



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 19, 2026

The Athletic

Past Hurricanes teams kept falling in the Eastern final. This might finally be the year

By: James Mirtle

The 11-day wait between series might be new, given it's a modern-day record for the NHL, but what isn't is the fact the Carolina Hurricanes are still playing hockey this deep into May.

This postseason marks the fourth time in the past eight that they've made the conference finals, a feat matched only by the already-eliminated Dallas Stars and the Vegas Golden Knights, who'll face the Colorado Avalanche over in the Western side of the bracket starting Wednesday.

In that span, only three franchises have more than Carolina's 55 playoff wins (Colorado, Vegas and Dallas), but just one of those victories has come after the second round. That lack of a deeper push — getting eliminated by Cup-winning teams and finalists in short order in Round 3 — has fed some of the skeptics about the Hurricanes over time, despite their undeniable regular-season dominance.

This is a team whose foibles have been listed as everything from its lack of a "true" No. 1 goaltender to missing a high-octane offensive superstar or being "Corsi merchants" — a reference to its ability to pile up shot attempts thanks to a consistent territorial advantage, an area in which it continues to excel.

Though there have been kernels of truth in all three areas over the past seven seasons, what's also clear is this year's version of the Hurricanes is a more evolved one than anything we've seen before. Overall, this is a deeper roster at every position, one that fought through plenty of adversity during a 113-point regular season. They are also better equipped to overcome those weaknesses against a plucky young Montreal Canadiens team in the Eastern Conference final, which begins Thursday in Raleigh.

Hurricanes depth scoring keeps them a perfect 8-0 in the playoffs so far

Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulskey, in his second season in the big chair but his 12th with the organization, believes what has separated his team this year is how workmanlike it was in piling up all those wins under less than ideal circumstances. Carolina, for example, lost more salary among defensemen to injury (\$6 million) than all but two other teams in the NHL this season, including defensive stalwart Jaccob Slavin's going down for 43 games.

"This year's team is as good as any we've had," Tulskey said. "We've had some great teams over the years. I would say this year's team has been uniquely challenged with injuries for sure and some other sort of unusual wrinkles — Olympic break, compressed schedule, everything else. We've had more injuries this year than any season since '14-15, and that included Slavin missing half the year. Coming through

that with the record we had and the team we have speaks to a resilience that has served us well."

Where Carolina's resilience has really showed all year is in its improved offensive game. The Hurricanes produced a franchise-record 291 goals this year, second to only the Avalanche leaguewide, and had the fourth-best power play in the NHL (25 percent). The seven previous iterations of the playoff-bound Canes never hit those heights. In fact, they were frequently outside the NHL's top 10 in either category; last season, they finished ninth in goals per game and way down in 25th with the man advantage.

That newfound offensive firepower isn't particularly concentrated on any one line, either: veteran center Sebastian Aho was the only Hurricane with more than 71 points this season. But Carolina had seven forwards hit 20 goals and 11 who rang up at least 10, which leads the NHL in both those categories.

"We've always had a very deep defensive corps," Tulskey said of the Hurricanes' historically stout blue lines. "I think we have added more skill up and down our forward group and have put together a team where all four lines are a threat to score in a way that is not easy to do and that we haven't always had."

One of the bigger catalysts in that shift has been the addition of Nikolaj Ehlers, who signed as a free agent on a massive six-year, \$51 million deal and had a career-high 71-point season in part to his effectiveness on the power play. But it's been the third line of greybeard Taylor Hall with youngsters Logan Stankoven and Jackson Blake that has been the true revelation this spring, as they've produced 14 of Carolina's 24 goals as part of sweeping the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers back-to-back.

It's an unorthodox line given their lack of size — including Stankoven, the center, at just 5 feet 8 — but they suit coach Rod Brind'Amour's relentless, swarming style of attack, especially as they're often deployed against other teams' bottom-two forward lines and third defense pairing. Few teams line-match as hard as Carolina, which will likely be a factor in the coming series.

Tulskey explained he and the Hurricanes scouts are always seeking the type of players who will fit their coaching staff's play style, a luxury they have thanks to the fact Brind'Amour has been behind the bench all of the past eight seasons of this playoff streak. Hall and Stankoven were high-profile trade acquisitions late last season during Tulskey's first year as GM; Blake was a fourth-round pick in 2021 when Tulskey was an assistant GM.

Combined, all three account for less than \$4.9 million on the salary cap.



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“One of the things our pro scouting group focuses on most is trying to assess who will look better for us than they do with their current team,” Tulsy said. “And that comes down to the way we play, which is very distinctive and requires certain skills and can be forgiving of (gaps) in other areas. So there are players who are very good at the things we need players to be able to do well and will come here and look good even if other aspects of the game hold them back a little with another team.”

Perhaps the biggest remaining question mark for this Hurricanes team remains in goal, where 36-year-old Frederik Andersen struggled through injuries and inconsistency in playing just 35 games during the regular season. Through two rounds, however, Andersen has been the best goaltender in the playoffs, posting an impressive 11.2 goals saved above expected in going a perfect 8-0.

Despite some high-profile exits in the playoffs earlier in his career with the Toronto Maple Leafs, Andersen has always had a very strong backer in Tulsy, who is adamant the big Dane hasn't been the issue for Carolina in postseasons past. But the GM didn't deny that all this rest, with Andersen playing just eight games in the past 38 days, might end up benefiting him more than anyone.

“He's been playing really well,” Tulsy said. “He has been good for us for a long time ... I think given his age and his history, you have to guess that it's good for him to get those breaks. At the same time, he's been good for us, and I imagine when you go four straight games looking really solid, you don't want to have 12 days before your next game. So I don't know that he would vote for that kind of break, but you know it probably does help him.”

As for this writer's suggested notion that this Hurricanes roster is “the culmination” of what he and his staff have been building toward the past eight seasons — since owner Tom Dundon bought the troubled franchise and promoted Brind'Amour to head coach — Tulsy wasn't biting there.

They might be undefeated in these playoffs and they might have taken strides to put them closer to being the top team in the league than ever. But no one's saying mission accomplished in Raleigh right now, not when they've made it to this halfway point so often in the past and fallen short. They know there's a long way to go.

“Culmination implies that we're done,” Tulsy said. “We want to keep getting better and better. But there is no doubt that our willingness to take risks and to seek every opportunity to make the team better has paid off over time.

“Part of how we've been able to build a deep roster is by trusting in our draft group and development pipeline to continue to turn out players like Blake and (rookie defenseman Alexander Nikishin). Part of it is by trusting our pro scouts to continue to find players like Ehlers and (Eric) Robinson and (Sean) Walker. Half our lineup came as free agents in the last year or two, so we've done a lot of work to keep bringing in talent and continuing to push things forward. And a lot really comes down to just a comfort with risk and betting on our ability to find players who will fit.”

It shows when you watch this Hurricanes team play this spring. In some ways, they look like the old Hurricanes. But in other, very important ones, they've leveled up.

Whether that improvement has been enough to take the next step is about to get its first big test.



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After wait, Hurricanes get Canadiens in conference final

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes and Canadiens have taken opposite paths to the Eastern Conference final. Montreal needed all 14 games in the first two rounds — including a 3-2 overtime win in Monday's Game 7 in Buffalo — to reach the NHL's final four.

Meanwhile, Carolina's magic number has been four — as in the conference's top seed needed only four games in each of its first two series, sweeping away Ottawa and Philadelphia to reach the third round for the third time in four seasons.

The Canadiens were the only team in the East that Carolina did not earn a win against this season, as Montreal swept the season series with 7-5, 5-2 and 3-1 decisions. But in the postseason, the Hurricanes have been unbeatable. Carolina hasn't allowed more than two goals in any of its eight playoff games, and coach Rod Brind'Amour's team is well rested with 11 days without a game before Thursday's Game 1 in Raleigh.

The forwards

The Canadiens have a high-powered top line led by captain Nick Suzuki, sniper Cole Caufield and former No. 1 overall Juraj Slafkovsky. The trio totaled 110 goals and 262 points during the regular season, and Suzuki is a finalist for the Selke Trophy as the NHL's best defensive forward.

The talent thins out after that. Rookie Ivan Demidov had a solid first season, finishing with 19 goals and 62 points, but no other Montreal forward eclipsed 40 points. Jake Evans and Alex Newhook — who had the game-winning goal in both Games 7s for the Habs — have elevated their play and provided secondary scoring this postseason.

The Hurricanes haven't gotten much out of their top line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis, but their second line has more than made up for it. Logan Stankoven, Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake have been unstoppable through two rounds and are widely considered the best line in the playoffs to this point. Jordan Staal will likely want to make a point that he deserved more Selke consideration.

Carolina's depth will be a problem for a young Montreal squad.

Advantage: Slight Carolina edge

The defense

Lane Hutson is on a path to stardom, and Noah Dobson is a reliable minute-muncher for the Canadiens. Beyond that, Montreal's defense has been shaky. Mike Matheson and Alexandre Carrier have been underwater analytically this postseason, and coach Martin St. Louis doesn't seem to trust

No. 6 defenseman Arber Xhekaj, who played a total of 1:52 in Monday's Game 7 and didn't see the ice after the 3:52 mark of the second period.

Carolina's defense, meanwhile, has been impenetrable. Jacob Slavin, coupled with Jalen Chatfield, continues to mystify top forwards, and the pairing of K'Andre Miller and Sean Walker is playing its best hockey at the right time. The Hurricanes can really get firing on all cylinders if the third pairing of Shayne Gostisbehere and Alexander Nikishin starts taking advantage of its sheltered minutes and puts up points.

Advantage: Clear Carolina edge

The goalies

Jakub Dobes has been a great story for the Canadiens, but he hasn't been on Frederik Andersen's level. Dobes ranks one-tenth of a point behind Andersen in goals save above expected this postseason, according to MoneyPuck.com, but that's in 14 games compared to Andersen's eight. Dobes did beat the Hurricanes three times this season, stopping 95 of 103 shots — including two stellar performances in March.

