



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 15, 2026

## The News & Observer

### Inside the NHL's post-series handshake, one of hockey's most enduring traditions

By: Chip Alexander

When you win, there's no better place to be.

If you lose, not so much.

The handshake line in hockey can be equally fulfilling or frustrating. Two teams battle their hearts out in a Stanley Cup playoff series, decide a winner, then line up and shake hands when it's over. It's quite the tradition.

"It's something unique to our sport and separates what we do," Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) forward Taylor Hall said this week.

The Canes have done it twice this year in the playoffs — both times as the winners. Both ended on the road before the other team's fans, in their building, both after four-game sweeps.

But what's it like to be in those lines?

"It's a little awkward, but it depends on what side you're on, obviously, and it depends on how the series ended," Hall said after a practice session at Lenovo Center. "You have to be a good sport about it. You don't want to gloat if you win and have a big smile on your face while you're dapping 'em up.

"I've had small, respectful conversations with those where you've just battled it out. I remember a guy with Florida last year who said, 'Good battles all series' because he and I went at it pretty good. That's stuck with me, so if I'm on the winning side, if there was someone I played against shift to shift all series, I try to convey it to him."

The Florida Panthers (Shopping Cart IconShop Panthers Fan Gear) knocked the Hurricanes out of the playoffs last year in the Eastern Conference Final, then went on to win the Stanley Cup. A year later, Canes are looking to atone for that knockout in the conference final after blowing past the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers, winning eight consecutive games in the two series.

Hall was a part of seminal moments in Game 3 of each series: his big hit on Sens defenseman Jake Sanderson, then another on Flyers defenseman Travis Sanheim. Sanderson suffered a series-ending concussion, the Sens said. Sanheim was shaken up but continued to play after what he said was a "pretty dirty play."

Hall was given two-minute minor penalties for each hit and quickly cast into the villain's role, the source of boos and animosity in Ottawa and then Philly.

Hall said he did not speak with Sanheim in the handshake line Saturday after the Canes' 3-2 overtime win in Game 4. The two did shake hands, he said.

"For sure," Hall said. "It was a good series. It was quick."

A test of brotherly love

Some handshake lines can be quick — and painful — especially if there is family involved. Jordan Staal was with the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2009 when the Pens swept the Canes in the Eastern Conference Final. That meant an emotional handshake with the Canes' Eric Staal, Jordan's oldest brother.

In the 2008 playoffs, the Pens had defeated the New York Rangers and defenseman Marc Staal, another older brother.

The flipside came in 2023, when Eric and Marc Staal were teammates on the Panthers team that swept the Canes in the conference final.

"My joke there is that it took both of them to take me down," Jordan Staal said, grinning. "I was fortunate to be on the right side of all the handshakes with the bros until that last one.

"Those series are always fun but hard at the same time. Obviously, playing against my brothers on the same team at our age and in the East Conference final, you couldn't have written it up any better. Obviously, I would have liked to have been on the other side of that one, but it was a pretty cool one."

Few players on the Canes get on the other team's nerves more than Andrei Svechnikov. The power forward can deliver the boom and will let you know about it, too. He plays on the edge and No. 37 seemingly is a part of every scrum if he's on the ice.

Svechnikov said no opposing player has shied away from shaking his hand after a playoff series. "You have to respect the other boys for playing hard hockey, and hitting you everywhere and all that," he said. "I'm fine with all that stuff. It's just hockey, you know.

"For me, personally, it's fine. It's like it's ended, you forget about what's happened. You have the handshake and move on."

Svechnikov noted that in Russia's KHL, there's a handshake line after every game in the regular season, then when a playoff series ends. "That's a little too much," he said. "I like our way more."

After beating the Flyers in Game 4, the handshakes began with Flyers fans, notorious for their boos, cheering for a team that gamely fought its way in the playoffs and won a round before running into the Hurricanes.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour paused a few seconds while shaking hands with Flyers coach Rick Tocchet, a former Flyers teammate, and pointed up toward the fans.

"I played with 'Toc' and have a lot of respect for him and obviously played in that organization for a long time and have a lot of respect for the people there," Brind'Amour said Tuesday. "You could hear the crowd was appreciative of their effort. That's all I said to him, 'You should be proud of



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that, because you're getting the team back in the right direction.'

"I was happy for him and those people, because it's a great hockey town."

Canes go back to work

After taking a few days off the ice, the Canes returned to practice Tuesday at Lenovo Center. The next opponent will be either the Montreal Canadiens or Buffalo Sabres, still locked up in their second-round series.

The Canes had a long break after the Ottawa series before playing the Flyers. They don't mind another one.

"I think everyone in this room has given everything they have since the start of these playoffs," Staal said after practice.

Staal won the 2009 Stanley Cup with the Pens. The Canes captain knows what it takes to get it done, lift the Cup.

That's one handshake line, the ultimate one, every player wants to be in as the winner. What was that like for Staal?

"It's a bit of a blur with all the stuff that goes on at that time," he said, smiling. "It's the same scenario, though, in showing respect and appreciating the battle and having that respect for the game."



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## The Athletic

### Undefeated Hurricanes want to reach 'another level' in playoffs. How can they do it?

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — Jordan Staal called the idea that the Hurricanes have had an easy road to the Eastern Conference final “funny.” Coach Rod Brind’Amour took it a step further, saying it is discourse not even worth having.

“Anyone who says that is just wasting time,” he said.

The Hurricanes, however, have plenty of time to waste. With their next opponent being decided by Saturday at the earliest, Carolina is combining high-energy practices with strategic time off.

“You don’t need to reinvent the wheel,” Brind’Amour said of trying to improve at this point of the season. “Obviously, we’ve got to get better at everything we’re doing, so we’re going to focus on that. But I don’t think you want to deviate too much from what you’re doing. It’s just, we always say, sharpening the knife. We’ve got to keep razor-sharp on what we do well.”

The team is healthy heading into the ECF, but having more than a week between games means attempting to stay sharp while also tending to any bumps and bruises.

And despite being 8-0 through two rounds, the Hurricanes believe they have even more to give.

“I honestly think we have another level to get to. ... We are playing well, and it’s great to get the sweeps, but I think we do have another level to get to,” center Logan Stankoven said after finishing off the Flyers in Game 4 last Saturday. “And I’m sure if you could ask any of the guys, they’d agree with me.”

Brind’Amour likes that his team is not satisfied.

“Can we be more efficient in certain areas? Yeah,” Brind’Amour said. “And then we’re going to have to be as we move on. I just love that that’s how they’re thinking.”

So how does Carolina reach another level?

Make it easier on Freddie

Frederik Andersen is having a historic postseason so far, becoming one of four goalies — along with Terry Sawchuk (Detroit, 1952), Jacques Plante (twice: Montreal, 1960 and St. Louis, 1969) and Grant Fuhr (Edmonton, 1985) to win their first eight playoff starts in a season.

Of those players, Andersen has faced the fewest shots (201), but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been challenged. According to Natural Stat Trick, Andersen has faced the second-most all situations rush chances (20), behind only Philadelphia’s Dan Vladar (21).

Carolina has been shielding Andersen from a high volume of high-danger chances — 52 in all situations, which is ninth among playoff goalies. The big difference, however, is that Andersen is stopping those chances. He’s allowed four high-danger goals, including only two on 37 five-on-five opportunities.

The Hurricanes have also been short-handed more than any team on average — 8:32 per game — and down two men six times. The 15 other playoff teams have defended a five-on-three 11 times, and no other team more than twice.

All of this is to say that Andersen has been spectacular, but Carolina could probably make it easier on its veteran goalie.

“I still think Freddie’s had to play very well for us to win games,” left wing Taylor Hall said.

Recharge the power play

As illustrated above, Carolina’s penalty kill has been lights out. The power play? Not so much.

After finishing the regular season ranked fourth in the NHL with a 24.9 percent conversion rate, the Hurricanes have barely operated at half that success rate. Through two rounds, Carolina is 5 of 37 on the power play, its 13.5 percent ranking 12th among 16 playoff teams.

“We can be better in certain areas,” Brind’Amour said. “We can score more on the power play.”

The biggest issue has been that Carolina’s top unit, which has seen about 38 minutes of man-advantage ice time to about 22 minutes for the second unit, has scored just once in the postseason.

The second unit, meanwhile, has four goals, led by a pair from Stankoven.

Regardless, scoring only once every seven or eight opportunities probably won’t cut it in the upcoming rounds.

“I think our power play can elevate a bit,” Hall said, “and be more dangerous and be more consistent. ... (It’s) probably the biggest thing that can elevate us to another level.”

Top line wakes up

The PP1 issues trickle down from what’s been going on at five-on-five. The top line of Sebastian Aho centering Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis hasn’t been bad, per se, but it hasn’t contributed offensively as expected.

Combined, the trio has 11 points — one fewer than Hall — and four at five-on-five.

Aho has been adamant that only one statistic counts.



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"All that matters is winning right now," Aho said. "We know we've got to be better at certain areas, but at the same time, wins are the only thing that matters right now.

"I've had series in the past and had some success myself, but then losing the series. And trust me, when I say this: It's way more fun. This is exactly what we're supposed to do, is win hockey games. And that's, like I said, all that matters."

The Hurricanes' top line has certainly contributed — it's just been at the other end of the ice.

All three players were not on the ice for a goal against during the Flyers series and have allowed one goal through eight playoff games.

"I don't think he's not confident. He's actually played well," Brind'Amour said when specifically asked about Aho. "He's just not on the score sheet. But their line defensively is actually probably the best he's played, their whole line, ever with (the) way they're going about it. They're just not scoring."

Jarvis joked earlier in the week that he isn't the person to ask about goal scoring, but he believes his line getting going will make Carolina even tougher to handle.

"If you can get all lines contributing, I think that's going to be a big boost," he said. "I think if I can get going and kind of help out (the other) lines a little bit offensively, I think that that just adds a whole element to our team."

Brind'Amour has remained nonplussed about his No. 1 line's point totals.

"They're playing against the other team's best guys, and they've sawed that off," he said. "If they had scored 15 goals and given up 15, that's the same thing. So they've done a good job. And we do need them to get on the score sheet — (Aho) knows that — but I've been happy with the way they've gone about their business."

Stay the course

The most important thing the Hurricanes can do is not press for these improvements. What they've done through two rounds has worked, and Staal thinks the best recipe for success is consistency.

"I don't know if we need to get another level," he said. "We've just got to sustain what we're doing and play the way we can and way we need to. I think everyone in this room has given everything they had from the start of this playoffs — and all season long, really — and it's just, really, it can't change."

That and stay hungry.

"We've been able to win games, and we've been playing at a good level," Aho said. "But I think it's good that the team is still more hungry and knowing that we have certain details in the game that we can be even better. So just work toward those and still have the same effort that we put in every game."



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## Canes Using Break To Reset Mentally, 'Sharpen The Knife'

By: Walt Ruff

"I know that for my mind and my body, it's been a good week, and I'm really excited to get going again."

RALEIGH, N.C. - Playoff hockey is a grind, both mental and physical.

The beauty of the Carolina Hurricanes' current situation is that they've bought themselves time to recharge in both of those departments.

As they await the Buffalo Sabres and Montreal Canadiens to decide who will line up across from them in this year's Eastern Conference Final, the team has had a balance of practices at Lenovo Center and days away from the ice. Starting with a rare back-to-back set of off days post-Philadelphia, the unit was back on the ice on Tuesday and Wednesday, before taking a third day off the ice on Thursday.

Three days without lacing up the skates in a single week is almost unheard of at any time of the year, but especially at this juncture of things. A luxury, nonetheless.

"It's really just turning that anxiety meter off a bit. That stress meter. Not thinking about the game. Turning your mind off is the biggest thing," Jordan Staal said of the downtime.

Whether it's a day spent with their young ones, on the golf course, or elsewhere, there's a benefit to it all.

"I don't know if people realize how stressed we can be, even on an off day. We're always thinking about the game. Some guys (take their mind off the game) better than others," the captain continued. "When you're out this long, it's good to take some time and enjoy your family time. Regrouping the mind and the body is very important."

There's no blueprint for how to handle a week between playoff games; however, the Canes are leaning on the cadence that helped them between Rounds 1 and 2, and still yielded success.

"I think that worked, what we did," Rod Brind'Amour said following one of this week's skates. "We've got to stay sharp, but we're not diving too much into (preparation for) anybody. We're worrying about our stuff."

With Buffalo-Montreal now needing a minimum of six games, the Canes will have at least four or five more days ahead of them before returning to game action.

"There are positives and negatives to it. I think the big positive is that we're onto the third round relatively unscathed and healthy," Taylor Hall pointed out. "You don't want to see

injuries, per se, but we hope these (other) series go far and these teams have battles. That's the advantage that we're going to have."

Practice days may seem monotonous, and wrapping up each session with half-ice sprints is far from a favorite, but the plan, developed by not just Brind'Amour but the whole staff, has the full trust of the players.

"We're going to be hockey-ready if the series goes long(er). Rod, our strength staff, and all of our staff do a really good job making sure that we're ready, athletically, to play. From there, we get our footing pretty quickly," Hall continued.

For a team that held just five practices following the Winter Olympics due to their condensed game schedule, there's beauty in having time to hone in on the details, too.

"(Practice is) always a good thing. Roddy's practices are enough," Staal said with a laugh. "We're chomping at the bit to get going, but at the same time, we have to stay as sharp as we can, and this is what you do when you're trying to do that."

Whether it's a rest day or a practice day, both can help the crew as they eye "another level" in Round 3.

They know their next test will be the toughest yet. Whoever it is, they'll have full faith in the process that's gotten them to this point.

"You don't need to reinvent the wheel. We've obviously got to get better at everything we're doing, so we're going to focus on that," Brind'Amour added. "I don't think you want to deviate too much from what you're doing. We always say 'sharpening the knife.' We've got to keep razor sharp on what we do well."

"We don't have to change our game and the way we play from the regular season. It's the same way. I think we up the physicality a little bit. We hammer in on the details, but the way we play is the exact same," Hall reaffirmed.

There's no complacency to be found, though.

"You take the win, and you take your rest. Obviously, it's not the goal," Jacob Slavin said of the break. "We've got to do all eight wins again just to get to the end. (Winning two series is) just another step."

Echoing that same hunger, it's not lost on the group that there would be no moral victory from getting to this point.

"You've got to get through the Conference Final to win it. It takes four series," Frederik Andersen offered. "We're happy with the work we've put in so far. We talk a lot about how the



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first step is to make the playoffs and take big steps after that. We just continue to push, and we have a lot of experience. We're going to be in for a good battle next series, no matter what."

Healthy, rested, experienced, and mentally fresh. Sounds like a dangerous combination.

The "rest versus rust" debate will linger for just a few more days, but, no matter when the puck drops, the team will be ready.

"One thing I love about this group is that when we show up to work, we work... You show up to work, and you work your butt off, right? That's kind of the way, and then on your

downtime, do whatever you want. I think the practices are high pace, high intensity, and that's how you stay sharp physically," Sebastian Aho said. "I have no worries about this team. We'll be ready whenever we start."

Whether Buffalo-Montreal concludes on Saturday or Monday, come next week, the Canes and Caniacs will have Lenovo Center ready to shake as the group begins a third Eastern Conference Final in four years on home ice.

"Everyone goes through life differently. Everyone takes the stress of this game differently," Staal finished with. "I know that for my mind and my body, it's been a good week, and I'm really excited to get going again."



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**AP** ASSOCIATED PRESS

## Frederik Andersen has gone from early struggles to elite postseason play for the Carolina Hurricanes | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Things didn't go smoothly for Frederik Andersen early in the regular season. He was hunting his game. And as he tried to work through it, a one-time waiver pickup was taking over the Carolina Hurricanes' crease with sudden stardom.

That feels long ago, with Andersen playing his best hockey in the Hurricanes' return to the Eastern Conference final of the NHL playoffs.

The 36-year-old Andersen is leading all postseason goaltenders in goals-against average (1.12) and save percentage (.950), allowing 10 goals for a playoff-tested team that is 8-0 through two rounds of play.

It took a climb to get here, from feeling better about his play as 2026 arrived to getting a rejuvenating spark from playing for his native Denmark in the Milan Cortina Olympics.

"I think it was gradual the whole way," Andersen said. "I thought I was playing really good hockey down the end of the regular season and just continued to build. That's the focus still, one practice now at a time until we know who we're playing and when — and just staying ready."

The Hurricanes are the first team to sweep the first two rounds since the NHL went to best-of-seven series in all four rounds in 1987. That has them in the East final for the third time in four years and fourth time in the current eight-year playoff run under coach Rod Brind'Amour, along with giving Andersen another lengthy break to recharge before facing Montreal or Buffalo.

### Technique and mentality

Brind'Amour tends to lean toward experience with lineup calls. He also trusts goaltending coach Paul Schonfelder with decisions like whether Andersen or 31-game winner Brandon Bussi should start the postseason run.

"He knows them better than I do. He knows where they're at, where their game's at, where their game is capable of going," Brind'Amour said. "It was an easy decision: he was like, 'No, Freddie's the guy.'"

Andersen rewarded that faith with a Game 1 shutout of Ottawa, then had another against Philadelphia to open that series, too.

Schonfelder can point to minor technical details where Andersen is sharper, such as "playing on his feet" to get into shooting zones and better using his 6-foot-4, 229-pound size. There's also the mentality to "just play free" and reduce the job to its simplest action: watching the puck and reacting.

"I remind Freddie: You just need to play to your capabilities, that's good enough," Schonfelder said. "Don't think you have to reach a level you've maybe never reached before or you're going to be perfect. Don't chase perfect. Just be you. Be you to the best of your ability, and that's good enough to win."

The Hurricanes rely on an aggressive forecheck and are among the best at limiting chances going the other way. But Andersen has repeatedly made stops against high-danger chances. He's been the backbone of a penalty kill that is 38 of 40 (95%) in the playoffs.

