



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Athletic

What we're seeing in Round 2 of the NHL playoffs: Hurricanes thrive, Canadiens take over

By: Shayna Goldman

The Carolina Hurricanes' signature style — a high-pressure game in all three zones, between a swarming forecheck and shutdown defense — tends to carry well into the playoffs, until it doesn't.

No matter how well Carolina has played in the regular season or the first two rounds, the team has fallen flat in the Eastern Conference final in two of the last three years. Those shortcomings sparked a conversation about whether the system, the roster or both are at fault.

The system creates a lot of wear and tear on opponents, but that unrelenting pressure is also pretty taxing after an 82-game regular season and a deep playoff run. Does this team just run out of gas by the time Round 3 rolls along? Or has an overcommitment to this style held this team back? Could it be that the system isn't the problem, it's who is asked to execute it?

This year's Hurricanes could finally have the answer.

The fatigue factor may not be an issue after back-to-back sweeps in Rounds 1 and 2. Carolina has had to play some extra hockey while going 8-0, with three games extending into overtime. But that's really only added up to about three extra periods of hockey, so at most, the Canes have played nine total games based on minutes played, with solid periods of rest between rounds. That's a pretty favorable workload, all things considered.

Then again, it's not that different from last year, when the Canes only played 10 games (after two 4-1 series wins) heading into Round 3.

So, how about play style?

The Hurricanes' usual style is still at the heart of this dominant run through two rounds. But unlike years past, they've also gone against the grain with a stronger attack off the rush.

The Sebastian Aho line has thrived in transition all season long, but now there's even more oomph below them. Logan Stankoven's line has been fantastic through two rounds and added a real spark in transition. Pairing a creative winger like Nikolaj Ehlers with Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook has even made the third line a threat off the rush, too. Plus, there's more support for this play style on the back end, with K'Andre Miller and Sean Walker breaking out with control to get those sequences started.

And that deeper approach of difference-makers checks off that last question, too. Roster strength seemed like the root of last year's conference final failure against the Florida Panthers, a team that embraced a playoff style and was

loaded with star power. While the Hurricanes' roster still doesn't perfectly measure up to the 2025 Panthers or the ideal contender, it's a lot stronger than last year.

So the Hurricanes should be poised to do some damage in the conference final, unlike seasons past — as long as they can adjust to a much different opponent from what they have faced so far.

Canadiens are starting to take over

Some playoff series are a test of who can adjust best. Right now, the Montreal Canadiens are winning that battle against the Buffalo Sabres after a disappointing Game 1.

Both teams were in for a change of pace after going head-to-head with older, slower teams in Round 1. And that's proving to be a much bigger challenge for Buffalo in the early goings of this series.

Against the Boston Bruins, the challenge was getting through a neutral-zone 'clog' and then trying to beat Jeremy Swayman. The Canadiens are posing a much greater challenge in all three zones.

The Sabres' puck management has been awful over the last two games. The Canadiens' pressure is forcing turnovers, but Buffalo's making a bunch of unforced errors on top of that. Once in possession, the Canadiens have cruised up the ice with control in each of the last two games, and right into the higher-danger areas of the ice.

In Game 3, it added up to 14 Canadiens chances from the home plate area with contributions from all four lines, as pictured below in red (courtesy of HockeyStats). Alex Lyon wasn't perfect by any stretch in Game 3, but he's a big reason why the score wasn't even more lopsided.

Buffalo had a few looks in tight, especially with the Josh Norris line on the ice. But the Canadiens have generally kept the Sabres outside of the middle of the ice, and that's no way to beat Jakub Dobeš, who has been excellent so far this postseason.

Sabres finally make power-play adjustments

With three of the Sabres' four lines struggling to make an impact offensively this round, the power play is all the more important.

But that was Buffalo's most glaring weakness in Round 1; the team went 1-for-24 in six games.

The Sabres, at least, are actively trying to change that with some adjustments ahead of Game 3. Josh Doan, Zach Benson and Jack Quinn were all bumped up to the top unit, which actually gave the team some juice. On the second



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power play of the game, the Sabres won the initial offensive faceoff and scored quickly off that possession.

But the third opportunity may have been the most promising. It showed almost everything this top unit has been missing this postseason. Not only did Buffalo win the first faceoff (which has been a weakness), Doan and Benson both won puck battles and retrieved pucks to extend zone time and helped the Sabres get a little more movement within their formation.

The longer the Sabres stay in the zone, the less they have to try and regroup, which is still a major weakness because of the team's insistence on using the drop pass.

Usually, at this point in the postseason, power-play opportunities start to dry up, which means 1) teams can't be as reliant on power-play scoring to get by, but 2) also have to take advantage of those few opportunities. This year, there has been an uptick in non-offsetting minors called, and it's not clear if officials will follow their usual patterns of putting the whistles away from this point forward. So the power play still matters in this series, because Buffalo isn't getting enough even-strength production and the Canadiens are breaking through when they have the man advantage.

Marnier's a playoff player

Sometimes, the difference between a good player and a great one is how they handle a high-pressure playoff environment. Teams need players who can bring them to the postseason, but there also have to be those 16-game players who can fuel a deep run.

And that was the struggle for Mitch Marnier throughout his time with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Sometimes, the narratives were overblown and spiraled out of control, no matter what Marnier contributed. The spotlight shone even brighter on the top of the lineup because Toronto generally didn't have enough depth support, either.

At the end of the day, he wasn't the playoff contributor Toronto needed. But he has been a total ace for Vegas so far.

It's a combination of the little things and the big moments — from clutch scoring late in games to the defensive details, even while playing center. Marnier's penalty-killing and patience, plus his crafty puck-moving, have been a pivotal part of the Golden Knights' attack so far.

Just take this pass from Game 1; he draws the attention of all five Ducks skaters and finds a passing lane to set up Brett Howden.

These are the types of plays that have always made Marnier a regular-season threat. Now it's translating more consistently to a playoff environment.

The competition so far is a part of it; it's obviously different going head-to-head against the Utah Mammoth and Anaheim Ducks than it was against the Lightning and Panthers in seasons past. But that shouldn't discount Marnier's current levels, either. He leads the playoff field with 16 points in 10 games and isn't showing any signs of slowing down.

LaCombe's matchup game

Connor McDavid was clearly held back by injury in Round 1, but Jackson LaCombe still impressed in that matchup. In 66 head-to-head minutes at five-on-five, the Ducks went up 78-50 in shot attempts, earned a 67 percent xG rate and outscored Edmonton 6-2.

The challenge is that LaCombe isn't just a one-dimensional shutdown threat. He has the skating ability to keep up with stars and disrupt their offensive momentum, and he activates on the other end of the ice and forces opponents to play defense against him. That's what he is putting to the test against the Golden Knights' best.

It has just meant different things for Anaheim on home ice in Games 3 and 4. In Game 3, LaCombe was primarily sent out against Jack Eichel. In about nine minutes of play, the Ducks went up 19-7 in shot attempts, rocked a 72 percent xG rate and broke even in scoring 1-1.

But in Game 4, he was served a heavy dose of Marnier instead — and Vegas won those 10:24 minutes across the board.

It'll be interesting to see how Vegas handles that matchup back on home ice. Originally, the Golden Knights matched Eichel up against LaCombe in Games 1 and 2. But that thinking may have changed after Sunday night. The Ducks may have won, but Marnier showed he could hold his own against LaCombe. That could be the best way to free up the Eichel line and get them going a bit more in Game 5.

Wild's leaky penalty kill

Shortly after killing off Zach Bogosian's interference penalty in the second period last night, the Minnesota Wild went right back to the box. This time, it was Yakov Trenin for closing his hand on the puck. And this time, after Minnesota killed off its first two penalties of the game, the Colorado Avalanche made them pay.

Allowing a power-play goal against has become a playoff staple for the Wild, who have conceded at least one in all 10 playoff games so far. It adds up to 15 so far this postseason (which is almost double the next team, Montreal, with eight), five of which were scored in this series.

It's a total change of pace from the regular season, too. Despite being pretty middle-of-the-road in terms of shot quality, the Wild allowed a league-low 4.81 goals against per 60 in short-handed situations in 24 games out of the Olympic break.

The goaltenders have been far from perfect on the penalty kill, but the skaters in front of the blue paint haven't done them many favors, either. It's easy to chalk it all up to Joel Eriksson Ek and Jonas Brodin's absence, but this has been a trend throughout the playoffs. The Wild have been way too vulnerable up the middle of the ice and in the net-front area throughout the playoffs. The Avs are cooking too much from the left circle, too. It all adds up to 12.3 expected goals against per 60, which is hard for any goalie to contain.

Minnesota was able to win Round 1 despite those penalty-kill woes. Now it's just adding to an avalanche of problems against Colorado.

Avalanche can play any way

With a 5-2 win over Minnesota on Monday night, the Avs are one win away from the Western Conference final, and the list



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of reason why Colorado is in this position is pretty long. On the surface, it's because this is a dominant, star-studded roster that controls five-on-five play. But this year, there's a lot more to it.

This is a team that can win games in all different ways.

The Avs can play tight one-goal games, like they did to open the series against the Los Angeles Kings. Game 1 against Minnesota showed they can win chaotic high-scoring events, too. Colorado has won with its B-game on rare off nights. Some nights it's the stars thriving, with Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Martin Necas taking over. Other nights, it's the Avalanche's deep approach that wins out, like when

Parker Kelly and Ross Colton contributed their first playoffs goals in Game 4. Some wins are thanks to Colorado's up-tempo, rush-based attack; other nights, it's the physicality and forecheck winning out.

Sometimes, it's the shutdown defense that stands out the most and keeps opponents to the outside. Or it's the goaltending leading the way, whether Scott Wedgewood is in net or Mackenzie Blackwood.

That versatility and depth, on top of the outright overwhelming roster strength, is what makes Colorado the team to beat this year.



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NORTH STATE JOURNAL

Hurricanes re-sign Jankowski to 2-year extension

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes have some time off to see who they will face in the Eastern Conference final. It was enough time to take care of some off-the-ice business.

Carolina announced Monday it has signed center Mark Jankowski to a two-year contract extension that will pay him an average of \$1.85 million annually through the 2027-28 season.

“Ever since I’ve been here, I feel like it’s been a seamless fit and wanted to stay here,” Jankowski said in a video conference with the media Monday afternoon. “My agent and the team have been talking for a little bit of time, and then for it to get all wrapped up in the middle of the playoffs here, it was nice to get it done. ... Super excited to be here for a couple more years.”

Jankowski had 11 goals and 21 points in 68 games while playing just over 11 minutes per night during the regular season, supplanting Jesperi Kotkaniemi as the team’s fourth-line center. In this year’s playoffs, he has one assist in eight games as Carolina swept the first two rounds of the postseason.

The 31-year-old, who was acquired from Nashville at the 2025 trade deadline in exchange for a fifth-round draft pick, has scored twice this postseason only to see both goals taken off the board upon video review in two overtime wins.

In Game 2 of the first round against Ottawa, his overtime goal was wiped out after it was ruled Carolina was offside on the zone entry. Jordan Martinook won the game in double overtime. In Saturday’s Game 4 in Philadelphia, Jankowski appeared to score the go-ahead goal in the second period only to have that overturned on a goaltender interference challenge. Jackson Blake won that game in overtime.

“The big thing is we’re winning these games,” Jankowski said. “So obviously it would feel a lot worse if I score, they take it back, and then we ended up losing. So both those games that I scored in, we ended up winning. So that took away a lot of the hurt, for sure.”

Jankowski did plenty of scoring upon arriving in Raleigh last season, scoring twice in his Hurricanes debut and seven times in his first 10 games with the franchise. On top of providing the occasional secondary scoring, Jankowski has both killed penalties and worked on the power play, and he has won more than 51% of his faceoffs since coming to Carolina.

