



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 1, 2026

The News & Observer

NHL sets date for Hurricanes, Flyers second-round playoff series to begin

By: Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes and Philadelphia Flyers will kick off their second-round Stanley Cup playoff series Saturday at 8 p.m., the NHL announced Friday.

Game 1 at Lenovo Center will be shown by ABC. The full schedule for the best-of-seven series has not been released.

The Hurricanes, the top seed in the Eastern Conference, will host the first two games. Games 3 and 4 will be in Philadelphia. Game 5, if necessary, will be in Raleigh, Game 6 in Philadelphia and Game 7 in Raleigh.

The Canes swept past the Ottawa Senators in four games in the first round and have spent this week practicing and getting some rest. The Flyers and Pittsburgh Penguins went to six games in their series before the Flyers took Game 6 in overtime.

The Canes were 3-0-1 against the Flyers in the regular season as all four games went to overtime and three were decided in shootouts.



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The Athletic

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Philadelphia Flyers 2026 NHL Stanley Cup playoffs preview

By: Sean Gentile, Shayna Goldman, Dom Luszczyzyn

Beating their cross-state rivals — a similarly surprising playoff team — is one thing. Beating the team that has essentially run the Metropolitan Division for the past half-decade is a much tougher task.

In a season defined by defying the odds, a seven-game series against the Carolina Hurricanes poses arguably the toughest challenge yet for the upstart Philadelphia Flyers. Can Rick Tocchet and company defy the odds once more?

The odds

To the surprise of no one, the Flyers enter this series as significant underdogs. That's to be expected for a team that few expected to make the playoffs, facing off against a perennial powerhouse.

It should be obvious to anyone that this is going to be an uphill battle for Philadelphia. The Hurricanes are several steps above the Penguins team the Flyers just dispatched in six. More importantly, the Flyers are arguably a few rungs below the Senators team that Carolina had zero trouble with in a sweep.

All of those point to what should be a short series, though that depends on how much magic the Flyers still have up their sleeves. Twenty-six percent isn't much, but it's not zero, either. It's also much higher than the chances Philadelphia had to even make the playoffs coming out of the Olympic break.

Defying the odds was a motivator against Pittsburgh, but Carolina may be too steep a hill to climb.

The numbers

The Flyers and Hurricanes are both powerhouses in their own zones, with just five total goals between their Defensive Ratings.

Shutdown defense has always been a hallmark of the Canes' system. Carolina was the best shot suppressor of the regular season at five-on-five and ranked top-10 in expected goals against. The Senators actually tested that with some quality looks in the first round, but strong netminding kept them quiet on the scoresheet.

The Flyers' stingy defense helped fuel their push to the playoffs. The team allowed more shots than Carolina in the regular season, but did a better job limiting the danger of those chances. That carried into the playoffs thanks to their 1-1-3 neutral zone setup that really limited the Penguins' ability to enter the zone with control.

Those defensive strengths trickle into short-handed situations, where both teams play a disruptive style. So this series will come down to who can contain their opponent best — and one side of the matchup has the edge on paper.

As much as the Flyers improved down the stretch, their attack doesn't hold a candle to Carolina's, as indicated by a near 50-goal difference in Offensive Rating. Carolina is a relentless team that creates waves of scoring chances at five-on-five. While the Canes still need to work on converting on those chances, their 3.48 xG per 60 in the first round crushed the Senators.

Philadelphia's offense was a lot more muted across six games, at just 2.11 xG per 60. To the Flyers' credit, they did a lot more with a little and scored at a higher pace at five-on-five.

The big question

Have the Hurricanes found their contender-caliber second line?

Playing Logan Stankoven between Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake is nothing new for the Hurricanes, and neither is that trio finding real success in their minutes.

In the regular season, only Carolina's no-questions-asked top line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis saw more time together than Hall-Stankoven Blake's 551 minutes, and league-wide, only three other non-Canes combos saw more minutes. With them on the ice at five-on-five, Carolina outscored opponents 35-25 for expected and actual goal rates of about 60 percent, beating out Svechnikov-Aho-Jarvis in both categories and, in expected goals, finishing first among the 26 lines league-wide with at least 350 minutes played together.

Good as that was, they leveled up a bit against Ottawa. In about 47 minutes with Hall-Stankoven-Blake on the ice spread over four games, Carolina outscored the Senators 3-0 and controlled a mammoth 76 percent of the expected goal share. Stankoven and Hall each scored twice, and Blake added a goal and two assists. Their play was doubly important, given that the Hurricanes got a quiet series from the top line — for that trio at five-on-five, only Aho logged a point. The second line's production may not have been surprising, but it was certainly necessary, and the sort of second-layer goal scoring that Carolina has too often lacked in recent postseasons.

Stankoven, in some respects, popped the most against Ottawa. He'd taken some degree of criticism dating back to Carolina's acquisition of him at the 2025 trade deadline as part of the return on Mikko Rantanen, and after a slow start



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after moving to the middle at for 2025-26, he'd seen the Hurricanes linked in trade hypotheticals to other more proven second-line centers such as Vincent Trocheck, a former Hurricane himself. At the Olympic break, Stankoven was producing 1.64 points per 60 at five-on-five — respectable, but not outstanding. After the NHL resumed its season, he dialed things up to 2.14 points per 60 with unsurprisingly strong underlying numbers. "Who's their 2C?" has been a valid question in Carolina since Trocheck left town in 2022, and Stankoven is showing himself to be a reasonable answer. Not for nothing, the two produced at nearly identical five-on-five rates over the course of the regular season (1.71 points per 60 for Stankoven, 1.69 for Trocheck).

Stankoven didn't lead the Hurricanes there, though, and neither did Aho, Svechnikov, Jarvis or Nikolaj Ehlers. It was Hall at 2.22 points per 60. That's a big bump from what he managed after Carolina acquired him last season (1.68) and his best overall since 2021-22. Blake, meanwhile, continued to show that the Hurricanes signing him to a contract through 2034 at a \$5.18 salary cap hit was a solid bit of business. Blake scored 22 goals and 31 assists in his second NHL season, both improvements on 2025-26, and has the look of a reliable, long-term play driver.

At some point, Carolina will need Aho, Jarvis and Svechnikov to dial things up, in terms of puck possession and point production, but in the meantime, they're better equipped to handle themselves at other spots in the lineup.

The X-factor

Can Matvei Michkov break through as the gamebreaker he was advertised to be?

On the goal that eliminated the Pittsburgh Penguins, after 77 minutes of hockey in Game 6, it was Michkov setting things up.

After Noah Cates won the faceoff back to Cam York, York moved the puck to Michkov, who evaded Penguins center Ben Kindel and sent the puck back to York for the series-winner. For him, that's not a bad way to come back from a healthy scratch — and for the Flyers, given how little they had generated offensively in nearly five full periods, it was a nice reminder of what Michkov can add to the mix.

Whether that leads to more opportunities for Michkov, and whether he seizes them, remains to be seen. He averaged about 11:30 in five games against Pittsburgh and looked strongest in Game 6, taking three shots on Artūrs Šilovs and nearly getting a goal or two himself. Michkov/Cates/Alex Bump seems like something Rick Tocchet would stick with, but given the overall situation, who knows?

It's a fair bet, though, that in what will be a grind-it-out series, the Flyers will need a pop of skill, especially given the strides Carolina has made in that department. Disappointing as Michkov's regular season may have been, he still produced 1.98 points per 60, a tick more than Zegras and third on the team among regulars. That'd also rank third on the Hurricanes.

The rosters

There are two ways to look at the fact that only Hall and Sebastian Aho outpaced Michkov's five-on-five scoring rate: There isn't enough oomph at the top of Carolina's roster, or

it's just a by-committee approach that spreads the offensive wealth.

Two things are true here.

The Hurricanes, like the Flyers, aren't led by an MVP-caliber forward. Aho is a jack-of-all-trades two-way center. Jarvis, on the other hand, embodies Hurricanes hockey; he leads all forwards in this series with a plus-3.0 Defensive Rating. Svechnikov rounds out that line as a scoring-chance generator and strong playmaker coming off one of his best regular seasons.

Carolina got by in the first round despite that trio only combining for one five-on-five point in four games. Aho, at least, had special teams contributions, and Svechnikov's controlled breakouts were a real plus. But ultimately, despite winning their minutes below the surface against the Tim Stützle line, they were outscored 1-0.

The Stankoven line made up for it. The third line of Jordan Martinook, Jordan Staal and Nikolaj Ehlers chipped in, too. When the Canes' forecheck attempts were broken up by Ottawa, Ehlers' puck-moving and transition game came in clutch. While he only ended the series with a point, he did lead all Hurricanes in scoring chance contributions. That ability to create despite his playoff reputation is something to build on moving forward. Having him limited to a third-line role isn't a perfect system, but he complements Staal and Martinook, and ensures each line has some versatility.

On the back end, Jaccob Slavin is Carolina's ace on the first pair, with a series-high plus-6.3 Defensive Rating. His first round may not have been perfect, but he has a long track record of elite shutdown play.

Behind him, the second pair of K'Andre Miller and Sean Walker made a real impact, too, with a lot of puck retrievals and controlled breakouts to get the Canes out of danger.

If Alexander Nikishin is good to go after sustaining a concussion in Game 4 (and Brind'Amour is hopeful he will be ready), the Canes' depth on the back end should be a real strength, too. Nikishin's physicality and defensive zone puck touches are the perfect complement to Shayne Gostisbehere's offensive spark. The two earned a 62 percent xG rate and outscored the Senators 2-1.

But maybe Carolina's most important player against the Senators was an unexpected one: Frederik Andersen.

Goaltending was the Canes' big question heading into the playoffs. Rookie Brandon Bussi's progress this year went off the rails post-Olympics. Pyotr Kochetkov was a less-than-ideal choice, too. Instead, it's been Andersen, who was pretty underwhelming in 35 regular-season appearances. And he has absolutely run with the starter's net, giving his team a chance to win with a quality start each game, a .955 save percentage, and a league-leading GSAX of 7.7 through four games.

In the opposite net, Dan Vladar has been The Guy for the Flyers. He's not a perfect No. 1 by any means, but has been a stabilizer in Philadelphia, throughout this team's playoff push and into the opening round. He earned a 0.936 save percentage and a GSAX of 5.7 through six games. Now he has to try and maintain that against an aggressive Canes team.



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At least he should have defensive support.

Travis Sanheim and Rasmus Ristolainen take on the toughest matchups in Philadelphia. Despite that usage, they earned a 54 percent xG rate in the regular season. Their numbers were less sparkling in Round 1, but being served a heavy dose of Sidney Crosby had something to do with it. The Flyers outchanced Pittsburgh in that matchup and outscored them 2-0.

Cam York's plus-3.5 Defensive Rating adds some oomph to the second pair with Jamie Drysdale. That duo had its moments against Pittsburgh — like the series-clinching goal from York — but has to level up on both ends of the ice to keep up with the Canes.

Up front, Noah Cates adds another element of shutdown play to the fold. So do disruptors such as Tyson Foerster and Sean Couturier in fourth-line capacities. That should help Philly match up to the Canes' two-way talent, but it's going to take a lot more offense to really stack up.

Cates, at least, has upped his scoring. Denver Barkey and Alex Bump both added some secondary scoring, too. But the real burden falls on the shoulders of the Flyers' top six.

Travis Konency and Christian Dvorak pulled their weight against the Penguins. After upping their two-way play down the stretch, this duo outplayed Pittsburgh with a 56 percent xG rate and outscored them 5-1 at five-on-five.

Porter Martone kept the magic alive from his NHL debut with some clutch plays, a lot of poise, and a ton of shots — 14.2 attempts per 60, which was second to only Owen Tippett.

Tippett had his chances in Round 1, without any five-on-five scoring to show for it. Trevor Zegras set up some chances, too. But it was clear who was the passer and the shooter,

making their combination a little too predictable. That won't cut it in this series; the Flyers need more out of this line to compete with the Canes' depth.

The key matchup

Jacob Slavin vs. Travis Sanheim

Slavin remains the gold standard for defensive defensemen in the NHL. This season, he had the league's best Defensive Rating per 82, the result of allowing just 2.24 xGA/60, 0.33 fewer relative to his teammates with a similar impact on goals against. Doing that against the toughest opponents on a nightly basis is no small feat.

Sanheim isn't cut from the same cloth, but he is growing into one of the league's most dependable defenders in a similar vein. Same tough minutes, slightly more expected goals against (2.30 per 60), but with a tad more offense. His growth this season as a legit top-level guy has been underrated and is a big reason for the Flyers' success; he was terrific in the first round with just 2.04 xGA/60.

The difference: Defense is Philadelphia's singular path to success, meaning any chance for victory runs through Sanheim having a monster series. The Hurricanes have a lot more avenues outside of having the better shutdown option to begin with.

The bottom line

The Flyers have shown high-end defensive ability and, down the stretch, some added offensive pop, but Carolina offers too much in both departments to be treated as anything but a serious favorite. If this one goes long, it'll probably be because the Hurricanes go cold and the Flyers maximize whatever chances they grind out.



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Round 2 Preview: Canes vs. Flyers

By: Walt Ruff

Taking a deeper look inside the series before the action begins in Raleigh

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes' road to a Stanley Cup continues with a second-round matchup against the Philadelphia Flyers.

It will once again be uncharted territory, as the two sides meet in the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the very first time.

The Canes arrive at the matchup after a clean sweep of the Ottawa Senators in Round 1. Allowing just four goals in five games, the series was a story of astute goaltending from Frederik Andersen, goal-scoring from Logan Stankoven's line, and a 20-for-21 performance on the penalty kill.

The Flyers punched their ticket to Round 2 after defeating their cross-state rival, the Pittsburgh Penguins, in six games. After initially taking a 3-0 series lead, the orange and black faced some adversity before eventually closing things out in Wednesday's Game 6. Goaltender Dan Vladar had a standout showing for Rick Tocchet's team.

The series will begin on Saturday, May 2, at 8 p.m. on ABC in the United States. A full schedule will be released in the coming days.

[GAME 1 INFO](#) | [PURCHASE ROUND 2 TICKETS](#) | [VIEW PLAYOFF HUB](#) | [ROUND 1 RECAP](#)

Revisiting The 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.

On The Other Side...

Just two months ago, popular hockey website MoneyPuck.com gave the Flyers a 3.8% chance at making the playoffs. With a 26-21-11 record coming out of the Winter Olympics, the team sat sixth in the Metro and were eight

points back of a Wild Card spot, with four other teams in front of them.

The small glimmer of hope became a rallying cry for the group, as they turned on the jets over the final six weeks of the season.

Going 18-7-1 in their final 26 games, Philadelphia fought its way back into the mix, punching its ticket to the postseason against the Canes in their second-last game of the regular season.

Their first trip to the Stanley Cup Playoffs since 2020, their mid-season turnaround can be credited to stellar defense and goaltending. Giving up an average of just 2.38 goals per game after Feb. 24, that number ranked the fewest among all Eastern Conference teams.

Last summer's free agency signing, Dan Vladar, has become the team's go-to in net. His 12 wins post-Olympics were tied for the most among all NHL netminders, and he rolled that right over into a strong first round, where he posted an outstanding .937 save percentage against the Penguins.

Additionally, the unit received a shot in the arm in late March when 2025 first-round pick (sixth overall) Porter Martone turned pro following his season at Michigan State and made an immediate impact. Turning in 10 points in his first nine NHL games, the 6-foot-3, 214 lbs. forward is as dynamic as they come.

The Special Teams Story...