But rest, experience and postseason performance are all check marks in Andersen's column, and the Canadiens will be seeing a different goalie in the opposing net from the one they faced two months ago.

Advantage: Slight Carolina edge

Special teams

The Canadiens' power play is clicking at 25%, but their penalty kill is far and away the worst of the four remaining teams at 74.1%. Carolina is the opposite: an underperforming 13.5% power play with an unreal 95% penalty kill.

The Hurricanes were better in both facets in the regular season, and their elite PK gives them an advantage in the series.

Advantage: Slight Carolina edge

Overview

Montreal is young but battle tested after two seven-game series. Dobes has proven he can steal a game, though there have been chinks in the armor as the playoffs have worn on.

The Hurricanes' biggest obstacle is getting back into game mode. After dispatching its first two opponents quickly, Carolina has done a lot of practicing, watching and waiting. Against the Flyers, the Hurricanes had no problem shaking off a six-day break, scoring twice in the first 7½ minutes of Game 1 on their way to a 3-0 win.



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Eleven days is nearly twice that, but Brind'Amour will want his team to pounce again early at home and try to rattle a team that has lost as many times (six) as any team in this year's playoffs.

It won't be the last we see of Montreal this deep in the playoffs, but as long as rust doesn't cost them a game, the Hurricanes should be able to use their depth and playoff guile to finish off the Canadiens quickly.

Prediction: Hurricanes in 5



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Hurricanes to face the Montreal Canadiens in Eastern Conference Final

By: Louis Fernandez, WRAL Sports

The Carolina Hurricanes finally know what the Eastern Conference Final schedule will look like, and who they will play.

Logan Stankoven's trip home to see his dad, helped rejuvenate him for the playoffs

By Louis Fernandez, WRAL Sports

Twelve days between series is the longest break any NHL team has had since the Montreal Canadiens waited twelve back in 1919. Well over 100 years later the Hurricanes will face Montreal in the Eastern Conference Final.

The Canadiens advanced to the Eastern Conference Final on Monday, defeating the Buffalo Sabres 3-2 in overtime of Game 7.

It's been a long wait for the Hurricanes, who swept the Philadelphia Flyers in the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs. The Canes, who are 8-0 in the playoffs, last played on May 9.

This is the third time in four seasons the Canes have made the Eastern Conference Final. They haven't made a return to the Stanley Cup Final since winning it in the 2005-06 season.

Carolina, the top seed in the Eastern Conference, will have home-ice advantage.

During the regular season the Canes went 0-3 vs the Canadiens. Montreal features Cole Caufield, who was second in the NHL this season with 51 goals. They are coached by Hall of Fame player Martin St. Louis. St. Louis won a Stanley Cup as a player with the 2004 Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Western Conference Final is set. Top-seeded Colorado and Vegas, which eliminated Anaheim with a win Thursday

night, begin their best-of-seven series on May 20. A potential Game 7 in that series would be played on June 1, one day before a potential Game 7 in the Eastern Conference.

Eastern Conference Final schedule

Game 1: Thursday, May 21 at Carolina, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 2: Saturday, May 23 at Carolina, 7 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 3: Monday, May 25 at Montreal, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 4: Wednesday, May 27 at Montreal, 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 5: Friday, May 29 at Carolina* (if necessary), 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 6: Sunday, May 31 at Montreal* (if necessary), TBD (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

Game 7: Tuesday, June 2 at Carolina* (if necessary), 8 p.m. (TNT, 99.9 The Fan)

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.

The Hurricanes announced Monday they had signed the forward to a two-year extension with an average annual value of \$1.85 million through the 2027-28 season.

As the Carolina Hurricanes wait for their Eastern Conference Final opponent, Canes center Jordan Staal spoke with reporters about how important home ice is in Lenovo Center.



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Canes To Face Canadiens In 2026 Eastern Conference Final

By: Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

Series begins Thursday at Lenovo Center

By Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

RALEIGH, N.C. - After sweeping the first two rounds of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs, the Carolina Hurricanes (M1) are set to square off with the Montreal Canadiens (A3) for the Eastern Conference crown.

Montreal took all three regular-season matchups against Carolina, but the Hurricanes proved stronger throughout the season to claim the conference's top seed and home-ice advantage for the upcoming series.

The two clubs have met twice in the postseason since the Canes relocated to Raleigh. Carolina won both of those best-of-sevens in 2002 and 2006 en route to the Stanley Cup Final in each respective playoff run, ultimately winning the Cup in the latter.

Tickets for the Eastern Conference Final are available now through the links below, and a full schedule can be found here.

2025-26 Regular Season Meetings...

January 1: Despite a five-point night from Sebastian Aho, the Hurricanes couldn't overcome the Canadiens in a 7-5 loss at Lenovo Center.

March 24: A pair of goals in the opening 7:09 couldn't get the Canes two points at Bell Centre as they eventually fell to the Habs 5-2.

March 29: Carolina struck first, but three unanswered goals in the second period cost them a 3-1 loss to Montreal in Raleigh.

Playoff History vs. MTL...

As Carolina...

2006 Eastern Conference Quarterfinal: CAR wins 4-2

2002 Eastern Conference Semifinal: CAR wins 4-2

As Hartford...

1992 Adams Division Semifinal: MTL wins 4-3

1989 Adams Division Semifinal: MTL wins 4-0

1988 Adams Division Semifinal: MTL wins 4-2

1986 Adams Division Final: MTL wins 4-3

1980 Preliminary Round: MTL wins 3-0



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Top 10 storylines ahead of NHL conference finals

By: Dan Rosen

Eichel-MacKinnon matchup, Hurricanes response to long layoff, Dobes' run for Montreal among top narratives

The final four is finally set.

Alex Newhook's goal 11:22 into overtime against the Buffalo Sabres in Game 7 on Monday sent the Montreal Canadiens into the Eastern Conference Final and filled out the field for the penultimate round in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

It's the Canadiens against the very well-rested Carolina Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final, and the Colorado Avalanche and Vegas Golden Knights in the Western Conference Final.

The West gets going first with the Golden Knights and Avalanche playing Game 1 at Ball Arena in Denver on Wednesday (8 p.m. ET; ESPN, SN, TVAS, CBC). Carolina and Montreal play Game 1 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Thursday (8 p.m. ET; HBO MAX, truTV, TNT, SN, TVAS, CBC).

All four teams have previously won the Stanley Cup. Vegas did it most recently in 2023 after Colorado won in 2022. Carolina won its lone Stanley Cup championship in 2006 and Montreal won its 24th in 1993, also the last time a Canada-based team won the Cup.

Here are 10 storylines for the conference final round:

1. Eichel vs. MacKinnon

The most anticipated individual matchup of the conference final round is in the West with Vegas' Jack Eichel going head-to-head against Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon.

They are two of the top centers in the League, both Stanley Cup champions, and two of the top scorers in the playoffs; Eichel tied for second with 15 points (one goal, 14 assists) in 12 games and MacKinnon tied for eighth with 13 points (seven goals, six assists) in nine games.

Vegas coach John Tortorella and Colorado coach Jared Bednar both will not hesitate to put their top center on the ice against anyone, let alone the opponent's top center. They won't play a matchup game to get the other one away and ruin the flow and limit shifts, so expect to see plenty of Eichel against MacKinnon in the series.

There will be other factors that determine the winner of the Western Conference Final, but the Eichel-MacKinnon storyline will persist throughout, especially if they are matched against each other often.

2. Shedding the rust

The Hurricanes haven't played since May 9, giving them 11 full days off between games before playing Game 1 against Montreal. It is the longest time off between rounds in the Stanley Cup Playoffs in 107 years and the fourth time a team has had double-digit days off in the playoffs.

The Canadiens had 12 days off before the Stanley Cup Final in 1919. More recently, the Boston Bruins in 2019 had 10 days off between sweeping Carolina in the Eastern Conference Final and starting the Stanley Cup Final. The Anaheim Ducks had 10 days off before the Cup Final in 2003.

Carolina had seven days between games bridging Game 4 of their first-round series sweep of the Ottawa Senators (April 25) and the start of their second-round series against the Philadelphia Flyers (May 2).

The break didn't impact the Hurricanes as they defeated the Flyers 3-0 in Game 1, the start of that series sweep.

But this is almost two full weeks off, a total of 11 full days and most of the 12th before an 8 p.m. ET start Thursday. It's unprecedented in the modern-day NHL and it'll be interesting to see how they respond against the Canadiens, who are coming off an emotional overtime win Monday.

3. Marner's mission

Mitch Marner is proving with each game that he is a clutch playoff performer, rewriting a narrative that followed him for the past several seasons when he was with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Stay hot and he could lead the Golden Knights to the Stanley Cup Final in his first season in Las Vegas, and remain one of the favorites, if not the unquestioned leader, for the Conn Smythe Trophy as the most valuable player in the playoffs.

Marner is in the conference final round for the first time and leading the playoffs with 18 points (seven goals, 11 assists) in 12 games. More impressive is that he has a combined six points (three goals, three assists) in Games 5 and 6, helping the Golden Knights go 4-0 to finish off both the Utah Mammoth and the Anaheim Ducks in six games.

With Toronto, Marner struggled as the series got later into Games 5, 6 and 7. He had 11 points (one goal, 10 assists) in 26 games played after Game 4 from 2017-25. Toronto went 9-17 in those games, advancing out of the first round just twice.

4. Colorado's depth scoring

So they say you need everyone contributing to win in the playoffs. Well, the Avalanche have basically had that through



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two rounds, and more contributions across the board in the Western Conference Final will help them punch their ticket into the Stanley Cup Final.

The Avalanche have had 17 different players score a goal in the playoffs, making them seventh team in NHL history to have at least that many unique goal-scorers through a team's first nine games in the postseason, and first since the Los Angeles Kings had 17 in 1993.

