



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The News & Observer

Carolina Hurricanes find winning formula for NHL playoffs. Can they keep it up?

By: Chip Alexander

Carolina Hurricanes center Jordan Staal (11) and left wing Jordan Martinook (48) work to slow Philadelphia defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen (55) in the second period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Raleigh

The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) have played five postseason games, won all five, and haven't trailed at any point in any of them.

The last team to do that in the Stanley Cup playoffs was the Washington Capitals in 1986, when Bryan Murray was the Caps' coach.

But Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour can be a hard man to impress, and is hardly concerned about such things. His only focus is on Game 2 of the second-round playoff series against the Philadelphia Flyers, Monday at Lenovo Center.

"We have played well," Brind'Amour said Sunday. "But hockey's just a random thing. You get a bounce here or there and that goes out the window. But, obviously, it helps to get ahead of it."

Carolina Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour talks center Logan Stankoven (22) in the third period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Logan Stankoven's line has seen to that for the Hurricanes, who opened the Flyers series Saturday with a 3-0 victory in Game 1. Stankoven scored the first goal in each of the first three games against the Ottawa Senators in the first-round sweep of the Sens, then again Saturday early in the first period against the Flyers.

Through the Canes' first five playoff games, Stankoven's line with wingers Jackson Blake and Taylor Hall has combined for 10 goals and 11 assists. They've had 47 shots on goal, constantly on the prowl in the offensive zone.

Carolina Hurricanes center Logan Stankoven (22) clears the puck from the boards in the first period against Philadelphia, during Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

"They're on a heater right now," Flyers coach Rick Tocchet said after Game 1. "When you're playing a confident line like that, you have to make sure you're in front of them and make it a tough night."

The Flyers, playing without injured forward Owen Tippett, changed up their lines during Game 1 to give the Canes

different looks. They also put in a practice Sunday while the Canes opted for off-ice work.

The Flyers were 0-for-4 on the power play in Game 1. On the first three, they did not have a shot while allowing three shorthanded chances to the Canes' penalty killers.

"Their PK is fast, they go right at you," Tocchet said.

Canes goalie Frederik Andersen also has been on point, shorthanded and at even strength, giving up five goals in five games. He opened the Ottawa series with a shutout win and did the same Saturday against the Flyers with 19 saves.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen (31) stops a scoring attempt by Philadelphia center Sean Couturier (14) in the third period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Andersen stopped 19 shots on goal in the Hurricanes' 3-0 victory.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen (31) stops a scoring attempt by Philadelphia center Sean Couturier (14) in the third period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Andersen stopped 19 shots on goal in the Hurricanes' 3-0 victory. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

"Everyone's digging in, but I think the little difference might be the goaltending has been a notch up from what it had been in the regular season," Brind'Amour said. "It was fine then, but now it has been that much better."

The Hurricanes have two power-play goals in the first five playoff games and also were 0-for-4 Saturday while generating five shots.

Canes defenseman Alexander Nikishin was scratched from Game 1 as veteran Mike Reilly was slotted into the lineup and contributed a pair of assists. Nikishin, who sustained a concussion in Game 4 against Ottawa, took part in Saturday's morning skate, but Brind'Amour said he "didn't feel quite right" following the skate and sat out.

Carolina Hurricane left wing Jordan Martinook (48) celebrates with Sean Walker (26), Taylor Hall and fellow teammates after scoring the game winning goal in the second overtime to secure a 3-2 victory over Ottawa in Game 2 on Monday, April 20, 2026 during the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

"We're just waiting for him to give us the OK," Brind'Amour said.

The Canes will look to continue doing all the right things, big or small, in Game 2. Defenseman Jaccob Slavin mentioned



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Sunday that Carolina's "heavy pressure" style of play is effective, saying it can be "suffocating."

The Canes will roll all four forward lines and each is capable of a strong forecheck than can wear down teams, through speed, puck pursuit and physicality.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Jordan Martinook (48) stretches during warmups for Game 1 against Philadelphia on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

"It's us getting momentum behind it," forward Jordan Martinook said Sunday. "When you see one line go and then the next line go, it's kind of like the snowball going downhill

kind of thing. ... When you get rolling, it's hard for the other team to push back."

The Canes would like to be sharper on the power play — Carolina is 2-for-19 in the playoffs — and sharper in the third period than they were in Game 1.

"All these games we have played could have gone the other way," Brind'Amour said. "We're always chasing the perfect game. I have yet to see it. There's a lot to get better at, and we're going to have to, because we know those bounces are going to go the other way at some point, and we need to be sharper as a group."

Second verse, same as the first for Hurricanes in Game 1 shutout of Flyers

By: Chip Alexander

Carolina Hurricanes center Logan Stankoven (22) reacts after scoring to take a 3-0 lead over Philadelphia in the second period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Raleigh

The legend of Logan Stankoven continues to grow.

The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) center, their little big man, scored twice and grabbed a piece of Stanley Cup playoff history Saturday in a 3-0 victory over the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 1 of their second-round series at Lenovo Center.

The second game of the Eastern Conference series will be played Monday at Lenovo Center as the NHL finally released its full playoff schedule Saturday night.

After scoring in each game of the Canes' four-game sweep of the Ottawa Senators in the opening round, Stankoven now has six, and Saturday he became the youngest player in playoff history to begin a postseason with a five-game goal streak.

Carolina Hurricanes right wing Jackson Blake skates to the bench after scoring to take a 2-0 lead over Philadelphia in the first period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Winger Jackson Blake added his second goal of the playoffs as the Stankoven line, so relentlessly potent against the Senators, continued to sizzle. Blake gave the Canes a 2-0 lead after the first period, and Stankoven scored again in the second for a 3-0 cushion.

"Stanks has been unbelievable this postseason and he's probably the hottest guy in hockey right now," Blake said of the 23-year-old forward.

In net again for Carolina was Frederik Andersen, who was at his best and allowed five goals in the Ottawa series. Canes fans were chanting "Fred-die! Fred-die!" before his fifth straight start, again during the game, and loudly as the time ticked away on his 19-save shutout.

It was Andersen's 51st career playoff win and his 24th with the Hurricanes, surpassing Cam Ward's franchise record. But he shrugged that off when it was mentioned after the game.

"We have a goal in mind and we want to get there and that means getting a win," Andersen said. "We're working hard to collect wins."

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen (31) stops a scoring attempt by Philadelphia center Sean Couturier (14) in the third period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Andersen stopped 19 shots on goal in the Hurricanes' 3-0 victory.

While the Canes had a week between playoff games, it was a quick turnaround for the Flyers, who played without injured forward Owen Tippett. Their first playoff series stretched to six games against the Pittsburgh Penguins, ending with an emotional 1-0 overtime win Wednesday as goalie Dan Vladar had 42 saves.

"I don't think we got back down to earth quick enough for this game," Flyers coach Rick Tocchet said. "We've got to raise our level of competitiveness. ... I thought a lot of guys were on their heels tonight."

The game Saturday, like the Ottawa series, had its chippy moments, with cross-checks and hard body checks and misconduct penalties being meted out.

Carolina Hurricanes right wing Jackson Blake (53) checks Philadelphia right wing Tyson Foerster (71) to the ice in the first period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

The Canes had a scary moment late in the second. Andrei Svechnikov was fighting for the puck along the boards when Philadelphia forward Tyson Foerster slashed the back of Svechnikov's right leg.

Foerster initially was called for a five-minute major, but after review was assessed a two-minute minor slashing penalty. Svechnikov stayed in the game, and his assist on Stankoven's second goal was his first point in the playoffs, although his physical presence was felt against the Senators.



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There was another flare-up 12 minutes into the third when Blake and Trevor Zegras tangled, sticks were high and Blake later was cross-checked in the back while on the ice.

"It was 3-0 at that point and eight minutes left, and I knew they were going to try and run us and do maybe not the smartest thing," Blake said. "It comes with the game."

Carolina Hurricanes center Logan Stankoven, center, is surrounded by teammates after scoring to take a 1-0 lead over Philadelphia in the first period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh.

Quick start for the Hurricanes

The Canes scored 91 seconds into the game and everyone in the building seemed to instantly have the same thought: Stankoven again? Yes, Stankoven. Again.

He had the first goal of the opening-round series with the Senators and was the first on the board in the second round. Positioned in the slot, he redirected a Mike Reilly shot past Vladar, and it was 1-0.

"We had a great start," Staal said. "The fans were buzzing and we were going."

Carolina Hurricanes center Logan Stankoven (22) scores on Philadelphia goalie Dan Vladar (80) to take a 3-0 lead in the second period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh.

Blake, who assisted on the first goal, then provided the second. Carrying the puck into the zone, he appeared to be shouldered past the cage by defenseman Travis Sanheim as he neared the net. But Blake reached out his stick and gave the puck a final tap — past Vladar at the post.

Six and a half minutes into the game and Stankoven and Blake had goals and Taylor Hall an assist on the Blake goal. That line was off and running again, and Stankoven added his second goal off a Seth Jarvis setup pass for a 3-0 lead.

"Junk-yard dogs," Blake called his line mates.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Nikolaj Ehlers pushes the puck ahead of Philadelphia left wing Noah Cates in the first period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Nikolaj Ehlers pushes the puck ahead of Philadelphia left wing Noah Cates in the first period of Game 1 on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

The Canes finished off a strong first period that had them take a 2-0 lead, kill off two penalties with ease and allow the Flyers just four shots on goal. The Flyers were 0-4 on the power play in the game as the Canes' penalty killers again worked hard.

Reilly, who replaced injured rookie Alexander Nikishin (concussion) on the back end, already had a pair of assists.

The Flyers' first power play had Canes fans howling at the refs. The Flyers' Nick Seeler, battling the Canes' Jordan Martinook along the boards, lifted Martinook's stick up near his face and earned a high-sticking call against Martinook.

One play, in particular, was symbolic of the Canes' defensive hustle in the game.

In the second period, the Flyers' Garnet Hathaway was called for slashing. The penalty killed, he jumped out of the box and had a breakaway, only to have Canes defenseman K'Andre Miller dive from behind to knock the puck away and deny a shot.

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Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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



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The Athletic

K'Andre Miller showed why Hurricanes coveted him with diving Game 1 highlight

By: Sean Gentille

RALEIGH, N.C. — Jaccob Slavin knows a good stick when he sees one.

The Carolina Hurricanes defenseman is one of the NHL's best at his position, a reputation built on the way he uses that piece of equipment to erase scoring chances, break up passing plays and bat down clearing attempts. If anyone is an authority in this particular space, it's him.

So, when Slavin says he appreciated a stick play made by teammate K'Andre Miller in Carolina's 3-0 Game 1 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday, it counts for something.

With 9:07 remaining in the second period, as a Carolina power play expired, Flyers forward Garnet Hathaway sprang out of the penalty box for what looked to be a breakaway attempt on goalie Frederik Andersen. Enter Miller, who showed a wild burst of closing speed, then sprawled out for a poke check that both disrupted Hathaway's attempt and didn't draw a penalty.

"Obviously, I appreciate a good stick, so watching that, I like that a lot," Slavin said. "It happens all the time throughout the game, not just in that play. It happens all of the time where a forward thinks they're around him, and then his stick comes out, pokes around and takes it and goes the other way. You watch that night in and night out and it's unbelievable, I think (he's) one of the best in the league."

The play also served as a bit of shorthand for the reasons Carolina acquired Miller from the New York Rangers last summer and immediately extended him for eight years and \$60 million despite a few seasons' worth of inconsistent results: a combination of physical ability and a system designed to maximize it.

Miller, 26, is 6-foot-5 with a wingspan to match and skating ability that Slavin called among the best on a team whose workbench is well-stocked with that particular tool.

"He's so effortless in his stride and just powerful," Slavin said.

That was one of the elements that popped during Miller's first five NHL seasons and hinted at how effective he could be. The environment in New York, though, made it tough to suss out just how good he actually was. Miller played for three coaching staffs, all of which were fired, and was frequently deployed in matchup minutes with mismatched partners. There were flashes of success, and some sustained stretches, but he also never posted a full season with better than a break-even expected goal share.

That didn't stop the Hurricanes from pouncing when they had the opportunity. At the time, the prevailing thought was that their staff and their system would more successfully take

Miller's talent and help it translate into actual on-ice value. This season, his first in Carolina, Miller was on the ice for more than 56 percent of expected goals. He played some matchup minutes, particularly when Slavin was injured in the first chunk of the season, but he wasn't overtaxed in the way he was with the Rangers.

Now, he's in the second round of the postseason, making defensive plays splashy enough to draw in casual fans. That's no simple task.

"He's an explosive skater," Carolina general manager Eric Tulsky told The Athletic. "We ask our defensemen to really gap up and close out, and that ability to get a strong first push and get into a guy faster than he expects, coupled with the reach that he has and his ability to recover with his stick when he gets a little bit caught, it makes him very effective in the way we ask our defensemen to play."

In that way, Miller is another example of the sort of player Carolina has long targeted: talented but misused in their previous stops. The goal, as executed by head pro scout Chris Abbott and his staff, is not just assessing how good a player is — it's assessing how good that player will be for the Hurricanes. Tulsky phrased it as a question: "Who is going to look better here than they do somewhere else?"

Their success rate is high, particularly with defensemen — Brady Skjei, another Rangers first-rounder, is a prime example, as are current Hurricanes Shayne Gostisbehere, Sean Walker and, now, Miller.

"He's been great from Day 1," coach Rod Brind'Amour said Sunday, the morning after he'd gone out of his way to praise the play on Hathaway. "Seemed to just fit in seamlessly. I mean, he has the physical attributes. He's a great athlete. That's what you see in those plays. That's just athletic ability. There's no scheme or anything. ... He's got reach and he can skate, and that's what we've seen all year."

Some other thoughts after a couple days around the Hurricanes:

- Postgame, Brind'Amour wasn't thrilled with his team's third period, and that carried over into Sunday's media availability. Philadelphia didn't score but won the shot battle 10-2 and held an expected goal share of about 70 percent. Plenty of that came with an empty net, but a rewatch didn't change Brind'Amour's opinion.

"We said it all yesterday. We were pretty much accurate," Brind'Amour said. "It was a good start, and then we kind of got through it in the third without too much damage. It wasn't our best period, that's for sure."



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• We'd say it was bizarre to see Flyers defenseman Nick Seeler draw a penalty by dragging Jordan Martinook's stick into his own face, but uh, he's done it before.

Martinook said on Sunday that Seeler eventually came up to him and apologized. "Doesn't help the fact after it already happened," Martinook said. "But yeah, that was interesting."

On the ensuing power play, Philadelphia generated one shot attempt by Noah Cates, which Slavin blocked. Literally no harm, literally no foul.

• There's a sense that Carolina's first-round sweep came against a better team than the end result indicated. The Ottawa Senators, indeed, had been one of better teams in the league down the stretch. The Hurricanes beat them four times without trailing and did the same in Game 1 against the Flyers, making them the first team since the 1986 Washington Capitals to manage that in their first five postseason games (If that was your guess as to the last team to log that accomplishment, go play the lottery).

Brind'Amour, as you'd expected, is playing down the situation. "I think we have played well," he said. "But hockey's such a random thing. I mean, you get a bounce here or there, that goes out the window."

