



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

The News & Observer

Carolina Hurricanes know who they'll play in second round of NHL playoffs

By: Justin Pelletier, Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) swept their first-round NHL playoff series against the Ottawa Senators, though some might say “survive” is a more apropos descriptor based on the level of physicality the teams displayed, despite the lopsided series score.

Now, the Canes will face an opponent that has given them fits all season, one that has a longtime reputation of physicality. With a 1-0 overtime win in Game 6 over the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Philadelphia Flyers have advanced to the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs and will face the Hurricanes.

During the regular season, all four games between the Canes and Flyers went to overtime. Carolina won once in OT — Seth Jarvis with the winner — and twice in a shootout

before losing in a shootout in the teams' fourth meeting of the season, on April 13.

The Canes and Flyers played a home-and-home Dec. 13-14 — first in Philadelphia, then in Raleigh. The Canes won both in shootouts, Jackson Blake and then Andrei Svechnikov getting the shootout-winning goals.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Taylor Hall each scored twice in games against the Flyers this season for Carolina.

This will mark the first playoff meeting between the teams in their franchise histories. The Canes, who started as the Hartford Whalers, are 63-74-30 all time against Philly in 167 games played.

Recently, the Hurricanes have had more success against the Flyers. Over the past 10 NHL seasons, Carolina is 24-9-3 against Philadelphia, and 16-2-1 in the past five seasons.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026



Series preview: Hurricanes get upstart Flyers in Round 2 | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes waited four days, but they finally have their second round opponent.

Carolina will face the Flyers after Philadelphia defeated the Penguins in overtime of Wednesday's Game 6 of their series to eliminate Pittsburgh and advance to the second round for the first time since 2020.

With several series still undecided, the NHL has not yet released when Carolina's series with Philadelphia will begin, but one thing we do know is Games 1 and 2 will be at Lenovo Center.

The Hurricanes went 3-0-1 against the Flyers this season, but none of the games was decided in regulation.

Seth Jarvis' overtime goal in Carolina's second game of the season earned the Hurricanes a 4-3 win Oct. 11. In an old-school home-and-home series Dec. 13-14, Carolina picked up a pair of shootout wins. Then in the penultimate game of the season, the Flyers punched their ticket to the postseason with a shootout win against a Hurricanes roster featuring several AHL call-ups.

Now the stakes are different. After dispatching the Senators in four straight in a series many thought would end with an Ottawa upset, the Hurricanes will be big favorites against the upstart Flyers.

The forwards

The effectiveness of the Taylor Hall-Logan Stankoven-Jackson Blake line was known by the fans and followers of the Hurricanes. Now the rest of the hockey world is catching on.

Stankoven led Carolina with four goals — one in each game — and Hall had a team-high seven points in the first round. In all, the trio had seven of the Hurricanes' 11 goals and 16 of the team's 32 points.

That also means Carolina didn't get much from its other lines, including the top line of Sebastian Aho centering Andrei Svechnikov and Jarvis.

"That line got diddly-squat this whole series," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said after Game 4 of the Ottawa series of his top line. "So that's a positive. Thankfully, their top line, they kind of canceled each other out. But that's a good sign that we can get through a team like that and those guys weren't really a factor. So we know moving on they're going to have to be, and they will."

The status of Nikolaj Ehlers, who missed Game 4 against the Senators with a lower-body injury, is certainly something

worth watching. When Ehlers is in the lineup, Carolina's checking line has a dynamic offensive player. When he's not, Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook are joined by William Carrier and bring a heavier — and less offensive — look.

While the Hurricanes were leaning on the Stankoven line in Round 1, the Flyers went with a Carolina-esque balanced attack. Philadelphia's 16 goals in the first round came from 14 different scorers. Only one forward — rookie Porter Martone, who has all of 15 games of professional experience — had multiple goals against the Penguins.

Philadelphia's top two scorers in the regular season were Travis Konecny (27 goals, 68 points) and Trevor Zegras (26 goals, 67 points), and Owen Tippett's 28 goals led the team. The Flyers leaned into their depth in the first round and will need to again to match Carolina, which ranked second in the league in goals in the regular season.

Philadelphia has four forwards who are 22 or younger, and the team gives off a bit of a "don't know they're not supposed to be this good" vibe, but Carolina is deeper and more experienced.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

The defense

It was good news for the Hurricanes on Wednesday that Alexander Nikishin — who suffered a concussion in Saturday's Game 4 win in Ottawa — was on the ice in a no-contact jersey at the team's practice.

Carolina's defense showed what it could do against the Senators. K'Andre Miller led the Hurricanes' blue line with three assists, and he and partner Sean Walker were not on the ice for a goal against during the sweep of Ottawa. The pairing of Jaccob Slavin and Jalen Chatfield quieted Tim Stutzle all series.

The one concern would be offensive production. Outside of Miller's three points, Carolina's defense had two points — one each for Chatfield and Walker. Shayne Gostisbehere was kept off the scoresheet, the first time this season he went four consecutive games without a point. He and Nikishin, however, handled their sheltered minutes and should get more opportunities against an opponent that is not as buttoned-up defensively. Gostisbehere also seems to relish playing against his former team.

The Hurricanes had four blueliners eclipse 30 points in the regular season, while the Flyers had two. Travis Sanheim logs more than 24 minutes for coach Rick Tocchet and led all Philadelphia D with 11 goals and 37 points. Jamie Drysdale is the other. While Drysdale's time in Philly will always be weighed against the player he was traded for, Ducks' 41-goal



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scorer Cutter Gauthier, the 24-year-old has offensive potential (eight goals, 32 points) that isn't yet fully tapped.

Cam York, who scored the OT winner to eliminate Pittsburgh, is another undersized defender who makes up for it with skating and smarts. Rasmus Ristolainen, playing in the playoffs for the first time in his 13-season career, is known mostly for his size and physicality, but he led all Flyers' players with five points in the first round.

Nick Seeler is a veteran stay-at-home defender whose decent underlying numbers this season were undone by a low save percentage when he was on the ice. Noah Juulsen and Emil Andrae both saw the ice in Round 1. Andrae, if fully healthy, may be a better choice against Carolina due to his ability to move the puck.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

The goalies

Dan Vladar and Frederik Andersen have arguably been the two best goalies so far in the playoffs. Andersen's performance against the Senators is well documented: He allowed five goals on 110 shots, just three at 5-on-5. Vladar is the reason Philadelphia reached the postseason. The longtime backup seized the starting job and went 29-12-11 in the regular season, and only Andersen's 7.6 goals saved above expected in the first round is more than Vladar's 6.9.

The 58 games Vladar has played so far this season are more than he did in the past two seasons combined, but he didn't seem to be worn down against the Penguins, posting a .937 save percentage and two shutouts. Interestingly, Philadelphia had no shutouts in the regular season.

Andersen has the higher ceiling and substantially more experience, while Vladar is playing the best hockey of his career this season. This is a close call, but Vladar faced more than 30 shots 12 times during the regular season and will likely see that many each game of Round 2. How he holds up to that kind of onslaught will determine who wins the goalie battle.

Advantage: Slight Carolina edge

Special teams

Neither team will be thrilled with how their power plays performed in the first round. Both scored twice, with Philadelphia going 2 for 17 and Carolina finishing 2 for 15. The difference is that was par for the course this season for the Flyers, who finished last in the league at 15.7%. The Hurricanes, meanwhile, ranked fourth in the league at 24.9%. That's the difference between scoring once on every four power plays vs. once every six chances.

Carolina also holds the penalty killing edge. The Hurricanes killed 80.5% of their penalties in the regular season and were nearly perfect in the first round, allowing Ottawa to score once on 21 chances (95.2%). The Flyers ranked tied for 21st during the regular season at 77.6% and were slightly better in the first round — Philadelphia allowed three goals on 19 chances (84.2%).

Special teams can turn on a dime in the playoffs, but the Hurricanes enter the series with the better units.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

Overview

The Flyers aren't here by accident. Philadelphia closed strong in the regular season, winning six of seven down the stretch to steal a playoff spot, and jumped on the Penguins for a 3-0 series lead before finishing them off in six games.

On paper and in reality, however, the Hurricanes are big favorites. Carolina is the better team in all facets, and the Hurricanes are a battle-tested playoff team. Carolina got a tough opponent in the first round and tossed them aside in four games. Philadelphia isn't on Ottawa's level, so a lot will need to go right for the Flyers to have a chance. It could happen, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Prediction: Hurricanes in 5



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026



Canes To Face Flyers In Round 2 Of 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs

By: Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

Schedule to be released in the coming days

RALEIGH, N.C. - With Round 1 in the rearview, the Carolina Hurricanes will take on a Metro Division foe in Round 2 of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The Philadelphia Flyers (M3) are the Canes' (M1) next opponent, having defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins (M2) in six games during their first-round matchup. Carolina went 3-0-1 against Philadelphia this season, with every contest requiring either overtime or a shootout.

This will be the first playoff battle between the Hurricanes/Whalers and the Flyers. The series will start in Raleigh (date TBD) as the Hurricanes own home-ice advantage throughout the Eastern Conference portion of the playoffs.

2025-26 Regular Season Meetings...

October 11: Seth Jarvis scored in overtime and 10 different skaters recorded a point as the Canes topped the Flyers 4-3 at Lenovo Center.

December 13: Carolina erased a two-goal deficit and held strong in a shootout, knocking off the Flyers 4-3 at Xfinity Mobile Arena.

December 14: For the second night in a row, the Canes took down the Flyers in a shootout, this time by a 3-2 final in Raleigh.

April 13: Missing several lineup regulars toward the end of the regular season, the Canes picked up a crucial point in Philadelphia to secure the top seed in the Eastern Conference despite a 3-2 shootout loss.

Living Loud At Lenovo...

Round 2 tickets are on sale now!

To be the first to know when tickets drop throughout the postseason, text "TICKETS26" to (919) 705-0896.

A full schedule with exact dates and times will be released by the NHL in the coming days.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hurricanes coach is hopeful Ehlers and Nikishin will be ready for Round 2 of NHL playoffs | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour is hopeful that winger Nikolaj Ehlers and defenseman Alexander Nikishin will be ready for Round 2 of the NHL playoffs with extra time off to recover from injuries.

The Eastern Conference's top seed closed out a first-round sweep of Ottawa on Saturday, though Ehlers was a late scratch with a lower-body injury. Nikishin was knocked from the second period with a concussion on a jarring hit from Tyler Kleven, leaving Nikishin prone on the ice and struggling to get back to his feet.

The Hurricanes were the first team to advance to Round 2 and next face the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh winner. The Flyers won the first three games, but the Penguins have extended the series to Wednesday's Game 6.

Neither Ehlers nor Nikishin skated with the team returning to practice Tuesday, though there's clearly no need to rush them back. Afterward, Brind'Amour said "everything's trending in the right direction" on Nikishin.

Veteran forward William Carrier took Ehlers' spot on the third line in Game 4, while Nicolas Deslauriers got his first playoff action since 2022 in taking Carrier's spot in a testy Game 4 with multiple scrums.

As for the blue liners, veteran Mike Reilly played 42 regular-season games to help the Hurricanes play through the absence of top defenseman Jaccob Slavin for much of the schedule, and is the team's seventh defenseman.

Additionally, Carolina called up defenseman prospect Charles Alexis Legault — a 22-year-old fifth-round draft pick from the 2023 draft — from the American Hockey League to work with the team.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

The Hockey News

Carolina Hurricanes To Face Philadelphia Flyers In Second Round

By: Ryan Henkel

Hurricanes, rested and dominant, prepare to clash with a resilient Flyers squad. Expect a thrilling, tight series featuring depth, experience, and hot goalies.

The Carolina Hurricanes have finally learned their second round opponent.

It took a bit longer than first expected, but the Philadelphia Flyers finally found that fourth win in a Game 6, 1-0, OT win to advance past the Pittsburgh Penguins after initially holding a 3-0 series lead.

The Hurricanes have already been waiting for four days after sweeping the Ottawa Senators in their first round series and odds are they're going to have a full week of rest before the second round series actually kicks off.

The two clubs have never met in the postseason before.

This year, Carolina went 3-0-1 against Philadelphia, with every game being decided beyond regulation.

However, the Hurricanes are a much deeper team, having more 20+ goal scorers (7-4) and four players who eclipsed 70 points this season (Flyers had zero).

The Canes are also a much more experienced team, having made the playoffs in eight straight seasons, while this is the first time the Flyers have been in the postseason since 2020.

Special teams might be another area where the Hurricanes can pull away as Philly had the league's worst power play this season (15.7%) and a bottom-10 penalty kill (77.6%).

However, what might give the Hurricanes a bit of trouble is the fact that Flyers have gotten a lot better defensively at 5v5, especially following the Olympic break.

They've gotten a Herculean effort from Dan Vladar in net and a hot goalie is always a difficult nut to crack.