He's also shown the requisite ability to regroup. The Flyers scored twice in a span of 39 seconds in the opening five minutes of Game 2 to give Carolina its first postseason deficit.

They didn't find the net again. Andersen finished with 34 saves in nearly 79 minutes of an overtime win along with an extra highlight: leveling defenseman Travis Sanheim at the crease late in regulation.

'Just stay in your bubble'

Andersen started 32 postseason games for Carolina the previous three seasons, then started 4-1 this year. That included an Oct. 23 win at Presidents' Trophy winner Colorado, with Andersen making 44 stops and denying three shootout tries.

But Andersen won just one of his next 12 starts over two months, posting a 1-9-2 mark with a 3.73 GAA and .850 save percentage.

There wasn't one simple explanation. He didn't make those timely stops, mixed with pockets of bad "puck luck." Then there was Bussi's rise, starting 10 games to Andersen's three from late November to New Year's Day and earning a three-year contract during the Olympic break.

"You feel like it's the hardest thing to do in the world when you're trying to get a win and trying to play a good game when it's not going your way," Andersen said. "Goaltending is a hard sport where you can't stop the puck harder, you can't force it. You've just got to let it come and trust what you're doing is going to lead you to success in the long run."

Still, Andersen started to feel better about his game after Christmas. Then came three Olympic starts for Denmark, posting a 2.75 GAA and .913 save percentage.

"A little change of scenery never hurts sometimes when you're finding a little new love for the game," Andersen said.

Andersen went 9-4-0 after the Olympic break, while Schonfelder saw consistency building in his game as April



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arrived. Andersen closed the schedule with a 1.50 GAA and .942 save percentage in his last two starts.

"He's a pro and I think we all knew he'd come back around," defenseman Jaccob Slavin said.

And now, that's carried into the conference finals.

"We've talked about it, and I say now: Just stay in your bubble," Schonfelder said, adding: "Don't let anything affect your bubble."



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## How Hurricanes are utilizing Nikolaj Ehlers' full capabilities

By: Adam Vingan

Nikolaj Ehlers was a source of fascination for many years in Winnipeg.

The Jets' usage of the dynamic winger at times seemed illogical. Case in point: Ehlers finished last season third on the team in scoring but ninth among forwards in five-on-five ice time per game behind the likes of Mason Appleton, Nino Niederreiter and Vladislav Namestnikov.

So when Ehlers left Winnipeg for the Carolina Hurricanes last summer, he sensed an opportunity to play a more meaningful role for one of the NHL's best teams.

"I've never said I wanted to play on the first line," Ehlers, who signed a six-year, \$51 million deal in free agency, told *The Athletic* earlier this season. "I've never said I wanted to play a certain amount of minutes and stuff like that. But you pay me to be an important, key guy on the team, and I want to be out there for the key situations."

Carolina has held up its end of the bargain, as Ehlers has helped the franchise achieve something never before done in league history. The Hurricanes pulled off sweeps of the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers, making them the first team since all four rounds of the playoffs became best-of-seven series in 1987 to start 8-0. (The league record for the longest playoff-opening winning streak belongs to the 1985 Edmonton Oilers, who won nine in a row on their way to winning the Stanley Cup.)

Ehlers' offensive numbers in the playoffs (two goals and four points in seven games) do not pop off the page. But he has pushed the puck up ice at an astounding rate, ranking second out of 194 forwards who have played in at least four playoff games in possession-driving plays per 60 minutes. Only Ottawa's Tim Stützle sits ahead of Ehlers. In addition, Ehlers has executed the most slot-driving plays (carries and passes) per 60 minutes among qualified forwards.

The Hurricanes, known more for their forechecking prowess, have developed into a dangerous rush team in recent years, which suits Ehler's skill set. They scored a league-leading 78 rush goals in the regular season — seven more than the next-closest team — and share the playoff lead with seven rush goals.

Initially, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour paired Ehlers with No. 1 centre Sebastian Aho. Ehlers also spent time flanking Logan Stankoven on the second line, but around the

midway point of the regular season, Brind'Amour put Ehlers on Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook's line.

On the surface, it looks like a clash of styles; Staal and Martinook are not finesse players. But they and Ehlers have formed a successful partnership. The Hurricanes' third line has levelled up in the playoffs, generating 59.1 per cent of the expected goals at five-on-five (xGF%) in 58:51 of ice time.

Ehlers, Staal and Martinook posted a 55.8 xGF% during the regular season.

Most impressively, Carolina's shutdown unit has dictated play and been on the ice for two goals against — one in each series — despite starting only 24.7 per cent of its even-strength shifts in the offensive zone.

"There's so many times where we're getting out of the (defensive) zone, but instead of maybe making a couple passes to get in there, (Ehlers) just carries it and can create so much space with the way that he skates," Martinook told reporters. "Me and (Staal), we want him to have the puck as much as possible, but when we can get in on the forecheck and try and get him to have his space, it's something that's a benefit for us."

Ehler's breakaway goal in Game 3 of the Flyers series was an excellent demonstration of how Ehler's, Staal's and Martinook's skills come together to produce results. Staal won a defensive-zone faceoff against Philadelphia's Christian Dvorak, which led to Hurricanes defenceman K'Andre Miller flipping the puck into the neutral zone. Martinook beat two Flyers players to the puck, and the speedy Ehlers did the rest.

"(Staal and Martinook) work their (butts) off," Ehlers told reporters. "They create a lot of room, a lot of space for me to use my speed and get into the open areas."

Over 10 seasons in Winnipeg, Ehlers was part of some successful teams, including the 2024-25 Presidents' Trophy winners. But he reached the conference finals just once (2018). The Jets, meanwhile, failed to adequately replace Ehlers, which contributed to their 26th-place finish this season.

"I believed that this team had the pieces to keep competing in the playoffs," Ehlers told reporters. "And I wanted to be a part of that. And now being here for my first full season, I know I was right."



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## The Hockey News

### Virtual Gaudreau Family 5K To Be Held In Cary

By: Ryan Henkel

Honor the legacies of Johnny and Matty Gaudreau at the American Tobacco Trail. Join local hockey fans to raise funds for youth athletics and animal welfare.

When the tragic news broke two summers ago of the deaths of Johnny and Matty Gaudreau, who were fatally struck by an alleged drunk driver on Aug. 29, 2024, it shook the entire hockey world.

But their legacy has continued to live on through those closest with them from the Olympics to the World Championships and more.

Another such avenue is the Gaudreau Family 5K, which is an annual walk/run that honors the memories and legacies of the Gaudreau brothers and helps raise money for causes that were important to them.

Funds raised from the run/walk will benefit the newly established Gaudreau Family Foundation, which carries forward the brothers' legacy by supporting programs that empower children, promote youth athletics and champion animals.

While the 2nd Annual event will be hosted again in New Jersey, there will be an in-person event held right here in North Carolina at the American Tobacco Trail in Cary for those interested in taking part.

Last year, the virtual runs drew over 1,000 participants across all 50 states.

The event is being organized by Tobacco Road Race Director and longtime Gaudreau family friend, Kaz Yahyapour.

"I think it's important to kind of bring everyone together and make sure that their legacy lives on," said Hurricanes forward Eric Robinson, who grew up with the Gaudreus and whose parents also serve on the 5K committee. "I know one of the Gaudreau's close family friends lives down here and I know he wanted to organize something. Hopefully I can be a part of that."

To register please visit this link.

When

Saturday, May 16, 2026 at 8:00 AM

Where

American Tobacco Trail – New Hope Church Road Parking Area

2584 New Hope Church Rd, Cary, NC

(Tobacco Trail New Hope Church Trailhead 5K Run/Walk Course)

For more information about the Gaudreau Family Foundation and the 5K, check out this interview with the family from colleague Kristy Flannery.

#### LINKS

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# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 15, 2026

## SportScan

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

1391358 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes' Eastern Conference Final schedule released ... sort of. What we know

Justin Pelletier, Chip Alexander

5-6 minutes 15/05/2026

The Carolina Hurricanes will start their next round of the NHL playoffs Tuesday.

Or Thursday.

That will depend on what happens over the next few days between the Buffalo Sabres and Montreal Canadiens.

The Sabres and Canadiens will play at least six games in their best-of-seven second-round series. Montreal won Thursday night, 6-3, in Game 5. Game 6 is slated for Saturday at 8 p.m. If the series ends Saturday with a Montreal win, the Canes will host the Canadiens in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final on Tuesday, May 19.

If the series extends to a seventh game, which would be played on Monday, May 18, the Canes would host Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final on Thursday, May 21.

If the series begins Tuesday, the Hurricanes will have endured — or benefited from — nine full days off. If it's Thursday? Make that 11 days since their most recent game, the Game 4 clincher in Ottawa on Saturday, May 9.

"Recovery in the playoffs ... you just don't get that luxury all that often," defenseman K'Andre Miller said Tuesday. "Any time you can get away from the rink and put up your legs and get your mind away from the ice and a stick and a puck is nice and is a good reset."

Added head coach Rod Brind'Amour: "It's important for the guys to stay physically sharp, but mentally it's OK to kind of get away from it a little bit because the playoffs are a grind mentally and physically," Brind'Amour said. "I think the mental rest is actually probably better for us than the physical rest."

Canes captain Jordan Staal noted that after the break following the Ottawa series, the Canes jumped right back into play and took a 3-0 win over the Flyers in Game 1, scoring twice in the first period.

"I think the guys were sharp," Staal said. "We had a good week of working out and practicing and getting the bodies right. We'll try to do the same and hopefully have the same start."

News Observer LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391359 Carolina Hurricanes

NC State grad, astronaut Christina Koch cheered for Flyers over Canes. What now?

Jadyn Watson-Fisher

4-5 minutes 14/05/2026

NASA's Artemis II crew safely returned to Earth one month ago after its trip around the moon, so how did one astronaut spend her time last weekend? Watching Game 4 of the Carolina Hurricanes and Philadelphia Flyers series in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

But, wait, didn't she grow up in North Carolina? And doesn't she hold multiple degrees from N.C. State? This feels like cheating.

It's true, Koch was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and grew up in Jacksonville, North Carolina. She went to White Oak High School in Jacksonville before attending North Carolina School of Science and Math in Durham.

Then, Koch attended N.C. State, where she received in 2001 dual bachelor's degrees in electrical engineering and physics. She later earned her master's degree in electrical engineering.

She even attended the 2023 Final Four in Houston — Koch is based in Galveston near Johnson Space Center — and told The News & Observer she is "proud to represent the Wolfpack in whatever way I can."

So shouldn't Koch be cheering for the Canes — who play in the same building as the N.C. State basketball team?

There's a simple, sweet and forgivable explanation: her husband.

Koch made history in 2019 when she broke the world record for the longest spaceflight by a woman — 328 days on the International Space Station — and participated in the first all-woman spacewalk. During that historic mission, however, Koch's heart yearned for a piece of home.

Her husband, Bob Koch, is from New Jersey and an avid Philadelphia Eagles fan. The two regularly watch games together. She did not ask NASA for access prior to liftoff, but once in space, the ground crew hooked her up.

NASA reportedly uplinked NFL Network to her station, allowing her to watch every Eagles game. It made her feel close to her husband and his family. She even took confetti from the Eagles' 2025 Super Bowl win on her most recent mission.

Koch watched the Phillies, 76ers and Flyers from space, too. She gave a tour of the Johnson Space Center to the Philadelphia 76ers in 2016 during an off-day visit — the year Joel Embiid was a rookie.

The Flyers, however, are Bob's favorite. He reportedly skated for Guy Gaudreau, a longtime youth hockey coach in New Jersey who is the father of the late Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. Johnny Gaudreau, a former NHL player, and his brother, Matthew, were killed when the bicycles they were riding were hit by a car in 2024.



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Bob Koch met longtime Carolina Hurricanes coach, and one-time Flyers player, Rod Brind'Amour multiple times. Bob Koch introduced Christina to his parents at a Flyers game in 2014.

Matt Sutor, the Canes chief marketing officer, said the organization was aware of Koch's connection to the team up north. She was not contacted following her return to Earth as a potential siren sounder.

In a lighthearted email, however, the Canes assured the position is open.

"We understand why Christina became a Philadelphia fan, and know fandom can begin for all different kinds of reasons," Sutor said. "Rooting for the Flyers is a forgivable offense, and we'll gladly save her a spot on the siren whenever she's ready to come home to the right team."

News Observer LOADED: 05.15.2026

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How the Carolina Hurricanes are managing the madness of a long NHL playoff break

Chip Alexander

7-8 minutes 14/05/2026

Raleigh

The Buffalo Sabres' win over the Montreal Canadiens in Game 4 of their NHL playoff series Tuesday meant one thing for the Carolina Hurricanes: a longer wait.

The Sabres' victory tied their Stanley Cup Playoffs series with the Canadiens at two games apiece. It also extended the second-round series — with the Canes sitting in Raleigh awaiting the winner.

Nothing new for the Hurricanes. After sweeping the Ottawa Senators in four games in the opening round, the Canes waited six days before facing the Philadelphia Flyers, creating the first rest-vs-rust debate.

Stormy, the Carolina Hurricanes' mascot, waves the team flag following the 3-0 victory in Game 1 over Philadelphia on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Stormy, the Carolina Hurricanes' mascot, waves the team flag following the 3-0 victory in Game 1 over Philadelphia on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett [rwillett@newsobserver.com](mailto:rwillett@newsobserver.com)

The Canes answered that by sweeping the Flyers. But that, in turn, has led to even more downtime before the Eastern Conference final — possibly as many as 10 days.

"Recovery in the playoffs ... you just don't get that luxury all that often," defenseman K'Andre Miller said. "Any time you can get away from the rink and put up your legs and get your mind away from the ice and a stick and a puck is nice and is a good reset."

And especially if you're a new father.

Oh baby! Miller, Walker welcome family additions

Miller and Sean Walker each have had a new addition to their families.

Miller and his girlfriend, Addison Clark, had a baby boy, Kashton, on May 2. Walker and his wife, Taylor, welcomed a baby girl, Quinn, on Saturday.

"It's probably the first time D partners have had babies in the same series, so it's a pretty cool experience and I know we're both really excited to be dads," Miller said.

With the Canes ending the series Saturday, Miller and Walker were back in Raleigh on Sunday and could take time for Mother's Day, along with their teammates.

"That was awesome," Miller said. "We both had our moms in town and obviously getting to celebrate our first Mother's Day was unbelievable and everything you dream of and hope for." Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour was another who took advantage of having Mother's Day as an off day.

"I actually thanked the guys for getting it done so quick," he said. "Instead of preparing for a (fifth) game and the added stress, worrying about all that, I got to bring my kid out here and skate. Like 'Thank you.' That's a stress reliever and that's a good day."

Miller joked that with a number of fathers on the team he has had some "therapy talks" about being a new father.

Brind'Amour also offered a bit of fatherly advice.

"They get enough advice from me, on everything," Brind'Amour said, grinning. "I certainly can help them in that area. First kids are always a little hairy, but that's OK.

"Sometimes, it's good to hear from somebody who's been through it, and it's like, 'It's going to be OK, it's supposed to be a little bit crazy.' And that's the world they're in right now."

Staying sharp

The Hurricanes, the top seed in the Eastern Conference, will open the conference final at home in the first two games. If the Sabres and Canadiens go to seven games, that would be the middle of next week.

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1391361 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes' Frederik Andersen 'always looks the same.' What's changed in the playoffs?

Sean Gentile

9-11 minutes 14/05/2026

No team expects to win its first eight postseason games. There, we can be honest. Still, that's where the Carolina Hurricanes, halfway through the Stanley Cup playoffs and squarely in the middle of an ever-growing wait on the specifics surrounding their next task, find themselves.

The Hurricanes are good, and the fact that they're laying low while the Montreal Canadiens and Buffalo Sabres put each other through a second-round thresher should surprise no one. At least one element



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contributing to their circumstances, though, has caught coach Rod Brind'Amour off guard: In net for every moment of that blemish-free run has been Frederik Andersen.

The worst regular season of Andersen's 13-year NHL career seemed to set the tone for, at minimum, a playoff time share with rookie Brandon Bussi. Andersen was in the driver's seat for Game 1 against the Ottawa Senators, and he's still holding the wheel, putting up a postseason-leading .950 save percentage, the top-line stat for an overall performance that has earned him a spot on Conn Smythe shortlists and kept Bussi on door-opening duties.

"I don't think anybody predicted that," Brind'Amour said after Andersen helped eliminate the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 4 of the second round.

"We certainly went into the playoffs thinking, 'OK, we're probably going to use (Andersen and Bussi). Why not? They both deserve to play.' And there's just been no reason to go any other direction. He's just playing lights out."

That sentiment doesn't stop with Brind'Amour. These days, Andersen has the idioms flying in Carolina's locker room. He's "a brick wall," according to Jaccob Slavin, and "a rock," per Taylor Hall, and someone who saved both "our ass" and "(our) bacon," Sean Walker said.

That's a far cry from the early winter, when Bussi, a 27-year-old who hadn't played an NHL game before October 2025, went from establishing his case for playing time to assembling one of the most successful starts to a career by a goaltender in history, setting a league record with 25 wins in his first 29 games.

Andersen, meanwhile, was seeing pucks slip past him at an unfamiliar rate. In his first 12 NHL seasons (three with the Anaheim Ducks, five with the Toronto Maple Leafs, four with Carolina) Andersen had put up a save percentage lower than .909 just three times; in 2020-21 with Toronto, when he missed two months with a knee injury; in 2022-23 with Carolina, when a lower-body injury ended his season in January; and in 2024-25, when another knee injury sidelined him from mid-January to the end of March.

This time, he was healthy. There were still mitigating factors — with Andersen in the net in December, a month in which he started just three games and allowed 14 goals on 73 shots, team video showed that the rest of the Hurricanes, via skates, sticks and other unlucky bounces, put more pucks past him than they did the opposition.

