



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The News & Observer

How can the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Montreal Canadiens? 4 things to watch

By: Chip Alexander

There are 16 squares on the front facade of the Lenovo Center above the arena's main entrance.

Eight have red storming-warning signs, The other eight are blank. The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) again have filled the first eight boxes with eight consecutive victories in the Stanley Cup playoffs. That's the idea: fill all 16, win the Cup.

But since 2006, when the Hurricanes were Stanley Cup champions, they have not gotten past nine, and often maxed out at eight. That's the reality. The Canes want to change that narrative this season. After dusting off the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers, winning both series impressively in four-game sweeps, Carolina now has its sights on the Montreal Canadiens in the NHL's Eastern Conference Final.

After a 12-day break, the Canes will face the Habs on Thursday in Game 1 at Lenovo Center. Game 2 is Saturday before the best-of-seven series goes to Montreal for two games.

"Once you know your opponent, it gets more real," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said after a Monday practice. "Once you know your opponent for sure, you can get more laser focused."

The Canadiens became that opponent Monday night, going into Buffalo's KeyBank Center for Game 7 of their series with the Sabres and emerging with a 3-2 overtime victory on Alex Newhook's goal.

The Canadiens won an Eastern Conference title in 2021 before losing to the Tampa Bay Lightning in the Stanley Cup Final. The Canes have had four trips to the conference final since the 2006 Cup — in 2009, 2019, 2023 and 2025 — and won one game.

The Florida Panthers (Shopping Cart IconShop Panthers Fan Gear), a bigger, stronger team with elite goaltending, ousted the Canes in 2023 and '25. Carolina did win Game 4 last year after falling behind 3-0 in the series.

"It doesn't matter what's happened in the past," winger Seth Jarvis said Monday. "We're a new team and playing a new opponent. We have experience in this round in knowing what it takes to compete and hopefully come out victorious."

What will it take to win four games against the Canadiens and come out victorious? Four things to consider:

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen (31) tends the net during practice on Friday, May 15, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Freddie stays hot

It all starts in net. For the Canes, that means goaltender Frederik Andersen. Andersen had a shutout win to begin the

Ottawa series and did the same to the Flyers. Starting and winning all eight games in the two sweeps, Andersen has been an elite goalie for the Hurricanes, called a calming presence by Brind'Amour and an "absolute wall" by defenseman Jaccob Slavin.

Andersen, 36, was only average in the regular season, but not the playoffs. Why the change?

"I've been patient and building towards a good stance, and the movement's been good," Andersen said Monday. "I've just been building my foundation that I feel like gives me the best chance of being in the way of the puck."

That's a bit of goaliespeak. But Andersen, facing 201 shots in eight games, has been in the way of the puck 191 times.

That's a .950 save percentage to go with his 1.12 goals-against average. His high-danger save percentage is .925, according to the NHL EDGE metrics.

Montreal's Jakub Dobes, 24, has twice won Game 7's on the road, only the second rookie goalie in NHL history to do it. He also beat the Canes three times during the regular season as the Habs went 3-0-0 against Carolina.

But Andersen has been on another level.

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) talks with left wing Nikolaj Ehlers (27), during practice on Friday, May 15, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) talks with left wing Nikolaj Ehlers (27), during practice on Friday, May 15, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

More production at the top

Canes center Sebastian Aho, in talking about his line, said, "We've got better hockey in us."

That was before the Flyers series.

The Aho line, while not shirking its defensive responsibilities, again was not dangerous enough offensively in the second round — albeit in that four-game window. Aho had one assist against the Flyers. Jarvis had one goal. Winger Andrei Svechnikov had a goal and two assists.

Logan Stankoven's line has been the Canes' best and has been the headliners, lastly with Jackson Blake's overtime goal to win Game 4 and close out the Flyers.

Taylor Hall has been the leading scorer for Carolina in the playoffs with 12 points. Blake (11) and Stankoven (8) are next, and Stankoven has a team-best seven goals.

Aho and his linemates have had more than enough time to think about producing "better hockey."

Win the special teams showdown



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The Canadiens have scored on 25% of their power plays in the playoffs. The Canes have killed off 95% of their penalties. That's the starting point entering the series.

The Hurricanes, always aggressive on the kill, have allowed two goals shorthanded in 40 chances over eight games. Defenseman Jalen Chatfield has a shorthanded goal for the Canes and there have been other shorthanded chances.

The Habs have 13 power-play goals in 14 games, including Zachary Bolduc's score in Game 7 against Buffalo. Slafkovsky has four power-play goals and Caufield three, and rookie defenseman Lane Hutson is a crafty power-play quarterback.

Carolina Hurricanes fans welcome the team to the ice for Game 1 against Philadelphia on Saturday, May 2, 2026, during the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Making home ice an advantage

The Hurricanes like to feed off their home crowd and will look to do it again. The decibel count again will be high at Lenovo Center when the siren finally is sounded again and it's game on.

Brind'Amour will have the last-change for matching up personnel and has a good feel for it, even if he downplays the significance of it when questioned.

"When you get to this point, I don't know if playing at home is an advantage," Brind'Amour said.

The Habs' top line with Nick Suzuki centering Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky is young and fast. Caufield, who had 51 goals in the regular season, has four in the 14 playoff games but was an offensive pest when the Canes faced him.

It will be interesting to see which line and defensive pairs Brind'Amour uses against the Suzuki line. Then again, Newhook has a team-leading seven goals playing with center Jake Evans and winger Ivan Demidov.

The Canadiens are 6-2 on the road in the playoffs. They twice won Game 7 on the road, in rowdy environments. They won at Lenovo Center in the regular season.

The Canadiens come in confident. The Canes are well-rested, prepared and still unbeaten in the playoffs.

Said Canes captain Jordan Staal: "We're champing at the bit to get going."



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The Athletic

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Montreal Canadiens 2026 NHL Stanley Cup playoffs preview

By: Shayna Goldman, Sean Gentile, Dom Luszczyszyn

If you like hockey games played between teams with contrasting styles ... boy, we've got the series for you.

The differences between the Carolina Hurricanes and Montreal Canadiens aren't confined to the on-ice product, either. By the time the puck drops, the Hurricanes will have had 11 days off between games and played just eight times in 36 days. The Canadiens, meanwhile, will be working on approximately 72 hours of rest.

Beyond that, we're getting the most traditional of traditional hockey markets vs. the poster child for the NHL's southern expansion — which makes for an important bit of common ground. The atmosphere in both buildings is going to be wild. Will the series follow suit?

Making history: three OT goals to secure conference final spots

The odds

As is usually the case for the Canadiens, the odds simply do not matter. Montreal Magic™ is something you can set your watch to. It doesn't matter how the games actually go — the hockey gods come through for their favorite team. Getting severely outplayed in Game 7 on the road in the first round and second round? No sweat, the Habs will literally just get the bounces.

VGK

NHL

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Tonight

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12% Picked

615 votes

88% Picked

Carolina starts this series as heavy favorites and deservedly so after being the first team ever to sweep two best-of-seven rounds to start the playoffs. This is an elite team, the best version of the Hurricanes we've seen in this era; they should be well-equipped to handle Montreal with relative quickness. The vast playoff experience they've accumulated over the last five or so years is a point in Carolina's favor, too.

But that's within the confines of general hockey logic. Montreal Magic™ is special. And this version of the team seems to have a whole lot of it. Discount it at your own peril.

The numbers

Look past the magic and Carolina has the edge by the numbers, with a plus-68 Net Rating that's more than double Montreal's plus-29.

The Hurricanes play a high-pressure game on both edges of the ice, between their swarming forecheck and disruptive defense. But this postseason, their rush game has been a real difference-maker, too.

Carolina was strong in Round 1, but even more dominant against a more one-dimensional opponent in the Philadelphia Flyers. It all added up to a 55.5 percent xG rate, second only to the Colorado Avalanche, and a 16-6 scoring edge at five-on-five.

Montreal's a completely different team stylistically, so Carolina's going to have to adapt to that. In the regular season, the Canadiens made the most of their scoring chances and improved defensively down the stretch. So far this postseason, they've done a good job adjusting to different matchups so far, too.

Against a star-studded but slower opponent, the Canadiens upped their defense at five-on-five to limit the Tampa Bay Lightning's best. It just suppressed their offense in the process. In Round 2 against the Buffalo Sabres, Montreal upped its xG pace by a full goal to 3.01 per 60, but was much leakier defensively.

That offensive boost extends to the power play, which was more efficient against Buffalo. That should be more of a challenge for the Canes to contain, compared to Ottawa and Philly, but their penalty kill (which might as well be called a power kill) should be up to the task. Montreal, on the other hand, has to tighten up its penalty kill if it's going to find a special-teams edge in this series.

The big question

Star power or depth: which will prevail?

When the Hurricanes have made their recent postseason exits — in the second round three times in the last five seasons, in the conference final the other two — it's been largely attributable to two factors: injuries and a lack of ultra-elite talent at the top of the lineup. Carolina fans are sick of hearing it, and we've gotten sick of writing it, but neither makes it any less true.

This year, they're as healthy as any team playing May hockey could reasonably expect to be. Maybe that holds up, maybe not. The second factor — whether they have true star power, and whether they need it — will be a question until they win the Cup.

That they look as good as they ever have seems undeniable, but also, not a ton has changed atop the pyramid. As great as Logan Stankoven, Jackson Blake and Taylor Hall have



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been (and may continue to be), they're still second-liners. For as much skill and creativity as Nikolaj Ehlers adds to the mix, he's still on a line with Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook. While the style Carolina plays has sharpened and added dimension, the approach is still, above all else, "strength in numbers."

There's value in that, quite clearly. The Stankoven line, for eight playoff games and eight playoff wins, has largely driven the bus at five-on-five, providing a layer of offensive insulation Carolina has lacked in previous runs. And that might be where things have changed most dramatically for the Hurricanes — because you'd have a tough time arguing that past versions of this roster could've survived for one round, let alone two, while getting almost literally nothing from the top line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis. Those three have just four five-on-five points between them. Aho and Jarvis have one goal each, and neither came with their typical linemates. As a unit, Carolina has lost their minutes 1-0 and controlled 43 percent of the expected goal share, compared to a 29-26 and 56 percent edge in the regular season.

Top League Content

Throughout the playoffs, Rod Brind'Amour has hammered two points about Aho-Jarvis-Svechnikov: He's not unhappy with their play overall, because they've gotten tough minutes and largely played them to a draw, and he's aware that at some point the scoresheet numbers will have to change. Until then, the rest of the lineup's depth can carry the day, and if the second line continues outscoring opponents at a 9-1 rate, not much else will matter.

Those opportunities may well continue against the Canadiens, who were uniquely powered by their stars during the regular season and remain in the postseason despite those stars' struggles. The fact Montreal has made it this far despite the top line of Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovský getting outscored 8-1 at five-on-five while carrying an expected goal share of 43 percent is borderline shocking. Kudos to the power play, and to Jake Evans, Alex Newhook and co., but if the Canadiens are to pull this off, something will have to change.

The X-factor

Will rest or rust be the bigger factor?

The Hurricanes and Canadiens could not be on more different paths to reach this point.

Carolina became the first team in NHL history to sweep two best-of-seven series to start the playoffs and the fifth team to start 8-0. The Hurricanes have had an unprecedented 12-day gap between games as a result. Montreal has played two grueling seven-game series already and will have had only two days off before Game 1. It's the classic "rest vs. rust" debate, and this is the most extreme example of it we've ever seen.

The question is, how much does it actually matter? Truthfully, we don't know — not at this level. This is going to be a live case study of the phenomenon at its extremes and there's reasons for both sides to believe it'll be their advantage.

The level of pace Carolina plays at can be a grind and it's been a factor in the team's demise in past playoff years,

when they ran out of gas. The time off here offers valuable rest that could help the Hurricanes maintain their uber-high level against Montreal. But it's also a pace Montreal has consistently played at for the past month, riding high on adrenaline through two close victories. That could give the Canadiens the edge early.

Statistically, there is a small edge against rust; teams coming off long breaks tend to perform worse than teams coming off one- or two-day breaks. But that's only measurable over the next game. It's hard to know what the effect actually is over a full series.

There have been a few instances of teams coming off a sweep playing against a team coming off a seven-gamer that could give us a clue, though. Since 2014 when the NHL went to the divisional format, there have been five such instances, and the teams that swept their previous series went 1-4.

That probably doesn't mean much — small sample, different teams, etc. — but it could signal more jump from Montreal than expected given the odds. The Canadiens will be in a rhythm right off the bat and the Hurricanes will have to match it quickly.

The rosters

In Round 1, the Suzuki line getting outplayed and outscored was a little more understandable against the likes of Brandon Hagel and Nikita Kucherov. But now it's been two rounds of underwhelming play on both ends of the ice.

One thing that's held this group back is that all three players are shooting the puck less often at five-on-five and from slightly further out. For Caufield, specifically, it's a change of about two fewer shots per 60, on average, from five feet back. In the second half of the series against the Sabres, though, his shot quality was on the rise, with more cycle chances and slot shots compared to the early goings. That's what Montreal needs to see more consistently, but creating space in the quality areas won't get any easier against Carolina.

If the Suzuki line gets a heavy dose of Aho's line, there's a lot of two-way talent to match up against. The Canes' second line is thriving off the rush and will have to be contained. Shift lower in the lineup, and there's even more shutdown talent. Staal and Martinook aren't tasked with the heavier matchups anymore, but can still be counted on to grind it out on both ends of the ice. Winning puck battles is Staal's bread and butter, especially in his own zone. With a crafty skater such as Ehlers on his line, there's an outlet to send those retrievals up the ice.

It's more than just offense coming in waves throughout the Hurricanes' top nine, though. It's three lines that can play the game any way, whether it's battling off the forecheck or generating chances in transition. Carolina's likely going to need to lean on both styles against a more up-tempo opponent here.

And the Canes are going to need more defensive excellence from the back end. Jaccob Slavin, unsurprisingly, comes in with a series-high plus-6.3 Defensive Rating. His game tends to be quietly effective: smart positioning, a disruptive stick, quick reactionary plays. That has helped fuel the first pair, which has only allowed 2.35 xGA/60 through two rounds and been on the ice for just two goals against.



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K'Andre Miller and Sean Walker are still cooking together. Their skating ability has helped drive the Canes' breakouts and rush game, for a 58.7 percent xG rate. Shayne Gostisbehere and Alex Nikishin have sparkling numbers on the third pair, too.

Those three skilled pairs have helped support one of the biggest storylines of the postseason for Carolina: Frederik Andersen's success in net. He leads all postseason goalies with 13 goals saved above expected and has given his team a chance to win with eight consecutive quality starts.

Across the way, Jakub Dobeš has stood tall for the Canadiens. He had a few hiccups in Round 2, but has been a real difference-maker most nights, with 10 quality starts in 14 games and a GSx of 10.1 that ranks second behind Andersen.

As well as Dobeš has played, there are still some questions in net for Montreal. Some surround this particular opponent, such as how well Dobeš will handle the Canes' unrelenting pressure, whether his aggressive style will burn Montreal, or if his puck-handling could break up the forecheck at all.

But maybe the biggest unknown is whether he can keep up this pace with such a demanding workload. Not only is Dobeš up to a career-high 57 games in a single-season, but playing a starter's rhythm without any rotation is unfamiliar territory. When it seemed like it could be weighing on him late in Round 2, he rebounded in Game 7. But if it proves to be an issue here, then he's going to need more help from Montreal's defense.

The problem is, not one of Montreal's pairs is above break-even through two rounds.

Lane Hutson's plus-14.5 Offensive Rating alone measures pretty closely to the Canes' entire starting six, and so far he's delivered with a plus-2.9 Offensive Rating, which is tied for the playoff lead. He has the game-breaking ability that can tilt a series, but the fatigue factor is also worth considering here with 1) his workload so far this postseason, and 2) the wear-and-tear that comes with playing Carolina.

Hutson spent most of Round 2 alongside Noah Dobson, whose puck retrievals and breakouts could be a major plus this series. But the coaches will have to decide if Dobson fits best with Hutson, on a pair that only has a 42 percent xG rate, or back with Mike Matheson. Matheson and Alex Carrier have only combined for a 41 percent xG, and the third pair of Arber Xhekaj and Kaiden Guhle haven't fared much better in limited minutes together, either. There should be a willingness to mix and match if necessary, as the coaches have done up front.