Carolina's Power Play In The Regular Season: 24.9% (4th)

Carolina's Penalty Kill In The Regular Season: 80.5% (11th)

Carolina's Power Play In Round 1: 2-for-15 (13.3%)

Carolina's Penalty Kill In Round 1: 20-for-21 (95.2%)

Tim Gleason's penalty kill was the story of the first round, holding an Ottawa team, which had a top-10 power play for most of the season, to just one goal.

Turning in an eight-for-nine performance in the series finale, Jaccob Slavin played 24:45 while shorthanded in the series, second-most among all defensemen in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Philadelphia's Power Play In The Regular Season: 15.7% (32nd)

Philadelphia's Penalty Kill In The Regular Season: 77.6 (22nd)

Philadelphia's Power Play In Round 1: 2-for-17 (11.8%)



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Philadelphia's Penalty Kill In Round 1: 16-for-19 (84.2%)

When it comes to Philadelphia's successes this season, special teams play isn't high on the list. The Flyers' power play ranked dead last among all teams over 82 games, and their penalty kill finished in the bottom third of the league.

But it's the playoffs, and anything can happen.

Trevor Zegras was the standout on the team's man advantage, leading the team with 10 power-play goals this season. The next closest Flyer had four.

During their four-game season series, Philadelphia held Carolina to just two power-play goals on 13 tries.

In Net...

Carolina: Frederik Andersen, Brandon Bussi, and Pyotr Kochetkov

Entering Round 1, it felt like a true coin flip between Andersen and Bussi for the first game of the series. The veteran option got the decision and never looked back.

"Zilla" was an absolute rock over four games, giving up a total of just five goals, with just three coming at even strength. While Rod Brind'Amour continues to say that the team feels confident if they do turn to Bussi at some point, the net is Andersen's to lose as Round 2 begins.

Philadelphia: Dan Vladar and Sam Ersson

The Flyers' MVP of Round 1 was their backstop, the 28-year-old Vladar. Highlighted by a 77-minute shutout in the deciding Game 6, it was the first time in his career that he was the team's starter for a full playoff series, and he proved along the way that he was worthy of the spot. His .937 save percentage over six games ranks fifth-best among all goalies in Round 1.

The only question mark regarding the subject is his health. Banged up a few times during the series against the Penguins, is he fully healthy? Does that matter?

Zooming out to take a look at his full body of work, his 52 starts this season were 22 more than his previous career-best of 30, and his .906 save percentage during the regular season tied the best year of his career, which he previously turned in during the 2021-22 season with Calgary.

Players To Watch...

Carolina: Logan Stankoven

Making history in Round 1 by becoming just the second player in NHL history to score a game-opening goal in three consecutive games to start playoffs, the second-year Hurricane was the driving force of the offense.

With his line of himself (4G, 1A), Taylor Hall (2G, 5A), and Jackson Blake (1G, 3A) combining for 16 points in the four games, they'll look to continue their success into the next round.

Philadelphia: Travis Konecny

Leading the Flyers with 68 points during the regular season, Konecny also co-led the team's forwards in Round 1 with four points. Only defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen (5) had more.

With all four of his points coming at even strength in the series against Pittsburgh, the 10-year Flyer is a threat, whether it's five-on-five or on special teams. He's never one to shy away from the physical part of the game either, something Carolina will have to be prepared for once again.

Injury Reports...

Defenseman Alexander Nikishin suffered a concussion in the team's Game 4 win over Ottawa on Saturday, Apr. 25. He returned to practice with the team in a no-contact jersey on Wednesday, Apr. 29. Head Coach Rod Brind'Amour said he is "hopeful" the 2020 third-round pick will be good to go for Game 1.

Forward Nikolaj Ehlers missed Carolina's Game 4 win over Ottawa with a lower-body injury. He has not practiced with the team since the injury, but Brind'Amour said he is also "hopeful" that last summer's free agent signing will be ready when the series starts and expects him to rejoin the team "shortly." Nic Deslauriers, whom the Canes acquired from the Flyers ahead of the trade deadline, played in Ehlers' place.

How They See It...

Rod Brind'Amour looking back on his team's first series...

"There were a lot of real positives. Winning in every game is huge. The way we played, I thought, was really consistent, from start to finish of every game. It was just the same, and everybody was dialed in. You're not always going to win those games, but it gives you a chance to win every night. Obviously, that's what happened."

Jordan Martinook on what impressed him most about his team in Round 1...

"So many different things. Just the resiliency and sticking together. I feel like there were a lot of times in the series where you could have been like, 'Okay, it's not going our way right now.' Everybody just kept going. There were no lulls, there were no breaks. Everybody was playing for each other. It was just a team series win, which is awesome to have."

Jalen Chatfield offering what he liked about the penalty kill to start the postseason...

"I just liked how resilient we were and how sharp we stayed throughout. When you kill that many times, especially in one game and one period, you get a little more tired. You might mess up the system and the structure, but we stuck with it. We didn't complain when we had to kill. We went out there and got the job done. Every time we hopped over the boards, if it was a good call or a bad call, whatever, we just had the mindset that we were going to kill it. I think we were just really consistent with that."

Where To Watch Every Game...

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

Each game of the series will be broadcast nationally. When they become available, the complete schedule and broadcast info can be found at the top of this article.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Philadelphia vs Carolina Game One time set for Saturday

By: Al Hood

Live from Raleighwood, it'll be Saturday Night.

Ever since Philadelphia ended their series against Pittsburgh on Wednesday, fans had been waiting for when the Flyers/Canes series would get started. Informed speculation had noted that ABC had an 8 PM slot for Saturday Night, also a traditional spot for "Hockey Night in Canada." The thinking was that if either Minnesota/Dallas or Edmonton/Anaheim needed a Game 7 that's when they would play, and if both series ended the league might go ahead and start the Canes versus the Flyers.

Well, Minnesota ended Dallas' season and then Anaheim wrapped up their series against the Oilers. As the Canes and the Flyers would be the most rested—you could have started Colorado against Minnesota in Denver but that would have given the Wild just one day off—and the league decided they didn't want to skip Saturday night, that just left for one option:

Note there's no word on the rest of the schedule as the other half of the East still may not be determined before the end of the day Sunday with Montreal/Tampa and Boston/Buffalo set to play their own Game Six on Friday. While Colorado and Minnesota is now set, the other Western matchup is still up in the air as Anaheim now waits for the Utah/Las Vegas

winner—which also may not be set until Sunday. Should the other East series not start until Tuesday—which is the earliest they could if either or both go seven—then the league will probably build in a long break between games in order to let the other series catch up. Whether that would be between games one and two, or two and three is unknown.

The night also promises to be a busy one for the city of Philadelphia, as the 76ers defeated Boston on Thursday Night to force a decisive Game Seven to be played on Saturday Night. That tip is scheduled for 7:30 in Boston, and it's going to be the only NBA game that day that will follow the Kentucky Derby.

Philadelphia was told on Wednesday that they might play Saturday, so the team likely made plans in case that happened. The Hurricanes are set to practice at 11 AM Friday Morning at Lenovo center, and with an 8 PM puck drop both teams will likely go through a full morning skate on Saturday.

The normal tailgating scene may be a bit subdued as the weather is forecast to be grey and rainy, perhaps heavy, but there's little doubt the start time will allow for a packed and raucous atmosphere as the Canes play for the first time in a week.

LINKS

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SportScan

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

1389555 Carolina Hurricanes

'Relentless': An inside look at Hurricanes' emergent top line in NHL playoffs

Chip Alexander9-11 minutes 30/04/2026

Logan Stankoven was in high demand after Carolina Hurricanes practice at Lenovo Center this week.

And why not? Stankoven, the offensive star of the series, scored a goal in each of the Canes' four wins over the Ottawa Senators in the teams' first-round sweep in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Forward William Carrier, who sits next to Stankoven in the locker room, fled in mock horror when he saw media converging. A few seats over, Jackson Blake stood alone, smiling, taking it all in.

Carolina head coach Rod Brind'Amour moved Stankoven to center this season, later changing up the line to have Blake at right wing and Taylor Hall on the left side. Together, the line had seven goals and nine assists against the Senators — one half of the Canes' point production in the series.

"Once we get the puck Rod's given us the ability to kind of freewheel and do our thing and use our creativity," Stankoven said.

Asked what one word best describes Stankoven, Blake quickly said, "Relentless."

Why relentless?

"He's a bulldog out there," Blake said. "He's always working hard."

Earlier in the season, Blake and others would use the word "snakebitten" in talking about Stankoven. He was generating offensive chances but often finding iron and not the net as shots bounced off posts and crossbars, or goalies robbed him.

"It's super difficult," Hall said of the move to center. "I think with him kind of exploding in the last bit of the regular season and now in the playoffs, it might be as simple as he's gotten more comfortable playing the center-ice position.

"At center, almost every shift you're starting out with a battle and worry about that, whereas with us wingers, we just get to play a little bit more. There's more thinking at the center-ice position and I think you're seeing a player getting better and better at it."

Stankoven was more productive after the break for the Winter Olympics, then scored seven goals in his last eight games in the regular season to finish with 21. He carried that over into the playoffs, scoring the first goal in each of the first three games against Ottawa to give Carolina the lead and then a go-ahead goal in Game 4.

"It's what you dream of as a kid," Stankoven said. "Other than winning the Stanley Cup it's what you want, to help the team win and score goals and be a difference-maker on the ice."

Hall had a pair of goals and five assists, and Blake a goal and three assists in the series, including the winning goal in Game 3 in Ottawa as the Canes won, 2-1.

"I think this year we didn't always get rewarded as much as we probably should have," Blake said. "Now I think our line is clicking a little bit.

"We all know what's at stake now, and we need to be at our best all the time. It's been fun and hopefully we can keep it going."

The Hurricanes' 'old guy' gets it done

Hall is the "old guy" on the line at 34 — Stankoven is 23 and Blake 22 — and the former league MVP has been the perfect complement with his speed, strength and savvy. There's a lot of been-there, done-that to his game and Blake and Stankoven can feed off it.

"The 'old guy' has been awesome," Blake said, smiling again. "He's making a lot of plays and scoring big goals for us. Me and 'Stanks' being younger guys, having a veteran presence on the line is really big."

Stankoven got his first playoff experience with the Dallas Stars two years ago, playing 19 games. Traded to the Canes last season by the Stars in the deal that sent disgruntled forward Mikko Rantanen to Dallas, he had five goals and three assists in 15 games as Carolina reached the Eastern Conference Final.

Blake finds his footing

Blake was a rookie last season. The playoffs were a first for him and, he held his own in the Canes' 15 games, averaging almost 17 minutes a game in ice time.

Coming off a 22-goal second season, Blake had 18:43 of ice time each game against the Sens.

"I'm more confident this year," Blake said. "I feel more comfortable. I mean, last year I didn't know what to expect. I do this year."

Blake said he was a bit jittery last year. The pregame butterflies fluttered in full force.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I was nervous. And I'm sure I'll be nervous for the rest of whatever it is.

"Last year, I actually thought in the first round I played pretty well, and I felt pretty good about it. But I get nervous before the game all the time. I just think it's natural. It's just the aspect of the game and what's at stake and knowing you have to be at your best in every game of the playoffs."

Hall, the Canes' leading scorer with seven points in the Ottawa series, said the line continues to read off each other better in the offensive zone.

"It's been a good progression all year," Hall said. "They love hockey, those two kids. They want to get better. They take it seriously, and I think you've seen that throughout the year. They've gotten better and better at everything they've done."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Hurricanes injury update: Nikishin at practice

The Hurricanes continue to practice Wednesday and guess about a second-round opponent. Later Wednesday, the Philadelphia Flyers edged the Pittsburgh Penguins in overtime to close out their series in Game 6.

The Canes, top-seeded in the Eastern Conference, will host the first two games of the second-round series at Lenovo Center.

Defenseman Alexander Nikishin, who suffered a concussion Saturday against Ottawa, was at practice Wednesday in a yellow, no-contact jersey — a promising sign for the Canes.

"I think he's feeling good," Brind'Amour said. "It's going in the right direction."

Forward Nikolaj Ehlers, sidelined with a lower-body injury that kept him out of Game 4, again missed practice Wednesday.

"He's getting better every day and I anticipate him coming out (to practice) shortly."

News Observer LOADED: 05.01.2026

1389653 Websites

The Athletic / Penguins, Sidney Crosby stuck between eras as the thrill of the past meets a hard future

By Josh Yohe

April 30, 2026

PHILADELPHIA — The 2025-26 Pittsburgh Penguins spent nearly seven months blurring the line between nostalgia tour and legitimate rebuild.

For a city that had endured a few years of inconsequential hockey, the regular season was a revelation — a stunningly successful stretch that saw the Penguins reignite their fanbase and grip Pittsburgh once again.

But as the handshake line formed Wednesday night after their first-round exit against their most-hated rival, the Philadelphia Flyers, the nostalgia evaporated and the Penguins' challenge returned to the forefront. Their out-of-nowhere winning season ended with a reminder that, although their architect, Kyle Dubas, flexed his muscles and first-year coach Dan Muse burst onto the scene, the Penguins remain several pieces away from truly competing for the Stanley Cup again.

Put it all in a blender, and you'll see that the Penguins are entrenched in transition with a long road ahead and room for surprises along the way. One thing is certain: They don't figure to bore their legion of followers anytime soon.

When will the Penguins be true winners again? There is no clear answer. Dubas, their president and general manager, has repeatedly said he doesn't want simply to reach the postseason; he wants to build a perennial championship contender.

As their six-game series loss to the Flyers made obvious, they aren't close to that yet.

"Everybody on this team, all the players, staff, they invested a lot. When it's over, it hurts a lot," Muse said after Game 6 on Wednesday.

The problem is that the Penguins were carried almost exclusively by players on the back nine of their NHL careers.

At times, the season felt more like a retirement farewell — a successful one, at least — instead of groundwork for the future. By mid-August,

Sidney Crosby will be 39, Evgeni Malkin will be 40, Kris Letang will be 39 and Erik Karlsson will be 36. This season was like seeing the Rolling Stones in 2026: The Penguins were still a thrill, and fans got their money's worth, but it wasn't the 1971 Rolling Stones.

Those four future Hall of Famers weren't the only performers on the wrong side of 30. Anthony Mantha, the team's leading goal scorer this season, will be 32. Like Malkin, he's a pending unrestricted free agent and no sure thing to return next season. And as with Malkin, there is hardly a groundswell of support in the organization for his return, even though he put up outstanding numbers.

After last season, Dubas was already touting the idea of being younger as the Penguins' best chance to thrive.

"I feel like we are slightly better positioned moving forward because of some of the younger players we've been able to add," Dubas said before this season.

And now, his veterans are even older.

So far, the decision to go young has been a mixed bag. Over the past year, though, some of Dubas' decisions have led to some legitimate optimism:

- Center Ben Kindel, who just turned 19, wrapped up a wildly successful rookie campaign and seems destined to become a Penguins mainstay.
- Egor Chinakhov has emerged as a gifted, top-six winger, despite a tough playoff series. He's only 25.
- Elmer Söderblom, a disappointment in Detroit, is only 24 and has looked like an important bottom-six player since coming to Pittsburgh.
- Forward Avery Hayes did some good things in the NHL this season and figures to see more time with the Penguins next season. He's 23.
- The Penguins' 2025 draft class routinely receives praise. Bill Zonnon and Will Horcoff project to be good NHL players, and other prospects in the draft have Pittsburgh's front office brimming with excitement.
- Goaltenders Sergei Murashov, 22, and Joel Blomqvist, 24, were in the organization before Dubas arrived, are just about NHL-ready and, especially in Murashov's case, have the potential to be special.