• Defenseman Alexander Nikishin (concussion) didn't play in Game 1 despite being cleared for contact and practicing with

the team. He was injured in Game 4 against the Senators on a brutal, legal hit by Ottawa's Tyler Kleven.

"I'm not really sure, to be honest with you," Brind'Amour said Sunday when asked about Nikishin. "I asked him how he's feeling (and) he was trending in the right direction. He was in a regular jersey and then said he didn't feel quite right, so I didn't even go past that. Once you hear that, you know you're waiting on him to give us the OK."

• Game 1 was intermittently chippy and, by the second half of the third period, had turned into a penalty-box relay. On Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon, the Hurricanes seemed unconcerned by and satisfied with any frustration on the Flyers' part.

"Yeah, it means we did our job," Martinook said. "I think it doesn't really matter if they're frustrated or not as long as we come out on top, and I think the way that we play, it can do that to teams, and as long as we're playing our style and not giving up a ton of time and space and winning the game, that's our No. 1 sole focus."

• Yes, the Lenovo Center Beer Skates (all 4,687 of them) have sold out. If you were angling to snag one for yourself at Monday's Game 2, you'll have to wait until next season ... unless you're down to pay \$200-plus on eBay or are willing to make your best offer to an enterprising sportswriter.

For Hurricanes' Logan Stankoven, 'the hottest guy in hockey,' nothing has changed

By: Sean Gentille

RALEIGH, N.C. — When the Carolina Hurricanes sent Mikko Rantanen to the Dallas Stars at the 2024 NHL trade deadline, the prevailing reaction came in two parts.

First was the realization that Carolina, indeed, had moved on from the exact sort of star winger they'd sought for years just 42 days after acquiring him. The fit hadn't been seamless, and Rantanen seemed less likely by the day to sign a long-term extension with the Hurricanes. But ... 42 days? They hadn't reeled in some smaller fish, they'd reeled in a shark. Who throws back a shark?

The second part, though, hit when you saw the return — because Logan Stankoven was the centerpiece. Of course the Hurricanes acquired a young, undersized forward laced with skill, tenacity and through-the-lineup versatility, who seemed to play every game of his brief NHL career in fifth gear. Of course it was him.

That's Carolina and coach Rod Brind'Amour's stock-and-trade, isn't it? It's why the Hurricanes are very good, and it's why they've been very good, and, perhaps, it's why when the late spring rolls around, they've yet to reach greatness. The process is relentless, unyielding, metronomic, effective — and in the postseason, it too often has resulted in too few goals. Bad luck and injuries have played their parts, but so has a lack of truly elite game-breakers. It happens. There aren't many of those guys. If Carolina didn't think it needed one, it would have stopped trying long ago.

Stankoven, though, is playing the part.

One and a quarter series in the Stanley Cup playoffs does not a gamebreaker make. Yet no matter how many consecutive games he scores in, the 23-year old Stankoven is producing beyond the level that even Carolina could expect from him, or from Rantanen, or from ... anybody, really. Stankoven has now scored six times in the 2026 postseason, including the first goal in four of the Hurricanes' five games. The most recent of those opened a 3-0 win in Game 1 of their second-round series against the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday night, a demolition job that felt like it was completed in 20 minutes, and the sixth set the final score in the second period.

Asked postgame how he's handling that type of result, glorious as it may be, Stankoven turned it back a few months.

"I think it just goes back to how many chances I've had throughout the season to score," he said, nodding toward linemate Jackson Blake, Carolina's other goal-scorer who was seated next to him at the podium. "These guys set me up, and (I was) hitting posts or goalies making good saves. I think I felt like since the Olympic break, things have started to turn and pucks have started to go in."

Brind'Amour sets a tone like few others and has a belief in his team's process that, at times, has verged on obstinance. It's rooted in the belief, though, that if you play the right way, rewards will follow. His second-line center sounds like he agrees.

"(Stankoven's) game hasn't changed. It's just (that) now the pucks are going in. I think he's always created opportunities and I mean, he puts in the work. So the confidence has



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always been there because of that," Brind'Amour said. "People want production, I get it, but he's been playing like this all year."

In many ways, both are correct. After the NHL resumed its season on Feb. 26, Stankoven shot the puck at five-on-five at a nearly identical rate as he did before the break (7.56 per 60 minutes vs 7.53), but generated higher-quality chances (0.95 per 60 vs. 1.52). The biggest difference — the kind that the Hurricanes need to port over to the playoffs as a team — is that more expected goals have turned into more real-life ones. Post-Olympics, Stankoven saw his scoring rate jump from 0.72 to 1.08 goals per 60, a hair behind wingers known primarily for their ability to produce offense like Jason Robertson and Kirill Kaprizov.

Stankoven, of course, is no longer a winger. Carolina moved him to the middle at the start of the regular season, and a relative lack of production led to some understandable criticism. The Hurricanes were playing the long game, though, and at the moment, they're winning.

In about 47 minutes with Stankoven, Blake and linemate Taylor Hall on the ice in their four-game sweep of the Senators, Carolina outscored Ottawa 3-0 and controlled a

mammoth 76 percent of the expected goal share. This came in a series in which the first line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis was preoccupied with playing Ottawa to a draw.

On Saturday night, Stankoven's line was even better: two goals for, zero against, and an expected goal share of 80 percent. None of that seemed to bother Flyers coach Rick Tocchet as much as a different moment in the game, when Stankoven "came out of the pile" with the puck and threw it on net.

"That can't happen," Tocchet said.

It did, though — and while it stayed out of the net, next time it might not. That's what Brind'Amour and the rest of the Hurricanes believe on a near-cellular level, and Stankoven is proving them correct.

"Stanks has been unbelievable this postseason," Blake said. "I mean, he's been unbelievable all year, but especially this postseason. He's been probably the hottest guy in hockey right now, I think."

Of course he is.



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Stankoven scores twice, Andersen posts shutout in Hurricanes' Game 1 win over Flyers

By: Cory Lavalette

Hurricanes center Logan Stankoven (22) celebrates after his second goal with teammates Mike Reilly (6), Andrei Svechnikov, back right, and Seth Jarvis (24) during Carolina's 3-0 win over Philadelphia in Game 1 of their second round series Saturday in Raleigh. (Karl DeBlaker / AP Photo)

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes, despite a weeklong break, picked up where they left off in Round 1 of the playoffs.

So did Logan Stankoven.

The Carolina center scored his fifth and sixth goals of the postseason, Frederik Andersen made 19 saves, and the Hurricanes dominated the visiting Flyers in a 3-0 win in Game 1 of their second round series Saturday at Lenovo Center.

Carolina needed 91 seconds to take a lead it wouldn't relinquish.

"That was the big question, how we were going to come out," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "And obviously that answered that question."

On his first shift of the night, Stankoven won an offensive zone faceoff that led to Jackson Blake setting up Mike Reilly — making his Hurricanes playoff debut — for a one-timer from the point. Stankoven got a stick to the shot in the high slot and redirected the puck past Dan Vladar (20 saves) to extend his postseason scoring streak to five games — including four game-opening goals.

"It's nice to have that confidence that comes with putting the puck in the net," Stankoven said, "and you just kind of build off of it."

Blake added, "He's been probably the hottest guy in hockey right now."

That line wasn't done, and it only took two more shifts.

Reilly rimmed a puck around the defensive boards that Taylor Hall collected inside the Carolina blue line. Hall made a spinning backhand that caught Blake in stride. Blake split Matvei Michkov and Travis Sanheim, then fended off Sanheim and slid a backhand past Vladar to double the Hurricanes' lead to 2-0 at 7:30 of the opening frame.

"I just had a little speed, and I saw that the guy on my left was a forward, so I just tried to beat him," Blake said. "And then I got a pretty lucky bounce, I'd say, back to my backhand. So God willing on that one for sure. But, yeah, I got lucky. It was a great play by (Hall) — I've got to give him a lot of credit there."

It gave Reilly, who hadn't played in nearly three weeks, two points in 7½ minutes.

"I don't know if I've had two assists in the last, like, few months," Reilly said.

Meanwhile, the Flyers were failing to generate anything. Carolina limited Philadelphia to four shots in the opening 20 minutes.

"I thought a lot of guys were on their heels tonight," Flyers coach Rick Tocchet said.

Stankoven returned to the top of the playoff goal-scoring list in the second period.

Andrei Svechnikov forced a turnover with his skate on the forecheck, and Seth Jarvis controlled the puck at the top of the left circle. Stankoven — who had just come on the ice for Sebastian Aho — created a fast-developing 2-on-1. Jarvis sauced a backhand pass over Nick Seeler's stick, and Stankoven buried the chance for his sixth goal of the postseason.

"It's nice to see (Stankoven) get rewarded," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "He's been good for so long, and I hope he can keep it going."

The penalty kill improved to 24 for 25 in the postseason, even holding the Flyers' power play without a shot on goal on its first three chances.

"It was really good," Staal said. "It's going to have to be like that. Everyone was sharp, eating pucks when they needed to."

And when a puck did get through to Andersen, he was again the last line of defense.

"Steady. ... He's been solid, and I can't overstate that," Brind'Amour said of Andersen's performance in this postseason. "That's a big deal."

The win was Andersen's 24th playoff win with Carolina, moving him past Cam Ward for the most in franchise history. It's an accolade that is a means to an end for Andersen.

"We have a goal in mind," he said. "I think that's what's really important. Obviously, we've got to get there. That means getting the wins. So we'll take it. But again, it's a team thing where we're working hard to collect wins, and that's what we're trying to do."

Notes: Forwards Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Nicolas Deslauriers, and goalie Pyotr Kochetkov were healthy scratches. Alexander Nikishin (concussion) did not dress. ... Flyers leading goal scorer Owen Tippett did not play due to an injury. ... Blake, Shayne Gostisbehere, Seeler and Trevor Zegras all received 10-minute misconducts in the second half of the third period. ... Staal had seven hits.



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Stankoven, Andersen lead Hurricanes past Flyers 3-0 in Game 1 of 2nd-round series

By: Aaron Beard

Logan Stankoven scored twice to continue his postseason tear and the Carolina Hurricanes smothered the Philadelphia Flyers in a 3-0 victory Saturday night to open the second-round series. Jackson Blake also scored for Carolina, and Frederik Andersen stopped 19 shots for his second shutout of these...

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Logan Stankoven scored twice to continue his postseason tear and the Carolina Hurricanes smothered the Philadelphia Flyers in a 3-0 victory Saturday night to open the second-round series.

Jackson Blake also scored for Carolina, and Frederik Andersen stopped 19 shots for his second shutout of these playoffs and seventh in his postseason career.

Other WRAL Top Stories

Game 2 of the series is Monday night in Raleigh, with Carolina yet to trail in any of its five postseason games so far after jumping to a 2-0 first-period lead in this one.

"We had a good start, obviously," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "That's what won the game."

Carolina closed a first-round sweep of Ottawa last weekend, then had an extended break while the Flyers battled to push past Pittsburgh in overtime of Game 6 on Wednesday night. That led to rest-versus-rust conversations about how the Eastern Conference's top seed would start Saturday night.

Instead, the Hurricanes pounced from the opening puck drop, a departure from how all four regular-season meetings went to overtime or a shootout.

Stankoven scored in each of the four wins against the Senators, then scored on a redirect from the slot just 1:31 in.

"I think you're just trying to get it off quick," Stankoven said. "Obviously, it's nice to have that confidence that comes with putting the puck in the net, and yeah, you just kind of build off of it."

Blake followed at 7:30, splitting two defenders as he entered the zone and charging in to slip a puck behind Dan Vladar.

That was more than enough offense on this night with the Flyers struggling to apply much pressure on Andersen — who opened the Ottawa series with a shutout, too.

"We definitely came ready to play," Andersen said.

Philadelphia started its first postseason since 2020 by battling through Pittsburgh to close out a six-game series in overtime on Cam York's Wednesday night winner. But the Flyers sputtered from the start, managing just nine shots on goal through two periods and being outshot 3-2 on their four power plays for the night.

Otherwise, they struggled to find much open ice with Carolina's aggressive style closing in rapidly to shut down lanes toward Andersen or for the pass.

"We talked about it, we just didn't live it on the ice," Flyers coach Rick Tocchet said, pointing to a need to react quicker against Carolina's pressure. "We weren't quick enough for their speed. ... It's a good baptism how some of our players are going to have to play."

By the final 10 minutes, the game had turned testy with players having to be separated multiple times. That included 10-minute misconduct penalties on Philadelphia's Trevor Zegras and Nick Seeler, along with Blake and Shayne Gostisbehere for Carolina.

Both teams were down key players. The Flyers didn't have regular-season goals leader Owen Tippett because of an undisclosed injury, while the Hurricanes were missing defenseman Alexander Nikishin after he suffered a concussion in Game 4 against Ottawa.

Carolina veteran Mike Reilly drew in for Nikishin and had the primary assist on Stankoven's first goal and the secondary assist on Blake's score.



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Preview: Round 2, Game 2 vs. Philadelphia

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Canes seek sixth straight win and a 2-0 series lead

RALEIGH, N.C. - After a rousing win in Game 1, the Canes will look to hold serve at home against the Philadelphia Flyers before their second-round series shifts to the Keystone State.

When: Monday, May 4

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch: ESPN; CBC, Sportsnet, TVA Sports

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Series: 1-0 CAR

The Series So Far...

Game 1: Logan Stankoven (2G), Jackson Blake (1G, 1A) and Mike Reilly (2A) led the way offensively while Frederik Andersen recorded a 19-save shutout in a 3-0 win.

Tricky Trio...

What more can be said about Logan Stankoven, Jackson Blake and Taylor Hall? Unquestionably Carolina's most dangerous forward line, those three have combined for 21 points through five games, including all three goals in Game 1 against Philadelphia.

Stankoven has been the headliner, scoring in every contest to become the first player in franchise history to light the lamp in five straight playoff games.

Hall, meanwhile, leads the team with eight points thus far after picking up an assist on Saturday.

Blake tallied two points in Game 1 to reach six during the 2026 postseason, matching his total from the 2025 playoffs in 10 fewer games.

In Net...

As long as Frederik Andersen says he's ready to roll, it seems as though it's his net to lose. Picking up his second shutout of the postseason in Game 1, Andersen also set the franchise record for playoff wins by a goaltender (24) and has allowed just five goals in five games.

Brandon Bussi would be the next expected option in the event Andersen needs a break. The first-year backstop wrapped up the regular season on a heater, following up his

first set of consecutive losses (0-3-0) with a 6-0-1 run and allowing two or fewer goals in four of those wins.

Pyotr Kochetkov also remains waiting in the wings. Although he made two conditioning loan starts with Chicago (AHL) following multiple lower-body surgeries this winter, his last NHL action came on Dec. 20.

On The Other Side...

Speaking to the media after Saturday's loss, Head Coach Rick Tocchet said that he felt like a lot of his players were "on their heels" in Game 1.

"I don't know if we were mentally prepared to play tonight," he said. "Winning our playoff series, (nearly) not making the playoffs, there was a lot of excitement. I don't think we got down to earth quick enough for this game... There were plays to be made, and we didn't make them."

Coming off a 42-save shutout to oust the Pittsburgh Penguins three nights earlier, goaltender Dan Vladar was met with a harsh welcome in Round 2, conceding three goals on 23 shots for his third sub-.900 save percentage performance in his last four starts.

