



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The News & Observer

Fans get a first look at Lenovo Center renovations. What's been upgraded so far?

Chip Alexander

The new Lenovo Legend Club, featuring a full-service bar and lounge seating, is shown on Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2026, at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. The luxury space replaces the arena's former media workroom as part of ongoing multi-million dollar renovations.

The new Lenovo Legend Club, featuring a full-service bar and lounge seating, is shown on Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2026, at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. The luxury space replaces the arena's former media workroom as part of ongoing multi-million dollar renovations. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

Raleigh

Carolina Hurricanes fans arriving Tuesday for a preseason hockey game at a renovated Lenovo Center found an arena different from the one they left after the Canes' Stanley Cup run a few months ago.

The lower bowl has new seats, all red. There are fewer aisles and a few extra seats. The third level has wider concourses, new bathrooms and a grab-and-go concession area, along with the View Bar that opened last season.

An overview of the newly renovated lower bowl at the Lenovo Center in Raleigh, is seen ahead of the Carolina Hurricanes' first home preseason game on Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2026. The arena underwent extensive summer upgrades, including the installation of 700 new seats in the lower bowl.

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There are new sound speakers and LED lighting. The WiFi in the arena has been improved.

In Tuesday's preseason game against Florida, the Hurricanes had an announced crowd of 13,200 at its 3-2 shootout win over the Panthers with Bradly Nadeau scoring the winning goal.

The Canes then returned to their locker room, which has been totally renovated and upgraded, given a more modern look complete with the team logo mounted on the ceiling. An expanded weight room area has also been added.

The arena, opened in 1999, is the home of Hurricanes hockey and N.C. State men's basketball. It is undergoing \$300 million in renovations and enhancements in a project divided into three phases, and was shut down during the summer before reopening for its first event – Rod Wave's Don't Look Down Tour – on Sept. 15.

The Hurricanes next take the Lenovo Center ice on Tuesday Sept. 29 for the 2026-27 season opener against the Panthers, with a new capacity for hockey – 18,800 – and a new Stanley Cup championship banner to be raised.

More renovations to come. Where's the money coming from?

Artist renderings of what a finished arena project could look like have been released by the Centennial Authority, the appointed body that is the arena landlord. Such changes as a new grand entrance way on the south end, expanded team store and restaurant/bar are planned.

"A lot of that will be determined this fall," authority executive director Jeff Merritt said Tuesday as he bounded about the arena before the hockey game. "The way our financing structure was, we had \$100 million and that's what you're kind of seeing the end of tonight through the rest of the fall.

"The other \$200 million kicked in this past summer. We're in the planning phases for that. Some time this fall or early next winter our (authority) board will get the final GMP, the guaranteed maximum price to finish the job."

That's when decisions will be made and some things might be left out.

"It's a la carte. We have to fit it in a budget," Merritt said. "And what the board had asked the design team to do was give us a menu of projects. Let's say the number is 25. We may be able to afford 19.

"What's the best use of that money? What gives us the most bang for the buck?"

The \$300 million is an appropriation from the hotel and prepared foods tax in Raleigh and Wake County, and the authority also uses money from its capital expenditures fund. The renovation project is separate from the entertainment district being planned adjacent to the arena.

Some Hurricanes fans have seen and experienced some of the added amenities. On the arena floor level, the expansive Legend Club has been opened. New bunker suites for private viewing are ready to be rented or leased.

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On the top level of the arena, a large section of the press box has been replaced by two rows of seats for fans.

How the changes will benefit the public

Some of what the public can't see now are improvements that have been made that will benefit the public, Merritt said.



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They should enhance the chance of the arena securing more NCAA basketball tournament games -- the arena will host an NCAA regional in 2028.

Touring companies, afforded more flex space and dining areas and amenities, could schedule more and different events.

The authority has had market surveys done with Live Nation and AEG. Merritt said, and the improvements made have incorporated some of the requests.

"What we're hoping to accomplish is to put us even higher on the list of 'You've got to stop here' or 'You've got to take your event there,'" Merritt said.

"So those are things the fans don't see, but it matters if you get X-amount more events here through the year. And we're at about 1.9 million people through the gate this year."

Before and after events, the work continues. Workers in hard hats patrolled the main concourse Tuesday and others were bolting in some railings along the aisles.

"I think fans still need a little grace, a little patience because we've got another two years of this construction work going on," Merritt said. "The heavy work will begin again next summer and will continue to go through the next couple of seasons."

"The dollars we have are finite but we think we've used the dollars to do some cool things."



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Hurricanes are defending champs, Panthers look loaded up for a run as the biggest NHL season begins

STEPHEN WHYNO — AP Hockey Writer

The Carolina Hurricanes head into the NHL season as the defending Stanley Cup champion. But they will have a host of challengers led by Colorado, Florida, Dallas, Edmonton and more.

Cruising through the regular season and the playoffs with the most dominant run in the NHL since the late 1980s, the Carolina Hurricanes go into this season as the defending Stanley Cup champion everyone else is looking to knock off.

"It kind of gives you something to chase after," Montreal's 51-goal scorer Cole Caufield said.

Other WRAL Top Stories

There is no shortage of challengers near and far chasing Carolina.

Florida is not far removed from back-to-back titles, gets captain Aleksander Barkov back from injury and loaded up by acquiring Brady Tkachuk to play with brother Matthew. Tampa Bay remains formidable in the East with several young teams on the rise, while Colorado, Dallas, Vegas and Edmonton are still the best in the West.

Those contenders and the rest of the league's 32 teams will each get two extra games before the playoffs begin in April in the first expansion of the regular season in more than three decades. They will combine to play 1,344 games — the most in history — before 16 get the chance pursue hockey's hallowed Cup.

"You're just trying to build momentum," Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog said. "You're trying to make your team better every single day. And then at the end of the day, you'll see where you stack up and if you can play your best hockey at the most important time of the year."

Carolina sets the standard

The Hurricanes finally got over the hump in their eighth consecutive postseason appearance, which followed a series of agonizing exits. Their 16-3 postseason record trails only Wayne Gretzky's 16-2 Oilers in 1988 since four rounds of best-of-seven series became the standard in 1987.

Except for goaltender Frederik Andersen, Carolina brings back virtually the same roster and appear to be the class of the Metropolitan Division after running away with it last year. Defenseman Jaccob Slavin does not think being everyone's target is a big adjustment for him and his teammates, who have amassed the most total wins in the league since the start of the 2018-19 season when coach Rod Brind'Amour took over.

"I feel like multiple years in a row, teams know that going to Carolina or when Carolina comes in, it's going to be a hard night," Slavin said. "Teams always have been giving us their best for years now, and winning the Cup just adds to that."

Florida is back with a vengeance

Before torn ligaments in Barkov's right knee and a series of other high-profile injuries derailed the Panthers last season and caused them to miss the playoffs, they hoisted the Stanley Cup back to back in 2024 and '25 as part of a streak of three trips to the final.

They got extra time off after so much time on the ice took a toll and had the chance to reset. The core of Barkov, Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Reinhart, Sam Bennett, Anton Lundell, Gustav Forsling and Aaron Ekblad remains in place, augmented by Brady Tkachuk, Seth Jones, Brad Marchand and a pair of new goalies, Jacob Markstrom and Akira Schmid.

Florida is the favorite to run it back for a third championship in four years.

"Of course that's our dream, that's our goal, but for us it's always been a day at a time," Barkov said. "We don't think too much ahead. We only live in the moment, try to live in a moment. And that's what it is. Of course we added unreal players, we added real leaders to our team and we're really excited about that."

Western Conference is a gantlet

The best player in the world, Connor McDavid, has now played 11 NHL seasons without winning the Cup, including a gut-wrenching Game 7 loss in the 2024 final against Florida and a six-game Final loss to the Panthers the following year.

This may be one of the last chances for the Oilers to show him they can do it; McDavid signed a two-year extension through 2028 without a raise to give management salary cap space — and a deadline — to figure it out.

Edmonton is turning to Mike Babcock to lead the way, much to the surprise of franchise icon and five-time champion Mark Messier, who questioned the old-school taskmaster coach getting the endorsement of McDavid and other leaders.

"I am absolutely shocked they hired him," Messier, now an ESPN analyst, said on a conference call Wednesday. "I'm absolutely shocked from the stories that I heard from very good, reputable, character people about the way they were treated. It's been no secret. ... I am just horrified about the whole thing, to be honest."



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To bring the Cup back to Canada for the first time since 1993, the Oilers almost certainly have to go through the defending Western Conference champion Golden Knights and a Central Division power like the Avalanche, Stars or Wild.

Dallas is hoping to bounce back from a first-round exit against Minnesota. Colorado, which won it all in 2022, has one more season before standout defenseman Cale Makar begins the richest contract in league history, while he, Nathan MacKinnon and others are still firmly in their prime.

"Pressure is a privilege, and it has to be embraced," Landeskog said. "It's not to say that you go every single day of the regular season and wake up thinking, 'Oh, it's Cup or

bust.' But I think you're aware of it. You know where your team's at. Everybody knows it."

Nobody knows which team will be the last one standing in June. The puck will drop more times than ever before figuring out hockey's next champion.



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Preseason Recap: Canes Stun Preds In Greensboro

Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

GREENSBORO, N.C. - After trailing by four goals near the midway mark of the contest, the Carolina Hurricanes rattled off five consecutive goals to stun the Nashville Predators 6-5 at First Horizon Coliseum in Greensboro, N.C.

[GAME SUMMARY](#) | [BOX SCORE](#) | [PRESEASON STATS](#) | [BUY TICKETS](#)

The Greensboro crowd was lively from the get-go, but it was the Predators pouncing first as Vitali Pinchuk whacked home a rebound in front at 1:48. Riding the early momentum, the Tennesseans tucked in two more tallies to take a 3-0 lead into the second period.

Carolina seemingly calmed the waters early in the middle frame when Logan Stankoven capitalized on some trademark forechecking work with his linemates, but just two minutes later, Nashville struck back to widen the gap back to three. Jack Drury, now sporting yellow, then found twine against his former club to make it 5-1 at 8:24.

Rather than serving as a fatal blow, though, Drury's goal marked a turning of the tide in favor of the Hurricanes as they mounted a late-period pushback. Jesperi Kotkaniemi was at the forefront, hammering home a shot from the slot, then setting up Juha Jääskä for a breakaway beauty before the break.

Now trailing by just two, Carolina's push produced a power-play goal from Juuso Välimäki at 8:26 to get within one for the first time since the game's opening minutes. Still, the tying tally remained elusive until the clock ticked down to 84 seconds remaining; with the goaltender pulled in favor of an extra attacker, Stankoven finished off a tic-tac-toe passing play to knot things up with his second of the night.

Overtime loomed on the horizon, but before it could arrive, Felix Unger Sörum completed the improbable comeback in the game's dying seconds. After some heroics from Pyotr Kochetkov and Dominik Badinka kept the puck out of the net in the defensive zone, Bradley Nadeau dashed into the offensive zone with no time to spare. Taking a dish from his linemate just inside the blue line, Unger Sörum drifted to the top of the right circle before wiring a shot past the glove of Nashville's netminder as the clock hit two seconds and the crowd of 13,863 erupted around him.

Kochetkov finished with an unofficial 23 saves on 28 shots, saving some of his best work for last to backstop the team in front of him to a furious comeback victory.

NSH at CAR | Recap

Stats & Standouts

While the competition for the spot available at forward has been the main topic of discussion to this point in training camp, with just one preseason game remaining after tonight, the battle on the blue line deserves just as much chatter. Juuso Välimäki had himself a standout night, including a power-play goal amid the comeback. As long as Alexander Nikishin remains out of the mix, there are presumably two spots available on the team's opening night roster, with Välimäki, Pierre-Olivier Joseph (1A), Charles Alexis Legault, Joel Nyström, and Mike Reilly as the most likely candidates for the spots.

Making their first appearance of the preseason, the line of Jackson Blake (1A), Taylor Hall (3A), and Logan Stankoven (2G, 1A), picked up right where they had left off in June. Serving as the only combination of NHL roster mainstays tonight, the trio "drove the bus" offensively for the team when it mattered most.

Among others deserving praise tonight was 18-year-old Zach Lansard. The 2026 third-round pick drew a massive assignment tonight, skating alongside two players with NHL experience - Juha Jääskä and Jesperi Kotkaniemi. In addition to that duo chipping in with Carolina's second and third goals of the evening, Lansard also drew a high-sticking penalty in the third period, aiding in his team's momentum that ultimately culminated in victory.

Carolina has twice erased a four-goal deficit in the regular season or playoffs in franchise history (Jan. 1, 2022 at CBJ & Jan. 19, 1989 vs. MTL).

They Said It...

Felix Unger Sörum giving his perspective on the comeback...

"We tried to stick with it and just keep on playing the game, and it worked out... I thought (the mood on the bench) was good. I didn't feel like there was any panic at all, and that's probably why we won it too."

Logan Stankoven chiming in on the thrilling evening...

"That's what it's about. You're never out until the final horn. It was great to see the guys battle. It was an exciting game. Even though it's only preseason, I think it's great just to get the juices flowing again, and it was a great turnout from the people in Greensboro."

Rod Brind'Amour giving praise to the Greensboro crowd...



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"It was a nice night. They were loud, they were cheering, and thankfully we gave them something to cheer about. It didn't look so good there for a lot of the game, but everyone went home happy, so that's good."

Taylor Hall following his first preseason appearance...

"I don't think it was perfect, but it was fun to get playing, and it was a good atmosphere. The crowd was into it all game. For our line, we work hard. That's kind of our recipe. If we manage the puck well, then we usually have chances just from our work ethic and our skills. That kind of paid off in the end."

What's Next?

The Canes are scheduled to practice on Friday. They'll wrap up their four-game exhibition schedule on Saturday afternoon in the Music City.



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Lapsed fan's guide to the NHL season: Top teams, players, storylines for 2026-27

Greg Wyshynski

The 2025-26 NHL season was a heck of a ride. Especially for Jaccob Slavin.

The veteran defenseman played a key role for the U.S. men's Olympic hockey team, which defeated Canada for its first gold medal since the 1980 Miracle on Ice as the NHL returned to the Winter Games.

A few months later, Slavin became just the second American-born player -- and ninth player overall -- to win Olympic gold and the Stanley Cup in the same season, as the Carolina Hurricanes eliminated the Vegas Golden Knights and hoisted the chalice for the first time since 2006.

Then the real fun began in the NHL, with one of the most drama-filled and unpredictable offseasons in recent history.

If you haven't kept up with the NHL in the past few months, don't fret, we've got you covered. Here's a chance to catch up on everything that has happened -- the hirings, firings, signings, trades and the unfinished stories that could reach intense conclusions.

It's all in our guide to the 2026-27 season for lapsed fans. Read up before the puck drops!

The Stanley Cup favorites

The Hurricanes will try to become the fourth team in the last 11 seasons to repeat as Stanley Cup champions, but it's not going to be easy. The Florida Panthers, the last team to go back-to-back (2024, 2025), are back with a vengeance after injuries derailed their push for a three-peat to the point that they missed the playoffs entirely.

Over in the Western Conference, the Colorado Avalanche are once again the favorites after finishing with the league's best record in 2025-26. Right behind them are the Edmonton Oilers, as stars Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl attempt to carry their team to a third Stanley Cup Final appearance in four seasons.

Here are the top contenders based on their DraftKings odds to win the Stanley Cup, as of Thursday:

Florida Panthers +650

Carolina Hurricanes +650

Colorado Avalanche +700

Edmonton Oilers +800

Vegas Golden Knights +850

Tampa Bay Lightning +1000

Minnesota Wild +1300

Dallas Stars +1400

Washington Capitals +1700

Also of note: the Montreal Canadiens (+2200), who were Eastern Conference finalists last season; the New Jersey Devils, Los Angeles Kings and Buffalo Sabres all at +3000; and Macklin Celebrini's San Jose Sharks at +3500. The longest odds: the Vancouver Canucks and Calgary Flames, both at +100000.

Trade demands granted ... and ignored

The NHL is in an age of player empowerment and that was never more evident than during this offseason. A half dozen players requested trades from their current teams, directly or indirectly. Some of those requests were granted. Some were not, leading to uncomfortable times for three American Olympians.

The Ottawa Senators traded captain Brady Tkachuk to the Panthers, where he finally unites with his brother and podcast co-host Matthew. Brady Tkachuk claimed his trade request was fueled by a desire to play for a Cup contender in Florida, which he helped force with his trade protection. Senators owner Michael Andlauer had another take: "Blood is thicker than water, and let's just say that his father and his brother got in his kitchen," he told The Athletic.

