



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

The News & Observer

The Canes' banner rises amid cheers — and Raleigh's championship memories return

Esther Frances

Under rows and rows of energetic, chanting fans, members of the Carolina Hurricanes stood with their arms each other's shoulders, basking in the glory of their hard work all season culminated in one form: a banner that reads, "Stanley Cup Champions."

The Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday raised their ceremonial banner to celebrate defeating the Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup Final in June.

During the ceremony, Carolina Hurricanes players emerged one by one from behind a light show of red and blasts from a smoke machine. Players held up their sticks to the fans as Caniacs gave wholehearted applause for each player — and a bit more for notable playoff heroes like goalie Brandon Bussi and captain Jordan Staal.

The players gathered at the middle of the ice around the Canes logo and led the crowd in a classic Storm Surge: a slow, over-the-head clap that slowly gets faster and faster until the sound blends into a fixed applause.

They then gathered and embraced at the blue line under a chorus of "Let's go Canes!" as the banner was raised.

Canes staff members, including athletic trainers and coaches, were also introduced one at a time while fans clapped and cheered. When head coach Rod Brind'Amour was recognized, he received a standing ovation.

The banner raised on Tuesday joins another that was hoisted in 2006, when the Canes won the Stanley Cup Championship with Brind'Amour as the team's captain.

A photo slideshow played in Lenovo Center that depicted fans inside and outside the stadium throughout their playoff run.

The Florida Panthers — the Canes' opponent on Tuesday and Stanley Cup winners in 2024 and 2025 — watched as the arena celebrated the championship.

The Canes fell to the Panthers 1-0 in overtime.

Panthers head coach Paul Maurice told reporters that it was "real important" for his team to witness the Canes' banner raising.

"We have a history with Florida of supporting celebrations of players and certainly the championships for teams," he said. "We want to be a part of it to show our respect for the great accomplishment."

Veteran Canes player Jordan Martinook told reporters on Monday that their championship ring was a cool keepsake and memory to have. He said the banner raising ceremony would "probably be emotional."

"A lot of memories will be in your head, but then obviously you're going to see the banner go up, and then the lights will come on, and then it's another hockey game, another season opener," Martinook said. "So it'll be exciting. I know the fans will be crazy."

'The fans will be crazy.'

Ten minutes after the Lenovo Center doors opened, spirited fans decked out in red and black began flooding the seats. A crowd on either side of the Canes' cage slowly gathered to watch the players during warm-ups.

Canes Crew members were handing out miniature celebratory banners for fans as they entered the stadium.

Derek Thompson, who is originally from England but has lived in North Carolina for 43 years, has followed the Canes since their inaugural season in 1997.

He said he used to travel from Raleigh to Greensboro with his wife, Barbara Thompson, for the Canes' first two years before the team moved to the capital city.

Derek Thompson said the couple attended Game 7 in June 2006 when the Canes defeated the Edmonton Oilers for the Stanley Cup.

"To do it 20 years later on the anniversary, I was like, 'Wow, that's pretty incredible,'" he said.

As he and Barbara Thompson were on their way to their season ticket seats, she said there "may be some tears" in his eyes when the team raises the banner.

She said winning the Stanley Cup is "a once-in-a-lifetime deal."

"You see them win it twice? That's pretty amazing," Barbara Thompson said.

Canes fan Erin Schmidt said that she used to come to games in the early 2000s when there "was hardly anyone there" and became a fan through purchasing Harris Teeter's discounted tickets. She said she watched the Canes win the championship at a dive bar.

"It was so crowded, and everyone had the energy," she said. "You could feel it. It was awesome."

Schmidt said she instilled the same Canes-loving energy 10 years ago into her friend, Giselle Lacuata, who lives in Boston.

At Tuesday's opening night, Lacuata and Schmidt were side by side.

Schmidt said the Canes getting to raise the banner was "very well deserved."

Lacuata added, laughing, "in Rod (Brind'Amour) we trust!"



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Panthers spoil Hurricanes' banner-raising party with late overtime victory

Chip Alexander

They rolled the Stanley Cup out, raised the Stanley Cup banner and thousands of Carolina Hurricanes fans thundered their approval and appreciation Tuesday at Lenovo Center.

And then they played hockey.

The Canes and the Florida Panthers went at it in a season opener that had little flow, little open ice, a lot of fumbled pucks, bad penalties and even worse power plays before Florida won it in overtime, 1-0.

With 4.3 seconds left on the clock.

On a last-gasp slapshot by Panthers defenseman Gus Forsling from 55 feet that somehow found its way past Canes goalie Brandon Bussi, who had played so well for so long.

It all happened so quickly that everyone in the building seemed surprised.

"I felt pretty good and then I gave up a pretty bad goal," Bussi said in a somber Canes locker room. "It might have hit our D-man, it took a weird bounce, but it was far enough out I should have kind of found it.

"For some reason I didn't get a good visual on it and it's four seconds left and we're trying to get to a shootout. I think by my standards, it's a bad goal."

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Bussi, who had 19 saves in the game, was the reason his team came away with a point in the opener. The Canes could have lost in regulation had Bussi not made a good stop on a late Niko Mikkola shot.

"He was good when he needed to be, but a tough one at the end," Brind'Amour said.

Jacob Markstrom, with 15 saves, was the winner as the former Panthers goalie returned to the Florida net for the first time since December 2013.

The Hurricanes did kill off all seven Florida power plays and nearly 12 minutes of power-play time. With winger Seth Jarvis sidelined, Logan Stankoven filled in on a penalty-kill unit and in Jarvis' normal spot and was effective.

The flip side: the Canes had six power plays, getting a few decent chances but not enough. They had an extended 5-on-3 advantage and had two shots on it but could not convert.

"The way the game looked, it wasn't a very good game to watch," Brind'Amour said. "But they made it hard on us. And when we did have opportunities, we beat it up.

"Not used to that kind of pressure. We just haven't seen it in practice and a game in preseason is half the pace of that.

Our top guys were fumbling it or their passes weren't connecting. The little plays that they normally make, they weren't making them. Or seeing them."

The first period was mostly a slumber of hockey parrying, stick battles, and dumping and chasing – until the Canes' Nicolas Deslauriers decided to change the mood.

After putting a big hit on Florida's Lars Eller, Deslauriers squared off with Bokondji Imama, dropped the gloves and had at it. Both got in some solid blows before going down, and Deslauriers was given a big ovation from the crowd, which clearly enjoyed seeing that.

"He did his job," Brind'Amour said.

For the Hurricanes, it was a night of celebration and anticipation as a new season began. For the Florida Panthers, it was the start of what they hope will lead to another banner-raising of their own.

The Canes won the Stanley Cup last season. The Panthers won the Stanley Cup in 2024 and 2025 before missing the playoffs last season. The NHL, always with an eye on ratings, saw fit to put the two on the ice together on ESPN to start the 2026-27 season.

Brind'Amour was fine with the made-for-TV matchup.

"It's exactly what you want," Brind'Amour said before the game. "This is going to shake you out of whatever thoughts you might have had coming into this one. It's a great team, we know, and they're going to be hungry. They've had five months off, which they haven't had in a long time."

The Canes had just three shots on goal in the opening period and had the first two penalties of the season. They then had five power plays in the second – including the 5-on-3 – but mishandled the puck too much, passed on some shooting looks or picked up penalties to negate them.

Carolina's Sebastian Aho did have a partial breakaway later in the second but Jacob Markstrom stopped him. Later, Eetu Luostarinen had the same for Florida, but Bussi made the stop.

The Canes' next game will be their first against a Metro Division opponent. The Washington Capitals, with Alex Ovechkin back for another season, come into the Lenovo Center on Friday.

"I think we're going to see every team's best," Bussi said. "We earned that right. So we've got to get used to that.



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Hurricanes lose 1-0 'muckfest' to Panthers in OT

Hurricanes right wing Jackson Blake can't get a 4-on-1 opportunity past Florida defenseman Gustav Forsling on a second period power play during the Panthers' season-opening 1-0 win over Carolina on Tuesday at Lenovo Center. (Stan Gilliland / North State Journal)

RALEIGH — On the night the Hurricanes raised their second Stanley Cup banner to the rafters of Lenovo Center, Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour wasn't much for celebrating after his team dropped a 1-0 overtime decision to the visiting Panthers on Tuesday night.

"We didn't grow the game tonight, that's for sure," Brind'Amour said after Florida defenseman Gustav Forsling's point shot glanced off Carolina winger Taylor Hall's stick and fooled goalie Brandon Bussi (19 saves) for the game's only goal with 4.3 seconds left in overtime.

"I felt pretty good," Bussi said, "and I gave up a pretty bad goal."

The two teams, who collectively won the last three Stanley Cups, generated little in a game Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal called "a muckfest."

"It's tough to find room out there," Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho said, "but when you do, you've got to execute, and we didn't do that today."

Nor did either team on the power play. Carolina was 0 for 6 in 8:38 of power play time — including 96 seconds at 5-on-3 — while the Panthers were even worse, going 0 for 7 in nearly 12 minutes with the man advantage, also logging time at 4-on-3 and with a two-man advantage.

"Obviously, the power play should have found a way there," Aho said. "But then again, our PK did the exact same thing to them than what they did to us."

Jacob Markstrom, playing his first game in his second stint with Florida, came into the game having won two of his 11 regular season and playoff games at Lenovo Center but posted a 15-save shutout.

But it was Forsling who was the true hero for the Panthers.

Not only did Forsling score the game's only goal, but the Florida defenseman had a few key blocks to stifle a handful of Carolina's limited chances.

The Hurricanes also shot themselves in the foot a few times.

Aho had a shorthanded breakaway in the second period, but Markstrom shut his five-hole to deny him, and Carolina's 4-on-1 counterattack in the third period was stymied by

Forsling, who blocked Jackson Blake's shot as the lone Panthers player back.

"We had a 4-on-1 and didn't get a shot on net," Brind'Amour said. "That's, to me, rust and not really being dialed in on the pace of what it is now."

A mostly uneventful first period — other than a heavyweight bout between Nic Deslauriers and Boko Imama — gave way to a penalty-filled second.

In all, nine penalties were called in the middle frame, and both teams had time at 5-on-3. But neither could dent the scoreboard, with Bussi and Markstrom making a handful of important stops to keep the score 0-0 through 40 minutes.

The third period was more of the same, and for the game at 5-on-5, Carolina registered 16 shot attempts and was credited with only one high-danger scoring chance.

"There's not a whole lot of room when you play against top caliber teams like that," Staal said. "They showed that tonight. I thought we did a good job of sticking with it and killing penalties. Just came up short at the end."

Brind'Amour said he expects his team to improve after a short preseason.

"It's going take time — a couple more games we'll see that, I'm sure," he said.

The Hurricanes held a pregame ceremony that included a Stanley Cup Storm Surge and the raising of the team's championship banner.

Staal said it was difficult to play the first game of the regular season immediately after the celebration, but he still cherished the opportunity to share the Cup with the fans.

"You really obviously want to still enjoy those moments," Staal said. "Pretty special. I wish we had more time to kind of give it to everyone and get the crowd going. ... But it was pretty special to have that Cup in the building on the ice with them and share that moment."

The Hurricanes' 2026 Stanley Cup banner is raised to the rafters of Lenovo Center during a pregame ceremony before Carolina's season opener against the Panthers on Tuesday in Raleigh. (Stan Gilliland / North State Journal)

Brind'Amour said the fans deserved the chance to see the Cup at Lenovo Center.

"They didn't get to see us celebrate it on home ice, so it was nice to do a little victory lap," he said. "I thought that was cool. They need to enjoy that stuff. They're a big part of the success we've had over the years. I thought that was cool."



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Notes: Andrei Svechnikov had a game-high eight hits. ... Carolina won 34 of 58 faceoffs (58.6%), and all four centers won more draws than they lost. ... K'Andre Miller played a

team-high 25:15. ... Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Cayden Primeau and Mike Reilly were healthy scratches for Carolina.



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Panthers spoil Hurricanes' celebration with 1-0 overtime victory in season opener

Brian Murphy, WRAL News

The game was scoreless until the final seconds of overtime when Florida's Gustav Forsling ripped a shot past Brandon Bussi.

It was a banner night in Raleigh.

But a bitter end.

The Carolina Hurricanes hung their 2026 Stanley Cup banner before Tuesday's season opener against Florida at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, allowing the home crowd one last chance to celebrate the Cup win.

After introducing Hurricanes staff, coaches and players, captain Jordan Staal carried the Stanley Cup around the ice, allowing fans on each side to cheer, and then to center ice where the Canes did a pregame Storm Surge.

"It was pretty special to have that Cup in the building on the ice with them and share that moment," Staal said.

Then the team gathered around for pictures as the 2026 banner was raised to the Lenovo Center rafters to loud cheers from the sellout crowd.

"That, to me, is more for the fans," coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "They didn't get to see us celebrate on home ice, so it was kind of nice to do a little victory lap. I thought that was cool. They need to enjoy that stuff. They're a big part of the success we've had over the years. I thought that was really cool."

He and the fans were less pleased with the actual game.

The Panthers spoiled the party when Gustav Forsling ripped a shot past Carolina goaltender Brandon Bussi with 4.3 seconds remaining in overtime for a 1-0 victory. Bussi, the Cup hero, had 19 saves.

"I gave up a pretty bad goal," Bussi said.

Forsling's shot appeared to deflect off Taylor Hall.

"It took a weird bounce, but it was far enough out that I should have found it. For some reason I didn't get a good visual on it. And it's four seconds left, trying to get to a shootout. On my standards, it's a bad goal."

Said Brind'Amour: "He's going to want that one back, but he's the reason we got the point. I thought he made some really big saves. Even though it wasn't a lot of action, he was good when we needed him to be."

"It just stings right now a little bit," Bussi said. "I think we deserved a little better there, probably should have gotten to a shootout. We'll take the point and move forward."

The Hurricanes were sloppy throughout the penalty-marred game, missing on passes and unable to keep possession. The opener didn't have much 5-on-5 flow as the teams were a combined 0-for-13 on the power play. Neither team had much space against tough defense.

"Not used to that kind of pressure," Brind'Amour said. "You just haven't seen it in practice or even games. In preseason, half the pace of that, so you can see our top guys were just fumbling it or throwing it and passes weren't connecting. It's just a lot of rust there for sure."

The Hurricanes won the Cup on June 14, closing out Vegas in Las Vegas in six games and kicking off a summer of celebration — from the parade in downtown Raleigh to individual days with the Cup. The NHL condensed its preseason, and most of the Hurricanes key players saw action in only one preseason game.

"We had a four-on-one [and] didn't get a shot on net," Brind'Amour said. "That's, to me, rust and not really dialed in on the pace of what it is now."

The Hurricanes host Washington on Friday night at Lenovo Center. The game will be broadcast on WRAL.

The Hurricanes returned nearly all of its championship roster. Goaltender Frederik Andersen, who started the first 16 games of the playoffs before giving way to Bussi, signed with Edmonton in the offseason. Defenseman Alexander Nikishin, a restricted free agent, has yet to reach an agreement on a new deal with Carolina and would prefer to be traded. Forward Seth Jarvis will miss several weeks after undergoing offseason shoulder surgery.

Carolina Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsy says the defending Stanley Cup champions are focused on a new season with the same attitude that carried them to last year's title.

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.



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Recap: Canes Dealt Last-Minute Loss On Opening Night

Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

September 29, 2026

RALEIGH, N.C. - Gustav Forsling's game-winner with 4.3 seconds left in overtime was the scoreboard separator that lifted the Florida Panthers over the Carolina Hurricanes 1-0 in the season opener on Tuesday.

Following a banner raising 20 years in the making, the defending champion Canes got to work against the team that held the title twice before them. A cagey first frame featured a few fireworks in the form of Nicolas Deslauriers and Bokondji Imama dropping the gloves for a heavyweight scrap before the break, but neither side found much in the way of offensive opportunities.

Major penalties gave way to nine two-minute minors in the second period, resulting in a stop-and-start stalemate that flowed into the final frame as well. When chances popped up as the two sides pushed for a deciding goal, both netminders had the answers between the pipes.

Forsling's dagger came after the first 4:55 of overtime looked much like the first 60 of regulation. Teed up for a long-range one-timer off the rush, the Swede leaned into a shot that eluded Brandon Bussi's blocker. Carolina's backstop still enjoyed a strong 19-save showing on the night, while Jacob Markstrom turned aside 15 of 15 at the other end.

Stats & Standouts

Tonight's standing-room-only crowd of 19,250 represents the largest attendance for a regular-season home game at Lenovo Center. Only two regular-season home games in franchise history have drawn more fans: the team's Stadium Series outdoor game against the Washington Capitals at Carter-Finley Stadium on Feb. 18, 2023 (56,961) and a game at the Greensboro Coliseum against the New York Rangers on Nov. 21, 1997 (19,358).

Tuesday's clash marked just the third time in the NHL's modern era (since 1943-44) when each of the two previous Stanley Cup champions will play a mutual season-opening game. The two prior instances were between the Blues and Capitals (Oct. 2, 2019) as well as the Black Hawks and Maple Leafs (Oct. 10, 1962).

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour reflecting on the contest...

"There wasn't a lot of room, obviously. That had a lot to do with how the game looked - it wasn't a very good game to watch. They made it hard on us, and then when we did have the opportunities, we beat it up. We were not used to that kind of pressure. You just haven't seen it in practice or even in preseason. It's half the pace of that. You can just see our top guys were fumbling it or throwing it (away). Passes weren't connecting. Just a lot of rust there, for sure."

Jordan Staal giving his perspective...

"It was obviously a tight game. There wasn't much going on beyond the power plays and penalty kills. I thought the penalty kills were good, and I thought the power play could have executed better. It was just kind of a muckfest at five-on-five. Three-on-three is what it is. We had some of our chances, and they found a way to get the last one."

Sebastian Aho after a night where the power plays combined to go 0-for-13...

"It was a little bit of that (lack of) sharpness. It was the first game. If you look at the last couple of years, these two teams have been top of the leaderboard, and there's a reason for that. There was kind of a similar style the whole game. Obviously, their game plan is not too far from ours, and clearly, it works. It's tough to find room out there. When you do, you've got to execute, and we didn't do that today."

Brandon Bussi reflecting on his night and the goal...

"I felt pretty good tonight. It just stings right now a little bit. I think we deserved a little better. It probably should've got to a shootout, but it didn't. We'll take the point, and we'll move forward... I felt pretty good, and I gave up a pretty bad goal. It might've hit our d-man or whatever, it took a pretty weird bounce. But it was far enough out that I should've had it. For some reason I didn't get a good visual on it. There's four seconds left. I'm just trying to get to a shootout. By my standards, it's a bad goal."

What's Next?

The Canes are next scheduled to practice on Thursday. They'll return to game action on Friday when they host the Washington Capitals.



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Forsling scores OT winner with 4.3 seconds left, Panthers spoil Hurricanes' banner raising

Kurt Dusterberg

Jacob Markstrom, who was acquired in a trade with the New Jersey Devils on June 30, made 15 saves for the Panthers. Markstrom was a second-round pick (No. 31) by Florida in the 2008 NHL Draft and played his first four seasons for the Panthers.

"Both teams were really hard on pucks and lots of battling," Florida coach Paul Maurice said. "It may not have had the flow that excites fans, but for the identities of the (two) teams, I was really happy with our game."

The 36-year-old goalie was not busy early in the game, stopping three shots in the first period, but he stopped Sebastian Aho's snap shot on a breakaway at 11:29 of the second.

"(Aho) maybe felt the backchecker was going to catch him," Markstrom said. "So I figured I'd try to grab some ice. He tried to go five-hole, and I was fortunate enough to stop it."

Brandon Bussi made 19 saves for the Hurricanes.

"They made it hard on us, and when we did have opportunities, we beat it up," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I think we are not used to that kind of pressure. We haven't seen it in practice or preseason games, it's half the pace of that. Our top guys were fumbling it or just throwing it and passes weren't connecting. A lot of rust there, for sure."

Prior to the game, the Hurricanes raised their 2026 Stanley Cup championship banner to the rafters.

"Pretty special," captain Jordan Staal said. "... I thought we could have played a little better for the Caniacs tonight, but it was pretty special to have that Cup on the ice with them and share that moment."

Forward Brady Tkachuk made his Panthers debut, playing 16:33 with one shot on goal. Tkachuk was acquired in a trade with the Ottawa Senators on June 21, joining his brother Matthew with Florida.

"It feels awesome," Brady said. "It was great, but when the game got going it didn't really matter. It was cool to warm up and start the game, knowing that he's on the same team. But once the game started, there's only one focus and that was to get the two points."

The Panthers also welcomed back forward Aleksander Barkov. The three-time Selke Trophy winner as the NHL's best defensive forward missed the entirety of the 2025-26 season after sustaining a knee injury early in training camp.

Barkov had one shot on goal in 20:32 of ice time and went 10-for-20 on face-offs.

"It was great," Barkov said. "The speed of the game is really fast. I missed a whole season, so coming here, the first game of the season is one of the (most) fast-paced."

"I felt good. I haven't had any problems like overthinking or anything like that. Just trying to play my game. I'm playing with really good players. They help me a lot."

The game featured a lot of special teams play, but each team's penalty kill limited the opponent's offensive chances.

Florida finished 0-for-7 on the power play. Carolina was 0-for-6.

"That game is kind of what you expect," Brady Tkachuk said. "Of course there's a lot of special teams, but that's the type of game we play, that's the type of game they play. Their PK and our PK are kind of what stirs the drink for our teams. You don't really give up chances because they're so aggressive. We'll try not to let that frustrate us. We know it's going to figure itself out."

All six of Carolina's power-play opportunities came in the second and third period.

"I don't think there was a lot out there," Aho said. "Obviously, the power play should have found a way out there, but then again, our PK did the same exact thing that they did to us. Tight game. Got a point. Move on."



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Panthers' OT win at Hurricanes comes in battle of Stanley Cup winners | AP News

Aaron Beard

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — The Carolina Hurricanes gathered at the blue line, the Stanley Cup sitting on a table a few feet away, and watched a championship banner rise to the rafters amid roaring home fans.

From the visiting bench, the Florida Panthers — the team that had won the Cup the two years before Carolina's June breakthrough — patiently waited through that 15-minute ceremony to remind everyone that they're fully back from an injury-hammered year.

It added up to a tight-checking, goaltender-dominated and sometimes testy reunion between title winners with playoff history between them. And it took a blue-liner in Gustav Forsling to finally end it by blasting a one-timer past Brandon Bussi with 4.3 seconds left in overtime that pushed the Panthers to a 1-0 season-opening win.

"Playoff-style hockey," Forsling said. "That felt like a playoff game to me. It was awesome, really fun."

The NHL said it marked the third time in its modern era (since 1943-44) that the two previous Cup winners met in a season-opening game, the others coming in 1962-63 and 2019-20.

The Panthers remind everyone of their championship credentials

The Panthers had reached the Stanley Cup Final for three straight years and won it all in 2024 and 2025, twice eliminating the Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final in that run. But injuries last year derailed any chance to contend, notably with captain Aleksander Barkov going down with a knee injury to open preseason camp.

Forsling's OT blast lifts Panthers past reigning Stanley Cup champion Hurricanes 1-0

The Carolina Hurricanes now face a new challenge: playing as reigning Stanley Cup champion

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

Getting Barkov back, along with Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk welcoming brother Brady as an offseason addition to an already deep lineup, had offered plenty of reason to believe Florida is back among the league's best. They also brought in Jacob Markstrom to take over the crease anchored by Sergei Bobrovsky during those title runs.

That's why Florida coach Paul Maurice pointed out it's a new team, even with so many championship holdovers. And why the Panthers sat on the bench to watch the Hurricanes' pregame ceremony.

"You get a chance to see what you want so bad," Maurice said. "We think it's really important that the teams respect each other for those achievements, whether it's an individual player hitting a milestone or certainly a Stanley Cup. They've earned the right to have as long of a ceremony as they wanted, and it was well done."

Markstrom was a standout in making 15 saves, including stopping Carolina top-line center Sebastian Aho on a short-handed breakaway in the second period. Forsling also stepped up beyond his walk-off winner, blocking a shot by a trailing Jackson Blake in the crease to help Markstrom in turning away a four-on-one rush late in the second.

Sequences like those were magnified on a night with the teams going a combined 0 for 13 on power plays.

"I thought we played a great game — everyone, the whole lineup," Markstrom said. "All four lines and all six D played really good, making my job a lot easier."

The Hurricanes fall short in a top-tier test

Bussi nearly matched Markstrom in making it through regulation and overtime unscathed. The waiver-wire wonder from last year, who posted a shutout in Carolina's Cup-clinching win against Vegas on June 14, made 19 saves.

But Forsling's blast from inside the blue line, off a feed from Carter Verhaeghe, zipped past Carolina forward Taylor Hall and beat Bussi to the glove side just as it seemed the game was headed toward a shootout. It left the goaltender crumpling forward to his pads and gloves, a disappointing end to his first game as the top starter since veteran Frederik Andersen's departure in free agency.

"It was far enough out I should kind of found it, for some reason I didn't get a good visual on it," Bussi said, uncertain if the puck clipped Hall on its way in. "And it's 4 seconds left, trying to get to a shootout. I think on my standards it's a bad goal."

It was a damper on a jubilant night for the Hurricanes, who had reached the Eastern final three times in the seven years before going 16-3 on the way to the franchise's second Cup. The Hurricanes return with a largely intact roster beyond Andersen's departure, top-line forward Seth Jarvis still recovering from shoulder surgery and third-pair defenseman Alexander Nikishin unsigned as a restricted free agent.

But having that cohesion back didn't eliminate rust, nor the ability to push past a tested Florida team in what could be a preview of yet another postseason reunion.

"I think it's a good game for us," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "The offensive guys got, 'OK, well now we've got to get going here with the way the game is played.'"



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Like I said, it wasn't a lot of room and the little plays you normally make, we weren't making them tonight. Or seeing them."



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Panthers win in overtime, spoil Hurricanes' banner night - ESPN

Emily Kaplan

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Gustav Forsling hammered a shot past Brandon Bussi with 4.3 seconds left in overtime to lift the Florida Panthers past the reigning Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes 1-0 in Tuesday's season opener for both teams.

On a night when the last three champions were on display, the defenses and goaltenders had the edge. And it was a blueliner who provided the winning play to end a matchup of Eastern Conference elite.

The Panthers had their final chance with the game seemingly headed to a shootout as Carter Verhaeghe brought the puck into the zone with under 10 seconds left. But Verhaeghe sent the puck back toward Forsling, who fired a one-timer from near the blue line that zipped past Bussi's glove side to end it.

"Playoff-style hockey," Forsling said of the opener. "That felt like a playoff game to me. It was awesome. Really fun."

That spoiled the end of a three-month celebration for the Hurricanes since beating Vegas in June to cap a 16-3 march to the franchise's second Cup. The final piece was the players gathering at the blue line and tapping their sticks as a championship banner rose to the rafters.

"It was great, and that to me is more so for the fans. They didn't get to see us celebrate it on home ice, so it was nice to do a little victory lap," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I thought that was cool. They need to enjoy that stuff. They're a big part of the success we've had over the years. I thought that was cool."

And that moment came against the Panthers, who reached the Stanley Cup Final for three straight years and won it all in 2024 and 2025. They had twice eliminated the Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference final in their run, though injuries derailed last year.

Getting captain Aleksander Barkov back from that lengthy injury list was one of several reasons to expect the Panthers to jump right back into contention, along with Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk welcoming brother Brady Tkachuk as an offseason addition. There was also the change by bringing in Jacob Markstrom to take over the crease anchored by Sergei Bobrovsky during those title runs.

"I can make a lot more mistakes on the bench now that he's in the lineup," Florida coach Paul Maurice said, referring to his captain.

And for much of this one, it was up to Markstrom and Bussi to hold up in net, including against multiple one-on-one quality chances and a combined 13 power plays in regulation.

Markstrom finished with 15 saves while Bussi, who posted a shutout in Carolina's Cup-clinching win against Vegas, made 19 saves before giving up the last blast.

"You could just see that our top guys were just fumbling it or passes weren't connecting," Brind'Amour said. "A lot of rust there for sure."

The Tkachuk brothers did not skate on the same regular line in the opener. Brady played on the top line with Barkov and Sam Reinhart. Matthew was on the second line, with Verhaeghe and Sam Bennett.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Wild top-pair D-man Brock Faber has surgery on fractured skull

Minnesota Wild defenseman Brock Faber underwent surgery on Sunday for a fractured skull, the team announced on Tuesday.

There is no timetable yet on his return.

