



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • July 8, 2026

The News & Observer

Hurricanes' first pick in NHL draft willing to wait his turn, keep working

By: Chip Alexander

Imagine being defenseman William Hakansson and being drafted by the Carolina Hurricanes.

There's excitement in knowing the Stanley Cup champions wanted you and picked you this year.

"I'm super pumped," the Swede said this week.

There's also the realization that the champions have many of their players under contract and returning, for next season and beyond, plus defensive prospects eager to play.

But no problem. You're 18 and in no real rush. You'll likely play in Sweden again in 2026-27 before making the jump to North America.

Hakansson, picked Saturday, June 28, in the second round of the NHL Draft, 51st overall, was in Raleigh this week for Carolina's prospect development camp. He said was able to watch the Canes in the playoffs and especially was impressed with the Canes' aggressive, in-your-face style of play on the back end.

"Their D corps, and the way they play, I think that fits me really well," he said. "It looks really fun."

"Nastiness" was a word Canes assistant general manager Darren Yorke used in describing Hakansson, who was the Canes' first pick in the draft Saturday after the team traded down out of the first round. It's almost like a badge of honor for the Stockholm native, who is listed at 6-foot-4 and 216 pounds.

Hakansson played 22 regular-season games and nine in the playoffs with Lulea in the Swedish Hockey League last season. He said one of his first texts Saturday, after being drafted, was from a Lulea teammate, Jesper Sellgren.

Sellgren was a sixth-round pick by the Hurricanes in the 2018 draft. The defenseman made the move to North America and helped the Chicago Wolves, Carolina's American Hockey League affiliate, win the league's Calder Cup in 2002.

But Sellgren would make the decision to return to Lulea and the SHL, signing a three-year contract, and has played in Sweden the past four seasons.

Hakansson said Sellgren never mentioned his days in the Hurricanes system or why he abandoned his hopes of advancing and playing in the NHL – something one of Sellgren's Chicago teammates, defenseman Jalen Chatfield, was able to do and now will have his name on the Stanley Cup.

Of the text Sellgren sent him Saturday, Hakansson said: "He talked good about the organization."

Sellgren is hardly a big guy at 5-11 and 180 pounds, which might have worked against him. Hakansson is just the opposite, tall and rangy with a big frame.

Hakansson helped win a gold medal for Sweden in the 2026 U20 World Junior Championship, and was ranked 12th among European skaters by NHL Central Scouting entering the draft.

The Canes have a number of younger D-men aching to get on the Canes roster and stay there. Charles Alexis-Legault, Joel Nystrom and Ronan Seeley got the chance to play some NHL games this season while others such as Dominik Badinka – a second-round pick in 2024 – await their turn in the AHL.

Asked to describe his play, Hakansson said: "Tough, big D, good reach, try to use my stick a lot, move the puck forward, close gaps. And don't let in any goals."

Hakansson also has been described as a "prankster" off the ice. Accurate?

"I don't know, I just like having fun," he said, smiling. "That's just part of my personality and I try to bring it around everywhere I go."

One day, he wants that to be the Hurricanes locker room.



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The Athletic

Grading every NHL team's free-agency moves so far this offseason

By: The Athletic NHL Staff

Four days into 2026 NHL free agency, the list of impact players remaining on the market of an already thin class is ... not lengthy. That hasn't stopped teams from making shocking moves to improve their rosters.

Has your favorite team gotten the help it needed?

The Athletic asked its NHL staff this week for their assessments of the early moves. The analysis is subjective to each beat, not based on a scale, and factors in a team's ability to make moves under the salary cap. Trades and re-signings since the season ended are also considered.

Here are the grades our writers assigned for the work done so far.

NHL free agency: Early winners and losers

Shayna Goldman and Madison Eades

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Anaheim Ducks: D

Their big move was trading Mason McTavish to St. Louis for futures, and they're betting on Nikita Klepov becoming a skilled NHL winger one day. But it's been an offseason of roster losses with the right side of their defense and depth forwards lost to free agency. Some were allowed to walk, but A.J. Greer is a pricey fourth-line winger, and Nick Jensen won't fill all the holes in the defense. Then they were hammered with the Flyers' massive offer sheet to Leo Carlsson, Anaheim's best player. It's been an underwhelming summer so far, and it could become disastrous if they don't match. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins: B-

The Bruins improved their offense by acquiring JJ Peterka for two first-round picks. Peterka, 24, should increase his production with greater ice time in Boston. But the Bruins did not upgrade their defense by acquiring Will Borgen and signing Connor Clifton. Neither pushes the offensive needle. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres: B

The Sabres weren't busy on July 1, but they made some sharp moves ahead of free agency to avoid long-term mistakes. Replacing Bowen Byram with Olen Zellweger and Louis Crevier gave the Sabres some needed cap savings. They still haven't added a forward, but Jarmo Kekäläinen believes that Buffalo's young players will take another step. Zach Benson's seven-year contract extension was also a good piece of business. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames: B+

The Flames weren't expected to be a busy team this offseason. But the moves they have made were smart. They flipped draft capital for a 23-year-old puck-moving defenseman in Šimon Nemec, and they received draft capital and a player for Blake Coleman and Olli Määttä. Connor Zary is reportedly on the market, so we'll wait to see how the rest of the Flames' offseason goes. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes: C

There wasn't much to do on a championship team that had nearly all its players signed for next season. Carolina took a run at signing John Carlson, trading for his rights before the opening of free agency, but the defenseman opted to sign in Tampa Bay. The Hurricanes also saw the end of Frederik Andersen's tenure with the club after he signed a one-year deal with Edmonton. Carolina still has cap space and a willingness to improve, but it may be more likely to do that via trade than what's left on the free-agent market. — Cory Lavelle

Chicago Blackhawks: C

Kyle Davidson finally took a big swing on an established player. The price Davidson paid to acquire Byram and extend him was substantial. Whether Byram is worth it and can prove to be a No. 1 defenseman will be judged by his play this season. The Blackhawks are banking on Byram elevating their whole group. Davidson also added a few role players to fill holes, but didn't bring in a proven player to play with Connor Bedard. The plan is for Roman Kantserov, last season's KHL leading goal scorer, and likely another young winger to start the season with Bedard. — Scott Powers

Jaden Schwartz signed a three-year, \$9.75 million deal with the Avalanche. Steph Chambers / Getty Images

Colorado Avalanche: B

It was a quiet July 1 for the Avalanche, which can often be a good thing. Colorado made only one signing of note, bringing in veteran winger Jaden Schwartz for three years at an incredibly reasonable \$3.25 million cap hit. Schwartz is coming off a season in Seattle where he played only 50 games and scored just 11 goals, but he's a solid middle-six winger with offensive skills that should shine on this fast-paced team. Also, locking up Brett Kulak for five years at \$4.5 million AAV earlier in the week was a good bit of business. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets: B

The big addition for the Blue Jackets took place before the draft, when they acquired Valeri Nichushkin from Colorado for three draft picks, including this year's second-rounder. Nichushkin gives them another top-six winger. The Blue



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Jackets also signed fourth-line winger Ryan Lomberg to boost the forecheck, and goaltender Pheonix Copley to push Elvis Merzljkins for the backup role behind Jet Greaves. Those moves, plus the departures of UFA forwards Boone Jenner and Mason Marchment, will give Columbus a different feel next season. But is it enough for the team to make a big stride forward? — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars: C

Had Zach Werenski not vetoed a trade to Dallas, this all would have looked quite a bit different. And if the Mavrik Bourque cap dump frees up enough money to re-sign Jason Robertson, it will have been worth it. But for now, all Dallas has to show for this offseason is the loss of Bourque, Ilya Lyubushkin and Alex Petrovic, and the return of depth forward Joel Kiviranta. Jim Nill is trying, but he still has plenty of work to do. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings: C+

The more accurate grade would be "incomplete." The most important moves for Detroit this offseason are still unfinished and could take a while. But the Red Wings did add solid players to address their needs, bringing in Viktor Arvidsson to help their five-on-five scoring, signing Daniil Tarasov as a backup goalie and trading for Keegan Kolesar to bring toughness and improved forechecking to the bottom six. This grade doesn't reflect the quality of those moves, which are more like a B, but rather it reflects how much work remains, especially with the Dylan Larkin trade. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers: A

The Oilers were top-heavy and needed to move the Darnell Nurse contract. The club also needed general manager Stan Bowman to address multiple needs with bona fide plug-and-play options. In adding goalies Frederik Andersen, Devon Levi, defensemen Ryan Shea and Shakir Mukhamadullin, along with forwards Kasperii Kapanen and Mathieu Joseph, Bowman delivered a focused and reasonable July 1. Not all decisions will work out, but there's depth in these moves and even some cap room to address additional needs such as a scoring winger. — Allan Mitchell

Florida Panthers: B

The big bet for the Panthers was Brady Tkachuk. That's where they put their newfound cap space and energy, and that's where the roster will have the most positive change. Swapping out the goalies for a couple of questionable bets in Jacob Markström and Akira Schmid will be interesting to monitor, but given that this will be a much healthier team and how deep it is up front, Florida should be a contender yet again. — James Mirtle

Los Angeles Kings: B-

We'll give Ken Holland credit for striking sound extensions for Brandt Clarke and Scott Laughton, where their value could increase further as the cap continues to rise. But the free-agent additions only made them older. Mats Zuccarello still has game. Erik Haula and Corey Perry have remained effective. But L.A. is still shy a true top-six center and didn't bring in a notable mobile, puck-moving upgrade for the defense. Sorry, Erik Gustafsson isn't nearly enough. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild: C

As of now, the Wild still have not added that long-coveted No. 1 center, and they've lost 50-plus goals and 150 points of production in Mats Zuccarello, Vladimir Tarasenko and Marcus Johansson, replacing them with Blake Coleman, Maxim Shabanov and kinda sorta Bobby Brink. Coleman should add some offensive pop, and along with Olli Määtä, should help the penalty kill. But scoring is a concern. — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens: C+

The Canadiens added yet another team-friendly deal to their young core by signing Ivan Demidov to an eight-year extension worth \$9.15 million a year. The three-year extension worth roughly \$5.4 million a year given to Jakub Dobeš has some risk, but not much. Still, the Canadiens have not accomplished their stated goal of improving their team compared to last season, at least not yet, and until they do so it is difficult to give them a stronger grade than this. — Arpon Basu