Colorado had 16 players score a goal in five games against the Wild in the second round, which is tied for the most unique goal-scorers for a team in any single playoff series with the 2025 St. Louis Blues (first round), 2019 Bruins (Stanley Cup Final), 1993 Kings (division semifinals) and 1988 Bruins (conference final).

Forward Joel Kiviranta, and defensemen Josh Manson, Jack Ahcan and Brent Burns are the only Avalanche players without a goal in the playoffs. Burns is the only one of the four who has played in all nine games. He has three assists.

5. Dobes' pursuit of legendary status

Ken Dryden.

Patrick Roy.

Jakub Dobes?

OK, it's premature to lump the Canadiens rookie goalie with two Hall of Famers who once proudly wore le bleu, blanc et rouge and paraded the Stanley Cup down Sainte-Catherine Street in Montreal when they were young goalies just getting their feet wet in the NHL.

But Dobes is halfway to becoming the third rookie goalie to win the Stanley Cup with the Canadiens after Dryden did it in 1971 and Roy in 1986.

He's doing it in similarly impressive fashion, with a 6-0 record and .938 save percentage in games following a loss and a .957 save percentage in two Game 7s, including 37 saves on 39 shots in Buffalo on Monday.

Dobes is 8-6 with a 2.52 goals-against average and .910 save percentage through two rounds.

Roy was 15-5 with a 1.93 GAA and .923 save percentage in 1986, when the first round was a best-of-5. Dryden went 12-8 with a 3.01 GAA and .914 save percentage in 1971, when the playoffs were three rounds.

6. Goaltending

There are no Vezina Trophy winners or finalists still playing in the playoffs. The goalies remaining are instead a mixed bag.

Carolina's Frederik Andersen is the most experienced having played in 93 playoff games since 2014, including going 8-0 with a 1.12 goals-against average, .950 save percentage and two shutouts in the first two rounds this postseason. He's a Conn Smythe Trophy candidate.

The Hurricanes could turn to Brandon Bussi if necessary. He has never played in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Pyotr Kochetkov is also on the playoff roster. He has played in 10 career postseason games with four starts.

In Colorado, there's Scott Wedgewood and Mackenzie Blackwood, who have combined to appear in 22 playoff

games in their careers, including 11 this year. Wedgewood was a career backup until this season.

Vegas' Carter Hart restarted his NHL career this season after being away from the League since Jan. 23, 2024. Hart was one of five players on Canada's 2018 IIHF World Junior Championship gold-medal team who was accused of committing sexual assault in June of that year. All five were found not guilty.

Hart's primary backup is Adin Hill, who won the Stanley Cup with Vegas three years ago.

And in Montreal, Dobes is making a name for himself as a rookie, especially in Game 7s.

7. Carolina and the conference final narrative

The Hurricanes are in the Eastern Conference Final for the fourth time since 2019, all under coach Rod Brind'Amour.

They have another chance to make this time different than the past three.

Carolina is 1-12 combined in its previous three (short) visits to this round. It was swept by the Bruins in 2019 and the Florida Panthers in 2023. Last year, the Hurricanes were down 3-0 to Florida, extended the series to Game 5, and lost it, 5-3, at home.

Go back to 2009, when Brind'Amour was still playing for the Hurricanes, and they're 1-16 in the conference final. That year, 17 years ago, they were swept by the Pittsburgh Penguins, who went on to win the Stanley Cup.

The Hurricanes are trying to reach the Stanley Cup Final for the first time since 2006, when they won the franchise's only championship.

8. Makar's health

Cale Makar's health is of paramount importance to the Colorado Avalanche and their chances of defeating the Golden Knights in the conference final.

Makar, a finalist for the Norris Trophy which goes to the NHL's best defenseman in the regular season, is expected to play Game 1 on Wednesday, but what we don't know is the severity of the upper-body injury he has been dealing with all postseason and if it will be limiting for him.

He has not been skating with the Avalanche on off days or at morning skates, but he has not missed a game.

Makar had to leave Game 5 against the Minnesota Wild with about 10 minutes remaining in the third period after taking a reverse check to his right shoulder. He returned to the game and stayed in it through Brett Kulak's overtime winner, but the way he left created obvious concern.

Colorado's health concerns also extend to defensemen Sam Malinski, Josh Manson and Brent Burns, and forward Artturi Lehkonen.

Malinski and Lehkonen didn't play Games 4 and 5 against the Wild because of upper-body injuries. Manson returned for Games 4 and 5 after missing four games with an upper-body injury. Burns has not missed a game and, frankly, never does.

Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said all of them plus Makar are expected to be ready for Game 1.



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9. Concern over Stone's availability

Mark Stone's ability to play in the Western Conference Final is one of the biggest question marks for the Golden Knights heading into Game 1 on Wednesday.

Stone (lower body) hasn't played since Game 3 against the Ducks, which was May 8. He missed the last three games of the second round and has not practiced with the Golden Knights during the break between rounds.

Vegas coach John Tortorella said he doesn't have an update on Stone's status for Game 1.

Vegas got by without its captain against Anaheim, but the challenge becomes greater against the Avalanche, the Presidents' Trophy winners who are 8-1 in the playoffs.

Stone's health will be a daily story in the series, and it's unlikely there will be many updates provided by the Golden Knights until he plays, or if he's ruled out completely.

10. Canadiens' power play vs. Carolina's penalty kill

Special teams will certainly play a role when the Hurricanes and Canadiens get going, particularly how Montreal's elite power play fares against Carolina's stout penalty kill.

The Canadiens are 25.0 percent with the man-advantage in the playoffs, including 4-for-6 in Games 5, 6 and 7 against the Sabres. They have scored at least one power-play goal in five straight games and six of seven.

Carolina, however, is 95.0 percent on the penalty kill, allowing two goals on 40 times short-handed. The Hurricanes also have a short-handed goal.

The one downfall is Carolina has been short-handed an average of five times in its eight games. It'll be hard for the Hurricanes to maintain their efficient PK if they continue to go to the box at that rate against the Canadiens.

Hurricanes to play Canadiens in Eastern Conference Final

By: NHL.com

Carolina swept Flyers to advance for 3rd time in 4 seasons; Montreal survived 2 Game 7s

The Carolina Hurricanes will play the Montreal Canadiens in the Eastern Conference Final.

The Hurricanes advanced to the Eastern Final for the second season in a row and third time in four seasons with a 3-2 overtime win against the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 4 of the Eastern Conference Second Round at Xfinity Mobile Arena in Philadelphia on May 9. The Canadiens advanced with a 3-2 overtime win against the Buffalo Sabres in Game 7 of their second-round series at KeyBank Center in Buffalo on Monday.

"You've got to take it one step at a time, and this is just another step in the process," Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin said. "We've got a good group in here who's all been there before now, and everyone knows what to expect and knows what is expected of us."

"So, we've got to make sure we go in with the right mindset and continue to just chip away and work hard like we do."

The Hurricanes, the No. 1 seed from the Metropolitan Division and Eastern Conference, will have home-ice advantage in the best-of-7 series against the Canadiens, the No. 3 seed from the Atlantic.

Game 1 will be in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Thursday (8 p.m. ET; TNT, HBO Max, truTV, SN, CBC, TVAS).

"They're a really good team," Canadiens forward Josh Anderson said. "They're fast, they're quick. They're going to be kind of like Buffalo -- they like to move the puck, they like rush games. I'm sure we're going to watch some video in the next 24 hours and move on. So, yeah, so enjoy this for tonight, and then move on tomorrow."

Carolina is 8-0 in the playoffs and has allowed a total of 10 goals. They are the fifth team in NHL history to begin a playoffs with eight straight wins, and the first since the Edmonton Oilers in 1985 (9-0).

Montreal, meanwhile, also needed seven games to eliminate the Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round.

"Well, it's a good thing because we're going to be one of four teams left, so however how long we've got to rest or be off, we'll do it," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I think the good part is we just literally had the exact same thing, and we had a plan and clearly it was OK, so we can follow that and run with it."

The Hurricanes had a week off in between the first and second round and will have 11 days off before the conference final starts.

"There's positives and negatives to it," Hurricanes forward Taylor Hall said. "I think the big positive is that we're on to the third round relatively unscathed and healthy. You don't want to see injuries per se, but we hope these series go far and these teams have battles."

"That's the advantage that we're going to have. They're going to be hockey ready if the series goes long, but I think Rod, our strength staff, all of our staff do a good job making sure that we're ready athletically to play, and from there we get our footing pretty quickly."

Hall leads the Hurricanes in the playoffs with 12 points (three goals, nine assists). Forward Jackson Blake has 11 points (four goals, seven assists) and forward Logan Stankoven has seven goals and an assist. Defenseman K'Andre Miller has six assists.

Goalie Frederik Andersen has started all eight games, going 8-0 with a 1.12 goals-against average, .950 save percentage and two shutouts.



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Defenseman Lane Hutson leads the Canadiens with 14 points (two goals, 12 assists) in 14 games this postseason. Nick Suzuki is second with 13 points (four goals, nine assists), and Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky each has nine points (four goals, five assists). Alex Newhook leads Montreal with seven goals, including scoring the overtime winner in Game 7 against the Sabres.

Jakub Dobes has started every game for the Canadiens, going 8-6 with a 2.52 GAA and .910 save percentage. Jacob Fowler has allowed one goal on two shots in 8:23 of ice time in his only appearance.

The Hurricanes went 0-3-0 against the Canadiens this season, getting outscored 15-8. Sebastian Aho had six points (two goals, four assists) and Andrei Svechnikov had five points (two goals, three assists). Forward Nikolaj Ehlers had four points (two goals, two assists).

Andersen was 0-2-0 with a 3.73 GAA and .806 save percentage, and Brandon Bussi was 0-1-0 with a 6.17 GAA and .727 save percentage.