2026 Stanley Cup odds: Avalanche, Hurricanes favored over Golden Knights, Canadiens

By: Adam Gretz

The Colorado Avalanche and Carolina Hurricanes have been two of the best teams in the NHL since the start of the 2025-26 season, and now that we're through the first two rounds of the playoffs, they look to be on an inevitable path to meet in the Stanley Cup Final.

They enter the conference finals, which begin on Wednesday, as the top two Stanley Cup favorites among the four remaining teams.

Just take that new-look second line, which didn't play much together in the regular season. Ivan Demidov has some juice now with Evans and Newhook, and has looked more noticeable as the playoffs have rolled on. His dynamic puck-movement is starting to stand out again and so is his willingness to shoot the puck. That trio now has a 57.6 percent xG together and is up 6-1 in scoring.

Phillip Danault and Josh Anderson have each had clutch moments this postseason, too. So has the fourth line; no matter who has slotted in as the third skater, Kirby Dach and Zack Bolduc have added a much-needed spark down the lineup and outscored opponents 8-4. That depth is going to be all the more important here against Carolina, especially if the top line doesn't get on track.

The key matchup

Taylor Hall vs. Alex Newhook

Every team that makes it to the conference final usually has at least one unsung hero who helped get them there beyond the star-studded cores. In Carolina and Montreal, it's the unsung heroes that have been the stars so far.

Based on each player's Net Rating, Hall and Newhook have been the best forwards on their teams. That's something no one could've expected before the playoffs started but it showcases the importance of depth to get this far.

With Aho's line being a complete non-factor, Hall has turned back the clock to look like his prior MVP self. His Net Rating per 82 is plus-32. And while Suzuki is putting up numbers on the power play, it's Newhook who's actually stepping up with five-on-five dominance (57 percent xG, up 9-3) and clutch scoring.

That these two performances have been so unexpectedly good also means the clock will have to strike midnight at some point. Whoever stays hot longest might be the reason either team ends up playing for the Stanley Cup.

The bottom line

It's easy to call this one Carolina's series to lose. The Hurricanes are tested, rested and don't have the Florida Panthers standing in their way. Instead, it's an up-and-coming Canadiens team that has played a lot of hockey through two rounds.

But Montreal has defied the odds before and could have some more magic left in the tank. That's why they play the game, and if these games are as thrilling as Montreal's first two series, we're in for a treat.

Colorado is still the favorite at +135 (via FanDuel), while Carolina is just behind at +160.

The Avalanche will play the Vegas Golden Knights (+600) in the Western Conference final, while the Hurricanes will play the up-and-coming Montreal Canadiens (+700) following their thrilling Game 7 overtime win against the Buffalo Sabres on Monday night.

Alex Newhook scores the series-clinching goal in Game 7



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Colorado Avalanche vs. Vegas Golden Knights: Avs have dominated

Colorado is trying to become the first Presidents' Trophy winner to win the Stanley Cup since the 2012-13 Chicago Blackhawks, and there has been little in their play to make anybody believe they can't do it.

After cruising through the first round with a four-game sweep against the Los Angeles Kings, they beat the Minnesota Wild, the seventh-best team in the NHL standings during the regular season, in a surprisingly swift five games.

They are 8-1 through their first nine playoff games and dominating the same way they did all regular season.

Nathan MacKinnon has seven goals and 13 total points in only nine games to give them the superstar difference-maker, while 17 different players have scored at least one goal to show off their depth. That includes 10 different players with at least two goals. Their center depth of MacKinnon, Brock Nelson and Nazem Kadri is the most impressive trio still remaining in the playoffs.

Along with dramatically outscoring their opponents, the Avalanche also have a 56 percent expected goals share (via hockey analytics site Natural Stat Trick) during five-on-five play, indicating they are also pushing the pace of games and winning the territorial battle. They also led the NHL during the regular season with a 56.3 expected goals share.

Ten of the past 15 Stanley Cup winners have finished the regular season in the top six in expected goal share. Only two finished outside of the top 12. None was lower than 20th. Colorado, Carolina and Vegas were all in the top six this season. Montreal was 23rd.

That doesn't mean the Golden Knights aren't a formidable opponent. Vegas has found new life under interim head coach John Tortorella, while Mitch Marner is putting together a Conn Smythe-worthy performance and completely rewriting his postseason narrative. He enters the series as the leading scorer in the playoffs.

Carolina Hurricanes vs. Montreal Canadiens: Will rust be an issue?

While Colorado has been the most impressive and dominant team over the course of the regular season and playoffs, Carolina is putting together what has been, to this point, a rather historic run.

The Hurricanes are the first team to sweep the opening two rounds since the NHL went to a best-of-seven format in every round, and will have gone 11 days between games when the puck drops in their series on Thursday night. That ties the modern record for most games off between playoff games.

Will that work against them? Will rust be an issue? Or will the fact that they had two weeks off to get healthy in the middle of a playoff grind work to their advantage, especially against a Montreal team that has already played two seven-game series? Even though the Canadiens and Hurricanes are at the same point in the playoffs, Montreal has played six additional games. That will take its toll physically.

Since the NHL went to the playoff format that features four best-of-seven rounds, only one team has ever won the Stanley Cup after needing to win a Game 7 in the first two rounds (the 2014 Los Angeles Kings). That has to be a potential red flag for the Canadiens.

Montreal has had to grind its way through these playoffs so far and lacks the overall depth of the other three teams, but Jakub Dobeš has been the proverbial "hot goalie" in the playoffs. He enters the Eastern Conference final having saved 11.1 goals above expected (via MoneyPuck), trailing only the 11.2 from Carolina's Frederik Andersen.

Given the way the two goalies have played, and given Carolina's defensive structure and play, this could be an extremely low-scoring series. If it is, that could also play right into Carolina's hands.



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Eastern Conference Final Preview: Canes vs. Canadiens

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Taking a deeper look inside the series before it kicks off on Thursday

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes' road to the Stanley Cup continues with an Eastern Conference Final matchup against the Montreal Canadiens.

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

The Canes arrive at this year's matchup after clean sweeps of the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers in the first two rounds. Allowing two goals or fewer in every game, the victories have been a story of astute goaltending from Frederik Andersen, stellar production from Logan Stankoven's line, and a 95% performance on the penalty kill.

The Canadiens punched their ticket following a pair of seven-game series victories over the Tampa Bay Lightning and division-winning Buffalo Sabres, ousting the latter in overtime on Monday. Six of their eight wins have come on the road, including that decisive Game 7 against the Sabres.

The best-of-seven series will begin on Thursday at Lenovo Center.

Revisiting The 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.

The Habs were a tough out during the regular season, claiming all three contests despite Carolina holding a lead in each one. Sebastian Aho (6 pts), Andrei Svechnikov (5 pts) and Nikolaj Ehlers (4 pts) were bright spots in the three-game set, highlighted by Aho's second career five-point performance on Jan. 1.

Brandon Bussi got the nod in that back-and-forth battle before Frederik Andersen started the next two against Montreal.

On The Other Side...

Despite being one of the youngest teams in the NHL, the Canadiens established themselves among the league's elite with the sixth-best record in the regular season.

The playoffs could have been a different story, but neither the high-flying Tampa Bay Lightning nor the division-winning Buffalo Sabres were able to best the upstart Habs, whose young stars are learning on the fly amid the club's deepest playoff run since 2021.

The tip of the spear is 26-year-old team captain and Selke Trophy finalist Nick Suzuki, who leads his club's forward corps in scoring after recording his first career 100-point campaign during the 82-game slate. On the blue line, 2025 Calder Trophy winner Lane Hutson is already making his case to be considered one of the best offensive defensemen in hockey, pacing his team and all remaining rearguards in scoring during the playoffs.

It's also been a breakout playoff run for Alex Newhook, who tallied the game-winner in both of Montreal's Game 7 victories this postseason. Now in his third season with the Canadiens, the 2019 16th-overall selection leads his team with seven goals in the playoffs, while no other skater has more than four.

Montreal's young talent shines from there — between 50-goal scorer Cole Caufield, 2022 first-overall pick Juraj Slafkovsky and Calder Trophy finalist Ivan Demidov, the Habs are spoiled by a slew of budding stars, all aged 25 or younger.

And that's to say nothing of rookie goaltender Jakub Dobeš, who has become a hero in Montreal after a stellar first season between the pipes. The 24-year-old Czech went toe-to-toe with Andrei Vasilevskiy in the first round, and despite a handful of hiccups against the Sabres, seems to have a firm grasp on the starting role.

The Special Teams Story...

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

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

Carolina's Power Play Through Two Rounds of Playoffs: 5-for-37 (13.5%)

Carolina's Penalty Kill Through Two Rounds of Playoffs: 38-for-40 (95.0%)

After a "down year" by their standards, Carolina's penalty kill has been one of their calling cards thus far in the postseason. Allowing just two goals through two series, it was rough sledding for both Ottawa, who had a top ten



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power play all season long, and Philadelphia, who had a tough time on the man advantage all year long.

As for the other half of the equation, there's more to get from the Canes' power play. Two of their five goals thus far this postseason came during Game 3 in Philadelphia. The league's most successful man advantage since Dec. 1 (50 goals in 57 games) has had some trouble finding traction over the last month, but there's plenty of reason to believe they can find it once again.

Montreal's Power Play In The Regular Season: 23.1% (10th)

Montreal's Penalty Kill In The Regular Season: 78.2% (18th)

Montreal's Power Play Through Two Rounds of Playoffs: 13-for-52 (25.0%)

Montreal's Penalty Kill Through Two Rounds of Playoffs: 40-for-54 (74.1%)

The Canadiens' special teams have been a tale of two extremes this postseason.

On one hand, the power play's 13 goals are the most by any team in the playoffs. Forward Juraj Slafkovsky leads the Stanley Cup Playoffs with four power-play goals.

On the other hand, their penalty kill has allowed 14 power-play goals, the most by any team remaining in the playoffs. Among all 16 playoff teams, only the Wild (15) has conceded more.

As we know, special teams can make or break you this time of year, and it has the potential to go either way for Martin St. Louis' team.

In Net...

Carolina: Frederik Andersen, Brandon Bussi, and Pyotr Kochetkov

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

"Zilla" has been an absolute rock over eight games, giving up a total of just 10 goals. His .950 save percentage and 1.12 goals against average lead all backstops thus far in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Rod Brind'Amour continues to say that the team feels confident in Bussi if they have to turn to him at some point, but as Round 3 begins, the net is all Andersen's.

Montreal: Jakub Dobeš, Sam Montembault, and Jacob Fowler

Starting 42 of the team's regular-season games, Dobeš took the reins in net for the playoffs and has played every game.

There have been nights where the former Ohio State Buckeye has looked incredible, including a 37-save effort in Game 7 against the Sabres and five total postseason contests with 31 saves or more. But then, there have been outings where he's looked human, including four goals allowed on 16 shots against in Game 3 vs. Buffalo, allowing a pair in the first 10 minutes of a crucial Game 5, and being pulled in Game 6 after allowing six goals on 33 shots.

Should things go sideways, the group has both Sam Montembault and Jacob Fowler to turn to. Montembault has

three career playoff appearances (2024-25), while the 21-year-old Fowler is in his first full season as a pro.

Players To Watch...

Carolina: Taylor Hall

With 12 points in eight games to start the postseason, the 2018 Hart Trophy winner has caught the attention of the league once again.

Fitting like a glove alongside Logan Stankoven and Jackson Blake, the trio has been driving the bus for the team offensively through two rounds. The three have combined for 31 points in the minimum number of contests and produced two of the team's five power-play goals.

Don't mistake the recent success for a flash in the pan, either. Rod Brind'Amour has frequently called the line the team's best post-Olympics.

Montreal: Lane Hutson

The 22-year-old product of Boston University has become one of the most dynamic blueliners in all of the NHL in just his second full season in the league.

Producing 14 points in 14 playoff games so far, he leads Montreal in scoring, and among all defensemen, only Quinn Hughes (15) has produced more this postseason.

Playing an average of 26:01 per night, the Canes will get a healthy dose of the smooth-skating sensation and will have to try to keep his offensive talents in check.

How They See It...

Rod Brind'Amour on the postseason run so far...

"We're having a lot of success from a couple of guys right now. Some more guys would like to get hot and I think it's coming. I think they're doing a lot of good things to get their chances and to create. Bounces aren't playing too much in their favor, but I think we did a really good job of contributing all four lines into these eight games of wins. It's taking everybody and we're doing the little things right to keep this thing rolling."

Taylor Hall talking about his line...

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

Jackson Blake looking at the big picture and being 8-0 in the playoffs...

"Everyone's contributing, top to bottom. Freddie, I don't know if I've ever seen a goalie play so good and handle the puck so well and do what he's doing back there. We have so much trust in him and what he's going to bring every night. Our PK, too, has been off the charts. That builds so much momentum for us. Most teams have good power plays, like the teams we've played so far, and for them to do what they do is pretty special. Everyone's been so good and it's been so fun, like (Taylor Hall) said, coming to the rink every day."

Jacob Slavin on three conference finals appearances in four years...



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"You take it one step at a time and this is just another step in the process. We've got a good group in here who have all been there before now. Everyone knows what to expect and what is expected of us. 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."

Jacob Slavin describing what makes this group different...

"Familiarity with the way we have to play. We have just about everybody back from last year and a couple of new additions that just make us that much better. All those guys are stepping up and playing big minutes and big roles. I think what's different and maybe what's helping us is just the expectations of how we have to play. You're getting success from goaltending, PK, power play, five-on-five hockey. Everything is clicking right now."

Taylor Hall giving Frederik Andersen some love...

"He's so calm. You're almost just expecting it every night now and that's kind of unfair to him. He forces them to almost make the perfect shot or the perfect play to score."

He's a huge reason why our PK is where it is. Some people might not notice how he handles the puck. He's so calm back there. He makes the right play every time and that makes it a lot easier on our D."

Frederik Andersen answering what he believes has made him successful this postseason...

"Just being patient and building towards a good stance and good movement. (My) movement has been good and it's kind of been building my foundation that I feel like is giving me the best chance of being in the way of the puck."

Where To Watch Every Game...

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

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



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2006 Hurricanes like current team's Stanley Cup chances entering Eastern Final

By: Tracey Myers

Praise makeup of veteran group still vying for Carolina's 2nd championship

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Erik Cole sees the excitement around this city, especially when the former Carolina Hurricanes forward has gone to a Stanley Cup Playoff game at Lenovo Center.

"The atmosphere in the building and how loud the crowd gets, it brings back a lot of memories," said Cole, who played for the Hurricanes for nine seasons over two stints from 2001-11, won the Stanley Cup with them in 2006 and still lives in the area.

"I think it's just the best time of year around here because all the colleges (in the area), all of that's winding down. Whether you cheer for UNC (the University of North Carolina), North Carolina State or Duke, you're all Hurricanes fans."

That excitement is there as the Hurricanes, who won the only Stanley Cup championship in their history 20 years ago, are primed to add another. They'll resume that attempt when they face the Montreal Canadiens in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final here on Thursday (8 p.m. ET; HBO MAX, truTV, TNT, SN, TVAS, CBC).

The Hurricanes swept the Ottawa Senators in four games in the first round and then did the same to the Philadelphia Flyers in the second round. They last played on May 9. There will be more excitement if the Hurricanes can get past the conference final, which has been their Achilles' heel.

Dating to 2018-19, the Hurricanes have been eliminated in this round three times, including last season, when they were ousted by the eventual Cup champion Florida Panthers in five games.

But you know the saying: What doesn't kill me makes me stronger.

"There aren't many teams that can go through and not have disappointment on the way to championships," said Justin Williams, a former forward who won the Cup with the Hurricanes and is a special adviser to general manager Eric Tulsky. "You look at Florida. They made it to Cup Final, they lost (in 2023) and then they won two in a row (in 2024 and 2025). There's usually a lot of disappointment behind winners' faces. We have a lot of that in Carolina. We have winning playoff rounds and going home before we want to be.

"There are three other excellent teams that have earned the way to get here (the Canadiens, Colorado Avalanche and

Vegas Golden Knights), but I have to say, obviously I'm speaking very biased, I really do think this is the year for these guys. They've had a lot of time together and I expect this is the year."

NHL Now previews the upcoming series between Carolina and Montreal

For longtime Hurricanes TV analyst Tripp Tracy, this group has been physically tougher to play against but it also has gotten tougher mentally.

"I know they've had two sweeps, but the four games they've won on the road, they've had to kill off a 5-on-3 in every one of those road games," he said. "The fourth game against Ottawa, a very good Ottawa team in my opinion, when things got dicey, I think previous teams may have gone quietly into the afternoon and regrouped for Game 5. Not this team. That's a combination of good physical and mental toughness."