It could be another tight series because of that, but I'd expect the Hurricanes to be heavy favorites given their depth, talent and overwhelming wealth of experience.

Injured Hurricanes Defenseman Returns To Practice

By: Ryan Henkel

A key defenseman skates again, offering a potential boost as the Hurricanes eye the next round.

Alexander Nikishin looks to be ahead of schedule in terms of a potential return to game action.

After suffering a concussion on Saturday in Game 4 of the Hurricanes' first round series, the Russian blueliner was back on the ice for practice on Wednesday.

Nikishin was sporting a yellow, non-contact jersey, but according to Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour, the rookie defenseman seems to be doing well.

"They said right away that he didn't really have a lot of symptoms, so I think he's feeling good," Brind'Amour said. "Whatever he's gotta do, it's going along in the right direction."

Ryan Henkel

Ryan Henkel

@RyanHenkel_

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Alexander Nikishin skating this morning in a yellow, non-contact jersey

10:36 AM · Apr 29, 2026

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The Hurricanes have had plenty of time off since their series sweep of the Senators and they might just continue enjoying this extended recovery time with the way the first round has been going.

While some worry about the rust factor, the benefit for injured players like Nikishin certainly outweighs those fears.

"Scary moment, but thank God he's fine," said teammate Andrei Svechnikov. "He's skating with us now and I think he's gonna be good."

And while the team has depth that they can rely on, having all of their main guys available is obviously preferred.

Nikishin has been a steady presence on Carolina's blueline this year, as the rookie finished the year not only third in defensive scoring, but also set a team record for points by a first-year defenseman.

His game has come a long way throughout the course of the season, and he's developed pretty well overall into being a consistent and trusted part of the defensive corps too.

"His game has been progressing all year," Brind'Amour said. "Playoff hockey, the only thing that changes is the intensity



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

and the physicality, and that's something that he should be able to adapt too really well. His game is good, but I still think there's another level and I think he knows that too. But a lot of positives too with where he's come and where we think he can get to."

"He had a really good second half of the year," Svechnikov said. "I think first half, he was trying to figure out and get used to the NHL speed and physicality and all that stuff. He's been really good. It's exciting to see him and I think he's only gonna get better from this point."

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SportScan

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

1389419 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes know who they'll play in second round of NHL playoffs

Justin Pelletier, Chip Alexander 3-4 minutes 30/04/2026

The Carolina Hurricanes swept their first-round NHL playoff series against the Ottawa Senators, though some might say "survive" is a more apropos descriptor based on the level of physicality the teams displayed, despite the lopsided series score.

Now, the Canes will face an opponent that has given them fits all season, one that has a longtime reputation of physicality. With a 1-0 overtime win in Game 6 over the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Philadelphia Flyers have advanced to the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs and will face the Hurricanes.

During the regular season, all four games between the Canes and Flyers went to overtime. Carolina won once in OT — Seth Jarvis with the winner — and twice in a shootout before losing in a shootout in the teams' fourth meeting of the season, on April 13.

The Canes and Flyers played a home-and-home Dec. 13-14 — first in Philadelphia, then in Raleigh. The Canes won both in shootouts, Jackson Blake and then Andrei Svechnikov getting the shootout-winning goals.

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This will mark the first playoff meeting between the teams in their franchise histories. The Canes, who started as the Hartford Whalers, are 63-74-30 all time against Philly in 167 games played.

Recently, the Hurricanes have had more success against the Flyers. Over the past 10 NHL seasons, Carolina is 24-9-3 against Philadelphia, and 16-2-1 in the past five seasons.

This is a developing story and will be updated.

This story was originally

Published April 29, 2026 at 11:06 PM.

Profile Image of Justin Pelletier

Justin is a 25-year veteran sports journalist with stops in Lewiston, Maine (Sun Journal), and Boston (Boston Herald). A proud husband, and father of twin girls, Pelletier is a Boston University graduate and member of the esteemed Jack Falla sportswriting mafia. He has earned dozens of state and national sportswriting and editing awards covering preps, colleges and professional leagues.

News Observer LOADED: 04.30.2026

1389420 Carolina Hurricanes

How Hurricanes' emphatic NHL playoff sweep proved they can handle the rough stuff

Chip Alexander 6-8 minutes 29/04/2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

In sweeping the Ottawa Senators out of the playoffs, the Carolina Hurricanes proved a point, to a certain degree.

In short, push and there will be pushback. The Canes are not to be trifled with.

The Senators learned that the hard way in losing four straight games in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Captain Brady Tkachuk picked a fight with Canes captain Jordan Staal after the opening faceoff of Game 1 and lost. That, in turn, set the tone for the rest of the series, which ended with the Canes' 4-2 win Saturday in Ottawa.

"Our team stepped up to the challenge," defenseman Sean Walker said Tuesday as the Canes resumed practice while waiting for their next playoff opponent to be determined.

"It comes with the territory. The intensity level is brought to another level in the playoffs. I thought our team did a good job in matching their energy, if not leading in that area. ... It was hard, as physical a series as I've been a part of. Every shift was a battle, but that was expected."

It wasn't just about energy in the second period of Game 4 on Saturday. Things got nasty on the ice. There were scums all over the ice as the referees tried to get things under control.

Second-period sucker punch

Walker had a cut on the bridge of his nose, blood trickling down it. At one point during a melee midway through the period, he was sucker-punched in the stomach by the Sens' Ridly Greig while Warren Foegele had him tied up in a headlock.

"I don't think that's hockey," Canes forward Jackson Blake said Tuesday of the second period. "I like the physical part of the game and all that, but when it gets over the top ..."

Video of Greig quickly went viral on social media and he was called out by many for his over-the-top sneak attack on Walker.

During a panel discussion on Sportsnet's Hockey Central, Greig's actions were called "gutless and disgusting."

Walker said Tuesday he had seen replays of the Greig punch, but said, "I don't think I need to make any comments on it. I think everybody saw what happened."

Told there had been plenty of comments about it, he said, "Yep, and I think a lot of comments were accurate. I'll leave it at that."

Greig's punch went undetected by the officials on the ice, but he will have a May 4 hearing with the NHL's Department of Player Safety.

Brind'Amour, as he has in the past, again made an appeal Tuesday for having an off-ice official at games to help review such plays., saying, "We need to look at it way more seriously, because number one, the safety of players. ... Just get it right."

Brady Tkachuk (7) of the Ottawa Senators pushes and shoves with Mark Jankowski of the Carolina Hurricanes during the second period of Game 4 of their first-round Stanley Cup Playoff series at Canadian Tire Centre on April 25, 2026 in Ottawa, Canada.

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Hurricanes on the mend

Injured during the second period of Game 4 was Canes defenseman Alexander Nikishin, who absorbed a huge hit from the Sens' Tyler Kleven and needed assistance leaving the ice. Nikishin, who did not return to the

game, was diagnosed with a concussion but returned with the team from Ottawa.

The Canes will face the winner of the Philadelphia Flyers-Pittsburgh Penguins first-round series. The Flyers won the first three games and were on the verge of their own playoff sweep, but the Pens then won the next two to extend it.

With the extra time, Canes took Sunday and Monday off before Tuesday's practice. Nikishin was not at practice as he goes through the concussion protocol, and remains sidelined indefinitely.

"Everything's trending in the right direction," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Tuesday.

Forward Nikolaj Ehlers missed Game 4 with a lower-body injury and also did not practice Tuesday. Brind'Amour said he was hopeful both Ehlers and Nikishin will be good to go when the second-round series begins.

Brind'Amour isn't sure how beneficial the layoff between will be, although practice time is always seen as a plus by the coaches.

"We'll see," Brind'Amour said. "We like having a few days for sure to heal some bumps and bruises, but when you're playing pretty well and pretty dialed in, you run the risk of being a little rusty. But it's out of our control."

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

News Observer LOADED: 04.30.2026

1389421 Carolina Hurricanes

Series preview: Hurricanes get upstart Flyers in Round 2

Cory Lavalette 8-10 minutes 30/04/2026

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Dan Vladar and Frederik Andersen have arguably been the two best goalies so far in the playoffs. Andersen's performance against the Senators is well documented: He allowed five goals on 110 shots, just three at 5-on-5. Vladar is the reason Philadelphia reached the postseason. The longtime backup seized the starting job and went 29-12-11 in the regular season, and only Andersen's 7.6 goals saved above expected in the first round is more than Vladar's 6.9.

The 58 games Vladar has played so far this season are more than he did in the past two seasons combined, but he didn't seem to be worn down against the Penguins, posting a .937 save percentage and two shutouts. Interestingly, Philadelphia had no shutouts in the regular season.

Andersen has the higher ceiling and substantially more experience, while Vladar is playing the best hockey of his career this season. This is a close call, but Vladar faced more than 30 shots 12 times during the regular season and will likely see that many each game of Round 2. How he holds up to that kind of onslaught will determine who wins the goalie battle.

Advantage: Slight Carolina edge

Special teams

Neither team will be thrilled with how their power plays performed in the first round. Both scored twice, with Philadelphia going 2 for 17 and Carolina finishing 2 for 15. The difference is that was par for the course this season for the Flyers, who finished last in the league at 15.7%. The Hurricanes, meanwhile, ranked fourth in the league at 24.9%. That's the difference between scoring once on every four power plays vs. once every six chances.

Carolina also holds the penalty killing edge. The Hurricanes killed 80.5% of their penalties in the regular season and were nearly perfect in the first round, allowing Ottawa to score once on 21 chances (95.2%). The Flyers ranked tied for 21st during the regular season at 77.6% and were slightly better in the first round — Philadelphia allowed three goals on 19 chances (84.2%).

Special teams can turn on a dime in the playoffs, but the Hurricanes enter the series with the better units.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

Overview

The Flyers aren't here by accident. Philadelphia closed strong in the regular season, winning six of seven down the stretch to steal a playoff spot, and jumped on the Penguins for a 3-0 series lead before finishing them off in six games.

On paper and in reality, however, the Hurricanes are big favorites. Carolina is the better team in all facets, and the Hurricanes are a battle-tested playoff team. Carolina got a tough opponent in the first round and tossed them aside in four games. Philadelphia isn't on Ottawa's level, so a lot will need to go right for the Flyers to have a chance. It could happen, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Prediction: Hurricanes in 5

The North State Journal LOADED: 04.30.2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

1389422 Carolina Hurricanes

Stankoven, Andersen rise to occasion in Round 1

Cory Lavalette 5-6 minutes 29/04/2026

RALEIGH — If there was a metric showing which Hurricanes players were mentioned most on social media as being a weak link this season, chances are Frederik Andersen and Logan Stankoven would be at the top of the list.

Andersen, the veteran goalie who is one win shy of a combined 375 regular season and playoff wins, went through perhaps the most difficult season of his career. The 36-year-old finished with a career-worst .874 save percentage and lost more games (14 in regulation, five in overtime and shootouts) than he won (16) for the first time in 13 NHL seasons.

The buzz around Stankoven had less to do about his performance and more about the perception that Carolina needed a bigger, more dynamic center behind Sebastian Aho.

Both silenced their detractors in Round 1.

"You can't understate that, especially when you consider how well the other guy was playing in their end," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said of Andersen after Carolina completed its sweep of Ottawa on Saturday. "It was a goalie matchup, and they were going save for save. And we needed it, right? Otherwise this thing could look a lot different. ... Freddie, it's probably the best hockey he's played for us since being a Hurricane."

While Andersen — who finished the series with a .955 save percentage and 1.10 goals-against average — was keeping the Senators off the scoreboard, Stankoven was filling it for the Hurricanes.

The 23-year-old opened the scoring in each of the first three games and would have had the game-winner in Game 4 if Ottawa hadn't scored with the goalie pulled for an extra attacker in the final minutes.

His line with Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake combined for seven goals, nine assists and 16 points — half of the 32 points Carolina totaled in the series — and was the difference in four straight wins that were closer than the sweep suggested.

"Just exceptional," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said of the trio after Game 4. "That line and (Stankoven) really took control of the series for us and found ways to bury them. I just kept telling (Stankoven) to get to the net because the puck seemed to be finding him. Another big goal tonight, and he's been so good. He competes so hard and he wants it so bad, and that's what everyone else in this room feeds off of and wants it as well."

Hall pointed out that his line not only produced but was responsible in its own end, proving that sometimes the best defense is a good offense.

"It's the other stuff too," Hall said. "We weren't on for a goal against all series, and he's our centerman. He's the guy down there doing the work. So it's not just the goals — it's a 200-foot game that him and our line has done pretty well."

At 5-on-5, the Stankoven line had 65.59% of the shot attempts, 65.31% of the scoring chances and 77.78% of the high-danger chances. They outscored the Senators 3-0 when on the ice and added a pair of power play goals — both by Stankoven, Carolina's only man-advantage tallies in the series.

"Stanky's line carried us throughout the series," Aho said.