Goalie Connor Hellebuyck is another gold medal winner seeking an exit from a Canadian franchise. The three-time Vezina Trophy winner, considered the best goalie in hockey, informed the Jets he wanted to be traded after last season, despite the 33-year-old being under contract through 2030-31. His no-movement clause limits the field, and the Jets haven't found an offer yet to their satisfaction.

Both the Jets and Hellebuyck released statements before training camp acknowledging the stalemate. He's currently suspended from the team and will begin losing salary on opening night. The Jets say the door is open for him to remain with Winnipeg.

Dylan Larkin, another U.S. national team player, had his trade request with the Detroit Red Wings go public late last season, despite having five years left on his contract. Multiple reports claimed that Larkin, who has a no-trade clause, limited his desired destinations to Minnesota, Florida and Vegas. Detroit has yet to fulfil that request, and in the process saw GM Steve Yzerman step away from that role. Larkin reported to Red Wings camp and was stripped of his captaincy.

Finally, U.S. Olympian Zach Werenski, who won the Norris Trophy as the NHL's top defenseman last season, reportedly informed the Columbus Blue Jackets that he didn't intend to sign an extension with the team when his contract is up in



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summer 2028. GM Don Waddell took the proactive approach and tried to trade Werenski to the Dallas Stars, only to have Werenski block the trade with his no-movement clause.

As all of this was made public to fans, Werenski and the team released statements in July that attempted to defuse the situation. Werenski said that "everything got blown out of proportion" and reaffirmed his commitment to win in Columbus, which has missed the playoffs in six straight seasons.

Two other players were more successful in their trade requests. Defenseman Darnell Nurse told the Edmonton Oilers he wanted a change of scenery after 12 seasons, and they sent him to San Jose. Defenseman Simon Nemec, the second overall pick in the 2022 draft, had his long-standing desire to move on granted by the New Jersey Devils, who sent the restricted free agent to the Calgary Flames.

Other faces in new places

Some of the big names that moved on to new teams this season include:

Center Vincent Trocheck, whom the New York Rangers (finally) traded to the Utah Mammoth in a deal that included defenseman Sean Durzi. Utah also added former New York Islanders captain Anders Lee as a free agent (three years, \$5.4 million AAV) and traded winger JJ Peterka to the Boston Bruins after just one season with the franchise.

The Tampa Bay Lightning signed Darren Raddysh to an eight-year deal (\$8.5 million AAV) and then shipped him to the Toronto Maple Leafs, who acquired him before Raddysh was expected to be the top unrestricted free agent defenseman on the market.

The Anaheim Ducks traded 23-year-old center Mason McTavish to the St Louis Blues for two first-round picks.

After goalie Sergei Bobrovsky decided to test free agency, the Panthers traded for Devils starting goalie Jacob Markstrom in a deal involving forward Evan Rodrigues.

The Capitals traded for Blues star winger Jordan Kyrou and added Sabres winger Alex Tuch via trade before inking a long-term deal (eight years, \$10.5 million AAV).

Former Capitals star John Carlson, who was traded to Anaheim at last season's deadline, signed a two-year deal (\$8.5 million AAV) with the Lightning.

Vegas traded leading goal scorer Pavel Dorofeyev to the Rangers, who signed the restricted free agent winger to a seven-year deal (\$11 million AAV).

Valeri Nichushkin was acquired via trade by the Blue Jackets from the Avalanche, who added another veteran winger in Jaden Schwartz (three years, \$3.25 million AAV).

Goalie Frederik Andersen, the 36-year-old who helped the Hurricanes win the Stanley Cup, became the latest possible solution to the Oilers' goalie issues on a one-year free agent deal (\$1 million AAV).

The Chicago Blackhawks acquired puck-moving defenseman Bowen Byram from the Sabres and signed him to a six-year contract extension (\$12.5 million AAV). But it's a reunion with another free agent that really captured the

hockey world's attention: Franchise icon Patrick Kane is back in Chicago, on a two-year deal (\$8 million AAV).

The Leo Carlsson offer sheet drama

If there was one moment that defined the 2026 NHL offseason, it was when Ducks star Leo Carlsson put pen to paper on a five-year, \$90 million offer sheet from the Philadelphia Flyers.

Ducks GM Pat Verbeek said he anticipated there could be an offer sheet tendered to the 21-year-old center ... just not one that massive. "Did we expect the offer sheet to be this high? No. We did not see that one coming," he said.

Verbeek had told his peers that Anaheim ownership would match any offer sheet given to Carlsson, and the Ducks did just that to keep their young center from bolting to Philly.

But the reverberations from that signing were felt all over the league -- and within the Ducks' own roster. Anaheim signed defenseman Pavel Mintyukov (five years, \$7.2 million AAV) to avoid any potential poaching, and handed 22-year-old Cutter Gauthier a six-year deal with a \$13.5 million AAV after Carlsson raised his price.

The mega-extensions

Carlsson's offer sheet deal gave him the largest cap hit in the history of the NHL ... for about a minute. Macklin Celebrini, the 20-year-old San Jose Sharks phenom, signed a five-year extension that begins in 2027-28 and carries an \$18.8 million cap hit. But about a month after that, Colorado defenseman Cale Makar became the first \$20 million AAV player of the salary cap era, signing an eight-year extension worth \$163.2 million that begins in 2027-28.

Other young stars that signed big extensions included Chicago's Connor Bedard (five years, \$15 million AAV) and Columbus center Adam Fantilli (six years, \$13.75 million AAV).

Had he agreed to play for the Seattle Kraken, Jason Robertson could have joined the mega-contract club, too. Multiple reports stated that the Kraken would have given the restricted free agent winger eight years and upward of \$15 million annually, but Robertson wouldn't agree to a sign-and-trade. Instead, he and the Stars ended a prolonged contract standoff with a one-year, \$12 million deal that keeps the 45-goal scorer in Dallas before unrestricted free agency next summer.

Two contract situations are dominating the discourse as the season begins. There's Minnesota defenseman Quinn Hughes, who can become an unrestricted free agent next summer. What's his desire to try and win a Stanley Cup with the Wild versus potentially playing with his brothers in New Jersey? There's also Nikita Kucherov, who won NHL MVP for the second time last season. The Tampa Bay star winger can become an unrestricted free agent next summer.

The coaching (and GM) carousel

There was plenty of movement off the ice as well since last season, from the bench to the boardroom.

Five teams named new head coaches. Former Kings coach Jim Hiller replaced Craig Berube in Toronto, with the well-traveled Peter Laviolette taking over in Los Angeles. AHL coach Ryan Craig is the bench boss in Vegas after replacing



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John Tortorella, who took over with eight games left in the 2025-26 season and led the Golden Knights to the Stanley Cup Final. Former Canucks player Manny Malhotra earned his first NHL head coaching gig with Vancouver, replacing Adam Foote.

But the most notable hiring came in Edmonton, where Mike Babcock made an unlikely return to the NHL to succeed Kris Knoblauch.

Babcock, a Stanley Cup champion who has been accused of mental abuse by multiple former players, resigned from the Blue Jackets in 2023 before ever coaching a game for them, after his requests to look at personal photos from players' phones drew criticism. But the Oilers turned to Babcock after the Golden Knights refused to let former coach Bruce Cassidy -- who was still under contract -- fill the Edmonton job opening. The NHL investigated Babcock's time with Columbus, found "no current basis to restrict his employment," and cleared the way for Edmonton to hire him.

What makes the situation ever more peculiar is that the Oilers' veterans leaders -- Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman -- drove the effort to hire Babcock, having vetted the controversial coach personally.

The NHL saw several changes among general managers, too. Colorado's Chris MacFarland left to take over the Nashville Predators from Barry Trotz; that led to Joe Sakic, whom MacFarland replaced with the Avalanche, moving back in as general manager. Ryan Johnson (Vancouver), Sunny Mehta (New Jersey) and Alex Steen (St. Louis) became first-time general managers. Shawn Horcoff became the interim GM in Detroit when Steve Yzerman abruptly stepped down after seven seasons. And former Arizona Coyotes GM John Chayka was named the new head of hockey operations for the Maple Leafs.

Turning over new leaves in Toronto

The Maple Leafs had a transformative offseason, having missed the playoffs for the first time in 10 seasons and still searching for their first Stanley Cup win since 1967.

After Toronto dismissed general manager Brad Treliving, the team stunned fans with his replacements: Chayka, who left the NHL after resigning as Coyotes general manager in 2020; and Maple Leafs Hall of Fame player Mats Sundin, who was brought on as a senior executive adviser in hockey operations. Chayka then hired Hiller, who was fired after 59 games by the Kings last season, to replace Berube.

On the ice, Chayka made more than a dozen moves to reshape the Leafs' roster behind returning stars Auston Matthews and William Nylander. He acquired Darren Raddysh in a sign-and-trade with Tampa Bay. He signed several free agents, most prominently goalie Sergei Bobrovsky of the Panthers and Jack Roslovic from the Oilers. Chayka also picked up forward Nicholas Paul from the Lightning.

The team's most intriguing acquisition arrived courtesy of its NHL draft lottery win: Gavin McKenna, the Penn State winger selected first overall in June.

Rookie class of 2026-27

McKenna is part of a deep rookie class at forward. It's led by Philadelphia Flyers winger Porter Martone, who was a late-

season star for them during Philly's playoff run. It's a class that also includes:

Sharks winger Ivar Stenberg, the second overall pick in June's draft

Blackhawks center Anton Frondell, the third overall pick in 2025, and winger Roman Kantserov, a point-per-game player in the KHL

Bruins center James Hagens, the Boston College player drafted seventh overall in 2025

Capitals forward Ilya Protas, brother of Capitals winger Aliaksei Protas

Sabres forward Konsta Helenius, who was an energizing presence as a late-season reinforcement

The top rookie defenseman is Washington's Cole Hutson, whose brother Lane is a star for the Canadiens. In goal, there are rookies worth monitoring: Montreal's Jacob Fowler and Pittsburgh's Sergei Murashov.

New CBA goes into effect

The new four-year collective bargaining agreement between the NHL and the NHLPA officially kicked in on Sept. 16, although some of its rules were fast-tracked in last season. Among the rules that kicked in this month:

An 84-game season, with two additional games added to the schedule thanks to a shorter preseason. NHL opening night is Sept. 29, the first time since 1993 that the league is opening its full regular season in September.

Long-term contracts are capped at seven years for a player re-signing with their current team and six years if they sign a contract with another club.

The total signing bonus money across a contract is capped at 60% of the total value of the deal. Leo Carlsson's offer sheet contract -- signed before the new rules kicked in -- had \$85.3 million of his \$90 million paid in bonus money, or around 95% of the total compensation.

Every team will now have its own emergency backup goalie (EBUG) who will travel with the team. These goalies can't have played in the NHL before under contract, can't have more than 80 games of pro experience and can't have played professionally anywhere in the past three seasons. Expect most of them to be team staff members.

Farewell skate for Alex Ovechkin?

It didn't feel like goodbye for Alex Ovechkin after last season, his 21st in the NHL. The league's all-time leading goal scorer with 929 tallies, Ovechkin said he was "pretty sure" the Capitals' season finale wasn't his last game and that his children wanted him to continue playing. But he did want to make sure that he was returning to an improved Washington team, after the Capitals missed the playoffs last season.

After a busy start to the offseason for Washington, Ovechkin officially announced he'd return for another NHL campaign, signing a one-year contract with a base salary of \$1 million and bonus money that brings his compensation to \$9 million.

The 41-year-old captain's return for a 22nd season was overshadowed in the preseason by his controversial appearance in a video for Russian President Vladimir Putin's



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political party. Capitals general manager Chris Patrick told ESPN's Robert Klemko that if Ovechkin had told the team he planned to film the ad, "we would have worked to avoid the situation very hard."

Finally, expansion is on the NHL's radar

While the NHL is not officially in an expansion phase, commissioner Gary Bettman said the league has received "expressions of interest" about landing a new franchise.

That interest is most intense in Texas. In June, the Friedkin family began a six-month process to evaluate Houston and Austin as potential locations for a second NHL team in the state, joining the Dallas Stars. At the time, Bettman said it would take an approximately \$3.5 billion investment to acquire a franchise, including an expansion fee and the cost of the new arena.

There are three groups in Atlanta that have discussed a bringing an expansion franchise there. It would be the third

time the NHL has put a team in A-Town; the Flames moved to Calgary and the Thrashers moved to Winnipeg.

Also seeking another chance at an NHL franchise: Phoenix, where the NHL has talked with multiple groups about a successor to the defunct Coyotes. But Bettman said, "It doesn't make sense to talk about it" unless there are firm plans to build an arena there."

Expect further clarity on expansion at December's board of governors meeting. But keep in mind that along with where these teams might play and who will own them, there are some NHL owners that aren't completely sold on adding a 33rd and 34th team to the league. After all, it's hard enough to win the Cup with 31 other opponents as it stands.



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Salary cap expected to substantially increase for 2028-29

Elliott Friedman

The NHL gave its first estimate for the 2028-29 salary cap at this week's Board of Governors meeting, and according to multiple sources, it's a whopper — \$127.5 million. (All figures in U.S. dollars.)

The league and NHLPA are in the second of a three-season agreement that sent to the ceiling to record levels. This year's number is \$104 million and next year's is \$113.5 million.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said revenue projections for this coming season are approximately \$8.1 billion in mixed currency, obviously a key factor in the rising total. If the 2028-29 guesstimate holds, it would also be the largest season-to-season jump of the cap era, at \$14 million.

That's going to be big challenge for some teams, especially some of the smaller Canadian markets earning revenues in their currency. But it's a huge windfall for the players, after a summer where Leo Carlsson, Macklin Celebrini and Cale Makar contracts set new stratospheres.

It is a new era for the NHL, and we're all adjusting to it.



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yahoo!sports

Comeback Canes: Hurricanes Overcome Four-Goal Deficit to Defeat Predators in Insane Return to Greensboro

Rachel Barkley

It is strange when you have so much you want to say, but you are just left speechless by the events of a preseason game. Down 5-1 in the second period...the Carolina Hurricanes had one of the most unreal freakin' comebacks I've ever seen in the preseason. And this is how it all went down...

Thursday night, the Hurricanes faced the Nashville Predators as they made their long awaited return to Greensboro – playing their first game there since before the turn of the century, before most players on Thursday's roster were even before.

The night was special, and the moment laid before them – but the story did not go according to the desired script...or at least, not at first.

Carolina's first period was...scattered, underwhelming – being less of the Hurricane we're used to, and looking more like a warm breeze and seeming like a weak tropical depression (with an extra scoop of 'depression' thanks to the score by the end of the frame). Three goals were allowed in less than 15 minutes, while Carolina went scoreless. The defense and goaltending – Pyotr Kochetkov minding the pipes – was the worst the team had shown of the preseason. It seemed as though no one could get a read from each other, or their opponents.

When the second period opened, the Hurricanes seemed to have gotten onto the same page for the most part. Early in the frame, Noel Fransen found Taylor Hall, who swung a magnificent short pass to Logan Stankoven skating towards the crease – with the 23-year-old centerman finding the back of the net to inch the game just a little closer. Or so it was at the time. A few minutes later, Nashville's Adam Edstrom got the puck past Kochetkov – and not long after that, former Hurricane Jack Drury did the same to make it 5-1.

Then, midway through the game, Jesperi Kotkaniemi resuscitated that spark of life that Stankoven had fostered, smacking in a rebound that Pierre-Olivier Joseph had generated.

Less than four minutes later, Kotkaniemi graced the scoresheet again as he set up his fellow Finn, Juha Jaaska, who brought the game within two.

As play went on, Kochetkov's performance significantly improved – he played bigger, and his confidence seemed to grow with each save, becoming more and more daring, yet calm in his game, playing the way that we've missed watching.

In the third period, the Hurricanes upgraded straight from a tropical disturbance to a category five – holding the Predators scoreless.

Just over eight minutes into the frame, on the power play, Juuso Valimaki found twine while – ironically for a defenseman – strolling past the crease. The primary assist came from the stick of Taylor Hall, who had just received the puck from Valimaki.

When the clock hit the 1:35 mark, Kochetkov began making his way towards the bench as head coach Rod Brind'Amour sent out the extra attacker – and in classic 'Junkyard Dawg' fashion – the line of Stankoven, Hall, and Jackson Blake led the charge into the Predators' zone, with Stankoven quickly tying the game – completely eradicating the lead that the Predators had since 1:48 into the game.

Of course...that wasn't all for the (kinda) home team, playing roughly an hour away from Raleigh.