“Mark has been an excellent fit for our organization throughout his time here,” Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsky said in the press release announcing the new contract. “He’s proven he can contribute in different ways, and we are glad he’s chosen to remain with the organization.”

Jankowski’s current contract, a two-year deal worth \$800,000 annually signed with the Predators, is set to expire this summer, and his new contract will give him security — and more than twice as much money — for the next two seasons.

“It definitely feels nice,” Jankowski said. “It definitely feels like all my hard work has been rewarded a little bit. But you definitely don’t want to get complacent. That’s something that I’ve been through a lot. I’ve seen a lot, I’ve been to a lot of different organizations. I’ve been up, I’ve been down, and I think that’s something that I can always carry with me is never get complacent, just keep pushing forward, keep working, keep your foot on the gas.”

“So it definitely feels nice to get that deal and feel like you were rewarded a little bit. But no, (I’m) not taking anything for granted, not getting complacent, that’s for sure.”



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Round 2 Recap: Canes Sweep Flyers

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Looking back at how the Canes continued their historic start to the postseason

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes brought out the brooms, again.

After sweeping the Ottawa Senators in their first-round series, the group became the first team in NHL history to do it again (in two best-of-seven series), ousting the Philadelphia Flyers in the minimum amount of games as well.

The Flyers had been riding the high of a stellar second half of the regular season and a first-round upset of the Pittsburgh Penguins, but turned out to be no match for the Canes in another series highlighted by Logan Stankoven's line and great goaltending from Frederik Andersen.

"How we've gone about it is the impressive part," Rod Brind'Amour reviewed, following the series finale in Philly. "Obviously, we're getting some huge performances, but everybody is doing it. It's how we have to get it done. Go down the list, every guy had his hands in these two series wins."

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.

Game 2: Taylor Hall's OT winner completed the comeback as the Canes erased an early two-goal deficit for their sixth straight win this postseason.

Game 3: A trio of special teams goals paved the way to a 4-1 victory for Carolina in Philly.

Game 4: Jackson Blake scored twice, including the overtime winner, to close out a second consecutive sweep.

Nothing short of impressive, here's a deeper dive into the series that was.

Hall, Stank, and Blake...

Much like the first round, the trio of Taylor Hall, Logan Stankoven, and Jackson Blake drove the ship.

Combining for seven goals and nine assists for a total of 16 points in four games against the Senators, that line enjoyed nearly identical production versus the Flyers, contributing seven goals and eight assists for a total of 15 points.

Responsible for the overtime winners in both Games 2 and 4, their teammates and head coach are running out of words to describe how special their performances have been.

"That line's just been incredible, obviously," Brind'Amour praised. "Hallsy, you've got to give him a lot of credit for how he's played. Blaker and Stanks, they've just really meshed... It was obvious. They were the best guys out there for us, and we needed them."

As of May 11, Stankoven co-leads the Stanley Cup Playoffs with seven goals. Hall sits fifth with his 12 points, and Blake (11) trails just behind, tied for sixth. Not bad for a trio that has played the minimum amount of games.

"It's unreal. It's everything I could ask for," Hall appreciated. "To play on a line with Blakey and Stank and to be a line for 50-60 games, it's a lot of fun to come to work right now. We're winning, and it feels like everyone is contributing. We work hard, and we do it with a smile on our face. That's a fun work environment. It's not like this everywhere. There are some places where it's like this, but this is pretty cool."

Fred, Again...

While the Stankoven line has been scoring enough to carry the Canes through offensive track meets, the team hasn't needed that because Frederik Andersen has been a brick wall behind it all.

Becoming the fourth netminder in Stanley Cup Playoffs history to allow two goals or fewer in each of his first eight starts of a postseason, a feat last achieved 57 years ago, he has taken the reins between the pipes and not looked back.

"I don't know if I've ever seen a goalie play so good, handle the puck so well, and do what he's doing back there," Blake said of his backstop. "We have so much trust in him and what he's going to bring every night."

Recording his eighth straight win and surpassing Cam Ward (2006) for the longest playoff winning streak in franchise history, it's taken a near-flawless effort to get one behind "Zilla."

"He's so calm. You're almost just expecting it every night now, and that's kind of unfair to him," Hall said with a smile. "He forces them to almost make the perfect shot or the perfect play to score. He's a huge reason why our PK is where it is. Some people might not notice how he handles the puck. He's so calm back there. He makes the right play every time, and that makes it a lot easier on our D."



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Never too high with the highs, nor too low with the lows, Andersen has kept the same approach throughout - one save at a time.

"For me, it's just staying with it. That's the key for me. Expect whatever they've got," the veteran backstop reasoned. "I don't really look at the chances and the quality so much, I just try to be in the moment, and whatever happens, if I save the one before, or I don't save it, I just try to save the next one. That's really my focus."

History In The Making...

Arriving at the Eastern Conference Final (ECF) with the longest playoff winning streak in franchise history, an 8-0 start to the postseason has the whole league on notice.

The first team in NHL history to sweep each of their first two best-of-seven series en route to a Conference Finals appearance since it was introduced in 1982, the Canes will have at least another week off before entering final-four play.

Undoubtedly, rest versus rust is always a discussion, but the team can lean on the fact that they had seven days between their Round 1 and Round 2 series, and that turned out just fine.

"It's a good thing because we're going to be one of four teams left. However long we have to rest or be off, we'll do it. I think the good part is that we literally just had the same exact thing and we had a plan, and clearly, it was okay. So we can follow that and run with it," Brind'Amour told reporters in Philadelphia.

Reaching the ECF for the third time in four seasons, and the fourth time in eight years under Brind'Amour, the head coach also said he wants his players to stay in the moment and enjoy the fruits of their labor.

"It's a huge accomplishment. Right now, you need to soak that part of it in, because it is (a huge accomplishment)," the head coach passionately remarked. "The season is so long. There's the 82-game regular season that we talk about that no one really gives credit to, yet this team's played well for eight months. They didn't just get hot at the end. Night in and night out. That's the biggest takeaway for me. Probably the thing that I'm most proud of with this group is that. Now, here we are. We have to find a way to get to the next step. That's obviously easier said than done. I know one thing is that they're going to give that same effort, and that's what we have to have."



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How Taylor Hall found his MVP form again with the Hurricanes - ESPN

By: Greg Wyshynski

PHILADELPHIA – Before Logan Stankoven was Taylor Hall's linemate on the Carolina Hurricanes, he was a Taylor Hall fan.

Stankoven was 7 years old when Hall, now 34, debuted with the Edmonton Oilers in 2010. He loved watching Hall flying down the wing, using his speed to create offensive chances.

"He's so fun to watch," Stankoven said. "Plus he can just crush some guys. Definitely keep your head up if he's around."

The Ottawa Senators witnessed that firsthand in the first round of the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs. In Game 3, Hall delivered a punishing forechecking hit on defenseman Jake Sanderson, with his shoulder connecting with Sanderson's head. Sanderson didn't play in Game 4. Hall was given a minor penalty and nothing further from the NHL Department of Player Safety. Ottawa fans were not pleased.

"I didn't know what the reaction was going to be. Then I get the puck on the first shift and I'm getting booed," Hall said. "I just had to refocus a little bit and know they were really going to be physical on me because of what happened. You can run away from it or lean into it, and that's what I chose to do."

As the Hurricanes roll through the playoffs at a record pace -- they're the first team to sweep the opening two rounds since the NHL's current playoff format was established in 1987 -- Hall has leaned all the way in. He has delivered pulverizing hits. He's been an antagonist, drawing more penalties per 60 minutes (1.86) than any other Hurricanes skater.

But more than anything, he's been a dominant offensive force: 12 points (three goals, nine assists) in eight games, including a game-winning overtime goal in Game 2 against the Philadelphia Flyers. His line with Stankoven and Jackson Blake is the best in the postseason, generating 67.2% of the expected goals at 5-on-5.

It's been a while since hockey fans saw this version of Taylor Hall. "A lot of people are saying this is a blast from the past from him," Stankoven said.

Hall is 16 seasons removed from being the first overall pick in the NHL draft. He's nine seasons removed from winning the Hart Trophy as NHL MVP with the New Jersey Devils. When Carolina acquired him in 2025 as the sidebar to the large-type headline of the Mikko Rantanen trade, it was his sixth team in six seasons. Now, he has found a home with the Hurricanes and has played himself into the Conn Smythe conversation through two rounds of the playoffs.

"It's unreal. It's everything I could ask for. It's a lot of fun to come to work right now. We work hard, but we do it with a smile on our face," he said. "It's not like this everywhere."

Taylor Hall would know.

IN 2010, there was one question perplexing the NHL: "Taylor or Tyler?"

Taylor Hall was a tough winger for the Windsor Spitfires, scoring 106 points in 57 games in his final Ontario Hockey League season while winning a second straight Memorial Cup. Tyler Seguin was an elite skilled center for the Plymouth Whalers, scoring 106 points in 63 games in his last OHL campaign.

The Oilers were the worst team in the NHL in 2009-10 and retained their first overall pick in the draft lottery. They went Taylor over Tyler. "I don't think I've ever met a more focused, competitive athlete," Oilers GM Steve Tambellini said at the time.

Hall was the bright light in what would become known as the Oilers' "Decade of Darkness" that spanned from their 2006 Stanley Cup Final loss to Carolina through the miraculous arrival of Connor McDavid in 2015. Hall had 328 points in 381 games. He had seven different coaches. He didn't get a sniff of the playoffs.

In 2016, a new phrase entered the lexicon of NHL fans: The "trade is one for one."

That was how venerable hockey insider Bob McKenzie of TSN started his tweet describing the deal that sent Hall to the Devils for right-shot defenseman Adam Larsson, the fourth overall pick in 2011 who hadn't quite met his potential yet. ESPN gave the Devils an A-plus. The Oilers got a C.

After failing to make the playoffs again in his first season with the Devils, Hall would have a career-defining season in 2017-18: 40 goals and 55 assists for 95 points in 76 games, lifting New Jersey to its first playoff berth in six seasons. Hall won the Hart Trophy for a torrid stretch that saw him score points in 36 of his last 40 games of the season, including a remarkable run of 44 points in 22 games.

With free agency looming at the end of the 2019-20 season, the Devils shipped him to the Arizona Coyotes during an uncharacteristic spending spree from the now-defunct franchise. He spent 35 games with the Coyotes before becoming the most coveted free agent forward in 2020. Hall stunned the NHL by signing a one-year, \$8 million contract with the Buffalo Sabres -- not exactly the franchise someone who talked about chasing a Stanley Cup would pick at that time. But it reunited him with coach Ralph Krueger, for whom he had enjoyed playing in Edmonton.

Krueger was fired in March 2021. A few weeks later, Hall was traded to the Boston Bruins, where he'd make the playoffs for three straight seasons. Hall didn't pass up the chance to make his mark on the biggest stage, tallying 17 points in 25 postseason games for Boston.



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It was clear that when Taylor Hall had a chance to compete for a championship, his competitive fire still raged. But in 2023, facing a salary cap crunch, the Bruins shipped Hall and forward Nick Foligno to a very noncompetitive team: the moribund Chicago Blackhawks, who wanted Hall to mentor first overall pick Connor Bedard like he did Connor McDavid when the two were in Edmonton for McDavid's rookie season.

Hall's time in Chicago was hockey misery. His first season saw him recover from a shoulder injury only to have his season end after 10 games with ACL surgery. His second season saw coach Luke Richardson make him a healthy scratch without giving Hall any notice, something unusual for a veteran of Hall's stature. The Blackhawks were abjectly terrible during Hall's two seasons there, with the second worst points percentage (.345) in the NHL.

