



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 17, 2026

The News & Observer

5 questions the Carolina Hurricanes still must answer as NHL training camps open

By: Chip Alexander

Morrisville

Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) captain Jordan Staal has signed a new contract extension.

Defenseman Alexander Nikishin remains unsigned.

Those were the two biggest developments as the 2026 Stanley Cup champions prepared for the start of preseason training camp.

The "offseason" was a short one. The Stanley Cup is still being passed around. But it's time to get back on the ice, and the Canes will skate out Thursday at 9 a.m. for the start of camp at Lane Arena, formerly Invisalign Arena, in Morrisville.

Nikishin's status remains uncertain to those not privy to the discussions between the Russian defenseman and Canes management. A restricted free agent, Nikishin does not have a contract and will not be at camp Thursday, general manager Eric Tulsky said in a statement Wednesday, adding the team would have no further comment on the matter.

Another option: a trade. That could change the dynamic of camp quickly.

Some of the Vegas oddsmakers have made the Hurricanes the betting favorites to win a second straight Cup. Others point to the Florida Panthers (Shopping Cart IconShop Panthers Fan Gear) as the favorites, with the Colorado Avalanche the third pick.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour often refers to seasons as a relentless "grind," but also a "journey." Last year, the journey ended in celebration in Las Vegas with the Canes holding up the Cup.

With a new season about to begin, here are five pressing questions for training camp:

Carolina Hurricanes right wing Seth Jarvis (24) eyes the puck after a deflection by Vegas goalie Carter Hart (79) in the third period of Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Final, on Tuesday, June 9, 2026 in Las Vegas, NV.

Carolina Hurricanes right wing Seth Jarvis (24) eyes the puck after a deflection by Vegas goalie Carter Hart (79) in the third period of Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Final, on Tuesday, June 9, 2026 in Las Vegas, NV. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Who (temporarily) replaces Seth Jarvis?

Jarvis said recently his rehab from shoulder surgery is moving along nicely, with no setbacks. He has been seen

skating at Lane Arena, taking a few shots. But that's a lot different than, say, being smashed in a corner fighting for the puck.

Forwards Jackson Blake and Bradly Nadeau both made their NHL debuts April 16, 2024, in the Canes' final regular-season game at Columbus. Of bigger importance: veteran forward Jesper Fast suffered a serious neck injury in the game.

Bradly Nadeau, left, and Ronan Seeley of the Carolina Hurricanes chat during warmups prior to the game against the New York Islanders at UBS Arena on April 14, 2026 in Elmont, New York.

Bradly Nadeau, left, and Ronan Seeley of the Carolina Hurricanes chat during warmups prior to the game against the New York Islanders at UBS Arena on April 14, 2026 in Elmont, New York. Bruce Bennett Getty Images

With Fast unable to play again, a spot was open in training camp in 2024 and Blake claimed it. After a strong rookie season in 2024-25, he received a new contract and now has won a Stanley Cup.

Jarvis will return this season, but may miss the first 15 to 20 games. Again, the door is open for Nadeau, a right-shot winger with a booming one-timer whose all-around game has improved in two years with the AHL's Chicago Wolves. So, too, Felix Unger Sorum, and others.

"All of us are ready," Nadeau said Tuesday. "It's a matter of who wants it the most."

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Alexander Nikishin (21) leaves the ice with goalie Frederik Andersen (31) following their 6-1 victory over Montreal, clinching the Eastern Conference Finals, on Friday, May 29, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Alexander Nikishin (21) leaves the ice with goalie Frederik Andersen (31) following their 6-1 victory over Montreal, clinching the Eastern Conference Finals, on Friday, May 29, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Who replaces Nikishin if he's out?

If Nikishin is a no-show, the easy move is to have veteran Mike Reilly play opposite Shayne Gostisbehere on the third D pair.

Reilly was needed in the playoffs after Nikishin's concussion in the Ottawa series, playing two games. He was a late free-agent signing this summer, but his experience makes him more than insurance in case Nikishin is not on the team.



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The Canes also signed two defenders with extensive NHL experience this offseason — Pierre-Olivier Joseph and Jusso Valimaki. Joseph has played 225 games, most recently with Vancouver; Valimaki has 271 games played, most recently with Utah.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Charles-Alexis Legault (62) during warm up against the Toronto Maple Leafs at Scotiabank Arena.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Charles-Alexis Legault (62) during warm up against the Toronto Maple Leafs at Scotiabank Arena. John E. Sokolowski IMAGN IMAGES via Reuters Connect

Keep an eye, also, on Charles Alexis Legault. At 6-foot-4 and 222 pounds, he could add toughness to the lineup and could be ready to make the step from the AHL to the NHL. He played 12 games last season for the Canes.

"I have a goal of playing in the National Hockey League for a long time, whether this year or in the future," Legault said last week. "My goal (in camp) is to control what I can control. That's my effort, what I put out there. The way I work, the way I play."

Is the 'Bus' ready to be full-time No. 1?

A year ago, goalie Brandon Bussi attended the Panthers' training camp and then was assigned to the AHL's Charlotte Checkers, only to have the road — and his life — take a turn.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Brandon Bussi raises the Stanley Cup, following a 3-0 victory over Vegas in Game 6, on Sunday, June 14, 2026 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, NV.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Brandon Bussi raises the Stanley Cup, following a 3-0 victory over Vegas in Game 6, on Sunday, June 14, 2026 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, NV. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Claimed off waivers by the Canes, he diverted to Raleigh. The rest was storybook: the chance to play in the NHL, winning 31 games, getting a new contract, closing out the Stanley Cup run with three straight victories.

With Frederik Andersen leaving in free agency, Bussi goes into his second season with the Hurricanes as the No. 1 goalie. But Pyotr Kochetkov, after hip surgery last year, comes into camp healthy, ready to push Bussi and compete for the net.

What prospect could surprise in camp?

Ivan Ryabkin will be one of the youngest players in camp and could be one of the feistiest. The Russian forward, a second-round pick by Carolina, is listed at 5-11 and 185 pounds and can be a bit unpredictable on the ice, mixing some offensive flair with a penchant to mix it up with opposing players.

After a cameo appearance with Dynamo Moskva in the KHL, he has spent the past two seasons in North America, playing in the USHL, QMJHL and then the Wolves, where he played 31 regular-season games and 21 in the playoffs. Undisciplined at times, he had 70 penalty minutes in the 52 games in Chicago.

"He's fearless," Wolves coach Spiros Anastas said Tuesday. "For a young guy, 18 years old, to play 21 playoff games against men every night, he showed well. We're hoping he continues to show that same grittiness and his discipline continues to get better."

What about the lines?

This could be an interesting twist in camp. Brind'Amour does like to tinker with lines and take a look at different line combinations in camp.

One would think the head coach will leave the NHL's hottest postseason line intact: Logan Stankoven centering Taylor Hall and Blake.

Staal should center Nikolaj Ehlers and Jordan Martinook, and Mark Jankowski with Will Carrier and Eric Robinson. Or, Brind'Amour could slip Ehlers to the top line with Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov and put Jarvis' temporary replacement with Staal.



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The Athletic

Unsigned Hurricanes RFA Alexander Nikishin to miss start of training camp, GM Eric Tulsky says

By: Sean Gentille

The Carolina Hurricanes will open training camp Thursday without unsigned RFA defenseman Alexander Nikishin, general manager Eric Tulsky wrote in a statement posted on the team's social media accounts.

"Alexander Nikishin is not under contract currently, so he will not be at camp when we hit the ice on Thursday," Tulsky's statement read. "We won't be commenting further at this time."

Nikishin, 24, requested a trade over the summer, and The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun reported on Monday that the request remains in place.

A former top prospect, Nikishin played third-pair minutes alongside Shayne Gostisbehere during Carolina's Stanley Cup run last spring. He also saw time on the Hurricanes' second power play; Gostisbehere runs the first unit.

Nikishin totaled 11 points and 22 assists as a rookie in 2025-26, and the Hurricanes won his five-on-five minutes 57-43 with customary solid underlying numbers.

Over the summer, a few players with profiles similar to Nikishin's — well-regarded, relatively inexperienced RFA

defensemen — signed long-term, big-money extensions. Among them: Vancouver's Zeev Buium (eight years, \$9.38 million AAV), Calgary's Simon Nemec (five years, \$7.25 million AAV) and Anaheim's Pavel Mintyukov (five years, \$7.2 million AAV).

"He's a young kid (with) a lot of promise; we'd want to have him back for sure, but we also know it's a business and they get agents involved," coach Rod Brind'Amour told Spectrum News 1 on Wednesday. "We don't waste time worrying about it. If he comes in the door, we'll obviously welcome him with open arms, but until that happens, we've got to move on."

Brind'Amour also alluded to players who are in camp and presumably aiming to replace Nikishin in the lineup. Joel Nystrom gave the Hurricanes solid minutes during the 2025-26 regular season, Mike Reilly stepped in at times during the playoffs and Pierre-Olivier Joseph signed a one-year deal with Carolina on Sept. 8.

"We've got a lot of other guys that are wanting that spot, and we'll get a little competition," Brind'Amour said. "We haven't really had a lot of that in years past, because the seats on the bus are always full and now maybe there's a spot open."



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NORTH STATE JOURNAL

Staal signs 1-year extension with Hurricanes through 2027-28 season

By: Cory Lavalette

Hurricanes center Jordan Staal celebrates with the Stanley Cup after Carolina defeated the Golden Knights 3-0 in Game 6 on June 14 in Las Vegas. (John Locher / AP Photo)

RALEIGH — In a crowded scrum moments after the Stanley Cup parade in downtown Raleigh, I asked Jordan Staal a simple question.

"Did you think of going out on a high note?"

Staal smiled and replied, "No. I want another one."

The Carolina Hurricanes captain will get at least two chances to do that.

The 38-year-old center, three months and one day after he won his second championship and earned the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP, signed a one-year contract extension for the 2027-28 season Tuesday that could pay him as much as \$10 million.

"Jordan is not only our captain, he's the bedrock of the culture we've established in this organization," Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsy said in a press release announcing the deal. "His leadership and on-ice performance throughout last season and especially in the playoffs was a primary factor in bringing the Stanley Cup back to Raleigh."

Staal will begin his 21st season Thursday when Carolina opens training camp and the defense of its title, his 15th year in Raleigh and the final season of a four-year, \$11.68 million contract signed in June 2023 that proved to be a bargain at just over a \$2.9 million cap hit.

The new deal will likely wind up worth at least twice as much. While Staal's base salary will be \$900,000, he received a \$4 million signing bonus — giving him a \$4.9 million baseline cap hit for the 2027-28 season. Staal can also earn another \$5.1 million in performance bonuses, making the contract worth up to \$10 million.

The Hurricanes can afford to reward their captain given their cap situation. The NHL will have its first \$20 million player that same season thanks to the new contract the Avalanche

gave two-time Norris Trophy-winning defenseman Cale Makar as league salaries explode and the salary cap grows exponentially.

The Hurricanes have more than \$8 million in cap space for the upcoming 2026-27 season, though they still need to sign or move on from defenseman Alexander Nikishin, and it's expected the cap ceiling — \$104 million for the season that is upon us — will likely climb another \$10 million or more the following season.

Staal's incentive-laden deal gives Carolina flexibility. Should the Hurricanes be up against the salary cap ceiling in 2027-28, Staal's earned bonuses could carry over to the 2028-29 season, when the cap will surely jump higher yet again.

It's easy to doubt that Staal will be able to continue to be one of the NHL's top shutdown centers as he approaches 40, but the veteran eclipsed 20 goals for the first time in a decade last year and then took over the Stanley Cup final against the Vegas Golden Knights.

Staal scored in each of the first five games of the final, including twice in Game 4 when his game-winning goal evened the series at two games apiece and was the first of three straight wins that led Carolina to its six-game win in the franchise's third trip to the Cup final.

Staal received 17 of 21 first-place votes for the Conn Smythe Trophy, outdistancing fellow veteran Taylor Hall — who was atop the other four ballots — to be named playoff MVP.

Should he remain healthy, Staal — with 318 goals, 429 assists and 747 points in 1,403 career regular-season games — is poised to become the 26th, 27th or 28th player in NHL history to eclipse 1,500 games. Corey Perry currently has 1,464 games, while Pittsburgh captain and Staal's former teammate Sidney Crosby is 17 games ahead of the Carolina captain with 1,420 games. Staal has also played 181 career playoff games — tied for the 44th most in league history.

And more significantly, Staal is now guaranteed at least two more chances to reach the sport's pinnacle — and a big payday after more than earning his previous contract.



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Hurricanes' Nikishin not under contract, won't be attending training camp

By: Sportsnet Staff

1–2 minutes

General manager Eric Tulsky announced Wednesday that the unsigned restricted free agent will not take the ice at training camp on Thursday.

"Alexander Nikishin is not under contract currently, so he will not be at camp when we hit the ice on Thursday," Tulsky wrote in a statement. "We won't be commenting further at this time."

The rookie defenceman had 11 goals with 33 points in 81 regular-season games. During the team's run to a Stanley Cup title, Nikishin had one assist in 17 games.

During an appearance on The Fan Hockey Show, head coach Rod Brind'Amour said that he wasn't going to dwell on Nikishin's status.

"Whether they figure that out or not, who knows?" he said. "That's, you know, if he's here, great. If he's not, we're moving on. So we don't have a choice there."

Carolina selected the 24-year-old in the third round of the 2020 NHL Draft and made his debut during the 2024-25 post-season.

Tulsky said the team would not have any further comment on Nikishin's situation.



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Hurricanes Training Camp starts Thursday—Storylines to watch

By: Al Hood

We made it, folks. It's less than two weeks to Opening Night, there'll be an actual hockey game involving some NHL players by the end of the weekend, and before we know it we'll be marveling at a banner being hung in the Lenovo Center rafters—which may look different if promotional materials sent out to fans and photo shoots are any clue:

As things begin Thursday and members of the media will get their first real chance to chat with members of the team before things kick into high gear, here are a couple of the storylines to keep your eye on as they take the Wake Competition Center ice.

Alexander Nikishin Missing

It shouldn't be a surprise following the blurb that Pierre LeBrun dropped earlier this week that Nikishin won't be on the ice to start camp. Truthfully, without any sort of contract to play, there's no reason for him to risk injury and get on the ice.

So after the fanfare to get him over from Russia to his debut in the 2025 playoffs and then a good but not great rookie season, the two sides continue to be at a stalemate. It's one of those situations where you truly see both sides. Nikishin and his camp see some of new contracts that young players have been signing and feel they should be getting commiserate value. The Hurricanes have the leverage though, cause no other team can sign him and he couldn't plead his case to an arbitrator. Perhaps if he had come over to the United States earlier he'd be in a position to where he could do that, instead the Canes are understandably in a mode of not wanting to sink a lot of money when the potential is there but hasn't fully shown itself.