The situation came to something of a head on Dec. 4 in a 5-1 loss to the Maple Leafs, when Andersen allowed a goal on the first shot he faced — a puck off the stick of Bobby McMann that hit the left post, bounced off Andersen's back and trickled over the goal line.

He allowed another on Toronto's third shot, when Maple Leafs defenseman Philippe Myers flung a dump-in off the glass behind the goal. Nearly everyone on the ice, including Andersen, seemed to expect the puck to end up in the corner. It wound up on Scott Laughton's stick for a tap-in from the slot.

The loss was Carolina's ninth straight with Andersen in net, compared to a 7-0-1 record in Bussi's starts.

"I'm just trying to stay with it. I know that things will turn," Andersen said. "The way I look at it, I've played worse hockey and had better numbers. It's not really — it doesn't look good. Obviously, we're not getting the wins with me in net lately, but I still feel like I've got my game, maybe not perfectly where I want it, but I've had worse stretches where things have looked better and gotten more wins."

"I try not to look at that stuff too much. I try to focus on what I can control and try to work my way out of it in practice."

By the Olympic break, he was playing a bit more frequently (six starts in January), a bit more effectively (an .887 save percentage) and with a bit

more luck. Before he headed to Milan as the starting goalie for Denmark, Andersen's goals saved above expected in the NHL had crept back up near the break-even point, according to public models.

After the break, as Bussi's play dipped, the Hurricanes returned to a more strict time-share model; Andersen started 13 of their last 25 games, including three back-to-backs, posting a better save percentage (.879 to .864) and saving more goals than expected than Bussi.

Still, Carolina's starter for Game 1 against the Senators was a game-time decision for Brind'Amour. Andersen rewarded the call with a 22-save shutout and would allow just five goals across Carolina's remaining three first-round victories, stopping 105 pucks overall for a .955 save percentage and saving nearly three goals more than expected. Ottawa's shooters never beat him more than twice in a game.

It's a stat line 180 degrees removed from the one Andersen put up in the regular season, even though to a layman — and his coach — not a ton appears to have changed, aside from the results.

"His game always looks the same," Brind'Amour said. "That's the thing about him. You never really know when he's playing good or bad. It just kind of looks the same. Obviously, he's been great for us."

In the Ottawa series, Andersen, long viewed as one of the more technically sound goaltenders in the league, showed more "battle and pop" in net, former NHL goaltender and TSN analyst Martin Biron told The Athletic.

"A play where maybe he would have gotten beaten before, he's not, because he's given himself that extra jump to get there," Biron said. "Freddie would be the perfect practice, goalie-school goalie, because he would always have the right pushes, the right balance, the right positioning, the right everything. But then do you have that last little bit?"

That principle carried over to Carolina's second-round series against the Flyers, with Andersen shutting out Philadelphia 3-0 in Game 1 and rebounding from a rare puck-handling mistake to make 15 saves in a 3-2 overtime win in Game 2. In the second period of Game 3, with the score 1-1, Flyers winger Alex Bump slid into the crease and sent Andersen to the ice. The goalie regained his composure, picked up his stick and was ready when Philadelphia's Porter Martone sent a pass back to Bump for another point-blank opportunity; Andersen waited Bump out, forcing him to overhandle the puck and send an attempt off the side of the net.

Only then did Andersen have time to turn his paddle right-side up. He'd dropped it in the initial net-front collision with Bump.

His Game 4 featured 15 saves on 17 shots, including a beautiful second-period pad save on Garnet Hathaway, who had an all-alone opportunity following a two-on-one break. The added level of confidence and desperation caught Biron's eye, too, and it was at the top of his mind when he declared Andersen his Conn Smythe favorite after Carolina's close-out 3-2 win.

"If you push across on a two-on-one and you just rely on your technique, you're going to have this beautiful butterfly slide and maybe a small extension, and you're gonna say, 'Well, if (the shooter) beat me, he beat me.'" Biron said. "But if you're trying to get a split and then an arm up and a stick out or whatever, you're like, 'Oh, that's different.'"

Andersen's numbers, compared to the regular season, certainly aren't the same. It's not just that he leads the playoffs in save percentage, his teammates say — it's that he's stopping prime chances, the kind that often pop up for Carolina's opponents. The Hurricanes' territorial dominance is well established. It's also borne of relentless aggression on the forecheck, which can lead to a fair amount of odd-man rushes toward Andersen's net.

The statistics from the first two rounds bear that out. No goaltender faced a higher average shot distance than Andersen, at nearly 42 feet, according to Natural Stat Trick; no goaltender faced more rush chances



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more frequently than Andersen's 2.6 per 60, either. The most relevant numbers might be his five-on-five high-danger save percentage, a ridiculous .946 that would've led the league in the regular season by 74 percentage points; and a playoff-leading goals saved above expected between 11 and 15, depending on the model.

If that continues, Carolina's win total will cruise past eight. It might not stop at 12 or 15, either.

"I think it's the key for me, to expect whatever they got. I don't really look at the (chance totals) and the quality so much," Andersen said. "(I'm) just trying to be in the moment and whatever happens — if I save the one before, if I don't save it — try to make the next one."

The Athletic LOADED: 05.15.2026

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What's the future best and worst case for playoff breakouts Logan Stankoven and Zach Benson?

Shayna Goldman

10-12 minutes 14/05/2026

Zach Benson had his fingerprints all over the Buffalo Sabres' series-tying win on Tuesday night against the Montreal Canadiens. At this point, it's nothing new — his breakout performance has helped fuel Buffalo to this point.

The same goes for Logan Stankoven in Carolina. His clutch scoring has been one of the driving forces behind the Hurricanes' ridiculous 8-0 start to the playoffs.

It's easy to get carried away with these kinds of difference-making performances. Thriving in the pressure-cooker that is the Stanley Cup playoffs can define a player's career. There are regular-season contributors, and then there are big-game players, where lore can outpace a player's actual ability.

But for both Benson and Stankoven, there is regular-season substance behind their playoff glow-ups. These two have shown signs of that next level throughout the regular season, and now it's coming together on the big stage.

So what does the future hold for these two?

Projecting a player's trajectory isn't a perfect science because there's so much uniqueness to sort through. But looking at players with similar characteristics in the same age range, like physical attributes, production, play-driving and other stylistic ticks, can help point to comparables and create a range of outcomes for an up-and-comer. And this year's postseason play from both Benson and Stankoven is pushing them closer to their respective best-case scenarios.

Logan Stankoven, Carolina Hurricanes

Eight points have been the lucky number for Stankoven each postseason: in 19 games in 2024, 15 games in 2025, and now eight games this year. But his run isn't over yet, and there's likely more in the tank this postseason if his pace to this point is any indication.

There's a lot of substance behind his performance, thanks to how often and efficiently Stankoven shoots the puck. He is currently ninth in the playoffs with 20.7 shot attempts per 60 at five-on-five, and a higher percentage of those attempts — about 76 percent, compared to 66 percent in the regular season — are going on goal. And those shots are

even more dangerous, thanks to dynamic pre-shot movement and more rebounds created.

That was clear from the first game of the playoffs, when the Hurricanes generated 19 shot attempts that added up to an xG value of 2.17 at five-on-five (of the team's total 3.16), only allowed five shots back, and went up 2-0 in scoring in his minutes. And this play shows what's worked so well for Stankoven's line with Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake. He drives to the middle of the ice, gets set up with a pass from below the goal line, and creates chaos in the net-front to give Hall space for a second chance.

What makes this line tougher to contain is that they can play the game in all different ways. Stankoven embraces the Canes' forechecking style of play and can help sustain long stretches of offensive zone pressure. But he also amps up their rush game, too, which has been a key part of the team's success so far.

What seems to be working best this postseason, in particular, is letting Hall and Blake do more of the puck-carrying while Stankoven gets open for the shot.

Add in some solid defense from Stankoven and clutch reactionary saves, and it all adds up to just a dominant start to the postseason. The Canes have outright controlled the play in his minutes with a 72 percent xG rate, and the score sheet backs that up with an 11-2 goal differential.

The key to any playoff breakout is finding the balance between excitement and reality. Stankoven didn't just develop into the 2C the Canes needed overnight; he showed signs of this caliber all year long. He built his game up to this moment and really picked it up down the stretch, as he grew more and more comfortable playing center.

That regular season showed some promising comps, and his postseason is proving those could very well be in his future.

Two stand out in particular: Artturi Lehkonen and Tyler Johnson.

Lehkonen was more of a late bloomer compared to Stankoven; at that age, they had similar traits, but Lehkonen was only worth a plus-0.1 Net Rating, while the Canes center ended the year at plus-2.9. But some of it had to do with his usage before getting traded to Colorado. With the Canadiens, Lehkonen was deployed in the defensive zone a lot, against the opponent's best, especially when the team needed to protect a lead. But he proved he was more than just a forechecker after getting traded to the Avs; that's where he really grew into being a top-six disruptor and facilitator. Stankoven's already ahead of that curve, and could push his ceiling higher. Still, this wouldn't be a bad outcome by any stretch.

The Johnson blueprint is pretty much the opposite, because he started strong with the Lightning and eventually fizzled out. At 24 years old, though, his Net Rating was just a shade ahead of Stankoven's at a plus-3.5. But that peak level he eventually grew into could be plausible here, and maybe even more sustainable.

A few other comps that could fit here are Cam Atkinson and Oliver Bjorkstrand, considering their similar two-way values at this point in their respective careers. Having the support of a contender this early in his career could help Stankoven move the needle higher.

This postseason obviously points to that possibility, but his regular season adds another layer to that. Remember, this was his first full season playing 1) center, which is a challenging position especially in this demanding system, and 2) a real top-six role. The more he grows into that (and the more Blake, one of his primary wingers, continues to develop) the more he could push the boundaries even higher.

Zach Benson, Buffalo Sabres

Benson is another short king proving size isn't everything, especially when you play a big game.



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He plays a fearless style, with no problem driving to the higher-traffic areas and mixing it up with defenders trying to box him out. Benson is quickly gaining a reputation for being pesky between the whistles and after them, which gets under players' skin, especially in a long, tense playoff series. And more times than not, he's drawing penalties, not taking them.

That kind of style and attitude is something general managers actively look for ahead of the playoffs. Every team needs scorers, but they also need playoff dogs, which Benson is quickly proving to be at just 21.

What makes him so special is that it's just part of his game; he isn't just some bottom-six player who can stir the pot when it matters most. He pairs all that tenacity with a high-skill game on both ends of the ice.

And it makes for some plays like this, where Benson sets up Josh Doan off the rush with a cross-seam pass.

Benson is a total menace with his puck-hounding. He reads plays well to spot trigger points. With those smarts, there's just a hard-working player who will outright create his own points to pounce at. Between his speed and pesky stick, he is great at forcing turnovers.

Just watch how he pressures Noah Dobson and Lane Hutson to extend the Sabres' zone time, then gets into scoring position to get his team on the board.

Along with puck-retrieving and forechecking, there's a lot of puck-moving ability in his game. He isn't the most dynamic rush threat just yet, since a lot of his game surrounds a chip-and-chase style, but he has shown signs of that being a part of his next level; in the regular season, when he did enter with control, he did a good job of turning those entries into scoring chances. He is chipping in with that so far this postseason, too.

With the puck on his stick, he does some real damage between his playmaking and scoring chance creation. Benson isn't a volume shooter, but he makes the most of his shots by driving right to the dangerous areas. That's earned him a 59.6 percent xG rate this postseason and helped the Sabres outscore opponents 7-2 in his five-on-five minutes.

The present is already bright for Benson, but the future is even more exciting — especially if he can stay on the Seth Jarvis path.

As one executive put it in this year's Player Tiers, "Hagel and Jarvis, they're little a--holes who play the game the way it should be played." And the Sabres are basically rocking the lite version of that, with Benson and Doan.

A lot lines up between Benson and Jarvis at 20 years old. Size and stature are a part of it, since neither player has a hulking frame. But their two-way values are what really drive this one home; their Net Ratings are neck-and-neck at this point in their careers. Jarvis has obviously built on that all-around game a ton over the last few years and become one of the rare wingers to gain some Selke consideration. The defensive side of Benson's game has developed a lot over the last year, which is why he is getting trusted to play tough usage this postseason, where he has limited opponents to just 2.06 expected goals against. He could have the makings to become a true shutdown threat and follow in Jarvis' footsteps.

Another comp, Anton Lundell, adds more weight to that potential as an all-around threat. But there is always a range of outcomes for any player, especially this early in their career. A few developmental missteps could instead put Benson on a path more similar to Tyler Ennis instead.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is one other player he tends to draw comparisons to: Brad Marchand. The pot-stirring, peskiness, defensive game and offensive ability all line up and make him the perfect player to mirror. What separates their similarity scores is that Marchand took a few more years to hit that high-caliber game. But when he broke through, he obviously became an elite two-way threat. That's exactly what Benson should be striving toward, and he is quickly showing encouraging signs it could be in his future.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391455 Websites

The Athletic / In Matthew Schaefer, generational NHL defensemen see the next one of their own

By Peter Baugh

May 14, 2026 6:30 am EDT

As Matthew Schaefer put together a Calder Trophy-winning rookie season for the New York Islanders, he frequently heard his name in conversation with those of historically great NHL defensemen. And while his prolific statistical achievements made him worthy of such comparisons, the players he was being likened to sometimes didn't register.

"A lot of people would say names to me, and I'd be like, 'So who's that?'" the 18-year-old told The Athletic during a late-season interview.

Schaefer is a savant on the ice, but he's far from one when it comes to knowing hockey history. Playing sports — hockey, soccer, football or anything outside with his family and friends — always trumped watching them. Plus, the defenseman he took the most from growing up never played in the NHL, let alone reached the Hall of Fame. His older brother, Johnathon, is 9 1/2 years his senior and played three full seasons with OHL Niagara. Young Matthew would go to those games and watch Johnathon, a shutdown blueliner, stop behind the net to let plays develop. Matthew would imitate it in his youth hockey games, much to his teammates' confusion.

Schaefer, named the NHL's rookie of the year Wednesday after a 23-goal, 59-point season, became a beloved presence on Long Island. Drafted No. 1 in 2025, he was electric on the ice and endearing off it: quick to smile and interact with fans and unafraid to show vulnerability when talking about his late mother, Jennifer, who died of breast cancer in 2024.

All of it made him a household name among hockey fans. And as Schaefer learned more about the legendary defensemen who came before him, they learned about him.

"When I think about (Wayne) Gretzky, (Mario) Lemieux, (Sidney) Crosby, (Alex) Ovechkin, (Macklin) Celebrini this year, these types of generational players, I think he definitely has a great chance to be one of these guys," said Hall of Famer Ray Bourque, a five-time Norris Trophy winner.

"How he's really reshaped and remolded and rebranded that franchise, there's not very many players in the league that have done that," added Chris Pronger, who is also in the Hall of Fame and boasts both a Norris and Hart Trophy on his resume.

To his predecessors, Schaefer's skating jumps out right away. According to NHL Edge, he ranked in the 99th percentile league-wide in speed bursts of 20 to 22 miles per hour. He also finished in the 87th percentile in miles skated per 60 minutes.

"He's got great speed, and he skates with his head up," said Hall of Famer Nicklas Lidström, who won the Norris Trophy seven times with the Red Wings. "He carries the puck but his head is up, his head is on a swivel, so he sees the ice and he's not afraid to use that to his advantage."

"It's cool to see because you think (the league) can't get any faster, any better, and then there's always someone who shows you something, that anything is possible," said Pittsburgh's Erik Karlsson, a three-time Norris winner.



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"It's like he's floating," said Montreal defenseman Lane Hutson, last year's Calder Trophy winner. "It seems pretty effortless, and when he goes full tilt, too, it's another gear."

Late in the season, Schaefer set NHL records for goals and points by an 18-year-old defenseman, eclipsing Phil Housley in both categories. Another Hall of Fame defenseman, Housley was pulling for Schaefer to pass him — "It was great to have for a long period of time, but records are made to be broken," he said — and likes that Schaefer has the ability to lead rushes, much like Colorado's Cale Makar and Minnesota's Quinn Hughes.

"He's a breath of fresh air for the Islanders on the back end, being able to contribute offensively and bring creativity, creating offense from the defensive position," Housley said. "It's always fun to watch a player like that in today's game."

Hutson also found himself impressed by Schaefer's play when he didn't have possession, saying he "maybe has an underrated IQ."

"He's just so good at putting himself in good spots without the puck, and then he gets the puck and he's able to get some good shots off and score quite a bit of goals," Hutson said.

The goal scoring was a boon for the Islanders. Schaefer found the net in his first home game and proceeded to tie Hall of Famer Brian Leetch's record for most goals by a rookie defenseman. Bourque praised his release and ability to walk the blue line, and he wasn't alone.

"It sounds so simple, but when the game is going so fast, it's not easy," Leetch said. "So for him to do it at 18, that's what I always shook my head at. I'm like, 'That was such an easy play, but it was so smart.'"

"He can see where the openings are," Lidström said. "He's confident he can get shots through, and he's good at it, too. Players in the NHL today are so good at blocking shots and being in lanes, but he's still finding ways to get shots through."

Drafting a player like Schaefer can turn around a team in a hurry, but there's no guarantee in the NHL that tanking turns into a high pick.

Leetch watched on television as Schaefer fired five shots on goal in his final game of the season, a 2-1 loss to the Hurricanes. None of the pucks went in, leaving the 18-year-old and Leetch tied atop the record list for rookie defensemen. Leetch's in-laws, watching along with him, were hoping the shots didn't find the net. "It doesn't matter, you guys," Leetch recalled telling them. "The kid's such a good kid and such a good player."