It's a combination the 2005-06 team had as well. Mark Recchi, a forward who was acquired by Carolina in a trade with the Pittsburgh Penguins on March 9, 2006, and had 16 points (seven goals, nine assists) in 25 playoff games to help the Hurricanes win the Cup that season, sees other similarities.

"On the D-core you could probably say, (Jacob) Slavin's a great shutdown defenseman but there's no superstar. We were similar in '06," Recchi said of a group that included Bret Hedican, Aaron Ward, Frantisek Kaberle and Mike Commodore. "If you looked at our D-core, we didn't have a superstar. We had just a bunch of great defensemen, really, really solid defensemen who understood what their roles were. It was easy to buy into it and they just did a terrific job.

"We just didn't have a superstar like most teams have nowadays, a superstar in front, a superstar on D. Everybody just did their job, did it very well and pulled it together and we win."

Former forward Matt Cullen, who played for the Hurricanes in 2005-06 and again from 2007-10, sees the two teams differently. This one has more players who have come up through the ranks to lead Carolina to several playoff runs, including forwards Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov as well as Jacob Slavin, who were drafted and developed by the organization.

Cullen also credits this Carolina team's identity, which has been built by coach and former forward Rod Brind'Amour, who was named captain of the Hurricanes prior to 2005-06.



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"The way Rod coaches them, the way they play, you see a team take on the persona of their coach, and I don't think I've never seen a team more like that," he said. "The hunger they play with, the relentless attitude they play with; it points to Rod and that's the sign of a good leader and a good coach. It's such a hard style of hockey, it's just relentless, in your face, and they have a lot of skill to go along with it. They're one of my more favorite teams to watch."

So now, these Hurricanes face the youthful Canadiens, with an average age of 25.8 years. They're coming off a riveting seven-game, second-round series against the Buffalo Sabres, whom they eliminated with a 3-2 overtime win on Monday. They're the youngest team to advance to a conference final since 1993, when the Canadiens won the Cup with the same average age.

Nevertheless, they have experience. Eric Staal, who played for Carolina from 2003-16, also went to the Cup Final with Montreal in 2020-21 with current Canadiens, including forwards Nick Suzuki, Josh Anderson, Phillip Danault and Cole Caufield.

"They've got experience, they've got guys who understand what it takes to make it to the Final, so (the Hurricanes) are going to have to be smart with how they play and level-headed with emotions, which I know both teams will do," said Staal, a former forward who is the older brother of current Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal.

"It's just going to be a competitive series. Carolina needs to play its style, be on the attack, be aggressive, be in their face, make life really, really difficult on the skill of Montreal and give themselves the best chance."

Avalanche, Hurricanes look to keep rolling in conference finals

By: Nicholas J. Cotsonika

Have gone combined 16-1 ahead of matchups with Golden Knights, Canadiens

Can the Colorado Avalanche or the Carolina Hurricanes be stopped or are they destined to meet in the Stanley Cup Final?

The top two teams in the regular season are 16-1 combined in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. That's the best record for two teams entering the conference finals in NHL history.

But now each powerhouse faces a compelling challenge -- the Avalanche against the Vegas Golden Knights in the Western Conference Final, the Hurricanes against the Montreal Canadiens in the Eastern Conference Final.

The Avalanche finished first in the NHL in the regular season and went 8-1 in the first two rounds of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, sweeping the Los Angeles Kings in the first round and defeating the Minnesota Wild 4-1 in the second. They're in the conference final for the first time since 2022, when they went on to win the Stanley Cup.

They have two of the best players in the world in center Nathan MacKinnon and defenseman Cale Makar, and they're deep. Seventeen players have scored a goal in the playoffs even though they have played only nine games.

The Golden Knights present a big test, starting in Game 1 at Ball Arena in Denver on Wednesday (8 p.m. ET; ESPN, SN, TVAS, CBC). They won the Cup in 2023, and they've won more games (70) and more series (14) in the playoffs than any other team since entering the NHL as an expansion team in 2017-18. That includes a six-game win against the Avalanche in the second round in 2021.

Vegas has gone 15-4-1 since John Tortorella took over for Bruce Cassidy as coach March 29 -- finishing the regular season 7-0-1, then defeating the Utah Mammoth in six games in the first round and the Anaheim Ducks in six in the second. This is the Golden Knights' fifth trip to the semifinal round in nine seasons.

Forward Mitch Marner leads the playoffs with 18 points (seven goals, 11 assists) in 12 games. Forward Pavel

Dorofeyev leads the playoffs with nine goals, and forward Brett Howden is second with eight.

"I think it'll be a good matchup," Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog said. "They're a good team. I think they've played obviously really well since 'Torts' came in, and they've got a lot of depth."

They've got their swagger back.

"I think we feel really good about ourselves," Tortorella said. "I think it's very important in playoffs. It's not just the X's and O's and all. It's how you feel and the confidence level you have. I think we're in a good spot."

How will the Golden Knights match up against the Avalanche in the Western Conference Final?

The Hurricanes finished first in the East in the regular season and went 8-0 in the first two rounds of the playoffs, sweeping the Ottawa Senators and the Philadelphia Flyers. They're in the conference final for the third time in four years and the fourth time since 2019, Rod Brind'Amour's first season as coach. This is their fifth trip since 2009.

Forward Taylor Hall leads Carolina with 12 points (three goals, nine assists) in eight games, giving him the same points per game (1.50) as Marner. Forward Jackson Blake is right behind with 11 points (four goals, seven assists), and forward Logan Stankoven has seven goals.

This seems like an important opportunity to seize to make the Cup Final for the first time since 2006, when the Hurricanes won the Cup with Brind'Amour as their captain. The two-time defending champion Florida Panthers -- who swept them in the conference final in 2023 and defeated them in five games in the conference final last year -- didn't make the playoffs mainly due to injuries. They're resting and rehabbing, hoping to make another run next season.

Carolina will have been waiting to play for almost 12 days by the time the puck drops for Game 1 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh on Thursday (8 p.m. ET; HBO MAX, truTV, TNT, SN, TVAS, CBC). Rust could be an issue, but rest is an advantage.

"Playoff hockey is hard," Hurricanes forward Jordan Martinook said. "It's hard on your body, and to play the



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minimum that we could is definitely a benefit for us. We've had, it feels like, a month to get healthy, and it felt like we came out of the Philly series actually pretty good, so I think everybody is just ready to go and champing at the bit to get going here."

How will the Canadiens match up against the Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final?

There is something special about the Canadiens, a team with an old, storied history and a young, exciting roster. They haven't lost consecutive games in the playoffs, always "bouncing forward," as coach Martin St. Louis likes to say, in seven-game wins against the Tampa Bay Lightning and Buffalo Sabres. They're back in the third round for the first time since 2021, when they made the Cup Final.

Defenseman Lane Hutson leads Montreal with 14 points (two goals, 12 assists) in 14 games, followed by captain Nick Suzuki, who has 13 points (four goals, nine assists). Forward Alex Newhook has seven goals, including two Game 7 winners, the last one in overtime in a 3-2 win at Buffalo on Monday.

"What we're going through right now, you can't buy that," St. Louis said. "It's amazing."

And it's only the halfway point of the playoffs.

Four teams left. Two rounds to go.



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NHL conference finals preview: Avalanche-Golden Knights, Hurricanes-Canadiens

By: Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton

From a starting point of 16 teams, the 2026 Stanley Cup playoff field is now down to four.

The Colorado Avalanche and Vegas Golden Knights match up in the Western Conference finals, while the Carolina Hurricanes and Montreal Canadiens face off in the Eastern Conference finals.

Which two teams will make it to the Stanley Cup Final? Ryan S. Clark (West) and Kristen Shilton (East) are here with intel on all four teams, including goaltender confidence ratings, what we've learned so far about each team, X factors and more.

Illustration by ESPN

Western Conference finals

Colorado Avalanche

How they got here: Defeated Kings 4-0, defeated Wild 4-1

Goalie confidence rating: 7.5/10

It has been a bizarre ride at times for Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood in terms of how they've performed this postseason. On the whole, the Avalanche have lost just once, and are sixth in team save percentage in 5-on-5 play. Wedgewood has a stellar .914 save percentage. But the abnormal nature of how the Avs have arrived at this point can be best viewed through what happened against the Minnesota Wild.

Wedgewood allowed six goals in Game 1 and recovered in Game 2 to stop 29 of the 31 shots he faced. Game 3 was different, as Wedgewood allowed three goals on nine shots before the switch was made to Blackwood in what ultimately became the Avs' first loss this postseason. Avs coach Jared Bednar started Blackwood in their Game 4 victory, before Blackwood opened Game 5 by giving up three goals on 13 shots. He was replaced by Wedgewood after the first period, and the Avs closed out the series.

The Avs will need to attain some consistency in net, as they are facing off against one of the top-three scoring teams for a consecutive series.

What we've learned about the Avalanche so far

Honestly, not a ton. If anything, there has been more confirmation bias about the Avalanche as they head into the Western Conference finals.

The expectation coming into the playoffs was that the Avs were the deepest team in the field. Depth has been at the center of their success, in that they've gotten crucial contributions from players throughout their lineup. Maybe the best example of that depth came in the series against the

Wild, when four different players -- Nazem Kadri, Nicolas Roy, Parker Kelly and Brett Kulak -- scored game-winning goals. Note that Kadri, Roy and Kulak were three of the players that Avs general manager Chris MacFarland acquired ahead of the trade deadline this season.

X factor for the conference finals

Finding a breakthrough against the Golden Knights' penalty kill. That could be among the keys to whether the Avs advance to the Stanley Cup Final -- or if their season comes to an earlier end than they would prefer. Kadri's return brought a change in what the Avs did on the extra-skater advantage. That was evident in their series against the Wild in which they finished with a 38.5% success rate. No team has been better on the power play since May 3, when the Avs began their second-round series.

However, the Golden Knights have the best penalty kill that the Avs' power play will have seen to this point in the postseason. The Avs' first-round opponents -- the Los Angeles Kings -- were 30th on the PK in the regular season, though they were third this postseason with a 90.9% success rate despite being swept. The Wild were 16th in the regular season and ended their playoff run with the second-worst PK in the postseason at the time of their departure. That's all a bit of a contrast compared to the Golden Knights, who were seventh in the regular season and are fifth in the postseason.

Can the defensive success the Avs had against Kirill Kaprizov be replicated against Mitch Marner?

A major talking point coming out of the last round series was how a four-time 40-goal scorer in Kaprizov was virtually silenced over the final two games. He recorded a single shot in Games 4 and 5 combined after opening the series with five points through the first three contests. Kaprizov still finished the postseason ranked second in points at the time that the Wild were eliminated.

Now Colorado's collective focus turns to Marner, who is the postseason scoring leader with 18 points. There have been three games this postseason in which Marner has gone without a point. The Anaheim Ducks kept him pointless in two games, with the most recent being Game 5. But the Golden Knights still won Game 5 before eliminating the Ducks in six. Marner had two points in Game 6 for his five, multipoint games this postseason. Those five games have come over his past seven contests this postseason. -- Clark

Vegas Golden Knights

How they got here: Defeated Mammoth 4-2, defeated Ducks 4-2

Goalie confidence rating: 8/10



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This regular season, only the Hurricanes were better than the Golden Knights in allowing the fewest shots per game. Vegas was top three in 5-on-5 shots allowed, and top 10 in fewest scoring chances allowed and high-danger chances allowed at 5-on-5. The Knights also had a top-10 penalty kill. All this led to the idea that the Golden Knights were one of the best defensive teams in the NHL. And they were doing it without Alex Pietrangolo.

All that made the disconnect between their defensive structure and goaltending such a maddening experience. They finished the regular season with the second-lowest 5-on-5 team save percentage. That inability to bridge the disconnect between their defensive structure and goaltending played a role in why they fired Bruce Cassidy in late March and hired John Tortorella, who previously coached Golden Knights goalie Carter Hart with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Hart's performances under Tortorella in the regular season created the belief that the Golden Knights have found the answer in the crease. Hart's performance through two rounds is proof that those methods are working. He entered the conference finals with the second-best save percentage and the sixth-best goals-against average among those with at least eight games played this postseason.

What we've learned about the Golden Knights so far

Scoring the most goals through May 16 along while possessing a top-five power play suggests that the Golden Knights need to control the puck. The thing is? They don't. Beating the Ducks in the second round showed that the Golden Knights don't need a massive amount of possession to generate scoring chances that they can convert to goals.

Natural Stat Trick's data showed the Golden Knights' collective shot-share for the six-game series was 43.7% in 5-on-5 play. Knowing they can get goals without needing more than 50% possession could be useful against the Avs. There were moments when the Avs' shot-share exceeded more than 55% against the Wild and was even into the 80% range at times. Having the ability to sustain pressure and consistently limit chances on one end all while knowing they can get goals without needing significant chunks of possession on the other end? This is what could make the Golden Knights the most unique challenge the Avs have faced to this point.

X factor for the conference finals

For all the understandable conversations about the superstars like Jack Eichel, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Marnier in this series, there's another discussion about the influence the bottom six could carry for both teams. Colorado has seen its bottom-six forward corps contribute in several ways. But how does Vegas' bottom six compare?

It turns out there are some similarities. In their most recent games, the Golden Knights went with a third line that featured Tomas Hertl, Brandon Saad and Colton Sissons. It's a group that has accounted for 12 points this postseason. Their fourth line of Nic Dowd, Keegan Kolesar and Cole Smith has six points. Those combined 18 points are the same as the bottom-six forward group that the Avs used to close out Game 5 against the Wild.

Perhaps the big difference -- and possible X factor to monitor -- is that the Avs have 18 different goal scorers this postseason, while the Golden Knights have 12.

Can the Golden Knights continue to be dangerous in every game scenario?

Think about how Vegas' playoff run has gone to this point. The Knights trailed multiple times in the first round against the Utah Mammoth, only to take the series in six games. They've found comfort in playing without the puck and are undefeated in three overtime games this postseason.

There's also the manner in which they've won those games. They've scored more than four goals in six of their eight wins entering the conference finals. They have top-five power-play and penalty-kill units. Couple that with the fact that Pavel Dorofeyev, Brett Howden and Marnier are in the top four in goals, while Eichel and Marnier are 1-2 in points. The Golden Knights will create problems for the Avalanche in ways that others have not. -- Clark

Eastern Conference finals

Carolina Hurricanes

How they got here: Defeated Senators 4-0, defeated Flyers 4-0

Goalie confidence rating: 10/10

Frederik Andersen's postseason performance epitomizes the phrase "no notes." What else is there to say about the playoffs' indisputable top goalie? He's a perfect 8-0, with a .950 save percentage and 1.12 goals-against average -- with multiple goals allowed (and by "multiple" that's a high of two) in only four of his eight starts.

There's no doubt the Hurricanes' suffocating defense has helped Andersen emerge as a Conn Smythe front-runner -- Carolina is giving up just 25 shots per game -- but for the most part, it's all Andersen. The 36-year-old is showing up like never before in his career and has answered critics who questioned whether he could stay healthy long enough to be the Hurricanes' go-to guy in the postseason and whether he was the right choice over first-year phenom Brandon Bussi, who usurped Andersen as the Hurricanes' starter through a significant portion of the regular season.

This is the time of year that truly matters, and Andersen has turned back the clock to be a formidable presence in the Hurricanes' crease.

What we've learned about the Hurricanes so far

It feels almost like we barely know Carolina. It has churned through opponents so swiftly that we are just itching to see the group back in action (for potentially more than just four games at a time).

The Hurricanes have been moderately dramatic, in the sense they've needed overtime to secure three of their eight victories to date, but by and large they just go about business with efficiency. It hasn't only been Andersen throwing off Father Time -- there's also 34-year-old Taylor Hall playing like the guy who won a Hart Trophy in 2018. He leads the Canes with three goals and 12 points (10 of which came 5-on-5), and the renaissance suggests Hall knows this is his best chance at securing a championship.



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Right behind Hall in terms of production is Logan Stankoven, with his seven goals in eight games. Carolina might rank eighth overall in playoff scoring, but it gets timely, balanced offense from the likes of Hall, Stankoven, Nikolaj Ehlers, Jackson Blake and others, and are generating the most shots on net (34 per game) in the postseason field. The Hurricanes have a stellar penalty kill (95%) to boot and it all just works, somehow.