In a storybook ending to finish their return to where it all began, snapping the curse or hex or voodoo or whatever that I had figured tainted the ice (considering how their last real game ended in a loss in April of '98), the young gun Felix Unger Sorum left the crowds squealing with a shocking goal with just 2.6 seconds remaining on the clock. Unger Sorum's game-winning goal sealed the deal with a 6-5 score in Carolina's favor.

Despite it all...Carolina somehow pulled it out. The 'Comeback Canes' did it again.

On a side note, this was the first game this preseason for the Hurricanes that did not involve fisticuffs...though it did still have this moment between Hall and Drury.

The Hurricanes next and final game of the preseason will be Saturday at 3:00 PM EDT, once again versus the Predators, but this time at Bridgestone Arena.



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Carolina Hurricanes Prospect Guide: NHL Prospects To Watch In 2026-27

Allen Catour

The Carolina Hurricanes have built one of the NHL's strongest organizations, and their prospect system continues to provide intriguing talent for the future.

While some prospects are pushing for NHL opportunities, others are continuing their development throughout the organization's system. As the 2026-27 season approaches, here are three Hurricanes prospects worth watching.

Nikita Artamonov Is Producing Against Professional Competition

Nikita Artamonov remains one of the most notable forward prospects in Carolina's system.

The winger is continuing his development in the KHL with Severstal Cherepovets, giving Hurricanes fans a chance to follow a young player competing in one of the world's top professional leagues. Artamonov's skill and offensive upside make him a prospect worth monitoring as he works toward the next stage of his career.

A strong season could further elevate his standing within Carolina's prospect pipeline.

Oskar Vuollet Continues To Develop Overseas

Forward Oskar Vuollet is another player to watch in the Hurricanes organization.

The Swedish prospect is developing with Skelleftea AIK and remains part of Carolina's growing collection of young talent. As he gains experience against professional competition, Vuollet will continue working to round out his game and move closer to future opportunities.

His progress will be an important storyline for Hurricanes fans following prospects overseas.

Ryder Fetterolf Could Be A Future Option In Goal

Goaltenders often take a unique development path, making Ryder Fetterolf an intriguing prospect to watch.

The young goalie is part of Carolina's system and enters the season after an impressive junior career. Goaltending depth is always valuable, and Fetterolf gives the Hurricanes another prospect to follow as he continues his development.

As he gains experience, Hurricanes fans will be watching to see how his game progresses.



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Hurricanes 6, Predators 5 - Felix Unger Sorum with Game Winner

Bob Wage

The Carolina Hurricanes fell behind 5-1 but then scored five straight goals to defeat the Nashville Predators, 6-5 on Thursday night in Greensboro. The win gives the Canes a 2-1 record this preseason with one game to play.

Felix Unger Sorum scored the game winner off a nice snap shot with just 3 seconds left in the game.

Pyotr Kochetkov was in net all the way and made 23 saves on the 28 shots he faced. He looked a bit rusty at times in this one.

Logan Stankoven scored two goals and Jesperi Kotkaniemi had a goal and an assist.

Juha Jaaska and Juuso Valimaki also scored for the home team.

Check out the summary in the following link which shows the highlights and video of every goal scored.

Box score:

The Canes finish up their preseason in Nashville on Saturday.



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SportScan

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

1400683 Carolina Hurricanes

Fans get a first look at Lenovo Center renovations. What's been upgraded so far?

Chip Alexander11-14 minutes 24/09/2026

Raleigh

Carolina Hurricanes fans arriving Tuesday for a preseason hockey game at a renovated Lenovo Center found an arena different from the one they left after the Canes' Stanley Cup run a few months ago.

The lower bowl has new seats, all red. There are fewer aisles and a few extra seats. The third level has wider concourses, new bathrooms and a grab-and-go concession area, along with the View Bar that opened last season.

There are new sound speakers and LED lighting. The WiFi in the arena has been improved.

In Tuesday's preseason game against Florida, the Hurricanes had an announced crowd of 13,200 at its 3-2 shootout win over the Panthers with Brady Nadeau scoring the winning goal.

The Canes then returned to their locker room, which has been totally renovated and upgraded, given a more modern look complete with the

team logo mounted on the ceiling. An expanded weight room area has also been added.

The arena, opened in 1999, is the home of Hurricanes hockey and N.C. State men's basketball. It is undergoing \$300 million in renovations and enhancements in a project divided into three phases, and was shut down during the summer before reopening for its first event – Rod Wave's Don't Look Down Tour – on Sept. 15.

The Hurricanes next take the Lenovo Center ice on Tuesday Sept. 29 for the 2026-27 season opener against the Panthers, with a new capacity for hockey – 18,800 – and a new Stanley Cup championship banner to be raised.

More renovations to come. Where's the money coming from?

Artist renderings of what a finished arena project could look like have been released by the Centennial Authority, the appointed body that is the arena landlord. Such changes as a new grand entrance way on the south end, expanded team store and restaurant/bar are planned.

"A lot of that will be determined this fall," authority executive director Jeff Merritt said Tuesday as he bounded about the arena before the hockey game. "The way our financing structure was, we had \$100 million and that's what you're kind of seeing the end of tonight through the rest of the fall.

"The other \$200 million kicked in this past summer. We're in the planning phases for that. Some time this fall or early next winter our (authority) board will get the final GMP, the guaranteed maximum price to finish the job."



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That's when decisions will be made and some things might be left out.

"It's a la carte. We have to fit it in a budget," Merritt said. "And what the board had asked the design team to do was give us a menu of projects. Let's say the number is 25. We may be able to afford 19.

"What's the best use of that money? What gives us the most bang for the buck?"

The \$300 million is an appropriation from the hotel and prepared foods tax in Raleigh and Wake County, and the authority also uses money from its capital expenditures fund. The renovation project is separate from the entertainment district being planned adjacent to the arena.

Some Hurricanes fans have seen and experienced some of the added amenities. On the arena floor level, the expansive Legend Club has been opened. New bunker suites for private viewing are ready to be rented or leased.

On the top level of the arena, a large section of the press box has been replaced by two rows of seats for fans.

How the changes will benefit the public

Some of what the public can't see now are improvements that have been made that will benefit the public, Merritt said.

They should enhance the chance of the arena securing more NCAA basketball tournament games -- the arena will host an NCAA regional in 2028.

Touring companies, afforded more flex space and dining areas and amenities, could schedule more and different events.

The authority has had market surveys done with Live Nation and AEG. Merritt said, and the improvements made have incorporated some of the requests.

"What we're hoping to accomplish is to put us even higher on the list of 'You've got to stop here' or 'You've got to take your event there,'" Merritt said.

"So those are things the fans don't see, but it matters if you get X-amount more events here through the year. And we're at about 1.9 million people through the gate this year."

Before and after events, the work continues. Workers in hard hats patrolled the main concourse Tuesday and others were bolting in some railings along the aisles.

"I think fans still need a little grace, a little patience because we've got another two years of this construction work going on," Merritt said. "The heavy work will begin again next summer and will continue to go through the next couple of seasons.

"The dollars we have are finite but we think we've used the dollars to do some cool things."

News Observer LOADED: 09.25.2026



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1400684 Carolina Hurricanes

The Carolina Hurricanes have a Bradley Nadeau problem. Here's how they can fix it

Justin Pelletier 10-12 minutes 24/09/2026

RALEIGH

The Carolina Hurricanes have a Bradley Nadeau problem — in the best way possible.

Nadeau is an NHL-ready player.

Not in the future. Now.

The former University of Maine standout has been among the top performing forwards at the Hurricanes' preseason training camp each of the past three years. This year, he's the best player, alongside Felix Unger Sorum and Charlie Cerrato.

In years past, finding room on the Canes' roster would have been tough, but doable for the right rookie. It's how Carolina ended up with young-and-able performers like Seth Jarvis and Jackson Blake, both of whom are now locked up on team-friendly contracts long enough to foster hopes of multiple Stanley Cup runs.

But this year presents a new, albeit fortuitous problem for the Hurricanes: They won the Stanley Cup, and they barely have any roster turnover from that championship team.

It's easy to say, "Let's run it back," but it's far more difficult in practice as teams around the division and across the NHL work to get better, each with the aim of knocking the Hurricanes off their shiny silver pedestal.

Carolina GM Eric Tulsky doubled down on his roster choices in the offseason, though, inking everyone eligible to return to extensions or new deals — except veteran goalie Frederik Andersen, who's found his way to Edmonton, and restricted free agent Alexander Nikishin, who hasn't reported to camp with his contract status pending.

The team also brought into camp two veteran NHL defenders, and, of course, half of the Chicago Wolves who played in the American Hockey League's Calder Cup Final this summer.

The competition for playing time and roster positions is as fierce as it's ever been which, for the team's long-term outlook appears great, but also creates a different set of problems.

Young stars — and make no mistake, Nadeau is a budding star — need to play when they're ready, or they'll look elsewhere for a place to play. Should Nadeau reach that point — and there's nothing to say that he hasn't already, at least privately — that shouldn't be held against him. He deserves a chance to ply his trade at the highest level possible. And that level now is the NHL.

Nadeau has nothing left to prove in the AHL. He had 27 goals and 29 assists in 52 games for Chicago last season. He had 32 goals and 26 assists in 64 games the season before that. That's 114 points in 116 games as one of the youngest players in the league.

Given the chance in both preseason games and on an extended regular-season look with the Canes, Nadeau has also found success, proving he can hang with the big boys. He had three goals in 12 games in limited call-up duty last season, and an assist in two games his first pro season.

Sunday and Tuesday, in the team's first two preseason games — against Florida's starting NHL lineup on both nights — Nadeau was among the best players on the ice for either team, scoring a goal in each game and generally controlling play every time he jumped over the boards.

So, how can he make the Hurricanes' roster?

Offseason surgery to Seth Jarvis gives the Hurricanes a bit of time to truly figure things out. Nadeau can play — and will play — in any role necessary to make the NHL club, of course. But his skill set is suited for a top-six role. His shot is elite. His shiftiness and creativity fits in well with

the Canes' aggressive style, because he doesn't shift and create while sacrificing defensive accountability.

So, while Jarvis remains on the mend, Nadeau can find a spot alongside Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov. That would allow the dynamite unit of Taylor Hall, Blake and Logan Stankoven to remain intact, as well as the amazingly effective line of Jordan Staal with Jordan Martinook and Nikolaj Ehlers.

The team could move Ehlers up, add one of Carrier or Robinson to Staal's trio, and slot Nadeau alongside Mark Jankowski or Jesperi Kotkaniemi, but that would not afford him the minutes or the offensive freedom he deserves.

And then, of course, there's the matter of what happens when Jarvis returns.

There is a potential answer there, too, though it may cause more than small stir, and it's rooted in the ongoing and unquenchable rumors surrounding all-world goalie Connor Hellebuyck, who's now widely known to have requested a trade out of Winnipeg.

The Canes have long been rumored to be "in" on Hellebuyck, the question has consistently been what it would cost.

With no deal in sight for Nikishin, and the glut of goalies Hellebuyck's acquisition would create, there's a plausible reality that a deal between the teams would include Nikishin and perhaps Pyotr Kochetkov, who's coming off an injury and is in the final year of a team-friendly contract. But that alone won't be enough to land a franchise-caliber goalie, and it won't free up the room on the roster for a player like Nadeau.

But what if the Hurricanes added a top-six player to sweeten the deal? What if they offered ... Svechnikov?

Of the Hurricanes' true core, Svechnikov has the shortest term remaining on his deal. His salary closely matches Hellebuyck's, which would maintain the Canes' cap flexibility going forward. And while he shows flashes of being the best player on the roster, Svechnikov also disappears for long stretches of the season.

In 19 playoff games in the Canes' Stanley Cup win, Svechnikov had six goals and 11 points. Given the same ice time and situational opportunities, it's plausible to believe that Nadeau could replicate that output.

Would Svechnikov's inconsistency, his contract terms, and a desire to manage the roster's youth and depth be enough to convince Canes management to dangle him in a blockbuster deal?

Maybe. Maybe not. But it's a reasonable solution to a problem that isn't otherwise going away. Players like Nadeau, Unger Sorum and Cerrato — all of whom showed out in spades Tuesday — don't all fall into an organization's lap that often, and taking steps to keep them under team control at a cost-effective salary is imperative to constructing a winning roster.

Tulsky and company know that combination as well — or better — than anyone in the league, and it would be shocking if they haven't at least considered moving a longer-tenured top-six forward to make room for a younger player or two.

Acting on those discussions could mean extending the Hurricanes' championship window another several years. But even with the favorable direction of the league's salary cap structure, allowing its top young players to find success elsewhere could hasten that window's closure.

News Observer LOADED: 09.25.2026



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1400807 Websites

The Athletic / How NHL players seized control of their careers and their league

By Mark Lazerus

Sept. 25, 2026

It was every morning for a little while there, in the immediate afterglow, the notification hitting everyone's phones bright and early, day after day after day.

Over the next few months, as the playoffs and offseason training became all-consuming, it started to die out a bit, the daily pings becoming more weekly. Now, some seven months after Team USA won Olympic men's hockey gold in Milan, the texts come far less frequently. Which somehow makes them even funnier.

Thanks, Helly.

Good morning, Helly.

Good job, Helly. Thank you.

That's pretty much it. On a random Tuesday morning, completely out of the blue, one of the 25 members of the American men's hockey team will fire off a terse text thanking goaltender Connor Hellebuyck for his singular performance against Canada in the gold-medal game. Two words, maybe three. Thanks, Helly. That's what the much-ballyhooed Team USA group chat has become.

Oh, sure, every now and then someone might bring up an actual memory from Milan — the sheer volume of lava cakes the guys consumed in the dining hall is a go-to gag — but "Thanks, Helly" is shorthand for all of it. The giddy flights. The buzz in the Olympic village. The goofing around on nights off. The thrilling victories. The gold medal. The bond. "Thanks, Helly" brings it all back in a rush and brings a smile to all 25 faces. Every time.

"You've been through an experience with them," Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "You feel bonded for life with that moment. Even seeing guys (at the player media tour in Las Vegas) that I was not close with before, I feel they're like my best buddies now. ... I think the one thing that really opened guys' eyes was just how fun winning is. For a lot of guys on that team, that was the first big thing we've all won. ... For a lot of us, that gold medal was the first taste of winning, and that's what amplifies in your mind — I want to do this more."

Is the NHL becoming the new NBA?

Max Bultman and Mark Lazerus

In the wake of this seismic summer of player empowerment, in which NHL players began seizing control of their contracts and their careers in a manner not seen in the salary-cap era, that Team USA group chat has taken on an almost mythical quality — the league's elite conspiring together to force their way onto a super team, probably somewhere warm.

Brady Tkachuk, one of the league's most impactful players, with two years left on his contract, flexed his way out of Ottawa and onto Matthew's team in South Florida. Hellebuyck, the league's best goaltender with three Vezina Trophy wins and five years left on his contract, is refusing to report until the Winnipeg Jets trade him somewhere he wants to go. Dylan Larkin, the dynamic two-way center, has told the Detroit Red Wings team he captained for the last five years to trade him elsewhere. And shortly before the Olympics, Quinn Hughes orchestrated his way out of Vancouver, and until he signs a contract extension in Minnesota, speculation will continue to run rampant that he'll join his brothers, including fellow Olympian Jack Hughes, either in New Jersey or somewhere else.

But Team USA is not some secret cabal of puppet-masters, bending and shaping the league to its whims, conspiring to extract every top American player out of Canada — a supersized, leaguewide version of the behind-the-scenes "rigging" of free agency that the NBA's LeBron James,

Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh pulled some 16 years ago when they decided to join forces in Miami, upending the league and forever changing the way basketball business was done.

"People can talk," Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin said with a laugh. "It's not reality. We are not doing that."

Ah, but in sports, perception is reality. And whether it's happening in a text chain or in a locker room or in summer training sessions or over beers while fishing or in routine conversations between players, agents and general managers, it is happening. In a sport whose culture has long suppressed the individual in favor of the collective, players are taking control. Whether it's Hellebuyck asking out or Tkachuk strong-arming his way to his brother's side or 21-year-old Leo Carlsson bullying his Anaheim Ducks into a gobsmacking raise by signing a paradigm-shifting offer sheet with the Philadelphia Flyers, or simply players signing shorter-term contracts to maximize their earning potential, the players are no longer falling in line, in sync with their respective front offices.

Like it or not, they're looking out for No. 1.

"There's a lot of mixed feelings on it throughout the league," the Seattle Kraken's Matty Beniers said. "I think it's great. The players are the product, and they should have somewhat of a say on where they want to play, and who they want to play for."