Carolina GM Eric Tulsky kept an eye on Hall in Chicago. Yes, he was 33 and in statistic decline. But his attributes ideally fit the Hurricanes' system, like using his speed to cut down on the time and space of opponents, and using his skill to create chances in high-danger areas.

"He's a very skilled player who we believed could fit with the way we want to play," Tulsky told ESPN. "We're looking for players who we think will come here and look their best, and he fit that mold for us."

But there was another intangible Carolina liked: Putting a Stanley Cup back within Hall's reach and seeing the former Hart Trophy winner emerge from his professional malaise.

"I mean, that was certainly part of it," Tulsky said.

On Jan. 24, 2025, the Hurricanes shocked the NHL by acquiring Colorado Avalanche superstar Mikko Rantanen. Chicago helped facilitate that trade by picking up half of Rantanen's salary and sent Hall to Carolina in the transaction.

Rantanen would play just 13 games with the Hurricanes before it became apparent that he wouldn't sign long-term in Raleigh. Tulsky shocked the hockey world a second time by trading Rantanen to the Dallas Stars in a deal that sent Stankoven -- now Hall's very successful linemate -- to the Hurricanes.

While Rantanen wouldn't commit to the Hurricanes, Hall gladly did so, signing a three-year, \$9.5 million extension last April. His journey after leaving Edmonton was a formative one. Hall said all the movement helped him "build emotional intelligence" as a player and become a better person.

But he was relieved to put roots down in Raleigh.

"I couldn't imagine being in a better spot, teamwise. Just the mix of guys that we have," Hall said.

JUST LIKE STANKOVEN, Carolina defenseman Jalen Chatfield was a Taylor Hall fan before he was Taylor Hall's teammate. He played for the Windsor Spitfires in Canadian juniors from 2014 to 2017, and Hall's legacy loomed large.

"They said he was a little older when he was coming here [to Carolina], but all I see is the young Hallsy," Chatfield said. "Fast, elite skill and a great leader on our team, too."

The Hurricanes' dressing room doesn't lack for veterans, whether its captain Jordan Staal, in his 20th season in the

NHL, or defenseman Jaccob Slavin, fresh off a gold medal win for the U.S. in the Milan Cortina Olympics. Hall's leadership, vocally and by example, has been a valuable addition to that group.

"I always talk to him. He probably doesn't even know it, but I'm always picking things up from him," Chatfield said. "The way he's stepped up for us has been huge. A guy of his caliber is capable of that."

That's one reason the emergence of Hall's line has been so exciting for the Hurricanes. Stankoven, who has seven goals in eight games, is in his third NHL season. Blake, 22, is in his second full NHL season, and he is second on the Hurricanes this postseason with 11 points. Hall has unlocked the offensive dominance of two key parts of Carolina's future. Hurricanes forward Jordan Martinook believes they've done the same for Hall.

"Those two young guys have brought the best out of Hallsy," he said. "It's always been there with him -- he's obviously been an MVP. But in the playoffs, he's elevated his game, and that's awesome."

Game 2 against the Flyers encapsulated that effort. With five seconds left in regulation and the score tied, Philadelphia center Noah Cates had a chance in win it with the puck on his stick in the slot. Hall got low to the ice and made a kick save with his right skate to deflect the puck out of play.

"I wanted to challenge him and kind of went road hockey goalie there for a second," Hall said. "Anyone on our team is going to sell out to try and block that if the situation comes. That was my turn."

It was then his turn to play the scoring hero. Hall got a shot on goalie Dan Vladar while wearing Flyers forward Denver Barkey like a coat and falling to the ice. He got to his skates, and defenseman Travis Sanheim was unable to prevent Hall from knocking the puck in for the game winner.

"That's a pro that just understands how to evaluate his game," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "The one thing about Hallsy that we know is that he wants to make a difference. That goal, to me, sums it up. You could almost tell when he grabbed it that he was like 'I'm going to put this one away.'"

In Game 3, Hall was back to being the antagonist. In the second period, Hall skated over to deliver a hit on Sanheim, who had dropped to one knee after the puck was played ahead. Hall crushed him against the sideboards. The officials gave him a five-minute major penalty for boarding to review the call.

What could have been a turning point in the game was undercut when the penalty was reduced to a two-minute minor for boarding -- and then Carolina vampirically siphoned the rest of the moment by scoring a short-handed goal 10 minutes later.

The Flyers would go after Hall for the rest of the night.

"It just felt like his hands drove my head right through the wall. I thought it was a pretty dirty play," Sanheim said. "It just felt like he could have laid off a little bit. He decided to put me right through the wall. I guess that's his decision."



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Hall didn't have a point in Game 3. That he was still a force in the game is, in Hall's estimation, a sign of his growth as a player.

"As you get older and you play this game a while, you have to figure out if you don't have your A-game. do you have your B-minus game or something close to that? You find a way to contribute. That's hockey," he said. "As I get older and play this game more and more, you're not always going to feel or play your best. But if you can find a way to contribute and not be an anchor on your line, then you're good."

Hurricanes sweep Senators with 4-2 win

Hurricanes score three goals in the second half to down the Senators 4-2 and sweep the series.

Hall has played 989 games over 16 seasons without winning the Stanley Cup. His appearance last season in the Eastern Conference finals with Carolina was his deepest playoff run. He's not Brent Burns (1,579 career games over 22 years) on

the "Old Guy Without a Cup" ranking, but he's certainly one of the biggest-name veterans still alive in the playoffs who is searching to raise the Cup for the first time.

"He wants to win. He's doing whatever he has to do to help the team," Brind'Amour said.

Conversely, the Hurricanes had been desperate to win under Brind'Amour. Despite being one of the NHL's most successful and respected coaches, his teams have yet to play in the Stanley Cup Final in his eight years behind the bench.

"This team has been chasing it. When you step in this locker room, you know our culture. It's either you get with it or you don't," Chatfield said.

Taylor Hall clearly gets it. And now he and the Hurricanes are eight wins away from getting what they've both been chasing for years.



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The Hockey News

The Carolina Hurricanes "Cakewalk" To The Eastern Conference Final

By: Ryan Henkel

Defying critics who dismiss their historic back-to-back sweeps as easy wins, Carolina's statistical dominance proves they are a balanced juggernaut capable of dismantling the NHL's hottest defensive units.

The Carolina Hurricanes are the first team to advance to the conference finals this year, completing back-to-back sweeps over the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers.

To sweep any team is hard, but to sweep two in succession is virtually unheard of, especially in a sport like hockey and in a league with as much parity as the NHL.

However, there's been quite a few narratives floated around about how the Canes simply had a "cakewalk" schedule.

Sure, the team didn't have to face any of the narrative darlings that usually dominate postseason discussions such as the Tampa Bay Lightning (who lost in the first round for the fourth straight year), but it isn't like the two teams they faced were pushovers.

In fact, Ottawa and Philadelphia finished the regular season ranked ninth and 10th in the league respectively, with a combined total of 197 points.

And perhaps a lot of the disparagement for Carolina's first two opponents also comes from the fact that they barely made the playoff cut.

But isn't how a team performs heading into the postseason a better litmus test than looking at the season as a whole?

Because if we look from the Olympic break to the final day of the regular season, the Flyers (37) had the third most points in the league and the Senators had the fifth (36).

Furthermore, in that span, no team allowed less goals than the Flyers (35) and the Senators weren't far behind at seventh (44) and both teams were also in the top-seven for expected goals against and high-danger chances against.

That means that heading into the playoffs, there were very few teams who were playing better defensive hockey than the two teams the Hurricanes faced.

During that stretch, both Dan Vladar and Linus Ullmark also had save percentages over 0.900, which was well above the league average for the season (0.889).

They were also both in the top-20 amongst goalies for goals saved above expected in the final 20 games, combining to stop 13.3 goals above expected.

Even further, Ottawa was one of the better special teams teams coming out of the Olympic break, with the sixth-ranked penalty kill (82.4%) and the eighth best power play (26%).

Those don't sound like cakewalks to me.

Perhaps people should be more willing to give the Hurricanes a little more credit.

Carolina is a machine. They know what they want to do and they're going to execute that same game plan every single time.

They dare their opponents to try and stop them and, so far, nobody's been able to.

The Hurricanes have been a defensive juggernaut, allowing just 50.1 chances, 22.18 scoring chances and 9.77 high danger chances against per 60.

On the flip side, no team is creating more chances, scoring chances and high-danger chances than them either.

They have the highest expected goals rate in the entire postseason and that isn't just from an endless cycle of low percentage shots.

They've been downright lethal off of the rush and most of their offensive generation comes from those transitional chances.

But it doesn't end there.

In goal, no netminder has been better than Frederik Andersen, who's pacing the league in wins (8), save percentage (0.950), shutouts (2) and goals saved above expected (11.2).

And you want to guess at who's number 2 and 3 for GSAX?

Dan Vladar (8.5) and Linus Ullmark (6.7), so that's perhaps why Carolina hasn't been as able to run up the score quite as some of the other playoff teams.

Oh and how about that penalty kill?

Carolina has been far and away the best shorthanded team in the entire postseason, allowing virtually nothing.

They don't allow any easy entries and their relentless pressure gives opponents no team to operate.

Despite being the most shorthanded team all playoffs, including nearly three and half more minutes at 5v3 than any other team, the Canes have allowed just two goals against while shorthanded, while scoring one themselves.

This isn't to say that the Canes are going to cruise their way all the way to a Stanley Cup. I mean, this is hockey after all. They could get swept themselves in the Eastern Conference Final.

But I just think people should be putting a little more respect on the Hurricanes and how good they've been through the first two rounds, because until Saturday, back-to-back sweeps simply hadn't happened in over 50 years.

Maybe, just maybe, this team is actually good



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SportScan

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

1390990 Carolina Hurricanes

Inside Frederik Andersen's blazing start for the Hurricanes in 2026 NHL playoffs

Chip Alexander8-10 minutes 11/05/2026

Fred-die, Fred-die, Fred-die ...

It's all the rage, you know. Goaltender Frederik Andersen has been making saves, winning games and impressing, well, everyone, as the Canes have zoomed into the Eastern Conference Final in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"He's locked in, an absolute brick wall," defenseman Jaccob Slavin said.

Who can argue?

Not Canes fans. They've been chanting his name at Lenovo Center since the playoffs began.

Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour has been asked about Andersen more and more as Andersen has started and won the first eight playoff games. Brind'Amour has said all the right praiseworthy things.

But it's almost like that baseball superstition about the pitcher in the midst of throwing a no-hitter: admire from afar but the less said, the better. Just leave him alone and let him keep hanging up the zeroes.

Or in Andersen's case, it has been 0, 2, 1, 2, 0, 2, 1, 2.

That's his goals-allowed linescore, so to speak, as the Canes swept the Ottawa Senators in four games in the opening round of the playoffs, then did the same to the Philadelphia Flyers in the second. Andersen became the first goalie since Hall of Famer Jacques Plante in 1969 to begin the playoffs allowing two goals or fewer in his first eight games.

"I'm just sitting back and watching that. I don't think anyone predicted that," Brind'Amour said.

Andersen 'playing lights out'

Andersen opened each series with a shutout win, in the Canes' case the perfect tone-setting start. Three of the eight wins came in overtime, when

one lapse in net can cost you a game, perhaps shift momentum in the series.

The Hurricanes twice went to OT against the Flyers, who clawed their way into the playoffs down the stretch and then held off the Pittsburgh Penguins in the opening round. Jackson Blake's goal, his second of the game, was the winner Saturday in a 3-2 victory that ended the series in Philadelphia's Xfinity Mobile Arena.

Andersen's numbers through the first two rounds: a 1.12 goals-against average and .950 save percentage, having stopped 191 of 201 shots.