Caufield (three goals, two assists), Suzuki (three goals, two assists), Slafkovsky (two goals, three assists) and Ivan Demidov (one goal, four assists) each had five points for Montreal against Carolina. Hutson had four points (one goal, three assists).

Dobes was 3-0-0 with a 2.67 GAA and .922 save percentage, allowing eight goals on 103 shots.

Carolina and Montreal have played twice in the postseason, with the Hurricanes winning each. The most recent was a six-game series in the Conference Quarterfinals in 2006.



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The Hockey News

Hurricanes To Start Eastern Conference Final On Thursday Following Record-Long Wait

By: Ryan Henkel

After an 11-day hiatus, Carolina will finally return to the ice. The rested Hurricanes await a Game 7 winner to battle for a spot in the Stanley Cup Final.

The Carolina Hurricanes have certainly had a long wait ever since their last postseason game.

The Hurricanes completed a four-game sweep over the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday, May 9 and since then, they've just been finding ways to fill the time.

The Canes are awaiting the winner between the Buffalo Sabres and Montreal Canadiens, but that series has gone all the way to a winner-takes-all Game 7 which will take place on Monday.

The Hurricanes had a six-game wait between the first and second rounds after sweeping the Ottawa Senators and by the time they next play, they'll have been off for a modern-NHL record 11 days.

While the team may not know who their opponent will be, they do at least know when they'll be playing as the Game 7 situation forced them into schedule option B.

The Hurricanes will kick off their Eastern Conference Final run on Thursday at the Lenovo Center, although puck drop has still yet to be determined.

Here is the full list of dates for the Eastern Conference Final:

Game 1: Thursday, May 21 (Lenovo Center)

Game 2: Saturday, May 23 (Lenovo Center)

Game 3: Monday, May 25 (Bell Centre/KeyBank Center)

Game 4: Wednesday, May 27 (Bell Centre/KeyBank Center)

Game 5: Friday, May 29 (Lenovo Center)

Game 6: Sunday, May 31 (Bell Centre/KeyBank Center)

Game 7: Tuesday, June 2 (Lenovo Center)

The games will be exclusively broadcasted by TNT (truTV, HBO MAX) in the U.S. and will be available on Sportsnet, CBC and TVAS in Canada.

LINKS

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7290146/2026/05/19/carolina-hurricanes-nhl-playoffs-eastern-conference-final-tulsky/>

<https://nsjonline.com/article/2026/05/after-wait-hurricanes-get-canadiens-in-conference-final/>

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<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/latest-news/hurricanes-to-start-eastern-conference-final-on-thursday-following-record-long-wait>



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SportScan

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

1391682 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes know who they play in NHL Eastern Conference Final after Game 7 drama

Chip Alexander 5-7 minutes 19/05/2026

The Carolina Hurricanes, with more history in their sights, will face the Montreal Canadiens for the right to play for the 2026 Stanley Cup.

The Canadiens moved into the Eastern Conference final of the Stanley Cup playoffs on Monday with a 3-2 overtime victory over the Buffalo Sabres in Game 7.

The Canes and Canadiens will play Game 1 on Thursday at 8 p.m. at Lenovo Center as Carolina, the top seed in the Eastern Conference, hosts the first two games. Game 2 is scheduled Saturday at 7 p.m. before the series moves to Montreal's Bell Centre for two games.

The Hurricanes became the first playoff team this year to move into hockey's version of the final four. They did it quickly and efficiently, winning eight straight games in sweeping past the Ottawa Senators and then Philadelphia Flyers.

The Colorado Avalanche and Vegas Golden Knights next advanced to set up the Western Conference final. Then, Montreal.

The Canes are one game shy of tying the NHL record for most consecutive wins to open the playoffs: 9, by the Wayne Gretzky-led Edmonton Oilers in 1985. Carolina was the first NHL team to open with two four-game sweeps since the four-round, best-of-seven format was created in 1987.

The Canes have not played a game since Saturday, May 9, when Jackson Blake's overtime goal decided Game 4 against the Flyers. There has been more than ample time to rest, recover, practice and prepare for either Montreal or Buffalo.

Montreal swept the Hurricanes in the regular-season series. The Canadiens, the youngest team in the playoffs this year, began the calendar year on Jan. 1 with a 7-5 win at Lenovo Center, earned a 5-2 win on March 24 in Montreal, and a 3-1 victory on March 29 in Raleigh.

Carolina-Montreal NHL playoff history

This series will be the first time the Hurricanes and Canadiens have met in the playoffs since the opening round in 2006. The Canes lost the first two games at home, then rallied for a Game 3 win in Montreal — Rod Brind'Amour with the tying goal in regulation, Eric Staal with the overtime goal in a 2-1 victory.

The Canes won the series in six games, springboarding their run to the Stanley Cup.

Then there was 2002, when the Canes and Habs went at it in the second round, and the "Molson Miracle" was born.

Trailing 2-1 in the series, the Canes fell behind 3-0 in the third period of Game 4 in what was then known as the Molson Center in Montreal. Carolina scored three straight goals to force overtime and then won on a goal from an unlikely source, defenseman Niclas Wallin.

The Canes finished off the series in Game 6 and beat Toronto to reach the Stanley Cup final before losing to a Detroit Red Wings team loaded with future Hall of Famers.

The Canadiens lost to the Tampa Bay Lightning in the 2021 Stanley Cup final, when Canes forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi was with the Habs. No Canadian team has won the Cup since Montreal in 1993.

2026 Hurricanes-Canadiens recap

Montreal 7, Carolina 5

Jan. 1, 2026, Lenovo Center

The Habs won at Carolina for the first time since April 2016, having gone 0-10-2. They won despite a five-point night by Canes center Sebastian Aho (2 goals, three assists) that tied his career high. The Canes had a 4-2 lead early in the second period. Said Habs coach Martin St. Louis: "They're a team we've been chasing for years. I feel like we're getting closer to these good teams."

Montreal 5, Carolina 2

March 24, 2026, Bell Centre

Goalie Jakub Dobes had 41 saves against the Canes, who led 2-0 in the first period and had a 43-19 shot advantage in the game. Cole Caulfield scored his 44th goal of the season for the Habs and Juraj Slafkovsky and Ivan Demidov each had a goal and assist.

Said Brind'Amour: "It's hard because for the most part we were really good tonight. You look at the score and you're like 'What just happened?' but it wasn't that kind of game."

Montreal 3, Carolina 1

March 28, 2026, Lenovo Center

The Habs' Nick Suzuki had a goal and two assists, Caulfield scored his 46th and Dobes had 34 saves for another win over Carolina.

Said Brind'Amour: "Pretty much identical to the game up there. We played well, we definitely created enough opportunities, we just didn't score. So, you tip your hat to that goalie. He played great again."

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

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1391683 Carolina Hurricanes

Inside a Carolina Hurricanes defensive duo's chemistry: Friendship forged in faith

Chip Alexander 7-9 minutes 18/05/2026

In hockey, it's important for defensive partners to have good chemistry on the ice, to instinctively have a good feel for each other.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin and Jalen Chatfield's bond goes deeper than that: They have a relationship that is professional, but also personal — spiritual.

When Chatfield first came to the Canes in 2021, Slavin was there to listen, help, encourage.

When Chatfield was married, Slavin was his best man. When Chatfield was baptized, Slavin performed the Christian ceremony — in the pool at his Raleigh home.

"With all your teammates you have chemistry," Chatfield said in an N&O interview. "But to have somebody as close as him since the first day I've come in, and then guide me in that, it's truly a blessing.

"He's known about all my struggles, because I was very open with him and talking to him about stuff. Whether it was my first year or second year, getting scratched or things like that, he's always been there for me and he's been my best friend.

"Just his guidance, and seeing how he is as a father, as a teammate, as a leader, I learned a lot from him and I appreciate every single day. And especially being able to work with him, play with him. It's special, for sure."

Chatfield paused and smiled.

"We always joked around about playing together, but I never would have imagined we would play together," he said. "And I think we've been good together."

Slavin finds complement in Chatfield

Slavin, 32, missed 39 of the first 43 games this season as he dealt with undisclosed lower- and upper-body issues. But he helped Team USA to the gold medal at the Milan Winter Olympics, and has been back at his best as the Canes finished as the top seed in the Eastern Conference and then swept Ottawa and then Philadelphia in the first two rounds of Stanley Cup playoffs.

Slavin, considered by many NHL observers to be the league's top defensive defenseman, has counted Brett Pesce, Dougie Hamilton and Brent Burns among his defensive partners the past few seasons. In Chatfield, he has another right-handed shooting D-man to complement the pairing, one willing to bump and grind in the D zone while also willing to jump into the offensive play.

"All my previous partners have been really talented offensively and great partners," Slavin said Saturday. "It's not that 'Chatty' doesn't have the offense. It comes back to the mindset of really making sure we really defend well, first, then go from there.

"His speed, his gap control, his skating are probably the best parts of his game, his strengths. It's in-your-face, hard-to-beat. He has developed into a really good defenseman for us."

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour talks with defenseman Jalen Chatfield (5) during practice on Friday, May 15, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour talks with defenseman Jalen Chatfield (5) during practice on Friday, May 15, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Defense first

Chatfield, like Slavin, is used on the penalty kill, good at it and has had a special playoff moment. His shorthanded goal in Game 3 of the Flyers series was the game-winner in a 4-1 victory and made him one of three Canes defenseman in franchise history to have a "shorty" in the playoffs, joining Brendan Smith (2022) and Mike Commodore (2006).

Chatfield took a pass from Jordan Staal off the rush and beat Flyers goalie Dan Vladar high to the blocker side.

"In the playoffs, every shift, every shot on net matters," Chatfield said. "You never know which bounce is going to be the one. Our PK has been sharp, and it's nice to see that bounce go in for us."