It's hardly a novel concept, or a radical idea. But in the NHL, it's earth-shaking. Not too long ago, Carlsson would have wrapped up his entry-level deal, signed a largely team-friendly eight-year extension with the Ducks and shut his mouth about it.

That's not the NHL anymore, though.

"I don't really remember how it was back in the day," Carlsson said. "I think it's just different times. ... It's our last call. Every time."

At the time, Jack Eichel didn't think he was at the vanguard of a new era, that what he was doing would change the way NHL players view themselves and their own influence. Eichel just wanted to have a say, to be heard. Eichel, on the advice of his own doctors, wanted to get artificial cervical disc replacement surgery to repair a neck injury that cost him most of the 2020-21 season. The Buffalo Sabres disagreed, deeming fusion surgery a better option than disc-replacement surgery, which hadn't been tried in hockey before. And though it was Eichel's neck that was injured, Eichel's cervical disc that had herniated, Eichel's pain that he felt every day, it was the team's decision. That's just how it always worked in the NHL.

But Eichel stood his ground, demanding the right to have the surgery he and his doctors wanted. Buffalo said no and stripped him of his captaincy before finally succumbing to Eichel's wishes by trading him to the Vegas Golden Knights, who promptly paid for the disc-replacement surgery.

Nearly five years later, Eichel is a Stanley Cup champion, an Olympic gold medalist and one of the league's best players. Durable and pain-free, too.

So, if there's a father of the player-empowerment era, it's Eichel. Every player since who's written his own ticket either in free agency or by flexing his no-movement clause — Claude Giroux and Brad Marchand accepting only trades to Florida, Patrick Kane accepting only a trade to the New York Rangers, Colton Parayko vetoing a trade from St. Louis to Buffalo, Jason Robertson refusing a sign-and-trade with Seattle, right up to Hughes, Tkachuk, Hellebuyck and Larkin — owes at least a little credit to Eichel for paving the way.

Eichel knows his situation was unique but takes some pride in knowing his situation has helped other players take control in their own ways.

"It's important for players to be the commander of your own ship," he said. "When you only get a crack at this career one time (and) you feel like you need to make a change, or maybe do something differently — be somewhere else — sometimes you're your biggest advocate in those situations. You've got to make hard decisions and do things that might not be popular from a public-opinion side of things. But if it's what's best for you, it's what's best for you."

The public-opinion perspective is understandable. Nobody wants to be rooting for laundry. Fans invest their time, their money and their passion into these players, and betrayal leaves an emotional scar. They don't forget. They also often don't understand.



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But players do. It's why Ottawa's Jake Sanderson was able to grab breakfast with Tkachuk in Las Vegas earlier this month, even after Tkachuk's trade went down on the day Sanderson got engaged — "Really weird day, for sure," Sanderson said. It's why Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele still counts Hellebuyck as a close friend, and someone he still wants to be there for throughout his ongoing drama. It's why Detroit's Alex DeBrincat holds no ill will toward Larkin and will be happy to continue playing alongside him as long as it takes for Detroit to find the right trade partner.

"It sucks," DeBrincat said of Larkin's trade request. "But it doesn't really change what we think of him."

DeBrincat understands better than just about anyone. He was blindsided when the Chicago Blackhawks traded him to Ottawa at the 2022 draft, and he and his wife never really felt comfortable there. He scored 27 goals and played in all 82 games in the 2022-23 season but made it known to then-GM Pierre Dorion that he had no desire to re-sign with Ottawa as a restricted free agent. So, Dorion traded DeBrincat's rights to his hometown Red Wings, who promptly signed him to a four-year contract.

And now, with the Red Wings in disarray and DeBrincat entering the last year of that contract, he's again mulling his own future, wondering whether Detroit is still the best place for him at this stage of his career. He's entering his 10th NHL season, but his only postseason experience came in the sterile bubble playoffs of 2020, when the Blackhawks backed into an expanded field. If DeBrincat feels Detroit — which is still without a permanent GM after removing Steve Yzerman from the role two months ago and is likely to lose one of its best players in Larkin soon — is headed in the wrong direction, he might once again be looking for greener pastures.

So, he's the last guy who's going to criticize Larkin for doing what he feels is best for him.

"There are so many different things that go into it, right?" DeBrincat said. "Everyone's got their own things going on. You have to do what's best for you at that time — for family reasons, for hockey reasons. It's tough to even really put a couple words on it, really. It's just a feeling that maybe it's not the best fit. ... I think communicating that with the guys is a lot easier than maybe everyone else thinks. I'm still best friends with some of those guys on (the Senators). So it's not like it burns bridges. It's a business, and you have to make decisions for yourself sometimes."

Tage Thompson was just starting his career in Buffalo when Eichel escaped. Now, Thompson's basically openly lobbying for Hellebuyck to join the nascent Sabres, who have quickly morphed from a punchline to a destination. And less than a year ago, before the Sabres surged up the standings, Thompson's name was popping up in trade speculation. A player's situation can change so quickly, for good or for ill.

Players know all too well that someday it could be them in Hellebuyck's shoes, in Larkin's shoes, in Tkachuk's shoes.

"It's not black and white," Thompson said. "It's tough to look on it from the outside because there's so many things that go into players' decisions. ... Then there's the family aspect of it, too. There's so many things that a player has to weigh. I think it's pretty unfair to sit on the outside and judge someone's decision based on what you just see from the outside."

Besides, for decades, NHL teams have coldly shipped off players, sending them to far-flung locales without any warning, any discussion, any say in the process. One day you wake up at home with your family in Nashville. That night, you're in San Jose, dressing jet-lagged for a team thousands of miles from your wife and kids. That doesn't happen in nearly any other line of work.

Teams can be utterly ruthless. Why shouldn't players do the same?

"That's the business that you're in," Thompson said. "Players now hold a lot of the cards, and if they feel like it's the best decision for them, they're out."

No sentiment is unanimous, of course. And players suggested there's a generational divide when it comes to trade requests. Younger players, who grew up in an era of short-term NBA paydays and baseball opt-outs, find no fault when a player desires a change of scenery. But for older players who came up in an NHL where ruffling feathers and putting yourself above the team was downright heresy, there can be resentment.

"It's definitely the old-school guys that (are like), you're in this spot, you make it work where you are," Beniers said. "But it's up to each guy. And I don't think it's a problem having that option to be able to say, hey, I don't want to play here and I want to go somewhere else. It's your decision."

And the fans? Well, they'd better get used to it. Just like the players get used to the boos.

"That backlash is a part of it, but you can block it out," DeBrincat said. "You're not just going to sit somewhere you're not happy with for 'X' amount of years just because you don't want to get hated on by that fan base. There's another fan base that will love you."

Then there's the Canada of it all. Hughes leaving Vancouver. Tkachuk and DeBrincat leaving Ottawa. Hellebuyck leaving Winnipeg. Tkachuk insisted he has "nothing but love and respect" for Ottawa, the city that "formed me into who I am as a person today." But it's hard to miss the trend of American players wanting to play in America.

It's why the Team USA group chat has turned into the kind of conspiracy theory that straddles the line between laughable and believable.

"It's a lot of American guys, the whole situation with the Olympics and winning and guys asking out and whatnot, so I get it to an extent," Werenski said. "But I can assure everyone from my point of view, there's no group chat (like that) — at least not one that I'm in."

Players always downplay the issue. Tkachuk insisted living in Canada isn't much different than living in the States. And not every American is unhappy north of the border. Matt Coronato grew up on Long Island but has made a happy home in Calgary.

Heck, the difference in traffic alone makes it worth it.

"I just love the city, I love living there," Coronato said. "The fan base is great, they love the team, they're respectful. It's awesome to play in a market where it's all about hockey. It's all been great for me."

Yet Maple Leafs fans will continue to wonder about Arizonan Auston Matthews' long-term wishes. Already-wounded Winnipeg fans have to wonder about Michigander Kyle Connor. And while Montreal is a hockey destination and the Canadiens are set up for long-term success, it's hard to blame fans if they wonder whether Cole Caufield and Lane Hutson will ever long for home.

NHL contracts in the cap era are designed to be ironclad — there's no NFL-style restructuring, no MLB-style opt-outs. But in this new era of the NHL, if a player wants out, he's getting out. And with the proliferation of no-movement clauses as bargaining chips — 280 skaters and 32 goalies have some level of trade protection, according to PuckPedia — star players have nearly all the control in the trade process, leaving teams with meager returns for cornerstone players because those stars can limit the field to one or two teams.

That's their right — one they earned, one the team granted them in the first place.

"As a player, you get things, whether you get as much money as you can, or you get a no-move clause or a no-trade clause," Tkachuk said. "You work hard for that."

You want to play with your brother? In the new NHL, you can. You want to get off the infernal treadmill of an endless rebuild and join a contender, fast-tracking your Cup chase? You can do that. You want to play with your Olympic teammates, not just text them? You can make it happen. You want to squeeze a team for every percentage of the salary cap you can? You can force their hand.

Between the trade requests and the soaring salaries in the wake of Carlsson's offer sheet — four of the seven highest-paid players in the league are 22 or younger, with Macklin Celebrini joining them next year — this isn't some brief fad. It's the new reality, one the league is still grappling with.

Might the league someday push to void no-movement clauses in light of a trade request? Could salaries be artificially reined in further? Is there a way to slow down the runaway train of player empowerment? Do owners and GMs want that? Do fans?

"Depending on how the trend evolves, perhaps at some point in collective bargaining, it'll have to be addressed in a different way than they're being addressed now," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said. "But we (just)



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started our current collective-bargaining agreement, which is four years. And I certainly don't expect the need to address what looks like it might become a trend earlier than the next collective-bargaining agreement."

The players certainly don't appear inclined to cede any of the ground they've gained.

"When a player makes a move like Leo did, it changes the dynamics in a lot of different ways," NHLPA director Marty Walsh said. "A lot of people talked about it in the past, but he did it. I think players are realizing, and we're certainly empowering the players association, too — don't be shy. This is your league."

Now more than ever.

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The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2026-27 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal

Sept. 24, 2026

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

Thursday, Sept. 24

Carson Lambos, LHD, Minnesota Wild

Lambos hasn't broken through in the NHL yet, but he's a highly mobile defenseman who plays hard. The offense and sense in his game are questions that have grown in concern over time, but the hope is he can make enough plays with his skating to take a regular shift. A first-round pick by the Wild in 2021, it would not surprise me if a team looked at him as a change-of-scenery type. — Pronman

Steven Lorentz, C, Toronto Maple Leafs

Most of the time when we're discussing waiver targets, we're analyzing bubble players who have split time between the NHL and AHL. That's not the case for Lorentz; he's played 381 NHL games over the last six seasons and hasn't suited up for a single AHL game since 2019-20, when he was 23.

Lorentz is a 6-foot-4 fourth-liner who can line up on the wing or at center and won the Stanley Cup with Florida in 2024. He's limited offensively, but checks hard, brings energy, boasts above-average defensive metrics and kills penalties.

Leevi Meriläinen, G, Ottawa Senators

Meriläinen is coming off a very challenging season in Ottawa, but his talent and potential are legitimately promising. In his age-22 season in 2024-25, Meriläinen posted strong results in the AHL (.913 save percentage in 37 games) and was stellar during his brief cup of coffee in the NHL, delivering a .925 save percentage in 12 games.

That was enough to convince the Senators he was ready for backup duties, but it all came crashing down last season. Meriläinen slumped to an .860 save percentage in 20 games, which shattered his confidence and nearly cost Ottawa a playoff spot.

With that said, Meriläinen just turned 24 this summer, and the immense promise he showed in 2024-25 can't be forgotten.

Ronan Seeley, LHD, Carolina Hurricanes

Seeley got one NHL game last season and was a good AHL defenseman. He doesn't stand out at either end, but he's a good skater with a high hockey IQ who can contribute two-way value. Given he has average size, there would be a clearer path for him to being an NHL regular if he played a bit harder. — Pronman

Other players on waivers: Viktor Neuchev (Hurricanes), Zachary Sawchenko (Hurricanes), Kyle Burroughs (Stars), Matthew Seminoff (Stars), Martin Chromiak (Kings), Cole Guttman (Kings), Joe Hicketts (Kings), Lane Pederson (Kings), Francesco Pinelli (Kings), Caedan Bankier (Wild), Dylan Gambrell (Wild), Matt Kiersted (Wild), Justin Kirkland (Wild), Tyler Pitlick (Wild), Roman Schmidt (Wild), Mason Shaw (Wild), Matthew Murray (Predators), Philip Kemp (Penguins), Brendan Brisson (Maple Leafs), Vinni Lettieri (Maple Leafs), Philippe Myers (Maple Leafs), Michael Pezzetta (Maple Leafs), Marshall Rifai (Maple Leafs), Henrik Rybinski (Maple Leafs), Ryan Tverberg (Maple Leafs), Matthew Stienburg (Canucks)

Wednesday, Sept. 23

Update: All players cleared.

Jonas Johansson, G, Tampa Bay Lightning

Johansson was Tampa Bay's full-time backup over the last three seasons. The 31-year-old has largely struggled in that timeframe, posting an .889 save percentage and a minus-25 goals saved above expected rating, which ranks fifth-worst among all NHL goalies. It's a bit puzzling that he's lasted this long in the NHL considering those numbers, but he's found big-league work across four different organizations since 2021, so he clearly has some tools teams and goalie evaluators fancy. — Dayal

Spencer Martin, G, New York Rangers

Martin has been a third-string goalie over the last several years. There are certainly times, especially during points of his stint in Vancouver, where he's flashed the kind of NHL play that you might expect from a full-time backup, but he's proven far too inconsistent over his career. Martin can be a competent option to deliver a handful of NHL starts in an emergency injury situation, and he's a likable personality and teammate, which matters with depth goaltenders, but rely on him any longer than that and you're probably going to be in trouble. — Dayal

Ozzy Wiesblatt, RW, Nashville Predators

Wiesblatt is a very good skating winger who plays hard and has a high overall compete level. He has decent hands, but the pure offense in his game is a bit bland, especially for a smaller winger. He projects as a depth option for an organization. — Pronman

Carl Grundstrom, RW, Philadelphia Flyers

Grundstrom is a well-traveled 28-year-old who has shown he can be a decent two-way winger. He's a physical, hard-to-play-against type who moves and handles the puck well enough, although he's not overly instinctive with the puck. He could still be a useful fourth-liner.

Zach Aston-Reese, LW, Philadelphia Flyers

Aston-Reese is a veteran fourth-line forward with over 400 games of NHL experience. He's very limited offensively (he's never hit the 20-point mark in a single season), but he can kill penalties and brings plus defensive value, driving an xG share greater than 50 percent in seven of his 10 NHL seasons. It's worth noting, though, that Aston-Reese's underlying metrics took a hit last season and he's 32 now, so age-related decline may be a concern. In any case, he'd be a serviceable 13th forward if a team is looking for some experienced insurance. — Dayal

Jack Studnicka, C, Philadelphia Flyers

Studnicka is a speedy, hardworking forward who has bounced between the NHL and AHL over the last few seasons. He's a natural center and can play down the middle if necessary, but in my viewings, he's been more comfortable and effective on the wing because he's subpar in the faceoff circle and a bit too skinny and lean. Studnicka can bring pace and energy, but he's a tweener role-wise because his offense has never really translated in the NHL (16 points in 126 career games), he isn't a defensive ace and isn't big and heavy enough to provide a physical edge. — Dayal

Ethan Cardwell, RW, San Jose Sharks

Cardwell is a good to very good skater who can burn past opponents. He has some hands and creativity, but his vision is just average, and he's a bit of a tweener as a small, yet not offensively dynamic forward. — Pronman

Other players on waivers: Maxence Guenette (Bruins), Pheonix Copley (Blue Jackets), James Malatesta (Blue Jackets), Owen Sillinger (Blue Jackets), Domenick Fensore (Avalanche), Christian Wolanin (Avalanche), Ronnie Attard (Red Wings), Wilmer Skoog (Red Wings), Cam Dineen (Flyers), Nolan Foote (Flyers), Danila Klimovich (Flyers), Taylor Gauthier (Penguins), Tye Felhaber (Sharks), Libor Hajek (Sharks), Cole McWard (Maple Leafs), Dakota Mermis (Maple Leafs), Cameron Hebig (Mammoth), Montana Onyebuchi (Mammoth), Jaxson Stauber (Mammoth), Cole Clayton (Canucks), Trey Fix-Wolansky (Canucks), Jimmy Schultz (Canucks), Jeremy Davies (Golden Knights), Jakub Demek (Golden Knights), Joe Fleming (Golden Knights), Adam Ginning (Golden Knights), Jaycob Megna (Golden Knights)

Tuesday, Sept. 22

Update: All players cleared.