Schaefer performed well outside of offensive situations, too. He wants to be a well-rounded player his team can trust in the defensive zone, and he finished the year with a positive defensive rating, per colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's Net Rating model. The fact that he held his own in that regard impressed Lidström, especially given his age.

"With the high skill and high pace and speed that the forwards have, you can get really exposed (as a defenseman)," Lidström said. "Especially what sticks out with him in the way he carries the puck, he's a very good skater, the way he can skate the puck out of trouble and find openings and be that threat coming up the ice."

Bourque knows Patrick Roy from their time together on the Avalanche, and said that the now-former Islanders coach was blown away by Schaefer.

"He already is a No. 1 defenseman," Bourque said. "It's something (the Islanders) didn't have. When you have somebody that's the quarterback and takes charge the way he has, they're really hard to find."

Among contemporaries, Schaefer called Makar his top current NHL player to watch. He appreciates the Colorado star's skating and believes he can learn from the way Makar attacks from the blue line.

"Guys get a little nervous when they're coming out at you," Schaefer said. "You can freeze them, use your skating ability to really get around them and make a move. I like how he's a really good skater but he's just so smart with the game and just has a really good hockey IQ."

Makar wasn't shy in heaping praise back on Schaefer.

"He's an electrifying player," Makar said. "I think he drives the offense on their team, it seems like. I feel like he's always up in the rush. As he grows and continues to develop, I feel like he'll find different ways to get in there even more."

Schaefer had a charmed rookie season, and Pronger is curious how he will handle on-ice adversity when it inevitably strikes. But that doesn't take away from how bullish he is on the 18-year-old's future.

"When you look at that Islanders team, it was obviously (Denis) Potvin, (Bryan) Trottier, (Mike) Bossy, Clark Gillies, four Stanley Cups in a row, the dynasty," Pronger said. "But now you don't hear that as much anymore. You hear about Matthew Schaefer."

At the beginning of Schaefer's historic rookie season, he was still learning about the great defensemen who came before him. By the end, he wanted to talk to one. After the final game, he approached Islanders staffers about arranging a call with Leetch. The two chatted for five or so minutes, including about Leetch watching Schaefer's season finale, and Leetch came away even more impressed than he already had been.

"I go, 'I'm the one who should be calling him!'" he said.

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The Athletic / What's the future best and worst case for playoff breakouts Logan Stankoven and Zach Benson?

By Shayna Goldman

May 14, 2026 6:00 am EDT

Zach Benson had his fingerprints all over the Buffalo Sabres' series-tying win on Tuesday night against the Montreal Canadiens. At this point, it's nothing new — his breakout performance has helped fuel Buffalo to this point.

The same goes for Logan Stankoven in Carolina. His clutch scoring has been one of the driving forces behind the Hurricanes' ridiculous 8-0 start to the playoffs.

It's easy to get carried away with these kinds of difference-making performances. Thriving in the pressure-cooker that is the Stanley Cup playoffs can define a player's career. There are regular-season contributors, and then there are big-game players, where lore can outpace a player's actual ability.

But for both Benson and Stankoven, there is regular-season substance behind their playoff glow-ups. These two have shown signs of that next level throughout the regular season, and now it's coming together on the big stage.

So what does the future hold for these two?

Projecting a player's trajectory isn't a perfect science because there's so much uniqueness to sort through. But looking at players with similar characteristics in the same age range, like physical attributes, production, play-driving and other stylistic ticks, can help point to comparables and create a range of outcomes for an up-and-comer. And this year's



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postseason play from both Benson and Stankoven is pushing them closer to their respective best-case scenarios.

Logan Stankoven, Carolina Hurricanes

Eight points have been the lucky number for Stankoven each postseason: in 19 games in 2024, 15 games in 2025, and now eight games this year. But his run isn't over yet, and there's likely more in the tank this postseason if his pace to this point is any indication.

There's a lot of substance behind his performance, thanks to how often and efficiently Stankoven shoots the puck. He is currently ninth in the playoffs with 20.7 shot attempts per 60 at five-on-five, and a higher percentage of those attempts — about 76 percent, compared to 66 percent in the regular season — are going on goal. And those shots are even more dangerous, thanks to dynamic pre-shot movement and more rebounds created.

That was clear from the first game of the playoffs, when the Hurricanes generated 19 shot attempts that added up to an xG value of 2.17 at five-on-five (of the team's total 3.16), only allowed five shots back, and went up 2-0 in scoring in his minutes. And this play shows what's worked so well for Stankoven's line with Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake. He drives to the middle of the ice, gets set up with a pass from below the goal line, and creates chaos in the net-front to give Hall space for a second chance.

What makes this line tougher to contain is that they can play the game in all different ways. Stankoven embraces the Canes' forechecking style of play and can help sustain long stretches of offensive zone pressure. But he also amps up their rush game, too, which has been a key part of the team's success so far.

What seems to be working best this postseason, in particular, is letting Hall and Blake do more of the puck-carrying while Stankoven gets open for the shot.

Add in some solid defense from Stankoven and clutch reactionary saves, and it all adds up to just a dominant start to the postseason. The Canes have outright controlled the play in his minutes with a 72 percent xG rate, and the score sheet backs that up with an 11-2 goal differential.

The key to any playoff breakout is finding the balance between excitement and reality. Stankoven didn't just develop into the 2C the Canes needed overnight; he showed signs of this caliber all year long. He built his game up to this moment and really picked it up down the stretch, as he grew more and more comfortable playing center.

That regular season showed some promising comps, and his postseason is proving those could very well be in his future.

Two stand out in particular: Artturi Lehkonen and Tyler Johnson.

Lehkonen was more of a late bloomer compared to Stankoven; at that age, they had similar traits, but Lehkonen was only worth a plus-0.1 Net Rating, while the Canes center ended the year at plus-2.9. But some of it had to do with his usage before getting traded to Colorado. With the Canadiens, Lehkonen was deployed in the defensive zone a lot, against the opponent's best, especially when the team needed to protect a lead. But he proved he was more than just a forechecker after getting traded to the Avs; that's where he really grew into being a top-six disruptor and facilitator. Stankoven's already ahead of that curve, and could push his ceiling higher. Still, this wouldn't be a bad outcome by any stretch.

The Johnson blueprint is pretty much the opposite, because he started strong with the Lightning and eventually fizzled out. At 24 years old, though, his Net Rating was just a shade ahead of Stankoven's at a plus-3.5. But that peak level he eventually grew into could be plausible here, and maybe even more sustainable.

A few other comps that could fit here are Cam Atkinson and Oliver Bjorkstrand, considering their similar two-way values at this point in their

respective careers. Having the support of a contender this early in his career could help Stankoven move the needle higher.

This postseason obviously points to that possibility, but his regular season adds another layer to that. Remember, this was his first full season playing 1) center, which is a challenging position especially in this demanding system, and 2) a real top-six role. The more he grows into that (and the more Blake, one of his primary wingers, continues to develop) the more he could push the boundaries even higher.

Zach Benson, Buffalo Sabres

Benson is another short king proving size isn't everything, especially when you play a big game.

He plays a fearless style, with no problem driving to the higher-traffic areas and mixing it up with defenders trying to box him out. Benson is quickly gaining a reputation for being pesky between the whistles and after them, which gets under players' skin, especially in a long, tense playoff series. And more times than not, he's drawing penalties, not taking them.

That kind of style and attitude is something general managers actively look for ahead of the playoffs. Every team needs scorers, but they also need playoff dogs, which Benson is quickly proving to be at just 21.

"People really get to see who he is," Sabres captain Rasmus Dahlin said of Benson's emergence this postseason.

What makes him so special is that it's just part of his game; he isn't just some bottom-six player who can stir the pot when it matters most. He pairs all that tenacity with a high-skill game on both ends of the ice.

And it makes for some plays like this, where Benson sets up Josh Doan off the rush with a cross-seam pass.

Benson is a total menace with his puck-hounding. He reads plays well to spot trigger points. With those smarts, there's just a hard-working player who will outright create his own points to pounce at. Between his speed and pesky stick, he is great at forcing turnovers.

Just watch how he pressures Noah Dobson and Lane Hutson to extend the Sabres' zone time, then gets into scoring position to get his team on the board.

Along with puck-retrieving and forechecking, there's a lot of puck-moving ability in his game. He isn't the most dynamic rush threat just yet, since a lot of his game surrounds a chip-and-chase style, but he has shown signs of that being a part of his next level; in the regular season, when he did enter with control, he did a good job of turning those entries into scoring chances. He is chipping in with that so far this postseason, too.

With the puck on his stick, he does some real damage between his playmaking and scoring chance creation. Benson isn't a volume shooter, but he makes the most of his shots by driving right to the dangerous areas. That's earned him a 59.6 percent xG rate this postseason and helped the Sabres outscore opponents 7-2 in his five-on-five minutes.

The present is already bright for Benson, but the future is even more exciting — especially if he can stay on the Seth Jarvis path.

As one executive put it in this year's Player Tiers, "Hagel and Jarvis, they're little a-holes who play the game the way it should be played." And the Sabres are basically rocking the lite version of that, with Benson and Doan.

A lot lines up between Benson and Jarvis at 20 years old. Size and stature are a part of it, since neither player has a hulking frame. But their two-way values are what really drive this one home; their Net Ratings are neck-and-neck at this point in their careers. Jarvis has obviously built on that all-around game a ton over the last few years and become one of the rare wingers to gain some Selke consideration. The defensive side of Benson's game has developed a lot over the last year, which is why he is



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getting trusted to play tough usage this postseason, where he has limited opponents to just 2.06 expected goals against. He could have the makings to become a true shutdown threat and follow in Jarvis' footsteps.

Another comp, Anton Lundell, adds more weight to that potential as an all-around threat. But there is always a range of outcomes for any player, especially this early in their career. A few developmental missteps could instead put Benson on a path more similar to Tyler Ennis instead.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is one other player he tends to draw comparisons to: Brad Marchand. The pot-stirring, peskiness, defensive game and offensive ability all line up and make him the perfect player to mirror. What separates their similarity scores is that Marchand took a few more years to hit that high-caliber game. But when he broke through, he obviously became an elite two-way threat. That's exactly what Benson should be striving toward, and he is quickly showing encouraging signs it could be in his future.

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ESPN / 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs: Lessons learned, what comes next – ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

The 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs began nearly a month ago. Six teams remain in the tournament, and 10 teams have been cast into the abyss.

There are lessons to be learned from this intense, remarkable postseason, about teams and players and what we expect from the NHL. Here are six hard lessons from the Stanley Cup playoffs:

Lesson: We underestimated the impact of the condensed schedule

Dallas Stars general manager Jim Nill has worked in NHL front offices since 1991. He has rarely experienced a season this exhausting.

"In all my years in hockey, this was probably one of the most demanding regular seasons I've ever gone through," he said. "That's the whole league. It's not only us but the whole league with the scheduling travel and the injuries."

The NHL's return to the Winter Olympics meant compressing the 2025-26 schedule to compensate for the multiweek break in February. That was coming off a compressed schedule at the start of last season to compensate for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

"We have to have a compressed schedule," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman told the New York Post. "We have to take into account that NHL teams send various amounts of players to the Olympics. Teams like Tampa and the Panthers send 10 players each, and we've got some teams sending one or two players. Teams are going to come back in a different place in terms of how they are than when we left. The fact of the matter is some teams are going to have a good chunk of their roster a little more tired and banged up."

According to NHL Injury Viz, which tracks roster absences, there were 8,160 man games lost to injury this season in the NHL. At the high end was Florida with 540 games, which included the 82 games Aleksander Barkov missed and Matthew Tkachuk being limited to 31 games. The Panthers missed the playoffs. Then again, so did the Detroit Red Wings, who had an absurdly low 86 games lost to injury, the fewest in the league.

There was also an injury cost for players going to the Olympics. After Boston's Charlie McAvoy and Florida's Matthew Tkachuk were injured at

4 Nations, the Winter Games resulted in the Los Angeles Kings losing Kevin Fiala for the rest of the season and the Stars' Mikko Rantanen tearing an MCL, which might help explain why he had just one even-strength point in six games this postseason. The Kings and the Stars were one-and-done in the playoffs.

For many teams this season, the question was when the true crunch of the condensed schedule was going to hit.

"When did it happen to you? Early? Some teams got crushed by the schedule in the middle of the season. Other teams got clobbered by it when they were pushing for the playoffs," one NHL general manager said.

Case in point: the Columbus Blue Jackets. They rolled into the Olympic break as the NHL's hottest team, going 10-1-0 after Rick Bowness was hired to replace coach Dean Evason. They were four points out of a playoff spot.

The Jackets would end up missing the playoffs thanks to a late-season spiral that saw them go 2-8-1 in their last 11 games. Bowness infamously torched his players after a loss in their season finale: "These guys, they don't care. Losing is not important enough to them. It doesn't bother them."

Another theory: Maybe they were just exhausted because they got crushed at the wrong time.

Columbus played 17 games in March, the most of any NHL team in a single month this season. That included three back-to-back games and only one break of more than one calendar day.

"It was a grueling schedule," Columbus GM Don Waddell said. "We barely could practice in March because we were playing so many games."

From March 26 through the end of the season, they won twice.

Bowness questioned the mentality of his players toward the end of the season. Frankly, that's the most underreported aspect of the condensed schedule.

"Some players had really big struggles with mental health or anxiety just because they could never get a breath," an NHL general manager said.

One veteran NHL player told ESPN the condensed schedule impacted how players recovered from adversity.

"If you have a bad game, and then you have another bad game right away, you're playing so many games in a short period of time that it snowballs," he said. "The coach is on you because he's feeling the pressure on him. There were so many more meetings and not as many days off. There weren't as many opportunities to get away from the game."

"I'm sure for a lot of the young guys that haven't been around a long time and haven't been used to that, it was just different."

Next season, the NHL will expand the regular season to 84 games, but without a prolonged break for an international competition.

"The year it was what it is," Waddell said. "Now we move on."

Lesson: Mikko Rantanen begat two juggernauts

Speaking of Rantanen, the aftershocks from last season's two trades involving the star winger are still being felt a year later. And not just because the three teams he played for in 2024-25 -- the Colorado Avalanche, Carolina Hurricanes and Stars -- were the top three teams of this regular season.

The Avalanche traded Rantanen to the Hurricanes in "a tough business decision," according to general manager Chris MacFarland at the time.



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After a subsequent trade, Rantanen ended up signing a deal with Dallas that carried a \$12 million annual salary cap hit. Colorado quietly hoped that Martin Necas, acquired from Carolina, could provide a decent percentage of the offense Rantanen had given them at a fraction of the cost (\$6.5 million average annual value). They also acquired Jack Drury in the deal, a player they liked for their bottom six.

Colorado used a second-round pick acquired in that trade to get center Charlie Coyle from the Boston Bruins. They used Coyle as an enticement to get Miles Wood offloaded from their cap, sending the pair to the Blue Jackets before the 2025 draft.

The cap space the Rantanen trade and related moves created helped MacFarland trade for center Brock Nelson last season, signing him to a team-friendly (\$7.5 million AAV) extension. It allowed the GM to continue to tinker, adding defenseman Brett Kulak, center Nicolas Roy and -- most significantly -- Nazem Kadri in a much-anticipated reunion.

The Avalanche have the best center depth in the NHL, in direct contrast with the Minnesota Wild, whose lineup is a doughnut. The four centers behind Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon -- Roy has played the wing, while Drury has centered their fourth line -- came from Rantanen-related moves. Necas has nine points in eight playoff games, after 38 goals and 100 points in the regular season. Necas signed an eight-year extension at \$11.5 million against the cap that starts next season.

Then there are the Hurricanes. They acquired Taylor Hall from the Chicago Blackhawks, who picked up part of Rantanen's salary. They picked up center Logan Stankoven from the Stars when they flipped Rantanen there. Those two have partnered with winger Jackson Blake to form the best line still in the Stanley Cup playoffs, earning 68% of the expected goals when on ice together. Hall in particular looks like a coup: The rejuvenated winger leads the team in scoring with 12 points in eight playoff games.

Carolina used a 2026 conditional first-round pick from Dallas to help acquire defenseman K'Andre Miller from the New York Rangers. Miller has six points in eight playoff games, skating to a plus-9 while being second on the team in average ice time in the playoffs (23:44 per game).

Meanwhile, after not signing Rantanen to an extension, the Hurricanes reallocated the money. Miller got a new contract with a \$7.5 million AAV, and the Hurricanes won the competition for free agent winger Nikolaj Ehlers, signing him to a deal with an \$8.5 million AAV. Ehlers has four points in seven playoff games, the offensive force on a very solid checking line.

The Avalanche (+150) and Hurricanes (+155) are the heavy favorites to win the Stanley Cup, via DraftKings Sportsbook odds. How they both leveraged losing Rantanen from their rosters is a big reason.

Lesson: It's a tough year for playoff format change supporters

The NHL adopted the wild-card playoff format in 2014, and that's about as long as I've argued against its existence.

I think the NHL tried to fix something that wasn't broken about the previous 1-through-8 conference playoff format, which the league implemented from 1993-94 until the wild card was adopted. It's a format that acknowledged regular-season success in ways the wild-card format does not.

If the 1-through-8 format were applied to this season's standings -- with the two division winners getting the top two seeds -- then the Dallas Stars would have drawn the Utah Mammoth in Round 1, while the Minnesota Wild would have faced the Edmonton Oilers ... rather than the No. 3 (Dallas) and No. 7 (Minnesota) teams in the entire NHL meeting in the first round.

The 1-through-8 format offered a variety of playoff matchups rather than the static ones you get with an emphasis on divisional play. And by that, I

mean there was a nonzero chance the Oilers and Kings would have met in the first round for a fifth straight time this postseason.

"I did think, growing up, it was pretty cool when they had the 1-through-8 seeding," Devils star Jack Hughes told me a few years ago, and he's right. "Maybe less play in the divisions. Because sometimes the divisions are stacked."