Philadelphia seemingly made it through the contest unscathed on the injury front, but went without standout forward Owen Tippett from the start. Labeled "day-to-day" ahead of the action, the speedy winger was replaced by Garnet Hathaway for the series opener.

Injury Updates...

Defenseman Alexander Nikishin (concussion) was knocked out of the first-round series finale and did not take part in Game 1 against Philadelphia, but has been practicing with the team since April 29 as he navigates the NHL Concussion Protocol.

What Are We Wearing?

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

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to practice on Tuesday and Wednesday before departing for Philadelphia ahead of Thursday's Game 3 at Xfinity Mobile Arena.

Next Game: Thursday, May 7 | Round 2, Game 3 at Philadelphia | 8:00 p.m. ET | How To Watch | Tickets | Parking



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Round 2, Game 1 Takeaways: Canes Roll To Fifth Straight Win

By: Peter Dewar

"The fans were buzzing and we were going... Everything was off to a good start."

RALEIGH, N.C. - Second verse, same as the first.

Two weeks to the day after earning a shutout victory to open Round 1 of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs, the Carolina Hurricanes ran it back for Round 2, blanking the Philadelphia Flyers 3-0 at Lenovo Center on Saturday.

Becoming just the fifth team in NHL history to go five games without trailing to start a postseason, the Canes came out flying to stun a young Flyers team still coming down from the high of a series victory over its rival three days earlier.

"I thought from the get-go, we had a great start," said Jordan Staal after the game. "The fans were buzzing and we were going. It's nice that the first shot goes in, that's obviously a bonus, but I thought the game was there too. Everything was off to a good start."

Before they look to do it all again in Game 2 on Monday, here's a look at how Carolina drew first blood in the second round...

The Usual Suspects...

If you thought Logan Stankoven was simply a first-round flash in the pan, he needed just 90 seconds to put that idea to bed.

Opening the scoring in a playoff game for the franchise-record fifth time as a Hurricane, Stankoven immediately cut through any external rest vs. rust concerns to put his team ahead once again.

"That was the big question, how we were going to come out, and obviously that answered that question," said Rod Brind'Amour after the game.

Stankoven is no one-man army, however. Six minutes after his league-leading sixth goal of the playoffs, his running mate Jackson Blake took his turn in the spotlight. Darting through the neutral zone, Blake eluded Dan Vladar to double the lead and notch his second point of the contest. And that's to say nothing of do-it-all Taylor Hall, who leads the team with eight points as his playmaking and physicality have come to the forefront.

"That whole line has been a difference maker from the start of this playoff (run)," said Staal. "They've been going for a while now... They're all smart, tenacious, hardworking players that have got great skill."

Through five games, that trio has produced three game-winning goals and outchanced opponents at a team-leading rate of 39-19 (67.24%) at 5-on-5 (per Natural Stat Trick), providing an edge opponents have yet to match when facing the Canes.

"That line's been great, all three of those guys, every game," said Brind'Amour. "Not just for five playoff games, it's been months of it. Obviously, that's been the difference."

Reilly's Rally...

Late in Round 1, the Hurricanes were tested by the injury bug for the first time this postseason. Nikolaj Ehlers missed Game 4 with a lower-body concern, while Alexander Nikishin sustained a concussion in that contest, leaving both as question marks for Round 2.

Ehlers returned to action on Saturday, but Nikishin remained sidelined, opening the door for Mike Reilly to get his first taste of playoff action as a Hurricane. Nerves would have been understandable, but if Reilly was experiencing any, logging two assists in the first 7:30 of the game would certainly have calmed things down for the 32-year-old.

"I don't know if I've had two assists in the last, like, few months," Reilly said with a chuckle, crediting the aforementioned Stankoven line for finishing plays he was a part of.

"I'm definitely the extra guy, but I understand," he continued. "I'm trying to stay as ready as I can and as sharp as I can. Although at times it's not that easy, when your name gets called, you've got to be ready."

Jokes aside, Reilly's role can be a difficult one for a player to be in. Stepping into the middle of the playoffs is a lot to ask of someone who logged just 42 games during the regular season, but being able to slot in seamlessly is what makes the Glenview, Ill. native so valuable to his team.

"(Reilly) has done this all year. He's in and out, I think he missed 30 games there for a stretch and then came right in and played well. There's a value to that veteran guy that, first of all, is a pro, and he showed that tonight," said Brind'Amour.

A popular figure in the locker room, Reilly's cohorts sang a similar tune after the game.

"Mikey's a great teammate. It's hard to come in right away and fit into playoff hockey, and he hadn't played in a bit. I thought he did a great job, just keeping it simple and a couple of apples for him. That's always a good feeling," said Stankoven.

"Awesome to see what he did tonight," concurred Staal. "He's worked so hard throughout this year. Obviously, being in and out of the lineup is not easy, and for him to step in and play the way he did is huge for us. We're going to need everyone in this organization if we want to keep moving forward."

Details Are Key...

The Stankoven line continues to rightfully grab the headlines, but Carolina's hot start to the postseason is also built on the back of well-structured hockey and rousing efforts. Up and down the lineup, plays are being made that may not make it onto the scoresheet, but still heavily impact the final outcome on a nightly basis.

When penalties opened a window for Philadelphia to gain a foothold in the first period, it was Sebastian Aho astutely rotating down low to prevent a seam pass to the back door. When the team needed to turn momentum into another goal in the middle frame, it was Andrei Svechnikov providing a



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second layer on the forecheck, forcing a turnover that Seth Jarvis collected and put on Stankoven's tape for the dagger.

Perhaps most notably, though, it was K'Andre Miller racing up the ice at the end of a power-play shift to track down a previously penalized Flyer who had conveniently exited the box for a breakaway as his team cleared the puck, then timing his dive perfectly to swipe the puck away and eliminate the threat without committing an infraction.

"(Miller is) one of the best skaters that we have on the team. He's so effortless in his stride and just powerful. Then, you mix in his long reach and a long stick, and it's elite out there," praised Jaccob Slavin. "It happens all the time where a forward thinks they're around him, and then his stick comes out of nowhere, pokes it around, takes it and goes the other way. You watch that night in and night out, and it's unbelievable."

After putting pen to paper on an eight-year contract with the Canes last summer, the first-year returns on Miller have been incredibly promising for a player who is still just 26 years old and continues to improve with each game.

"He's been great from day one. Seemed to just fit in seamlessly," said Brind'Amour. "He has the physical attributes, he's a great athlete, and that's what you see in those plays. That's just athletic ability; there's no scheme or anything. He's got reach and can skate, and that's what we've seen all year."

Steady Freddie...

What a story Frederik Andersen is writing. Now the franchise's all-time leader in playoff wins after collecting his 24th in red and black on Saturday, the veteran Dane has backstopped five straight victories while allowing just five goals.

A noteworthy win, sure, but to Andersen, it's just one of 16 the team needs to win the big prize in June.

"We have a goal in mind, and that's what's really important. Obviously, we've got to get there and that means getting the wins, so we'll take it. It's a team thing. We're working hard to collect wins," he said.

Andersen's even-keeled nature often belies such achievements, but it also enables him to stay in the moment. His team might be leading or trailing, he may be facing 19 shots or 39, but his approach remains the same.

"(Andersen was) steady. Not a lot of work there for the first half of the game, but a couple of big saves to start the third, especially," said Brind'Amour. "Then at the end, we get in a little bit of penalty trouble and they pull the goalie, there's a whole bunch of flurries, but he's been solid. Can't overstate that; that's a big deal."

Carolina's vaunted penalty kill has been on another level throughout the postseason, successfully navigating a league-leading 24 of 25 shorthanded situations thus far. Credit is due all around for Tim Gleason's dedicated crew of killers, but the heaviest burden in those scenarios often falls on the shoulders of a goaltender, and Andersen has been happy to carry the weight.

"I think the first thing is Freddie," said Slavin when asked what has fueled the PK through five games. "He's coming up with big saves when there have been a couple of lapses, and sometimes you need your goaltender to be your best penalty killer."

What's Next?

The Canes' lineup regulars stayed off the ice on Sunday, instead meeting to discuss areas of improvement ahead of Monday's Game 2 (7 p.m. ET; ESPN). Dialing in the details will be crucial as the Flyers make adjustments to overcome the pressure that swept them aside in Game 1.

"You don't want to give up as many chances as we do. You look at all the plays, maybe it's getting a puck out here, or a missed clear, you're striving for greatness and when you're giving up a chance, you want to look at it and figure out how you can eliminate that," said Jordan Martinook. "I think we're no different than any other team. There are things that we can clean up, and we're going to do that and try to bring our best game every time we go on the ice."

Despite rattling off five straight wins, Brind'Amour and his group know the road only gets tougher from here.

"All these games that we've played could have gone the other way. A bounce here or there, and all of a sudden it looks different. We're always chasing the perfect game, and I have yet to see it," said the Canes' coach. "There's a lot to get better at, and we're going to have to because we know that those bounces will go the other way at some point. We need to be sharper as a group."

Recap: Hot Start Helps Canes Down Flyers In Game 1

By: Peter Dewar

Stankoven strikes twice; Andersen posts franchise-record 24th playoff win

RALEIGH, N.C. - Picking up right where they left off in Round 1, the Carolina Hurricanes opened the second round with a 3-0 shutout of the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 1 of their 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs series.

Any concerns of a week-long layoff negatively impacting the Canes were allayed just 90 seconds in, when Logan Stankoven — yes, again — opened the scoring with a

deflection of Mike Reilly's one-timer. Six minutes later, Jackson Blake turned on the jets through the neutral zone and fooled Dan Vladar to make it 2-0 in favor of the hosts.

The Canes maintained momentum through the second period on the back of some stout penalty killing and defensive gems like this one from K'Andre Miller. With 3:44 left in the frame, Carolina turned defense to offense to stretch its scoreboard advantage to three as Stankoven buried a slick saucer setup from Seth Jarvis.

Carrying a comfortable lead into the third, Frederik Andersen and Co. shut things down for their fifth consecutive victory to



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start the playoffs. The veteran netminder stopped all 19 shots that came his way for his seventh career playoff shutout and second of this postseason.

PHI at CAR | Recap

Stats & Standouts

Frederik Andersen notched his 24th playoff win as a Hurricane and surpassed Cam Ward for the most in franchise history. Andersen also tied Ward for the most postseason shutouts by a Hurricanes/Whalers netminder with his fourth.

Logan Stankoven's remarkable postseason rolls on. Tacking on two more goals to his league-high-tying total of six, he became the first player in franchise history to score in five straight playoff games.

Stankoven is the fifth active NHL player to record a postseason-opening five-game goal streak, and is the youngest player in league history to do so.

Mike Reilly starred in his first playoff game as a Hurricane as he drew in for the injured Alexander Nikishin. With two assists, he tied the franchise record for points in a postseason debut by a defenseman, joining Brent Burns and Sylvain Cote.

Reilly's two assists came in the first 7:30, marking the fastest two points to begin a playoff career with a franchise by a defenseman in NHL history.

Carolina became the fifth team in Stanley Cup Playoffs history to go five straight games to start a postseason without trailing. The others: Montreal (8 GP in 1960), Washington (6 GP in 1986), St. Louis (6 GP in 1969) and Boston (5 GP in 1969).

The Canes became the fifth team in Stanley Cup Playoffs history to open the scoring in each of their first five games of a postseason and win, joining the 1960 Canadiens (8-0), 1946 Canadiens (7-0), 1969 Blues (6-0) and 1980 North Stars (5-0).

The Hurricanes have now allowed just five goals through the first five games of the postseason. Only seven other teams in the previous 50 years have allowed five or fewer goals through their first five games of a playoff year: Ottawa (2 in 2002), Vegas (3 in 2018), Toronto (3 in 2001), Tampa Bay (5 in 2004), St. Louis (5 in 2002), New Jersey (5 in 1995) and Montreal (5 in 1976). Of note, four of the seven teams went on to at least the Stanley Cup Final (VGK, TBL, NJD & MTL).

They Said It...

Jordan Staal on the importance of once again setting the tone in Game 1 of a series...

"I thought from the get-go, we had a great start. The fans were buzzing and we were going. It's nice that the first shot goes in, that's obviously a bonus, but I thought the game was there too. Everything was off to a good start."

Rod Brind'Amour on the Stankoven/Blake/Hall line remaining hot after a week of no games...

"That was the big question, how we were going to come out, and obviously that answered that question. That line's been great, all three of those guys, every game. Not just for five playoff games, it's been months of it. Obviously, that's been the difference."

Logan Stankoven on how he is processing the kind of success he's having this postseason...

"I felt like, since the Olympic Break, things have started to turn and pucks have started to go in. I think as a player, I've been learning what areas of the ice to find to get shots off. I think that, in time, things change, and I feel like I've been able to develop as a player and a person."

Jackson Blake on Stankoven and their line with Hall as a whole...

"Stanks has been unbelievable this postseason. I mean, he's been unbelievable all year, but especially this postseason he's been probably the hottest guy in hockey right now... Hallsy, too, just making those little plays makes it easier on me. Stanks and Hallsy are working so hard, being junkyard dogs out there. They've been awesome and really fun to play with."

Mike Reilly on stepping in and standing out in his first playoff game as a Hurricane...

"I'm definitely the extra guy, but I understand. I'm trying to stay as ready as I can and as sharp as I can. Sometimes it's not that easy, but when your name gets called, you've got to be ready."

Frederik Andersen deflecting the praise of setting the franchise record for playoff wins by a goaltender...

"We have a goal in mind, and that's what's really important. Obviously, we've got to get there and that means getting the wins, so we'll take it. It's a team thing. We're working hard to collect wins..."

Postgame Quotes: Jackson Blake and Logan Stankoven

What's Next?

The Canes will next hit the ice on Monday when they host Game 2 against Philadelphia at Lenovo Center.

Next Game: Monday, May 4 | Round 2, Game 2 vs. Philadelphia | 7:00 p.m. ET | How To Watch | Tickets | Parking



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Undefeated Hurricanes still chasing 'perfect game' in Stanley Cup Playoffs

By: Tom Gulitti

Carolina 5-0 after shutting out Flyers in Game 1 of East 2nd Round

RALEIGH, N.C. -- The Carolina Hurricanes' start to the Stanley Cup Playoffs has been near perfect.

The Hurricanes are 5-0 through their first five games, they have yet to trail and didn't allow more than two goals in any of those games. As pleased as they are about that, though, there was a sentiment following their 3-0 victory against the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Second Round on Saturday that they have some areas they need to clean up heading into Game 2 of the best-of-7 series at Lenovo Center on Monday (7 p.m. ET; ESPN, SN, TVAS, CBC).

"All these games that we've played could have gone the other way," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Sunday. "A bounce here or there and now all a sudden it looks different. We're always chasing the perfect game. I have yet to see it, so there's a lot to get better."

Brind'Amour said a review of the video of Game 1 was "pretty much accurate" to how the Hurricanes' felt about their play in the immediate aftermath. Carolina jumped to a 2-0 lead in the opening 7:30 and was in control from there.

"It was a good start, and then kind of got through it in the third without too much damage," Brind'Amour said. "It wasn't our best period, that's for sure."

The positives were the same that carried the Hurricanes through their four-game sweep of the Ottawa Senators in the first round. The second line, with Logan Stankoven (two goals) centering Jackson Blake (one goal, one assist) and Taylor Hall (one assist), continued to drive the offense.