"He's been playing lights-out," Brind'Amour said Saturday.

Andersen has been in such a groove, so unflappable, that he once defended the net with his paddle upside down after being jostled and knocked down in the crease by the Flyers' Alex Bump.

Brind'Amour went into the playoffs saying the Canes probably would need to use both Andersen and goalie Brandon Bussi. He hasn't had to call Bussi's name yet.

"They both deserve to play, but there's been no reason to go in any other direction," Brind'Amour said.

Andersen, 36, has had playoff success before in his career, with the Anaheim Ducks and Toronto Maple Leafs before coming to Carolina in 2022. He has now played in 93 playoff games and has 54 wins, seven of them shutouts. His career numbers are a 2.28 GAA and .916 save percentage.

Hurricanes benefit from keeper's calm

Andersen isn't a flashy goalie. The Dane, a big presence in net at 6-4 and 229 pounds, makes the occasional flopping, scrambling save but at his best is poker-faced and smooth in his play, making tough saves appear routine, with a modicum of movement. He has been unfazed by the havoc around him in the playoffs, especially when the Canes have been shorthanded and had to kill off penalties.

"And what some people may not notice is how well he handles the puck," forward Taylor Hall said Saturday. "He's so calm back there. He makes the right play every time and makes it a lot easier on our D."

The Canes' defense has made it easier for Andersen at times, too. He faced just 17 shots Saturday.



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"The extra layer," Andersen called Slavin and his D corps.

Andersen has had his share of knee issues in his career. His numbers during the regular season were pedestrian as Bussi carried much of the load.

But Andersen enjoyed the thrill of a lifetime in playing for his native Denmark in the Milan Winter Olympics. He didn't win a medal, but now is after the NHL's biggest prize and seemingly inspired by it all, judging by his play.

Buffalo or Montreal? The Canes plan on being ready for either in the conference final and for now can sit back and watch those two battle it out.

The Eastern Conference final will begin with two games at Lenovo Center. The dates and game times for the best-of-seven series will be announced later by the league.

"Every series is a race to four," Andersen said Saturday. "That's our mindset. You want to win the next one, however you have to do it. That's really the focus."

News Observer LOADED: 05.12.2026

1390991 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes re-sign Jankowski to 2-year extension

4-5 minutes 11/05/2026

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes have some time off to see who they will face in the Eastern Conference final. It was enough time to take care of some off-the-ice business.

Carolina announced Monday it has signed center Mark Jankowski to a two-year contract extension that will pay him an average of \$1.85 million annually through the 2027-28 season.

"Ever since I've been here, I feel like it's been a seamless fit and wanted to stay here," Jankowski said in a video conference with the media Monday afternoon. "My agent and the team have been talking for a little bit of time, and then for it to get all wrapped up in the middle of the playoffs here, it was nice to get it done. ... Super excited to be here for a couple more years."

Jankowski had 11 goals and 21 points in 68 games while playing just over 11 minutes per night during the regular season, supplanting Jesperi Kotkaniemi as the team's fourth-line center. In this year's playoffs, he has one assist in eight games as Carolina swept the first two rounds of the postseason.

The 31-year-old, who was acquired from Nashville at the 2025 trade deadline in exchange for a fifth-round draft pick, has scored twice this postseason only to see both goals taken off the board upon video review in two overtime wins.

In Game 2 of the first round against Ottawa, his overtime goal was wiped out after it was ruled Carolina was offside on the zone entry. Jordan Martinook won the game in double overtime. In Saturday's Game 4 in Philadelphia, Jankowski appeared to score the go-ahead goal in the second period only to have that overturned on a goaltender interference challenge. Jackson Blake won that game in overtime.

"The big thing is we're winning these games," Jankowski said. "So obviously it would feel a lot worse if I score, they take it back, and then we ended up losing. So both those games that I scored in, we ended up winning. So that took away a lot of the hurt, for sure."

Jankowski did plenty of scoring upon arriving in Raleigh last season, scoring twice in his Hurricanes debut and seven times in his first 10 games with the franchise. On top of providing the occasional secondary scoring, Jankowski has both killed penalties and worked on the power play, and he has won more than 51% of his faceoffs since coming to Carolina.

"Mark has been an excellent fit for our organization throughout his time here," Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsy said in the press release announcing the new contract. "He's proven he can contribute in different ways, and we are glad he's chosen to remain with the organization."

Jankowski's current contract, a two-year deal worth \$800,000 annually signed with the Predators, is set to expire this summer, and his new contract will give him security — and more than twice as much money — for the next two seasons.

"It definitely feels nice," Jankowski said. "It definitely feels like all my hard work has been rewarded a little bit. But you definitely don't want to get complacent. That's something that I've been through a lot. I've seen a lot, I've been to a lot of different organizations. I've been up, I've been down, and I think that's something that I can always carry with me is never get complacent, just keep pushing forward, keep working, keep your foot on the gas."

"So it definitely feels nice to get that deal and feel like you were rewarded a little bit. But no, (I'm) not taking anything for granted, not getting complacent, that's for sure."

North State Journal LOADED: 05.12.2026

1391080 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Mock Draft 2026: All 32 first-round picks projected by Corey Pronman

By Corey Pronman

With the draft lottery setting the order of the first 16 picks of the 2026 NHL Draft, we are officially in mock draft season. Today, I make my first projection for the top-32 picks. Keep in mind we're still pretty early in the process, so intel on teams and players is scarce, and this is mostly based on where I think players' ranges will be on draft night.

1. Toronto Maple Leafs: Gavin McKenna, LW, Penn State (NCAA)

McKenna is the consensus favorite for the top spot right now, though we're still early enough in the process that it's not a done deal yet. There are camps in the scouting world that have other preferences, be it a particular defenseman, Ivar Stenberg, or Caleb Malhotra. It's hard to see the Maple Leafs passing on his dynamic skill and vision at No. 1 as it currently stands.

2. San Jose Sharks: Chase Reid, RHD, Sault Ste. Marie (OHL)

If McKenna goes first, the Sharks face a massive debate between adding another high-skill forward into what's becoming a crowded power play or anchoring their blue line. Reid's name comes up often in those conversations as arguably the draft's most talented defender who can quarterback the power play with San Jose's young forwards for a decade.

3. Vancouver Canucks: Caleb Malhotra, C, Brantford (OHL)

Malhotra is the hot name in the scouting community currently after his OHL postseason. Teams in this range are debating the value of his all-around center profile versus taking a swing on a high-skill winger such as



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Stenberg or McKenna. For a lot of teams, he's right here, and very well could go as high as No. 3 to Vancouver.

4. Chicago Blackhawks: Ivar Stenberg, LW, Frölunda (SHL)

I think the dream for Chicago is to add a dynamic scorer to eventually pair with Connor Bedard. Stenberg's electric puck skills fit the bill, though there are still mixed opinions on how high he ultimately goes. Some think he could be gone by No. 4, but history lacks precedent of two 5-foot-11 wingers going at the very top of the draft.

5. New York Rangers: Carson Carels, LHD, Prince George (WHL)

If the board goes like this to start, I think you will see a run on defensemen, as there is a very good top group of blueliners remaining. Carels' heavy, competitive style to go with some offense certainly fits what the Rangers like from their defenders.

6. Calgary Flames: Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, North Dakota (NCAA)

Calgary needs everything right now in its rebuild except probably a power-play QB after taking Zayne Parekh. Verhoeff's combination of size, feet and offense will be hard to pass up at No. 6.

7. Seattle Kraken: Alberts Smits, LHD, Munich (DEL)

Seattle has heavily drafted forwards in recent years, leading to early speculation that the Kraken might pivot to the blue line with this pick. Smits offers great size and mobility along with decent offensive skills, which could make him a prime target if they look for someone to play major NHL minutes.

8. Winnipeg Jets: Malte Gustafsson, LHD, HV71 (SHL)

Winnipeg has a track record of coveting big, rangy defensemen, and Gustafsson's name has generated a lot of buzz in this range recently after a great U18 worlds. His excellent gap control, good puck-moving skills and rugged play make him an easy projection for a top four in the NHL.

9. Florida Panthers: Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Prince Albert (WHL)

It's been a while since Florida picked this high, so it's hard to get a read on the Panthers' preferences. The league loves Rudolph; his elite brain makes him a strong top-10 pick candidate, and he could even be gone by No. 9.

10. Nashville Predators: Wyatt Cullen, LW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

Cullen's massive recent growth spurt has his stock rising, making him one of the true wild cards of the top 10 due to his elite skill level. Guys with late helium tend to keep rising, and along with Malhotra and Gustafsson, he's been one of the late risers in this draft cycle.

11. St. Louis Blues: Oscar Hemming, LW, Boston College (NCAA)

The Blues are transitioning between GMs this summer, so it's hard to predict their tendencies here, but Hemming is very well thought of in the league. Hemming is highly physical with size, while also having a good amount of talent that makes him a potential hard-nosed top-six winger.

12. New Jersey Devils: Viggo Björck, C, Djurgården (SHL)

Where Björck lands will be fascinating because he's extremely talented and competitive, but he is also 5-foot-9. Teams will wrestle with whether he's Brayden Point or closer to Marco Rossi or Matt Savoie.

13. New York Islanders: Tynan Lawrence, C, Boston University (NCAA)

Lawrence was very well thought of in the league six months ago, with many teams having him in the top three, but he's plummeted in the second half of the season after average performances in college and at the U18 worlds. He's a great skater and competitor down the middle, but the level of offense in his game is a minor concern.

14. Columbus Blue Jackets: Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor (OHL)

Belchetz was once thought of as a potential top-five pick due to his massive 6-foot-5 frame, hard elements and being able to score. He didn't have a great season, though, and scouts have concerns about his pace. This deep into the draft, though, he starts to become very enticing, and Columbus takes the swing on him at No. 14.

15. St. Louis Blues: Oliver Suvanto, C, Tappara (Liiga)

With their second pick, the Blues bolster their center depth. Suvanto's direct, highly competitive net-front style to go along with legit offense is a highly desirable player type, even if his feet are a bit heavy.

16. Washington Capitals: Alexander Command, C, Örebro (U20 Nationell)

Washington has been checking in on several centers in this range as it looks toward the future. Command is viewed around the league as a highly projectable, safe bet for the middle six, which could appeal to their brass.

17. Los Angeles Kings: Elton Hermansson, RW, MoDo (SHL)

Hermansson's stock is a bit all over the place in May, with teams loving his puck skills but questioning his consistency. He's coming off a great tournament at the U18s where he led Sweden to gold, though. He's one of the most purely talented players left in the draft and has top-six potential if he hits.

18. Washington Capitals: JP Hurlbert, LW, Kamloops (WHL)

After getting a well-rounded center with their first pick, Washington rolls the dice in some ways on a much more skilled player in Hurlbert, who has more holes. Hurlbert is one of the more purely talented scorers and playmakers in the draft, but he is just an OK skater who can be inconsistent.

19. Utah Mammoth: Maddox Dagenais, C, Quebec (QMJHL)

Utah loves raw athletic tools, and Dagenais fits the type it tends to target. Dagenais moves exceptionally well for being 6-foot-4; he plays with an edge and has enough skill and scoring ability to play in the league.

20. San Jose Sharks: Gleb Pugachyov, RW, Nizhny Novgorod Jr. (MHL)

After securing an elite defenseman at the top of the draft, the Sharks add a big, heavy winger to their forward corps with this pick. Pugachyov has exciting pure tools, skates well and plays with a ton of bite. While there are some questions about his pure offense, his heavy elements will complement the skill in the Sharks' system.

21. Philadelphia Flyers: Casey Mutryn, RW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

Philadelphia loves hard-nosed, competitive players, making Mutryn a very natural fit for their organizational identity. He's a hardworking, physical 6-foot-3 winger who plays at an NHL tempo and has some offensive touch too. He complements the skill the Flyers have in their forward group.

