



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 18, 2026

The News & Observer

Why Carolina Hurricanes' training camp will 'make you forget the Stanley Cup'

Chip Alexander

Morrisville

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"We're on a new journey, right?" he said. "It started with day one today, and that's exactly what I kinda needed to hear."

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ben.pennington@newsobserver.com

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That was another comment Brind'Amour was happy to hear.

"He looks good, he's skating well," Brind'Amour said. "But I can promise you they're not going to rush him back. He's got to keep progressing along and getting stronger. And when he's ready he'll let us know, and we'll get him in there as soon as we can."

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The makeup of the two groups does not preclude Brind'Amour and the staff from inserting a younger player into the mix, the coach said.

"There's going to be competition, and it's good to have that, and we'll see how it all shakes out," Brind'Amour said.

Aho, 29, will be entering his 11th NHL season. In his early years with the Canes, there were no postseason playoffs for the Finnish center. Then, seven seasons of reaching the playoffs but falling short of the ultimate goal.

Aho's 10th season was the one he wanted so badly — a Stanley Cup, a championship. But what now? What's the motivation?

"It's higher than ever, honestly," Aho said Thursday.

"Knowing how much it takes, how much work you have to put in, how great it feels when it finally happens, it makes you want more."



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Jarvis feels 'ahead of schedule' for Hurricanes in recovery from shoulder surgery

Kurt Dusterberg

Forward in noncontact jersey at training camp, expected to need 4-6 months after June procedure

NHL.com Independent Correspondent

September 17, 2026

MORRISVILLE, N.C. -- Seth Jarvis skated in a noncontact jersey during the Carolina Hurricanes' first training camp practice Thursday, and the forward could be ahead of schedule in his return following surgery on his right shoulder in late June.

Jarvis had repairs for a torn labrum and rotator cuff and was expected to need 4-6 months to recover, with a return between late October and December the initial projection.

"Last I checked I was a little ahead of schedule, so (I will) just keep rehabbing as hard as I can," Jarvis said. "It's been a long grind, but I can start to kind of see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Jarvis initially injured his shoulder during the 2023-24 season but opted to play through any issues the past two seasons, including 71 regular-season games and 19 games in the Stanley Cup Playoffs to help the Hurricanes win the Stanley Cup last season. He also played five games for Team Canada at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

"I've been skating for a few weeks now," he said. "Cardio feels pretty good. It's more just getting used to being around other people. Obviously I've got to be careful bumping into people, but for the most part it felt pretty good."

"It's nice not to be in a brace anymore and have a little bit more motion out on the ice, being able to use more width and feel more free out there."

Jarvis led the Hurricanes with 32 goals last season, and had 11 points (four goals, seven assists) in 19 playoff games.

"He looks good, he's skating well," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "But I can promise you, they're not going to rush him back. He's got to keep progressing along and getting stronger. When he's ready, he will let us know and we'll get him in as soon as we can."

Unsigned restricted free agent defenseman Alexander Nikishin did not take part in practice. The 24-year-old had 33 points (11 goals, 22 assists) and averaged 18:11 in ice time in 81 regular-season games and had one assist in 14:50 of ice time in 17 playoff games last season, playing mostly on a pair with Shayne Gostisbehere. He was named to the NHL All-Rookie Team.

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

In Nikishin's absence, the Hurricanes will have plenty of competition for ice time on the blue line, including three returning players. Mike Reilly had nine points (one goal, eight assists) in 42 games, Joel Nystrom had 10 points (one goal, nine assists) in 38 games, and Charles Alexis Legault had two points (one goal, one assist) in 12 games. Of the three, Reilly was the only one to play in the postseason, with two assists in two games.

The Hurricanes also have Juuso Valimaki, who played for Chicago of the American Hockey League after being acquired from the Utah Mammoth on Jan. 5 and signed a one-year contract June 24, and Pierre-Olivier Joseph, who signed a one-year contract Sept. 8.

"We've added some pieces there," Brind'Amour said. "There's going to be some competition there, along with the younger guys that we know who have come up and played well. It's good to have that. We'll see how it all shakes out."

The Hurricanes open the season against the Florida Panthers at Lenovo Center on Sept. 29 (5 p.m. ET; ESPN).



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Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes open preseason camp | AP News

Aaron Beard

Barely three months had passed since the Carolina Hurricanes finally punched through a playoff roadblock to win another Stanley Cup when it was time to turn their attention forward to another season.

The confidence and experience gained from that run? Invaluable.

Dwelling on it beyond that at the start of preseason camp? Not so much.

"You have to keep building, we understand that," Carolina top-line center Sebastian Aho said Thursday. "Three months ago we were playing some amazing hockey and we were able to accomplish something we dreamed of for a long time.

"But at the same time, it doesn't really help us today."

Monday marked three months since the Hurricanes shut out the Vegas Golden Knights in a road Game 6 to win the Cup for the second time in franchise history. In the time since, they've celebrated with a parade that brought a six-figure crowd to downtown Raleigh and gotten their individual days to spend with hockey's cherished trophy.

The team that has returned from that long celebration is largely the same as the one that ended last season with three straight victories under face-of-the-franchise coach Rod Brind'Amour.

Top goaltender Frederik Andersen is gone after signing a one-year deal with Edmonton. And rising defenseman Alexander Nikishin isn't in camp as a restricted free agent still awaiting a deal after working in Carolina's third pairing; general manager Eric Tulsy issued a statement Wednesday saying the team wouldn't comment on Nikishin's status.



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yahoo!sports

Red Wings Trade Pitch Lands Alexander Nikishin for 41-Goal Wing in Blockbuster

Jonathan Vankin

A Red Wings trade pitch lands Alexander Nikishin in a blockbuster one-for-one swap that would send 41-goal wing Alex DeBrincat to Carolina.

Alex DeBrincat of the Detroit Red Wings could be on the move in a blockbuster deal.

A trade pitch directed at the Detroit Red Wings would send winger Alex DeBrincat to the Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes.

In return, the blockbuster scenario would land Detroit the rights to restricted free agent Alexander Nikishin, a defenseman who scored 11 goals in his rookie season.

The scenario imagines DeBrincat skating for Carolina, inverting the real standoff gripping training camp. It's Nikishin, still unsigned, who wants out of Raleigh, not DeBrincat trying to leave Detroit, according to a The Athletic report.

PuckPedia's Puck GM trade tool, in a build titled simply "Debrincat," pegs Carolina's projected cap hit at \$102,649,818 against a payroll carrying just \$1,350,182 in space and no LTIR room on a full 23-man roster, according to the Carolina Hurricanes cap simulation. DeBrincat sits on the Hurricanes' top line in that build, meaning Nikishin would have to go to bring in the nine-year veteran DeBrincat.

DeBrincat's Detroit Resume Meets Nikishin's Ceiling

Alex DeBrincat #93 of the Detroit Red Wings waits to be recorded

GettyAlex DeBrincat of the Detroit Red Wings could be on the move in a blockbuster deal.

DeBrincat, born Dec. 18, 1997, in Farmington Hills, Michigan, stands 5-foot-8 and 181 pounds. Chicago drafted him 39th overall in 2016, and his path ran through the Erie Otters, the Blackhawks and a stop with the Ottawa Senators before Detroit inked him on July 9, 2023, to a four-year, \$31.5 million contract carrying a \$7.875 million cap hit. He posted 41 goals and 44 assists in 82 games in 2025-26, his third career 40-goal season and his first in Detroit, and he becomes an unrestricted free agent next summer at 29.

"My intention is obviously to stay in Detroit," DeBrincat told NHL.com earlier this month, adding that his stance "hasn't changed" even as the Red Wings navigate captain Dylan

Larkin's trade request and a search for a new general manager following Steve Yzerman's exit.

Nikishin, born Oct. 2, 2001, in Orel, Russia, is a 6-foot-3, 218-pound defenseman Carolina drafted 69th overall in 2020. He starred for Spartak Moscow before taking over at SKA St. Petersburg, where he led all KHL defensemen in scoring in back-to-back seasons, racking up 56 points in 2023-24 and 55 the year before. Carolina signed him to a two-year, \$1.85 million entry-level deal in April 2025, and he answered with 11 goals, 22 assists and a Stanley Cup as a rookie.

Bruins Trade Pitch Sends Pavel Zacha to Vegas For Nic Dowd, First-Round Pick

Who Wins the Red Wings-Hurricanes Swap?

Moving DeBrincat clears Carolina's \$7.875 million cap hit for a player who currently costs nothing against the cap. But Nikishin is an unsigned restricted free agent carrying an \$874,125 qualifying offer, and his camp is still focusing on a trade rather than a return to Raleigh. Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky has already confirmed Nikishin will skip the start of training camp unsigned.

Detroit, in this scenario, absorbs one season of proven scoring at a below-market rate. Carolina swaps an expiring rental for a 24-year-old asset it could control for years, provided it signs him at a reasonable number. DeBrincat's next contract, wherever he plays it, is projected to carry a cap hit north of \$12 million, a figure shaped by the same rising cap that has Nikishin's camp comfortable asking for roughly \$8 million after one NHL season.

Competitively, Detroit gets an immediate top-six scoring boost from a winger it already knows well. Carolina, already stacked with Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Jackson Blake up front, solves a real roster problem. Nikishin's fit, not his talent, has been the issue behind Jalen Chatfield, Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere's spot on the top power-play unit.

One-for-one, DeBrincat remains the better hockey player this winter. Nikishin, 24 and already a Stanley Cup champion, is the asset worth building around for the next decade. Whichever side eventually signs him without overpaying walks away with the better end of this deal.



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

1399825 Carolina Hurricanes

Why Carolina Hurricanes' training camp will 'make you forget the Stanley Cup'

Chip Alexander

7-8 minutes 17/09/2026

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"It's higher than ever, honestly," Aho said Thursday. "Knowing how much it takes, how much work you have to put in, how great it feels when it finally happens, it makes you want more."

Brind'Amour was the team captain when the Canes won the Cup in 2006. The next season, the Canes did not reach the playoffs. Injuries, Brind'Amour said, played a big part in that disappointment.

And this year's Hurricanes team?

"The good thing is they've done it, so they know what it takes," Brind'Amour said. "The passion and the grit and everything you have to bring to win in this league, that doesn't disappear now that you won. It



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probably magnifies it, in that you have to figure out how to find that little more of an edge. We're that much more of a target."

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1399826 Carolina Hurricanes

Ex-Canes player wants to redevelop Glenwood bar on 1st floor of up to 40-story building

Nolan Wilkinson

3-3 minutes 15/09/2026

Two bars owned by former Carolina Hurricanes player Bates Battaglia and his brother Anthony could be rezoned in a proposal allowing an up to 40-story building.

The bars — Teets on Glenwood Avenue and Lucky B's on adjacent Tucker Street — are currently zoned to allow up to seven stories of building height and a mix of commercial, residential and office uses.

Teets will remain, and is envisioned as part of the first floor of a future development on the site, according to a statement provided by Hunter Winstead, who is representing the brothers in the rezoning.

"First, don't worry Caniacs — Teets will ALWAYS remain open and will even be expanding over the next month," Anthony Battaglia said in the statement. "We want to make Glenwood great again. The current expansion plans for Teets and this rezoning will improve the whole area."

The N&O asked what more immediate expansion would entail and if Lucky B's would also remain after the redevelopment, but we did not receive an immediate response.

The properties are in a pre-submittal phase, according to city spokesperson Julia Milstead. That means a neighborhood meeting has been set for Sept. 21 at 5:30 p.m. at the Halifax Community Center on Halifax Street

"A neighborhood meeting is required before a property can be requested to be rezoned," Milstead wrote in an email to The News & Observer on Tuesday.

Across the street from Teets, developers are building Highline Glenwood. At 37 stories, it will be the largest residential tower in Raleigh when it opens in 2028.

Sites for Canes celebrations

Teets has been open for about five years and has become a home for Canes watch parties and celebrations.

It was named for the Battaglias' grandfather, Sam "Teets" Battaglia, a member of the Chicago mafia. "Teets" comes from when Sam Battaglia threatened to bust in another mobster's teeth, according to the bar's website.

Bates Battaglia played as a left-winger for the Canes, including during their 2002 Stanley Cup run. He and Anthony won CBS' "The Amazing Race" in 2013.

More recently, the Canes' current left-winger Jordan Martinook made Teets the first stop for the Stanley Cup when the team returned to Raleigh after winning it in Las Vegas in June.

Bates Battaglia opened Lucky B's in 2005, according to an interview he gave to VoyageRaleigh last year.

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1399827 Carolina Hurricanes

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

Chip Alexander

9-11 minutes 17/09/2026

Carolina Hurricanes 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 at 9 a.m. for the start of camp at Lane Arena, formerly Invisalign Arena, in Morrisville.

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 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:

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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 209 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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1399828 Carolina Hurricanes

Latest on Nikishin, Staal's contract and Hurricanes' next big swing:
Catching up with Eric Tulsky

Pierre LeBrun

9-11 minutes 17/09/2026

Time off? After a Stanley Cup championship and a short summer?

Not a whole lot for the general manager of the Carolina Hurricanes.

"I had a few days off, not a lot, in mid-August," Eric Tulsky told The Athletic with a laugh Thursday morning.

And he wouldn't trade it for the world.

"Nope," he said without hesitation. "It's been great."

Having said that, it sure helps when you can return the majority of your roster after winning a Stanley Cup. That's not always the case in the salary-cap era. The Canes, however, have most of the band back together, which has its own advantages as they attempt to go back-to-back as NHL champions.

"We're fortunate to be in this position," Tulsky said. "The continuity is really helpful to us, especially with the shortened training camp. There's less to teach, more opportunities to just add a little new wrinkle here and there instead of having to bring someone along from square one."

"So that's helpful to (coach Rod Brind'Amour), to help the team get going. And just from a personality and cohesion point of view, everyone in that locker room knows each other well, and they know they can win together."

Of course, there are no real magic shortcuts to fighting the Stanley Cup hangover if players hit a wall at some point, mentally or physically. The Florida Panthers were the latest team to fight through it, winning back-to-back Cups in 2024 and 2025 before the carryover effects of all that hockey finally got to them last season. The Tampa Bay Lightning won back-to-back Cups in 2020 and 2021 and reached the Stanley Cup Final in 2022 before losing to the Colorado Avalanche, too.

It's doable, to be sure. In the here and now, the Canes feel as refreshed as a team could after winning it all.

Doesn't hurt that they played only 19 games in the playoffs — the same number as the Montreal Canadiens, despite going a round further — going 16-3 with two sweeps.

"Every one of our players looks as fit as ever and ready to go," Tulsky said. "We have a very hungry group that is aware that every game we play, the other team will be looking to knock us off and prove a point, and our guys will have to be ready for that."

One player who was not at camp Thursday as on-ice sessions began was restricted free agent Alexander Nikishin, who remains unsigned and whose future with the club is unclear.

"I don't really know at this point," Tulsky said when asked where he thought things would land with the Russian defenseman. "We're working to find a resolution, and all I can say is that today he's not under contract. We're playing it day by day."

The sides in this impasse have agreed to avoid making it a media circus. There has been next to nothing said publicly about what's going on. Nikishin's agent, Ben Kreyzerman of Quartexx, politely declined to comment when reached by The Athletic earlier this week.