I know goofing on the Toronto Maple Leafs' lack of playoff success in the Auston Matthews era is a cherished pastime, but the fact is that six of their nine playoff eliminations were at the hands of the Boston Bruins, Florida Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning because of the wild-card bracketing.

So, I like the 1-through-8 more than the wild card. Like Hughes, many of the players I've spoken with about the postseason tournament prefer the 1-through-8 format, too. But none of that matters because there's one guy who is rather fond of the way things are. A rather important guy.

"Some people have that thought; I personally don't," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said on "The Pat McAfee Show" last week. "What we have has worked really well in terms of the series that develop, how the playoffs play out, the races to get into the playoffs. With the wild card, our regular season goes down to the wire for virtually all of our clubs."

Bettman also argues that the wild-card format means more competitive series, which is what one would expect when you have the third- and seventh-best teams in the NHL meeting in the first round.

"Six or eight first-round series went at least six games. That's extraordinary," Bettman said. "From our standpoint, it's working well. I don't see the need for a change."

Gary Bettman: Current NHL playoff format works well

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman joins "The Pat McAfee Show" to discuss the current format of the NHL postseason.

Here's the thing: It did work well.

The first round delivered one storied rivalry (Pittsburgh Penguins vs. Philadelphia Flyers), one hopeful rivalry (Vegas Golden Knights vs. Utah), one must-see matchup (Dallas vs. Minnesota), four upsets based on seeding, and a Game 7. The hockey was uniformly incredible, including within the sweeps by Colorado and Carolina.

Even as the self-appointed No. 1 wild-card format hater, I have to admit when it works. This is absolutely the wrong postseason to try to push my change agenda. It's like trying to promote wine spritzers at Oktoberfest.

That established ... can I interest you in some playoff expansion, given that we're soon to have 34 teams in the NHL, meaning more than half of them won't make the postseason? And that every other major and college sport seems to have expanded its playoffs while the NHL steadfastly refuses?

I've long endorsed play-in games: No. 7 vs. No. 10, No. 8 vs. No. 9. Just a single game. Like four Game 7s to kick off the postseason before the winners are seeded in the traditional 16-team tournament. Don't like the regular season boiling down to one game for what are currently playoff teams? Here's my advice: Finish sixth.

For the standings-curious: This season's play-in games in a conference format would have been the Penguins vs. the Red Wings and the Flyers vs. the Capitals in the East, with the Ducks vs. the Predators and the Blues vs. the Kings in the West. Winners take all.

I think NHL playoff expansion is inevitable, given the trends in other sports and the money being left on the table. But probably not until Bettman is no longer commissioner -- and good luck trying to pin him down on when that will happen.



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Lesson: Mitch Marner is on a revenge tour

It's so typical of the Maple Leafs that they miss the playoffs for the first time in 10 seasons and still manage to be the main character of the postseason.

Hiring Mats Sundin and John Chayka to lead their hockey operations. Firing coach Craig Berube. Having the very real possibility that Auston Matthews might not return to Toronto next season. Winning the draft lottery after heading in with the fifth-best chances.

And, of course, the Toronto market coming to grips with the fact that Marner was leading the playoffs in scoring (14 points in 10 games) with as many goals (six) as he had in his last three postseasons combined with the Maple Leafs. Which was entirely predictable.

With the Leafs, Marner's points-per-game average in the playoffs (0.90) was a far cry from that in the regular season (1.13). He played too much on the periphery at a time when goals are scored in the trenches. He looked overmatched by opponents and by the moment. He became a pariah, the lightning rod of culpability for Toronto's lack of playoff success in the search for its first Stanley Cup since 1967.

With unrestricted free agency looming, Marner and the Leafs parted ways last summer, when the Golden Knights acquired the winger and signed him to a new eight-year contract that carries a \$12 million AAV. Vegas is not Toronto when it comes to media and fan scrutiny. (I mean, what is?) So he escaped the Ontarian pressure cooker, exhaled for once and became the Golden Knights' playoff pacesetter after sputtering along during 70 postseason appearances for the Leafs.

Marner critics didn't even get to see him tormented by noted taskmaster John Tortorella when he took over the Golden Knights with eight games remaining in the regular season! The memes were everywhere, predicting a fragile star being broken by the league's most intense coach.

On the contrary, Torts loves "Mitchie," as he has referred to him to the media, and has pushed back against the narratives formed about him in Toronto.

"I think he's a hell of a hockey player. I think he's very confident in what he brings," Tortorella said after Marner's natural hat trick in Game 3 against the Ducks. "People give him s--- all the time about playoffs and this and that. I don't think it bothers him a lick. He just plays."

When asked about the narratives the next day, Tortorella said: "You guys don't see the stuff he does. People here, people in Toronto, all the people that talk about this guy, they don't see any of the things he brings to a game even if he doesn't score a goal. I've known that coaching against him. So, that narrative is a bunch of bulls---. Mitch doesn't care. Mitch is a pro. He's one of the top players in this league, and he plays for us."

Mitch Marner, thriving in the playoffs under coach John Tortorella. We'd say that's the most surreal Maple Leafs-related thing to happen in the past month, but then Toronto just hired John Chayka to replace Brad Treliving.

Lesson: Winning in the playoffs is a harsh education

Why have the Stanley Cup playoffs been so thrilling? I think part of it is the boundless enthusiasm of first-time participants.

The Buffalo Sabres ended a 14-season playoff drought. The Anaheim Ducks reentered the postseason for the first time since 2018, while the Philadelphia Flyers made it for the first time since 2020. The Pittsburgh Penguins were a playoff team for the first time since 2022 and had a roster of newbies behind the franchise standard-bearers such as Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

The Utah Mammoth made the playoffs for the first time in their existence -- and since The Franchise That Shall Not Be Named When Discussing The Mammoth (aka the Coyotes) hadn't made the playoffs since 2020, that's a whole bunch of first-time playoff voyagers on that roster.

If there was one overriding theme to the start of this year's playoffs, it was inexperienced teams and players figuring out how to win in the postseason. It's a harsh education, because the Stanley Cup playoffs are functionally a different sport from what's played in the previous 82 games.

"I just think it's a different style of game," said Trevor Zegras, who played 349 games in the NHL before making the playoffs with the Flyers this season. "Every series is a little different. The Pittsburgh series was a little more physical, more battles and a little bit more hatred, whereas the Carolina series was maybe a little faster, make more plays under pressure."

Zegras learned a lot about pressure over the last few weeks. "I just think the pressure of the games was something that you can't really prepare for. How you're going to feel when the puck drops for that playoff game," he said.

You could count on one hand the number of Flyers with previous playoff experience. You could almost do the same with the Sabres, which is why they ran into situations like Game 3 against the Canadiens. The lead slipped away. Bell Centre was popping. Tage Thompson said his team "got a little too emotional," including a parade to the penalty box that extended into Game 4.

That's why the approaches for Utah and Anaheim were intriguing. The Ducks balanced out their incredible generation of young talent by collecting players like Alex Killorn, who won multiple Cups with the Lightning; John Carlson, a Cup winner with Washington; and former New York Rangers Jacob Trouba and Chris Kreider, both with their own gravitas.

The Mammoth had multiple Cup winners in Mikhail Sergachev (Lightning) and Ian Cole (Pittsburgh), as well as Nate Schmidt, who won a Cup last season with the Panthers. GM Bill Armstrong told me that was by design to help his inexperienced players manage their emotions in the playoffs.

"We had some really good leaders that kind of stepped up and just said, 'Hey, you're going to feel like you're on top of the world, you're going to win the Stanley Cup, and the next night you're going to feel terrible. The world's fallen out,'" he told ESPN. "You've got to stay even-keeled in this process. And that's a huge thing not to get too up and down."

It was exhilarating to watch these teams learn in real time. Watching the Ducks figure out that possessing the puck means you don't have to figure out your defensive zone deficiencies. Watching Buffalo answer the bell when it seemed as if its series were on the brink of disaster. Watching the Flyers not freak out when Sid and the Penguins started to erase a 3-0 series deficit.

"It was such a good learning experience for myself and a lot of the other young guys that have never played a playoff game," Zegras said. "We know what to expect now."

Lesson: In the end, fans should choose joy

Philadelphia offered two of my favorite environments during the Flyers' run in the Eastern Conference.

The first was Game 3 against Pittsburgh, which was one of the most raucous and chaotic crowds in recent memory. The Flyers hadn't played a home playoff game since 2018. They were taking on their archrivals from Pittsburgh. The crowd was singing derogatory chants aimed at Sidney Crosby an hour before Crosby hit the ice and then throughout the game.

Gritty, in the mascot's first playoff appearance, threw a life-size stuffed penguin from the second level to the fans below, who crowd-surfed it while taking breaks to punch it in the face until an usher wrestled it away. It was pure, uncut Philly.

welcome to Philly [pic.twitter.com/cNADNF09GU](https://pic.twitter.com/cNADNF09GU)



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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— Gritty (@GrittyNHL) April 22, 2026

But so was what happened at the end of Game 4 against the Hurricanes, as Carolina completed the sweep. The game ended in overtime. Almost immediately, these passionate Philly fans -- whose passion, admittedly, can manifest in a variety of ways -- stood up and started loudly chanting "Let's go Flyers!" to numb their players' pain and acknowledge their accomplishment. It was one of the most touching things I can recall at the end of a series.

It even got to Rod Brind'Amour, who played nine years with the Flyers. As he shook Philly coach Rick Tocchet's hand, he pointed to the roof of the arena and told Tocchet to "take a minute" and soak in the love the fans were giving him and the team.

Listen in as Rod Brind'Amour goes through the handshake line after the @Canes closed out their Second Round #StanleyCup Playoffs series against the @NHLFlyers! [pic.twitter.com/LwqKtd4WCh](https://pic.twitter.com/LwqKtd4WCh)

— NHL (@NHL) May 12, 2026

Look, not every elimination is going to be sunshine and rainbows, and not every fanbase is going to treat the end of a series like a curtain call of a Broadway show. But ... what if they did?

These are the 16 teams that earned the right to keep playing after the regular season. Win a round, and their team is still playing while three-quarters of the league is not. What's not to cheer, at least in the moment, as the reality of dashed expectations sets in.

I didn't have "Philadelphia fans as beacons of positivity in the face of defeat" on my bingo card, but here we are.

ESPN LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391458 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens earn chance to eliminate Sabres at home with Game 5 redemption

Eric Engels

BUFFALO, N.Y. — This was a redemption story.

For Jakub Dobes, who started by giving up three goals on the first four shots he faced before finishing by stopping the next 31; for Ivan Demidov, who took a step back Tuesday only to take a massive one forward Thursday to produce the most decisive plays; for a power play that went one-for-seven in its last outing but scored on both its attempts on this one; for the Montreal Canadiens as a whole — a team that has now followed up each of its last nine losses with wins.

Their resolve, their heart and their mental clarity through utter chaos at KeyBank Center sent them home with a 6-3 win in Game 5 and a chance to dispatch the Buffalo Sabres from the Stanley Cup Playoffs in Saturday's Game 6 at the Bell Centre.

Those qualities showed once they erased a Buffalo lead just 4:31 after Jason Zucker scored two minutes into the first period. And then again, just nine seconds after Josh Doan made it 2-1 Sabres at the 7:54 mark of that frame.

Just when you thought a Konsta Helenius sifter that leaked through Lane Hutson before sneaking by Dobes for a 3-2 Sabres lead would break the Canadiens, they eventually snapped back to attention and redeemed themselves.

"I think we just try to not care about what the score is. We try to stay focused with our game," said Juraj Slafkvosky. "You're going to go down, but it's about how you answer and about how you get back up."

Dobes was down, but the Canadiens' coaching staff picked him back up.

Martin St. Louis, who's admittedly not a goaltending expert, looked down his bench after Helenius scored 10:15 into the first and asked assistant Trevor Letowski to radio up to goaltending coach Marco Marciano.

"He made the call," said St. Louis. "It was a very quick call, too, so it was, 'OK, let's move on.'"

Dobes did. And when the Canadiens continued coughing up pucks to feed the Sabres' offensive push early in the second period, he came up with the save that changed the game.

Tage Thompson came flying into Montreal's end in possession of the puck — and with every Canadien on the ice chasing him. The big, rangy right-hander swept through the crease, went from backhand to forehand, and got stuffed by Dobes.

"Huge save," said Nick Suzuki. "We got hemmed in there, my line. Guys were trying to get off the ice and they transitioned really quick there. That could've probably changed the game in their favour, and he comes up with a huge save."

It came 3:49 into the second period and gave the Canadiens the wind for their huge push through the end of the game.

They tilted the ice over the next four minutes and Josh Anderson tied it up 3-3.

Then Demidov took over.

The talented 20-year-old had been snuffed out by the Tampa Bay Lightning through the first seven games of these playoffs. After leading NHL rookies with 19 goals and 62 points in the regular season, he was held to just one assist in Round 1. And all the momentum he seemed to gain through the first three games of Round 2 suddenly evaporated as he forced pass after pass on the failing Canadiens power play in Game 4.

But the chances kept coming for Demidov early in Game 5 until he finally capitalized on one to sneak the puck through Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

Jake Evans tucked that home for a 4-3 Canadiens lead 16:15 into the second period. And after Suzuki scored the late-second-period-power-play goal that ultimately chased Luukkonen from the game to start the third, Demidov beat Alex Lyon for his first goal of the playoffs.

His belief it was coming never wavered.

"Every game I've had 100 per cent chances to score," Demidov said. "This game, Hockey Gods decided I have to score."

The Canadiens took care of the rest.

"Really happy that they stepped up when they needed to," said Dobes, "and obviously I'm really proud of myself, too, for not giving up and (continuing to make) saves."

Dobes was 13-2-2 directly following losses in the regular season. He was a perfect 4-0 with a 1.49 goals-against average and a .948 save percentage directly following losses in these playoffs. And it seemed impossible he was going to improve on that after the way he started Game 5.

But not to the Canadiens.

"I just think he's super confident in himself. I think he puts in the work off the ice to have his mental training where it needs to be," said Suzuki. "He's a fighter, he wants to be in the battle with the guys, and he's got the perfect kind of attitude in a goalie."



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And the Canadiens have the right one in front of Dobes, which is precisely what enabled them to redeem themselves after such a jittery start.

That, and the calm that overtook them following Dobes' save on Thompson.

"Honestly, I can't say exactly how long it lasted," said St. Louis, "but it was for about 12-13 minutes in the second where we got momentum, and as far as just how well our team is able to play, we hit that high level of execution and our collective game and then we were able to score some big goals..."

The Canadiens didn't allow the early ones to rattle them. They fought back.

Now the chance to play the Carolina Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final is right in front of them.

"We saw against Tampa it takes a lot to close out a team," said Suzuki. "We have another opportunity to do that. I'm sure the crowd's going to be into it hours before the game starts, and it's going to be rocking. So, we're ready for that and we're excited for the opportunity to close it out."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391459 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Sabres' defence simply not good enough against Canadiens

Luke Fox

BUFFALO, N.Y. — When the goalie who allows three goals on his first four shots faced is neither the goalie who gets pulled, nor the goalie who loses, one can't help but wonder what the starter at the other end is thinking.

So, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, how do you interpret Jakub Dobes's 32-consecutive-save lockdown effort in the Montreal Canadiens crease?

"I think that is playing good defence," the Buffalo Sabres goaltender replied, after a 6-3 Game 5 loss. "You know, he's playing good, no denying that. But I think how well they defend, how many pucks are loose over there, but they kind of get them away in front of him. They did a good job with that. So, I wouldn't say it's necessarily (Dobes's performance). I think it's more how well they're defending as a team."

In other words: How poorly the high-event, low-composure Sabres are defending as a team.

Luukkonen — already dry from his post-game shower, getting yanked after 40 minutes and five goals against — may be hesitant to heap any more praise on his buzzy counterpart at the other end of the rink. But that doesn't make his assessment untrue.

The Sabres are much too leaky in this playoff series, just their second after a 14-year drought. And because they blew leads of 1-0, 2-1, and 3-2 in Thursday's pivotal home game, they must fly to Montreal for what they hope is the first of two must-wins — in the cacophonous lion's den that will be Bell Centre on Saturday night.

In getting to Dobes early but surrendering four unanswered, Buffalo lost home ice (again) and shed so much of the swagger that had the Sabres' blistering Mötely Crüe goal song on repeat through the game's first minutes.

"Five goals is unacceptable. That shouldn't be happening," said Luukkonen, who was quick to share blame with his teammates.

The losing netminder, who ceded his crease back to Alex Lyon (again), referenced an unattended back door and deep pucks that failed to result in clean breakouts.

As thrilling as the Sabres' pointed attack with the puck can be, they look too sloppy and scattered without it right now to reach the final four. That Buffalo gave up 15 high-danger looks and 5.48 expected goals, per NaturalStatTrick.com, supports the don't-just-blame-the-goalie argument here.

Conor Timmins yakked up a puck in the slot on one strike, then failed to cover scorer Josh Anderson on another. Luke Schenn and Peyton Krebs missed boxouts and failed to tie up two more successful attackers in tight. If the Canadiens weren't sniping, they were tapping in.

"That's puck play by us," veteran Alex Tuch said, quietly. "We definitely could've prevented a couple of those goals. But they're a good team, so they're going to score. We have to make sure we're getting back to our game, especially defensively. And we didn't do that tonight."

"It's not good enough. Really not good enough."

A two-way force right through Round 1's besting of Boston, Tuch, in particular, has not been good enough.

The 33-goal, 66-point threat is still searching for his first point of the series. Linked with fellow star Tage Thompson on the first line, Tuch's trio got cratered in Game 5, outchanced 10-2 at even strength.

"I gotta bear down," Tuch said. "I gotta be better."

He is a man swallowing a difficult truth.