Whether they fall behind and have to recover, or are in control from the start, the Canes know how to reset, regroup and recapture a lead when necessary.

X factor for the conference finals

The Hurricanes' results until now speak for themselves, but it's time for the top line to do some talking. Carolina's top unit of Andrei Svechnikov, Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis has yet to manufacture more than one 5-on-5 goal together through the first two rounds, minimizing the impact of what should be a dominating unit.

It's true the Aho line has been tackling all the toughest matchups Carolina has seen, but its lone goal -- in double overtime against Ottawa during Game 2 of its first-round series -- truly feels like a season ago. In the meantime, Svechnikov kicked in one power-play marker, Jarvis scored once while skating on a different line, and Aho has three total goals from two empty-net strikes and another produced seconds after a penalty ended. Again, that's not all to say their line as a whole hasn't done well in neutralizing Tim Stutzle and Trevor Zegras (among others) en route to this point, but Carolina would be more confident seeing them stand out at both ends of the ice.

There could be an element of (bad) luck too, given that Svechnikov/Aho/Jarvis combined have a 31-30 advantage in shots when on the ice (not to mention they're up 85-70 in shot attempts). The creation of chances is there and that's good. What could come to help define Carolina's success this round is whether it can finally get some of those pucks to find mesh.

Is rest truly an advantage?

Well, Carolina didn't look too off balance going from four games against the Senators right into jettisoning the Flyers in four games. No, the real question is whether either of those clubs have truly challenged Carolina enough to prepare them for the battle-tested team entering its building.

The Hurricanes haven't exactly cruised their way to the conference finals -- those overtime outings are proof that they can dig deep when needed. It's a lack of adversity, perhaps, that the Hurricanes are up against. How will Carolina manage a second long layoff when they line up across from a Montreal squad that has pounded its way through practically twice as many games and earned its lumps in the process? Whether the Hurricanes can handle the sort of emotional pushback that's coming will be telling.

It's one thing for outsiders to discuss what they've learned about a team; it's another to determine what a team has learned about itself, especially when under duress. The Hurricanes will need to show quickly they aren't affected by a relatively easy ride into this conference finals. If they don't ramp up the intensity from the hop, a hungrier group across

from them could put them on the ropes for the first time this spring. -- Shilton

Montreal Canadiens

How they got here: Defeated Lightning 4-3, defeated Sabres 4-3

Goalie confidence rating: 9/10

Jakub Dobes was Montreal's workhorse all season for a reason -- and he has shone brighter in the playoffs.

The rookie has handled every start of the Canadiens' run so far, getting the hook only once from an uncharacteristically poor performance in Game 6 against Buffalo (when he allowed six goals on 33 shots). That's the only time Jacob Fowler has had a sniff of action; barring another unforeseen circumstance, don't expect Dobes to give up the crease anytime soon.

His 8-6 record in the postseason doesn't truly reflect Dobes' impact on Montreal -- it's the .910 save percentage, 2.52 goals-against average and lack of consecutive losses setting him apart. There's a swagger to Dobes that has frankly folded its way through the entire Canadiens lineup. He thrives under pressure and performs his best in a series' toughest pinnacles (like, say, back-to-back Game 7s, in which he recorded 65 saves on 68 shots).

Dobes' rookie status has hardly been an issue. The way he has shouldered the spotlight against more veteran-laden teams in Tampa Bay and Buffalo is impressive. And while his personal mantra (as indicated by the writing on his water bottle) is to "stay humble," he deserves to be celebrated for a spring showing to remember.

What we've learned about the Canadiens so far

Montreal's postseason identity is rooted in adaptability, resiliency and a seemingly unbreakable sense of self. The Canadiens do an excellent job reacting to adversity in-game (their response goals against Buffalo were particularly telling of that skill) and the club has yet to record back-to-back losses in these playoffs, because it can assess what went wrong and fix it fast.

The Habs wouldn't be where they are without role players, either. Alex Newhook has introduced himself to the league at large, with seven goals and nine points in 14 games (including consecutive Game 7 game winners), Juraj Slafkovsky (four goals and nine points) looks like a star on the rise, and Jake Evans, Alexandre Texier and Zack Bolduc have each carved out their own niches. That's not to say the Canadiens' elite stars didn't start to show up in a big way by the second round -- Nick Suzuki has 13 points and Cole Caufield has collected nine -- but Montreal's success isn't tied to what those elite top-line skaters can do.

The Canadiens benefit from a strong power play (25%), and defensively they've done well limiting opponents' opportunities (with just 28 shots per game allowed). It's the bounce-back in Montreal that's an intangible superpower, though. Consider how its penalty kill faltered in that 8-3 drubbing by Buffalo in Game 6 (giving up four power-play goals). The Canadiens didn't let it rattle them. They studied the tape and then stifled the Sabres' single-man-advantage chance in Game 7 (while capitalizing on their own). That



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single goal was essentially the difference between advancing or not in an eventual 3-2 OT victory.

X factor for the conference finals

In an NHL era that seemingly prioritizes coaching turnover versus longevity, it's interesting that both Eastern Conference finals squads are guided by a bench boss with actual long-term tenure. Martin St. Louis is in his fourth full season with Montreal but making just his second postseason appearance. Rod Brind'Amour is eight years deep with the Hurricanes, without a Cup Final berth to show for it.

Carolina has been outcoached at this stage before -- twice by Paul Maurice with the Florida Panthers -- but now it's Brind'Amour who knows the ropes much better than St. Louis. Will that be an issue Montreal can't overcome?

There is nuance on the coaching side just like for players; St. Louis has had the right beat on the Canadiens until now, but Carolina is by far his team's most formidable foe in this journey. The two teams have similar strengths and weaknesses, but things such as special teams, for instance, tend to balance themselves out the deeper a playoff run goes (here the Hurricanes have a marked shorthanded edge to the Canadiens' upper hand on the power play). Brind'Amour has had more time to study what Montreal brings to the table. It'll be on St. Louis to get himself up to speed in a hurry so he's not out of his element on the other side.

How will the Canadiens' youth (and inexperience) impact this series?

Montreal is the youngest team -- with an average age of 25.8 -- advancing to a conference final/Stanley Cup semifinal series in 33 years. What sort of effect will that have on what's next in Carolina?

The majority of the Canadiens' roster had its first postseason experience via a swift first-round series against the Washington Capitals last year. Now, the Canadiens have more than doubled that experience as verifiable underdogs, punching above their weight class.

Meanwhile, the Hurricanes are making their third Eastern Conference finals appearance under Brind'Amour, with the same core that has reached this juncture twice in the past four seasons. Does that automatically give the veteran-heavy Canes a clear advantage over the exceedingly green Canadiens? It's fair to wonder.

Carolina can match Montreal's depth, goaltending and star-level talent. But there is no substitute for learning on the job, and the Hurricanes have taken their lumps while failing to get over the proverbial hump to a Stanley Cup Final. The Canadiens have an indefinable swagger and shouldn't feel intimidated despite their youth. Montreal's true proving ground though will come on the ice against a Carolina crew that likely believes this is its best chance to reach that elusive championship promised land. -- Shilton

LINKS

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SportScan

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



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1391756 Carolina Hurricanes

What NC State grad, astronaut Christina Koch said about the Carolina Hurricanes

Jadyn Watson-Fisher 5-6 minutes 19/05/2026

Artemis II astronaut Christina Koch was a student at N.C. State when the Carolina Hurricanes moved to Raleigh in 1999. She attended her first NHL games at the now-Lenovo Center.

Talk about whiplash when she attended Game 4 of the Canes-Philadelphia Flyers postseason series last weekend, at the franchise's invitation, dressed in Flyers gear. It was a somewhat last-minute trip, she told *The News & Observer* on Monday. Koch did an interview in California for the Oprah Winfrey podcast and flew to Philadelphia for the matchup before returning to Houston.

It was one of the few non-work opportunities she had between media responsibilities, speaking engagements and typical post-mission debriefs at Johnson Space Center.

"I feel like I have a connection to that team," Koch said of the Flyers. "But it definitely was a struggle being at that Canes game, because, obviously, I'm from North Carolina, I did spend my time in Raleigh, and I've seen the Canes in person."

Koch's connection doesn't mean she's necessarily switching her support, though. In fact, she might be the most neutral sports fan out there, despite the light trash talking.

The 47-year-old admires the teamwork, athletic excellence and the need for players to "bring their best." Koch said she can see that when watching any game. Plus, she loves a good David-and-Goliath-type story.

"The Canes just aren't the underdog right now," Koch said. "They are sweeping everywhere they go, so the underdog lover in me is really struggling with what to do."

The astronaut converted into a Philadelphia fan largely when she worked on the International Space Station several years ago. NASA uplinked Eagles games on the weekend or one small device had limited internet access. She watched NFL Ticket or looked for highlights as time allowed.

Watching games connected with her husband, a longtime Eagles and Flyers supporter. She didn't get to watch anything during the most-recent mission, due to the distance and more operational nature of the trip.

Koch went on to explain she believes people select teams based on what matters to them, and what they take pride in. That can be a love for family history, where someone is from, or any other trait they value.

"I just try to be true to that," Koch said. "And, everyone knows I love North Carolina. Obviously, it formed who I am. All my family's there. It's home."

N.C. State alumna and NASA astronaut Christina Koch sent Carolina Hurricanes and Philadelphia Flyers gear to her nieces and nephews. Koch attended Game 4 of the Canes-Flyers playoff series in Philadelphia on May 9, 2026.

N.C. State alumna and NASA astronaut Christina Koch sent Carolina Hurricanes and Philadelphia Flyers gear to her nieces and nephews. Koch attended Game 4 of the Canes-Flyers playoff series in Philadelphia on May 9, 2026. Courtesy Christina Koch

What does her family think of her Flyers fandom?

The Flyers lost the game she attended, eliminating them from playoff contention. That became a rivalry among her family, with siblings, nieces and nephews taking sides and engaging in banter. It's a split situation, she said.

Koch even sent Canes and Flyers jerseys to her relatives. Some embraced Gritty and others remained true to Stormy. She'll have to see how things go this weekend, when the Canes begin the Eastern Conference Finals.

"It is true that my family will be paying attention to the Canes," Koch said. "I have no doubt that we'll be keeping up with how it's going."

Koch makes first trip back to NC

The first trip Koch booked when the Artemis II crew made it safely back from space was to North Carolina. She's finally making the trek this weekend, and it'll be the first time she sees her parents, siblings and their children in person since the mission's completion.

She's excited. The crew has interacted with a lot of families and children since its return, but hers is last to get checked off the list.

"It has felt really hard to have spent so much time [away]," Koch said. "I've obviously talked to them and video chatted with them, but I cannot wait to hug them. That'll be my final completion of coming back to Earth."

Will Christina Koch attend NC State games?

The Wolfpack alumna would love to attend a football or basketball game, she said, if the university extends an invitation. (The Flyers invited her.)

"I'm waiting. I am ready. I love N.C. State, so bring it on," Koch said. "I have been contacted by N.C. State. They've been very gracious, and I really just can't wait to see the best way that I can maybe be involved in inspiring students and showing all the great things that you can do with STEM education all throughout North Carolina."

N.C. State football hosts an "Alpha Wolf" — from famous alumni to popular people on campus — before every home game to rile up Carter-Finley Stadium. Former players, of any sport, and high-profile figures have sat courtside at men's and women's basketball games.

Who better than the Wolfpack's lone astronaut? It's time someone gets Athletic Director Boo Corrigan on the phone.

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1391757 Carolina Hurricanes

After wait, Hurricanes get Canadiens in conference final

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



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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. Jaccob 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.

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

North State Journal LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391758 Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes have fallen short of the Cup Final before. Why it's finally their year

James Mirtle8-10 minutes 19/05/2026

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 general manager Eric Tulsky, 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



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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," Tulsy 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," Tulsy 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.

Tulsy 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 Tulsy's first year as GM; Blake was a fourth-round pick in 2021 when Tulsy was an assistant GM.

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

"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.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391826 Websites

The Athletic / NHL teams wait for Vegas' permission to talk to Bruce Cassidy: 'Our focus currently is on the Stanley Cup playoffs'

By Mark Lazerus

May 19, 2026 Updated 9:05 pm EDT

DENVER — The Vegas Golden Knights let Bruce Cassidy go. But they're apparently not ready to let him go somewhere else.



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Vegas fired Cassidy in March, with eight games remaining in the regular season. They replaced him with John Tortorella, who has taken the Golden Knights to the Western Conference final, where they'll face the Colorado Avalanche starting Wednesday night. Cassidy won the Stanley Cup in Vegas in 2023 and won the Jack Adams Award as the league's best coach in 2020, when he was behind the Boston Bruins' bench. Unsurprisingly, after being let go by Vegas, he promptly became a leading candidate for current job openings in Edmonton, Los Angeles, Toronto and now Vancouver.

But Vegas has not granted those teams permission to speak to Cassidy, who is still under contract with — and therefore still being paid by — the Golden Knights for another year, league sources told The Athletic this week. Such permission is typically a mere formality in these situations, as teams are eager to rid themselves of the financial obligation. But the Oilers, Kings and Canucks are division rivals, and Vegas appears to be in no hurry to help them.

During a pre-series news conference on Tuesday, Vegas general manager Kelly McCrimmon said, "We've been consistent that our focus currently is on the Stanley Cup playoffs and the teams have respected that. I have spoken with Bruce; he understands that, as well."

The NHL Coaches' Association released a statement on Tuesday in an apparent attempt to apply pressure to Vegas, saying it's been "closely monitoring the situation."

"While we respect the league's rules and processes, it is our position that coaches who remain under contract, but are no longer working for their club, should not be prevented from pursuing other employment opportunities," the statement said. "It would be unprecedented at the head-coaching level should multiple teams be denied permission to speak with Coach Cassidy. The situation is still unfolding, but our priority is to protect the interests of our members in this type of circumstance."

This is the second high-profile off-ice controversy for the Golden Knights as they prepare for the Avalanche. The team was docked a 2026 second-round draft pick and Tortorella was fined \$100,000 for "flagrant violations" of the league's media regulations after Vegas' series-clinching victory over Anaheim in the second round on May 14. The league cited "previous warnings" issued to the team regarding their failure to comply with media regulations and "other associated policies."

McCrimmon also addressed that situation on Tuesday, hours after the NHL upheld the punishment after an appeal, and said in part, "We were wrong. It will not happen again."

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1391827 Websites

The Athletic / Henrik Lundqvist: These are the 3 best leaders I played with in the NHL

By Henrik Lundqvist

May 19, 2026 6:00 am EDT

Henrik Lundqvist played 15 years in the NHL for the New York Rangers. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2023. He is now a hockey analyst for TNT.

These are the three best leaders he played with during his career.

Jaromír Jágr, New York Rangers forward

It was after the lockout in 2005. There were a lot of new guys coming in, and nobody really knew how we were going to do.

Jágr was obviously the star, and for me, it was the way he embraced the role of being the guy. He handled everything and took on a lot of the pressure; he didn't shy away from it.

I looked up to him because of the way he handled it, and I think he gave the group a lot of confidence because of the way he handled it. He was not the most vocal guy, but you could see that he put that pressure on himself to carry the team.

I always remember one game. We were playing in Pittsburgh, and every time we played there, they always booed him because he left. As soon as he touched the puck, they were on him.

One time, he had to leave the ice in the middle of the game and head back to the locker room. You could feel the energy of our team go down. Then he came into the game and scored a hat trick.

It was just one of those moments where I was like, "Yeah, this guy is special."

At that point, he was 33, so he was extremely established, and he was the big star of the league. But his commitment to the game really stood out.

He did everything he believed was going to help him and the team win games. Sometimes it was unique. He really pushed the boundaries of training and the way he approached the game. That showed a lot of strength and confidence in himself and belief. Stuff like that matters.

As a young player, it made me think about the importance of having great leaders in the room.

Mats Sundin, captain of the Swedish national team

We had a lot of stars on the 2006 Swedish team, including Daniel Alfredsson, Nicklas Lidström, Henrik Zetterberg and Peter Forsberg.

But with Mats, there was just something about his energy. When he walked into a room, I could feel it. When he spoke, everybody listened. There was just so much respect for him.

He was the ultimate leader. It always just felt like he knew when to speak and what to say, and that definitely helps in pressure situations.

We won the Olympic gold medal in 2006, and for Team Sweden, the tradition when you win is for the team to go back and celebrate with the fans. Either the NHL or the Swedish Federation said we wouldn't have time to do that. We had to fly back to the States because the NHL started in a few days.