As reported Monday, however, other sources have confirmed that Nikishin still wants out. It's not every day a guy reaches the pinnacle of the sport, winning a Stanley Cup, and then decides his team's not a fit, yet here we are.

"It's better if I keep our conversations just between us," Tulsky said. "He has every right to expect that when he comes to me, that it's just

between us and not a conversation with the media, and I want to be respectful of that."

Let's see where this goes with the talented 24-year-old rearguard. There's been talk that he could entertain a return to the KHL. Perhaps Tulsky can sign him in the end and convince him to come back and play in Carolina. Or, of course, there's the trade route, and teams have obviously been calling on him.

One trade possibility that seems too obvious to ignore is whether Nikishin could be part of a deal with the Winnipeg Jets for star goalie Connor Hellebuyck, who announced last month he had requested a trade and then didn't show up to camp this week, prompting the Jets to suspend the 33-year-old. League sources with knowledge of the situation, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss negotiations that aren't public, confirmed that Carolina remains interested in Hellebuyck if there were ever a fit that made sense.

"I really can't comment on that," Tulsky said. "It wouldn't be appropriate."

The obvious fly in the ointment with a Nikishin-Hellebuyck trade is whether Winnipeg would want to inherit the problem Carolina has, as far as not knowing if he would sign. We'll see where that Hellebuyck situation goes in Winnipeg, but rest assured, Carolina will keep an eye on it.

Otherwise, it was a relatively quiet summer for the Canes, though not for lack of effort. Carolina acquired the rights to pending unrestricted free agent John Carlson in the days leading up to July 1 but wasn't able to close the deal with him, and he ended up in Tampa Bay. That one stung a bit.

"In some sense it's a big swing because he's a big-name player," Tulsky said. "In a different sense, it was not a huge investment, as we traded a pick at the end of the sixth round for a chance to talk to him a few days early. We tried to get a deal done and knew ahead of time that if we didn't, the loss was something we could withstand. We have a deep prospect pool, and every draft pick has value, but we knew we could get by without a late sixth-round pick if we needed to take a chance to add a player who could help our team take a step forward."

"We worked hard on a deal with him, and the fit wasn't there. I have no regrets taking the shot."

Teams that are scared to take shots get left behind. The Canes have never been in that group. Speaking of which, there was all kinds of chatter around the league this summer that Carolina was aggressively exploring the offer sheet market. Nothing materialized on that front.

"I mean, we always want to use every tool to get better," Tulsky said. "We're not interested in issuing offer sheets that just drive up the price for someone else. Our goal is to try to find ways to make our team better. And so we talked to everyone we thought might help make our team better about what a contract might look like and tried to evaluate how likely we were to get players (via offer sheet) and how we might be able to make it fit. In the end, we didn't find anything that worked for us."

Tulsky did get some business done this week in extending captain Jordan Staal with a one-year, bonus-filled contract, negotiated with veteran agent Rick Curran — a deal that could be worth up to \$10 million in 2027-28. In addition to a \$4 million signing bonus and \$900,000 in base salary, Staal will get \$650,000 after each of 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 and 70 games played, and then \$550,000 after 75. Those game thresholds include the regular season and playoffs, with the last one also being tied to the team making the playoffs.

Staal was willing to take this route instead of demanding guaranteed salary so that, under rules for 35-plus contracts, some of the cap hit could be rolled over to 2028-29 to help Carolina max out its cap flexibility. It also meant getting a deal done before midnight Tuesday, when the old collective bargaining agreement expired.

"We wanted to get a contract done," Tulsky said. "We knew ahead of time that we would be using the 35-plus structure to use performance bonuses to give us some cap flexibility, and we also wanted to be able to pay him a signing bonus up front, and under the new CBA, the limits on the ratio of signing bonus to base salary meant our ability to take advantage of both those two things would be limited if we had waited another day."



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"So we got it done ahead of time, and we are glad to have him not have to think about it this year."

The \$10 million figure raised some eyebrows given that he will be 39 when the deal kicks in, but the dude just won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP, and I do think it's payback for his current four-year deal, which expires after this season and is paying him only \$2.9 million per year. He means so much to the Canes on and off the ice.

The team has also talked to its other players on expiring deals, notably Jalen Chatfield, Shayne Gostisbehere and Jordan Martinook, who all can be UFAs after this season.

"We've talked to all of our pending UFAs about what an extension would look like," Tulskey said. "We would always like to get ahead of it if we can. Sometimes the best fit comes at the end of the year. It gives players the chance to play the year out and establish where they are."

"If there is an opportunity to get something done early, and allow everyone to remove the risk of uncertainty about what happens over the coming year, we're happy to pursue that. But at this time, (Staal) has been the only (pending UFA) we were able to reach agreement with."

The guy to keep an eye on is Chatfield. His agent, Darren Ferris, likes to bring his clients to the UFA market to maximize their earning potential. That doesn't mean that will happen if Chatfield wants to stay, but it's a layer to it all nonetheless.

There's always something to talk about with the Canes. They're never boring. They'll probably be big-game hunting again ahead of the trade deadline. They smell an opportunity to repeat, and that's a realistic notion, to be sure.

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ESPN / NHL rookie watch list: The next wave of young hockey superstars - ESPN

Rachel Kryshak

Rachel Kryshak is a professional data consultant specializing in data communication and modelling. She's worked in the NHL and consulted for professional teams across North American and Europe. She hosts the Staff & Graph Podcast and discusses sports from a data-driven perspective.

NHL training camps are getting underway, and the new wave of rookies expected to play impactful roles is very notable. Three of the top 10 picks from the 2026 draft could see significant NHL time this season.

And for the first time in a while, a goaltender makes an appearance on a preseason watch list. Add in a few players who signed at the conclusion of the 2025-26 NCAA season and there is more than enough talent for an intriguing Calder Trophy race.

Here are 10 first-year players to monitor as the 2026-27 season begins:

Note: Ages are as of opening night, Sept. 29.

Gavin McKenna, LW, Toronto Maple Leafs

Age: 18 | Draft: 2026 No. 1

McKenna was going to be in the spotlight regardless of where he landed. The moment the Maple Leafs won the draft lottery, the spotlight cranked to 11.

McKenna will slot into a top six in Toronto that has Auston Matthews, William Nylander, John Tavares and Matthew Knies. Regardless of which line he plays on, he's going to have the opportunity to create offense with elite talent. Whether he gets first- or second-unit power-play opportunities remains to be seen, but he's going to get time on one of them.

How he adjusts to NHL pace and physicality will ultimately determine how successful his rookie season is. If he meshes well and becomes a primary setup man for Matthews and Knies, 65-plus points is not out of the question. That would likely mean a much-needed rebound season from Matthews, further elevating McKenna's importance to Toronto's immediate future.

McKenna is going to be under the microscope more than any other rookie this season. If he plays well, Toronto will get the offensive jolt that has been missing.

Porter Martone, RW, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 19 | Draft: 2025 No. 6

If his first cup of coffee in the NHL was any indication, Martone should probably start the season as the Calder favorite. Not only was he excellent for the Flyers in the stretch run, but he was vital in the Flyers' playoff series against the Penguins. The big winger has already endeared himself to the Flyers faithful and more importantly, head coach Rick Tocchet.

Playing a consistent top-six role with extended time on the top power-play unit will give Martone plenty of opportunity to pile up the points. Philadelphia was not the most entertaining team to watch last season, given their focus on defense and lack of offensive firepower. Martone was an immediate offensive catalyst and gave the Flyers a dimension they were missing.

He's going to be one of their most important players in the present and future, especially if the Flyers want to avoid a step back this season. Whether he is scoring, creating offense or agitating opponents, the perfect Philadelphia Flyer is going to be an impactful rookie and extremely fun to watch.

Ivar Stenberg, LW, San Jose Sharks

Age: 18 | Draft: 2026 No. 2

The second overall pick joins a Sharks team that seems primed to take a major step forward. The Sharks, like the Leafs, jumped from further back (ninth) to second via the lottery, and drafted Stenberg with the pick. Many scouts believed Stenberg was the most NHL-ready of the top prospects and that his professional experience in Sweden would serve him well in a middle-six role during his rookie season.

Stenberg is a tremendous talent, who is capable of impacting the game both offensively and defensively. Should he play his way onto Macklin Celebrini or Michael Misa's wing, there is a real opportunity for him to produce offensively. Regardless of where he plays, Stenberg is likely to have the best two-way impact of the entire rookie crop. Stenberg's combination of two-way play and offensive play-driving ability should be a major boost for the Sharks and may help put them over the top as a wild-card team this season.

If Stenberg finds himself in the top six, producing offensively, and playing secondary matchups, he's going to be in the conversation for the Calder. He is exactly the type of forward who can slot in with San Jose's young crop of elite skill and elevate their play.

James Hagens, C, Boston Bruins

Age: 19 | Draft: 2025 No. 7

The Bruins couldn't believe when the top-line center from Boston College was sitting there for them at No. 7 in 2025. Fast-forward to now, and Hagens was far and away the best player at B's rookie camp and has a real shot to make the Bruins in 2026.

He's one to watch because the Bruins are already a decent team and there is no need to rush him. Having said that, Hagens' raw offensive talent is greater than any other option Boston has in the middle of the ice. His shot has come a long way, making Hagens a true scoring threat and an even more dangerous dual-threat attacker.

There is a distinct possibility that Hagens breaks camp on the wing with the Bruins, simply because the Bruins believe it is better for his development to play in the NHL rather than the AHL. He would certainly jolt the Bruins' offense and give it a dimension it has lacked the past couple of years. Hagens has true potential to be a top-line center and the ability to produce 55-plus points in a top-six role in his rookie season.

Cole Hutson, D, Washington Capitals

Age: 20 | Draft: 2024 No. 43

With John Carlson gone, Hutson is going to get elevated offensive opportunities in his first full NHL season. He's likely to quarterback the second power-play unit which should feature Jordan Kyrou and fellow rookie Ilya Protas.

In a 14-game audition with the Capitals last season, Hutson notched 10 points and generally impressed. He consistently showed excellent skating ability, moving laterally with ease, changing gears in tight areas and facilitating offense. His first pass is going to drive a ton of transition offense, and his in-zone offense is going to create scoring chances with regularity.

Hutson's ability to create space with his skating, find passing lanes and thread pucks through coverage should make him the premier rookie defender in the class. He will likely start in sheltered minutes given the talent ahead of him on the depth chart while being given opportunities to earn more ice time as the season progresses.

Ilya Protas, LW, Washington Capitals

Age: 20 | Draft: 2024 No. 75

The second Capitals rookie to watch is another familiar name. Ilya Protas is the younger brother of Aliaksei, who is a mainstay in Washington's top six. The younger Protas has a similar build to his brother, and he won AHL Rookie of the year in 2025-26 after averaging more than two points per game in the OHL in 2024-25 as an 18-year-old.

After a nearly point-per-game AHL season, Protas is primed for a shot with the big club. There is depth ahead of him, but he should be given a chance to play a bottom-six role. His versatility may see him start on the wing, but with the injury history to the Capitals' centers, he is likely to get an opportunity there at some point.

Protas is the epitome of the young player that contenders need on an entry-level contract to take advantage of playing in the bottom six. There



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is every reason to believe the younger Protas will produce offensively against softer matchups and a 40-point season should be attainable.

Longer term, the Capitals expect the younger Protas to be a key piece of their powerful top six that already features Tom Wilson, Alex Tuch and Ilya's older brother.

Anton Frondell, C, Chicago Blackhawks

Age: 19 | Draft: 2025 No. 3

The third overall pick in 2025 looked every bit the part of an NHL top-six player in his 12-game audition to end last season.

Frondell is a foundational piece of Chicago's future, one who needs to start moving in the right direction. With Connor Bedard out to start the season, Frondell is going to have the opportunity to play big minutes in key situations from the outset.

His dual-threat offensive game, combined with ability to drive play should allow him to produce offensively and keep the puck out of Chicago's end. If he gets top power-play minutes throughout the season and retains a top-six role upon Bedard's return, it's quite possible he scores 65 points in a full season. If Chicago takes a step toward playoff contention this season, Frondell could be a major reason why -- and that will boost his Calder candidacy.

Roman Kantserov, RW, Chicago Blackhawks

Age: 22 | Draft: 2023 No. 44

One of the most intriguing rookies is likely to start in the season in Chicago's top six. Kantserov is coming off a point per game season in the KHL as a 21-year-old and has the skating and playmaking ability to be a real offensive threat in the NHL.

He's lesser known largely due to lack of coverage in the Russian leagues, making him the player most likely to surprise NHL fans seeing him for the first time. His quick puck-moving ability combined with chance generation off the rush will fit well with the type of offense Chicago's young players are trying to create.

There is always an adjustment period for players from overseas, and it would not be surprising if it took him a month or two to adjust. However, players with this skill set almost always have a measurable impact in their rookie season, and Kantserov should be no different. A 45-point campaign would be a wonderful success as Kantserov adjusts to the NHL and earns more offensive opportunities.

Viggo Bjorck, C, Winnipeg Jets

Age: 18 | Draft: 2026 No. 8

It remains to be seen where Bjorck will start his North American professional career, but there is little doubt his future is as a top-six center for the Winnipeg Jets.

Bjorck is a play-driving, get-you-out-of-your-seat player. Whether he's causing turnovers and generating breakaways or outmuscling players much bigger than him, the stocky Swede is going to be a mainstay in the Jets' lineup when he's ready.

If he makes the team out of camp, there is real opportunity for him to slot ahead of Adam Lowry on the second line and have an immediate offensive impact. If he doesn't, his most likely development path is putting in time as the top-line AHL center and a recall after the All-Star break (or as injury necessitates).

He's extremely fun to watch because of his dogged puck pursuit, fearlessness in battles and outright offensive skill. When he's in the lineup, he's going to give Jets fans every reason to be excited, and given Winnipeg's need for a legitimate top-six center, there's an argument that he should start the season with the big club.

Sergei Murashov, G, Pittsburgh Penguins

Age: 22 | Draft: 2022 No. 118

It is extremely rare that a goalie finds himself on a rookie watch list, so that should tell you all you need to know about Murashov's potential. He's one of Pittsburgh's top prospects and is looking to prove his rookie season should be a 1A/1B situation with Arturs Silovs.

There is a legitimate chance that Murashov is the 1A starting goaltender for the Penguins at some point this season, and if that's the case, not only is he a top prospect, but he's also probably in the Calder conversation.

He's a wonderfully charismatic conversationalist off the ice, which is always endearing to fans and media. His mindset and demeanor on the ice are as cool as can be, which has led to sparkling AHL numbers (including a .919 save percentage in 38 starts last season for Wilkes-Barre/Scranton). Add in the intrigue of being a southpaw goaltender capable of spectacular saves, Murashov could be a key piece of Pittsburgh's elongated competitive window. If the Penguins make the playoffs and he plays the lion's share of the games, it will be difficult to keep him out of the Calder discussion.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'He's a fighter': Mayich family opens up about son, brother Matthew

Elliott Friedman

John and Christina Mayich have two requests.

First, they want the world to learn more about their son, Matthew.