Stankoven said he's felt more comfortable as the season has progressed and he got more experience at center.

"Some guys are able to just jump right into the league and produce right away," Stankoven said Tuesday. "I think for me, it's taken me a little bit longer to get to where I want to be, and I'm still not a finished product. I just want to be the best version of myself and help this team win a Cup."

With it likely the Hurricanes will have to wait at least a week to start their second round series against either Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, Carolina will have to balance rest — which is important given injuries to Alexander Nikishin and Nikolaj Ehlers — with staying sharp as the rest of the league catches up with them.

"Obviously you like having a few days for sure to heal some bumps and bruises," Brind'Amour said Tuesday. "But we're playing pretty well, pretty dialed in — you run the risk of being a little rusty, but it's out of your control."

Brind'Amour is hopeful that Nikishin, who is in the league's concussion protocol following a hit by Ottawa defenseman Tyler Kleven in Saturday's Game 4, and Ehlers, who sat out the clinching game with a lower-body injury, will be ready to go for the second round.

"Everything is trending in the right direction," Brind'Amour said of Nikishin. "So I guess it kind of depends on how long we're (waiting to play Round 2). So that could work in our favor if it is a little longer."

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1389526 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Vezina Trophy finalists announced: Vasilevskiy nears rare goaltending territory

By Jesse Granger

April 29, 2026

Andrei Vasilevskiy of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Ilya Sorokin of the New York Islanders and Jeremy Swayman of the Boston Bruins on Wednesday were named finalists for the Vezina Trophy, awarded to the NHL goaltender "adjudged to be the best at this position."

Vasilevskiy, who won the award in 2019, is the favorite to win it again. Doing so would make him the 24th goalie in NHL history with multiple Vezina Trophy wins. He would also join Florida's Sergei Bobrovsky and Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck as the only active goalies with multiple Vezina wins.

Capturing the trophy for a second time would also put the 31-year-old netminder in a small historical group. He would become only the fifth goalie since the award's criteria changed in 1982 — and voting began for the award — to win multiple Stanley Cup championships and multiple Vezina trophies. The only others to accomplish that are Bobrovsky and Hockey Hall of Famers Dominik Hašek, Martin Brodeur and Patrick Roy.

Vasilevskiy led the NHL with 39 wins this season, the sixth time in his 12-year NHL career he's recorded at least that many. He helped Tampa Bay to its ninth consecutive playoff appearance with a .912 save percentage and 23.57 goals saved above expected. This is the sixth time Vasilevskiy has been named a finalist for the Vezina, which leads all active goalies.

Sorokin had a brilliant season that nearly willed the Islanders into the playoffs. The 30-year-old led the NHL with seven shutouts and finished second with 27.5 goals saved above expected. Sorokin's most impressive stat, playing behind a porous New York defense, was his league-leading .864 save percentage on high-danger shots. This is Sorokin's second time as a finalist for the award. He finished as the runner-up to Linus Ullmark in 2023.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

After a disappointing 2024-25 season in Boston, Swayman bounced back with a sensational 2025-26 campaign. The Anchorage, Alaska, native set a new career high with 26.5 goals saved above expected, which ranked third league-wide, and was one of the biggest reasons for Boston's return to the postseason. This is Swayman's first time as a Vezina finalist, and only his second time receiving votes for the award.

Named after former Canadiens goaltender George Vezina, the trophy is voted on by the general managers of the NHL's 32 teams.

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1389527 Websites

The Athletic / What young NHL players can learn from their superstar playoff opponents

By Shayna Goldman

April 29, 2026

It may not seem like Leo Carlsson has a ton to learn from Leon Draisaitl in this very moment — not when the Anaheim Ducks, a team filled with young and inexperienced players, have pushed the back-to-back Western Conference champion Edmonton Oilers to the brink of elimination in Round 1.

But even if Anaheim upsets Edmonton in six games, there are still elements of Draisaitl's game worth delving into. And a playoff series is a unique time to do it.

In the regular season, matchups come and go; players have to turn the page and focus on the next game quickly. The playoffs are different because teams are laser-focused on one opponent for up to two weeks. There is a lot more time to study players and tendencies, and go into a whole new level of detail.

And this year, there's another level of intrigue to that, considering some of the similarities between these head-to-head matchups. Three players — Carlsson, Ivan Demidov and Logan Cooley — are going up against a best-case scenario version of their future selves.

Leon Draisaitl vs. Leo Carlsson

Few players can stack up to Draisaitl. He is, unquestionably, one of the best players in the world. In the regular season, he is a force on both ends of the ice. Somehow, he only ups his game when it matters most to dominate in the playoffs. Only one player has scored at a higher pace than Draisaitl's 1.48 points per game in the salary cap era: his teammate, Connor McDavid.

Draisaitl is the established threat. Carlsson could be on a path to following in his footsteps.

Carlsson has shown a lot of similar traits to Draisaitl at his age, especially in the early goings of this season. By Dec. 1, Carlsson was in the top five in scoring with 36 points in 26 games. That was supported by some great offensive work below the surface at five-on-five. It seemed like he was taking the leap to the next level earlier than expected, which is essentially when a player's elite skill set, experience and physical development all merge.

Even though Carlsson's production slowed down from that point on, there were still glimpses of those similarities in his game. So this matchup against Draisaitl is a chance to study one of the best and see first-hand what to emulate to take his game to the next level.

Game 1 provided an early learning moment when Draisaitl powered into the offensive zone and through Carlsson and Jackson LaCombe with just over two minutes left in regulation.

Part of what makes Draisaitl such a special player is his combination of elite skill with size and strength, and more importantly how he combines them in sequences like this. He uses his frame to shield the puck and has the strength to hold off opponents with one arm while maintaining possession.

That shines in the Big Moments like this game-winning goal, but also is one of the little things that make his all-three-zones play click. It's something that helps Draisaitl transition from defense to offense, too. These two centers retrieved pucks at similar rates this year, but the difference was their efficiency: Draisaitl did a better job of exiting with control, while Carlsson racked up a few more failed exits along the way. It's something that should improve with more experience and physical development.

Gaining more strength on the puck should help Carlsson take his offense to the next level, too. It could be the difference between generating shots and being a true scoring-chance machine.

Carlsson, like Draisaitl, is a really smart player with skilled hands. He created a lot of looks in transition and set up his teammates with an above-average rate of primary passes.

Draisaitl was on another level. It wasn't just the sheer volume of his shot assists that stood out this year; it was the quality that stood out league-wide. He drove closer to the net than Carlsson in the regular season and was one of the most dangerous passers in the league.

To Carlsson's credit, he has done a good job of generating chances this series and has the edge in shot quality in his head-to-head minutes against Draisaitl. The Oilers star pulled his team ahead in scoring (4-3) in their shared minutes on Tuesday, though.

But he obviously has a ways to go to become the next Draisaitl, or a player near his true peak caliber. Once Carlsson starts putting all of the pieces together, though, the path is there for this to be the next evolution of his game — and that could be the difference between being a solid 1C to becoming a true franchise center.

Nikita Kucherov vs. Ivan Demidov

In the Atlantic Division, there is a showdown between two very similar teams. In so many ways, the Canadiens look like the next version of the Lightning, who are now in the later stages of their window of contention. It's true on a macro-level and micro-level, thanks to some similarities between Kucherov and Demidov.

Similar to Draisaitl and Carlsson, there is still a massive gap between Kucherov and Demidov. Kucherov is the best winger in the league and one of the most valuable players in the world. As exciting as his last year has been with Demidov, he is still light-years away from matching that level of impact.

But just like with Carlsson, it's a best-case scenario for Demidov to build toward, given some shared traits: a methodical approach to dangerous puck movement. That is what made Demidov such an offensive threat for the Canadiens in his rookie season. When the puck was on his stick, defencemen were drawn to him, creating time and space for his opponents. His quick thinking, no-look passes and ability to move the puck through the slot added another element of danger to their shots.

Those plays are a lot harder to create consistently in a playoff environment. Demidov has had a few so far — one of his best was a cross-seam pass to Juraj Slafkovský during a four-on-four that went right through two Lightning skaters.

But generally, he hasn't been able to play to his regular-season strengths and has to find different ways to be effective.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Kucherov is the perfect opponent to study to see how to translate this style of play to the postseason. As well as Demidov set up his teammates this year, with 5.60 scoring chances per 60, Kucherov was on another tier. Not only did he generate more scoring chance assists (6.98 per 60), he also had one of the highest rates of high-danger passes.

Like Demidov, the foundation of his cerebral game is his vision, anticipation and deception. But overall strength is something Demidov has to try to grow into as he matures; it's what helps Kucherov lift sticks and win puck battles to gain possession and hang onto it.

The other difference is the willingness to shoot the puck, with one of the highest scoring chance rates in the league. And that's a gap that has been really apparent between these two so far this series. Kucherov has attempted 27 shots, with 10 going on goal. Demidov has only attempted four (two on goal).

The fact that opponents don't know whether Kucherov will take the chance himself or send it to an opponent makes him that much tougher to defend. It adds variety and unpredictability to his shifts. It's the difference between just being a great playmaker and being an all-around offensive threat.

Plus, as Kucherov's shot late in Game 4 shows, good things happen when you put the puck on net.

Put those skills together, and it helps Kucherov essentially quarterback play in his minutes. He controls the pace and the attention of his opponents, both at five-on-five and on the power play.

Take this power-play shift from Game 4, where Kucherov gets six puck touches (including the primary assist) before Brandon Hagele scores. Those last two are particularly important; the pass to Jake Guentzel brings two penalty killers further from the net, opening a passing lane right in front of the blue paint for Kucherov.

Everything runs through Kucherov in Tampa Bay. It doesn't yet through Demidov in Montreal, which is completely understandable this early in his career. So this series is giving him a first-hand look at what his peak could be, with the right development.

Jack Eichel vs. Logan Cooley

The way Cooley attacks the game is reminiscent of a young Jack Eichel — which is why, in our playoff preview, we compared them to Charmander and a fully evolved Charizard.

Cooley, like Eichel, has quickly become an ace in transition. His speed off the rush and ability to create scoring chances off those entries were among the best in the regular season, ahead of even Eichel in what has been a pretty funky season for the Golden Knights.

The difference is what else Eichel brings to a lineup now, compared to his early years. He became a premier playmaker and one of the best puck-movers in the league. That was the side of his game that stood out the most in his first playoff experience (and championship), and it was one of his best strengths this season.

So while Cooley's primary passes were above-average, Eichel took that a step further with one of the best high-danger pass rates in the league. Those differences in quality add some offensive separation at five-on-five, similar to Kucherov and Draisaitl with their younger counterparts.

Via AllThreeZones

It's not just where Eichel moves the puck. It's how he does it. The opening goal of Game 4 was a prime example of what makes him such a threat; he absorbed a hit to make a play and drew the attention of all five Mammoth skaters. Still, he found the passing lane to Ivan Barbashev and completely opened up Pavel Dorofeyev.

That happened again in overtime, when all five defenders were zoned in on Eichel below the goal line, leaving Shea Theodore completely open in the slot.

And that's something for Cooley to take note of — especially if Eichel's performance in Game 4 ends up being the turning point of this series. As much as Cooley's rush game and ability to score goals (without putting up a ton of shots) are strengths, he has the chops to expand his toolbox to become a more versatile threat. That is something for the up-and-coming star to keep in mind as each game (and series) gets tighter this postseason and beyond.

The real differentiator between Cooley and Eichel, though, is their play without the puck. Eichel has become an all-situational threat who can be trusted against any competition. That is the kind of all-around game and responsibility Cooley could be in for down the line, if the idea is for him to keep following the Eichel blueprint. His ability to retrieve pucks in the defensive zone and breakout with control is a promising sign of that potential.

There is some risk and reward with that added workload. Too much shutdown responsibility can weigh on a player's ability to drive play. Vegas experienced that last spring, when Eichel's attempts to contain Connor McDavid in Round 2 had unintended consequences for his scoring. This year, through the first three games in particular, the challenge has been slowing down the Cooley line and creating offense.

In Games 1-3, Cooley has had the five-on-five edge against Eichel in shot volume (22-8 attempts) and quality (88 percent xG rate). Utah went up 1-0 in scoring in those matchup minutes, after slipping the puck past Eichel in the neutral zone and turning on the jets to get behind Vegas' defenders.

But in Game 4, Eichel looked like the difference-maker the Golden Knights needed. So if Cooley is going to emulate his game, this is the game to learn from, since it was his best balance between his workload, responsibilities and the offensive traits that make him so special.

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1389528 Websites

The Athletic / Rod Brind'Amour is right: The NHL needs more video review — just not for offside

By James Mirtle

April 29, 2026

Eleven days into the NHL playoffs, we are all now familiar with the drill.

A terrific back-and-forth game goes the distance, in many cases to overtime, and it ends on a highlight-reel play. But before anyone — players, coaches, fans — can celebrate the big win, all eyes turn to the officials.