Faber, 24, was hit in the head by a deflected puck during a preseason game against the Dallas Stars on Friday.

Faber stayed in the game and didn't miss his next shift -- but was ultimately taken to the hospital in the third period.

The Wild placed Faber on injured reserve retroactive to the injury. Faber, a gold medalist on the 2026 USA men's Olympic hockey team, is expected to play alongside Quinn Hughes as the Wild's top defensive pair. Captain Jared Spurgeon should slot into Faber's spot during his absence.

The defenseman is coming off a career year in which he scored 15 goals and 52 points in 80 regular-season games.

Faber averaged 30:44 minutes in 11 playoff games last spring as Minnesota defeated Dallas in the first round before losing to Colorado.

Minnesota enters the season with hefty expectations as questions swirl about Hughes' future. The Wild open their season Thursday against the Predators.



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Predictions for every NHL team's finish in 2026-27: Why the Panthers will win the Cup - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

As is tradition, I reached out to the general manager of my Stanley Cup champion-in-waiting to let him know what's coming.

Florida Panthers GM Bill Zito's reaction to my pick: "FINALLY!"

I didn't pick the Panthers when they won the Stanley Cup in 2024, because the Edmonton Oilers were supposed to do that. I didn't pick them the following year when Florida won again, because I figured it was the Dallas Stars' turn to win.

So I'm happy someone had the confidence to give the underrated and overlooked Florida Panthers, who have won three conference titles and two Stanley Cups in the last four seasons, their Stanley Cup pick.

I have the Panthers winning hockey's Holy Grail again over the Colorado Avalanche, who channel their frustration from a conference final defeat into a run to the NHL's last round ... only to find the deepest, nastiest and most self-assured team in hockey ready to pounce on another title.

What about the rest of the NHL? Here's my division-by-division breakdown of the projected standings. Playoff teams are bolded. Good luck to all 32 teams. I hope everyone has fun out there.

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Tampa Bay Lightning

Montreal Canadiens

Florida Panthers

Toronto Maple Leafs

Buffalo Sabres

Boston Bruins

Ottawa Senators

Detroit Red Wings

The Tampa Bay Lightning amassed 106 points in a season with several key players missing chunks of time, battling through injuries and, in the case of captain Victor Hedman, off-ice matters. Coach Jon Cooper finally won the Jack Adams Award for keeping this rickety ship sailing straight, with assists from Nikita Kucherov (130 points, winning the Hart Trophy) and Andrei Vasilevskiy (39 wins, capturing the Vezina Trophy).

Given the dominance of their top six and a deeper blue line thanks to the addition of new power-play QB John Carlson, it's hard to imagine the Lightning finishing anywhere but near the top of the Atlantic, as long as Vasilevskiy holds up his end of the bargain. But then comes the hard part: Getting out of the first round, something they haven't done since winning their second of back-to-back Cups in 2021. If that happens again, is it time for some changes?

The Canadiens were the last Canadian team to win the Stanley Cup in 1993 and are poised to become the next one

to lift it. GM Kent Hughes is really putting the pieces in place, what with Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield locked into the top line; Ivan Demidov powering the second line; and Phillip Danault centering the third line. The addition of Chris Kreider adds some veteran physicality and leadership to a team that already earned an education in its conference finals loss to Carolina.

It still feels like a team that's a year away from breaking through the conference ceiling. That said, its strong young goaltending and dynamic defenseman Lane Hutson -- my personal pick for the Norris Trophy this season -- might make it ahead of schedule. Montreal is a legit Cup threat.

We all know the Panthers have three dominant forward lines and two championship-caliber defensive pairings. What makes this team special is how these star players approach the game. "Humility" isn't often associated with the Florida Panthers, but it's one of the secret ingredients to their success. There have been team meetings over the years in which players are asked about their individual stats and they can't recall them. No one cares who scores the game-winning goal as long as the game is won -- and the Panthers have the utmost confidence that the guy next to them in the locker room can score that goal.

That's why I think Brady Tkachuk is going to work extremely well with the Panthers. He goes from having the weight on his shoulders and the spotlight in his eyes as the Senators' franchise player to being a gear in a well-run machine in Florida. This isn't to say that Tkachuk can't be "the guy" if needed, just that there's a different comfort and confidence level for a star player to walk into a dressing room already filled with Stanley Cup rings. See also: Mitch Marner in Vegas last season.

Every person around the NHL that I've spoken to about the Panthers echo the same sentiment: a healthy Aleksander Barkov and a rested roster are scary, but can Jacob Markstrom sufficiently replace Sergei Bobrovsky? To that I'd say the Panthers knew Bob might price himself off the roster and had game-planning out potential replacements. Markstrom was vetted and eventually acquired from the Devils. They believe he can be what they need -- and that the team in front is great enough to overcome a potential downgrade in goal to win a third Stanley Cup in four seasons.

After the Maple Leafs acquired Blue Jackets leading goal scorer Kirill Marchenko this week, a former NHL front office executive texted me to say, "You may have to upgrade Toronto" in the standings projections.

The trade that sent Matthew Knies to Columbus for Marchenko doesn't just give Auston Matthews his most talented linemate since Mitch Marner -- although Marchenko doesn't have Marner's defensive chops. It's the clearest indication of GM John Chayka's intention for the roster. Both Marchenko and Knies stand at 6-foot-3, but Knies had about 30 pounds on the newest Leaf. Knies is the player you keep on the roster if your team is specifically designed to take on the likes of the Panthers. Marchenko is the player whom you acquire if you're leaning into skill instead of bulk, a direction



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Leafs fans have been begging this team to take since the Core 4 ruled the Six.

First overall pick Gavin McKenna fits into that as well, but he also serves a more important purpose: a lottery win that gave the Leafs a sense of future and purpose right as it seemed like the franchise was on the precipice of entering its next phase.

Chayka's aggressive reshaping of the rest of the roster had its "throw all the bottom-six forwards at the wall and see what sticks" chaos, but it wasn't without salient improvements such as Darren Raddysh's addition to the blue line. Enough of those bets will pay off, and the Leafs will return to the postseason.

The Buffalo Sabres making the Stanley Cup playoffs in back-to-back seasons might have previously been seen as a sign of the apocalypse, but Buffalo will return to the party as a wild card.

The crushing weight of the playoff drought has been lifted, but the bigger psychological development is a collection of young players getting playoff experience and the confidence that comes with it. Josh Doan, Jack Quinn, Noah Ostlund and especially Zach Benson are all progressing nicely and ready for greater responsibilities. Throw in rookie wild cards such as Konsta Helenius and Jiri Kulich, and the Sabres are as fueled by youthful exuberance as they are by stars such as Tage Thompson and Rasmus Dahlin.

David Pastrnak is going to score 100 points, Jeremy Swayman is going to make a bunch of saves, and Charlie McAvoy is going to move the puck and throw the body. The Boston Bruins have won with a holy hockey trinity before -- Bergeron, Chara and Rask, hallowed be thy names -- but usually with a supporting cast that has fewer question marks than the current incarnation of the Bruins.

It's hard to imagine Pavel Zacha and Morgan Geekie running it back after career years, or the team's prospects such as James Hagens and Fraser Minten leveling up to the point of moving the needle.

I do like the addition of JJ Peterka, whose ill-fitting time in Utah ended after one season. But there's just not enough offense for me to depend on after Pasta.

The Ottawa Senators naming Quebecois Thomas Chabot as their captain was the most obvious thing in the history of obvious things. Jake Sanderson is younger, better, signed for longer and absolutely capable of captaining a team. But he's probably on the Team USA Olympic group chat, and this team plays in Ottawa and just saw previous captain Brady Tkachuk migrate to South Florida.

No matter how fractured things were with Tkachuk after the Olympics, he was one of the Senators' most consistent regular-season performers, with 59 points in 60 games last season. They're not replacing that point production or his snarly intangibles. Getting William Eklund from the Sharks certainly increases the skill level of a team that already has Tim Stutzle and Drake Batherson driving play at the forward spot, but there's not enough pop here to keep up with the rest of the division.

There is, however, an extremely good defensive team under the guidance of coach Travis Green. As Linus Ullmark showed in the playoffs last season, he's still an elite

goaltender when locked in. It's not out of the realm of possibility that Ottawa can sneak into the playoffs on the strength of that team defense.

Detroit is a mess. Captain Dylan Larkin requested a trade ... and as punishment Detroit made him continue to play for the Red Wings with fewer responsibilities, taking away the captaincy. They're grinding 23-year-old defenseman Simon Edvinsson in a contract negotiation. Worst of all, the franchise had to finally admit the "Yzerplan" was a failure, as franchise icon Steve Yzerman left the general manager's office after seven playoff-less seasons.

The Red Wings have a few reasons for hope, such as defenseman Moritz Seider, winger Lucas Raymond and a prospect pool that's filling up but without any franchise-level talents.

In the long term, maybe the plan is hoping the Hughes brothers all want to play close to their Michigan roots when Jack is a free agent in 2030. In the short term, there's speculation about who's leaving next after Larkin is dealt, and does his name rhyme with "Alex DeBrincat?"

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

Carolina Hurricanes

New Jersey Devils

Washington Capitals

Philadelphia Flyers

Columbus Blue Jackets

Pittsburgh Penguins

New York Rangers

New York Islanders

Nothing is going to detract from the Hurricanes' hard-fought and well-earned Stanley Cup championship, the prize at the end of an absolutely dominant postseason run. This is essentially the same roster that skated the Cup on Vegas ice: a perfect alchemy of the Hurricanes' defensive hallmarks (in players such as Jacob Slavin and Jordan Staal) and the offensive spark plugs that powered their championship engine (Nikolaj Ehlers and Logan Stankoven among them).

However ... don't we all want to see Carolina go through their tormentors from South Florida for another shot at the Stanley Cup? To witness the last two champions in a slobber-knocker, especially now that GM Eric Tulsy has built a roster as good as any that the Panthers have faced? Of course we do, and not just for the Southeast Division nostalgia of it all. And given the strengths of both teams, we might get it.

A caveat about the Canes' season: There seems to be a growing sentiment that the Hurricanes are going to eventually solve their Alexander Nikishin problem -- an unsigned restricted free agent defenseman seeking a change in scenery -- by solving the Winnipeg Jets' Connor Hellebuyck problem, likely through a three-way trade of some sort. With due respect to the newly signed Pyotr Kochetkov and playoff legend Brandon Bussi, putting a multitime Vezina winner in a Rod Brind'Amour system behind that blue line is like putting a wall made of adamantium in front of the Hurricanes' net.



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Stop me if you've heard this one before: The New Jersey Devils' success will hinge on the health of star center Jack Hughes and the quality of their goaltending. Rinse, repeat.

They went 34-24-3 with the Olympic hero on the ice last season and 8-13-0 without him. Their goaltending was 21st in the NHL in save percentage, thanks to the .903 that Jake Allen put up in 37 games. Jacob Markstrom was traded to Florida, which means the crease belongs to Allen and Nico Daws -- with Mikhail Yegorov gestating at Boston University.

New GM Sunny Mehta didn't take gargantuan swings in the offseason. (Potential Quinn Hughes trade pending.) Rather, he added some sorely needed scoring depth so the Devils might withstand the absence of Jack Hughes better than they have in previous seasons. Anthony Mantha, Luke Evangelista, Evan Rodrigues and Amadeus Lombardi join a forward pool that also includes Arseny Gritsyuk, who showed flashes of brilliance last season.

The Washington Capitals have a tantalizingly high ceiling this season. Like the Panthers and Hurricanes, every line brings something to the table. I love their mix of established veterans and young impact players such as Ilya Protas and Cole Hutson. I love that they can win a match of skills or one game pummeling one another in the corners. Logan Thompson is now overdue to win the Vezina Trophy, giving them goaltending on which they can build a contender.

What's holding me back from anointing the Capitals as conference champions, because the potential is there? Their Stanley Cup championship was won with John Carlson, Matt Niskanen, Dmitry Orlov and Brooks Orpik logging the most ice time. I don't see that presence or pedigree within their current defense corps. That could change with a deadline deal or two, but that's the only glaring concern on an otherwise stout roster. Alex Ovechkin's last NHL season -- we think? -- is going to be a lengthy one.

The rest of this division you could basically pick out of a hat and have a decent chance of getting the order right. That's not to say the Metro Division's other five teams are beyond my power of prognostication, but that there's so little daylight between them that any of them could be fourth and any of them could be eighth and none of it would be surprising.

Take the Philadelphia Flyers, who ended a five-season playoff drought and won a playoff round last season. There's at least a little fear around the team that there's going to be a step back before there's a leap forward with a young but very talented roster.

Just a little regression from their forward group or goalie Dan Vladar could turn a three-points playoff bubble cushion into a postseason miss.

In fact, one could argue that the Flyers wouldn't have made the playoffs had the Columbus Blue Jackets not epically face-planted with two wins in their last 11 games last season. The biggest question facing Columbus is what, if any, impact the turbulent offseason is going to have on the team. Norris winner Zach Werenski reportedly indicated he wasn't signing another contract with the Blue Jackets, vetoed a trade to the Stars and spent the next two months on a PR campaign to smooth things over with the fanbase.

Kirill Marchenko, their leading goal scorer for three seasons, declared he wanted out and was traded to Toronto for a package centered around Matthew Knies.

Now that the noise has quieted, are the Blue Jackets a playoff team? Potentially, if they look as good as they looked for much of Rick Bowness' time as head coach last season. Adam Fantilli is just getting started and leads a solid trio of centers with Sean Monahan and Charlie Coyle. They're going to have to get goal scoring from veteran wingers such as Valeri Nichushkin, imported from Colorado, and Conor Garland. They obviously also need young forwards Cole Sillinger and Kent Johnson to progress as Fantilli has.

The defense is in good hands with Werenski, Ivan Provorov and the underrated Denton Mateychuk. One assumed Jet Greaves' breakout season in goal wasn't a fluke. Like the Flyers, they're right on the cusp.

The Pittsburgh Penguins were an unlikely playoff team last season after they ended up last in the Metro in most projections. Can Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin conjure another postseason party in their sunset years? That depends on three factors:

1. How much second-year coach Dan Muse can tease out of the team's supporting cast, after a masterful job last season.
2. Whether Erik Karlsson, finally in the last year of his contract, has another remarkable season in him after 66 points in 75 games, finishing ninth for the Norris.
3. How quickly rookie goalie Sergei Murashov can ascend to the starter's role and whether his play is good enough to separate the Penguins from the Metro pack.

I think the improvement of the rest of the division keeps the Penguins out. Which is a bummer, because I want all the Sidney Crosby in championship tournament spotlights I can get, as the clock ticks.

Full disclosure: An early draft of these projections had the New York Rangers as a wild-card team, even as they announced a "retool" earlier this season. Retool they have, adding Marcus Pettersson and Sean Durzi to round out a pretty good group on the back end led by the resurgent Adam Fox and solidified by Igor Shesterkin, one of the best goalies on the planet.

They also traded for Vegas winger Pavel Dorofeyev and handed him a seven-year deal worth \$11 million annually against the salary cap. If he pops for another 30-plus goal season, the Rangers' ceiling is a bit higher in the standings. If he doesn't, because neither Jack Eichel or Mitch Marner is on the Rangers, then the climb becomes a bit steep. His two goals over the final nine playoff games last postseason gave me pause.

Dorofeyev isn't the only player whose performance could level this group up. If Gabe Perreault doubles his points, Will Cuyllle bounces back from a regression year and Alexis Lafrenière finally answers "When will Alexis Lafrenière become a star?" with "Right now, baby," the Rangers could end up in the postseason. If not, the "retool" continues."

Someone who doesn't miss the playoffs often is New York Islanders coach Pete DeBoer, who took over with four games left last season. Not counting his cameo appearance last season and when he was fired by the Sharks after 33



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games, DeBoer's teams have made the playoffs in nine of 10 seasons.

Alas, those Sharks and Knights and Stars teams were much more talented than this current group on the Island, despite the presence of rookie of the year defenseman and franchise touchstone Matthew Schaefer, as well as goalie Ilya Sorokin. It feels like a franchise stuck between previous iterations of the team and whatever the Islanders will look like in the Schaefer era.

CENTRAL DIVISION

Colorado Avalanche

Dallas Stars

Minnesota Wild

Utah Mammoth

St. Louis Blues

Nashville Predators

Winnipeg Jets

Chicago Blackhawks

Injuries to Cale Makar and Nathan MacKinnon gave the Colorado Avalanche plausible deniability for losing in the 2026 Western Conference finals, but let's face it: They weren't playing well enough at 5-on-5 to win the Stanley Cup anyway. MacKinnon and Brock Nelson had zero goals in 13 games at evens; Martin Necas and Artturi Lehkonen had one each. Over the last two rounds, Mackenzie Blackwood (.890) and Scott Wedgewood (.874) were a faint echo of their regular-season success.

After having the league's best record in the regular season, those diminishing returns must make the Avalanche angry -- and I like the Avalanche when they're angry.

Brent Burns trimmed his beard. That's how you know it's serious.

They were the best offensive (3.63 goals per game) and defensive team (2.40 goals against per game) last season. I don't expect the Lumber Yard (Blackwood and Wedgewood) to lead the league in save percentage again, but I do think Blackwood becoming the de facto starter will help slow that regression to the mean. MacKinnon and Makar drive play like few others can. The supporting cast took a little hit in the offseason, but I love the Jaden Schwartz addition and look forward to a full season of Nazem Kadri back in familiar grounds.

Plus, I have unending faith in newly reestablished GM Joe Sakic to aggressively improve the team if necessary ... provided opposing GMs are dumb enough to pick up the phone.

Only one team had a better regular-season points percentage than the Avalanche over the last three seasons (.673), and that's the Dallas Stars.

They enter the season with Jason Robertson, the 45-goal scorer who sweated out a contentious contract standoff for a one-year deal (\$12 million AAV) that walks him up to unrestricted free agency, and with a healthy Tyler Seguin, who looked incredible last season before (another) injury derailed him.

They enter this season without now Nashville center Mavrik Bourque, a rising star turned cap casualty who had 20 goals last season, and without current Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski, who vetoed a trade to Dallas in the offseason. But the Werenski ordeal is another example of GM Jim Nill trying to take the huge swing when the opportunity presents itself -- like when he acquired Mikko Rantanen, who had 77 points in 64 games last season to help drive the offense.

But the reason the Stars aren't the Avalanche is the scoring depth beyond Robertson, Rantanen and Wyatt Johnston. Dallas was ninth in goals per game (3.33) and 21st in expected goals at 5-on-5 last season. The slow leak of middle-six scoring talent -- Bourque, Logan Stankoven, Mason Marchment and Mikael Granlund, to name a few -- and the decline of players such as Matt Duchene is catching up with the Stars. But they're still the second-best team in the division, because they have discernible center depth, unlike the third-best team in the division.

The Minnesota Wild remain the NHL's most decadent artisan doughnut: gourmet ingredients on the outside and nothing in the middle.

The Wild have a tenacious collection of wingers led by goal-scoring stars Kirill Kaprizov and Matt Boldy; they have a stout blue line, topline by Norris winner Quinn Hughes and the rock-solid Brock Faber (whenever he returns from injury); and they have one of the best goalie tandems in the NHL with Filip Gustavsson and Jesper "The Wall" Wallstedt. And their No. 1 center is Joel Eriksson Ek.

What makes Minnesota so intriguing is the potential variance in its season. If GM Bill Guerin persuades the team from Hockeytown to trade Dylan Larkin, a close friend of fellow Olympian Quinn Hughes, to the State of Hockey, then that hole at center gets much smaller and the Wild's Stanley Cup odds get much better.

Then again, if it becomes apparent that all this dillydallying by Hughes about a contract extension just means he's going to bolt for his brothers' condo in New Jersey next summer, that could dramatically alter Guerin's plans. Keep him for a Cup run or get something before he skates away? That's why they pay Billy the big bucks.

Speaking of variance: How much higher can the Utah Mammoth climb above their 92 points last season if Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley reach the next tier of their stardom? Guenther, 23, popped for 40 goals last season. Cooley, 22, might have joined him were it not for an injury that limited him to 54 games, as he scored 24 times.

GM Bill Armstrong did the thing that young contending teams do and imported some veteran leadership this offseason in Swiss Army knife forward Vincent Trocheck from the Rangers and Islanders captain Anders Lee. They form a nice experienced core with returning forwards Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz, who were a stabilizing force last season.

We know they can score. The Mammoth's success ultimately comes down to their defense corps -- which will be without promising Maveric Lamoureux for at least four months -- and the goaltending tandem of the tireless Karel Vejmelka and former Red Wings prospect Sebastian Cossa. Unless, of course, the Jets could be convinced to send Connor Hellebuyck to Salt Lake City.



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The St. Louis Blues are one of my surprise teams this season. They sucked me in with their last 25 games, posting a .740 points percentage with the best goals-against average (2.16) in the league and a top-10 offense.

That's what happens when you turn your crease over to Joel Hofer, who went 12-2-2 in 16 starts to Jordan Binnington's nine appearances (5-3-1). Hofer had a .933 save percentage in that stretch. I don't think that was an aberration -- he's a goalie on the rise. Binnington, meanwhile, is in the last year of his contract. Maybe he ups his game for his next deal. Maybe he's wearing another uniform by the trade deadline.

I'm also confident that the trio of Dylan Holloway, Robert Thomas and Jimmy Snuggerud fuels this team's playoff journey. They produced 5.7 goals and allowed 1.4 goals against per 60 minutes. That's a preposterous 80.1% goals share at 5-on-5. If they can stay healthy -- a legit concern with Thomas and Holloway -- they have the potential to be the best line in the conference and carry this team offensively. Although it would be nice if players such as Jake Neighbours, Dalibor Dvorsky and the newly acquired Mason McTavish help shoulder that goal-scoring load.

Squint hard enough at the Nashville Predators, and this collection of Barry Trotz acquisitions and Chris MacFarland augmentations looks like a playoff team.

Steven Stamkos and Ryan O'Reilly clicked, leading to Stamkos's 42-goal season. Filip Forsberg had 40 goals of his own, and I'm excited to see how he works with young winger Matthew Wood. They could go a solid three lines deep.

It's the blue line beyond Roman Josi's top pairing, as well as goalie Juuse Saros's frustrating decline, that's like an anchor dragging back their momentum. That said, even if this is coach Andrew Brunette's final season, it should be a fun ride.

It's been a lot less fun these days in Winnipeg. The Jets watched their franchise goalie Connor Hellebuyck peace out with a trade demand, suspending the multiple-time Vezina winner for not reporting to camp. Last season wasn't his greatest, but he's still a goalie with a .927 save percentage and a 1.98 goals-against average at 5-on-5 over his last 180 games. Due respect to Stuart Skinner, but there's no replacing that.

There's apparently also no replacing Nikolaj Ehlers. The winger's departure as a free agent in 2025, combined with several injuries on last year's roster, saw the Jets' offense plummet from 3.35 to 2.79 goals per game. Without the usual Hellebuyck safety net in a down year, that led to a staggering 34-point drop in the standings.

There's still a nice core here with Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Josh Morrissey. They could be better than expected if young players such as Viggo Bjorck, Isak Rosen and Brad Lambert level up, and if Cole Perfetti reverses his regression. But no Helly, no playoffs, no matter what comes back the other way in his eventual trade.

How far the Jets slide down the standings will determine whether or not the Chicago Blackhawks finish last in the Central for a fifth straight season.

In a major leap forward for the franchise, there are now multiple reasons to watch Chicago this season beyond the

continuing offensive adventures of Connor Bedard. Center Anton Frondell (19) could challenge for the Calder. Center Frank Nazar (22) is maturing nicely into a point-producing pivot. Can defenseman Bowen Byram prove worthy of his six-year deal with an elephantine \$12.5 million cap hit? Will Patrick Kane be something more than a nostalgia play?

The Blackhawks might not win much else this season, but they've recaptured our attention.

PACIFIC DIVISION

Edmonton Oilers

Vegas Golden Knights

San Jose Sharks

Anaheim Ducks

Los Angeles Kings

Seattle Kraken

Vancouver Canucks

Calgary Flames

I guess I see things differently than Connor McDavid. I thought what has held the Edmonton Oilers back from winning the Stanley Cup are factors like not having a good bottom six, not having six good defensemen, and a cursed goaltending situation that left Edmonton unclear about who would actually start an elimination game in the Final.

Connor obviously felt the problem was the Oilers not having an NHL coaching pariah with an inflated legacy using his sports psychology degree to squeeze another percent of effort out of the best player in the world, all while fighting the urge to invade his players' personal electronic devices.

However this Mike Babcock hiring turns out -- I know it's subtle, but I'm skeptical -- the quintet of McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Zach Hyman, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Evan Bouchard will drive this team to its first division title since 1987, which is a truly wild gap of titles given the team's successful history.

Then the real questions can start being answered, especially the one about their goaltending: Can the three-headed monster of Tristan Jarry, Devon Levi and Stanley Cup champ Frederik Andersen finally give McDavid the championship quality netminding he's lacked in Edmonton?

The Vegas Golden Knights' reign of dominance is now 10 years old, having won six division titles, three conference titles and the Stanley Cup. The coaches during that reign: Gerard Gallant, Pete DeBoer, Bruce Cassidy and John Tortorella. All experienced, all accomplished and three of them with Jack Adams Awards. Tortorella took over the Golden Knights with eight games left in the regular season and led them to the Cup Final. He wanted to come back. But GM Kelly McCrimmon told him that Ryan Craig is his guy.

Boy, is he. Craig played for McCrimmon's beloved Brandon Wheat Kings. He joined the Golden Knights as an assistant coach in their inaugural season before taking over their AHL club for the past three seasons -- missing the playoffs twice, for what it's worth. He's been primed to take over this gig for the entirety of the team's existence, handpicked by his boss to replace a coach who had just led them to within two wins



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of a championship. (That's nothing to say for how good Mitch Marner played under Tortorella, too.)

The Golden Knights collect stars like they're playing a round of "Mario Party," which is why they're going to finish first or second in the Pacific again. But for the first time in their short history, they don't begin the season with a star behind the bench. No pressure, Ryan Craig. You're just a handpicked guy seeking to meet the highest standard of excellence for any NHL team in the last decade.

Please recall that Sidney Crosby played for the Stanley Cup in his third season. I'm not willing to go quite that far with his heir apparent, but I do have Macklin Celebrini winning the Rocket Richard, the Hart Trophy and Lululemon curator of the year in leading the San Jose Sharks back to the playoffs for the first time since 2019.

He is surrounded by a roster filled with young potential stars such as Will Smith (nearly there), Michael Misa, Sam Dickinson and Ivar Stenberg, their latest stroke of draft lottery luck.

But GM Mike Grier has been slowly building a truculent supporting cast in the punishing Western Conference, from his Kiefer Sherwood pickup last season to adding Jacob Trouba to an improved blue line that also now includes Darnell Nurse. You'd like a little more in goal from Alex Nedeljkovic and especially Yaroslav Askarov, who was an atrocious minus-19 goals saved above expected last season, and maybe the new vets on the back end help that out.

The Anaheim Ducks lost Trouba from their back end last season. Olen Zellweger is now a Sabre. Radko Gudas is back in Florida. John Carlson, added at the deadline, is in Tampa. None of them were sufficiently replaced on the fifth-worst team in expected goals against (5-on-5) in the league last season.

Granted, GM Pat Verbeek had to deal with his star center Leo Carlsson signing a \$90 million offer sheet from the Flyers, matching it, and then figuring out how much more he had to pay leading scorer Cutter Gauthier ... because of Leo Carlsson signing a \$90 million offer sheet from the Flyers. Maybe he was too busy to build on this team's playoff round victory last season, because this roster looks primed for a dip.

Having the Los Angeles Kings outside of the playoff picture just seems wrong. They've made the postseason cut five straight times. New coach Peter Laviolette has made the playoffs in his first full season at each of his six previous NHL coaching stops. They're going to have a full season of star winger Artemi Panarin skating up with Quinton Byfield and either Adrian Kempe or Kevin Fiala when healthy. Their back end features master Drew Doughty, his apprentice Brandt Clarke and the steady work of veteran goalie Darcy Kuemper.

What they don't have is a replacement for Anze Kopitar, who never received the appreciation for how much he did for the Kings in his sunset years. Will they have to move Kempe in the middle for depth's sake, further exposing a past-their-prime group of wingers? There's always a possibility of a trade for a center, but the Kings will have to take a number before being served one -- nearly every team wants another scoring center.

There's a chance I'm wrong here and the Kings vacuum up points in a weak division to make the playoff cut again. But their scoring depth and lack of overall team speed concerns me, even under a coach that gets results.