Then there are the concerns, of course:

- Forward Rutger McGroarty, considered perhaps the best prospect in the organization since he was acquired from Winnipeg in August 2024, has managed only four goals in 32 NHL games. His skating has been an issue. The 22-year-old hasn't looked bad or even out of place, but he also hasn't made the impact the Penguins were expecting.
- Forward Ville Koivunen, one of the crown jewels of the 2024 Jake Guentzel trade, has two goals in 47 NHL games and was extremely disappointing this season. He turns 23 in June.
- Defenseman Harrison Brunicke, who turns 20 in May, looked like a sensation in training camp again, but his play fell off a cliff after his first few NHL games. The Penguins didn't handle him well this season, but he seems to have taken a step backward.

The Penguins have reached a pivotal time in their rebuild, which began with the Guentzel trade two-plus years ago. The team doesn't call it a rebuild because it hasn't been a sudden sell-off. Even if he wanted to, Dubas couldn't simply eliminate some of the older players from his roster. It takes time to get younger. But make no mistake, a rebuild is happening, it's just in the background while the older players begin to fade.

Malkin is no sure thing to return to Pittsburgh next season, despite his strong showing over the past few months. Letang, who struggled mightily for most of the season, has two years remaining on his contract. His situation is tricky — because he was 35 when he signed the deal, the



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Penguins won't receive any cap relief if they buy out the contract. Three other players who are 30 or older — Kevin Hayes, Noel Acciari and Connor Clifton — almost certainly won't be back next season.

Dubas has long wanted to take some big swings for talented, young players in the summer of 2026. He took an early cut halfway through this season by trading for Chinakhov, who has star potential, but this summer has the makings of a significant offseason.

The free-agent market doesn't look all that strong. Dubas will spend some money there — the Penguins figure to have around \$45 million in cap space, though they aren't expected to use all of it — but much of that will likely go toward potential trades.

The Penguins have interest in 26-year-old Stars winger Jason Robertson, who remains unsigned to a long-term deal in Dallas. If other big names, preferably on the younger side, become available this summer, Dubas won't hesitate to make offers. He is eager to turn the Penguins into a winner — a sustained winner — sooner rather than later. He has a glut of draft picks and older veterans for trade bait, he has money to spend, and, more than anything, he has the Penguins-Flyers series fresh in his mind as proof that his team needs to get younger immediately.

"I think 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," Karlsson said after Game 6. "We just couldn't find that extra gear that is needed this time of the year."

Despite the way it ended, this season was huge for the Penguins. They matter in Pittsburgh again in a way that they haven't in many years. Their season-ticket base should get a boost. Muse has brought positive energy that has connected well with the dressing room. He's clearly a good NHL coach and was a smart, under-the-radar hire last offseason.

In many ways, the Penguins are trending upward. Goal prevention is their biggest issue, but Murashov could make a difference as early as next season. Their blue line is pretty shaky, but their financial flexibility could help Dubas land reinforcements.

The flip side is that the Penguins desperately need young star power, and finding it is an enormous challenge. The one problem with this surprise season is that the Penguins won't be picking high in the talent-rich 2026 draft. It's not the end of the world, and Dubas has done a nice job maintaining his army of draft picks and prospects.

Overall, things are looking up. But until a young wave of talent comes along — not just a Kindel here or a Chinakhov there, but a complete wave of hungry, electric young talent — the Penguins will be stuck in the mushy middle.

Dubas has done fine work over the past year, but he'll need to sustain his hot streak a while longer.

"I wish things could have ended differently," Kindel said Wednesday night. "It's been such an amazing thing to be a part of."

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The Athletic / NHL playoffs Concern-o-Meter: Favored Oilers, Lightning on the brink of elimination

By Shayna Goldman

April 30, 2026

Everything is amped up in the Stanley Cup playoffs — excitement, tension, concern and, most of all, drama.

That is even more true with five teams pushed to the brink of elimination. Those teams no longer have the luxury of brushing off a loss and reloading for the next game. One mistake could mark the end of the season.

So how worried should these teams be? It's time to dust off the Concern-o-Meter™.

Edmonton Oilers

Concern-o-meter: 9/10

The Oilers of the last few seasons have proven one thing: The regular season doesn't matter that much once the playoffs begin. This team knows how to flip a switch and dig in when the pressure rises. Any concerns should be tempered until this team finds itself up against it in the postseason.

Unlike the past two years, it took only four games to reach that point.

It didn't seem like that would be the case after Game 1 — not after the Oilers won their first game all season without Connor McDavid getting on the scoresheet. The return of Leon Draisaitl helped Edmonton play spoiler in the final two minutes of regulation to steal the first win of this series.

And then the Ducks bounced back and started beating the Oilers at their own game.

This series was always going to be a race to see who could outscore their problems. As much promise as the Ducks' up-and-coming core showed this year, the team defense has been an outright disaster. Edmonton, at least, cleaned up its defensive zone coverage with the return of Paul Coffey behind the bench, which seemed like enough to give its shaky goaltending some help.

But in Games 2, 3 and 4, the Oilers couldn't even string together semi-competent defense in front of Connor Ingram or Tristan Jarry.

Connor McDavid looked ordinary at best, clearly hampered by his injury. The Jackson LaCombe matchup shut him down even more. Draisaitl's line couldn't carry this team enough to counter a Ducks offense coming in waves, all the way down to its pesky fourth line. Anaheim's dangerous power play poured on the scoring, too. So, heading into Game 5, the Oilers looked totally outmatched.

Edmonton thrives under pressure and responded with a strong start led by the 'in case of emergency' top-loaded line of Draisaitl and McDavid, who looked much more active despite his injury. This is a battle-tested team that has fought back from even more daunting deficits, like being down 3-0 in the Stanley Cup Final just two years ago. So after Game 5, there is reason to think this group could battle back against an inexperienced Ducks team.

Still, the big picture is sounding alarms on the concern-o-meter. What would be worse than a Round 1 elimination? Management chalking up the early exit to fatigue from two deep runs and injuries to McDavid, Draisaitl, Zach Hyman, Jason Dickinson, and Adam Henrique, among others.

That would actually be the worst-case scenario if it led to another misguided offseason that leaves the team in the same position (or worse). The reality is the clock is ticking on the McDavid era. He opted against a long-term deal, instead signing a two-year contract that keeps his options open in case the team takes a less-than-inspiring direction. Since signing that deal, management has mismanaged the cap and limited trade assets, while leaving gaping holes that landed this team in a 3-2 hole.



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There's a lot more riding on this series than just the Oilers' season ending early at this point.

Boston Bruins

Concern-o-meter: 8/10

Jeremy Swayman can steal a few games, but he can't win a playoff series single-handedly.

Swayman has given his team a chance to win with four quality starts in six outings. And his last outing, where he saved 2.62 goals above expected, literally saved Boston's season. The Bruins don't just have the best goaltender in this series; they have one of the best in the entire league.

And yet that hasn't been enough so far. Swayman needs some help on the other end of the ice.

He can be a difference-maker even without much defensive help. Defense and footspeed were always potential weaknesses for Boston in this matchup. The Sabres are one of the faster teams in the league and have used that to their advantage in this series. Just take Game 4, when Buffalo pushed the Bruins to the brink. The Sabres played to their strengths early, using their speed and pressure to force turnovers — three of which led to first-period goals, which absolutely crushed Boston early.

The problem is, the Bruins haven't converted on chances enough to counter that. Add in some mistake-riddled performances from some of their key players across this series — from Hampus Lindholm, Elias Lindholm and even Charlie McAvoy at times — and it added up to a 3-1 deficit heading into Game 5.

Boston's best stood tall to force a Game 6. Swayman was outstanding, and David Pastrnak came through with the overtime game-winner to keep the season alive.

There is a real opportunity to build some momentum from that. After some lineup tweaks for Game 5, the Bruins did a much better job getting to the net-front areas and making life hard on Alex Lyon. Add in Noah Östlund's Game 4 injury, and how that could unravel the progress the Sabres' power play was making, and there is an opening here for Boston to take advantage of.

There is just so little margin for error, even with Swayman in net. Winning one game while facing elimination is a challenge. Pushing that momentum to three straight is even more daunting against a team that has won games in different ways so far. But the Bruins have been nothing if not a streaky team this year, so there is a slim opening to make things interesting.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Concern-o-meter: 7/10

This series has been as back-and-forth as it gets, with Montreal and Tampa Bay trading one-goal wins through five games. Each time the Lightning have trailed in this series, they have responded to even things back up.

There is reason to think the Lightning can pull that off once more to stave off elimination and extend the series. Naturally, it revolves around Tampa Bay's elite talent and experience in these situations. At times in this series, the Lightning have taken over games and looked like the more seasoned team built for this — overtime in Game 2 was the prime example of that.

But Tampa Bay has looked a step behind even more often, controlling just 46 percent of the xG share. Surprisingly, it's not the Lightning's defense holding them back. The Canadiens, even without Noah Dobson, have suppressed the Lightning's dynamic offense to just 1.72 xG per 60. A lot of that falls on the top of the lineup.

Nikita Kucherov has had his moments, but hasn't hit his top gear. He wasn't as crisp on the power play in Game 5, where Tampa Bay has done a lot of damage so far. Kucherov didn't convert on his chances at even strength, either, like an early third-period chance that would have pulled the Lightning ahead.

Brayden Point hasn't been at top speed. Neither has Andrei Vasilevski, whose playoff lore is starting to fade.

The Canadiens' top liners may not be at their usual offensive heights in this series, but at least they're getting production elsewhere. Jake Guentzel and Brandon Hagel are pulling their weight for Tampa Bay, and Dominic James stepped up in Game 5. But the fourth line hasn't been on the ice for a single goal for this series, while Montreal's has come up clutch to give the team a more balanced approach than expected.

A return from Victor Hedman still seems unlikely, so the Lightning will have to find a spark from within. Otherwise, this team will be looking at a fourth straight Round 1 exit. At this point, it doesn't matter how successful this team is in the regular season if it doesn't translate to a deep run; the pressure is on to change that because this core isn't getting any younger.

Dallas Stars

Concern-o-meter: 6.5/10

Jake Oettinger tends to shoulder a lot of the blame for the Stars' shortcomings. His playoff history and tendency to let up weak goals do raise some red flags. Just take Michael McCarron's third-period goal that ended up as the game-winner for Minnesota in Game 5.

Oettinger hasn't been sparkling this spring, but he isn't the reason the team is in this position. It's the fact he doesn't have goal support at five-on-five.

It's a familiar position for Dallas, which only mustered 1.69 goals per 60 at five-on-five last year and let the power play do a lot of the heavy lifting. This year, the Stars' pace is even lower at 0.67 per 60.

Dallas has only mustered three five-on-five goals (while giving up 11). For context, that's as many goals as the Senators scored on their way to a Round 1 sweep, and only one more than the Kings tallied.

The Stars, at least, have had a ton of power-play success, with nine goals so far. And those scoring woes aren't for a lack of trying, with shot quality that adds up to 10.3 xG. That shakes out to 2.31 per 60 when accounting for minutes played, which isn't a dominant mark this postseason, or equal to what the team generated in the regular season. It is a shade above the Wild, though, without results to show for it.

Jesper Wallstedt has a lot to do with that. But so do some disappointing performances, which start at the top of the lineup. Wyatt Johnston, one of the Stars' best scoring chance generators, only has one goal this spring. Mikko Rantanen has yet to tally a single point at five-on-five, has a team-low 37 percent xG rate, and has been outscored 4-0 in his minutes.

And the depth isn't scoring enough to make up for it. Some of that's due to injury; with Roope Hintz out for Game 6 (and likely 7), it forces Matt Duchene into the top six, leaving the bottom six extremely short-handed offensively.

A few things save Dallas from a higher reading on the meter. This was always going to be a long series, and this team is built for that. Jason Robertson has been a total standout for Dallas, plus Rantanen has that Big Game Ability (and showed it just last spring). Pair that with the Jonas Brodin injury leaving Minnesota's blue line short-handed, and there is a path to extending this series.

Utah Mammoth

Concern-o-meter: 6/10



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Just when it seems like Utah has some momentum, Vegas finds a way to turn the tide. Game 5 was the prime example of that.

The Mammoth's speed was once again a problem for the Golden Knights in the third period. First, when Dylan Guenther and Kailer Yamamoto turned on the jets in the neutral zone and sped down the ice to score in transition. Then, about seven minutes later, when Alex Kerfoot sent Michael Carcone a cross-slot pass to set up another rush goal.

It wasn't just those two-on-one sequences that gave Utah the edge in the third period. It was how the Mammoth disrupted the Golden Knights' ability to get set up in the zone or get many looks from their forwards.

But Pavel Dorofeyev's third goal of the game played spoiler to force overtime. Those extra frames were where things started to get dicey for the Mammoth, who started to look gassed as time rolled on into double overtime. The Golden Knights, despite all their footspeed issues, have experience in these types of games. So despite showing a lot of resilience in regulation, the Mammoth fell short for the second straight game. Now they're facing elimination.

Utah's power-play struggles add another level of concern to the situation. While there are generally fewer penalties called late in series (and rounds), the Mammoth still need to find a way to take advantage of their opportunities — especially if they are going to keep giving their opponent chances to get their power play back on track. Not only did Utah fail to convert on five opportunities in Game 5, the team has now been outscored 2-1 on the man advantage this postseason after Brett Howden's short-handed game-winner.

Concern is officially brewing in Utah now that the Golden Knights have the momentum. But there are ways to make this a series: sticking to that speed game clearly exposes Vegas, and the goaltending has been below average. If the Mammoth can stop getting caught puck-watching and tighten up a little more defensively, this could go seven games.

The difference here between Utah and some of the other teams facing elimination is that this is the start of the Mammoth's playoff window, and this being such an even series shows how much this team has grown. Any sort of elimination would obviously be a disappointment, but this dynamic core has an exciting future ahead.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.01.2026

1389655 Websites

The Athletic / Buffalo Sabres fans stepped in to save 'O Canada,' raising the bar on what anthems are about

By Tim Graham

April 30, 2026

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Shane Doan stood beside his wife in KeyBank Center on Tuesday night and hoped the world noticed what was unfolding.

The Buffalo Sabres were one victory away from eliminating the Boston Bruins in Game 5 and advancing in the postseason for the first time since 2007. But that wasn't the moment that had Doan gobsmacked. Nor did it have anything to do with his son, Sabres forward Josh Doan, skating in his first Stanley Cup playoff series.

Shane Doan, the 402-goal scorer and Olympian from the Alberta prairie, was in awe before the game began. Seconds into "O Canada," national anthem singer Cami Clune's microphone malfunctioned. A dutiful crowd of 19,070 — Shane and Andrea Doan included — rushed to her aid with a full-throated, word-for-word reinforcement.

"With all the things in the world we're bombarded with, somebody, please, make a big deal out of this," Doan recalled thinking. "People always are so quick to point out the things that separate us, and realistically there isn't much.

"You hoped that people understood how special it was."

Amid cross-border tensions that have included U.S. tariffs and rhetoric mocking Canada's sovereignty, what happened in Buffalo was rejuvenating.

The eager audience took over from the third line, which begins "True patriot love," as Clune's microphone cut in and out. She continued to sing until the end, although the mic mostly went silent around the first "We stand on guard for thee." Seemingly aware of the significance, the fans' chorus grew louder.

"The response from the crowd brought me to silent tears," said Seymour Knox IV, watching from his usual perch. "I think it was one of the highlights in the 30 years of the arena."