As for the desire of the Nikishin side to get a trade, again the Canes have most of the leverage. While they know he may not be a great fit for them they know his value and aren't going to just give up on him. The sole leverage the Nikishin camp has is not having any promise to sign long term to a new team, thus decreasing his value.

Latest Video from SB Nation

How the Senators' implosion proved inevitable despite their deep playoff run

The Ottawa Senators shocked everyone when they pushed the Penguins to a game seven, double-overtime finale of

2017's Eastern Conference Finals. They over-performed, they got lucky, they shouldn't have made it that far - but they were there. The Sens sat on the doorstep to competing for the franchise's first-ever Stanley Cup. And then, poof. Not only did they lose that game, but everything that their magical run momentarily covered up came fully into view. Their destruction came from within and as the months rolled by it proved that no matter what the players had done on the ice in 2017, their demise was inevitable.

What does this mean now that hockey is actually starting? Really, not much. As much hype as Nikishin had coming in, no one a) expected the team to trade for K'Andre Miller last summer and b) that turn out to be one of the best moves they could have made. The Canes' blue line looks more solid than it did when Nikishin arrived, and thus there are several young defensemen who'll be battling to take that spot as well as depth pieces the Canes signed. We'll see if a deadline forces movement, because in the end Nikishin loses in that he's in the United States and not earning anything.

Stable Roster

Besides Nikishin how stable is the Canes roster? They lost all of one person from last year's Cup winning team—Frederik Andersen who is already out with injury for Edmonton. They filled that spot from within as Pyotr Kochetkov comes back to the team fully healed from lower body surgery this past winter and with the chance in the last year of his deal to really cash in—either with the Canes or someone else as he'll be a UFA next year. Beyond that, everyone that lifted the Cup for the Canes is back, and this is reflected in the Training Camp roster released by the team on Wednesday.

Camp is going to see two groups of players take the ice, and there's no mixing of the groups. One group is your defending Cup Champs, the other is the group of players that will likely start the season in either Greensboro or Chicago.

So, the only chance players will have to really show what they can do with the main players is before and during the four Pre-Season games. On those days, the camp changes from the major/minor league rosters to game/non-game skaters. That's likely where we'll get some sort of clue of any player that has impressed.

Competition for open spots

Despite the amount of stability, the fact remains that there is at least one open spot available to players to start the year, and perhaps two depending on what happens with Nikishin.



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The spot is the one belonging to Seth Jarvis. While he's been spotted on the ice doing some drills before formal camp, there's still every indication he'll miss the first couple months of the season so his shoulder can finally be 100%. After a performance that won him a spot in the Four Nations, the Olympics, and hero of the Stanley Cup Game Two, he's earned the right now to sit back and make sure he's 100% for hopefully another long run.

Thus, the question is how the lines will be shaken up while Jarvis recovers? Will the team bring up a Bradley Nadeau to give some time, build a true enforcer fourth line with the likes of Nicholas Deslauriers, give Jesperi Kotkaniemi one last real chance to impress so they may be able to fetch a good price for him on the trade market, or all of the above? It also makes one wonder how the lines will be constructed, as Jarvis had been shuffled between the Aho and the Staal lines, and it's difficult to see the Stankoven line being broken up at least to start.

Short lead up

If you're thinking that we're going from zero to hockey in a very short time, you're not wrong. This is going to be the first season of the 84 game schedule. This was done to bring the NHL back to the setup where you play your division four times, the other division three, and the other conference twice. To commit to playing two more regular season games

the players asked for concessions in the preseason which—my guess is—the owners weren't too upset about giving up.

This means a much shorter Training Camp, two less preseason games, and—much to the dismay of coach Rod Brind'Amour—no more fitness test.

Joking aside, we've seen the result of a reduced camp and preseason in the other big contact sport—the NFL—and while you can't blame the players for wanting to reduce the grind, you can't help but to think it'll hit the Hurricanes the hardest of all the teams because of how late they played AND they were spending the time celebrating their Cup win. It'll be interesting to hear how Brind'Amour speaks of the drills and camp with significantly less time to get his team ready to defend their crown.

The short leadup is probably also going to lead to a rush of information once camp is over. Normally the end of camp carries a four or five day break before the season opens, but this season the Canes play their last preseason game on Saturday, September 26th then open the season on Tuesday, September 29th. Thus once the final horn sounds next Saturday, expect the social media build to be fast and furious.

Are you ready for the season to begin?



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SportScan

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

1399670 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal receives extension after Stanley Cup run

Chip Alexander3-4 minutes 16/09/2026

Raleigh

After winning the Stanley Cup, Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal has been given a one-year contract extension that could pay as much as \$10 million.

The Hurricanes announced late Tuesday night that Staal, 38, would receive an extension through the 2027-28 season. Staal will be paid a base salary of \$900,000, plus a \$4 million signing bonus, and also can earn as much as \$5.1 million in performance bonuses.

The announcement came just before the start of training camp for the Cup champions, who came away with the franchise's second Stanley Cup title. Staal was named the Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP as the Canes went 19-3 in the playoff march.

Staal began the 2026 playoffs by accepting the challenge of then-Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk, dropping the gloves to fight and winning it. He ended the playoffs with six goals in the Stanley Cup Final as the Canes finished off the Vegas Golden Knights in six games to win the Cup.

"He's the bedrock of the culture we've established in this organization," general manager Eric Tulsky said in announcing the signing.

Staal was a Stanley Cup winner with the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2009. Traded to Carolina in June 2012 – on his wedding day, no less – he was named the Canes captain on Sept. 29, 2019, after briefly serving as the team co-captain with Justin Faulk under previous coach Bill Peters.

Rod Brind'Amour, named head coach in 2018, made Justin Williams his captain and then turned to Staal after Williams retired.

Staal signed a four-year contract extension in 2023. While some wondered if he might retire if the Canes won a Cup, he quickly said after the Cup run that he intended to play out his contract. Now, he has another year.

This story was originally

Published September 16, 2026 at 8:28 AM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

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1399671 Carolina Hurricanes

Unsigned Hurricanes RFA Alexander Nikishin to miss start of training camp, GM Eric Tulsky says

Sean Gentile3-3 minutes 16/09/2026

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A former top prospect, Nikishin played third-pair minutes alongside Shayne Gostisbehere during Carolina's Stanley Cup run last spring. He also saw time on the Hurricanes' second power play; Gostisbehere runs the first unit.

Which next gen superstars jumped the highest in the NHL player tiers?

Nikishin totaled 11 points and 22 assists as a rookie in 2025-26, and the Hurricanes won his five-on-five minutes 57-43 with customary solid underlying numbers.

Over the summer, a few players with profiles similar to Nikishin's — well-regarded, relatively inexperienced RFA defensemen — signed long-term, big-money extensions. Among them: Vancouver's Zeev Buium (eight years, \$9.38 million AAV), Calgary's Simon Nemec (five years, \$7.25 million AAV) and Anaheim's Pavel Mintyukov (five years, \$7.2 million AAV).

"He's a young kid (with) a lot of promise; we'd want to have him back for sure, but we also know it's a business and they get agents involved," coach Rod Brind'Amour told Spectrum News 1 on Wednesday. "We don't waste time worrying about it. If he comes in the door, we'll obviously welcome him with open arms, but until that happens, we've got to move on."

Brind'Amour also alluded to players who are in camp and presumably aiming to replace Nikishin in the lineup. Joel Nystrom gave the Hurricanes solid minutes during the 2025-26 regular season, Mike Reilly stepped in at times during the playoffs and Pierre-Olivier Joseph signed a one-year deal with Carolina on Sept. 8.

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1399791 Websites

The Athletic / Inside the Arizona State men's hockey program, and the workout that left a player on life support

By Katie Strang, Nathan Fenno and Adam Kilgore

Sept. 17, 2026 5:00 am EDT

Greg Powers was going to fix the problem. The longtime Arizona State University men's hockey coach, the only person to lead the program in its 12 years in Division I, had watched his 2025-26 team lose 10 of its final 12 games and miss the postseason, and he knew why.

In a 247Sports podcast on May 18, Powers lamented that he didn't get "buy-in" from the players and that the Sun Devils had lost the blue-collar identity that he felt propelled a nascent Division I program to four winning seasons and a 2019 NCAA Tournament berth.

"I hate to say the word 'soft,' but that's what we were," Powers said. "And it became contagious. It was a team that just didn't attack adversity."

This season was going to be different, starting from day one. When players reported for the first official team activity Aug. 20 at Sun Angel Stadium, the workout was not led by the coach. Instead, according to photographs and interviews, Powers wore a pair of slide-on sandals and watched from the side as Tim Ziesel, 39, a former Green Beret, shouted commands at his players.

Powers told the players that the new workout would be challenging, multiple people present said, but if they wanted to be successful, they would get through it as a team.

Among the new players Powers brought in was Matthew Mayich, a St. Louis Blues prospect who arrived from Stoney Creek, Ontario, about a week earlier. Teammates called him "Mayo." Toward the end of the roughly 45-minute workout, Mayich, 21, collapsed, dropping the medicine ball he had been hauling. An athletic trainer hurried toward him and attempted to cool him down. Emergency responders rushed to the scene. Mayich was taken to a local hospital. He remains in critical condition; a lawyer representing his family said he is unlikely to recover.

Powers and the coaching staff haven't spoken publicly about what happened that day, and Powers declined to comment through a university spokesperson. Last month, Arizona State, which also declined to comment for this story, announced it was reviewing the circumstances of the workout, repeatedly emphasizing the review was not an investigation. The Arizona State University Police Department opened a probe, a move the university called standard.

The Athletic spoke to more than two dozen people for this story, including many who witnessed the training session or were briefed on it, and reviewed photographs of the workout, as well as text messages and emails, in an effort to understand what happened at the workout and the decision-making surrounding it. Most spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly about an incident that is the subject of an ongoing inquiry or out of fear of retaliation.

Powers was determined to toughen up his team, those sources said. His normal preseason conditioning setup was replaced by an unorthodox workout that may have violated NCAA guidelines on acclimating athletes to new climates and training periods.

In the aftermath of Mayich's collapse, some players are angry that Powers is being allowed to continue coaching while investigators ask them about the incident and the program, team sources said. Some feel trapped as they want justice for a teammate on life support, but their hockey careers are under the control of the coach who greenlit the workout that put him there.

Powers became a polarizing figure as he built Arizona State from a club team — for which he played goaltender in the late 1990s — into a credible NCAA Division I program. Several former players described an admired, culture-setting motivator who helped them land jobs and cared for them even after graduation. He was effusive with praise when things were going well and a skilled recruiter who sold players on creating a tradition of hockey in the desert. He cultivated bonds with donors, leading

to the construction of the \$137 million Mullett Arena and the position of Greg Powers Endowed Men's Hockey Head Coach.

But his reputation within hockey was mixed. Though seen as a strong fundraiser, he was considered a weak tactician, and he was sensitive about the latter. He could also flash a temper. He smashed a staff member's laptop during intermission of a game and broke a flat-screen television in the locker room after another, according to people who witnessed or were told about the outbursts.

He called players "pussies," according to multiple players from the past three seasons, and was known to fire off late-night text messages to players disparaging their character, effort and performance — calling one's performance "a joke," telling another he had cost ASU a game, and mocking another's postgame media availability.

Before one practice last season, players saw a flyer tacked to the wall of the hockey facility. At the top were the practice groups for the day, split into maroon and gold. In the middle was a picture of a pack of Charmin Ultra Soft toilet paper. Below that were the logos for the ECHL and WHL — leagues that would be either considered a step down or where they could go play instead — next to another for the NCAA transfer portal. Beneath the logos was a photo of office cubicles.

Another day, Powers printed out and posted a text message he said he received from a season-ticket holder and ASU hockey alum that read, in part: "If I was in your place, I cut half the team and call up club players with heart. Because talent obviously means f— all. Talented pussies are still f—ing pussies."

After last season, 10 players entered the transfer portal. This season's roster featured 18 newcomers, including Mayich.

The Athletic spoke with 12 people either at the Aug. 20 workout or who were briefed about it. Players were uneasy as they gathered at Sun Angel Stadium around 7 a.m., expecting that Ziesel's workout would be arduous. The team's normal preliminary training in years past featured a 2-mile run, 300-yard shuttle run and weightlifting. Ziesel, who served in Afghanistan and Ukraine before being discharged in 2020, had given a motivational talk to the team the previous season, but he had never led one of their workouts.

Several former Arizona Christian University basketball players who went through Ziesel-directed workouts at the school in 2022-24 told The Athletic that those sessions were physically and mentally demanding but not impossible, studded with stories from Ziesel's military career to motivate them. They noted the workouts started early in the morning, sometimes before sunrise, to avoid problems with heat.

"Man, that name still gives me chills," wrote ACU forward Mikah Blackwell, who added a laughing emoji. He participated in the workouts in 2022 and 2023 and said he has fond memories of Ziesel.

Ziesel did not respond to repeated phone calls, text messages and emails with questions about the workout. He retained a criminal defense attorney, Larry Kazan, who confirmed that ASUPD has asked to interview his client. "We're still watching things unfold" before deciding whether to speak with police, Kazan said.

Under Ziesel's direction, as the temperature pushed toward the high-80s, Arizona State players lined up in a staggered formation. He called out a position with an associated exercise — planks for push-ups, squat for squats, supine with legs elevated for flutterkicks. Players would have to repeat the command and yell, "Ready!"

If they said it incorrectly, they would run the width of the field, down and back. If Ziesel saw players "cheating the drill" or not executing with proper form, he ordered extra sprints.

About two minutes into the workout, a player dropped to a knee. Ziesel ordered the team to sprint the width of the field, down and back. He directed similar sprints at least a half-dozen other times.

Another player — not Mayich — dropped to his knees and appeared nauseous before he vomited. He went to drink water. Another player vomited.

Ziesel turned the workout into a competition. Players bear-crawled the width of the field and halfway back. Ziesel stood in the middle of the field, and the first eight players to reach his toes could stop. The rest had to keep going, and when they finished, Ziesel ordered them to stand and run the length of the track. The first six finishers were done, but the



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others were told to keep running. The faster finishers had time to sip water for about 15 seconds. The later ones did not. When asked about this, Kazan said, "I don't believe water was denied to anyone."

Mayich, who is 6-foot-3, was one of the late finishers. During the bear crawl, one witness said, Mayich crawled on his hands and knees and seemed disoriented. When he stood, he almost collapsed before he caught himself by straightening his legs.

In a different segment, players held planks while Ziesel told stories from his military career. Records show he served in the Navy as a hospitalman from 2007 to 2011, attempted SEAL training, then joined the Army in 2013. In a podcast reflecting on growing up as a child of globetrotting missionary parents and later serving in the military, Ziesel said: "God's made me a protector at heart, to say the least."