The best thing for the Seattle Kraken this season would be to be terrible, but this franchise continues to exhibit a stubborn inability to suck. They've never had a points percentage under .463 since their inaugural season. They haven't selected in the top four since drafting Shane Wright in 2022, a young center currently best known for being potential trade bait. Coach Lane Lambert has a system that squeezes out enough points to keep the bubble in sight.

Seattle's analytically driven front office continues to make the nice move here and there: Securing Bobby McMann from the Leafs, getting Mackie Samoskevich from Florida and finally unlocking Kaapo Kakko's potential. Assuming a bounce-back from Joey Daccord, their goaltending is quite solid. But the Kraken are once again neither good enough for the playoffs nor bad enough to maximize their draft lottery odds. They are the embodiment of hockey purgatory.

You probably won't find a standings projection that doesn't have the Vancouver Canucks and Calgary Flames in the bottom of the Pacific. I'm buying into the vibe shift in Vancouver, with the Sedin twins running hockey operations above beloved former player and now head coach Manny Malhotra. They have two potentially solid scoring lines anchored by Elias Pettersson and Jake DeBrusk as well as Marco Rossi and Brock Boeser.

It'll be fun to see if Zeev Buium, who like Rossi came over in the Quinn Hughes trade, has another level.

The Canucks should be better than 31st in scoring, which is where they were last season. I'm not sure the Flames will be better than last in the league again, and that's fine. GM Craig Conroy is in the middle of a rebuild that he's handling adeptly.

Unless goaltenders Dustin Wolf and Devin Cooley prevent the bottom from falling out, the Flames should be 8th-of-8 in the Pacific.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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SPORTSNET

In battle of Cup winners, Panthers announce return in OT win over Hurricanes

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes gathered at the blue line, the Stanley Cup sitting on a table a few feet away, and watched a championship banner rise to the rafters amid roaring home fans.

From the visiting bench, the Florida Panthers — the team that had won the Cup the two years before Carolina's June breakthrough — patiently waited through that 15-minute ceremony to remind everyone that they're fully back from an injury-hammered year.

It added up to a tight-checking, goaltender-dominated and sometimes testy reunion between title winners with playoff history between them. And it took a blue-liner in Gustav Forsling to finally end it by blasting a one-timer past Brandon Bussi with 4.3 seconds left in overtime that pushed the Panthers to a 1-0 season-opening win.

"Playoff-style hockey," Forsling said. "That felt like a playoff game to me. It was awesome, really fun."

The NHL said it marked the third time in its modern era (since 1943-44) that the two previous Cup winners met in a season-opening game, the others coming in 1962-63 and 2019-20.

The Panthers remind everyone of their championship credentials

The Panthers had reached the Stanley Cup Final for three straight years and won it all in 2024 and 2025, twice eliminating the Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final in that run. But injuries last year derailed any chance to contend, notably with captain Aleksander Barkov going down with a knee injury to open preseason camp.

Getting Barkov back, along with Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk welcoming brother Brady as an offseason addition to an already deep lineup, had offered plenty of reason to believe Florida is back among the league's best. They also brought in Jacob Markstrom to take over the crease anchored by Sergei Bobrovsky during those title runs.

That's why Florida coach Paul Maurice pointed out it's a new team, even with so many championship holdovers. And why the Panthers sat on the bench to watch the Hurricanes' pregame ceremony.

"You get a chance to see what you want so bad," Maurice said. "We think it's really important that the teams respect each other for those achievements, whether it's an individual player hitting a milestone or certainly a Stanley Cup. They've earned the right to have as long of a ceremony as they wanted, and it was well done."

Markstrom was a standout in making 15 saves, including stopping Carolina top-line center Sebastian Aho on a short-handed breakaway in the second period. Forsling also stepped up beyond his walk-off winner, blocking a shot by a trailing Jackson Blake in the crease to help Markstrom in turning away a four-on-one rush late in the second.

Sequences like those were magnified on a night with the teams going a combined 0 for 13 on power plays.

"I thought we played a great game — everyone, the whole lineup," Markstrom said. "All four lines and all six D played really good, making my job a lot easier."

The Hurricanes fall short in a top-tier test

Bussi nearly matched Markstrom in making it through regulation and overtime unscathed. The waiver-wire wonder from last year, who posted a shutout in Carolina's Cup-clinching win against Vegas on June 14, made 19 saves.

But Forsling's blast from inside the blue line, off a feed from Carter Verhaeghe, zipped past Carolina forward Taylor Hall and beat Bussi to the glove side just as it seemed the game was headed toward a shootout. It left the goaltender crumpling forward to his pads and gloves, a disappointing end to his first game as the top starter since veteran Frederik Andersen's departure in free agency.

"It was far enough out I should kind of found it, for some reason I didn't get a good visual on it," Bussi said, uncertain if the puck clipped Hall on its way in. "And it's 4 seconds left, trying to get to a shootout. I think on my standards it's a bad goal."

It was a damper on a jubilant night for the Hurricanes, who had reached the Eastern final three times in the seven years before going 16-3 on the way to the franchise's second Cup. The Hurricanes return with a largely intact roster beyond Andersen's departure, top-line forward Seth Jarvis still recovering from shoulder surgery and third-pair defenseman Alexander Nikishin unsigned as a restricted free agent.

But having that cohesion back didn't eliminate rust, nor the ability to push past a tested Florida team in what could be a preview of yet another postseason reunion.

"I think it's a good game for us," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "The offensive guys got, 'OK, well now we've got to get going here with the way the game is played.' Like I said, it wasn't a lot of room and the little plays you normally make, we weren't making them tonight. Or seeing them."



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yahoo!sports

Hurricanes news: Rod Brind'Amour gets real about Brandon Bussi after tough loss to Panthers

Michael Whitaker

Hurricanes news: Rod Brind'Amour gets real about Brandon Bussi after tough loss to Panthers appeared first on ClutchPoints.

The Carolina Hurricanes raised their 2026 Stanley Cup banner to the rafters of Lenovo Center on Tuesday evening before their first regular-season matchup of the new season against the Florida Panthers, who had won back-to-back championships in 2024 and 2025.

While it wasn't a championship game, the Panthers got the last laugh at Carolina's expense. Gustav Forsling scored the only goal of the game with just seconds remaining in overtime, ending what had been a scoreless battle and giving Florida a 1-0 victory along with the extra point in the standings.

Goaltender Brandon Bussi, who was sharp throughout the game, didn't see Forsling's shot until it was already past him. According to head coach Rod Brind'Amour, the one mistake Bussi made on the night was one he'd want a mulligan on,

but he also pointed out that Bussi was the reason the Hurricanes earned a point in the standings.

"He's going to want that one back, but he's the reason we even got the point," Brind'Amour said of Bussi via Ryan Henkel on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Bussi replaced now-former Hurricanes goaltender Frederik Andersen in Game 3 of the Stanley Cup Final earlier this spring, and later led Carolina to three straight wins, winning the club's first title in 20 years. After Andersen departed to join the Edmonton Oilers, Bussi officially became the leading man on Carolina's goaltending depth chart.

Bussi finished the game with 19 saves on 20 shots, while his Panthers counterpart, Jacob Markstrom, who was traded back to the club that originally drafted him, earned the shutout with 15 saves.



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Hurricanes drop season opener in OT to Florida 1-0

Al Hood

Gustav Forsling scored with just over four seconds left in Overtime, and the Carolina Hurricanes dropped a heartbreaker to Florida on Opening Night 1-0.

For one last time the Hurricanes got a chance to celebrate the Stanley Cup—and they did it in a way that showed just what they would have done had they been able to do so at home. The usual player introductions started, and included Seth Jarvis in uniform, coming out to thunderous cheers. The change occurred when Captain Jordan Staal was announced, skating out with the Stanley Cup in tow. He skated around the arena to the cheers of the fans—including passing right by the assembled Florida Panthers—and then sat the Cup down in the middle of the ice where the players had all set up in a circle.

As Staal joined the team, the familiar beating clap sounds played, and the team fans completed a Stanley Cup Storm Surge. It finished with Staal picking it back up and everyone on the team touching it one last time before it was sat back on the table. One last symbolic celebration for the fans who didn't get a chance to celebrate with the team at home. The 2026 banner was then raised, the team took photos with it, and that was that.

Anyone expecting a high-scoring game, though, was sorely disappointed as both squads showed exactly what a condensed training camp and preseason leading to a regular season with two more games will do. The teams essentially skated up and down the ice during the first, and the only reason there was a 6-3 Florida advantage in shots was due to the two power plays Florida had. Both were successfully killed, including having Logan Stankoven slot into Seth Jarvis' spot. Both Brandon Bussi and Jacob Markstrom made strong saves, and the period ended with a fight between the two enforcers Nic Deslauriers and Bokondji Imama. Even that was mostly a draw as it was the two just holding and circling each other.

The second period wasn't nearly as clean, as both teams spent time on the 5-on-3, and both teams combined for nine penalties. Yet despite all the chances for both sides, the

penalty kills ruled. Florida arguably had a few better chances but Bussi made some great saves. It wasn't until the final Power Play of the period that Carolina actually put some decent shots on goal, but again, came up empty. The period ended with a scrum that saw Sean Walker head to the box.

In the third period, Carolina got to their game and had arguably their best power play of the night led by the second unit. Again, both teams traded penalties, again both teams traded chances, but the Canes were able to kill a late Power Play, and Florida decided to melt the period off to guarantee each team a point.

Carolina controlled the action for most of the Overtime, but the communication was still tough between the team as they put more shots on their own goalie than they did on Markstrom. As the clock ticked down, K'Andre Miller made an ill-advised pass over to Andrei Svechnikov near the goal, and it created one last rush that Florida was able to take advantage of. Forsling let loose with the shot right as he crossed the blue line and it blew past Bussi to give the Panthers the 1-0 win.

After the game Bussi took the blame for the goal, saying it was one he should have seen. Despite making several great saves, it was clear his mind set is one where he expects more out of himself. Coach Rod Brind'Amour after the game didn't seem to upset overall, saying that Bussi would want the shot back but he was also the reason they made it to Overtime in the first place. His bigger concern was just how choppy the play was with all of the penalties, making it difficult to get into the flow of the game—already a problem considering the opponent.

Carolina will now get a couple of days to study the loss and prepare for their next home game on Friday night against Washington, before flying up to Philadelphia on Saturday.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Forsling spoils Hurricanes' opening night as the Panthers win 1-0 in overtime

Jakob Halbur

Center Jordan Staal climbs onto the bench during the round one playoff game versus the Ottawa Senators at the Lenovo Center on Monday, April 20, 2026. The Hurricanes beat the Senators 3-2 in double overtime.

Center Jordan Staal climbs onto the bench during the round one playoff game versus the Ottawa Senators at the Lenovo Center on Monday, April 20, 2026. The Hurricanes beat the Senators 3-2 in double overtime.

Sound the sirens, the storm has returned.

107 days after they claimed the Stanley Cup over the Vegas Golden Knights, the Carolina Hurricanes took the ice again to begin their quest for a second-consecutive championship. Although the Hurricanes (0-0-1) began the evening with a celebratory banner raising above the ice; on the ice they would leave much to be desired as the visiting Florida Panthers (1-0-0) emerged victorious in overtime.

As the team was introduced to usher in the start of the 2026-27 NHL season, captain and forward Jordan Staal emerged onto the ice holding the Stanley Cup as he and his teammates led the fans in the team's signature "Storm Surge" celebration. A sold-out Lenovo Center crowd watched on as the 2026 team became forever enshrined in franchise and hockey history with the raising of its championship banner

"It was pretty special to have [the Stanley Cup] in the building, on the ice with [the home crowd] and share that moment with them," Staal said.

In terms of the product on the ice, it was a tight and minimally-offensive matchup with both the Panthers and the Hurricanes not having much to show for on the scoresheet. The teams combined for only 35 shots on goal throughout all three periods and overtime, significantly lower than many were expecting for teams full of superstar players.

Hurricanes' head coach Rod Brind'Amour attributed the lack of offense to the tight positioning on the ice but also to the caliber of a team like the Panthers who, this offseason, saw the return of forward Aleksander Barkov along with the addition of forward Brady Tkachuk.

"I thought, you know, there wasn't a lot of room [on the ice], obviously, so that had a lot to do with how the game looked," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "But they made it hard on us, and when we did have opportunities, we beat it up."

While the first period looked as if both teams were still finding their footing at the start of the season, the second turned up the intensity with a combined nine penalties. And although nothing came about these man-advantages offensively for

either team, it allowed them to showcase their penalty-killing prowess, including a new look for the Hurricanes featuring forward Logan Stankoven who takes the spot of injured forward Seth Jarvis as he recovers from offseason shoulder surgery.

"Again we're missing a really good player [in Jarvis], and you know you don't replace that player you have to fill in with, and Jarvy's a driver, he's a big penalty killer," Brind'Amour said. "So, was looking for someone to step up there, and I thought [Stankoven] did a great job."

With the score still knotted after three periods, and neither team finding much success against either goaltender — including a combined 0-13 on the power play — Carolina and Florida looked to overtime to settle the score.

For four minutes and 55 seconds, it looked as if the extra period would follow suit with regulation, but Florida defenseman Gustav Forsling had other plans in mind.

In the waning seconds of overtime, Forsling alongside forwards Carter Verhaeghe and Brady Tkachuk rushed into the Carolina zone. After a setup from Verhaeghe, Forsling ripped a one-timer just under the right arm of goaltender Brandon Bussi to win the game for the Panthers with 4.3 seconds remaining on the clock.

"I don't know, it might've hit our d-man or whatever and took a weird bounce," Bussi said. "But it was far enough out, I should've found it."

Although the Canes netminder was a bit hard on himself for allowing the game-winner, his head coach was still proud of his performance between the pipes.

"Yeah, he's going to want that one back, but you know he's the reason we got the point," Brind'Amour said. "I thought, you know, some real big saves, and even though there wasn't a lot of action, he was good when we needed him to be."

The Canes will have a chance to avenge their performance from opening night as legendary forward Alexander Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals come to town on Friday, Oct. 2. Puck drop against the Capitals is set for 7 p.m.



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SportScan

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

1401253 Carolina Hurricanes

Panthers spoil Hurricanes' banner-raising party with late overtime victory

Chip Alexander8-10 minutes 30/09/2026

They rolled the Stanley Cup out, raised the Stanley Cup banner and thousands of Carolina Hurricanes fans thundered their approval and appreciation Tuesday at Lenovo Center.

And then they played hockey.

The Canes and the Florida Panthers went at it in a season opener that had little flow, little open ice, a lot of fumbled pucks, bad penalties and even worse power plays before Florida won it in overtime, 1-0.

With 4.3 seconds left on the clock.

On a last-gasp slapshot by Panthers defenseman Gus Forsling from 55 feet that somehow found its way past Canes goalie Brandon Bussi, who had played so well for so long.

It all happened so quickly that everyone in the building seemed surprised.

"I felt pretty good and then I gave up a pretty bad goal," Bussi said in a somber Canes locker room. "It might have hit our D-man, it took a weird bounce, but it was far enough out I should have kind of found it.

"For some reason I didn't get a good visual on it and it's four seconds left and we're trying to get to a shootout. I think by my standards, it's a bad goal."

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Bussi, who had 19 saves in the game, was the reason his team came away with a point in the opener. The Canes could have lost in regulation had Bussi not made a good stop on a late Niko Mikkola shot.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Brandon Bussi (32) stops a scoring attempt by Florida Panthers center Alexander Barkov (16) in the second period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Brandon Bussi (32) stops a scoring attempt by Florida Panthers center Alexander Barkov (16) in the second period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

"He was good when he needed to be, but a tough one at the end," Brind'Amour said.

Jacob Markstrom, with 15 saves, was the winner as the former Panthers goalie returned to the Florida net for the first time since December 2013.

The Hurricanes did kill off all seven Florida power plays and nearly 12 minutes of power-play time. With winger Seth Jarvis sidelined, Logan Stankoven filled in on a penalty-kill unit and in Jarvis' normal spot and was effective.



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The flip side: the Canes had six power plays, getting a few decent chances but not enough. They had an extended 5-on-3 advantage and had two shots on it but could not convert.

"The way the game looked, it wasn't a very good game to watch," Brind'Amour said. "But they made it hard on us. And when we did have opportunities, we beat it up."

"Not used to that kind of pressure. We just haven't seen it in practice and a game in preseason is half the pace of that. Our top guys were fumbling it or their passes weren't connecting. The little plays that they normally make, they weren't making them. Or seeing them."

The first period was mostly a slumber of hockey parrying, stick battles, and dumping and chasing – until the Canes' Nicolas Deslauriers decided to change the mood.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Nicolas Deslauriers (44) drops the gloves for a fight with Florida Panthers left wing Bokondji Imama (14) in the first period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes left wing Nicolas Deslauriers (44) drops the gloves for a fight with Florida Panthers left wing Bokondji Imama (14) in the first period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

After putting a big hit on Florida's Lars Eller, Deslauriers squared off with Bokondji Imama, dropped the gloves and had at it. Both got in some solid blows before going down, and Deslauriers was given a big ovation from the crowd, which clearly enjoyed seeing that.

"He did his job," Brind'Amour said.

For the Hurricanes, it was a night of celebration and anticipation as a new season began. For the Florida Panthers, it was the start of what they hope will lead to another banner-raising of their own.

The Canes won the Stanley Cup last season. The Panthers won the Stanley Cup in 2024 and 2025 before missing the playoffs last season. The NHL, always with an eye on ratings, saw fit to put the two on the ice together on ESPN to start the 2026-27 season.

Brind'Amour was fine with the made-for-TV matchup.

"It's exactly what you want," Brind'Amour said before the game. "This is going to shake you out of whatever thoughts you might have had coming into this one. It's a great team, we know, and they're going to be hungry. They've had five months off, which they haven't had in a long time."

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) trips Florida center Sam Reinhart (13) in the second period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) trips Florida center Sam Reinhart (13) in the second period on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

The Canes had just three shots on goal in the opening period and had the first two penalties of the season. They then had five power plays in the second – including the 5-on-3 – but mishandled the puck too much, passed on some shooting looks or picked up penalties to negate them.

Carolina's Sebastian Aho did have a partial breakaway later in the second but Jacob Markstrom stopped him. Later, Eetu Luostarinen had the same for Florida, but Bussi made the stop.

The Canes' next game will be their first against a Metro Division opponent. The Washington Capitals, with Alex Ovechkin back for another season, come into the Lenovo Center on Friday.

"I think we're going to see every team's best," Bussi said. "We earned that right. So we've got to get used to that."

This story was originally

Published September 29, 2026 at 9:16 PM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

In more than 40 years at The N&O, Chip Alexander has covered the N.C. State, UNC, Duke and East Carolina beats, and now is in his 15th season on the Carolina Hurricanes beat. Alexander, who has won numerous writing awards at the state and national level, covered the

Hurricanes' move to North Carolina in 1997 and was a part of The N&O's coverage of the Canes' 2006 Stanley Cup run.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

1401254 Carolina Hurricanes

The Canes' banner rises amid cheers — and Raleigh's championship memories return

Esther Frances8-10 minutes 29/09/2026

Under rows and rows of energetic, chanting fans, members of the Carolina Hurricanes stood with their arms each other's shoulders, basking in the glory of their hard work all season culminated in one form: a banner that reads, "Stanley Cup Champions."

The Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday raised their ceremonial banner to celebrate defeating the Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup Final in June.

During the ceremony, Carolina Hurricanes players emerged one by one from behind a light show of red and blasts from a smoke machine. Players held up their sticks to the fans as Caniacs gave wholehearted applause for each player — and a bit more for notable playoff heroes like goalie Brandon Bussi and captain Jordan Staal.

The players gathered at the middle of the ice around the Canes logo and led the crowd in a classic Storm Surge: a slow, over-the-head clap that slowly gets faster and faster until the sound blends into a fixed applause.

They then gathered and embraced at the blue line under a chorus of "Let's go Canes!" as the banner was raised.

Canes staff members, including athletic trainers and coaches, were also introduced one at a time while fans clapped and cheered. When head coach Rod Brind'Amour was recognized, he received a standing ovation.

The banner raised on Tuesday joins another that was hoisted in 2006, when the Canes won the Stanley Cup Championship with Brind'Amour as the team's captain.

Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal (11), surrounded by his teammates, raises the Stanley Cup to the delight of fans on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal (11), surrounded by his teammates, raises the Stanley Cup to the delight of fans on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

The Florida Panthers — the Canes' opponent on Tuesday and Stanley Cup winners in 2024 and 2025 — watched as the arena celebrated the championship.

The Canes fell to the Panthers 1-0 in overtime.

Panthers head coach Paul Maurice told reporters that it was "real important" for his team to witness the Canes' banner raising.

The Carolina Hurricanes surround the Stanley Cup at center ice, as they celebrate their 2026 Championship ahead of their opening night game against Florida, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

The Carolina Hurricanes surround the Stanley Cup at center ice, as they celebrate their 2026 Championship ahead of their opening night game against Florida, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

"We have a history with Florida of supporting celebrations of players and certainly the championships for teams," he said. "We want to be a part of it to show our respect for the great accomplishment."

Veteran Canes player Jordan Martinook told reporters on Monday that their championship ring was a cool keepsake and memory to have. He said the banner raising ceremony would "probably be emotional."

"A lot of memories will be in your head, but then obviously you're going to see the banner go up, and then the lights will come on, and then it's another hockey game, another season opener," Martinook said. "So it'll be exciting. I know the fans will be crazy."

The Carolina Hurricanes raise their 2026 Stanley Cup Championship banner as the team looks on, ahead of their season opener against Florida on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

The Carolina Hurricanes raise their 2026 Stanley Cup Championship banner as the team looks on, ahead of their season opener against Florida on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

'The fans will be crazy.'

Ten minutes after the Lenovo Center doors opened, spirited fans decked out in red and black began flooding the seats. A crowd on either side of the Canes' cage slowly gathered to watch the players during warm-ups.

Canes Crew members were handing out miniature celebratory banners for fans as they entered the stadium.

Derek Thompson, who is originally from England but has lived in North Carolina for 43 years, has followed the Canes since their inaugural season in 1997.

He said he used to travel from Raleigh to Greensboro with his wife, Barbara Thompson, for the Canes' first two years before the team moved to the capital city.

Derek Thompson said the couple attended Game 7 in June 2006 when the Canes defeated the Edmonton Oilers for the Stanley Cup.

"To do it 20 years later on the anniversary, I was like, 'Wow, that's pretty incredible,'" he said.

As he and Barbara Thompson were on their way to their season ticket seats, she said there "may be some tears" in his eyes when the team raises the banner.

She said winning the Stanley Cup is "a once-in-a-lifetime deal."

"You see them win it twice? That's pretty amazing," Barbara Thompson said.

Canes fan Erin Schmidt said that she used to come to games in the early 2000s when there "was hardly anyone there" and became a fan through purchasing Harris Teeter's discounted tickets. She said she watched the Canes win the championship at a dive bar.

"It was so crowded, and everyone had the energy," she said. "You could feel it. It was awesome."

Schmidt said she instilled the same Canes-loving energy 10 years ago into her friend, Giselle Lacuata, who lives in Boston.

At Tuesday's opening night, Lacuata and Schmidt were side by side.

Schmidt said the Canes getting to raise the banner was "very well deserved."

Lacuata added, laughing, "in Rod (Brind'Amour) we trust!"

This story was originally

Published September 29, 2026 at 5:52 PM.

Profile Image of Esther Frances

Esther Frances

The News & Observer

Esther Frances covers politics, the state legislature and lobbying for The News & Observer.

News Observer LOADED: 09.30.2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

1401255 Carolina Hurricanes

Here's how to watch or stream Carolina Hurricanes hockey games this season

Chip Alexander3-4 minutes 29/09/2026

For months, Carolina Hurricanes fans wondered how they would be able to see games this season after the FanDuel Sports Network folded.

The Hurricanes, in conjunction with the NHL, started the Hurricanes Hockey Network and will show 72 of the 84 games this season. The network launches Friday when the Canes host the Washington Capitals.

Twelve games will be broadcast or streamed by national carriers as the 2026 Stanley Cup champions gain added exposure.

The Canes open the 2026-27 season Tuesday against the Florida Panthers in a game to be televised by ESPN and streamed nationally by Disney+ and Hulu.

Canes games will continue to be shown on cable by Spectrum in North and South Carolina and parts of Georgia and Alabama — channel 313 on Spectrum in the Raleigh market will have Canes games. Spectrum also televises the pre-game and postgame shows.

"This is a vital agreement for Hurricanes Hockey Network, ensuring our games will be available on the biggest cable distributor in our region," Mike Sundheim, the Canes' vice president of communications, said when the multi-year arrangement with Spectrum was announced Sept. 22.

What will streaming the Canes cost?

Prime Video is the direct-to-customer streaming home for the Canes this season. Subscriptions are \$99.99 for the season or \$19.99 per month.

The Canes announced Monday that Fubo had a multi-year distribution agreement to carry HHN. Fubo has several pricing plans at fubo.tv/welcome/plans. The network will be available for Fubo customers in the Hurricanes' broadcast territory beginning with the Caps game on Friday.

The Canes also will have 10 games shown in a simulcast package by WRAL and Fox 50 in the home market beginning with Friday's game. The package then will shift to "Saturday Night Hockey on WRAL" beginning with the Saturday, Dec. 5 home game with Toronto.

Mike Maniscalco will continue as play-by-play man on HHN and Tripp Tracy remains the game analyst. Hanna Yates and Shane Willis also continue their roles on the network as broadcast and digital hosts.

This story was originally

Published September 29, 2026 at 7:35 AM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

News Observer LOADED: 09.30.2026



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

1401256 Carolina Hurricanes

2027 Stanley Cup odds: Panthers open as favorites ahead of Hurricanes, Avalanche

Adam Gretz6-7 minutes 29/09/2026

The Florida Panthers may have missed the playoffs last season, but that is not lowering the hype or expectations for them at the start of the 2026-27 campaign. Not only are they expected to bounce back and return to the playoffs — they're expected to win the whole thing.

The Panthers start the season as the Stanley Cup favorites with their +650 odds at major sportsbooks giving them around a 13 percent implied probability to win it all.

That might seem like a shocking level of confidence for a team that missed the postseason, but the Panthers are not your typical non-playoff team. They are just one year removed from playing in three consecutive Stanley Cup Finals, winning back-to-back titles in 2024 and 2025.

Their 2025-26 season, and their quest for a three-peat, was also completely sabotaged by a series of injuries to their best players, including a knee injury that took their best player — center Aleksander Barkov — out of the lineup for the entire season. Matthew Tkachuk also missed half of the season, and by the time the final month rolled around, they were putting a lineup on the ice that was almost unrecognizable due to injuries.

Which NHL arena has the best game-day experience?

All of that should change this season as Barkov returns, Tkachuk healthy from the start and a fresh start for everybody on the roster. But that is only a part of what is giving the Panthers the best odds. They also had a massive offseason that saw them make the blockbuster addition of Brady Tkachuk in a trade with the Ottawa Senators, while also overhauling their goalie situation by acquiring Jacob Markström from the New Jersey Devils.

Markström might be the biggest question on the roster, but the depth of the team is so strong that they are not going to need a lot from him. Speaking of depth, there might not be a deeper forward group in terms of both star-power and depth. They are also capable of playing the most physically demanding style of hockey in the league. The Panthers will be a nightmare to play in a potential best-of-seven series.

Winners of the 2026 Presidents' Trophy, the Colorado Avalanche, and the defending Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes are the next-biggest favorites ranging from +700 to +750 depending on the sportsbook. The one exception is DraftKings, which has Carolina tied with Florida at +650 as the top favorite.

2027 Stanley Cup odds

One of the more interesting teams to watch this season is going to be the Edmonton Oilers under new head coach Mike Babcock.

While Babcock is one of the most polarizing and controversial head-coaching hires the NHL has seen since ... well ... since his brief stint with the Columbus Blue Jackets a few years ago, the oddsmakers seem to be expecting him to make a big difference for the Oilers. They are one of the top-five favorites with +800 odds at DraftKings and BetMGM and +1000 odds at FanDuel.

The Oilers do have two of the league's best players in Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, but there are still a lot of potential flaws with that team that could be season-altering.

For one, there is a concerning lack of depth beyond the top two stars and a very unsettled goalie situation with Tristan Jarry and Frederik Andersen expected to carry that load. There is also the reality that Babcock has not actually won anything in the NHL in close to 15 years. He has not coached a team to the second round of the playoffs since 2013 and has not finished above third place in his own division since 2011. He also hasn't coached an NHL game since the 2019-20 season. It's quite possible that the game has completely passed Babcock by.