The penalty kill was 4-for-4, yielding only two shots on goal (each during a 6-on-4 late in the third period), to improve to a League-best 24-for-25 (96 percent) for the playoffs. The Hurricanes limited the Flyers to 19 total shots, 13 during 5-on-5 play, and goalie Frederik Andersen stopped them all to post his second shutout of the postseason.

PHI@CAR, Gm1: Andersen shutout leads Hurricanes to Game 1 victory

"The PK was solid and 5-on-5 play, we didn't give them too much," Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal said. "Freddie was

great when he needed to be, and it's a good start to the series."

So much is going right for Carolina that defenseman Mike Reilly played his first game of the postseason and had two assists in place of Alexander Nikishin, who wasn't ready to return from a concussion he sustained in Game 4 against Ottawa, and remains questionable for Game 2.

Still, the Hurricanes felt they were sloppy in some areas, even on defense.

"You don't want to give up as many chances as we do," forward Jordan Martinook said. "You look at all the plays that maybe it's getting a puck out here or a missed clear."

The Hurricanes were able to get away with those misplays in Game 1, but they know that to go on a long run in the playoffs and, ultimately, win the Stanley Cup for the first time since 2006, they need to keep pushing themselves.

"You're striving for greatness," Martinook said. "And when you are giving up a chance, you want to look at it and figure out how you can eliminate that. So, I think we're no different than any other team. There's things that we can clean up every game, and we're going to do that and try and bring our best game every time we go on the ice."

The most glaring facet of the Hurricanes' game that needs to improve is their power play, which was 0-for-4 Saturday with five shots on goal, but also four short-handed shots against. Carolina is just 2-for-19 (10.5 percent) with the man-advantage in the playoffs.

"It's got to score at some point," Brind'Amour said. "But we did some good things."

Brind'Amour has a similar view of the Hurricanes top line of Andrei Svechnikov, Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis, which has yet to produce a goal at 5-on-5 in the playoffs.

"I think there is another level that they're going to need to get to, for sure, but I think they're doing other things that are helping us, too," Brind'Amour said. "Obviously, your top guys have got to score at some point, get on the scoresheet, because they're playing so many minutes. But I do like the intent of which they're playing."

Svechnikov picked up his first point of the postseason with an assist on Stankoven's second goal Saturday. Jarvis also got his third assist (and point) of the playoffs on that goal. His



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other two assists came on Aho's empty-net goals in Game 4 in Ottawa.

PHI@CAR, Gm 1: Stankoven fires it in for second goal of the game

Aho's only other goal was essentially was scored short-handed – one second after a Senators power play expired in 3-2 double overtime victory in Game 2. That line will probably need to start producing at some point, particularly if opponents begin to focus on shutting down Stankoven's line.

Aho said their focus is solely on the results, though, and those have been very good so far.

"At this time of the year, you play for the win," Aho said. "Don't get me wrong; everyone wants to be on the scoresheet. I know we've got some better hockey in us and I'm confident in our line, but having said that, that's stuff is so secondary. Not even secondary, it's irrelevant, to be quite honest, who scores.

"You play to win a hockey game and that's it."



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NHL insiders debate biggest playoff surprises, disappointments

By: Ryan S. Clark, Arda Ocal, Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski, and Victoria Matiash

The first round of the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs is officially complete. From a field of 16 teams, the bracket is down to eight.

What were the biggest surprises -- both positive and negative -- in the first set of series? Which eliminated teams face the biggest questions this summer? And have any of our analysts changed their pre-playoff Stanley Cup prediction?

Which player surprised you the most in a positive way?

Ryan S. Clark, NHL reporter: Alex Lyon. There's a feeling among coaches and executives that few teams can get through the playoffs with one goaltender. What Lyon has done reinforces why tandems are so important beyond the regular season. His coming in for Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen in Game 2 -- only to then take over the net with a .955 save percentage to close out the series -- was a turning point for the Buffalo Sabres.

Victoria Matiash, NHL analyst: Logan Stankoven. While there's some debate about whether his true nickname is "Stanky" or "Stanks" -- wonder what his parents, Deana and Wes Stankoven, might think of either choice -- there's nothing odorous about how Carolina's second line has performed (read: superbly) this postseason.

Flanked by veteran Taylor Hall and sophomore Jackson Blake, the diminutive center has six goals in five games thus far, scoring in every single contest, including two game-winners. Not too shabby for a skater who amassed 21 goals and 23 assists all year and struck as the lesser prize in exchange for Mikko Rantanen two Marches ago. The best part? At 23, Stankoven is just getting going.

Arda Öcal, NHL broadcaster: Porter Martone. He has settled into NHL play very nicely. Since his debut, he has led the Flyers in goals and points, and he has scored game winners, proving to be clutch for Philly. He is already the kind of player the city can rally behind early in his career. Every so often we get a rookie who breaks through in the playoffs (though it's often a goalie) -- Martone is proving to be that guy early on.

Kristen Shilton, NHL reporter: Frederik Andersen. I am guilty of questioning whether Andersen was the right choice over Brandon Bussi for Carolina. The veteran has always been solid in the postseason but not necessarily clutch. And Bussi's overall numbers in the regular season were better than Andersen's (.895 vs. .874 in save percentage, for example). The rookie stumbled more frequently down the stretch, so it wasn't completely surprising Rod Brind'Amour

tapped Andersen to start Game 1 against Ottawa -- and, boy, did Andersen deliver.

The veteran went 4-0-0 with a .955 save percentage in Carolina's sweep of the Senators. He gave up just five goals -- and three at even strength. He had a playoff-leading goals saved above expected (7.6), showing that it was Andersen -- and not just Carolina's defensive play -- doing the heavy lifting. If Andersen can keep this up, it's hard to see the Hurricanes not continuing to cruise their way back to the Eastern Conference finals.

Greg Wyshynski, NHL reporter: Taylor Hall. The 34-year-old winger had a nice bounce-back season before becoming an absolute terror in the playoffs. Hall had two goals and six assists through five games, skating to a plus-7. He has helped power arguably the best line in the playoffs with Logan Stankoven (six goals) and Jackson Blake (six points), providing veteran physicality and agitation to his young linemates.

I keep wondering: Has Hall officially entered his Corey Perry era -- a former Hart Trophy winner and offensive star who settles into being a "win at all costs" depth player on a team with championship aspirations? Hall might have a bit more left to offer offensively before earning that late-career designation. In fact, he's one of the reasons I believe this is the deepest group of scoring threats Brind'Amour has had -- deep enough to potentially advance Carolina out of the Eastern Conference.

Which team or player was the biggest disappointment of Round 1?

Clark: I'm going with the Dallas Stars. There were the defensive breakdowns. There were the penalties they took that increased the threat of those breakdowns. There was that stretch of more than 200 minutes that saw them fail to score in 5-on-5 play. There were also times when their urgency -- or lack thereof -- came into question.

The Stars were a top-five shot-share team in the first round, yet it was the Minnesota Wild who had more sequences that dictated play. Getting knocked out in the first round, though not ideal, doesn't mean that they're not still in a championship window. But there are major items they must address between now and next season.

Matiash: Oh, the Edmonton Oilers. Maybe blame recent conditioning inspired by watching them in two straight Stanley Cup Finals, but I had a difficult time picturing June hockey, never mind May, without Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. Sure, defensive and netminding issues remained in play, and yes, they were clearly badly banged up, but my gut still told me the two superstars would haul the rest of their gagger into Round 2 at least.



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Öcal: The Edmonton Oilers. Taking nothing away from the Anaheim Ducks and their first playoff series win in several years, Edmonton was plagued by injuries (including a certainly not 100% Connor McDavid) but also looked lifeless and tired in big stretches of this series.

"An average team with high expectations," McDavid said in the aftermath of the loss. "You're going to be disappointed."

This was a tough pill to swallow for Oilers fans hoping McDavid will sign a long-term extension and stay in Edmonton for the remainder of his career. His team-friendly contract extension kicks in next season, and the launch point isn't on the firmest ground. One of my biggest offseason questions is what the Oilers will do to bolster another Cup Final push.

Shilton: The Ottawa Senators. Linus Ullmark played lights-out hockey for the Senators, and they absolutely wasted his performances. To wit, Ullmark had zero wins but a .932 SV% and 2.03 goals-against average.

Meanwhile, his teammates produced a playoff-worst grand total of five goals in four games between two players (thanks for coming, everyone except Drake Batherson and Dylan Cozens). Did Tim Stutzle, Brady Tkachuk, Thomas Chabot, Shane Pinto, et al. just not get the memo that the playoffs had begun? It was a sorry sight to see how Ullmark was left out to dry -- especially given how he rallied from a roller coaster of a regular season.

Wyshynski: It's Connor McDavid, and now we know why. Coach Kris Knoblauch revealed that his star captain played with a foot and ankle area fracture in the six-game loss to the Ducks. As McDavid said: "My advantage is my speed burst. That quick step. I had none of that." McDavid had six points in six games (one goal, five assists) but only two points at even strength. The Oilers were outscored 7-3 at 5-on-5 when McDavid was on the ice; in the regular season, Edmonton outscored foes by eight goals when he was out there.

This isn't a criticism of McDavid. This isn't me sitting here administering some "Connor McDavid has got to step it up!" hot take. He was significantly injured and deserves credit for trying to gut through it. But if the question is who the biggest disappointment of the playoffs is thus far, then it's obviously the potential NHL MVP becoming a nonfactor for his team. And, by virtue of that injury and others, seeing the Oilers go from back-to-back Stanley Cup Final appearances to a first-round casualty, which only is intensifying speculation about McDavid's future in Edmonton just as his two-year extension kicks in.

What does Connor McDavid's future look like in Edmonton?

Greg Wyshynski examines Connor McDavid's future with the Oilers after being eliminated by the Ducks.

Has your Stanley Cup pick changed?

Clark (COL): No, but we'll know more after the series against Minnesota. That's nothing against the Avalanche. It's just that the Wild are no longer a one-and-done team, but rather one that could be inclined to reshape the power dynamic in the Western Conference.

2026 Stanley Cup Favorites

Carolina Hurricanes

+210

Colorado Avalanche

+225

Vegas Golden Knights

+650

Tampa Bay Lightning

+850

Minnesota Wild

10-1

Odds provided by DraftKings Sportsbook

Matiash (COL): This one's tricky since I certainly can't loathe my original pick after the Avs disposed of the Kings in four. However, having since become more smitten with the Wild, I find myself favoring Kirill Kaprizov & Co. to edge Jared Bednar's formidable crew in a long, hard-fought series. So, in respect to that fresh projected formula, my answer is a soft yes. If permitted to grant myself a minor hedge here, I really like whoever emerges from this series to win the whole darn thing.

Öcal (EDM): Yep. With the Oilers out, I'm going with the Wild. They looked impressive against Dallas, and if they can get through Colorado, they'll have been through the toughest first- and second-round gauntlet in recent memory.

Shilton (CAR): Nope. Carolina's perfect record to date requires no notes.

Wyshynski (COL): Not in the least. The Avalanche swept the Los Angeles Kings without really breaking a sweat, which is the kind of series they needed before meeting whoever emerged from the Thunderdome that was the Stars vs. Wild.

Colorado has a significant lineup advantage in the middle, sporting the deepest group of centers in the playoffs. It won't be easy, but I think they'll get through the Wild -- and they're better than whoever the Pacific Division will nominate as its representative in the conference finals. My Stanley Cup Final prediction before the season was Colorado vs. Carolina. I'm sticking to that. My Stanley Cup winner was the Avalanche in five games. Sticking to that, too.

Which eliminated team faces the biggest questions this summer?



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Clark: Dallas and Edmonton are legitimate candidates, but my answer is the Los Angeles Kings. Failing to get out of the first round for more than a decade comes with its own set of questions. There are also more direct items that must be addressed, such as figuring out how they'll replace captain Anze Kopitar now that he's retired. Or how they will try to find more scoring help while having a little more than \$18 million in projected cap space -- knowing some of that will go toward defenseman Brandt Clarke's new deal.

After all that, there's the added motivation of trying to find those answers with the reality that the West looks like it could get a few more teams challenging for the wild card next season.

Matiash: I don't want Edmonton GM Stan Bowman's job right now, in having to address several pressing questions. The Oilers have nine roster forwards, five defenders, and one goalie signed through next season, and not a lot of salary cap room with which to work. Management will have to get rather creative in massaging a team that's expected to make another run ASAP.

The club still needs to solve its goaltending issues after shipping Stuart Skinner off to Pittsburgh in exchange for Tristan Jarry and his \$5 million-plus price tag. (Remember, the Oilers bought out Jack Campbell less than two years ago.)

Öcal: Edmonton for sure, for the reasons stated above. But an honorable mention goes to Ottawa because although Brady Tkachuk has been deflecting the trade talk, an offseason question will definitely be: How will the Senators improve?

Shilton: Oh, Edmonton. What are you going to do to satisfy Connor McDavid? Can you get an actual No. 1 goalie to backstop a team centered by the best player in the world (and his 1B, Leon Draisaitl?) McDavid offered the Oilers a limited window of time (the two-year contract extension that's about to kick in) to earn his Stanley Cup championship.

A first-round exit against the Ducks is not what McDavid signed back up for -- but it does reflect why he did so cautiously. Your move, Stan Bowman.

Wyshynski: When the Oilers went from back-to-back Stanley Cup Final losses to a first-round elimination, Draisaitl said the organization had "taken big steps backward." So what of the Stars, who went from three straight Western Conference finals losses to a first-round ousting? Will they chalk it up to an inequitable playoff format in which the third overall team was forced to face the league's seventh-best team in the first round? Or to not having Roope Hintz against the Wild?

Or will a team that never shies away from a bold swing make one in the offseason?

Which brings us to Jason Robertson, a restricted free agent this summer, and the unending -- some would say inexplicable -- debate about his future with Dallas. Robertson, 26, has the sixth-most goals in the NHL over the past two seasons (80) and led the Stars with five goals in six playoff games. Yet some believe that he isn't worth the big money and the term he's seeking, and that he could bring back a significant player in trade to take Dallas closer to the Stanley Cup it is chasing. Stay tuned.



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Takeaways: Stankoven hits another level as Hurricanes dominate Flyers in Game 1

By: Emily Sadler

Logan Stankoven scored two for the Hurricanes, and Frederik Anderson saved all 19 shots he faced, as Carolina picked up a Game 1 win over the Philadelphia Flyers, 3-0 in the final.

There's being in the zone, and then there's whatever realm of hockey greatness Logan Stankoven has unlocked this spring. The Hurricanes forward was sensational in Round 1 against the Ottawa Senators, scoring in all four games of his squad's sweeping victory, and he wasted no time making his mark on Round 2 as he led Carolina to a 3-0 series-opening win over the Philadelphia Flyers Saturday night.

Just as he did versus Ottawa, Stankoven was the first to light the lamp in this series — he needed just 91 seconds to make his mark against the Flyers. He added another goal in the second frame to give Carolina a 3-0 lead, bringing his post-season goal tally to six through just five games.