After the planks, he briefly huddled the group and told the players a story about the time he broke his leg on duty and had to be carried by a fellow soldier. That led to a drill where players had to fireman's-carry a teammate the width of the field. A player carried Mayich, one witness said, but Mayich did not carry his partner back.

Ziesel gathered the players again. He belittled players' toughness, telling them his young son could perform the workout, which Kazan characterized as common motivational coaching, then added: "They've heard worse, I'm sure."

Matthew Mayich remained hospitalized and in critical condition a week after the punishing training session.

Ziesel gave them instructions for the final event, then shook coaches' hands and left. He paused on his walk out to jokingly ask a handful of 20-something hockey alumni watching the session if they planned to join the workout tomorrow. It remains unclear why Ziesel left, though his friend and former attorney Buddy Rake said he didn't want players getting "too attached." Ziesel still had two more days of workouts with them.

Players formed teams of five and ran a relay race, each leg a sprint the length of the field and back, while hefting a medicine ball.

Mayich, a sophomore defenseman who played last season at Clarkson University, was one of the last players to start his leg of the medicine ball relay, sources said. As he approached the other side of the field, he stumbled and dropped the medicine ball. Mayich crumpled to the ground. He tried to stand and collapsed again. Mayich tried once more to get up, then collapsed for the last time.

One player screamed for someone to help Mayich. An assistant coach shouted similar directions. Teammates sprinted to him and found him lying on the ground, incoherent and distressed, unable to respond to questions. He stayed in the sun for several minutes before four players carried him into the shade, holding his legs out and keeping him upright. One player tried sitting back-to-back with him to keep him upright.

An athletic trainer put an ice pack on Mayich's chest, squirted him with water and placed towels from a cooler on him in a desperate effort to lower his body temperature. Sirens pierced the quiet morning. Tempe Fire Medical Rescue responded to the stadium at 8:31 a.m. The urgent voice of a first responder crackled over the radio about 10 minutes later: "We're going to be coming down with a serious heat emergency ... Have them ready for it."

Mayich was hospitalized in critical condition. A lawyer representing his family, Rob Carey, said Mayich suffered exertional heat stroke, leading to a lack of oxygen in his brain that left him unconscious and unlikely to recover.

The next morning, one player short, the team practiced. Powers was present. Ziesel was not.

Initially, players were led to believe by hockey staff members that Mayich would recover. But by the time the incident became public three days later, most understood the gravity of his condition. They then watched as school officials and others downplayed the workout's severity.

Rake, Ziesel's friend, minimized the workout's difficulty. "There isn't a D1 athlete on the planet that would describe this as a hard day of exercising, including the ASU hockey team," he told Phoenix's 12News.

Athletic director Graham Rossini, during his first public comments on the collapse, emphasized the nature of the school's inquiry during an interview on Arizona Sports 98.7: "This is not an investigation where

someone is suggesting something went wrong. We're just reviewing the facts and understanding the scenario."

Rossini emailed players' parents the first week of September promising that initial findings from the review will be shared soon; an ASU spokesperson said that information would be shared in the next week.

Arizona State players attended a vigil for Mayich on Sept. 3 at the hospital where he is on life support. The coaching staff wasn't there, according to multiple people present. Two days after the vigil, and two weeks after Mayich collapsed, the hockey program made its first public reference to the situation in a post on X:

"Matthew – your ASU teammates and the entire Sun Devil community are keeping you and your family in our thoughts and prayers during this incredibly difficult time."

Thinking of you 27 pic.twitter.com/fX3flnqzRr

— Sun Devil Hockey (@SunDevilHockey) September 5, 2026

Some players are conflicted, some are angry, people close to them said. Some are also scared. School and police officials probing the situation have reached out to them, but some players have been advised not to talk unless a law enforcement agency independent of ASU takes over, as the Mayich family's attorney has demanded. None of the players have spoken publicly about the incident, and some have been harangued on social media and in private messages for not speaking up for Mayich. Some would like to, but they've been cowed by the specter of retaliation.

"There's always that fear there are going to be repercussions coming back to you because the hockey world is so small," said a former ASU player. "If you haven't been in a high-intensity locker room with a coach like that, no one would truly understand."

In private, some current players have lamented the impossible position they have been put in, sources said. They believe the workout went too far and are angered at any suggestion that it didn't. And almost every day they interact with Powers, the coach who approved the workout that landed "Mayo," their teammate, in the hospital and unlikely to recover.

With the season scheduled to open Oct. 2, Powers' words from May linger: Is this the "adversity" they are supposed to "attack?" Is it "soft" to feel that some things are bigger than hockey?

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The Athletic / NHL futures best bets, win totals: Fade the Ducks, ride the Lightning

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Sept. 16, 2026 3:09 pm EDT

Our season preview series kicks off in a couple of weeks, where we've got all the odds and ends of what to expect for the upcoming NHL season.

But for our friends looking for action earlier than that, we're taking a spin through the best bets on the board from the NHL futures market. Though the 2024 edition was hit or miss, we've seen a lot of success across the other years in 2022 and 2023, and especially last year with the beautiful Buffalo Sabres coming through.

Let's keep that momentum going this season. As always, the best bets are separated into two sections: point totals and playoffs, then division, conference and Stanley Cup futures. Here's what we're going with this time around.

Point Totals and Playoffs

Florida Panthers

Under 107.5 points

Let's start with a banger, betting against a team many consider the league's best. There's some risk here based purely on the bounce-back potential after last season and the depth available up front.

But...

The Panthers haven't been a team focused on the regular season under Paul Maurice. That was their demise last season, and they'll focus more this time, but I'm not sure their style translates to a big point total. There's also the relative fragility of a lineup that was very injured last season and the ramifications of what that means for their value going forward. Add in some age effects for a forecheck-heavy roster, and I'm not sure this is a Presidents' Trophy threat. The time to fear Florida is during the playoffs, not the regular season.

There's one other major element here and that's goaltending. It was a large part of their demise last season and I don't believe it was fixed adequately with Jacob Markström and Akira Schmid. There's risk there that undermines a lot of the good elsewhere.

Anaheim Ducks

Under 92.5 points

Miss playoffs (-106)

I'm really low on the Ducks this year. That's not to say they won't be a team to watch going forward, but I am skeptical of what they built for this season. Their defense is in shambles after some key exits, and I'm not sold on the bottom six. The loss of Troy Terry to start the season is a big deal, too, as is losing Chris Kreider due to cap space issues.

There's a good chance the team's youth takes a major step forward to make all that moot, but I think there's still a far way to go to hit 92.5 points. The team was lucky to get 92 last season with a minus-23 goal differential. The team's youth movement is offset by a weak defense, and I expect a similar goal differential this season. The point total that comes with that lands in the mid-to-high 80s.

San Jose Sharks

Under 93.5 points

Miss playoffs (+108)

Someone has to make the playoffs in the Pacific, and someone has to get points. So it's a little weird to not be sold on two of the division's "strongest" chances, if we can call it that. Many of the issues that apply to Anaheim apply all the same to the Sharks. I'm not convinced about the

team's defense, and they were lucky to get the point total they did last season with a minus-41 goal differential.

In the Sharks' case, I am much more convinced they'll be a better team and see a deep improvement with their goal differential as a result. But it may not quite show up in the standings to a major degree. Something a little above last year, but below the market's estimation is where I'm at.

Chicago Blackhawks

Under 79.5 points

There's a trend here: the market is very high on the league's youth movement exploding; I'm a lot more reserved. There's a real chance I am wrong on all three of the Ducks, Sharks and Blackhawks, but even after adjusting for the age of each roster, it's hard to get to these totals.

For the Blackhawks in particular, I just don't like much of anything the team has shown to date from their youth movement. It's been sink or swim, and few, if any, know how to swim. Getting Anton Frondell and Roman Kantserov for a full year is good, along with the additions of Patrick Kane and Bowen Byram should help the team create a lot more offense. But defensively, this team is still a real mess that's not ready for primetime. The two big additions only add to that problem.

The market is expecting major changes to this team, but until they actually show it I remain unconvinced and would rather fade them at this price. Just because a team is young doesn't necessarily mean they're destined to take a huge jump. There's still far too much wrong with the Blackhawks.

Vancouver Canucks

Under 74.5 points

There's one thing that gives me pause here and that's a new coach. Adam Foote had one of the worst coaching impacts on record, and all indications are that Manny Malhotra is fairly sharp. That could have a huge impact, but Vancouver's roster is still so bereft of talent that it should be fine. A 70-point season is still a massive improvement over last year and a win for us.

Can the Sedins change the Canucks' culture?

Sean Gentile and Thomas Drance

Columbus Blue Jackets

Make playoffs (+148)

While the model isn't quite as jubilant on the Blue Jackets as it was on the Sabres last year (there isn't even an edge on the point total), Columbus carries similar vibes. Seemingly toxic from the outside, but could turn raucously joyous in an instant if the wins start piling up. I think Columbus has the depth and youth to make more noise than expected and currently have the Blue Jackets as the third best team in the Metro. There's some risk with Kirill Marchenko's status somewhat up in the air, but I like the make-up here.

Playoff parlay

Make: Tampa Bay, Edmonton, Dallas

Miss: Chicago, Seattle, Islanders

Price: +221

While I've had recommendations for steeper-priced playoff picks for parlay purposes, actually putting one together is a first for this series.

Last year, I finally got my playoff pricing more in line with the market by adding dynamic expected win percentage estimations to the year-long simulation. That cleared out a lot of the overconfidence at the extremes I once had, but there are still some cases where I don't think the market goes far enough. All six of the above teams are at -250 or higher to make or miss the playoffs, but I don't think that goes nearly far enough. I make this combination closer to +103 with five of the picks landing at 85 percent or higher (the Islanders are the lone exception).

Leans

Seattle Kraken (U80.5)

Tampa Bay Lightning (O104.5)



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Minnesota Wild (U104.5)

Dallas Stars (O101.5)

New York Islanders (U86.5)

If you want to sprinkle a little more, I have all of these off by around four points. It's an edge, but the others have a bit more juice.

Futures

Tampa Bay Lightning

Win division (+270)

Win East (+650)

Win Stanley Cup (+1200)

Big surprise, Dom's model loves the Lightning again.

Despite yet another disappointing flameout in the first round, I still believe the Lightning are the best team in the Atlantic and are bringing mostly the same team back, with the exception of swapping Darren Raddysh for John Carlson. That's probably a wash, though some would call that a win.

Either way, Tampa Bay remains a powerhouse team with an electric group of star players up front, a deep group of defenders and one of the best goalies in the league. And while it might just be a model that's fooled by the team's star power, it is somewhat comforting to see Tampa Bay's GM also go to bat for the team over the last two years, calling them the best during their contention run.

Despite the lack of postseason success, I don't think that statement is far off. I think the pricing for the Lightning and Panthers should probably be flipped.

Dallas Stars

Win division (+400)

Win West (+750)

Win Stanley Cup (+1700)

I'm a little surprised that the Stars aren't getting the love in the Central, being viewed by the market as the clear third-best team. I get that they lost to the Wild in the playoffs, but it feels like the Wild took a bigger step back this summer and don't have nearly the same depth as Dallas does. Like the Lightning and Panthers, I think the odds should be flipped for the Stars and Wild. And that gives a decent edge for Dallas across the board.

The Hurricanes, Sabres and Mammoth remain in the hunt for Connor Hellebuyck while talks are unusually quiet on a Nikita Kucherov extension.

Edmonton Oilers

Win division (+160)

The Oilers famously never win their division, and we always go back to the well anyway. They're probably the best team in the Pacific and should get a new coach bump from Mike Babcock. The major key for Edmonton is actually taking the regular season seriously, and that seems to be a vocalized priority amongst the team's leadership group this summer. This could be the year they finally break through in that regard.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Win division (+1400)

Win East (+2700)

Win Stanley Cup (+5500)

The Blue Jackets are no Sabres and none of these edges are massive, but I like these prices for an upstart team. Just like last season, don't spend too much on a long shot, but if you're interested in a riskier proposition, Columbus feels like one of the better bets this season. They have the young talent to take a step, the depth to stay consistent and a rising defense group led by last year's Norris winner.

The key reason to like them for playoff bets, though, is the Jet Greaves factor. Few goalies have been as efficiently excellent as he has been

since he arrived on the scene, and that gives him series-stealing potential — if Columbus gets there. It's only 50-50 that the Blue Jackets do, and it'll be an uphill battle then anyway. But they're probably a better team than being priced here, and that's what matters.

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The Athletic / The NHL Contention Cycle: Where does each team stand going into 2026-27 and in the future?

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Scott Wheeler

Welcome back to another year of the NHL Contention Cycle, our annual exercise that shows where each team currently stands in their contention window.

In a salary cap world, most teams follow a pattern: build, rise, contend, fall, and rebuild — all with the goal of one day hoisting the Stanley Cup. With this exercise, our goal is to map out where every team is in that cycle by measuring each team's core of top players and prospects. Our industry-sourced Player Tiers and Prospect Tiers support that by breaking down the league's best in each category.

The key to the Contention Cycle is the idea that the NHL runs on star power; the best teams have the best players, and usually a large quantity of them. It's that level of quality and quantity that creates the foundation of most Stanley Cup contenders.

Figuring out which teams have the best collection of high-end pieces informs where they land in the Contention Cycle. In that sense, we're trying to answer two questions: How good is this team now, and how good will it be in five years? How those two relate to each other helps to tell us where they are, where they're going and their trajectory to winning a Stanley Cup.

Going into the 2026-27 season, here's where each team stands. Arrows denote movement from last season.

While the NHL may run on star power, that can only go for so long. A lot depends on how bright the stars can shine, how long that lasts, and whether there's a succession plan ready to take over.

Our usual guess: The better a player is, the longer they last. That helps with bridging timelines between the current stars within the Player Tiers and the future stars within the Prospect Tiers. That's crucial for each team's Future Rating in particular; it's not just about their prospects, but about how their current star-level players are expected to age.

Of course, this exercise isn't everything. Many other factors matter: the front office and coach, the salary cap, the rest of the roster and the team's depth of prospects. But when we're talking about a team's ultimate ceiling, it's still the strength of the core that matters most, making the other factors easier to manage.

And it's not set in stone. That's the whole point: Teams move within the cycle and how they chart their path is part of the intrigue. This is a snapshot as we enter the 2026-27 season, something that can be altered with stronger players, better drafting and roster movement.

With that in mind, we've separated each team into nine tiers based on their spot in the Contention Cycle. Here's where they land now and in the future, which players get them there, and what their path to contention is.

You can find the methodology behind Present Rating and Future Rating at the bottom of this post.