Mavrik Bourque was traded from the Stars to the Predators. Peter Creveling / Imagin Images

Nashville Predators: B

Chris MacFarland's first signature move as Preds GM was the trade to get Mavrik Bourque from Dallas, sending a second and third and taking on Ilya Lyubushkin. If Bourque becomes a top-six staple with increased opportunity, it will be looked back on as brilliant. He's making the roster younger and faster; next up, can MacFarland find takers for any well-paid veteran players? — Joseph Rexrode

New Jersey Devils: B

New Devils GM Sunny Mehta got a strong return for Šimon Nemec, and he was able to move Jacob Markström's contract and got two quality forwards, including Evan Rodrigues, in return. He got Nico Hischier's extension done, and he still could add more with two first-round picks in each of the next two drafts. Big question: Is Jake Allen, Nico Daws and David Rittich enough in net, or will the team need to add there? — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders: C+

The direction of the Islanders is honestly just confusing after a trade deadline that took a promising retool off the rails. This team should have been all over trade targets such as JJ Peterka and Jordan Kyrou to add top-six talent in the right age range for this team. Instead, Anders Lee walked in free agency and signed a reasonable contract in Utah, and there's no clear replacement for him. Matias Maccelli is a nice add, but no other offseason move really moves the needle. — Shayna Goldman

New York Rangers: B

The Rangers made moves to give themselves an above-average defensive corps to go along with elite goaltending, and the forward group added punch with Pavel Dorofeyev and Oliver Bjorkstrand. The team is unquestionably better than it was at the end of last season, but Chris Drury still has to find a way to turn it into a true contender. And moving three first-round picks (two for Dorofeyev, one for Marcus Pettersson) comes with risk. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators: C-



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The Senators' offseason will be highlighted by the loss of Brady Tkachuk. All things considered, they could've done worse than three first-round picks and a second-round pick in return. But they could've added a player, and it all leaves fans wanting more. William Eklund is a good pickup from San Jose, and they got two prospects out of it, but it's not entirely clear if their following moves, such as trading for Samuel Ersson when he could've been a free agent or accommodating Andre Burakovsky's \$5.5 million contract, actually make them better. — Julian McKenzie

The Flyers signed Leo Carlsson to a five-year offer sheet with an average annual value of \$18 million on Friday. William Liang / Imagn Images

Philadelphia Flyers: C+

If the Flyers actually do land Leo Carlsson after offer-sheeting him on Friday, this will be a solid A+. If not — and at this rate, it's difficult to envision the Ducks not matching — they snagged a solid depth piece in free agency with Noel Acciari, who should give their fourth line a boost, and upgraded their backup goalie position, too, with Joseph Woll. If Carlsson doesn't become a Flyer, this is still a team in playoff-bubble territory. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins: B-

Kyle Dubas did nothing to hurt the Penguins' long-term outlook, which is important. He's essentially trying to emulate last summer's short-term free agency success with this class. That will be hard to pull off. The left side of his blue line appears to be a problem. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks: B

Mason Marchment can be a nuisance with some scoring touch, so the Sharks add some grit to balance out all their playmaking skill on their loaded top three lines. And they addressed some obvious needs on defense with Jacob Trouba and Darnell Nurse, who was another pricey addition through trade. Those two will help now, but those contracts might age poorly. But with the battle-tested duo and Michael Kesselring, San Jose should ice an improved blue line. If the goaltending holds up, this should be a playoff team. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken: C

The Kraken didn't do anything too reckless or irresponsible. The Bobby McMann extension is a bit long, as they would've been better off paying a higher salary to keep the term more manageable. They incurred too much opportunity cost in bridging Mackie Samoskevich, and they failed to land the impact superstar when Jason Robertson declined to sign an extension with Seattle. Chase Reid falling to No. 7 in the draft was a steal value-wise, and he may be the superstar the Kraken need more than anything, but otherwise it was another summer treading water. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues: B+

The Blues needed centers, a veteran defenseman and toughness, and they got all three. They traded for Anaheim's Mason McTavish, who will be the No. 2 center, and drafted centers Tynan Lawrence (No. 11 overall) and Maddox Dagenais (No. 16). They traded for defenseman Brandon Carlo, which will allow 2024 first-round pick Adam Jiricek to grow at his own rate. And they signed enforcer Ross

Johnston, who will make opponents think twice. None of the moves were flashy, but they were necessary. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning: B

The Lightning probably should have tried to get a little younger and faster this summer. Ilya Mikheyev, at least, addresses the latter. His speed and disruptive game should be a real plus in the bottom six and on the penalty kill. John Carlson's declining footspeed is a little concerning, but his offensive dependability on a two-year deal is a great bet, and less risky than a long-term deal for Darren Raddysh. The one real head-scratcher, though, is a five-year commitment to a fourth-liner such as Jeffrey Viel. — Shayna Goldman

Sergei Bobrovsky signed a three-year, \$21 million contract with the Maple Leafs. Carmen Mandato / Getty Images

Toronto Maple Leafs: B-

Whether this grade goes up or down will depend on whether the big bets on Darren Raddysh and Sergei Bobrovsky pay off. Both have something to prove. For Raddysh, that last year wasn't a one-off. For Bobrovsky, that last year wasn't the beginning of the end. The depth forward additions make sense — particularly the added variety at center — even if the cost was a little high. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Mammoth: B+

Utah added a top-six center without surrendering any prime future assets in the Vincent Trocheck deal. Signing Anders Lee to a reasonable three-year deal is also a nice addition. His size and net-front skill set will be a sweet complement to the team's fast, dynamic forward group. — Harman Dayal

Vancouver Canucks: B

The Canucks have had a solid rebuilding offseason to date. The club probably would've been even better off if it could've subtracted more, but pulled off two subtractions — Nils Högländer and Marcus Pettersson — got paid, and replaced them adequately with players attached to no acquisition cost, less term and some sell-on value to aid in continued accumulation. Vancouver drafted a bunch of good prospects, revamped the character and feel of its dressing room, did nothing reckless and added some much-needed high-character people to the group. A solid B. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights: C

It wasn't a disastrous start to free agency, but for a team that typically finds great value, this year felt different. The seven-year extension to Rasmus Andersson at \$8.5 million per season felt a bit rich, compared to how he performed for the Golden Knights. Trading Kaedan Korczak and his \$3.25 million cap hit to Pittsburgh felt like a solid cost-saving move until they signed their much-older bottom-pair defenseman, Jeremy Lauzon, for six years at \$4 million AAV. Vegas lost top-scorer Pavel Dorofeyev and doesn't currently have much space to replace him, so it likely got worse this summer. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals: B+

There's some long-term risk with the Alex Tuch contract, but between him, the excellent trade for Jordan Kyrou, adding Boone Jenner and the cherry on top of Alex Ovechkin's return, the Capitals improved significantly and have a chance



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to emerge as the second-best team in the Metro Division. A lot of hockey fans made fun of the Vincent Desharnais contract, but I don't think people realize how dramatically his game improved in San Jose, and how he's quietly become an analytical, shutdown darling. — Harman Dayal

Winnipeg Jets: B+

Winnipeg's two key signings, Stuart Skinner and Mario Ferraro, are solid bets at sensible cap hits. Skinner in

particular gives the Jets flexibility, with a contract and ability level that make him a serviceable starter, a strong tandem option, or even Connor Hellebuyck's backup if Hellebuyck is somehow not moved. Ferraro is a legitimate third-pairing defenseman. Everything that's been done has been good, but Hellebuyck's uncertain future and a big hole on the second line loom large. — Murat Ates



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Back where it belongs

By: Cory Lavalette

Perfect Storm: The Carolina Hurricanes' Incredible Run to the 2026 Stanley Cup is a new book chronicling and commemorating this past season, written by North State Journal's managing editor Cory Lavalette. It's available at Triumph Books' website and at retail bookstores around North Carolina. Here's an excerpt from the book's introduction.

Twenty years after lifting the Stanley Cup as captain and eight years after he took the head coaching job with the goal of returning hockey relevancy back to Raleigh, Rod Brind'Amour has the Hurricanes back on top of the NHL.

Carolina completed its road to redemption in Game 6, beating the Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup final to win the franchise's second championship.

Carolina's two-decade climb — one filled with missteps, few highs and, once Brind'Amour was hired, a return to the top of the league without the end goal fulfilled — wasn't made in a day.

"How many coaches can do their job where they live and where they're from, had a footprint in everything that's going on here over the last 20 years?" Brind'Amour said in 2021 when he signed a contract extension. "I don't know what kind of value you can put on that."

Dundon also infused cash into a payroll that often lagged behind the rest of the league under the previous regime. The owner's decisions to promote Don Waddell to general manager and give Eric Tulsy a bigger role in the organization before elevating him to GM two years ago also helped turn around a franchise mired in mediocrity.

Waddell put his stamp on the franchise with several bold moves that helped the team return to the playoffs under Brind'Amour's guidance, and Tulsy took it to the next level since taking over June 18, 2024.

With a core of players acquired by the three general managers who came before him — Jim Rutherford, who orchestrated the trade that brought Jordan Staal to Raleigh in 2012 and drafted Jaccob Slavin two summers later; Ron Francis, who selected Sebastian Aho in the second round of the 2015 draft; and Waddell, who was in the big seat when the team traded for Jordan Martinook, signed Jalen Chatfield, drafted Andrei Svechnikov second overall, acquired the first round pick that led to the franchise landing Seth Jarvis, and also selected Jackson Blake, Pyotr Kochetkov and Alexander Nikishin — Tulsy reshaped the rest of the team in two summers.

Big swings that ultimately failed didn't deter Tulsy. Most notably, he dealt away Mikko Rantanen in a swap that

landed the team Logan Stankoven and Taylor Hall along with a surplus of draft capital that helped him trade for K'Andre Miller.

Tulsy signed last summer's biggest free agent, Nikolaj Ehlers, and previous under-the-radar free agent signings — Shayne Gostisbehere and Sean Walker on defense, William Carrier and Eric Robinson up front — were supplemented by moves that drew even less fanfare, such as trading for Mark Jankowski and claiming Brandon Bussi.

When injuries struck during the 2025-26 regular season, Carolina's organizational depth came through. Rookie defensemen Joel Nystrom and Charles Alexis Legault stepped in and kept the Hurricanes near the top of the conference.