"Matthew is a boy's boy," Christina said. "He's a guy's guy. He is a simple, simple guy who has an infectious smile. Anybody you talk to will tell you about his smile. He loves to fish. He fishes almost every day, every chance he can get. He loves his family. He likes to hang out at home. He doesn't like to go out partying ... he just likes to be with us. He loves his girlfriend, his siblings, funny guy, chirper.

"And he, as a teammate, he obviously loves hockey. That's his world. He likes to stand up for his teammates. He has your back. I wish you got to meet him as the Matthew we all know and love."

"He brings joy to a room, bottom line," John added, before Christina continued.

"When he's away for hockey, our house is different. When he is there, there is so much, so much life, so much energy. He brings a different vibe to our home, to our family, and to the neighbourhood."

Their second request is this: no matter where you are from or what faith you follow, you pray for their 21-year-old son.

Matthew Mayich came to Arizona State last month, joining the Sun Devils after four seasons with OHL Ottawa and another at NCAA Clarkson. Days after his arrival, on Aug. 20, Mayich collapsed during an outdoor workout and has been hospitalized since. The university is reviewing the circumstances, and a spokesman emailed Wednesday that "we expect to be able to update everyone on our review process in the coming days."

"We've been told there was a workout scheduled for early (that day), and I guess it was hot, and the conditions weren't good for working out," John said. "(Matthew) basically got heat stroke. (It) had nothing to do with his heart. He came in shape. He was 100 per cent ready to go this season. He worked all summer, and he was ready.

"And I guess just the heat ... just snowballed from there. He ended up collapsing and is still in a coma. Considering the situation, I think we're somewhat strong in just trying to push through. We've got no choice."

What have doctors told the family about the prognosis?

"We're taking it day by day," Christina answered. "We're here praying hard, praying to our Lord for a miracle."

"He's a fighter," added John. "So we know that, and we're giving him every chance to survive."

John and Christina have a strong support group in Arizona, including daughter Stephanie and son Josh — two and three years younger than their brother, respectively — and Matthew's girlfriend of four years, Alexa. But what's really helped in immeasurable ways is support from the most unexpected places, including priests who reached out from Kenya.

"There's so many countries that we were very shocked to hear," Christina said. "Matthew is a simple boy from Stoney Creek, Ont., and we don't know how he made it that far that people are praying for him. It's just proof that there's a lot of great people out there. We've seen a different side of humanity that we would have never seen if we didn't go through this."

The Mayich family is hugely thankful to the doctors, nurses and hospital staff; Anthony Houston, who oversees eight Arizona hospitals, making sure Matthew received proper care. They were embraced by the local Lebanese community after the family visited one of their churches to pray to St. Charbel, a Lebanese-born monk revered for his powers of healing.

Among many from the hockey community: Utah coach Andre Tourigny, who scouted Matthew back when he coached the Ottawa 67's, Auston

Matthews, Clayton Keller and the Xhekaj family. John and Jack Xhekaj — Arber and Florian's father — have a long friendship.

"If we don't speak one Sunday, we'll speak the next," John laughed. "We never go more than two Sundays without talking."

And the Thompson family, led by Kim, Tage's mother.

"Kim set up a lovely vigil for Matthew that included his (Arizona State) teammates, their family, and anybody who wanted to come out and pray for Matthew, which was very lovely and means so much to us," Christina said.

"I think there was about 25, 26 current players and ex-players," John said. "It was very nice to see."

"For me, it was emotional seeing them," Christina continued. "When you saw the team, it was like, 'Matthew, you should be sitting there with them right now. You shouldn't be up here.' So it was tough, but it was also very warm, very ... I can't explain. It's all in my heart, so I'm thankful to everybody."

John Mayich has a message for Matthew's Sun Devil teammates.

"I feel for them. I don't want them to feel guilty at all that this happened. They had to see some ugly stuff, and I just hope they can push through. I wish them nothing but the best."

If his parents are most proud of one thing, it's that their son had an ability to make friends of all ages, from putting together a three-year-old neighbour's bicycle to helping Alexa's octogenarian grandfather with his garden tomatoes. John Mayich smiled reminiscing about Ring video of young kids from the neighbourhood asking Matthew to come out and play street hockey with them, a request rarely — if ever — refused.

"He was, just ... he lived life," John said. "That's it. He really did live life and he didn't judge anybody. Never."

Thanks to old friends and newfound supporters worldwide, Matthew's hospital room is personalized with unique items.

"Five of his friends flew down when they heard the news, and they bought him fishing paraphernalia," Christina said. "Went to Bass Pro, just kind of decorated his room, which was very nice, surrounding him with the things that he loves."

By his head there is a stone in a pouch. On his body, there's a small medallion, called the Miraculous Medal. Christina describes the Mayiches as devout Catholics; the Miraculous Medal reminds you to keep the faith, never lose your trust in the power of prayer.

"A man from England found us, and he had sent the package, which was the rock and a Miraculous Medal. When he sent it, (with) a picture of a Sister, I didn't quite know who the Sister was. She's an Irish nun who had just passed, and she's on her way to being Canonized.

"And he took a chance, and he said, even if you don't believe, there's nothing to lose if you put this by Matthew's head. So I did, because I was just so touched. And the next day I reached out to him, and he explained to me that he felt in his heart when he heard Matthew's story that he needed to deliver this to us, to somehow find us. And he explained that he is disabled and doesn't leave home often, but this time he did. And he said this rock and this medal were blessed from a place that is near and dear to us in Medjugorje."

(Medjugorje is a famous Catholic pilgrimage destination. Located in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it has strong historical ties to the Croatian people, which is the Mayich family's heritage. For years, Matthew's smartphone screensaver is him in a Luka Modric jersey, the Croatian soccer legend.)

"It was blessed by Our Lady, which to me meant the world," Christina continued. "And I could not believe that was happening. And it was a sign that Mary, our mother, is with us. And she is leading us to her son and giving us that peace and calm. So, we thank you from the bottom of our heart that you found us all the way from England.

"There's just so many, so many people we've met along the way that have touched our hearts and that are showing us the goodness of humanity, and they all give us hope and faith."

"Seeing the support back home and all over the world, it's like, unexplainable," added Josh, the younger brother. "It's something I never imagined and it's honestly a blessing."



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Christina carries a spiritual necklace she also places on Matthew's body during her visits.

"All the kids here with us all put their crosses on here," she said. "His siblings' crosses are here, his cousin Vicky, her husband, Owen. And we also have a special gift from Matthew's new best friend, Sister Betty, who I forgot to mention. She has been a godsend. She comes every day to visit her best friend, Matthew, and she prays for him."

"She gave me one of her own personal relics. She was in a terrible car accident. And she said not one scratch came while she had this relic. And she wanted Matthew to have it. And she said Matthew is going to return it to her when he wakes up."

"We've had so many people from different religions reaching out to us, letting us know that their groups are all praying for him. And I cannot tell you. It just takes our breath away. How many people are fighting for him. And we're just thankful."

"It seems like it started on our street with the yellow ribbons and then just spread," John added. "And that's Matthew. That's his personality. You meet him once. Someone wants to introduce him to someone else and it just spreads."

"It actually started in Canada in there's an Instagram group," Christina added. "It's called 'Yellow Ribbons for Matthew.' So people are tying yellow ribbons on their trees outside. And the kids are wearing yellow ribbons. And there was just a soccer tournament in Ottawa ... they were honouring Matthew by wearing 'M.M' (and the) number nine, his soccer number when he was little."

"So this yellow ribbon has grown."

There are three yellow ribbons on his hospital room window.

The family realized Matthew's hockey dreams had a chance to become reality when Tourigny, then head coach and vice-president of hockey operations for the OHL 67's, started showing up to Matthew's games and practices.

"People are driving six, seven hours to just watch him skate for an hour," John said. "So to me, that's pretty cool."

Christina: "We were excited for Matthew because he was excited."

The Coyotes hired Tourigny away from Ottawa before Matthew played a game. Enter Dave Cameron, who also developed a strong relationship with the player and family.

"I just remember dropping Matthew off the first time in Ottawa," John smiled. "He's 16 years old so we're driving up and we get to the house. It was COVID so you couldn't meet the billet family who are super people. I just remember this red door. I'm getting Matthew's stuff out of the car and he goes to the front porch and the door's closed. I started putting the stuff away, like what was left over back in the trunk. I look, he already shut the door. He was in the house, ready to go."

"Yeah, we met the billet family and they're like, 'We're new to this,'" Christina added while also smiling. "And I'm like, 'So are we.' And we're like, 'Okay, bye, Matthew.'"

John added: "But he wanted to be there."

Was he ever homesick or anything like that? Both parents immediately jump in.

"No. No. No."

"Yeah, he missed us," Christina continued. "But he was, you know, this is his job. This is his dream. And he loved it. And he loved all his billet families. He was very close with all of them."

Then came the lead-up to the 2023 NHL Draft. The calls were coming to Matthew's phone.

"All sorts of teams were reaching out," John said.

"Matthew would go in a room and I'd be at the door listening to him talk to the teams," Christina laughed.

John grew up a Maple Leafs fan in the era of Wendel Clark and Doug Gilmour, his favourite players.

"I think when the Leafs called him, it kind of ... kind of hit home a bit."

Christina: "Yeah, they called a couple of times."

John continued: "And, you know, when they call, you're just like, 'Wow. Like, how far (Matthew has) come with this sport. It's unreal.'"

The St. Louis Blues selected Matthew in the sixth round, 170th overall, in the 2023 NHL Draft. The family went to Nashville and saw it first-hand. John said they knew the Blues were a possibility, but "the reason why we went to the draft was because Tampa Bay told him to bring his skates, so you know there's interest there."

"So we're like, 'We better go,'" Christina added.

"It's surreal, right?" John continued. "You just think of all the work ... You think of all the work that we did, all the work, his grandparents, his brother and sister, and his friends."

"One thing I'll give Matthew: he surrounded himself with good people. He really has good people around. You can't name them all, but that's one thing he did right, is he surrounded himself with very good people."

Good people attract good people.

John paused before answering: "Yeah."

"Just seeing his dreams come true in that moment," sister Stephanie remembered. "There was a point where I was ... I don't even know, but I was getting a little nervous. I was like, 'What's happening over here?' When they finally called his name and you see that relief it's kind of a blur. But, at the same time, it sticks with you. You see all his hard work. At that point, it was worth it."

"Me and Matthew would always grow up watching the draft," Josh added. "That was always our thing. We love the draft, and to be there and for him to be a part of it was surreal, and when I came to that moment where his name got called it's something I'll never forget, ever. For St. Louis picking him — and I grew up a Boston fan — the first thing I joked about was when St. Louis beat Boston. It was a dream come true seeing my older brother get drafted."

"When we were leaving," Christina continued, "we were out at the corner, and there was a group of guys also drafted as well. And I see a man walk by, and he went through the crowd ... and I see him go over to tap Matthew."

"And I said, 'Johnny, who is that guy? I know him. I've seen him before.' And he's like, 'Oh, that's Shane Doan.' We asked Matthew, 'What did he say to you?'"

John, now: "(Doan) said, 'Congratulations. We'll be watching you.'"

"I don't know if he just said that randomly, but to Matthew, that meant a lot," Christina said.

Last spring, at a Buffalo Sabres playoff game to cheer on son Josh, Shane saw Matthew in the crowd. He walked over, tapped Matthew on the shoulder and said hello.

"It meant a lot to Matthew that he just found him in the crowd, tapped him and said that," Christina added.

"He went out of his way to get a hold of him," John emphasized. "It wasn't just by fluke. He went out of his way to talk to this kid."

Since Matthew has been in hospital, Doan has reached out several times to make sure the family is okay and offer whatever help is necessary.

John and Christina also wanted to recognize Matthew's girlfriend, Alexa. There is a joke that the "official" relationship is four years, but they've known each other longer than that. She carries with her a scrapbook of great photos from their times together.

"So Alexa's our special angel," Christina said. "I met her at hockey. She came to support and watch Matthew. And ever since that date, she's been part of the family. We had just met, but we were going on a road trip right away to Ottawa so she got a crash course into the family. Her family is Matthew's family, too. Her dad's one of his best friends. They're so supportive and (Matthew) loves her so much."

"And I am so thankful, so thankful, so thankful for everyone and to share the story. If we can get prayers, more prayers for Matthew, it would mean so much to us."

Last word to Matthew's sister Stephanie.



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"He brought light everywhere he went. He brought noise, but the best type of noise. He's so humorous, and that's something we hope and pray we can hear again. And I believe that we will."

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Sportsnet.ca / Clock ticking on Jets' Cheveldayoff to resolve Hellebuyck situation

Jeff Hamilton

WINNIPEG — Cramped at a small table inside a tiny room at the Hockey for All Centre on Thursday, Kevin Cheveldayoff faced a wall of TV cameras and reporters, looking exactly like someone boxed into a corner.

He preached patience. He preached process. He tried to sell the idea of a unified family — minus one, of course. It was a familiar script, only this time even harder to believe.

In other words, it was classic Cheveldayoff: stay the course, trust the leaders in the room and protect the status quo.

By now, you've probably heard that the Winnipeg Jets suspended goaltender Connor Hellebuyck for refusing to report to training camp. It's what we all expected to happen, even if there was still a surreal feeling when the Jets made it official with a social media post Wednesday night, hours after Hellebuyck no-showed for his physical.

Suspending Hellebuyck for missing training camp isn't just a procedural move. It marks both the end of a loving relationship and the continuation of a nasty, ugly breakup, one that started with an exit-interview trade request in April, dragged through the entire summer, and exploded into public view late last month when the two sides hit an impasse.

So, rather than suiting up for a 12th season in Winnipeg, the 33-year-old, three-time Vezina and Hart Trophy winner — who also has five years remaining on a seven-year, \$59.5-million contract and a full no-move clause — is sitting at home waiting for a new hockey home.

The Jets are operating in uncharted territory, even if they've faced a similar situation before with the likes of Jacob Trouba, Patrick Laine and Pierre-Luc Dubois. This one feels different because it is, and despite Hellebuyck being the best player among the bunch, he is almost surely to fetch the lowest return.

For Cheveldayoff, the clock is ticking. But he's moving at his own pace.

"This isn't necessarily a time thing," Cheveldayoff told me when I asked how long he was willing to play this out. "My obligation is to the Winnipeg Jets, the Winnipeg Jets players and the Winnipeg Jets fans... I just want to get this right."

He then doubled down on the organization's belief that better days are ahead, despite only months removed from a season the Jets finished seventh in their own division and 26th across the league.

"We are still trying to win," he said. "Period."

Cheveldayoff scoffed at the idea of taking back future assets or draft picks in a trade, claiming it would send the wrong message to the veterans who committed to winning in Winnipeg. That's really the crux of all this, as Cheveldayoff can't afford to move backwards, lest he risk finding another defector.

"If it's future assets that are going to be picked how many years into the future, that's not the message that I'm sending to Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele, Josh Morrissey, Dylan Samberg," Cheveldayoff said.

If the Jets are to push for a playoff spot this season, they're going to need a minor miracle, but also their veteran core to step up. Cheveldayoff also pointed to the arrival of Viggo Björck, the club's eighth overall pick this year, the arena renovations — including a brand-new dressing room — while still holding hope for one or two prospects to make the jump to the big club.