Knox's father and uncle, Seymour Knox III and Northrup Knox, co-founded the Sabres in 1970. They chose to spell it that way to conform to the Old English style used in Canada. The Knoxes also wanted both national anthems played before every home game — even if the opponent was a U.S. team — to honor Canadian players and fans.

Fifty-five years later, Sabres fans know the words to "O Canada" almost as easily as "Happy Birthday."

What added to the gravitas Tuesday night was that it raised the bar on what national anthems should be. Recent geopolitical turbulence has caused fans to react boorishly. At last year's 4 Nations Face-Off, fans in Montreal booed "The Star-Spangled Banner," causing fans in Boston to boo "O Canada" in response.

But not in Buffalo, known as "The City of Good Neighbors." Besides, it's practically a Toronto suburb, with Canadian television and radio stations penetrating the airwaves. Labatt Blue is considered a domestic beer. Tim Hortons is as common as McDonald's.

"The beauty of what happened is that it was completely spontaneous and was all about helping somebody out," said Buffalo State history and social sciences education chair Andrew Nicholls. The Midland, Ont., native teaches British, Canadian and European history.

"Having lived here for 30 years, this is kind of the equivalent of 19,000 people pulling over in a snowstorm to help somebody whose car is stuck in a snowbank. That's just what people here do."

Nobody should assume Canadians comprised a disproportionate share of the singers.

The Buffalo Bills and Sabres do draw multitudes over the border. Toronto is within the NFL's 75-mile radius that determines a club's home territory. That puts around 21 percent of Canada's population within the Bills' designated market.

But resentment toward U.S. politicians who talk about annexing Canada to make it the 51st state and fears about the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have reduced tourism — even to watch the Canadian pastime in person. Buffalo has long been a destination for hockey fans who can't afford Toronto Maple Leafs tickets, who follow the Original Six or who want to see national icons such as Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid.

"Usually, when the Bruins play in Buffalo, I see a ton of Ontario license plates," said lifelong Sabres fan and Financial Post columnist Garry Marr. "We had one car in front of us at the Rainbow Bridge on Tuesday night. There are no Canadians coming over right now.

"Those were all Americans singing the national anthem. It's pretty unbelievable."



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There certainly were some Canadians in attendance, but even if the broadcast crews cared one iota about KeyBank Center's demographics, they didn't have time for a census.

The moment Clune's microphone sputtered, producers for the national and local feeds leaned into a moment that lasted 64 seconds.

Not every broadcast shows national anthems, but the Sabres' in-house broadcasts have long done so. Turner Sports emphasizes NHL national anthems because of the energy they convey. The only time Turner Sports doesn't televise the anthems is when game coverage from different time slots overlaps.

"There is an amazing amount of pride from the players and fans who sing it," Turner Sports vice president John O'Connor said. "The excitement right before, the anthems themselves and the energy coming off the anthems, that crazy excitement going into the game provides an atmosphere that feels like you're in the building."

In the production truck outside the arena, Sabres broadcast director Matt Gould quickly diverted from his usual close-up shots of the players' intense expressions. Instead, he filled the screen with scenes of the singing crowd. Turner Sports director John Tackett and producer Kevin Brown took a similar tack, letting the unscripted moment take over.

Clune was given a replacement microphone for the American anthem, but the crowd kept its momentum. Knox said the a cappella "O Canada" was louder, while Gould noted "The Star Spangled-Banner" still hit a higher decibel level than normal.

Another local singer, a Canadian watching on TV in suburban Buffalo, was blown away by what he saw from Clune and her 19,020 backup singers.

"I thought she handled it just perfectly," said Jeremy Hoyle, bandleader for renowned cover band The Strictly Hip, an homage to Canadiana icons The Tragically Hip. "That's a very stressful situation. You're in an arena, and everything stops to listen to you."

"Anthems are scary. Look what happened! It can change your life if something goes wrong, but then something beautiful can happen too."

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1389656 Websites

ESPN / NHL teams' offseason keys, including free agency, draft needs - ESPN

Kristen Shilton is a national NHL reporter for ESPN.

May 1, 2026

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs are underway, which means that while some teams are looking forward to their shot at the best trophy in sports, the others will be looking ahead to the offseason.

What went right and wrong for each of the eliminated teams? How should they modify their rosters this summer via trades, free agency and the draft? And what is each club's outlook for 2026-27?

Read on for full breakdown on every team that is no longer eligible to win the Stanley Cup in 2026. More teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated, so keep this page bookmarked.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton. Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per PuckPedia. Dates listed with

each team are when the entry was published. Teams are listed alphabetically by publication date.

April 30: Dallas Stars

Projected cap space: \$11.1 million

2026 draft picks: 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (TOR)

What went right? The Stars fired Peter DeBoer in the wake of a third straight Western Conference finals loss and hired Glen Gulutzan. Despite the change behind the bench, the Stars finished with a fourth straight season of more than 100 points. There were times when the Stars looked as if they might be the best team in the NHL, or at least one that could look comfortable challenging teams in that space.

They were a top-10 team in goals per game and finished second in fewest goals allowed per game. Dallas had nine players finish with 10 or more goals despite injuries to key players such as Matt Duchene, Roope Hintz, Mikko Rantanen and Tyler Seguin, who had a season-ending ACL injury in December.

Despite those injuries, other Stars players had breakthroughs. Mavrik Bourque went from 25 points in his first full season to finishing with 20 goals and 41 points. Sam Steel's 12 goals and 33 points were career highs in both categories, and Justin Hryckowian emerged as a legitimate NHL regular, finishing with 14 goals and 30 points.

What went wrong? All the offensive options who paced Dallas in the regular season struggled in the postseason. Again.

Last year's conference finals defeat to the Oilers raised quite a few concerns about the Stars. There were the ones about Jake Oettinger after he was pulled for allowing two goals on his first two shots. But there was also a conversation to be had about why the Stars struggled to score goals themselves. They finished with four goals in their final four games en route to being eliminated.

Fast-forward to this year's postseason. Instead of reaching the conference finals, the Stars got knocked out in the first round. And in what's becoming a trend, the Stars lost Game 1 for the ninth time in their past 11 playoff series. Perhaps the most significant reason for their exit is the lack of goals that hindered them last year bleeding into their first-round series against the Wild. They'll finish the first round as a bottom-five team in goals per game.

But even that statistic is a bit misleading because it takes power-play goals into account. Nine of the Stars' 13 postseason goals going into Game 6 came on the extra-skater advantage. Their 5-on-5 struggles came under even more focus after their Game 5 defeat in which both goals came on the power play. Not only did losing Game 5 place them within a game of a first-round exit, but it also continued a stretch in which the Stars failed to score in 5-on-5 play for more than 215 minutes.

Keys to the offseason: Does Stars GM Jim Nill feel that now is the time to make significant changes with his roster? And if so, which players could be moved in order to help the Stars win the second Stanley Cup in franchise history?

Jason Robertson was the Stars' most consistent offensive player in the regular season and playoffs, and his performance comes as he's in the final months of his contract. He's a pending RFA who has one year remaining under team control before he would hit the unrestricted market. The asking price that Robertson -- or any player with his profile -- could command is expected to come with a rather high premium -- especially given the deals signed by fellow star wingers like Kirill Kaprizov and Mitch Marner last summer.

The Stars can make that work, but doing so would likely force them to shed salary elsewhere. And in an even more crowded Western Conference landscape year-over-year, they will need to improve around the edges as well.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Realistic expectation for 2026-27: They are still in a championship window, but windows aren't forever. The need to make moves to win now is certainly ramped up for Nill and his colleagues this offseason.

April 29: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$45.8 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 6th (NSH)

What went right? Pittsburgh proved to be a better offensive team than anticipated this season, and that's what put it back in the playoffs after a three-year absence. The Penguins ranked third overall in regular-season offense, averaging 3.54 goals per game.

Anthony Mantha -- in his first campaign with the club -- had a career-best showing with 33 goals and 64 points in 81 games, Sidney Crosby and Bryan Rust both scored 29 goals, and Rickard Rakell and Evgeni Malkin were top-tier threats up front again. Plus, the midseason addition of Egor Chinakhov was an excellent move by GM Kyle Dubas, given how seamlessly he worked himself into the Penguins' forward group.

Pittsburgh's power play was an asset, finishing seventh overall at 24.1%. Pittsburgh's biggest flex might have been the way first-year NHL head coach Dan Muse performed in his new role. He didn't look intimidated as a freshman behind the bench, taking the Penguins from seventh last season to second this season in the Metropolitan Division. That alone is a sign of positive things still to come in Pittsburgh.

What went wrong? A strong offense and high-end specialty teams can mask other issues, namely, poor collective defense and substandard goaltending. Outside of Erik Karlsson and Parker Wotherspoon performing admirably in the regular season, Pittsburgh struggled to find an effective flow on the back end. Muse cycled through various options, but nothing quite stuck enough to lessen the load on that Karlsson-Wotherspoon pairing.

That wasn't the only reason Pittsburgh was ninth in goals against this season (giving up 3.15 per game). Its goalies were unreliable from the jump, with December addition Stuart Skinner (12-9-5 with an .885 SV%) and Arturs Silovs (19-12-8, .888 SV%) repeatedly bailed out by the Penguins' ability to outscore their mistakes.

That all worked out fine for Pittsburgh's first 82 games. When the Penguins got to the playoffs -- and faced a fast, hungry Philadelphia squad -- they looked old and slow, and their offense dried up accordingly (Mantha didn't score a goal and had only one point). In tandem with Pittsburgh's faltering up front, the team's defensive flaws and shaky goaltending were exposed, and that ultimately doomed it to a thorough postseason beating in a four-game sweep.

Keys to the offseason: The Penguins have been dipping their toe into a rebuild for a while. This is the time to decide if they're going all-in on that adventure.

Pittsburgh has four picks in the first three rounds of the upcoming draft. It could acquire more if Dubas decides to use the nuclear option and trade Crosby.

Remember, the 2025-26 season began with everyone pondering where the Penguins would trade Crosby so that he could chase another Stanley Cup. Now, the Penguins' captain has one year remaining on his contract, and it's no secret he doesn't want to spend these twilight years fronting a retool. Deciding whether to work with Crosby on finding a trade partner will be a defining choice for Dubas.

Dubas must also make a decision on whether Malkin -- a free agent pushing 40 -- will be welcomed back in Pittsburgh or left to pursue another contract elsewhere. Mantha is a free agent as well, and at age 31 will want his next contract to be both lucrative and somewhere that's competitive.

All that is to say: Are the Penguins ready to embrace a full-on rebuild, or are they going to try to parlay their unexpected success this season into one more run with their legendary core? That will dictate how Dubas & Co. attack the weeks and months ahead.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Penguins couldn't hide what ails them when it mattered most, and without a serious overhaul (i.e., getting younger) the playoffs feel out of reach in 2027. However, many counted Pittsburgh out this season, and look where it wound up. If the Penguins do elect to run it back, they are a long-shot playoff contender at best, and more likely on the outside looking in next postseason.

April 26: Los Angeles Kings

Projected cap space: \$18.5 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (CBJ), 3rd (WSH), 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (COL), 7th

What went right? The Kings' goaltending and defensive structure were the major consistencies in a season that had its share of inconsistencies. Darcy Kuemper finished the regular season with a 19-14-15 record and .891 save percentage, and Anton Forsberg went 16-12-5 with a .910 save percentage. It was Forsberg getting the net in the postseason, and he was strong in defeat, with a .922 save percentage.

The Kings finished the regular season in the top three in team save percentage in 5-on-5 play. They were also in the top 10 or just outside when it came to shots allowed, scoring chances allowed and high-danger chances allowed. Having a proven formula to limit goals and shots helped them make the playoffs in the tight race for the final Western Conference wild-card spot. It's what also allowed them to stay within a goal for the majority of their first three games against the juggernaut Colorado Avalanche.

What went wrong? A fifth straight first-round exit is another sign that the Kings have both macro and micro concerns.

The overarching problem is they've yet to break through into the higher class of teams that can reach the second round consistently. The biggest reason for that inability to take the next step is the lack of goals, which placed even more stress on their defensive structure and goaltending.

L.A. averaged the fourth-fewest goals in the regular season (2.68) and was the only team in the NHL's bottom 10 in goals per game to reach the playoffs. Those struggles carried over into a postseason in which the Kings averaged 1.33 goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: It starts with whether they remove the interim tag from D.J. Smith or go in another direction for what would be their fourth head coach since 2024.

There are also the moving parts that come with Anze Kopitar's retirement. His absence leaves the Kings to decide who will be their next captain while also trying to find another top-six forward who can help them address their lack of goals. It's also worth noting that Kopitar was one of the league's top two-way centers, playing in a conference where most of the top contenders are exceptionally strong down the middle. Given the players set to hit free agency, filling Kopitar's shoes might be most easily accomplished via trade.

The Kings must also make decisions on players with expiring contracts. Deadline arrival Scott Laughton and fellow forward Andrei Kuzmenko are both UFAs, and defenseman Brandt Clarke is an RFA.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Kings should be in contention for a playoff berth, with the reality that they'll once again face strong competition in doing so.

April 25: Ottawa Senators

Projected cap space: \$17.3 million



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2026 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 3rd (FLA), 3rd (DAL), 4th (CBJ), 5th, 6th

What went right? Ottawa went from being tied for last place in the Eastern Conference in mid-January to making the playoffs. The Senators' defense was a strength all season, and coach Travis Green made the necessary tweaks -- such as changing who ran the team's penalty kill to take it from 31st in late January to top six in the league post-Olympic break -- to keep Ottawa on track.

Jake Sanderson established himself as one of the league's emerging elite defenders (and formed a strong pairing with Artem Zub). Tim Stutzle and Drake Batherson shone in terrific individual seasons, and Brady Tkachuk persevered through injury to remain a point-per-game player.

From Feb. 1 to mid-April, Ottawa owned the fifth-best points percentage in the NHL, was the fourth-best team defensively and was allowing the second-fewest shots against per game. The Senators could have let this season slip away, but they rallied through the adversity to give themselves some hard-won experience to lean on going forward.

What went wrong? The Senators' goaltending was poor to start the season -- so bad that they churned through five different goalies to land at a league-worst .864 team save percentage at the end of January. Supposed No. 1 Linus Ullmark was 14-8-5 at that point, with an .881 save percentage.

That collective failing in the crease made things tough on the Senators and necessitated that herculean effort to eventually make the playoffs. Perhaps it was that grind which made Ottawa's offense so impotent in the postseason. The Senators were shut out by Carolina in the opening game of their first-round Eastern Conference playoff series and managed just two goals in Game 2, one goal in Game 3 and two in Game 4 of the Hurricanes' sweep.

The Senators generated nearly 28 shots on goal per game, yet all those capable scoring threats -- Stutzle and Tkachuk in particular -- couldn't get anything to hit paydirt. It was a disappointing end for Ottawa, especially considering the excellent goaltending provided by Ullmark in the series, the team's superb penalty killing and its dialed-in defense.

Keys to the offseason: The Senators' core is locked in long term, and the only looming internal contract negotiations pertain to veterans such as Claude Giroux and Nick Cousins. That leaves general manager Steve Staios free to scour the open market for reinforcements.

Ottawa could use a top-four, right-handed defender to pair with Thomas Chabot (think a Colton Parayko type) and -- given its dwindling offensive production in the postseason -- a consistent scoring threat with versatility to slot throughout its top-six rotation.

There are other areas where Staios could look to add -- it's not like the Senators would say no to some bottom-six depth with a player like Viktor Arvidsson -- but Ottawa's success is going to stem from the continued growth of the key players already driving this franchise forward. There are unknowns for the team in terms of how the players it has invested in will continue to mature. It'll be on them to lead the charge and keep knocking on that door.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Senators should be a playoff team again -- one that is too talented to waste half the year chasing the league. Expect Ottawa to come out swinging.