Will it count? Was anyone's big toe on the wrong side of the blue line two minutes ago? Can we quickly dissect the play on the iPads on the bench? Is there time to make it to the fridge and back before they sort this one out? (Most likely, yes.)

So we wait, and wait, and finally, after the broadcast reviews the same two angles a dozen times, we either get a winner or we play on, deep into the night. It doesn't seem like anyone loves this system, which we have now had in place for, unbelievably, 11 postseasons. But would you rather the league not follow the rules to the letter of the law and get it wrong?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Blasphemous.

So we live with it, at least until a controversial play blows up in the Stanley Cup Final at some point and it gets abandoned. But what you rarely hear is anyone around the league calling for more video reviews, what with all the delays we have already.

Carolina Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour, however, put that on the table on Tuesday, as his club awaits its next opponent after sweeping the Ottawa Senators in Round 1. That series ended in a bloody Game 4, one where there were multiple big hits and post-whistle scrums, including a particularly ugly one that will result in Senators forward Ridly Greig suspended to start next season.

The on-ice officials not only missed Greig uppercutting a defenseless Hurricanes defenseman, but they also put Brind'Amour's team on the PK afterward, something the Canes coach said shouldn't be acceptable given how many people in the building saw the incident take place.

But after years of watching mistakes such as this, Brind'Amour didn't place blame on the two refs and two linesmen on the ice. Instead, he went back to an argument he has been making since he stepped behind the bench: the NHL's officials need more help to get things right.

Rod Brind'Amour was asked about Ridly Greig's punch on Sean Walker today.

From that, he reiterated the stance he's been preaching since he became a head coach – there should be more reviews.

"That goes to my point that we've been having for eight years on what needs to be done," Brind'Amour said. "Review the penalties. You have officials there.

"In the regular season, I get it. Maybe (you don't have the) manpower. We have a supervisor that's a former official (in the playoffs). Have him down there on the review watching all the stuff so these guys (on the ice) don't have to try to figure all that out. It's too chaotic out there."

Brind'Amour pointed out that he had seen these mistakes happen in other series already in this year's playoffs, including one where it took officials seven minutes and he believes the wrong call was still made. Which, when you think about it, isn't a great experience for anyone in the building, especially the fans paying \$300 to take all that dead time in.

"It is impossible to referee our sport live," Brind'Amour added. "It really is. Everything's happening so fast. Now you're getting embellishment everywhere. Sticks aren't even coming close, they're doing this —"

The coach whipped his head back, exaggeratedly, at the podium.

"Because, why? You're getting a call. But if you had a guy on the review that said, 'Woah, woah, that's embellishment,' it would be out of the game. We need to look at it way more serious. Because, No. 1, safety of player."

The pushback to date on this type of fix has come from the officials themselves, who don't want to cede even more control over their ability to call games to an eye in the sky than they have already. But it feels like there's a compromise here that makes some sense, where the league and officials can hopefully reach some consensus about how to get the most high-leverage calls right more often.

We're in an era in professional sports where we're seeing technology leveraged to speed up and improve play more than ever, including MLB's new automated ball-strike (ABS) challenge system, which has generated largely positive reviews from players and fans. In many cases, the tech is adding to the viewing experience, not detracting.

The MLB's early success with the automated ball-strike challenge system could provide lessons on how to improve replay reviews in the NHL.

So what if the NHL's mandate was to put more focus on getting the big plays right — those that led directly to goals or penalties — and stop grinding games to a halt over things that likely don't matter all that much in the grand scheme of things? Could they not return offside calls to the domain of the on-ice officials, given how few of the missed ones are actually egregious, and then beef up the review process for other, more important plays?

Catch the high hits and punches to the head away from the play. Let go of the player who was ahead of the puck by a millimeter long before a goal is scored.

The NHL isn't yet at the point where it can use camera and AI tech to determine as many things automatically as other sports, but maybe that shouldn't be the only goal. What the league needs to figure out with its primary stakeholders is how it can use these tools to not only "get things right" but also accelerate and improve how the biggest decisions are made.

That doesn't seem to be happening right now, not when they're completely missing suspendable plays such as what Greig did and instead drilling down over and over on technicalities that happen 64 feet away from the goal line and don't typically affect a scoring play.

Brind'Amour didn't make the case for pulling back on the scope of coach's challenges, but the reality is you can't review everything, not when so many of these plays in the NHL are judgment calls and the stoppages grind games to a halt. In general, however, he's a fan of the direction the league has gone with this and wants to see that evolution continue.

"I'm all for replay," Brind'Amour said. "I've yet to see one that isn't done right. You might not agree with (the end result) ... but I like the fact that they went to it (on the hit against Alexander Nikishin in Game 4) instead of just make it up or guess. Live, it happens so fast. How do you really know?"

"That's exactly what needs to happen. So why not do it for all the calls so we get them right and we don't have an issue that could cost the game, which could cost the series, which changes everything? Nobody wants to end it on something like that."

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1389529 Websites

The Athletic / Your NHL team is the best! (At this one very specific stat from the 2025-26 season)

By Sean McIndoe

April 29, 2026

Everybody's good at something. It's just a case of figuring out what.

Or at least, that's how it was explained to me growing up. Granted, those explanations often came from coaches who were cutting me from the team, or concerned teachers whispering to my parents, or over the shoulder of horrified potential prom dates as they sprinted away from me. But the lesson stuck.

And it turns out it applies to the NHL. Even in a league with 32 teams that range from model franchises to ... um, not that, everyone is good at something. In fact, every team in the league is the very best at something. You just have to be willing to dig deep enough to find it.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Digging deep is kind of my whole schtick. So today, let's go through each team and find at least one positive stat in which they led the entire league during the 2025-26 season.

Your team is the best ... in this one extremely specific thing.

Anaheim Ducks

Led the league in: Shootout record (8-0)

They weren't the most impressive shootout team of the year; that would be the Utah Mammoth, who didn't have any. But of the teams that did soil their season with a shootout, the Ducks were the only one to never take a loss. And they didn't sneak in with a win or two — at 8-0, they had more shootouts than half the teams in the league.

Boston Bruins

Led the league in: 100+ mph shots by forwards (two)

Thanks to the NHL's new-ish EDGE stats, we know that there were only three shots of 100+ mph taken by a forward in the entire league this year. One was by New York's J.T. Miller in January, while the other two were by Morgan Geekie. That includes one that clocked in at 103.3 mph, the hardest shot in the league by any player this season. I'm going to go ahead and assume it was this one.

Buffalo Sabres

Led the league in: Shooting percentage at four-on-five (19.5 percent)

The story here isn't just that the Sabres led the league in this admittedly weird category, but in just how effective they were. The Sabres' shooting percentage when down four-on-five was not only better than every team's number at five-on-five, but also somehow better than every team's number at five-on-four except for Dallas. The next-best team at four-on-five was Vegas, which was way back at 13.6 percent, and four teams in the league came in under 5 percent. Maybe more impressive: The Sabres did all this without leading the league in four-on-five goals this year (that was Calgary).

Calgary Flames

Led the league in: Percentage of unblocked shots at five-on-five that missed the net (32.61 percent)

To be clear, this was the best mark in the league, which is to say it was the lowest. In related news, NHL teams miss the net a lot more than you might think.

Carolina Hurricanes

Led the league in: Winning percentage when trailing first (.515)

The Hurricanes gave up the first goal in 33 games, one off the league lead for the fewest such games. But they went 17-12-4 in those games, making them the only team in the league to win more than they lost when they trailed first. Perhaps relatedly, they also finished first in winning percentage in one-goal games.

Chicago Blackhawks

Led the league in: Penalty kill rate in wins (96.9 percent)

The penalty kill was a strength in Chicago, where they finished second overall with an 83.6 percent kill rate. This isn't a piece about teams being second-best, though, so we'll dig deeper. And when we do, we find that the Blackhawks were almost unbeatable when short-handed in games they ended up winning. Their mark of 96.9 percent wasn't just the best; it made them the only team that came in over 90 percent. And even more impressive, they actually scored more short-handed goals (four) in wins than power-play goals given up (three).

Colorado Avalanche

Led the league in: Fewest goals allowed in any period (59 in the third)

As you'd expect, the Avalanche led the league in plenty of things, including relatively obscure stats such as wins, goals for, goals against, points and penalty killing. But far more importantly, the 59 goals they allowed in the third were the fewest in the league in any 20-minute period. Tied for second: The 61 goals allowed in the first period by ... the Avalanche. Yeah, these guys might be good.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Led the league in: Five-on-three penalty-killing (100 percent)

The Blue Jackets made for fertile ground in this exercise, also leading the league in four-on-four goals as well as shootout goals. But you can't argue with perfection, and the Blue Jackets were the only team to never allow a goal while down five-on-three. And it wasn't for lack of opportunity; they faced the situation seven times, which was right around the middle of the pack.

Dallas Stars

Led the league in: Wins when trailing after two periods (eight)

In today's NHL, trailing after two periods often means it's game over. But the Stars managed to pull off the comeback with regularity, eight times in 22 opportunities for a win percentage of .308, which also led the league.

Detroit Red Wings

Led the league in: Least injured team by CHIP (\$4.55 million)

This is the specialty stat that measures injury impact by Cap Hit of Injured Players, as measured on this site. The Red Wings finished dead last, which is to say they finished first, since injuries are bad and you want to avoid them. Detroit mostly did, finishing almost \$1 million behind the next team (Nashville) and miles behind Florida's league-leading \$28.35 million.

Edmonton Oilers

Led the league in: Winning percentage in two-goal games (.769)

The Oilers struggled badly in one-goal games, finishing tied with the Blackhawks for 29th in winning percentage. They were better in three-goal games, ranking 14th. But the sweet spot was two goals — no more, no less. In two-goal games, the Oilers went 10-3, good for a league-best .769 winning percentage.

Florida Panthers

Led the league in: Power-play opportunities (266)

Huh. And here I thought the Panthers were dirty. But it turns out they're the victims, because NHL referees give them more power plays than any other team. What an interesting observation.

Los Angeles Kings

Led the league in: Long-range shots by forwards (203)

I'm a big believer in degree of difficulty, so I decided that for the Kings' entry, I wouldn't use anything that had to do with going to overtime. This is what I wound up with. I probably should have just done an overtime stat.

Minnesota Wild

Led the league in: Goals differential at four-on-three (+5)

We can argue about whether this year's Wild were a great team or merely a good one, but at four-on-three, nobody could touch them. Not only did they score a lead-leading five goals, but they were also one of eight teams not to give up any.

Montreal Canadiens



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Led the league in: Shooting percentage on slap shots (15.3 percent)

The slap shot is a dying art these days. Just apparently not in Montreal, where the Habs buried them at a significantly higher rate than the next-best team; the Rangers (13.8 percent) and Hurricanes (12.1 percent) were the only other teams north of 11 percent. As a bonus, Montreal also topped the league in wrist shot percentage, at 13.1 percent.

Nashville Predators

Led the league in: Wraparound goals during overtime losses on the road (one)

I'm going to be honest, it's a lot harder than I thought to find one of these for every team.

New Jersey Devils

Led the league in: Games where both teams had equal shots (six)

Shot stats are weird in the NHL, where score effects mean teams with fewer shots often win at a higher rate than teams that have more. Then there are the games where both teams register the exact same shot total. The Devils had more of those than anyone else, with six. They won three and lost three, in case you're wondering.

New York Islanders

Led the league in: One-goal wins on the road (14)

Nothing makes a coach happier than seeing his team win a close game on the road. And that's apparently especially true if your coach is a former goalie such as Patrick Roy, who saw his team do it 14 times. Pete DeBoer could never. (No, really, couldn't — the Islanders didn't play any road games with him as coach.)

New York Rangers

Led the league in: Percentage of hits made (56.73 percent)

Honestly, we could go with just about any hits-based stat for the Rangers. When you pride yourself on being an old-school, bruising team that's hard to play against, you're going to get a lot of hits. When you're bad and never have the puck, you'll get even more. Hey, at least they gave (way) more than they got.

Ottawa Senators

Led the league in: Fewest empty-net goals allowed (nine)

The Senators' big problem through most of the season was that their goaltenders gave up too many goals, which was true no matter who was in net. But when there was nobody in net, the Senators became the hardest team in the league to score against. Does that mean they should have played the entire Hurricanes series at six-on-five? Look, the numbers don't lie.

Philadelphia Flyers

Led the league in: Least amount of time spent down five-on-three (1:44)

We can chalk up the Flyers' performance here to two main factors. First, they were disciplined enough to only go down five-on-three twice all year. And second, they gave up a goal both times. In other words, being down five-on-three is a fight they don't want to start, but are more than willing to finish (by getting scored on).