But even if all of those things come to fruition, the Jets will still have a massive hole in the crease. While Stuart Skinner has the playoff experience the Jets covet, he's nowhere near the talent of Hellebuyck.

Where do the Jets fall in the NHL hierarchy?

They are no longer an elite team, by underlying numbers or the eye test. Last season wasn't an outlier; it was a warning.

Winnipeg free-fallen from a Presidents' Trophy high down to a dismal .500 record, all in the span of 12 months, becoming just the fifth team in NHL history to miss the playoffs after finishing first the previous year. Cheveldayoff believes they're closer to the first team than the one they witnessed last year.

But that was with Hellebuyck between the pipes, masking their flaws, as he's done for the better part of a decade. For years, Cheveldayoff's entire blueprint seemingly relied on having the world's best goaltender.

Hellebuyck has helped erase defensive breakdowns, lapses in structure and passive roster building. But with the franchise's best player explicitly stating he wants nothing to do with this inevitable rebuild, that leaves Cheveldayoff a small fish in a big pond.

It's difficult to criticize Cheveldayoff for demanding top dollar in return for his prize horse, even though he acutely understands the market he's trying to break. You can do that with a top-pairing defenceman or a 200-foot centre, while goalies are usually sold in buyer's markets.

Cheveldayoff admitted as much, noting that true contenders already have their starters and aren't lining up to give up other top talent. The offers across his desk haven't moved the needle, or seem to come even close, but as he said, he's not feeling the pressure of time.

But he should be. When your best player forces his way out, you don't automatically get to dictate terms from a position of strength. Cheveldayoff has pulled off some magic before — dealing away Trouba, Laine and Dubois for solid returns — only this feels more like a Cirque du Soleil level of negotiating.

Then there's the really uncomfortable human element to all this. When Hellebuyck's camp made it clear that a trade is the "best path forward for me and my family."

It may have been a direct response to the vitriol and harassment they faced after claiming gold at the Olympics in Milan.

Cheveldayoff said the team took the threats seriously enough to seek out legal counsel, while also requesting additional security and having extra police patrol in areas the players lived. I then noted here that some are content with letting Hellebuyck rot on the sideline, and if Cheveldayoff and the Jets, as good family members, felt any level of responsibility for what's played out?

"Connor Hellebuyck's part of our family until he's not part of our family," Cheveldayoff said. "You don't say, 'Well, you're not my family member anymore.' You find ways to get around it."

Perhaps the most telling part of the day was when Cheveldayoff insisted that the dressing room "has never really been stronger" and that if Hellebuyck was to return he would be welcomed with open arms.

Kyle Connor, Hellebuyck's close friend and U.S. Olympic teammate, set the record straight. When asked about a potential return, Connor gave us the straight goods: "Come back as in to come back and just play or come back and recommit to this organization? I think that's the biggest question. If he just comes back, that's gonna be pretty tough situation to walk into, to be honest."

Connor sounded somewhat defeated, as did Mark Scheifele, both of whom felt heartbroken and blindsided by the news. Connor said his attempts to convince Hellebuyck to return over the summer went nowhere.

Connor was honest about the reality of where his team stands. No use for the typical clichés, the star winger instead challenged his teammates.

"We all know what last year was and how much we need to improve," Connor said. "We never shy away from a challenge. There's a lot of compete in that room and this situation is no different."

Connor expressed excitement about the team getting "faster and quicker," and praised the smarts of Cole Perfetti, who has been skating on his line with Scheifele. Connor views the holdout as a challenge for the room to step up, rather than a reason to fold.

Speaking of Scheifele, he seemed uncomfortable in comparison, deciding the best way to handle the few minutes he spoke by regurgitating media-trained, otherwise non-answers. Scheifele — who



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inked an identical deal on the exact same day as Hellebuyck back in October 2023 — repeated variations of "I'm just focused on myself" and "what I can control" nearly a dozen times during his availability.

Asked how he processes his goalie saying this team isn't good enough to compete? "I'm not focused on anyone else but myself."

When asked about replacing the irreplaceable with newly acquired Skinner, Scheifele called him a "fantastic goaltender" and a "great guy," only to add that they haven't skated together much. Skinner is a serviceable, even solid, at times, NHL goaltender, but expecting him to shoulder the same load as Hellebuyck would be better suited for someone who wears a cape for a living.

To his credit, Scheifele took ownership of the team's massive fall in the standings last year, admitting that after going from the top of the mountain to the bottom, every guy in that room needs to show up with a massive chip on their shoulder. But the overall feeling from the team's now-best player was of someone trying to wash his hands of the drama.

This part is most concerning. When a key part of your leadership seems disengaged from the team's reality and your top winger is talking about fractured trust, the dressing room isn't "stronger than ever."

Cheveldayoff can sit in that room and insist it's business as usual. But clinging to the status quo when the ground is caving in beneath you isn't patience — it's a slow death.

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Sportsnet.ca / '100 miles an hour': Gavin McKenna jumps into Toronto's top six

Luke Fox

TORONTO — To the coach's eye, Gavin McKenna appeared to be contained.

Toronto Maple Leafs shutdown man Chris Tanev, he of 878 games in the show, had seemingly boxed the 18-year-old winger into the corner during a tight battle drill.

Not so fast.

"I saw him dance away and just do a nice little backhand sauce pass into space. That jumps out at you," head coach Jim Hiller said Thursday, after running his first practice at Ford Performance Centre.

"So, those are the things that you're just standing there and you see them and you go, 'OK, well, that's a high level.' That's what he's going to have to do against veteran NHL defencemen when the real games start."

And that's why 2026's first-overall pick is targeted to make his pro debut as a fixture of Toronto's top six, to the left of last season's leading goal scorer, John Tavares, and leading point-getter, William Nylander.

It's not only the neckguard (now mandatory for NHL freshmen) that made McKenna stick out from the pack during his first official Leafs practice. It was also his vision, heavy stick, offensive instincts, smooth hands and pass-happy tendencies.

"I'm not looking for Gavin," Hiller said, "but I see Gavin — if that makes any sense."

No unit is etched in stone, but for now Hiller sees McKenna making plays with his new billet dad and the über-skilled Swede on a frightening second line (potentially both ways), while Auston Matthews reunites with power forward Matthew Knies and his old U.S. National Development Team pal Jack Roslovic on Line 1.

"It's super awesome that they've got confidence in me to play with those type of players," McKenna enthused after an up-tempo skate bubbling with two-on-none, two-on-one, and one-on-zero rushes. "So, it was fun being out there with them. I think they're both super-smart players."

"Being in this environment with guys who are going 100 miles an hour every single shift, I think it kind of just rubs off on you."

Tavares — who was first to the draft dais when his new tenant was still in diapers — finds McKenna's youthful energy equally contagious.

"I honestly feel the same way today as probably he does. Just the butterflies, the excitement," Tavares said. "So much fun to be back at it for real."

McKenna's debut reminds Nylander to enjoy every moment; careers can fly by at 100 miles an hour, too.

"It feels like just yesterday I was playing my first game. So, it goes pretty fast," said Nylander, who was filmed celebrating Toronto's unlikely lottery win alongside Knies at a Marlies playoff game in May. "It's a gamechanger. I mean, we were fired up."

"We won that thing, and the team has been rebuilt in a different way and a little different thought behind it. So, I mean, I'm super excited."

Hiller chose to start McKenna with Tavares because of the former captain's attention to detail and passion for sharing tricks of the trade with newcomers. Tavares frequently broke down strategy with sophomore Easton Cowan last season.

On rides to and from the rink, McKenna can pick the brain of Tavares, one the most consistent stars of his generation. When the teenager isn't out in the yard playing baseball with Tavares's kids, shop talk is more than welcome.

Who cares if the Zamboni has long cleared the ice?

"The best thing is just living it, right? And getting the experience," Tavares said. "When there's time to chat through things and see what they're thinking, how we can play off one another, and maybe it's certain things I can do better to help support your teammates, your wingers, all those sorts of things. Those communications are ongoing."

"Other times, it's best things are left unsaid, especially with a young player with a lot of potential. You don't want them thinking a whole lot as well, right? So, it's always a balancing act. There's no perfect way to plan for it. I think, just let things happen naturally."

Naturally, the wiry McKenna's ability to create through thick traffic, to control the puck with his instincts and surprisingly heavy stick has fast made an impression on his teammates.

But Hiller will lean on Tavares and Nylander to pick the rookie up in the defensive zone, where McKenna's growing pains will be most evident. Still, dropping an elite playmaker into a top six who was craving just that is enticing.

"Won't be long before he's one of the best at doing it. So, whether it's Willy or anyone, he's going to help a lot of us and make a lot of plays," said Tavares, radiating with proud-dad vibes.

"He's been so good his whole life. He's had the spotlight on him for a long time, and it'll only be magnified now. And you get to live your dream. So, cherish that. Soak it in. Never take that for granted. And just be yourself."

Maple Leafs opening lines at camp

Knies — Matthews — Roslovic

McKenna — Tavares — Nylander

Cowan — Paul — Sissons

Lorentz — Blueger — Duhaime

Joshua

McCabe — Tanev

Ekman-Larsson — Raddysch

Andrae — Danford

Blankenburg — Stecher

Bobrovsky

Stolarz

Fox's Fast Five

- Seeing Daniel Alfredsson all decked out in Maple Leafs blue and white and Mats Sundin leaning over the rail watching a roster he helped design is quite the sight.

"It's pretty crazy, actually. To be honest, I mean, we're seeing two Swedish legends every day," says Nylander.

"I was shocked as well. I mean, we have a mutual friend in common. He never said anything about it, so pretty shocked. But I'm obviously very happy that it happened."

- Bet on right-shot defenceman Nick Blankenburg, the camp's lone PTO, to sign a short-term contract before puck drop.

That Ben Danford is skating with the NHL group over veteran depth options Philippe Myers and Dakota Mermis speaks volumes about the prospect's value internally. He's poised to be first Marlie up, should injury strike.

- Toronto's first season-long emergency backup goaltender is Brendan Bonello, the only player to participate in both on-ice sessions. All EBUGs are required to wear No. 00.

The 27-year-old Mississauga, Ont., native appeared in three pro games with the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones and has served as a practice goalie for the Leafs and Marlies in past seasons.

- A truncated training camp compelled the Leafs to form one dedicated NHL group and another destined for the minors.



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"Makes it harder for guys that want to battle for spots and to make the team," Nylander said. "But, I mean, it's good for shorter camp."

Good news for ticket holders: Expect the A-listers, including McKenna, to play at Scotiabank Arena Saturday (vs. Montreal) and Wednesday (vs. Ottawa) in pre-season action while the B team hops a charter to play the road half of the split-squad matches.

- Third-liners Nick Paul and Easton Cowan looked excellent Thursday. Methinks it won't be all too long before they get a peek higher up in the lineup.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Malhotra leads by example at energizing camp

Iain MacIntyre

PENTICTON, B.C. — We knew Manny Malhotra could yell and coach. We didn't know he could still fly.

At the end of an energetic opening day of training camp that launched the rebuild era for the Vancouver Canucks, Malhotra capped Day 1 as a National Hockey League coach on Thursday by joining players — and beating some of them — in a back-and-forth conditioning skate at the South Okanagan Events Centre.

"Yeah, that would be a first where you're getting toasted in the bag skate by your head coach," 36-year-old defenceman Luke Schenn said.

Malhotra, 46, and his staff of new assistants actually did the skate twice, at the end of both split-squad practices. Each player had to do it only once.

"Don't ask others what you're not willing to do yourself," Malhotra explained to reporters. "Obviously, I time it so that I know that they're a little bit more tired, so I can be a part of it. Our mentality as a coaching staff is that we're all in this together; it's not you guys and us. We're a part of doing the work and ... building something."

The entire Canucks organization seems to be part of it.

The re-energization began with regime change last May when Ryan Johnson was hired as general manager by new co-presidents Daniel and Henrik Sedin. Johnson promoted Malhotra just over two weeks later — one year after the duo guided the minor-league Abbotsford Canucks to the Calder Cup.

The positivity grew as Johnson and Malhotra built out their staffs over the summer, and was stoked by the early return to Vancouver of the entire roster of players, who were encouraged by veterans Brock Boeser and Thatcher Demko, among others, to report for pre-camp skates no later than Sept. 1.

This is all part of the foundational plan drafted by Johnson and the Sedins to build a healthier, more positive environment for the Canucks after the team collapsed over the last two seasons amid dysfunction that former president Jim Rutherford said was the worst he had encountered during his lifetime in the NHL.

Everything the Canucks are doing has this environment in mind, which is why it seemed fitting that Malhotra threw himself and his assistants into the miserable task of skating lengths on Thursday — even though Malhotra was simply doing what he did as a head coach in the American Hockey League

"It doesn't shock me," Boeser, the longest-serving Canuck, said. "Manny would do that stuff my first couple years when he was assistant coach (with the Canucks)."

Does it matter?

"Absolutely," Boeser said. "When I'm gassed and I see the other coaches doing this, I'm like, 'All right, they're in the fight with us.' Some of those guys are older. They could be like, screw it, take the easy path. But they're doing those sprints with us. It was great to see."

"I mean, it has changed so much from last season," centre Marco Rossi, who arrived in Vancouver from Minnesota in last December's blockbuster trade of Quinn Hughes, said of the change in atmosphere around the Canucks. "When I came here, I could feel like maybe it's not a team, you know, where you feel comfortable around everyone. Now, coming here (this season), it's completely different."

The roster is not completely different, but it looks different enough.

The strategic additions of defencemen Schenn and Jamie Oleksiak in free agency and winger Brendan Gallagher in a June trade from the Montreal Canadiens appear already to have had a positive impact on the group.

Schenn, who spends his off-seasons just up Okanagan Lake from Penticton, in Kelowna, is on his third stint with the Canucks.

He last played for them in 2022-23 before he was traded at the trade deadline to the Toronto Maple Leafs, and is well aware of whatever tensions existed within the Canucks before Rutherford trumpeted them publicly two years ago as he traded J.T. Miller to the New York Rangers.

"No, none of it surprised me," Schenn said Thursday about reports of disharmony in Vancouver. "I've got a pretty good relationship with some guys in the room. I'm buddies with guys who were here last year and the year before, and obviously, I was here under the last manager. So I have a pretty good pulse of what's going on and has gone on."

"I don't know if it was as bad as maybe people think, but there's definitely room for improvement. You don't want to keep bringing up the past because I think there's such a good environment right now and a good attitude about what's going on."

"There's a great bunch of young guys. Incredible direction and leadership from the top down: Henrik and Daniel, R.J. and Manny. We definitely have a lot higher expectations than what's gone on here in the last little bit."

A two-time Stanley Cup winner with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Schenn knows what great team culture looks like.

"You don't want it to be cliquey at all where guys, you know, are not invited to dinners with a certain group of guys, and then they find out about it the next day," he explained. "I think you want to just include everyone, build relationships with everyone. You're taught in kindergarten, treat people how you want to be treated. I mean, just be a good person."

"The word 'culture' gets thrown around a ton, but there's so much that goes into it: the right attitude, positivity each and every day, trying to push to get better on the ice and in the gym. There's just so much that goes into it. But you can't do that unless you're all getting along. You know, when I've been on winning teams, everyone gets along from the top down. It's like everyone feels like they're part of something bigger than themselves."