Non-playoff teams

April 14: Calgary Flames

Projected cap space: \$19 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (VGK), 2nd, 2nd (NYR), 2nd (UTA), 2nd (OTT), 3rd, 3rd (VAN), 4th, 5th, 6th

What went right? The front office acknowledging reality. The Flames finished with more than 90 points twice during the four-year span in

which they've missed the playoffs. That might have created a mixed message: Were they close to being a playoff team or was the postseason the object in the mirror that was closer than it appeared?

Moving on from Rasmus Andersson and Nazem Kadri in exchange for significant draft capital, it appears as if the Flames are about to embrace the full freight of a true rebuild rather than a retool on the fly. With eight picks in the first three rounds this summer, one of the best prospect pipelines in the league will get another big boost.

What went wrong? The Flames finished in the top 10 of most scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes and the most high-danger chances allowed per 60, which illustrates their defensive challenges. But the strongest image detailing how the Flames struggled to score? It was the fact that Kadri, who was traded to the Colorado Avalanche on March 6, was still tied for the team lead in points and led them in assists and power-play assists as of April 7.

Keys to the offseason: Let's say that the Flames are clear about their direction. What does that mean for their veterans?

Jonathan Huberdeau has four years left on a contract worth \$10.5 million annually, but he has reached the 60-point mark only once in four seasons with Calgary. The Flames could also be facing major decisions with Blake Coleman, Morgan Frost and Ryan Strome all entering the final year of their contracts. Strome, who has 11 points in 15 games since being traded to the Flames, has the most expensive contract of the trio at \$5 million. That could make it easier to move one or all of them in exchange for prospects or draft capital.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: While having that elite prospect pipeline is great for the future, it appears the Flames are headed toward the short-term challenges that come with being in a full-on rebuild.

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$40.2 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (FLA, if not in top 10), 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 2nd (NYI)

What went right? This season was the most promising that the Blackhawks have looked since last making the playoffs during the pandemic-shortened 2019-20 season. In fact, it was the first time since that season they finished with 70 or more points.

The franchise saw young cornerstones such as Connor Bedard, Wyatt Kaiser, Artyom Levshunov, Frank Nazar and Alex Vlasic finish in the top five on the team in average ice time. Tyler Bertuzzi scored a career high in goals, and Spencer Knight -- who arrived in the Seth Jones trade during the 2024-25 season -- proved he could handle being a No. 1 goaltender.

What went wrong? Chicago's youth was also a challenge at times, especially with its defensive structure and the problems it manifested.

The Blackhawks gave up the second-most shots per 60, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60. What added to those defensive challenges was the fact they had the third-lowest shot-share, meaning they spent more time defending than attacking. It's what made Knight and Arvid Soderblom teaming up to give the club the 17th-best team save percentage in 5-on-5 so crucial. Otherwise, they would've been under water.

Keys to the offseason: Getting a new contract done for Bedard, who is a pending restricted free agent, will be the No. 1 priority. But another area of focus is the defense. The seven defensemen who are under contract for next season are all younger than 24. It's possible the Blackhawks could seek to add some veterans, or elect to let that group continue to develop.

That idea could also hold true when it comes to their situation at forward. Veterans Ilya Mikheyev and Sam Lafferty are pending unrestricted free



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agents, while one wonders if the club is getting enough from Andre Burakovsky. He's entering the final season of a deal worth \$5 million annually, and hasn't scored more than 20 goals and 40 points since 2021-22.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Rebuilding teams use the 80-point mark in the standings as a barometer. That could be the path for the Blackhawks next season, with anything better than that being a nice bonus.

April 14: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$39.3 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (STL), 3rd (COL), 4th (TOR), 5th, 6th (PIT), 7th

What went right? The Blue Jackets started early in their quest to improve after narrowly missing the playoffs last season. And GM Don Waddell's offseason trade for Charlie Coyle was a hit. The veteran center had his best statistical season in years, while providing critical depth for Columbus down the middle.

Coyle wasn't the only one, either. Sean Monahan was a timely contributor, and Kirill Marchenko was terrific pacing the Blue Jackets in scoring with 27 goals. Mason Marchment was a December addition who pumped up Columbus' offensive attack, too. Plus, Jet Greaves proved he could handle the pressure of increased responsibility in net.

But perhaps the biggest win for the Blue Jackets was having Zach Werenski playing Norris Trophy-worthy defense. Werenski has given his all to see Columbus be part of the playoff field, and this season was no exception as he played an eye-popping 26:34 in ice time per game.

What went wrong? Columbus was its own worst enemy in the end. There was a good chance the Blue Jackets would secure a wild-card entry to the playoffs, right up until a mid-March slide that turned into an avalanche. Special teams cratered -- with the power play taking a stunning dip below 10% -- and the offense followed suit with a dive to 32nd overall (averaging just two goals per game from late March into April).

Struggles with closing out opponents and winning on the road also took their toll. When Werenski's partner Damon Severson suffered a season-ending injury on March 26, it depleted Columbus' D corps in a seemingly insurmountable way. Losing Dmitri Voronkov and Mathieu Olivier to injuries in late March gave the Blue Jackets few checking line options, and made them anemic against a good forecheck. One game after another, Columbus watched its playoff opportunity slip away.

Keys to the offseason: Columbus has a swath of pending UFAs who could all make a case for coming back. Coyle was a standout in his first season with the Blue Jackets, captain Boone Jenner has provided production and leadership his entire career, and Marchment was a superb fit.

Once Waddell decides who to keep or let walk, he can focus on fixing what ultimately derailed Columbus' postseason quest. The Blue Jackets have talent; what they need is more reliable depth to complement it. Targeting physical skaters to give Columbus an advantage in its bottom six (even when injuries crop up) would go a long way.

And what will the Blue Jackets do about their backup goaltending? Elvis Merzlikins was unremarkable behind Greaves, and it has felt for years like the veteran netminder could use a change of scenery. This seems like the right time for Columbus to bring in a goalie who can work more in tandem with Greaves and salvage a few more victories for the Blue Jackets than Merzlikins did.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Blue Jackets are a playoff-caliber team that needs tweaking. If Waddell can fine-tune the roster with his offseason moves, Columbus can compete with most teams in the Metro for a long-overdue postseason appearance.

April 14: Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$30.1 million

2026 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (CGY)

What went right? Detroit was exciting out of the gate this season, and in excellent position to bust a decade-long playoff drought. The Red Wings were initially electric up front with Alex DeBrincat (in a 40-plus goal effort), Lucas Raymond (operating at a point-per-game pace) and Dylan Larkin (eclipsing the 30-goal mark again) each making Detroit a viable threat. John Gibson settled in nicely in goal leading up to midseason with some steady, veteran consistency.

At the same time, Detroit got a solid look at its future in skaters such as Emmitt Finnie -- who overachieved in his rookie season as a true contributor. Detroit was a serious contender for first place in the Atlantic Division going into the Olympic break, and ended this season with its highest point total since that last playoff appearance in 2016.

Dylan Larkin nets a hat trick for the Red Wings

Dylan Larkin completes the hat trick to bury the Flyers.

What went wrong? The Red Wings blew it. Not just once, but repeatedly. Detroit held a postseason slot for the majority of this season. Then, its breakdown in March completely snuffed out those hopes. Detroit was the league's fourth-worst team that month, going 5-7-2 while losing significant ground in the standings to surging teams in Boston, Ottawa and Buffalo.

The Red Wings' offense became unreliable -- it ranked 29th in 5-on-5 scoring -- and the dwindling attention to defensive details resulted in a pileup of blown leads, including in a loss to New Jersey with two games remaining that eliminated Detroit from the playoffs. It all felt like more of the same from the Red Wings -- especially to their fan base, which booed their skaters off the ice following that defeat against the Devils.

There were injuries Detroit had to weather in the back half of the season, but given where the Red Wings were in late February, it's a stunning disappointment that they fell out of a postseason spot. And, adding insult to injury, it was Detroit's division rival Buffalo that passed the torch of league's longest playoff drought onto the Red Wings at 10 seasons.

Keys to the offseason: It's imperative that Detroit addresses its problem generating consistent even-strength scoring. Outside of DeBrincat, Larkin and Raymond, only Patrick Kane was regularly producing at 5-on-5. Seeking out some fresh depth on the free agent market or via trade is something GM Steve Yzerman hasn't done enough of, and it has hurt Detroit time and again.

Speaking of Kane, he's among a handful of veteran unrestricted free agents (UFAs) -- along with David Perron, James van Riemsdyk and Cam Talbot -- Yzerman will have to ponder in his attempt to get Detroit over the hump. Frankly, the Red Wings can't afford to keep running it back and hoping for different results. They have prospects on the way and skaters such as Finnie are already making a mark, but Detroit needs to look outside itself for answers.

Coach Todd McLellan has shown he can pull something special out of this team -- even he acknowledged though that the Red Wings' mental toughness dipped post-Olympics along with their resiliency. That alone necessitates change. Time will tell how Yzerman proceeds in fixing the issues.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Detroit can and should push toward the postseason again. If it can't get into the mix and stay there, it will spell major turnover for the team this time next year.

April 14: Florida Panthers

Projected cap space: \$13.8 million



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2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (WSH), 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Panthers again put themselves in a strong position this spring -- only this time, it's with good odds for a high selection in the upcoming NHL draft. Their first-rounder was conditionally traded to the Blackhawks as part of the Seth Jones swap, but it is top-10 protected. That's about all the silver lining to find in a dissatisfying season for the back-to-back Stanley Cup champions.

There were some small victories in 2025-26. Florida's penalty kill ranked in the top 10 in the league for much of the season, and to see Brad Marchand pushing 40 while still producing over a point per game is a good sign that he has plenty left in the tank to guide Florida on another potential run. And, for the first time in three years, there's a long summer ahead for the Panthers to heal, rest and recalibrate.

What went wrong? Aleksander Barkov tore his ACL and MCL during a preseason practice and sat out the season. Meanwhile, Matthew Tkachuk was sidelined to open the season while recovering from surgery. That took two of Florida's best skaters immediately out of the mix.

Whether it was the absences or something else, the Panthers never found a rhythm. Sergei Bobrovsky turned in the worst statistical season of his career. Florida finished top-five in goals against, and its power play ranked 20th. Sam Reinhart and Carter Verhaeghe were average compared to seasons past at generating offense, leaving the Panthers to finish 20th in scoring. All around, Florida looked like a shadow of their Cup-winning selves.

Keys to the offseason: The core of this team is intact and locked-in long term. There is talent throughout the lineup. What Florida must do now is get healthy. Having Barkov and Tkachuk back playing elite-level hockey is crucial.

Then there's the matter of goaltending. Bobrovsky is a pending UFA, and showed every part of his 37 years in 2025-26. Will Florida recommit to the goalie who has been integral to its Stanley Cup runs? Do the Panthers key on adding another veteran and lean more heavily on 27-year-old Danil Tarasov? That decision could define the Panthers for years to come.

The other looming contract negotiation internally is with restricted free agent Mackie Samoskevich, whom Florida should want to retain well into the future. But mostly, GM Bill Zito can focus on the upcoming draft, where the Panthers have a chance of an excellent first-round pick (again, provided it's in the top 10).

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Florida's next phase hinges in large part on the goalie question. If the Panthers can answer it correctly, they should be back to terrorizing the Atlantic Division with a roster of healthy players to carry them through.

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$30.3 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (MIN), 3rd, 3rd (SEA), 4th, 4th (PIT), 5th, 5th (EDM), 5th (CAR), 6th (UTA), 7th

What went right? A five-game winning streak from mid-to-late March changed quite a bit for the Predators. It initially appeared they were going to miss the playoffs again, until that streak -- coupled with the fact that other teams have struggled to hold a firm grip in the Western Conference wild-card race -- presented an opportunity for the Predators. It's why they came into the final week of the regular season challenging for a playoff spot.

This was a particularly good bounce-back season for Steven Stamkos, who reached the 40-goal mark after just 27 last season. Ryan O'Reilly will finish at least 20 points better than last season, while also playing his usual version of excellent two-way play.

What went wrong? Some of the items that plagued them last season were present this season as well. There was an overreliance on their veterans at times; eight of their top 10 in points are older than 30.

Another item that carried over was how they struggled to attain consistency to start the season. A four-game losing streak in mid-October was followed by a separate three-game skid to end that month. They lost five games in early November before having another three-game slide later that month. Goaltender Juuse Saros was up and down, and he is on track to finish his second straight season with a save percentage under .900 after being over that mark for the previous eight.

Keys to the offseason: The Predators need to find a new GM. Then they need to figure out what they'll do with Jonathan Marchessault, who was rumored to be moved at the trade deadline.

They'll also need to figure out the best way to use their cap space, and all of that draft capital.

Finally, it's a matter of determining if all those moving parts can eventually align to help the Predators figure out what their identity will be for next season.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Depending upon how all the offseason shuffling goes, they should be right back in the mix fighting for a playoff spot.

April 14: New Jersey Devils

Projected cap space: \$12.2 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 4th (WPG), 5th, 6th

What went right? The Devils have a renewed Jack Hughes on their hands, and that's the best news of the season. Hughes' fame skyrocketed when he scored the gold-medal winning goal for Team USA at the 2026 Olympic Games. But before that, Hughes was humming for the Devils. Granted, he struggled to stay off IR early after a "freak accident," but when available he was a dominant force.

Overall, New Jersey saw nice depth down the middle with Hughes, Nico Hischier, Cody Glass and Nick Bjugstad (who seriously elevated the fourth line after his trade from St. Louis). The Devils also showed a knack for closing out opponents: When entering the third period with a lead, they were a perfect 24-0-0. And hey -- getting out from under the weight of Ondrej Palat's contract also was a tidy bit of business.

What went wrong? The Devils' offensive woes never truly subsided after a relatively strong start; they were top-10 in league scoring into mid-November, but their stats plummeted from there and they finished averaging fewer than three goals. That simply wasn't good enough even with a relatively strong defensive game to their credit (averaging 3.05 goals against).

Injuries to Hughes, Evgenii Dadonov, Stefan Noesen, Luke Hughes and others also contributed to the inconsistencies, and forced coach Sheldon Keefe to put together a lineup that was rarely at its strongest level. That is perhaps the most disappointing part of New Jersey's season -- the "what could have been" of it all. New Jersey is too talented not to be in the playoffs. It made sense that GM Tom Fitzgerald was let go, when it feels as if the Devils need a refresh.

Keys to the offseason: Finding a replacement for Fitzgerald will be the Devils' first priority. Fitzgerald is the one who hired Keefe two years ago, and whether he'll stay on behind the bench could be a decision for the incoming GM.

After that, New Jersey has to quickly put the 2025-26 season behind it and strike back as a postseason contender. There are players in their prime -- Hughes, Hischier, Timo Meier and more -- that the Devils must use to win now. New Jersey also has good complementary players -- Glass was a particular standout this season -- and newcomer Arseniy



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Gritsyuk's summer development could be of great consequence to the Devils' offensive resurgence in 2026-27.

New Jersey is somewhat lacking in projected cap space, and holds only two picks in the first two rounds of the upcoming draft. The answers probably will have to come from within.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: New Jersey has to be a playoff team. The organization has invested in a core that can contend in the present, and every decision made from now until October should reflect that goal.

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$14.4 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? It's notable that the Islanders went from winning the NHL draft lottery and drafting at No. 1 to being a legitimate playoff contender in less than a year. But that's the sort of effect a phenom such as Matthew Schaefer can have.