Pittsburgh Penguins

Led the league in: Backhand goals scored (32)

It was close, with the Stars right behind at 31 and three other teams at 30, but the Penguins pulled it off. Led by Anthony Mantha's seven, the Penguins were the best of the best. Consider that a backhanded compliment.

San Jose Sharks

Led the league in: Fewest hits taken (1,469)

You can't hit what you can't catch. And nobody got hit less this season than the Sharks, who edged out the Blues, Leafs and Blue Jackets for that honor. As that list would indicate, a low hit total can sometimes mean a team never has the puck. In the Sharks' case, it presumably meant that nobody wanted to risk angering Macklin Celebrini.

Seattle Kraken

Led the league in: Shutouts recorded in a loss (1)

It's not easy to post a shutout in a losing effort. But also not impossible, thanks to the odd way the league records scoreless games that go to a shootout. In those cases, both teams get credit for a shutout, with the shootout winner counting as a goal for on the standings page but not in the goaltending stats. Does that make sense? It does not. But thankfully, this season featured only one of those dreaded 1-0 shootout decisions, and it came in this Nov. 23 barnburner between the Kraken and Islanders. Congratulations on the shutout, Joey Daccord, you loser.

St. Louis Blues

Led the league in: Home shutouts (5)

Yeah, they wouldn't have been my pick either, but here we are. Despite Jordan Binnington and Joel Hofer struggling badly through much of the season, the Blues managed to post five shutouts on home ice — one more than the Kings, Islanders, Wild and Avalanche each managed.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Led the league in: Penalties drawn per 60 (4.97)

The Lightning are no strangers to the penalty box — they led the league in penalties, and in minors, and also majors, and also misconducts, and also game misconducts. Luckily for them, their opponents also took a ton of penalties, averaging nearly five per game. The Panthers were next on the list at 4.48 opponent penalties/60, in case you were wondering, with nobody else in the league being above 4.17.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

New-look Lightning apply lessons learned from playoffs past in winning Game 2

Tampa Bay spent the season working on a new identity after three straight first-round playoff exits. It was on full display in Game 2.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Led the league in: Neutral-zone faceoff percentage (56.2 percent)

And the negative Toronto media acted as if nothing went well this season. The Leafs were more than a full percentage point better than the next-best team, the Rangers, and they were further ahead of third-place St. Louis than the Blues were ahead of 22nd. That's called domination. Full credit to Craig Berube, who made sure to play to his team's strengths with a defensive system that constantly resulted in faceoffs at center ice.

Utah Mammoth

Led the league in: Shots blocked while on a five-on-four (15)

You know a team is locked in when even its power-play unit is blocking shots. Wait, should your power play be surrendering shot attempts? Look, don't think too hard about it, just give the Mammoth credit for having one more block than the Habs and Senators at 14 each.

Vancouver Canucks

Led the league in: Shootout save percentage (.871)



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

This might be one of the wildest stats of the year: The Canucks goalies managed to go a league-best .871 in the shootout, and a league-worst .872 across all other situations.

Kevin Lankinen does most of the heavy lifting here, giving up just one goal on 23 tries for a truly impressive .957, which is just one point back of Jhonas Enroth for the best mark ever by a goalie who faced at least 20 attempts.

Vegas Golden Knights

Led the league in: Goals differential in any period (+47 in the third)

I'm not a big Xs and Os guy, but if I were an NHL coach, I'd probably tell my team to go out there and score more goals than anyone while also giving up fewer than anyone. The Golden Knights came very close in the third period, with a league-leading 108 goals and just 61 against, which trailed only Colorado.

Washington Capitals

Led the league in: Mid-range shooting percentage by defensemen (15.2 percent)

Fun fact: the Capitals were the last team in the league that I could find a stat for. Can you tell? You could probably tell.

Winnipeg Jets

Led the league in: Five-on-three power play conversion rate (100 percent)

We'll end with an easy one, because when it comes to five-on-three efficiency, no other team came close. The Jets were, quite literally, perfect.

As in, they went one-for-one. Look, it still counts.

The Jets' only opportunity of the season came on Jan. 15 in Minnesota, and it was Jonathan Toews who converted. The goal got slightly more attention for being his 900th career point, but it also turned out to be the entirety of the 2025-26 Jets' five-on-three experience. And it was perfection.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.30.2026

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Just classic': Canadiens come together for series-tilting win over Lightning

Eric Engels

TAMPA, Fla. — Long after the oldest player on the Montreal Canadiens scored on the first shot of his first shift of this series, his young teammates offered their most mature performance of the season when they needed to most.

The Canadiens took a 3-2 lead over the Tampa Bay Lightning when 26-year-old Alex Texier scored 1:06 into the third period, and everything they did after that secured their 3-2 lead in the series. They notched six of the next seven shots of the game over the next 12 minutes, established offensive zone pressure for much of it, managed the puck to near perfection to disable the Lightning from generating any odd-man rushes, denied clean entries to their zone, and then they locked it down in front of their own net over the final 3:30 of play.

Yes, 33-year-old Phillip Danault was on the ice for all that time at the end.

But 21-year-old Juraj Slafkovsky was right there next to him for the final 2:33, while the Lightning had Andrei Vasilevskiy on the bench, six skaters on the ice, and were pressing to tie the game. And thanks to him, Danault, Jake Evans, Nick Suzuki, Mike Matheson and Alex Carrier, rookie goaltender Jakub Dobes was able to see all 10 shots he stopped to seal the win.

This was the harmonization of the Canadiens in one performance. A group driven by young talent, steeled by the experience of veterans like Danault, Evans, Matheson, Carrier, Josh Anderson, and yes, Brendan Gallagher.

It was Gallagher who stormed off the bench, drove down the gut of the ice, put his stick down and buried his first goal of the playoffs after watching the first four games of this series from the sidelines.

"Just classic," said Evans.

He wasn't just talking about Gallagher's goal from three feet away. He was also referring to the other nine shifts he played — all around the blue paint, all up in the Lightning players' faces, all the more noticeable over his 6:48 than Oliver Kapanen was in his place in his 34 minutes spread from Game 1 through Game 4.

"It's impressive, and that sums up his character," said Evans. "He was obviously frustrated that he wasn't in, but he showed that he's a playoff guy and those are the type of games he needs to be in. He was awesome. Even if he didn't score, he meant a whole lot to this group. And you talk about maturity, and he's a big reason why we were so mature in the third."

Danault didn't have a single shot attempt in the game, but he prevented a bunch just by winning six of 10 face-offs (including some huge ones near the end), notching two hits, earning a key takeaway, and just generally making every play right to be the same pain to play against he's made a career of being.

But again, it wasn't just Danault.

"We did the job when it was time," he said. "This team is special, and it will be for the next few years for sure. We're learning still, but we can do damage. I like what I see. You need offence to move forward. But you also need a lot of character and maturity, and we're showing it."

You could see how youth and inexperience plagued the Canadiens in Game 2, when they led 2-1 and ended up losing 3-2.

Kirby Dach, 25, wore the blame for that one at Benchmark International Arena, with his forced errors in overtime leading to J.J. Moser's game-winning goal.

But Dach responded with a goal and an assist in a Game 3 win for the Canadiens at the Bell Centre, and he scored a huge goal in Game 5 that wrestled back the lead for Montreal 11 seconds after they lost it in the second period.

This was Texier's 26th career playoff game, and he punctuated it with the biggest goal of his life — a high wrister that blew right through Vasilevskiy's glove, tumbled into the net and proved to be the winner.

This was Gallagher's team-leading 77th playoff game, and he emerged from it proud, triumphant, and of course, wearing a badge of honour near his right eye.

"You grind all season to have this opportunity," he said after playing his first playoff game in this arena since losing his last one here in the 2021 Stanley Cup Final.

Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis said he probably would've put Gallagher in one sooner had he not felt good about how his team was playing through the first three games.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

But after the Canadiens dropped Game 4, St. Louis knew what he had to do.

"With the way we lost the last game after leading 2-0, emotionally, I think it could hit us a bit," he said. "And to get a jolt, we were able to turn to a veteran who's carried himself so well when it's not easy for a veteran like him to be sitting with all the experience he has. Not easy for a coach to sit a veteran out like that, either. But this was the right moment to bring him in. You think of all the baggage he carries, you know what he's going to give you. I didn't think he'd do what he did tonight, but after his whole journey of his career, I was confident he deserved the chance to give us a jolt."

It worked, with the Canadiens flying through the start of the game before Gallagher scored at the three-minute mark.

And while St. Louis' other decisions — moving Slafkovsky away from Suzuki and Cole Caufield and putting Evans next to Ivan Demidov — didn't unlock the Canadiens' top six at five-on-five, they still helped the team come together for the most pivotal moment of this series.

"What I liked most was our response," said St. Louis. "We were up 2-0 in the last game, and we lose that game, and then we have to start rebuilding our game. And then we're playing a good game, and they score quick, and we respond again. The line is so thin between winning and losing, and every play is important. I loved our push back, I loved the way we played tonight, I loved the way we controlled the puck. It was one of our best games in terms of how we managed the puck and forechecked."

It was the young guys, the older guys, everyone really. Especially at the end.

"They go and execute big blocked shots," said St. Louis. "Dobes was awesome. It's not easy to go that long five-on-six, and I thought we managed it pretty well. And it wasn't one thing, it was just collectively we found a way to keep it out of our net."

It gave the Canadiens the chance to return to Montreal with their first opportunity to eliminate the Lightning.

That'll present an even bigger challenge.

"They're a veteran team, a great team," said Danault, "so they're going to be hard to close."

There was nothing easy about doing it on this night, but the Canadiens came together and found a way.

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1389531 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Flyers outlast Penguins, clinch series in hard-fought Game 6

Sonny Sachdeva

Two weeks ago, on the eve of this hard-fought, white-knuckle, rollercoaster series, Sidney Crosby sat in his stall at the Pittsburgh Penguins' practice facility in Cranberry Township, Penn., and made clear the margins.

Stepping into a first-round bout against a Philadelphia Flyers team that had fought tooth and nail to get there, had climbed steadily from the basement to the spotlight, there would be no easy path ahead for his Penguins. They would have to be perfect.

"There are so many details," Crosby had said then, trying to distill the fog of post-season chaos into a few minutes' summary. "You can't rest on the fact that you've done something over the course of the season. You've got to go out there and do it every night. And those things that are important tend to be a little bit harder — it's physical play, finishing hits, blocking shots, wall plays, battles. All those things add up. That's why you preach them during the season. So they become habits.

"All those things will be important. Those things will be the difference between winning and losing."

Eighteen periods of hockey later, the Penguins and Flyers found themselves locked in a nail-biter Wednesday night in Philadelphia, an all-or-nothing overtime that would either send this series back to Pittsburgh for Game 7 — humbling the young Flyers after they'd struck gold with a 3-0 lead through the first half of this series — or send the Penguins home empty-handed.

In the end, it came down to the details. One iced puck, one lost faceoff, and Cam York left standing at the point with just enough space to wire a wrist through traffic, past a screened Arturs Silovs, and into the back of the Penguins' cage.

Game, series, season.

"It's unfortunate," Crosby told the gathered media in Philadelphia in the wake of the 1-0 Flyers win. "We were a shot away from going back to Pittsburgh for Game 7. It just comes down to bounces sometimes. Putting yourself in that position is tough, but I think we all had a lot of belief that we could dig ourselves out of it. And I think our game showed that. It's just unfortunate that we got behind early in the series."

The Penguins dominated the Flyers for much of the night, outshooting the eventual winners 23-11 through the third period and overtime. They had a number of dangerous chances on Dan Vladar, prime opportunities to end this one themselves. But the Czech puck-stopper, who's been the Flyers' MVP all campaign, held the fort and earned his second shutout of the series to send Philly on to Round 2.

"We played probably our best game of the series," veteran Erik Karlsson told the media post-game. "They bent but they didn't break, and that's why they're moving on to the second round. ... We got everyone playing up to their full potential all year. Then, come this time of the year, you're going to need a little bit more, and we just couldn't reach that level unfortunately.

"We just couldn't find that extra gear that's needed this time of year. Philly did. So, all credit to them."

For the Flyers, Wednesday's win seems a fitting step for a group that's been proving doubters wrong for the better part of two months, a group that looked finished coming out of the Olympic break, only to bulldoze their way up the standings and back into the dance.

They haven't looked back since.

"It's been a long time. I know there's been a lot of frustration. I'm happy for the guys," head coach Rick Tocchet said from the podium Wednesday. "The Penguins — hell of a series. They played great tonight. They weren't going to die, and I thought that we hung in there. But winning this, it's huge for the young guys. To play — 19, 20 years old — in this kind of pace, playing against Sidney Crosby, this atmosphere, overtime. ... This is huge development for these young guys. To taste it.

"There were some stretches we were kind of rope-a-doping out there. I'm 61, so I used to watch Muhammad Ali. But we hang in there. That's what I love about the team, they hung in there. They're resilient."