Malhotra spent his first day emphasizing intensity and defending. He had the loudest voice on the ice, and it was heard often.

"That's what Manny is — he's a leader," veteran Canuck minor-leaguer Guillaume Brosebois said. "He's still like a player; he leads by example. If he asks us to be in the gym, he's going to be in the gym also. If he asks us to bag skate, we're going to see him bag skate, too. It's easy for us to get behind him."

Malhotra used second-year Canuck winger Linus Karlsson on a potential top line, alongside Elias Pettersson and Jake DeBrusk. He deployed prospect Jonathan Lekkerimäki with Rossi and Liam Ohgren. No. 1 defenceman Filip Hronek was paired with Oleksiak and not \$75-million prospect Zeev Buium, who instead was assigned to Schenn.

And like every other NHL coach on the first day of training camp, Malhotra urged reporters not to read too much into his Day 1 lineups. Naturally, his plea was mostly ignored.

"I was very pleased with the energy and the jump of the guys today," the coach said. "There was a lot of chatter on the ice ... the intensity was high, and that's a great start for me. It was a great environment from a competitive standpoint, and I think the guys very quickly got out of summer skate mode."

But the positive summer vibes continued.

"I can't speak on what happened before or what was said before," Malhotra explained. "Throughout this whole off-season, my focus has been on what we're going to be doing on Sept. 17, on Day 1. How are we going to establish the environment we want to create here? What are we going to look like systematically? The focus is on moving forward. Obviously, guys who have been here in the past have their history, but for me, it's about starting anew, starting from ground zero and building from here."

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Day 1 isn't too soon to read into Canadiens' forward lines

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — We'll just throw caution to the wind and read far deeper into Day 1 line combinations than Martin St. Louis wants us to — and not just because it's fun, but also because they make sense.

At least the first two do.

We're fairly confident Brett Berard won't be filling out the third line with Alex Newhook and Jake Evans over Zachary Bolduc or Alex Texier when Sept. 29 rolls around. And while Florian Xhekaj has a chance to stay where he practised Thursday — with Phillip Danault and Josh Anderson on the fourth line — he's still an underdog to unseat Kirby Dach or whomever of Bolduc or Texier is cut from the third.

Familiarity is one — because Caufield and Suzuki have so much of it with each other and are such prominently featured players, just about any winger who's seen highlights of them playing together would know how to provide the right complement.

Even from afar, Kreider has definitely seen enough of them to be that guy. And considering he's made a living of bringing the exact elements the ideal linemate for Suzuki and Caufield would, he's a natural fit.

"Obviously, he's got everything," Caufield said after the trio's first practice. "He's heavy, wins a lot of battles, good in front, helps our team depth-wise, too. And obviously, he has that experience, too. I think he's played everywhere in the lineup, and he can help Nick and I out."

It's what Kreider's been doing for his linemates through 958 games in the NHL.

He's always been a driver but has never been considered the driver of his line. Even when he scored 52 goals with the New York Rangers in 2021-22, he was largely the complement to Mika Zibanejad and a combination of Alexis Lafreniere, Kappo Kakko, Frank Vatrano and Barclay Goodrow.

Similarly, he was just that to Zibanejad and Pavel Buchnevich over other seasons, and to Leo Carlsson and Troy Terry through most of last season with the Anaheim Ducks.

Playing with Caufield and Suzuki will be a new experience for Kreider, but the role should feel anything but that to the six-foot-three, 232-pound power forward.

The familiarity factor also enables the assembly of Slafkovsky, Kapanen and Demidov straight off the hop. The trio had a very strong run as Montreal's second line for close to half of last season, producing 25 goals and allowing only 18 in close to 364 five-on-five minutes together in total. And while the line's underlying numbers left something to be desired — 46 per cent in Corsi and expected goals — much of that was simply due to Kapanen and Demidov being rookies.

Considering how both players have gained valuable experience, those numbers could spike.

Kapanen and Demidov both believe they will as they build on their already impressive chemistry with Slafkovsky.

"I think everyone knows his role and just being in the exact spot that the other guy wants him to be," Demidov said, "so that's probably (why it can work)."

Another reason is Kapanen fits the exact description St. Louis gave for an ideal second-line centre when he spoke with media members Wednesday.

"Guys who habitually play centre, they have to have a good computer, have to be able to complement other players," the coach said. "What I want out of a player who plays centre with players who might be more offensive is that he has a game that's balanced and that's capable of doing pretty much anything on the ice."

That was Kapanen for most of last season, until he admittedly hit a wall.

The 23-year-old Finn said the grind of his first 82-game schedule, which was compressed by a trip to the Olympics, physically wore him down by April.

But the disappointment of sitting out playoff games in May shouldn't overshadow all the success Kapanen enjoyed from October to March. We shouldn't forget he scored 22 goals and 39 points as a rookie.

Especially since he hasn't.

"The end of last year wasn't what I wanted, but I feel like I had a good year if I don't take those couple last months into it," Kapanen said, adding that the comfort of knowing what to expect, now coupled with the preparation over "a great summer" of training in Finland, sets him up to learn from the few failures and build on the many successes.

Demidov showed few blemishes in scoring 62 points — more than any other rookie — but also learned key lessons that he believes set him up for an even better sophomore season.

The 20-year-old Russian said he paced out his summer training because he learned that it's better to be prepared for September rather than August. He said last season taught him to manage the work-to-rest ratio. And when he wasn't resting, he said he spent his summer working out some of the finer details of skating and puck possession.

Demidov bringing those elements consistently and employing them with the top-tier skill he possesses will only help elevate Kapanen and Slafkovsky, who's taken incredible strides since being drafted first overall by the Canadiens in 2022. That's the plan, at least.

The plan also appears set for Kreider's experience and skillset to keep Suzuki and Caufield at a level few other forwards in the NHL can match. The former scored 101 points and won the Selke Trophy as the league's top defensive forward while the latter tallied 51 goals, and their potential to match that success feels just as strong next to a player who had 22 goals and 50 points last season.

They could do even better when you look at that top-six composition. You can envision two lines not only pushing each other but also taking pressure off each other. The potential of both lines commanding so much attention from the opposition would only have a trickle-down effect of freeing up the bottom two lines to provide depth scoring.

Perhaps that would all still prove true if Slafkovsky and Kreider switched spots, but we don't see that happening too soon.

Maybe St. Louis would say we're getting ahead of ourselves, but we don't expect him to tinker with these combinations while Kreider's also adjusting to the city he just arrived in on Sunday. As Caufield pointed out, "He's got a lot of other issues to kind of figure out with living and stuff," so throwing him new linemates after just a couple of skates with the top guns wouldn't make much sense.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' Babcock era begins with emphasis on details

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — The Mike Babcock era began with a loud voice and constant demand Thursday, as the latest head coach to try to get the Edmonton Oilers over the top ran his first practice.

"What we're trying to do is send the message on how we want to play," began Babcock. "We've asked them to learn the details and then find your game within our game. So if you know the details and everyone's detailed, everybody on the team can be important.

"When you're not detailed enough, no one knows where to go. And only the best guys get to be important."

Get used to that theme, folks, as Babcock tries to do what so many have failed at here: empowering the entire roster to have a role in the fate of the team — not just the top guys.

"We're going to play without the puck, and in order to play here, you've got to be fit," Babcock declared. "We're going to play 12 forwards, and everyone's going to be important. So you have to have a role, and you have to understand what we expect."

Babcock opened with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl on a line with Vasilii Podkolzin, and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins centring Zach Hyman and Ike Howard.

"I'm going to try to start with the two of them together for sure," he said of No's 97 and 29. "The third piece on each one of those top three lines, I don't know."

No one is taking anything for granted in Edmonton this fall, perhaps a metaphor for the season to come.

"That's your everyday, right?" said Draisaitl. "Your everyday is the practices, the details, the little things that have gotten away from us a little bit over the last couple of years. Now is the time to dial these back in."

"That was his big message today," added defenceman Ryan Shea. "Everything was upbeat. He wanted everything quick, and just the little things. He wants everyone finishing the drill, stopping at the net... Everything that it takes to be a good player and a good team, he was harping on."

One notable change was the pairing of Evan Bouchard with Shea, and Mattias Ekholm — Bouchard's partner for three years — playing alongside young newcomer Shakir Mukhamadullin.

Was that a sign that the veteran Ekholm will slip down the lineup?

"Ecky's hanging out with Shaq because Shaq's a new guy ... but there's no indication of what the pairs will be," Babcock said. "We've got new players, and we want them to feel comfortable. Ekholm's a man. He's a real leader. He can help the kid get going."

Shea's Stadium?

Speaking of Shea, he may be one of Stan Bowman's most intriguing acquisitions over the summer. He's an older cat — he turns 30 in February — who has been allowed to walk away as a free agent by Chicago, then Dallas, and now Pittsburgh.

But when you talk to folks in Pittsburgh, they'll tell you he was one of the Penguins' most consistent blue-liners last season, and an excellent defender.

"It's just confidence," said Shea, who has just 150 NHL games on his resume. "That coaching staff, that team, gave me confidence last year. I know it's been in me the whole time, and right now there's no reason for my confidence to be any lower than it was last year. I'm ready to go. I'm ready to help this team win."

Bouchard led the Oilers in even-strength time on ice last season, logging 19:15 per game. But Darnell Nurse averaged 19:14, and with him in San Jose there's nearly 20 minutes of ice time to be accounted for.

Cue Shea, and if he sticks with Bouchard, he will have to be that pairing's defensive conscience, while hopping the boards for 26 or 27 shifts per night. Shea was excellent defensively as a Penguin, but only averaged 16:27 of even-strength TOI last year.

"I know what I do well, and I'm sure (the coaches) have watched plenty of tape. I'll just play my role, whatever that may be," said Shea, whose confidence was not hindered when he showed up at the rink Thursday and saw his name next to the franchise's No. 1 D-man. "It definitely doesn't go down, that's for sure."

Here are your lines and pairings on Day 1 of Oilers camp:

First Group

Draisaitl-McDavid-Podkolzin

Formenton-Dach-Joseph

Jones-Samanski-Hutson

Tralmaks-Nicholl-Berzkalns

Lewandowski, Bookman

Shea-Bouchard

Stastney-Emberson

Stillman-Brown

Carfagna-Robinson

Jarry

Tompkins

Second Group

Howard-Nugent-Hopkins-Hyman

Frederic-Dickinson-Kapanen

Griffith-Pittlick-Michaels/Harvey

Raty-Marjala-Stonehouse/Tassy

Walman-Murphy

Ekholm-Mukhamadullin

Leppanen- Cibulka

Sjolund-Akey

Levi

Ungar

Net Gains

Getting injured just a couple of weeks after arriving in Edmonton last season was the wrench in Tristan Jarry's gears that he just didn't need. From there, his game went south, and he eventually lost the starter's net to Connor Ingram.

Jarry got into just one playoff game, and then the team acquired Frederik Andersen and Devon Levi in the off-season, which speaks to the Oilers' trust level in Jarry.

"It wasn't the ending that I wanted to my season," Jarry said. "After I got injured, it was tough. Going back and being able to rehab the injury ... I just didn't really feel like myself."

Jarry was set up to enter a three-goalie system, the first ever in these parts, until Andersen came up injured this summer. Like it or not, Jarry is now the clear No. 1 in Edmonton, with Levi — who has just 39 career NHL games of experience — as his backup.

It isn't the first time that Jarry has had to battle for an Opening Night start in this league. But at age 31, if he doesn't make the most of this season, it may be his last chance at one.



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"You want to start every game. That's the mindset," said Jarry, who was in Edmonton the entire summer training for a season that will tell us much about where his career goes from here. "You play the game to play, (and) there can only be one (goalie) at a time playing. But you have to earn it.

"Throughout training camp and throughout the pre-season games, that's what has to happen."

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: How teams stack up heading into training camp

Ryan Dixon

The start of training camp is a signature event on the NHL calendar and talking about how we think teams will fare is a staple of this time of year.

That can mean only one thing: time for the first Sportsnet.ca Power Ranking of the 2026-27 campaign.

This pre-season edition will serve as an appetizer to the weekly ranking we'll do once the puck drops on the new campaign. To be clear, topping this list is not a synonym for being the Stanley Cup favourite. Obviously, our top club — and two handfuls of teams underneath — have championship hopes, but this ranking reflects how we see the squads stacking up as we hit the ground running in less than two weeks.

Preamble — like the pre-season itself — should be as short as possible, so without further delay, let's unveil our ranking of all 32 clubs.

1. Colorado Avalanche The Avs — four years removed from the 2022 title — are a scary combination of talented and hungry. Colorado finished first overall last year, then ended the season on a sour note by losing the Western Conference Final in four games to the Vegas Golden Knights. Nathan MacKinnon just turned 31, Cale Makar (battling a minor lower-body injury) has been extended; Nazem Kadri is here for the full season to make the centre depth incredible; and the goalie tandem provides a solid foundation. All that's left to do is get 41-year-old Brent Burns his ring.

2. Dallas Stars After three straight trips to the Western Conference Final, the Stars bowed out in the first round of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs, and didn't look particularly great doing so. A long summer reset probably wasn't the worst thing in the world for this club, which returns a deadly and deep lineup.

3. Washington Capitals It's fair to have chemistry questions about the Caps, who are incorporating two new top-six wingers into the mix in Jordan Kyrou and Alex Tuch. Still, don't let a one-year blip of missing the playoffs throw you off; Washington finished second overall in 2024-25 and has a fantastic mix of veteran players supported by really, really good up-and-comers like defenceman Cole Hutson, banging winger Ryan Leonard and the hulking Protas brothers, Aliaksei and Ilya. Underpinning it all is the top-notch goaltending of Logan Thompson, who has finished fourth in Vezina voting in each of the past two seasons. If you're sleeping on the Capitals, time to wake up.

4. Carolina Hurricanes Truthfully, you could consider ranking the defending champs a little lower on this list when you factor in big-time fatigue and the fact Seth Jarvis is on the shelf for a chunk of the year. Does anybody really expect Carolina to come charging out of the chute? Still, the Canes are one of the safest bets to excel in the league and have gone from wondering what they have to do to get over the hump to knowing they've got the stuff to hang a banner.

5. Tampa Bay Lightning Continuity is king here, and assuming John Carlson replacing Darren Raddysh as the right-shot D-man on the power play goes smoothy, the Bolts should be good to go.

6. Minnesota Wild The uncertainty surrounding Quinn Hughes' future is a bummer of a distraction. For now, though, Minny is ready to roll with two stud wingers in Kirill Kaprizov and Matt Boldy, a drool-worthy top pair of Hughes and Brock Faber and a strong Swedish duo of Filip Gustavsson (still recovering from hip surgery) and Jesper Wallstedt in goal.

7. Montreal Canadiens The Canadiens could not find the stud forward they've been after for months during the off-season, but veteran Chris Kreider falling in their lap on the eve of camp could workout great. Even if improving on last season's 106-point showing is a big ask, there's no denying something special is coming together in Montreal.

8. Buffalo Sabres The Sabres have been linked to suspended Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck more than any other club. Regardless of whether that megadeal comes together, Buffalo is the real deal and has

young players coming to skate into voids left by winger Alex Tuch and defenceman Bowen Byram.