22. Pittsburgh Penguins: Ryan Lin, RHD, Vancouver (WHL)

Pittsburgh doesn't really have a future power-play QB in its prospect pool, and Lin could be that. He's a highly intelligent defenseman, and despite being undersized and having average skating, he competes hard and wins a surprising amount of battles, giving him a chance to be a quality NHL defenseman.

23. Boston Bruins: Adam Goljer, RHD, Trencin (Extraliga)

Goljer is trending up with teams after a strong worlds and the Bruins haven't picked a defenseman in the first round in a decade. Goljer skates well, breaks up plays effectively, and makes a good first pass, even if he doesn't project as a major offensive driver. He projects to become a dependable top-four presence on the Bruins' blue line.



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24. Vancouver Canucks: Adam Novotny, LW, Peterborough (OHL)

After taking Malhotra, the Canucks use their second first-rounder on the versatile Novotny. He has NHL-level speed and skill and can play in a variety of spots in a lineup.

25. Montreal Canadiens: Liam Ruck, RW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

Montreal has shown it isn't afraid to bet on sheer hockey sense, making Ruck an intriguing target here. He's a dangerous, intelligent scoring winger who relies on his great stick and brain rather than elite athletic tools. Despite being a below-average skater, he gets to the hard areas to generate offense, giving him a chance to be a middle-six contributor.

26. Seattle Kraken: Ilya Morozov, C, Miami (NCAA)

Seattle grabs a big, physical center in Morozov, who plays a style that translates directly to winning playoff hockey. He skates well for his size, uses his frame to win battles and competes at a high level. He may never be a prolific point producer, and some teams view him more as a bottom-six type, but centers are hard to come by.

27. New York Rangers: Brooks Rogowski, C, Oshawa (OHL)

The Rangers take a massive swing on sheer upside with Rogowski, whose aesthetic tools are impossible to ignore. A 6-foot-7 center who moves well with enough puck skills is a rare thing to see. His ultimate scoring potential will be debated, but he's just as talented as someone such as 2024 Bruins pick Dean Letourneau was at the same point.

28. Calgary Flames: Jack Hextall, C, Youngstown (USHL)

Calgary adds a highly intelligent, diligent pivot to its prospect pool in Hextall with its second pick after going defense with its first selection. He's a slick playmaker with excellent offensive sense who doesn't shy away from going into traffic to make plays. Though his skating doesn't stand out and he hasn't been a prolific scorer, his strong two-way detail makes him a very safe bet to be a useful pro down the middle.

29. Buffalo Sabres: William Håkansson, LHD, Luleå (SHL)

Buffalo adds a massive, highly competitive defenseman in Håkansson. He moves very well for his size, plays the body aggressively and excels at killing plays defensively. While his offensive ceiling and puck play are limited, his high-end compete level and physical tools project him as a highly dependable everyday NHL defender, and Buffalo has plenty of guys who can slot onto a power play.

30. Carolina Hurricanes: Nikita Klepov, LW, Saginaw (OHL)

Carolina has a long history of betting on pure hockey sense and skill in the draft, and Klepov fits that mold perfectly. He's a highly intelligent winger with the ability to consistently make difficult plays and potentially run an NHL power play. He lacks dynamic athleticism and can be pushed to the perimeter, but the Hurricanes are the exact type of organization to bet on his talent after leading the OHL in scoring.

31. St. Louis Blues: Marcus Nordmark, LW, Djurgården (U20 Nationell)

Armed with their third pick of the first round, the Blues can afford to swing on Nordmark's immense raw talent. At 6-foot-2, he skates very well, possesses highly gifted hands and can break open a shift with his flashy offensive abilities. He comes with notable risk due to an inconsistent effort level and some bad habits, but his pure tools are those of a top-six NHL winger.

32. Ottawa Senators: Juho Piiparinen, RHD, Tappara (Liiga)

Ottawa closes out the first round by adding a steady, projectable right-shot defenseman to its system. Piiparinen is a mobile blueliner who moves pucks up the ice cleanly and uses his length to break up plays defensively. He doesn't truly excel at any one specific trait, and his offensive upside is a question mark, but he's a dependable defender

whom coaches tend to trust and projects to log a decent number of NHL minutes.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2026

1391081 Websites

The Athletic / All 12 Stanley Cup Final matchups left in play, ranked purely on narratives

By Sean McIndoe

You know what they say: When it comes to a hockey playoff series, all that matters is what happens on the ice. You wave away the distractions and noise and just focus on the games being played.

That's what they say, because they are fools. It's the playoffs. It's all about the narrative, baby.

OK, I'll acknowledge the slight possibility that my media background is shining through here, and not everyone cares about pre-built storylines quite as much as I've been trained to. But it's my column, so today we're doing narratives.

Specifically, we're looking ahead to the various possible matchups we could see in the final. With the Philadelphia Flyers out, we're down to 12 possible combinations of teams, and please don't ask me how long it took to figure that math out on my own without asking Dom.

Let's look ahead to what June could bring, ranked from the least to the most enticing, based purely on the narratives that people like me will beat into the ground.

12. Carolina Hurricanes vs. Anaheim Ducks

Or, as the narrative will call it: The Frederik Andersen series.

Fans used to shudder at the term "playoff Freddie", but he's been fantastic so far this spring. Will he cool down over the roughly 47 days off Carolina will have before their next series? Maybe, but for now, the 36-year-old is emerging as one of the top stories of the playoffs. Having the rare OGWAC goalie story facing the team he started his career with in a full-circle moment would be some strong long-term booking. (And I'm going to go ahead and say it would be the first time in NHL history that one of the goalies in a final was drafted by both teams involved.)

And a bonus narrative: The original cap-era champs battle for entry into the two-timers club. Carolina won in 2006, the Ducks won in 2007, and neither team has even been back to a final since. Five teams have won multiple Stanley Cups in the cap era, and one of these teams would get to join them.

11. Minnesota Wild vs. Montreal Canadiens

Or, as the narrative will call it: The Cinderella Habs face their kryptonite.

Apologies for the mixed pop culture metaphors, but it fits. A series between these two teams would probably just focus on their star players. We'd definitely do the Cole Caufield Olympic snub revenge narrative with Bill Guerin, and maybe we'd find a way to force a "Quinn Hughes and Kirill Kaprizov as the future for Lane Hutson and Ivan Demidov" sort of deal.

But don't sleep on the weird and probably entirely flukish one-sided history between these two teams. It was big news when the Canadiens beat the Wild earlier this year, because it was only the second time it had happened in ten seasons. And as far as Montreal winning in Minnesota, you somehow have to go all the way back to 2011, a game so long ago that it featured a hat trick for a rookie named P.K. Subban.



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Why does Montreal have so much trouble against Minnesota? Is this somehow related to the old North Stars being the ones to end the last Canadiens dynasty? I'm not sure. But if this is our final, we might find out.

10. Colorado Avalanche vs. Buffalo Sabres

Or, as the narrative will call it: The ultimate bandwagon faces the final boss.

On one side, you have the 98-pound weakling who's been getting sand kicked in their face for decades. But now, finally, they're fighting back, and might be ready to shed their loser image once and for all.

And who do you think they need to get through to make it happen? Just the biggest bully in the league. The Avs are everything the Sabres have ever wanted to be — this year's Presidents' Trophy winner, with multiple Cup banners already hanging in their rink and a roster of all-time legends having worn the uniform. And they've done it all in roughly half the time the Sabres have been around. As far as final tests go, you couldn't draw up a better one for Buffalo's underdog story.

Mix in the Bowen Byram revenge subplot, a ton of talent on both sides, and that it would mean the Sabres' Adams Division revenge tour story came true, and this one would be all sorts of fun.

9. Montreal Canadiens vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Or, as the narrative will call it: The rematch from 2021 ... with a key returning character.

The 2020-21 season was weird. It was the COVID year, with remade divisions and baseball-style schedules and empty buildings with piped-in crowd noise. And through it all, the Canadiens nearly pulled off a miracle.

Beating the spotlight-wilting Maple Leafs was one thing. Same with the so-so Jets. But the Knights were big dogs back then, and should have had an easy time dispatching the upstart Canadiens. Instead, we got an oddly fascinating series featuring close games, lots of overtime and some wild bounces. It was fun. And five years later, we'd get a rematch.

Is there anyone left from that series? Barely, which is why this one can't rate much higher. But one player who was around back then: Montreal's Nick Suzuki, a 21-year-old in his second season who managed just one goal in the series. Think he'd like another shot at the team that drafted him and then traded him away before he ever had a chance to play a game for them?

8. Minnesota Wild vs. Carolina Hurricanes

Or, as the narrative will call it: Tools of the mid-season trade.

For you kids out there, a "trade" is a rarely used loophole buried deep in the CBA that allows teams to exchange players. Your favorite team probably doesn't use them much, if at all, because they're considered extremely difficult and most GMs are timid babies who are afraid of getting yelled at.

But the Wild and Hurricanes? They're willing to take big swings. The Hurricanes seem to be in on just about every big name who hits the market, and are still feeling the effects of last year's pair of Mikko Rantanen deals. And the Wild landed the biggest of them all when they acquired Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks earlier this season.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Quinn Hughes delivers a signature performance in his biggest Wild game: 'He's the best'

Hughes' second goal Thursday stood up as the game-winner and series-clincher for the Wild.

In a league where pulling off trades is becoming an increasingly crucial path toward building a contender, some teams are still stuck in a past where deals were rare and midseason blockbusters all but impossible.

Watching these two teams face off for the Cup might be the wake-up call they need.

7. Anaheim Ducks vs. Montreal Canadiens

Or, as the narrative will call it: Youth will be served.

In hockey, as in life, there's something to be said for being too young and dumb to know you're not supposed to be somewhere.

In the case of these two teams, neither was supposed to be anywhere near a Stanley Cup Final this year. Heading into the season, the Ducks were a long shot to make the playoffs, one where it felt like just being near the race for most of the year would be a win. Expectations were a bit higher in Montreal, but not by much, given how stacked with veteran contenders we thought the Atlantic would be. But neither division played out as we thought, and both of these teams took huge steps forward. Now they'd be facing off in one of the unlikeliest Cup matchups in memory.

One team would lose, but still come away feeling like they'd earned invaluable experience in the process. And the other would win, and reset the conventional wisdom on rebuild timing forever. The fact there's a good chance they'd play a fascinating, high-scoring and occasionally mistake-prone series to do it would be a bonus.

6. Carolina Hurricanes vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Or, as the narrative will call it: The eradication of playoff ghosts.

In addition to infuriating those crusty Canadian fans who hate these new-fangled markets — and to be clear, that's also a selling point — this matchup would feature each side trying to put the ghosts of past failure to rest.

For the Hurricanes, that would be their recent record of coming into the playoffs as favorites and then running out of gas right when it seemed like it might finally be their year. That storyline has played out especially often in the conference finals, meaning they'd have already cleared one mental hurdle to get to the final at all. Now they'd have a chance to finish the job and win their first title in 20 years.

Vegas has a much more recent championship, and there really aren't any ghosts haunting this team as a whole. But there are plenty following Mitch Marner around, thanks to his repeated failures in Toronto. So far, he's doing a great job of burying those narratives. Why not finish them off entirely with a Cup — and maybe even a Conn Smythe to go with it?

Man, the Leafs should have traded this guy when they had the chance. Oh wait, you mean they did, but he turned down the move because he wasn't interested in a long-term commitment to that franchise. Which team was that again?

5. Montreal Canadiens vs. Colorado Avalanche

Or, as the narrative will call it: The Patrick Roy trade comes home.