There's no overstating how pivotal this step is for a young Flyers team that was expected to finish in the basement once again this season. Instead, the underdog Broad Street squad is headed to Round 2, where they'll face the Eastern Conference's best, the Carolina Hurricanes.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

But first comes a moment to soak in what was achieved here — the franchise's first series win in half a decade, claimed against a club stocked with Hall of Famers and Cup winners, claimed after withstanding an onslaught, these Pens going from down 3-0 to a goal away from Game 7.

"They've had their fair share of beating me over the years," said Philly's Travis Konecny, a 10-year veteran of this Battle of Pennsylvania. "So, against Pittsburgh, it felt extra good."

Vladar, Silovs give everything in wild, back-and-forth Game 6

It was a sterling night for both netminders.

Vladar has waded through a difficult stretch since his dominant start in the early games of this series, the 28-year-old allowing a couple particularly regrettable goals in Games 4 and 5. But the Flyers stalwart found his best again when his club needed it most, turning aside all 42 shots the Penguins threw at him Wednesday.

"They pressed the entire game. Through overtime, three periods. The amount of grade-A's, point-blank saves he made, was just crazy," Jamie Drysdale said of his netminder post-game. "Incredible. Big-time player. He was unbelievable tonight."

"You saw it in overtime — it was just so back and forth, grade-A chances both ways," added OT hero Cam York. "It just felt like nothing was going to get past Vladdy. I think we all felt that. We knew that we just needed one decent look."

On the other side of the sheet, Arturs Silovs turned in his third straight standout game for Pittsburgh, stopping 31 of 32, including some particularly dangerous late flurries, before being beaten on York's shot from distance.

"He was awesome," head coach Dan Muse told the media post-game. "I mean, just massive saves. Both guys played great tonight. You know, it's not easy going back and forth every other game [in the regular season] and then you go for a long stretch, you're not playing. For him to come into this series the way he did, I can't say enough about him. He's such a competitor."

"I don't think you can ask for more," Karlsson added. "Arty did everything to give us a chance to win by scoring only one goal, and we couldn't find a way to beat their guy."

As Pens' season comes to a close, questions about Big Three's future loom

Simmering beneath the surface for this Penguins team all series, all season, was the question of what life after 2025-26 looks like for Pittsburgh's veteran core — particularly for Evgeni Malkin.

The franchise legend, who played a central role in hanging three Stanley Cup banners in Pittsburgh, was playing out the final season of the four-year deal he signed back in 2022. Reports earlier this season suggested the Penguins would not be offering Malkin a new deal. A sterling season, and strong post-season may have changed that.

But the future for Malkin, Crosby and Kris Letang — who've played a record two decades together in black and gold — remains murky.

"It's probably hard to put into words, honestly. It's something that we've just gotten used to," Crosby said of being part of the trio. "They're like family. That's the best way to describe it. You know, we've had some great wins, some tough losses like this — ultimately though, that's a long time that we've played together, and I'm just so appreciative of the opportunity to be able to play with them as long as we have. Hopefully we can keep going."

Muse got his first chance to work with the three future Hall of Famers this season. He heaped praise on them Wednesday night, as the dust settled on Pittsburgh's season-ending loss.

"You know, you see it from afar, you hear how people talk about all three of these guys, prior to being here. Then you get to see it first-hand and it's just, it's special," Muse said. "To be doing what they've been doing for this long, at such a high level, just continuing being able to elevate their games — especially when things get hard, when it's late in the season, whether it's fighting to clinch a playoff spot, or when your team needs to dig out of a hole during the regular season, or in the playoffs — they just continue to elevate, find different levels."

"I honestly don't think the three of them get enough credit for the fact that they've been doing it together for this long. I mean, it hasn't happened before in sports in North America. And there's a reason for it. Because it's ridiculously hard, and it's so uncommon. And it takes special people to be able to do it."

For his part, Malkin has reiterated time and time again that he hopes to remain in black and gold.

"I hope it's not over," he said last week, ahead of Game 4, the first potential end to this series. "I want to be here. I want to be part of the team next year too. I want to retire in Pittsburgh. But it's not my choice."

Flyers' youth, blue-line scoring pivotal to series-ending Game 6 win

Much was made heading into this series of Philadelphia's inexperience, of the question marks surrounding the club's young core, how they might navigate the tumult of the post-season. For a spell there, it seemed the moment had gotten to them, the veteran Pens pushing back, staving off elimination twice, showing their steady hand as they climbed off the cliff's edge.

But Wednesday night, with it all on the line, it was the Flyers' youth that clinched it for the club.

It was Porter Martone building momentum, tilting the ice back in Philly's favour, with a dangerous chance that nearly ended the game minutes before the actual winner. It was Matvei Michkov — scratched for Game 5, back in the lineup for Game 6 — setting up the eventual clincher. And it was Cam York ending it all with one game-winning shot, sending his club on to Round 2.

"It's the craziest thing ever," Drysdale said of York, his blue-line partner. "Yorkie's the man. Vladdy's the man. Everyone killed it, stuck together. It's crazy."

"It's special," York said of his winner. "I can't say enough about my teammates. The coaching staff has been unbelievable with me, just reassuring confidence. Guys are just giving it everything they've got this time of year. Last year didn't go my way obviously, but I wanted to have a bounce-back year. I feel like I've done a pretty good job of that."

Offence from the blue line wound up a crucial game-changer for Philly in Round 1. The club saw five different defencemen collect goals in the series, with Travis Sanheim potting two and Rasmus Ristolainen, Nick Seeler, Drysdale and York each tallying one.

Though one of those goals no doubt reigns above the rest.

"Yorkie was due," Drysdale told the media Wednesday night. "He's a stud. He's been playing unreal all series. It was his time to shine, and boy, did he ever shine."

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1389532 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Tkachuk dismisses rumours about Senators' future, but drama just getting started



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — Will he stay or will he go?

That's what the talk will be surrounding Brady Tkachuk until there's a resolution.

He might not like it — and he said as much on Wednesday, when speaking to the media — but it's going to happen.

It was a tumultuous year for Tkachuk, from a thumb injury in the third game of the season to achieving his dream of winning a gold medal, being the centre of online attention, becoming a podcaster and becoming a father for the second time, as his daughter Lyla was just born days ago.

Nevertheless, the "outside forces" of online aggregators and certain fans — especially outside of Ottawa — have been beating the drum of the song "he gone."

"I feel like I've answered this hundreds of times," said Tkachuk. "That none of that, I've never shown, I've never said, none of those things ever came out of my mouth. Quite honestly, it's just getting frustrating. It's becoming a distraction. I have been fully committed to this team, this city."

His frustration was palpable when asked about his future.

"I don't really, honestly, I don't get why it's a consistent thing, and it's happened so many times, personally, and it's frustrating," he said.

We know why. It's because Tkachuk is a player, as Ottawa head coach Travis Green said earlier this week, who 31 other teams would love to have. His mix of size, skill, brute force and infectious energy make him a hockey unicorn.

He has two seasons remaining until he's an unrestricted free agent in the summer of 2028.

"The extension talk is ... it's a year away, so that's something that you physically can't even do anytime soon," he said. "I just will talk to (general manager) Steve (Staios), when we have that conversation (on) where he views our team, what he thinks we need to improve on. ... I'm excited to hear Steve's thoughts."

Tkachuk ended his media availability by going out of his way to thank Senators fans.

He said all the right things and dismissed any notion of him asking out.

Tkachuk is beloved by many Ottawa fans. He's been a part of many charitable endeavours, giving his time and money to Ottawa over the years. Ask people behind the scenes in Ottawa, and he's known for how kind he is to Senators' staff and fans; he's committed.

At the same time, on Wednesday Tkachuk never uttered a version of what his teammate Jordan Spence said the other day: "I want to be here."

The Senators captain could have and chose not to. If you squint hard enough, he sounded a little like the politicians who inhabit this city. Sometimes it's as much what you don't say as what you do.

For Sens fans, these discussions about another marquee player's future in Ottawa are PTSD-inducing.

They've seen Erik Karlsson, Alexei Yashin, Dany Heatley, Mark Stone and Jason Spezza all walk out the door of the Canadian Tire Centre.

Brady isn't his brother Matthew: he chose to stay long term in Ottawa in 2021. However, the world has changed and the politics of a Team USA star playing in Canada weren't the same back then.

On the positive side, the Senators' future seems bright with Tim Stutzle, Jake Sanderson and the plethora of young talent in Dylan Cozens,

Shane Pinto and Thomas Chabot, despite the early exit from the playoffs two years in a row.

And Ottawa fans routinely chant "Brady! Brady! Brady!" But if you looked at Twitter/X comments ... well, Tkachuk said he's left the social media platform because of all the vitriol.

"It's tough. Sometimes the algorithms, you can't control it, you just see it. And honestly, that's for me, the way I kind of handle that is to get off Twitter," he said.

In January, Tkachuk's personal life was part of unfair and unsubstantiated social media rumours. You feel for him.

The Twitter/X trolls and online discourse hasn't helped.

And many people have criticized Tkachuk's play this season, seeing a lack of commitment that contrasted with his run with Team USA.

"That was really challenging," he said. "To be honest with you, come off such a high and then we go right on the road out west, (it) was tough."

But the truth is, Tkachuk was almost a point-per-game player this season, even with a bummed thumb that limited his ability to get rough — something that has always energized the captain emotionally.

"Being able to fight again, I feel like I was able to truly be myself," he said about the latter part of the season after his injury had healed. "I didn't like having my hands tied when I wasn't able to fight."

That said, Tkachuk was pedestrian in the playoffs, failing to register a point.

"(I) want to be a playoff player and, for me, I just wasn't good enough," said Tkachuk.

In the end, the Senators need more from their captain and he needs more from his front office if the marriage can stay together.

"I think, every year, we have taken steps," said Tkachuk, on how close this team is to being a Stanley Cup contender.

Staios is in an unenviable position because the time is now with Tkachuk and the rest of his young core. If Staios can make the right moves this off-season, the Senators could become a Cup contender, and that would make it easier to re-sign Tkachuk.

The best way to pitch yourself to anyone is winning.

However, Staios has to ask Tkachuk, honestly and directly, whether he sees himself in Ottawa after 2028. Staios was asked this week whether he would have a discussion with Tkachuk about his future this summer.

"There's nothing that we have talked about or thought about where that conversation should happen," Staios said, later adding, "It is what it is, and it depends on what week and what fan base it's coming from. So, I don't read it. I don't bother with it."

His captain does read it and is bothered with it, though.

We are dubious that Staios won't have that discussion with his captain, but we understand why the general manager wants to quiet the public drama.

To lose Tkachuk for nothing would be shades of Mitch Marner in Toronto. It would set the entire franchise back. If Tkachuk is coy, that's where this situation gets really difficult for Staios.

Every analytic would have told you that the Senators were an elite team this season, if not a Stanley Cup-calibre team. Staios could very reasonably believe — even with uncertainty surrounding Tkachuk's future — that next season the Senators could join the contention bracket of the NHL. Let's say the Senators make the conference finals or even finals, it would give the Senators a better chance of keeping their captain past 2028.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

You wonder if Tkachuk does extend, whether it's a Connor McDavid-esque short-term two- or three-year contract.

At the same time, if the Senators struggle and bounce out early in the playoffs, then all bets are off.

If, for whatever reason, Staios feels forced to trade his captain next off-season, then he will get pennies on the dollar compared to this summer because Tkachuk has a no-move clause and will likely decide his next destination himself.

The Senators have a bright future, but that light will shine or dim for years to come, depending on what transpires with their captain.

We don't know what Tkachuk will do, but we do know the drama surrounding his future is just getting started.

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Sportsnet.ca / Takeaways: Mammoth's power-play mistakes prove costly in 2OT

Emily Sadler

Five games into the first-round series between the Utah Mammoth and the Vegas Golden Knights, these games just keep getting better and better.

They're getting longer and longer, too.

After Game 4 looked destined to head to double overtime before Vegas put it to bed 5-4 in the final minute on Monday night, Wednesday's Game 5 did reach a second OT period.

But it ultimately ended in the same fashion: A 5-4 Golden Knights win and jubilation for Vegas, and missed opportunities and heartbreak for Utah. The Golden Knights' victory, won on the stick of Brett Howden's shorthanded goal in double overtime, now has Vegas up 3-2 in the series with a chance to claim the series in Game 6 Friday night in Salt Lake City.

Buckle up for that one, because it's going to be mayhem. Get your coffee ready, too. In the meantime, here are our takeaways from Vegas' 5-4 double-overtime victory in Game 5.

Dorofeyev responds again (and again, and again)

You can blame your lack of sleep on Pavel Dorofeyev, who tied things up with just 53 seconds remaining in regulation of Game 5 Wednesday night. What looked like a sure victory for Utah suddenly... wasn't.