There is pressure for Edmonton to win, but the flaws are very real and very concerning.

The Washington Capitals are another intriguing team, generally coming in anywhere between +1100 and +1700.

Like the Panthers, the Capitals missed the playoffs a year ago but are returning a good roster that was bolstered with a big offseason. They spent big this offseason to acquire forwards Jordan Kyrrou and Alex Tuch, and will also be getting a healthy Pierre-Luc Dubois after he missed all but 27 games a year ago. They have the size to hang with Florida, the skill and depth to outscore any opponent on any given night, and an elite goalie in Logan Thompson who can put the team on his back if needed.

The Capitals are going to be in it. And they could be a problem.

If you are really looking for a sleeper team, go out West to the Utah Mammoth.

Their best odds are at FanDuel, where their +2700 price is the 12th shortest, and they jump slightly to +3000 at DraftKings and +3500 on BetMGM. They boast a talented young core with Logan Cooley, Dylan Guenther and Clayton Keller. They also made a couple really strong offseason additions, bringing in center Vincent Trocheck and winger Anders Lee.

The Mammoth's roster can match up with a lot of top teams in a wide-open Western Conference. The wild card with them is in goal, but they have been floated as a potential landing spot for Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck. If they could figure out a way to swing a deal for him, that would change the expectations significantly.

At the bottom of the list, the Vancouver Canucks and Calgary Flames are the longest shots, with both as low as +100000 at DraftKings. They are not only two teams in the early stages of massive rebuilds, they are easily two of the worst rosters in the league on paper.

The Seattle Kraken and Chicago Blackhawks also both find themselves among the bottom-five across the board.

Sep 30, 2026

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

1401257 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes lose 1-0 'muckfest' to Panthers in OT

September 29, 2026 Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — On the night the Hurricanes raised their second Stanley Cup banner to the rafters of Lenovo Center, Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour wasn't much for celebrating after his team dropped a 1-0 overtime decision to the visiting Panthers on Tuesday night.

"We didn't grow the game tonight, that's for sure," Brind'Amour said after Florida defenseman Gustav Forsling's point shot glanced off Carolina winger Taylor Hall's stick and fooled goalie Brandon Bussi (19 saves) for the game's only goal with 4.3 seconds left in overtime.

"I felt pretty good," Bussi said, "and I gave up a pretty bad goal."

The two teams, who collectively won the last three Stanley Cups, generated little in a game Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal called "a muckfest."

"It's tough to find room out there," Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho said, "but when you do, you've got to execute, and we didn't do that today."

Nor did either team on the power play. Carolina was 0 for 6 in 8:38 of power play time — including 96 seconds at 5-on-3 — while the Panthers were even worse, going 0 for 7 in nearly 12 minutes with the man advantage, also logging time at 4-on-3 and with a two-man advantage.

"Obviously, the power play should have found a way there," Aho said. "But then again, our PK did the exact same thing to them than what they did to us."

Jacob Markstrom, playing his first game in his second stint with Florida, came into the game having won two of his 11 regular season and playoff games at Lenovo Center but posted a 15-save shutout.

But it was Forsling who was the true hero for the Panthers.

Not only did Forsling score the game's only goal, but the Florida defenseman had a few key blocks to stifle a handful of Carolina's limited chances.

The Hurricanes also shot themselves in the foot a few times.

Aho had a shorthanded breakaway in the second period, but Markstrom shut his five-hole to deny him, and Carolina's 4-on-1 counterattack in the third period was stymied by Forsling, who blocked Jackson Blake's shot as the lone Panthers player back.

"We had a 4-on-1 and didn't get a shot on net," Brind'Amour said.

"That's, to me, rust and not really being dialed in on the pace of what it is now."

A mostly uneventful first period — other than a heavyweight bout between Nic Deslauriers and Boko Imama — gave way to a penalty-filled second.

In all, nine penalties were called in the middle frame, and both teams had time at 5-on-3. But neither could dent the scoreboard, with Bussi and Markstrom making a handful of important stops to keep the score 0-0 through 40 minutes.

The third period was more of the same, and for the game at 5-on-5, Carolina registered 16 shot attempts and was credited with only one high-danger scoring chance.

"There's not a whole lot of room when you play against top caliber teams like that," Staal said. "They showed that tonight. I thought we did a good job of sticking with it and killing penalties. Just came up short at the end."

Brind'Amour said he expects his team to improve after a short preseason.

"It's going take time — a couple more games we'll see that, I'm sure," he said.

Staal said it was difficult to play the first game of the regular season immediately after the celebration, but he still cherished the opportunity to share the Cup with the fans.

"You really obviously want to still enjoy those moments," Staal said. "Pretty special. I wish we had more time to kind of give it to everyone and get the crowd going. ... But it was pretty special to have that Cup in the building on the ice with them and share that moment."

The Hurricanes' 2026 Stanley Cup banner is raised to the rafters of Lenovo Center during a pregame ceremony before Carolina's season opener against the Panthers on Tuesday in Raleigh. (Stan Gilliland / North State Journal)

Brind'Amour said the fans deserved the chance to see the Cup at Lenovo Center.

"They didn't get to see us celebrate it on home ice, so it was nice to do a little victory lap," he said. "I thought that was cool. They need to enjoy that stuff. They're a big part of the success we've had over the years. I thought that was cool."

Notes: Andrei Svechnikov had a game-high eight hits. ... Carolina won 34 of 58 faceoffs (58.6%), and all four centers won more draws than they lost. ... K'Andre Miller played a team-high 25:15. ... Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Cayden Primeau and Mike Reilly were healthy scratches for Carolina.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2026

1401258 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes begin title defense

September 29, 2026 Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes' defense of their Stanley Cup title begins Tuesday against the Florida Panthers at Lenovo Center, and no Cup champion in the salary-cap era has brought back as much of its roster.

"You're always detailed, but you don't have to go over the ins and outs of things," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Monday of having a lineup full of players familiar with his coaching. "Or when you're just kind of (giving) reminders, guys (say), 'Oh yeah, we've done this over and over.' So there is some of that, and I think just having that comfort of guys that you know you can trust is good."

The players also now know for certain that the Hurricanes' style of play — criticized by pundits for years as too taxing in the regular season to hold up in the playoffs — can work for more than 100 games.

But for all the knowns Carolina has as it embarks on the 2026-27 season, there are still some uncertainties.

The biggest is the fate of defenseman Alexander Nikishin.

Nikishin is not with the team as he and the Hurricanes remain at a stalemate over a new deal. Reports say the Russian is aiming for both a bigger role and to be the highest-paid Hurricanes defenseman (K'Andre Miller is currently first at an average salary of \$7.5 million annually).

Nikishin, who has little leverage as a restricted free agent without arbitration rights, recently changed agents from Quartexx's Benjamin Kreyzerman to Paul Theofanous of TMI LLC. There is a glimmer of sunlight in that swap since Theofanous has more clients on the Hurricanes than any other team — including Pyotr Kochetkov, who just signed a two-year extension with Carolina last week.

Despite not being in a position to strong-arm the team to bend to his contract demands or force a trade, Nikishin does have an understandable position: He was one of the top rookie defensemen in the NHL last season, and the market for blue liners exploded this offseason thanks to big deals for Vancouver's Zeev Buium and Anaheim's Pavel Mintyukov.

Also playing a role is Nikishin's age: He will be 25 on Friday, and his window to cash in on his career is much smaller than those of most players entering their second full NHL season.

Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsy took the high road Monday when meeting with the media.

"We're trying to find a resolution," Tulsy said. "He has largely kept things out of the media, and I want to be respectful and make sure that when players talk to me, they know that it's just between us."

It still seems like a shortsighted play by Nikishin seeing that the roles he seemingly covets — more even-strength minutes and perhaps the chance to quarterback a No. 1 power play unit — could both be available to him next season with the contracts of Jalen Chatfield and Shayne Gostisbehere set to expire.

Nikishin's absence did open the door for competition on the blue line, and 2023 fifth-round pick Charles Alexis Legault has, at least to start the season, won the job next to Gostisbehere on the third pairing.

"He takes pride in his defensive game, and he takes pride in what he does every day," Gostisbehere said of Legault, also praising the 6-foot-4, 220-pounder's size and physicality.

Legault, who played 12 games with the Hurricanes last season, said he is excited for the opportunity.

"There's still a lot of work to do, so I'm going to keep on working on that," he said Monday.

Legault will be the only rookie on the opening night roster after Carolina reassigned both Brady Nadeau and Felix Unger Sorum to the AHL's

Chicago Wolves — the end of a training camp that Brind'Amour said led to "tough, tough decisions."

"I would anticipate we'll see some of these young guys shortly," Brind'Amour said.

Part of the reason neither Nadeau nor Unger Sorum are starting the season in Raleigh is the team's roster crunch.



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1401401 Websites

The Athletic / The NHL season is here: Let's get you ready for opening night

By Sean McIndoe

Sept. 29, 2026 10:34 am EDT

Good morning to everyone except anyone I know who is going to try to talk to me today. You had all summer to have your birthday or invite me to your wedding or whatever. Now hockey's back, and I'll be unavailable until June.

We've got a big trade to break down, a contest to enter and some oddly specific predictions to make. It's a lot. Good thing we all reported to camp in the best shape of our lives.

Let's Go

NHL hockey is back tonight, and we'll have games every night from now through Black Friday. Let's get you ready.

First, about that trade. Yesterday, the Maple Leafs sent Matthew Knies, Steven Lorentz, Emil Andrae and a 2027 second-round pick to the Blue Jackets for Kirill Marchenko, Miles Wood and Elvis Merzljkins. The move ends two offseason storylines: Marchenko's unhappiness in Columbus and the Leafs' apparent fixation on trading Knies (pictured above).

It's a complicated deal involving retained money on Merzljkins, who'll head to long-term injured reserve but was necessary to get the cap pieces to work. It also involved an extension for Marchenko carrying a \$12.5 million average annual value. Our experts called the trade reasonably positive for both sides. We also looked deeper into the deal from both sides — here's the Leafs' view, and here's the Jackets' side.

And now, on to the regular season:

What you need to know

Season starting! Bullet points! Too excited for full sentences!

We projected every single team's season, and you can find them all here.

Pierre LeBrun surveyed coaches and executives to get their Stanley Cup picks.

Jesse Granger just dropped his 2026-27 goalie tiers, featuring 45 different names.

Our staff made one bold prediction for each team — and a whole bunch of other predictions.

My predictions for every team, which I reserve the right to delete.

And a big one: We're going live to mark the new season. Join Max Bultman, Sean Gentile and Shayna Goldman on Tuesday for a LIVE NHL Opening Night preview at 3 p.m. ET on YouTube.

💡 Trivia Time!

We'll all overreact to whatever happens tonight, and tomorrow, and the night after that. It's what hockey fans do. But as a public service, today's trivia will remind us that the first week of the season doesn't always tell us as much as we think.

Only one team started last year 3-0-0 with all three wins in regulation. What was the team?

Hint: This team didn't make the playoffs.

Answer at the bottom.

What to Watch

Most weeks, this is the section where we'll highlight two or three games from that evening's schedule. But since it's opening night, let's binge all five of tonight's matchups. (And be sure to check out Jesse Granger's guide on how and where to watch the NHL this season.)

📺 Panthers @ Hurricanes

5 p.m. ET on ESPN

Note the early start time, as the Hurricanes get the honor of kicking off the season with their banner-raising ceremony while the Panthers debut Brady Tkachuk and Jacob Markström. These two teams represent the last three Cup winners, and many people's two favorites for an eventual Eastern Conference final showdown.

📺 Canadiens @ Maple Leafs

7 p.m. ET on ESPN+, Sportsnet / TVA

The classic rivalry is back, albeit featuring two teams that spent last year heading in opposite directions. This one marks the NHL debut of No. 1 pick Gavin McKenna — whose unlikely journey from remote Whitehorse, Yukon makes him all the more interesting — and maybe Marchenko. It's also new Leafs goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky's first chance to show the skeptics he's not washed.

📺 Rangers @ Bruins

8 p.m. ET on ESPN

Nothing says "late September" like a Boston-New York rivalry matchup. The Rangers are rebuilding, and most of us have written off their chances at doing much of anything this season. Then again, we all said the same about last year's Bruins, and they racked up 100 points. This will be our first look at Pavel Dorofeyev as a Ranger and JJ Peterka as a Bruin.

📺 Canucks @ Oilers

10 p.m. ET on ESPN+, Sportsnet

It's not often you can have multiple stars in a game and still have the focus be behind the bench, but here we are. After six years, multiple scandals and one short-term job that didn't go so well, Mike Babcock makes his return to the NHL. Can he get the Oilers over the hump? Time will tell, but the rebuilding Canucks should offer up a chance to hit the ground running.

📺 Blackhawks @ Golden Knights

10:30 p.m. ET on ESPN / TVA

Last year's Western champs open at home against the Hawks, who won't have Connor Bedard but still feature plenty of intriguing young talent. The focus will be on Bowen Byram, who gets to start proving us all wrong about his new contract. Meanwhile, Ryan Craig makes his NHL debut as the Knights' head coach and will look to make it through all three periods without Kelly McCrimmon finding a reason to fire him.

Full NHL schedule here. Try streaming games like these for free on Fubo.

Let's Get Odd

Today marks the return of one of my favorite traditions: my annual oddly specific predictions column, in which I make 32 way-too-detailed-to-ever-come-true calls, one for each team. Every now and then one will hit, and I never shut up about it. Most of them do not. But it's all about showing up, even if I know the scoreboard is going to be ugly. It's like being on the Calgary Flames, only from my couch.

So sure, click/tap here for this year's oddly specific predictions. But since you subscribe to the newsletter and are therefore my favorite people, let's drop three bonus predictions just for Red Light readers.

How rare is it to see a shutout with 50-plus shots against these days? Extremely rare — it's happened in the regular season only eight times in the cap era, and only one of those came in the last eight years. (Casey DeSmith, of all people, had 52 saves for the Penguins in a 4-0 win over the Bruins in April 2022.) If anything, we'd expect these kinds of games to be an endangered species these days, with the league getting super picky about shots on goal stats. But no guts, no glory, so let's say we'll get a 50-save shutout at some point this year.

Last year, in this very space, we predicted the league would see its first goalie fight since 2020. We were right ... kind of. There were actually three, the most in a season since 2003-04. What can I tell you? Goalies are weird. This year, let's predict that one of those six combatants from



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last year gets into another scrap, joining Ray Emery and Rick DiPietro as the only goalies to have more than one in the cap era.

Finally, while I'd hate to be blamed for bringing this energy into the world, the NHL has been lucky long enough. This is the year that we see a Game 7 overtime winner called back over some nitpicky replay review that will make everyone furious — and maybe even lead to the league finally getting rid of this nonsense once and for all.

Remember, try to act surprised when all three of these happen.

Coast to Coast

📺 If you haven't yet, be sure to find time for Max Bultman's righteously scathing look at the Red Wings' indecisive summer and how it's still costing them.

💰 NHL team values keep soaring, as the average franchise is now worth \$2.43 billion. The Maple Leafs unsurprisingly top the list, but the rest of the values are fascinating.

📄 Seven Arizona State men's hockey players asked the university's president to place coach Greg Powers and his staff on administrative leave pending further investigation into the workout that left sophomore transfer Matthew Mayich on life support.

📺 "Hockey Night in Canada" is back after all, with a new season that will feature the PWHL.

© The league has two new captains: David Pastrňák in Boston and Macklin Celebrini in San Jose.

📺 Our newsletter pal James Mirtle has a piece on nine of the biggest storylines to watch this year.

🧠 It's important to take a stand on the important issues in life.

📺 Oh look at that, the "Jets are the Jets" people were right all along. Well, I guess we knew that already, but now it's official.

📺 On Monday's "The Athletic Hockey Show," Max Bultman, Mark Lazerus and Jesse Granger break down Jesse's goalie tiers rankings. Watch or listen here.

Last Call

If you haven't entered the annual NHL prediction contest yet, you still have a few hours before the 4 p.m. ET deadline. The contest is free to enter, and the questions are easy. Well, they seem easy.

All you have to do is tell us which teams you're confident will or won't make the playoffs, whose jobs are safe and which players will be part of the awards discussion next year. The more right answers you give, the more points you score. And there's even a simple bonus question to let you pad your total, just by predicting a 50-goal scorer.

Of course, those easy predictions never end up being easy at all, because this is the NHL and nothing makes sense. Within the next few weeks, we'll already have stories emerging that nobody saw coming. Breakouts, Cinderella teams, slow starts and injuries, you name it. Just when you think you've figured out the answers, the NHL changes the questions.

Our questions won't change, though. So if you haven't entered yet, be sure to take some time today to throw your hat into the ring. Remember, the law of the land is that if you don't enter the contest, you don't get to make fun of anyone else's predictions all year. And what fun would that be?

Ready to try it? Click or tap here to find out more about the prediction contest and submit your entry.

Trivia Answer

Last year's only perfect three-game start came from the Florida Panthers.

They earned regulation wins at home over the Blackhawks, Flyers and Senators, clearly establishing themselves as the team to beat. Then they went on the road and lost four straight in regulation and never truly recovered, ultimately finishing 14th in the East and missing the playoffs by 14 points.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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1401402 Websites

The Athletic / NHL team values keep soaring, average franchise now worth \$2.43 billion: Who leads the way?

By James Mirtle

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:51 pm EDT

monitoring, as the NHL has managed to avoid becoming a league of haves and have-nots since the 2005-06 introduction of the salary cap.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.30.2026

It's not just the NHL's salary cap skyrocketing these days.

According to Sportico's annual team valuation rankings released Tuesday morning, the average NHL franchise is now worth an estimated \$2.43 billion. That is up 16 percent from last season and more than 140 percent from 2022, when the average team value was pegged at \$1.01 billion.

Driving that growth over the past year are four unexpected teams, with the New York Islanders making a 40 percent jump from 2025, followed by the New Jersey Devils (32 percent), the Calgary Flames (23 percent) and Anaheim Ducks (21 percent).

The Flames' boost was due to Calgary's new arena that should open in the fall of 2027, as a state-of-the-art replacement for its aging Saddledome. The Islanders, Devils and Ducks, meanwhile, "benefit from investors' willingness to pay premiums in big markets across U.S. sports leagues," according to Sportico.

On a related note, the outlet reported Monday that the Islanders were set to sell roughly 15 percent of the franchise to minority partners at a \$3 billion valuation, a premium beyond the \$2.7 billion in Sportico's latest rankings. Eight other NHL franchises are currently listed with a valuation of more than \$3 billion, with the Toronto Maple Leafs and New York Rangers leading the way at \$4.8 billion and \$4.15 billion, respectively.

Even the lowest-valued NHL franchises have seen their valuations increase dramatically in recent years, with the Columbus Blue Jackets and Winnipeg Jets now listed as being worth approximately \$1.5 billion.

While the NHL still lags behind the other "Big Four" North American sports leagues in terms of average team valuations, NHL clubs have grown more quickly than in the NFL, NBA and MLB over the past five years. The NHL's hard cap system — with a fixed upper limit of \$104 million this season — combined with increasingly robust revenue sharing and a lucrative new Canadian TV deal has helped make these teams desirable commodities in many markets.

That the NHL is set to potentially expand into Houston or Austin by 2030 would also bring a \$2 billion windfall to be split among the incumbent 32 owners. That's a dramatic increase over what Las Vegas and Seattle paid — \$500 million and \$650 million — for new teams in 2017 and 2021, and it's unlikely the league would stop at an uneven 33 teams.

The NHL's most established franchises are still driving the highest valuations. The Original Six teams, for example, are valued at an average of \$3.62 billion, with the Maple Leafs, Rangers, Montreal Canadiens, Boston Bruins and Chicago Blackhawks all ranking among the league's six highest-valued teams.

We asked our reporters what one NHL rule they would change

Lauren Morales-Jones and Jorge Ribas

Meanwhile, the average Canadian franchise is worth \$2.72 billion compared to \$2.34 billion for the average U.S.-based franchise, although the American teams have been increasing in value at a faster rate (16.4 percent to 14.8 percent) over the past year.

The average team based in the U.S. Sun Belt (\$2.23 billion valuation) has almost caught up to the league average, too, in part driven by recent on-ice success in Vegas, Carolina and the two Florida teams. Those four franchises have won six of the past seven Stanley Cup championships.

Overall, the valuations point to the NHL being in its best financial health in decades, with revenues set to approach \$8 billion in 2026-27 and few markets struggling to keep pace. Whether that changes as the salary cap continues to rise dramatically in the coming years will be worth



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1401403 Websites

The Athletic / Oddly specific NHL predictions for all 32 teams' 2026-27 seasons

By Sean McIndoe

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:51 pm EDT

The prediction game can be a thankless one.

You know the drill. When a writer puts their predictions for the season out into the world, like I did last week, there's one of two ways any particular pick can go. If they're wrong, they're an idiot and should have to hear about it all year long. But if they're right, well, big deal — everyone knew it was going to play out that way.

It's rough. But over the years, I've come up with two ways to counter it. The first is the reader contest, which launched last week. That gives you a chance to make your picks, which gives me the chance to make fun of you when you're wrong. Remember, you don't get to dunk on my picks if you didn't enter the contest. (Which you still have time to do before it closes this afternoon.)

And then there's today's column: The annual set of oddly specific predictions. These are the picks where I get so ridiculously precise that it flips the script. If I'm wrong, well, of course I was. But if I successfully predict a 30-year-old defensive defenseman's first career goal in the exact game it happens, then you're never going to hear the end of it. (I did that, by the way. Did you know that? It happened. It was years ago, sure, but it still happened.)

Or at least, that's the idea. You'll probably still dunk on me. Just know that if any of these hit, I will be insufferable about it.

Asking NHL coaches who will win the Stanley Cup

Pierre LeBrun

One oddly specific pick per team, in alphabetical order. Here we go ...

Anaheim Ducks

Let's kick things off with one our annual traditions: The team that feels like they have a wide range of possible outcomes but just annoys everyone by finishing the season with the exact same number of points as they had last year. The question is whether the Ducks' 92 points will be enough to make the playoffs this year.

Boston Bruins

We know the hockey gods will make sure something good happens in Boston this year. We just don't know what. How about this: This year's Bruins will do something they haven't managed since the 1990s, when they score nine goals in a road game.

Buffalo Sabres

Bowen Byram wanted out in part because he wants to be a No. 1 defenseman, and knows that wouldn't happen on a team with Rasmus Dahlin. He'll get some firsthand evidence he was right this year, when Dahlin records a hat trick in a game against Byram's Blackhawks.

Calgary Flames

Everyone thinks they're going to be bad from day one, but that's wrong — they're going to start the season with three straight wins. (And then they're going to be bad for the rest of the year.)

Carolina Hurricanes

Tonight's banner-raising against the Panthers is a) reasonably spiteful and b) the season's first game. What better way to keep the party going than by having last year's playoff hero score the NHL's first goal of 2026-27? That's right, it will be Tom Dundon's kids captain Jordan Staal who gets the league-wide ice-breaker.

Chicago Blackhawks

One of last year's closest near-misses was our prediction that Connor Bedard, who entered the season without a career hat trick, would get two in the first month. He did it twice early, but not quite early enough, and we missed by a few days. We can't do any first-month predictions for Bedard this year since he's going to miss the start of the season. But when he does rejoin the lineup, he's getting a hat trick in his first game back.

Colorado Avalanche

I'm already out on a limb in a few other places, so let's keep it going: Cale Makar will finish as a Hart Trophy finalist. And if that doesn't seem like an especially bold call, remember that a defenseman hasn't done it since way back in the 1999-2000 season.

Columbus Blue Jackets

I'm tired of all the negativity coming from idiots like this, so let's stick with something that's unquestionably positive: For the first time in the cap era, the Blue Jackets will see a player score four goals in a game this year.

A six-player blockbuster trade between the Blue Jackets and Leafs achieves the seemingly impossible: a win-win exchange.

Dallas Stars

Speaking of Columbus ... About a month from now, the Stars face the Blue Jackets twice in a week. That should be fun given the Zach Werenski for Thomas Harley trade we apparently almost had happen in the summer. That will make for interesting matchups, but it won't settle much, because each guy is scoring once.

Detroit Red Wings

Where will Dylan Larkin be traded? I'm not sure. What about Alex DeBrincat? Also no idea. But without getting into either player's new home (if any), let's thread the needle with this prediction: DeBrincat and Larkin will end up facing each other in this year's playoffs.

Edmonton Oilers

They hired Mike Babcock because the star players wanted a demanding coach. Well, they'll get it. Specifically Leon Draisaitl, who'll find himself benched at some point in the season's first month.

Florida Panthers

After finally getting their wish to play together, Matthew and Brady Tkachuk will take the brother act even further by finishing the season tied in goals scored.

Los Angeles Kings

Nobody seems to think they'll be any good in the post-Kopitar era, and they get to start the season on the road against the reigning Presidents' Trophy winners. So it goes without saying that they're going to win in Colorado tomorrow. To get even more oddly specific, the final will be 4-1.

Minnesota Wild

Here's a weird one. What do you think these numbers represent: 57, 33, 21, 40, 33? Those are the year-to-year variations in Kirill Kaprizov's point total in each season of his career, either plus or minus. In other words, he's never come within 20 points of his previous year's total. He'll end that streak this year by finishing within exactly five points of last year's total of 89.

Montreal Canadiens

Despite a loaded lineup, they're not going to score on every shot this season. It will just start that way, as they get their first goal on their first shot against Sergei Bobrovsky and the Maple Leafs tonight.

Nashville Predators

With a new GM and an uncertain short-term outlook, nobody should be surprised if the Predators continue to be active on the trade market. Combine that with the league's new longer schedule, and somebody who starts the season on the Predators' roster will end up becoming just the tenth player in NHL history to play at least 85 games in a season.

New Jersey Devils

Somewhat surprisingly, the Devils were one of only two teams last year that went the entire season without ever losing a game in which they led



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after two periods. (The Avs were the other.) Not this year, though, because they'll blow a second-intermission lead in their opener against the Flyers.

From forced trades to offer sheets, NHL stars are shedding traditional deference to front offices and taking control of their futures.

New York Islanders

Congratulations to Bo Horvat on becoming the 16th captain in franchise history. But teammate Matthew Schaefer will find even more exclusive company this year, when he joins Mike Bossy and Billy Smith as the only Islanders to win All-Star Game MVP honors.

New York Rangers

After years of waiting in the wings, Alexis Lafrenière finally leads the Rangers in points. Wait, what do you mean somebody beat me to that one? OK, fine — he does it after trailing the race heading into the season's final week.

Ottawa Senators

The biggest game on the calendar comes on Oct. 21, when the Senators host former captain Brady Tkachuk and the Panthers. The good news for Ottawa: They'll win an emotional game. The even better news: The winning goal will come from their other Team USA star, Jake Sanderson.

Philadelphia Flyers

Porter Martone looks like a future 50-goal guy. Then again, there was a time that we said the same about Matvei Michkov. For now, we'll pencil both guys in to hit the mark this year — as in, Martone and Michkov produce 50 goals combined.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Good news: Somebody from their opening-night lineup is going to score an overtime goal in this year's playoffs. Bad news: It won't be for the Penguins.

San Jose Sharks

Will Macklin Celebrini take another huge leap forward, or will he see the sort of temporary step back lots of young stars experience? No to both questions because he's going to finish with the same number of points as last year — 115 on the nose.

Seattle Kraken

An underrated revenge scenario on this year's schedule: The Kraken hosting the Stars for back-to-back games in early December. That will be a chance for Seattle fans to let Jason Robertson know what they think about his insulting refusal to join the Kraken over the summer, and for the team to show him he made a mistake. Alas, he's scoring the winning goal in one of those games.

St. Louis Blues

Longtime readers know it wouldn't be the Oddly Specific Predictions without me trying to call a goalie goal. I turned to The Athletic's goalie whisper Jesse Granger for help on this one, and he suggested Joel Hofer. Done. Remember, if this is wrong you can blame Jesse, but if it's right then all credit goes to me.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

2026-27 NHL Goalie Tiers: Anonymous panel of coaches and goalies rates 45 netminders

Heading into this season, four elite goalies have clearly separated themselves at the top of the NHL.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Jon Cooper finally got his Jack Adams Award last year, which was well-deserved. But voters are fickle, and this year Cooper doesn't get so much as a single vote.

Toronto Maple Leafs

After two straight disappointing years, Auston Matthews finishes the year with exactly 50 goals — just enough to quiet the talk of him being washed, without being quite enough to truly fire up the "he is so back" talk.

