sustainable, and a series with a lot of penalties called will undeniably play to Vegas' favour.

The Utah advantage: If the Golden Knights have been known for one thing over the past decade, it's an unrelenting forecheck that breaks down even the best playoff teams over the course of a seven-game series. But in this series, there is no doubt who the better even-strength team is, and that's the Mammoth. Andre Tourigny's team finished with the fourth-best scoring offence there (2.9 goals per 60), and seventh-best goal differential (+0.45 goals per 60, tied with the Carolina Hurricanes) in the process. What's scary about this group is they are fast, deep, and come in waves. Clayton Keller's playmaking (60 assists; 14th in the NHL) turned Nick Schmaltz and Lawson Crouse into dangerous attackers on the top line. Then they come off, and you deal with the dynamic duo of Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther – the latter so electric this year he crossed the 40-goal threshold. And remember, no defensive pairing in the NHL had more success than veteran staples in Nate Schmidt and John Marino, outscoring opponents 62 to 33 (+29) when deployed.

Player to WATCH: I'm watching the Vegas crease, in general. The biggest reason the Golden Knights struggled this year was because of shockingly poor goaltending. Adin Hill had a disastrous season (87.1 per cent stop rate), and Carter Hart (89 per cent stop rate) wasn't much better. The best netminder of the group may have been journeyman Akira Schmid (89.3 per cent stop rate; +8 goals saved versus expected). I expect Hart to be given the starter's net to open the series, but this may be a game-to-game experience.



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Pick: This is the hardest pick of the eight first-round series for me. Vegas' playoff experience cannot be discounted, but I've believed in this Utah team all season long and I can't stop here. Mammoth in seven.

[2] Edmonton Oilers vs. [3] Anaheim Ducks

Yost3 Yost

What to know: It's been a difficult season in Edmonton to say the least – the goaltending position remains of major concern, the lineup is still missing superstar Leon Draisaitl, and they were moments away from being pushed into a gauntlet of a first-round series against the Avalanche until the final day of the regular season. And yet, the Oilers still have the best player in the world at the top of their lineup and a viable path to a third consecutive Stanley Cup Final. It starts against a plucky Anaheim Ducks team returning to the playoffs for the first time since the 2017-18 season.

The Edmonton advantage: With or without Draisaitl in the fold (he's rumoured to return at some point in the next two weeks), is there a belief Anaheim can stop this turbo-charged Edmonton attack? The Oilers enter this series with, once again, the league's best power play – Edmonton scored nearly 12 goals per 60 minutes on the man advantage this year, almost double the effectiveness of Anaheim. And they torched this Anaheim team over three games in the regular season, amassing a whopping 16 goals in the process.

The Anaheim advantage: There is a meaningful goaltending disparity between the two sides here. The aggregated numbers for Anaheim understate how solid starter Lukas Dostal was over the course of the year. In 55 appearances, Dostal was 26 goals better than a replacement-level goaltender, stopping 89.0 per cent of shots faced in the process. For baseline purposes, that performance is on par with that of Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck. He has also been fantastic in games against this very Edmonton team; in six starts over the last two seasons, Dostal's been five goals better than expected, stopping 90.0 per cent of Oilers shots in the process. Of equal importance: the Oilers goaltending situation is on shaky ground at best. Stuart Skinner started the year poorly, culminating in a trade to acquire Tristan Jarry from Pittsburgh, who somehow was worse (85.8 per cent stop rate). That's paved the way for Connor Ingram to take over Edmonton's net. He's done an admirable job picking up the slack, but he's a journeyman with very limited playoff experience, and at this point a wild card for the Oilers. Anaheim must like the goaltending head-to-head in this series.

Player to WATCH: Draisaitl's return may be around the corner, but Zach Hyman is back, and that's a huge deal for this Oilers team. Hyman amassed 31 goals in 58 games, but more importantly has established chemistry with McDavid.

Pick: Edmonton in six; their goaltending situation remains a question mark, but I have faith in the Oilers' big guns to overwhelm Anaheim here.

[2] Dallas Stars vs. [3] Minnesota Wild

Yost4 Yost

What to know: If it seems like this matchup has been in the cards for months, well, it has, and you can thank the NHL's bizarre playoff format. Minnesota and Dallas have been two of the NHL's best teams all season long, but because they happen to play in the same division (and one occupied by the Presidents' Trophy-winning Colorado Avalanche), their fate in the two-versus-three series was inevitable back in December. Both teams earned an easier path, but that's moot at this point.