And Mats just said, "We'll charter our own plane then. We're going to Stockholm to celebrate with our fans."

I don't know who he convinced, but we did fly back, and it was a memory none of us will ever forget.

It was like: That's our captain right there.

Martin St. Louis, New York Rangers forward

At that point in my career, I was way more experienced and had more of a leadership role.

That was a time as a team and an organization when we felt we had this window to win. We had a really good team, and so we traded for Marty in 2014.

There was humility with Marty, but there was also a lot of fire. You could see it in his eyes. I loved that passion that he had. He was very vocal in the room, and he was a great speaker.

Any great leader has to know people. They have to read people.



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The way he spoke in the locker room just brought a lot of confidence to the group. That run to the Stanley Cup Finals in 2014 was very special. He lost his mom in the series against Pittsburgh. Then he came back and scored on Mother's Day.

There was so much happening during that run, and I felt like the way he approached the team and the way he tried to win was something that I really appreciated as a teammate.

There were a lot of times when he spoke in the locker room before or after games when we weren't in the right place mentally. He just said the right things — he was comforting, supportive and positive.

I'm not surprised that he's doing well as the head coach in Montreal. Not one bit.

— As told to Jayson Jenks

The Athletic LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391828 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Mock Draft 2026: Predicting all 63 picks of the first 2 rounds

By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler

May 19, 2026 5:00 am EDT

Each year, The Athletic's prospects writers Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler put together their own mocks predicting the draft.

Once a year, though, they also come together to make picks for the first two rounds to give the exercise more of the unpredictability that comes over draft weekend. This year, after a coin flip, Wheeler started the mock with the No. 1 pick, and then he and Pronman made their way through the first 63 selections of the 2026 NHL Draft.

Remember: These are not how they would pick (that's a different exercise coming soon) but rather their educated best guesses based on their understanding of team preferences, areas of need and the consensus around where these players will be selected.

Note: The Vegas Golden Knights were stripped of their second-round pick (originally No. 61) as a result of "flagrant violations" of the NHL's media regulations; they can appeal that decision to the league office. This mock draft was also completed before the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs was completed. As a result, the draft order at the ends of Rounds 1 and 2 has changed slightly since these picks were made.

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

I don't think it's a foregone conclusion that McKenna is the pick for the Leafs; there is some doubt out there about him, and there's a case to be made to prioritize a longtime organizational need on D. But there's risk in chasing a premium position at the expense of a premium talent, and I still expect that the Leafs will land on McKenna in the end. — Wheeler

Gavin McKenna is the likely No. 1 pick in the NHL Draft, but the Maple Leafs have options to explore.

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

The Sharks get a foundational defense piece they've needed throughout their rebuild, as Reid projects to run a power play and log a lot of minutes in the NHL. Ivar Stenberg is tempting here, but the stars feel like they

would align too well for the Sharks and Reid, given how close the two players are in talent. — Pronman

San Jose will pick in the top two for the third straight year, a run that hasn't happened in 14 years.

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

The Canucks add the top center in the draft, filling a premium position with a winning player with local ties. Malhotra checks a lot of boxes. He's a player you build around and could be Vancouver's future captain. — Wheeler

The No. 3 pick was statistically the Canucks' most likely draft slot, and it's by no means a consolation prize.

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

Chicago adds the most dynamic player left on the board in Stenberg, a potential top-line winger with a high compete level, even if it makes its core forward group a bit on the smaller side. — Pronman

The 2026 draft could go in a few different directions before the Blackhawks are on the clock at No. 4 on June 26.

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

In Carels, the Rangers get a high-end skater and competitor who fits their profile and gives them the stud left-shot D their pool lacks. — Wheeler

Could the Rangers trade up into the top four? Which top-end defensemen could be on their radar? Our beat writer digs into the big questions.

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

The Flames get a premier two-way defenseman in Verhoeff, a 6-foot-4, mobile blueliner with legit offense and stopping potential at the next level. — Pronman

7. Seattle Kraken: Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Prince Albert (WHL)

A strong season — and a stronger finish — has put Rudolph into this conversation. After years of taking exclusively forwards with their top picks, the Kraken finally take a premium D. — Wheeler

8. Winnipeg Jets: Alberts Smits, LHD, Munich (DEL)

The Jets are thrilled to get a defenseman like Smits at 8, a blueliner who can affect the game at both ends with size, skating, puck play and a big point shot. — Pronman

Though the Jets slipped one spot after the draft lottery, there are still a number of promising prospects in play.

9. Florida Panthers: Viggo Björck, C, Djurgården (SHL)

Centers never linger long, and the Panthers know the value of a smart and competitive one. Tynan Lawrence makes sense here for the same reason, but Björck wins out on pro experience, proximity to making their veteran club and IQ/skill. — Wheeler

10. Nashville Predators: Malte Gustafsson, LHD, HV71 (SHL)

The Predators grab a massive, mobile blueliner in Gustafsson, who was arguably the best defenseman at U18 worlds. He's comparable as a player to former Preds defenseman Mattias Ekholm. — Pronman

11. St. Louis Blues: Tynan Lawrence, C, Boston University (NCAA)

The Blues have dedicated a lot of draft capital to the wing and defense in recent years. They'll be thrilled to add one of the top centers in the class if there's one available here. — Wheeler

12. New Jersey Devils: Wyatt Cullen, LW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)



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The Devils step up to take one of the most dynamic and talented players in the draft in Cullen, who has the potential to become a top-six winger if his development continues to trend as it has over the last six months. — Pronman

13. New York Islanders: Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor (OHL)

The Islanders don't have a player like Belchetz in their pool, and that makes him and BC's Oscar Hemming attractive here. Belchetz's track record gives him the slight edge. — Wheeler

14. Columbus Blue Jackets: Oliver Suvanto, C, Tappara (Liiga)

Columbus drafts a highly competitive two-way center in Suvanto, who projects to have middle-six offense in the NHL. — Pronman

15. St. Louis Blues: Alexander Command, C, Örebro

The Blues double down on centers and add Command, a strong, pro-look center who projects as a middle-six pivot. — Wheeler

16. Washington Capitals: JP Hurlbert, RW, Kamloops (WHL)

The Capitals get a little screwed by a run of centers and opt for the dynamic Hurlbert, who is one of the most skilled and natural scorers in this class, albeit as an average-sized winger. — Pronman

17. Los Angeles Kings: Oscar Hemming, LW, Boston College (NCAA)

The Kings need a legit forward prospect, and they're thrilled to pounce on Hemming, a big, powerful forward with some unique attributes in this class. — Wheeler

18. Washington Capitals: Maddox Dagenais, C, Quebec (QMJHL)

Dagenais is a big, physical forward with good but not great offensive skills whose stock kept rising all season. He has middle-six potential, even if it's not a sure thing that he will stay down the middle as a pro. — Pronman

19. Utah Mammoth: Ryan Lin, RHD, Vancouver (WHL)

The Mammoth have prioritized length on their back end, and their pool is missing a prospect like Lin as a result. He gives them something different while still offering the competitiveness they look for. — Wheeler

20. San Jose Sharks: Adam Goljer, RHD, Trencin

The Sharks leave the draft with two potential top-four defensemen in Reid and Goljer. Goljer was excellent at the recent U18s, with strong skating and puck-moving ability while being able to make stops. — Pronman

21. Philadelphia Flyers: Adam Novotny, LW, Peterborough (OHL)

Novotny has NHL strength, speed and work ethic to go with an NHL shot, and fits the Flyers' profile. He projects as a middle-six winger who can play up and down your lineup. — Wheeler

22. Pittsburgh Penguins: Ilija Morozov, C, Miami (NCAA)

The Penguins get a versatile two-way center with size in Morozov, who had a productive 17-year-old season in the NCHC while also displaying a detailed, physical game off the puck. — Pronman

23. Boston Bruins: Elton Hermansson, RW, MoDo

The Bruins had success drafting a talented winger out of HockeyAllsvenskan in the late first round once before. We won't set those kinds of expectations for the highly skilled Hermansson, but the Bruins are willing to try to go two-for-two. His 21 points in 38 games isn't far off from the 24 points in 36 games that a certain someone produced in 2013-14, either! — Wheeler

24. Vancouver Canucks: Casey Mutryn, RW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

The Canucks pick up a versatile forward in Mutryn, who has size and speed and can play on both special teams. Between him and Malhotra, they just got a lot harder to play against. — Pronman

25. Montreal Canadiens: Ryder Cali, C, North Bay (OHL)

The Habs add size, strength and a north-south pro-style player in Cali, a driven and brawny forward who gives their pool something different — and something it needs. — Wheeler

26. Seattle Kraken: William Håkansson, LHD, Luleå

Håkansson adds some size and grit to a Seattle prospect pool that's lacking in those areas. A gold medalist at the World Juniors for Sweden, Håkansson projects to play hard defensive minutes in the NHL one day. — Pronman

27. New York Rangers: Simas Ignatavicius, C, Genève-Servette

The Rangers add a big, strong, pro-built center, filling multiple areas of need at once within their pool. — Wheeler

28. Calgary Flames: Liam Ruck, RW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

Calgary steps up to take one half of the most dynamic duo in the CHL this season. Liam is considered a half step above his brother and has high-end offense and a good motor, although so-so foot speed. — Pronman

29. Buffalo Sabres: Gleb Pugachyov, LW, Nizhny Novgorod

The Sabres haven't shied away from drafting Russians and could use a big, strong, competitive, high-motor forward like Pugachyov in their pool. With a young core already established on their roster, they can also afford to wait for him; Pugachyov has two more years on his KHL contract and could well re-up there another time. — Wheeler

30. Carolina Hurricanes: Tommy Bleyl, RHD, Moncton (QMJHL)

Carolina selects one of the most prolific defenders in junior hockey this season. Bleyl is a mobile, highly skilled blueliner who has racked up points all year, including a great postseason, but he's of average size. — Pronman

31. St. Louis Blues: Jack Hextall, C, Youngstown (USHL)

The Blues again prioritize adding depth down the middle in their pool with the well-rounded, pro-style Hextall, one of the only players left who's a safe bet to actually stick as a center in the NHL. — Wheeler

32. Ottawa Senators: Brooks Rogowski, C, Oshawa (OHL)

With Ottawa's re-awarded pick, the Senators take one of the best pure athletes in the draft. He's a massive center with the feet and hands to play at the next level. He's not the sexiest pick, but he looks like an NHL player. — Pronman

33. Vancouver Canucks: Nikita Klepov, LW, Saginaw (OHL)

It's not often that the OHL's leading scorer is available in the second round, and the Canucks jump on Klepov to start Day 2. — Wheeler

34. Chicago Blackhawks: Jakub Vanecek, LHD, Tri-City (WHL)

Chicago takes a promising young defenseman in Vanecek, who was productive at multiple levels this season. He's tall and skates well, while showing the ability to play both ways with potential secondary offense in the NHL. — Pronman

35. Calgary Flames: Mathis Preston, RW, Vancouver (WHL)

The Flames take the fast and skilled Preston, leaning into a player type they've targeted in the past and comfortable betting on his talent and pedigree winning out in Round 2. — Wheeler

36. Calgary Flames: Tobias Trejbal, G, Youngstown (USHL)



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The Flames select the best goalie in the draft. Trejbal had a fantastic season in the USHL, and he's big, athletic and technically sound with all the traits you want. — Pronman

37. Chicago Blackhawks: Ben Macbeath, LHD, Calgary (WHL)

The Blackhawks add another good-skating D in Macbeath, who didn't finish on a high note in the WHL playoffs and at U18 worlds, but was a riser this season and in the second half. — Wheeler

38. Seattle Kraken: Alessandro Di Iorio, C, Sarnia (OHL)

Seattle drafts a hard-to-play-against center in Di Iorio, whose skating and effort level could make him a dependable bottom-half-of-the-lineup pivot one day. — Pronman

39. Pittsburgh Penguins: Juho Piiparinen, RHD, Tappara (Liiga)

After taking a forward with their first three picks of last year's draft, the Penguins take Piiparinen, the captain of this '08 Finnish age group and a projectable — if vanilla — NHL D who does a lot of things at an average or above-average level. — Wheeler

40. Florida Panthers: Chase Harrington, LW, Spokane (WHL)

Harrington is a scrappy winger with good speed and hands who has scored at a quality clip the last two seasons in the WHL. He plays the game in a way the Panthers tend to target. — Pronman

41. Vancouver Canucks: Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW, Örebro

The Canucks add the Norwegian-born Aaram-Olsen, a talented scoring winger who can beat goalies from the high slot and has been highly productive in Sweden. — Wheeler

42. Nashville Predators: Xavier Villeneuve, LHD, Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)

Nashville rolls the dice on the dynamic Villeneuve, a second-round swing akin to when they picked Samuel Girard, as Villeneuve shares high-end skating and offensive skills while being a concern away from the puck. — Pronman

43. Columbus Blue Jackets: Marcus Nordmark, LW, Djurgården

The Blue Jackets take a swing on the highly talented but frustrating Nordmark, the most purely skilled player remaining. — Wheeler

44. New Jersey Devils: Nikita Shcherbakov, LHD, Ufa

The Devils are happy to take a chance on a massive Russian defenseman who played very well versus men this season. His offense isn't amazing, but he showed two-way potential against pros this season. — Pronman

45. Chicago Blackhawks: Dmitri Borichev, G, Lokomotiv

The Blackhawks take one of the top goalies in the class, prioritizing an area of need with their third second-round pick. Borichev was excellent in the MHL this year and is the top '08 Russian goalie. — Wheeler

46. Los Angeles Kings: Jonas Lagerberg Hoen, RW, Leksands

The Kings take one of the most purely talented players in Lagerberg; he has first-round tools/underage profile, but he missed almost the entire season due to a knee injury. He's a tall, fast goal-scorer who has shown significant offense in junior in Sweden. — Pronman

47. Detroit Red Wings: Thomas Vandenberg, C, Ottawa (OHL)

It has been 14 years since the Red Wings have had to wait this long to make a pick, and they take the hardworking Vandenberg, a Providence commit who's one of the youngest players in the class. — Wheeler

48. Florida Panthers: Samu Alalauri, RHD, Pelicans

Florida drafts a mobile puck-moving defenseman in Alalauri, who was one of Finland's best U18 players in international play this season. He has decent size and projects to have value at both ends of the ice versus men. — Pronman

49. Toronto Maple Leafs: Jaxon Cover, RW, London (OHL)

The Leafs select Cover, one of the more fascinating development stories of this draft class. Cover, a Penn State commit, has legit puck skill and is still learning the rest of the game after coming up as a roller hockey player. — Wheeler

50. Anaheim Ducks: Måns Gudmundsson, RHD, Färjestad

Gudmundsson is a big, heavy, right-shot defenseman who projects to play hard defensive minutes in the NHL, although his puck play is average. — Pronman

51. Calgary Flames: Markus Ruck, C, Medicine Hat (WHL)

The Flames make the Ruck twins' dream come true and are happy to get Markus, the CHL's leading scorer this year, late in the second round to boot. His skating needs to improve at his size, but the work ethic and playmaking are there. — Wheeler

52. Edmonton Oilers: Patriks Plumins, G, Zemgale

The Oilers take another stab at their goalie of the future by drafting the 6-foot-4 Plumins, who was brilliant at the recent U18 worlds for Latvia. — Pronman

53. Philadelphia Flyers: Egor Shilov, C, Victoriaville (QMJHL)

Shilov isn't a prototypical Flyer in play style, but they take a swing on the talented center, a Penn State commit who finished top 10 in the Q in scoring this year. — Wheeler

54. Pittsburgh Penguins: Filip Ruzicka, G, Brandon (WHL)

The Penguins draft the towering 6-foot-7 Ruzicka, who was one of the top goalies in the WHL this season. He's a talented albeit somewhat unorthodox type of netminder. — Pronman

55. Calgary Flames: Ryan Roobroeck, LW, Niagara (OHL)

After taking some smaller skill guys with their earlier picks, the Flames take a swing on the big and talented but mercurial Roobroeck. A team with a lot of picks makes a lot of sense for Roobroeck, and this is already the Flames' sixth selection of the draft. — Wheeler

56. Boston Bruins: Maksim Sokolovskii, LHD, London (OHL)

The Bruins select one of the best athletes in the draft, a massive, highly physical blue liner who can move and intrigued scouts a lot with his play down the stretch. — Pronman

57. Nashville Predators: Egor Barabanov, C, Saginaw (OHL)

The Preds make Barabanov the first overager selected. Barabanov, a UMass commit, was one of the most talented playmakers in the OHL this season. — Wheeler

58. Montreal Canadiens: Adam Nemeč, LW, Sudbury (OHL)

Montreal selects the highly versatile Nemeč, who projects as a two-way bottom-six winger in the NHL and has performed well at various levels over the last two years. — Pronman

59. Tampa Bay Lightning: Tomas Chrenko, C, Nitra

The Lightning take Chrenko, a standout for Slovakia internationally at the U20 and U18 levels who scored 43 points in 63 combined regular-season and playoff games with HK Nitra's pro club this season. — Wheeler

60. Dallas Stars: Oļivers Murnieks, C, Saint John (QMJHL)



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The Stars select the highly competitive Murnieks, who's been very good in the last few months of the season, elevating his stock. He's not overly skilled, but he's a hard two-way center who has enough offense to potentially make it. — Pronman

61. Toronto Maple Leafs: Adam Andersson, C, Leksands

Toronto selects a big center in Andersson, who has played very well for Sweden internationally. He moves well, works hard and has potential secondary skill to score versus men. — Pronman

62. New York Rangers: Zach Olsen, RW, Saskatoon (WHL)

The Rangers take Olsen, one of the draft's strongest and most competitive forwards. He was a riser this season and projects as a bottom-six checker. — Wheeler

63. San Jose Sharks: Rian Chudzinski, RW, Moncton (QMJHL)

The Sharks draft one of the most tenacious and competitive players in the draft in Chudzinski, who is having a great playoff run with Moncton to close out the second round. — Pronman

The Athletic LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391829 Websites

ESPN / 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs: Hurricanes-Canadiens conference finals preview – ESPN

5–6 minutes

ESPN staff May 19, 2026, 05:00 PM

The Eastern Conference finals matchup in the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs is finally set: The Carolina Hurricanes (who last played May 9) will square off against the Montreal Canadiens, who won 3-2 in overtime over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday.