Window Open

Montreal Canadiens

WINDOW OPEN

Dallas Stars

WINDOW OPEN

Minnesota Wild

WINDOW OPEN

Carolina Hurricanes

WINDOW OPEN

Window Closing

Tampa Bay Lightning

WINDOW CLOSING

Edmonton Oilers

WINDOW CLOSING

Florida Panthers

WINDOW CLOSING

Window Opening

Anaheim Ducks

WINDOW OPENING

Detroit Red Wings

WINDOW OPENING

Buffalo Sabres

WINDOW OPENING

Utah Mammoth

WINDOW OPENING

Win Now

Colorado Avalanche

WIN NOW

Vegas Golden Knights

WIN NOW

Win Later

San Jose Sharks

WIN LATER

Chicago Blackhawks

WIN LATER

Limited Ceiling

Columbus Blue Jackets

LIMITED CEILING

New York Rangers

LIMITED CEILING

Washington Capitals

LIMITED CEILING

Toronto Maple Leafs

LIMITED CEILING

Boston Bruins

LIMITED CEILING

New York Islanders

LIMITED CEILING

New Jersey Devils

LIMITED CEILING

Ottawa Senators

LIMITED CEILING

St. Louis Blues

LIMITED CEILING

Rebuilding



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Calgary Flames

REBUILDING

Rebuild Time

Winnipeg Jets

REBUILD TIME

Los Angeles Kings

REBUILD TIME

Window Closed

Philadelphia Flyers

WINDOW CLOSED

Pittsburgh Penguins

WINDOW CLOSED

Nashville Predators

WINDOW CLOSED

Vancouver Canucks

WINDOW CLOSED

Seattle Kraken

WINDOW CLOSED

Methodology

Similar to this exercise, we compared each player's final placement in the Player Tiers project with his projected Net Rating. That led to the following valuations for each position, depending on their tier placement — their "Tier Rating."

Those values were then added up for each team and normalized with percentiles to a scale of 0-to-10 to create their "Present Rating."

To get each team's "Future Rating," we looked at how each player from the Player Tiers (and some young players/goalies outside it) is projected to age over the next five seasons and applied that figure to their Tier Rating. We compared that number to the value for each Tier, and put each player in their corresponding future tier.

That process left us with 86 names.

With that in mind, we did the same exercise with the Prospect Tiers. To get the 113 prospects outside the NHL to fit into the remaining top 150 — and to account for prospect uncertainty — we applied a sliding probability scale to each tier.

Their Tier Ratings were added to the age-adjusted Tier Ratings of the remaining players for each team. That collective value, normalized to percentiles on a scale of 0-10, gave us our Future Rating.

Each team's Present Rating and Future Rating were then plotted together (as seen in the introduction), informing their place in the Contention Cycle.

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The Athletic / NHL player poll: League's elite weigh in on expansion, trade demands, state taxes and more

By Chris Johnston and Mark Lazerus

Sept. 16, 2026 5:30 am EDT

The NHL and NHLPA's annual player media tour — one event in Europe and one in Las Vegas — is an opportunity for television rightsholders, league-run media and a handful of independent journalists to have casual conversations with some of the best players in the league (and also, for some reason this year, a guy in a budget Bugs Bunny costume?).

When it's someone such as Quinn Hughes, in his current situation, the questions become quite pointed and specific. But for most players, the questions can be all over the place. What's the best Christmas present you ever got? Who's your favorite teammate ever? Who decides who gets to be the dressing-room DJ? What's the dumbest question you've ever been asked?

So what better place to do a quick player poll?

We'll have our usual deep-dive polls later in the season, with a much broader selection of the league surveyed. But here's a quick sampling of what some of the league's best had to say on a handful of pressing topics heading into training camp.

What city should the league expand to next?

Quebec City

3

Houston

3

Arizona

3

Atlanta

2

San Francisco

1

Kansas City

1

Helsinki

1

Zurich

1

At this point, both Helsinki and Zurich feel more likely than Quebec City to land an NHL team. A return to Quebec has long been a hobbyhorse for players, fans and sportswriters alike, and for good reason: It's a magnificent city with an NHL-ready arena and a hockey-starved populace. But the league has shown little interest in resurrecting the Nordiques.

Houston is starting to feel like a fait accompli, though anecdotally, there's some intrigue about Austin. The league has had success by being the first major team in secondary markets such as San Jose, Raleigh, N.C., and Las Vegas, so Austin fits the model. But Houston is the fourth-largest city in the United States, so that'll be tough for the league to pass up.

And while fans might roll their eyes at giving Arizona another shot, the warm weather and countless golf courses will always be appealing to NHL players.

A few player comments:

On Houston: "It's a great market."

On Arizona: "That would be sweet. It was always nice to play there. Great weather."

On Atlanta: "I think it would be cool."

Would it bother you if a teammate demanded a trade but only wanted to waive his no-movement clause to one or two other cities?

Yes

5

No

11

One thing becomes clear when talking to NHL players about the era of player empowerment: Fans take this stuff a lot more personally than players do. The players better understand the nuance of being in a bad situation — for yourself, for your career, for your family.

Patrick Kane forcing his way to the New York Rangers? Claude Giroux forcing his way to the Florida Panthers? Brad Marchand forcing his way to Florida? Brady Tkachuk forcing his way to, yes, Florida? It's not personal. It's just business.

"It's a tough one, but it's got to be a couple cities, OK? If you want out of here, it's got to be a real list."

"That's not how it should go."

"If that's not the right fit for them, and they feel uncomfortable or their family feels uncomfortable in that situation, then I'd want them to move somewhere else where they're happy."

"Not as long as you communicate it, if you're open and honest about your intentions. I think your teammates deserve for you to be all-in in what you do. As long as players communicate it openly and honestly, I don't have a problem. It's a business."

Would you consider local taxes a major factor when you negotiate a contract?

Yes

12

No

4

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman might not think state and provincial taxes are a big deal, but the players we spoke to — most of whom are in the upper echelon of the league pay scale, mind you — sure do. No, none of them will have any trouble paying their mortgage. But keeping an extra few hundred thousand dollars (or more) per year is still plenty appealing. After all, it's not as if plowing the roads is a major concern in most tax-free states.

"It's definitely a factor."

"I think it (is) for every player."

"When I'm 36, yes."

"It depends if they have a good team. I think if you're choosing between two good teams, yeah, it's part of that."

"I'm OK. You can't avoid the taxes, right? If you're on the lower end, I don't think it makes that much of a difference."

"I don't think I'm at that salary echelon where it makes too much of a difference. But I understand for someone who makes \$18, \$19, \$20 million."

"They're a nice attractive side (consideration), but I wouldn't pick the city because of the money. I believe in bigger things than just money. Money can't buy happiness."

4. Who will be the NHL's first/next \$20 million player?



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We ran into an issue on this question: The European player tour took place before Cale Makar became the league's first player to sign for an average annual value above \$20 million, extending for eight years with the Colorado Avalanche at \$20.4 million per.

So we'll split the voting into those cast before and after Makar's contract.

Of the 10 voting before Makar signed, five saw the payday coming and picked him, though they also saw reason to think it might not be quite that high.

"He deserves it, but if he wants to stay in Colorado, he may have to take a discount." (Editor's note: Nope.)

"I don't know if he's going to take that much, but he definitely could." (Editor's note: Yup.)

Four of those 10 chose Connor McDavid, who re-signed for a bargain \$12.5 million AAV with the Edmonton Oilers a year ago and is scheduled to hit free agency in 2028.

"He can choose wherever he wants to go."

The last of those 10 picked an unlikely candidate, Macklin Celebrini — perhaps unaware that the young San Jose Sharks superstar had signed an extension a month earlier at an \$18.8 million AAV, which takes him through 2032.

Of the five who voted after Makar signed, four picked Minnesota Wild defenseman Quinn Hughes as the league's next \$20 million man, and one picked Zach Werenski. Hughes' current contract takes him through 2027 and Werenski's takes him through 2028.

5. Who is one coach you'd like to play for?

There was no consensus pick here, but Jussi Ahokas, a fast-rising name in coaching circles, drew a couple of votes. After three years behind the Kitchener Rangers bench, Ahokas takes over the Colorado Eagles — the AHL affiliate of the Avalanche — this season.

Meanwhile, Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl may have wanted Mike Babcock to be their coach, but the new Oilers bench boss didn't come up in our poll.

Spencer Carbery (Washington Capitals), Jon Cooper (Tampa Bay Lightning), Ryan Huska (Calgary Flames), Paul Maurice (Florida Panthers), Joel Quenneville (Anaheim Ducks), Marco Sturm (Boston Bruins), André Tourigny (Utah Mammoth), Ryan Warsofsky (San Jose Sharks) and Barry Trotz (adviser for the Nashville Predators) received one vote each.

On Maurice: "I've heard so many good things about him."

On Carbery: "I don't know him, but the players just seem to love playing for him."

6. All things equal, would you rather play in a market with a lot of fan/media attention or a quieter market with more anonymity?

Pressure market

8

Quiet market

8

No kid dreams of being a faceless hockey player when they grow up. They dream of being a superstar, scoring the winning goal in front of an adoring crowd and being celebrated everywhere they go. But the reality of superstardom isn't for everybody. While some players crave the spotlight, the love and the pressure of playing in a city such as Toronto or Vancouver, it seems just as many want to ply their trade in peace and quiet in South Florida, Dallas or Los Angeles.

On playing in a pressure market:

"It's way more exciting."

"Personally I like the pressure."

And a quiet market:

"You don't want to be too comfortable, but it's too much in some cities."

"You can live your life and not worry too much about that stuff."

7. Do you look at any advanced stats while evaluating your game?

Yes

4

No

18

Many NHL locker rooms still have printed-out stat sheets waiting for the players after the game, and you'll still occasionally catch a guy lamenting his plus-minus postgame. But while nearly every player polled understood at least some of the value of analytics — from expected goals to rush chances to slot shots to speed bursts over 20 mph — they'd much rather let the coaching staffs and front offices worry about that. Let's just say the phrase "eye test" came up a lot.

Said those who voted "yes":

"Some stats are really good and useful. I think that Corsi actually really says how the player is on the ice."

"I don't get into too much detail of it because there's just no stopping. I just leave it at a brief minimal level to see where some of the players are at, where my name is at, and go from there."

And "no":

"I don't personally, but a lot of teams do."

"I have no idea what any of those are. I don't pay attention to any stats, to be honest."

"The coaching staff does, but I don't think it's that accurate yet. It's not like baseball."

"There's so many stats getting thrown around, and I have no idea where to look, to be honest. It's way too much stuff, especially when the coach comes in with new stats and whatever. It's getting out of hand here."

"It's more eye test, or feel. I lean towards that. But it's nice having those tools."

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ESPN / Another hockey team in Texas? What you need to know about NHL expansion - ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski

Since June 23, the debate about where an NHL expansion team should go in Texas has been focused on two cities: Houston and Austin.

Although Houston remains the largest metropolitan area in the nation without an NHL franchise, Austin has thrived as one of the fastest-growing markets for more than 15 years.

This all started when NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said the league is exploring placing a second team in Texas with Austin and Houston as potential targets. Bettman said the NHL entered into an agreement with the Friedkin family, which had around six months to explore placing a team in either city. The family agreed to an investment of \$3.5 billion that includes an expansion fee and building costs for an NHL arena.

Adding another team in Texas, where the Dallas Stars have played since 1993, would mark the third time since 2017 that the NHL has expanded its footprint. The NHL added its 31st franchise in 2017 with the Vegas Golden Knights and grew to its current 32-team dynamic in 2021 when it added the Seattle Kraken.

Now it appears that a 33rd franchise could be on the way. As are the many questions that come with a major development for the NHL at a time in which its revenue from last season was between \$7.5 billion to \$8 billion.

ESPN NHL reporters Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton and Greg Wyshynski are here to answer those questions about Austin, Houston and what it could all mean going forward.

How did Austin get on the NHL's expansion radar?

Sometimes, the NHL expansion process is fairly straightforward. When Las Vegas was looking to land a team, it was an effort driven by billionaire Bill Foley with no other owner or ownership group seeking to buy the franchise or build an arena for one.

In other cases, there are multiple groups seeking to land a franchise. Seattle had several possibilities for both ownership and arena sites before Seattle Hockey Partners secured the Kraken and refurbished Climate Pledge Arena. In Atlanta, where the NHL is expected to expand for a third time after the Flames and Thrashers relocated to Canada, there are three different ownership groups vying to own a team as an anchor for real estate projects.

Competition can be a good thing in negotiations. The NHL's potential second franchise in Texas didn't really have any: It was the Friedkin family as the owners, and Houston was the destination. So Austin entered the picture as another option for the Friedkins.

But rather than just being a stalking horse in the expansion race, Austin started to garner more attention from the Friedkin family as a possible home for its expansion team. The demographics were hockey-friendly. There was a ton of tech money to be had. An NHL franchise in Houston would be another pro team in a crowded sports market, much like the Kraken were in Seattle -- a market that is even more competitive when the NBA is in season. An NHL team in Austin would be more like the Golden Knights were in Vegas: the first ones through the door among the "big four" sports, immediately creating a bond with local fans.

At some point in the process, Austin's momentum was such that it became the group's preferred destination. But that doesn't necessarily mean the NHL is destined for the land of hipsters. Just because an owner has the financial means to run a team doesn't mean that the league and its 32 members are going to approve where that group wants to place a franchise. -- Wyshynski

What is the pro sports footprint for Austin and Houston, and has it ever included any form of hockey?

Austin has a unique sports landscape. The University of Texas isn't a professional team, but its programs such as football, men's and women's basketball, baseball, softball, men's and women's swimming and diving along with men's and women's track and field have strong followings.

The market's first and lone professional team among the major men's leagues is Austin FC in Major League Soccer. Until Austin FC began MLS play five years ago, the city was the largest market in the nation without a pro team. Austin also has the Circuit of the Americas, a track that has hosted Formula 1 for the annual United States Grand Prix since 2012 and the Texas Grand Prix as part of the NASCAR Cup Series since 2021.

Austin has also been home to minor league teams. The Austin Spurs, the G League affiliate of the San Antonio Spurs, play in the Cedar Park suburb. The suburb of Round Rock is home to Round Rock Express, the Triple-A affiliate of the Texas Rangers. Then there are the Texas Stars, who also play in Cedar Park and are the AHL affiliate to the NHL's Dallas Stars. Austin has had the Stars since the team relocated from Iowa in 2009.

Houston has a more established professional sports scene, with six teams across the major men's and women's leagues starting in 2027. The oldest team is the Houston Astros; the two-time World Series champions have played in the city since 1962. The Houston Rockets have been around since 1967, winning two NBA championships in the 1990s. Houston initially lost its NFL team to Nashville but gained another with the Houston Texans, founded in 1999 with their first season in 2002.

The city expanded into soccer in 2006 with the Houston Dynamo joining MLS and winning consecutive titles in 2006 and 2007; the Houston Dash joined the National Women's Soccer League in 2014. Houston was also home to the Houston Comets of the WNBA until the franchise folded in 2008. The Fertitta family, which owns the Rockets, reached an agreement in March to purchase the Connecticut Sun, relocate the team to Houston and rename it the Houston Comets.