We saw glimpses of his playoff clutch gene last year when Stankoven scored twice in Carolina's playoff opener against New Jersey and also opened the Hurricanes' scoring in Round 2 versus Washington. His strong start again this spring has proven to have plenty of staying power. With Saturday's two-goal performance, the 23-year-old is now tied for the league lead in playoff goals with Tampa Bay's Brandon Hagel and Minnesota's Matt Boldy, with one fewer game to his name.

Carolina extends unique streak

Through five games of these playoffs, the Hurricanes are making post-season hockey look easy. They never once trailed through four games against Ottawa last round, and with their 3-0 victory on Saturday, they extended that streak to five straight games of playoff domination. And, just like their series against Ottawa, Carolina kicked off Round 2 against the Flyers with a shutout win.

They've now outscored playoff opponents by a combined score of 14-5 through five matchups.

Hurricanes' Stankoven stays hot in playoffs with opening goal vs. Flyers

Watch as Carolina Hurricanes' Logan Stankoven scores in his fifth straight playoff game, tipping in Mike Reilly's point shot to put his team on the board early in Game 1 against the Philadelphia Flyers.

Philly learning on the fly (the hard way)

After ousting the Pittsburgh Penguins in overtime of Game 6 Wednesday night, the Flyers had just two days to rest and reset for Game 1 of their second-round series against the Hurricanes — and it showed.

A turnaround that quick is a tough ask for any team, but for a Flyers squad coming off such an emotional, turbulent return to playoff hockey, there's no question it's taken its toll. We saw it on the injury report, too, with forward Owen Tippett held out of Game 1 and now given a short runway to heal up and return to the lineup.

There's plenty of hockey ahead to right the ship, but not much time to ready the crew going forward. Game 2 is set for Monday night, giving them just one day to review film on this one and learn from it.

And there's a lot to learn. Top priority will be trying to get something — anything — going on the power-play. While neither side of this matchup excelled with the man advantage on Saturday night, with both the Flyers and Hurricanes going 0-for-4 on the power play, the Flyers' unit clearly needs a lot of work. It's been a weakness all season, registering a league-worst 15.7 per cent success rate. They scored just two power-play goals on 17 opportunities against Pittsburgh in Round 1. Carolina's penalty kill allowed Ottawa just one power-play goal on 21 chances, and was just as stifling in Game 1 Saturday night. Through their first three power plays, Philadelphia couldn't muster a single shot on goal. They finally registered two during their final power play of the night.

Rest is best for Andersen

There was no rest-versus-rust debate when it came to this matchup. Rest won out by a mile. Carolina entered Saturday's contest on a full week's rest, and no player benefited more than goaltender Frederik Andersen. The veteran netminder was at his best Saturday night, stopping all 19 shots he faced for his second straight series-opening shutout. That brings his post-season goals-against average to an otherworldly 0.90, while registering a .961 save percentage through five games. Pacing can be tricky for goalies in the playoffs — long breaks can mess with flow, while the intense schedule can bring too heavy a workload at times. So far, it's looking like the Hurricanes' conservative approach to Andersen's playing time is paying off.



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The Hockey News

10 Takeaways: Hurricanes Stay Hot, Win Game 1

By: Ryan Henkel

Logan Stankoven's record-breaking heater and Mike Reilly's veteran poise fueled a shutout victory, yet the team continues to demand more as Carolina's suffocating defense shifts into high gear.

The Carolina Hurricanes skated to an easy 3-0 victory over the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 1 on Saturday.

Here are 10 takeaways from the win:

1. Logan Stankoven's Historic Run

The NHL's leading goal scorer has been on a crazy run with the Hurricanes to start the postseason.

Logan Stankoven, who picked up two goals in Carolina's Game 1 win, has scored in every single game of the playoffs so far, setting a franchise record for both the longest goal streak (5 games) and the most game-opening goals in a playoff year (4).

Not only that, but he also became the youngest player in NHL history to begin a postseason on a five-game goal streak.

"He's the hottest guy in hockey right now," said linemate Jackson Blake.

"His game hasn't changed, now it's just that pucks are going in," said Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour. "He's always created opportunities. He puts in the work, so the confidence has always been there because of that. We always seem to judge people on production and I get it, but he's been playing like this all year."

2. Jackson Blake Elevating His Game

Last year's playoffs was a big eye opening experience I think for the sophomore winger, who struggled quite a bit as the postseason went on.

However, this year, Blake is thriving, already matching last season's point total in a third of the games.

Last night, he had a goal and an assist and what a beauty the goal was.

"I just had a little speed and I saw that the guy on my left was a forward so I just tried to beat him and then got a pretty lucky bounce I'd say back to my backhand," Blake said. "God willing on that one, for sure."

The 22 year old forward has really matured his game on both ends of the ice and he continues to be a difference maker on one of the NHL's best lines.

"You want guys pushing each other," Brind'Amour said on Stankoven and Blake. "I don't think there's a competition there, but they're trying to push each other to be good players. It's kind of obvious that they're playing really, really well and that's what we've needed."

3. Mike Reilly Steps Up

Alexander Nikishin wasn't ready to return from his concussion in Game 1, so in his place, Mike Reilly drew in.

The veteran has been in and out of the Hurricanes' lineup all season as the seventh defenseman and hadn't played in the postseason since 2024.

And to top it all off, he only found out he was playing that morning.

Despite that, he jumped into the lineup and didn't look out of place at all and picked up two assists and a +3 rating in just 11 minutes of action.

"Reils has done this all year," Brind'Amour said. "In, out. He missed 30 games there for a stretch then came right in and played well. There's a value to that veteran kind of guy who's, first of all, a pro and he showed that tonight."

4. Suffocation

All playoffs long we've heard how the Hurricanes just suffocate their opponents and the Flyers got to learn that first hand on Saturday.

The Canes just don't give opponents any time or space and their aggressive, in-your-face style leaves most feeling frustrated and lost.

After jumping out to an early lead, the Hurricanes basically shut everything down as they no longer needed to push for offense.

Despite playing conservatively, they gave up only two shots on goal at 5v5, zero of which were considered a high-danger chance.

The Flyers' only real offensive push came on the 6v4 situation to end the game and still they couldn't score.

In total, the Hurricanes surrendered just seven scoring chances and two high-danger chances over the course of the game at 5v5.

5. Top Power Play Still Searching For Finish

The Canes had four power play opportunities last night, but they still haven't been able to find a way to convert.

The top unit has been scoreless so far this postseason and it's a problem that needs to be figured out sooner rather than later.

In Game 1, they had 10 chances and five shots on goal, but they just weren't able to bury anything.

A lot of those guys are looking for their first goals of the postseason still and you have to think that once the floodgates finally burst, the goals will start coming in bunches.



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And again, they're at least getting the chances, but at the end of the day, they need to convert.

6. Penalty Kill Dominance

In the first round, the Hurricanes penalty kill was nearly unbeatable, going 20 for 21 across four games.

It's safe to say that that shorthanded dominance has carried over as the Canes' PK absolutely stifled the Philadelphia power play.

The Flyers had four power play opportunities and were actually outshot 3-2 in total over that span and actually only managed to even get those shots on net when they pulled their goalie to make it a 6v4.

Carolina is one of the most aggressive penalty killing teams and they don't give opponents any time to make a play.

They're going to force you to beat them and so far, no one has really been able to.

7. Not Shying Away

It seems like most teams think they can beat Carolina by starting to play more physical, but this iteration of the Canes is more than happy to get in the mud though.

The Hurricanes aren't afraid to be physical back to their opponents and they have more than a few guys who can really lay down the hurt too should it come to that.

While it's not necessarily their game, they're not going to let anybody take advantage of them and that's a true hallmark of a good team.

"We're a tight-knit group," Andersen said. "We want to be there for each other when things get crazy and we want to play physical too and put it on them that way. I think we're doing a really good job at that."

"We're trying to invest with physicality," said Jordan Staal. "I thought the guys were good with being physical, especially on the D corps. A lot of guys on there play a lot and we want to keep investing with that and just give them no room and play our style."

8. Time Spent Trailing - 0:00

So far this postseason, the Canes have not trailed at any point. The team is a perfect 5-0 so far and have never once been behind in a game.

It's a ridiculous feat and one that has only been accomplished five times in NHL history, the most recent being 1986.

The Hurricanes have also only allowed a total of just five goals through the first five games of the postseason, which only seven other teams in the previous 50 years have done.

And not only that, but the Hurricanes also became the fifth team in Stanley Cup Playoffs history to open the scoring in each of their first five games of a postseason and win.

Just a crazy run overall.

9. Frederik Andersen Just Doing His Job

While Game 1 was yet another shutout for Andersen, it was probably one of the easiest ones he's ever had as the Flyers generated virtually nothing.

At 5v5, Philadelphia was credited with just 0.8 expected goals and they just never really got much of anything going offensively.

Regardless, he played his role perfectly and made all the saves he was asked to make.

It's been a tremendous postseason run for the veteran so far and hopefully he and the Canes can keep it going.

10. Unsatisfied

Despite what was a dominant win for Carolina, the main feeling I got coming away from the team was that they just didn't seem too happy.

Guys were talking about how there was still a lot to clean up and overall they surprisingly seemed a bit ticked off for a team that just had a big win.

But that's the reality for a group that has such high expectations for themselves.

This team has been here time and time again, so a Round 2 win just doesn't mean much to them.

They're always looking to be better than they were the game before and if you're a fan of the team, you probably love the fact that they're nowhere near satisfied.



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SportScan

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

1389965 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes push back at 'soft' talk against Flyers, in all the right ways

Justin Pelletier

9-12 minutes 03/05/2026

No one dropped the gloves at puck drop Saturday night as the Carolina Hurricanes opened their second-round series against the Philadelphia Flyers with a 3-0 shutout win.

For most playoff games, that would track. Playoffs get physical, yes, but fights? Off the opening faceoff? Almost never.

Thing is, Ottawa tried that in Round 1, Game 1, when Senators captain Brady Tkachuk asked, and Canes captain Jordan Staal obliged. And that was on brand for Ottawa, which had players drop the gloves 21 times in the regular season.

But for the Canes? That was fight No. 9 of the season. For those keeping track at home — and many are — that's easily the lowest fight total in the NHL. The next closest? Colorado, with 10 in the regular season. In fact, 19 teams in the NHL had more fights by themselves than Carolina and Colorado combined.

What do Carolina and Colorado have in common? Only that they were the top two teams in the NHL's regular season, locking down the No. 1 seeds in their respective conferences.

It doesn't always work out that way, of course. Plenty of physical teams have succeeded in the NHL's regular season. But it does at least temporarily silence those who believe physicality is the only way to success.

Playoffs are different, though. Any player, coach or executive with playoff experience will tell you that element of the game ramps up in the postseason.

And that's been a knock on the Canes in recent years, despite their ability to make the playoffs in eight consecutive seasons. Depth, timely goaltending and toughness, mostly in that order, have been the team's sticking points.

It's possible, in one fell swoop, that this year's edition of the team has proven it has overcome all of those — certainly the "tough" factor.

That was evident in Game 1. Logan Stankoven scored twice more — his fifth and sixth in five playoff games — and became the youngest player in NHL history to begin the Stanley Cup Playoffs on a five-game goal streak, as the Hurricanes rumbled past the Flyers on a supercharged Saturday night in Raleigh.

Frederik Andersen, as he did in Game 1 against Ottawa, looked fresh, stopping 19 shots in the shutout.

The Hurricanes locked the Flyers down early, allowing just four shots on goal while absorbing 17 hits in the opening period. Most importantly for Carolina, it also scored twice on 12 shots — Stankoven and Jackson Blake with the honors — while dishing out 12 hits and killing two penalties.

The Flyers, trying to find a spark, also outthit the Canes in the second, 13-6, and Tyson Foerster took a whack at Andrei Svechnikov's knee for good measure late in the frame, for which he was assessed a penalty. But Stankoven added his second of the night to push the Canes' lead to 3-0.

In the third, Taylor Hall smushed Christian Dvorak into the boards early in the period, again setting a tone that the Canes were not going to lay back — offensively or physically. Hall's hit drew a small crowd, but officials didn't blow a whistle and play continued.

Later in the third, Blake and the Flyers' Trevor Zegras jostled their way down the ice. Zegras picked up an extra minor, both were assessed



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misconduct penalties, ending their nights. Carolina defender Shayne Gostisbehere and Flyers defender Nick Seeler also exited after matching misconduct penalties as officials tried to maintain control of the contest.

Hurricanes match teams' physicality

The Hurricanes' ability to play physical — yet mostly clean — hockey has been on display all season, and the raw numbers back that up.

After Sunday's Game 7 between Montreal and Tampa Bay (Has there been a more entertaining series in the past two years? I would argue "no"), there will be eight teams remaining in the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs. But, given they're both technically still "in," we've included them here for analysis.

Tampa, in a complete reversal of a year ago, led the league with 44 fighting majors and, as a result, 1,207 penalty minutes. But those altercations aside, the Lightning were actually in the middle of the pack in hits per game at 19.82. They are an outlier, in terms of fights and penalties per game among remaining playoff teams, but right there among those with a higher total of hits.

Of the nine remaining playoff teams, Carolina is seventh in penalty minutes assessed per 60 minutes, sixth in total penalty minutes, seventh in hits and as previously mentioned, ninth in fighting majors. Colorado, the gold standard for success in the NHL this season, is ninth, seventh, ninth, and eighth.

The Flyers — whom the Hurricanes/Whalers had never faced in a playoff series prior to Saturday night — have earned a reputation over the years as a rough-and-tumble team; the Broad Street Bullies in their early years, the Legion of Doom some 30 years ago. The Hurricanes' own head coach, Rod Brind'Amour, knows that latter group well.

This season, the Flyers were fourth overall in the NHL in hits per game with 22.46, just one place behind Ottawa, the Hurricanes' first-round opponent. They were fourth in fights (25), seventh in total penalties taken (322), and ninth in penalty minutes (785). Among remaining playoff teams, Philly was tops in total hits, fourth in penalties and third in fights.

Saturday, the Flyers started the game having been assessed 96 penalty minutes over six playoff games, an average of 16 per game. The Canes had 47 minutes in four games, a shade fewer than 12 per game. It was Carolina, though, that went to the box early in Game 1, taking two penalties to Philly's one in the opening frame.

Amid the parade to the penalty box in the third as the Flyers tried to scratch and claw their way back into the game, the Hurricanes again held their own, responding in kind when challenged, dishing out hits when warranted.

Are the Hurricanes without flaws? Of course not. Andersen has been elite, but he has been in the first two rounds in the past, as well.

The injury bug bit the Hurricanes at the end of the Ottawa series: Alexander Nikishin was still unavailable Saturday, perhaps the only true casualty of "physical play" in that opening series. But that will test the Canes' depth on the blue line, and Mike Reilly stepped into the fray.

The Hurricanes may yet struggle in these 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs, but it's safe to say, at least for this run, it won't be due to a lack of physicality.

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1389966 Carolina Hurricanes

For Hurricanes' Logan Stankoven, 'the hottest guy in hockey,' nothing has changed

Sean Gentile

5-7 minutes 03/05/2026

RALEIGH, N.C. — When the Carolina Hurricanes sent Mikko Rantanen to the Dallas Stars at the 2024 NHL trade deadline, the prevailing reaction came in two parts.