The Canadiens have an NHL-record 24 Stanley Cup championships, with the most recent coming in 1993; in fact, they are the most recent Canadian franchise to have won.

The Hurricanes have just one Stanley Cup title, but it was much more recent, in 2006. Current Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour was the captain of that team.

To help get you up to speed before Game 1 on Thursday, we're here with key intel from ESPN Research, wagering info and more.

M1 Carolina

Hurricanes

vs.

A3 Montreal

Canadiens

Path to the ECF:

Hurricanes: Defeated Senators in four games, Flyers in four games

Canadiens: Defeated Lightning in seven games, Sabres in seven games

Schedule:

Game 1: Canadiens at Hurricanes | May 21, 8 p.m. ET (TNT)

Game 2: Canadiens at Hurricanes | May 23, 7 p.m. ET (TNT)

Game 3: Hurricanes at Canadiens | May 25, 8 p.m. ET (TNT)

Game 4: Hurricanes at Canadiens | May 27, 8 p.m. ET (TNT)

Game 5*: Canadiens at Hurricanes | May 29, 8 p.m. ET (TNT)

Game 6*: Hurricanes at Canadiens | May 31, TBD (TNT)

Game 7*: Canadiens at Hurricanes | June 2, 8 p.m. ET (TNT)

*If necessary

Series odds:

Hurricanes -275

Canadiens +225

Stanley Cup odds:

Hurricanes +170

Canadiens +700

Leading playoff scorers:

Hurricanes: Taylor Hall (3 G, 9 A, 12 P)

Canadiens: Lane Hutson (2 G, 11 A, 13 P)

Matchup notes from ESPN Research

Hurricanes

The Canes are the first team with a four-game sweep in the first two rounds of a single Stanley Cup playoffs run (the NHL went to four rounds of best-of-seven in 1987).

Carolina's 8-0 streak is the longest in franchise history, and the Canes are the fifth team in Stanley Cup playoff history to start 8-0 or better; they are the first since the 1985 Edmonton Oilers, who started 9-0.

The Canes have outscored opponents 24-10 this postseason and are the fourth team in the NHL's expansion era (since 1968) to allow 10 goals or fewer through eight games; the 2004 Tampa Bay Lightning, 2002 Ottawa Senators and 1969 St. Louis Blues are the others.

Carolina has won 21 playoff series since the franchise relocated from Hartford in 1997-98. That is the sixth most among all teams over that span, behind the Lightning (25), Pittsburgh Penguins (24), Dallas Stars (24), Detroit Red Wings (24) and Colorado Avalanche (22).

Frederik Andersen has allowed two or fewer goals in eight straight games and is the fifth goaltender in the past 20 years to backstop eight consecutive victories. The others are Chris Osgood (2008), Dwayne Roloson (2011), Jonathan Quick (2012) and Tuukka Rask (2019).

With a series-clinching goal in Game 4 against the Flyers, Jackson Blake became the second-youngest player (22 years, 279 days) to achieve that feat in franchise history; only Ulf Samuelsson (22 years, 17 days in Game 3 of the 1986 division semifinal) was younger.

Logan Stankoven scored seven goals thus far, which is the most through the first eight games of a single postseason in franchise history.

Captain Jordan Staal is the oldest player on the Hurricanes' roster. Blake and Stankoven were born in 2003; that ensuing season, Staal had 92 points in 49 games for the Thunder Bay Kings U16 team before joining the Peterborough Petes in the OHL for 2004-05.

Canadiens

The Canadiens went 3-0-0 against the Hurricanes this regular season, with an aggregate score of 15-8.

This is the second time that the Habs have played the Hurricanes in a playoff series since the franchise moved to Carolina; Montreal played five



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series against the Hartford Whalers prior to the move. The Canadiens had a 5-0 series record against Hartford but are 0-2 versus Carolina.

The Canadiens are the youngest team (25.8 average age) to advance to the conference finals/Stanley Cup semifinals in 33 years. This ties the average of the other team atop the leaderboard... the Canadiens in 1993 (a team that won the Cup).

This is the fourth conference finals/Cup semifinals appearance for Montreal since 2010, which is the third most in that span, behind only the Lightning (seven) and New York Rangers (five).

Will rest be a factor? Since April 26, the Canadiens have played 11 games, which is the most among the NHL's final four: the Golden Knights have played nine games in that span, the Avalanche six and the Canes four.

Alex Newhook scored the series-winning goal in Game 7 in both Round 1 and Round 2. He is the second player in NHL history with multiple Game 7-winning goals in a single postseason; Nathan Horton (2011, with the Bruins) is the other.

Jakub Dobes is the third Canadiens rookie goalie to win a Game 7 in overtime, joining Steve Penney in the 1985 division finals vs. the Nordiques and Patrick Roy in the 1986 division finals vs. the Whalers.

Lane Hutson and Cole Caufield were considered "snubs" from the gold medal-winning Team USA roster for the 2026 Olympics. In Rounds 1 and 2, they have played a role in eliminating "double champ" candidates Jake Guentzel and Tage Thompson. Is Jaccob Slavin next?

ESPN LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391830 Websites

ESPN / Stanley Cup playoffs daily: Previews, stats, schedule, bracket – ESPN

2–3 minutes

ESPN staff May 19, 2026, 12:00 PM

Nine days after the Carolina Hurricanes earned their spot in the Eastern Conference finals, they finally found out their opponent, after the Montreal Canadiens defeated the Buffalo Sabres 3-2 in overtime in Game 7 on Monday night.

Those two teams will square off beginning Thursday night for a spot in the Stanley Cup Final. The other spot will be determined by the Western Conference finals matchup between the Colorado Avalanche and Vegas Golden Knights, which begins Wednesday on ESPN.

We officially have the schedule for the next round, and there will be an incredible array of preview content coming soon. For now, here's a look back at how the Canadiens got the job done in Game 7, along with updated stats and the current Stanley Cup playoff bracket.

Full schedule

Playoff Central

Stanley Cup odds

Offseason guide for eliminated teams

Monday's scoreboard

Montreal Canadiens 3, Buffalo Sabres 2 (OT)

Canadiens win 4-3

After two straight blowouts, this game did not stay on trend -- although the first period appeared as though it could head in that direction. Phillip Danault got the Canadiens on the board first, and Zack Bolduc scored later in the frame to give the visitors a 2-0 lead at the intermission.

However, Jordan Greenway got the Sabres within one on a goal that deflected in off his equipment, and the Sabres had the Habs on their heels for the rest of regulation. Then captain Rasmus Dahlin's goal tied it at 2 at the 6:27 mark in the third.

Despite a number of high-level scoring chances for both clubs, no one could solve Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen or Jakub Dobes for the final 13 minutes-plus of regulation, or the first 11:21 of OT. But at 11:22, Alex Newhook -- the hero of Montreal's earlier Game 7 against the Tampa Bay Lightning -- finally got one past UPL, sending the Habs on to Round 2. Here's what the Sabres do to get better for 2026-27. Full recap.

ESPN LOADED: 05.20.2026

1391831 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' coaching search begins, with Malhotra as clear early favourite

Iain MacIntyre

7–8 minutes

VANCOUVER — When Ryan Johnson needed to hire a minor-league coach for the Vancouver Canucks two years ago, he described his search process this way: "There was a bunch of names on one list and then there was one name on my main list, and that was Manny."

So far, Manny Malhotra is also the only name on Johnson's new list to coach the National Hockey League team.

Six days since his promotion to general manager, Johnson on Tuesday fired head coach Adam Foote and assistants Brett McLean, Kevin Dean and Scott Young — all of them one-and-done as coaches in Vancouver and victims of one of the worst seasons in franchise history.

The Canucks have a new GM, new co-presidents in Daniel and Henrik Sedin, and will also have an entirely new NHL coaching staff beyond the likely retention of goaltending coach Marco Torenus and skills coach Jason Krog.

Johnson told reporters that he plans to be the first manager this spring to interview Malhotra for an NHL job, and the betting money says he will probably be the last one.

As the American Hockey League GM of the Canucks' farm team in Abbotsford, Johnson specifically recruited Malhotra, bringing him back to Vancouver after a stint as Sheldon Keefe's assistant coach in Toronto.

Not only did Johnson and Malhotra have similar traits as Canuck players — smart and professional, articulate, dependable and brimming with character — but they shared a strong vision about how prospects should be developed, with their values as teammates every bit as important as skill development.

That shared vision brought the Canuck organization its first Calder Cup championship 11 months ago, and the partnership seems perfectly suited now for an NHL team coming off a 58-point season and undertaking its first rebuild this century.



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"It's hard to be ignorant of an internal candidate that we obviously have, so I'm not going to deflect that," Johnson said Tuesday. "Manny has shown his ability to develop young players, to build a connection and, obviously, win a championship with a very young group. I am going to speak with him, sit down with him, and talk about the future.

"I don't think I've got an expectation of how big that net (to find a new head coach) needs to be cast. Like I said, I don't want to be ignorant to you guys or anybody and say I'm not going to have a serious conversation with Manny. That's just the truth of it. I think those discussions may determine how big that net is cast. But I'm not ruling out anything. I've just got to go through the initial steps here."

Interestingly, Johnson said he is not conflicted about considering Malhotra for coach when the Canucks might also select his son, centre Caleb Malhotra, with the third pick of next month's entry draft.

"I'm in no position to change or make decisions based off one or the other," Johnson said of the Malhotras. "There will be no sacrifice (of priorities) because of a father-son relationship, I would say."

So both Malhotras could be with the NHL Canucks next season. Or neither.

The Maple Leafs or San Jose Sharks, who pick ahead of the Canucks, could deprive Vancouver of Caleb, although that seems highly unlikely given those teams' needs and other elite prospects available at the top of the draft.

But Manny Malhotra to the Canucks' bench now feels even more likely than did Johnson to the general manager's office, although the latter was always the soft favourite to be promoted to the job before former teammates Henrik and Daniel Sedin chose Johnson last week over Boston Bruins AGM Evan Gold.

Johnson packed other news into his 17-minute press conference, confirming that incumbent assistant GMs Cammi Granato and Emilie Castonguay will remain with the Canucks, and speaking unequivocally in support of amateur scouting director Todd Harvey.

"As with Cammi and Emilie, nothing has changed," Johnson said. "They are a big part of this group. They've been a big part, I think, of my maturation as a person and a professional, so nothing has changed in that regard."

Of Harvey, who was promoted by previous GM Jim Benning to replace Judd Brackett in 2020, Johnson said: "I have the utmost respect for Todd Harvey, how he's led his group. He has really evolved as a leader over the years and been challenged to, but he's been able to build this group and make some changes where he felt needed. Nobody works harder than Todd. He commands the room, he has empowered his staff, and if you really strike it down to some of the picks ... these guys have done a fantastic job of finding players (in) middle to late rounds. We haven't had an opportunity to pick up (near the top of) the draft. But we will this year, and so that's exciting for those guys."

With much of the Canucks' staff scattered for the summer, Johnson said he informed Foote and his assistants by phone that the team would not be bringing them back. Former GM Patrik Allvin and outgoing president Jim Rutherford gambled on making Foote, who had limited coaching experience, a first-time NHL head coach when Rick Tocchet bolted from Vancouver 13 months ago.

But at least Johnson and the Sedins moved quickly to provide clarity about which way the Canucks are going.

"A very tough and tumultuous year (with) so many variables," Johnson said. "So this wasn't an easy day. They're great coaches, but great people, and I want to thank them personally. Speaking with them this morning, I just felt from the organization — the alignment and what we were looking for — I just wanted a new voice and a new group to come in and start this next era of the franchise.

"I felt out of respect for the staff, too, the longer you drag something like this out, you also hold them from maybe their next opportunities. And I want to be respectful of their time and the ability to move on.

"The environment is my utmost priority in moving forward with a young group, and I've said that before. Between the coach, your manager, president, again we come back to being aligned, and we have to make sure that we all have the same vision — that we're going to stick to the teaching."

There aren't many better-suited to that mandate than Manny Malhotra, and nobody else has his relationship with the GM here.

"I've never brought coaches here to be in the American League for 10 years," Johnson said a year ago for a Sportsnet feature about him and Malhotra. "That would be a failure on my behalf."

"I needed to take the next step and take that leap of faith," Malhotra told us then about returning to the Canuck organization. "But in this business, it's not just about getting the opportunity, it's getting the opportunity with people that you want to work with and places you want to be. I was very fortunate to come back to an organization where I have history, I know the people internally and wanted to work with them again. It worked out perfect."

Feels like it's going to.

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1391832 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Golden Knights GM McCrimmon defends Cassidy situation

Eric Francis

~4 minutes

DENVER — "We were wrong."

Those were the words included in a prepared statement read by Kelly McCrimmon to open what should have been a straightforward pre-series presser.

After being in the eye of a few different NHL storms of late, the Vegas Golden Knights GM felt compelled to clarify — somewhat — his team's stance on a pair of controversies he discussed earlier in the day with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

One was his coach's doing, the other was his.

"We were today in New York, where we had a hearing with the National Hockey League regarding the events following Game 6," said McCrimmon, whose coach was fined \$100,000 and his club was docked a second-round draft pick after John Tortorella kept the locker room closed and refused to speak to the media after eliminating Anaheim.

"We missed a great opportunity that night to connect with our fans and share with them the victory of a playoff series. I've always felt in a playoff series, when you win a series, you galvanize the bond with your fan base. We missed that opportunity by not having John available to do post game. That's on John for failing to do that. That's on me as general manager of the hockey club. That's not at the feet of our comms people, who made other arrangements with each of you to accommodate tight quarters in and around our dressing room postgame. We have no explanation other than to say we were wrong and to assure you that it will not happen again. The league has spoken on the matter. We have



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spoken on the matter. Neither John or I will be taking any questions on this."

With his team's Tuesday morning appeal denied, he considered the case closed.

What isn't yet resolved is the curious case of Bruce Cassidy.

McCrimmon confirmed several teams have sought permission to speak with the former Jack Adams winner, who they fired with eight games remaining and another year left on his contract.

But even though teams in Toronto, Edmonton, Los Angeles and Vancouver are searching for their next head coach, he suggested the timing isn't right for him to concern himself with the matter.

"We've been consistent that our focus currently is on the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and the teams have respected that," said McCrimmon, admitting no wrongdoing.

"I've spoken with Bruce, he understands this as well."

The NHL Coaches' Association doesn't understand it, as they released a statement earlier Tuesday, condemning the Golden Knights for what they said is an unprecedented stance on a man seeking future employment.

"While we respect the league's rules and processes, it is our position that coaches who remain under contract, but are no longer working for their club, should not be prevented from pursuing other employment opportunities," it read.