Houston has a bit of a hockey history. Minor league hockey came to the city for a few years in the late 1940s. It returned in 1972 when the WHA encountered setbacks in its attempt to have a team in Dayton, Ohio. That led to the team moving to Houston, where it became the Aeros. Led by Gordie Howe and his sons Mark and Marty, the franchise won two league titles. The Aeros' final season was in 1979, before the WHL disbanded.

The second version of the Aeros played in Houston for 19 seasons. They were initially part of the defunct IHL before joining the AHL back in 2001. The Aeros were the affiliate for the Minnesota Wild -- and the Stars for one season -- before relocating to Iowa in 2013. -- Clark

What is the Friedkin family's background?

This would be the family's first venture into owning a North American professional sports team, but it has experience as an owner in European soccer.

Dan Friedkin, who has a master's degree from Rice University in Houston, is the owner and president of AS Roma in the Italian Serie A and the owner and chairman of Everton FC in the English Premier League. He also owns AS Cannes of Ligue 3, the French third division.

Friedkin took control of Roma in August 2020, and the club has finished in the top seven of Serie A every season since. The Giallorossi captured the UEFA Conference League, the third tier of European club competition, in 2022. In 2023, they finished second in the Europa League, the second-tier European club competition. Roma finished third in Serie A in 2025-26 and are competing in the premier European club competition -- the UEFA Champions League -- this season.

He took over Everton in December 2024, and the club finished with consecutive 13th-place finishes in the 20-team Premier League. Last season, the club left its famed Goodison Park venue and moved into Hill Dickinson Stadium, the eighth-largest soccer venue in England. -- Clark

Expansion teams usually struggle to start. Is there a reason to think this one could be good right away?

Absolutely, thanks to the lessons it will have learned from the Vegas and Seattle expansion drafts. (Though the Utah Mammoth are technically an expansion team, their players were ported over from the Arizona Coyotes when that franchise ended its existence.)



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It's expected that any new expansion team will have the same rules as the Golden Knights and Kraken did during their respective drafts:

NHL teams can protect either eight skaters and a goaltender or seven forwards, three defensemen and a goaltender.

Teams must expose at least two forwards and one defenseman who are under contract for the inaugural season of the expansion team. Teams must also expose one goalie who is under contract for that season or a restricted free agent.

Teams are required, with some exceptions, to protect any player with a no-movement clause.

Famously, the Golden Knights leveraged those rules into a series of significant trades with jittery teams that had a little over a year to prepare for the expansion draft. That netted Vegas players such as Shea Theodore, Alex Tuch and Reilly Smith, along with several high draft picks.

Infamously, Seattle didn't have the same opportunity, as teams better understood the rules, were more prepared and didn't flinch from expansion draft pressure points. Vegas made the Stanley Cup Final in its inaugural season and won in 2023. Seattle finished with the league's third-worst record in its first season and has yet to find its footing as a franchise: making the playoffs once in five years and failing to leverage its expansion draft class into roster upgrades.

A new Texas franchise will have the same fundamental advantages that this draft format offers. Building around the fourth-best defensemen from other teams' rosters is a good starting point. Populating the forward group with veteran depth players can build a solid foundation. The same can be said about the veteran backup goalies the draft offers up.

But immediate success for a team in Houston or Austin will come down to three factors:

1. Goaltending. Simply put, Vegas had it in Year 1 with Marc-Andre Fleury and Seattle did not have it with Philipp Grubauer and Chris Driedger, who combined to give the Kraken the worst save percentage in the NHL that season.
2. Coaching. The Golden Knights had a strong starting point with their roster, but it wasn't an All-Star team. Coach Gerard Gallant maximized the players' abilities with his system, earning instant success. Seattle's Dave Hakstol was unable to give the Kraken a discernible personality during his three years as head coach despite overseeing their only playoff appearance and series win. The right coach can get instant results.
3. Leveraging location. Austin and Houston have quality-of-life advantages that could be desirable to NHL players. But Texas as a whole has one edge that has led to on-ice success in several markets, including Dallas: no state income tax. Whether tax relief is the reason the Stars, Panthers, Lightning and Golden Knights have found tremendous success in the past decade, it'll be an advantage as well for the new Texas team. -- Wyshynski

How would a 33-team NHL compare with other major pro leagues in North America? And if the NHL wants an even number, what other markets will it consider?

If the NHL does add a 33rd team, it stands to be the largest major professional sports league by club count (the NFL has 32 teams, while the NBA, MLB and MLS clock in with 30). There have been ongoing talks in other leagues -- namely MLB and the NBA -- about potential expansion in the near future as well. But those leagues, like the NHL, want to be prudent about creating another mouth to feed. Diluting an already good, established product is of paramount concern with any expansion proposition. How many star players are available who could make a new franchise instantly exciting?

Granted, there's a considerable pipeline of players in the current landscape -- from the junior ranks through college and European clubs -- so adding another 20 or more to a new franchise isn't necessarily a huge lift. It's just about finding the right ones, which is the goal of any team.

When it comes to having an odd number of NHL teams, commissioner Gary Bettman has said in the past that he's not concerned about the divisions being somewhat off-kilter.

"Symmetry, I don't think, should necessarily govern expansion," Bettman said in June. "You expand if you think it makes sense and enhances what the league has."

So it's not imperative that the NHL have a second potential landing spot in mind. However, Atlanta and Phoenix will likely continue to be discussed as possible destinations for a future franchise. Among the main factors in those discussions is existing infrastructure: What sort of arena space is already there, or how long would it take to have an NHL-standard rink up and running?

Those are the types of concerns that would dictate whether a 34th team is a viable idea and where it could go (assuming, of course, the NHL finds its 33rd in the Lone Star State). -- Shilton

What might the divisions look like if the league adds a 33rd team?

The NHL could look at different scenarios with an odd number of teams.

If there is truly no concern over symmetry, the simplest path forward is slotting the new franchise into an existing division (likely the Central if it's another club in Texas). So the Western Conference would run with 17 teams to the Eastern Conference's 16.

In that case, would there have to be some sort of alteration to the playoff proceedings? And would an uneven number of contenders alter how the NHL puts together its scheduling? Those questions would have to be considered.

That's where another possibility could come into play: restructuring the league into as many as six divisions and spreading out the teams (with four, five or six in each) for balance.

This could leave room for future franchises to join and open the door for the NHL to put in place an entirely fresh playoff realignment, too. But that's a lot of alteration if the NHL intends to add a 34th team in the immediate future. The idea makes sense in the long term regardless of whether Bettman acknowledges the general need for a balance of conferences.

To make a 33-team league work, simply having 17 clubs in the West and 16 in the East is the most sensible path from a practical standpoint. The best suggestion to avoid a sweeping overhaul would be that the NHL at least has a plan in place to go from 33 to 34 franchises in fairly quick succession, however. If the potential to get back to an even number isn't something the league can achieve in a reasonable window, then a broader shakeup -- with realignment and more divisions -- will have to be in play. -- Shilton

What does the NHL board of governors think about expansion in Texas?

We are likely to find out more about the state of NHL expansion at the board of governors meeting in New York on Tuesday.

Deputy commissioner Bill Daly told ESPN last week that he would reach out to the Friedkins for an update, including a temperature check on Austin and Houston as their current focus for NHL expansion. The potential owners informed the league that they'd give both sites a fair shot in their assessment.

What city the Friedkin family chooses has significant ramifications for the board of governors. According to sources, there's a split among the owners on where to expand in Texas. Some of the NHL's most influential owners apparently prefer Houston, especially for its television market. Some of the newer owners are said to prefer Austin.

Whichever group holds the most sway, the ultimate decision comes down to where the NHL's leaders want to go. Bettman and Daly will push for their desired result. It's hard to imagine a scenario in which the board doesn't bend to Bettman's preference.

There's another aspect to the decision worth mentioning: Some owners don't want to expand at all. There are concerns about the player pool being further diluted as well as how expansion would impact the chances of making the cut for a playoff tournament that remains at 16 entrants, sources told ESPN.

Will those concerns manifest as a "no" vote on expansion? Probably not if Bettman is pushing to expand. But they're something to remember if the board is on the fence about a debatable location. -- Wyshynski

What could a TV broadcast deal look like for another Texas-based team?



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The NHL will want to be strategic in terms of media potential anywhere it expands. Daly has noted that other possible landing spots Atlanta and Phoenix are the seventh- and 12th-largest TV markets, respectively, in the U.S. Houston is the sixth-largest, while Austin is 34th. When it comes strictly to investigating the options in Texas, it's a serious plus for Houston to hold that sort of reach with the potential for local and national backers to get in on a new franchise.

Looking at a nearby comparable in Dallas shows that the fourth-largest market in the U.S. is home to an exclusive streaming partnership with Amazon Prime for viewers in the region starting in the 2026-27 season. Whether another franchise goes that route or not, it's something to take into account.

There are regional networks and local broadcasts stations in Houston that support the four major pro sports teams already established there. The same sort of attention could be given to an NHL franchise, and hockey could draw a fresh fanbase that opens up a wider range of possible advertisers.

It's hard to say exactly how a TV deal would play out Houston or Austin, but there are multiple options. There isn't a significant precedent for major league sports broadcasting contracts in Austin, though. The only major pro team in the city is Austin FC, whose games are streamed through Apple TV as part of MLS' rights agreement with the platform. The games are then rebroadcast on local television.

The media landscape at large is in flux, especially when it comes to regional broadcasters, so expect the NHL to consider where it can maximize local viewership when it comes to selecting the next expansion spot. -- Shilton

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Auston Matthews is still a Toronto Maple Leaf

Luke Fox

TORONTO — From confusion to conviction.

The last time Auston Matthews addressed local reporters at the Toronto Maple Leafs' west-side headquarters — one month removed from a season-ending knee injury and two years away from unrestricted free agency — the captain dropped a quote that hung over the fanbase like an ominous raincloud on a summer day.

Well, the organization he represents has undergone wholesale changes between the captain's trips to the podium.

Enter an aggressive new GM; a familiar and offensively minded new head coach and legendary power-play coach; one of the scariest point bombs in the league; a longtime pal and complementary forward who can skate top-six; a starting goaltender bound for the Hall of Fame; and, of course, the club's first No. 1 draftee since Matthews and most talented setup man since the last one skipped town.

No, Matthews — nor John Chayka, nor your favourite rumour monger — still cannot predict the future. But as he breaks into his 11th training camp with Toronto, Matthews asserts his devotion to the present.

"My intent was always to be here," Matthews said Wednesday, one day before his 29th birthday. "With the way things finished last year — the general manager gets fired before the season's over; there's obviously a lot of incoming change — you never really know who's coming in, what their plan is, what they think."

So, while a trio of his fellow American gold medalists (Connor Hellebuyck, Dylan Larkin, Brady Tkachuk) demanded trades from their own disappointing NHL clubs, Matthews chose to step back, lay low, fire up the red light, pour his energy into rehab, and watch Chayka cook.

Chayka and his chief advisor, Matthews' record-book victim Mats Sundin, held several conversations over a hectic off-season, both as a group and individually. Personnel, tactics, and culture were discussed.

Matthews arrived at those meetings in a unique spot. For the first time, the onetime Hart winner knew how it felt to be a team champion (Milan 2026) and how it felt to miss the playoffs completely. As the franchise's drivers drilled into the details, sources say, Matthews was focused only on how the Leafs can win.

The smoothness of the centre's recovery, the fortuitous lottery bounce, the improvements on the back end, and Jim Hiller's open communication and vow to implement an up-tempo game plan "that the players will be excited to play" all gave Matthews hope that Toronto could get back on the rails for the Chayka era.

Any worry that the new boss might envision a rebuild vanished.

"With John here now, I really like what he's done this summer. I think he's made some great changes, brought in some great people, some great players, great outside hires as well, and it's been great so far meeting everybody," Matthews said. "It's been super positive. Great energy at the rink."

Hiller worked with a young Matthews for years as the Leafs' power-play coach, and the two have maintained a friendship since. They'll work together to jolt the three-time Rocket champ back into the goal-scoring elite.

"This is, for me, as excited as he's been in my time talking to him," Hiller said. "I've just really appreciated where our relationship is today, how it's grown over the years, and he gives me confidence right now when I speak with him."

"So, I don't know what exactly that looks like or what number (of goals) that translates into. But when you talk to your captain, and your captain instills confidence in you, then I would say you're in a pretty good place."

Matthews and those around him insist he is in a good place, healthwise, after battling back and wrist injuries in addition to the Grade 3 MCL tear and quad contusion that have left surgical scars on his left knee.

Chayka assures his MVP is "full go, 100 per cent" after six months working with world-class rehabilitation specialists and trainers, seeking every extra edge for improvement.

"More importantly," Chayka said, "he's smiling and he's having fun and he's engaging with his teammates and he's being the great leader that he is."

He's been leading captain's skates at Ford Performance Centre for two weeks now, and shutdown defenceman Jake McCabe assures 34 looks "fantastic — just like always."

Sergei Bobrovsky is relieved he only needs to face that curl-and-snap laser in practice.

"I'm so happy that I'm not gonna play against him," Bobrovsky said. "He's got everything on him — shot, size, vision, everything. So, to see him in the practices and to be around him, it's an honour."

McCabe adds: "I mean, he's as professional as it gets. And you know he's taking care of himself. I kinda forgot about the knee, to be honest with you. Honestly, it doesn't look like anything changed."

Something did change last season, though.

Injury, inconsistency and, for stretches, an incompetent power-play, conspired to push Matthews down to career lows in goals (27) and points (53). For the first time in seven seasons, the 2024 Selke finalist finished as a minus skater (dash-4).

The fire dimmed. The joy Matthews exhibited freely in Italy and during the Team USA mini parade through Miami and D.C. was scarce upon return.

"The expectations for myself are always high," Matthews said. "So that was a frustrating year last year, of course. But it's a new season. We've had a lot of time to think about it. And going into this year, I'm feeling as good as possible."

The Atlantic Division is only getting tougher. Toronto might survive without a 69-goal Matthews; it cannot thrive without, say, a 45-goal Matthews.

"I want to score. I want to produce. I want to win, most importantly," Matthews said.

"When you look at the best players, they're constantly consistent, and I want to be in that category. The last couple years haven't gone how I wanted them to personally, and it's just trying to get back to that level and produce. I'm excited to be able to show that this year."

Thursday's excitement at Leafs HQ will revolve around Hiller's first crack at forward lines and whether Matthews and Gavin McKenna will hop over the boards together, just a couple of first-overalls filling nets.

"Let's have the suspense build," the coach smiled, when a peek at the whiteboard was requested.

"We've played with each other a little bit at some of these scrimmages," Matthews revealed. "You just watch, and it's really evident that he's an extremely gifted player. He's a full-package player. He sees the ice well. His hands are quick. He can pass. He can shoot. He's deceptive. Extremely smart."