Slavin has averaged a team-high 24:10 in ice time in the eight playoff games, and Chatfield is third at 22:54. The D corps has been solid and with goalie Frederik Andersen sharp and controlling the crease, the Canes have allowed 10 goals.

"They're two really good players who take pride in how they play that position, and defending," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Chatty's a world-class player in his own right. With the speed he brings and the way he defends it's real special. You put them together and they're a tough pairing to play against."

A year ago, Chatfield was knocked out of the playoffs in the second round against the Washington Capitals with a hip injury. He hoped to return, but the Canes bowed out in five games in the Eastern Conference Final against the Florida Panthers.

Chatfield, a native Michigander, was sidelined with a concussion early this season, but played 72 games and had a plus-15 plus/minus rating that was second-best on the team.

Becoming a Christian man

Slavin, raised in Colorado, has long been known as a man of strong faith, one who has said that neither the game nor any success or accolades given him would ever define him.

Slavin said Chatfield first approached him about coming to the church that Jaccob and Kylie Slavin attend in Raleigh. Before long, the two D-men used the team trips and plane rides to talk longer and deeper about religion, the gospel.

Chatfield and his wife, Drew, both were baptized at the Slavins' home.

"The same day. It was a really special moment, something you never forget," Chatfield said.

'We know what we're capable of'

The Hurricanes could go on to win a Stanley Cup this year, which would be unforgettable. They're off to the best possible start in the playoffs and have been able to mix rest and practice after the series sweeps.

They're also ready to get back to it.

"We know what we have to do to win," Chatfield said. "We've stuck to our system and our compete level has been through the roof, and that's something we can't get off of.

"And at the end of the day, we have to keep getting better. We know what we have, and we believe in each other, and we know what we're capable of."



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Regardless of how it unfolds, the Slavin-Chatfield bond and his admiration for his D partner will remain strong, Chatfield said.

"It's how great of a guy he is and how much I love him and how he is in the community and how he interacts with his teammates," Chatfield said. "Nobody's perfect, but he's a guy to look up to."

This story was originally

Published May 18, 2026 at 5:30 AM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

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1391741 Websites

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

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

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

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

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

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

Jump ahead to a team:

ANA | BOS | BUF | CGY | CHI

CBJ | DAL | DET | EDM

FLA | LA | MIN | NSH

NJ | NYI | NYR | OTT

PHI | PIT | SJ | SEA

STL | TB | TOR | UTA

VAN | WSH | WPG

Eliminated in Round 2

May 18: Buffalo Sabres

Projected cap space: \$12.9 million

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

What went right? The Sabres looked lost and destined to extend their historic playoff drought to 15 seasons when they were sitting 30th overall

in the NHL with an 11-14-4 record on Dec. 8. GM Kevyn Adams was fired on Dec. 15 (and replaced by Jarmo Kekalainen). Somewhere in between -- on a road trip through Western Canada -- Buffalo bonded over "drinking beers," according to Sabres captain Rasmus Dahlin and that might have helped flip a switch.

The Sabres ran off 13 wins in 14 games into the new year and finished the regular season from that point on with a league-high .784 points percentage (38-9-4) to grab top seeding in the Atlantic Division. In that 51-game stretch, Buffalo stood out in every category -- it ranked third in offense (3.71 goals per game), first in defense (allowing just 2.61 goals against), and leaned on an excellent goalie tandem of Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Alex Lyon (who ranked second and fifth, respectively, in save percentage among netminders with at least 20 starts).

Tage Thompson hit the 40-goal mark for a second straight season, Zach Benson collected career-best totals (with 13 goals and 43 points), blueliner Mattias Samuelsson was a standout at both ends of the ice, and all of Bowen Byram, Jack Quinn, Ryan McLeod and Josh Doan found significant roles.

Head coach Lindy Ruff is a Jack Adams Award finalist for a reason -- he took stock following Kevyn Adams' firing and found a way to get the best of this group -- to put Buffalo back into the postseason after a 14-year drought.

What went wrong? The Sabres did so much right in the regular season that their middling power play didn't stand out as an issue -- but it truly became one. Buffalo finished 21st overall with the extra man (19.5%) but the wheels truly came off in that department starting in the beginning of April. Buffalo went 11 straight games without a man-advantage goal (0-for-39) until Dahlin finally stopped the bleeding in Game 5 of their first-round series against the Boston Bruins. The Sabres' special-teams production was hit-or-miss after that. And they were truly abysmal at home (2-5) versus on the road (5-1) this postseason.

Buffalo's goaltending became a serious issue in its second-round series against the Montreal Canadiens, when Ruff had to toggle between Lyon and Luukkonen as both struggled to perform behind a Sabres team with increasingly lax attention to defensive details.

Buffalo's stars never came out consistently in the postseason, either. Thompson had just two goals in the first six games (one in an empty net), Tuch had zero points through six games, and overall their whole top line (with Peyton Krebs, who had a goose egg against the Habs going into Game 7) never found an offensive rhythm.

While Montreal appeared more powerful by the game, the Sabres were too often shadows of their former selves, as several key players got their first postseason experience.

Keys to the offseason: Kekalainen's first task will be nailing down an extension with Tuch. The pending unrestricted free agent will be a coveted player on the open market -- after producing 33 goals and 66 points during the regular season -- if he chooses to test it. Kekalainen will have to prepare an offer Tuch can't refuse if he intends to retain his top-line winger (with a potentially significant raise). Krebs and Benson are both pending RFAs in need of new deals as well.

Once Kekalainen handles that business, he can start to search for what the Sabres were lacking in the end -- suitable depth scoring, a little extra physicality and some defensive help (no shade on trade deadline pickup Luke Schenn, who stepped in as best he could late in the Montreal series). There are some intriguing names out there -- Rasmus Andersson, Anthony Mantha and Viktor Arvidsson among them -- who might just give Buffalo a bit of a boost to take another step next season with their young core well in place.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Sabres aren't about to start another playoff drought. They'll be back.



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May 14: Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$40.5 million

2026 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd, 4th (PHI), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Ducks have built a team that blends a young, homegrown core with veterans who have won elsewhere. That all led to the Ducks taking a significant step forward in 2025-26.

Whether that step was going to include a return to the playoffs was the biggest question as the season went on. The Ducks made their first playoff appearance since 2018 and advanced to the second round for the first time since 2017, beating the two-time defending Western Conference champion Edmonton Oilers.

The Ducks are now among the teams ready to challenge the power structure in the Western Conference, perhaps a little ahead of when anyone expected them to do so.

What went wrong? The Ducks ran into one of the NHL's most dangerous trios in the second round. Mitch Marner's nine points through five games of the second round was the most of any player in that span of postseason games, and he's the leading overall scorer in the 2026 playoffs with 18 points through 12 games. Jack Eichel is tied for second with 15, and Pavel Dorofeyev leads all playoff goal-scorers, with nine.

Cutter Gauthier and Beckett Sennecke were the only Ducks who averaged more than 0.70 points per game in the series entering Game 6. That's a contrast from the Golden Knights, who had four players who averaged more than 0.80 points per game against Anaheim. Although the Ducks showed offensive flashes, they were simply outmatched here.

Keys to the offseason: The good thing about having young talent? Those players provide the promise of a bright future at relatively team-friendly rates on their entry-level contracts.

The bad thing about having young talent? In the coming summers, those entry-level contracts will be expiring, and those players will need significant raises.

The challenge for the Ducks in the near future: Leo Carlsson, Pavel Mintyukov, Olen Zellweger and Gauthier are restricted free agents this offseason. Getting new deals done for them comes as the club has three veteran defensemen -- John Carlson, Radko Gudas and Jacob Trouba -- who are hitting unrestricted free agency. There is a lot of projected cap space, but it could be tricky to keep everyone.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Ducks are now officially among the ranks of expected playoff teams and should be pushing to at least get back to the second round next spring, if not further.

May 13: Minnesota Wild

Projected cap space: \$13.5 million

2026 draft picks: 3rd, 4th, 5th, 5th (SJ), 6th

What went right? A team that had been a perennial first-round exit leveled up in 2025-26 to stake a serious claim within the Western Conference hierarchy.

The Wild won the Quinn Hughes sweepstakes, which signaled that they were serious about trying to make a push for a Stanley Cup, whether it be this season or in the near future.

Hughes' addition brought several new elements to the Wild, and the club showed off its new firepower in preventing the Dallas Stars from reaching a fourth consecutive Western Conference finals, ousting them with a dominant performance in the first round.

What went wrong? "Within reach, while struggling to gain a firm grasp" is the best way to describe the Wild's second-round series against the Colorado Avalanche. It happened in Game 1; they overcame falling into

an 0-3 hole to eventually take a 5-4 lead before losing by three in a wild series opener. In Game 2, the penalty kill allowed two goals in a 5-2 defeat, before Minnesota rallied for a 5-1 win in Game 3.

Then there was Game 4, when they staved off pressure to tie the game at 2-2 ... only to allow the Avs to tally the go-ahead score on Parker Kelly's first career playoff goal, and add two empty-netters thereafter. Colorado was simply able to counterpunch Minnesota at each step of the way.

Keys to the offseason: GM Bill Guerin and his front office will need to navigate an eight-player UFA class featuring Nick Foligno, Marcus Johansson, Vladimir Tarasenko and Mats Zuccarello, among others.

After that, the Wild should consider adding more top-six help. Once again, the Wild are playing with limited cap space because Kirill Kaprizov's new contract will raise his cap hit from \$9 million annually to \$17 million annually.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: The Wild will be right there with the other top Western Conference contenders, and should be challenging for their first trip to the conference finals since 2003.

May 9: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected cap space: \$39.5 million

2026 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th

What went right? It seemed implausible in October that Philadelphia would be a nearly 100-point team, and earning its postseason ticket for the first time since 2019-20. That's why they play the games, right?