When New York drafted Schaefer in June, it couldn't have anticipated he'd transition so easily to the professional game. The Islanders were solid defensively across the board, giving up the sixth-fewest goals against per game. Ilya Sorokin deserves credit for that stinginess as well, holding a .907 save percentage and 2.65 goals-against average.

Offensively, New York got strong output from Mathew Barzal -- at a nearly point-per-game pace -- and Bo Horvat -- who again eclipsed the 30-goal mark. The Islanders might have saved the best for last though, plucking Pete DeBoer as their new coach to try to ensure next season doesn't end the same way.

What went wrong? It's old news by now: The Islanders simply didn't score enough. Their 25th-ranked offense averaged fewer than three goals, and the Islanders' lacked enough depth -- with only three skaters total scoring 20 times or more -- to get those timely markers when it counted. That New York also had the league's third-worst power play was an unsurprising carry-over from their other offensive woes.

The Islanders made a mess out of too many blown leads and a general inconsistency that put too much pressure on Sorokin and the team's defense. New York's system under ex-coach Patrick Roy clearly wasn't bringing out the best of the lineup -- the Isles were playing slow, lifeless hockey by the time Roy was fired. And even all of DeBoer's past experience couldn't immediately undo eight months of ups and downs.

Keys to the offseason: Do the Islanders have enough elite talent to truly begin opening their window as a Cup contender? It's a fair question. When healthy, New York has players such as Barzal, Horvat, Sorokin and even Schaefer who could be classified as top tier. But there's a significant drop-off from there.

Captain Anders Lee has been a critical part of the Islanders in recent seasons, but the front office must decide if it's worth another contract for the 35-year-old. And will GM Mathieu Darche look at fast-tracking the Islanders' retool given how aggressively he chased DeBoer with only four games left in the season? If that's the case, then New York needs to get younger, quicker and more skilled. The good thing for the Islanders is their coach is already in place -- now it's time to let DeBoer make this club his own.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: There is a quick path to contention, so as to maximize the three years DeBoer and Darche are both signed for. DeBoer has a winning pedigree and with the right moves by Darche, he could have the Islanders punching their way to a postseason berth next spring.

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$27 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (CAR or DAL), 2nd (CAR), 3rd, 3rd (NYI), 3rd (LA or DAL), 3rd (BUF), 5th, 6th, 6th (CHI), 7th (VAN)

What went right? The Rangers can view this season as a positive look at their future. Will Cuyllé is a rising star up front, Alexis Lafrenière is increasingly consistent, rookie Noah Laba had a solid campaign and all of Matthew Robertson, Tye Kartye and Adam Sykora showed promise.

The Blueshirts are in a retool, and it's good to know they'll have Mika Zibanejad (still averaging over a point per game), Adam Fox (an excellent defenseman) and Vladislav Gavrikov (a nice fit on the Rangers' top pairing in Year 1 of his contract) to support the next wave of talent. New York can also hang its hat on a late surge to the end of the season that showed its potential, plus a strong power play that was among the best in the league all season.

Will Cuyllé shines for the Rangers in an 8-1 thrashing of the Capitals in New York.

What went wrong? New York got too caught up in the short term, and too reliant on its aging core, and it was enough to just insert a new coach (Mike Sullivan) to quickly see a change. It was clear from the beginning that home ice was going to be a problem -- the Rangers lost their first seven games at Madison Square Garden, and when they were eliminated from the postseason had only nine total victories in their own barn.

Injuries piling up didn't help the Rangers find any sort of rhythm. Igor Shesterkin, J.T. Miller and Fox were their biggest losses, and the Rangers' patchwork efforts to replace them never held much water. By the time Artemi Panarin was traded to the Los Angeles Kings before the Olympic break, it was apparent that this season was too far gone for the Rangers to recover, but their focus now was on what's next.

Keys to the offseason: It starts at the draft for New York. The Rangers have seven picks in the first three rounds -- including two in the first -- and there's no time like the present to embrace a youth movement. That said, further development of their own young skaters is also key.

Gabe Perreault showed real promise in his rookie season -- particularly through March and April -- and seeing him earn top-line playing time is an excellent sign. Having Kartye, Sykora and Laba keep improving is also fundamental to New York's improvement. The Rangers are fortunate to have cap space available to no major internal negotiations to handle, meaning they can explore the free agent market to fill in the gaps.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The best thing New York can do is build off the momentum it generated in the final six weeks of the regular season. The Rangers played more freely and with real energy, which helped them collect wins. It might not translate into an immediate return to the postseason, but New York should at least be in the mix next spring.

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.5 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (EDM), 2nd (COL), 4th (FLA), 4th (VGK), 5th (MTL), 6th (PHI or CBJ), 7th

What went right? There are two ways to look at this. One of them is viewing it through the prism of Macklin Celebrini. The 2024-25 season showed that he could handle the demands of being a top-line center as an 18-year-old. This season proved that he's actually one of the best players in the NHL, who earned consideration from voters for the Hart Trophy as league MVP.

But what did this season mean for the Sharks' long-term goals?

Reaching the 80-point mark has become a sign that a rebuild is trending upward. This was the first time since the 2018-19 season that the Sharks finished with more than 80 points, entering the final week of the regular season still in the fight for a playoff spot.



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Macklin Celebrini scores on the power play for the Sharks to reach 100 points on the season.

What went wrong? Let's go back to Celebrini. He entered the final week of the season with 110 points. That's the same amount that Will Smith and Alexander Wennberg, who were second and third on the Sharks in points, had combined. So, getting more secondary and tertiary support from their lineup was a challenge at times this season.

Much of that comes back to how they had a handful of players younger than 23 in their lineup. It's the sort of challenge that was expected as part of their bigger-picture plans, but it came more into focus during their surprising push for a playoff spot.

Keys to the offseason: In addition to Celebrini and Smith, the Sharks have a strong young core, including Yaroslav Askarov, Igor Chernyshov, Sam Dickinson, William Eklund, Michael Misa and Collin Graf (who will be a restricted free agent this summer). GM Mike Grier and his staff will be planning for second contracts for these players in the coming years.

More immediately, the Sharks must decide what to do on defense, as four veterans hit UFA status -- Nick Leddy, John Klingberg, Mario Ferraro and Vincent Desharnais -- while Shakir Mukhamadullin will be an RFA.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Similar to what the league has seen with Anaheim and Utah this season, it's possible San Jose could be the next upstart to challenge for a playoff spot.

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$28.4 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 2nd, 4th, 4th (NYR), 6th, 7th, 7th (NJ)

What went right? Everything they did before March 4. Why March 4? Because that was the day the Kraken were in the second and final Western Conference wild-card spot.

The Kraken's profile was that of a team that struggled to score goals and generate consistent scoring chances but had a solid goaltending and defensive structure. That's how they were able to cobble together a minus-3 goal differential. It made them accustomed to playing in tight games, with the notion that some teams have used that roadmap to reach the playoffs in seasons past.

What went wrong? Everything they've done since March 4. The Kraken went from being in playoff position to missing the postseason for a fourth straight season. They lost four straight, and then eight of their next 10 games. In total, they went 5-12-7 from March 4 through April 11, earning 12 out of a possible 38 points.

Their goal differential fell to minus-31, which played a significant role in the Kraken ultimately being eliminated from playoff contention in the final days of the season.

Keys to the offseason: The Kraken have many needs to fill, given that they finished in the bottom 10 of scoring and goals allowed. Could they also move on from players who have been there since their first season? Or even those who were expected to play a role in the future?

Jamie Oleksiak is going to be a UFA, as is Jaden Schwartz in the wake of an injury-riddled season. There was talk that the Kraken could have moved on from Shane Wright at the trade deadline.

Speaking of the trade deadline, what becomes of deadline acquisition Bobby McMann? He's also a UFA who could be in line for a major payday having scored more than 28 goals through 75 games this season.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: This team is close to returning to the playoffs for the second time in franchise history, but GM Jason Botterill must make the right moves this summer to give them the best chance to do so.

April 14: St. Louis Blues

Projected cap space: \$21.8 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (DET), 1st (COL), 3rd, 3rd (NJ), 3rd (SJ), 4th, 4th (DAL), 5th, 5th (PIT), 6th, 7th

What went right? Numerous items contributed to the Blues having one of the best post-Olympic break records entering the final full week of the regular season. But primary among them was their goaltending, and more specifically, Joel Hofer.

The 25-year-old showed earlier in the season he could offer the team consistency in net. That became more evident throughout March when he won six of his nine starts, had a 1.73 GAA and .945 save percentage. Hofer gave the team more starts, and Jordan Binnington posted a 1.62 GAA and a .921 save percentage in six starts, leading to the Blues having the top team save percentage after the Olympic break.

What went wrong? Several items compounded into one, which led to the Blues missing the playoffs after sneaking in last season.

It started with a seven-game losing streak spread across late October and early November. That was amplified by the Blues' struggles to score goals, when one of their perceived strengths was scoring depth, with eight players who scored 10 or more goals last season. Turning into a bottom-five team in goals per game added to the challenges they faced within their defensive structure and goaltending, and those early struggles were too much to overcome in the spring.

Keys to the offseason: How much of the Blues' current core should remain in place? They used the trade deadline to move on from then-captain Brayden Schenn. Robert Thomas was rumored to be moved ahead of the deadline. Colton Parayko appeared to be gone before he nixed a trade to the Sabres.

Then there's Binnington. His post-Olympic break efforts helped the Blues make a late push for a wild-card spot. But Hofer receiving the majority of the starts creates questions about what the Blues could do with the veteran, who is entering the final year of his contract in 2026-27.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Maybe it's somewhere between a rebuild and a retool, given that the Blues didn't end up missing the playoffs by too much this season.

April 14: Toronto Maple Leafs

Projected cap space: \$22.2 million

2026 draft picks: 1st (to BOS if not in top 5), 3rd, 3rd (OTT), 4th, 5th, 5th (COL), 6th

What went right? The Leafs got a solid look at their next wave by working rookie Easton Cowan into more of an opportunity than he might have received if Toronto were a better team. There aren't many strong prospects in the Leafs' system, so knowing Cowan can hold his own already at the NHL level is positive.

For once, the Leafs' fall potentially has some benefits -- they are entering an offseason without major cap constraints after being traders at the deadline, and they should be in the running to land a high pick in the upcoming draft to start restocking their bare cupboards (with an asterisk on that pick).

What went wrong? Mitch Marner's absence was even more devastating to Toronto -- both offensively and defensively -- than predicted. The Leafs' high-octane offense was a thing of the past, even with admirable efforts from William Nylander and John Tavares to provide consistent scoring. Auston Matthews had a mediocre season while battling injuries and -- thanks to a knee-on-knee hit from Radko Gudas -- sat out the end of the season because of a torn MCL.

Toronto was abysmal defensively in the second year under head coach Craig Berube, and their goaltending was unreliable. It was of little surprise that GM Brad Treliving didn't survive the season. Oh, and their



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first-round pick belongs to Boston unless it lands in the top five, making the final week of the season -- and the draft lottery on May 5 -- extra nerve-racking.

Keys to the offseason: One question is clearly most vital: Who will replace Treliving? Toronto's entire next decade could hang in the balance.

Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment CEO Keith Pelley knows that whom he hires as Toronto's next GM -- potentially along with a new president of hockey operations -- will define his tenure with the company. Whomever comes on board will then decide on a vision for where the Leafs go from here: Is that a rebuild, a retool, or another new word NHL teams haven't yet used? Does Berube stay or go? Which players will be a part of the team's new direction -- particularly as trade rumors already are churning out possible destinations for Matthews?

And amid all of that, the Leafs have to make the best decision possible if they do retain a top-five pick. They are woefully short on top prospects, and no matter where Toronto is headed, it needs all the help it can get to climb back into contention.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: It's too early to say what the Leafs can reasonably accomplish next season. There are too many variables with the front office in a state of flux.

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$21.6 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (MIN), 2nd, 2nd (SJ), 3rd (CBJ), 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (WSH), 6th (BOS)

What went right? Trading their most valuable player en route to having one of the worst seasons in franchise history. Moving on from Quinn Hughes on Dec. 12 allowed the Canucks to get three young players who could play now and in the future, along with a first-round pick.

Couple that with the fact they'll finish with the NHL's worst record and the strongest odds to win the draft lottery, and they are clearly in position to jump-start their rebuild.

What went wrong? Think about the characteristics that come with being the worst team in the NHL. The Canucks displayed many, if not all of them.

They were among the bottom 10 in the NHL in shot-share, scoring chances per 60, high-danger scoring chances per 60 and shots per 60. Their underlying defensive metrics were also challenging, as they were in the bottom 10 in terms of most shots allowed per 60, most scoring chances allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Put it all together and as of April 13, the Canucks were 30th in goals per game (2.56), 32nd in goals against per game (3.81) and their minus-96 goal differential was 35 clear of second-worst mark in the league.

Keys to the offseason: The Canucks have UFAs such as Teddy Blueger and Evander Kane that they can let walk in free agency. But beyond that, hitting a full-on reset could prove challenging. The Canucks have seven players under contract for next season who will have more than three years left on their current deals. It's a group that includes Elias Pettersson, who will enter the third year of his eight-year contract worth \$11.6 million annually.

It's possible that the Canucks could seek to sign players they believe can address some of their short-term needs, with the idea they could move on from them ahead of the 2026-27 trade deadline to add to their future draft capital.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Unless something drastically changes, the rebuild will continue through 2026-27.

April 14: Washington Capitals

Projected cap space: \$34 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 1st (ANA), 4th, 5th, 7th

What went right? The Capitals relied on several fresh faces this season who will define the team's new core. Ryan Leonard was excellent in a 20-goal rookie campaign, Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael made strides, and late additions Cole Hutson and Ilya Protas fit right in.

Meanwhile, the Capitals' veteran guard was pulling its weight, too: Tom Wilson and Alex Ovechkin both scored 30-plus goals, Dylan Strome had another consistent season as a top-six producer, and Jakob Chychrun stayed healthy in what was the best statistical season of his career (with 59 points in 78 games).

Spencer Carbery has been the ideal coach for this squad in every phase Washington has trudged through the last few seasons. The Capitals acknowledge now that they are entering a new era, but there are a number of players already in the fold who will be integral to a smooth transition back toward being the President's Trophy winners they were only three seasons ago.

What went wrong? It didn't bode well for the Capitals chances when top center Pierre-Luc Dubois was injured six games into the season and was sidelined post-surgery until February. Wilson and Leonard also missed enough time that it significantly impacted the Capitals' chemistry. Washington didn't have the depth to make up for those critical absences, which showed up in its middling power-play numbers and may have been the determining factor in a season that could have gone another direction.

The Capitals' defensive habits were also a consistent problem, with odd-man rushes and blown coverages becoming all too frequent a reason for losing out on two points. GM Chris Patrick signaled to the entire hockey world that the Capitals were embracing their next chapter when he traded defenseman John Carlson to Anaheim at the deadline -- a blockbuster no one (especially teammates like Ovechkin) saw coming.

Keys to the offseason: First and foremost, Ovechkin will decide on his future. Does he come back for one more season or call it a career? Washington's captain doesn't plan to make a call until the season is complete.

Ovechkin tells Eisen decision on future will be made this summer

Alexander Ovechkin joins "SportsCenter" to discuss what his future may hold with the Washington Capitals.

That has a ripple effect on what Patrick can do for the Capitals. They have that young core ready to take on increased responsibilities, but if Washington wants to take advantage of its prime seasons, the team has to start now by surrounding that group with the right veterans who can provide production but also leadership (particularly if Ovechkin doesn't return).