9. Edmonton Oilers We'll see exactly what new-coach bump looks like under Mike Babcock. There's a clear sense, after a first-round exit, the Oilers are rested, re-focused and placing greater significance on the regular season.

10. Florida Panthers If we were doing Cup odds here, the Panthers would be much higher. They've still got a roster that screams playoff success. It might take a minute for the new pieces to fall into place, though, and so much of this season for the Cats will come down to how Jacob Markstrom fares as Sergei Bobrovsky's replacement.

11. Vegas Golden Knights It's hard to imagine the defending Western Conference champs coming out of the gate with the pedal pinned. It's a long game for the Knights, who need their veteran-heavy lineup to be at its peak come playoff time.

12. Utah Mammoth They're good now and have the prospect powder to pull off another huge deal if something — would the Jets trade Hellebuyck within the Central? — comes up. The arrow is pointing way up in Utah.

13. Anaheim Ducks All the drama around Leo Carlsson's offer sheet and the drawn-out negotiations with sniper Cutter Gauthier shouldn't distract from the fact this is one of the best up-and-coming squads in the league.

14. Ottawa Senators We're not going to call losing Brady Tkachuk addition by subtraction because that's overlooking what a unique player profile the former Sens captain had. Still, it feels like Drake Batherson putting pen to paper on a new extension officially helped kick off a new chapter for Ottawa, which is icing a club that's strong down the middle and features one of the best young blueliners in the world in Jake Sanderson.

15. Toronto Maple Leafs There's always a lot of attention on the Maple Leafs to start a new season, but all the new faces bring an added layer of intrigue as Toronto tries to snap right back into Cup contention. There's lots of top-six talent, a crew of new bottom-sixers who embrace their role and a tandem to believe in with Sergei Bobrovsky backed up by Anthony Stolarz. The Leafs' fate will come down to how the blueline fares.

16. Boston Bruins Boston is the seventh Atlantic team we've listed and we're only halfway through the league. Man, it's going to be a real slog in that group. For the B's, they can bet on known quantities in goal (Jeremy Swayman), on defence (Charlie McAvoy) and up front (David Pastrnak). If James Hagens can be an offensive threat as a rookie and newcomer JJ Peterka finds his stroke playing on the top line, Boston will be in business.

17. San Jose Sharks Most squads would kill for this team's five-year future and, in a mid West, this could be the first of many consecutive seasons in the playoffs for Macklin Celebrini and the Sharks.

18. Philadelphia Flyers Be honest, did you remember the Flyers made it to the second round last spring? Getting back into the playoffs will be a big ask, but Porter Martone will be a favourite to win rookie of the year and already feels like he's Mr. Flyer.

19. New Jersey Devils It's tempting to pick the Devils as a bounce-back candidate and there's certainly skill to bet on. That said, the goaltending is a huge question mark, Jack Hughes always seems to miss 20 games and — as far as we know — the rumours of acquiring a third Hughes brother that dogged the dressing room last season have not gone away.

20. Winnipeg Jets No team has more pressing uncertainty around it thanks to the drama involving Connor Hellebuyck. Just remember, the Jets played well into November without key players Adam Lowry, Dylan Samberg and Cole Perfetti last year. Winnipeg won the Presidents' Trophy 16 months ago and the Jets will surely play with a collective chip this year. As long as Stuart Skinner and any goalie who comes back in the eventual Hellebuyck deal hold the fort, it's foolish to write off the Jets.

21. Los Angeles Kings Year 1 without Anze Kopitar should be interesting. Actually, with the Kings, everything feels kind of boring at this point. We'll see if new bench boss Peter Laviolette can squeeze enough offence out of a group that gets Artemi Panarin for a full season.

22. St. Louis Blues The Blues have underperformed for a couple years, but there's sneaky potential on this club. They not only kept Robert Thomas, they made him captain. If newcomer Mason McTavish can be a



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solid 2C and Joel Hofer further solidifies his grip on the starting role, there's a clear roadmap back to the playoffs.

23. Pittsburgh Penguins Look, last year was a delightful surprise in Steeltown and the Pens could very well back it up with another post-season appearance. Finishing four points out of the final wild card would be a bummer, though, because as good as GM Kyle Dubas' retool is going, at some point Pittsburgh needs to draft back up in the range where it got Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin many moons ago.

24. New York Islanders Even though he technically took over at the end of last season, we're still making Pete DeBoer eligible for new-coach bump consideration. Ilya Sorokin provides a solid foundation and Matthew Schaefer lets you dream about the future, but — as always — you just wonder if the Isles can score enough.

25. Detroit Red Wings Until there's resolution on Dylan Larkin's future, it's hard to know what to make of the Wings. Detroit is thin down the middle with Larkin and, obviously, it gets way worse — depending on the return — if he leaves. Hard as it is for playoff-starved Wings fans to hear, a small reset might be in order.

26. Columbus Blue Jackets Columbus' roster warrants being much higher in this ranking. The problem, though, is there are major questions surrounding the futures of Kirill Marchenko and Zach Werenski, to say nothing of unsigned centre Adam Fantaiili. There are just too many big-time questions swirling around Ohio to have faith in the Jackets right now.

27. Nashville Predators The Preds could look very different by season's end if this is the year that the likes of Ryan O'Reilly (a pending UFA) and Steven Stamkos (two years left on his deal) move. The likes of Matthew Wood, Brady Martin and newcomer Mavrik Bourque need to put their stamp on this team in transition.

28. New York Rangers Don't get too swept up in Rangers retool talk; the Blueshirts still have capable forwards, an all-world defenceman in Adam Fox and a goalie, in Igor Shesterkin, who keeps your floor relatively high.

29. Chicago Blackhawks We've arrived at the final club in our ranking where, if you really do some mental gymnastics, you could talk yourself into it making the big dance. Maybe. Here's hoping Connor Bedard is back as soon as possible, giving Hawks fans some legit hope.

30. Seattle Kraken Chase Reid was an exciting pick last June at seventh overall, but genuine thrills still seem so far away in Seattle.

31. Calgary Flames Unlike recent campaigns, Calgary enters this season with no questions about which veteran guy could be gone by February. It's all about the kids now and, with one more twirl at the Saddledome before moving to the new rink, this should be a fun — if loss-filled — year in Southern Alberta.

32. Vancouver Canucks This is right where the Canucks figure to be for a few years and that's just fine when you're entering a long build with clear eyes. May the lottery gods be kind ...

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators flash early pace and skill on first day of camp

Wayne Scanlan

The first sessions of NHL training camp aren't much different from the first day of school.

A lot of howdy-dos, fresh faces and classmates competing for attention.

Maybe it's the aerial view from the second floor of the Sensplex arenas, but the Ottawa Senators were flying in their opening camp sessions.

"I'm exhausted just watching them," quipped Dave Poulin, Senators senior vice president of hockey operations as the first group, led by Tim Stutzle, Jake Sanderson and Drake Batherson, finished up an hour of drills on one sheet of ice before moving to a fresh sheet next door. In their wake at rink one, they left behind a two-inch buildup of snow from 20 skaters and three goaltenders ripping into it.

One of the highlights of the second session was watching Sanderson and Stutzle in the corner fiercely contesting a one-on-one drill. Arguably Ottawa's two best players, neither yielding an inch.

"He's one of the best Ds in the league," Stutzle said. "We're just trying to set the tone, push the pace. I think on the whole with a lot of young guys coming in, we're just trying to do the right things."

The maturing Stutzle is suddenly one of the veterans trying to help the kids along. He spent some time watching rookie camp and came away impressed with what he saw, from newly drafted forward Jaxon Cover among others.

A veteran head coach isn't going to get overly excited about anything related to the first drills of main camp. Still, Travis Green felt it was an auspicious start for his group.

"It was a good first day," Green said. "I thought the guys looked good. I thought our pace was high. Execution was pretty good. There's going to be some rust, that's expected. But all in all, a good Day 1."

Among the notable line and defence combinations at the outset: Stutzle with wingers Drake Batherson and Andre Burakovsky; Dylan Cozens between the Swedes Fabian Zetterlund and William Eklund. And on the defence - Sanderson with rookie Carter Yakemchuk and Thomas Chabot alongside Jordan Spence.

Green joked that he read somewhere that the newly arrived Eklund should play with his former San Jose Sharks teammate Zetterlund.

The coach tipped a cap to Eklund's speed and abilities.

"You can see he has high-end skill," Green said.

One veteran who earned praise from Green was Claude Giroux, who is clearly in top shape and enjoyed a battle drill against young Eklund.

"Everybody was pairing up and I'm like, I want to see what this kid can do," Giroux said. "He's definitely quicker than me, but you know, we had a few good battles."

Burakovsky in dad's steps

It's been a while since the Senators have had a Burakovsky in training camp. But Andre Burakovsky, acquired by Ottawa in the off-season, is here where his father, Robert, once played for the 1993-94 Senators. Son told father via telephone back in June.

"I called him and told him that I'm walking in his footsteps now," Burakovsky said after Thursday's morning session.

"He said, 'what do you mean?' I said, I'm playing for your old team now. My mom got more excited, she's like I gotta go (to Ottawa) and see where we lived, you know, all that kind of stuff. She's excited."

Ottawa represents a huge opportunity for Burakovsky, acquired during draft week from the Chicago Blackhawks in exchange for a sixth-round 2027 pick.

Skating alongside Stutzle and Batherson on Day 1 illustrates a door open to a top-six spot, if not the top line opening left by the departure of Brady Tkachuk. Fellow Swede Eklund might have something to say about that.

Green feels that Burakovsky can play up and down the lineup.

"Two really skilled, hardworking guys, unbelievable players," Burakovsky said of being with Stutzle and Batherson. "It was fun to play with both of them. I think we found some chemistry on the three-on-twos, we found each other pretty good, scored a couple of goals."

It's only the first day and a first look. Burakovsky is aware that he is not a lock to stay on that line.

"It's a great opportunity but at the same time, you gotta deliver," Burakovsky said. "I mean, if you look at Ottawa's roster, it's a lot of competition and there's a lot of really good players. So you've got to fight hard and not take anything for granted."

In Chicago, the 31-year-old was off to a great start (7 goals, 15 points, 17 games) before being sidelined by a concussion in late November. And though he managed to play 75 games, he didn't recover his early-season scoring touch. He finished with 11 goals and 22 assists for 33 points, a far cry from the 61 he produced with Colorado in 2021-22.

He wants to be closer to that type of player as he settles into a Senators dressing room with more Swedes than he's ever encountered in a training camp.

"The other day I came out of the shower and a guy that was here for development camp, and is still here, said hello in Swedish," Burakovsky said. "Then four more guys came up and said hello (in Swedish) and I'm like, what's going on here? It's fun."

First day linemate Batherson likes what he sees in Burakovsky.

"Great skater, lots of skill, can shoot the puck," Batherson said. "He's a guy I've watched for a long time. Obviously, two Stanley Cups, so when you can add a guy like that, it's good, for sure."

The well-traveled Burakovsky won those Cups with Washington and Colorado.

Yakemchuk eyes a spot

Though he's technically still a rookie, Carter Yakemchuk has already had brief NHL regular season and playoff experience with the Senators.

Now the goal is to earn a full-time spot with Ottawa out of camp. It doesn't hurt to start camp with Sanderson as a partner.

"It felt pretty good, I mean he's a great player," Yakemchuk said. "So being able to play with him is pretty special. He helps me a lot."

Yakemchuk says he learns a host of things from Sanderson, "the way he possesses the puck, his ability to skate and defend. He makes it pretty easy when guys are coming down on us."

Learning to defend will be key for Yakemchuk to earn trust on a team coached by Green.

Over the summer, Yakemchuk worked on his skating most of all, he said.

'Weird' with no fitness test

Giroux, who broke into the NHL with Philadelphia in 2008, admitted it felt very "weird" not having camp fitness tests, as per the new CBA.

"I feel like, in the summer, that's one of your motivations is getting ready for the testing," Giroux said. "You don't want to embarrass yourself. You want to show that you've put in the work."

"But I mean, you look at practice today, you can tell right away who came in good shape, in great shape - there's nobody who comes to camp in bad shape anymore, so it's not like the testing is necessary. You can tell by how well everybody was skating today."

Hutton on a PTO

Defenceman Ben Hutton, who grew up and played minor and junior hockey in the Ottawa region, was added to camp on a professional tryout. Hutton, 33, has 575 games of NHL experience, including time with a Vancouver Canucks team coached by Green. He also played for Green in AHL Utica.



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Hutton played with the Vegas Golden Knights for the past five seasons and could be added insurance if Artem Zub's injury lingers past camp.

Hutton joked that he recognized some of Green's drills "and the nice bag skate at the end."

It's comfortable for Hutton to try to earn a spot while in his home environment and with a few veterans he knows, including Giroux and Michael Amadio.

"I just want to showcase myself, show the Sens I deserve a spot and that I belong in this league," Hutton said. "And hopefully gain a contract."

If it doesn't happen with the Senators, Hutton has to hope another team sees something during this short pre-season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames' Parekh 'confident' off-season work will set up success

Eric Francis

CALGARY – Zayne Parekh's summer assignment was simple.

Get stronger.

So, the 20-year-old defenceman turned to former Flame Gary Roberts to push the issue.

"I think I'm like close to 191 pounds right now, so I had a really good off-season," said the six-foot defenceman, who is listed at 179 pounds in the NHL's official bio.

"Working out with Gary Roberts was a big adjustment this summer. A lot of stuff I wasn't used to, but I think I had a really good summer."

With every big hit Parekh took last season while trying to make plays, management grew increasingly concerned for his safety as an undersized rookie.

He eventually suffered an upper body injury after a clean hit by Nick Foligno, which sidelined him for a month as part of a season he'd, quite frankly, like to forget.

"I don't really care too much about that anymore," said the talented first rounder when asked how he'd sum up last year.

"I think I feel really confident and really good about my game right now, and feel really good about how my body feels and how I feel on the ice. I think that's all that matters."

Indeed, for a youngster who had confidence issues he'd previously never experienced, moving forward is the healthiest approach — a tack made easier by the fact that he finished the final month of the season playing with the type of swagger he seemed to regain at the World Juniors.

"I think me and Griddy (Matvei Gridin) took big steps after the trade deadline," said Parekh, who had four goals and three assists in his last 14 games.

"If you look at our last 10 games or that stretch of hockey, we played some really good hockey, and we were winning games."

Parekh certainly has the potential to be the most exciting of all the young prospects in the organization.

The key is to simply get out there and play — stop worrying about the outside noise and expectations.

"I haven't felt like this in the previous two years — I just feel comfortable and confident," said Parekh.

"It doesn't really feel like there's any pressure on me, or any expectation. I just feel normal again, and it's a nice feeling to get back to."

For a young man with a brilliant smile and personality he will eventually put on display more regularly on and off the ice, it was obvious last year was not fun in any way.

The injury, the uncertainty, the healthy scratches, the loan to Team Canada and his comments from the World Juniors about NHLer's being robots that rankled some teammates... are all things he likely learned from.

"The experience that he went through last year, for a young guy to get all that - he pretty much handled anything and everything that came out, and he had a lot of things that he had to handle," said coach Ryan Huska, who started camp Thursday with Parekh paired up with Jake Middleton.