Urho Vaakanainen, LHD, New York Rangers



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Vaakanainen is a great skating defenseman who is a bit of a vanilla player outside of that one particular trait. The Rangers are his third NHL team, and they added a lot of defensive depth this offseason. On a lesser defense unit, he could still be a useful player. He makes a decent first pass and has OK skill, though he's not a natural puck-mover, and he's not overly hard to play against. — Pronman

Juuso Parssinen, C, New York Rangers

Parssinen is a decent-sized center with good hands who plays hard. His skating is OK for his size; he's not a burner, but he moves fine. The pure sense and offense in his game are never going to excite people, but he could be a useful depth center with size for a team looking to add at that position. — Pronman

Jacob Bryson, LHD, Detroit Red Wings

Bryson is a No. 7/8 defenseman with over 300 games of NHL experience, who suited up for 50 games split between the Sabres and Jets last season. At 5-foot-9, Bryson is one of the smallest defensemen in the league. That's always going to be a major knock on him as teams typically like bigger, heavier depth defensemen, but Bryson's skating compensates for it as he ranked 42nd among all NHL defensemen in speed bursts greater than 20 miles per 60 minutes.

Bryson's underlying results were respectable in ultra-sheltered usage, as the Sabres controlled 50.1 percent of scoring chances and a 50 percent goal share during his five-on-five shifts. However, Lindy Ruff never fully trusted Bryson — he averaged just 10:02 per game. That lack of faith in the third pair is what prompted the club to acquire Logan Stanley and Luke Schenn from the Jets. Bryson could be a serviceable No. 7/8 if a team's desperate for an experienced veteran that can inject some speed on the back end. — Dayal

Ethan Bear, RHD, New York Islanders

At one point in 2022-23, Bear wasn't just a cromulent depth defenseman; he profiled like a legitimate No. 4/5. Bear averaged 18:32 per game for the Canucks that season and won his matchups, with the club generating more shots and goals than they surrendered with him on the ice at five-on-five.

However, Bear suffered a shoulder injury playing for Canada at the worlds that summer, and it's been tough sledding since then. He signed with the Capitals in 2023-24, but his play fell off a cliff. During the last two years, he's been a full-time AHL player.

It's very unlikely that Bear can hold up against NHL competition at this stage in his career, but his name is at least worth a mention because of his pedigree and big-league experience.

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The Athletic / Why these 6 NHL teams are most likely to take a step backward in the 2026-27 season

By Murat Ates

Sept. 24, 2026

On Tuesday at The Athletic, we analyzed the seven NHL teams most likely to improve their point totals from last season. Today, the pendulum swings in the other direction.

When we've studied surprising success stories in previous years, the indicators included new coaching, substantial offseason additions, luck and young talent aging into its prime. Teams that underperform expectations tend to have the opposite factors working against them: core players getting older, offseason talent losses, and ice-cold shooting and goaltending performances. It also helps to be starting from a high point total in the first place.

Today, we use these criteria to predict the teams most likely to take a step backward in 2026-27. Some, such as the Boston Bruins, are playoff teams facing stiffer challenges this season than they did last year. Some, such as the Detroit Red Wings, lost a lot of talent in the offseason. And others, such as the Anaheim Ducks and Buffalo Sabres? There's still a lot to like but too many reasons to think last year's point totals are just a little too inflated to match.

Here are the six teams who could find themselves winning games less often this season than last.

Is the NHL becoming the new NBA?

Max Bultman and Mark Lazerus

Anaheim Ducks

2025-26 record: 43-33-6, 92 points

The best case for a decline: The Ducks overachieved to hit 92 points on a minus-23 goal differential (not counting shootout wins and losses), then lost key components of their team.

That's a tough case to make, given that the single biggest story of Anaheim's offseason is that it retained Leo Carlsson — a more critical piece of its rebuild than any of Mason McTavish, Jeffrey Viel, John Carlson, Jacob Trouba, Olen Zellweger or Radko Gudas. Then you reflect on the length of that list and the number of quality pieces on it. Even acknowledging that Carlson (the defenceman) was a late-season addition, it's going to be hard for Carlsson (the center), Cutter Gauthier, Jackson LaCombe, Beckett Sennecke, and Anaheim's other elite youth to compensate for the loss of all that talent.

The Ducks' Cup contention window is opening. Carlsson and LaCombe are among the top stars in the NHL, and their supporting cast does have quality despite being a work in progress. It's still hard to bet on a team that got outscored by 23 goals losing that much talent, trusting so many unproven young players on defence, and matching their 2025-26 point total. Merely going .500 instead of a perfect 8-0 in the shootout would also hurt Anaheim's cause.

Boston Bruins

2025-26 record: 45-27-10, 100 points

The best case for a decline: Regression to the mean. It's hard to assume that Boston will continue to outperform its underlying numbers.

Boston created the 29th-most high-danger scoring chances but scored the 10th-most goals in the NHL last season. It spent the 25th-most time in its own zone but gave up the fourth-fewest goals. David Pastrnak is a good bet to score more than "expected," but the Bruins finished second only to Dallas in PDO — shooting percentage plus save percentage, which tends to regress toward average as opposed to being stable and repeatable. Morgan Geekie can't shoot 22 percent forever, can he?

It's common to predict the demise of the Bruins and be wrong about it. Fans have the right to be smug about the 24-point improvement their team made from 2024-25 to 2025-26, and it's hard to bet against Pastrnak, Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman. It's even harder to assume the Bruins' depth players can keep outperforming their poor underlying numbers.

Buffalo Sabres

2025-26 record: 50-23-9, 109 points

The best case for a decline: Buffalo is well-positioned to absorb the loss of Alex Tuch and Bowen Byram, but the Sabres are right behind Boston and Dallas in terms of unsustainable shooting and save percentage numbers. Combine that with Florida's re-emergence in an ever-more-competitive Atlantic Division and Buffalo's position as the NHL's fourth-best regular-season team could be in peril.

To be clear, I'm not as down on the Sabres as The Athletic's season previews, which question Buffalo's goaltending and centre depth while projecting a 95-point finish. I like Buffalo's depth and expect the regular season to reveal Zach Benson as every bit worthy of the hype he built in the playoffs. I also believe in the Hurricanes model of running four lines and at least two defence pairs who can hand shifts off to one another, wearing teams down through continuous offensive zone time. The Sabres don't beat teams in quite as many different ways as Carolina does, and they're not as insulated against cold shooting or goaltending streaks as a result. It still seems that 100 points and continued playoff success are within reach.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is the wild card; the 27-year-old goaltender has yet to chain consecutive quality seasons together, but he's only just emerging as an NHL starter. (And if he struggles, maybe Buffalo figures out that Connor Hellebuyck trade after all.)

Detroit Red Wings

2025-26 record: 41-31-10, 92 points

The best case for a decline: Detroit's offence is in trouble if Dylan Larkin is a part of it and in peril if he isn't.

Patrick Kane's departure hurts the Red Wings' 12th-ranked power play, which helped Detroit make up for the NHL's third-worst five-on-five offence. Meanwhile, James van Riemsdyk's departure hurts Detroit's depth scoring. The Red Wings will hope summer signing Viktor Arvidsson and rising young player Michael Brandsegg-Nygård make up for those losses, but Arvidsson's injury history and Brandsegg-Nygård's youth allow room for doubt.

The challenge isn't about a lack of players to be excited about. Moritz Seider was dominant in so many facets of the game last season that he finished 11th in Hart Trophy voting and fifth in Norris Trophy voting. Lucas Raymond is an electric offensive player whose defensive commitment is solid for a 24-year-old star in the making. It's about what happens when the Red Wings' top line and top pairing aren't playing — it's hard to look at veterans such as Andrew Copp, J.T. Compher and Mason Appleton and find Detroit's missing depth scoring.

Detroit does have a next wave of young talent and it's possible that Simon Edvinsson (23) or Marco Kasper (22) goes off in 2026-27. The other route to avoiding a decline would involve John Gibson turning back the clock to his early career dominance, while Daniil Tarasov may make a few more saves than last season's edition of Cam Talbot.

Pittsburgh Penguins

2025-26 record: 41-25-16, 98 points

The best case for a decline: Sidney Crosby and the rest of Pittsburgh's veteran greats will age out of elite performance ... eventually.

It didn't happen last season, with Crosby, 39, particularly brilliant and Evgeni Malkin rebounding from a relative down year by posting 61 points in 56 games. Erik Karlsson was so good that it drove scouts wild, winning his minutes while producing 66 points and earning Norris Trophy votes. There's still the sense that a team whose top five scorers from last season are all between 33 and 40 years old can't be trusted to do it all over again. Even if they do, they've got to do it with Artūrs Šilovs (career save percentage: .886) and Sergei Murashov (excellent in the AHL, but a 22-year-old rookie) playing goal.



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But there are reasons to doubt the doubting. Digging into Pittsburgh's zone time and scoring chance metrics reveals a team well-worthy of success, too — NHL EDGE data shows that no team took more shots from the home plate area of the ice than Pittsburgh did last season. Their 3-10 record in overtime and the shootout is a candidate for positive regression.

If Pittsburgh embarrasses me by cranking out another timeless 100 points and going on a playoff run, call it ageism. Their underlying numbers are better than some of the other teams on this list.

New York Islanders

2025-26 record: 43-34-5, 91 points

The best case for a decline: Anders Lee was more than a netfront force for New York; he was their captain, leading the team to the Eastern Conference final and seeing it through the lean years that followed. The Islanders added Matias Maccelli and hired Peter DeBoer, but were already a bottom-10 offensive team and didn't make up for Lee's loss.

There is also the matter of the Islanders' unsustainable save percentage and shooting percentage on their penalty kill: Ilya Sorokin was shelled — as he often is — but excelled so far beyond his career average to produce the NHL's 10th-best PK results after finishing 31st and 32nd with similar shot metrics in the two seasons before this one. Sorokin is an elite goaltender but got more out of the Islanders' poor flow of play than expected at even strength, too, and some regression is expected.

There's hope for the future — obviously, with Matthew Schaefer (19), and also with Calum Ritchie (21) and others. There's hope for the underlying numbers, too: DeBoer has historically made a positive impact on team defence. There just aren't enough impact players after Sorokin, Schaefer, Mathew Barzal, and Bo Horvat to make up for the lack of depth.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.25.2026



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ESPN / Projecting the NHL's leap-forward, regression candidates - ESPN

Rachel Kryshak

Sep 24, 2026

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.

Every year, fantasy hockey managers look for players who could see a massive jump in production to get value in later rounds. They are also keenly in tune with "buyer beware" situations on players coming off stupendous seasons.

Casual NHL fans want to understand reasonable expectations for developing young players, and drop-offs after great seasons. I've identified a dozen players who fall into one of those two categories for 2026-27.

To qualify for this list, a player cannot be a rookie. Many players projected to take a meaningful step forward are in their final years of their entry-level contracts or in the first year of their first standard contract. Many players projected to take a step back enjoyed career years in 2025-26, with elevated shooting percentages or roles they are unlikely to maintain.

How to watch the 2026-27 NHL season on ESPN networks -- including 100 exclusive games and the out-of-market package (over 1,050 games).

Leap forward candidates

Matvei Michkov, RW, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 21 | Contract AAV: \$950,000

2025-26 stats: 81 GP | 20 G | 31 A

I've been on the Michkov train for a very long time, and after what seems to be a very impressive summer, Michkov seems primed for a true breakout.

He is rightfully having to earn the trust of Rick Tocchet, but the Flyers absolutely need a more balanced offense to avoid a step back this season.

Michkov's talent is undeniable, and a summer in which he prepared his body for the grind of the NHL season should see him able to execute more effectively. At his best, Michkov can be a top-six difference-maker at even strength and a reliable power-play option. His production will directly relate to the opportunity he earns -- and is hopefully given.

There is every reason to be excited and every reason for the Flyers to reward their young talent with greater opportunity. If Tocchet gives him offensive opportunities and chances to show his development, Michkov could crack the point-per-game threshold and establish himself as a go-to offensive producer.

Matthew Wood, RW, Nashville Predators

Age: 21 | Contract AAV: \$950,000

2025-26 stats: 71 GP | 17 G | 13 A

One of the key players of Nashville's rebuild enters his second season primed for a much bigger opportunity. Wood is expected to play regular top-six minutes with Filip Forsberg and get a long look on the top power-play unit.

Given Wood's physical makeup, he has the package to be a power forward with significant goal scoring potential. His net-front presence on the power play will be a nuisance to opposing goaltenders, and his ability to drive off the rush should pose problems for defenders.

Centering Forsberg provides Wood a great opportunity to produce offense and cement himself as a top-six center. Accounting for increased ice time, power-play opportunity and expected improvement of the team around him, Wood's production could reasonably rise to 55 points, nearly double his rookie season (30 points). He's not the only player who could break out in Nashville, but Wood seems to be the most reasonable bet to take a tangible leap in his offensive production given the opportunity.

Gabe Perreault, RW, New York Rangers

Age: 21 | Contract AAV: \$941,667

2025-26 stats: 49 GP | 12 G | 15 A

Finding yourself on the top line to start the season is a recipe for a breakout. The Rangers seem poised to give their budding young star a real opportunity to become a bona fide offensive threat in his second NHL season.

The tremendously talented winger will see a sharp increase in ice time at even strength and might play his way onto the top power-play unit at various points through the season. His goal-scoring ability should suit Mika Zibanejad's playmaking ability, and the two of them should develop significant chemistry.

The Rangers desperately need their young players to contribute meaningful offense to make the best of what is left in the careers of Zibanejad, Adam Fox, Igor Shesterkin and J.T. Miller. Perreault is critical to that, and thus the opportunity presented to him is a recipe for breakout success. If Perreault plays top-line minutes and gets power-play time -- he's projected to score 23 goals and 60 points -- it will be a major step forward in his development.

Michael Misa, C, San Jose Sharks

Age: 19 | Contract AAV: \$986,250

2025-26 stats: 45 GP | 9 G | 12 A

Misa might see the biggest jump in his production this season. Given the trajectory of San Jose and his development, there is a real chance the young Shark triples his rookie production. Misa enters his second season after putting on significant muscle, and training with fellow Sharks Macklin Celebrini and Sam Dickinson this summer.

It is highly likely that Misa takes over Alexander Wennberg's spot as the second-line center and becomes the primary weapon on the second power-play unit. In a 45-game rookie season, Misa tallied 21 points, nearly a half point per game.

There is every reason to believe that Misa could produce 65-plus points in a full season in which his ice time should increase by 20%. Misa's development should continue on defense as well, taking a major step to becoming a two-way play-driving center.

With development on both ends of the ice and increased opportunity, Misa's breakout season could be two-fold as he becomes one of the best young players to watch in the NHL.

Luke Evangelista, RW, New Jersey Devils

Age: 24 | Contract AAV: \$3 million

2025-26 stats: 81 GP | 121 G | 44 A

One of the shrewdest acquisitions of the summer was made by the Devils. Evangelista will get significant offensive opportunity in New Jersey's top six, and given the left-handed offensive talent already on the roster, his right-handed shooting will bring some balance.

He's likely to get an extended opportunity on the top power-play unit because of Sheldon Keefe's desire for a right-handed shooter to complement the unit. Evangelista's style is going to create space and offensive opportunities for his linemates, by winning puck battles and getting pucks to scorers in dangerous areas.

He might take time to adjust to the offensive system in Jersey, meaning the points might not come right away. But he's highly underrated as a two-way player that makes him the perfect fit beside Nico Hischier and certainly will be relied upon in key situations on both ends of the ice, providing value as he finds his offensive step. Evangelista's step forward should not only see a step forward in production but some recognition as one of the league's quality defensive wingers.



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Jimmy Snuggerud, RW, St. Louis Blues

Age: 22 | Contract AAV: \$950,000

2025-26 stats: 70 GP | 21 G | 30 A

Snuggerud finds himself on the right wing of what has the potential to be one of the best lines in the NHL, this season. Paired with Dylan Holloway and Robert Thomas, Snuggerud will be the beneficiary of Holloway's speed and successful puck retrievals and battles, as well as Thomas' playmaking ability. Snuggerud is a perfect fit to play with those two and it is more than conceivable that he capitalizes on the opportunity by scoring more than 30 goals.

Snuggerud had a wonderful rookie season and given his trajectory and his quality of teammate, he's going to be one of the go-to scoring threats for the Blues for the foreseeable future. With a step forward in development, Snuggerud should also help a power play that struggled last season, and easily top his five power-play goals in 2025-26.