First was the realization that Carolina, indeed, had moved on from the exact sort of star winger they'd sought for years just 42 days after acquiring him. The fit hadn't been seamless, and Rantanen seemed less likely by the day to sign a long-term extension with the Hurricanes. But ... 42 days? They hadn't reeled in some smaller fish, they'd reeled in a shark. Who throws back a shark?

The second part, though, hit when you saw the return — because Logan Stankoven was the centerpiece. Of course the Hurricanes acquired a young, undersized forward laced with skill, tenacity and through-the-lineup versatility, who seemed to play every game of his brief NHL career in fifth gear. Of course it was him.

That's Carolina and coach Rod Brind'Amour's stock-and-trade, isn't it? It's why the Hurricanes are very good, and it's why they've been very good, and, perhaps, it's why when the late spring rolls around, they've yet to reach greatness. The process is relentless, unyielding, metronomic, effective — and in the postseason, it too often has resulted in too few goals. Bad luck and injuries have played their parts, but so has a lack of truly elite game-breakers. It happens. There aren't many of those guys. If Carolina didn't think it needed one, it would have have stopped trying long ago.

Stankoven, though, is playing the part.

One and a quarter series in the Stanley Cup playoffs does not a gamebreaker make. Yet no matter how many consecutive games he scores in, the 23-year old Stankoven is producing beyond the level that even Carolina could expect from him, or from Rantanen, or from ... anybody, really. Stankoven has now scored six times in the 2026 postseason, including the first goal in four of the Hurricanes' five games. The most recent of those opened a 3-0 win in Game 1 of their second-round series against the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday night, a demolition job that felt like it was completed in 20 minutes, and the sixth set the final score in the second period.

Asked postgame how he's handling that type of result, glorious as it may be, Stankoven turned it back a few months.

"I think it just goes back to how many chances I've had throughout the season to score," he said, nodding toward linemate Jackson Blake, Carolina's other goal-scorer who was seated next to him at the podium. "These guys set me up, and (I was) hitting posts or goalies making good saves. I think I felt like since the Olympic break, things have started to turn and pucks have started to go in."

Brind'Amour sets a tone like few others and has a belief in his team's process that, at times, has verged on obstinance. It's rooted in the belief, though, that if you play the right way, rewards will follow. His second-line center sounds like he agrees.

"(Stankoven's) game hasn't changed. It's just (that) now the pucks are going in. I think he's always created opportunities and I mean, he puts in the work. So the confidence has always been there because of that," Brind'Amour said. "People want production, I get it, but he's been playing like this all year."

In many ways, both are correct. After the NHL resumed its season on Feb. 26, Stankoven shot the puck at five-on-five at a nearly identical rate as he did before the break (7.56 per 60 minutes vs 7.53), but generated higher-quality chances (0.95 per 60 vs. 1.52). The biggest difference —



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the kind that the Hurricanes need to port over to the playoffs as a team — is that more expected goals have turned into more real-life ones. Post-Olympics, Stankoven saw his scoring rate jump from 0.72 to 1.08 goals per 60, a hair behind wingers known primarily for their ability to produce offense like Jason Robertson and Kirill Kaprizov.

Stankoven, of course, is no longer a winger. Carolina moved him to the middle at the start of the regular season, and a relative lack of production led to some understandable criticism. The Hurricanes were playing the long game, though, and at the moment, they're winning.

In about 47 minutes with Stankoven, Blake and linemate Taylor Hall on the ice in their four-game sweep of the Senators, Carolina outscored Ottawa 3-0 and controlled a mammoth 76 percent of the expected goal share. This came in a series in which the first line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis was preoccupied with playing Ottawa to a draw.

On Saturday night, Stankoven's line was even better: two goals for, zero against, and an expected goal share of 80 percent. None of that seemed to bother Flyers coach Rick Tocchet as much as a different moment in the game, when Stankoven "came out of the pile" with the puck and threw it on net.

"That can't happen," Tocchet said.

It did, though — and while it stayed out of the net, next time it might not. That's what Brind'Amour and the rest of the Hurricanes believe on a near-cellular level, and Stankoven is proving them correct.

"Stanks has been unbelievable this postseason," Blake said. "I mean, he's been unbelievable all year, but especially this postseason. He's been probably the hottest guy in hockey right now, I think."

Of course he is.

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

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

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.

Jump ahead to a team:

CGY | CHI | CBJ | BOS

DAL | DET | EDM | FLA

LA | NSH | NJ | NYI

NYR | OTT | PIT | SJ

SEA | STL | TB | TOR

UTAH | VAN | WSH | WPG

Eliminated in Round 1

May 3: Tampa Bay Lightning

Projected cap space: \$13.6 million

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

What went right? The Lightning showed once again why they've been a perennial powerhouse over the past decade. Head coach Jon Cooper, the league's longest-tenured bench boss and 2026 Jack Adams finalist, consistently manages to bring out the best from his team. The Lightning produced an impressive 109-point regular season, finished second in their division and secured a ninth consecutive playoff berth.

Per usual, it was the elite offensive performance of Nikita Kucherov -- second in league scoring with 44 goals and 130 points -- that helped put the Lightning in such prime position, with Jake Guentzel (38 goals and 88 points) and Brandon Hagel (36 goals and 74 points) producing as well. Andrei Vasilevskiy was top-tier in a Vezina Trophy-worthy campaign (.912 SV%, 2.31 GAA), aided by a strong defensive front led by the emergence of J.J. Moser (with a career-high seven goals, 29 points and plus-44 rating) and veterans Ryan McDonagh and Victor Hedman. All told, Tampa Bay finished fourth in offense (3.49 goals per game) and third in goals-against (2.79) and had the third-best penalty kill (82.6).

What went wrong? Too many of Tampa Bay's regular-season standouts went silent in the playoffs. The Lightning had play their entire first-round series against Montreal without Hedman. What Tampa Bay didn't need was players in the lineup to be noticeably invisible at key moments. Kucherov and Brayden Point each scored just one goal and Guentzel had two. Hagel was pulling his weight (with six goals and eight points), but his efforts couldn't make up for the rest of the club's deficiencies as the Lightning ranked in the bottom six in playoff scoring (with fewer than three goals per game).

Would having Hedman have made a significant difference? He's an all-world defenseman, so probably. But Moser and McDonagh were still strong. It was just that the Lightning appeared less cohesive as a group against the Canadiens than they did throughout the year. The number of overtime games in the series also played a factor -- the Lightning were one timely goal or save away from victory in their first three outings -- but that's what separates teams in the spring. On any given night, who gets the job done? On too many occasions it just wasn't Tampa Bay, and so the Lightning bowed out in the first round for the fourth straight season.

Keys to the offseason: The Lightning are mostly locked in with regards to their own talent -- only Darren Raddish's expiring deal stands out following his career-best season (22 goals and 70 points in 73 games). Otherwise, Tampa Bay has all the players in place to stay a top contender in the Eastern Conference. But will Father Time catch up with the Lightning? Hedman and McDonagh are both over 35, and Kucherov, Point, Guentzel and Vasilevskiy are in their early 30s. Critics have said before that the Lightning's window is closing, and at some point that will be true.

How will Tampa Bay make the most of the best years their top skaters have to offer? It's a question that should be consuming GM Julien BriseBois. It's hard to nitpick what the Lightning accomplished in the regular season, and analyzing only those games, it doesn't appear they have glaring holes. Perhaps it's more of a mindset shift that Tampa Bay



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should be chasing. Why did some of the team's major talents go dormant against the Canadiens? Is it the long-term fatigue of a decade's worth of extra games under the belt catching up to the Lightning? Or do they require an injection of new life? Could BriseBois work his magic to get someone like Charlie Coyle or Alex Tuch in the mix to add offense and some fresh energy?

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Tampa Bay will be back in the playoffs -- the only question is, can they advance to the second round (or beyond) for the first time since losing in the 2022 Stanley Cup Final?

May 1: Utah Mammoth

Projected cap space: \$14.3 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 3rd (CAR), 4th, 5th, 5th (CHI), 7th

What went right? In a word? Progress. Last season, the Utah Hockey Club finished seven points shy of reaching the postseason. Teams on the bubble can go one of two directions in the following campaign. Utah's approach to making sure it had a better postseason shot included adding JJ Peterka to a group that already had Logan Cooley, Lawson Crouse, Dylan Guenther, Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz.

Those six played a role in why the Mammoth had 10 players who reached double figures in goals. But it wasn't just the core. The Mammoth got contributions from others such as Michael Carcone (16 goals) and Kailer Yamamoto (13). They had five defensemen who finished with more than 20 points, while goaltender Karel Vejmelka won a career-high 38 games while starting 63 times.

GM Bill Armstrong bolstered the roster at the trade deadline, adding MacKenzie Weegar on the blue line, who helped the club attain consistency in a chaotic Western Conference wild-card race.

What went wrong? Taking a 2-1 series lead in the first round against an experienced group like the Vegas Golden Knights answered quite a few questions about the Mammoth's young core in its first postseason. That's what made how their series ended complicated. They were an overtime win away in Game 4 from taking a 3-1 lead. They were another overtime win away in Game 5 from having a 3-2 lead.

Instead, the Golden Knights won both games in overtime, taking a 3-2 series lead against a team that was trying to figure out a few issues. One of those issues: trying to regain the defensive consistency they had in Games 2 and 3. The Mammoth allowed two goals in those games, both victories. In their losses, they allowed four or more goals.

Another concern facing the Mammoth was how Peterka, who was fourth on the team in goals in the regular season, was held without a point through all six games of the series.

Keys to the offseason: They have decisions to make about veteran UFAs such as Ian Cole, Alexander Kerfoot, Kevin Rooney, Kevin Stenlund, Vitek Vanecsek and Yamamoto. Their cap situation is only going to amplify the need for them to add veterans at team-friendly rates if they feel can contribute toward another playoff run.

Then there's the discussion about whether it's time for top prospects Tij Iginla and Caleb Desnoyers to hit the NHL ice. Iginla, 19, who was Utah's first-round pick in 2024, finished the WHL regular season with 41 goals and 90 points, and he scored 12 points in nine playoff games for Kelowna. Also 19, Desnoyers scored 78 points in 45 games for Moncton of the QMJHL, and has added 15 points through 12 playoff games.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: They'll once again be in the collection of teams fighting for a playoff spot in a crowded Western Conference and are one of the teams that is shifting the power dynamic.

May 1: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$16.4 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (DET), 4th (TB), 7th

What went right? Into late December, the Bruins were hovering near the .500 mark, and it wasn't clear whether they'd repeat as playoff no-shows or bully their way back into postseason conversations. The Bruins did the latter, reeling off 11 wins in 14 games through mid-January to eventually secure a playoff spot. It took a renewed consistency from the Bruins' second- and third-line skaters, including Casey Mittelstadt, Pavel Zacha and Viktor Arvidsson, to get Boston on a roll, complementing the team's other strong points.

Jeremy Swayman bounced back from his own down year in 2024-25 to carry the Bruins in net, with a 31-18-4 record and .908 save percentage. Two players acquired at the 2025 trade deadline also blossomed: Fraser Minten collected 17 goals in his first full season with the Bruins, and Marat Khusnutdinov added 15. Tanner Jeannot was productive in his inaugural year with the club, Lukas Reichel proved to be a good 2026 trade deadline pickup, and 2025 first-round pick James Hagens got some regular and postseason experience under his belt.

Overall, it was a solid showing from first-year NHL coach Marco Sturm, guiding the Bruins to their familiar post as playoff stalwarts.

What went wrong? The Bruins got into the postseason but too often looked like they didn't belong. The Buffalo Sabres bullied the B's out of the playoffs in six games, and the Sabres did it multiple ways: They erased a multigoal deficit in Game 1, came from behind to take Game 3, blew Boston out in Game 4 and finished the job in Game 6. It was supposed to be Buffalo's inexperience being exposed after a 14-year drought, not the Bruins admitting embarrassment by their own poor performance. Boston's secondary scoring was MIA for much of the series, their power play was lukewarm at best, and they were increasingly bad defensively.

The Bruins' top players -- other than Swayman -- were neutralized in frustrating fashion, too. David Pastrnak had three goals, Arvidsson had two, Zacha had one and Middlestadt and Charlie McAvoy had none. It was Pastrnak's overtime winner in Game 5 that gave the Bruins a shot at redemption in their building following the blowout 6-2 defeat in Game 4, but Boston again couldn't take advantage of the home cooking. Buffalo made adjustments where the Bruins did not. That speaks as well to how green Sturm still is compared to Sabres coach Lindy Ruff.

Keys to the offseason: Boston will need to handle its own business first in negotiating with pending restricted free agent Reichel and unrestricted free agent Arvidsson before GM Don Sweeney goes in search of adding to the roster.

The Bruins had admirable contributions from their forwards in the latter half of the regular season -- Morgan Geekie led the way with 39 goals, and Arvidsson, Pastrnak and Zacha eclipsed the 25-goal mark -- but the way Boston was exposed in the playoffs speaks to what Sweeney has to fix. The Bruins need their third and fourth lines to do more than just generate energy; they have to frequently appear on the scoresheet more often as well.

Sweeney has to be thinking ahead this summer too -- Middlestadt, Zacha and Sean Kuraly will be entering the final year of their contracts. Is Sweeney prepared to run it back before making some significant alterations? Boston's focus, one way or another, has to be on limiting those high-danger chances that were so costly in the postseason. Anyone the Bruins key on should bring the physical play style and strength the team got away from. A player like Mason Marchment, a pending UFA who can battle in the corners and score 20-plus goals, would make sense.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Bruins' core gives them a solid chance of being postseason contenders again. Entering the year with a chip on their shoulder won't hurt, either.

April 30: Edmonton Oilers

Projected cap space: \$16.5 million



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2026 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th

What went right? For a team as top-heavy as the Oilers, depth scoring is always a need. The contributions from Jack Roslovic and Matt Savoie helped when it came to finding that secondary scoring this season.

Another positive development this season was the path that took Connor Ingram from being an AHL call-up to providing the Oilers with some of the most consistent goaltending they received in recent seasons.

Also noteworthy is that they went 6-2-2 over the final 10 regular-season games to make the playoffs, even as Leon Draisaitl was sidelined with a lower-body injury that forced him to miss the final 14 games of the regular season. However ...

What went wrong? Let's start from the beginning. Signing Andrew Mangiapane was the major free agent move last offseason for a cap-strapped team. He was eventually waived and then traded ahead of the deadline.

With goaltending a concern again, the Oilers traded Stuart Skinner for Tristan Jarry in December -- only to then change course by turning to Ingram. Regardless of who was in the crease, the Oilers had the worst team save percentage in 5-on-5 play. That was further compounded by a defensive structure that struggled for consistency.

All of those issues generated concerns about whether the Oilers would be good enough to advance to a third consecutive Stanley Cup Final. But they didn't even get close, as they were bounced in the first round by an Anaheim Ducks team that looks to be ascending into the crowded field of Western Conference powers.

Keys to the offseason: After signing a contract extension this past preseason, Connor McDavid is under team control through 2027-28. So, how do the Oilers build the strongest team possible in what could be McDavid's final seasons in Edmonton? That's really the only question that needs to be answered. It's not to say there aren't other concerns -- because there are. But those concerns also are connected to that larger and rather looming question.

Once again, the Oilers will be trying to find help at team-friendly prices. One way they could solve those issues is to move on from one of those larger non-Draisaitl or non-McDavid contracts.