"So, by being around last year and having success at the end of the year, like he did, he left here feeling really good about himself. He had a better understanding of what he had to do physically and mentally to be a successful NHL player, and he put the work in this summer. And now

he's come back feeling much more comfortable. I think he feels like he has a better handle on what's expected out of him."

Parekh's goals, and those of the organization, are aligned:

"I want to be an elite power play one guy on this team," said Parekh, a two-time 30-goal scorer in the OHL who had four goals and nine assists in 37 outings last year.

"I want the power play to click and I want to be the guy that's driving that, and I think it's a good challenge for me. Obviously me and (Simon) Nemec are going to compete there, and it's going to be good for both of us. I don't think there's a point total I want to (project). I just want to continue to establish myself as a good NHL player."

The Lines

Gridin-Frost-Coronato

Honzek/Harrington-Backlund-Farabee

Zary-Strome-Sharangovich

Tsyplakov/Nylander-Pospisil-Klapka

Bahl-Nemec

Kuznetsov-Whitecloud

Middleton-Parekh

Hanley-Pachal

Wolf

Cooley

The Kid

Flames' second-round pick Chase Harrington was a surprise addition to the main group to open camp, splitting time on line rushes alongside Mikael Backlund. Excitement surrounding the 18-year-old throwback winger is high, but his extended stay is simply an exercise in development.

"Zero expectations on him," said Huska, hinting the plan is still to dispatch the B.C. native to Spokane soon.

"I will say that we want to see him come here and learn how some of our older guys handle themselves on a daily basis. If he keeps getting better and better while he's on the ice, that's great for us. But we just want him to see what a lot of these NHL players are like and how they handle themselves both on and off the ice."

PTO update

Alex Nylander, 28, is the lone player on a professional tryout, brought in with the outside shot he can help the team score goals.

"He's an offensive player, and he's helped teams win in the past, like last year," said Huska of the Calder Cup winner, who had 23-plus goals each of the last two seasons with the Marlies.

"He's a very good power play player. So I think when he plays his couple games that he's allowed to play, those are things that we'll look for."

Nylander was born in Calgary while his father, Michael, played for the Flames.

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Sportsnet.ca / Most interesting contract on every team in Metropolitan Division

Justin Arenburg

Welcome to the contract-maxing era of the NHL.

No, this entire off-season wasn't just a dream. We did, in fact, see record-breaking after record-breaking contract being handed out, and there is no sign of it slowing down. The salary cap is only projected to keep jumping year after year.

However, after seeing all of these deals come through, many are starting to rethink the contract environment.

Maybe it's thinking about how much top players will demand in the coming years, or which contracts look like bargains, or whether the latest deal signed was fair market value. All in all, the shifting landscape has made for some interesting discussions about players' contracts.

In the first two editions of this series, we looked at the Pacific and Central Divisions. Now, it's time to discuss the most interesting contract on every team in the Metro Division.

General manager Eric Tulsky has to be happy that Jackson Blake and Logan Stankoven decided to sign their extensions in the summer of 2025, with one year remaining on their entry-level deals, and not 2026.

We now live in a world where young players are getting handed the bag for showing any significant potential less than 100 games into their NHL career, a bill that Blake and Stankoven certainly fit. But because Leo Carlsson's offer sheet for \$18 million annually didn't come until this year, Tulsky managed to sign the duo to eight-year deals for a total of \$11.117 million annually — Blake at \$5.117 million, and Stankoven for \$6 million.

But imagine what they could've demanded from the Hurricanes this summer if they had waited. When they were still on their entry-level deals last year, both Blake and Stankoven put up career highs in goals and points during the regular season. Then they tore it up in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Blake led the team in scoring with 20 points in 19 games, while Stankoven was fourth with 16 en route to the Hurricanes winning their second Stanley Cup in franchise history.

Now, with Blake and Stankoven entering the first year of these new contracts, they already look like two of the biggest steals in the NHL.

This has been a long off-season for Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, mainly because of all the trade rumours and contract negotiations surrounding the team's star players.

One was Kirill Marchenko, the Russian winger who is entering the final year of a \$3.85 million AAV deal and poised to become a restricted free agent after the season.

The contract itself has worked out tremendously in the Blue Jackets' favour, with Marchenko putting up 58 goals and 141 points in 155 games over the last two seasons, setting him up for a massive pay bump.

However, that deal might not come in Columbus.

Over the summer, Marchenko's agent Daniel Milstein went public and said that it's unlikely that Marchenko will be re-signing in Columbus, which led to his name being a popular one in trade rumours during the off-season.

But as training camps are set to open, Waddell said Marchenko is in Columbus and told him, "I'm going to play my butt off here."

Considering there is one year left on Marchenko's deal, Waddell's long summer of hearing the noise will likely continue into the season until a contract extension is signed or the forward is traded.

When the former general manager of the New Jersey Devils, Tom Fitzgerald, signed Jake Allen to a five-year deal on July 1, 2025 at \$1.8 million annually, people scratched their heads because of the term handed out to a then 35-year-old goaltender. But given Allen was the

backup behind Jacob Markstrom — a good backup at that — lowering the AAV to give more term made sense.

Fast forward a year with the team now under new general manager Sunny Mehta, and this deal has heads turning for a different reason. Markstrom is gone after being dealt this off-season to the Florida Panthers, making Allen the projected No. 1 goalie when the season begins.

While that might make some fans concerned, it doesn't seem like Mehta is.

There might be two reasons behind this.

First, the goaltender position can fluctuate drastically year-to-year, so even if the Devils wanted to get a "top-notch goalie" making over \$8 million AAV, it doesn't guarantee they will be good. Look at the Hurricanes. They won the Stanley Cup using two goalies that combined to make \$3.525 million against the cap.

Second, when Mehta's name popped up as a potential general-manager candidate this summer, the biggest attraction was his knowledge and use of analytics. So, there may be some data not made public which is telling him Allen is the guy for the job. If that's the case, and Allen has a great year, this contract at such a low AAV could help them build a better roster to win the Stanley Cup.

It's funny to think that nobody — probably not even the New York Islanders organization — expected Matthew Schaefer to be as good as he was during his unanimous Calder Trophy-winning season as he tied Brian Leetch's NHL record for most goals by a rookie defenceman with 23.

Let's be honest, though: there is really nothing interesting about a player's entry-level deal. The interesting part is picturing what comes after the first contract in the NHL. So, considering how special the first-overall pick looked in just one season, it's safe to assume general manager Mathieu Darche wishes he could've signed Schaefer to an extension this summer instead of having to wait until next year.

Why?

Well, Darche has no choice but to watch another cycle of defencemen get paid under the rising cap, knowing Schaefer's price tag is only going up with every deal that is signed. Just look at the contract the Vancouver Canucks gave Zeev Buium for \$9.38 million annually over eight years with only 76 NHL games played in his career and 26 points.

On top of those 23 goals mentioned earlier, Schaefer finished with 59 points.

At least for one more season, Darche can watch each game and appreciate the talent from his franchise defenceman before preparing to back up the Brinks truck next summer.

This might be the most interesting contract on this list.

Prior to this season, Braden Schneider, the New York Rangers 19th-overall pick from 2020, was on a two-year deal paying him \$2.2 million AAV. During those two seasons, he mainly played on the third pair, putting up six goals and 21 points in year one and two goals and 18 points in year two.

Rangers general manager Chris Drury extended a qualifying offer to Schneider, a restricted free agent, before the deadline in late June, then agreed with the 24-year-old on a raise to \$5.5 million on a one-year deal in July.

Drury also traded for defencemen Marcus Pettersson and Sean Durzi, making the Rangers the highest cap-dedicated team to blue liners this season. As of now, Schneider is still only projected to play third-line minutes again, and that's before considering the minutes 2026 fifth-overall pick Albert Smits might consume.

Maybe we get to a point in the season where the Rangers feel they can't afford to be paying a third-pairing defenceman over \$5 million and look to trade Schneider. If not, at the bare minimum, the Rangers will have to extend a qualifying offer of \$5.5 million to Schneider next off-season.

Talk about picturing what a contract will look like for a player coming out of their entry-level deal. Matvei Michkov put up a tremendous rookie campaign with 26 goals and 63 points in 80 games, but the Philadelphia Flyers' 2023 sixth-overall pick did a 180 last season.



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He came into training camp out of shape, according to head coach Rick Tocchet, and had all of his stats go backwards. Michkov finished with 20 goals and 51 points and saw his ice time decrease by almost two minutes per game.

While a lot of players would kill for a 51-point season, the expectation for a player like Michkov is much higher. It seems, however, Michkov realized last year was a wake-up call and has taken his off-season program more seriously this summer.

If Michkov goes out there this year and impresses, his next contract will reflect that. But his season looks like last, he will still get paid, but way less than the Flyers probably hoped for when they drafted him.

47 games and 14 points.

That's all it took to convince Pittsburgh Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas that Ville Koivunen was worth a long-term commitment before he signed him to an eight-year deal at \$4 million per season this summer. Koivunen, 23, has spent over 60 per cent of the last two seasons in the AHL, where he has been producing at a point-per-game rate.

Seeing a deal like this in the NHL is fascinating for multiple reasons, but mainly because we never see such a big bet on a kid that hasn't cracked an NHL lineup full time yet.

Dubas is following the exact strategy that Atlanta Braves general manager Alex Anthopoulos has with his young prospects: offer money up front and hope it will look like a bargain on the back end.

It certainly worked for Anthopoulos when he gave Ronald Acuna Jr. an eight-year, \$100 million deal in 2019. Koivunen probably isn't going to win the Hart Trophy like Acuna Jr. has won the National League MVP, but if he can become a top-six player who produces 40-50 points per season, it would be a win.

On the other hand, if Koivunen flops in the next two years, the Penguins can buy him out in the summer of 2028 and would never have a dead cap hit of more than \$750,000 against them for the following 12 seasons.

Continuing the trend of players getting paid without a ton of NHL games under their belt, we have Ryan Leonard of the Washington Capitals, whose ink might not even be dry yet on his new eight-year contract worth \$10.5 million annually.

Leonard, the eighth-overall pick from 2023, has appeared in just 84 games, but broke out in his first full season with the Capitals last year with 20 goals and 45 points. What makes Leonard's contract interesting is the fact general manager Chris Patrick felt the need to get the eight-year deal done before the old CBA expired.

Everyone can see Leonard has the talent to become a top-tier player in the NHL, but with the Capitals' loaded forward group this season after bringing in the likes of Alex Tuch, Jordan Kyrrou and Boone Jenner, Leonard is projected to play on the third line. That might prevent a massive breakout season from happening, and could've saved the Capitals some cap space.

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Sportsnet.ca / Most interesting contract on every team in Central Division

Emily Sadler

Before the players hit the ice for the 2026-27 campaign and let their play do the talking, it's their contracts that tend to garner the most chatter.

As the cliché goes, money talks. And in a swiftly shifting salary cap landscape at a time of great growth in the league, contract conversations are more fascinating than ever. It's not just about the series of league-altering, market-setting, history-making deals that have gone down this summer — we're also seeing a growing trend of stars opting for mid-level term to maximize career earnings, while more and more GMs are buying early on budding talent and signing them to long-term pacts that might look surprising now, but will likely pay off plenty in just a few years.

It all makes for a very interesting time in the NHL.

Yesterday, we kicked off our series with a look at the Pacific Division. Today, we shift to the Central, and examine the most interesting contract on each team in the division.

A big summer in Chicago brought some notable new contracts, as GM Kyle Davidson acquired and extended Bowen Byram, brought back Patrick Kane on a two-year pact, and locked in five more years of Connor Bedard at \$15 million per. All that was made more possible by the extension inked last summer — that one that saw Frank Nazar sign for seven years at just shy of \$6.6 million annually.

The two sides agreed to the deal just 56 games into Nazar's NHL career. That timing made the contract both a giant vote of confidence from the team and an incredibly good value on the future of a centreman who's poised to outplay that AAV in short order as a key part of the club's young core. With the rising cap, and the trend of players prioritizing maximum earning potential on shorter-term deals, Nazar's pact — and the fact he left money on the table — looks like something of an outlier.

After building on his rookie season with 15 goals and 41 points through 66 games last year, the final season of his entry-level deal, he's primed for a true breakout campaign. And when those stats pop, the deal is only going to look better and better.

So instant, and so seamless, was the fit between Martin Necas and the Colorado Avalanche when the club acquired him via trade in January 2025, management wasted little time inking him to a lucrative extension just 41 games into his Aves tenure.

After signing his eight-year, \$92-million extension last October, Necas immediately went about showing us all why he's a worthy investment. He posted career-highs across the board with his 38-goal, 62-assist, 100-point campaign — all while still playing out the final year of his expiring contract, which counted for just \$6.5 million against the cap.

Now, his second full season in Colorado sees him embark on the first year of that eight-year deal, worth \$11.5 million annually. The team's second-highest scorer in 2025-26 is now, fittingly, their second-highest-paid player. (Cale Makar's historic extension, and matching \$20.5-million cap hit, doesn't go into effect until July 1.)

What makes Necas' contract so interesting is not just the heightened expectations that accompany his new paycheck to keep pace with last season's numbers, which he's well-situated to meet. It's also the fact that, as Mikko Rantanen's replacement, Necas' productivity and paycheck compare so closely to the man now starring down in Dallas. Rantanen, the centrepiece of the three-team trade that brought Necas to Colorado in the first place, signed for eight years at \$12 million per in Dallas. Signing Necas — two years Rantanen's junior — for just below that mark and getting slightly more production (1.28 points per game, compared to Rantanen's similar 1.20) in Year 1 shows us how the Avalanche took a tricky situation when navigating Rantanen's future and found an ideal solution in Necas.

Obvious? Yes. Interesting? Very. After posting 45 goals in a contract year in 2025-26, Jason Robertson's summer-long contract saga with the Stars was one of the most noteworthy storylines of the off-season —

complete with a vetoed trade, a surprising settled-upon AAV and term, and a post-signing press conference that didn't exactly do much to smooth things over.

Now, Robertson's one-year, \$12-million pact, which walks him straight to unrestricted free agency next July, will be serving up one of the most intriguing storylines of the upcoming season.

Interestingly, Rantanen's \$12-million deal seems to have been a measuring stick in Dallas, too. Word of Stars management not wanting to go over Rantanen's team-leading AAV factored into speculation around Robertson's earning potential — and still does, moving forward.

Robertson will be eligible to sign an extension with Dallas on Jan. 1. Will the two sides decide on a long-term pact then? Or will he skate straight into the open arms of another squad? He already proved his worth once. Now, he's got to do it again in his second consecutive contract year with a massive payday on the horizon.

Wow, we really are being creative here, huh? But, like Robertson in Dallas, we can't look away from the ongoing storyline that is Quinn Hughes' next contract.

Come to think of it, we can't really look away from his current deal, either. The six-year, \$47.1-million contract he signed in Vancouver in October 2021 was a bargain pretty much right away. That five years later, the game's most dynamic American rearguard still counts for less than \$8 million against the cap is a luxury most GMs don't have.

Obviously, that's about to change.