This combination of factors should see Snuggerud cement himself as a top-line offensive threat capable of producing 80-plus points.

Honorable mention

Nicholas Robertson, LW, Pittsburgh Penguins

Age: 25 | Contract AAV: \$3.25 million

2025-26 stats: 78 GP | 16 G | 16 A

He's playing next to Sidney Crosby. For as long as that happens, it is reasonable to assume that his production would be leaps and bounds better than previous seasons. The list of players whose production rose astronomically after finding chemistry with Crosby is long. There is no need to read into it more than that.

Regression candidates

Anthony Mantha, RW, New Jersey Devils

Age: 32 | Contract AAV: \$4.75 million

2025-26 stats: 81 GP | 33 G | 31 A

The last time Mantha had a season with more than 20 goals, the world did not know about COVID-19. So yes, it has been a while.

Mantha is coming off a 33-31-64 season, far surpassing his career highs. Last season was the second of Mantha's career in which he played 80 or more games; he has struggled to stay healthy. The interesting part about Mantha is that he has enjoyed three consecutive seasons with a shooting percentage over 20%. Though that might not be his true shooting talent, he has sustained it for a large enough sample size that it is reasonable to assume he is an elite shooter.

This season, Mantha will be afforded the opportunity to play in New Jersey's top six, centered by one of Jack Hughes or Nico Hischier. His placement on this list is largely due to his projection of playing only 71 games this season. He's going to get less power-play time than he did last season, because the Devils' top unit plays a significant portion of the power play, and an output of seven power-play goals is highly unlikely to sustain.

There's a very likely situation that Mantha's shooting percentage remains high, but his production falls to about 50 points, which would be around a 20% regression.

Pavel Zacha, C, Boston Bruins

Age: 29 | Contract AAV: \$4.75 million

2025-26 stats: 78 GP | 30 G | 35 A

Coming off a career season, in which his goal total was nearly 50% better than his previous high, Zacha is highly likely to see a return to his 20-goal norm. Hitting the 30-goal mark was buoyed by a shooting percentage of 22.9%, one of the highest in the NHL last season and 6.4 percentage points higher than his previous career-high shooting percentage of 16.5%.

My model projects him to score 23 goals if he retains the second-line role for Boston. If he is surpassed by Fraser Minten, it falls to 20. Moreover, Boston is expected to be in a tougher spot this season with the improvements of Buffalo and Montreal, and the expected return to

competitiveness of Florida and Toronto. The games that Zacha plays will be tighter, given the strength of the Atlantic Division.

Of the regression candidates, Zacha is most likely to see the biggest step back given the combination of shooting luck and expected role.

Darren Raddysh, D, Toronto Maple Leafs

Age: 30 | Contract AAV: \$8.5 million

2025-26 stats: 73 GP | 22 G | 48 A

Raddysh is going to have the basically the same offensive opportunity in Toronto that he was afforded last season in Tampa Bay. He will run the top power-play unit and be depended on to play top-pair minutes and generate offense from the back end. Expecting Raddysh to produce near a point-per-game pace is wholly unreasonable.

Raddysh performed at his best with a strong defensive partner that allowed him to take risks and drive play. With the Leafs, a healthy Chris Tanev or Jake McCabe would be the closest to replicating the partnership he had in Tampa Bay. Without that, Raddysh's defensive load would increase, which will depress his offensive involvement and production.

Furthermore, Raddysh benefitted from one of the best power-play players of the generation in Nikita Kucherov. The Leafs do not have a dual threat of that level. Auston Matthews and William Nylander are primary shooters, but neither is the dual-threat passer and shooter that Kucherov is, making them more predictable. Raddysh will play with extraordinarily talented players in Toronto, but equaling his career-high point total (after doubling it from the previous season) is rarely sustainable for nonsuperstar players.

Reasonable expectations would have Raddysh in the midteens for goals and high 50s in total points. Though that's still among the game's best, it is a significant step back from a near point-per-game season in 2025-26.

Nick Schmaltz, C, Utah Mammoth

Age: 30 | Contract AAV: \$8 million

2025-26 stats: 82 GP | 33 G | 41 A

Schmaltz is coming off a career season in which he scored 33 goals and 74 points, a 44% increase in goal-scoring output over his previous career high of 23. When healthy, Schmaltz is a true talent 25-27 goal scorer.

Heading into this season, Schmaltz is going to battle a few forces against him. His shooting percentage and regression to his true talent is likely to lead to a drop into the 60s in points. More importantly, Logan Cooley could ascend to the top-line center role in Utah in 2026-27. Combine that with the addition of Vincent Trocheck in the offseason, and Schmaltz is likely to see a reduction in ice time by 2½ to 3 minutes per game from his 2025-26 average of 19:43.

Utah's center depth took a meaningful step forward with the Trocheck acquisition, and should balance how the top lines are deployed. The combination of each of these factors is likely to lead to a 15% reduction in offensive production, with a projected total of 26 goals and 63 points.

Wyatt Johnston, C, Dallas Stars

Age: 23 | Contract AAV: \$8.4 million

2025-26 stats: 82 GP | 45 G | 41 A

The Stars might take a step back as a whole this season. Whether they do or don't, the likelihood of Johnston scoring 27 power-play goals again is low.

Johnston is an excellent player and the drop-off in power-play production is not an indictment of him as a player. It's more that those types of power-play numbers are generally not repeatable by the game's elite. For reference, Alex Ovechkin's career high is 25 power-play goals and he is the greatest goal scorer in the history of the sport. He topped Johnston's 42 power-play points twice in his 21-year career. The notion that Johnston would be able to outpace the game's greatest goal scorer on the power play is not one based in reality.

Johnston's play and value to the Stars is unlikely to regress given his age and talent, but his production rate is likely to regress. Forty-two of Johnston's 86 points in 2025-26 came on the power play, where a more sustainable output would see Johnston notch 30 power-play points.



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Beyond the power play, a shooting percentage of 21.8% is likely to regress to 17%, seeing Johnston's goal total dropping to the mid-30s. Combine those factors and a healthy Roope Hintz to carry some of the offensive load, it is conceivable that Johnston's production suffers a 12% drop-off, roughly 11 points.

ESPN LOADED: 09.25.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers takeaways: AHL-laden lineup impresses against Canucks

Mark Spector

It's either going to be a great year in Bakersfield or a very long season in Vancouver, after an AHL-laden Edmonton Oilers roster walked into Rogers Arena and beat the Canucks 2-1 Thursday night.

"They worked their butts off," said Oilers veteran goalie Tristan Jarry, one of only four Oilers players expected to open the season in Edmonton who made the trip to Vancouver. "In the offensive zone, the defensive zone ... They were doing everything right. Just everything we've been going through in practice, they really implemented tonight."

The Canucks iced a lineup with roughly 16 expected Opening Night players, compared to an Oilers roster that featured three or four: Jarry, Ike Howard, No. 6 defenceman Ty Emberson, and Josh Samanski, who will likely be Edmonton's 12th or 13th forward.

As for NHL games played, the Canucks lineup had 6,789 games to 1,277 for the Oilers.

But it was Howard, playing his third pre-season game, who was the most dangerous player on the ice, with a goal, an assist and seven shots on goal. Quinn Hutson had the other Oilers goal and five shots on net, while Jarry allowed just one power-play marker, stopping 25 shots to all but secure the Opening Night start against these same Canucks Tuesday night in Edmonton.

"I was impressed with our group here tonight," Babcock said. "We found a way to get it done, and they should feel good about themselves."

Another young player who made his presence known was rugged winger Connor Clattenburg, who drilled veteran defenceman Filip Hronek, one of his game-high five hits.

"I like him," said Babcock. "He can skate, he's physical. He pisses off the other team, which is kind of fun, and I like watching that. But he's got energy, and he's a good teammate. You know, he's going to play here one day."

Line 'em up

Defenceman Tomas Cibulka was plus-2 with an assist in 17:00 of ice time. And Viljami Marjala, the OT hero from Tuesday night in Winnipeg, had another strong game.

Expect a bunch of assignments on Friday as the Oilers get down to their NHL squad for practice. Their final pre-season game, at home against Calgary on Saturday, will be a dress rehearsal for Opening Night.

The day began with a shot across the Oilers' bow from revered alumnus Mark Messier, who questioned the whole process of hiring head coach Mike Babcock.

The fact that Babcock interviewed with players, a compromised leadership group, and that too many decisions were being made by the Oilers players. It was all too much for the Oilers legend-turned-ESPN panellist.

"I am just horrified about the whole thing," said Messier.

"I think from the management to the coaching to the players, there has to be a divide," continued the guy who once installed Mike Keenan behind the bench in Vancouver as a prequel to the darkest and most futile era of his own career. "The leadership of your team has to protect the players inside the dressing room. How can you do that when you're directly involved with the decisions they're making at the management level and hiring of the management and coaches? I don't understand it."

The fact that a Hall of Fame Oiler had taken a strip off the current players was a hot topic at Thursday's practice.

"I don't see a lot of headlines about any players here; I see a lot of headlines about the coach," said Oilers captain Connor McDavid.

"Our organization has its layers just like everyone else. My job is just to be who I am and captain of this team and make sure I'm doing things right every day, and to be ready to roll."

Nobody wearing blue and orange is going to speak ill of Messier, a five-time Cup winner in Edmonton. A team that accrues the Babcocks, Alex Formentons, and all the other second-chancers the way Edmonton has, better have a thick skin.

It was the friendly fire that surprised, if anything.

Zach Hyman, who was on the ground floor of the Babcock hire, invited Messier back to his hometown to have a look-see.

"If he really wants to see what's going on firsthand, he's more than welcome to come here," invited Hyman. "Oilers fans love him. There's a lot of excitement, there's a lot of positivity here. Nothing but good is happening right now. So, to try and spew something negative right now, I think it's his opinion."

"I haven't heard anything about me, Leon (Draisaitl), or Connor; it's about 'Babs,' which, obviously, I think he can handle that," Hyman continued. "From a player standpoint, there's a lot of excitement with training camp, how pre-season has gone, how we've worked in those games. I think that you're seeing changes on the ice, and it feels good as a player, and it's all positive. It's been really good."

Babcock took the high road when asked about the Messier criticism. It won't be the last blast he'll get this season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Chytil's injury woes continue as Canucks lose to Oilers in pre-season

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — In a 2-1 preseason loss to the Edmonton Oilers' reserves, it was difficult to tell which Vancouver Canucks players took a step forward as the National Hockey League season looms. But it was obvious Thursday which unlucky one went backwards.

Centre Filip Chytil, a huge wild card for the team after playing only 12 games in the last 18 months due to serious head and neck injuries, was hurt in the first period of Thursday's loss when he accidentally hooked skates with referee Riley Brace and crashed heavily into the boards behind the Oilers' net.

Chytil's head appeared to hit the ice upon falling, but Canucks coach Manny Malhotra told reporters post-game that it is the talented 27-year-old's shoulder that will be reassessed on Friday.

The concussion the skilled centre suffered on a thunderous hit by Washington Capital Tom Wilson in the Canucks' sixth game last October was the early turning point in Vancouver's disastrous season.

The Czech returned for six games before last February's Olympic break, but then was shut down for the season when hit in the face by teammate Brock Boeser's deflected pass during a practice. And now, with his fourth injury in 18 months following his trade from the New York Rangers, Chytil has been hurt by the referee.

He is a snake bite away from joining luckless former Canuck Sami Salo, who suffered at least 40 injuries during his 15-season career but never got the credit he deserved for his toughness in always coming back until Salo's famous "balls of steel" playoff game against the Chicago Blackhawks in 2010.

"I don't even know what happened," Canuck defenceman Luke Schenn said of Chytil's latest injury. "I honestly haven't talked to anyone, so I don't know if it's bad or just precautionary. But for me, he's been one of the most impressive players and eye-opening players for me in camp — just his skill set, the way he can control the puck. Even the practices before camp, I thought he was incredible. You think to yourself: if this guy can stay healthy, another big centerman with that skill set up the middle, he's really going to help. Hopefully, it's nothing serious."

ONE'S INJURY, ANOTHER'S OPPORTUNITY

If Chytil is going to miss the start of the season, does that push a door open a little wider for 19-year-old centre Braeden Cootes to make the Canucks?

"At this moment, you don't even want to look at it like that," Cootes said after his third straight pre-season game. "You want to make sure he's OK. He's an awesome player. I remember seeing him last year in our home-opener and he was a stud. You know, health comes first and hopefully he gets healthy and we make sure that he's OK. I want to be a good teammate and I want him to be playing and playing at his best because he's a great player."

Cootes could become a great player, too. After scoring or setting up all three Vancouver goals in his first two pre-season games — losses to Seattle and Calgary — Cootes went pointless against the Oilers but did show a few offensive flashes and was part of a second-unit power play that generated a goal for Linus Karlsson.

The Canucks' fourth and final pre-season game is Saturday at Rogers Arena against the Kraken.

With Malhotra dressing most of his NHL team and leaning heavily on top centres Elias Pettersson and Marco Rossi, Cootes logged just 11:14 of ice time after starting on the fourth line between Paul Cotter and Brendan Gallagher.

"You never want to be satisfied," Cootes, who made the Canucks' opening lineup last season as an 18-year-old, said of his pre-season

body of work. "But, you know, the games I've played so far, they've been solid. They've been pretty good. You know, I'm a young guy and they have a plan for me. I know that I'm going to trust them whatever happens. I'm going to have a good attitude and just work as hard as I can."

Cotter, who signed in July as a free agent from the New Jersey Devils, took shifts at centre after Chytil left the game. Projected fourth-line centre Aatu Raty did not play on Thursday, and the Canucks also have forward Max Sasson as a centre option.

FIRST LINE TOPS

Although it did not score at even strength, Vancouver's first line of Pettersson between wingers Jake DeBrusk and Karlsson was dominant territorially against an Oilers lineup that could have as few as four players advance to their NHL team for Tuesday's opener in Edmonton against the Canucks.

Shots were 9-2 for the Canucks when Pettersson's line was on the ice at five-on-five, and shot attempts were 16-4. Pettersson also led his team with four hits and went 16-4 on faceoffs.

"Obviously when you have quality O-zone time, it means that you're doing things right," Malhotra said. "But the bigger picture stuff, getting pucks to the interior, attacking seams, getting pucks on net is the bigger issue. As a group overall, I think we can do a much better job offensively of getting inside and delivering pucks (to the net)."

CHRIS DRIEDGER IS A GOALIE

With a four-game pre-season and two NHL goalies to prepare for the regular season, Chris Driedger knew his professional tryout with the Canucks might not include, you know, actual game time.

But after Nikita Tolopilo played the first two periods, surrendering goals to Oilers Isaac Howard and Quinn Hutson, Malhotra gave Driedger the third period on Thursday and the 32-year-old journeyman stopped all six shots he faced.

"I'm always grateful to get on NHL ice," Driedger said. "I played a couple of times in this barn before, but never in the home net, obviously, so it was good to get in there. It was just fun to get in there and do my thing."

Kevin Lankinen, the Canucks' projected starter due to Thatcher Demko's ongoing recovery from hip surgery, is expected to play the final dress rehearsal on Saturday.

POSITIVELY POSITIVE

The Canucks are 0-3 in the pre-season and have scored four goals in three hours. This week has provided a glimpse of how the team will be challenged this season to maintain the positivity and energy the organization has generated at the early stages of its rebuild.

"That's where it all starts," Schenn, the 36-year-old defenceman, said. "If you turn on each other and get negative. . . obviously, you're going to go the other way. We're building one day at a time. I've heard that the results don't matter but, obviously, to the players in this room, the results matter. We're all professional athletes, and, you know, we show up every day to try to figure out ways to win. That won't change."

"It was our first game together here. It's easy to sit and see that (the Oilers) did not have a full lineup, but. . . we did some things that we can build off of. We'll show up to work tomorrow and carry it back out on Saturday."

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Sportsnet.ca / Real Kyper's Trade Board 1.0: A first look at who could move this season

Nick Kypreos

If there is a prevailing theme at the start of this NHL season, it's that 'player empowerment' is having a major impact.

We are now living in a new era of NHL hockey. The days of Lou Lamoriello telling you how long your hair can be, or managers sending you to the minors just because you looked at them the wrong way are long gone. The modern NHL star is no longer just a passenger; they are the drivers of organizations. They have the keys, they have the map, and they now believe they are in position to dictate exactly where they are going and how fast they want to get there.