"We've had some nice moments in summer scrimmages so far, and it's been fun. He's going to continue to get better, and I'm sure there'll be an opportunity at some point where we're going to play together, and I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun."

Fun, huh?

That's what was missing in these parts last winter. That's what will be hard to tap into if Matthews, the Nation, or the general manager starts ruminating over that unpredictable future.

"So, my message to fans is: Just enjoy it. Like, I know there's a lot of talk about him and his contractual status," Chayka said.

"One day he won't be a Toronto Maple Leaf. Hopefully, that ends with retirement. But ultimately, being able to have the privilege of working with



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him and watching him — again, not only on the ice but off the ice — it's a great honour for us.

"We're excited to link arms with him and walk side by side as we try to accomplish a really hard goal."

Translation: Win a Stanley Cup. In Toronto, Canada. Fishbowl and rumour mill. Pessimism and positivity and passion all knotted together.

"That's all I know," Matthews said. "I definitely don't take that for granted, to play somewhere where the fans, the city, are heavily invested in the team. They care and they want to see us succeed."

"You know, there's good days and there's bad days. But it's something I try to never take for granted because it truly is very special, very unique to play in a market like this. And I try to make the most of it."

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Sportsnet.ca / Lankinen ready to shoulder load as Canucks begin camp with Demko sidelined

Iain MacIntyre

Signed two years ago to back up Demko, who was then returning from a serious knee injury after finishing second in Vezina Trophy balloting, Lankinen has instead been, essentially, the Canucks' starter the last two seasons.

With Wednesday's announcement by general manager Ryan Johnson that Demko will be at training camp in Penticton but is not ready to practise with the main group, it seems likely that Lankinen could again be leaned on heavily when the Canucks' regular season opens on Sept. 29.

"Of course, I've had a front-row seat and I know how hard Thatcher has worked," Lankinen told Sportsnet on Wednesday at Rogers Arena before the team travelled to the Okanagan Valley for the opening of camp on Thursday morning. "He's putting everything on the line, you know, turning over every single stone. I'm really happy to see him come back because I know the path he's been going through, and it's not an easy path. But he's a competitor, a great pro who does everything he can. He's a big part of the team and he's going to help our team win when he gets back.

"Before that, it's everybody else's job to chip in, and I'm really excited for another opportunity. You know, this is my third year and it's been more or less the same thing (filling in for Demko). I'm more prepared than I've ever been before. I had a great summer, had some really good experiences the past couple years that I've been able to learn from, and I'm just really excited to get going here."

Knee, groin and hip injuries have plagued Demko, restricting him to just 43 games over the last two seasons, most of them played in discomfort. The goalie and the Canucks hope the hip surgeries he underwent in February will be long-term solutions to his chronic lower-body issues.

The 30-year-old is starting a three-year, \$24.5-million contract extension he signed 14 months ago. Briefly healthy when last season began, Demko's performance over seven games in October – a .929 save rate and NHL-leading metrics in goals saved above average – proved he can still stop pucks at a world-class level.

But the discouraging string of significant injuries has made him a wildcard for the Canucks – an X-factor whose impact on the team and its rebuild are impossible to project at this point.

"The main focus is on Thatcher, not necessarily for what he means to the organization, but Thatcher the person," Johnson said when asked about Demko's uncertainty. "He has battled a lot. He's been through a lot physically and emotionally. You can imagine the amount of recoveries and things that he has gone through, and what that mental strain has been on him.

"So, what does he mean to the organization right now? I think he's a perfect example of somebody that just keeps fighting and keeps wanting to get back. He has so much love for the game and love for his teammates. Some of our discussions, I mean, he doesn't just want to get back and play, he wants to get back and be a part of this solution for this organization moving forward. So, I commend his approach. And like I said, my focus is on Thatcher the person right now, and I think it'd be very selfish to think about it the other way of what he means necessarily to the future of the organization."

Lankinen was so impressive filling in for Demko two years ago that the Finn who had been a career backup in the NHL earned a five-year, \$22.5-million contract extension from the Canucks.

But as with so many Canuck players last season, Lankinen's performance regressed as the team imploded and veered into a major rebuild. His .875 save percentage was easily the worst of his career, and Lankinen won only 11 of 43 starts.

The 32nd-place Canucks were the NHL's worst team defensively, so the systems work under new head coach Manny Malhotra and his staff will be vitally important during training camp and the pre-season.

"Playing in the NHL is always a challenge, right?" Lankinen said when asked about the porous defensive environment around him last season. "And my job is to stop the puck. Of course, if we have a good structure, that helps because it's a five-man, six-man job (to defend). There are always a lot of things. . . out of your control, which I don't really want to go into because I just need to focus on my own stuff and what I can do better. I take full ownership for being better and doing the best I can. That is my absolute goal this year.

"Nobody can be happy about last year, myself included. And I take full ownership in that. Yeah, statistically, and in the win column, we weren't where we wanted to be, quite simply. I kept working on things to help us win games, and there were some stretches that those things showed really well. But at the same time, you know, we need to be more consistent where we bring our elite game every single night, myself included. So I'm not happy with last year, of course not. But did I learn something? Absolutely, and I am stronger and more mentally and physically prepared for this year than ever before."

Minor-league goalie Nikita Tolopilo, who logged 21 NHL games last season and is subject to waivers for the first time, is second on the Canucks' depth chart with Demko injured.

Chris Driedger, a 32-year-old journeyman who spent last season in Russia, is with the Canucks on a professional tryout.

Johnson has confidence in Lankinen but said the Canucks will be looking daily at all goaltending options so the position doesn't become a liability.

"We'll be looking at all avenues to be able to make sure that we feel really good about what we have at that position," the GM said.

Lankinen can't wait to get started. He echoed what many Canuck players and staff have said about a profound change in atmosphere around the team and the positive, invigorating environment Johnson and Malhotra are creating.

"It puts a smile on my face," Lankinen said. . . smiling. "It just feels like we're aligned, you know, from management to coaches to players. Everybody in the room, we're on board. It kind of tells you about the commitment that all the guys showed up early.

"I just like where this team is heading. Yes, we're in a rebuild, but we have a foundation. We have something to look forward to. Like, we want to win the Stanley Cup, we want to raise the Cup for the fans of Vancouver and the organization. These are the first steps that we're doing here, and that's what creates the excitement."

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Sportsnet.ca / Coach Travis Green sees bright future for Tkachuk-less Senators

Wayne Scanlan

OTTAWA — Welcome to the dawn of NHL training camps, where nowhere can be heard a discouraging word.

Every player is in the best shape ever. Any extra pound is all muscle.

Over the summer, poorer skaters honed their edging. Errant shooters found their mark.

Every team aims to go 84-0 (there's a new possibility, with two added regular season games).

Every power play is menacing.

Here in Ottawa, the scorched earth of a captain's departure surely left a mark, but you wouldn't know it from our first encounter with Senators head coach Travis Green.

"It seems like a long time ago," Green said, to a gaggle of reporters, on the topic of the departure of captain Brady Tkachuk.

Given this was Ottawa's only media availability of the day — no players will speak until the first skates of camp on Thursday — we naturally hung on the coach's every word. We parsed consonants and vowels for extra context.

Green, who has already spoken publicly about Tkachuk, did repeat that as a coach you are always "disappointed" to lose a key player, especially a captain with whom you've had a close relationship.

"He's a good player and you don't want to see that," Green said. "But that happened and here we are today."

While he declined to frame the details of it, coach and captain held a frank and honest discussion before Brady hit the road to South Florida to play with his brother Matthew on the Panthers.

Green doesn't feel the loss of Tkachuk will have any bearing on his team's approach, or as fuel to prove him wrong.

"That's come and gone, and it's not a topic at all," said the coach.

All right, then.

He will leave it to the hockey chat forums where the Tkachuks will burn bright as a topic all season.

Green, wearing an off-season smile, believes his Senators team will be better than a year ago, grown with age and experience like wine in a Bordeaux cellar.

He sees winger William Eklund, acquired from San Jose as part of the Tkachuk transaction, as a nice addition, although clearly a different type than the burly Tkachuk.

Green described him as a "good player" while offering no hints as to where he may line up.

Overall, as he heads up this club for a third season, Green believes the young-ish Senators should rise up together in the same way that a growing tide floats all boats.

"I think they've all become better hockey players," Green said. "And, quite honestly, I expect them to be better again. Almost to a man it's a group that can improve still."

Captain TBD

Green offered no hint as to who will be the team's new captain, nor when that might take place, echoing the words of general manager Steve Staios.

"Steve touched on it last week, about making sure we take our time and get it right," Green said. "And part of that reasoning is that we want to see our team together again."

A player's citizenship would not be a factor, Green said, to a question about the recent trend featuring American players wanting out from Canadian cities — including Connor Hellebuyk in Winnipeg and Quinn Hughes from Vancouver, along with Tkachuk here.

Fair enough, but what exactly could Green say if it IS a factor — there will be no Yankee captains in Canada's capital, friends? Now that would be a story.

Of the three obvious choices as captain, the safe bet and safest choice remains Thomas Chabot.

Jake Sanderson doesn't need the 'C' to be Ottawa's best player and top defenceman. Tim Stutzle can do his thing wearing an 'A.'

Chabot, proud Senator, longest-running Senator, would relish the role and it would not weigh him down as though the 'C' were made of lead.

Zub, Foegele injured

We knew there was the possibility that defenceman Artem Zub would not be available to start camp due to a lingering injury from last season's playoffs, but Green tossed in winger Warren Foegele as another not quite ready to join workouts. He offered no hints as to the nature of Foegele's injury. Nor Zub's, for that matter.

"They're skating," Green said. "I always tell you guys that when they're skating, they're close. I would expect both of them to be in in the next week, two weeks."

With a departure in the coaching ranks — franchise icon Daniel Alfredsson leaving for Toronto — Green confirmed that Ben Sexton, son of franchise co-founder Randy Sexton, will take over the power-play coaching duties.

The head coach heaped praise on Sexton as "an exceptional young coach."

Referring to him as "Sexy" (what else), Green described Sexton as hardworking, bright, and a student of the game.

"He's more than ready to run a special team," Green said.

Nothing but clear sailing as far as the eye can see. Of course. It's the day before camp starts for real.

Trouble? That is but a speck on the distant horizon.

Goaltender Linus Ullmark, who had a rollercoaster season but finished strong, looks ready and prepared to take on the team's most important job, we're told.

Winger Drake Batherson's massive new contract? Green says he's always happy to see a fine player get rewarded.

On it goes. Ready for the first drops of the puck and drops of camp sweat on the ice — this time around bereft of NHL training camp fitness tests.

"Every year is fresh," Green said. "I'm sure there'll be some white noise somewhere along the line. I think that's one of the great things about playing in a Canadian market — passion, excitement — fans love it, you guys love it."

"No team wants adversity. Every team has it."

The good ones deal with it best.

Travis Green, author of two playoff seasons in his first two years in Ottawa, believes his group is ready to be one of those teams.

Without Brady Tkachuk.

Who's to doubt him on the first day of camp?

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' McKenna era begins as training camp gets underway

Sonny Sachdeva

TORONTO — Three months after hearing his name called on the draft floor at Buffalo's KeyBank Center, after being ushered into the Toronto Maple Leafs fraternity by none other than Stratford, Ont.'s Justin Bieber, Gavin McKenna's next chapter officially got underway Wednesday as his new club opened its 2026 training camp.

The 18-year-old arrives in Toronto amid an off-season of sweeping change, his Maple Leafs approaching the 2026-27 campaign with a new front office pulling the strings, a new head coach manning the bench, and a lineup that's been tweaked and turned over plenty.

Taking the dais at the Ford Performance Centre in Etobicoke, Ont., Wednesday alongside his captain, Auston Matthews, and his new housemate, John Tavares — three generations of first-overall picks comprising the season-opening panel — McKenna reflected on the path ahead with opening night just two weeks away.

"I obviously have high expectations for myself," he said. "Coming to a market like this, the expectations are going to be higher — for me, I think it's a good motivator coming to a market like this, where the eyes are on you and you're going to hear if you're playing bad. It's something I've learned how to deal with over the past couple years, especially last year.

"Some people might not like it, but for me I see it as a blessing in disguise."

The Whitehorse, Yukon phenom is no stranger to the spotlight after years of attention leading up to his crowning moment at the 2026 NHL Draft. A roller-coaster 2025-26 at Penn State gave him a taste of how to navigate the highs and lows that may lie ahead.

"Last year I had a bit of a slow start to the year, and kind of heard all the noise. And I started to work harder," McKenna said. "So, for me, I want to start the year as best I can, and hopefully not have to hear that noise — but if I do, I think it's a good motivator for me."

Leaning on the two veterans who were stationed next to him Wednesday will be crucial, too. McKenna's already been taken under Tavares's wing, the former captain inviting the teenager to move into his home for his rookie campaign.

"That just shows the type of person he is," McKenna said of the veteran Leaf, who was effusive in his praise for the young star. "Such a good leader. He's been around the game for a while now, he knows what it takes. ... One thing I've noticed, obviously he played 82 games last year. I don't think that comes without the off-ice stuff and the habits he has. So, for me, being a young guy, to try to learn from him early on in my career and hopefully have seasons like that where I can play 82 games, take care of my body, (I've) already noticed little habits that I can try to implement into my everyday life."

The new franchise cornerstone has spent time with his captain, too, McKenna mentioning last week that Matthews invited him over to his home for dinner.

"I want to get to know him — I'm as excited with him joining the team as anybody else," Matthews said of the meal, through a wide grin. "I mean, it's not every day you get the first-overall pick and you get a player and person of his calibre. So, I want to get to know him, I want to build that relationship on and off the ice."

"We want him to feel as comfortable as possible, for him to come in here and just focus on playing hockey and working hard and being a good teammate. That's what it's all about. Everything else will take care of itself."

The question on everybody's mind as camp gets underway is where exactly the young phenom will begin the campaign — perhaps on the top line with Matthews, perhaps on the second with Tavares, or maybe

further down the lineup, with the coaching staff pushing him to earn a starring role.

Asked about his plan for the young star, head coach Jim Hiller — who heads into his first season as the Leafs' head coach himself — said the club will prioritize patience with McKenna.

"We're just going to try to be wise. We're not setting any ceiling on him at all — we're going to let him dictate where he falls," Hiller said Wednesday. "Ultimately, we all know he's going to be a tremendous player in the league. How quickly does he get there? It's a development curve for every single player that comes into this league. I think he's got great support around him — Auston's a No. 1, John's a No. 1. But you've got William Nylander, you've got (Matthew) Knies as a young player who's come in and done really well, you've got Easton Cowan on the come-up as a young player. He's got peers with him, it's not just the old guys. So, I think we're set up really well to have the right support around him."