"He's lost just a little bit of confidence, trying a little bit too hard to make that extra play," coach Lindy Ruff said. "The biggest thing is, you got to move your feet. Always move your feet. Get your feet moving, whether it's through the neutral zone, whether you're challenging at the blue line. And that line just hasn't been quite connected."

"You got to believe in your top guys, and they got to get it done for you."

Belief in Buffalo has taken a hit this week. The Sabres stole one in Game 4, then blew one in Game 5. They're on the brink.

This feel-good, beer-guzzling brotherhood must band together and cut down Montreal's good looks and second chances. The Sabres are scrambling, and they're down to their last life.

"Well, I'll just say this," Ruff said, nodding toward Saturday. "We've won four out of five games on the road in real tough buildings. We played fast. We played hard."

Now, it is imperative they defend hard, too.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391460 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks do the right thing by hiring Johnson, Sedins

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — After exhausting all other options, the Vancouver Canucks finally did the right thing in hiring Ryan Johnson as their general manager and Henrik and Daniel Sedin as co-presidents of hockey operations.

We borrowed that paragraph from Winston Churchill, who purportedly said something similar about American foreign policy. But there is a



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relevance to it because the Canucks, in a sporting sense, are nation-building. Or re-building.

Canuck managing owner Francesco Aquilini and outgoing president Jim Rutherford interviewed 17 candidates to replace former general manager Patrik Allvin. And after the ownership family decided whom they wanted to run hockey ops, the iconic Sedin twins were presented with the two finalists: Johnson and Boston Bruins AGM Evan Gold.

It was Daniel and Henrik who then chose to hire Johnson, the Canucks assistant GM, who was the first candidate and, eventually, the final one.

What the three new leaders of the Canucks have in common, besides their background as players and manager/coaches with the National Hockey League team, is intelligence and irreproachable character and integrity.

And since they are taking over an organization at its nadir, a team that rotted from within with startling speed over the last two seasons, those characteristics are a pretty good place to start in undertaking the repairs.

The Canucks are in the embryonic stage of a rebuild, already with a few potential building blocks but obviously needing more. This is not in dispute by anyone, including the Sedins, Johnson and Aquilini.

What was clear from Thursday's press conference at Rogers Arena to introduce the new regime is that the most important and immediate job for Johnson and the Sedins is to build a culture and dressing-room ecosystem that can anchor the framework for competitive improvement.

And here again, it would be difficult to find better people to lead that work since the dressing room culture started to erode as soon as the Sedins, who set Canuck standards for more than a decade as players, retired in 2018.

"Before we talk about wins and losses or getting to that point, the environment will be first and foremost," Johnson told reporters. "The expectation of the players, I always talk about the professionalism of how they approach every day and having a plan. . . my biggest challenge to them every day is: What is the quality of teammate that you could be for each other today?"

"I'm not worried about wins and losses. The environment is something that I will establish now, as I'm talking to players, not in September. They'll be very aware that when they walk into this facility in September that they've got to make a decision of who they want to be as a player, (and) who they want to be as a person and a teammate. We will establish that very, very quickly."

Johnson, 49, was hired as a consultant by Mike Gillis, promoted in player development by Benning, then promoted again to assistant GM by Rutherford. Johnson managed and largely built the Abbotsford Canucks, who, 11 months ago, delivered the organization's first American League championship.

Fans who are uneasy about Johnson's connection to "failed" regimes headed by Benning and Rutherford should remember that the turnover in hockey ops under both was widespread. And how did that turn out?

Johnson spent two seasons as a player in Vancouver and said upon his arrival in 2008 that he felt the influence and leadership of the Sedins as soon as he walked through the dressing room door.

All three of them would have been appalled at what became of the Canucks' culture.

"Culture is huge," Henrik said Thursday. "You cannot win without it; that's impossible. And you cannot be sustainable without it. For us, the culture piece is our main thing to fall back on over the next little bit here. And that's starting with us. We've got to come in every day, and we've got to show up and we've got to do the things that took us to this position. It's the same as players — preparation, preparation. We're going to do everything it takes to do this job well."

Clearly, the Canucks will be demanding more from their best and most experienced players. Leadership was reset after the trade deadline when veterans like Brock Boeser and Teddy Blueger, Filip Hronek and Marcus Pettersson, and Kevin Lankinen talked amongst themselves and agreed that the dressing room needed to be a more positive and supportive place for the team's many young players.

But beyond the environment, it can't be acceptable if Elias Pettersson or other veterans report to training camp with conditioning scores that can't be posted inside the dressing room for younger teammates to see.

"Here's my initial thought on Elias," Johnson said, "I want to wipe away all the expectations... not just our players, but our staff. We're asking them to come in September the most prepared that they could be, and for our players, that's going to be physically and mentally ready to make a decision. I'm looking forward to talking to him and just letting him know that that's what's important to me out of the gate. And like I just said, and I'll reiterate again, I'm going to challenge these guys to be as good teammates that they can be for each other. And if we commit to those little things, everybody's going to be better for it, including him."

Johnson noted a couple of times during the 40-minute press conference that Thursday was "Day 1," so he could not offer substantive answers to questions about the future of head coach Adam Foote or incumbent assistant GMs Cammi Granato and Emilie Castonguay or what hockey-ops departments he needs to improve.

"To evaluate off of last season, I think is pretty unfair," he said of Foote.

But the new GM, lauded for his respectfulness and decency, made it clear he can make difficult decisions.

"You can talk to players or coaches or trainers or staff that I've had a lot of difficult conversations with and some hard, honest conversations," Johnson said. "I think it's a false narrative, (that) because I'm empathetic that I can't make tough decisions. People that work alongside me know that's far from the truth."

Aquilini began the press conference by introducing his new hockey operations team before retreating and leaving questions to Johnson and the Sedins.

But the owner pledged full support and said for fans: "We appreciate this rebuild will require patience. But we will ice a team that competes hard every night. Rebuilding and competing hard are not mutually exclusive."

No one would be trapped into providing a timeline for the rebuild.

"I think to put any type of timeline on it is unfair to the process," Johnson said. "I think it's more about building the environment first, it's making sure that the staples are there, the things that we believe in — creating an environment, a safe environment, where players can improve, can make mistakes, that have resources.

"But we're going to do this step by step, and we're not going to race through it. We're going to be very strategic with everything we do."

Henrik Sedin said: "To do this as fast as possible, we've got to be very careful and go slow. I think that's the fastest way to get to where we want to be."

We don't think he was trying to be funny, and what he said made sense.

When Rutherford started the GM search four weeks ago, Johnson was the soft favourite to get the job. But nobody expected then he would be answering to two of the greatest and most respected figures in Canucks history.

The 45-year-old Sedins to the Canucks are not Mats Sundin to the Toronto Maple Leafs; they have remained closely connected to the hockey team and have a first-hand understanding of all that has gone wrong and needs to be fixed.



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"I think it's a strength that we've been a part of all aspects of the organization," Henrik said. "I think we see what's needed."

Importantly, it was the twins' decision to hire Johnson.

"I think my journey here has been very organic," the new GM said. "I started as a consultant with Mike Gillis and Stan Smyl and that group. And so I've spent a lot of time, very early, just listening, spending a lot of time observing, trying to take in information. And as you go from (player) development and into managing an AHL team and working with amateur (scouting) staffs and pro staffs, it's been an organic journey. I haven't skipped or jumped the line. I never had an agenda to work my way (up). I just wanted to do good work, do it with good people. And it's led me to this."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391461 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 'Game-breaker': Marner leads Golden Knights into Western Conference Final

Sonny Sachdeva

Much has been made of the former Toronto Maple Leaf flipping the script and becoming a post-season stud for his new club. The Vegas Golden Knights winger came into Thursday night's Game 6 meeting with the Anaheim Ducks leading the post-season in scoring, and sitting tied with Team Canada teammate Nathan MacKinnon for the scoring lead in Round 2, too.

One minute into Game 6, Marner made clear he has no intention of slowing down, the smooth-skating winger breaking in all alone on Ducks netminder Lukas Dostal, and pulling a filthy move to draw first blood for the Golden Knights.

Seven minutes later, he was on the board again, setting up Brett Howden for a short-handed tally that wound up as the night's game-winning goal, and series-clinching goal.

The Ducks weren't able to close the gap, falling 5-1 in the end, bringing their meteoric campaign of progress to a close. For Vegas, the second-round win sends them back to the conference final for the first time since their Cup-winning run in 2023. The organization has reached the conference final five times since joining the league in 2017-18, the most of any club in that span.

Marner was no doubt essential in getting them there. It was an up-and-down regular season for the winger in his first campaign as a Knight — he posted 80 points in Vegas after a career-best 102-point season to close out his tenure in Toronto. But this Golden Knights run has seen Marner play the best hockey of his playoff career. His seven goals rank as the second-most tallied by a Golden Knights player in their first post-season with the franchise, one behind Jonathan Marchessault's eight in 2018, and Marner became the second Golden Knight to record multi-point games in two straight series-clinching tilts after posting two goals and an assist in Vegas's series-ender against Utah.

The Markham, Ont., product finishes Round 2 with a league-leading 18 points through 12 games in these playoffs — a career-best mark in the post-season. More importantly for him and his Golden Knights, he now heads into territory his former club could never reach: the third round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"He's a game-breaker," teammate Jack Eichel said on the broadcast after the final buzzer sounded on Vegas's series-clinching win. "You saw it in that series — he was the best player in that series. I mean, he comes out

here in the beginning of the first period, makes two incredible plays, and all of a sudden you're playing with a lead.

"He's on a pretty special run right now. It's been a lot of fun to watch. I'm so happy for him — I feel like he's had a lot of critics, and I feel like he's shutting a lot of people up right now."

Golden Knights' special-teams dominance continues in series-clincher

The Golden Knights came into Game 6 vastly outperforming their young opponent on the special-teams front.

Through five games in this series, Vegas's power play was humming at 30.8 per cent, the second-best mark of all Round 2 participants, while Anaheim's man-advantage unit struggled to a 17.6-per cent success rate. The same went for the penalty kill — Vegas came into Game 6 with their kill operating at 83.4 per cent, again among the best in Round 2, compared to Anaheim's 69.2 per cent.

In Game 6, that trend continued. A dominant first period saw Vegas build a 3-0 lead on the back of some sterling special-teams play. After Marner's opening-minute display, the Knights collected a short-handed goal and a power-play tally to put the Ducks on their heels early.

Anaheim managed one power-play marker in the second period — a Mikael Granlund snipe that wound up as the Ducks' only goal of the night — but overall left plenty of opportunities to get back in the game on the table. The Ducks finished the night 1-for-5 on the power play, and 4-for-22 in the series overall — a stark drop-off from their league-leading 8-for-16 success rate in Round 1.

Dorofeyev, Howden stay hot, take over top of playoffs goal-scoring race

Pavel Dorofeyev's banner year continued Thursday night. The 25-year-old put up a career-best 37 goals during the regular season, besting the career-best 35 he potted a year prior. And through two rounds of this post-season, the Russian winger has kept that elite pace alive.

He added two more goals in Game 6, scoring the final two tallies of Vegas's 5-1 win, to take his 2026 post-season total to a league-leading nine goals in 12 games. Dorofeyev now has goals in three straight, putting up five tallies in Games 4, 5 and 6 to help close out the Ducks.

Earlier in the night, it was teammate Howden who briefly took over that top spot in the playoff goal-scoring race when he tallied his eighth goal of the post-season. The 28-year-old had just 12 goals during the regular season, and has already set a career high in the playoff goals category, sitting just a handful away from equalling that regular-season sum.

Howden's short-handed tally Thursday night was his third of this Golden Knights' run, leaving him tied for the most in a single post-season.

Sennecke, Ducks' young stars held off the board in pivotal Game 6

Anaheim's 20-year-old phenom, Beckett Sennecke, came into Thursday night's tilt on fire — the winger had goals in four straight games heading into Game 6, including tallies in both of Anaheim's wins in this series.

Thursday night, the run came to an end as the veteran Knights held Sennecke and the rest of Anaheim's young stars — 22-year-old Cutter Gauthier, 21-year-old Leo Carlsson, and 25-year-old Jackson LaCombe — off the board. Sennecke, who finishes tied for the team lead in goals during this playoff run, got his chances, throwing a team-leading five shots on net, but was unable to break through.

Still, though their 2026 run comes to an end, the Ducks no doubt sent a message this season in what was an immense step forward for the organization. After missing the playoffs for much of the past decade, the club's young core turned their potential into performance in these playoffs, and put the rest of the West on notice.

Next up: Vegas meets Colorado in the Western Conference Final

Now, the path gets far more difficult for the Golden Knights.



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After taking down two younger, more inexperienced squads in Utah and Anaheim through the first two rounds, Vegas now gets the opposite challenge in Round 3: an incredibly experienced Colorado Avalanche team that's looked far and away the best in the league all season.

Colorado enters Round 3 having swept the Los Angeles Kings in Round 1, followed up by taking down another bona fide contender, the Minnesota Wild, in Round 2. In the regular season, the Avs took two of three meetings with Vegas, winning once in regulation and once in a shootout, while the Knights claimed one win themselves in overtime.

In what will be a series of seasoned vets, the Golden Knights and Avs will head into their third-round battle with 23 Cup winners dotted among both squads (12 for Vegas, 11 for Colorado), marking the first time in more than a decade that a conference final match-up will feature two clubs with double-digit Cup winners on their rosters.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 05.15.2026

1391462 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' Bowman must find right coach to get most out of players

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — There are some constants that have been established in Edmonton, over the arc of a competitive window that has lasted for most of a decade.

They are cemented in Edmonton's culture, some good, some not so good. And the solution has always been the same: Fire the coach.

But after this much time, whether we like them or not, we should recognize exactly what these forces are and shape them accordingly, as the end of the Connor McDavid window rises on the horizon.

One: The Oilers possess an elite ability to score, aided by the best power play in the National Hockey League. It's an inherent advantage, and must be leveraged.

Two: That offence will get you to the playoffs every year. How far they go after that, however, is dictated by the Oilers' collective ability to keep pucks out of their own net. Offence is your strong suit, sure. Defence wins championships.

Three: There is an issue of inclusivity that has existed for years in Edmonton's dressing room. The fourth line can not be asked to play the same way the first line does — or vice versa — but the entire roster has to be made to feel like it is part of the process. The depth guys cannot simply be spectators, just as the top guys can not be asked to provide every element a team needs to succeed.

Four: Management has panicked in its fevered search for goaltending, undermining the confidence of players, coaches, fans and media. Can Stan Bowman and Jeff Jackson — who have presided over an ever-diminishing asset for two seasons now — finish the job here?

Let's start there, as the Oilers fire yet another coach in Kris Knoblauch, an act that happens every second season in Northern Alberta, like someone changing the air filter in their lawn mower.

"We (the front office) are definitely part to blame for where we are today. I don't think that we're trying to hide from that," Oilers general manager Bowman said on Wednesday, in announcing the poorly kept secret that Knoblauch had been fired after just 233 games — and two Stanley Cup Finals — as coach. "We had players who didn't perform to the level they

should. We had players that I brought in that didn't perform to the level that we expected them to — so that's on myself.

"There's blame to be had by all of us, myself included."

So, as we wait for the Vegas Golden Knights to give up their swing at the playground — even though they've no intention of playing on it anymore — to allow Bowman to interview Bruce Cassidy, it becomes clear what qualities will be required from the 10th coach in Ryan Nugent-Hopkins' NHL career.

He must, first and foremost, crack the code of allowing Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard their offensive flair, but demand that it is flexed within the context of a team game.

No more backhand passes through three sticks at the top of the offensive zone by Draisaitl, or Bouchard toe-dragging defenders while the last man back, when nursing a 3-2 lead with eight minutes to play.

And just because McDavid stands up on the bench and looks over his shoulder, it does not always mean he gets the nod from his coach. Other guys want to play too.

Bowman, who really had no strong opinion on how Knoblauch became the one to lose his job when so many others performed so poorly last season, knows he needs more buy-in from his leaders when it comes to a defensive posture.

"That would help, there's no question," he said. "There is that fine line. They do things that no one else can do, and there is an element of risk to that. Calibrating that (properly) is the Midas Touch: How can you not take away from what they can do that no one else can do? But, there are elements of their game (last season) that, at times, wasn't a strength.

"So, that (buy-in) would help, without a doubt."

Among other transactions last season, Bowman provided Knoblauch with a seven-point player on an eight-year contract in Trent Frederic, a free-agent acquisition who never meshed in Anderew Mangiapane, and the GM topped off his handiwork with the Tristan Jarry trade, a debacle in its purest form.

On the ice, McDavid termed the regular season "monotonous," and despite having two top-10 NHL scorers and the highest-scoring defenceman, Edmonton defended its way to a goals differential of plus-13, which was 14th-best in the NHL despite being the league's seventh-highest scoring team.

Defence and goaltending. It has to be the focus in Edmonton, and Bowman must now find a coach who can make that demand stick with these high-end players.

"At the end of the day, the coaches aren't on the ice. The players are on the ice doing it," Bowman said. "How can you ... hold them accountable, or enforce that to a greater degree? Whether the word is compliance, or you get more consistent performance?"

"When they've shown they can do it, but they don't always do it, then the question is, 'Well, how can we get there?'" Bowman asked. "Can you find a coach that can get the most out of those guys?"

"That's what we're looking for."

They're looking everywhere, here in Edmonton.

Everywhere but the mirror.

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# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Sportsnet.ca / Seven candidates to be the next Maple Leafs head coach

Luke Fox

TORONTO — John Chayka vows to dig deep as he seeks the 33rd head coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

You're about to hear a whole whack of names in the rumour mill. Old-guard retreats, active assistants and AHL heads craving promotion, and under-the-radar longshots will all be speculated as potential candidates.

"We will have a thorough process. It will be a wide search. We'll take our time. We'll try to get it right. It is the most critical decision as a general manager," Chayka declared Wednesday, upon firing Craig Berube.