The regular season was much like the last few under Brind'Amour, with Carolina staying near the top of the standings, though this year included sending several of its players to Italy midseason for the Olympics. Three returned with medals — including Slavin's gold with Team USA.

Meanwhile, Bussi proved to be exactly what Carolina needed when Kochetkov was lost to injury and Frederik Andersen stumbled through the regular season.

Down the stretch, Andersen returned to form, leading the Hurricanes to the top seed in the Eastern Conference. He got the nod in net to start the playoffs, and Carolina steamrolled through the first three rounds of the Stanley Cup playoffs, losing just once in three series against the Senators, Flyers and Canadiens.

The matchup with the Golden Knights proved to be more difficult than the previous three rounds, and Bussi stepped in for Andersen in the third period of Game 3. The Golden Knights won that game despite a furious four-goal comeback by the Hurricanes, with a fluke bounce getting past Bussi in double overtime.

But Bussi — who at 27 had never played in an NHL playoff game and was now on hockey's biggest stage — won Games 4 and 5, and in Game 6 earned his first career playoff shutout.

And after the Stanley Cup made its way through the Hurricanes' players, each lifting it triumphantly over their heads, it again found its way to Brind'Amour, two decades after he realized his childhood dream of winning it as a player.

He raised it again — this time not fulfilling a lifetime goal but rather one he shared with the players, coaches, staff and fans of the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Stanley Cup is back in Raleigh, right where Brind'Amour always thought it belonged.



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Looking Ahead: The 2026-27 Organizational Outlook

By: Walt Ruff

Keeping you up to date with who is under contract with the Canes moving toward the fall

RALEIGH, N.C. - As the summer rolls along, the Carolina Hurricanes are in a strong position to put together another promising season.

Below is a continuously updated look at who is under contract and where they could be come the fall.

These "depth charts" are not official in any capacity and are largely based on lines and pairings from each team's final game during the 2026 postseason.

The Big Club

Left Wing

Center

Right Wing

Left Defense

Right Defense

Goalies

Martinook

Aho

Svechnikov

Slavin

Chatfield

Bussi

Hall

Stankoven

Blake

Miller

Walker

Kochetkov

Ehlers

Staal

Jarvis*

Gostisbehere

Nikishin [RFA]

Carrier

Jankowski

Robinson*

Valimaki

Deslauriers

Kotkaniemi



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Seth Jarvis is expected to miss the start of the 2026-27 regular season due to offseason shoulder surgery. He is slated to be out approximately 4-6 months from the end of June.

While it remains to be seen who will fill Jarvis' spot, when asked about Bradly Nadeau, General Manager Eric Tulsky said, "He absolutely will be in the conversation if we need a call-up at the start of the year. I think it would be a good opportunity for him to get some runway."

Eric Robinson underwent knee surgery at the end of June, rendering him out for about 6-8 weeks. He is expected to be available come training camp in September.

Tulsky also said at his NHL Draft availability that summer re-signing Juuso Valimaki could compete for a spot on the blue line in Raleigh after a strong campaign with Chicago (AHL). If Mike Reilly goes elsewhere in free agency, Valimaki could be first in line for the role, unless another signing is brought in or a move is made.

The Chicago Wolves (AHL)

Left Wing

Center

Right Wing

Left Defense

Right Defense

Goalies

Nadeau

Robidas [RFA]

Unger Sorum

Seeley [RFA]

Nystrom

Primeau [RFA]

Trikozov

Ryabkin

Jaaska

Fransen

Legault

Sawchenko

Neuchev [RFA]

Cerrato

Heimosalmi [RFA]

Badinka

Khazheyev

Leyh (AHL)

Gagnon (AHL)

Montgomery

There are spots to fill for the Canes' American Hockey League affiliate, but these are often filled as the offseason progresses.

Forwards David Gagnon and Ethan Leyh are on American Hockey League contracts.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Carolina Offseason Tidbits: Volume 3

By: Bob Wage

I hope everyone had a great holiday weekend! I'm afraid there is not much going on to discuss regarding the Carolina Hurricanes at the moment, (officially anyway).

They did sign another goalie for depth, Zach Sawchenko. More information can be found [here](#).

The biggest "non" news for Carolina is the lack of progress in the re-signing or trading of rookie defenseman, Alexander Nikishin. There are plenty of rumors and scuttlebutt out there, but there is nothing official.

Rumors:

A deal was almost done with the Rangers, but Nikishin's camp would not agree with the contract offered by New York.

Currently there are negotiations with St. Louis and other teams.

According to the "Fourth Period", the Canes are trying to include Jesperi Kotkaniemi in a Nikishin deal, perhaps complicating things.

The Canes are rumored to be involved in another offer sheet to an un-named player.

They are not completely out of the Connor Hellebuyck conversation yet.

Speaking of offer sheets, how about that \$18 million AAV offer sheet for Leo Carlsson? Yikes!



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Hurricanes begin active offseason following Stanley Cup victory

By: Haley O'Neill

Fresh off their Stanley Cup victory, the Carolina Hurricanes entered the 2026 NHL Draft looking to complement their championship core while continuing to build for future postseason success.

The Hurricanes began the draft with just four selections, but turned their first-round pick into additional assets through a series of trades. Carolina sent the No. 31 overall pick to the Nashville Predators for two second-round picks, No. 42 and No. 57. General manager Eric Tulsky then dealt No. 42 to the Calgary Flames and No. 57 to the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for four picks, ending with six total positions to fill.

"We have several people on the board whom we like," Tulsky said. "We wanted to build to try and get more than one of them. We don't have a lot of picks this year, and I saw an opportunity to accumulate an extra pick and hopefully pick up two guys going forward."

As the day concluded, Carolina acquired two goalies, one defenseman, and three forwards in rounds two through six. The Canes focused on adding size, skill and depth to its prospect pipeline.

With the Canes' first pick — No. 51 overall — they selected Swedish defenseman William Hakansson. The 6-foot-4 blueliner ranked 12th among international skaters by NHL Central Scouting, and helped Sweden capture gold at the 2026 IIHF World Junior Championship. Hakansson brings size and professional experience to the team despite being only 18 years old.

"I just [felt] happiness being there with my family," Hakansson said. "They helped me, and you can totally see them enjoying it, and friends and family back home as well. It was a really fun moment to spend with them."

The Hurricanes continued to strengthen their offensive line by selecting center Wiggo Sorensson and wingers Zachary Lansard and Michael Berchild.

Carolina rounded out the draft class with two goalies, Ryder Fetterolf and Zachary Jovanovski. Fetterolf, selected 125 overall, ended the 2025-26 season with a .923 save percentage and earned the Goaltender of the Year award from both the Canadian Hockey League and Ontario Hockey League.

Although none of the draft selections are expected to contribute immediately, it is understood that adding high-level prospects remains an important part of the process to sustain the organization's long-term success.

"If you're not picking in the top three or five or seven spots, the guys we're drafting are probably at least two or three years away from making it to the league and probably four or

five years away from really being a significant impact player," Tulsky said. "Who knows what our needs are going to be three or five years from now?"

Although it's hard to look ahead, finding potential advantages over other teams remains a priority for Carolina.

"We've had a lot of years where we were good enough to win if things went our way, and this was the year that went our way," Tulsky said. "That can't make you complacent. Other teams are taking steps. Things change year to year. We need to keep finding ways to get better every time we can"

Outside of the draft, the Canes have two other challenges to deal with. Tulsky announced that center Seth Jarvis and winger Eric Robinson will both be out for an extended period of time. Jarvis, who underwent shoulder surgery after putting it off for a few years, is expected to be out four to six months, leaving a gap in the lineup. Bradly Nadeau — winger for Carolina's American Hockey League affiliate — is one possible solution.

"[Nadeau] has been great in the [AHL]," Tulsky said. "He had two call-up stints this past year, and I thought the first one, he looked like someone who is acclimating for the first time. The second one he looked like someone who is acclimated, and you could see the progression. So he absolutely will be in the conversation if we need to call up at the start of the year."

Robinson is expected to be sidelined for only six to eight weeks due to a knee injury that required surgery, but will likely be back on the ice before opening night.

The Hurricanes have also been active on the trade log. Tulsky traded the team's seventh-round draft pick to the Anaheim Ducks for rights to pending unrestricted free agent defenseman John Carlson. The Canes have until July 1 to strike a deal before Carlson heads to the open market and can negotiate with other teams. The move highlighted Carolina's ability to use draft picks to bring in other players for immediate roster upgrades while still building a solid pool of prospects.

"We're always looking to make the team better," Tulsky said. "The situation right now, everybody on the team is under contract, aside from one or two players who are in depth roles and one key piece from our lineup. That focuses a lot of the conversation there. We are looking at everything we can do to make the team better."

The draft may be over, but the Hurricanes' efforts to build a stronger roster have just begun. Starting July 1, the Canes can add to their lineup by signing free agents, after spending the coming days evaluating unclaimed players throughout the league.



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ESPN / NHL free agency 2026: Grades, fits for all the big signings – ESPN

Greg Wyshynski and Kristen Shilton and Ryan S. Clark

19–24 minutes

Jul 7, 2026, 05:00 PM

The 2026 NHL offseason has already been busy with a number of huge trades and the NHL draft.

As the free agent deals roll in, ESPN NHL reporters Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton and Greg Wyshynski will be grading the big-name signings, including the player's fit with his new team, terms of the deal and more.

We'll continue to assess the most notable moves through the offseason, so check back for fresh grades as deals are consummated; the newest grades will be listed first. Contract terms are per year.

Draft recap: All 224 picks

Grades for all 32 teams

Winners and losers

July 7

Claude Giroux, RW

Ottawa Senators

The terms: One year, \$5 million

Grade: B

Where does he fit?

If only the Senators had that answer already...

All jokes aside, Giroux will continue to be part of the Senators' top nine -- and in a role that's more likely to be in the middle six should he replicate what he did in 2025-26.

Giroux was sixth on the Senators in points last season (49), while his 14 goals were tied with Jake Sanderson for ninth.

Of course, Ottawa's top-nine forward dynamic is slated to have a different look overall. This offseason saw the Senators trade captain Brady Tkachuk while bringing in Andre Burakovsky and William Eklund.

Does it make sense?