The Oilers have had the desire to be creative in the past. It's just that this offseason might force them to take a different approach, given what's at stake.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Another trip to the playoffs is the bare minimum. If the front office gets creative with a big swing, that must be weighed against the long-term impact.

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.

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 additions of Egor Chinakhov and Elmer Soderblom were excellent moves by GM Kyle Dubas, given how seamlessly they worked 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



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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 worked out fine for Pittsburgh's first 82 games. When they got to the playoffs -- and were taking on a fast, hungry Philadelphia squad -- the Penguins looked old and slow, and their offense dried up accordingly (Crosby, Mantha and Rakell all failed to score early in the series and that was an issue). By the time Pittsburgh's veterans were fully engaged, the Pens' were already down 3-0 in the series. No amount of experience makes that an easy deficit to overcome. The Penguins did stave off elimination twice to avoid a sweep -- a feat led by Crosby netting four points through Game 4 and 5 -- but Pittsburgh's defensive flaws and shaky goaltending were exposed and ultimately doomed their hopes of a long run through spring.

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

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.



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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 (NYY), 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 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.



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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.

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

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



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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.

Greg Wyshynski examines Connor McDavid's future with the Oilers after being eliminated by the Ducks.

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 Arseny 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.



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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 Cuyille is a rising star up front, Alexis Lafreniere 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.

play

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Marco Rossi wins it in OT for Canucks

Marco Rossi wins it in OT for Canucks.

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.

Dylan Larkin completes the hat trick to bury the Flyers.

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.



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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 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.



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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.

play

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Celebrini becomes sixth teenager in NHL history with 100-point season

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

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

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.



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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.

ESPN LOADED: 05.04.2026

1390052 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens flip instant classic series with miraculous Game 7 win

Eric Engels

TAMPA, Fla. — In the end, the coin came up Canadiens.

It flipped seven times in this series. Just once more to the Montreal side in Tampa Bay.

Three of the Canadiens' four wins over the Lightning came at Benchmark International Arena, and this last one, which saw them held to just nine shots on net — and none in the second period of the game — was sealed by a miraculous goal.

"We got a bounce with (Alex Newhook)," said coach Martin St. Louis.

The Canadiens weren't going to eliminate the Lightning without at least one big one.

"They're a great team, they're well coached, they've got a lot of skill, a lot of their players play the right way, they're hard to play against, chippy," said Kaiden Guhle. "They're a hard team to beat."

They're a championship team. A team that, in more than one way, gave birth to this version of the Canadiens.

"After the (Stanley) Cup Final (in 2021), there was a lot of tough times, and a lot of guys left and we started this rebuild," said Nick Suzuki.

He was one of six current Canadiens to suffer through that loss to the Lightning before delivering yet another big push down on their contention window.

Suzuki opened the scoring 18:39 into Game 7 on Montreal's fourth shot, and it wasn't until he blocked the last of Tampa's 55 attempts on the night that he could exhale and contemplate the Canadiens' journey to this point.

"It's definitely been probably faster than most people expected, but when you get a lot of great players together in a great system, great leadership, things can turn quickly," Suzuki said. "I don't know if we're the youngest team in the playoffs, but we've got a lot of gamers, and we have a lot of

guys that want that moment and are able to raise their game to a different level."

Jakub Dobes did that from start to finish, and not just in Game 7.

The 24-year-old rookie goaltender stopped 181 of the 196 shots he faced in this series, and he conjured miracle after miracle in the final game, outduelling the greatest goaltender of a generation in Andrei Vasilevskiy.

"Dobes kind of stole the game," said St. Louis.

If he could take back the words, "kind of," we're sure he would.

"He's super confident in himself, which you love to see," said Suzuki of Dobes. "He puts the work in every single day away from the rink in preparing himself to go into games in a proper mindset, which I learned a lot of his routine last night, which was pretty cool. ... He's a gamer. He's been doing that since he got to our team, and we're going to need him to continue playing well as we go along here."

Before we get to Buffalo and to the challenge that awaits the Canadiens in Round 2 versus the resurgent Sabres, some review is in order of the closest playoff series in recent memory.

It was the third series in NHL history to have all seven games decided by a single goal. There was just one two-goal lead the whole time, and it lasted less than six minutes. Each punch was countered, each goal replied to until the final one stood, and the shots were just about even until the Lightning decided to deny the Canadiens any for 26:57 of Sunday's game.

The Canadiens couldn't find Vasilevskiy's padding, let alone his net, between Suzuki's goal at the end of the first and the wrister he hit Vasilevskiy with 5:36 into the third period.

"That was their best stretch of the series," said Lane Hutson. "It showed they've been here before."

Before Sunday's loss made it a fourth consecutive first-round exit, the Lightning were perennial winners of games like these.

They set the foundation of their standard on their run to the 2015 Cup Final. By 2020, they turned it into the golden one of the league with their first of back-to-back Cup wins. And then they fell just two wins short of winning a third straight in 2022.

At the start of that year, the Canadiens began their rebuild.

A month later, St. Louis, a former Lightning legend, took over the bench in Montreal and tried to emulate everything he'd learned from watching this Tampa team.

"How long has (Jon Cooper) been here (coaching the Lightning)? It's been 13 years," he said. "You look at the steps they took, and it's something that we've tried to replicate. It's an organization and team that set the standard, and I watched the Lightning a lot before I was coach, and with good reason. Not just because I played for the Lightning, but also because of how they play."

"When I took the job as coach, I wanted to have a team that could play in possession, that could defend, that had a good power play. I tried to absorb a lot of the things the Lightning did and bring them here to Montreal, and it was the biggest challenge to go beat that team in the first round. We were two teams with the same attitude, but they had more experience in the playoffs. We stayed on task to get through the highs and lows, and we learned a lot."

Especially about what it takes to not only win, but to beat a champion.

St. Louis talked about timely power-play goals in Game 1, depth scoring in Game 3, a winning goal in Game 5 produced on a good line change as an example of the details required, and miraculous goaltending in Game 7.



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"You need a little bit of everything," he said, "and I feel that's what we got in this series."

What the Canadiens needed two-thirds of the way through Game 7 was a dose of perspective.

Suzuki said St. Louis delivered it.

"I think he's one of the best coaches in the whole world," said Suzuki. "It feels like he says the right thing in every single situation, knows how to get the best out of his guys. Obviously, no one was happy with that second period, and he comes in all fired up, getting us going for the third, really motivating the guys."

After his press conference, on his way out of Benchmark International Arena, St. Louis told us he jolted the Canadiens; made them realize that, despite their freeze-up in the second, they had a chance to go win the third and the series; that they had given up a huge advantage on the shot clock but only a power-play goal to Dominic James; that the score was still tied 1-1 and a lead was available to them if they could just flip momentum.

Newhook, who beat the Lightning in 2022 with the Colorado Avalanche to become the Cup winner on the Canadiens, snatched it back from behind Vasilevskiy's net with 8:53 to go.

And then the Canadiens held the lead and prevailed with the lowest shot total ever recorded in an NHL playoff win.

Was there some luck in it? Of course.

You don't advance without it.

But the Canadiens fought for this. From Suzuki, who scored 101 points in the regular season before finally breaking through Anthony Cirelli's dogged coverage to record his first at five-on-five of the series Sunday, to Noah Dobson, who missed the first six games with an injury to his left hand before taking 25 shifts in Game 7.

They earned respect.

"We couldn't have played it any better, and it still wasn't good enough," said Cooper. "So at some point, too, you have to tip your cap to Marty St. Louis and the Montreal Canadiens and Jakub Dobeš. They made a plan and stuck to it. They got the lead, protected it, and when they broke down, their goalie was there for them. And that takes something, too, because it's not like they just won one game like this. They won three prior games to get to this game. And it comes down to one game. And that's why sports is an incredible life here."

It gave us a sensational series unlike any we've covered.

The coin just came up Canadiens in the end.

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1390053 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 'Probably a one-off': Avalanche take Game 1 after high-scoring duel with Wild

Iain MacIntyre

DENVER — It was a heavyweight clash without heavyweight hockey.

The Colorado Avalanche and Minnesota Wild, Stanley Cup contenders who are rarely easy to play against or break down, opened their titanic Western Conference semifinal playoff series by trading chances and

goals like it was an All-Star Game. Except for the intensity, atmosphere and stakes.

The National Hockey League's best team during the regular season, the Avalanche scored the first three goals, still managed to trail by one late in the second period, then scored five of the final six to beat the Wild 9-6 in Game 1 Sunday in Colorado.

It was unexpected and spectacularly entertaining for everyone except the goalies and coaches.

We hardly knew what to make of it. Except this best-of-seven actually may live up to the hype that began about the time the Wild traded for Quinn Hughes in December to announce themselves as a serious threat to the Avalanche.

But it was Colorado's Norris Trophy defenceman, Cale Makar, who made the difference in Game 1 by returning from the medical room to score twice in his team's four-goal third period.

"That's Cale Makar doing Cale Makar things," Colorado captain Gabriel Landeskog said. "I wasn't that concerned; I know he's tough and he was going to be back at some point."

After Minnesota missile Marcus Foligno launched Makar into orbit with a hit on the forecheck less than three minutes into the game, the player regarded as the best defenceman in hockey went straight to the bench, then the dressing room, and was not seen again until the second period.

The Wild saw too much of Makar in the third when he twice zipped shots past rookie goalie Jesper Wallstedt from the right-wing circle.

"Just a weird game," Makar said. "Coming from the last few games we played (in the first round against the Los Angeles Kings), it was really tight out there. Today, it just felt a little bit more open and sometimes that can be a tendency to kind of lack a little bit on the defensive side. I don't think we're going to see that again. Just probably a one-off. But I liked that we were able to stick with it and find a way to win, obviously, in a unique way."

Makar said of Foligno's legal hit: "I obviously saw it coming. I tried to absorb it. Just a weird kind of fall there. I tried to kind of back out of it as I saw he was kind of coming at me. I knew he was trying to separate myself from the puck. It's a very common thing; you're going to see it every single night. Just unfortunately caught me in a weird spot like that. I think I've got to find different ways to go back on pucks."

Makar's return was a game-changer. Had he not — had he been seriously enough injured to miss the rest of the game and others — it could have decided the series.

"You've got to give him a lot of credit, right?" Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said. "Comes back not feeling great after the injury in the first. Gets sorted out and taken care of, but comes back and has a great finish to the game."

"But I'll say, there's not too many guys this time of year that aren't playing hurt and digging in and playing through that stuff. That's what makes the playoffs great. That's what's expected; it's not a one-off. The bulk of guys on every team that are still playing and will continue to play are going to play hurt and injured. I think they all deserve the credit. Tonight, it was Cale. Tomorrow night, it'll be somebody else."

Game 2 is here Tuesday. And Game 1 is probably a one-off because the slack defending, missed coverages, poor plays with the puck, were so uncharacteristic for the Avalanche and Wild, who have in common that they do not often beat themselves.

The Avalanche led the NHL in team defence during the regular season, then allowed only five goals in their four-game sweep of Los Angeles in the playoffs' first round.



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The Wild hit that total on Sunday when Foligno scored on a shorthanded breakaway at 16:55 of the second period, nearly disfiguring both Avalanche goalie Scott Wedgewood and the net as Minnesota's heavy forward crashed into the post while giving Minnesota its only lead, 5-4.

As for his team's defensive play, although the Wild were ventilated in Round 1 by the Dallas Stars' power play, they yielded only four five-on-five goals during a six-game win. The Wild dominated at even strength. The Avalanche scored seven five-on-five goals Sunday.

A power-play goal by Colorado's Artturi Lehkonen offset Foligno's shorty as the defensive powerhouses skated into the third period tied 5-5.

But Makar scored from a poorly-defended faceoff play at 3:21 of the third period, and Nazem Kadri beat Wallstedt cleanly from 35 feet on a breakaway to make it 7-5 at 5:43.

And after Matt Boldy's bounce pass to the front of the net caromed in off teammate Mats Zuccarello to bring the Wild back within a goal with 3:59 remaining, Makar scored again 65 seconds later, creating room to get his shot past Boldy and through Artturi Lehkonen's screen.

Nathan MacKinnon, who let the puck get past him on Foligno's breakaway, scored into an empty net with 2:08 to go.

Eight different Avalanche players scored and 13 skaters finished with at least one point. MacKinnon had a goal and two assists and was plus-three. Devon Toews, Makar's defence partner, had four points and was plus-four.

Hughes led the Wild with a goal and two assists. Minnesota's offensive stars, Boldy and Kirill Kaprizov, finished with only a single assist each. The Wild played without top centre Joel Eriksson Ek and key defenceman Jonas Brodin, both injured.

"Listen, that was a crazy game," Landeskog said, and not in an admiring way. "Let's just call it for what it is. But I think we did a good job on the bench, in the room, talking about what we needed to focus on, settling down when we needed to when they kind of had momentum. We'll enjoy this one tonight, and then tomorrow we'll sort out what we can do better."

Both teams did enough to lose.

"It's not that we weren't emotionally engaged in the game and physically engaged in the game, because I think we were," Bednar explained. "But not enough on the defensive side. We were on the offensive side. The forecheck looked good (and) we did some good things. But like when it came to the defending, I feel like we forgot a little bit just how hard we need to work to be good defensively. We were easy in some areas and loose on some gaps and late a few times, and they play hard offensively."

The Avalanche hadn't played in a week. They had plenty of rest and practise for the series. The Wild, however, eliminated the Stars on Thursday night and didn't know until late Friday that they'd be flying the next day to Denver to start on Sunday.

But Minnesota coach John Hynes bristled at the idea that his team could have used a practice to prepare for the Avalanche.

"I don't think our practice has anything to do with it," he said. "I think it's all about wrapping your head around the series and understanding the differences between Colorado and Dallas. I think if we went out there for a 30- to 35-minute practice, it wouldn't have made one ounce of difference on this. It's about the mindset and understanding the differences between the two series."

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs officially hiring Mats Sundin, John Chayka to lead front office

Elliott Friedman

Finally, clarity:

The Toronto Maple Leafs announced their new hockey leadership Sunday afternoon, with a media conference scheduled for Monday at 1 p.m. ET.

The Maple Leafs have hired Mats Sundin, who returns to the organization as Senior Executive Advisor, Hockey Operations. It's a full-time commitment; he and his family are moving to Toronto.

John Chayka is the new general manager, and no other additions or changes are planned.

"Today is an important day for the Toronto Maple Leafs organization," Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment president and CEO Keith Pelley said in a statement. "I'm thrilled to welcome John and Mats to their roles, two great hockey minds that will strengthen our entire hockey club. From the start of this process, it's been about building a championship-calibre team for our fans and our city and today is an important step towards that goal."

One of the big questions is structure: How is this going to work? No doubt more will be explained when they meet with the media, but, as I understand it, the goal is for Sundin and Chayka to present a united front in making decisions. We're also going to learn more about their history, as, apparently, they first met at the 2012 Memorial Cup. (I asked around on the weekend, there are no plans for Tie Domi to join the organization.)

Ultimately, however, there must be someone who has the final say and reports directly to Pelley. That is Chayka. The position the organization advertised in its interview process was "head of hockey operations," and that's what Chayka will be.

We'll learn more on Monday, but Sundin/Chayka is the new duo at the top of the Maple Leafs' mountain.