It doesn't feel like Washington has many holes to patch, per se; it's more about making decisions aligned with whatever timeline Patrick has in mind for building Washington back into a championship team. Does that mean holding on to veteran UFAs like Trevor van Riemsdyk and David Kampf? Or will Patrick put further faith into the organization's prospect pool and see what happens?

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The way Washington finished the season -- with good results from its young players providing playoff hope until the bitter end -- there's no reason the Capitals shouldn't be aiming for the postseason again next season. If Dubois and Wilson can stay healthy -- and Patrick can add some depth scoring should Ovechkin retire -- Washington should have most of what it needs for a quick turnaround.

April 14: Winnipeg Jets

Projected cap space: \$21.6 million



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2026 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 4th (BUF or EDM), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (BUF)

What went right? The Jets went from being what appeared to be a lottery team to coming within four points of the final wild-card spot with five games left. Their push to reach the playoffs for what would have been a fourth straight season fell short. But the argument could be had that they might not be that far off from returning to the playoffs once they address a few of their concerns.

Individually, Mark Scheifele hit a career high with 99 points through 79 games. Kyle Connor brought a gold medal home from the Olympics, and had another season with 30 or more goals, the eighth of his career. Gabriel Vilardi also hit a career high in points, with 64 through 79 games.

What went wrong? Losing Connor Hellebuyck in late November while he recovered from a knee procedure brought quite a bit into focus for the Jets. Namely, this is a team that relies too heavily on its star players.

Hellebuyck, the reigning Hart Trophy and three-time Vezina Trophy winner, helped mask their defensive deficiencies. Connor, Scheifele and Vilardi were tasked with trying to generate goals for a team that was in the bottom 10 in scoring chances per 60, shots per 60, high-danger chances per 60 and goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: The mission is clear for the Jets' front office: finding complementary players who can take some of the scoring burden off of Winnipeg's stars. Right now, the Jets have seven players with less than two years remaining on their contracts after this season, with Gustav Nyquist and Jonathan Toews part of a seven-player UFA class.

Another thing they'll need to take into account is determining what sort of term they'll provide Cole Perfetti, who is slated to be an RFA after a 32-point campaign.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Jets should be back in the mix pushing for a playoff spot -- provided they insulate their core with a more consistent supporting cast.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Not good enough': Playoff-fatigued Oilers overwhelmed by upstart Ducks

Mark Spector

ANAHEIM — They've been searching for it all year long. As it turns out, "it" was never there.

The Edmonton Oilers were eliminated by the Anaheim Ducks Thursday night, losing 5-2 in Game 6 of their Round 1 series, unable to flip a switch on a season-long malaise that left them an "average team" in the eyes of their captain.

It marked an end to a 2025-26 season that never really started for the Oilers, an 82-game search for some semblance of the game that had taken them to consecutive Stanley Cup Finals.

"We were an average team all year," said Connor McDavid. "An average team with high expectations, you're going to be disappointed."

And disappointed they are, left in the slow lane by the big, speedy Ducks. Anaheim was simply too much for this version of the Oilers — throughout the series and certainly in Game 6 — in a series that ended with the Ducks scoring eight times on 16 power-play opportunities.

"That's a real hockey team over there. They have some good players," observed Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. "But at the end of the day we've got to

find ways to keep the puck out of our net. It's not just a couple of guys, it's everyone.

"It's a bit of a theme through the season."

"They played very fast and we weren't very fast," added McDavid. "We weren't very good on the penalty kill. Our power play didn't get off to a good start but found its way into the series.

"But we struggled on the PK all year, too. We've been searching for consistency there, too."

If you earn your puck luck in this game, then it was all Duck luck Thursday, as Anaheim got two goals from two fortunate deflections in Period 1 to break it open early. The Ducks led wire to wire, did not give the Oilers a single power play, and held McDavid pointless in Game 6.

In the end, McDavid limped through a largely ineffective series. He was injured in Game 1 when he got tangled up with teammate Mattias Ekholm, stopped practising, and posted just six points and a minus-8 in the six games.

"Too hurt, too soon," said McDavid of the Oilers limpy, gimpy roster. "The first round is always tough, it's always chaotic. It's tough to play through things so early on, as many guys did in here."

"Leon was injured for the last four or five weeks heading into the playoffs," said head coach Kris Knoblauch. "For him to come back after that long stretch, I thought he played really well."

"We've got some guys with some fractures that were playing through things that made it really difficult to play at their best. But I certainly love their effort and how they dug in."

"Our centres — one, two and three — are playing through stuff," said Draisaitl, who forgot about Adam Henrique, Edmonton's 4C who was hurt in Game 1 and never returned. "But at the end of the day you have to find ways to win games, in any way. You have to grind one out; you have to defend one out."

"Injuries, they suck and it hit us at a bad time certainly. But they were the better team."

Like their captain, the beat up and aging Oilers simply looked like a team that's played too much hockey in the last two springs, the fatigue exacerbated by a compressed Olympic schedule during which they never seemed to catch their collective breath.

No team has played more hockey than this one over the past few seasons, though to a man, the players we spoke to post-game refuted that angle.

"I don't know," said Draisaitl. "You strap your skates on for every playoff game and you try to go out and do your best and try to win it. Obviously we fell short."

"As much as it hurts, I think they were just the better team."

So they'll go into the summer and get the rest required for a fulsome Stanley Cup charge again next year. But there will be change — around an awful penalty-killing unit, among their seven unrestricted free agents, and who knows where else.

Starting now, the Anaheim Ducks are the team to beat in the Pacific. It's Edmonton that will have to figure out how to stay relevant out West, as their McDavid-era competitive window begins to close.

"At the end of the day they were just better than us," Draisaitl said. "For sure, we never really found what you need to find at this time of year especially to go all the way."

"In my opinion, just not good enough."

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Sportsnet.ca / Takeaways: Hughes' historic night leads Wild past Stars, into Round 2

Sonny Sachdeva

Back in December, when news first broke of the blockbuster that sent Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks to the Minnesota Wild, GM Bill Guerin made clear just how much of a game-changer the defenceman could be for his franchise.

"Bringing a player like Quinn Hughes here, you just don't get these opportunities all that often," Guerin had said that day, after the Wild traded away three talented young players and a first-round pick to land the blue-liner. "When a player of Quinn's calibre comes available, and you have an opportunity to get him, there's a cost to it. And we were willing to do what it takes."

Thursday night, the Wild faithful were reminded why Guerin moved out that hefty package to land the 26-year-old, the fans at Grand Casino Arena getting a front-row seat to the Quinn Hughes Show as Minnesota came up with a 5-2 win in Game 6, eliminating the Dallas Stars and booking their ticket to Round 2.

Hughes kicked off the festivities six minutes into the tilt, spurring a breakout from his own zone and finishing the play off himself with a feathery wrist that beat Jake Oettinger clean. Before the night was through, he'd tallied two more crucial points, registering an assist on a second-period marker from Vladimir Tarasenko to tie the game, and then scoring the game-winner to clinch it midway through the third.

With the three-point night in tow, Hughes finishes the series with eight points in six games, breaking the Wild's franchise record for the most points collected by a defenceman in one playoff series. He also matched the franchise record for most points in a potential clinching game, and became the first Wild blue-liner to pot a series-clinching goal.

Wallstedt comes up clutch for Minnesota when it matters most

While all eyes were on all the offensive firepower spread among these two clubs, the contributions of netminder Jesper Wallstedt were no less crucial in Minnesota closing out the series.

In the second period, trailing 1-0, the Stars made a push. A power play granted them a tying goal — their league-leading 10th man-advantage marker of the series. They kept coming, but Minnesota's 23-year-old puck-stopper stood tall, preventing them from tallying in quick succession and truly swinging momentum back in their direction.

In the final minute of that middle frame, with the score knotted at 2-2 after both clubs had tallied again, the netminder held his ground once more as the Stars started stacking dangerous looks. Again, Wallstedt held them off, stopping the Stars from building a lead and some confidence, heading into the break.

But it was in the final 20 minutes that the Swede did his best work. Early in the frame, as both clubs hunted for a game-winner, Wallstedt was there to quell a dangerous rush from Sam Steel and Colin Blackwell. After Hughes tallied the go-ahead marker, Wallstedt calmly gloved down an attempt from Michael Bunting. And then another from Wyatt Johnston, after the Stars' goalie had been pulled, before Matt Boldy potted two empty-netters to ice it.

The young Swede finished the night with 21 saves on 23 shots and finishes Round 1 with a .924 save percentage.

Foligno brothers bring the pain for hard-checking Wild

It was the acquisition of Hughes that swung this game, and perhaps this series, for the Wild. But the arrival of veteran Nick Foligno last month paid off Thursday night, too.

Suiting up alongside his brother Marcus, the Folignos went full Bash Brothers mode in Game 6, leading a hard forechecking effort that had the Stars on their heels all night.

It started minutes in, with the Wild making clear from the opening puck drop they were going to press the visitors, push them back, pressure the offensively gifted squad into bobbled passes and broken rushes. But the home side's physicality seemed most impactful down the stretch, over the final minutes of the game, as Minnesota defended its one-goal lead, the Folignos making their presence known with a handful of well-placed, well-timed checks.

By the end of the night, the Wild brothers combined for 11 hits, with Marcus adding an assist on the game-opening tally as well.

Stars' power play cashes in again, but rest of offence goes quiet

For the Stars, there will be questions about all that was left on the table.

While the Stars' power play continued to dominate, and came up with a crucial goal early in the second period Thursday to briefly tie the game — a silky tic-tac-toe sequence finished off by Wyatt Johnston — there was still much to be desired from Dallas's overall offensive effort.

Game 6 saw leading talents Jason Robertson, Mikko Rantanen, and Matt Duchene combine for just two shots on the night. And while Rantanen and Duchene set up that Johnston man-advantage goal, the trio went pointless at even strength in the season-ending effort.

It was an issue for Dallas throughout the series. The Stars leave Round 1 with only four five-on-five goals scored against Minnesota — the third-fewest among all playoff participants, besting only Los Angeles and Ottawa, both of whom were swept out of these playoffs.

Dallas had a chance to swing things with another power-play marker in this one, getting a man-advantage chance early in the third, before Hughes' game-winner, that they couldn't cash in on. But in the end, the five-on-five scoring woes sunk them.

Looking ahead to Round 2: Wild vs. Avalanche

Minnesota's path gets no easier moving forward — they'll now head to the second round to face a Colorado Avalanche squad that's been dominating all season, a group that's well-rested after dispensing with the Kings in four games.

The series will be just the fifth in NHL history to feature the two most recent Norris Trophy winners pitted against each other, as Hughes (2024's Norris winner) will match up against Cale Makar (2025).

The last such battle? The 2007 conference final that saw Detroit's Nick Lidstrom take on Anaheim's Scott Niedermayer. Expect some fireworks.

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Sportsnet.ca / Josh Anderson's impact on Canadiens' playoff success 'immeasurable'

Eric Engels

TAMPA, Fla. — Two goals, three blocks, four giveaways, eight shots, 10 penalty minutes, 21 hits, and an average ice time of 15:32 as a stat line isn't representative enough of the massive impact Josh Anderson has



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had in helping his Montreal Canadiens grab a 3-2 series lead against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

But Anderson is part of an exclusive group of players you should just watch while mostly ignoring what the numbers say about him.

Because Anderson's underlying stats won't properly portray how frequently he's brought his teammates into the fight. They can't possibly give you an accurate sense of how much pain he's inflicted in post-whistle scrums. And there's no way for them to contextualize the feeling he's given opposing defencemen by bearing down on them at full speed on the forecheck.

"Tom Wilson, Josh Anderson, Brady Tkachuk, Marcus Foligno and Adam Lowry are in a class of their own as far as that goes," says bruising Detroit Red Wings defenceman Ben Chiarot. "I know when they're forechecking."

Especially in the playoffs.

When Chiarot was with the Winnipeg Jets, he played with Lowry against Foligno and the Minnesota Wild in the playoffs. When he was with the Florida Panthers, he played a series against Wilson and the Washington Capitals. And when he was with the Canadiens, he played alongside Anderson and against Lowry and the Jets, helping the team reach the 2021 Stanley Cup Final.

Chiarot described Anderson's impact over that run as "immeasurable."

"Great teammate," Chiarot said. "A guy I loved going to battle with. Probably at the top of the league in terms of that size and speed combination. Not fun having him chase you down. He's a real horse when he gets up to speed."

Wilson, who's the thoroughbred of the pack, agrees.

"Nothing but respect for (Anderson)," he said via text message Wednesday, and it resonated for a couple of reasons.

The first is that Wilson has been battling with Anderson ever since both were up-and-comers in the Ontario Hockey League and knows his game probably better than any of his opponents. The twin 225-pounders have traded hits for years, and they've exchanged punches on multiple occasions — including most recently at the Bell Centre, in the visitors' bench during last year's first-round meeting between his Capitals and the Canadiens.

The second is that Wilson, a Stanley Cup winner who's terrorized opponents with huge hits, punishing punches and timely goals, has set the gold standard for heavyweight power forwards in the NHL. So no one knows more about the intangible impact players like Anderson can have than he does.

"When you play a physical game, you know your opponent will be conscious of that," Wilson said. "The physical players that can do this in the most intelligent way will always be the best at impacting the game positively (in playoffs). Sometimes finish the hit, sometimes take the puck, let the opponent rush their play and then turn it over to you. A lot goes into it, but those hits have the ability to change the momentum of a game if executed correctly, and that only gets more amplified in the playoffs."

It can be muted during the regular season, where opponents meet occasionally rather than every second day.

Though it's rarely muted for Wilson, which is what makes him a bit of a standout in his category of player.

He turned 32 in March and is coming off a second straight season of more than 30 goals and 60 points. His ability to produce as much while maintaining such a punishing and exacting style as consistently as he has is remarkable, and something not even Anderson can lay claim to.

"Over the year, you'll see that version of Andy, but it's impossible to see that version of him over 82 games," said Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis of the player who had 14 goals and 23 points over 72 games during the regular season. "It's (important) to understand that as a coach and always try to get him as close to that level as possible. But in the playoffs, he'll give you more than you'll get from him in the regular season because the playoffs just bring that out of him. It helps him play to his identity.

"He's a really important player for us."

Everyone knows, including Anderson's biggest rivals.

"Every player knows the opponents that will show up and compete and leave it all out there," said Wilson. "For me, Josh has always been one of those guys for his team. I think there is a level of respect that is gained between two players competing against each other when you know they're also willing to do that."

No matter how much pain is suffered in the process, Anderson has shown he'll never relent at this time of year.

After suffering an upper-body injury late in the season, the soon-to-be 32-year-old had tone-setting performances through the first three games of this series. He got tangled up with Ryan McDonagh in the second period of Game 4 and came up limping, but quickly returned and has been a thorn in the Lightning's side ever since.

"We have the chance to close the series now," Anderson said on Wednesday night. "A lot's on the line here, and we definitely don't want to come back to Tampa.

"Time to put everything on the line."

It's what Anderson has always done in the playoffs.

"You have a goal since you were a little kid, and you're trying to do everything you can to accomplish that goal and bring everything you possibly can because each and every game is so important," he said. "Just trying to put everything I have on the ice and just imagine winning."

No matter what the numbers say, the Canadiens' chances of doing so would shrink dramatically without him.

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators' off-season checklist: All eyes on Brady Tkachuk

Alex Adams

OTTAWA — Quiet off-seasons haven't been the norm for the Senators for a long time, and it's not about to change now.