Perhaps the strongest indication that it made sense for the Senators to re-sign Giroux, 38, is that he was rumored to return to the Philadelphia Flyers. Why? Because it shows there's a market for a player such as Giroux that has as much to do with off-ice as on-ice reasons.

It starts with the belief that one team can never have too many forwards of top-nine caliber. Especially if one of them is a proven veteran who can score within your system. Giroux has more than 1,100 points in his career.

Another factor is the experience Giroux provides the Senators' locker room. The Sens were the 17th-youngest team last season and one of the youngest that reached the Stanley Cup playoffs.

This coming campaign will be Giroux's fifth in Ottawa, and having his experience on the roster can help shape the club's post-Tkachuk culture. -- Clark

July 1

John Carlson, D

Tampa Bay Lightning

The terms: Two years, \$8.5 million

Grade: B

Where does he fit?

Where Darren Raddysh used to fit. Raddysh had a career season (70 points in 73 games) in his free agent walk year. The Lightning weren't willing to give him the term he was seeking at the salary that he wanted, so they did a sign-and-trade with the Toronto Maple Leafs, who landed Raddysh on an eight-year term with an \$8.5 million cap hit.



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That left the Lightning with a hole on the right side of their defense. Enter Carlson, 17-year NHL veteran and the next best offensive defenseman on the free agent market. The Carolina Hurricanes traded for his negotiating rights from the Anaheim Ducks but couldn't close the deal. So Carlson hit July 1 and the Lightning secured him for two seasons ... at the same cap number as Raddysch (\$8.5 million), which is cheeky.

Carlson had 60 points in 71 games last season between the Ducks and the Washington Capitals, with whom he played 1,159 games and won the Stanley Cup in 2018.

Does it make sense?

Given the circumstances, Carlson made a lot of sense for the Lightning. They had to replace Raddysch with another puck-moving defenseman. They were unable to land Columbus star Zach Werenski, who reportedly had the Lightning on his short list of approved destinations before recommitting himself to the Blue Jackets. So Carlson gives them offensive pop from the blue line, but without the long-term contract that Raddysch was seeking.

Carlson can quarterback a power play and play upward of 24 minutes per game. He's a strong even-strength scorer. Carlson finish 10th in the NHL last season in passes that led to shots on goal (11.27 per 60 minutes, all situations). While defense has never been his calling card, he's generally not a liability.

While the short-term deal for a 36-year-old defenseman should be lauded, it doesn't change the fact that the Lightning are likely to have three important players on the blue line that are 35 and older next season: Carlson, Victor Hedman (35) and Ryan McDonagh (37). That's understandable, given the Lightning are in win-now mode. But it doesn't roll back their respective odometers. -- Wyshynski

Frederik Andersen, G

Edmonton Oilers

The terms: One year, \$2.8 million

Grade: A-

Where does he fit?

Andersen will have an opportunity to be Edmonton's new starting goaltender in a logjam that currently includes three potential candidates to backstop the Oilers. Edmonton picked up Devon Levi in a trade with Buffalo earlier Wednesday, and Tristan Jarry was already entrenched with the club (on a deal that spans two more seasons with an AAV of \$5.375 million).

With Andersen also on board, coach Mike Babcock can pit the netminders against one another in training camp and see who comes out with a job. Andersen is the eldest at 36 years old but is coming off an impressive campaign with Carolina, where he was (mostly) excellent guiding them to a Stanley Cup Final -- at which point an injury sidelined him and paved the way for Brandon Bussi to take over.

Earlier in the playoff run, Andersen was performing better than he had in years, and if he can remain healthy, this one-year deal (laden with performance bonuses) could be a bargain for Edmonton.

Does it make sense?

The Oilers have tried just about everything to get a reliable goaltending tandem in place; Andersen is the latest veteran they are acquiring to make that happen. Jarry is hardly reliable given his record for the Oilers last season (9-6-2 with an .858 save percentage), and Levi didn't appear in a single NHL game for the Sabres last season.

So, Edmonton is letting Andersen bet on himself; he's earning just \$1 million in salary with an additional \$1.8 available in various bonuses for games played. It puts the onus on Andersen to get his time in the crease. There's familiarity there too between Andersen and new Oilers coach Mike Babcock -- some of Andersen's most productive and consistent years were with Toronto when Babcock was behind the bench. Granted, that was from 2016 to 2019, but perhaps Babcock can pull the most out of Andersen again.

Either way, it's a low-risk decision for Edmonton that puts a tested, experienced goalie in its mix who has a recent championship pedigree. Which is exactly what Edmonton is trying to achieve. -- Shilton

Boone Jenner, F

Washington Capitals

The terms: 4 years, \$5.75 million AAV

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

Jenner will come in to boost the Capitals' third line using his collection of well-established skills. The long-time captain in Columbus is approaching his mid-30s but is still a reliable contributor (with 13 goals and 38 points in 67 games last year) and a playmaker who can move the puck and give Washington some net-front presence.

The Capitals have clearly prioritized adding size to their forward group in the offseason, and Jenner (6-foot-2) fits the bill there. He also is an experienced leader and will bring his knowledge to a Capitals' dressing room that is still uncertain about whether its own captain (Alex Ovechkin) will be returning next season.

Does it make sense?

In the short term, yes. How well Jenner can live up to the deal in its third and fourth seasons remains to be seen. But again, Washington doesn't know (or isn't saying, yet) if Ovechkin will return; and while Jenner isn't about to replace what Ovechkin does, he gives the Capitals a good veteran player.

The Capitals' lack of center depth cost them last year -- especially when Pierre-Luc Dubois went down with an injury -- and Washington has been serious about getting that shored up for the coming season (and beyond). The Capitals already had targeted Alex Tuch and Jordan Kyrou in previous trades (with Buffalo and St. Louis, respectively) to get set in their top six on the wing. And putting Jenner in the mix shows they are serious about improving offensively down the middle too. (Although, Jenner can play on the wing, as well, underscoring his versatility for the Caps.) -- Shilton

Oliver Bjorkstrand, F

New York Rangers

The terms: 1 year, \$4.5 million

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

Adding Bjorkstrand has a chance to pay off for the Rangers in a few ways.

The first is the consistency. Bjorkstrand is going to get double-figure goals, and he is a five-time 20-goal scorer. Another facet of that consistency is he rarely misses games, playing in 80, 81, 82, 79 and 80 games across the past five campaigns.

Does it make sense?

Perhaps the second reason this could work out well for the Rangers depends on how they look going into the trade deadline. There's a chance they could miss the playoffs again next season, considering they finished last in the extremely competitive Eastern Conference.

If they are in a playoff push, Bjorkstrand will give them someone who can be counted on for two-way play in those crucial moments. And if they are not in the playoff discussion? His one-year contract could allow them to receive some draft capital from a contending team. -- Clark

Sergei Bobrovsky, G

Toronto Maple Leafs

The terms: 3 years, \$7 million AAV

Grade: B

Where does he fit?

The Maple Leafs had crease-related questions following last month's trade of Joseph Woll to Philadelphia (and subsequent move of an asset from that transaction -- Samuel Ersson -- to Ottawa). Would it be Anthony Stolarz carrying the load alongside youngster Dennis Hildeby? Or would GM John Chayka get Stolarz some veteran help? Chayka did the latter



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by going all-in on two-time Stanley Cup champion and two-time Vezina Trophy winner Sergei Bobrovsky (who, ironically, was Stolarz's partner on the Florida Panthers' Cup run in 2023-24).

The only question now is -- what version of Bobrovsky lands in Toronto? Is it Bob at his (late-career) best, carrying the Panthers to three consecutive Cup Finals with high-caliber playoff performances? Or is Bobrovsky's below-average showing in 2025-26 (with a 27-23-1 record and .877 SV%, the worst he has generated in a full NHL season) more of what he'll deliver for the Leafs as their No. 1 or No. 2 in net? Toronto is banking on Bobrovsky to rebound.

Does it make sense?

Toronto needed a second, experienced goaltender (no disrespect to Hildeby). Bobrovsky fits the bill. He is tried and tested, has a relationship with Stolarz and has embraced different roles in recent years, being both Florida's go-to guy and a supportive backup when necessary. It's just an interesting decision -- and investment -- by the Leafs given that it looked like the wheels were coming off for Bobrovsky last season.

There's a long history of success for Bobrovsky, though, so it's a good bet he can bounce back with a new opportunity. His postseason numbers through both Panthers Cup runs were strong (with a .906 SV% in 2024 and .914 SV% in 2025) and there's no accounting for that sort of championship pedigree in a town that's starving to finally manufacture some of its own. The term of Bobrovsky's deal -- given he'll be 38 when next season begins -- could come back to bite Toronto (quickly). But if the Leafs can get a solid two years out of Bobrovsky, then ultimately, it's a signing that was worth making. -- Shilton

Jacob Trouba, D

San Jose Sharks

The terms: 4 years, \$8.25 million AAV

Grade: B-

Where does he fit?

The Sharks are one of the Western Conference's fastest rising contenders thanks to the generational talent of Macklin Celebrini and a collection of great young forwards surrounding him. What San Jose didn't have before this offseason was a defensive corps to support them, which is why GM Mike Grier made the blue line his priority.

The first step was acquiring Michael Kesselring from the Buffalo Sabres. The next step was signing Trouba, 32, who walked away from the Anaheim Ducks after two seasons. He's a 13-year NHL veteran, a former captain with the Rangers and brings a physicality that the Sharks needed from their defensemen.

Does it make sense?

This signing is going to make the bottom of a lot of free agency rankings and report cards. Trouba is 32 and has lost a step defensively. That makes a four-year term suspect and an \$8.25 million cap hit open to criticism. But I'm going to zag here: I like this for San Jose. Trouba does two things really well that can help out the Sharks. His breakout passing remains strong, which will come in handy with this collection of fast scoring forwards. The other thing is Trouba's calling card: Delivering hard, sometimes injurious hits from the back end. The Sharks have some physicality up front, but didn't really have a defenseman that could strike fear in opposing puck carriers that Trouba does.

The years? Given his erosion of skills, that could be an issue. The money? The Sharks have nothing but cap space in the next few years. Add in the veteran leadership component and his familiarity with the division and this signing is better than what some of the reactions are going to indicate. -- Wyshynski

Stuart Skinner, G

Winnipeg Jets

The terms: 2 years, \$3.75 million annually

Grade: A-

Where does he fit?