"And he's just going to show us where he fits. We have no doubt that one day he's going to bring us all out of our seats — we're just not putting that pressure on him, that he has to do that starting tomorrow when he hits the ice."

Hiller didn't reveal where exactly he'll deploy No. 92 to begin camp, but stressed the decision will be made with the bigger picture in mind.

"Our goal is to put him in the best position to succeed, while accounting for all the other players on the team that we want to put in the best position to succeed as well. It's a team, and he's going to be an important part of the team," the coach said. "We've really been thoughtful about where exactly he starts. But in the end, he's got to get out there and play hockey. That's what he's done best all his life. And then things just slowly start to reveal themselves."

How Hiller hopes to help Maple Leafs find 'a little bit more' in 2027

While the Maple Leafs' lineup will have a significantly different look compared to the last few seasons at Scotiabank Arena, the most crucial change made this off-season may be behind the bench.

After two roller-coaster years under Craig Berube — the first bringing a second-round playoff berth, the second seeing Toronto miss the playoffs altogether — the club's coaching reins have been turned over to Hiller for 2026-27. The 57-year-old returns to Toronto after serving as an assistant coach for the club from 2015-19.

He spent three seasons as an assistant coach on Long Island after that initial blue-and-white foray, followed by a stretch in Los Angeles that saw him elevated to his first big-league head coaching role.

"There's obviously some familiarity there between myself, John, some other guys that had him here when he was an assistant," Matthews said of Hiller's return. "The communication's been great. He's been around, talking to guys, getting a feel for (the team), getting to learn new people, meet new people. In my experience with Jim, he's extremely personable, good at talking and communicating with the players. And I think that's a very important part of this job."

For the man himself, that emphasis on communication is a fundamental part of his approach to the role.

"I think what I do well is talk to the players," Hiller said of his coaching style. "I like players. I really respect the players. The game's gotten harder and harder over the years. It requires more focus, more dedication, more fitness, more nutrition, more and more in every area. And I think you really have to appreciate what they go through."

"My job, on top of that, is just to make sure that when they hit their level, to try to understand that they've got a little bit more. We all do, it's not just them — I know that for myself. You've got a little bit more. And I think, all of our players, what will be the challenge to them, no matter what you've done in your career — whether you're just getting started coming into the league, or you've played forever — is (finding) just a little more."

Chayka provides injury updates on Matthews, Tanev, Rielly

After a 2025-26 campaign significantly disrupted by injuries, all eyes will be on how the Maple Leafs keep their players on the ice in 2026-27, too, particularly amid the rigours of an extended 84-game season.



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On Wednesday, general manager John Chayka shared a number of updates regarding the health of the club's core.

Key among those was the news that Matthews and Chris Tanev are both healthy and ready to return to the lineup come opening night. The former was limited to 60 games last season, enduring a knee injury in March that cut short his season. Tanev played only 11 games in 2025-26, battling a number of injury issues over the course of the past couple years. A healthy season from both, and a return to the form both showed a couple seasons ago, would be pivotal for the club's chances of returning to the post-season in 2027.

Elsewhere on the blue line, veteran Morgan Rielly is currently dealing with a viral condition, per Chayka, and will be ramped up slowly as camp gets underway. The veteran defender may miss pre-season games but is expected to be ready for opening night on Sep. 29, according to the GM. Depth defenders William Villeneuve and Cade Webber are both out long-term, as the former recovers from an ACL reconstruction and the latter from an elbow reconstruction.

Chayka also announced that forward Max Domi failed his physical and will be out indefinitely. In May, the team announced that the 31-year-old underwent off-season surgery to address an issue he played through during the 2025-26 season, but complications arose from the procedure. Per Chayka, the winger is expected to address his injury situation himself in the near future.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks notebook: Back to basics in first training camp of rebuild

Courtney Jacobsen

VANCOUVER — For the first time in recent memory, there is absolutely no ambiguity about where this Vancouver Canucks team is headed.

Before the 2026-27 season even begins, we have a pretty good idea of where it will end — deep in the standings basement and, with a little stroke of luck, a top-two draft pick.

The Canucks begin their first training camp since a last-place finish last season triggered a major teardown in Penticton, B.C., on Thursday, and the new Canucks leadership group — led by co-presidents of hockey operations Daniel and Henrik Sedin with their general manager Ryan Johnson — emphasized how important it will be to set the tone for how the next several years of this rebuild will play out.

Building a foundation, first and foremost, is a top priority.

"The ground-level stuff, the foundational pieces that we need to put in place are going to be prioritized in camp," rookie head coach Manny Malhotra said Wednesday at Rogers Arena just before he departs for his first camp at the helm. "We're not cutting corners, we're not skipping the line. We have to have these foundational pieces in place before we can start talking about improving and getting the wins and advancing."

This September, it's back to the basics for the Canucks.

And for the best, too, as the team finished last in virtually every metric last season, including a staggering -100 goal differential, significantly worse than the -62 Chicago Blackhawks, who finished in 31st place. Even with the comfort of a clear direction, the Canucks aren't expected to make any standings gains this season.

"There's a very big difference between losing games, which is inevitable — every team is going to do it — and playing losing hockey. The measure of our group will be on playing the right way," said Malhotra.

"Those are the measures that, when you look back on a game, did we check those boxes? That's where the pride or the joy will come from, knowing that we're learning, we're doing the things we're asked, and it's getting better."

The emphasis heading into training camp is to trust the process. In other words: Wins and losses this season aren't as important as how the team got there.

"If (wins and losses are) what our focus is on, then we've failed everybody in what we've discussed since we came on board," said Johnson. "We want to win, but if we win and we fluctuate and we have volatility through our game, that means we don't have something to fall back on."

"But now, what we're trying to put in place is something we could fall back on when we get punched in the gut, when we take a punch in the face — what are these guys going to fall back on when that happens?"

Simply put, the rebuild is full-steam ahead. The ownership has bought in, as has the management. The players have too, and — led by Brock Boeser and Thatcher Demko — decided to return to the city and begin skating together long before camp was set to begin.

Returning players and newly signed veterans are committing to being part of the solution and building something sustainable — in the process, shedding the toxic-locker-room stigma. Remember when Vancouver used to be a top-notch destination to play?

"Players talk. Their wives talk. They are often the best communicators of what you have and what you're building," said Johnson. "I feel if we stay the course with how we want to do this, the conversation will be, 'hey, Vancouver is somewhere I want to go, and a Canuck is someone I want to be.'"

So, given where we are in the process to get there, what does a successful 2026-27 look like for the Canucks?

"We want to see a team that plays for each other," said Henrik, Canucks captain of eight years and one of the most well-respected leaders in the game. "The fans walk into the building, and they see a group that fights for each other."

"You see a plan in everything they do."

The quest for that begins on Thursday in Penticton.

What's next for Braeden Cootes?

This time last year, all the talk was on the Canucks' 2025 11th-overall pick. The then-18-year-old impressed everyone at the 2025-26 training camp, and as a result, played three games with the NHL club before he was returned to his WHL team in mid-October.

This year, the approach is different for Braeden Cootes, who may specifically benefit from a new CHL-NHL rule that allows one 19-year-old prospect per season to be assigned to the AHL instead of being sent back to their junior team.

"The player's play will dictate where they belong, but at the same time, we have to balance to make sure we're not just starstruck by short-term goals and the short-term success of the player," said Malhotra. "It's about the long view."

"It's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to go backwards," added Johnson, who is in no rush to call up players from the AHL if doing so would do a disservice to their development. "I do not believe in a yo-yo, up and down, American League to NHL (approach) ... How I see it, there's one call-up."

"There are elite players that never play in the American League, but it is a rarity. And it's our job to protect those young players and doing right by them."

Gone are the days when we see multiple AHL call-ups per season, sometimes per month. When a player earns their call to the NHL, it won't be temporary.

O'Captain, (who is) my captain

The Canucks have traded their captain mid-season twice in just under three years. Not since Henrik Sedin have we seen a captain serve in the position more than three full seasons, and the most recent lasted just a season and a quarter.

This time around, the Canucks are choosing carefully. And there is no urgency to do so.

"We're in no rush to hand out letters just for the sake of handing out letters," said Malhotra when asked about the possibility of naming a captain this season. "The leaders of this group will emerge when the time is right. That's going to play out over the next few weeks to see who takes hold of that type of role, and we see who the guys want to follow. But we're not in a rush to put A's and C's on guys. When it happens, it happens."

The Canucks are one of seven teams without a serving captain after the Los Angeles Kings named Drew Doughty captain on Wednesday night.

Demko out — for now

The Canucks announced Wednesday that Demko, the oft-injured starting netminder and 2024 Vezina Trophy finalist, will indeed not be a full participant in training camp.

The 30-year-old goalie underwent season-ending surgeries on both hips in February, but Johnson insists this development is "not by any means a setback."

"It's a part of our process," the GM added. "We never had a timeline on his recovery. We just wanted to make sure that it was a one-time thing, and that when he got back, he felt 100 per cent ready to go, that he'd done everything possible to get to that point without rushing it or feeling like we're trying to expedite it."

Quotebook:



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"The players will dictate where they play," said Malhotra on more than one occasion Wednesday, giving up absolutely no hints as to how his lineup may shake out in training camp.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens training camp preview: Pressure is on to meet high expectations

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — With Arber Xhekaj signing at the 11th hour, the band is officially back together, ready to start training camp, seemingly prepared to cruise out of the rebuild and throttle down towards Stanley Cup contention.

Though the Montreal Canadiens may still have a few miles to cover on that journey, general manager Kent Hughes' masterful salary cap manipulation — on display once again in inking Xhekaj for just \$1.5 million before buying up four prime years of Alex Newhook's career for just \$22.2 million — has set them up to arrive in short order. He's got the core locked in at a bargain, and with depth overflowing up front, on the back end and in net, he's still got some wiggle room and plenty of incentive to add.

So, buckle up, because this ride is about to get much more exciting.

Of course, there are some teams poised to throw spokes in the wheels, especially in the Atlantic Division, which will be a brutal gauntlet to run this season.

The Florida Panthers are back after a brief sabbatical from dominating the league, and they might be even better than they ever were through back-to-back championship seasons from 2023-25. The Tampa Bay Lightning have kept their contention window open while the Buffalo Sabres have cracked theirs ajar. And the Toronto Maple Leafs, Ottawa Senators and Boston Bruins all have what it takes to turn this division upside down.

Last year we all discounted the Sabres' ability to break the NHL's longest playoff drought and now we're doing the same to the Detroit Red Wings for obvious reasons (here's looking at you, Dylan Larkin). But perhaps we shouldn't forget their coming-of-age roster has had a winning record over each of the last three seasons and knocked on the door in two of them.

I'd imagine the Canadiens aren't overlooking them.

Still, the Red Wings obviously don't pose the biggest threat to this Canadiens season. The mirror does.

What if they look in it and realize the bar's been set too high to clear?

After all, the Canadiens are coming off a 106-point season and an appearance in the Eastern Conference Final. Their captain, Nick Suzuki, posted 101 points and won the Selke Trophy as the league's top defensive forward. His linemate, Cole Caufield, became the first player in the organization to top 50 goals since Stephane Richer did it in 1990. And the pressure for them and their teammates to follow up that impressive act is so palpable that when owner Geoff Molson was asked at the annual golf tournament Monday about his expectations for the season, he sidestepped the question like he was dodging a hip check from Xhekaj.

"I don't like using the word expectation, necessarily," Molson started. "For me to use the word expectation for the team, I don't think it's the right word.

"We're proud of them, they did great last year, and I have no doubt that they're going to come back and try to be even better this year."

When Canadiens president of hockey operations Jeff Gorton came out 10 minutes later and balked at defining what a successful season would look like for the team before saying, "The guys want to be good, they know we have a good team, they know we're moving in the right direction, and we try not to add any pressure to that," it certainly spoke to his concern about the bubbling hype in the market.

The Canadiens have earned it, no doubt. They've put one foot in front of the other through each of the last four seasons of this rebuild.

But this step out of it is a huge leap, and we're going to find out over the coming months if the Canadiens are indeed ready to take it without tripping.

Salary cap space: \$2,783,924 (according to PuckPedia.com)

GM: Kent Hughes

Head coach: Martin St. Louis

Assistant coaches: Derek Lalonde, Stephane Robidas

Unsigned players: None

Key additions: Chris Kreider

Key subtractions: Patrik Laine, Brendan Gallagher, Joe Veleno

What we'll learn during the pre-season

1. Where Arber Xhekaj fits

Don't be surprised if it's up front once everyone's healthy, with five defencemen in Lane Hutson, Mike Matheson, Noah Dobson, Kaiden Guhle and Alex Carrier ahead in the pecking order and Xhekaj and Jayden Struble being pushed by ready-for-primetime players like Adam Engstrom and David Reinbacher.

Of course, Guhle's potential short-term absence might obscure that possibility for now. But if the Canadiens intend on giving Xhekaj some runway at forward at one point or another this season, testing it out in camp feels like a good idea.

Testing it out actually feels necessary, because being able to use Xhekaj and his brother, Florian, on a line together as nuclear deterrents to the Tkachuks when Florida rolls around — or the Lightning, Sens, Bruins and Leafs, who are all built brawnier than in recent memory — is something this team needs to be able to do.

2. How the goaltending shakes out

Hughes was unequivocal: He's fine with starting camp with three goalies but has no intention of keeping three around to start the season.

That's good news for Jakub Dobes, who's under virtually no threat to lose the starting position in a camp that'll run less than two weeks and feature only three pre-season games (two of them with split squads).

What's less clear is what it means for Jacob Fowler, who's still eligible to return to the American Hockey League without having to clear waivers.

Not that he should be planning to.

Fowler's a big part of the Canadiens future but can also be a big part of their present if given the opportunity. And given his performance over the last year, it wouldn't surprise us if he jumped up and grabbed it.

Though again, the 21-year-old's got limited runway over a short camp to do that.

Does Samuel Montembeault have enough time to show he'll be more like the guy who finished top five in the NHL in goals saved above expected two years ago rather than the guy who seemingly couldn't save most of the shots he was expected to last year? Will another team out there see enough from him over a limited sample to trade for the final year of his \$3.15-million contract?

If not, could Montembeault be waived and parked in the AHL in favour of Fowler?

Hughes' response on the issue guarantees these questions will be answered soon.

3. Who's left without a chair?

Remember that overflow I mentioned? The one at forward makes you wonder if all the regulars starting camp will be finishing it with the Canadiens.

Hey, depth stimulates internal competition, and that's all well and good.

But depleting a bit of it to free up more cap space for a GM still looking for a premium piece up front is not only better but also seemingly necessary.



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If Hughes doesn't make a move or two soon, he certainly will before he eventually adds. And he could end up subtracting more than just one player, especially with some young ones currently pushing for spots and other young ones set to arrive later this season (here's looking at you, Michael Hage).