The Senators' core has been locked up to long-term contracts, but some decisions are looming after another first-round exit.

The team needs to start thinking about re-upping and extending key players such as Drake Batherson, Artem Zub, and Jordan Spence.

The time to contend is now, even if general manager Steve Staios won't say that publicly.

"Don't know if I'm going to paint myself into a contention window with this group," said Staios this week. "Our most important (players) ... are still not in their prime."

But the team's window to compete probably begins and ends with Brady Tkachuk, who is two seasons away from free agency.



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Staios said there had been no concrete discussions about his captain's future, but you wonder what might be happening behind the scenes. If nothing else, Senators management needs to know if Tkachuk is happy with the direction of the team.

"The extension talk is ... it's a year away, so that's something that you physically can't even do anytime soon," Tkachuk said. "I just will talk to (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."

The core of Tkachuk, Tim Stutzle and Jake Sanderson is another year older and another year more experienced, while still on the right side of their primes. But two quick exits in the playoffs obviously raises the question whether it is worth keeping the group together.

Meanwhile, the NHL's salary cap is expected to rise and players' salary demands will inevitably rise with it. That may make it hard for a small-market team to keep the gang together. The Senators' best approach may be to sign long-term contracts on younger players within their system rather than overspend on players in free agency.

The tough part for Staios is to decide who to keep and how to improve.

Players like Thomas Chabot and Stutzle said their playoff scars, including this year's sweep at the hands of the Carolina Hurricanes, are learning opportunities. Every analytical category suggested they were a top-10 team in the league.

Staios seemed to suggest that not all sweeps are made the same, and that if injury luck was on the Senators' side, we wouldn't already be in off-season mode in the nation's capital.

"Acting or reacting emotionally or making decisions (emotionally) is not going to help us," he said.

Here are the moves he must make to take the Senators to the next level:

Tkachuk discussion

Know where your captain is at.

Tkachuk reaffirmed his commitment to Ottawa for the next two seasons remaining on his contract on Wednesday but wouldn't speak about his future beyond that. Winning cures all, and Staios' other moves this summer will either hamper or improve his pitch to Tkachuk.

"I think, every year, we have taken steps," said Tkachuk.

Extensions/contracts

Extend Batherson and Zub and sign Spence long-term. What was clear watching the Senators' battle into the playoffs and their performance once they were there was the importance of all three players.

Let's start with Batherson: he has set an NHL record by improving his point tally in each of the first eight seasons of his career, finishing with 33 goals and 71 points this season. In the new cap world, in the summer of 2027 when Batherson would be a free agent, he'd likely be able to command \$8-9 million on the open market.

We believe Batherson would like to stay, but Staios might have to overspend to keep him. On the other hand, there is no easy way to replace him if he leaves. It would be hard to trade him now and match his scoring with the return. The Senators have a player who they know, who continually improves, wants to stay in Ottawa and helps in the pitch to Tkachuk to hang around. Extend him.

As for Zub, it's a similar story. The 30-year-old is a beloved teammate and was healthy all season until suffering an injury in Game 1. He has become immensely effective with No. 1 defenceman Jake Sanderson. They've become one of the best pairings in the NHL. Plus, Zub, who is a free agent in 2027, said he'd be open to staying. You sometimes wonder about defencemen aging, but Zub's has elite hockey sense, great gap

control and a shrewd stick. None of which should decline sharply into his 30s. 6x\$6 million anyone?

Lastly, Spence became a key figure down the stretch and into the playoffs. He was Ottawa's best defenceman from March onwards because of the injuries. Despite his small frame, he defended at an extremely high level in the playoffs. "I want to be here," said Spence. A 5x\$5 million might make sense for both sides.

Scoring punch

"It'd be nice," said Staios about adding a scoring winger. "They're hard to find."

Ottawa needs sniper. The Senators finished eighth in goals this season more because they outshot and outchanced opponents than because they had elite scorers. Nobody on the Senators roster has ever scored 40 goals.

The hope way back was that Alex DeBrincat would be the solution. Unfortunately, because the Senators have few elite prospects and can't trade their 2026 first-round pick, Staios is in a bind. Still, the Senators have plenty of really good hockey players on their roster, so maybe move quantity for quality. If Staios can add another goal scorer, the Senators' outlook could improve.

Depth defenceman

No team had as many key injuries as the Senators this season, specifically on the blueline. The Senators used 12 defencemen after the trade deadline, and eight in the playoffs. It was more than unlucky, but injuries do happen and the Senators' lack of depth, specifically on the left side, was evident.

Outside of Sanderson, Chabot and Tyler Kleven, there were no bona fide left-shot defenceman. No shade to Dennis Gilbert who played in three of the four playoff games, but the Senators need to upgrade from Gilbert for playoff time next year. This summer, Staios must add a savvy vet or another NHL-calibre left-shot defenceman to insulate his blueline.

Backup goaltender

If the Senators had James Reimer from Day 1, they'd likely had finished in the top three in the Atlantic. Not that Reimer was sparkling, but he was a serviceable backup who won more games than he lost.

"I didn't do a good enough job of supporting Linus (Ullmark) ... and probably didn't put (backup) Leevi (Merilainen) in the best position to have success as well," Staios said.

Heading into this summer, Staios must add a backup who has the possibility to be a 1B goaltender because Ullmark has never played more than 49 games in a season.

The good news is that Ullmark returned to Vezina-calibre play down the stretch and in the playoffs. Unfortunately, there are very few good goaltenders hitting free agency this summer. Staios has to be smart, but likely won't want to expend too many resources, either. Merilainen can stay in the picture, just not as the clearcut backup.

Fourth-line centre

Lars Eller was a very good two-way, fourth-line centre. Bringing back the soon-to-be free agent wouldn't be a bad move. It's clear the Senators need to maintain their depth. Also, it's time to give Stephen Halliday a full-time role and a real shot in the NHL next season.

Giroux question

Claude Giroux didn't seem clear-eyed as to whether he'd played his final game of his illustrious career.

Regardless, Giroux is an integral part of the team's leadership and would be a perfect third-liner alongside Shane Pinto and Michael Amadio next



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year. That line was excellent before Giroux was needed higher up in the lineup.

If Staios can convince Giroux to come back in that role, it would be good for the team. Giroux would be hard for Ottawa to replace.

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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 22-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, steered 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 unforced 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.

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."



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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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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.)

Like a handful of other first-time playoff performers in Utah, Guenther's playoff identity is really taking shape and he's clearly excelling on this stage. Can he step up for the home side Friday night to keep Utah alive?

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TSN.CA / Carson Carels hopes breakthrough season leads to Canadian team at NHL draft

Mark Masters

Carson Carels plans to watch June's NHL draft from his family farm in tiny Cypress River, Man. instead of travelling to Buffalo to be there in person.

"It's something we thought about during the whole season," the Prince George Cougars defenceman said. "You can only bring so many people to the draft ... We have a big family of five kids and obviously my parents so I think just staying at home on the farm and seeing all the relatives and having all the people that kind of got me where I am today is special."

Growing up on the farm, which is about two hours southwest of Winnipeg, played a significant role in turning Carels into one of the most promising players in this year's draft class.

"Just working with cows all the time you kind of gotta have a little chip on your shoulder," the 17-year-old said with a smile. "Sometimes they're a little crazy so you gotta be a little more crazy than them to make sure they don't run you over. That and just the hard work that you have to do on the farm, it's kind of made me who I am as a person and player. I owe a lot to the farm and obviously my parents and siblings."



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The hard work is about to pay off for the 6-foot-2, 198-pound Carels, who is up to No. 2 in the latest rankings from TSN director of scouting Craig Button.

Carels has been surging up draft lists all season. He finished with 20 goals and 73 points in 58 Western Hockey League games, which was up from six goals and 35 points in 60 games last season. He also cracked Canada's roster at the World Juniors becoming one of the youngest defencemen to ever play for the country at the event.

During a conversation with TSN, Carels reflected on his breakthrough season, detailed what life on the farm is like and explained why he's hoping to be drafted by a Canadian team. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TSN: What's life been like for you since the season ended with a second-round loss in Prince George on April 19?

Carson Carels: It's been pretty peaceful. I've been back home on the farm and helping dad and helping with everything because it's kind of the craziest time of the year with calving and everything. But, other than that, it's just been just resetting and regrouping after a long season.

TSN: What's a day on the farm look like at this time of year?

Carson Carels: Well, right now we're having about five to 10 calves born a day so you got to tag all those calves and make sure everyone's fed and make sure nobody needs help calving or anything. And right now we're doing a little bit of fieldwork so the other day I was in the tractor for about 12 hours. It's pretty long but it's pretty good. All the goats, they kidded already, and we got a lot of little kids jumping around so it's pretty cool to see.

TSN: What is your favourite part of life on the farm?

Carson Carels: How peaceful it is. We don't really have many neighbours in the area. It's not like a city where you step outside your door and you see everybody. I think just hearing all the sounds and breathing in that fresh air is the main thing that I love the most.

TSN: What's your craziest cow story?

Carson Carels: I don't know if I could say it because (smile) it's pretty dangerous. Sometimes when cows have calves and you gotta tag them you kind of gotta run away with her calf to get away from them because they beeline at you. It's pretty scary, but it's worth it when you get the calf all healthy and everything.

TSN: You had the entire Cougars team out to the farm during the season. What was that like?

Carson Carels: Really special. It was a pretty nice day even though there's snow on the ground. All the guys that are from the city, even the guys from Russia and Ukraine, they just really enjoyed seeing all the calves and cows and the goats. They loved the goats. It was pretty cool. Even for the staff it was a little eye-opening. Some of them don't really get away from the city much so they kind of appreciated it and seeing what I do in the summer. Obviously, it's a lot different so I think they had a lot of fun.

TSN: What will draft night look like?

Carson Carels: A lot of close relatives are gonna be there. All the staff from Prince George, the coaches and trainers and everybody that I've spent lots of time with, they're gonna be there. I think a lot of my teammates from this past year are gonna try and drive up and stay over and have a little week with me. And then obviously buddies that I've been close with from where I'm from are gonna be there. If it's a nice day, we'll do it outside but if it's not, well, we have enough room in the house to do a little something in here. But I think it's gonna be special wherever that is and whenever that is.

TSN: You were the last player on the ice after the season ended in Prince George. What were you thinking?

Carson Carels: There's a lot of emotions going into that. Just seeing all the fans and just embracing that, how special it is up in Prince George and how great of an environment it is and all the culture we have there with the fan base and everything. Just the emotion of seeing it for the last time that season was really hard. Obviously there's a few decisions to be made this summer and see where I'll end up for next year so I think I just kind of had to embrace that moment and hope it's not my last, but I think that there's a chance it might be. It's kind of hard to take that all in, but I think I enjoyed it a lot.

TSN: How do you feel about your season now that it's done?

Carson Carels: Going into the season, personally, I didn't really think that I was gonna hit these achievements or do things that I did like make the World Juniors. I came into the season just with an open mind of having goals of obviously point totals and where our team's gonna finish and all that, but I think the extra things that I was able to accomplish just boosted this year a whole lot. I'm really proud of myself for how it went. And in Prince George, we had a great group of guys and I'm really proud of how that ended as well and just how tight we were. I mean a lot of guys didn't expect us to be that good, so it was obviously awesome to achieve.

TSN: What was your goal for a point total coming into the season?

Carson Carels: I just wanted to be 50 points or above. Before the season that was a goal that I was reaching for. But then, obviously, when we started picking it up a little bit I think I had to push it up a little and, yeah, I hit it, so it was good. It wasn't really too much about the points. Even if I hit just 50 I was happy. Just how it all ended up I owe a lot to all the guys that I was playing with like [Terik] Parascak and [Brock] Souch and all those guys, they really helped. Obviously with our power play, it was a pretty good one, so I owe a lot to that too.

TSN: Where do you feel like you grew the most or improved the most this year?

Carson Carels: Coming into the season, I think a lot of people thought I was more of a stay-at-home defenceman and didn't do too much in the O-zone. But, I mean, it was a learning year my 16-year-old year and just learning to put myself in good ice and all that. I came in with a different mindset this year. I wanted to be the top guy on the back end and help the team succeed as much as I could. Just that confidence and swagger of 'We need to do this and get it done' kind of helped my offensive game. I mean, back in u15 I was more of an offensive guy so I had to bring that back out and it showed this year.

TSN: What did you take away from the World Juniors?

Carson Carels: That World Junior experience helped the back half of my year. Just learning from all those guys that have played NHL games or have been drafted, I mean, obviously I owe a lot to them. Just sitting down with the Hunter brothers [coach Dale and manager Mark], they really talked a lot to me and let me watch the games and embrace it all. The main thing was just the confidence that I brought back to Prince George.

TSN: What's the biggest thing you learned from someone at the World Juniors?

Carson Carels: How creative you can be. Just watching [Zayne] Parekh, he's so special and what he did at the end of the year in Calgary was surreal. Once I went back to Prince George, it kind of opened my eyes. You can make some mistakes sometimes and obviously it's gonna happen but, I mean, the amount of things that you can try and the confidence that it builds, it helps your game completely.

TSN: Did you have a Parekh-type moment this season on the ice down the stretch?



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Carson Carels: Just that last goal of the playoffs. I don't really know how I got up there in the middle of the ice, but it kind of happened. It's just the confidence of putting yourself in an area like that and, even if it doesn't work, you gotta keep doing it. It worked and obviously it's a big thing.

TSN: The hockey world certainly is noticing. Button had you No. 2 on his latest list. What do you think about that?

Carson Carels: I don't really pay too much attention. Obviously people send it to you and it pops up on your Instagram or whatever and you kind of take a look at it and you smile or whatever. But it's a post or list that you look at for a minute and you just are proud of yourself for a second, but then you gotta keep going and stay humble about it and stay in reality.

TSN: There's going to be a number of Canadian teams picking high this year including Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg and maybe Toronto. What do you think about potentially playing in Canada?

Carson Carels: Something every Canadian kid dreams of is playing for a Canadian team. It's closer to becoming a reality now just with all those teams being in the top of the range. A lot of people have asked me what team or who I would want to go to, I think any Canadian team is definitely at the top of the list. You want to bring Canadian hockey back and bring a Stanley Cup back to your country. So, I think any Canadian team would be awesome.

TSN: How prepared are you for the extra attention you get in a Canadian market?

Carson Carels: Obviously there's a lot of spotlight just being in Canada and you kind of hear a lot of things about Toronto and places like that. You just gotta stay humble and stay to your roots and that's what I'm about. Not a lot of things get to me. You're always in contact with your parents about the farm and it kind of just keeps you grounded. So that's something I do and will continue doing if there was a little spotlight.

TSN: What would it be like to be picked by the Jets? Carson Carels: It'd be really special. I mean, I don't think that feeling of playing for the Jets would ever go away, because obviously you're playing for your hometown. There would be a lot of people that know you and familiar faces everywhere so I think it'd be really special. I wouldn't have to go too far away so I'd be able to go back to the farm once a while as well.

TSN: Did you cheer for the Jets growing up?

Carson Carels: My dad was a big Jets guy, but my brother was a Caps fan so I kind of followed my brother's footsteps and turned into a Caps fan.

TSN: Why was your brother a Caps fan?

Carson Carels: He was a big Alex Ovechkin fan. He loved Ovi and wore his number and everything so it kind of just drew me to him as well.

TSN: Who was your favorite player?

Carson Carels: When I was younger, it was usually Erik Karlsson. Now, it's Jake Sanderson. I think any of those guys that can play two-way games and drive their back end is kind of who I like watching and just model my game after.

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