At minimum? This is the Jets getting a proven goaltender with a manageable cap hit who can back up Connor Hellebuyck with the intent it should lessen the burden on the three-time Vezina Trophy winner.

Or this is the Jets getting a jump start on the fact they would have an experienced NHL starting goalie if they decide to trade Hellebuyck.

Does it make sense?

The decision around Hellebuyck's future is the most pressing item facing the Jets because of its short-and long-term impact. By getting Skinner, this at least gives the Jets a chance to evaluate all options knowing they'll have someone with experience if and when the time comes to part with the 2025 Hart Trophy winner. -- Clark

Jack Roslovic, F

Toronto Maple Leafs

The terms: 2 years, \$4 million annually

Grade: B

Where does he fit?

Roslovic going to the Carolina Hurricanes in 2024-25 saw him tie his previous career high in goals with 22 in 81 games. His lone year with the Edmonton Oilers led to him scoring 21 goals in 69 games.

Adding another consistent 20-goal scorer to a team that was 16th in goals per game during the 2025-26 season should help. He'll provide the Leafs with a top-nine option that has a chance to help them improve from a lottery team back into one competing for the playoffs.

Does it make sense?

Much of that depends upon if the version of Roslovic the Leafs receive is the one that's shown consistency over the last two seasons.

There were times in Roslovic's career when he showed flashes of consistency only to be met with stretches where he struggled to score goals. -- Clark

Mason Marchment, F

San Jose Sharks

The terms: 5 years, \$7 million annually

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

Trading William Eklund before the NHL draft meant the Sharks needed a top-six winger -- even though they would draft Ivar Stenberg with the No. 2 overall pick. Even if Stenberg is NHL ready, the Sharks adding a proven 6-foot-5 winger who can score more 20 goals and play top-six minutes only bolsters their roster.

What Marchment provides is the sort of skill set that can help the Sharks now and going forward with all the young talent they possess, led by Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith, among others.

Plus? There's also the fact that he's going back to a place where there's family history with his late father, Bryan, spending six seasons with the Sharks.

Does it make sense?

Marchment signing with the Sharks appears to be one of those deals that has quite a few advantages for a team that's trying to make a legitimate push for the playoffs after falling four points shy in 2025-26. -- Clark

Viktor Arvidsson, F

Detroit Red Wings

The terms: 2 years, \$5 million AAV

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

Arvidsson will be a second- or third-line guy for the Red Wings, who add some physical presence along with a pretty high-end 5-on-5 scoring ability. He ranked second among Boston's skaters last year in even-



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strength points (with 45, in what was a 25-goal, 54-point effort through 69 games). Arvidsson also played a role on the Bruins' power play and could help Detroit on their second unit. He's 33, but Arvidsson isn't showing many signs of his age just yet. And while he's not the biggest body (at 5-foot-10), Arvidsson brings some physicality and is a tenacious forechecker, which should help to make Detroit tougher up front.

Does it make sense?

This is a good deal for Detroit. The term is right given Arvidsson's into his 30s, and it's a dollar figure commensurate with what he's done, and can still do, for the Red Wings. Detroit ranked 30th in the NHL last season in 5-on-5 goals so that's the most obvious area Arvidsson can help improve. In general, Detroit had to be eyeing some depth scoring given the uncertainty around Dylan Larkin's status and with Patrick Kane hitting free agency. Even if Kane does re-sign with Detroit, Arvidsson will have a role to play (and a potentially significant one at that) if he can build off one of the best seasons of his career in 2025-26. -- Shilton

Jaden Schwartz, LW

Colorado Avalanche

The terms: 3 years, \$3.25 million AAV

Grade: A-

Where does he fit?

Schwartz was an O.K. (Original Kraken), joining the team as a free agent for their inaugural season in 2021-22 after playing 10 seasons with the St. Louis Blues and winning the Stanley Cup in 2019. Last season saw him score 11 goals and 15 assists in 50 games, skating 16:08 per game. His goal-scoring dipped a bit from his 26 goals in 2024-25, but he was still an effective forward. Schwartz moves into Colorado's bottom six, where the Avalanche lost both Ross Colton and Jack Drury via trade.

Does it make sense?

Schwartz wanted to play in Denver. His college hockey days were spent at Colorado College, and he's admired the Avalanche from afar. Hence, the 34-year-old forward took less than market value on a free agent contract to join GM Joe Sakic's team, as AFP Analytics had him projected at around \$4.8 million on a two-year term. He's an ideal depth forward addition: experienced, hard-working, offensively gifted and hungry to play relevant hockey after only making the playoffs once in Seattle. Good player, really good cap number for Colorado -- even if they went one year longer than you'd like for a 34-year-old. -- Wyshynski

Mats Zuccarello, F

Los Angeles Kings

The terms: 1 year, \$1 million plus bonuses

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

What makes Zuccarello a hypothetically strong fit is the fact he gives the Kings a top-six winger that can generate goals both for himself and for those around him. The 38-year-old had 15 goals and 39 assists for 54 points in 59 games while averaging more than 18 minutes per game last season with the Minnesota Wild.

His production over 54 games still would have made him the Kings' second-leading scorer last season. Although they're still searching for a top-six center with Anze Kopitar retiring, Zuccarello does give them that experienced presence.

Does it make sense?

Trying to win in the playoffs is hard enough. What makes it even harder was the fact the Kings, who have not made it beyond the first round since 2014, finished the regular season with the fourth-fewest goals per game. -- Clark

Rasmus Andersson, D

Vegas Golden Knights

The terms: 7 years, \$8.5 million AAV

Grade: B+

Where does he fit?

Andersson, 29, was acquired from the Calgary Flames last season in a deal that saw defenseman Zach Whitecloud go the other way. The 10-year NHL veteran had 17 points in 33 games for Vegas in the regular season, skating 21:42 per game on average. His ice time jumped to 23:26 per game in the playoffs, but his overall game fell off: six points in 22 games, including just one assist in his last eight playoff games, skating to a minus-3.

Does it make sense?

Despite his postseason dip, Andersson is a solid re-signing with the Knights. He plays a ton, carries the puck well and can generate goals from the blue line. He worked well with Noah Hanifin as a tandem in the regular season, although the duo struggled in the postseason due to Hanifin's upper body injury. If Andersson hit the open market, he would have likely earned more than this AAV -- according to AFP Analytics, he was projected for \$8.75 million on a six-year term. For now, it's a move that solidifies the Golden Knights' back end. If this contract doesn't age well, Vegas has been known to find its way out of them in the past. -- Wyshynski

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ESPN / Judging overreactions to the first wave of 2026 NHL free agency -- ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

23--29 minutes

Jul 7, 2026, 02:30 PM

The champagne hadn't even been mopped up from the Carolina Hurricanes' Stanley Cup celebration when the NHL offseason hit warp speed.

It wasn't just the incredible volume of trades, signings and multiple offer sheets. It was that the NHL, for the first time, had the kind of drama-filled offseason that other sports experience, filled with trade requests, contract squabbles, empowered players voiding deals and all the messy details leaking out about all of it.

It's been awesome. Every day, a new debate among fans.

Here are 10 overreactions to the 2026 offseason that we judge to be absolutely reasonable or totally misguided. Enjoy!

Draft grades for all 32 teams

Offseason trade grades

Free agent signing grades

Pat Verbeek should be fired

At the time of this writing, the clock was still sticking on the Philadelphia Flyers' offer sheet on Anaheim Ducks center Leo Carlsson, to the tune of five years and \$18 million annually.

If Anaheim matches the offer, its salary cap management is in shambles, leaving the team neither the space to re-sign Cutter Gauthier nor add an impact defenseman to a downgraded group. If Anaheim lets Carlsson walk, it stays out of salary cap hell and gets four first-round picks, which the Ducks could hopefully use to fill a gaping hole at center in a conference where center depth is a necessity.

But that's all academic. The real issue here is that GM Pat Verbeek and vice president of hockey operations Jeff Solomon, who handles negotiations for the team, left the franchise open to being raided by a team like the Flyers.

Look at all the teams that signed their potentially vulnerable pending RFAs with months to spare and money saved:



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Edmonton signed top defenseman Evan Bouchard last June before he could be given an offer sheet, locking him in at \$10.5 million AAV.

Montreal signed star defenseman Lane Hutson at an \$8.85 million AAV last October.

Utah signed center Logan Cooley at a \$10 million AAV last October.

Los Angeles signed defenseman Brandt Clarke at a \$7.4 million AAV in June.

Montreal locked up Ivan Demidov a year before restricted free agency at a \$9.15 million AAV on July 1.

And so on.

But that's not how the Ducks operate. They grind. They try to win the war of attrition in talks, which is why Jamie Drysdale, Mason McTavish and Trevor Zegras all missed training camp time during RFA contract talks in seasons past. All three are no longer in Anaheim.

The Ducks also don't like to hand out contracts like the one Carlsson signed, where \$83.5 million of his \$90 million will be paid out in buyout-proof signing bonuses. The combined signing bonus money on the Drysdale, McTavish and Zegras extensions? Zero.

Anaheim had an exclusive negotiating window with Carlsson for several months, couldn't get anything done and then totally miscalculated how thirsty the market was going to be for a 21-year-old franchise center, given the rise of the salary cap and the lackluster unrestricted free agent crop. In January, Verbeek told Victory+ that the team "tabled" its talks with Carlsson and other RFAs. "We want their focus to be on the playoffs," he said.

Hope this was worth that second-round playoff exit.

But the real kick in the pants here for Ducks fans is that Carlsson expressed a willingness to get something done last summer, and at a significantly lower price than what Anaheim or Philadelphia is going to pay. During a player-on-player interview with Elias Pettersson on Daily Faceoff, he said "I'd take that, for sure" when asked about an eight-year deal with a \$9.5 million cap hit. That's nearly half of what his new contract is going to pay annually!

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION. As one NHL executive put it: "I really think it's a fireable offense."

Consider that the Ducks could have probably landed Carlsson at eight years and \$100 million last summer, based on what he said he was willing to agree on. Now, it's \$90 million on a five-year term. If his next contract runs around three years and builds on that AAV ... well, the Ducks' front office just cost the Samueli family tens of millions of dollars that it didn't need to spend on a single player.