The most comparable player to Hughes is his Canadian counterpart over in Colorado, Cale Makar. Makar's monster eight-year, \$163.2-million extension signed late last month marked the largest contract in league history. While it doesn't take effect until next season (Makar will still count for \$9 million against the cap for 2026-27), we all know it is greatly affecting the market for elite rearguards now. And next in line is Hughes. He reportedly isn't after the kind of term Makar agreed to, which should change the calculus of his earnings. Will he set the market anew, or leave money on the table in Minnesota? Might he ultimately opt to join his brothers in New Jersey, or perhaps jump to a destination not yet on the radar?

In a recent chat on 32 Thoughts: The Podcast, Hughes sounded comfortable being patient, and confident a deal would get done to keep him with the Wild. Interesting times ahead, to say the least.

Since taking over the Predators' front office in June, GM Chris MacFarland has done some savvy business. He's completed more trades than signings, emphasizing value over big swings on the new contracts he has handed out, and has dipped into familiar player pools for both to open up his tenure in Nashville.

No single player represents all of that better than Mavrik Bourque.

Seeing the Stars' impending cap crunch in Dallas, MacFarland traded for the unsigned RFA and then promptly handed him a six-year, \$33-million deal that feels like a win for both player and team. MacFarland's biggest contract signed in Nashville so far, by both term and AAV, sets the tone for what he's trying to do here. That there is no trade protection attached goes against the league's recent trend of handing out clauses liberally. Bourque's breakout 2025-26 season saw him tally 20 goals and 41 points. MacFarland's decision to lock him up now, before he really pops, is likely to pay off in a big way soon. At 24 years old, he's now a key part of the Predators' core moving forward. While the cap hits of veterans Steven Stamkos (\$8 million through 2027-28) and Jonathan Marchessault (\$5.5 million through 2028-29) have looked a little heavy, Bourque's presence should insert some fresh energy into the lineup that could revive the top-six. That's money well spent. It also represents a team in transition, and has us keeping a close eye on MacFarland's next moves.

Forward Dylan Holloway and defenceman Philip Broberg are forever linked, thanks to their shared history as Oilers-turned-Blues via a pair of offer sheets in 2024 that caught Edmonton in a bind and has the Alberta squad still paying for the missteps.

Both players are entering Year 1 of new deals that, while signed under now-former GM Doug Armstrong, set up new GM Alex Steen for long-term and sustainable success.



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Broberg, 25, is blossoming into a top-pairing rearguard, and last January signed a six-year, \$48-million contract to reflect that. His \$8-million cap hit nearly doubles his offer sheet AAV that pried him from Edmonton, and makes him the club's highest-paid defenceman and the second highest-paid player on the team (tied with Pavel Buchnevich).

Holloway's deal, signed in May, is for five years, totalling \$38.75 million and counting for \$7.75 million against the Blues' cap through 2030-31. Not bad for a top-line winger whose 22 goals and 51 points ranked him second in team scoring last year, and who's well-equipped to build on that.

Separately, Broberg and Holloway represent two more arguments in favour of betting early on players with potential, before they pop. They're kind of the poster boys of how these Blues do business. Together, they make up a crucial part of the Blues' core moving forward — both in leadership and production — and have helped St. Louis stay relevant through some up-and-down seasons while avoiding a full roster overhaul.

Speaking of offer sheets...

Questions about RFA Barrett Hayton's worth were answered by the New Jersey Devils, who opened free agency by lobbing a one-year, \$4.775-million offer sheet Utah's way in the hopes of luring Hayton to Newark.

It accelerated what could've been some long, drawn-out negotiations, with Mammoth management matching to keep Hayton in Salt Lake City on a cap hit that nearly doubles the \$2.65-million AAV of the bridge deal he inked two years ago.

It also started the timer on what feels like a referendum season for the 26-year-old — and whether he can elevate his play to match the expectations that accompanied his arrival into the NHL as Arizona's fifth overall pick back in 2018. It's been an up-and-down tenure, to be sure, with injuries and environment both getting in the way of him reaching his high ceiling. The team's move to Utah brought stability, with the club thriving in the two seasons since landing in the new NHL market. Hayton himself had a career year in their first season in Utah, but injuries again got in the way of him building on it in 2025-26.

There's no doubting the skill Hayton possesses. The clock is now ticking for him to unleash it.

Stuart Skinner's two-year, \$7.5-million contract looked good when he signed on July 1, a low-risk insurance policy in a crease that entered the off-season with plenty of uncertainty around Connor Hellebuyck's future with the team.

Looks like the Jets are going to need that insurance. With Hellebuyck going public with his trade request late last month, we still don't know where he'll land — but we do know Skinner's importance to the squad just grew exponentially.

What makes this contract so interesting isn't just the timing, or his rising value to the club's hopes of remaining relevant — it's also about the balance it achieved between affordability in a rising salary cap age and fair pay for a netminder who has done plenty to earn another shot to succeed. His \$3.75-million AAV is a career-high for Skinner, but still affords GM Kevin Cheveldayoff flexibility as he searches for a solution. Should a return for Hellebuyck include a starting netminder, his cap hit won't hinder the club from absorbing a larger salary. If the Jets opt to start the season with Skinner as the No. 1, they can afford to bet on a solid backup or take a tandem approach.

There's a lot still to be determined in Winnipeg, and the Skinner signing should factor positively into all of it.

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TSN.CA / McKenna turns heads while skating beside Tavares, Nylander in first Leafs practice

Mark Masters

The Toronto Maple Leafs held the first practices of training camp on Thursday at the Ford Performance Centre.

First overall pick Gavin McKenna is starting on the second line. The 18-year-old left winger slotted in beside centre John Tavares and right winger William Nylander during Thursday's first on-ice session at Maple Leafs training camp.

"It feels good knowing that the staff has confidence in me and [is] putting me with those type of players," McKenna said.

Newly minted head coach Jim Hiller insists there's not one big reason why McKenna is starting in that spot although he did highlight the fact that the rookie will be living with Tavares this season.

"John's detailed, so that probably helps him," Hiller noted. "They can go home and talk about anything, if he has any questions for him at the end of the day."

Hiller admits the biggest challenge for the new combination will come in the defensive zone.

"That's really going to be on John and Willy to do their job extremely well and help Gavin along the way," Hiller said.

At the other end of the ice, McKenna should be able to help Tavares, who led the Leafs in goals last season, and Nylander, who led the team in points, create plenty of offence.

"I mean, the playmaking is elite," gushed Tavares. "You can already see times when he gets out there and you think he doesn't have much room, time and space, and his ability to make a play out of nothing. The puck control and the puck skill is off the charts."

"We had some very good opportunities just today in practice when we were out there," Nylander noted.

Earlier this week, TSN Hockey Insider Chris Johnston reported that the Leafs decided not to immediately play McKenna on the top line with Auston Matthews because they didn't want to put too much on his plate early on.

Matthews was flanked by Matthew Knies and free-agent addition Jack Roslovic on Thursday. Matthews and Roslovic also played together during their junior days at the U.S. National Team Development Program.

"Auston really likes Rosie's game," Hiller said. "He likes the skill. He likes how he can complement him. He carries the puck through the neutral zone, a really good skater."

The new combinations will debut on Saturday when the Leafs open the pre-season schedule with split-squad games against the Montreal Canadiens.

"You spend all summer doing this and then, as you guys know, the second period of the second game, it looks different," Hiller cautioned. "This is the plan for now, but nothing is set in stone."

Nylander celebrated the Leafs draft lottery win while attending a Toronto Marlies game with Knies on May 5.

"It's a game changer and we were fired up," Nylander recalled.

McKenna is already showing off some of his game-changing ability at training camp. One play, in particular, stood out for Hiller on Thursday. McKenna appeared to be cornered by defensive stalwart Chris Tanev during a drill.

"I saw him dance away and make a nice little backhand sauce pass into space," Hiller said. "That jumps out at you. I thought Tanev was going to

contain him. I thought, 'This will be interesting to see.' He was able to elude him and make a play out of that. So those are the things that you're just standing there and you see them and you go, 'OK, that's a high level.' That's what he's going to have to be able to do against veteran NHL defencemen when the real games start."

Tavares and Nylander have played together a lot in recent years, but they've never really had a playmaker quite like McKenna on their line.

"Gavin's ability to make plays through traffic is elite," Tavares said. "That is, I think, what makes him really special is his ability to make plays not just when he has time and space, but in traffic."

McKenna also appears to be stronger than his 5-foot-11, 170-pound frame suggests.

"Even though he's not the biggest guy, you know, you can tell how firm he is on the stick," Tavares observed. "I think he's got some of that natural hockey strength."

McKenna perked up when that comment from Tavares was relayed.

"That's obviously a good compliment from John," the Whitehorse, Yukon, native said. "He's got one of the best sticks I've ever seen. That's something I tried to work on this summer. Coming to the NHL, guys are going to be heavy on their sticks and it's going to be hard to strip pucks and be hard on that stick. I think it's also smarts. You need to know where to put your stick and when to move it. It's something I've developed over the years and it's a big key to the game if you want to have the puck on your stick."

Living with Tavares may help McKenna maintain his strength amid the grind of an 84-game season. Tavares, who will turn 36 on Sunday, is well known for his off-ice recovery routines.

"He's got everything you need," said the 24-year-old forward Brendan Brisson, who is also living with the Tavares family during training camp. "I mean, he's got the saunas, the cold tubs, the Normatec [compression therapy], the red light [therapy], everything to help your game and it's awesome to watch his every-day routine. Me and Gavin are maybe making a few jokes about it but we're also following along a bit too."

Brisson, who signed a one-year deal with the Leafs earlier this month, skated in the group with players destined to start the season in the American Hockey League. He is the son of agent Pat Brisson, who represents Tavares.

"It's pretty dialled," Brisson said of life in the Tavares household. "He's very structured. It's cool for me and Gavin to see that."

McKenna had his moments on Thursday, but Hiller identified another young player as the stand-out performer at the first practice.

"If I had to say who was the player that just jumped out at you in this morning's session, for me it would be Easton Cowan," Hiller declared. "He made some plays with the puck, but he was a puck hound. He was everywhere. And, you know, we talked to him about that. He's got tremendous skill but where he can help us best is be a puck hound and then use that skill. To me, he was all over the ice."

Cowan, who produced 29 points in 66 games as a rookie with the Leafs last season, skated beside newcomers Nick Paul and Colton Sissons on the third line. That trio could be an effective checking line.

"I see it as more than that," Hiller stressed. "That's a line that should be able to play against the other team's best players, but also push them offensively because those three players, they can score goals. Easton can be the straw that stirs the drink from an offensive perspective and keep the other team's best line honest."

Cowan, 21, projects to be the second youngest player on the Leafs this season behind only McKenna.

Tanev practised with the Leafs for the first time since sustaining a season-ending injury in December. The 36-year-old defenceman underwent core muscle surgery in March and was cleared to play again on the eve of training camp.



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Tanev skated alongside Jake McCabe at practice. That duo formed a dominant shutdown unit during the 2024-25 season.

"We really feel like, if we [want to] create a shutdown pair, who are two defencemen that, if you're the other team's best line, you would least like to play against," Hiller said. "And I think it's probably those two."

Big off-season acquisition Darren Raddysh paired up with Oliver Ekman-Larsson.

Morgan Rielly skated in a separate group while wearing a red no-contact sweater. General manager John Chayka announced on Wednesday that the defenceman will be ramped up slowly after dealing with a "viral condition" recently.

When is the 32-year-old expected to rejoin the main group?

"I don't know," Hiller said. "I'm hoping he'll be back out there next week but we'll play it by ear."

Morgan Rielly skating in red sweater with third group at training camp

Ramping up slowly after dealing with what John Chayka called a "viral condition"

Jim Hiller hopes he'll be with main group next week

"We'll play it by ear" @TSN_Sports pic.twitter.com/54Is6SE5Y1

— Mark Masters (@markmasters) September 17, 2026

Sergei Bobrovsky practised while wearing a plain white mask on Thursday. The free-agent signing is still awaiting a new design as he gets to work with his new team.

"We just met and we spoke a little bit," said Leafs goalie prospect Artur Akhtyamov. "He's kind of a great guy. I like him. Probably he still my favourite goalie. I like to see him and I like how he works hard."

Like many in the hockey world, Akhtyamov was surprised to see Bobrovsky leave the Florida Panthers and join the Leafs in the off-season. He's grateful for the chance to learn from his countryman.

"Probably I am still nervous when I see him," Akhtyamov said. "He's a superstar. He's one of the best goalies in this league."

The 24-year-old is already being inspired by Bobrovsky's work ethic.

"He does lots of workout, lots of stretching," said Akhtyamov. "When I came in our gym room, he's every time here."

Akhtyamov, who backstopped the Toronto Marlies to a Calder Cup title last spring, is No. 3 on Toronto's goalie depth chart. He made his NHL debut last season posting an .877 save percentage in three games with the Leafs.

"I think I play not really well my first games in NHL," he said. "I try to work hard this season, this preseason, and I hope I'm going to be ready for next chance."

Thursday's practice was the first one for new Leafs associate coach Daniel Alfredsson. It was strange to see the former Ottawa Senators captain wearing a blue tracksuit and coaching up Matthews, Tavares and Nylander.

"The past is the past," said Hiller. "He was obviously a great player for Ottawa but now he's going to be a great coach for the Maple Leafs and that's all that really matters."

"Yeah, it's different, but it's exciting," Tavares said with a smile. "Heck of a career. Helluva competitor. Really excited to learn from him and have him impact the group in a lot of ways."

Alfredsson, whose contract as a Senators assistant coach concluded after last season, surprised the hockey world by switching sides in the Battle of Ontario and joining Hiller's staff.

"I was shocked as well," said Nylander. "We have a mutual friend in common and he never said anything about it so it came as a complete shock, but I was obviously very happy that it happened."

While Alfredsson helped out on the ice, Mats Sundin watched from the sideline with the rest of Leafs management. Sundin signed on to serve as a senior executive advisor as part of the front-office makeover.

"It's pretty crazy, actually, I mean, to be honest, seeing two Swedish legends every day," Nylander said. "Actually, I haven't really thought about it, but it's pretty crazy."

The Leafs emergency back-up goalie this season will be 27-year-old Mississauga, Ont. native Brendan Bonello. He last played in the 2021-22 season when he suited up in a handful of games with York University and the Cincinnati Cyclones in the ECHL.

Further to this, it sounds like every EBUG is required to wear No. 00 for their NHL team this season!!

As a reminder: Everyone will carry an emergency backup home and road this season. Those goalies can't have NHL experience or more than 80 pro games. <https://t.co/tiPr46b99v>

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) August 25, 2026

Lines at Thursday's practice:

Group 1

Knies - Matthews - Roslovic

McKenna - Tavares - Nylander

Cowan - Paul - Sissons

Joshua - Blueger - Duhaime

Lorentz

Ekman-Larsson - Raddysh

McCabe - Tanev

Andrae - Danford

Blankenburg - Stecher

Bobrovsky

Stolarz

Bonello

Group 2

Groulx - Koblar - Lettieri

Quillan - Haymes - Tverberg

Sim - Johnstone - Pezzetta

MacEwan - Rybinski - Brisson

Rifai - Myers

Mermis - McWard

Chadwick Borges

Smith - Bilecki

Akhtyamov

Hlavaj

Bonello

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