OK, the main storyline here would probably look a lot like the Sabres/Avs one, where a young team of feisty underdogs has to go through the veteran juggernaut. That on its own would be great fun.

But the Roy factor elevates this version, because you could argue the Canadiens are the ones who created this Colorado monster. That infamous trade is the Avalanche villain/hero origin story, depending on your perspective. And now exactly three decades later, Montreal would be facing them with a chance to win the first Stanley Cup since the trade went down — not just for the Canadiens, but an entire country.

Oh, and they'd be doing it with a rookie goalie, just like they did with Roy back in 1986. Nice touch, hockey gods.

And if all of that isn't enough, how's this for some subtle foreshadowing of this matchup that we all missed in the moment: What was one of Colorado's biggest midseason trades this year? The one where they sent



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picks to Montreal's oldest rival in exchange for ... a guy named Roy. Yeah, I think I might know who's scoring the winner in this one.

4. Buffalo Sabres vs. Anaheim Ducks

Or, as the narrative will call it: The battle of the veteran coaches.

Only four coaches in NHL history have won 950 games, and this series would feature two of them. Lindy Ruff and Joel Quenneville would make this the top coaching matchup in Stanley Cup Final history in terms of wins, games coached and just about any other all-time metric you want to come up with.

And they'd be coming at the matchup from very different angles. Quenneville already has a fistful of Stanley Cup rings; Ruff doesn't have any. Quenneville's in year one with his team; Ruff has coached the Sabres for 17 across two stints. And of course the Sabres' status as the season's best bandwagon team makes Ruff eminently easy to root for, while Quenneville is ... not that.

We've had Stanley Cup Final matchups before where coaching felt like it would be a key. We've never had one featuring nearly 2,000 combined wins of experience.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

How the NHL's youngest teams are pushing for the Stanley Cup

Four of the five youngest teams in the league at the start of the 2025-26 season are all into the second round of the playoffs

3. Carolina Hurricanes vs. Colorado Avalanche

Or, as the narrative will call it: The Mikko Rantanen reckoning, part two.

It's classic Hollywood. Last year, we got the original version, in which Rantanen faced his former team in the first round and singlehandedly destroyed them. It was a hit with audiences and critics alike. A true early-summer blockbuster.

So, of course, you start thinking about a sequel, with even higher stakes. This could be it.

And sure, Rantanen himself wouldn't be involved. But that's OK. Hollywood makes sequels without the original stars all the time, and they always work out great.

In this case, the focus would be on the original Rantanen trade, which included Martin Necas going to Colorado, where he's been tearing it up to the tune of a 100-point season. He'd get a chance to face his former team. And while Logan Stankoven never played for the Avs, and hasn't been anywhere near as productive as Necas, he came over in the other Rantanen trade and he's been lighting it up in this year's playoffs. We could work with this.

Combine that narrative potential with the fact that this final would feature the two best teams in the league, an ultra-rare meeting of each conference's top seed, and it would have the potential to be a classic.

2. Buffalo Sabres vs. Minnesota Wild

Or, as the narrative will call it: The battle between the two greatest hockey markets to never win a Stanley Cup.

The two teams represent arguably the two best hockey markets in the United States, places where fans live and breathe the game instead of occasionally noticing it during gaps in the NBA or college football seasons. But they've never won the big one.

Buffalo's Cup drought dates back to 1970. Minnesota goes back even further, all the way to the original 1967 expansion that birthed the North Stars. Both cities have seen their teams go to multiple Stanley Cup Finals but come up empty each time, sometimes in agonizing fashion. Minnesota suffered the indignity of watching its first team move to Dallas;

Buffalo has had some lows that probably had fans wondering if relocation would put them out of their misery.

Now you're saying they could face each other head-to-head, with one market finally getting that Stanley Cup they've been waiting over 50 years for, while the other is forced to watch the celebration? That's some A+ drama right there.

1. Buffalo Sabres vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Or, as the narrative will call it: Jack Eichel returns.

Honestly, this isn't just the best option for this year, it may be one of the best possible finals in recent memory.

Eichel was supposed to be the chosen one in Buffalo, the reward for two years spent openly tanking. It didn't work, it ended badly, and his eventual trade to Vegas for a handful of magic beans felt like rock bottom for a Sabres franchise that just couldn't have nice things. Watching him almost immediately win a Cup with the Knights was the icing on the turd sandwich.

But now it's five years after the trade, and the Sabres are finally back. And who else could be waiting for them in the final, but the former captain who betrayed them? (Or just stood up for his right to make his own medical decisions, but we're building a narrative here, let's not let facts get in the way.) That means he might have to watch the Sabres celebrate the long-awaited title he was supposed to be part of ... or be the guy who prevents it from happening.

Mix in that one of those magic beans turned out to be Alex Tuch, and the payback potential here is off the charts. Oh, and the series would feature a Knights team that's easy to hate because they've never really had a bad season, against the best bandwagon story the league has seen in years, maybe ever.

This would be the absolute best. Hockey gods, we don't ask for much. You've already shown us you have a sense of humor, now it's time to tap into your sense of drama. Give the hockey world the Knights vs. Sabres matchup we're all begging for.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Relentless' Avalanche lean on depth in momentum-shifting Game 4 win

Iain MacIntyre

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Colorado Avalanche flexed. But what was most impressive about their display of muscle on Monday against the Minnesota Wild is that the guys who did the heaviest lifting in the third period were not the stars.

Fourth-line winger Parker Kelly, a 21-goal scorer during the National Hockey League's regular season, scored from Jack Drury's determined setup to break a tie at 11:32 of the third period and send the Avalanche to a 5-2 victory that moved the Stanley Cup favourites within one win of advancing to the Western Conference Final.

After letting Minnesota into the second-round series on Saturday, when the Wild cut a 2-0 series deficit in half with their own 5-2 win, Colorado absolutely dominated the first half of Monday's game and, critically, that game-deciding minutes that followed Nico Sturm's tying goal for Minnesota at 9:15 of the third period.



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In a five-minute span, the Avalanche attempted 14 shots, put six pucks on Wild goalie Jesper Wallstedt, registered four hits and generally didn't let Minnesota out of its end.

It didn't look fair.

Colorado defenceman Josh Manson got away (sort of) with butt-ending Minnesota centre Michael McCarron in the face, but the Wild were floored by the Avalanche's punch to the chops.

Backup goalie Mackenzie Blackwood started for Colorado for the first time in nearly a month and made 19 saves. Depth scorer Ross Colton also beat Wallstedt in the third period. And superstar Nathan MacKinnon, after taking a puck in the face at the end of the second period, played seven minutes in the third and scored an empty-netter.

This is what a Stanley Cup contender looks like.

"For me, the biggest change from last game to this game is we were a more determined group," Colorado coach Jared Bednar said. "To a man, just more determined and committed to playing the right way. I didn't hate our details last game. . . but I thought that we got outcompeted in that game a little bit. And tonight we kind of swung it back in our favour and guys went to work. Relentless all over the rink — we just looked quicker.

"Looking at our roster and the way the game went, there's a lot to like. I didn't think we had any passengers tonight from our goaltender out. Guys played hard, regardless of ice time. Every time they hit the ice, they were ready to go. You have to be pretty happy with that."

Top-six winger Artturi Lehkonen and second-pairing defenceman Sam Malinski were surprise injury scratches for Colorado after taking the morning skate.

Five-foot-eight defenceman Jack Ahcan made his NHL playoffs debut, and the Avalanche also got back from injury winger Joel Kiviranta and Manson, the rugged defenceman.

But Manson's game came close to ending just 7:07 into the first period. Taken hard into the boards by McCarron, the players wrestled briefly on the ice before Manson delivered a quick chop with the back of his right hand, hitting McCarron on the side of the face with the butt of his stick.

Referees Jean Hebert and Trevor Hanson huddled with linesmen Ryan Gibbons and Shandor Alphonso and called a five-minute major, but upon review downgraded Manson's penalty to a double minor. The Wild went ahead 1-0 on Danila Yurov's power-play goal, but Manson stayed in the game.

McCarron was incensed, and during a first-intermission interview with ESPN's P.K. Subban said: "I mean, you played against Josh. He's a dirty player. He's always been. Surprised he got away with only a four-minute. I'm happy he's still in the game."

"I mean, he hits me, but then he lands on me," Manson told reporters after the game. "So I don't really like that, to be honest with you. We're in a scrum, and I just, I mean, I butt-ended him. Was it on purpose? Was that my intention? Absolutely not. Did I want to punch him in the head? I did want to punch him in the head, yeah.

"I was trying to give him a smack because I didn't like that he landed on me. I didn't think that was fully necessary. You know, I served my four-minute penalty. It wasn't my intention to butt-end him in the face; it was more trying to smack him in the head. I think I just lost awareness of where the grip was."

Told about McCarron's comments, Manson said: "That's fine. If he wants to call me a dirty player, you can just look at my history. I mean, it's been 13 years (in the NHL) and I haven't been suspended yet, so obviously I'm not that dirty."

Manson adds another element to the Avalanche, who were flying around the ice.

"I think it's from top to bottom," star defenceman Cale Makar said of his team's ability to surge like it did after the Wild pulled even. "When you see the top guys elevating, I think it trickles down the lineup and vice versa. If the bottom guys are going, I feel like we've got to pick up our game (at the top of the lineup). And there's a lot of communication going on. We knew they were going to push but we wanted to be the more desperate team, especially at that point. I felt like we were able to hound them and stay on them."

Minnesota defencemen Zach Bogosian and Jake Middleton each had giveaways before Kelly's game-winner, which came after Drury out-battled Sturm along the boards to knock down the puck and send it across to Kelly for a one-timer.

Nicolas Roy intercepted Daemon Hunt's clearance to beautifully set up Colton's backside goal at 6:56 of the third period.

"I think everybody can be the hero or tilt the ice in our direction at any point in the game," Roy said. "Whether it's a big goal from the fourth line there, or any line, that works for our advantage."

"Just the depth of this team, it's pretty special," Colton said. "We've seen it all year. I mean, this guy (Kelly) scored 20-something. That's pretty awesome. And again, it's kind of just the next guy mentality. We switch up the lines a little bit (and) maybe the chemistry is not there for the first couple of shifts. But it's just up to us to kind of, whoever you're playing with. . . let's go out there and make an impact."

Those five minutes after Sturm scored from Quinn Hughes' magnificent backhand pass were probably the most impressive of the series for Colorado.

"Just, like, tenacious," Bednar said. "There was no hesitation on our forecheck. Guys were skating — they weren't coasting in — so we came up with some turned-over pucks. . . and then we ended up getting rewarded."

The Avalanche will try to eliminate the Wild in Game 5 Wednesday in Denver.

"I know it's a cliché, but you can't sit there and think we've got to win three games at once," Minnesota winger Matt Boldy said after registering one shot and going minus-three in 23:51 of ice time. "You go take care of business there, you come back and go from there. Then you look at the next game, the next one, and whatever happens happens. That's the approach in this room. And we're confident in our group."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Dach, Newhook flipping perception of trades that landed them in Montreal

Eric Engels

MONTREAL — When the Canadiens flipped multiple long-term assets at back-to-back drafts for Kirby Dach and Alex Newhook, they were looking in part for short-term payoffs to play a big hand in determining how those deals would come to be evaluated.

A big goal in those deals for the Canadiens was to accelerate the early portion of their rebuild by moving multiple pieces from areas of surplus to add two young players who'd already gained enough mileage in the NHL and could pop quickly.

That's why when general manager Kent Hughes first traded left-handed, bruising defenceman Alexander Romanov to the New York Islanders in



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2022 for the 13th overall pick, and then flipped that pick, along with the 66th pick to the Chicago Blackhawks for Dach — a former third-overall pick in 2019 — the Bell Centre erupted. He had just stepped to the podium of his home rink to take six-foot-three, 238-pounder Juraj Slafkovsky moments earlier, and now he was landing a 21-year-old, six-foot-four, 215-pound centre to play with him and grow alongside him.