Plus, don't look now, but that wave of young stars who were supposed to power the Ducks for a decade has crashed. Drysdale, McTavish, Zegras and Olen Zellweger -- traded to Buffalo -- are gone. Carlsson could be gone. The Ducks have some young key core players -- Gauthier, Jackson LaCombe, Beckett Sennecke -- but suddenly perhaps not enough of them. There's certainly an argument to be made that Verbeek has the franchise trending in the wrong direction.

Leo Carlsson isn't worth \$18 million per year

The reaction from many NHL fans when the Flyers put an offer sheet on Leo Carlsson: "\$18 million annually for a guy whose career high is 67 points?!"

Barring the pending contracts for RFAs Jason Robertson and Connor Bedard, the 21-year-old Carlsson will have the highest cap hit of any player in the NHL next season. More than Kirill Kaprizov (\$17 million), whose career high is 108 points. More than Leon Draisaitl (\$14 million), whose career high is 128 points. More than Nathan MacKinnon (\$12.604 million), whose career high is 140 points.

I mention MacKinnon for a reason. His career high after three seasons was 63 points, which he tallied as a rookie in winning the Calder Trophy for the Colorado Avalanche. In his third season, he had 52 points in 72 games. There was so little talk about someone offer-sheeting MacKinnon that GM Joe Sakic let him linger until July 8 before signing him to a seven-year extension. That seems absurd now for a guy who was third in voting for the Hart Trophy last season, but MacKinnon wouldn't become MacKinnon until his fifth year in the league.

When you watch Carlsson -- and not enough people on the East Coast have! -- you can see the raw materials with which he is working. Basically, he's a Swedish Evgeni Malkin, except with wheels. He's still learning how to use his size and find that next level offensively, but you can see where it's heading. Which is to say that he could be worth the money during that five-year term.

Leo Carlsson scores to gives Ducks 2-0 lead in 3rd period

But really, does that matter? The Flyers gave him that offer sheet for two reasons.

The first is that they weren't going to find a center like Leo Carlsson with any of the four first-rounders they'd surrender for him, barring extreme draft lottery luck. Coach Rick Tocchet's team made the playoffs last season and, at worst, project to be a "mushy middle" team for the next four seasons. They have two wingers -- Porter Martone and Matvei Michkov -- who could end up as franchise players. They needed a center to tie it all together, and getting one in their age range would be spectacular.

But to get him, they had to offer an essentially absurd contract that would both entice the player to sign and give the Ducks pause about matching it. That's the offer sheet game.

The verdict: OVERREACTION. It's not just that we're high on Carlsson as a No. 1 center in this league, whether it was for the Ducks or the Flyers. It's that the cap keeps rising, and young stars keep needing contracts. What is Carlsson's deal going to look like in three years?

There are two paths: The one where the young stars reset the market like Carlsson did, or the one where they're following the model of Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid or MacKinnon, in which they take a little less to allow the team more flexibility to build around them. But even that latter altruism is overstated: Crosby's second contract was worth 15.34% of the salary cap at the time. Carlsson's deal is worth 17.31%.

It was a good swing from the Flyers. Carlsson is one of the few players age 20 to 23 worthy of it, and maybe the only one theoretically available.

The Panthers will bludgeon their way to another Cup

When Nicolas Deslauriers signed a contract extension during the Carolina Hurricanes' Stanley Cup celebration in Raleigh, it was a nice bit of showmanship for the fans. It was also a reminder that although Deslauriers played only 3:09 during the Canes' Cup run, they'll need his particular set of skills next season. Because the Florida Panthers still exist.

The Hurricanes won the Cup without having to go through the Panthers, who had eliminated them in two of the previous three postseasons. Florida's run of back-to-back Cups ended with a nonplayoff season caused primarily by long-term injuries to Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk.

The expectation is that Florida will return to Cup contention next season, and it has apparently decided to take its frustrations out on the rest of the NHL by getting nastier and more physical in the offseason.

The headliner was trading for Ottawa Senators captain and famous sibling Brady Tkachuk, who opened the playoffs with a fight against eventual Conn Smythe winner Jordan Staal. But the Panthers also added forward Garnet Hathaway and defenseman Radko Gudas, neither of whom will ever be short-listed for the Lady Byng Trophy.

Once again, the Panthers look like the Panthers. But the secret to their success has always been that their veteran core players can be every bit as nasty and bludgeoning as their supporting cast -- something no other team in the NHL can match.

The verdict: SLIGHT OVERREACTION. There is one place where the Panthers no longer look like the Panthers, and that's in goal. Sergei Bobrovsky priced himself out of South Florida and signed a free agent deal in Toronto. GM Bill Zito turned to a former Panther to take the crease: Jacob Markstrom, coming off two disappointing seasons as the "solution" to the Devils' goaltending issues. The Panthers go into next season, and potentially next postseason, with Markstrom and Akira Schmid as their tandem.

There's something to be said for Markstrom playing behind a demonstrably better defensive team than he had in New Jersey, which



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could yield better results. His postseason numbers (.911 save percentage in 31 games) are promising.

But Bobrovsky was Playoff Bob for a reason. He was good when the Panthers needed him to be and never lost them a series. Having that goalie who can make that key save at a key time is the difference between playing for the Cup and failing to advance from the conference bracket. We'll see if Florida's new netminder can become Postseason Marky.

Dallas is the offseason loser

Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill won the NHL general manager of the year award three straight seasons (2022-25) before the honor went to the Minnesota Wild's Bill Guerin, whose team eliminated the Stars in the first round this year to end a run of three straight conference finals appearances for Nill's team.

It hasn't gotten much better for the Stars since then, mainly because they've been unable to navigate through the Jason Robertson issue.

The restricted free agent winger has been in a prolonged contract negotiation with Dallas, with a gap in money that appears too wide to bridge. The Stars thought they had a solution when they had a sign-and-trade deal in place to send Robertson to the Kraken for the No. 7 pick in last month's NHL draft, but Robertson wouldn't sign a long-term deal with Seattle -- despite a reported offer of \$120 million over eight seasons. He has filed for salary arbitration, eliminating the potential for an offer sheet and potentially leading to a one-year deal that would leave him as an unrestricted free agent next year.

Players refusing to move has unfortunately been a common theme for Dallas this offseason. The Stars thought they had a trade in place for Columbus star defenseman Zach Werenski, in what sources said might have been a one-for-one trade for 24-year-old defenseman Thomas Harley. But Werenski squashed the deal with his no-movement clause. Dallas then had to smooth things over with Harley.

Meanwhile, the Stars were forced to trade 24-year-old center Mavrik Bourque to Nashville due to cap considerations.

The verdict: OVERREACTION. The Stars' roster remains loaded with talent from the teams that made those runs to the conference finals, from Mikko Rantanen to Miro Heiskanen to Jake Oettinger. The Stars finished third in the NHL last season.

The notion that it has been a disastrous offseason is misguided. Frustrating or embarrassing? Sure, but not as bad as the vibes make it seem. Nill clearly misplayed his hand with Robertson, whose name has been in the rumor mill for the past year. Obviously, trading a guy who had 96 points and 45 goals, and was so important to the Stars' success last season, was going to be difficult.

The Stars are loaded with talent but could use a Jason Robertson type on the wing, as delusional as it might sound. I thought there was a path back for both sides. Robertson clearly wants to stay. One assumes Nill is genuine in wanting to keep him. Unless there's a trade that improves the Stars, it makes more sense to find a way to keep doing business together. But even if that doesn't happen, Dallas should be OK this season.

Jason Robertson puts Stars up 2-0

The Capitals are major Cup contenders again

Ted Leonsis said this week that "everyone felt empty" after the Capitals missed the playoffs last season. So the organization made a commitment to "go for it" in the offseason, resulting in what Leonsis feels might be the fastest and deepest team in his 27 years as owner.

The team traded for St. Louis Blues star winger Jordan Kyrou; made a sign-and-trade with the Buffalo Sabres that landed the team winger Alex Tuch, who would have been the top forward available in unrestricted free agency; and it signed Columbus center Boone Jenner, Rangers forward Jonny Brodzinski, as well as defensemen Justin Holl (Blues) and Vincent Desharnais (Sharks).

Oh, and the Capitals found room to bring back the greatest goal scorer in NHL history: Alex Ovechkin, who turns 41 before the season.

As Capitals GM Chris Patrick noted, the primary motivation for the acquisition spree wasn't meant to entice Ovechkin, but to augment the

core that'll be in place after the Great 8 hangs up his gold-laced skates. That includes veterans such as Pierre-Luc Dubois, Tom Wilson and Jakob Chychrun, and younger standouts such as Ryan Leonard and the Protas brothers.

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION. On paper, the Capitals have the depth of their Eastern Conference rivals but have better goaltending than either the Panthers or Hurricanes, with Logan Thompson and Charlie Lindgren. Whether they materialize as a Stanley Cup contender greatly depends on how some of their young players improve in 2026-27: Leonard, Ilya Protas, Justin Sourdif and especially rookie defenseman Cole Hutson, from whom they're expecting huge things. They have an elite coach in Spencer Carbery.

If the offseason pieces fit into place -- and the Capitals' front office has earned the benefit of the doubt -- Washington is on the short list in the East.

Dylan Larkin will start the season in Detroit

There's a difference between the "player empowerment" happening with Dylan Larkin and that of his Team USA friends. Brady Tkachuk and Ottawa parted ways, with him having two years left on his contract. Ditto Zach Werenski, seeking to finish the last two years of his contract elsewhere.

But Larkin has five more years left on his deal with the Red Wings. There's no threat of him not re-signing after an eight-year deal that started in 2024.

GM Steve Yzerman said he received the trade request and the teams to which Larkin would like to be traded, which reportedly are Florida, Minnesota and Vegas.

"My job as the manager of the Detroit Red Wings is always to do what is in the best interest of the Detroit Red Wings, and I will act accordingly to that," Yzerman said after the NHL draft. "I cannot make any guarantees, or did not make any guarantees, that that request could or would be met."

That sounds like a GM ready to play the long game with his captain, even if that game extends into the regular season.

The verdict: OVERREACTION. It has been interesting to see how the power dynamics have shifted to Larkin having a full no-movement clause. With Tkachuk, that protection led to Florida being the only destination. With Werenski, that protection meant refusing a trade to the Western Conference. With Larkin, the no-trade clause has prevented the Red Wings from trading him to a destination of their choosing, and that's the purpose of the clause. But now Yzerman is playing hardball over that trade protection.