Utah Mammoth

The Mammoth did something beautiful last year: They went an entire season without having a single shootout. The hockey gods are surely pleased, and fans across the league thank the Mammoth for their service. Anyway, they'll have a shootout within their first three games this year.

Vancouver Canucks

They'll obviously be bad, and might finish dead last. Maybe even on purpose. But they'll beat some good teams along the way because hockey is weird, and that's going to include a win over the eventual Stanley Cup champion before the season is a month old.

Vegas Golden Knights

They'll make the playoffs, which isn't much of a prediction. This might be: When they do make the playoffs, they'll be led onto the ice for their first game by a goalie who's not currently on their roster.

Washington Capital

In what a lot of us are assuming will be his final season, let's pencil in Alex Ovechkin's last goal of the regular season for April 4, on home ice against the Penguins. And just to layer on the symbolism even more, let's say his old pal Sidney Crosby is on the ice for the goal.

Winnipeg Jets

Finally, we almost have to do something involving Connor Hellebuyck's first game back in Winnipeg after his inevitable trade. The problem: Not only do we not know which team he'll be dealt to, we can't even assume he'll play in any homecoming because goalies are fragile little flowers. So how about this: In the Jets' first home game against Hellebuyck's new team, Stuart Skinner gets the shutout.

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The Athletic / The NHL is emphasizing skater equipment rules. Here's what is required and what is new

By Kaitlyn Pohly

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:51 pm EDT

Philadelphia Flyers center Trevor Zegras' trip to the penalty box last Thursday during his team's preseason win over the Boston Bruins came with a harsh two-minute reminder for the rest of the NHL: Wear your equipment properly.

Alongside the new collective bargaining agreement taking effect this season, the league is putting its foot down on a collection of fashion rules for skaters: some new, others merely newly enforced.

So, what exactly can skaters wear this season? And could your favorite forward or defenseman fear two minutes for a questionable color combination? Not quite. From tucked jerseys and tilted visors to helmets and neck guards, here's a refresher on the NHL's equipment rules. We'll limit this to skaters, since goalies have an entire different world of equipment nuances.

Neck guards

This is the only truly new equipment rule in the CBA. Beginning this season, players without prior NHL experience must wear cut-resistant neck protection carrying at least an A5 rating. That means the material can withstand at least 2,200 grams, or roughly five pounds, of force from a blade in laboratory testing before it is cut through.

Asking NHL coaches who will win the Stanley Cup

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The protection must also be worn during pregame warmups and cannot be rolled, taped, cut or modified in any way. Players with at least one NHL game of prior experience are grandfathered in and do not have to wear neck guards.

The mandate follows the death of former NHL player Adam Johnson, whose neck was cut by a skate blade during an on-ice collision in England in 2023.

Jerseys

No new jersey rules arrived with the updated CBA. However, it seems the league has made proper equipment use, including tucked jerseys, a point of emphasis this (pre)season.

Players must begin each shift with their jerseys untucked and covering their protective equipment. However, if a jersey rides up or becomes tucked during play, the player will not be penalized, as long as it was properly positioned when he stepped onto the ice. Jerseys must also be properly tied to the player's pants at all times.

The league also gets remarkably specific about what constitutes a legal jersey. Rule 9.3 includes a diagram prescribing measurements for jersey sizes 46 through 60 at six different points across the jersey, in some cases down to an eighth of an inch. Most of the listed dimensions allow a tolerance of just three-quarters of an inch.

These rules apply to every player, regardless of NHL experience.

To protest Zegras' penalty, a majority of Flyers players emerged for warmups Saturday before their preseason game against the Washington Capitals with their jerseys tucked into their pants.

"Just having some fun with it," defenseman Jamie Drysdale said to The Athletic's Kevin Kurz. "Maybe one last time to tuck the jersey in. We won't take a penalty like that during the year."

Visors

Beginning in the 2013-14 season, players with fewer than 25 games of NHL experience were required to wear visors. Rule 9.7 mandates that

they be "affixed to the helmets in such a fashion as to ensure adequate eye protection."

What constitutes "adequate," however, is not precisely defined, leaving plenty of gray area ... and plenty of tilted visors. Former Maple Leafs forward Leo Komarov demonstrated just how far a player could push that ambiguity.

Known for tilting his visor almost entirely above his eyes, Komarov received a two-minute illegal-equipment penalty in Toronto's 2017 season opener after repeated warnings from officials.

The rulebook prescribes neither an acceptable tilt angle nor how far down the face a visor must extend, leaving officials to decide when one tilts so high it no longer meaningfully covers a player's eyes.

In March, The Athletic's Chris Johnston identified four remaining NHL players who did not wear visors: Nashville's Ryan O'Reilly, Minnesota's Zach Bogosian, San Jose's Ryan Reaves and Dallas captain Jamie Benn. Reaves retired this month, leaving O'Reilly, Bogosian and Benn as the three active, visor-less holdouts entering this season.

Helmets

All players must wear league-approved helmets during games, whether they are on the ice or sitting on the bench or in the penalty box.

Pregame warmups are slightly more complicated. Players who entered the NHL in 2019-20 or later must wear helmets, but veterans are grandfathered in and can let their hair flow for those 16 minutes.

If a skater's helmet comes off during play, his choices are simple: put it back on or get off the ice. He is allowed to finish an immediate play but continuing without a helmet results in a two-minute minor penalty. A player who intentionally removes an opponent's helmet also receives a minor for roughing.

Goalies follow different rules, because nothing involving goalie equipment can ever be quite that simple, as noted earlier.

If a goalie loses his mask while his team controls the puck, play stops immediately. If the opponent has possession, any imminent scoring chance can continue before play is stopped.

The biggest question now may be how long the NHL maintains its newfound attention to detail.

The league launched a similar crackdown on tucked jerseys in 2013, when Evgeni Malkin received what was believed to be the first regular-season penalty for the infraction. Enforcement then quietly disappeared for nearly 13 years. Until Zegras.

Now the rules are back in the spotlight. Whether his penalty marks the beginning of a new standard, or merely another preseason point of emphasis that fades once the games count, remains to be seen.

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The Athletic / How to watch NHL games in 2026-27: TV channels, streaming info and broadcast schedules

By Jesse Granger

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:51 pm EDT

The NHL is back!

The defending Stanley Cup-champion Carolina Hurricanes host the Florida Panthers on Tuesday to drop the puck for the 2026-27 NHL season. That game begins at 5 p.m. ET and is the start of a tripleheader on ESPN that includes the Boston Bruins hosting the New York Rangers at 8 p.m. ET, followed by the Vegas Golden Knights hosting the Chicago Blackhawks at 10:30 p.m. ET.

With the television broadcast landscape changing faster than ever, finding the game you're looking for can be challenging. Both national and local broadcasts have been strewn across over-the-air antennas, cable packages and a variety of streaming services, but don't fret. Whether you live in the U.S. or Canada, and whether you're watching a local or out-of-market team, we have you covered. Here is The Athletic's comprehensive guide on how to watch the 2026-27 NHL season.

Also, to keep up with The Athletic's NHL coverage, don't forget to follow the league and your team(s) of choice by managing your feed, and subscribe to The Athletic Hockey Show podcast on your preferred platform.

You can watch in-market and nationally televised NHL games on Fubo ().

How to watch nationally televised NHL games in the United States

With the regular-season schedule expanding to 84 games, there's more hockey than ever. Of the 1,344 total games this season, 172 will be broadcast nationally in the U.S., across ABC, ESPN, ESPN Select, Disney+, Hulu and TNT Sports. The league is entering the sixth year of its seven-year rights deal with the ESPN family of networks and TNT Sports, so you'll find the vast majority of nationally televised games on those platforms, in addition to NHL Network.

ESPN will still be broadcasting mostly on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while TNT handles mostly Tuesday and Wednesday nights, and ABC airs games on Saturday.

Now in its fourth season, the NHL's "Frozen Frenzy" returns on Oct. 13, with all 32 teams in action on a single night and start times staggered by 15 minutes to create more than seven hours of non-stop hockey. The event will begin with a tripleheader on ESPN, beginning at 6 p.m. ET with the New Jersey Devils and Detroit Red Wings. The additional 13 games will be available on NHL Power Play on the ESPN App, while ESPN2 airs a whip-around show with live look-ins.

ABC

ABC is the home for nationally broadcast NHL games on Saturdays. The station will televise 16 NHL games on 13 different Saturdays during the 2026-27 season, most of which will be afternoon doubleheaders. The station will also broadcast the 2027 All-Star Game from Long Island, N.Y., on Feb. 6, and the 2027 Stadium Series game between the Dallas Stars and Vegas Golden Knights from AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas on Feb. 20.

What you need to watch these games: A broadcast antenna will suffice, though ABC is also available on any cable provider or streaming service. These games are also available with an ESPN Unlimited subscription.

ESPN

ESPN will broadcast 36 regular games this season on select Tuesdays, Thursdays and weekends. ESPN and ABC will also broadcast the first three rounds of the playoffs. The station's studio show, "The Point," will return for its sixth season, with weekly pregame coverage on ESPN2 and ESPN Select. That begins Sep. 29 as part of ESPN's opening night tripleheader, and will provide pregame and postgame coverage all the way through the playoffs.

What you need to watch these games: Most cable providers and streaming services have this channel. ESPN Unlimited subscribers will also have access to these games. Subscribers to ESPN Select will not be able to view these games unless they log in through a separate cable/streaming subscription.

TNT

TNT will broadcast the NHL on 10 Tuesday nights and 24 Wednesday nights throughout the season, most of which are doubleheaders, and will also have several Sunday doubleheaders and the occasional Thursday night broadcast.

The station will also air the Stanley Cup Final, as well as other marquee games such as the Winter Classic between the Utah Mammoth and Colorado Avalanche at Rice-Eccles Stadium in Salt Lake City on Dec. 31, and an American Thanksgiving doubleheader featuring the New York Rangers visiting the Chicago Blackhawks and the Pittsburgh Penguins taking on the Buffalo Sabres.

What you need to watch these games: Most cable providers include TNT and truTV. Otherwise, all are available to stream on Max.

NHL Network

The game schedule isn't nearly as regular for the league's network, but includes a live game or two most weeks.

What you need to watch these games: Most cable providers include the channel as part of a premium package. You can stream it through Fubo, Sling and DirecTV Stream.

Hulu

All 47 of the games exclusively broadcast on ESPN Select will also be shown live on Hulu.

What you need to watch these games: A subscription to Hulu (\$12.49 per month, or \$124.99 per year) or ESPN Select (\$13.99 per month or \$139.99 per year).

How to watch out-of-market NHL games in the U.S.

More than 1,050 out-of-market games will be broadcast on NHL Power Play through the ESPN App throughout the season. The games include the choice of two separate live streams with either home team or away team commentary. Replays of most games are available the next day on the streaming service, including games that air on TNT.

What you need to watch these games: An ESPN Select subscription (\$13.99 per month or \$139.99 per year).

How to watch out-of-market NHL games in Canada

Sportsnet+ Premium will broadcast over 1,000 out-of-market NHL games.

What you need to watch these games: A Sportsnet+ Premium subscription (\$44.99 CAD per month or \$344.99 CAD annually).

How to watch in-market NHL games

This is a bit more complicated. If you're located inside the regional area for the local team, you won't be able to watch the games live on ESPN Select, as they will be blacked out. Instead, you'll have to buy the cable package that includes your market's regional sports network, or in some cases, simply find the over-the-air broadcast that can be watched for free.

Here are the options for each team:

Anaheim Ducks: Watch locally with 54 games on FOX Los Angeles+ (Channel 13) and 10 games on KTTV FOX 11 (Channel 11), which are both free with a broadcast antenna. All 82 games will be streamed on Prime Video (\$14.99 per month or \$139 per year).

Boston Bruins: Watch locally on NESN (available on cable and satellite) or stream games on NESN 360 (\$29.99 per month or \$239.99 per year).

Buffalo Sabres: Watch locally on MSG (available on cable and FuboTV) or stream games on DAZN (\$29.99 per month, \$249.99 per year, or \$9.99 per game).



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Calgary Flames: Watch locally on Sportsnet West and Sportsnet One (available on cable), or stream games on Sportsnet+ (\$34.99 CAD per month or \$269.99 CAD per year).

Carolina Hurricanes: Watch locally on Hurricanes Hockey Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream on Prime Video (\$19.99 per month or \$99.99 per year for an HHN subscription; no Amazon Prime subscription is necessary).

Chicago Blackhawks: Watch locally on Chicago Sports Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream games on CHSN app (\$19.99 per month).

Colorado Avalanche: Watch 20 select games locally on 9NEWS (Channel 9) and KTVD (Channel 20), which are free with a broadcast antenna. The remaining games will air on Altitude (available on cable and satellite) and stream on Altitude+ (\$19.95 per month).

Columbus Blue Jackets: Watch locally on Blue Jackets Hockey Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream on Prime Video (\$19.99 per month or \$99.99 per year for a BJHN subscription; no Amazon Prime subscription is necessary).

Dallas Stars: Watch locally on Prime Video with an Amazon Prime membership at no additional cost.

Detroit Red Wings: Watch locally on Detroit SportsNet (available on cable and satellite) or stream with Detroit SportsNet (\$19.99 per month or \$189.99 per year).

Edmonton Oilers: Watch locally on Sportsnet West and Sportsnet One (available on cable) or on Sportsnet+ (\$34.99 CAD per month or \$269.99 CAD/ per year).

Florida Panthers: Watch locally on Scripps Sports for most of the region, on "The Spot – South Florida" in Miami and Palm Beach, and "LAFF" in Fort Myers (available on cable and satellite). Stream on PanthersPlus.TV (\$69.99 for the season).

Los Angeles Kings: Watch locally on ABTV (available on cable and satellite) or stream games on DAZN (\$19.99 per month or \$129 per year).

Minnesota Wild: Watch locally on Wild+ (available on Spectrum cable) or stream games on Prime Video (\$19.99 per month or \$99.99 per year for a Wild+ subscription; no Amazon Prime subscription is necessary). The NHL is currently negotiating other cable and satellite deals to make Wild+ available. About a dozen games will also be available over the air, free with a broadcast antenna.

Montreal Canadiens: Watch locally on TSN (English) and RDS (French), both of which are available on cable.

Nashville Predators: Watch locally on The Spot 28 – Nashville (available over the air with a broadcast antenna, or on cable and satellite) or stream games on the Nashville Predators app (\$74 per season).

New Jersey Devils: Watch locally on MSG Sports Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream games through MSG+ on DAZN (\$29.99 per month).

New York Islanders: Watch locally on MSG Sports Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream games through MSG+ on DAZN (\$29.99 per month).

New York Rangers: Watch locally on MSG Sports Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream games through MSG+ on DAZN (\$29.99 per month).

Ottawa Senators: Watch locally on TSN5 or RDS (available on cable), or stream on TSN+ (\$24.99 CAD per month).

Philadelphia Flyers: Watch locally on NBC Sports Philadelphia (available on cable and satellite) and stream games on the NBC Sports app (with a cable subscription) or on Peacock with an NBCSP add-on (\$24.95 per month).

Pittsburgh Penguins: Watch locally on SportsNet Pittsburgh (available on cable and satellite) or stream on SNP 360 (\$21.99 per month or \$99.99 for a season pass).

San Jose Sharks: Watch locally on NBC Sports California (available on cable and satellite) and stream games on the NBC Sports app (requires

cable subscription) or on Peacock with an NBCSC add-on (\$17.95 per month).

Seattle Kraken: Watch locally on KONG or KING 5 (both free with a broadcast antenna) or stream on Prime Video if you live in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana or Alaska (\$14.99 per month or \$139 per year).

St. Louis Blues: Watch locally on Blue Note+ (available on cable) or stream games on Blue Note+ on Prime Video (\$19.99 per month or \$99.99 per year).

Tampa Bay Lightning: Watch locally on The Spot – Tampa Bay 66 (free with a broadcast antenna or available on cable and satellite) or stream games on the Lightning app (\$66 per season).

Toronto Maple Leafs: Watch locally on Sportsnet and TSN (available on cable) or stream on TSN+ (\$24.99 CAD per month) and Sportsnet+ (\$29.99 CAD per month or \$249.99 CAD per year). Select Wednesday games stream on Prime Video (\$9.99 CAD per month or \$99 CAD per year).

Utah Mammoth: Watch locally on Utah 16 (free with a broadcast antenna) or stream games on Mammoth+ through SEG (\$69.99 per season).

Vancouver Canucks: Watch locally on SportsNet Pacific (available on cable) or stream on Sportsnet+ (\$29.99 per month or \$249.99 per year). Select Wednesday games will be streaming on Prime Video (\$9.99 CAD per month or \$99 CAD per year).

Vegas Golden Knights: Watch locally on Vegas 34 (free with a broadcast antenna, and also available with cable and satellite) or stream games on KnightTime+ (\$69.99 per season).

Washington Capitals: Watch locally on Monumental Sports Network (available on cable and satellite) or stream on Monumental+ (\$19.99 per month or 179.99 per year).

Winnipeg Jets: Watch locally on TSN3 (available on cable) or stream on the TSN app (cable subscription required), with select Wednesday games streaming on Prime Video (\$9.99 CAD per month or \$99 CAD per year).

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The Athletic / Biggest storylines of the 2026-27 NHL season: Celebrini's MVP bid? McDavid's long-awaited Cup?

By James Mirtle

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:51 pm EDT

It was a short preseason, to be sure, but it leads into a fascinating 84-game campaign for the NHL.

Beginning with Tuesday night's opening slate of games, the 2026-27 regular season kicks off with new faces, overhauled rosters, established villains and a wide-open race for the Stanley Cup. Against a backdrop of star players asking for trades and a rapidly rising salary cap, the league is also entertaining expansion bids, enjoying record-setting revenues and attempting to broaden its appeal into other markets.

There's so much going on around the league that it was difficult to whittle the top storylines down to a manageable list, and I'm sure there are going to be things I'll have missed by the time we get to the end of the season. But here's our best attempt to capture the spirit of the thing, as the NHL drops the puck on Game 1 of 1,344 for its 32 teams.

9. Will the Capitals contend in Ovechkin's swan song?

Alexander Ovechkin's summer decision on retirement went on long enough that it feels pretty clear this season, at age 41, will be it for the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer. Capitals GM Chris Patrick has done a nice job ensuring his team will be competitive in Ovechkin's final year, too, airlifting in Jordan Kyrou, Alex Tuch and Boone Jenner for an impressive overhaul of their forward depth.

With a solid youth movement that includes Cole Hutson (brother of Lane) and Ilya Protas (brother of Aleksei), as well as a second season for Ryan Leonard, there's plenty of room for upside here. This team is good enough on paper that Ovechkin will likely be relied upon less than ever to produce, even though he's coming off a respectable 32-goal, 64-point season.

It'll also be interesting to watch how Ovechkin is treated in his various "last stops" across the league late in the year, especially in light of the continued controversy over his ties to Russian president Vladimir Putin.

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8. Can the Hurricanes repeat as Cup champs?

Carolina's championship run last spring was one of the more convincing ones of the salary cap era, as the Hurricanes went 16-3 — including two sweeps — en route to the franchise's second Stanley Cup title.

And they're well-situated to take another run at things this year.

GM Eric Tulsky returns almost his entire lineup from last season, with only netminder Frederik Andersen moving on as a free agent (to the Edmonton Oilers) and RFA defenseman Alexander Nikishin still without a contract. Carolina also has more than \$8 million cap space open and has been one of the main suitors for Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck in an attempt to add yet another difference-maker. Expect them to be in on all the big names when trade talk ramps up midseason.

The Eastern Conference is certainly challenging, but with most of the contenders confined to the Atlantic Division, the Hurricanes should have a fairly reasonable path to defend their title. And this is an organization that, from the top down, isn't satisfied with winning just once with this cast.

7. Can Sharks phenom Celebrini make an MVP bid?

In Year 1, Macklin Celebrini put up 25 goals and 63 points on a last-place San Jose team. In Year 2 last season, he was one of the best players in the world, with a star turn for Canada at the Olympics and a 115-point campaign that ranked among the best in NHL history for a teenager.

Newly anointed as the Sharks' captain last week, Celebrini is talented enough that he could take another big step in the final year of his entry-level deal, potentially leading San Jose back to the postseason for the first time since 2019. More importantly, he has more help than ever, with a revamped defense and new wunderkind Ivar Stenberg aboard to make his own bid for the Calder Trophy.

The only question for Celebrini? Is he ready to surpass Connor McDavid, Nikita Kucherov, Nathan MacKinnon and others as the face of the league? Winning a Hart Trophy at age 20 would be a good start.

6. Will the Panthers get healthy and chase a dynasty?

After three consecutive trips to the final and back-to-back Stanley Cup wins in 2024 and 2025, Florida completely fell apart last season due to a pronounced run of injuries, including missing captain Aleksander Barkov for the entire campaign.

Now Barkov is back and they've added Brady Tkachuk to the mix, giving the Panthers arguably the best cast of forwards in the entire NHL. Florida is getting long in the tooth — projected to be only one of two teams (along with the Kings) with an average age over 30 — and even with last spring's postseason absence there are a lot of miles on all these bodies.

Still, the Panthers are going to be one of the teams to watch this season — or in some cases, hate-watch, given the reputation the Tkachukleheads, Sam Bennett, Brad Marchand, Radko Gudas and their other baddies have gained over the years. Florida's take-no-prisoners style hasn't earned them many friends over the years, but can it earn them another Cup?

5. Can No. 1 pick McKenna push the Leafs to the playoffs?

There have been some incredible performances from players right out of the draft of late.

The past two seasons, Celebrini and New York Islanders defenseman Matthew Shaefer both shot out of the gate as 18-year-olds, changing the complexion of their teams and injecting new hope for their suffering fan bases. Gavin McKenna arrives in Toronto in a unique spot, joining a veteran Maple Leafs club that was a failed contender for years before imploding to an embarrassing 78-point finish last season.

What's compelling about the challenge in front of McKenna is just how much help he'll have. In addition to established stars Auston Matthews, William Nylander and John Tavares all looking for redemption, new GM John Chayka pulled off a blockbuster trade for the Blue Jackets' Kirill Marchenko and added the best defenseman (Darren Raddysh) and goaltender (Sergei Bobrovsky) available in free agency.

The Leafs will likely need a 20-point improvement to sniff the playoffs in the difficult Atlantic Division, but a massive rookie campaign from McKenna could be a key part of that type of rebirth. And it would come just in time, given Matthews will be at a crossroads come summer 2027 when only one year will remain on his contract.

Toronto always receives a lot of attention thanks to the size of its market, but the Leafs will be more of a draw than ever with McKenna onboard as they attempt to re-establish themselves as a competitive franchise.

4. Will the rise of the rebuilds bring a changing of the guard?

This trend began playing out during last year's playoffs, with four of the NHL's five youngest teams — Anaheim, Buffalo, Montreal and Philadelphia — all advancing to the second round.

While the Ducks face considerable challenges after a mess of an offseason highlighted by a massive offer sheet bomb to Leo Carlsson from the Flyers, the other three clubs don't appear to be going anywhere in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

Potentially joining them as young clubs on the rise? The Sharks are probably the best candidate for being "up next," but the Senators (Jake Sanderson, Tim Stützle, William Eklund), Mammoth (Dylan Guenther, Logan Cooley), Blackhawks (Connor Bedard, Anton Frondell) and Red Wings (Moritz Seider, Lucas Raymond) also have been through long rebuilds and have youth-focused cores attempting to make inroads into the NHL's established contender group.

That old-guard top end group includes many of the oldest teams in the league — including Florida, Colorado, Vegas and Tampa — who will



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increasingly face challenges from the NHL's new stars in the coming years. Could the 2026-27 season be when it shifts even more?

3. How does the skyrocketing salary cap impact the season?

The biggest story of the offseason has clearly been how the rising cap has affected player salaries, especially those of young players who are netting record-setting contracts again and again.

Expect that trend to bleed into the season, especially after last week's news that the early projections for 2028-29 have the salary cap jumping to a record \$127.5 million. That will mean an unprecedented 23 percent rise over the next two seasons, giving teams already flush with cap space even more to spend despite little talent available to add.

The NHL's cap growth over a decade, in chart form.
pic.twitter.com/sej63bbUlo

— James Mirtle (@mirtle) September 25, 2026

More teams than ever will have excess flexibility, with eight clubs currently boasting more than \$10 million in cap room entering the year and another handful having \$4 million or more to play with.

That should allow for more player movement than ever, especially given how many contenders have key holes to fill. A poor start for any of the large mass of teams in the NHL's mushy middle could push their GMs from trying to compete to throwing in the towel, meaning they'll be offering up talent to the highest bidder — potentially well in advance of the trade deadline.

There are also more than 250 players entering the final years of their deals without a contract extension, meaning some big names like Alex DeBrincat, Ryan O'Reilly, Erik Karlsson, Vince Dunn, John Gibson and Jared McCann, among others, could be available during the season.

2. Will the player empowerment movement gather more steam?

It was a storyline all offseason, what with both Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin and Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck asking for trades, following in the footsteps of Canucks captain Quinn Hughes (now with the Wild) and many other stars of late.

Both the Larkin and Hellebuyck situations remain unresolved, creating plenty of drama in Detroit and Winnipeg. Columbus has open questions, too, as there was plenty of noise around Zach Werenski this summer.

It appears likely that more star players could join the exodus throughout 2026-27 if their teams struggle on the ice, with the Kraken, Predators, Blues and other bubble teams worth monitoring for dissent. Pending UFAs such as Hughes in Minnesota, Kucherov in Tampa Bay, Jason Robertson in Dallas, Drew Doughty in Los Angeles, among others, will also be storylines all year, as their extensions would cost their teams more than ever. Do any of those talks go sideways? And, if so, what then?

Huge decisions are also coming on McDavid in Edmonton and Matthews in Toronto by 2028, when Werenski, Clayton Keller, Artemi Panarin, Andrei Vasilevskiy, Brady Tkachuk and other big names will also be coming up as potential UFAs.

1. Will McDavid get his Cup playing for Babcock?

All eyes are on Edmonton entering what figures to be a fascinating experiment involving two of the NHL's best players and a controversial coach who has been out of the game for seven years.

McDavid put the Oilers on notice by signing a bargain-basement, two-year deal last October, indicating that the franchise is down to two more attempts at winning a Stanley Cup before this core's contention window hits an endpoint. Edmonton's roster isn't going to be dramatically different, aside from no longer having Darnell Nurse and adding two goaltenders (Frederik Andersen and Devon Levi) who bring their own question marks.

After a disappointing 93-point campaign and first-round exit last spring, the Oilers appear to be banking heavily on Mike Babcock being the biggest catalyst for improvement, which is a huge roll of the dice for an organization where every season is now must win.

It could work. It could implode spectacularly. And it could determine whether the best player in the game stays put in Edmonton long term or joins other stars league-wide in heading out the door.

It doesn't get more high stakes than that, w

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The Athletic / Predicting the 2026-27 NHL season, from Stanley Cup winner to awards to trades and more

By Harman Dayal, Mark Lazerus, Shayna Goldman and The Athletic NHL Staff

Sept. 29, 2026 Updated 3:50 pm EDT

After missing the playoffs last season, is the road clear for a Florida Panthers comeback — not only to the postseason, but to a third Stanley Cup championship? Is Macklin Celebrini ready to make his case for the Hart Trophy? Where will Connor Hellebuyck and Dylan Larkin be traded?

The 2026-27 NHL season is finally upon us, and that means it's time for The Athletic to ask its staff for their predictions. Who will take home the individual awards? Who will make the playoffs? Who are the potential dark horses? Which fan base is bound for disappointment? We dig into it all.

To pick apart the results of our polling, provide context and give us a healthy critique, we've brought in national writers Harman Dayal, Mark Lazerus and Shayna Goldman.

Which NHL arena has the best game-day experience?

Harman Dayal: It makes complete sense for the Panthers to be favorites. They're healthy and rejuvenated, adding Brady Tkachuk gives them one of the best top-nine forward groups ever assembled in the salary cap era, and nobody is built for the physicality and grind of playoff hockey like the Panthers.

Mark Lazerus: It's me, the one guy who picked Buffalo. Because Connor Hellebuyck will be the Conn Smythe winner. (Insert dramatic musical sting here.)

Shayna Goldman: Can I get a hell yeah to the idea of a Hurricanes-Panthers Eastern Conference Final? These are two of the deepest teams in the league; it makes perfect sense to see both finish so highly in voting here.