Dorofeyev's sudden surge has brought a massive turnaround for the Golden Knights. Or, maybe we should say surges — because there have been a few at this point. For the first three games of this series, the Golden Knights' leading scorer in the regular-season was playing like he'd been hitting the snooze button. Head coach John Tortorella called on his biggest stars to step up over the weekend, and Dorofeyev responded in Game 4 with an early goal. He was back in the doghouse later that game, though, benched for most of the third period. He responded in overtime of Game 4 with what appeared to be the game-winner before it was ruled offside.

After waking up in Game 4, he was indeed wide awake and clearly energized in Vegas Wednesday night with a hat trick — including a power-play goal for a unit that had been struggling mightily in this series.

Not only did Dorofeyev respond to his coach's messages multiple times, he responded within Game 5, over and over. All three of his goals on Wednesday night were game-tying markers.

Utah's PP struggles prove costly for the second straight game

After 13 straight opportunities held without a goal, the Vegas Golden Knights' power play finally broke its streak when Dorofeyev cashed in with the man advantage in the first period. It was Vegas' third PP opportunity in the first frame, their baiting of Mammoth players early in this one finally paying off.

Much of the talk this series has been about Vegas' lack of attack with the man advantage — and Utah's penalty-killing prowess — but after the Mammoth went scoreless on the power play in Game 4, and again in Game 5 despite ample opportunity to cash in, we should probably flip our focus.

A lack of PP firepower early in this series has devolved into straight-up costly mistakes for the Mammoth as Vegas' penalty kill takes over. Not only have the Golden Knights held Utah to just a single power-play goal in 14 opportunities this series, they've now scored two shorthanded goals — including the double-overtime winner in Game 5. Howden has scored both, also scoring short-handed in the first period of Game 4.

It's true that the power play was never Utah's biggest strength. But it's now a major weakness, and it's proven costly in back-to-back games.

Guenther's point streak continues

After being held without a point in Game 1 of this series — feels like forever ago, doesn't it? — Mammoth forward Dylan Guenther has put his name on the scoresheet each game since. Guenther scored to tie the game 3-3 early in the third period, his signature snap shot serving up his third goal of the series. Guenther's shot — snap shot, slap shot, one-timer, all of the above — is truly a thing of beauty, and it's getting plenty of spotlight time in this series.

He now has three goals and five points in the series, tied with Lawson Crouse for the team lead. (Captain Clayton Keller also have five points, thanks to a two-assist night on Wednesday, but has fewer goals.)

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Sportsnet.ca / Hot and not so much: Oilers' mid-series report cards

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — We've reached the point in this series when we're spending more time spent in the air and airports than inside hockey rinks, as we navigate back and forth the nearly 2,600 km between Edmonton and Anaheim — with a connector in Vancouver, just for the fun of it.

The Edmonton Oilers have packed their playoff experience to Anaheim for Game 6 (Thursday, Sportsnet, Sportsnet+, 8 p.m. MT / 10 p.m. ET), with a welcome carry-on of confidence after finally getting a saddle on the thoroughbred Ducks in a 4-1 win Tuesday.

"You have to be grateful just getting to the next day. All we did is survive one more day," Oilers captain Connor McDavid said after Game 5, his team still trailing its Round 1 series, 3-2. "The pressure is still on us, but it's a big game for them too."

We'll see both teams at Thursday's morning skates, but for now, how about something new? A mid-series report card for select Oilers, on a scale of 1-5.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

Let's start with an easy one:

Vasily Podkolzin: 5

Podkolzin leads the Oilers in hits, has become their chief settler of scores, has a point per game and is plus-6. It's crazy to think that Rick Tocchet never saw a player in this Muscovite when the two were in Vancouver. He fights, he scores, he hits ... kind of like a young Rick Tocchet.

When Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch shuffled his lines in Game 5 and went to the nuclear option, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zach Hyman had their best games of the playoffs with Podkolzin on their left side.

"He improves every line he goes to," said Knoblauch, "whether it's the first, second, third or fourth line. A lot of it is just being able to play simple. Like, he's a good player."

Trent Frederic: 1

Frederic has played his way right into the press box, as a season in which he gave his new team a grand total of seven points in 74 games rolls into a pointless post-season. Frederic is not engaged enough as a fourth-line winger playing playoff hockey, and he's not good enough to earn a spot anywhere above that.

At first we thought Colton Dach was dragging Frederic into the fight. Now, Dach fights alone as injuries at centre necessitate Curtis Lazar's inclusion in the lineup. Frederic was healthy-scratched in Game 5.

Zach Hyman: n/a

A year ago, Hyman was leading the playoffs in hits when he dislocated his wrist and bowed out of the Western Conference Final. This year, he ranks seventh on his own team in hits, which tells me he's playing hurt to some unknown degree.

We're not positive what the injury was that cost Hyman the final five games of his regular season, but it's left him unable to perform a vital part of his playoff mandate. His two goals have helped, but he's not the same guy so far this spring.

Leon Draisaitl: 5

There aren't many gamers like this guy, who's absolutely elite in both skill and will. He's winning 56 per cent of his face-offs while leading the Oilers with nine points, coming off a knee injury that cost him the final month of the regular season.

Total respect for a player who's proven it over and over, and is doing it again this spring: The bigger the moment, the better Draisaitl plays. He's never missed a playoff game, playing all 101 post-season contests the Oilers have taken part in during his career, and he gives you 23 hard minutes, night in night out — with a huge dose of offensive production.

Kasperi Kapanen: 5

Kapanen's former teams — the Leafs, Penguins and Blues — must be wondering why they didn't get the same Kapanen that the Oilers have these days, a big-game producer who skates, hits and scores at his highest rate in the post-season. He's tied for third in the NHL with four goals (all at even strength), he's plus-7, and he's fourth on the Oilers in hits. Tidy work for a guy who plays 17-and-a-half minutes per night.

Connor Ingram: 3

Ingram has had two outstanding games and two average ones, not good enough come playoff time to be considered a genuine No. 1.

Playing behind Edmonton's structure — or lack thereof, at times — and against an explosive Anaheim team, you're going to see your share of grade-A's. Ingram handled the load exceptionally well in Game 5, but he'll need two more of those if Edmonton is going to see Round 2 again this season.

Evan Bouchard: 2.5

His first three games were sleepy, but then you see how he stirs the Oilers' drink when his game is as focused as it was Tuesday night. He leads the Oilers with six assists (seven points), but they'll need the "good Bouchard" from here on in.

Bouchard is too good a defenceman to bring his B-game to the rink in April and May. The Oilers hope they've seen the last of it.

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Sportsnet.ca / What are realistic expectations for Pettersson after major scoring slide?

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — Shortly before this season began, Elias Pettersson finished another one of those interviews in which he says almost nothing.

He was accommodating, but not revealing. Nothing introspective.

At the end of the brief conversation, however, when Pettersson was asked if he expected to at least do better than his 15-goal, 45-point disaster from 2024-25, he paused and then deadpanned: "Yeah, it shouldn't be too hard."

With Pettersson and the Canucks then still riding the vibes of a positive training camp and full of hope for a bounce-back season, it was a rare moment of self-deprecating humour from the most expensive, and one of the most enigmatic, players in franchise history.

Seventy-four games later for Pettersson, the 27-year-old finished with 15 goals and 51 points (in 10 more games than the previous season) as the Canucks cratered and were last in the National Hockey League by 14 points.

Late in the regular season, my boss asked if it was time for another "What's-wrong-with-Elias-Pettersson" story.

My response: "Maybe nothing's wrong. Maybe this is who he is now" — a 50-point, second-line centre who plays with a defensive conscience, blocks shots, and exasperates fans and coaches alike because he's capable of so much more.

It has been more than 26 months since Pettersson's elite, offensive game vanished over a cliff in February 2024 just as Canucks management was leaning on the Swedish centre to sign a long-term extension ahead of that year's trade deadline. Or else.

In 166 games since Pettersson had three assists in a 4-1 win against the Detroit Red Wings on Feb. 15 two years ago, he has 36 goals and 113 points, tied for 133rd in the NHL over that time.

In his previous 135 games, going back to the start of his 102-point season in 2022-23, Pettersson's 174 points were seventh-best in the league. You can probably name the only six guys who were ahead of him: Connor McDavid, Nikita Kucherov, Nathan MacKinnon, David Pastrnak, Leon Draisaitl and Mikko Rantanen.

No wonder the Canucks gave Pettersson that \$92.8-million contract, and no wonder they have regretted it for most of the time since then.

This is the third straight off-season when the narrative around Pettersson is the same. He needs a big summer to train and work on his game so he has the chance to rebound next year.

But maybe this is who he is now.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

"He's been disappointing, obviously," Canucks president Jim Rutherford said at his season-ending press conference 11 days ago. "I think there's a lot of good things he did. He tried to become a two-way player and, you know, he's tried to do the things that it ultimately takes to win as a team. But his production is down so much, it's difficult, right?"

Rutherford continued: "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 (next) GM is going to have to make a decision."

It was the same issue that the GM Rutherford just fired, Patrik Allvin, raised publicly halfway through the previous season.

"I think, again, it comes back to expectations and preparation -- how you prepare yourself?" Allvin told Sportsnet at the end of 2024. "I don't believe that he was aware of just how hard it was going to be. Just because you achieve one thing to get a long-term extension ... life just gets harder. You haven't really accomplished anything. You're not even halfway there (to winning a Stanley Cup). And then obviously the mental part comes in there, too, and suddenly you feel the pressure."

Asked to get stronger and heavier last summer, Pettersson did what the team wanted.

Overall, he still tested disappointingly at training camp -- enough of the veteran Canucks were near the bottom of the fitness standings that staff did not post conditioning results for all players to see -- but he added six kilograms and was stronger.

Still, he finished with 51 points. Pettersson scored in just one of the Canucks' final 36 games, a two-goal effort on March 17 against Florida that ended a 20-game scoring famine.

With 14 points in 14 games in November, Pettersson did have his best month since signing his franchise-record contract. But he missed eight games with an upper-body injury at the start of December while also dealing with the emotional blow of his wife, Katelyn's, miscarriage.

Pettersson's game was not the same after he returned.

"He's got to be better, and he knows that, he's aware of that," head coach Adam Foote said after benching Pettersson in the third period of a Feb. 28 loss in Seattle. "We need more from him and he's got to find it. He knows he's got to be better for us and we'll see that next game.

"(He has) got to play with more zip, like, more pace to his game, more engaged. Good things will happen when he gets his motor going."

Foote sounded a lot like previous coach Rick Tocchet, who told us one year earlier, after a loss in Utah: "We've talked about he has to move his feet, and can't double clutch (with the puck). I think he's waiting for something. I don't know if it's a lack of confidence in his shot, but as soon as he has room, he's got to take it and ... just got to blast it. He's not moving his feet. If he just takes three or four strides ... I don't know if it's a mental block right now, all year, but he's got to move his feet."

Tocchet had planned to visit Pettersson in Sweden last summer, but instead left the Canucks for the Philadelphia Flyers.

None of Pettersson's "problems" are new. He needs to be better prepared, better conditioned and stronger on his skates. He must play with pace and shoot the puck.

But, again, on the ice, it has been more than two years since he regularly did those things.

Before the Canucks' final game, a 6-1 loss in Edmonton on April 16, Pettersson said of his season: "I didn't start that well, but I thought it's gone a little better and better. But also, I know I can make some changes

in the summer that I want to get better at, and try come back better next year."

But does he need to produce more than 50 points per season?

"Oh, yeah. Points are great. But, like, if I do enough good stuff out there, create chances (and) play good defence, points will come. Of course, I definitely want to have more. That's always a thing. But if I think too much about points, then points are not coming. So I'm just trying to focus on what matters in terms of effort, and making plays -- make the right play when they're there and play the right way when a play is not there."

Pettersson is emphatic that he wants to be part of the rebuild in Vancouver.

In the flat-cap era, his mammoth contract would have burned through the Canucks' hull over time and sunk the ship. But for now, with a skyrocketing cap and the team loading up on entry-level and early-20s players, his salary isn't much of a problem beyond the terrible optics.

It should be noted that Pettersson is not a detriment to teammates. According to people inside the team, he takes up little space in the dressing room. He's quiet, a good teammate and tries hard. He's still shifty with the puck even if he doesn't shoot enough or move his feet, and he led all NHL forwards with 108 blocked shots this season.

Pettersson is not a leader, but neither is he a problem in the room.

But he is grossly under-performing that contract and the next manager, hired and empowered by Rutherford and owner Francesco Aquilini, may decide the situation is untenable. Even after re-signing Pettersson, the Canucks looked at trading him in the last two off-seasons. His trade value, like his offence, has eroded.