The Flyers exceeded expectations for a number of reasons, from goaltending on out. Dan Vladar had his best season ever with a 29-14-7 record, 2.42 goals-against average and .906 save percentage, which was top 10 among goalies making 40-plus starts. Vladar wasn't the only one with a breakout campaign. Trevor Zegras -- in his first season with Philadelphia following an offseason trade from Anaheim -- set a career high in goals (26) and points (67), while Noah Cates put up his best numbers too (18 goals and 47 points) while Owen Tippett led all Flyers with 28 goals to match his own top total from two seasons ago.

Coach Rick Tocchet's newly implemented, defense-forward structure seemed to steady the Flyers and help them rank ninth in goals against during the regular season, and made them one of the stingier clubs in the postseason as well. Despite being tied as the second-youngest team overall in the playoff field (with an average age of 27) and dressing eight players under age 25 -- three among them who didn't start the season with Philadelphia -- the Flyers surged through their second half with the league's fourth-best winning percentage (.712) out of the Olympic break to earn their spot in the postseason.

The Flyers were in full control for much of their first-round Eastern Conference series there against the Pittsburgh Penguins, taking the first three games and eventually ousting their state rivals with a tight 1-0 overtime victory in Game 6. Philadelphia showed they are finally starting to crack the ceiling on this team's potential.

What went wrong? Philadelphia wouldn't have been in the playoffs at all without the contributions of their young skaters -- but the lack of postseason experience that started hurting them late in the first round was further exposed against the high-flying Carolina Hurricanes. A team like Carolina will make its opponent pay for every mistake, and that is part of how the Hurricanes halted any of the Flyers' momentum and seemingly deflated their confidence.

But again, Philadelphia's struggles -- particularly offensively -- first bubbled up when they had Pittsburgh on the ropes with a 3-0 series lead. The Flyers scored just five goals in the three games prior to advancing, and then tallied just three goals in their first three outings against the Hurricanes (with zero scores coming from Christian Dvorak, Travis



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Konecny or Matvei Michkov). Injuries to Tippet and Cates only exacerbated the team's scoring problems. Philadelphia's power play -- a season-long issue for the club -- was operating at just 4.3% over that stretch, too.

Frederik Andersen is light-years ahead of Penguins' netminders Stuart Skinner and Arturs Silovs, and while Vladar performed especially admirably given the Flyers' circumstances, he couldn't quite match how Andersen was protecting the Canes' crease. This season should still be viewed as a win overall for the Flyers. It's a massive steppingstone toward being a perennially competitive group again, and there's no doubt they'll learn from taking a few lumps.

Keys to the offseason: The Flyers are in a good spot. GM Danny Briere's first priority will be negotiating Zegras' next contract. He's a pending restricted free agent at the top of his game, and that's going to cost Philadelphia -- but the fit between team and player has been so strong that both sides will want to get something done. Defenseman Jamie Drysdale is another RFA who Briere will be motivated to keep following his best season in years.

Then there is backup goalie Samuel Ersson. He's an RFA too, but without Zegras or Drysdale-like proficiency to support his cause (Ersson was 14-11-5 with an .870 SV% playing behind Vladar this season).

Philadelphia has cap space to spare, so once Briere is done with his in-house work, he can figure out how to help Philadelphia continue its evolution. If Ersson isn't coming back, who will the Flyers' go with as their No. 2 (assuming Vladar returns to form as their go-to next season)?

Then it's time to fix the team's awful power play, which finished 32nd in the regular season, at 15.7%. Some sort of upgrade/overhaul has to happen. How Briere chooses to address that -- via a coaching change or personnel addition -- will have a notable effect on the Flyers next season.

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: Philadelphia showed enough in the past nine months to put itself firmly in the 2027 playoff conversation from opening night onward. And realistically, when the Flyers do get to the postseason, absolutely no one should be surprised if they make a longer run than this one.

Eliminated in Round 1

May 3: Tampa Bay Lightning

Projected cap space: \$13.6 million

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

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

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

What went wrong? Too many of Tampa Bay's regular-season standouts went silent in the playoffs. The Lightning had play their entire first-round series against Montreal without Hedman. What Tampa Bay didn't need was players in the lineup to be noticeably invisible at key moments. Kucherov and Brayden Point each scored just one goal and Guentzel

had two. Hagel was pulling his weight (with six goals and eight points), but his efforts couldn't make up for the rest of the club's deficiencies as the Lightning ranked in the bottom six in playoff scoring (with fewer than three goals per game).

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

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

How will Tampa Bay make the most of the best years their top skaters have to offer? It's a question that should be consuming GM Julien BriseBois. It's hard to nitpick what the Lightning accomplished in the regular season, and analyzing only those games, it doesn't appear they have glaring holes. Perhaps it's more of a mindset shift that Tampa Bay should be chasing. Why did some of the team's major talents go dormant against the Canadiens? Is it the long-term fatigue of a decade's worth of extra games under the belt catching up to the Lightning? Or do they require an injection of new life? Could BriseBois work his magic to get someone like Charlie Coyle or Alex Tuch in the mix to add offense and some fresh energy?

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

May 1: Utah Mammoth

Projected cap space: \$14.3 million

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

May 1: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$16.4 million

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

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

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

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

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

The Bruins' top players -- other than Swayman -- were neutralized in frustrating fashion, too. David Pastrnak had three goals, Arvidsson had two, Zacha had one and Middlestadt and Charlie McAvoy had none. It was Pastrnak's overtime winner in Game 5 that gave the Bruins a shot at redemption in their building following the blowout 6-2 defeat in Game 4, but Boston again couldn't take advantage of the home cooking. Buffalo

made adjustments where the Bruins did not. That speaks as well to how green Sturm still is compared to Sabres coach Lindy Ruff.

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

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

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

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

April 30: Edmonton Oilers

Projected cap space: \$16.5 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

April 30: Dallas Stars

Projected cap space: \$11.1 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason Robertson was the Stars' most consistent offensive player in the regular season and playoffs, and his performance comes as he's in the final months of his contract. He's a pending RFA who has one year remaining under team control before he would hit the unrestricted market. The asking price that Robertson -- or any player with his profile --

could command is expected to come with a rather high premium -- especially given the deals signed by fellow star wingers like Kirill Kaprizov and Mitch Marner last summer.

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

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

April 29: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$45.8 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

April 26: Los Angeles Kings

Projected cap space: \$18.5 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Given the players set to hit free agency, filling Kopitar's shoes might be most easily accomplished via trade.

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

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

April 25: Ottawa Senators

Projected cap space: \$17.3 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Non-playoff teams

April 14: Calgary Flames

Projected cap space: \$19 million

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

What went right? The front office acknowledging reality. The Flames finished with more than 90 points twice during the four-year span in which they've missed the playoffs. That might have created a mixed message: Were they close to being a playoff team or was the postseason the object in the mirror that was closer than it appeared?

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$40.2 million

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

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

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

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

The Blackhawks gave up the second-most shots per 60, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60. What added to those defensive challenges was the fact they had the third-lowest shot-

share, meaning they spent more time defending than attacking. It's what made Knight and Arvid Soderblom teaming up to give the club the 17th-best team save percentage in 5-on-5 so crucial. Otherwise, they would've been under water.

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

That idea could also hold true when it comes to their situation at forward. Veterans Ilya Mikheyev and Sam Lafferty are pending unrestricted free agents, while one wonders if the club is getting enough from Andre Burakovsky. He's entering the final season of a deal worth \$5 million annually, and hasn't scored more than 20 goals and 40 points since 2021-22.

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

April 14: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$39.3 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Once Waddell decides who to keep or let walk, he can focus on fixing what ultimately derailed Columbus' postseason quest. The Blue Jackets have talent; what they need is more reliable depth to complement it.



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Targeting physical skaters to give Columbus an advantage in its bottom six (even when injuries crop up) would go a long way.

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

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

April 14: Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$30.1 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coach Todd McLellan has shown he can pull something special out of this team -- even he acknowledged though that the Red Wings' mental

toughness dipped post-Olympics along with their resiliency. That alone necessitates change. Time will tell how Yzerman proceeds in fixing the issues.

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

April 14: Florida Panthers

Projected cap space: \$13.8 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$30.3 million

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

What went right? A five-game winning streak from mid-to-late March changed quite a bit for the Predators. It initially appeared they were going



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to miss the playoffs again, until that streak -- coupled with the fact that other teams have struggled to hold a firm grip in the Western Conference wild-card race -- presented an opportunity for the Predators. It's why they came into the final week of the regular season challenging for a playoff spot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: New Jersey Devils

Projected cap space: \$12.2 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

After that, New Jersey has to quickly put the 2025-26 season behind it and strike back as a postseason contender. There are players in their prime -- Hughes, Hischier, Timo Meier and more -- that the Devils must use to win now. New Jersey also has good complementary players -- Glass was a particular standout this season -- and newcomer Arseny Gritsyuk's summer development could be of great consequence to the Devils' offensive resurgence in 2026-27.

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

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

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$14.4 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$27 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.5 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$28.4 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Realistic expectation for 2026-27: This team is close to returning to the playoffs for the second time in franchise history, but GM Jason Botterill



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must make the right moves this summer to give them the best chance to do so.

April 14: St. Louis Blues

Projected cap space: \$21.8 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: Toronto Maple Leafs

Projected cap space: \$22.2 million

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

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

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

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

and -- thanks to a knee-on-knee hit from Radko Gudas -- sat out the end of the season because of a torn MCL.

Toronto was abysmal defensively in the second year under head coach Craig Berube, and their goaltending was unreliable. It was of little surprise that GM Brad Treliving didn't survive the season. Oh, and their first-round pick belongs to Boston unless it lands in the top five, making the final week of the season -- and the draft lottery on May 5 -- extra nerve-racking.