Dach hadn't come all that close to meeting his massive potential in three seasons with the Blackhawks, but the upside he showed — despite missing a chunk of his first one and most of his second due to injury — was obvious enough to the Canadiens for them to part with Romanov (with Kaiden Guhle, Arber Xhekaj and Jayden Struble already in the system), one of three first-rounders, and one of three third-rounders they held that year.

"He can complement skilled players and add size down the middle," a Western Conference-based scout told Sportsnet that day.

"He's a top-nine (forward) that can turn into a top-six (forward) with time."

That same thinking applied to Newhook.

He had won the Stanley Cup as the Colorado Avalanche's third-line centre just days before the Canadiens drafted Slafkovsky and traded for Dach, and the thought that the former 16th overall pick from Dach's draft class could come to Montreal one year later, at 22 years old, and soon pop — thanks to more opportunity and personalized development — was easy to buy. Especially when the price was the second of two first-round picks (31st overall after the Canadiens chose David Reinbacher fifth), a second-round pick and B-prospect Gianni Fairbrother.

Newhook was signed to a cost-controlled four-year, \$11.6-million contract. Similarly, Dach was given a four-year, \$13.45-million contract less than two months after landing in Montreal.

The Canadiens paid a bit for potential in both cases, but the deals were perceived as strong value bets that would likely pay off before both players would be due raises as restricted free agents.

The trades didn't pay the type of short-term dividends hoped for — largely because both players suffered devastating injuries, but also because neither played to their potential over sustained periods.

Dach gained major steam over the back half of his first season in Montreal. He finished 2022-23 with 14 goals and 38 points in 58 games, producing much of it alongside Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield, and he built up the confidence that he could return to the Canadiens the following fall poised to take charge of his own line.

But in Game 2 of the 2023-24 season, up against his former team, a freak collision with Jarred Tinordi saw him tear the anterior cruciate and medial collateral ligaments of his right knee.

A little over a year later, he blew out the same ACL. And this past season, every time he gained positive momentum, it was abruptly halted by injury — a broken bone near his ankle cost him 10 weeks on the sidelines, and an upper-body blow kept him out from March 15 to April 7.

Newhook got off to the best start to a season of his career, producing six goals and 12 points in 17 games between Oct. 8 and Nov. 13. Then he suffered a displaced fracture of his ankle and missed 15 weeks.

Not ideal considering how his first three seasons in Montreal went.

The Newfoundlander had slow-burned his way to 14 goals and 30 points over his first 82 games with the Canadiens. And while the uptick was palpable when he put up 15 goals and 34 points in his first 54 games of the following season, the high-ankle sprain he suffered in Game 55 — coupled with his somewhat slow processing of the intricacies of coach Martin St. Louis' uber-detailed system of play — led to a downturn in production last season.

With just 15 goals and 26 points over 82 games, the overwhelming public sentiment was the Canadiens would come up short on their bet that Newhook would become a top-six forward.

And now?

Well, you could argue the long-term payoff is hitting with both Newhook and Dach.

With two goals in Game 3 of Montreal's Round 2 series against Buffalo, Newhook took over the team lead in goals. The first of his five in these playoffs was the winner in Game 7 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, and he's scored four since the puck dropped in Buffalo last Wednesday.

Dach started these playoffs on the same wobbly foot he's skated on for most his time since arriving in Montreal. He was the source of two costly errors in the Canadiens' Game 2 overtime loss to the Lightning.

But the 25-year-old bounced back with a goal and an assist in their Game 3 win and has scored three other huge, timely goals since.

The one that made it 5-2 Canadiens Sunday, as the Sabres were at their most threatening to make it 4-3, was perhaps Dach's biggest.

Like Newhook, he's been coming through at the most important time and starting to flip perception of his trade to Montreal.

"I'm happy for the player," said St. Louis. "I know what Kirby's capable of. And it's easy to take a negative situation and blow it up into more than what it is. But I know the player, I know the person. I find what Kirby's doing for us in these playoffs is he's going to get us momentum.

"You look at the goal in the third, Buffalo was attacking a lot, and he goes and scores a huge goal. You look at his goal and his offensive actions, he's absolutely seizing momentum for us. For the role he's playing, that his line is playing, it's really important. They're lines that go get momentum for your team. I think that's what he brings, and it's super fun."

Newhook is bringing top-flight speed and finishing skill to Montreal's second line with direct centre Jake Evans and super-talented winger Ivan Demidov.

He, too, has changed the way people looked at most his tenure with the Canadiens.

"I don't really know what the perception of it is," the 25-year-old said. "I know that management here believed in me, and I know the coaching staff and everyone believed in me here. I believed in myself.

"I'm just trying to prove to myself and this team that I can help out and be a part of a winning team here, and that's the only thing that's on my mind."

That mission continues for both Newhook and Dach, and they still have steps to take for their trades to Montreal to be considered successes.

They didn't prove to be in the short term, but those deals were never made with just the short term in mind.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs mailbag: How will GM John Chayka attack the off-season?

Luke Fox

Hope and fan engagement have spiked like gas prices.



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Which means a flood of questions for our off-season Maple Leafs mailbag.

How will the team approach the No. 1 draft pick? What will happen with Morgan Rielly and Craig Berube? What's up with those Matthew Knies trade rumours? And surely the lottery is rigged, right?!

Let's dig in...

What are the chances the Leafs trade down to acquire more assets and choose a defenceman? —@Andrew84868

This was the most common question submitted, Andrew. And for good reason.

General manager John Chayka and the Maple Leafs both have a history of trading down to multiply assets, and this year's presumed top pick, Gavin McKenna, is not an absolute no-brainer on the level of Matthew Schaefer (2025), Macklin Celebrini (2024) and Connor Bedard (2023).

Several amateur scouts point to fellow winger Ivar Stenberg as the better, safer two-way force. Further, the Leafs' system is screaming for defencemen first, centres second and wingers third. Blue-chip defencemen Chase Reid, Keaton Verhoeff and Carson Carels should all go top eight.

There is a legitimate conversation to be had about getting cute here. Ultimately, we don't see it happening.

While Chayka is both an outside-the-box hire and thinker, trading No. 1 — or selecting anyone other than the Canadian kid with the highest upside and greatest hype — is simply too bold and risky a move to pull off so early in his tenure.

Last time a team traded away the first-overall pick, in 2003, the Penguins jumped up to snatch Marc-Andre Fleury. The Panthers went for volume, getting Nathan Horton (third overall), Stefan Meyer (55th overall) and prospect Mikael Samuelsson.

Meyer played four games and scored zero points for the Panthers. Samuelsson scored three goals in 37 games before bolting back to Europe. And while Horton racked up five 20-goal seasons in Florida, Fleury helped backstop Pittsburgh to three Stanley Cups and is one of the most beloved Penguins of all time.

Don't look a gift horse in the galaxy brain. And don't go against the wishes of Leafs Nation in your seventh week in office.

How do the Leafs restructure the blue line if all the guys are locked up? Should they ask Morgan Rielly to waive, or because of our lack of puck movers do we have to keep him? —@Tenkay23

Toronto's top seven D-men are all under contract for 2026-27, and of that group only Simon Benoit and Philippe Myers lack trade protection. The Leafs must get younger and more mobile on the back end. So, I asked Chayka your first question.

"Flexibility is a real asset, and obviously we don't have that in that position," the GM replied. "We're gonna have to make some decisions and see how we can create some flexibility. But I'm aware that they're under contract. Again, it's a priority for us to try to find a way to improve it."

Veterans Jake McCabe, Brandon Carlo and Oliver Ekman-Larsson all have value on the market. Plenty of competitors are desperate for minute-munchers on the back end. The Sharks, for example, have Dmitry Orlov and no other NHL defencemen signed for next season.

Rielly is the biggie, though.

The man is deeply loyal and still one the Leafs' best offensive threats from the back. Yet a change of scenery feels due. I got sent a note: "Rielly for Darnell Nurse: Who says no?" The Leafs say no. They need

puck movers. Only with more coming in do they move Rielly, who will call his own shot here.

Mats Sundin famously bristled when then-GM Brian Burke asked him to waive his no-trade in his final Leafs season. Sundin was asked point blank if he'd ask a Leafs player to do the same.

"It's a good question," Sundin replied. "I don't know if I would put a player in a position that I got put in."

Hmmm...

With a new GM in place, will the Leafs be using a scalpel, chainsaw or machete to the roster? —@MrEd315

Scalpel.

The top-down mandate is to build around Matthews and William Nylander. Plus, it's pretty difficult to rev up the chainsaw when six of your best players have full no-trade protection, five others have partial no-trade protection, and your prospect and draft pick capital pales in comparison to most of the league.

Is there a worry that Matthews' relationship with Shane Doan can negatively impact his relationship with Chayka? —@IzunaDrop66

Interesting thought, but I don't believe so.

Doan — who has already had employment conversations with the Vancouver Canucks — will be moving on. He was handpicked by Brad Treliving, and Chayka was running the Coyotes when the franchise pushed Doan out.

Certainly, the respected Doan has strong connections to several Leafs, including Matthews, Matthew Knies and (more low-key) Nick Robertson.

That said, I'd like to believe that Matthews' decision on his future will be based purely on whether he thinks he can win a Cup in Toronto. The captain's family has known Chayka since he was teenage phenom in Arizona. And Chayka is tight with Tie and Max Domi, one of Matthews' closest friends on the team.

Toronto was top 12 in xG% and CF% for four straight years. Then Berube made a bottom-10 team in both last year, saved in 2024-25 by being second in sv%, and this year fell to 29th in xG% and 32nd in CF%. How can management justify bringing him back with league-worst numbers and a No. 1 pick incoming? —@Leafs_Storm

Chayka was essentially asked this exact question — and it's a valid one — last Monday off-camera.

"Look, I understand data. I started a data company, as I'm sure you're aware," Chayka responded. "Data is one part of the puzzle. And I think you need to look at what a coach is given. You need to look at what he's good with. And you got to take it into part of the entire holistic review of things. But I would definitely ask that question of Craig and get his input as well."

Reading between the lines: Berube was also given a roster short on puck-moving defencemen and defensively responsible forwards. It's not the coach's fault that a one-time Selke finalist walked out the door last summer.

I understand Chayka and Sundin waiting to decide Berube's fate until after meeting with him. They just got here; Berube has insight on every player to share. Gather information.

If Toronto does retain Berube after the debacle of 2025-26, we sure hope that it won't be based on the club being committed to Berube for two more seasons. Management must do what's best for the hockey. And there's a pretty good coach in Bruce Cassidy just sitting out there.



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Why are people still talking about Knies being traded? Does the kid want out? Literally the only reason I'd trade him. So, what gives? — @Beer_Gurouche

Did you catch Knies chugging a beer at the Raptors game? Or celebrating RJ Barrett's OT miracle shot? Or finding out about Toronto's draft lottery win while attending a Marlies playoff match alongside Nylander?

Doesn't seem like a kid who wants out to me.

What gives is that Knies is the rare Leaf without any trade protection and Treliving was under pressure to recoup as many assets as possible at the trade deadline. The GM tried flipping his stud power forward into three pieces.

Chayka has had his eye on Knies since he played for the Junior Coyotes. He doesn't sound eager to move him.

"Knies is a really unique player. I think his blend of size and skating and skill is really, really hard to find," Chayka told me. "I'm not aware of what happened at the deadline or what previous regimes thought. I think Mats and I are going to go through and evaluate the roster and make some decisions.