The Dallas advantage: Minnesota is an elite defensive team, but the Stars have shown they are among the NHL's best at creating dangerous scoring chances. What the Dallas attack lacks in volume (20th in scoring chance rates, 32nd in shot differential) it more than makes up in conversion rates; no team carried a higher shooting percentage this season than Dallas (13 per cent), owing in large part to their ability to

create pressure from the inside slot and near the net mouth. What makes this work is having two elite finishers in Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston, who combined for 88 goals this season.

The Minnesota advantage: This Minnesota power play is one of the few units in the league that could crack Dallas' stifling defensive play; the Wild finished the year fourth in rate scoring and are second-best since the turn of the calendar year, averaging 11.6 goals per 60 minutes. Dallas' penalty kill is nothing to sneeze at, but they're going to have to figure out a way of dealing with the two-headed monster of Kirill Kaprizov and Matt Boldy, who have combined for 30 power play goals alone this season.

Player to WATCH: This is an easy one – it's Quinn Hughes. Perhaps the most prolific offensive defenceman in the league, Hughes has taken so much of the puck-carrying pressure off the forward group, and it's showing in the numbers. Minnesota's averaged 3.7 goals per 60 minutes of even-strength play with Hughes on. For baseline purposes, the Avalanche averaged 3.3 goals per 60 minutes this season.

Pick: I like the upset potential here. Minnesota in seven.

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1387836 Websites

TSN.CA / Safe sport code can be applied to historic abuse, court says

Rick Westhead

An Ontario court has ruled that Canada's national safe sport code can be applied to alleged misconduct that occurred years before the rules were formally enacted, a decision with significant implications for how abuse cases in sport are investigated and sanctioned.

In a decision released by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice on March 27, Justice Charles Hackland dismissed an appeal by figure skating coach Tyler Myles, who had sought to overturn an arbitration ruling that allowed the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) to be applied to allegations dating back to 2005.

The decision is likely to have wide-reaching implications across Canadian sport. Since 2022, the UCCMS has formed the backbone of the country's safe sport system, with national organizations required to adopt it and athletes and coaches required to consent to its terms.

By confirming that the code can be used to assess historical allegations, the ruling reinforces the ability of investigators and regulators to examine past conduct, particularly in cases involving serious abuse, even if those incidents occurred long before the current system was put in place.

Myles's case stems from a complaint filed on Feb. 20, 2023, with the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC).

An independent investigation found Myles, who was based in Alberta, engaged in misconduct involving underage athletes nearly two decades earlier, including providing alcohol, exposing them to pornography and sharing a bed with them.

The investigator also concluded Myles attempted to interfere with the OSIC investigation by coercing witnesses to provide false testimony.

Based on those findings, the OSIC's director of sanctions and outcomes declared Myles permanently ineligible to participate in Skate Canada-sanctioned events, effectively ending his coaching career.



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Myles challenged that decision through arbitration at the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC), arguing that the UCCMS, which was introduced by the federal government in 2022 to streamline codes of conduct throughout amateur sport, should not apply to conduct that occurred before its existence.

Arbitrator Peter Lawless ruled the code could be applied, finding its primary purpose is to protect participants in sport, not to punish past behaviour.

That conclusion was the central issue before the court.

In his ruling, Justice Hackland upheld the arbitrator's reasoning, finding no error in law. The court concluded that the UCCMS is a "forward-looking" framework designed to safeguard athletes and the sporting public, meaning it can examine historical conduct if doing so serves a protective purpose.

The decision relies heavily on established legal principles around retroactivity. While Canadian law generally presumes that new rules should not apply to past actions, there is a key exception when legislation or regulatory frameworks are aimed at protecting the public.

Justice Hackland found that exception applied in this case.

"The UCCMS is a code designed to ensure the protection of the sporting public," the ruling states, echoing the arbitrator's conclusion that the code is not primarily punitive but preventative in nature.

The court also pointed to the contractual structure underpinning Canada's safe sport system. National sport organizations, including Skate Canada, were required to adopt the UCCMS as a condition of federal funding. Participants, including coaches, signed consent forms agreeing to be bound by the code, language the court found broad enough to include historical conduct.

The ruling emphasized the type of behaviour alleged in this case – sexual misconduct involving minors – was never acceptable, regardless of when it occurred.

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