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

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

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

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

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$21.6 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's possible that the Canucks could seek to sign players they believe can address some of their short-term needs, with the idea they could move



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on from them ahead of the 2026-27 trade deadline to add to their future draft capital.

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

April 14: Washington Capitals

Projected cap space: \$34 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14: Winnipeg Jets

Projected cap space: \$21.6 million

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Sportsnet.ca / Young Canadiens' journey pays off with Game 7 triumph: 'Can't buy that'

Eric Engels

BUFFALO, N.Y. — One of these teams is not like the others, and we're referring to the ones that knocked off the Buffalo Sabres in overtime of Game 7 Monday.

How the Montreal Canadiens did it was not quite as miraculous as how they beat the Tampa Bay Lightning in Game 7 of Round 1, but there was some pixie dust sprinkled all over this one too.

For the Canadiens had a two-goal lead they squandered. They defended spectacularly well through the first period to earn it, only to find themselves defending far too much through the second and the third.

And after Jakub Dobeš made some heroic saves in overtime on Zach Benson and Tage Thompson, Alex Newhook stormed down the ice, received a lead pass from Alex Carrier, slowed himself down for Jake Evans to drive the net, and then used Rasmus Dahlin as a screen to take the shot that knuckled past Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen for his second Game-7-winning goal of these playoffs.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Of this one, Newhook said the main thing he felt was “a little bit more relief” because unlike the one in Tampa, which he scored to make it 2-1 Canadiens with 9:57 to play in the third period, it immediately ended the game.

It also propelled the Canadiens to the Eastern Conference Final, making them the only team of the four left standing to have not won its division this season.

The Colorado Avalanche, a veteran team in search of its first Cup since Newhook won with them as a rookie in 2022, won theirs by nine points. They're facing a Vegas Golden Knights team that won the year after, a team that emerged as the winner of the pillow fight — as Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid famously coined it in March — that was this season's Pacific Division.

Meanwhile, the Carolina Hurricanes, who won the Metropolitan Division by 15 points, have been cooling their heels for the last 10 days after completing their second sweep of these playoffs. This is their fourth consecutive appearance in the Eastern Conference Final.

And then you have these Canadiens, who beat the 50-win, Atlantic Division champion Sabres after dispatching the veteran, 106-point Lightning. At 25.8 years old on average, they are the youngest team to make it this far in the playoffs since the 1993 Stanley Cup champion Canadiens did it.

These Canadiens were born in the flames of a spectacular burnout following an appearance in the 2021 Stanley Cup Final, and their journey to here will be a case study for all teams pondering the pain of a rebuild.

Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki called it “a long journey” roughly 30 minutes after Newhook scored the winning goal Monday, but some in the hockey world would consider it among the shortest ever for a team that bottomed out to embark on what they thought would be a non-linear path to any type of triumph.

“There's been a lot of different steps,” said Suzuki, who then noted how they've actually been quite linear.

“We traded for Newy, we traded for (Kirby Dach),” Suzuki said, though the record states those moves were made in reverse order. “We drafted really well. A lot of studs through the draft that had an impact right away, so that really put our process further in motion. And ever since (coach) Marty (St. Louis) came (in February 2022), we had a belief we could be a really good team really quickly, and guys have really bought into how we play and everything that Marty preaches. It's really cool to be in this situation this fast, being such a young team. We're just having a lot of fun and we just want to keep the journey going.”

It looked like it might stop dead soon after Dahlin scored to make it 2-2 with 13:33 to go in the third period of Monday's game.

Early goals from Phillip Danault and Zachary Bolduc didn't appear as though they'd hold up as the ice tilted heavily towards Dobes in the second period.

After Mattias Samuelsson banked one off Jordan Greenway to get the Sabres on the board 13:19 into that frame, the waves of pressure came crashing down on the Canadiens.

That's when Dobes kept his team from drowning.

“I was just doing my job,” he said. “Their fans like to chant my name, so I like that, too. Thanks for that. That was giving me fire because I like when you're the villain when you're in this situation.”

Dobes stole away sure goals from Alex Tuch and Thompson in the final minute of the second period, and he made 16 more saves before Newhook scored to make it 3-2 Montreal.

In between, Josh Anderson missed the second of two breakaways and pinged the cross bar.

Emotions swung wildly on every rush, as pucks got nervously bobbed by both teams, and then Buffalo made the final mistake.

“It hurts,” said Sabres coach Lindy Ruff. “For the team, it hurts. That pain will go away, but I won't let this one game define the season we had.”

It was a remarkable one, which started about as disastrously as the 14 playoff-less ones that preceded it. Ruff wanted them to “just bleeping go,” and they did, running over nearly everyone in the league from Dec. 9 onward.

That's when they notched the first of 10 wins in a row, which they followed up with a league-leading 29 over the final 43 games of the season.

They'd have crushed the Boston Bruins in less than six games if not for goaltender Jeremy Swayman, and they crushed the Canadiens 8-3 in Game 6 before almost extinguishing them in Game 7.

“Game 7 is about finding a way,” said St. Louis, “and that's what we did.”

For the second time of these playoffs. For the first time in overtime on the road in a Game 7 in the team's 117-year history.

Who'd have thought it would be this version of the Canadiens?

They were just learning how to play through the 2022-23 season. In 2023-24, we saw them play — and lose — the most one-goal games in the NHL. They came into 2024-25 just looking to be in the mix and then went on an unforeseeable run post-4 Nations Face-Off to the playoffs before getting run over by the Washington Capitals in five games. And now, youth be damned, they're in the final four.

Youth was a baked-in excuse to lean on at any point over 96 games this season, but St. Louis refused to let the Canadiens do that.

“It's easy to just use the age as a crutch,” he said. “Two years ago, we know that we lacked experience. But that doesn't mean that you can't advance and mature. So, I feel like the process that we have in place, the environment, and the mindset, I think it's allowed us to grow no matter what, how old we are.”

It's been a massive spurt for the Canadiens over the last month.

“What we're going through right now, you can't buy that,” said St. Louis. “It's amazing. I'm so happy for the players to live that. It's unbelievable to play in the NHL as a player, but to get to live these do-or-die situations in terms of moving on or you're done, scoring the big goal in the overtime, that feeling that a player has, it's unbelievable. I'm so happy that they're getting to live that.”

That journey continues, this time into uncharted waters alongside the three titans of the league.

“We have a special group,” said Josh Anderson.

The Canadiens have shown that so far, and now they'll try to prove just how special they really are.

“I think we got all the pieces,” said Newhook. “We're a team that plays with a lot of pace. I think when we're playing our style, we're a really hard team to play against for everyone. We're a deep team. I think in playoffs you need to have depth and you need to be able to get something from everyone in the lineup. I think we've had that from the start of the playoffs up until now, and Dobes is playing really well. We're confident in him, and we're confident in everyone in the room. I think we know what we're capable of and we're excited to keep it rolling.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Why pain of Game 7 defeat won't define best Sabres season in 19 years

Luke Fox

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Pain can hit in such different ways, you wonder why we lump it all under the same umbrella.

The familiar ache of missing the playoffs for a ridiculous 14 straight seasons grows almost numbing with its persistent frustration. That brand of pain nags like a bum ankle but eventually just feels part of the Western New York uniform, interwoven with the identity of a whole generation of fans whose birthright is disappointment.

The sad comfort of long-term losing is a whole different animal from the gut punch of a second-round knockout. On home ice. In overtime. Of Game 7. After quieting Bell Centre on a Saturday night. After rallying from a 0-2 deficit in a winner-take-all and revving the diehards to can't-hear-yourself-think decibels.

It's so late Monday night, it's almost Tuesday. The Buffalo Sabres goaltender's eyes are as red as the lamp Alex Newhook lit behind his net in the 72nd minute of Game 7, the final one of his season. Inside the home room hangs a giant, stuffed buffalo head and the quiet of a morgue.

"It just sucks. It stings. It sucks. I dunno," Luukkonen says.

The Sabres have just scored nine of the series' final 12 goals. They've just dominated the Montreal Canadiens in every offensive category of Game 7 (shots, attempts, chances, high dangers, expected goals) except the one that matters.

The Canadiens have won 3-2, advancing to the conference final, where they'll face a Carolina Hurricanes team that must suddenly remember how hockey games work.

All because Newhook pulled a puck on a low-reward rush, slipped defenceman Rasmus Dahlin into a screen, and whipped a knuckle puck that dipped just under Luukkonen's glove and over his left pad.

Before shaking hands and saluting fans and answering the tough questions, Luukkonen chucked hunks of his equipment down the hallway.

"It comes down to small things. They got the bounces," Dahlin says. "F--- --- sucks.

"One shot decides the whole season. It sucks."

Decides? Yes.

Defines? No.

Why it hurts is because for the first time in 15 years, Buffalo — a hockey town deprived of meaningful hockey — was actually good. And fun. Resilient. And surprising in all the best ways.

When Dahlin tied Game 7 with a snipe in the third period, KeyBank Center jolted to life like Frankenstein's monster. Your heart got kickstarted long before Mötley Crüe's goal song had a chance to blast.

The teams in this series — overall the tightest but within stretches the most lopsided of Round 2 — treated goal-scoring the way Drake treats album drops: long buildups of anticipation, then a bunch all at once. And because of that, you expected the pressing Sabres to complete their plot twist Monday.

"I don't think anyone in this room felt like we were done yet," Tage Thompson says. "I thought we played a really good game, which makes it even tougher.

"Luuk played great. Keeps it tight for us. Pull our way back into it and felt like we had all the momentum. Just couldn't score."

No team in the Eastern Conference has scored more often than these Sabres, who piled 326 goals between the regular season and playoffs. A 327th would've kept them alive.

Still, they should be celebrated for their accomplishments.

According to the royal-blue-and-gold hat legendary NFL broadcaster Chris Berman sported to the game, these Sabres were a WAGON. And a whole city guzzled Blue from a beer sabre and jumped aboard for the joyride.