"We are going to start very wide and talk to as many people as we can with varying backgrounds. As a general point, yeah, I think experience — certainly, experience in the NHL and in larger markets — could be an asset and will be weighed, but I wouldn't discount anything at this time."

If the end of Berube's brief tenure taught the organization anything, it should be that fit matters. Chayka and chief advisor Mats Sundin should not be in a rush to lock up the most familiar name, most readily available guy with a whistle, or any candidate with a Cup ring.

The Maple Leafs must first identify how they want to play hockey, then find players and a head coach that aligns with that style and culture.

Here are some thoughts on the hot names and a few underdiscussed options Chayka should explore as he makes this critical decision.

Bruce Cassidy

Far and away the most coveted (and expensive) coach on the open market, Cassidy comes with a recent Stanley Cup ring, a 4 Nations Face-Off championship, and an Olympic silver medal.

After successful runs in Boston and Vegas, how would the Ottawa native feel about coaching a Canadian team?

"Usually, the first thing you think of is the market. Does the team have a chance? How does it impact your family? Then you worry about the city later. Is ownership solid?" Cassidy told Leafs Morning Take last month.

"Yeah, it would be kinda cool to do it. I'll tell ya what would be cool is to win a Stanley Cup in a Canadian city right now, because it's been a while. That would be something else."

Demanding, detailed and dialed in from a media perspective, Cassidy could handle the heat in Toronto, but he's in win-now mode and the Oilers and Kings also want to explore a fit. Of course, those pesky Golden Knights, who are still cutting Cassidy's cheques, need to grant permission first.

Our gut says Edmonton is the best and most likely landing spot for Cassidy.

Manny Malhotra

The head coach of the AHL Canucks in Abbotsford has paid his dues, learned the trade, and is knocking on the door.

Malhotra, 45, isn't nearly as far removed from his playing days as the 60-year-old Berube, and has proven capable of elevating young players. He guided Abbotsford to 44 wins and the 2025 Calder Cup. Which is precisely why Vancouver — now managed by that AHL squad's GM, Ryan Johnson — will weigh the idea of promoting Malhotra against sticking with Adam Foote.

There's already a familiarity between Malhotra (brother-in-law of Auston Matthews' tennis buddy, Steve Nash) and this Leafs core; he served as an assistant in Toronto from 2020 to 2024, but Abbotsford fell off this past

season and missed the playoffs, leading to some questioning Malhotra's NHL readiness.

"Growing up in Toronto, you obviously understand the gravitational pull that the Leafs have on the community," Malhotra told us when he first joined Sheldon Keefe's bench.

"Each individual is different. They all learn differently. They're all motivated by different things. So, it's important for me to understand the person and get to know them as an individual to find out who they are, what's their makeup, before we can get into the X's and O's of the game.

"That's a big thing for me, the communication aspect of things. And from there, you learn how to get information to players. That's part of coaching that I really enjoyed, learning about guys and learning what makes them tick."

Jack Capuano

The 59-year-old made his NHL debut for the Maple Leafs back in 1989-90, and it would be worth exploring a full-circle moment here.

Capuano ran the Islanders bench for nearly seven seasons beginning in 2010-11, making the playoffs thrice and overseeing John Tavares's deepest run on Long Island.

Well-liked by players and never out of work long, Capuano has quietly served as an associate coach for the Panthers, Senators, and now the Wild, who were eliminated Wednesday after an impressive season.

David Carle

The hottest name outside of the NHL, Carle just captured his third NCAA championship in five years for the Denver Pioneers. Those trophies pair nicely with the Alaska native's gold medals from the 2024 and 2025 world juniors. Surely, the 36-year-old will want to see if his winning touch translates to the pros at some point.

The recent success of young, enthusiastic Eastern Conference head coaches like Martin St. Louis, Spencer Carbery, and Dan Muse suggests a first-timer can work.

But Carle would be the youngest of all 32 NHL bench bosses, and he would be tasked with motivating and managing one of the oldest dressing rooms in the league.

Our understanding is that Carle wants big money and a voice in roster construction if and when he makes the leap to the NHL and already turned down a lucrative offer from Chicago's Kyle Davidson during the Blackhawks coaching search in 2025.

Mike Yeo

The Toronto native has been a valued assistant in Philadelphia, Vancouver and now Ottawa in the seven seasons since he was fired from his second head gig in St. Louis. Yeo was the Blues coach Berube replaced in 2018-19, so there would be rich irony here.

There's no questioning Yeo's experience; the 52-year-old has stood behind a pro bench every season since his own playing career ended in 2000.

The Maple Leafs' greatest weakness was team defence, which was arguably the greatest strength of the Senators in the two seasons Yeo assisted Travis Green's bunch.

Yeo should be given serious consideration here.

John Gruden

No, not Jon Gruden. (The h is for hockey!)

The current head coach of the Toronto Marlies is busy taking the Leafs' farm club to the North Division final and is focusing on the task at hand. Understandably, Gruden is downplaying his personal ambitions, but that



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doesn't mean the former Islanders and Bruins assistant wouldn't want a crack at an NHL head job.

Or that Gruden's familiarity with several current Leafs and the market should be seen as a benefit. The deeper the Marlies go, the more intriguing a prospect Gruden becomes.

"That is not part of my aspiration right now," Gruden told reporters Wednesday. "I coach because I love it. I've always coached because I love it. It has put me in this very fortunate situation. I am just really happy to be here and coaching this remarkable group in our locker room.

"The players can make the coach look really good. They're doing that for us right now as a staff."

Joe Sacco

The former Maple Leafs winger has 10 years of coaching experience, biding his time mostly as an assistant in Buffalo, Boston and now New York since his run as the head man in Colorado from 2009 through 2013. Sacco, 57, was a candidate to take the Bruins' job last season before it went to Marco Sturm.

"Joe's awesome. He was put in a tough situation, for sure — just with where the team was at the time," Bruins star Morgan Geekie said of Sacco. "I had a lot of fun playing for him.

"I can't say enough good things about him as a coach, as a man."

More candidates to consider: Pascal Vincent, Peter Laviolette, Gerard Gallant, Steve Sullivan, Dean Evason.

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Sportsnet.ca / Knoblauch's firing a reminder it 'starts with the coaches' in Edmonton

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — For good reason, the go-to question at a time like this has always been, "So, that's how many coaches for Ryan Nugent-Hopkins...?"

The answer, as the Edmonton Oilers mercifully relieved Kris Knoblauch of his duties late last night, is that the next one will be No. 10 for the longest-serving Oiler.

That's right, folks: Nugent-Hopkins' next game will be career regular-season game No. 1,032, and his 10th coach will be sending him over the boards.

In lighter times, it has become a quiz we've challenged Nugent-Hopkins to partake in. He eventually names them all, but it is not without some serious recall.

At a time like this — with another solid man pushed under Edmonton's coaching carousel — it's really not very funny at all.

A 100-games-and-change shelf life. That's what a coach gets here in Northern Alberta, a number skewed somewhat by temp gigs handed to Todd Nelson and Ken Hitchcock over the years.

It may end with a Zoom call for Ralph Krueger, or perhaps when a young coach is just 133 games into his tenure, as Jay Woodcroft was.

This time was particularly unseemly, as team president Jeff Jackson and general manager Stan Bowman were caught with their collective hand in

the coaching cookie jar, outed this week for having approached Vegas for permission to speak with Bruce Cassidy before firing Knoblauch.

On Wednesday evening, they moved on from Knoblauch after just 233 regular-season games. He had coached the team to the Stanley Cup Final in two of his three seasons behind Edmonton's bench.

And even then, Bowman left Knoblauch twisting in the wind for a few days before informing him of the move.

Such is the state of being an NHL coach, it seems:

Win one Cup for Vegas, as Cassidy did, and the Golden Knights fire you with eight games left in a season. Then they try to control where your career path takes you — or at least delay things to the speed at which they'd prefer you move on.

Coach the Oilers to a pair of Stanley Cups, like Knoblauch, and they don't even have the decency to look you in the eye before calling around behind your back.

There is no loyalty in sports, folks. There is less in the coaching world.

And here in Edmonton, where two productive, award-winning, Hall-of-Famers-to-be front the lineup, it's never about the players.

Sure, the GM tweaks the roster and takes care of the signings. But in Edmonton, when there is trouble, it lands at the feet of the coach or the goalie — full stop.

It's low-hanging fruit, yes. And sometimes Darnell Nurse takes a turn.

But as we approach the plausible end of the Connor McDavid era, the absolute terror of laying any of the blame for this ongoing dysfunction at the feet of The Big Boys will become more than just palpable.

And increasingly, McDavid and Leon Draisaitl have fed the culture.

"They were able to stay on top of us all over the place and we were never really able to generate any momentum up the ice," McDavid said in the frustrating moments after a Game 6 loss in the 2025 Stanley Cup Final. "We kept trying the same thing over and over again, banging our heads against the wall."

Did he mean that the game plan never changed, or that the Oilers could not crack Florida's defensive scheme? Or did it merely sound that way?

"They have a great system. They're perfectly coached. They all know what they're doing all over the ice. They're a great team," McDavid said after a loss to Tampa in March.

Was he gushing over Jon Cooper, or was that a backhanded slap at his own coach?

Or when Draisaitl, after a loss in Calgary sent Edmonton into its Olympic break on a downer, declared, "It starts with the coaches."

"Everybody," he then added. "You're never going to win if you have four or five guys going, and it starts at the top. Our leaders can be better."

Everyone can be better. But remember, it starts with the coaches.

It always starts with the coaches here.

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Sportsnet.ca / One big off-season question facing each NHL team eliminated in Round 1



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Rory Boylen

The second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs goes on with some outstanding series. Colorado and Carolina -- two big favourites -- are already through to their conference finals, while the other two series are very tight with some big games ahead.

But eight other teams had their playoff runs end early in the first round, in disappointment for some, but in a somewhat acceptable (or expected) way for others. We'll take one more look back at those teams that were ousted in Round 1, with a big question they are all facing this off-season.

**Boston Bruins:** After 100-point season, how will they stay afloat in difficult Atlantic Division?

After they missed the playoffs last season, our big question in regard to the Bruins was how long it would take them to become a contender again. They had started 2024-25 still perceived as a Cup challenger, but became a deadline seller and had to pivot.

We noted that Jeremy Swayman, perhaps, would have a better season in 2025-26 with the benefit of a full training camp. Check. We acknowledge they would be looking for a full-time coaching hire, and Marco Sturm had a tremendous impact in his first season behind the bench. And we raised the question about GM Don Sweeney's future since, at the 2025 year-end press conference, the team didn't commit to him beyond the following season. They later signed him to a two-year contract extension.

Boston improved by 24 points in 2025-26 to reach 100 points again, but that only got them a wild-card berth. They couldn't handle the emerging Buffalo Sabres in Round 1, falling in six games. There are young players coming along, namely Fraser Minten, who scored 35 points and nearly reached 20 goals in his rookie season, and James Hagens, who joined the team at the end of the season and gained a few games of playoff experience. But how do they come back better next season?

There are plenty of teams looking for a top-six centre, and Boston is one of them -- in fact, they could really use a No. 1 centre. They could use another scoring winger as well. And they also need to tighten up as a defensive unit after allowing the fourth-most expected goals against at 5-on-5 this season, with much better actual results thanks to Swayman. Do they seek another blueliner, or will that be more tweaking from the coach and buy-in from the players?

All this and the backdrop is the Atlantic Division, which is full of legitimate contenders and upstart teams quickly becoming ones. Buffalo and Montreal are still alive in Round 2. Ottawa, despite being swept by Carolina, has a lot of promise behind it. Tampa Bay is a fixture. Florida is bound to be healthier and return as a force. Toronto just landed the first overall pick, and Detroit figures to at least challenge for a playoff spot again. That's a lot of strong teams, and some are destined to be left out. Boston's challenge will be staying ahead of at least three or four teams from this group.

"Albeit we're proud of the accomplishments and the productive year we had, we have work to be done. We need to continue to deepen on our skill set and our speed of our club," Sweeney said at the end of the season. "It's going to be an uphill climb. Every team is getting better."

**Tampa Bay Lightning:** How open is the Stanley Cup window?

When a Stanley Cup window opens and a set core is in place, it can sometimes seem like you have a longer time to go after it than you really do. The Pittsburgh Penguins won back-to-back Stanley Cups with the Crosby-Malkin-Letang core in 2016 and 2017, but have won a single playoff round since. When the St. Louis Blues won in 2019 after going on a second-half tear with a new No. 1 goalie on the come-up, they had a great mix of young and experienced talent that suggested they could have multiple runs ahead. They've also won a single playoff round since.

The Tampa Bay Lightning went to three straight Stanley Cup Finals from 2020 to 2022, winning two of them, and although they've had to endure

some roster attrition due to the salary cap, most of the core has remained intact. But now they have also been ejected in the first round four years in a row.

As mentioned above, the Atlantic Division, which the Lightning call home, is getting better every season. This year's playoff exit was against one of those up-and-coming teams, as the Canadiens look to be just at the beginning of their window. It's hard to say Tampa's Cup window has slammed shut, but it's fair to wonder where they really are in this timeline.

"Our window, we're still in it," GM Julien BriseBois said. "I don't know how long we're going to be able to extend it. My job is to extend it for as long as possible. I don't see the end in sight."

Victor Hedman played just 33 games this season and none in the playoffs for personal reasons. He'll turn 35 early next season. Andrei Vasilevski had another fantastic regular season and is a Vezina finalist, but he is 7-16 with an .886 save percentage in his past 23 post-season games over four years. He'll turn 32 this summer. Nikita Kucherov is a Hart Trophy finalist this season, but has just two playoff goals in the past four years. He'll turn 33 this summer and, interestingly, has just one season left on his contract. Eligible for an extension in July, how much of a raise will he get on his \$9.5 million AAV?

Are the early-to-mid-20s players going to be able to pick up the flag and keep the window ajar?

"We have players that are getting better," BriseBois said. "Conor Geekie is getting better, Emil Lilleberg's getting better, J.J. Moser's getting better. I think if you looked at the age of our players, if it hadn't been for our success, people wouldn't be talking about our age as much. It's just we've been on this stage for so many years."

**Ottawa Senators:** What happens next with Brady Tkachuk?

Had the Senators played better, earlier this season, they may have drawn a better first-round opponent for themselves and perhaps had a better result. But a four-game sweep at the hands of Carolina was certainly a disappointing way for it to end after the Senators had played so well for a few months and, as far as underlying metrics go, were a buzzsaw team down the stretch.

There are things to figure out here. Linus Ullmark had a bumpy enough season that the Senators will want to make sure they have a reliable backup who could step in for long stretches. They'll want to start the process of getting Artem Zub re-signed as he heads into the final season of his contract. And though the team did improve on offence, they still would ideally like to add a truly elite goal scorer.

But the Brady Tkachuk watch also begins. He now has two years left on his contract, both seasons with a full no-move clause. Just as was the case with Quinn Hughes when he was two years away from UFA, and just as is happening now with Connor McDavid and Auston Matthews, these teams have to start considering all options and planning for any outcome in this scenario. Tkachuk hasn't asked out and has never indicated he's not happy in Ottawa, but after a point-less playoff, especially, some hard discussions will need to be had.

Tkachuk was asked, again, about his outlook at the end of the season, and it's clearly beginning to wear on him.

"Quite honestly, it's just getting frustrating," he said about rumblings regarding his future in Ottawa. "It's becoming a distraction because I have been fully committed to this team, the city, and it's just becoming a distraction, frustrating to deal with."

**Pittsburgh Penguins:** What are the real takeaways from the season, and will Evgeni Malkin be back?

Few saw an 18-point improvement for the Penguins this season, but it launched them back into the playoffs after missing three in a row. Part of the reason for that success was some shrewd acquisitions for younger



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players by GM Kyle Dubas: Ben Kindel became an instant every-day NHLer after being drafted 11th overall; Yegor Chinakhov scored 18 goals and 36 points in barely over half a season after being traded from Columbus; Arturs Silovs started the majority of games after an off-season trade.

But a teardown rebuild can't be done here as long as Sidney Crosby is around and he's on the books for another season, most likely still to finish his career as a Penguin whenever that time comes. There are other core vets, too. Erik Karlsson had a great season, but has one more season left on his contract. Evgeni Malkin had one of his better seasons in years, but he is on track for free agency.

The Penguins do want to keep getting younger and bring in more players like Kindel and Chinakhov. But after getting back to the playoffs, what is the real takeaway the team sees here? Was this a blip? A legit and sustainable bounce back? Something in between? And how will that influence their off-season plans?

Malkin, for his part, made it clear he still wants to play another NHL season at age 40.

"I want to play in NHL for sure, but I know it's not easy for Kyle," Malkin said. "Maybe he wants new blood here. I understand it's a business. I understand he wants maybe new team, like (to) see new faces here. For me, I want to play one more year in the NHL. I'm not looking back to the KHL. If not Pittsburgh, I hope some team."

Los Angeles Kings: How do they replace Anze Kopitar?

Your team needs a top-six centre? Good luck. So does most of the rest of the league. Unfortunately for the Kings, they have to replace a future Hall of Famer as Anze Kopitar walks off into retirement.

While Los Angeles has made the playoffs five years in a row, they have been eliminated in the first round each time, and this year were swept out by Colorado.

If you think the answer to this should be taking a step back or (gasp) rebuilding, that doesn't seem likely. Remember, Los Angeles traded for Artemi Panarin in-season and extended him for another two years. Perhaps if Kevin Fiala's season didn't end at the Olympics, they would have finished stronger and drawn a more favourable first-round opponent.

But Los Angeles is undoubtedly in a tough situation now, with no recent playoff success and an older core with some younger players sprinkled in. By now, they would have hoped Quinton Byfield would be a strong first-line centre who could drive a productive line, but he's gone from 55 to 54 to 49 points over the past three years. Turning 24 over the summer, it is time for him to deliver on that hope, but the Kings can't sit back and count on it.