"I'm honoured to join the Toronto Maple Leafs organization and excited to work alongside Mats and the entire organization," said Chayka in a statement. "This is one of hockey's most historic franchises, with a passionate fan base who want to win. I'm focused on building a team that is competitive, driven and relentless — one that is in the best position to win for our fans and for the City of Toronto."

"This fan base deserves greatness and I am grateful for the opportunity to help this team, organization and city achieve that," said Sundin in a statement. "My love for the Maple Leafs and the City of Toronto is an important part of who I am and who I will always be. I look forward to working closely with John as we both recognize the incredible opportunity and responsibility to win here in Toronto."

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Sportsnet.ca / Sunday Overreactions: Where do the Penguins go from here?

Michael Amato



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Beyond the joy of making the playoffs, this season also offered Pittsburgh Penguins fans the gift of silence.

There was a reprieve from all the talk about Sidney Crosby and what his future might hold. Even if Crosby and the Pens weren't doing anything to fuel them, there were constant rumours and speculation about whether he would leave Pittsburgh to pursue one more Stanley Cup. This year, that chatter was quickly quieted, though. The Penguins got off to a fast start and never slowed down. A season that was supposed to end in disappointment turned into another opportunity to watch Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and company compete in the post-season.

Unfortunately for the Pens and their fans, that playoff run was abrupt, and after the dust settles, it won't be long before the conversation about the team and Crosby's future starts picking up volume again.

Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas did a masterful job over the past year of walking the fine line of adding players to help the roster while also not sacrificing anything for the future. The additions of Anthony Mantha, Parker Wotherspoon and Yegor Chinakhov were critical, but even still, Pittsburgh was never really a true Cup contender and looked a step behind the Philadelphia Flyers for most of Round 1.

Penguins need to pick a clear path going forward

As good a job as Dubas has done, the Penguins are still somewhat stuck in the mushy middle. It doesn't feel like they are a step or two away from competing for a championship and they aren't bottoming out to accumulate high draft picks. Their core is older and only Crosby remains as a real impact player, but that isn't going to last forever. The level Crosby is playing at is almost unprecedented for a 38-year-old and that isn't going to last forever.

There is no guarantee the Penguins can duplicate their success from this season with Crosby, Erik Karlsson, Kris Letang being another year older, as well as Evgeni Malkin being a UFA and closing in on 40. Dubas will also have to decide if he wants to double down on Mantha or let him walk in free agency. The 2025-26 campaign really felt like all the stars aligned for the Pens and banking on that to happen again would be extremely risky.

Pittsburgh has navigated a path down the middle about as well as you can do it, but without committing to a direction one way or another, it's going to be hard to eventually get back on a path towards the Stanley Cup.

Overreaction? – No

Obviously, it would be much easier to rebuild if Crosby decided he'd be open to a trade, but he's never given any indication that's something he's even entertaining. So, Dubas and the Pens need to pick a path with the assumption that Crosby will finish his career in Pittsburgh. That means they may have to trade some assets for picks and prospects with Crosby still on the roster.

Dubas has done a great job of accumulating second and third-round picks (15 of them over the next four drafts) but they need to bring in players more likely to make a significant impact. Ben Kindel is a good start, as he looks like he'll be a great two-way centre, though they can't stop there. The last time the Penguins picked inside the top 10 was 2012. Could they consider moving Bryan Rust or Rickard Rakell for a first to try and land a high-impact talent?

Pittsburgh could ultimately choose to go the other direction, too. They could try and parlay some of those second and third rounders they've stockpiled and add this summer via the trade route. Crosby is still playing at a high level and surrounding him with more talent could maximize his value for the next couple of seasons.

Ultimately, the Penguins have to really commit to a direction one way or another if they want to get back on the path to contention status. Right now, they've proven they can get back into the playoff mix with some

savvy moves but I don't see them taking another step forward if they just stick with the status quo.

Canucks need Gavin McKenna more than any other team

The Vancouver Canucks have the best odds to secure the number one overall pick in next week's draft lottery, which could be a silver lining in what has been a dismal season. Vancouver managed just 58 points, had the fewest regulation victories and finished with a minus-100 goal differential. The Canucks can pick no worse than third in the draft and are guaranteed to get a good player regardless, but securing the right to draft anyone they want, like Gavin McKenna, is critical to get the franchise back on track. Vancouver is devoid of star power and McKenna could mean more to them than anyone else.

Overreaction? – No

It's very hard to have success in the NHL without a superstar and maybe the Canucks can land one with any of the top three picks, but the safest bet is probably McKenna. With Quinn Hughes traded and Elias Pettersson regressing in a major way, Vancouver no longer has an elite talent to lean on. McKenna could instantly fill that void and could find his way into the lineup as early as next season.

Not to mention, McKenna would be an immediate draw as far as ticket sales and attention around the team goes. There haven't been too many positives for the Canucks to boast about over the past two seasons but we've seen the arrival of players like Macklin Celebrini and Matthew Schaefer breathe new life into a franchise almost instantly. McKenna would have a chance to do the very same thing for the Canucks.

The Vezina nominees were announced earlier this week and Ilya Sorokin, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Jeremy Swayman are up for the award. One notable omission from the ballot was Dan Vladar, who had an excellent campaign during his first season as a starter with the Philadelphia Flyers. Vladar had been a career backup prior to 2025-26, before going 29-14-7 with a .906 save percentage this season. He also finished in the top 10 in goals saved above expected. Vladar was a major reason the Flyers finished strong down the stretch and ended their playoff drought. You could certainly make a case he deserved to be nominated for the league's best goaltender.

Overreaction? – Yes

There's no denying Vladar had a tremendous year, but you'd be hard-pressed to argue that one of the three nominees deserves to be removed. Vasilevskiy posted 39 wins and a .912 save percentage despite playing behind a makeshift defence corps for much of the campaign. The Tampa Bay Lightning were decimated by injuries on the back end and Vasilevskiy still delivered elite numbers.

Only one goalie saved more goals above expected than Swayman this year, as he had a really strong bounce-back season for the Boston Bruins. Swayman was the biggest reason Boston found its way back to the postseason. Then there's Sorokin, who had to deal with a brutal New York Islanders defence. The Isles gave up the third-most high-danger chances and Sorokin still almost willed the team to the playoffs.

I think Vladar definitely deserved consideration for the award, but I have a hard time bumping any one of the three nominees out in his favour.

One of the great things about the Stanley Cup playoffs is how they shine a light on players that fans may not see on a regular basis. Dylan Guenther is someone who received some more love during this post-season, as the Utah Mammoth forward scored three times and produced 27 shots on goal in six games. Something that stands out with Guenther is his shot and lightning-quick release. He's a threat to score from just about anywhere inside the blue line and won't hesitate to let it fly from almost any position. Guenther is really starting to gain some traction as having the best shot in the league.



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Overreaction? – Yes

This goal against Toronto from earlier in the year is a great example of what Guenther is capable of. The shot is off his stick and in and out of the net in an instant.

If you're looking around the league for comparables, Guenther has few rivals right now. In his prime you could put Alexander Ovechkin in that category, but at 40, his shot doesn't have the same zip on it as it once did. What about Auston Matthews? The Toronto Maple Leafs centre was virtually unrivaled with his release, though injuries over the past couple of years appear to have diminished his shot somewhat. The only player I think has an edge on Guenther right now is first time 50-goal scorer Cole Caufield. The Montreal Canadiens sniper has a great blend of quickness and accuracy with his shot and can score from just about any angle. Give me Caufield number one and Guenther two in the best shot power rankings if I had to rank them today.

Anze Kopitar should go down as the greatest Los Angeles King ever

As the Los Angeles Kings bowed out of the Stanley Cup playoffs, Anze Kopitar's career came to an end. The future Hall of Famer has had a storied career that includes two Selke Trophies, three Lady Byng's and a pair of Stanley Cups. He also surpassed Marcel Dionne as the Kings all-time leading scorer this season and has played 1,521 games in Los Angeles, the most in franchise history. Kopitar is also the team's all-time leader in assists and was a long-serving captain of the Kings, so it's not a stretch to say he's been the greatest player in franchise history.

Overreaction? – No

There's a distinct difference between the greatest player in franchise history and the greatest player to play for a franchise. Obviously, in the case of the Kings, that's Wayne Gretzky, and if you wanted, you could argue Luc Robitaille and Marcel Dionne have had better overall careers than Kopitar. But when it comes to time spent with the Kings, Kopitar deserves his due. He played nearly 1,000 more games for Los Angeles than Gretzky did and had more game-winning goals than anyone else. Add in the first two Cups in franchise history that Kopitar played a massive role in and that should easily set him apart from anyone else who ever put on a Kings jersey.

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 2 preview: Wild vs. Avalanche

Rory Boylen

All season long, everyone could see how tough the path would be to get through the Central Division. Now, it's the moment we've been waiting for as the last two teams standing, the Colorado Avalanche and Minnesota Wild, meet in Round 2.

You've probably heard this many times by now: this matchup of titans is worthy of being a conference final or even a Stanley Cup showdown. That is the calibre of teams we're seeing here. Colorado finished as the league's top regular-season team, then coasted through a quick Round 1 victory, while the Wild had the league's seventh-best record and outlasted the Stars, the NHL's third-best regular season team, in the opening round.

The headline matchup to watch here is, of course, Cale Makar vs. Quinn Hughes. With three Norris Trophies between them, and both making

cases to be considered for the award again in 2026, these two will be loud.

In Round 1, Makar scored in Games 3 and 4 but didn't have a particularly stand-out series — though he didn't necessarily have to either. Hughes, on the other hand, put up eight points (a record for a Wild defenceman in a single playoff series) as Minnesota outscored the Stars 9-1 at 5-on-5 when he was on the ice.

Both elite blue liners will play monster minutes and will see lots of each other. Hughes gets to Round 2 averaging a league-high 31:40 per game in the playoffs, while Makar leads all Avs with 25:37 per game, a mark that wasn't pushed up by very much overtime.

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Broadcast schedule

A potentially interesting factor to watch, at least early on, is the state of both teams who got here in much different ways. While Colorado cruised through a sweep of the Kings, Minnesota outlasted Dallas in a tough six-game series, but won the last three. The Avalanche come in rested, while the Wild will arrive at Game 1 on just two days of rest and with injury questions around defenceman Jonas Brodin (who missed Game 6) and potentially centre Joel Eriksson Ek, who took a hard tumble into the boards in Game 6, which forced him out of the game briefly.

Can the Avalanche keep on their path to the Stanley Cup, and try to reclaim a trophy they last won in 2022 with much of their core still in place? Or will the Wild, who just won their first playoff series in 11 years, get to their first conference final since 2003 and make a big statement that they are in fact ready to be a true contender?

This will be a heck of a series, and here's how the two teams stack up:

Head-to-head record

Wild: 2-1-1

Avalanche: 2-1-1

Playoff team stats

TEAM

PP%

PK%

GF/G

GA/G

Wild

16.0 (8)

60.0 (15)



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3.83 (2)	62.79 (1)
2.50 (5)	56.39 (1)
Avalanche	.922 (1)
9.1 (13)	9.84 (13)
81.3 (12)	Key Stat: 5-on-5 goal differential from Round 1 In just four games, the Avalanche blew through the Kings and dominated them at 5-on-5, outscoring their Round 1 opponent 9-2. That's an 81.82 goal share percentage, the best of any team in the first round.
3.25 (6)	In fact, Colorado allowed just five total goals all series, stymying a Kings offence that was 29th among all teams in regular-season scoring vs. Colorado's No. 1 ranked defence and No. 1 team save percentage. The Wild will present a much stiffer challenge in all aspects.
1.25 (1)	Minnesota outscored Dallas 14-4 at 5-on-5 in their opening-round series for a 77.78 per cent goal share that is second-best among all playoff teams. Matt Boldy's five even-strength goals lead all players, while Boldy, Quinn Hughes and Kirill Kaprizov are all tied atop the league with seven even-strength points.
Regular-season advanced stats (5-on-5 via Natural Stat Trick)	Could this be where the series is won or lost?
TEAM	While both teams were solid at 5-on-5 in the opening round, it was a different story on the power play, where both struggled. The Avalanche, whose PP ranked 27th in the regular season, converted on just one of their 11 chances against the Kings, while the Wild — who had the third-best regular season PP — scored on just four of 25 opportunities.
CF%	The Avalanche's regular-season penalty kill was the best in the league and could contain Minnesota's power play in Round 2, or the Wild's middling regular-season penalty kill could open an opportunity for the Avs' PP to finally find itself.
GF%	But 5-on-5 is where these two are most evenly matched, and where the heavy star power on both sides will go at it for the majority of the series.
xGF%	How Minnesota wins
SV%	The Avalanche have a decisive advantage at centre, with Nathan MacKinnon, Brock Nelson and Nazem Kadri facing Ryan Hartman, Eriksson Ek and Michael McCarron.
SH%	But Eriksson Ek is one of the best checking, defensive centres in the game and in Round 1 he was not on the ice for a single 5-on-5 goal against. He and linemate Boldy both enjoyed excellent series — Boldy with a standout offensive performance, and Eriksson Ek helping control the puck with his defensive effectiveness and winning 56.4 per cent of his league-leading 149 face-offs.
Wild	That second line will be critical in this matchup. On the top line, it's certainly obvious that Kaprizov needs to have another big series after scoring nine points with a playoff-leading plus-11 in Round 1, which means the Avalanche will be focused on neutralizing him. So the Wild's second line, led by their only elite centre, will have to win some key minutes against Colorado's stars.
48.24 (24)	And then there's the matter of the goaltending. Jesper Wallstedt was full marks in his first playoff series with a .924 save percentage, 2.05 GAA and 3.7 goals saved above expected after he took the top job from Filip Gustavsson with a strong finish to the regular season. But all of those great stats are less than what Colorado's Scott Wedgewood put up in his first run of playoff starts.
51.38 (15)	
51.43 (10)	
.917 (5)	
9.06 (23)	
Avalanche	
56.69 (2)	



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The goalies at both ends of this series lack a great deal of playoff experience and both took over the No. 1 jobs on their teams through a strong regular season. Wedgewood, largely a career backup to this point in his career at 33 years of age, is having a heck of a career season, but the 23-year-old Wallstedt could be at the beginning of his ascent towards being a long-term NHL starter. This will be a huge test for him against a potent Avalanche offence, facing a similarly hot goalie at the other end. A defining series performance from their young "goalie of the future" could give the Wild the edge they need.

How Colorado wins

It's mind-boggling how a power play that includes MacKinnon, Kadri, Martin Necas, Makar and Gabriel Landeskog could have been so ineffective for so long this season, so at some point that collection of stars will breakthrough on the man advantage.

Right?

If and when it happens, the Avalanche will become an even bigger problem than they already are as the Presidents' Trophy winners. Unlocking another avenue of offence that just hasn't been there yet all regular season or into the playoffs would see this team evolve to a new level that would present a massive challenge for the Wild to contain, or even keep pace with.

Both teams have some tremendous talents leading their rosters, but the Avalanche have more of them. In fact, their centre depth is so great that coach Jared Bednar has the option of putting Nic Roy back into the 3C spot if he wants to use Kadri as a winger to load up the top six. This series is about star power and whoever's top guys come out ahead will likely prevail and move on to the conference final. On paper at least, the advantage there is with the Avalanche.

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