"Ultimately, if you're making a decision, you're trying to get better. I think you'd be really hard-pressed to do better than Matthew Knies."

With upstarts like Anaheim, Buffalo and now San Jose making noise with young and fast teams, do you think Dubas was right all along in terms of build philosophy but wrong on timing? —@sunofthebay

There will be books written about this topic.

Kyle Dubas was right to build around young, dynamic talent, no doubt. He did not negotiate early enough or hard enough when Matthews, Nylander and Mitch Marner were wrapping their entry-level deals. Then he suffered an unforeseen blow of bad luck when the virus sucked fans out of arenas, and the salary cap flattened.

That's simply crummy timing. The pandemic arguably harmed the Leafs' competitive window more than any other team.

That said, Dubas kept doubling and tripling down on four expensive forwards and one expensive offensive defenceman. He didn't recognize the value of homegrown depth players such as Zach Hyman and Connor Brown. He never pivoted and addressed the roster's weakness on the blue line. There was no Kawhi-DeRozan moment.

I've long wondered about Alex Pietrangolo's pending free agency with St. Louis in 2019-20. That should've been the guy Dubas went after, hard. Instead, he ended up in Vegas and won his second title there.

Pietrangolo had everything Toronto needed: big, gritty, skilled, right-shot defenceman with a Cup ring.

Who knows? Maybe Pietrangolo would've never signed in Toronto anyway. Ah, well.

Should congress investigate NHL and its draft? —@ShahShite

Absolutely.

Right after congress inspects Connor McDavid's skates for secret hidden jet packs, performs a deadliness analysis of Cutter Gauthier's stick, and conducts a deep dive into how Henrik Lundqvist became so damn handsome.

Foul play must be afoot.

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TSN.CA / Marlies toast emotional win over Habs affiliate as top Leafs prospect Danford joins the group

Mark Masters

After the Toronto Marlies eliminated the Laval Rocket on Saturday, some fans at Place Bell tossed beer cans on the ice. Marlies defenceman Dakota Mermis picked one up and pretended to chug.

"It's just a fun rivalry," Mermis said with a grin. "It was a very intense series. I think, at the end of the day, the fans were just saying, 'Cheers on a hard-fought series,' and I was just enjoying that with them."

The best-of-five affair between the American Hockey League affiliates of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Montreal Canadiens went the distance with the final game hanging in the balance until the final seconds. Toronto rallied from 2-1 down in the third period to win 3-2.

The broadcast showed Mermis' celebration take place while Laval's Alex Belzile was hunched over his stick skating back to the Rocket end.

"The way the camera happened to catch that ... kind of just caught it perfectly," Mermis said with a smile. "There's a lot of emotion when that series ends and there's stuff falling from the sky."

Mermis' phone was flooded with messages as the moment circulated on social media. The 32-year-old confirmed the beer can was already empty when he picked it up, but the moment was full of satisfaction for the underdog Marlies.

Toronto finished fourth in the AHL's North Division and needed to survive a best-of-three series against the Rochester Americans before facing top-seeded Laval, who received a bye to the second round.

"They were rested 10 days coming into Game 1 and came out really physical," Mermis said. "We stayed with it. We wore a lot on the chin. We stayed extremely disciplined, poked back when we could, knowing that they were a team that would kind of get undisciplined if you stayed disciplined. They wanted a hard game, but only if it came easy."

The Marlies had 23 power plays in the five-game series versus 15 for the Rocket.

"There were a lot of bumps and bruises and guys had to swallow their pride in a lot of situations," Mermis said. "So when you finally pull off that win and you finish that series, come back in the third, there's just a lot excitement. Always good to beat a rival, especially in the playoffs in their building. It was a good confidence builder."

The Marlies will now take on the Cleveland Monsters, Columbus' farm team, in the AHL North Division final, which starts on Thursday in Ohio.

The Marlies roster received a boost on Monday as the Leafs assigned Ben Danford to the AHL. The 20-year-old defenceman saw his Ontario Hockey League season come to an end when the Brantford Bulldogs lost Game 7 against the Barrie Colts in the Eastern Conference final last week.

"I'm looking forward to it," Danford said after taking part in an optional practice. "Last thing I want to do is go home and sit around for a couple weeks. This is going to be fun. They've been playing great here. They have a great lineup and just such a great group. You can already tell how tight they are."

"He's going to fit in," said Marlies head coach John Gruden. "He's a great teammate [and] having him is going to definitely be a boost of energy for the older and younger players."



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It can be a big adjustment when a player goes from junior hockey to the professional level, but Danford's transition may be easier because of the way he plays.

"It's always a difference just with physical matchups," Gruden noted. "Guys are just stronger, bigger, but there's a lot of things that are the same. The hockey instincts are still there for him and the way he defends, he's cognizant of his own end, and that is going to help him."

Gruden also believes Danford's experience with Team Canada at the World Juniors will serve him well in adapting to playoff pressure at this level.

"It will take him a bit to get acclimated, but good players like that find a way to figure it out," the coach said.

"His game just fits the pro level perfect," said Marlies winger Easton Cowan. "He plays hard, is a very good skater and has a very, very good hockey mind so he'll help us out a lot."

Danford, who was Toronto's first-round pick (31st overall) in 2024, and Cowan, who was the Leafs first-round pick in 2023 (28th overall), have gone from OHL rivals to close friends.

"We went out to the Jays game yesterday, went out for dinner, and it was good catching up with him," said Danford. "Maybe I'll go stay at his place for a couple nights. They have me in a hotel, but maybe I'll go have a sleepover over there."

Cowan produced two goals and two assists in the second-round series against the Rocket, including a highlight-reel goal in Game 2.

"I thought my first three games of the series went very well," he said. "Last two, kind of, you know, lost the groove a bit, I'd say. But that's OK. There's going to be ups and downs, you just gotta be able to battle through that."

All four of Cowan's points came in Game 2 and Game 3, which were both won by the Marlies. What was missing in the final two games?

"Just didn't generate as much as I'd like to," said Cowan. "I feel like once I do that it brings a lot of momentum to our team. So just keep that going, have a positive mindset, and it'll be good."

One year ago, Cowan was named the MVP of the Memorial Cup while leading the London Knights to a Canadian Hockey League title. The Marlies are confident he will also be a clutch performer during this first professional playoff run.

"Players of his calibre, they feed off points and goals," Gruden said. "We don't want him to focus on that. If he does the other things, the goals and assists will come, so just make sure he's doing the other things and making sure he's being responsible. I thought he handled things extremely well and I liked his line [with Jacob Quillan and Ryan Tverberg]. He's only going to continue to get better."

Danford's Oshawa Generals were eliminated by Cowan's Knights in the 2024 and 2025 OHL championship series.

"A good way to describe it is he's a game changer," Danford said. "He's a guy that can go out there and just change the whole tide of a game. The way he can think a game is pretty crazy and the skill he's got, he's got a lot of confidence. And he's a great guy off the ice. He's a great teammate. He's someone you want to go to war with."

Cowan made his NHL debut this season and suited up in 66 games with the Leafs. Danford is hoping to join him on the NHL roster next season.

The Leafs won the draft lottery and will pick first overall next month, so Toronto could have another youngster in the lineup next season. Gavin

McKenna, who is the favourite to go first overall, played with Cowan at the 2025 World Juniors.

"We've stayed in touch," Cowan said.

So, how does Cowan feel McKenna would handle the spotlight in Toronto?

"He'd be fine," Cowan said. "He's got that swagger and he's a good player. He's confident. He's got a lot of skill, but he's got that swagger that I like. So, he'd be good."

The final decision on what the Leafs do with the pick will be made by new general manager John Chayka and new senior executive advisor Mats Sundin.

Gruden hasn't had much communication with the new management leads since they were hired, but did get a message after Saturday's win.

"Just a 'congratulations' text, which was nice to get," Gruden said. "We're going about our business, but it was nice for them to check in and to know they're watching."

Marlies lines in Saturday's game:

Groulx - Shaw - Lettieri

Cowan - Quillan - Tverberg

Pare - Haymes - Nylander

Pezzetta - Johnston - Johnson

Rifai - Thrun

Mermis - Villeneuve

Smith - Chadwick

Akhtyamov

Hildeby

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TSN.CA / Hurricanes ride dominant defence to rare postseason double sweep

Travis Yost

A double sweep to open the National Hockey League playoffs hasn't happened in more than 40 years. But after humbling the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers in lightning-quick fashion, the Carolina Hurricanes look primed to finally win a Stanley Cup.

That's not to say the road doesn't get tougher from here — a collision course with the Colorado Avalanche would, in all certainty, give us the best-on-best Stanley Cup the hockey world craves.

Detractors have been quick to point to underwhelming competition in the first two rounds — especially a Flyers team that looked young and rattled for a second-round foe. But I think that discounts too much of what Carolina does to teams when they're at their best, and that's bringing offences to a screeching halt.

The Hurricanes' defensive numbers through the first two rounds are staggering, and frankly a phenomenal reminder that one of the benefits



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of dominating possession is your opponent simply spends a lot of time trying to win the puck back.

Over the eight games against the Senators and the Flyers, the Hurricanes won the scoring battle at even strength 16-6 (+10). Just as remarkable: opponent power plays are only one goal better than Carolina over that same eight-game stretch; the goal differential for Carolina's penalty kill is just -1.

Six even-strength goals against in eight games is remarkable but in line with what we witnessed from this Hurricanes team all season (and in prior seasons past as well). It is simply very difficult to even get the puck into Carolina's zone, and in the oft chance teams do, it's another task entirely to try and create scoring chances from the dangerous areas of the ice.

Carolina's personnel play tightly within structure and are exceptional at keeping opposing forwards on the perimeter. We observe the same relationship on the penalty kill, where a four-man unit of Jordan Staal, Jordan Martinook, Jaccob Slavin, and Jalen Chatfield can completely shut down the game.

Said another way, Carolina defensive zone is hockey's Bermuda Triangle (heat maps via HockeyViz):

Yost1 (Travis Yost)

Watch a Carolina game, and one thing becomes crystal clear: This team will forecheck you into oblivion, and inexperienced teams can struggle mightily against the pressure.

One of the parts not lost on me from the first two rounds was how many quality forwards from both Ottawa and Philadelphia found zero space to operate against Carolina's vaunted defence. In fact, if you look at the forward groups of both teams and compare their shot volumes from the regular season versus their head-to-head matchup with Carolina, there is a staggering drop-off from most:

Yost2 (Travis Yost)

It's not just that so many players had such decisive, double-digit drop-offs in opportunity, it's that Carolina also did it to some of the most dangerous players on the ice.

Skaters like Brady Tkachuk, Drake Batherson, Travis Konecny, and Trevor Zegras were bottled up. The only two consequential skaters who outperformed were Tim Stutzle and Christian Dvorak, and that outperformance is only a function of shot volume; Stutzle was blanked at evens in four games against Carolina, and Dvorak had just one helper. (It goes without saying that the last thing you want to see are depth forwards like Lars Eller and Garnet Hathaway being leaned on to generate offensive pressure, which also was the case).

Sprinkle some great goaltending behind all of it through Frederik Andersen and his absurd .950 save percentage, and you can see why Carolina has broomed the competition.

Ask anyone in the Hurricanes organization and they'll tell you the job isn't finished. Few teams have more postseason wins than Carolina over the past decade, and yet they still haven't raised the Stanley Cup since 2006. There's been a tortured history there of late, especially in the Eastern Conference Final. Carolina has been here two of the past three years, with both of those bids ending unceremoniously against a better Florida Panthers team.

But those Panthers have long been vanquished, and whether it's the Buffalo Sabres or Montreal Canadiens as their third-round opponent, Carolina will be the favourite to advance.

Is this the year Rod Brind'Amour's team finally gets it done?

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