There is no better example of this than Quinn Hughes, who was traded to Minnesota last year and is now beginning the 2026-27 season with an expiring contract. Then there's Brady Tkachuk, who was traded to Florida over the summer to team up with his brother Matthew. They are both elite talents who flexed their muscles and leveraged short-term contracts to land in what they consider more favourable environments.

But what happens when a star player attempts to change his existing circumstances while in the middle of a long-term contract?

Connor Hellebuyck and Dylan Larkin are two examples of players who committed to their organizations with seven- and eight-year contracts, respectively, and were given full no-trade clauses but both have now publicly acknowledged they'd like to move on to new horizons.

Unlike players who could test the UFA waters in 12-24 months, Hellebuyck and Larkin both still have five years remaining on their contracts and the fan bases in Winnipeg and Detroit seem to have very little patience for what's happening here given the players accepted the security of these long-term deals only to pivot a few years later. Fans, rightfully, view this as a betrayal.

Making matters worse, the GMs who have to navigate these scenarios are restricted to a limited number of options.

Wings rookie interim GM Shawn Horcoff, who only was empowered recently, is in a delicate position, having to balance Detroit's goal to make progress with the fact the team's No. 1 centre and former captain wants out. Larkin certainly didn't do himself any favours with his recent press conference, where he didn't elaborate on exactly why he wanted to leave and didn't seem to have any ideas on how to manage the fallout of his request being made public. He noted that Detroit fans deserved answers then failed to provide them. Awkward to say the least.

Montreal took a crack at convincing Larkin to come and help Nick Suzuki, but Larkin still has no interest in coming to Canada.

In the Meantime, Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff seems boxed in with Hellebuyck's full no-move clause and a tricky goalie market. It's already hard enough to attract UFAs to Winnipeg, so how do you get another team's top-six player or goalie to lift their own trade protection to go to Manitoba? For now, the answer to that question is: you don't.

Making the Jets' situation even more difficult is Hellebuyck's age. As one executive told me: "He's 33, with a reputation for not delivering in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, so it's challenging to match a return value with his current and future value."

All the while, teams like Buffalo, Utah and San Jose continue to monitor the Hellebuyck situation as multiple teams try and convince the Jets to focus on acquiring their blue-chip prospects instead of roster players.

Between Winnipeg's asking price on Hellebuyck, Larkin's current injury, and teams generally wanting to assess their own rosters out of camp, both players seem destined for a lengthy holding pattern.

Some other notes on trade thoughts around the league:

- With so much attention on Hellebuyck, very few are asking what this could mean for Mark Scheifele. If their MVP goalie is on the way out, the

Jets are beginning to ask themselves if it's better keeping the 33-year-old Scheifele, or looking for an impressive trade package that could reignite the Jets and take them in a different direction for the next decade.

The Canadiens are among the teams asking about Scheifele after failing on Larkin. They have their eye on him as the perfect 1-2 punch to support top line centre Nick Suzuki. It would, of course, be a hefty price that could include prospect Michael Hage, or 23-year-old NHLer Oliver Kapanen, among others (Kirby Dach is wrapped up in this too). And the thought of adding Sam Montembeault to work in tandem with Stuart Skinner is intriguing for Winnipeg, because they then wouldn't need to get a goalie back in a Hellebuyck trade.

- Now, can someone answer why Quinn Hughes hasn't signed in Minnesota just yet? Is it that he doesn't want to stay past this season, or that he's waiting for an AAV

offer over \$20 million just like Cale Makar? Or is he just buying time until he unites with his brothers next?

- Kirill Marchenko, who desperately wants out of Columbus, should have an easier time doing so since he doesn't have any trade protection on his contract, so it comes down to the Blue Jackets finding a deal they like. Furthermore, he's a pending RFA with arbitration rights so a team trading for him won't just be getting a one-year rental. Toronto, Edmonton and Montreal seem poised to try and make something work with Columbus.

- In Vancouver, there is still plenty to watch out for. Brock Boeser may be in the most difficult predicament of all because he's a pure shooter, but who is the centre that will reliably get him the puck this season? He needs to find ways to get the puck in the back of the net, build his trade stock back up, and position himself to be a trade candidate between now and the deadline in March.

And then there's Elias Pettersson, who we're still monitoring on the trade front. Making \$11.6 million against the cap, Vancouver would probably need to eat about \$2-2.5 million of that in a deal, but teams are beginning to come around to the idea of acquiring Pettersson. The inflation occurring around the league has changed the calculation on how much Pettersson needs to produce to justify a \$9-10 million cap hit. Even with reduced output in the 55-to-60-point range, Pettersson is becoming more attractive given where the cap is going.

The flurry of high-profile trade requests and contract standoffs as of camp makes a late-September trade board rather relevant. Usually we don't start seeing major player talk until closer to American Thanksgiving or the quarter mark, which arrives earlier now that the regular season begins in September. But the sheer amount of "unhappy situations" lingering has kept the off-season rumour mill spinning at a mid-season pace.

For my first trade board, I'll look at players who can solidly be designated as trade candidates right now, plus other players who are on my "watch list" to see how they and their teams perform in the early-goings, and how that may affect their own availability.

TOP TRADE CANDIDATES

His trade request was made at the end of last season, and though the Jets had many talks with teams around the draft and into the summer, they ultimately haven't received the right offer for him yet. Now, Hellebuyck has not reported to camp and will sit out the start of the season waiting for a resolution, but it's not often a star, award-winning goalie of this stature is moved so it won't be an easy trade to make.

A scrum with local reporters did nothing to calm the rumours around Marchenko. The 26-year-old's production has exploded the past two years, making him a real difference maker who would be able to net a nice return for Columbus. Though he is a pending RFA for next summer, he's only one more year away from becoming UFA eligible.

A Stanley Cup champion in his rookie season, Nikishin is different than others on this trade board in that he doesn't have any real control over his situation. The 24-year-old blueliner isn't at camp and he doesn't have a contract, but he's an RFA who cannot receive an offer sheet. He either has to sign with the Hurricanes, or wait for a deal to be found and then sign. There's lots of chatter about this delay being about a massive asking price from Nikishin's side, but that isn't necessarily the case. This is more about getting an opportunity in a market to be a top-three defenceman, no different to comparable players like Brandt Clarke in Los



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Angeles (\$7.4 million), Simon Nemec in Calgary (\$7.25 million) and Pavel Mintyukov in Anaheim (\$7.2 million).

His trade request went public, his captaincy was stripped, but Larkin is at camp and participated in practice Wednesday. This is an important trade the Red Wings can't afford to undervalue. Given he still has five years left on his contract, it's not necessarily a trade that has to happen quickly either.

A carryover from last season's board, Robertson's RFA contract status with Dallas was resolved when he signed a one-year, \$12 million deal. That will get him back on the ice in a Stars jersey for 2026-27, but what happens after that? He's eligible to extend with Dallas Jan. 1, but that likely won't happen because under CBA rules any no-trade clause wouldn't kick in until his next contract does. That means Dallas could sign him long-term and still trade him to Seattle, where he has already rejected a move to. Robertson is completely on track to become a UFA next July or get traded if he doesn't sign a new deal somewhere before then. Something to watch out for: Word is the Penguins' acquisition of his younger brother Nick was done for a number of reasons, including the chance it will help lure Jason to town either in a trade or through free agency. Pittsburgh is one market Jason has tremendous interest in.

TRADE WATCH LIST

The Jets want to compete, but are they in a position to do that still? If the season starts slowly, urgency to react might pick up. The Jets may be asking themselves if the Hellebuyck trade request is the best time to pivot the direction of the overall roster. As mentioned above, if Winnipeg can get a great package for Scheifele that includes a goalie, it would take the pressure off needing to get a netminder back in a Hellebuyck move.

Unlike Larkin or Marchenko, Hughes is saying all the right things about Minnesota, but until an extension is signed he has to be a trade candidate to watch. What's the hold up? It can't only be money as Minnesota is willing to go to a \$20 million AAV for him. How long can the Wild go before they have to trade him or, if a contract doesn't come, would they hang on to him as if he's a rental?

Some damage control has been done here by both GM Don Waddell and Werenski after it seemed like a trade was imminent in June. But once you get past that smoke, what's really changed? He's got two years left on his contract, we don't know where the Blue Jackets are going as a team, he's 29 years old and wants to be chasing a Stanley Cup, but hasn't tasted the playoffs since 2020.

After rumours swirled about his availability last season, I'm keeping Knies as a player to watch because, aside from his size and speed, the greatest asset right now for Toronto is that there are no trade restrictions on Knies' contract. The noise will not go away with a new season. Not many top-six forwards around the league are without any trade protection and if the Leafs are still looking to land a big fish, Knies is a candidate to go the other way.

Horcoff only recently was green lighted to take over and make decisions in Detroit and he's walking into a tough situation. Right now, he could use a win after the team has been getting beat up for a while. DeBrincat would be that easy win if Horcoff could get an extension done, but until that happens this player is one to watch for in trade rumours since he's on an expiring contract and could be a UFA next summer.

Nobody did Dunn a bigger favour than Bo Byram, who signed a long-term deal with Chicago this past summer with a \$12.5 million AAV. Dunn also knows that Seattle's opening bid for Jason Robertson was a \$15.6 million AAV on an eight-year deal. Dunn falls into the same category as DeBrincat. He's a pending UFA, so until he inks a new deal his name will be out there. We know he can get a minimum of six years elsewhere if he goes to market, and likely get a number in the neighbourhood of Byram's contract.

What sort of team will the Penguins be this season? They were able to get back to the playoffs in 2026, but can they do it again? Karlsson is coming off a very solid season and now goes into the final year of his contract where his base salary is just \$1.5 million. If the Penguins fall out of it, Karlsson becomes a very real trade candidate provided he lifts his NMC to play for a Stanley Cup-contending team.

Another carryover from last season, Binnington starts as a player to watch because he's heading into the last year of his contract with the Blues. But until Hellebuyck is traded, Binnington takes a back seat in the goalie market.

The Bruins are in a real pickle with 29-year-old Zacha and teams like Nashville, Columbus, Philadelphia and Montreal are watching closely. Boston could commit now to a long-term deal in around a \$9 million AAV, or wait it out to see what type of start they get out of the gate. If it's a slow one, Zacha could skyrocket as a top trade candidate this season.

They still would like to find a way to move him, but it's harder to do that now. Still a situation to watch as the season gets going.

There is no urgency for the Canucks to make a move here, but teams are taking an interest in Pettersson again. If the Canucks retain money and trade Pettersson at a \$9 million cap hit, they might be able to find a deal that puts them in a better place to rebuild.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.25.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Jets' Viggo Bjorck facing hefty expectations, big-league adjustments

Jeff Hamilton

WINNIPEG — Despite a growing number of critics, the Winnipeg Jets remain steadfast in their belief that a major rebound is on the horizon.

This will be no easy task, of course.

Star goaltender Connor Hellebuyck did the Jets no favours by making his trade request public and refusing to report to camp. The coinciding suspension has cast a dark cloud over the entire organization, only adding to the disappointment of last year's 35-35-12 effort that saw Winnipeg finish seventh in the Central Division and 26th league-wide.

While many outsiders increasingly view the Jets as a former contender clinging to a once-achievable goal — with the team's confidence, stemming from a President's Trophy in 2025, only delaying an eventual rebuild — the belief inside the room appears firmly intact.

"We still have a lot of good pieces," Jets captain Adam Lowry said. "(There's) the belief that a lot of us didn't live up to our expectations last year. We're going to find our game again, and we're going to get back to where we want to be."

But if a return to regular-season greatness is actually in the cards, a lot has to go right. Perhaps nothing is more important to achieving that goal than finding a two-way, second-line centre, a position that has evaded the franchise for years.

The Jets have appointed the rookie to the job, asking Bjorck not only to quickly adapt to the best league in the world, but to actively drive a second line that has struggled to support the scoring of Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor on the top unit. Scheifele and Connor, along with linemate Gabriel Valardi, accounted for 105 — or 45 per cent — of the club's 231 goals last season.

Bjorck was a heralded prospect long before Winnipeg selected the Swedish forward with the eighth overall pick in June. What he lacks in size — listed at a modest 5-foot-nine and 180 pounds — he makes up for with tenacity and a high hockey IQ.

The hype has followed Bjorck to Winnipeg. Few rookies have been viewed in such a favourable light upon arrival, with praise coming from the coaching staff and players alike. After the first couple weeks of camp, there's a strong feeling the Jets aren't just hoping he can fill the massive hole, but that they're actively cheering it on.

Final cuts ahead of the Jets' regular-season opener in Boston on Oct. 2 won't be finalized until next week, but Bjorck's spot is all but confirmed. Head coach Scott Arniel put him in the top six at the start of camp — with a veteran in Vilardi and fellow Swede Isak Rosén as his wingers — and has remained committed through camp and three pre-season games.

That begs the question: has this cushy assignment been fully earned, or do the Jets simply lack any better options?

So far, Arniel has preached patience, given the steep learning curve. He also knows Bjorck will need time and space to adjust to an NHL pace where both come at a premium.

"We're just trying to gradually have him progress," Arniel said a week into camp. "And then it's also just him getting comfortable."

Bjorck hasn't dazzled in his two pre-season games against Edmonton and Colorado, where he averaged more than 17 minutes of ice time. But he also hasn't looked out of place either. His quickness is evident, and his decision-making with the puck is equally strong.

While Arniel has been rightfully patient, the NHL schedule is no friend. Under the league's new collective bargaining agreement, training camps have been reduced from nearly three weeks to 13 days, with only a four-game pre-season schedule, down from eight.

"You don't have the time ... to do longer, in-depth stuff," Arniel added. "So, it's every day trying to take advantage of showing them stuff and talking about different things."

Scouts have praised Bjorck's fearlessness and processing speed, and they collectively agree he was a steal at No. 8. What's helped Bjorck adjust more quickly is his experience playing against grown men back home — a significant advantage over prospects arriving from Canadian junior leagues or US colleges.

Bjorck made his professional debut at 16, scoring in his only regular-season game with Djurgårdens IF, in Sweden's second-tier league. The next year, he made the jump to the top club, finishing with six goals and 15 points in 42 games while playing on an "all-junior" line with Victor Eklund and Anton Frondell.

More recently, he made history as the youngest player ever to suit up at the men's world championship at 18 years, 65 days. Skating on a line with Detroit Red Wings forward Lucas Raymond and 2026 second-overall pick Ivan Stenberg, Bjorck registered one goal and five assists in eight games.

"You can see it," Arniel said. "Him having experience in the Swedish men's league and then also in the worlds, he's been able to play against older guys that have that ability to close fast."

While his experience overseas should help with the transition, the physicality and speed in the NHL are undoubtedly a different beast. That increased level of difficulty has already caught up with Bjorck a few times.

In the win over Colorado, Bjorck felt the full force of a bone-rattling hit from six-foot-four prospect Gustav Stjernberg. But Arniel said he's only grown from his mistakes and is getting better every day.

"There were a couple times the other night that we did have a little chat about, that don't put yourself in too many of those situations because there's some really big guys and fast guys that will be coming as these games get harder and harder and more of the true lineups we're going to see," Arniel said. "But he is elusive. His head is always up. He's always got a good idea what's coming, what's around him."

Then there are the adjustments off the ice.

Bjorck is living in a new country where few, aside from a couple of teammates, speak his native language. Planning to live alone in an apartment downtown, he'll also be responsible for doing his own laundry and cooking his own meals.

While that might sound like simple chores, living independently from home or a billet family while navigating the NHL lifestyle is among the greatest challenges for players turning pro.

"I guess we'll wait and see," Bjorck said with a chuckle when asked about balancing life on and off the ice. "But I think I'm ready."

Bjorck has a maturity beyond his 18 years. When asked directly how he was handling the pressure of centring the second line, expecting a bit of hesitation, he was hardly fazed.

Instead, Bjorck leaned on his time in the Swedish Elite League. European leagues might not be at the same level as the NHL, he said, but they're no cakewalk either.

Perhaps most telling, he refused to let the pressure of the moment ruin living out a childhood dream.

"Obviously, the NHL is another step up," Bjorck said. "Plays happen a bit quicker here, and (you have) a little less time. I just keep working, get used to a new environment every day that comes. It's going to come eventually."

Bjorck's father has already visited for a week, and both his parents will be at his first home game. He also has a room full of teammates keen to support him and a Jets staff working tirelessly to ensure a smooth transition.

Vilardi has already proven himself as an on-ice support system by stepping up immediately to defend Bjorck after Stjernberg's hit. Having Rosén around to speak Swedish also helps a lot, though Vilardi has asked them not to tune him out on the ice.