Dayal: I also voted for Colorado here; it's the most loaded team on paper in the West. However, I'm at least mildly concerned about the age of some of the club's key secondary forwards. Brock Nelson is weeks away from turning 35 (and disappointed during last season's playoffs), Nazem Kadri will be 36 in one week, Gabriel Landeskog turns 34 in November, and they lost some solid depth in Valeri Nichushkin, Jack Drury and Ross Colton this past summer.

Lazerus: Colorado's been getting the benefit of the doubt since winning the Cup, but that was four long postseasons ago. Time for this group to prove it's not a one-Cup wonder.

Goldman: One thing that stands out between the two polls is who isn't getting a ton of support: the Stars. It could be voter fatigue at this point, since so many of us have bet on Dallas to win in recent years. Or the Avalanche have put themselves that far ahead. Either way, it's something to keep track of with only one more guaranteed year of Jason Robertson.

Dayal: Going from Adam Foote to Manny Malhotra behind the bench should be a significant upgrade, so you can't say 32nd is guaranteed for the Canucks, but they're deserved favorites here. There just isn't any star talent on this roster, the goaltending is in flux with Thatcher Demko's health and the odds of a defiant Elias Pettersson bounce-back seem slim.

Lazerus: These are three of the most beautiful places in North America. So go outside. Don't watch. For your own sake.

Goldman: Honestly, it will be a bigger disappointment in Vancouver and Calgary if these teams finish too highly in the standings and burn their chances of landing a top pick.

Dayal: I'd be surprised if the Oilers struggled in the regular season, even after what happened in 2025-26 and even with the risk of the Mike Babcock hiring. It feels like Edmonton finally knows it has to take the regular season seriously, the Pacific Division is a cakewalk, and I'm not

expecting players such as Jake Walman to underperform as much as they did last season. With that said, there's a big difference between comfortably making the playoffs and being a true Cup contender; the latter is where it's fair to have concerns.

Lazerus: The Babcock experiment is going to be an unmitigated disaster. I'll make the popcorn.

Goldman: The Babcock situation is (rightfully) distracting us from that goalie situation, too. Frederik Andersen proved he still has the juice last spring and Devon Levi has potential, but the Tristan Jarry of it all can't be overlooked. The top two teams in voting, Edmonton and Vegas, are pretty lucky to be in the Pacific Division.

Dayal: It feels kind of funny to call a team that's been to the Cup Final in three of the last four years a "dark horse."

Lazerus: Feels like we're being too attached to the projections here. Not a single person in the hockey world views Florida as a dark horse. In fact, none of these teams feels very dark-horse. Maybe the Mammoth, just because they're inevitably going to finish in fourth place in the Central. But nobody's sleeping on Utah.

Goldman: It makes sense why the Panthers landed in this range by the numbers, considering last year's woes, core ages and the goaltending ... but maybe we all should have put non-Panthers answers here to get a better feel. Montreal and Buffalo are extremely fitting dark horses.

Dayal: Truthfully, I didn't like any of the candidates in this range as a playoff team. However, the Isles are clearly the best shot: They're in a more wide-open division, they have legit high-end talent in Matthew Schaefer, Ilya Sorokin, Bo Horvat and Mathew Barzal, and Peter DeBoer is one heck of a coach.

Goldman: Chicago, in this economy?!

Lazerus: It wasn't me, I swear.

Dayal: There weren't as many coaches who are obviously on the hot seat as I expected. Lane Lambert, for example, is only entering his second season as head coach of the Kraken. I suppose it doesn't really matter, though, given how short the average NHL coaching stint is nowadays.

Lazerus: Feels like I've checked off Andrew Brunette in these surveys 174 times by now. Yet there he remains.

Goldman: I was this close to putting Scott Arniel, but with new leadership in Nashville, Brunette doesn't have the same safety net as he did in the Barry Trotz era.

Dayal: New Jersey and Toronto are the most interesting unknowns in the top group to me. Both of them desperately need to get back on track; right now, I agree with the consensus that the Devils are probably more likely to do it.

Lazerus: This is what happens when you have like a dozen staffers who live in the greater Toronto area.

Goldman: The wild-card race should be really deep this year; I just have a hard time counting out both the Flyers and the Rangers.

Dayal: I love the San Jose hype. The Blues are probably a bit underrated here — it wouldn't surprise me to see them snag a wild-card spot.

Lazerus: I don't see it yet for San Jose. A ton of overtime and shootout points masked some larger growing pains for the Sharks (a minus-41 goal differential!). They're going to be a megapower soon enough, but I think the clock starts next fall for them. (Though I guess somebody has to finish third in the Pacific.)

Goldman: Macklin Celebrini almost dragged the Sharks to the playoffs last year. The fact that he has a ton of forward support around him should make up for that disastrous back end. A San Jose playoff run is rightfully getting more hype than the Kings slipping in only to get knocked out in Round 1 again.

Dayal: Narratives tend to matter with awards voting, and Celebrini is going to have an extremely compelling one for MVP if he drags the exciting-but-flawed Sharks into the playoffs for the first time since 2019.

Lazerus: Aleksander Barkov is a fun pick here. We saw just how important he was in his absence. I also wouldn't bet against a Nikita



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Kucherov contract year for the ages. As for Kirill Kaprizov, I'd think Quinn Hughes or Matt Boldy are more likely possibilities.

Goldman: Yep, I really like the Barkov pick here — especially if it challenges us to compare a two-way forward with more offensive aces. But I can't vote against Celebrini; he almost took the No. 1 slot on my ballot last year.

Dayal: The Rocket Richard race usually sees a lot of turnover from year to year (way more than the Art Ross race), so I'm just waiting for an off-the-board name (Dylan Guenther?) to enter the top-five race this season.

Lazerus: Jason Robertson 50-goal season incoming.

Goldman: It's really exciting to see young guns in the conversation such as Cutter Gauthier, Cole Caufield and Guenther. But I'm really curious to see if David Pastrňák flips the switch and shifts back to being a dominant goal scorer, after his elite playmaking shined last year.

Dayal: Cale Makar is the safe, obvious pick, but I'm surprised that no one predicted Zach Werenski to repeat.

Lazerus: I went with Schaefer here. He's this year's Celebrini — no sophomore slump, just straight into the stratosphere.

Goldman: If Rasmus Dahlin didn't miss time last year, I think he would have earned more votes. He is going to build on that this year.

Lazerus: If Igor Shesterkin drags these Rangers into the playoffs, he'll be worthy of serious Hart consideration. The Vezina can sometimes be a different story. Remember, general managers vote on this award, not writers. Wins matter most to them. Logan Thompson and Andrei Vasilevskiy will have the edge there.

Goldman: Vasilevskiy and Thompson will likely have the edge in wins, which tends to matter a lot. But if the Rangers can be semi-competent in front of Shesterkin for a change, that should get this team back in the playoff picture and earn him some votes.

Shesterkin vs. Hellebuyck: Who's the Vezina favorite?

Jesse Granger, Mark Lazerus and more

Lazerus: God, we're so uncreative.

Goldman: It would be fun to see names such as Joel Eriksson Ek, Roope Hintz and Nico Hischier get in the mix ... but Barkov sets the bar so high.

Lazerus: Roman Kantserov is the one to watch. He's 22 and dominated against men in the KHL last year. And he'll be playing on a line with Patrick Kane (and, when he returns, Connor Bedard).

Goldman: Cole Hutson has the offensive acumen, plus a little more physicality than his brother, to get on all of our radars this season. He's my pick, but I think Ivar Stenberg makes a really strong case this season, too.

Who will win the 2026 NHL Rookie of the Year Award?

Lazerus: Never mind the Jack Adams. If he can keep this Blue Jackets team on course and get them into the playoffs, Rick Bowness should get a Nobel Prize in peace. And another one in chemistry.

Goldman: A rare year where this list isn't headlined by numerous new hires. What Martin St. Louis has done to shape the Canadiens' young core is impressive.

Lazerus: Buffalonians deserve this. Also, Buffalonian is a fun word.

Goldman: My real question for anyone who picked "he won't be traded this season" is when does he give in and return to play in Winnipeg?

Lazerus: I still don't see how Minnesota pulls this one off with so little to offer. But Bill Guerin is damn sure going to try.

Goldman: Dallas is a spicy one; imagine the Stars swooping in and stealing the center so many of us penciled in for the Wild?

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs 'look like a new team' in emotional opening loss

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Darren Raddysh caught a glimpse of his baby boy Beau in the lower bowl as the Ontario-born defenceman skated out as a Toronto Maple Leaf for the first time.

The moment whisked him all the way back to when his own dad, Dwayne, would bring Darren to Scotiabank Arena to watch his favourite hockey team.

Dwayne died of pancreatic cancer in March. He never did get to see Darren live out his dream. But Beau did.

"It was a little bit emotional going out there," Raddysh said, following Toronto's 3-2 home loss to the Montreal Canadiens Tuesday. "I saw my son on the glass, and just seeing him kind of brought back memories to me and my dad. So, yeah, it was nice to see him out there and know he was in the stands watching his dad."

Raddysh was one of 10(!) players who made their Maple Leafs debut, a collection of grinders and phenoms, of high-priced free agents and steep-cost trade acquisitions forced to make fast friendships and strike instant chemistry after a truncated training camp and one blast of a boys' trip to Arizona.

Heck, one top-six forward, Gavin McKenna, hadn't played a single pro shift that mattered. And another, Kirill Marchenko, figured he was going to play for the Blue Jackets until, oh, 26 hours before puck drop.

Raddysh was hardly the only new guy fielding a flood of exciting texts and ticket requests from friends and family members while trying to dial in the details in a new uniform.

It probably didn't help that the Leafs were playing for an overhauled coaching staff against the reigning conference finalists, a familiar, organized group essentially intact from their playoff run deep into May.

So, yes, the Maple Leafs channelled giddy energy and clean-slate renewal into a furious first 10 minutes. And, yes, sniper William Nylander — buzzing all night — found twine 48 seconds into the season (plus once more late).

But, no, Toronto's hot start was not sustainable.

There will be growing pains, for Raddysh (dash-2) and McKenna (same) and some of the Leafs' D pairs and offensive lines that struggled to sort out their assignments without the puck or bobbled it on the wrong side of centre.

"We had a lot of new guys, and I thought we looked a little bit like a new team today," head coach Jim Hiller said. "We just weren't connecting with our passes. I don't know if that has anything to do with nerves or being in the building for the first time, and the first time everybody together, so we just weren't we weren't clean as a team."

Nylander believes the Maple Leafs "sat back" in the second period, when the visitors seized a lead they would not relent, and noted that linemate McKenna might require "a little bit of adjustment time."

Pre-season affords playmakers more space than the regular season.

"Got a little bit sloppy there halfway through the game, and kind of let momentum slip from our hands a little bit, but I think it's just some little execution plays. Taking care of the puck when you have to," captain Auston Matthews said.

"One of those nights all around," John Tavares agreed. "Nothing was really clean."

While dangerous top-line shifts gave Beau and the other Leafs faithful hope, costly turnovers in the defensive and neutral zones — a recurring theme from last season — proved Toronto's undoing.

"Most of the chances that they got, we gave them," Hiller said. "That was really our Achilles heel."

Hiller promoted the less risky puck hound Easton Cowan to Nylander and Tavares's line, which was always going to be a defensive gamble. Good for Cowan; a challenge for McKenna.

"It's just going to take some time. Everybody settles into their roles. Everybody wants to do extremely well, and sometimes that's more of a curse than a blessing. You try to do too much and get a little tight," Hiller explained, patiently.

"First time playing for the Maple Leafs in this building in a regular season game, so that might have a little bit to do with some nerves."

Flush the emotions. Learn from the mistakes.

Avoid excuses. Get right back on the horse.

The New York Islanders are rolling into town Wednesday.

"It's the NHL. You gotta be ready for Game 1," Raddysh said.

"Good thing we play tomorrow."

Fox's Fast Five

- Can't say we've seen a rookie skip an optional morning skate, particularly one ahead of his NHL debut, but that's what McKenna did Monday.

"He's got some swag," veteran Chris Tanev said, flashing a grin.

McKenna instead visited with family members in the stands while 11 of his teammates got in a pre-game sweat.

"I actually thought it was great. I really did," Hiller said. "Because that's an optional skate. It's optional if you think you need it to get ready to play tonight. And when I heard he didn't go out, it didn't surprise me. He just has that way. He knows who he is. He knows what he has to do. And I think how he's adapted in a short amount of time just speaks to who he is and the confidence that he has in himself."

McKenna's debut stat line: one shot, minus-2, two giveaways, 42 xGF%, 15:19, one commercial co-starring alongside Michael Cera.

- During Tuesday's Zoom meeting with reporters, Matthew Knies admitted that getting traded out of Toronto began to feel "inevitable" and that the waves of rumours hung over his head this off-season.

"Glad it's over with," said Knies, who was caught off-guard by the timing. "I never saw something like this right before opening day."

Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness plans to drop Knies net-front on the top power-play unit (a job he lost at Leafs camp) and skate him on the left side of Adam Fantilli.

Fantilli and Knies were both Hobey Baker finalists in 2023, and the centreman described the power forward as "a nightmare" to play against in college.

Bowness stressed the addition-by-subtraction value of ridding the room of a player who wanted out before the season began (cc: Red Wings, Jets).

"You could kinda tell Marchy didn't really want to be here. Don't need that hanging over us to start the year off," Zach Werenski said. "It's good we got ahead of it."

- New guy Marchenko sorted out his work visa jumped right into the fire, skating on Matthews' top line, swiping Jack Roslovic's spot on the No. 1 power-play unit, and notching an assist in his first shift as a Leaf.

Fun fact: Marchenko told the What Chaos! podcast that he once wore No. 34 in Russia because of his affinity for Matthews.

"I didn't know that," Matthews smiled. "I'll have to ask him about that. That's pretty funny."

The linemates are already in sync.

"I remember talking about him probably three years ago with one of the guys, and I said, 'I think he might be the best unknown player in the league,' just because of maybe playing in Columbus," Matthews said. "I



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felt like every time we would play them, he was one of the best players on the ice. And his skill set is very, very elite."

- The most common birth city listed on the NHL's opening-day rosters?

Toronto, 24 times.

- The Maple Leafs are leaning into their status as the team you love — or love to hate — with 2026-27's hype video. Nylander, he of bird-flipping fame, even gets bleeped out for dropping a cuss word. New marketing tack for the storied franchise.

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Sportsnet.ca / Sloppy Oilers deliver 'unacceptable' performance in Babcock's debut

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — Organized? Structured? Hard to play against?

Those were the slogans that accompanied Mike Babcock to Edmonton. In his first game behind the Oilers' bench, however, Babcock's team displayed exactly zero of those attributes in a thrilling 6-5 overtime loss to the Vancouver Canucks on Tuesday.

"We turned the puck over. We stayed out too long on the ice. We made poor decisions," began Babcock after a game that required a late, three-goal comeback just to secure a single point for Edmonton. "I mean, we gave up six tonight. I think we gave up five in exhibition (in four games).

"If we want to work, we want to do things right, we're going to have a lot of success. If we want to play like that, we're going to be chasing the game. To be honest with you, I feel fortunate we got a point."

That point came on the back of Evan Bouchard's five-point night. He had a hat trick and two helpers, becoming the first NHL defenceman with a season-opening hat trick since Mark Howe of the Hartford Whalers, way back in 1980.

Amazingly, the three goals came sans the Bouch Bomb, three wristers that all found their way past Canucks goalie Kevin Lankinen.

"It was one of those nights," Bouchard said. "But without those guys in front none of them were going in. (Zach Hyman) was battling. (Vasily Podkolzin) is always battling in front. Without those guys they wouldn't have went in."

Speaking of going in, let's talk about Tristan Jarry's game.

The returning Edmonton goalie who was supposed to give the Oilers a bounce-back season laid an egg in the opener. There was almost zero big saves, and simply no feeling that his team could get away with a mistake that wouldn't end up in the back of its net.

Jarry let in a soft, soft goal that broke a 2-2 tie just 70 seconds into the critical third period, and before you knew it the score was 5-2 Canucks. Though he faced some very high quality scoring chances, Jarry didn't give his team a big save until overtime.

Between the goaltending and the defensive play, this Oilers team looked no different than the last seven or eight editions. Loose, with lousy netminding.

It's no recipe for success.

"I need one or two of those," Jarry admitted post-game. "You never want to get scored on. Obviously the goalie has the biggest outcome of the game and when he has those slips or those downs in a game, it makes for a (bad) game."

What did Babcock think of his new goalie?

"It's pretty clear," said Babcock. "Let's move on."

Babcock understandably did not want to get too personal after Game 1 of an 84-game campaign. So he spoke about his team play instead.

"The hard part is we have to play way better. That was ridiculous," spat the coach. "You can't have a guy with five points and lose the hockey game. It just doesn't make any sense."

Podkolzin scored twice against the club that drafted him 10th overall, the second one a rocket that forced overtime with just 42.5 seconds left in the third period.

There was a time when the Oilers were thrilled with a game like this, but that time has passed. This season was supposed to be about defensive responsibility, limiting chances, and responsible play.

Then the 32nd-place team walks into your barn on Opening Night and scores six on you.

Yikes!

"We can talk about these guys and talent, but we have to do things right as a group," said a disgusted head coach. "Tonight, while it looked like we were trending in the right direction ... the great thing about the National Hockey League is if you don't do it right, you feel bad when you leave the rink."

Folks in Edmonton have watched a version of this game for years. This was Babcock's first screening.

Did he know what he was getting into when he took the gig?

"Not for one second did I think this was going to be easy," he promised. "Tonight was an indication we have serious work to do. Playing like that, getting away from the way we have to play, is unacceptable for us. We have to set a better standard for ourselves."

Call it a base line.

This is what the Oilers are today, a loose team that talks a good game about responsible play. But when it doesn't go their way quickly enough, they devolve into a run 'n' gun, firewagon group that entertains on a Saturday night in October, but can't get it done in June.

Let's see where it goes, and how fast it changes, if at all.

They'll reconvene in Vancouver on Thursday night.

Spec's checks

Alex Formenton got the push up to the top line when Babcock split Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl on to separate lines, playing on the left side with McDavid and Hyman. Podkolzin, Draisaitl and Kasper Kapanen formed the second line. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins' injury at Monday's practice threw Babcock's training camp lines into the blender.

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Sportsnet.ca / Defiant Dobes seals Canadiens' season-opening win over Maple Leafs

Eric Engels

TORONTO — It was with a fraction of a second remaining in the first win of this Montreal Canadiens season that Jakub Dobes yanked John Tavares' stick from his hands and goaded the Toronto Maple Leafs forward into pushing him.

The puck was out of sight, the game was all but over, but not for the feisty goaltender who made it clear from the start he would battle to the last whistle — and beyond if he had to.

That last gesture was a clear message to Tavares. A rather unnecessary one in the eyes of just about anyone other than Dobes.

The thing is, though, this is what he thrives on.

"We all know he's a competitor," said winning goal-scorer Alexandre Carrier, though that doesn't fully sum up what Dobes is.

He is a defiant competitor, a guy blocking every puck like he's batting away every barb of criticism that's ever stung him.

If you were keeping count Tuesday, Dobes blocked 26 pucks — including three from Auston Matthews, three of five from William Nylander, four from Kirill Marchenko, and yes, four from Tavares — in this season-opening 3-2 win at Scotiabank Arena.

Then he came out after the game and said, "I feel pretty good, I saw that a lot of people have a lot of opinions about me..."

About that...

In the lead up to Tuesday's game there's was understandably some buzz around the hockey world about whether Dobes could follow up the outstanding finish to his rookie season with a stable start to his sophomore year.

Coupled with all the positive noise around Samuel Montembeault's resurgence through pre-season and some totally misplaced scrutiny of his last practice before the Canadiens took off for Toronto, the 25-year-old was obviously irked before the puck even dropped.

After it did, and after Dobes allowed the first of the two Nylander shots that got by him, he played like his middle finger was holding his glove up for the rest of the night.

Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis called Dobes "excellent," though "reassuring" would've worked just as well.

No goaltender was better from trade deadline through three rounds of the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs. He topped all of them in goals saved above expected, winning 10 of his last 14 regular-season games before winning nine more in the post-season and setting the bar almost impossibly high to clear.

But, as Carrier said after Tuesday's game, "You could feel he was in control, focused, and he took off on the same foot he left off on last season."

The Canadiens forced Dobes to do that, and he responded as they'd hoped he would.

"He made some really big saves for us, especially early on," said St. Louis. "I felt like we weren't playing fast enough, and he bought us some time to get going."

No doubt.

Then, in front of friends and family from his nearby hometown of Burlington, Ont., Josh Anderson did what he always does against the Leafs. His 17th regular-season goal in the 42nd game of his career versus Toronto tied things up 1-1.

The Canadiens tilted the ice over the next 15 minutes spread over the second half of the first period and first third of the second period and Zachary Bolduc capped that sequence by finishing a nice play from Mike Matheson to put them up 2-1.

Carrier's goal at 13:12 of the third period would've put this game out of reach if not for a phenomenal play by Nylander to pull the Leafs back within a goal with 4:14 to play.

But Dobes had the last laugh — though not the last push — when he charged out of his crease to make a great stop on Matthews to seal the win.

All of Dobes' best ones looked like that.

When asked how he's found this perfect balance between patience and aggression, he quipped, "I was playing with it during the pre-season, but had a really good practice... Monday? Yeah, Monday..."

Again, defiance.

You could say Dobes needn't get wrapped up in whatever's being said about him off the ice or whatever's happening in front of him on it, but to suggest it's distracting him would be inaccurate. We have enough of a sample — especially after watching some of his antics in the playoffs — to know it's quite the opposite.

"Well, you could see it at the end (with Tavares), said Carrier. "I think it's part of his mindset, his attitude; he wants to be that guy. And I personally love it."

The Canadiens should because it seems to bring out the best in Dobes.

It certainly did on this night, when the Canadiens were far from their best and needed him at his feistiest.

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Sportsnet.ca / Marchenko shows glimpses of promise in whirlwind Maple Leafs debut

Sonny Sachdeva

TORONTO — Thirty hours before he took the ice under the Scotiabank Arena lights Tuesday night, before his Toronto Maple Leafs opened their new campaign with a rollercoaster test against the rival Montreal Canadiens, Kirill Marchenko was still a member of the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The 26-year-old had waded through a full training camp over the past two weeks with the American club, had suited up for pre-season tilts draped in Columbus colours. Then came a down-to-the-wire blockbuster trade Monday night, a seven-piece deal that sent Marchenko east, a light-night flight to Ontario.

Even head coach Jim Hiller, as late as Tuesday morning, wasn't sure if his new winger would be in the lineup when the Leafs opened their 2026-27 campaign, Marchenko's arrival so fresh, he hadn't yet logged a single minute on the ice with his new teammates. But come puck drop, there was No. 86, bathed in blue, starting the new season in a new city, with new linemates, and a new crest on his chest.

Forty-eight seconds later, he had his first point as a Leaf.

"I thought he did really well today," William Nylander said from the Maple Leafs' locker room post-game, the winger's dazzling opening goal having gifted Marchenko his first assist with his new club. "You know, that's always tough, coming to a complete new team — I mean, he didn't even skate, gear's brand new, everything. He did a great job."

For all the chaos and upending that came in the hours before Tuesday night's affair — packing up his life in Columbus, making the trek to Toronto and getting dropped straight into the action — the Russian phenom made the promise of his impact immensely clear in his first outing.

Skating alongside Auston Matthews and Jack Roslovic, occupying the top-line spot formerly held by Matthew Knies, who was traded to the Blue Jackets in the deal that brought Marchenko to Toronto, the winger's ability with the puck on his stick was clear from the jump.

It was clear late in the first period, when Marchenko dashed down the left wing, cut inside, and whipped a dangerous wrister at netminder Jakub Dobes. Clear, too, in the opening minutes of the second, when Roslovic set Marchenko up for a blistering one-timer, and again early in the third, when the former Blue Jacket charged through the slot and stitched together a silky toe drag, creating a moment of promise out of nothing.

"We talked to him a little bit, gave him a little bit of an understanding of our systems and structure," Hiller said late Tuesday of the coaching staff's approach to preparing their new star for his debut. "He's had quite a day, so we tried not to overload him. But I think you all saw some of the things he can do. Him and Auston, and I thought Rosy played really well with them, too — that whole line was dangerous."

For the man himself, this one was simply about holding on for dear life, about showing what he could in this short-notice foray, before he truly settles in.

"It's crazy," he said after the Maple Leafs fell 3-2 to the Canadiens in their season-opener. "We packed, we moved, with my wife, to here. Two busy days, really busy. But I'm happy it's done now, and I'm happy to be here."

The winger finished the night with four shots and 20 minutes of ice to his name, stringing together some quality offensive sequences and getting the fans on their feet with some physicality, too. He assured it was only the start.

"We had good chances, but not what I want to see from myself," he said Tuesday, after remarking in awe at the number of reporters crowded into the club's locker room to speak to him post-game. "I can play better. I can play better for sure."

It's an adjustment for the rest of the locker room, too. Monday's deal no doubt added some high-octane skill to the blue-and-white's attack, but it also removed a young star in Knies, who'd established himself as a key piece of this core over the past couple of seasons.

"It's mixed emotions for sure," John Tavares said from his stall after the dust had settled on Tuesday's loss. "I think the world of Kniesy — he's obviously very close to the group in here, and a heck of a player. He's got a great future ahead of him. You know, it's a little bit shocking in a way, just because of the impact he's made since coming in.

"But you add a talent like Kirill — I think you saw tonight some of the flashes of what he can do, how he'll impact the game, what his skill set is. You know, a really, really gifted hockey player, with a lot of things that I think are going to be very helpful for us. So, it's mixed emotions, but we're real excited to have Kirill and what he's going to bring to the team."

If there's one thing that was made abundantly clear by the newest Leaf after his first game was in the books, it's that the excitement is mutual.

"It's unbelievable for me," Marchenko said of joining this team, of landing on its top line. "It's a good opportunity for me to show how I can play, how I can help these guys. And they really help me. Because my partners right now, it's Auston Matthews, it's Jack Roslovic — it's obviously one of the best centres in the league. I was nervous. But I'm so excited."

There's no shortage of wrinkles still to be ironed out. That much was clear in a 3-2 loss that saw the Maple Leafs start well, then wobble, and gift Montreal far too many chances courtesy of some shaky play in their own zone. But there were signs too, between the missteps, of a group that has the capacity to surprise this season. It's that potential that prompted Marchenko to put pen to paper on a six-year, \$75-million deal that kicks in next season.

"Four years with CBJ, it's unbelievable for me," the winger said Tuesday. "I grew up as a player. But now I think I can do another step here, with the guys here in this locker room. It's just a good opportunity for me, a good opportunity to win games, win the Cup, win something.

"I think everybody wants to win here. It's the Toronto Maple Leafs — it's one of the biggest teams in the world, and in the NHL. I'm so happy to be here."

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Sportsnet.ca / THE 27 PEOPLE WHO WILL DEFINE THE 2026-27 NHL SEASON

By Luke Fox

Future Hall of Famers and legacy chasers. Hot-seat coaches and comeback seekers. Clever negotiators and billionaire influencers. You can find them all on this year's list.

As the curtain rises on the 2026-27 campaign, fans will be glued to the drama on and off the ice. They'll get hyped over the fresh faces in the new places and will tune in as a new road to the Stanley Cup gets paved.

Like pens scratching paper, skates scratching ice will write this season's indelible, incredible stories.

And at the core of every good (and bad and ugly) sporting story, you'll find people. Supreme on-ice talents and front-office giants. Combustible coaches and groundbreaking overachievers. The National Hockey League will lean on all the above to keep our attention through the winter, past the trade deadline, then deep into spring.

Here, in alphabetical order, are the 27 characters set to define the NHL in 2026-27.

The serial winner, task master, and cellphone enthusiast stands as this summer's greatest whoa-Nelly, Hail Mary hire. Stan Bowman's decision to bring Babs to Edmonton after 2023's debacle in Columbus was slammed by the great Mark Messier but endorsed by the Oilers' letter-wearers. They want to be coached harder, driven with detail and diligence, in effort to win that elusive fourth round.

If Babcock crosses the line, the captain has vowed to "step in," but says he would do that with any coach. Babcock, with his medals and rings and skeletons, is not any coach. He's McDavid's sixth — and potentially last, if the Oil can't emerge from the West.

"I want to be coached. I do. There's areas of the game that I have figured out, and they come naturally and easy to me. And there's other areas of the game that I need some help with, and I need to be coached," McDavid said. "I know Babs will have our group organized. We're going to be the most prepared team in the NHL. I know that because I've seen him at work already."