His wager, and it's a good one: that Larkin will not want to walk into training camp as a captain abandoning his ship, nor will he want to sit out for an indefinite amount of time with no pay if he doesn't report. Hence, the hope is that he'll expand his trade horizons beyond a team that doesn't want to break up its core (Florida) and teams that might not have the pieces Yzerman is seeking (Minnesota and Vegas).

Larkin's agent Pat Brisson is a pragmatist. He has navigated choppy waters in the past. The relationship between player and GM is likely too far gone to repair. Even though Yzerman can win the waiting game, this one should be resolved before the season.

Dylan Larkin scores short-handed goal for Detroit Red Wings

The Blackhawks blew it with Byram

There wasn't a trade more maligned in the last month than the one Chicago made with the Buffalo Sabres for 25-year-old defenseman Bowen Byram. The Blackhawks sent defenseman Louis Crevier, the fourth overall pick in the 2026 draft (which Buffalo used on defenseman Daxon Rudolph, who is headed to Denver) and the 45th overall pick (selecting defenseman Jayden Kurtz, headed to Wisconsin). Chicago also took on the full \$4 million cap hit of forward Jordan Greenway.

GM Kyle Davidson then signed Byram to a six-year deal that starts in 2027-28, carrying a \$12.5 million cap hit.

The cost of acquisition was criticized. The contract was criticized. Projecting Byram to be a franchise-level defenseman when he's seen as one-dimensional was criticized.



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"This was just a value that we put on a really, really good young player in Bo that we felt it was advantageous to move on and acquire for our group," Davidson said. "He fits the style of play that we want to play. He fits the age range that we want to put our players into and have our players grow together within. And so it just made a lot of sense."

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION. The fourth overall pick, the 45th overall pick, the Blackhawks' leading scorer on defense and then taking on another team's problem contract on top of all of that? Thy name is overpayment. There's no debating that.

The debate is whether Byram can be what the Blackhawks want him to become. Other teams were seeking to trade for him. How many saw him as a No. 1 defenseman, as Chicago did?

But the other issue is why they made this trade. There's obvious pressure to surround Connor Bedard with as much talent as possible as quickly as possible as he enters the fourth season of an NHL career that hasn't gotten him within a mile of a playoff berth. But while teams like San Jose and Utah and Anaheim have finally emerged from their rebuilds, Chicago was 31st in the NHL last season. The Blackhawks are very much in a rebuild. Giving up the fourth overall pick for Bowen Byram makes it seem as if they're in denial about that.

Chayka/Sundin have turned the Leafs around

When John Chayka (GM) and Mats Sundin (Vibes) took over the Toronto Maple Leafs this offseason, they vowed to revitalize the team's depth and defensive corps. What we didn't realize at the time was that that meant signing half the league as free agents.

That began June 19 when Chayka acquired Darren Raddysh in a sign-and-trade with the Lightning, snagging the most coveted free agent defenseman before July 1. Then came defenseman Troy Stecher, center Jack Roslovic, goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, center Colton Sissons, center Teddy Blueger, forward Brandon Duhaime, center Zack MacEwen, center Henrik Rybinski and center Vinni Lettieri.

They acquired defenseman Emil Andrae from the Flyers in a deal for goalie Joseph Woll. They traded for forward Nick Paul from the Lightning. They rid themselves of Brandon Carlo and Nicholas Robertson for picks. Oh, and they won the draft lottery and used the first overall pick to select Penn State winger Gavin McKenna, who might finally give the Leafs their Mitch Marner replacement.

Annnnd exhale.

Gavin McKenna excited to step onto the ice as a Maple Leaf

The verdict: SLIGHT OVERREACTION. The Leafs are obviously dealing in volume here, and some moves are better than others. Raddysh should broaden the skill set of the blueliners. Paul is a great bottom-six contributor. Heck, given Bobrovsky's numbers while playing in Toronto as an opponent, maybe this was worth a shot, too, reuniting him with former Florida backup Anthony Stolarz.

But there were also times this felt like busywork. Like a new GM was signing a bunch of familiar names who get flipped at the deadline for fourth-round picks to show that the effort was being made.

"At times, it may not have made a lot of sense in terms of individual moves. As we thought about the bigger picture and what we want to create, it all kind of fell into place for us," Chayka said.

The Leafs should be better than their .476 points percentage with this flood of new faces. The problem is that everyone in their division finished above .500. Some teams (Buffalo, Montreal) continue to improve, while teams like Florida, Tampa Bay and Boston stubbornly continue to contend. Slightly better won't cut it.

Everything's cool between Werenski and Columbus

Well, that was uncomfortable.

After Zach Werenski informed the Columbus Blue Jackets that he wasn't going to sign another extension after his current deal ends in 2028, that set the wheels in motion for a trade this offseason. GM Don Waddell found one he liked from the Stars, sending Werenski there for Thomas Harley, a great young defenseman. But Werenski didn't want to move west and used his trade protection to void the deal, bringing this very public situation to a boil.

In fact, it was too hot for Werenski to handle, leading to one of the offseason's most shocking twists. Werenski and Waddell released statements bringing the temperature down. Werenski said the situation was "blown out of proportion" and recommitted to playing for the Blue Jackets. "I want to win and I want to do that in Columbus. As I've thought about things and discussed everything with my wife and family, we want to be in Columbus," he said.

Meanwhile, Waddell said: "He has invested a great deal in this organization, and after coming close and falling short the past two seasons, his desire is to win here and get this team back into the playoffs."

Done and done. Let's drop the puck, right?

The verdict: OVERREACTION. Oh, c'mon, he's out of there. With apologies to Valeri Nichushkin, nothing has materially changed about the Blue Jackets to make them a contender in the East.

Columbus was like, "It's Dallas or nothing for now." Werenski was like, "I hate being the main character."

So they decided to press pause and start the season with the Norris Trophy winner on the Blue Jackets. But all that does is kick the can down the road a bit. Whether it's next season, next summer or in 2028, Werenski is going to be a former Blue Jacket ... unless they suddenly become a lot better in a loaded conference.

This is just how the offseason is now

The absolute chaos of the 2026 NHL offseason can best be summarized like this: The NHL announced in late June that it was considering Austin, Texas, for an expansion team. That news cycle lasted a few hours before the Sabres traded Byram to the Blackhawks. If you had to rank all the headlines in the past month in the NHL, expansion to Austin, Texas, might not break the top 20.

That's how chaotic it's been.

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION. The salary cap keeps climbing, all the way up to \$113.5 million for the 2027-28 season. Teams have the space to keep their players away from free agency, turning that pool into a puddle. Thus, to get better, teams are having to be more aggressive in terms of trades and offer sheets.

That has collided with a player empowerment movement that has encouraged disgruntled stars not only to demand trades -- directly or indirectly -- but also not to shy away from maximizing their earning potential ... which, in some cases, has been the catalyst for trades. Not to mention a bold new generation of front office executives who, like Eric Tulskey of the Hurricanes, know that fortune favors the (well-informed) bold.

Welcome to the new NHL, where it's finally "on" in the offseason.

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1396830 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs signal fresh approach with Alfredsson addition

Luke Fox

6–7 minutes

TORONTO — Minutes after the buzzer sounded on the Toronto Maple Leafs' season, on a dark mid-April night on the outskirts of Ottawa, William Nylander was spotted in the bowels of Canadian Tire Centre sharing a laugh and a chat with another one of Sweden's great offensive talents.

Daniel Alfredsson, then a member of the Senators bench and, seemingly forever, Toronto's all-time enemy in the Battle of Ontario.

But with off-season upheaval aplenty in the province, those Alfie-Willy conversations will now be the norm.



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In a head-spinning announcement Tuesday, the first modern-era Senator to have his number retired in Ottawa is taking his coaching talents westbound down the 401.

The 53-year-old Alfredsson — one of the 20-plus candidates who interviewed for the Maple Leafs' head job — is joining Jim Hiller's staff in Toronto as an associate coach.

John Gruden, hot off his Calder Cup championship with the AHL Marlies, and Brad Werenka, who most recently served as an assistant coach for the University of Calgary's program, were named assistants.

Mike Van Ryn and Derek Lalonde will not be returning as assistant coaches next season. Steve Sullivan was not mentioned in the Leafs' press release, but his name is no longer listed as a coach on the club's website. Gruden's promotion leaves a head coaching vacancy for the Marlies.

Hiller attempted to snatch friend D.J. Smith as his right-hand man on the bench but was outbid by Mike Babcock and the Edmonton Oilers.

Following a thorough search and interview process under GM John Chayka's guidance, Hiller landed on Alfredsson, who had been rumoured to be open to a move after three years assisting the Senators.

"While I wish he wasn't joining an arch rival, Alfie is forever an Ottawa Senator, and the door will always be open for his return. He has done so much for our organization and community, and he has my full respect," Senators owner Michael Andlauer said in a statement.

Make no mistake: This is a tough look for Senators fans, a group still swallowing the exodus of captain Brady Tkachuk to another divisional foe in Florida.

For Chayka's Leafs, the completion of an overhauled bench, as selected by Hiller, further enforces its off-season themes of top-down alignment and a training camp that should feel fresher, with faces and ideas, than it has in years.

Alfredsson is a direct line from the room to Sundin's ear.

It's no secret that Nylander and ex-coach Craig Berube saw the game differently. Alfredsson worked with the Leafs' leading scorer as an assistant on Team Sweden's 2026 Olympic bench. Ditto Swedish Leaf Oliver Ekman-Larsson.

Alfredsson and Chayka's chief advisor, Mats Sundin, go way back to those epic Battles of Ontario in the early 2000s, highlighted memorably by Alfredsson's mocking of Sundin's stick toss.

The Hall of Famers and good friends captured Olympic gold as teammates in 2006, though.

And Toronto's Swedish ties have long run deep. Newly acquired defenceman Emil Andrae is the latest member of what captain Auston Matthews once affectionately referred to as the room's "Swedish mafia."

We wonder: Could the respected Alfredsson get more out of franchise cornerstone Nylander, who looks to bounce back from an injury-plagued campaign?

In Ottawa, Alfredsson ran the forward group and oversaw a power play that ranked eighth (24 per cent) in the 2025-26 regular season but shrivelled in the Sens' four-game playoff sweep by the eventual champion Hurricanes (1-for-21; 4.8 per cent).