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Lowry, once a wide-eyed rookie himself, said there is no one-size-fits-all approach to transitioning rookies to the NHL. But after two weeks, he's been impressed with how Bjorck has handled the heavy workload.

"Everyone's personality is different, but it's about getting to know them, making sure they have a voice, making sure they understand the systems, making sure the adjustment is as easy as possible because there's going to be growing pains," the captain said. "As leaders or just as teammates, I don't think it's one guy's job. It's important that everyone checks in."

Arniel understands the stakes of this experiment. The Jets have been unable to fill the second-line centreman hole since trading away Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Los Angeles Kings, with the likes of Lowry, Jonathan Toews, Sean Monahan and, most recently, Vladimir Namestikov all earning a shot with mixed results.

Only time will tell if Bjorck is the right answer. But whether speaking from confidence or underlying desperation, Arniel made his case Thursday as the Jets prepared to take off to Colorado for one final tune-up game.

"The one thing about Viggo is it's between his ears. He does get things that way easy; he picks things up quick," Arniel said. "I've noticed it right from development camp ... his hockey sense is really, really strong. We're not trying to give him the overload every single day. We're trying to let him breathe a little bit, but he's been great about picking stuff up."



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Sportsnet.ca / 'Just fires me up': Maple Leafs' MacEwen fighting for Lorentz's job

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Zack MacEwen stood tall in the Toronto Maple Leafs dressing room late Wednesday. Sweat was dripping off his tattoos and party-at-the-back hockey hair. An ice pack was strapped to a limb, soothing a shot block and dripping on the floor.

The fifth-liner had just jumped up in the rush to finish a pretty feed from Easton Cowan. He'd fought Hayden Hodgson, another rugged fringe winger he knows from his Ottawa days, then got booted late for sticking up for Jake McCabe when Hodgson refused to lose quietly.

MacEwen's PIMs (15) outweighed his TOI (11:11), and he couldn't be more pleased to defeat his former Senators squad, splash the game sheet, and prove his worth to his new club in one last pre-season gasp.

"Felt good," MacEwen said. "I think it's a bit of a statement game for me. Obviously, I'm trying to insert myself here, and I feel like I did a good job of that tonight."

So good, in fact, that the Maple Leafs elected to waive good soldier Steven Lorentz Thursday and promote MacEwen to the fourth line in their final skate before jetting to Arizona for a weekend of team bonding.

"He was good on the forecheck, right? He gets pucks in. He skates well for a big man. He finishes his checks. So, that's what we need from him," head coach Jim Hiller said post-game. "And then, if it gets rough or somebody's trying to take liberties, that's also part of his job. And so, I thought he did both things really well tonight."

MacEwen (six-foot-four, 226 pounds) saw Hodgson running around, trying to stir up chaos in a 6-1 pre-season blowout and answered the bell without a blink.

"I mean, you always want to play well against the team that you played for. It's kind of a game that you have marked in the calendar," MacEwen explained. "And as far as that stuff goes, I know him, and he knows me. I think he's trying to make a statement for himself. I think he went a little bit too far at the end. Like, he doesn't really have a lot of respect for the game doing that s---. I'm sorry — stuff. But it's part of the game. You know, tensions run high, and it's pre-season. People are trying to make a statement. Everybody's trying to make the NHL."

Congratulations, Zack. You made it.

This after playing a measly three games for the New Jersey Devils last season and having his season end in November due to a fluke ACL tear. This after signing a team-friendly, two-year, \$1.75-million contract as a free agent, and a gruelling summer of training in Halifax along the likes of Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon and Brad Marchand.

"Coming off the year I had last year and getting back into that kind of the game within the game stuff, that's part of my game," said MacEwen, moved by Scotiabank Arena's roar of approval when he dropped the mitts. "Having that go the way it went tonight, it was special. And hearing the fans like that, it just fires me up."

Fired his teammates up, too.

"Mac did an awesome job tonight. Scored a goal," McCabe said, his praise unprompted. "Blocked a shot. Got up in the rush. Cow makes a great play to him. It's nice to see players like Mac get rewarded: a big fight, sick up for his teammates ... unbelievable night."

Lorentz, also 30, had a decent night in Ottawa, too. Scored a goal. But he is a gentler sort, and, unlike most of John Chayka's role-playing forwards, he was signed by the former GM.

"Obviously (Chayka) has added some grit, some guys that are established in the league, some guys who aren't afraid to get their noses dirty — and that's exactly what we need," Lorentz said recently. "It's nice to go play with guys who aren't afraid to go into those corners, start some scrums, go to the net and play a dirty style of hockey."

That Lorentz carries a heavier cap it (\$1.35 million) suggests he'll clear waivers easier. But now he'll have to earn his way back onto a Leafs team for which he contributed 19 points and played 80 games (both career highs) in 2024-25.

Lorentz — a diehard Leafs fan since childhood — took a step back in 2025-26, dealing with healthy scratches and self-doubt.

"There were times I was struggling with confidence and almost trying too hard at times. That can throw you off your game. I think you have to go back and simplify," he said. "Rather than thinking you have to go make a big splash and try to run every guy in sight, you just have to play the right way."

MacEwen's setback was more physical, but the Charlottetown, P.E.I., native devoted himself to the long rehab that comes with ACL surgery, weighed multiple offers, and picked Toronto based on geography and Chayka's willingness to give him two years.

"I did everything I could to get back early, and now I'm back," MacEwen said. "I'm feeling great. So, just knowing that work I put in is coming to fruition is a good feeling. And, you know, I'm just gonna keep building on it, getting better."

And getting father up the Leafs' depth chart, thanks to one night of soft hands and hard knuckles.

"Things change quickly in this business," MacEwen said Wednesday. "I feel like I did my job tonight. Just see what happens."

One-Timers: Nick Paul (undisclosed) left Wednesday's win early and did not practice Thursday. Hiller told reporters he is "not overly concerned" about Paul's injury but is unsure if his third-line centre will play in Tuesday's opener. Third-line wing Colton Sissons tells us he prefers playing centre, so it's a simple shift. ... Matthew Knies wants to earn his way back onto PP1, but in the meantime? "We have a pretty darn good second unit." That's where Gavin McKenna plays, too. ... Auston Matthews on Leafs training camp relocating to Scottsdale for a few days: "Not complaining. It's in my hometown."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.25.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / 'You've got to produce': Flames' Connor Zary knows the score on his role

Eric Francis

CALGARY — Connor Zary knows the clock is ticking, and he's ready to rewrite the script.

After bursting onto the scene as an electrifying call-up three seasons ago, the skilled Calgary Flames winger has seen his offensive momentum stall out.

Beset by injuries and a lingering lack of production, the 2020 first-round pick finds himself at a career crossroads.

And he's the first one to point it out.

"This is a big season for me," said the 24-year-old, who has two seasons left on his three-year deal worth \$3.7 million annually.

"You want to either build off what you did last year or change the narrative around yourself, and I think it was a bit of a down year for me.

"I think I know who I am as a player, but it's going out there and showing it, and it's doing it and proving it. You've got to produce. You've got to do it on a night-by-night basis, trying to help the team win and trying to create plays that create scoring chances. That's what I have to do, is prove that to people and prove that to myself, and know I have the ability and the confidence to do that."

Indeed, things haven't worked out as well as he or the organization had hoped when they drafted the Saskatoon native 24th overall in 2020, prompting word to leak this summer he was being shopped around by GM Craig Conroy.

There were no takers, setting the stage for Zary to up his stock here.

"I love being here, it's home for me," said Zary, dispelling any notion he'd rather be elsewhere.

"My brother lives here, and this is the sixth year I've been with this organization. So there's nothing that for any reason I would say I don't want to be here. I think that's totally wrong, and that's never been the narrative."

He heard the rumours, did his best to distance himself from social media over the summer, and retreated to Saskatoon to surround himself with family, friends and a skating coach.

What he couldn't ignore, however, was his own performance.

Now that his future revolves around point production, not potential, Zary is the first to admit that last season was a disappointment. With just 12 goals and 25 points in 74 games, he realized he simply wasn't as physically prepared as he thought he was coming off previous ailments.

"I think it was a bit of a down year," said the former Kamloops Blazers captain, who was drafted as a centre, but used in Calgary as a winger.

"You think you're ready coming off injury, but I think it just had a slow start, and that kind of ate away. Maybe my strength wasn't quite there. But I feel like now I had a really good summer. I know I did the right things, and I want to get right after it from the start."

With that in mind, Zary altered his summer regimen, changing his diet and leaning heavily into cardio and power skating.

Head coach Ryan Huska acknowledges that unlocking Zary's full potential comes down to execution, pace and capitalizing on golden opportunities — much like Zary did as a rookie when he and Martin Pospisil were early-season call-up sensations on a line with Nazem Kadri.

"He had a little bit of a tough stretch from that point forward with some injuries along the way, but he's a very gifted player," said Huska. "Our challenge with Connor is to find a way to use a little bit more pace and

speed in his game to allow him to be around the puck more because when he has the puck, he makes the right decisions."

While there has been a chicken/egg debate over the opportunities Zary has been given as a bottom-six regular, Huska plans to open the season with Zary on the second line with Ryan Strome and Yegor Sharangovich.

"I don't think there's a narrative that has to be changed with him," said Huska. "I feel like we know what he is. We know he's a very good hockey player, and what we would like to see is him get off to a great start. We need that from him as a team, and I think he needs that for himself as well, so he can really, really dig in on that belief that he's a great player and he's someone that can help our team win."

At the end of the day, the excuses are gone.

Conroy, who drafted Zary, still believes in his raw abilities, and the coaching staff is handing him the offensive reins.

Now, it's up to Zary to make good on the opportunity, and prove that his best hockey in a Flames sweater is still ahead of him.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.25.2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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TSN.CA / 'Our captain lives there': Matthews grateful Leafs bringing bonding trip to Arizona

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs practised at the Ford Performance Centre on Thursday before travelling to Arizona to begin a team-bonding trip. The team's next practice in Toronto will be on Monday.

Auston Matthews was "pretty excited" to find out the Leafs planned to switch the site of their annual team-bonding trip from Muskoka to Arizona.

"It's going to be a lot of fun," the 29-year-old centre from Scottsdale, Ariz. said before heading to the airport on Thursday. "I think the guys are excited. I feel like the bar's been set pretty high, so hopefully we'll be able to meet it."

The Leafs wanted to try something new this year and it's obvious why they're willing to make the journey to the Valley of the Sun.

"The fact that we're heading all the way to Arizona, you might say, '[Why] so far?'" head coach Jim Hiller said. "Our captain lives there and I know he's got some plans for the guys and the weather's pretty good (sunny with a high of 34 degrees on Friday). So, we'll take it. We'll enjoy it and we'll take the positives that come with it."

Matthews will host the players at his place during the trip.

"He's got a good setup," noted Phoenix native Matthew Knies. "He's got a little sport court and everything so get the games going and, yeah, just watching TV with the guys and enjoy it. This is a pretty unique opportunity for us to kind of get close to each other, form some camaraderie. It's short, but it's good momentum for the season."

Hiller stressed they are not sacrificing any on-ice time due to the trip. The team will hold a practice at Mullett Arena in Tempe on Saturday before heading home to Toronto that evening.

No one around the Leafs seems overly concerned about dealing with long flights and a time change only days before things get going for real.

"There's still going to be time to get back and get adjusted here and ready for the regular season," said Knies.

Toronto opens the regular season with consecutive home games on Tuesday against the Montreal Canadiens and Wednesday against the New York Islanders.

"There's definitely some time between now and the first game," Matthews said. "And I'm definitely not complaining that it's in my hometown."

Third-line centre Nick Paul did not take part in practice after leaving Wednesday's game with an undisclosed issue.

"That's nothing I think that we're overly concerned about, but we have to take it day by day," Hiller said. "That's what I would leave it with."

Will Paul be ready for the season opener?

"I can't say that," Hiller acknowledged. "I can't say that with certainty."

Acquired in a trade with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Paul is quickly emerging as a popular figure in the dressing room.

"He's great," said Matthews. "We've obviously been playing in the same division for a long time, and he's always really hard to play against. And you can just tell he's such a team-first guy and just a competitor. He just goes out there and he does his job. He works extremely hard and keeps things light and keeps things fun as well. But definitely a guy that you really enjoy having on your side."

Colton Sissons moved to centre at practice with Bo Groulx joining the third line.

Following Wednesday's game, Hiller described Knies' performance during the pre-season as "OK."

"There's more there, for sure," the coach concluded.

Knies did not hit the scoresheet in his two exhibition outings and generated just two shots on net despite playing on the top line with Matthews and Jack Roslovic.

"It's been fine," the 23-year-old winger said of his training camp. "I think my game kind of excels when there's a lot more predictability and a lot more north-south play and, you know, playing simple, playing hard, and I think that's kind of what you find in a regular season. So, yeah, I'm just trying to get my feet under me, get good puck touches, make good plays, and hopefully in the regular season, you know, I can kind of keep to my game and just play to my strengths."

Hiller spoke with Knies on the ice before practice began and struck a more positive tone with reporters when asked about the chat.

"We watched video before the practice started, and he was in most of the positive clips," Hiller noted. "And it was some of the stuff we talked about, skating back, lifting sticks, winning puck battles. So those types of plays, sometimes you get rewarded on the scoresheet with those, but sometimes you just don't, and he led our team in those plays and those areas last night. So just let him know that that was a positive game for him and he can build on that."

Toronto's top line bounced back after a quiet opening pre-season game with Matthews and Roslovic both scoring during the 6-1 win over the Ottawa Senators.

"I thought the last game was obviously much better for us as far as just creating more offence and sustaining more offence," Matthews said. "And just want to keep trending in that direction and continue to get better and all that."

Roslovic's goal on Wednesday came on the power play.

Knies is hoping to earn his way back onto the top power-play unit. He spent most of last season as the net-front presence with that group, but was bumped to the second group by Roslovic's arrival.

"I mean, I think every time I've been here, you know, I've kind of been on both [units]," Knies noted. "I think we have a pretty darn good second unit with those guys. So, yeah, just try and stay prepared, play to my strengths, play around the net, try and create things and hope I can earn my way onto the first one. But, you know, I think, again, our second one is pretty lethal."

The second unit features Morgan Rielly, Easton Cowan, Paul, Gavin McKenna and Knies.

After Paul exited the game, there were some different line combinations on Wednesday night and McKenna got a couple shifts in Knies' spot beside Matthews.

"It was good," the rookie sensation said. "We had a good couple shifts together and one ended up in the back of the net. So, yeah, he played unbelievable, I think we all saw. And, yeah, to be out there with him, you're always kind of looking for him in a spot so he can let his shot go. I think he was looking for me out there as well. So I had a lot of fun playing out there."

The feeling was mutual.

"Yeah, it felt good," Matthews said. "I mean, the few shifts we had together, we had the puck a lot and making things happen in the offensive zone."

McKenna finished the night with one assist and a plus-three rating.

"He's just a really, really smart player," Matthews said. "I mean, there's times where he has the puck and he does stuff with it that not many people can do, but then there's also times where he just makes the right simple play and it ends up creating so much space for the other guy ... His IQ is extremely high."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Leafs placed Steven Lorentz on waivers on Thursday. Zack MacEwen, who had a goal and a fight in Wednesday's game, skated in his spot on the fourth line at practice.

"We like the physicality," Hiller said. "I mean, I know he scored last night, but I think what was equally or probably more important to us was, you know, there was some stuff going on, and he was able to get in there fairly quickly and do his job."

When Ottawa's Hayden Hodgson went after Toronto defenceman Jake McCabe near the end of the game, MacEwen jumped in immediately.

"Mac did an awesome job," McCabe praised. "Scored a goal. Blocked a shot, got up in the rush and [Cowan] makes a great play to him. It's nice to see players like Mac get rewarded. A big fight, stick up for his teammates ... unbelievable night."

MacEwen, who sustained an ACL tear and was limited to three games with the New Jersey Devils last season, signed a two-year deal (\$875,000 cap hit) with the Leafs in the summer.

Defenceman Nick Blankenburg, who is at camp on a pro tryout, continues to skate with Toronto's main group and is attending the team-bonding trip. All signs point to the 28-year-old signing a contract soon.

"Well, I mean, he's an NHL defenceman," Hiller said. "We know that. So we were fortunate that he was able to get over here and come to our camp."

Blankenburg produced 24 points in 61 games last season split between the Nashville Predators and Colorado Avalanche. He scored one goal in five playoff games with the Avalanche.

Dakota Joshua skated as the extra forward at practice as he continues to work his way back from a lingering core injury. The winger stayed on the ice well after practice to do some extra skating.