So where is that centre coming from? The trade market seems the only way, but that will be a competitive field with all sorts of teams looking for an upgrade at the position. If the Kings can't do it, they are definitely at risk of really slipping into the mushy middle part of the league -- the no man's land where nobody wants to be.

Dallas Stars: Will Jason Robertson sign long-term, short-term, or be traded?

It's not a great year for UFAs, but Jason Robertson's contract situation has him close enough to unrestricted free agency that, in all likelihood, his long-term future will be determined (somewhere) this off-season.

On July 1, Robertson will become an arbitration-eligible RFA, but if he were to take just a one-year award, it would put him on track to become a UFA in the summer of 2027. The Stars would rather not walk him to free agency, and Robertson is in a great place to cash in now at 26 years old, coming off a 45-goal season. So we should expect a contract with a term.

As the salary cap climbs to \$104 million next season, it's not like a few years ago, when half the league will be bumping up against the ceiling. Fewer teams will be "capped out" now, but Dallas is one of the unfortunate ones. They are projected to have about \$11 million in cap space this off-season, and it's reasonable to suspect that Robertson alone could ask to at least match Mikko Rantanen's team-high \$12 million AAV, if not go higher than that.

GM Jim Nill acknowledged that figuring out Robertson's extension was a high priority for him ("I'd like to get that done sooner than later"), and it will set the tone for what follows. Mavrik Bourque, another pending RFA, might then be difficult to fit in after his 20-goal season, which will lead to a sizeable raise out of his entry-level contract. Whether it's Bourque or someone else on the roster, a Robertson extension -- maximum term or something shorter than that -- would force Nill into other moves.

Or, if Robertson's extension talks become difficult, perhaps trading him will have to be considered.

Utah Mammoth: Can they get in on a summer blockbuster?

After qualifying for the playoffs and giving the much more established Vegas Golden Knights a solid opening series, Utah has evolved as a hockey club. No longer are they just waiting on prospects to arrive and fully form an NHL roster (although there are still plenty of prospects on the way). This is a competitive team now, with a young core that has taken an important step up.

A lot of the most important contracts are already done. Dylan Guenther has even years left on his contract, Nick Schmaltz will begin an \$8 million AAV deal next season, and Logan Cooley will begin a \$10 million AAV contract in the fall. At their year-end press conference, GM Bill Armstrong talked about how many depth chart spots are now established, and it's no longer a guessing game in training camp as to who will fit, where. He acknowledged that some minor adjustments and additions could be made, but noted that the Mammoth are in a really nice place right now.

For a while now, Utah has been linked in trade rumours for the biggest names because of all the draft picks and prospects they've accumulated over the years. And the front office has been active on the trade front. JJ Peterka was brought in last summer, and MacKenzie Weegar was an important pickup at the deadline. But we still have to wonder, if the opportunity arises, could the Mammoth pull off a blockbuster move?

In Nick Kypreos' latest piece looking at Auston Matthews' uncertain future in Toronto, he named Utah as one team keeping a close eye on that situation. Whenever a big name like that comes up, the Mammoth aren't too far away from the rumour mill. Their team's success this season might even make them more motivated to really go all-in.

Edmonton Oilers: Can Stan Bowman 'win' an important off-season?

The clock is ticking on the Connor McDavid window as he enters into the first of a two-year contract signed last season. If the 2026-27 season goes or ends poorly, however, we will be left questioning how long he has left in an Oilers jersey.

So the 2026 off-season is a hugely important one for the Oilers organization as they make another attempt to surround McDavid and Leon Draisaitl with the right mix of players to complement them, and the right goalie (or goalies) to get them all the way through the playoffs.

The first move of the off-season was made on Thursday, firing Kris Knoblauch, the coach who led this bunch to back-to-back Stanley Cup Finals. Bruce Cassidy may be his replacement -- we'll see -- but that's just step one on a long list of things to do. and, arguably, it may not have been the most necessary thing to do.

Centres Adam Henrique and Jason Dickinson are free agents at a crucial position behind the two stars. Kasperii Kapanen evolved into a difficult-to-play-against player and is also a free agent to figure out, or replace. Deadline pickup Connor Murphy became an important shutdown blue



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liner for this year's team, and is another free agent to resolve. The goaltending? Connor Ingram turned out to be the starter, and he's also a pending UFA, leaving underperforming Tristan Jarry as the only one left under contract.

Under Stan Bowman and Jeff Jackson's leadership, Edmonton's moves have been a mixed bag. The Jarry trade turned into a disaster. The signings of Jeff Skinner and Viktor Arvidsson two years ago didn't work out, and letting Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway leave to St. Louis via offer sheets was a tough pill at the time, and looks terrible in hindsight.

And now, there is no more room for error. This very well may be the last off-season to really go at it with McDavid before -- gasp -- we're contemplating the thought of a trade vs. walking him to free agency in two years. That job is still in the hands of Bowman and Jackson, who need this to be their best summer yet.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Vinnie Matteo is working to make hockey more welcoming and accessible

Ryan Dixon

Make a suggestion around Vinnie Matteo — even in jest — and you best be prepared for him to follow through. Matteo runs Avalanche Kidz — a Montreal-based program designed to introduce people with autism and other special needs to hockey — and even at 67 years old, he'll take on a new task in the blink of an eye.

Still, he likes to know what he's getting into. That's why, when a few parents chatting to him at the rink joked about getting to learn the game themselves, the guy who specializes in solutions got the bright idea to incorporate a family skate into the program's year-end party to gauge where these parents were at.

"Let me see what you can do before I start another program!" Matteo says with a laugh.

Even if he never helped another soul at the rink, Matteo has already done enough good to fill five hockey lifetimes, and has been recognized this year as a finalist for the NHL's Willie O'Ree Community Hero Award. Avalanche Kidz, founded in 2022, is his latest in an endless stream of hockey projects and it's safe to say — of all the work he's done — Matteo is most gratified by what he sees every Sunday morning from the people aged four to 40 who are part of the program.

Part of the reason some view Matteo as a hero is likely because he himself has no time for labels. "I don't like to call them 'special needs,'" he says of the participants in his program. "I call them kids. They're just kids. I have a hard time saying 'special needs.' These are children, just having fun.

"I've seen a thousand kids who can't skate. We're going to teach them how to skate."

That can-do approach is how Matteo — who's done everything from elite skills training to owning a squad in the now-defunct National Women's Hockey League — got Avalanche Kidz going in the first place. It came about when Matteo was involved with a program in Montreal that helped reduce barriers to hockey for low-income families. One day, he got a call from a woman who said she could not find a place for her autistic son to play. The response was classic Coach Vinnie: Come to the rink, we'll figure it out.

Once the two connected, the mother said she knew loads of parents in her position who would love to find their kids a place to play.

"From that day on, here we are," Matteo says.

Matteo is the first to tell you Avalanche Kidz would be nowhere without the fleet of volunteers — including his daughter, Linda — devoted to making the program work. Most of those people put their hand up to help, but some are told to be there.

"When I do training for these more elite [hockey players], I tell them, 'We have a program for autistic children and I expect you to come give your time and help out,'" Matteo says. "We're just trying to teach everybody to give a hand; it's a better world [if you do]."

However they get there, every person associated with Avalanche Kidz is attempting to help families who are used to things others take for granted presenting huge hurdles.

"The biggest challenge is for the parent to trust us," Matteo says. "It's not easy at times because they're going into the unknown. We try to make the process a little easier for them."

For participants in the program, everything from the noise of a buzzing rink to the feeling of putting on a helmet has the potential to unsettle a moment. Once the off-ice obstacles are cleared, though, the benefits of the on-ice experience become apparent.

"They feel part of a community," Matteo says. "Part of a team, right? Once they start going on the ice, sure it's hard for them at first, but week in, week out they get the gist of it. They start having fun. And it's like their own world. You build a safe environment for them. They get comfortable. And the parents get comfortable watching kids play hockey (when they probably) never thought they could play. Now parents can say, 'My kid can play hockey, too.'"

Matteo points out with a chuckle that teaching is often a two-way street with the Avalanche crew, as program participants sometimes help Coach Vinnie when he can't figure out how something works on his phone. And to be sure, the entire experience is a boon for highly taxed parents who suddenly find an entire community to lean on and share life experiences with.

"They already have hardship as it is," Matteo says, emphasizing the importance of making the program accessible and fun. "I see it. I see it every Sunday."

Over time, Matteo has come to realize his true hockey calling is that of an organizer, and few people have a network as deep as his to draw on. From three-time Canadian Olympic gold medalist Kim St-Pierre — the goalie for Matteo's Quebec Avalanche in the NWHL some 25 years ago — to all the kids he trained who grew up to find success in hockey and other places, Matteo has quite the rolodex to flip through when a donation is needed, a special tutor is required or an available sheet of ice needs to be found.

"I see both worlds," he says of the disparate ends of the hockey spectrum. "But the world that's closer to my heart is the autistic children and low-income families."

Speaking of a gulf, there's certainly some differences on the ice when you've got both children and adults alike participating in Avalanche Kidz. Matteo has two grown men in the program he calls the "Twin Towers" and they share the ice with friends just beginning their journey in hockey and life.

"But it works," Matteo says. "It's crazy how it works."

That's because one person, in particular, always believes it will.

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# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 15, 2026

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Sportsnet.ca / Fox: Firing Berube the right call by new Maple Leafs management team

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The Toronto Maple Leafs had fallen into a troublesome employment trap.

And on Wednesday — smartly, finally — they got over the hump.

They broke a dysfunctional cycle.

In firing Craig Berube and agreeing to pay him millions of dollars to not coach the team for the next two seasons, John Chayka and Mats Sundin did what was best for the franchise, not themselves.

The showed some decisiveness and urgency, traits missing on the ice of late, and set a tone.

Way back when a young Kyle Dubas took the GM chair, he retained the inherited Mike Babcock despite an ill fit and a slow-burn friction and a poorly kept secret that one day the job would belong to Sheldon Keefe.

When Brad Treliving took the reins from Dubas in 2023, he too stuck with the coach he was given, keeping his power dry even when a refresh felt necessary.

It's the safe and financially prudent move. It's also self-preservation disguised as patience.

Following the greatest year-to-year decline in Toronto's history, a 30-point tumble from final five to bottom five, Leafs Nation was all out of patience.

So, when Chayka announced last week that "of course" he'd consider running back Berube — the coach who had overseen the defensive debacle of 2025-26 — #BerubeOut became a popular hashtag on social media.

At some point between all those closed-door meetings held with Chayka and Sundin, the new guys in charge read the room.

They made the "bigger-picture decision," as Chayka framed it, to search for a fresh head coach — the fourth in the era of Auston Matthews, William Nylander and John Tavares.

Without question, Treliving's flawed roster construction and the players' uninspired performance share blame for this season's failures, lowlighted by a minus-46 goal differential and league-high 2,633 shots allowed.

But when the 2026 Maple Leafs refused to dig in and lock down and grind away like Berube's 2019 Blues, when the goalies' save percentages receded to the mean, the coach failed to adapt, to work with the pieces he was given and find a way to make the sum greater than its parts.

"We're trying to play a certain way here, and I don't think that we fully grabbed that buy-in that way," Berube had said, minutes after coaching his final game for the Leafs, a seventh straight loss. "We tried to do a lot of different things this year, and it didn't work out."

It didn't work out for Morgan Rielly, dashing through the show. Or Matthews, stuffed too frequently in the defensive zone and missing a true get-him-the-puck wingman. Or Scott Laughton, whose importance instantly jumped after a trade to L.A.

Or Berube himself, whose frustration rarely but pointedly boiled over as his message was repeatedly returned to sender.

There was the pointed "ask those guys, not me" dagger during a lifeless stretch in December. The suggestion by Berube that he couldn't give his

players heart as rival Ottawa zipped by Toronto in the standings. And his repeated diagnosis that the Leafs have "a mental block" when it comes to rising to the moment.

Successful teams can have a chicken-or-egg debate over which comes first, the good vibes or the winning. What is not up for debate is that the 2025-26 Maple Leafs had neither.

Only time will tell how much of a difference swapping out Berube — a standup man who loves to coach more than, evidently, this group loves playing for him — will make for these Leafs.

The GM and coach both got the axe, punishment for the first missed post-season in a decade. Two layers of excuses have been removed from the core. More losing, and the next major change should come at the player level.

With Chayka and Sundin's goal being to spin momentum and, at a bare minimum, make life inside and outside the Maple Leafs feel different, revitalized, the charts and hearts agree: This was the only move.

Even if, for Chayka, Berube Out was not the safest way out.

That, in itself, is an encouraging sign for a regime hired under a cloud of skepticism.

The competitive window may be shrinking, but they're thinking a little bigger.

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TSN.CA / Habs shrug off Ruff's embellishment claim, aim to bounce back again in Buffalo

Mark Masters

BUFFALO — The Montreal Canadiens had seven power-play chances in Game 4. Lindy Ruff thought it was a bit much.

"I think they're going down easy," the Buffalo Sabres coach told reporters on Wednesday.

"You gotta be careful with your sticks. You know if they have a chance to make the play worse than it is, they're going to. It's playoff hockey. Every team in this league does it."

But not every coach turns it into a big talking point on the off day of an intense playoff series.

On Wednesday, Martin St. Louis did bite briefly when asked about Ruff's comment.

"Was he talking about his team, too?" the Montreal Canadiens coach quipped.

But St. Louis has generally seemed reluctant to engage in gamesmanship through the media in this year's playoffs.

"I feel like if I'm relying on the refs for me to win a series I'm spending my energy in the wrong place," he explained on Thursday.

Buffalo scored on two of their four power-play chances during Tuesday's win, which evened the second-round series at two games apiece.

The Canadiens players who spoke with the media at the team's hotel on Thursday morning shrugged off Ruff's claim of embellishment. In fact, Josh Anderson suggested Montreal could have had more power plays in Game 4.



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"I thought there was a lot of high sticks in the game," Anderson said. "You know, to be honest, they missed a couple. But the refs are doing the best they can. Sometimes it's hard to see with everything that's going on there. So, I think for us it's just staying disciplined and going out there and playing our game."

The Canadiens have had 20 power plays in the series versus 16 for the Sabres.

"You know, I think the refs have done a good job both ways," said Habs winger Alexandre Texier.

Kaiden Guhle leads all Canadiens players with nine drawn calls in the playoffs. Ruff did not like the cross-checking penalty the defenceman drew on Tage Thompson on Tuesday.

But the Habs believe they are earning their calls.

"Just trying to get on the forecheck, trying to get in front of the net," Anderson said. "There's a lot of bodies in front of the net, so there's going to be sticks involved and things like that. But, talking about it today, we need to stay disciplined and let the refs call their game."

"You gotta win your 1-on-1 battles," Texier said. "You gotta go to the net and extend your shift in the O-zone. When you're tired you're not moving your feet and that's when you're taking some penalties, so we're trying to do that."

Montreal leads the playoffs with 70 drawn penalties while Buffalo is third with 66.

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Ivan Demidov has yet to score in this year's playoffs, but the Canadiens believe it's only a matter of time before the 20-year-old rookie sensation breaks through.

"He's done a phenomenal job this year," said Anderson. "Obviously, a generational talent. He's so silky out there, so skilled. He's probably got one of the best edge works I've seen as a player, so for him to come in as a young guy in this market, he's done a phenomenal job and I think he's only getting better too."

After being held to just one assist in seven games against the Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round, Demidov has three assists in four games against the Sabres.

The Canadiens may need some Demidov magic to break down Buffalo's defence. The Sabres blocked 27 shots on Tuesday night.

"There's a lot of traffic in front of the net on both sides and we gotta find ways to break through that," Anderson acknowledged. "Obviously their goalie played really well the other game, so hopefully find key areas to maybe [have] him not seeing as many pucks and things like that."

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 29 of 31 shots in his series debut for the Sabres in Game 4 and is slated to start again on Thursday night.

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Despite being the youngest team in the playoffs, the Canadiens have proven to be good problem solvers, going 4-0 following a loss.

"We just stay confident," said Texier. "You can see in our group, there's no panic, nothing. We've been in this situation before ... A lot of smiles. It's just a hockey game. You gotta enjoy. A young group and we're excited."

Texier scored the game-winning goal in Game 5 in Tampa, which allowed Montreal to regain the upper hand in the first-round series. The Canadiens also won Game 7 on the road.

"We know how to respond," Anderson assured. "We have full belief in this group. I like where our game's at, to be honest with you, and we have full confidence that we'll come in tonight and play the right way."

Montreal has not dropped consecutive games since March 14-15.

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St. Louis deserves a lot of credit for that. The 50-year-old former star player is relishing the chance to coach in the playoffs. What does he love about it?

"The environment," said St. Louis, who lifted the Stanley Cup with Tampa Bay in 2004. "You feel you're on the battlefield and you're trying to win this battle against this team and it takes four wins. You get knocked down and the process of getting back up, to me, it's like a boxing match almost where the round's over, you talk about it, you might've won the round, lost a round, you make subtle adjustments, you get back and you show some courage. Just being inside that battlefield and I know I'm not on the ice, but you're in there with them, it's pretty fun."

After a couple Canadian teams dumped their head coaches this week, St. Louis was asked about whether he reflects on how crazy the coaching profession can be.

"Oh, I mean, honestly, it's part of the business and it's not something I worry about," he said. "I love what I'm doing and I'll do it until somebody tells me I can't do it anymore. And I'm okay because I love hockey, but I have a life outside of hockey. So, I'll go watch my kids play. I'm good with that."

Hired on Feb. 9, 2022, St. Louis now the fourth-longest tenured head coach in the league behind only Tampa Bay's Jon Cooper, Colorado's Jared Bednar and Carolina's Rod Brind'Amour.

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