"This is a giant step for us. A giant step for all the players to really get a feel what it's really like to be proud of being a Buffalo Sabre, to be proud of playing here," coach Lindy Ruff says.

"You know, when I took the job, I thought No. 1 was I wanted these guys to like being a Buffalo Sabre. I think they like being a Sabre, and I think they did our city proud. It wasn't the result we wanted, and to a man they're all disappointed, but they gave me everything you had in their tank."

Forget the quenching of a drought that lasted since 2011, this was the best Sabres squad in 19 years.

They jumped year-over-year from 79 to 109 points, their most since 2007. They ousted the Bruins and nearly the Canadiens. After years of drafting top five, they finish top five.

"I don't think you get to this spot, especially the way we started the season, without a group of brothers that want to go to war for each other," Thompson says. "You're going to face doubt and hate, and a bunch of noise all year long, especially in the position we were in. And the only way to get through that is to lean on each other.

"We did that all year. We leaned on each other hard. A lot of hard work went into this season by everyone that lot of people don't get to see. A lot of adversity and a lot of challenges. The physical and mental grind that we went through to get here is why it hurts so bad. Felt like we should have got rewarded for it a little bit more."

Be it digging out of a self-inflicted October hole, overwhelming the more veteran Bruins in Round 1, or pushing the Habs to the brink, Ruff will remember this group for its resilience.

"This was a team that they never quit. And they probably had every excuse to at times, but they always found a reason to win," Ruff says.

"The energy around our team, around the city, in this building, outside the building, this was the first time our players got to experience something like this. And I couldn't be more proud of the way our city represented themselves with our play."

Tonight feels dark, no doubt, but the future is bright for the third-youngest roster in the NHL.

Local man Alex Tuch, who failed to register a point in this series, is an impending unrestricted free agent, and he won't be cheap to keep. Bulldog Zach Benson and Peyton Krebs are both restricted and in need of raises. But the bulk of Buffalo's core is locked up, most at reasonable if not favourable rates. And GM Jarmo Kekalainen has cap space and momentum on his side.

But just because the long-suffering Sabres are entering a window of relevance doesn't guarantee their ticket to Round 3 will be so close to getting punched.

"The way we were playing, I think everyone in the room felt like we were winning that game," Thompson says. "We just gotta, unfortunately, take that taste with us into the summer and do something about it."

The only remedy for this type of pain is winning.

"I told the team it hurts," Ruff says. "That pain will go away. But I won't let this one game define the season we had."



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TSN.CA / 'Plays into our hands': Canadiens confident in road game, bounce-back ability

Mark Masters

The Montreal Canadiens and Buffalo Sabres held media availabilities at their hotels on Monday.

The Buffalo Sabres decided to stay in a hotel on Sunday night despite being the home team in Monday's Game 7 against the Montreal Canadiens.

"We're going to try to do everything we possibly can, try something different," coach Lindy Ruff told reporters. "It's like changing the lineup sometimes. Sometimes you just feel, 'Man, if I just change it, maybe something better, you can find something better.' I've always been on the side of, let's give it a try [rather] than just keep trying to pound a round peg in a square hole."

The Sabres treated Sunday night like a typical road night with a dinner available to the players at the hotel.

"I didn't even know they were doing that but whatever you want, I guess," said Canadiens winger Alex Newhook with a shrug.

"It's something a little different," Sabres defenceman Bowen Byram told reporters. "Obviously we haven't had our best efforts on home ice so just trying to change something up to change some of our fortune, I guess."

Both teams are 2-1 on the road in the series with lopsided wins in the last two games.

Montreal is 5-2 on the road in the playoffs, including a Game 7 win in Tampa last round. The Canadiens tied for the second-best points percentage (.683) on the road during the regular season.

"We've been a good road team all year," Newhook said. "We're confident being here. We've been a good road team and I think that kind of goes with the brand. When you simplify it a bit and raise the standards and expectations on physicality and emphasis on playing a deep game, I think [that] plays into our hands so we're confident being on the road, and just gotta get another win."

Buffalo is 5-1 on the road in the playoffs, but just 2-4 inside KeyBank Center. The Sabres were the fourth-best home team (.695 points percentage) in the regular season.

"I can't explain it," Ruff said. "The reason we tried to change it up last night is there's a lot of distractions now. You got a lot of friends, a lot of family, just tried to get away from that and just be with the group, be with each other and wrap our arms around this opportunity."

Home teams own a 118-84 (.584) advantage all-time in NHL Game 7s.

The Sabres are changing up the pre-game routine with usual anthem singer Cami Clune announcing she will not be on the microphone before Game 7.

Doug Allen, whose 30-year run as the team's anthem singer came to an end during the COVID pandemic, is listed as the singer for Monday night.

Hi Everyone! Just wanted to let you all know that I won't be singing the anthems for Game 7 tonight because they're bringing in a guest singer. But - I'll still be hanging at Party in the Plaza / Canalside!! 🍷

See y'all for Home Game 1 of Round 3 😊💙💛

LET'S GO SABRES!!!

— Cami Clune (@camiclune) May 18, 2026

Instead of the traditional blue and gold, Ruff wore the team's retro 'goathead' logo to his morning media briefing.

The Sabres are 1-6 in Game 7 in franchise history with the only win coming while wearing the 'goathead' in the first round against the Ottawa Senators in 1997. Derek Plante scored in overtime to help the Sabres advance to face the Philadelphia Flyers.

"Are you ready Legion of Doom?" legendary play-by-play man Rick Jeanneret declared that night, referencing Philadelphia's top line. "Here come the Buffalo Sabres!"

That iconic call has inspired Buffalo's rally towels for Game 7.

Lindy in the GoatHead gear?

Will Pegula be paying the fine?

The last time they won a Game 7 was in 1997 in the original Goatheads

If this happens, they really are pulling out all the stops@2Goalies1Mic pic.twitter.com/UjH1UableR

— Duane Steinel (@DuaneS39) May 18, 2026

Ruff declined to name a starter but all three goalies skated in the morning and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was the first one off the ice. Luukkonen picked up the win in Games 4 and 6, but was pulled in Game 5.

Jakob Dobs is set for a 14th straight start in the playoffs and the Canadiens goalie is looking to respond to his worst outing. Dobs allowed six goals on 33 shots before being pulled in the third period on Saturday.

"I'm not worried about Dobs," coach Martin St. Louis said succinctly when asked about the goalie's mindset.

"He's been great for us all year," said Newhook. "He's a confident guy. We didn't do a lot to help him out last game and we're very confident he'll be at his best tonight."

The Canadiens did not have any players on the ice on Monday morning, which means any lineup news will have to wait until warm-up.

"I got guys available," said St. Louis. "I got options."

St. Louis did confirm that forward Joe Veleno is available to play after taking a big hit late in Game 6.

If the Sabres stick with the same personnel on Monday night, they will have five players with previous Game 7 experience in the lineup, but only two (Alex Tuch, Ryan McLeod) who have won a Game 7.

Ruff is urging his players to embrace the moment.

"If we were in training camp this year and we're on the first day and we wanted to talk about playing a game in the middle of May on an 85-degree day in Game 7 to move on, we'd all sign on the dotted line," the Sabres coach said.

If the Canadiens stick with the same lineup, they will have nine players with multiple Game 7s under their belt. That number goes up to 10 if veteran winger Brendan Gallagher draws in.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Canadiens just won a Game 7 in the first round against the Lightning although they didn't play particularly well in getting outshot 29-9 in Tampa.

"We didn't probably play our best, but Doby played great for us," said defenceman Kaiden Guhle. "Might've been gripping our sticks a little bit too tight that game and same thing with Game 6 [on Saturday]. Just go play. I mean, if you told us in September we'd be in the second round in Game 7 in Buffalo we'd be pretty happy so just go play and have fun and leave it all out there."

What did the team learn from the experience in Tampa?

"It's about finding a way," said St. Louis. "It's not about being perfect. It's about finding a way."

St. Louis' teams went 6-2 in Game 7 during his Hall-of-Fame career.

"You don't get a do-over so you just leave it out there," St. Louis advised when asked about the proper Game 7 mentality.

Newhook scored the decisive goal in the third period of the Game 7 in Tampa Bay.

"Game 7s are a fun part of hockey and I think everyone in our room is going to embrace that," Newhook said. "We're excited to get back to that moment and embrace it and just get a win on the road."

The Canadiens blew a 3-1 lead en route to an 8-3 loss in Game 6 on Saturday night at the Bell Centre.

"We looked at some stuff, but it's more just flush it," said Guhle. "It's our worst game we've played in a really long time for whatever reason. I think a lot of guys wanted that game back and you can't do that so it's just bounce forward."

St. Louis has been using the phrase "bounce forward" all season long and his players have responded well to defeats all season long. In fact, Montreal has not dropped consecutive games since March 14-15.

"It's a standard expectation thing," Newhook said. "All year we've been good after a loss so another reason for us to be confident tonight. You look at what went wrong last game, take the emotion out of it, we know we gotta be better. We'll improve on what we need to be better at and give ourselves the best chance to win."

The Canadiens are, understandably, looking for a better defensive effort.

"Just being alert is huge," Newhook said. "Staying on top of their guys. They like to play on the rush and send a lot of guys throughout the game so staying on top of them is huge and not giving them that advantage off the rush. And all the other small details of being physical, stick details, being alert all those things come into play."

The penalty kill can also be better after surrendering four goals to the Sabres on Saturday.

"We looked at it this morning," said Guhle. "I'm not going to tell you what we need to do, but we looked at this morning. We got some things up our sleeve that we're going to try out."

Different round, same story.

Montreal dropped Game 6 at home in Round 1 before going on to win Game 7 in Tampa Bay. Can the Habs pull off another road-series win?
pic.twitter.com/AFBcXIY5zE

— BarDown (@BarDown) May 17, 2026

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