Bold prediction

If no other top-six forward is added before camp breaks, Chris Kreider starts the season on a line with Suzuki and Caufield.

Why? Because Juraj Slafkovsky can drive a line with Ivan Demidov and either one of Oliver Kapanen or Alex Newhook and Kreider proved in riding shotgun with Troy Terry and Leo Carlson with the Anaheim Ducks last season that he's still got the finishing ability and all-around game to excel in this role.

It helps that coach Martin St. Louis already knows what he has with Suzuki, Caufield and Slafkovsky. Whenever he wishes to reunite them, he'll be assured it'll flow.

But starting Kreider with Suzuki and Caufield, and Slafkovsky with Demidov and whomever, could offer the Canadiens better balance up front. Think of the trickle-down effect for the other two lines, as well, because they're loaded with the talent, experience and versatility to feast on weaker matchups.

Projected roster

Forwards

Cole Caufield — Nick Suzuki — Chris Kreider

Juraj Slafkovsky — Oliver Kapanen — Ivan Demidov

Zachary Bolduc — Jake Evans — Alex Newhook

Alexandre Texier — Phillip Danault — Josh Anderson

Kirby Dach, Florian Xhekaj

Defence

Lane Hutson — Noah Dobson

Mike Matheson — Alex Carrier

Jayden Struble — Arber Xhekaj

*Kaiden Guhle (assuming he doesn't start the season on time, one of Adam Engstrom or David Reinbacher would be in this slot)

Goaltenders

Jakub Dobes

Jacob Fowler

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames' newest 'beauty' Jake Middleton brings a blue-collar edge

Eric Francis

CALGARY – Ask anyone about Jake Middleton and the word “beauty” often follows.

Whether it's a reference to his moustache, his personality, or his perspective on how he entered the NHL, it's apropos.

Asked about the painful exercise of being selected last in the 2014 draft, the newest member of the Flames smiled.

“The last pick before (Connor) McDavid,” he reframed the accomplishment with a wink, reflecting on hearing his name called 210th overall by the Los Angeles Kings, just one agonizing spot ahead of a certain generational talent who went first overall the following year.

“Why'd you have to bring that up?”

It is a trivia nugget Middleton wears with an endearing blend of self-deprecation and grit.

Long before that agonizing day, or before he began his latest NHL stint by rolling his 2008 Harley-Davidson Softail Cross Bones into the Scotiabank Saddledome parking lot, Middleton was earning his keep the hard way.

A high school dishwasher who also spent summers laying bricks, mending fences, and cutting 100 acres of grass on a hobby farm, his path to the NHL helps you understand the DNA of the Calgary Flames' newest defenceman.

Middleton didn't glide into a leadership role on a rebuilding NHL roster, he manual-laboured his way there.

When the 30-year-old defenceman arrived in Calgary alongside his 70-year-old, “old-school as hell” father, Steve, it marked the end of a two-day, 1,600-kilometre motorcycle trek from Minneapolis through Swift Current.

He packed light – no hockey bag on the back.

So light, in fact, that a FedEx delay on the rest of his stuff left Middleton living out of a single overnight bag for his first two weeks in town.

“Everything I shipped hasn't shown up yet... I've done quite a few loads of laundry and worn the same clothes since September 1st,” laughed Middleton, acquired in the Blake Coleman trade.

“I've got some nice clothes, but I'm on probably my fifth time wearing them now.”

When your hockey origin story is forged in restaurant kitchens and masonry sites, repeating an outfit barely registers as a bump in the road.

That blue-collar work ethic isn't just a quirky backstory, it's the exact culture general manager Craig Conroy and head coach Ryan Huska need as they reshape the Flames' locker room.

Middleton was born four hours northwest of Cowtown, in tiny Wainwright, Ab., where his parents put in endless hours running the Honeyput Eatery & Pub his father and grandfather built.

When Middleton was eight, the family moved to Stratford, Ont. where his father worked as a custodian and millwright at a Toyota plant for two decades, while his mother, Darlene, balanced restaurant shifts with a job at the town paper.

“That's just kind of how we did things in our family,” said Middleton.

“My brother, sister and I, we were always working. We always worked for what we got.”

That relentless grind was put to the test on a Saturday afternoon in June 2014.

Middleton decided to skip the draft in Philadelphia because he wasn't sure his name would even be called, choosing instead to monitor the draft while attending a Blue Jays game. He watched 209 players selected before his name was called.

The sting was real.

“How did it shape my career? It's truly an embarrassing moment, right?” admitted Middleton, who didn't end up getting a contract offer from the Kings,

“You're thinking you're gonna be better than last. I didn't go to the draft because I was not confident. I was happy to get a chance, but yeah, there was some embarrassment behind it, a little bit of ‘eff-you’ going forward, and it took a lot of work. But we're here.”

“Here” required a journey through the ECHL's Manchester Monarchs and years of development with the AHL's San Jose Barracuda. Nobody handed him an NHL sweater. He earned every bit of his 11-year professional career brick by brick, transforming from a minor-league longshot into a rugged, reliable defender in San Jose and Minnesota.

Now settling into Calgary with his wife and young daughter, Stevie, the Western Canadian ties his family established in Wainwright have brought him full circle. And he arrived in Alberta with plenty of experience watching how NHL leaders operate.

“As a 22-year-old call-up as the seventh defenceman, I got to watch how Joe Thornton and Joe Pavelski and Patrick Marleau did things,” said the former captain of the Ottawa 67's.

“Even how a guy like Brent Burns carried himself. And then I get to go to a team like Minnesota that had an extremely solid four when I got there with Spurgeon and Foligno.”

Just as importantly, he paid attention to how those veterans welcomed younger players.

“The way that they were leaders in giving Matt Boldy and Brock Faber a voice when they were coming up, I got to see a lot,” said the 6-foot-3, 219-pound defender.

“I've been in a lot of different situations the past 10 years, and I think that's something that I'll be able to lean on going forward with the Flames.”

His leadership on a rebuilding club will revolve around sticking up for teammates, playing depth roles, and leading by example on a team that has established a similarly admirable work ethic as its calling card.

“I'm not afraid to get uncomfortable too, which I think is a leadership quality in a lot of guys,” said Middleton.

There will indeed be plenty of uncomfortable moments for these Flames – nights made easier with the humour and guidance of leaders like Middleton.

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TSN.CA / 'My intent was always to be here': Matthews clears air on Leafs future

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs opened training camp with a media availability at the Ford Performance Centre on Wednesday.

Auston Matthews was noncommittal about his future with the Maple Leafs back in April.

"I can't predict the future," he told reporters on locker clean-out day after Toronto missed the playoffs for the first time in his 10-season career.

As the Leafs opened training camp on Wednesday, the captain cleared the air.

"My intent was always to be here," Matthews said. "With the way things finished last year, you know, general manager [Brad Treliving] gets fired before the season's over, there's obviously a lot of incoming change. You never really know who's coming in, what their plan is, what they think and it was just [my decision] to take a step back and see what happens and have open lines of communication with whoever was hired."

John Chayka got the job on May 3 and has made a good first impression on the face of the franchise.

"I really like what he's done this summer," Matthews said. "I think he's made some great changes, brought in some great people, great players, some great outside hires as well and it's been great so far. Meeting everybody, you know, it's been super positive. Great energy at the rink."

Chayka gave the front office a facelift, revamped the support staff, changed the coaching staff and turned over almost half the roster during a busy summer. Among the new faces coming in are first-overall pick Gavin McKenna, 70-point defenceman Darren Raddysh and two-time Stanley Cup winning goalie Sergei Bobrovsky.

The hope is all the change will allow the Leafs to bounce back immediately after a disastrous 28th-place finish last year. Matthews, who will celebrate his 29th birthday on Thursday, was in no mood for a full rebuild.

"For myself, like, it was more so just taking a step back and seeing who comes in because you never know, they might think something different or they may have different plans or different visions for what they see fit," Matthews explained. "And so I thought it was just appropriate to take a step back, see what happens, and go from there."

Matthews has been sidelined since suffering a grade 3 MCL tear and quad contusion in his left leg courtesy a knee-on-knee hit by Radko Gudas on March 12. He underwent surgery to repair the damage on March 20.

"He looks great," Chayka said. "Give him credit, he's put in the work. He worked with some world-class rehab specialists and trainers ... He's full-go, 100 per cent. Physically, he looks great. More importantly, I'm sure you guys see it the same way I do, he is smiling, having fun, engaging with his teammates that way, and being the great leader he is."

Matthews has two years remaining on his contract and will be eligible to sign an extension next summer.

"My message to the fans is just enjoy it," Chayka stressed. "I know there is a lot of talk about him and his contractual status or things like that. One day, he won't be a Toronto Maple Leaf. Hopefully that ends with retirement. But, ultimately, being able to have the privilege of working with him and watching him — not only on the ice, but off it — is a great honour for us and something [where] we're excited to link arms with him and walk side-by-side as we try to accomplish a really hard goal."

Matthews is coming off his two lowest goal-scoring seasons and the hope is better health and a new head coach in Jim Hiller can help him get back in the Rocket Richard Trophy race. Hiller knows Matthews well, having served as an assistant coach during his first three seasons in the NHL.

"In my experience with Jim, he's extremely personable, good at talking, communicating with the players," Matthews said. "I think that's a very important part of this job."

"I've had a pretty good relationship with Auston over the years," Hiller said. "This is as excited as he's been in my time talking to him and I just really appreciate it. I really appreciate where our relationship is today, how it's grown over the years, and he gives me confidence right now when I speak to him."

So, how many goals can we pencil Matthews in for?

"I don't know exactly what that looks like or what number it translates into, but when you talk to your captain and your captain instills confidence in you, I would say you are in a pretty good place," Hiller said.

Despite all of the offseason changes, the Leafs will likely only go as far as the 2022 Hart Trophy winner takes them.

"I think the expectations for myself are always high," Matthews said. "I try to hold myself to an extremely high standard. It was a frustrating year last year, of course, but it's a new season. We've had a lot of time to think about it and going into this year, [I'm] feeling as good as possible ... A lot of new people, new change, which is inevitable, but I think it's also exciting too, to come to the rink and have that energy, have that excitement again."

One reason why Matthews is excited is the arrival of McKenna, who sat beside him and alternate captain John Tavares during Wednesday's news conference.

Matthews recently invited the 18-year-old winger over to his place for dinner.

"I want to get to know him," he said. "I mean, I'm as excited about him joining the team as anybody else. It's not every day you get the first overall pick and get a person and player of his calibre."

The presence of McKenna at Wednesday's news conference raised eyebrows because in the past the team opted to have the leadership group speak on the first day at camp.

McKenna is embracing the spotlight in the centre of the hockey universe.

"Some people might not like it but, for me, I see it as a blessing in disguise," the Whitehorse native said.

McKenna pointed out that it was criticism from media and fans amid a slow start in the NCAA that sparked a second-half surge at Penn State last season.

"I obviously want to have high expectations for myself, so coming to a market like this the expectations are going to be higher," McKenna said. "I think it's a good motivator coming to a market like this where the eyes are on you and you're going to hear if you're playing bad."

McKenna is hoping to get off to a quicker start this season and can lean on fellow first overall picks Matthews and Tavares.

"He's extremely aware of his environment and what's going on around him, but is still soaking it in, enjoying all the steps along the way," observed Tavares. "He's very comfortable in his own skin."

McKenna will be living with Tavares, who was the top pick in the 2009 draft.

Hiller highlighted that McKenna can also look to fellow rising stars Easton Cowan and Matthew Knies for support.

"He's got peers with him," the coach said. "It's not just the old guys. So, I think we're set up really well to have the right support around him and he's just going to show us where he fits. We have no doubt that one day he's going to bring us all out of our seats, we're just not having the expectation or putting that pressure on him that he has to do that starting tomorrow when he hits the ice."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Despite McKenna being wise beyond his years, the Leafs plan to ease him into the lineup. TSN Hockey Insider Chris Johnston reported on Insider Trading that McKenna will not start on the top line with Matthews.

"We're just going to try to be wise," Hiller explained. "We're not setting any ceiling on him at all. We're going to let him dictate where he falls and ultimately we all know he's going to be a tremendous player in the league. How quickly does he get there? It's a development curve for every single player who comes into this league."

Hiller declined to say who McKenna will skate with at the first practice on Thursday.

"Let's have the suspense build and let's watch tomorrow morning," Hiller said with a grin. "I know it's a burning question, as it should be, but we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. You'll find that out tomorrow. Our goal is to put him in the best position to succeed while accounting for all the other players on the team that we want to put in the best position to succeed as well ... You'd be surprised at how much goes into a decision on where a player of that stature starts. There's always unintended consequences. You have to think about not only that player but other players."

McKenna is hoping to earn a look beside Matthews at some point, but it sounds like free-agent signing Jack Roslovic is likely to get the first look on the top line. Roslovic played with Matthews during their junior days together at the US National Team Development Program.

"I'm really excited to play with him again," Matthews said. "We've definitely stayed in touch and stayed pretty close over the years. Hanging out with him and seeing him again, he's a lot of fun to be around. He's funny. He's always got something to say and definitely a chattier guy, which is great in the locker room. I'm excited to rekindle that chemistry with him. He's been here for a couple weeks now so we've been skating with each other and hopefully it's as seamless as possible as we get going here. I know I'm really excited."

After undergoing core muscle surgery on March 4, defenceman Chris Tanev has been cleared to play.

"He's had an amazing recovery," Chayka said. "He pushes himself as hard as anybody in the gym and on the ice. So, feel really confident that his injuries are in a good place. He's as healthy as anybody and obviously he's a big part of the team."

Tanev, 36, also dealt with a concussion and spine injury last season. He was limited to just 11 games, which is a big reason why the Leafs fell to 31st in goals against.

"I think they missed him a lot last year," Chayka said. "He's an important piece for any team that's serious about trying to be successful and we're lucky to have him on our team."

Tanev returns to roots as he plots path back to Leafs lineup

Defenceman Morgan Rielly is dealing with a "viral condition" and may miss the first preseason game on Saturday.

"He is working his way through it," Chayka said. "Nothing we're worried about, but he will probably be ramped a little slower than expected. He might miss the first game, but we expect him to be ready for opening night."

The Leafs open the regular season on Sept. 29 against the Montreal Canadiens.

Chayka: 'At no point' did Leafs have 'serious trade opportunity' with Rielly

Forward Max Domi failed his physical ahead of training camp.

"He will be out indefinitely," Chayka said. "He is going to address that personally in terms of his injury and he will do so in the near future."

In May, the team revealed that Domi is dealing with complications from a surgery he had to remedy an issue he played through last season.

Chayka also announced that right-shot defenceman William Villeneuve, who was a key part of the Toronto Marlies Calder Cup championship, is out long-term after undergoing ACL reconstruction.

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