Get your popcorn ready.

The louder pick from the Florida Panthers — the 2024 and 2025 champs who used the off-season to get healthier and angrier — would be the freshly united Tkachuk brothers, what with their polarizing podcast, matching gold medals and chirp-happy ways.

But Paul Maurice's squad's return to relevance after a DOA three-peat bid rests more so on the captain. Barkov missed the entirety of 2025-26 after tearing his right knee 20 minutes into the first practice of training camp. He recovered in May and played stellar in leading Finland to gold at the '26 world championships. A healthy Barkov instantly slots middle-six centres Sam Bennett and Anton Lundell appropriately and puts Nick Suzuki's Selke Trophy defence at risk.

Y'all forgot about Sasha.

Wonderful talent, crappy team, impossible division. That's the book on Bedard as 2023's first-overall draft choice wobbles into his fourth NHL campaign recovering from off-season surgery on his left shoulder and newly minted with a \$75-million payday and the captain's C.

"It's easy for people to look at the last three seasons and see them all as the same. But for me, last season was different. Obviously, it didn't go how we wanted it to, especially in the second half. But I felt like the energy in our room was something new. For the first time, there was this sense of anger about us falling short," Bedard wrote this month.

Bedard is coming off a breakout 30-goal and 75-point season in which he gave Team Canada's Olympic brass pause. But No. 98 is a minus-98 through his first 219 pro games, and Kyle Davidson's Chicago Blackhawks haven't made the dance since three years before Patrick

Kane left. Well, Kane's back, Bowen Byram is rich and ready, and the 21-year-old phenom from Vancouver must lead them out of the basement.

The commissioner's fingerprints will be all over 2026-27 as revenue, salaries, and interest levels all elevate. Still riding the high of 2026's Olympic jolt, NHL fans will have to wrap their brains around new contract term limits and TV partners and two extra games and the (strong) possibility of further expansion deep in the heart of Texas. The 74-year-old Bettman will be busy prepping for the '28 World Cup, another round of U.S. broadcast rights, weighing even more expansion pitches (34 teams will be his legacy), defending his 16-team playoff format and quietly designing a plan for his successor.

He's 21. He's only played 201 games and has never seen a conference final. He's still seeking his first 30-goal campaign.

And yet, with a few pen strokes at the bottom of an offer sheet, Carlsson singlehandedly reshaped the NHL's salary structure for 2026-27 and beyond.

The stud centreman's eye-popping \$18-million AAV created a wave of raises for restricted free agents, set a new high bar for forwards across the board, and emboldened more established superstars, like Colorado's Cale Makar, to smash the \$20-million threshold.

While union members rejoice, Pat Verbeek and the Anaheim Ducks weep. Carlsson's windfall (thank you, Danny Briere) not only cost the Ducks a top-six winger in Chris Kreider but encouraged teammate Cutter Gauthier to ask for \$13.5 million. The previously prudent Ducks need Carlsson to dominate if they are to build on 2026's promising run.

"It's just like a little bit higher pressure, but nothing that I can't handle," Carlsson assures. "I've had pressure in every year so far, so it's just nothing new."

Well, from where managers and agents and the next wave of RFAs sit, it sure feels like something new.

Guess the sophomore slump is just a myth, eh?

Leaping from 63 to 115 points, shining on the Olympic stage alongside his heroes, and dragging the San Jose Sharks into playoff-push relevance, Celebrini authored one of the most electric stories of 2025-26 and earned his \$94-million extension.

Now the most well-rounded 20-year-old centreman since the next guy on this list will be tasked with ending the NHL's second-longest active playoff drought (seven years) and leading that young, fun team in teal — we see you, Will Smith and Michael Misa — into deep April. NHL 27's coverboy is best reason for East Coasters to stay up late on weeknights.

One September ago, the hockey world wondered if Crosby might leave rebuild-on-the-fly Pittsburgh to chase his next Stanley Cup elsewhere. Well, despite his beloved, aging franchise now being eight years removed from its most recent playoff series victory, the Penguins proved their doubters wrong last year and are showing promise despite Kris Letang, Erik Karlsson and Evgeni Malkin all inching toward retirement.

"It energizes you, when you're winning games and young guys come in, and as a team, kind of that underdog role. I think you just get caught up in that, and it's fun to be a part of that," a rejuvenated Crosby says.

The \$8.7-million kid needs a new contract (again), but he and his lucky belt have stacked 21 consecutive point-per-game seasons — and we don't see them falling apart now.

Entry to top-five all-time in scoring is imminent, and Crosby is hungry to play "a number" of more years, so our appetite to watch Father Time get lit up like a rent-a-goalie remains strong.

Unlike John Tortorella in Vegas, the Islanders' last-minute veteran coaching hire wasn't quite enough to rally a mediocre roster into April's playoffs. But we're eager to see how, given a full summer to prep, DeBoer milks more from a franchise in transition.

Blessed with the calibre of No. 1 defenceman and No. 1 goaltender most coaches dream of, but losing long-serving captain Anders Lee, DeBoer has already slapped the 'C' on the chest of Bo Horvat and swallowed news of a Mathew Barzal injury.

The man who has never lost a Game 7 nor lifted the Stanley Cup will be in tough to jolt the league's 25th-ranked offence, but he's had a year to



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sit back and analyze the game. He's coming in with passion and ideas and will demand attention.

Two years removed from his 50-point self, the longest-serving L.A. King enters his age-36 contract season under conspicuous circumstances. GM Ken Holland has decided to table extension talks with the right-shot minute-muncher until 2027, but also acknowledged Doughty's importance to the room by awarding him a captaincy that belonged to the recently retired Anze Kopitar.

If health has been an issue for late-career Doughty, confidence and leadership and competitiveness and candid quotes have not. Doughty must simultaneously mentor his club's next wave of D-men, led by Brandt Clarke, while sharpening his own game.

Can Doughty help stretch the Kings' postseason streak to five years? Or will he turn into 2027's version of John Carlson and hear his name as trade candidate away from the only team he's loved?

Anyone out there have the need for a six-foot, 192-pound, 73-point, right-shot, 18-year-old, junior-champion defenceman?

The consensus top prospect for the 2027 NHL Draft represents a tantalizing lottery prize for clubs that underachieve ahead of the March trade deadline and GMs who wish to get a jump on their reset.

Like Gavin McKenna before him, the former Silvertips stud has brought his talents to the NCAA (Michigan) and will play against student athletes after running laps around the WHL. Dangerous power-play quarterbacks who are also physically sturdy enough to clear their own net-front and embrace contact don't exactly grow on trees.

Expect "Landin' Landon!" campaigns to sweep NHL markets who find themselves in position to tank.

The 61-year-old, San Diego-born businessman is the latest billionaire to step to Bettman with an expansion pitch. Friedkin, who already owns soccer clubs in Serie A (Roma) and Premier League (Everton), has already made great strides in his efforts to plant the NHL's 33rd franchise in either Houston or Austin.

With Friedkin prepared to erect an arena and fork over an escalated \$2 billion expansion fee, the other owners can't help but salivate at the notion of messin' with Texas.

League growth will create jobs and further Sun Belt interest, no doubt. But it will also dilute the talent pool, decrease your favourite team's odds of winning the Cup and trigger debates over realignment and playoff format.

Worthy of Jack Adams consideration in 2026, the Ottawa Senators head coach will be faced with an even trickier task in 2027. Not only are the Sens expected to make the playoffs in the deepest division (Florida and Toronto want back in), but they must do so without the services of their former captain and elite power forward, who begged out with two years remaining on his deal.

Despite a dismal team save percentage (.878), Green's group survived the 2025-26 regular season only to get trounced by the Canes. Ottawa will need more saves and more goals, to fill Brady Tkachuk's void. Moreover, they'll need a strong game plan and an injection of belief from the bench after a tough off-season that also saw franchise icon and assistant coach Daniel Alfredsson join another hated rival.

How swiftly did this marriage between MVP goaltender and passionate Canadian outpost deteriorate that this is where things stand on opening week?

The Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient so wants liberty from Manitoba that he became the first star under contract (five more years owed!) since Alexei Yashin in the mid-'90s to not report.

Hellebuyck wants a trade yesterday, and Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff would win the Hart annually if it was awarded to the most patient executive in the league.

This is the most fascinating standoff in sports. Soon the paycheques will stop, but will the trade packages get any better?

The Toronto Maple Leafs could toss any number of representatives on this listicle. GM John Chayka brought in a new front office, cleared the bench, and acquired 10 new players. Sergei Bobrovsky, 38, will fall under the spotlight as the aging champ in net. Gavin McKenna represents hope

and gotta-see-it highlights. Darren Raddysh's pay bump was as heavy as his point shot. And Auston Matthews is gunning for a bounce-back less than two years away from UFA status.

But head coach Hiller is the key to making all these new pieces fit. The Leafs were a defensive disaster that lacked buy-in and identity and emotion last season. The parts were greater than their sum. Hiller didn't exactly leave L.A. with great success, but the weapons and personalities and pressure he'll be dealing with in Toronto are all stronger.

Every power play, line juggle and postgame presser will be picked apart. Can Hiller keep it altogether and rally Matthews & Co. back into contender status?

If you're a fan of a hockey team not called the Montreal Canadiens, do yourself a favour: Do not call up the Habs' cap sheet on PuckPedia.com. With minimal drama, Hughes and righthand man Jeff Gorton have assembled an on-paper juggernaut before the ante doubled.

Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield, Juraj Slafkovsky, Ivan Demidov, Alex Newhook, Jake Evans, Zack Bolduc, Noah Dobson, Lane Hutson, Mike Matheson, Kaiden Guhle and Jakob Dobes are all under contract through at least 2029-30. None of the forwards make more than \$7.875 million per year, none of the D-men more than \$9.5 million.

That leaves gobs of cap space for Hughes to trade for a true No. 2 centre and fill in whatever depth holes he needs. There's a reason Chris Kreider hopped aboard.

Ironical that the former agent is now the one successfully convincing players to sign for less.

One day the eldest Hughes brother plans to share a dressing room with his Jersey-bound siblings. But today, he's happy to jump off to a hot start with his Minnesota Wild, who trounced the Dallas Stars and hold his rights for at least another nine months.

Like Kirill Kaprizov before him, Hughes holds all leverage in negotiations with GM Bill Guerin. And the former Norris winner is well aware that Makar just raised the AAV bar for elite D-men.

Hughes trusts in his abilities and wants a little silver to go with his gold. He'll sign on his terms. Or not. In which case, rival execs will be falling over themselves to get a crack at his services. Not unlike Guerin himself did last season.

The previous regime left the Vancouver Canucks in shambles: a torn dressing room and an embarrassing 58-point, 32nd-place finish, punctuated by an exodus of talent.

In comes callup Johnson who hired callup coach Manny Malhotra and will be backed by two of the most highly regarded men in the sport. Daniel and Henrik Sedin will play a key role in getting the culture on track and advising Johnson as he cuts his teeth as an NHL shot caller.

Expectations are lower than Elias Pettersson's stock, but with Johnson already recruiting high-character vets Luke Schenn and Brendan Gallagher to set the tone and inking his first big-swing extension with Zeev Buium, the baby steps of a proper rebuild are underway.

There's only one direction Johnson can take this thing.

The reigning Hart Trophy champ is ready to enter the eighth and final season of his contract without an extension in Tampa Bay. Perhaps this is all posturing. But imagine the bidding war a six-time 100-point threat and two-time Cup champ could command in this rising-cap world if Kucherov and GM Julien BriseBois fail to strike common ground.

The 33-year-old winger could crack this list on his otherworldly talent alone, but knowing that BriseBois already let one all-time Bolt (Steven Stamkos) walk over money suggests there could be some off-ice fireworks with Kuch as well.

Less discussed: Kucherov has totalled a mere two goals over Tampa's past four playoff series — all Round 1 losses.

The Detroit Red Wings' stripped captain has showed up to collect his paycheques despite submitting a not-yet-fulfilled trade request that now falls on the desk of interim GM Shawn Horcoff — the man (for now) charged with ending the NHL's longest active playoff drought.

The gold medallist's desire to join a contender and dictate where he plays, for reasons he is choosing to keep private, is just one more thing



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fretting a restless fan base that remains in the dark regarding Detroit's front-office direction, the contract status of RFA Simon Edvinsson and the future of impending UFA Alex DeBrincat.

How uncomfortable will life get for Larkin and the Wings?

"Larks has played five playoff games. He's going in his 12th season. That guy's the ultimate team guy. Seriously. And any team in the league would be lucky to have Larks. Larks is one of my favourite people out there," Quinn Hughes defends. "The Wings would be lucky to have him. I would take him (in) two seconds. You watch him in the Olympics. You know how much the guys love him, what a team guy he is, and how he performs in big moments. Yeah, so that's what I feel about Larks."

Were this a power ranking as opposed to an alphabetical roundup, No. 97 would be No. 1 with a bullet. Which is where the world's most outstanding hockey player ranks in most fantasy drafts. Had he wished, McDavid could be beginning another eight-year contract this week. Instead, he put the Edmonton Oilers on the clock and himself on track to fall outside the NHL's top-10 salaries by the time McDavid corrects the market in 2028.

Swallowing the bitter taste of Olympic silver and stewing through his longest summer since 2021, McDavid arrives as motivated and committed to victory as ever. He'll be in his 30s before winning his first Stanley Cup. And to make that a reality, he'll endorse the controversial Babcock and Alex Formenton and whoever else can help push this Cup-or-bust crew to the mountaintop.

God help Tristan Jarry, Devon Levi and (injured) Frederik Andersen if they can't cobble together enough saves.

That teenager bouncing to calculus in the oversized Devils Starter jacket is now living a New Jersey dream come true: general manager of his favourite hockey team. A former New Orleans jazz guitarist, poker shark and day trader, Mehta comes back home armed with Stanley Cup knowhow and one of the more diversified résumés in pro sports.

But forget backstory. It's what Mehta does today that matters to his fellow Devils fans, whose team has shown great talent and underwhelming results of late.

The Luke Evagelista trade and Nico Hischier extension are encouraging first steps, but there is a looming decision to make on Dawson Mercer, and rolling with a goalie tandem of Jake Allen, 36, and Nico Daws, 25, is questionable.

Flyers fans rejoiced as whipping boy Michkov opened his second camp under Rick Tocchet by speaking in English(!) about shedding 30 pounds, the result of a more aggressive off-season training regimen and a more disciplined diet.

"I think this is so good for me. I feel right now lighter on the ice. More speed. Every skill, more speed, better speed," the high-ceiling forward announced. "I eat right now, just good food. No fast food. No sugar. Little bit. I like chocolate, but just day off."

The Flyers need Michkov — whose 26-goal promise as a rookie slumped to 20 as a sophomore — to be a home run. Just as the 21-year-old wants to build off his playoff taste and smash one in restricted free agency this summer.

Should things slide sideways, however, the inconsistent Michkov may well represent a negotiation nightmare or, perhaps, an offer-sheet candidate.

The next goal Ovechkin scores will break the record for most all time. And the one after that. And the one after that. Every time No. 8 winds up from the dot, we have a chance to watch history, as the gap narrows between Ovechkin's combined regular-season and playoff goal total (1,006) and Wayne Gretzky's (1,016).

Hockey's most prolific shooter is also entering the final season of his contract, again. He's 41 and remains noncommittal about 2027-28. His coach, Spencer Carbery, must delicately deploy his iconic captain (O-zone starts aplenty) while empowering his new star wingers (Alex Tuch and Jordan Kyrou).

Hovering over what might be Ovechkin's last hurrah, of course, is his continued endorsement of Vladimir Putin, as the Russian leader's invasion of Ukraine persists.

Buckle up, Dallas. You're in for yet another Robertson contract season. Except this time your 45-goal, 96-point winger can walk for free.

"He means a ton," Wyatt Johnston says of his teammate. "Just a huge part of our team. It was super exciting that we were able to get a deal done for him and have him back this year. Just an awesome player."

An awesome player that Seattle (sorry, Kraken fans) or Pittsburgh or Detroit or any number of potential suitors would love to get their mitts on.

Does Stars GM Jim Nill, who already failed once at locking Robertson up long-term, try to recoup some return for such a valuable asset? Go all-in blind on a Robertson Cup bid? Or blow Mikko Rantanen and his well-kept internal cap structure out of the water to keep Robertson around?

Year 1 in Salt Lake City solved an NHL problem while introducing elite hockey to a winter-sports mecca. Year 2 brought a jolt of talent and the (very loud) Delta Center's first taste of Stanley Cup Playoffs. Year 3 will bring a Winter Classic tailor-made for postcards and something else new for Smith's burgeoning venture: expectations.

The Mammoth still operate in the contender-cluttered Central Division but are now stomping out of happy-to-be-here territory. Hence the Hellebuyck interest. Ramped is the pressure on coach Andre Tourigny to push this team to the next level and GM Bill Armstrong to spend Smith's cap space and extra draft picks wisely.

He may never gain entry to the Old Boys Club, but the architect of the reigning Stanley Cup champions is worthy of respect from all hockey heads.

Save for disgruntled (and unsigned) defenceman Aleksander Nikishin and injured goalie Frederik Andersen (now in Edmonton), Tulskey has essentially brought back his entire beringed roster for coach Rod Brind'Amour to run it back.

While he did reward pending-UFA captain Eric Staal with a Conn Smythe-like raise, Tulskey got way ahead of 2026's signing spree, locking up core pieces Logan Stankoven, Nikolaj Ehlers, Jackson Blake, Jaccob Slavin and K'Andre Miller before the price of poker skyrocketed.

Carolina's Tom Dundon-like payroll will keep the Canes' competitive window wide open, and because of Tulskey's analytical approach to the GM chair, owners in Toronto (Chayka) and New Jersey (Mehta) are taking notice.

If the Columbus Blue Jackets general manager needs to restock his medicine cabinet with another bottle of Advil, forgive the man.

Not only did Waddell's 59-point centre, Adam Fantilli, arrive late to camp after a gruelling contract negotiation that resulted in a massive \$82.5-million deal that walks him to UFA at age 27, but his leading goal scorer, Kirill Marchenko, has been shipped out of town (to Toronto for Matthew Knies) after telling the world that he's not interested in hanging around Ohio.

Toss in the facts that a couple of unnamed players showed up to camp out of shape; rehired coach Rick Bowness is in a dogfight to reshape the culture or blow a gasket; and the reigning Norris champ, Zach Werenski, is less than two years away from potentially walking for nothing, and Waddell's headaches could be recurring.

Meanwhile, the forever middling Jackets did come within three wins of a playoff spot last season and are expected to take a step forward.

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Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Dawn rises on a new NHL after summer of change

Elliott Friedman

This is Year 1 AC — After Carlsson.

We are in a new era, a new NHL. Players are flexing their muscles more than ever, with teams determined to regain more control over their situations. Cale Makar is the first \$20 million player, and Quinn Hughes peers over his shoulder. The cap could be \$127.5 million in the fall of 2028, a number we never dreamed we'd see. Commissioner Gary Bettman, who has run the league with an iron fist for almost 35 years, will be 75 next June and admits succession discussions are underway.

If you are my age (an old and creaky 56), there's one movie line you never forget: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." That's Matthew Broderick from Ferris Bueller's Day Off, and 40 years after it hit the theatres, it's as true as the first time I heard it. There's something special about this time of year. Tuesday morning, I will walk into an arena for Opening Day 2026-27, and I'm going to love it. I'm closer to the end of my career than the beginning and I will miss these days when they are gone.

This is an age of change, and more is coming.

It was great to see Lou Lamoriello at the Board of Governors, but it's different without him in one of the 32 GM chairs. Steve Yzerman is absent. So is Doug Armstrong, although I won't be the least bit surprised to see him resurface. These were three of the league's most powerful managers, big personalities with a big say. Eric Tulsky's Stanley Cup victory gave more teams the confidence to consider an alternate path to the managerial chair.

Even with a Kirill Marchenko conclusion, there are more unsettled situations to start a season than I can remember. From Connor Hellebuyck to Dylan Larkin to Nikita Kucherov to Hughes to Simon Edvinsson to Alexander Nikishin, there is going to be as much focus off the ice as there will be on it. Some of those names are bigger than others, but all are (or will be) impact players for years to come. They are wanted, coveted, and less afraid to rock the boat.

Then, there's the hockey itself.

If the four-game pre-season schedule did one thing, it was ramp up the intensity. Usually, we'd have to watch Florida-Tampa Bay or Montreal-Ottawa for fireworks. I don't know what got into everyone's cornflakes, but this year's games were nasty and fierce. This is going to be an incredibly entertaining season, especially because few teams are in retreat.

It's a rebuild in Vancouver, a youth movement in Calgary, a "let's see how this goes" in Nashville and a desire to compete everywhere else. Teams are not stupid. They see what's going on out there. They see how players are fleeing what they see as unwinnable situations. No one wants to be that. That rising cap scares them, not only for economic reasons, but also because it gives the best teams — or locations — more money/space to play with. Rebuilding in the NHL is a long and painful process. Many owners only go that route as an absolute last resort.

In 82-game seasons during the salary cap era, just 10 of 75 teams four points out of the playoffs after games on Nov. 1 made the post-season. Fall behind early and you drown.

This is going to be a crazy 84-game season. I can't wait for it to start.

32 THOUGHTS

1. The league dropped an immediate banger on our laps with Carolina raising the banner against hated rival Florida. Adding to the intrigue: I don't know who, but someone created a photo of a Hurricanes' Stanley Cup banner with the caption "Missed the Panthers in the playoffs, 2025-26" — insinuating victory because they avoided Florida. Apparently, it was sent to members of the Carolina organization, big yikes. When I heard that, I thought Rod Brind'Amour was going to play.

2. The delay in completing the Marchenko trade was due to NHL "tagging rules." Essentially, you can't have more salary committed for future seasons than the cap allows, so Toronto was not allowed to extend the winger without clearing space beyond this year. I suspect that's why Emil Andrae was included, as he has \$1.55 million owed in 2027-28.

Columbus GM Don Waddell made it clear he didn't have to trade an unhappy Marchenko yet, especially as the Blue Jackets hope to compete for a playoff berth. There were at least three reasons he reconsidered. First, they were never offered anyone as appetizing as Knies, especially since he's locked in at great value. He will benefit from "quiet," not being in three trade rumours per week. Teammates believed he was annoyed at the speculation; had enough of it. Second, the Maple Leafs think so highly of Marchenko — an absolute superstud in their eyes — they were willing to take Elvis Merzlikins and Miles Wood to get it done. They tried their best to hide their interest, but lusted after him, feeling he has the highest ceiling of anyone in this trade. Third, the relationship between Marchenko and head coach Rick Bowness was ... uneasy. One very interesting thing: Months ago, word was Marchenko would go to Montreal no problem, but he wasn't as certain about Toronto. Whatever his initial concerns, he warmed up when it really mattered.

3. A lot of people are asking why Knies was in so many rumours. Fair question. A big reason, I think, is he was one of the only players they could trade without asking permission. The only negative I ever heard about him was concern about the number of injuries he'd suffered in such a short time. That's it. You have to give quality to get quality.

4. Montreal was aggressive all summer, trying to make it work. But no one they offered excited Columbus as much as Knies. They were creative at the end, trying to involve third teams to either eat Blue Jackets salary or include more palatable players. As for the extension, I do think the Canadiens would have done the six years, \$12.5 million AAV Toronto did — even if it altered their tight salary structure. Who else was in there? Boston, the Islanders, Seattle, Tampa Bay. No doubt others. But Knies was impossible to beat.

5. Some other notes on this trade. The condition on the second-round pick is that Columbus gets the lower of Toronto's two next June. Will Merzlikins be declared unfit to play this season, so the Maple Leafs can access his full cap hit for LTIR usage? The league and NHLPA would have to sign off, but it would make him ineligible through the playoffs. There is talk that it's not an unrealistic scenario. I spent some time over the past couple of days asking around about Wood, who averaged 14 goals a year over a five-full-season stretch in New Jersey. Injuries have limited his effectiveness, but if he can stick to straight lines and pursuit, he can contribute.

6. The biggest question in the Hellebuyck saga is this: Does Clay Stevenson convince Winnipeg to ease their desire to get a goalie in any trade? This is a huge opportunity for Stevenson, claimed on waivers from Washington, who trains with one of Hellebuyck's netminder mentors, B.C.-based Adam Francillia. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, one of the Jets' potential trade targets, can now block a trade to Manitoba, and there is believed to be at least one other goalie they looked at who can do it, too. That's made the path more difficult. If Stevenson convinces Winnipeg he's legit, that's a way to change focus and ease the stalemate.

7. The Oilers considered a Stevenson trade before going with Devon Levi. His new teammates are raving about the ex-Sabre. It just never got off on the right foot for him in Buffalo, and it's hard to imagine Levi with a better opportunity to make a massive impact on a good team.

8. Hellebuyck badly wants this to end. Players want to play, and this time of year your body clock is telling you to "get off the couch." Initially, his target was Florida, but the Jets weren't crazy about the Panthers' offer — which included Evan Rodrigues, another roster player (possibly Eetu Luostarinen) and the draft-pick package sent to Ottawa for Brady Tkachuk. (No goalie.) Hellebuyck widened his list more than any other player with trade protection this summer, basically anywhere he thought could win. Buffalo was the closest to getting something done. I think Anaheim and Utah were among those that took a peek. We'll get to Carolina in a moment.

But the biggest challenge for Hellebuyck is that this trade is bigger than him, personally. For the Jets, it's existential. They have to get this right. If they don't, they worry about the domino effect. Hellebuyck now ... and then who? How many? They'd much, much, much rather make no trade than a bad trade. Everyone here is trying their best to be nice, but it's stressful.



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9. Right now, Carolina is the most motivated pursuer. If Nikishin wanted to sign in Winnipeg, Hellebuyck would already be in Wolfpack country. There are now some teams with permission to speak to Nikishin (who just changed agents), and the suspicion is it's because the Hurricanes want to see if there's a three-way available. I mentioned on Monday's pod that Nikishin is believed to be looking for a \$9 million AAV over five years. I had a few sources reach out to say they think that could be lower in the right situation.

St. Louis has been a consistent pursuer, and there are some who are surprised it hasn't happened. Nashville tried, but wasn't close enough for what Carolina wants. The Hurricanes were disappointed the Rangers trade didn't work out and made it clear they would move Nikishin at their own pace. They are motivated now, so we'll see. Nikishin is a talented player, but has zero leverage under the CBA.

10. Heading into last weekend, Detroit was firm on a bridge for Simon Edvinsson. I say it a lot: If you think someone is a cornerstone, lock him up for as long as you can, because the price never goes down. This is a great opportunity for Shawn Horcoff, but it might be prudent for Detroit to bring in an experienced advisor, a sober second thought, if you will. I can understand the Red Wings don't desire to make major commitments in the interim, but time does not stop. Edvinsson, Larkin and UFA-to-be Alex DeBrincat must be dealt with sooner or later.

11. Boston is trying to find a new home for Henri Jokiharju, who cleared waivers. There are teams curious to see what they do with Matthew Poitras, who avoided them for the time being. Can't imagine he'd slide through.

12. Edmonton has no right-shot centres. That's why you hear a lot of Kirby Dach (plus his history with Stan Bowman). They also took a long look at Shane Wright, but it didn't get to the finish line. Would have liked to see that fit.

13. Leon Draisaitl said (with a smile) the most honest thing Mike Babcock told him was "he hated my changes." Evan Bouchard said Babcock told him he didn't have to hit a home run every play. Sometimes Bouchard-winger-McDavid works just as well as forcing the puck to McDavid.

14. OK, a breakdown of the equipment crackdown promised by the league. Most of these are protection-related and make perfect sense.

Let's start with neck guards. That is the sole rule change for 2026-27: Those who never played prior to this season must wear one. If it flies off or unzips during play, you can finish your shift, but must have it properly attached before your next one. As in all of these cases, the first violation is a warning, followed by a minor penalty, a misconduct and a game misconduct (could you imagine?).

Next, helmets. Those who debuted in 2019-20 or later must wear one in warmups. If you don't, it's a warning and if you don't comply with that, you start the game with a minor penalty. There are exceptions, including those taking a first-game rookie lap and/or wearing a toque before an outdoor game.

Let's go to visors. I think we are down to three no-visor players (Jamie Benn, Zach Bogosian, Ryan O'Reilly) and the key to this enforcement is that it will not happen with anyone who doesn't have to wear one, because, technically, those players could just remove it. However, if you must (entered NHL 2013-14 or later) and wear it improperly (too high on your head) so it doesn't provide proper eye protection, you will get the warning, followed by the penalties. I laughed when I heard Leo Komarov was featured on the video package sent to teams. Gone from the NHL for five years, but not forgotten for his visor abuse.