Toronto's power play rebounded when Sullivan was brought in mid-season, but finished a disappointing 15th overall (21.3 per cent).

Hiller's Maple Leafs are depending on a rejuvenated man-advantage to drag them back into contention. Hence, the signing of quarterback Darren Raddysh and the acquisition of offensive minds like Hiller and Alfredsson.

"I'm incredibly excited to add Daniel, John and Brad to our coaching staff," Hiller said.

"Daniel's experience, leadership and understanding of the game speak for themselves. John has established himself as one of the top coaches in the American Hockey League and played an instrumental role in leading the Marlies to a Calder Cup championship last season. Brad brings a unique combination of NHL experience, player development and

expertise in performance analytics. Together, they'll be outstanding additions to our team."

Alone, Alfredsson's new job will be a thorn in the side of Senators.

Berube reflects on Toronto's two big losses

Speaking of Leafs coaches...

In his most candid discussion yet of what went wrong as the Maple Leafs plummeted to 28th place last season, Berube explained to Rob Simpson that Mitch Marner was the club's emotional centrepiece.

"Mitch brought the energy and the emotion to the game on a nightly basis — and to practice. Vocal guy. Chatted a lot on the bench. Chatted a lot in practice. Brought the energy. He'd come back to the bench and let guys know: Pick it up. Let's go. He was great. I really enjoyed coaching him," the ex-coach said during an appearance on Simmer's Morning Skate.

"We lost our emotional leader, for sure. It was a big loss. Not only the player but that side of it, too — in the locker room, on the bench, in practices. He held guys accountable."

A casualty of Toronto's failings in 2025-26, Berube also mentioned goaltender Joseph Woll's absence in training camp, Chris Tanev's injuries, and the team's flat performance out of the Olympic break as contributors to the Leafs' dropoff.

But Marner's departure was the biggie.

"Never really found that winger to play with Matthews, just the chemistry of your No. 1 line," said Berube, who believes his roster was better than the results.

"It bothers me.... Just couldn't catch a hold of anything."

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs add Senators great Daniel Alfredsson to coaching staff

Elliott Friedman

~2 minutes

This is a sentence I never thought I'd write:

Daniel Alfredsson is joining the Maple Leafs. The Hall of Famer who spent the last three seasons as an Ottawa assistant coach, has been named Toronto's associate head coach, the team announced on Tuesday.

It's just so incredibly weird. During the ferocious Battles of Ontario — four playoff series in five years at the start of this century — Alfredsson and Mats Sundin captained these bitter rivals. They were friendly and held great respect for one another, but there was nothing but disdain and hatred between these two teams on the ice.

In January 2004, Sundin was suspended one game when he disgustingly threw a broken stick and it accidentally went into the crowd. The game he missed was a 7-1 loss to Ottawa, where Alfredsson's own stick broke and he faked tossing it into the stands. Senators fans loved it, Leafs fans ... not so much.

Two years later, they won Olympic gold as Swedish teammates, a group Sundin captained.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see them reunite, but, man, it feels crazy writing this story.

The Leafs also announced that John Gruden and Brad Werenka have been named assistant coaches, and that Mike Van Ryn and Derek Lalonde will not be returning as assistant coaches next season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Who's the next Leo Carlsson? A look at upcoming intriguing RFAs

Ryan Dixon

8–10 minutes

When we think of offer sheets like the massive one Leo Carlsson signed last week, your mind naturally drifts to the player side of the equation as you scout around the league wondering who — if anyone — could be next.

Before we address that, though, what about the other side of the coin?

Will teams see the Philadelphia Flyers' bold play — general manager Daniel Briere threw \$90 million over five years at Carlsson — and view it as the off-season version of, "Why not us?"

When you're talking about trying to lure a young player to your team, it really widens the field in terms of what type of club — as in, where they are in their competitive arc — could conceivably be interested.

Philly is an up-and-coming squad trying to surge forward. Couldn't the same, more or less, be said of Montreal, Buffalo, Utah and Pittsburgh?

What about rebuilding squads near the bottom of the standings trying to expedite what can be a long process? On one hand, you could see a team in that position balking at a price like four first-round picks — which is what the Flyers would fork over to the Anaheim Ducks if the latter doesn't match the offer to Carlsson by Friday — during a down phase for the franchise. On the other, why leave your fate up to lottery luck? Instead, make a strong play for one immaculate, known entity who has already shown real promise in the league and is on the precipice of his best seasons.

Could a bottom-feeder like the Seattle Kraken — who already have a decent prospect cupboard and had big-money plays for Artemi Panarin and Jason Robertson thwarted in 2026 — go that route?

At the other end of the standings, a contender with cap space — and, boy, that upper limit is rising higher and higher — could take the unconventional route of offer-sheeting a young player to put them over the top.

The only consideration there, of course, is you must have the draft capital to complete the transaction. If we're talking about an offer that features an AAV of (basically) \$12 million or above, four teams currently can't fulfill the obligation of handing over four first-rounders in the next five drafts, thus making them ineligible to tender an offer sheet in 2026: the Toronto Maple Leafs, Colorado Avalanche, New York Rangers and the Florida Panthers.

In terms of having cap space, remember the upper limit for the 2027-28 campaign is expected to be \$113.5 million. That means, by the second season of his new five-year contract, Carlsson's AAV will be taking up only 16 per cent (the maximum for one player is 20 per cent) of either the Flyers or Ducks cap. In 2025-26 terms, that's basically a \$15 million AAV.

With all that in mind — and with a huge assist from the heroes over at Puckpedia — let's take a look at some high-profile and/or intriguing RFAs and potential RFAs from now until 2028.

2026 RFAs

Adam Fantilli, Columbus Blue Jackets

For a minute there, it seemed like things could really slide off the rails this summer in Ohio. But both Zach Werenski — with two years to go before he can become a UFA — and Kirill Marchenko — who is offer-sheet eligible as an RFA in 2027 — remain with the club. For now.

Surely the Jackets see Adam Fantilli, picked one spot after Carlsson at third overall in 2023, as the centrepiece they need to lock down. Fantilli hasn't truly exploded offensively yet, but he's a big No. 1 centre with all kinds of leverage given some of the big-picture question marks in Columbus.

If you were a team seriously contemplating an offer to Carlsson, any chance you'd pivot to Fantilli?

Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks

You knew there was still a long road ahead when the Hawks took Bedard first overall in 2023, but three years into his career, Chicago has yet to even sniff a playoff spot.

Bedard, who sustained an apparent shoulder injury during off-season training last week, is due for a new deal and it will be interesting to see how long-term he commits. Will he take an eight-year deal — which can only be offered until September, when new CBA stipulations will limit term to seven years — or a shorter deal that offers more flexibility in coming years.

Chicago paid a heavy price to acquire and sign defenceman Bowen Byram; now it's time to lock down the franchise centre.

Potential 2027 RFAs

Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Like everyone who is a potential 2027 RFA, Celebrini is eligible to ink an extension any day now. Would it surprise anyone if Celebrini's next deal supplanted Kirill Kaprizov's contract (\$136 million over eight years) as the richest deal in NHL history? If you're San Jose, no question you're hoping to secure Celebrini's services for as long as possible. An eight-year deal — which is eating into pricey UFA years — at, say, \$19 million per season would come in at a total of \$152 million.

And, honestly, it might soon seem like a bargain.

Matvei Michkov, Philadelphia Flyers

If the Flyers don't land Carlsson, they can turn their attention to extending the Russian winger who fell to them at No. 7 in 2023. It hasn't been all smiles and sunshine for Michkov during his first two years in the league, but the talent is there.

Where a situation like this gets interesting — beyond the obvious curiosity of whether teams will target Philly after its play for Carlsson — is if Michkov doesn't ink an extension this summer, has another 20-goal season and doesn't seem like a slam-dunk for a monster deal.

Would a team swoop in and make a big bet that he can be their guy in a different situation?

Kirill Marchenko, Columbus Blue Jackets

As noted above, Marchenko has one year left on his deal and it sure doesn't seem as though he'll be putting pen to paper in Columbus any time soon.

A lot can change in a year, but this will be a serious situation to monitor if Marchenko remains unsigned next summer — assuming he's not traded in the interim.

He's provided crazy value for Columbus on his current three-year bridge deal, which packs an AAV of just under \$4 million.

His next AAV could be nearly quadruple that.

A trio of goalies

In the history of the NHL, only two goalies have received offer sheets — both resulting in successful bids — and they occurred within two weeks of each other. If you just said to yourself, "Yeah, Ron Tugnutt to Ottawa and Arturs Irbe to Dallas in 1996," please depart immediately for the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto and demand they open an entire wing in your honour.

Could we see another goalie offer in 2027? Probably not, but let's flag the names Jesper Wallstedt in Minnesota, Joel Hofer in St. Louis and Yaroslav Askarov in San Jose.

All three goalies will be coming off two-year deals signed in 2025 and in the mid-20s-age sweet spot where goalies firmly establish themselves in the league. Hofer is taking the reins in St. Louis, Wallstedt has a goalie partner, in Filip Gustavsson, who accounts for an AAV of \$6.8 million through 2031 and Askarov must prove he's worth betting on as the guy who can backstop an emerging power in San Jose.



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It's hard to see any of these clubs parting with these players, but — as we know — things change fast in the crease.

Potential 2028 RFAs

Matthew Schaefer, New York Islanders

The real question here is, with both Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar eligible to ink extensions right now, how will Schaefer's first non-ELC contract measure up to those new deals?

It's a long way to look down the road, but even if Schaefer — who can sign an extension 51 weeks from now — inked a deal that carried a \$21 million AAV, that would represent only 17 per cent of his team's cap hit in the first year (2028-29) of his new pact, when the upper limit is projected to be \$123 million.

This is a clear blank-cheque situation for the Isles.

Beckett Sennecke, Anaheim Ducks

Let's be honest, whether they keep Carlsson or not, everything to do with the Ducks and payroll just got a lot more interesting.

Sennecke is coming off a fantastic rookie season where he not only finished third in Calder Trophy voting, but came through in the playoffs with five goals in 12 outings.

If Anaheim lets Carlsson go, there will be extra pressure to keep the rest of the young crew intact. If Carlsson stays, there's a pretty high precedent for what great young players get on their second contract in the organization.

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