"It would be unprecedented at the head coaching level should multiple teams be denied permission to speak with Coach Cassidy. The situation is still unfolding, but our priority is to protect the interests of our members in this type of circumstance."

With the GMs traditionally called upon to kick off the conference final with a media availability, many wondered how, or if, McCrimmon would acknowledge the elephants in the room.

He did, and then immediately moved on to answering questions about the series with Colorado that opens at Ball Arena Wednesday, marking the fifth time in Vegas' nine seasons it will play in the Western Conference Final.

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1391833 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Avalanche not taking anything for granted ahead of Western Conference Final

Eric Francis

5-7 minutes

DENVER — Jared Bednar didn't flinch when asked if he was concerned about the playing status of Cale Makar.

"No, not yet," said the Colorado Avalanche coach, whose star defender missed practice Tuesday, on the eve of his club's conference showdown with Vegas.

He delivered the line with the same calm certainty that has defined his tenure — a quiet confidence that mirrors the team he leads into a Western Conference Final that feels overdue.

Because for all the winning the Avalanche have done — the Presidents' Trophies, the 2022 Stanley Cup, the star power, the analytics dominance,

the highlight-reel nights — this is only their second trip to the third round since drafting Nathan MacKinnon in 2013.

A decade of excellence, and yet, a sense of unfinished business hangs over everything.

And that's exactly how they want it.

Gabriel Landeskog, the heartbeat of the room even after missing nearly two full seasons, put it plainly:

"Yeah, I mean, listen, it's just that it's a part of the process," he said of Wednesday's series opener here at Ball Arena.

"We've got bigger goals and dreams than this."

Despite going 8-1 in these playoffs, while outscoring Los Angeles and Minnesota by 12, the tone around this group is not one of celebration.

It's a more mature, business-like approach that stems from being elite for years, only to have the narrative shift to the pain of first or second-round exits in seven of their last nine playoffs.

They've been great, but when it matters most, they haven't been great enough.

MacKinnon, who has never been shy about the standard he holds himself and his team to, echoed that sentiment when asked about the championship pedigree on both sides:

"Yeah, it's a lot," said the man who has scored in six-straight games.

"I mean, I think they've (won) it recently (2023), just the year after us (2022), so you know, they have a lot of guys who know what it takes. I just can't see this being a short series. It's going to be tough, and ready for a seven-game here."

This is the version of MacKinnon that terrifies opponents — the one who's not grinding, not exhausted, but energized by the moment.

"It doesn't feel like a grind at all," he smiled, while still displaying the fading signs of two black eyes.

"I think we're all having a lot of fun, and we've been lucky enough to have a couple breaks in between series, so the grind is more like January, February. The last game was probably the most fun we've all had playing hockey. This is what we get up for, so I think everyone's feeling good right now."

With the noted exception of Makar, who would appear to be dealing with an upper-body ailment suffered, or made worse, by a reverse hit from Mats Zuccarello in the Game 5 comeback clincher against Minnesota. The team has skated three times since ousting the Wild last Wednesday, and Makar has yet to be seen.

Yet, with the depth GM Chris MacFarland has accrued to a team that has been on the cusp of greatness for years, there's every reason to believe that with or without Makar to open the series the Avalanche should remain optimistic.

This is the most balanced Avalanche team since 2022, and some are already arguing it may be even deeper than that.

They're 15-4-1 in their last 20 games, scoring 73 and allowing 47. They've won track meets, they've won grinders, they've won comeback games, and they've won suffocating defensive battles.

"With our group now, I think we can win in different ways," said MacFarland, whose top-ranked club shocked many by being the stingiest defensive team in the league with a goalie tandem many saw as unproven.

"We have high-skilled guys, we can score goals. I think we like to dictate play for sure, like everybody does, but you've seen the different ways that we've been fortunate enough to win in the first two rounds, and



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throughout the season. I know the one thing I don't think we got enough credit for is how well we're prepared game in, game out, and how we defend. Defending is a skill, but it's also guts and determination, and to do the hard things day in, day out, it's a mindset that I think starts with our leadership group, and the guy to my left."

That's the identity shift that makes this Avalanche team feel different. They're not just fast and skilled. They're stubborn. They're layered. They're comfortable in the battle.

John Tortorella's Golden Knights are the perfect foil. Heavy, structured, opportunistic, and still anchored by a veteran core of Cup winners, led by Jack Eichel. They too are 15-4-1 in their last 20, thanks to a late 7-0-1 jolt to wrap up the regular season after Tortorella was hired.

They're built to frustrate, to lean, to wear you down.

The Avs feel ready.

This is a team that erased a three-goal deficit in Minnesota to close out a series. A team that took two days off after advancing, practised twice on the weekend, and still looks fresh. A team that has learned, painfully, what happens when you take anything for granted.

Last year's first-round exit against Dallas wasn't ignored. It was absorbed.

"That type of failure makes you realize how painful it can be," said Logan O'Connor of the late comeback authored by former Av Mikko Rantanen that sunk Colorado in Game 7.

"You don't want that feeling again."

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1391834 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Eastern Conference Final preview: Canadiens vs. Hurricanes

Sonny Sachdeva

9-11 minutes

The two clubs set to collide in the Eastern Conference Final arrived via opposite paths.

The Carolina Hurricanes come to Game 1 of Round 3 with a flawless record. Rod Brind'Amour's squad has won eight straight games, swept two straight series, to book their ticket to the third round. So dominant were they in Round 2, they haven't even played a hockey game in over a week, having closed out their last series way back on May 9.

The only club in NHL history to sweep their first two best-of-seven series to start a post-season, the Canes have gotten a little bit of everything to this point — offence from all corners of the lineup, stout defence from the blue line, sterling goaltending from Frederik Andersen.

Twice they've come up against a rambunctious, talented squad with plenty of youth and promise, and twice they've snuffed them out with ease. Now, another young, up-and-coming outfit arrives on their doorstep.

The Montreal Canadiens, fresh off a second straight seven-game battle, have climbed to the conference final for the first time since their Stanley Cup Final march in 2021. Whatever happens now, the campaign has been a significant step forward for this young Habs core, which is quickly emerging as one of the most dangerous in the league. But Martin St.

Louis' group will be looking for more than just a pat on the back for having made it this far.

The Canadiens beat these Canes in all three meetings this season, outscoring them 15-8 over those tilts. The chances of them doing that here, given how the Canes have looked to this point, and given how Andersen's performed through two rounds, seem slim. But the Habs have the firepower to make some noise.

Can they slow down a Carolina squad that's been barreling through the East like a runaway train? Or will the Canes finally pull it all together and reach their first Stanley Cup Final since they won it all two decades ago?

Game 1 goes Thursday.

Head-to-head records

Hurricanes: 0-3-0

Canadiens: 3-0-0

Playoff Team Stats

TEAM

GOAL DIFFERENTIAL

PP%

PK%

SV%

Canadiens

43-38

25.0 (5)

74.1 (13)

.906 (5)

Hurricanes

24-10

13.5 (12)

95.0 (2)

.950 (1)

Hurricanes' Key Playoff Moment: Andersen's pair of Game 1 shutouts

Andersen has been flat-out dominant to start this post-season run. Through two series, the 36-year-old has posted an absurd .950 save percentage, allowing just 10 goals over the Canes' eight wins. But it's how he started each of Carolina's series that stands out most.

In each of the two previous rounds, the Hurricanes entered Game 1 against a young, hungry team with plenty of momentum. And both times, Andersen kicked things off by shutting the door, stymying the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers at every turn, bringing that momentum to a grinding halt.

The Great Dane's sterling start allowed Carolina to set the tone, and send a message, putting the club's more inexperienced opponents on their heels early. They'll no doubt be looking to do the same against the young Habs.

Canadiens' Key Playoff Moment: Habs' offence comes alive in Game 2

After an incredibly tight series against the Tampa Bay Lightning in Round 1 — a seven-game grind that saw four games decided by overtime, and all seven tilts decided by one goal — the Canadiens began Round 2 with another nail-biter against Buffalo. But in Game 2, Montreal came alive.



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A 5-1 win over the Sabres saw the Habs claim their most dominant win of the post-season to that point. Two nights later, they did it again, winning 6-2 in Game 3. The Sabres fought back with a narrow win in Game 4, until Montreal again kicked down the door with a 6-3 victory in Game 5, and battled through a difficult final stretch to close out the series in seven.

In the games following that Game 2 revival, Montreal saw some key offensive stalwarts rediscover their scoring touch — most notably 50-goal man Cole Caufield, who found the twine in three straight following Game 2, after managing just one through his first nine games of this post-season. A good sign heading into a tough bout with the Canes that will require No. 13's best.

Hurricanes will win if...

The Canes will continue their campaign of destiny if their second line continues to dominate as they have so far.

Through two rounds, the trio of Taylor Hall, Logan Stankoven and Jackson Blake have been unstoppable for Brind'Amour's squad. In Round 1, the line combined for 16 points against the Senators — Hall led the way with two goals and seven points overall, Stankoven added four goals and five points, and Blake managed a goal and four points himself. In Round 2, they held that level. The line put up 15 points against Philly — Blake led this time with three goals and seven points overall, with Hall adding a goal and five points, and Stankoven put up three goals.

With 31 points between the three of them heading into the conference final, the Habs' defence figures to have their hands full with the second-line trio — and then there's Carolina's star-laden top line of Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov, and Seth Jarvis to deal with.

Canadiens will win if...

Montreal will keep rolling if Jakub Dobes continues his run in the Habs' cage, and matches Andersen's elite form.

The 24-year-old Dobes has been a revelation for Montreal this season, particularly in these playoffs. Playing just his second campaign in the big leagues — his first in a starring role — the 2020 fifth-round pick has emerged as a key piece of the Canadiens' core. He put up a dominant .923 save percentage in Round 1, holding the offensively gifted Bolts to three goals or fewer over the seven-game series. And while there were some stumbles in Round 2, Dobes came up clutch when it mattered most, turning aside 37 shots and limiting the Sabres to two goals in Montreal's do-or-die Game 7 win.

It's simply what Dobes has been doing all year in Montreal, and all playoffs, too. He's been especially exceptional when his team's needed to claw its way back after a loss — overall through this season (regular and post), he's 19-2-2 after a loss. In these playoffs so far, Dobes is a perfect 6-0 coming off a loss.

Against a Canes team that ranked as the second-best offensive outfit in the league this season, the Habs will need No. 75 to continue that run of form.

Carolina's Unsung Hero: K'Andre Miller

In his first season with Carolina, the 26-year-old blue-liner has been excellent for the Canes. Coming over from New York after a five-season run with the Rangers, the fit seemed fairly seamless during the regular season — Miller managed one of the most productive campaigns of his career under Brind'Amour, accumulating 37 points in 72 games, and skating a career-high 22:24 per night.

But in the post-season, he's raised his game even further. Round 2 saw the St. Paul, Minn., product skate a team-high 23:58 against Philadelphia, and come up with some incredible defensive moments for his club:

Overall, heading into the conference final, Miller ranks second on the team in ice-time with 23:44 minutes per night through eight Canes wins — behind only all-world rearguard Jaccob Slavin — and leads all Canes blue-liners in scoring.

Newhook pulled the spotlight towards him in the final moments of Round 2, wiring home the game-winning, series-clinching goal to send Montreal on to the conference final. But the 25-year-old has been doing it all playoffs for the Habs.

Montreal has no shortage of quality performers to heap praise on for their run so far, with star-studded leaders Nick Suzuki, Caufield, Juraj Slafkovsky and Lane Hutson all making waves, and Dobes earning plenty of praise in the cage behind them. But Newhook has been just as pivotal.

Through two rounds, the former Colorado Avalanche winger is leading Montreal in goals with seven, and leading the league in even-strength goals in these playoffs. He's also been incredibly clutch during two series that have gone the distance — in Game 7 against Tampa Bay, he scored the game-winner midway through the final period of the series; in Game 7 against Buffalo, he sunk the overtime winner.

Newhook had just two goals in 32 playoff games heading into this run, but the St. John's product has found his footing, and found an important role, for these meteoric Habs.

Series Schedule

* all games available on Sportsnet and Sportsnet+.

Game 1: Montreal at Carolina, Thurs. May 21 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

Game 2: Montreal at Carolina, Sat. May 23 at 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT

Game 3: Carolina at Montreal, Mon. May 25 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

Game 4: Carolina at Montreal, Wed. May 27 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

*Game 5: Montreal at Carolina, Fri. May 29 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

*Game 6: Carolina at Montreal, Sun. May 31 at TBD

*Game 7: Montreal at Carolina, Tues. June 2 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

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Sportsnet.ca / 2026 Western Conference Final preview: Avalanche vs. Golden Knights

Ryan Dixon

8–10 minutes

"I'm going into my ninth year and I haven't won sh--," MacKinnon said in 2021, when — after winning the first two games of a second-round series — Colorado lost four straight contests to Vegas.

The next spring, MacKinnon and the Avs finally broke through by winning the 2022 Stanley Cup. One year later, it was Vegas' turn to summit the mountain.

Now, both clubs arrive in the 2026 Western Conference Final looking to brush away fresh piles of frustration that have accumulated since their championship seasons. Neither Vegas nor Colorado has been this deep in the dance since winning it all three and four years ago, respectively.



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There's a new feel to the Golden Knights, who are being led by a coach — in John Tortorella — who was hired with eight games left in the season and a superstar player — in Mitch Marner — in his first year with the club and the first conference final of his 10-year career.

Colorado, meanwhile, kind of put the band back together when it re-acquired Nazem Kadri from the Calgary Flames at the trade deadline. While this team obviously features several different players at important positions than the one that claimed the 2022 Cup, it does feel as though the Avs have recaptured some of that championship magic by having Kadri and captain Gabriel Landeskog both back in a post-season lineup together after the former spent several seasons in Calgary and the latter was sidelined for years by a knee injury.

The Avalanche are attempting to become the first Presidents' Trophy winner from a full 82-game campaign to make the Stanley Cup Final since the Vancouver Canucks did it 2011, while Vegas — which underperformed for much of the season and was still no lock to make the playoffs when it replaced Bruce Cassidy with Tortorella at the end of March — is hoping its perfectly timed surge continues.

Two long-standing Western Conference powers are about to lock horns with a berth in the final on the line.

Head-to-head records

Colorado: 2-0-1

Vegas: 1-1-1

Playoff Team Stats

TEAM

GOAL DIFFERENTIAL

PP%

PK%

SV%

Avalanche

37-23

25.0 (5)

79.3 (11)

.902 (6)

Golden Knights

44-31

25.7 (4)

86.8 (5)

.912 (4)

Avalanche's key playoff moment

We may have just witnessed it on Wednesday night. After carrying a 3-1 series lead over the Minnesota Wild home to Denver, the Avs fell behind the Wild 3-0 in the first period of Game 5. At that point, a Game 6 — and maybe even a Game 7 — felt inevitable for Colorado.

But the Avs swapped goalie Scott Wedgewood in for starter Mackenzie Blackwood, got a second-period strike to pull them within two, then delivered a memorable final five minutes that saw Jack Drury cut the lead to one before, who else, Nathan MacKinnon found the equalizer with less than 90 seconds to go.

Brett Kulak made sure the regulation-time comeback was more than a footnote by scoring the overtime winner 3:52 into the fourth frame.

While it was obviously a galvanizing and inspiring victory, the real gain for Colorado is the tangible fact that by dispatching the Wild in five games as opposed to six or seven, Colorado made it through the first two rounds playing a total of nine contests.

Good as the Avs are, nobody expected them to arrive in the West final via the deadly Central Division without getting through a gruelling series first. As it turns out, Colorado made the semifinal with an 8-1 record after sweeping the L.A. Kings in Round 1 and making much shorter work of Minnesota than it seemed it would early in Game 5.

Golden Knights' key moment

The Knights were on the verge of falling behind the Utah Mammoth 3-1 in their first-round series, with the Mammoth holding a 4-3 lead on home ice halfway through the third period of Game 4. However, Brett Howden — more on him later — tied the game by tipping home a puck right in front of goalie Karel Vejmelka and Shea Theodore got the game-winner with 52 seconds left on the clock in the first OT stanza.

As it turned out, that was the first of consecutive 5-4 extra-time victories for Vegas, as it wrested control of the series back from Utah and closed out the set with three straight wins for a six-game triumph.

Six games versus Anaheim later, and Vegas is in the final four.