"You're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't," Rutherford said at his year-end presser. "You're damned if you trade the guy because he could go and take off again. Or you could decide, 'no, he's going to do it here,' and he doesn't. So it's a very tough decision. But I do feel confident that Petey has the ability that he can bounce back. And he doesn't have to be a guy that gets 110 points. Even just a point a game will be enough. As this team grows and becomes a better team, it'll be enough for this team to be successful. But he's got to get to that, and he's got to work at it.

"I'm sure that's going to be a key point for the new guy that comes on board. He's going to want to know what's going on with this guy, and he's going to look into it and make that decision."

"As players, we need to be better," Pettersson said in Edmonton. "Front office needs to be better, all of us need to be better as a whole organization. It won't come overnight, but if we do the right things over time, good things will happen, I believe."

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Sportsnet.ca / Systems Analyst: How the Bruins turned a major disadvantage into an OT win

Justin Bourne

The Boston Bruins' overtime winner in Game 5 will ultimately be remembered as a David Pastrnak moment, and that's fair. It's a superstar read of a developing play, a superstar move, and a superstar finish. But this game could've gone either way. Buffalo can certainly make the case they should have won this one.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

For a brief flicker of a moment in overtime, it looked like it would. The door was open.

Pastrnak may have had the big moment, but the events that shaped it centred around two players, Boston's Marat Khusnutdinov and Buffalo's Peyton Krebs.

By the time the big moment came, Krebs was on the verge of a sterling performance. He played the second-most minutes among Sabres forwards (24:28), controlled the puck with regularity, and his line nearly put away the game in overtime.

But in the end, he's going to wear the goat horns. That's playoff overtime hockey, baby. Krebs turned the puck over in a big spot, right where coaches hate it – within five feet of the blue line – and it resulted in a worst-case scenario outcome.

The first note is that on the final play of the game, Krebs is involved in a long shift. By the time the Bruins scored he had been on the ice for 1:22, about double the length of what you'd be looking for in overtime. But if you watch how the shift unfolded, it's not hard to see how this happened.

Krebs was only recorded with one giveaway in the game, but he maybe should've been hit with another because he actually made a similar mistake to the nuclear one earlier on the same shift.

First, he receives a pass in the neutral zone with room to skate when there's 11:43 to go in the period.

Krebs takes it across the blue line and clearly should get the puck in deep. But he doesn't do that. He has it here...

...but his chip-in gets knocked down. However, thanks to the desperate work of his linemates, the puck stays in the zone. You'd think this would've been an "oh crap" moment for the next time, but alas.

The Sabres battle and get it back.

OK, so this is where we are: The Sabres stay on offence, and this leads to the type of shift that will burn out your legs. Krebs just had to sprint up the ice to stay ahead of a back-checker, and now -- at the end of the above gif -- he has the puck again. Krebs has to push to keep it safe and away from Boston's defenders, before getting Rock Bottomed by Hampus Lindholm in the corner. That takes a lot out of a guy.

This is Krebs with the puck to start.

This leads to a long possession where the Sabres very nearly score.

Now we're a minute into the shift and everyone is dying on both sides, but the Bruins are particularly toast because they have to deal with the long change and don't have the puck. Boston manages to chop it out, but they get "three-quarter iced" which means they don't get it far enough down for a clean change and that puts them in a bad spot. They're going to sprint to the bench and dive in to try and get a few bodies off.

The Sabres are going to change too, but Krebs makes a good read. His defenceman, Mattias Samuelsson, is going to need an outlet so Krebs goes to post-up for a stretch pass.

Now remember, at this point Krebs is gassed but if he can just get this puck in deep so Samuelsson doesn't have to ice it, he can then get off and it'd be a great play for all involved because the Sabres would be able to forecheck against some tired defenders.

Check out the Bruins' bench as Samuelsson turns it back up ice. Panic.

Here you can see Khusnutdinov stepping on the ice to start his shift, and Pastrnak dangling a leg over the boards, waiting for his change to make it all the way to the bench.

The Bruins are in MAJOR trouble here. The Sabres have possession and numbers up ice.

Look at Ryan McLeod. Boston's Andrew Peeke is panicked, sprinting on to the ice so frantically that he's not yet got his top hand to the top of his stick by the time we hit our critical frame. McLeod is in. (He did have to hold to stay onside, so maybe Peeke would've caught him, but we know McLeod can fly.)

But the other thing I want you to notice in this next frame is Khusnutdinov's stick. Ooo, coaches love this: he's pursuing the puck carrier and leading with his stick on the ice, on the puck. You can still throw a hit with your stick in a good spot.

Fun fact about Khusnutdinov: he has no points in this series, not a goal or an assist. But coaches want to know "what can you do when you aren't providing offence?" Do you have a 'B' game?

Khusnutdinov averaged 14:30 of ice time during the regular season, and Tuesday night he played 21:30. Why? Well, during the regular season he threw 77 hits in 42 games played. In Game 5 he threw five hits, a total he's only surpassed once in his NHL career -- and that was in Game 4, when he threw seven. Khusnutdinov's 19 hits are second on the Bruins in the playoffs, after finishing 14th on the team in the regular season. Maybe he's not piling up points, but I'm guessing his coach likes that. (I also think there's a case that he should have gotten an assist on the OT winner, but that's not what we're discussing here today.)

As you can see, the puck hits Khusnutdinov's stick in the frame below, creating a turnover back to the Bruins, and he continues on into the body of where Krebs was going, were he moving with any speed.

Now, does Krebs turn it over because he thinks he might get hit? I don't think that's an irrelevant factor here by any means.

But typically, Krebs hasn't been afraid of contact. He took the third-most hits on the Sabres this season, and he also rarely gave the puck away. During the regular season he was 15th on the team in giveaways per 60, and in the playoffs, he's not even in the "top" 10 in giveaways for the team. He normally takes pretty good care of the puck.

So here I see a player who is at the end of a shift and tired. He just doesn't have the mental clarity or physical energy to make the right tiny adjustments to find a passing lane. I see a good stick by a defender, and some luck involved in the bounce. I see a puck that drifts right to Lindholm as Jack Quinn skates by (which is fine, he thinks the puck may go in deep), and just as Pastrnak would be getting on the ice.

Suddenly, it's the Sabres who are in trouble.

It's kinda like this old meme:

And now, from here, it's just a good pass and a forward who stays onside by a hair. You can see in the frame below the puck in the zone before the skate.

All Samuelsson can do is try and stop Pastrnak from cutting across the net, which goalie Alex Lyon also expects...

...until Pasta hits them with the smoke-bomb/cloud-of-snow and cuts it back.

So what was probably an inch from being a Sabres breakaway for McLeod turned into a Pastrnak break about three seconds later, which is playoff overtime hockey in a nutshell.

The Sabres had the Bruins on the mat, before the Bruins came back to life like The Undertaker.

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1389537 Websites



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

TSN.CA / Leafs' Cowan channeling Bolts' Hagel in bid to make bigger impact in AHL playoffs

Mark Masters

Easton Cowan is drawing inspiration from watching Brandon Hagel deliver for the Tampa Bay Lightning in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"He's playing unreal," the Toronto Marlies winger said. "He's playing hard and he's helping their team win. You look at guys like that and you want to be a difference maker like that eventually."

Cowan considers the 6-foot-2, 186-pound Hagel to be a role model as he plots his own path in professional hockey.

"I've always watched him play obviously, but when you play against him you really realize how good he is," said Cowan, who stands 6-foot, 190 pounds.

The 20-year-old faced the Lightning twice during his impressive rookie season with the Toronto Maple Leafs, including one showdown in March when Hagel posted a goal and an assist. But Hagel, who represented Canada at the Olympics in February, is on a different level now. The Lightning winger is leading the Stanley Cup playoffs with six goals in four games against the Montreal Canadiens.

"He's a rat, but he plays hard," Cowan said. "He can make plays all over the ice and he's being used in every situation and he's capitalizing on his chances. He's very fun to watch."

Hagel scored twice, including the game-winning goal, on Sunday as the Lightning rallied from 2-0 down to beat the Canadiens and level their first-round series with Game 5 set for Wednesday night in Tampa.

Cowan is not just watching Hagel. He is studying Hagel's game.

"That's what he wants to emulate," said Marlies head coach John Gruden. "When I show him some [mistakes] he's like, 'Well, that's not Brandon Hagel-like,' so he understands. He's a smart hockey player. He's a gifted hockey player and he likes [big] moments."

The Leafs stumbled to the finish line with eight straight defeats, but Cowan ended on an uptick with seven points in those games while riding shotgun on the top line beside John Tavares and William Nylander.

After wrapping up his 66-game, 29-point rookie season in the NHL, Cowan welcomed the opportunity to go to the American Hockey League for the Calder Cup playoffs. The expectation was that he would play a key role for the Marlies, but the native of Mount Brydges, Ont. failed to make a big impression in the opening round.

Cowan produced two assists in three games – each coming on the power play – in Toronto's victory over the Rochester Americans.

"I feel like I can be more physical in ways and obviously make better plays and be smarter with the puck," Cowan readily admitted after practising on the Marlies second line beside Jacob Quillan and Ryan Tverberg.

The Marlies will now face the first-place Laval Rocket, Montreal's affiliate, in a best-of-five North Division semifinal series, which opens on Wednesday in Quebec.

"I'm glad we got the win and advanced," Cowan said. "I can be better, I know that."

Cowan was one of four Marlies to finish the series against Rochester as a minus player.

"He understands that there's some things he can improve on," Gruden said. "But we also have to be patient with him and understand he's played a lot of hockey. I know when his back's against the wall that kid's going to show up."

Cowan already possesses some clutch credentials. He led the London Knights to back-to-back Ontario Hockey League titles and last year was named MVP of the Memorial Cup as London claimed the Canadian Hockey League championship.

Cowan has played plenty of high-leverage hockey, including two appearances with Team Canada at the World Juniors, but the AHL is a different beast. And Cowan only played four games with the Marlies during the regular season.

"Sometimes that adjustment is very hard because the league is different," said Marlies defenceman Dakota Mermis. "Probably more physical in a lot of ways so there's always that adjustment period."

Based on Tuesday's practice, Cowan's comfort level is growing. He caught gritty Marlies winger Michael Pezzetta off guard by attempting a reverse hit.

"I told him not to do that any more," Pezzetta said with a chuckle. "He's laying the boom. I think that's a great tool in his toolbox and it's going to help him down the road."

Cowan felt he had a good practice on Tuesday.

"Just have to build off that," he said. "I know I can be better and I will [be]."

After serving as the backup to Artur Akhymov in the first two games of the playoffs, Dennis Hildeby stopped 29 of 31 shots to pick up the win in the decisive Game 3 against Rochester on Sunday.

Hildeby will get the start on Wednesday in Laval.

"He deserves it," said Gruden. "He came in and played outstanding."

Hildeby's 6-foot-7, 222-pound frame should allow the Swede to handle the heavy style of game employed by the Rocket.

"He fits it perfectly," Gruden said of the matchup. "They have a couple lines that like to get to the front of the net. They are going to be around him quite a bit. We gotta make sure we can keep them away from Dennis, box out early as possible, but also stay away from the scrums because they're going to try to goad us into, I'm sure, some penalties. We'll have to address that and I thought we did a really good job of that last series."

The rivalry between the Leafs and Canadiens is intense in the NHL and it's very much the same between the Marlies and Rocket in the AHL.

"Two proud organizations and when the teams get out there, it seems like the intensity just gets raised a little bit and now, under the circumstances of playoffs, it's going to get raised even more," said Gruden.

The Marlies won five of the eight games against the Rocket this year, including the final two games of the regular season in Toronto.

"It's going to be a war out there," predicted Pezzetta, who spent seven seasons with the Canadiens organization before signing with the Leafs last summer. "I think that's the best kind of hockey."

While the Marlies playoff run continues, MLSE continues its search for a new head of hockey operations. Former Leafs captain Mats Sundin is reportedly in line for a role in the front office.

"He was my favourite player growing up," said Toronto native Pezzetta. "I used to wear 13 my whole career, that was for him. So, for me, you're super excited to maybe get to meet him one day. I think for the organization he's a pivotal player. His banner is up in the rafters. It's exciting for Leafs Nation for sure."

"It's always special for a former legend like that to come back and help out," said Hildeby. "It will definitely be special."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 30, 2026

John Chayka is reportedly among the contenders for the team's head of hockey operations position. He served as Arizona Coyotes general manager from 2016 to 2020.

Mermis broke into the NHL with the Coyotes in the 2017-18 season.

"I was early in my career and he was very young at the time as well," Mermis recalled. "You hear about analytics, numbers, you know, his history with the company he started (Stathletes) and analytics in sports, and obviously he is very good with numbers and being able to dissect those numbers. I enjoyed working with him at that time ... It'd be good if he resurfaces."

Defenceman Matt Benning missed Game 3 against Rochester and did not take part in Tuesday's practice.

"He is still out with an upper-body injury for a while," Gruden said. "They'll re-evaluate it and hopefully we'll get him back. If not, it is next man up."

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