Colorado will win if...the power play keeps humming

Despite their overall success and all-world talent, the Avalanche only produced the 27th-best — or, put another way, sixth-worst — power play in the league during the regular season. The struggle continued at the outset of the playoffs, with Colorado failing to score a PPG in its first three games versus the Kings and finishing that series just 1-for-11 with the man advantage.

Then something clicked.

The Avs went 5-for-13 on the power play versus Minnesota, scoring a PPG in every game of the series except the final one.

MacKinnon, in particular, has caught fire on the man advantage, notching two goals and four points on the PP against the Wild. Kadri and Landeskog also kicked in three power-play points apiece as the top unit has caught fire in Colorado.

If a special-teams unit that was a deficiency for so long for the Avs suddenly becomes a consistent strength, Colorado will be tough to stop.

Vegas will win if...Tomas Hertl has awoken and Mark Stone returns

Hertl endured a brutal stretch of 29 straight games without a goal before finding the net late in Vegas' Game 4 loss to Anaheim. The big Czech scored again next time out and closed Round 2 with four points in the final three contests. It would be a massive boon to the Vegas attack if Hertl could kickstart some offence further down in the lineup.

Also, Stone left Game 3 versus Anaheim with a lower-body injury and Vegas is just a much different team with its captain in the lineup. Recall, this is a player who scored 73 points in just 60 games this year and had seven more in the nine post-season outings he played. And, of course, it's about so much more than the offence with Stone, who does everything right in all three zones.

We'll see if having nearly a week off between series helps Stone get back in the lineup.

Colorado's unsung hero

This will seem like recency bias because he just played the role of OT hero, but Brett Kulak has really been a steady influence for the Avs. The guy who went to two straight Cup finals with the Edmonton Oilers is back in the West final for a third straight year averaging 21:29 of ice per game in the playoffs, more than every other Colorado skater save Cale Makar and Devon Toews.



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Overall, Kulak — picked up from Pittsburgh after Edmonton discarded him in the ill-fated Tristan Jarry trade — has five points in nine post-season contests while going plus-3 for the Avs.

Vegas's unsung hero

Hello, Brett Howden. The guy who had 12 goals all season already has eight in the playoffs — four in Round 1, four more in Round 2 — including a strike in the series-clinching Game 6 win over Anaheim.

Howden is actually part of a newly constructed second line that has one Conn Smythe favourite, Mitch Marner, and another unsung hero in William Karlsson. "Wild Bill" didn't play for six months before returning for Game 1 of the series against Anaheim. He picked up three assists versus the Ducks, but most importantly, his stabilizing presence at centre freed Marner to flip back to the flank, where he's basically played his entire NHL career. Now, Karlsson between Marner and Howden is a dependably deadly unit for Vegas.

Series Schedule

* all games available on Sportsnet and Sportsnet+.

Game 1: Vegas at Colorado, Wed. May 20 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

Game 2: Vegas at Colorado, Fri. May 22 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

Game 3: Colorado at Vegas, Sun. May 24 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

Game 4: Colorado at Vegas, Tues. May 26 at 9 p.m. ET / 6 p.m. PT

*Game 5: Vegas at Colorado, Thurs. May 28 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

*Game 6: Colorado at Vegas, Sat. May 30 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

*Game 7: Vegas at Colorado, Mon. June 1 at 8 p.m. ET / 5 p.m. PT

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1391836 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Five off-season priorities for new Canucks management group

Iain MacIntyre

8–10 minutes

VANCOUVER — It took 28 days from the time Jim Rutherford fired Patrik Allvin just before the Vancouver Canucks' final game for both executives to be replaced when owner Francesco Aquilini announced on Thursday that Ryan Johnson is the new general manager and will report to co-presidents Henrik and Daniel Sedin.

Four weeks at the start of an extended off-season is little more than a short shift in the history of a National Hockey League franchise. But given the monumental scope of the Canucks' rebuilding project, it means the new management team must play a little catchup.

Daniel Sedin immediately left to watch the world championships in Switzerland, while Henrik Sedin and Ryan Johnson got to work internally, talking with the staff they've inherited. The new leaders of hockey operations have a bunch of key personnel decisions. Undoubtedly, some of them will be difficult.

One of the worst campaigns in Canucks history is being followed by one of the franchise's most important off-seasons. There is a mountain of work. Here are five issues that should be near the top of the list for Johnson and the Sedins.

Choose their coach

Johnson rightly noted during Thursday's introductory press conference that evaluating Adam Foote off of last season is "pretty unfair" and difficult to do. And yet Foote was fired Tuesday by a new regime empowered and responsible for deciding who stays and who goes.

Hiring Foote to replace experienced and successful coach Rick Tocchet was one of the biggest home-run cuts outgoing president Rutherford and former GM Allvin made a year ago. They needed continuity, wanted to appeal to defenceman Quinn Hughes and were desperate for a bounce-back season.

But the team bled scoring chances and goals and any continuity was hard to see as the Canucks struggled much of the season to play cohesive, dependable hockey. Hughes was traded, and the team plummeted 32 points in the standings, a nearly 200-point collapse in winning percentage that was easily the worst single-season decline in franchise history.

In some respects, Foote never had a chance. Management failed to provide the centre depth everyone knew the Canucks needed, a tsunami of injuries quickly swamped them and drowned starting goalie Thatcher Demko, and a mostly veteran team that was expected internally to return to the playoffs suddenly pivoted to a rebuild and back-filled the roster with early-20s players.

And if there wasn't enough impetus to deal with the issue expeditiously, the leading candidate to replace Foote, highly regarded Canucks minor-league coach Manny Malhotra, is already on the radar of other teams. Malhotra built his coaching foundation on player development, and has years-long relationships with Johnson and the Sedins.

Revamp hockey ops

Just as Foote deserves clarity, incumbent (and ground-breaking) assistant general managers Cammi Granato and Emilie Castonguay also need to know if they're going to be part of what comes next. Castonguay has adeptly managed the salary cap, been involved in contract negotiations and worked through CBA issues. Granato has overseen scouting, among other responsibilities.

But the Canucks, as management said during its press conference, must improve hockey operations. At minimum, with Johnson promoted to the GM's chair and the Sedins surrendering their important roles in player development, there is a giant organizational need for development staff and someone to run the farm team in Abbotsford. With a rebuild starting, player development has never been more important.

"Obviously, moving forward with all the prospects (and) draft picks, player development is going to be a huge part of this journey," Henrik Sedin said last week. "So that's obviously one thing we're looking to make better."

Amid historic salary-cap inflation, the need for a crack capologist isn't the priority that it was just a couple of years ago. But it's still vitally important long-term, as is expanding the organization's lean analytics department. And what about amateur scouting director Todd Harvey and his staff?

Johnson has a pile of decisions to make.

Get draft-ready

Rutherford and Allvin may have overseen the collapse of a team that was one win short of the conference final just two years ago, but they leave the Canucks with a rebuild head start that includes four picks among the first 41 selections of the entry draft in June. Vancouver selects third, 24th, 33rd and 41st and has 10 picks overall.

That number of early at-bats is not only rare for the Canucks, who over a three-draft period starting in 2020 had only two picks in the top 41 — two! — but rare by NHL standards. Last year, Nashville, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh each had four picks in that range. But before that, you had to go back to 2022 to find teams with that high-end volume. Only 10 times



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in the last 10 years has a team called out four names among the first 41. So when Rutherford said during his final week as president that the draft could be a “game-changer,” it wasn’t hyperbole.

Most of the planning and nearly all of the scouting, of course, have been done. But with a scouting background and tireless work ethic, Allvin probably did as many prospect viewings as any GM in the league. Without his influence, do things change for the Canucks at the draft? Probably not. But one wrinkle Johnson may have to deal with is how to handle top centre prospect Caleb Malhotra, whom the Canucks have long admired and should be available at No. 3, if dad Manny is to be the team’s next coach.

It would be foolish to think that top centre Elias Pettersson, after more than two years of grossly underperforming the richest contract in franchise history, will find a time machine this summer and re-appear at training camp in September as the top-10 player who earned that eight-year, \$92.8-million deal.

But it doesn’t mean Pettersson isn’t still useful as a two-way centre who contributes 50 or 60 points, blocks shots, plays on special teams and works hard. The new bosses have to decide if they can live with that. Part of that decision should be based on what they might still be able to get for Pettersson if they can actually trade the 27-year-old.

Recurring trade rumours and the accompanying public debate aren’t helping Pettersson or the Canucks, so settle the issue.

As we’ve written, Pettersson may be prickly with the media and outwardly miserable at times, but he is not a problem in the dressing room. Younger teammates may simply find him quiet, possibly quirky, but he doesn’t yell at or ridicule them, is supportive and tries hard when he plays. The Canucks can live with Pettersson — if they can live with his contract.

How big is the sale?

In one winter, the Canucks traded veterans Hughes, Kiefer Sherwood, Tyler Myers and Conor Garland to get the rebuild going. But it’s not enough.

Even with new management sharing old management’s conviction that you need some capable, character veterans around to teach the prospects and help the team stay competitive — the Canucks can not have another season in which they win only nine home games — the organization still possesses marketable assets, especially with salary retention.

We don’t think defencemen Filip Hronek and Marcus Pettersson are going anywhere, but Johnson and his staff must make decisions on incumbents like Brock Boeser, Jake DeBrusk, Kevin Lankinen and Thatcher Demko, weighing how valuable they are to the team versus their trade value. Of course, to get anywhere in a trade, management will have to work through trade protection for most.

Johnson also needs to decide whether to try to retain depth centre Teddy Blueger, who emerged as a key leader after this season’s trades, or let the 31-year-old leave in free agency. Those who covered Johnson with the Canucks late in his playing career will see strong similarities between him and Blueger.

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

Eric Engels

7–9 minutes

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 Dobes 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.

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.”



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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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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TSN.CA / NHL playoff preview: The Conference Finals

Travis Yost

8–10 minutes

The Conference Finals are set. After the Montreal Canadiens beat the Buffalo Sabres in a thrilling Game 7 on Monday night, we are left with just four contenders for the Stanley Cup.

The group notably includes the consensus favourites from each conference when the tournament started; the favoured Carolina Hurricanes in the East, and the Presidents' Trophy-winning Colorado Avalanche in the West.

Let's preview both matchups, starting in the Eastern Conference.

Montreal Canadiens vs. Carolina Hurricanes

Yost Habs 1 Yost Habs 1

What to know: This may be the ultimate rest-versus-rust series we have ever witnessed in the NHL. The Carolina Hurricanes made tidy work of both the Ottawa Senators and Philadelphia Flyers in a double sweep. Their close-out game against Philadelphia was on May 9, which means they'll have a 12-day layoff between the end of their second round series and the first game of the Eastern Conference Final. Coupled with how short the series was against Ottawa, Carolina's rest might be unprecedented — the team will have completed a 26-day stretch in which they played just five games!

The Montreal advantage: You won't find a team with better regular-season results against the Hurricanes than the Canadiens. We are only talking about three games, but all three games came after the turn of the calendar year and Montreal won all three in regulation, outscoring Carolina 15-8 (+7) in the process. Perhaps there was some puck luck there (Carolina's goaltenders in these games stopped a shockingly poor 75.0 per cent of shots faced), but even expected goals — blind to the performance of the respective goaltenders — were in favour of Montreal (50.5 per cent). And most encouragingly, if you are a Canadiens fan, a lot of that scoring success was through the big guns at the top of the lineup. The combination of Cole Caufield, Juraj Slafkovsky, and Nick Suzuki had eight goals in these three games. Simply put: there's credible evidence Montreal can skate with Carolina and then some, in stark contrast to most of the teams around the league.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Carolina advantage: Perhaps Ottawa ran out of steam. Perhaps Philadelphia was an underwhelming second-round opponent given what other teams (like Colorado facing a dangerous Minnesota club) had to offer in terms of quality of competition. Still, do not discount just how lethal this Hurricanes team is defensively. The Rod Brind'Amour era has been defined by an unrelenting forecheck and a pace of play that stifles opponents, and to dismiss how dominant this team is defending the run of play because of their 2026 postseason opponents would be foolish at best. In the last five seasons, they rank second in goals conceded (all situations) and first in expected goals conceded. What's different now is goaltender Frederik Andersen has been on a heater this postseason (95.0 per cent stop rate; +15 goals saved versus expected), a monstrous step up from what we saw from Andersen and Brandon Bussi in the regular season. Couple great goaltending with Carolina's ability to protect the most dangerous areas of the defensive zone, and you have a team that's very difficult to score on (defensive heat maps via HockeyViz):

Yost Habs 2 Yost Habs 2

Player to WATCH: It's the small but mighty Logan Stankoven. Lost in Carolina's double sweep was that much of the work was not completed by their top-line of Andrei Svechnikov, Sebastian Aho, and Seth Jarvis, who were relatively quiet through the first two rounds. It's been Stankoven (playing with Taylor Hall and Jackson Blake) who have been doing nearly all of the damage; Stankoven has seven goals in eight games and against the likes of Ottawa and Philadelphia, this trio won the goal differential battle 11-1 (+10). Stankoven was part of the colossal Mikko Rantanen trade between Dallas and Carolina last year, and he has fit in seamlessly with this Hurricanes group.

Pick: I don't want to overweight the regular season results, but it's clear Montreal's talent can skate with Carolina and coupled with the play of Jakub Dobes in net, I expect the Canadiens to be an absolute handful for Carolina – unquestionably their toughest draw of the postseason so far. That said, I think this is the year the Hurricanes get over the playoff hump. Carolina in six.

Vegas Golden Knights vs. Colorado Avalanche

Yost Avs Yost

What to Know: Colorado steamrolled a 112-point Dallas Stars team and a 104-point Minnesota Wild team that acquired superstar defenceman Quinn Hughes in the middle of the season; there's a reason they are the prohibitive favourite to win it all. But standing in their way is a daunting foe in the Vegas Golden Knights; a veteran-led team that plays within structure and one that has already shown it can slay the Colorado goliath. Remember, the last time Colorado won the Presidents' Trophy (2020-21), they ran into a game Vegas team seemingly unphased by their pace of play, with the Golden Knights advancing in six games.

The Vegas advantage: Vegas sleepwalks their way deep into the playoffs seemingly every season; the question this year – fairly, I would submit – concerns the quality of the roster. On one hand, they have been playing much better under John Tortorella after a late-season coaching change, and have found real goaltending stability – their biggest bugaboo in the regular season – through Carter Hart (89.1 per cent stop rate; +8.5 goals saved versus expected). On the other hand, Colorado is a decisive step up in quality of competition from the likes of Utah and Anaheim. I will continue to point to Vegas' special teams as a core strength though, even in a series like this. Their 9.6 goals per 60 minutes on the power play was third best during the regular season and they are still hovering around that average in the postseason. A lot of it has to do with personnel. There are few better playmakers in the game than the likes of Jack Eichel, Mitch Marner, and Tomas Hertl – add a finisher like the red-hot Pavel Dorofeyev (nine goals already this postseason), and you have the recipe for a lethal man advantage. The Avalanche must stay out of the penalty box in this round.

The Colorado advantage: When you think of the Avalanche, you think of a team four lines deep that can seemingly score on any shift – it's been

their calling card for years now and this season was no different. But this isn't the same Colorado team as we saw in seasons prior, and a key reason for that is material improvement at the goaltending position. Investments in the tandem of Scott Wedgewood and Mackenzie Blackwood has paid off handsomely. As a duo they stopped more than 91.0 per cent of shots faced this year (a staggering 50 goals above expected, it also should be noted) enroute to a Jennings Trophy. Great Colorado teams in years past have suffered through occasional goaltending meltdowns in the playoffs, but it's been sunshine and blue skies through the first two rounds here. Even amidst Hart stabilizing the Vegas net, there's little question in my mind which team has the goaltending advantage here, and that's Colorado. That's not something we have necessarily suggested in years past.

Player to WATCH: How can it not be Mitch "Made For May" Marner? Toronto Maple Leafs fans will balk at the nickname but he has been on absolute fire with Vegas in his first postseason, including what looks like the goal of the Stanley Cup Playoffs against Anaheim. Marner's 18 points lead all skaters in playoff scoring and there are no signs of that slowing down. The playmaking winger gets to play with two of the smartest players in the game in Mark Stone and William Karlsson, and it makes the Golden Knights very dangerous behind the Eichel-led top line.

Pick: I think this version of Vegas is much better than the one we saw during the regular season, and I wasn't surprised to hear Avs coach Jared Bednar talk about how difficult he thought this third-round battle would be. But it's difficult to find any flaw on this Colorado team amidst their defensive improvements. I'll take Colorado in six games to advance.

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