15. That brings us to the Zegras Zone. The Flyers forward got the warning and the minor last week for tucking his jersey. Players are expected to begin shifts with the jersey out. If it gets tucked during a shift, there is to be no punishment. This isn't a safety issue like the other stuff; tucked jerseys don't bother me at all and Zegras posting a picture of the Patriots-Raiders 2002 NFL playoff "Tuck Game" was funny.

There was a lot of feedback on why this is so important, ranging from the league's hard push to market players, to making life easier for broadcasters, to making it so certain cameras can see it, to conspiracy theorists saying it's only a matter of time before ads are going there. Whatever the case, we all wonder if this one has staying power. It happened a little over a decade ago, and, well ... police don't really want to write tickets for jaywalking. We'll see where we are in March.

16. Next Board of Governors meeting is in Florida during the second week of December. I thought for sure we'd see one major vote while Kyle Bukauskas sipped Lava Flows at the beach — expansion into Texas. I'm not sure now, because there was more pushback than I'd thought. If this is about a better U.S. television deal, some owners asked why Houston wasn't the default selection over Austin since it is the largest market in North America without a team. There's time between then and now (10 weeks), room for alliances to build and discussion to be had, but the way things were being discussed over the summer, it looked like an absolute certainty. Not anymore.

17. The other hot topic will be Bettman's succession plan. He's very loyal to deputy commissioner Bill Daly, who'd be an excellent choice and could do the job blindfolded. I wasn't as certain about this being put to a vote as I was about expansion, but the possibility existed. Instead, some owners fought to have a search. They wouldn't have a problem with Daly emerging victorious in that way, but want that process. So I don't know where it stands.

18. Loved that Calgary owner and NHL vice-chair Murray Edwards said it is important there be one Canadian and one American (new chairman of the board, Ted Leonsis) at the top of the executive committee. That should be permanent. It matters.

19. Philadelphia remains the lead horse to host the 2027 Draft.

20. A number of you have asked about Patrik Laine. A few times, I've heard rumours of the Kings, but every single time, that has been denied.

21. Yes, Sidney Crosby is an elite human, first-class. But we all know he's pushing the equipment cart to hide his 20-year-old lucky belt from the cameras.

22. At the Vegas media tour, features producer Paul Sidhu asked Crosby to pick his 60th anniversary all-Penguins starting lineup.

"I've got to leave some really good players off this lineup, so I'm going to take some heat for this one," he laughed. "I'll go Mario (Lemieux), Geno (Malkin), (Jaromir) Jagr. And then, I gotta go Tanguay (Kris Letang). Do I go two righties? I don't know. I go with (Paul) Coffey or I go two righties, Larry Murphy. I don't know, both good answers. And then in net, Flower (Marc-Andre Fleury)."

Of course, Crosby left himself out. "Yeah, you asked me to pick a starting lineup. I'm going with them." End of discussion.

23. Quinn Hughes is — deservedly — the sexiest defenceman currently available next summer, but after that, it's the Kraken's Vince Dunn. There were talks between player and team, but there is work to do. Still time.

24. Big summer accomplishment: Seattle's Jared McCann had his first-ever hole-in-one at Zach Hyman's golf tournament. Wedge from 135 yards. Sadly, no video.

25. We should get clarity on Brock Faber's injury/status Tuesday. That was a scary-looking fluke play.

26. Personal request for Calgary's final season at the Saddledome: During the Flames' final home game, officially retire No. 2 for Al MacInnis and No. 25 for Joe Nieuwendyk. Enter their brand-new, beautiful building with these two alongside Lanny McDonald (9), Jarome Iginla (12), Mike Vernon (30) and Miikka Kiprusoff (34).

27. I was talking with a couple of executives about storylines and what to watch. I asked if there was anything that I'm missing or wasn't discussing enough. They both answered, "Ryan O'Reilly." Over the past two years, team after team tried to pry him out of Nashville and were rebuffed. He didn't have written trade protection, but there was a verbal promise that the Predators honoured. Now, he's entering the final year of his contract. If Nashville indicates it won't extend, what will he choose to do? That's a question interested parties will want to know. The interest — and respect — for O'Reilly remains high.

28. The Maple Leafs presented the Mayich family with a name-plated team jersey when they visited last week in Arizona. A statement from them: "We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the entire Toronto Maple Leafs organization, including the players and staff, for taking the time to support Matthew during his time of need. Your kindness, compassion, and willingness to be there for Matthew truly meant so much to our family. It was a powerful reminder of the human side of professional sports and the impact that genuine support can have beyond the game itself. We are incredibly grateful for your thoughtfulness



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and support, and we wish the entire Maple Leafs organization the very best in the upcoming season. With sincere appreciation, The Mayich Family."

29. Correcting an egregious omission from the original written piece on Matthew Mayich: Buffalo's Owen Power has been hugely supportive and should have been recognized as such.

30. Outstanding story from Mark, a Dallas Stars fan and podcast listener from Widnes, England.

"Back in the spring of this year I was doing some hockey-related research. I was shocked and excited to discover that Lord Stanley of Preston, who donated the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup (aka the Stanley Cup), had been laid to rest with members of his family in a recently rediscovered crypt under a church in Knowsley, England — a mere 15-minute drive from my home!"

After some renovations to fortify the building, Mark was able to view Lord Stanley's resting place.

"According to church records, the last burial in the crypt was in 1943 and the last mention of it on record was in 1946. So it had been left completely untouched and forgotten about for 80 years, until springtime this year when some flooring contractors made the discovery of the forgotten crypt. Being from somewhere that hockey isn't very popular, you always feel a million miles away from the hockey world — especially the NHL — so to have the actual Lord Stanley buried close by makes me feel a little more connected. I just thought it was a cool piece of hockey history that a hockey historian or anyone who loves the game would enjoy knowing about. I've attached a couple of photos I took from today to the email if anyone is interested."

Mark, thank you for sharing, it's an awesome story. If travelling to England, add it to your list.

31. Over the past few years, we've discovered Jacob Trouba's passion for art. Through Jan. 3, 2027, the Arizona State Art Museum will exhibit Trouba's work with artist William Wegman.

Per the organization's website: "Drawing on his experience as an athlete, Trouba covers himself in ink while wearing hockey gear and propels himself across the canvas, leaving behind marks that record speed, force, and impact. Wegman responds by translating those gestures into paintings that reinterpret the movement at an intimate scale, creating an ongoing dialogue between action and reflection."

Naturally, the exhibit is entitled "Cross Check," which "reveals how physicality, play, and creative exchange transform movement, whether on the ice or in the studio, into a powerful form of artistic expression." Here are some photos of what's on display:

32. I never pick a repeat champion — even though there were three in the last decade, and Carolina is about as good a bet as a team could be. Never. So, I'm going with Edmonton-Florida III in June. Hope there's a charter.

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Sportsnet.ca / Nine NHL storylines we're watching in 2026-27

Emily Sadler

Well, that was quite an off-season, eh?

A lot has changed in just a short span of time — trade requests! massive contracts! expansion talks! — but there's no time to rest. We've got hockey to watch.

More hockey than ever before, in fact, as the league's 32 teams each face an 84-game schedule ahead. Nobody knows what's in store for the campaign to come, but if this summer was any indication, we should probably buckle up.

With a fresh slate of hockey ahead and the standings all reset to zeros, here are the storylines we're watching in 2026-27.

Which division is strongest?

To try and predict this, we must first narrow down our definition of, well, "strongest." For example, no one will accuse last year's Metropolitan Division of throwing down the gauntlet, but it did produce the Stanley Cup champions in Carolina — a team that is well-positioned to run it back.

No division appears to be deeper than the Atlantic, with all eight squads able to make a legitimate case for why they could be playoff-bound this year, buoyed by a healthy Panthers squad poised to make noise and a Leafs roster brimming with intrigue. Neither made the playoffs last year. Both could jump back in. But don't count on any one of Montreal, Boston, Tampa Bay, Ottawa, or Buffalo stepping aside to let them in. Detroit, meanwhile, is a wild card in either direction (or maybe even literally).

A top-heavy Central Division promises to pack a punch as Colorado, Minnesota, and Dallas look ready to once again fight for the top three spots — but can Utah relegate one of them to a wild card spot?

And as tightly as Edmonton and Vegas have gripped the Pacific Division's top slot, this year feels like it could bring a changing of the guard with San Jose looking to make a splash while Anaheim brings plenty of fascination, too.

McDavid's two-year contract starts the clock ticking in Edmonton

The pressure to win is palpable every season when you've got the consensus top player in the league on your side... but 2026-27 carries a little more weight considering Connor McDavid's entering the first season of the two-year, \$25-million deal he signed with the Oilers last October. At the time of the signing, McDavid said the deal gave him and the organization "a chance to extend our window" after back-to-back Stanley Cup Final appearances in 2024 and 2025. He got his coach of choice, despite blowback, in Mike Babcock, in hopes of giving the team an edge. McDavid will be extension-eligible next summer, and whatever happens this year sets the tone for that monumental decision.

Class of pending UFAs packs plenty of intrigue

For the second straight season, Jason Robertson embarks on an all-important contract year. Despite proving his worth to the Dallas Stars as a pending RFA in 2025-26, finishing the campaign as the club's leading scorer, the two sides settled not on a long-term pact but rather on a one-year deal that walks Robertson into unrestricted free agency next July. If we thought last year was interesting in Dallas, the intrigue doubles (along with the stakes) in 2026-27.

And then there's Quinn Hughes. Based on how the pending UFA defenceman has answered questions about his future, Hughes isn't bothered by any timeline other than his own.

"For me, I just feel at peace," he said during September's Player Media Tour. "I'm gonna take my time, and [Wild GM Bill Guerin]'s gonna take his time, and I'm sure it'll work out."

That last part should ease Minnesota fans' minds. A strong start for the team would surely go a long way, too. Perhaps the bigger question in this

case isn't if he'll sign, but rather for how much — does he eclipse the \$20.4-million AAV Cale Makar's extension carries?

All the chatter about Robertson and Hughes over the summer distracted us from truly acknowledging Nikita Kucherov's name listed there atop the pending UFAs. It feels impossible to picture him in a sweater other than the blue and white of Tampa Bay, but until the two sides sit down and sign an extension, there remains a great unknown. At 33, he's coming off the second-highest point total of his career and his fourth straight year eclipsing 110 points. We can wager a guess as to his worth, but what does the term look like?

Toronto has a new No. 1

Ten years after Toronto opened up a new era by calling Auston Matthews to the draft stage first overall, lottery luck was once again with the Maple Leafs, and Gavin McKenna their unquestioned top pick. An off-season of significant changes has brought in new management and coaches, an updated blue line with a veteran goaltender behind it, a revamped bottom-six, and — as of Monday afternoon — a new elite sniper to complement all of it in Kirill Marchenko, with Matthew Knies part of the Columbus-bound return. Even amid all that change, all eyes will be on the new kid to see how he fares early on in his Toronto tenure.

Ovechkin's last run?

After last spring's will-he-or-won't-he weeks of wondering in Washington and around the league, Ovechkin signed a one-year pact to come back for the 2026-27 campaign... will this one be his last? If the man himself is to be believed, not even Ovechkin knows the answer to that. ("We'll see" were his words of choice when asked about it this summer.) At 41, he enters his 22nd NHL season as the third oldest player in the league behind just Brent Burns and Corey Perry (both of whom are just a few months his senior).

So, what will we see from Ovi this season? The league's greatest-ever goal-scorer has 929 markers to his name after putting up 32 last year. He's 21 from hitting 950, and with 1,006 regular-season and playoff goals combined to his name, he's just 10 shy of breaking another one of Wayne Gretzky's records (The Great One had 1,016 combined markers). Of course, it's not just the fate of the Great No. 8 that makes this upcoming Capitals season so intriguing, though. It's also how the club has reshaped its top-six to both make the most of this last chapter (or two!) of Ovechkin's career, as well as prepare for a post-Ovi era — whenever that may be.

Crosby's milestone watch

Meanwhile, in Pittsburgh, Sidney Crosby also embarks on his 22nd NHL season and while he, too, is due a new deal, the questions about retirement aren't quite so loud. The bigger storylines around Crosby right now are the milestones he's fast approaching. He's 38 points from surpassing Ron Francis (1,798) and breaking into the NHL's top five all-time, and 89 from tying Gordie Howe for fourth on the list. Any opportunity to recognize Sid's greatness is an opportunity we'll take.

How will Hellebuyck, Larkin situations unfold? (And will we see more trade requests?)

Unfinished business follows the Winnipeg Jets and Detroit Red Wings from the summertime into the season, as two of the largest off-season developments become two of the most consequential storylines of the upcoming campaign. After not reporting to Winnipeg for camp, goaltender Connor Hellebuyck has made it clear he's played his final game as a Jet — and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff made his own stance clear, too: He's not moving the netminder until he gets a return worthy of his talent.

Like Hellebuyck in Winnipeg, Dylan Larkin's chapter in Detroit is coming to a close — the team's move to remove the captain's 'C' from his sweater spoke volumes, erasing any hope that after a summer-long standoff the two parties would put aside their differences and move forward together. Unlike Hellebuyck, Larkin did report to camp — it was an injury that sidelined him early on, though he's skated with the team since and was named to the opening-night roster.

All this points to the larger picture that's developed league-wide over the past year, and accelerated over the summer, of this new era of player empowerment that's seen players requesting trades out of organizations despite being under contract. Brady Tkachuk forced a move away from Canada's capital to join brother and Team USA teammate Matthew in



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Florida. Quinn Hughes wanted out of Vancouver before he was dealt to Minnesota last winter. Rumours of Zach Werenski wishing to leave Columbus were ultimately dismissed and resolved, but Kirill Marchenko's desire to be dealt was granted on the eve of the season when he was traded to Toronto. Will we see more similar situations unfold this season?

Big contracts bring bigger expectations

The salary cap remains on the rise, and players are cashing in. Never before has an off-season so monumentally altered the league's financial landscape — just look at all the major-money deals handed out. One of the biggest league-wide contract trends we saw was a tidal wave of teams investing early in young stars, resulting in AAVs out-shining actual performances... so far.

The league's highest AAV for 2026-27 belongs to Leo Carlsson — albeit via a matched offer sheet — who will earn \$18 million for the next five years despite not yet reaching 30 goals in a season. Four of the top six cap hits for this season belong to players age 22 and younger (Carlsson, Connor Bedard, Adam Fantilli, Cutter Gauthier) with just one 70-plus-point season among them (that belongs to Bedard last year).

And then there are the extensions that kick in next year, with both the game's biggest young names (Macklin Celebrini) and lesser-known stars in the making (Ivan Demidov, Zeev Buium, Noah Ostlund, Ryan Leonard, to name a few) signing long-term pacts early. This is a trend that should continue this season and beyond.

Will expansion talks heat up again?

As the saying goes, everything's bigger in Texas. And for a few weeks late in this off-season, it seemed almost certain that applied to the NHL's reported hopes of expanding to the state... but then, talks seemed to cool as quickly as they heated up.

As Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman reported, expansion to either Austin or Houston is no longer the certainty it felt like mere weeks ago. We should learn plenty more in the months leading up to the league's next Board of Governors meeting in December.

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators make unifying choice in naming Thomas Chabot captain

Wayne Scanlan

OTTAWA — Everyone in hockey recognizes the 'C' on a jersey, emblematic of the most important role on any team.

In Ottawa today, 'C' also stands for Chabot, as in Thomas, the newly named 11th captain in the modern history of the Senators.

And for "Cherie," as in his precious new baby Romy.

In the past several days, Chabot became a father for the first time, as he and his wife Marion welcomed their new daughter into the world.

Then on Tuesday, Chabot spotted his wife and newborn at the Canadian Tire Centre and thought to himself, "OK, something is up here."

"It kind of obviously clicked," Chabot told media members in a conference room, a group that waited long enough for the news to drop to feel a bit as though they were a parent or grandparent, awaiting news on a family childbirth.

Instead, the expectancy centred the Sens' captaincy, a buzz that rippled through the stands of the arena as Senators players conducted mundane practice as usual down below.

Then, news broke that the Senators released a video of Chabot in the dressing room being introduced by owner Michael Andlauer and management as the captain to succeed Brady Tkachuk.

"It's a big honour, I'm kind of shaking right now," Chabot said to his teammates.

Several minutes later, he was paraded upstairs to answer questions alongside GM Steve Staios and head coach Travis Green.

Chabot is the perfect choice to be Ottawa's captain and not just because he is the first francophone captain in the history of the franchise, overdue in the nation's capital where the French and English languages mix like gin and tonic.

The 29-year-old from Ste-Marie-de-Beauce, Que., is the longest serving Senators player and the only one to have been around Ottawa's 2017 playoff club, although the rookie didn't get on the ice for that run to the Conference Final. Since being drafted 18th overall in 2015, Chabot has lived through some of the darkest times of the Eugene Melnyk era and into the trough of a deep rebuild, from which the Senators only emerged over the past two seasons or so.

There were times when fans in Ottawa wondered if poor "Chabby" would ever get to participate in a playoff series — a matter that was rectified these past two springs, albeit in losing causes.

"I think part of leadership is experience and moving through some tough times... dealing with that adversity and learning from that," Staios said.

"And part of Thomas that I think gets a little misunderstood is that while he's an offensive defenceman, can wheel around the ice and make plays, he's tough as nails."

Yes, oddly enough, the man who smiles the most in the dressing room is the same guy willing to suffer the most on the ice. Nifty combination, that.

The two other main captain candidates, Jake Sanderson and Tim Stutzle, will wear 'A's on their sweaters, along with veteran Claude Giroux.

While any of the three would have been fine choices, it's been said here before that Chabot would wear the 'C' more easily. Sanderson doesn't need the added role to be Ottawa's best defenceman. And Stutzle might try a little hard — we've seen that backfire before — if he were to succeed his old pal Brady.

Coach Green noted that Chabot "exemplifies everything you want in a captain," not just in the room and on the ice, but in the community.

Chabot speaks easily in both official languages and brings the energy to the rink so necessary over the long and gruelling season, home and away. As with all captains, he can only be as good as the cast around him.

"I take a lot of pride in coming in every day with a smile on my face and enjoying and supporting my teammates as much as I can," Chabot said. "Like Travis said, it's trying to bring everybody together to push in the same direction."

Chabot has been auditioning for this role for years, perhaps unwittingly. That new jersey slipped over his shoulders like Superman's cape. Consider him the every-man superhero.

"Thomas doesn't have to be anything other than who he is," said Staios, who has a knack for saying the right thing in these moments.

As one of the last of the C-less NHL clubs, the Senators certainly didn't rush the decision. Green said he wanted to see the group together, vets mixing with aspiring kids like Hoyt Stanley. Management knew for a while that Chabot was their guy but had to stickhandle around the pending birth of Romy to make it official this week.

Chabot has played alongside captains in junior and pro. Of all he'd care to emulate — and there will be snippets taken from a few — he cited Patrice Bergeron, "the perfect human," in Chabot's words, as the ultimate leader. Chabot was a mere teenager when he used to train in Quebec City with Bergeron, the great Boston Bruins captain.

Now, getting to see fans in Ottawa wearing No. 72 Senators jerseys with a big 'C' on the chest will be a little surreal for Chabot.

"Ottawa is home for us," he said. "We bought our first house here. We've had our first child here. Ottawa will always be close to our hearts, no matter what."

Should he lead the Senators to a championship one day, or even an extended playoff run, Chabot will rise up into Daniel Alfredsson territory as a franchise icon.

All in due time. Much work remains.

Today, let the man enjoy one of the most eventful weeks of his life — as a new father and a new captain. In the panorama of one's life, this was one heck of a snapshot.

"It's a lot, but it's fun," said the new dad, wearing the 'C.' "It's been nothing but pure joy. Seeing my new little daughter every day, it's been awesome. To top it off with being captain, it's awesome. I don't have many words for it, if I'm being honest."

And with that, Chabot was whisked off to a photo shoot with Sens' PR.

Duty calls for the captain. Not for the last time.

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Sportsnet.ca / Chayka explains Maple Leafs' push for Marchenko-Knies blockbuster

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The best player in the deal, regardless of cap hit or sweeteners or cost of doing business.

"There's a lot of good players in the NHL, very few that can impact winning and can single-handedly dictate outcomes of games. We believe that Kirill is one of those players for us," Toronto's general manager said Tuesday morning, just hours after the trade and hours before the club's home opener against the Montreal Canadiens (Sportsnet, Sportsnet+, 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT).

Marchenko inked a six-year, \$75-million extension, which required MLSE ownership's stamp of approval, as part of the transaction.

"A big commitment from the club. That was a player that wasn't willing to just go anywhere. Wants to win. He wants to be part of a world-class organization," Chayka said.

"While it's an expensive player, we think it's a player that fits and we can build around."

The GM described the deal as "complicated." Discussions on sending Knies, who lacks trade protection, to Columbus began early in the off-season and grew serious over the past several weeks.

A fire was burning under all that smoke.

The Blue Jackets knew Marchenko had no interest in re-signing in Ohio and are adamant about changing their culture. They want players who want to be there.

Thing is, Knies wanted to stay in Toronto. That wasn't enough, however, to prevent the aggressive Chayka from seeking an upgrade — a play driver with 40-goal potential who can complement centres Auston Matthews and John Tavares.

"You have to give up quality to get quality, and we gave up some quality people and some quality players," Chayka said. "But ultimately, my job is to always make the team as best as possible. And not just collect talent but put together a team that fits and works."

Simply put: The Leafs see more upside in Marchenko, a speedy right shot who can play both wings, transport the puck and snipe from distance.

"He skates very well with the puck," coach Jim Hiller said. "A lot of times a player can skate really well, they get the puck and they slow down a little bit. He's one of those guys that seems to accelerate with the puck. I know he loves having the puck."

"He's a shot threat, and he distributes. So, there's lots there for us. He'll be a really strong addition."

As for the subtraction, Chris Tanev says the room was "very surprised" by the deal, particularly with the timing of it landing one day before puck drop and a couple days after the club flew to Knies's home state of Arizona to bond.

"It can be a s----- business, right?" Tanev said. "He's a great guy and very good player, so Columbus is getting a horse with him. And just good person, good player. Obviously, he'll be missed here. It's a s----- part of the business, but we're welcoming in an amazing player that I've heard nothing but great things about."

"(Marchenko) is a very dynamic player, and he's tough to defend. So, we're very excited to have him on our team as well."

Chayka thanked Knies, Steven Lorentz and Emil Andrae for their service and acknowledged that Columbus was getting a strong asset.

"Matthew's a great player. There's no doubt about it," Chayka said.

"Look, I apologized to him for the noise over the last several months. I

don't think it was necessarily fair to him. This was the only (trade) we seriously considered as a management crew. These things happen. He understands. He's a professional athlete, and he's a smart kid. But he took the news well. I mean, it's a good young team he's going to. I think it's a good fit for him. I think he'll do well."

Marchenko is in Toronto sorting out his immigration and work visa, but his availability for the home opener is unknown. If he plays, Chayka will dress eight(!) forwards making their Maple Leafs debuts.

That alone speaks to the GM's overhaul of a roster he assures he'll remain "patiently aggressive" to improve as the season unfolds.

The deal-maker ain't done dealin'.

"We're not going to do anything before tonight," Chayka said, "but then we'll react as the team plays."

One-Timers: Miles Wood will have "a chance to earn his way back up" to the NHL, according to Chayka. The forechecker cleared waivers prior to the trade and will start the season with the Marlies.... Elvis Merzlikins (shoulder) will require four to six months of rehab and starts the season on long-term injured reserve. Chayka says he's "hopeful" the goalie can return to action.... Rookie Gavin McKenna skipped Tuesday's optional morning skate ahead of his pro debut. Power move.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens must remain grounded amid soaring expectations

Eric Engels

TORONTO — “Once it starts back up Tuesday, it’s all zeroes again,” Samuel Montembeault said after closing out a near-perfect pre-season that enabled him to solidify his place behind Jakub Dobes on the Montreal Canadiens opening roster.

That level of sobriety was easy to come by for the goaltender who had the ground fall out from underneath him just last winter.

If anyone on this team knows how quick the tumble from grace can come — and how hard the landing can feel — it’s Montembeault, who stopped more expected goals than all but four goaltenders in the NHL in 2024-25 but struggled more than just about any goaltender in the league to make a save last season. He went from No. 1 to no one in mere months, so treating his two-week reclamation of name and face as tenuous feels both natural and necessary.

It seems necessary for Montembeault’s teammates to also treat this upcoming season the same way, though you can’t help but wonder just how naturally inclined they’ll be to do that.

Like Montembeault, who travelled the arduous path from waiver claim to backup to starting goaltender to top-tier starting goaltender through his first four years in Montreal, the Canadiens emerged from the ashes of a rebuild and walked towards competing before arriving at winning and now being expected to contend. But unlike Montembeault, they’re still standing on high ground.

If things go as coach Martin St. Louis expects, the Canadiens will avoid losing their balance and tumbling, because he believes they’ve avoided getting drunk on their most recent success.

“I feel like we live with that mentality. Every day, we start over,” St. Louis said after Montembeault stopped 14 shots in regulation and four of five in the pre-planned shootout that took place after the Canadiens beat the Ottawa Senators 4-2 last Saturday to emerge from exhibition with a 4-1 record.

“Whether you had a good game the night before or a bad game, you’ve got to start over, and I feel like we have that mentality — process-driven, not get too high, too low with the actual result,” St. Louis continued. “I feel like when you’re process-driven like that, usually things take care of themselves. We try to be like that as a team, and I think it has bled down to how the individuals actually see it as well, and it helps them go through the grind of an NHL season.”

We’ll begin finding out Tuesday, with the Canadiens facing a Toronto Maple Leafs team champing at the bit to knock them down a peg.

The Maple Leafs’ fall to 28th place last season — after nine consecutive playoff berths — was swift and humbling. And now, with a remodelled roster, they have a golden opportunity to immediately bolster renewed hope while planting a seed of doubt for their oldest rivals.

But maybe just a seed for a rising Canadiens team that earned 106 points in the standings last season and took out equally good teams in Tampa Bay and Buffalo in the playoffs before losing to the eventual Stanley Cup-champion Carolina Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference Final.

Montembeault was mostly right — it all goes back to zeroes ahead of Game 1 of this season.

Except for self-belief, which, of course, is justifiably well-embedded in the Canadiens’ locker room.

The only new member of it, Chris Kreider, has been talking about how healthy it is, about how he’s only observed a consistent culture of commitment to improving since arriving in Montreal just over two weeks ago.

“It’s a lot of fun, but everyone works really hard,” the 35-year-old, who’s coming into his 15th NHL season, said after scoring his first goal as a Canadien at the Bell Centre in last Saturday’s win. “The guys are on the ice early, getting their touches every single day. Guys are on the ice late. They love working, and they have fun doing it.”

From his experience on good and bad New York Rangers teams and the up-and-coming Anaheim Ducks of the last two seasons, Kreider knows the value of that — especially in the face of rising expectations.

“The thing about Kreids is he’s got perspective. He’s played in the league for a long time, so he’s able to compare things,” St. Louis said to reporters in Brossard, Que., before the Canadiens departed for Toronto Monday. “So, if he feels good about this environment being here for, I don’t know, three weeks now, it’s great to hear. Because it’s hard to describe that (from just observing); it’s something you (need to) see, feel. So, it’s great to hear.”

He said he liked what Montembeault said last Saturday, too.

And we’re sure St. Louis probably enjoyed hearing Dobes reiterate those thoughts Monday when he said, “We’ll just go day by day.”

It’s the best approach for the start of a marathon, even if the Canadiens appear more prepared for this one than any other they’ve run since their rebuild began in 2022.

They’re that much deeper, as evidenced by sending three emerging NHL players — Owen Beck, David Reinbacher and Jacob Fowler — back to the American Hockey League and keeping two, Florian Xhekaj and Adam Engstrom, on the margin of their roster. The least experienced players in their opening lineup are Dobes and Ivan Demidov, who both finished among the top four vote-getters for the Calder Trophy for rookie of the year. And everyone else dressing up to play in Toronto has at least 150 games under his belt.

What some of these Canadiens have done with not much more than that has been astounding (here’s looking at you, Lane Hutson). And the young guys with nearly double or more (Juraj Slafkovsky, Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield) still have ceiling above them, which is as good a reason as any why the expectations for the Canadiens have risen so high.

“We’ve earned that,” said St. Louis. “We know what kind of responsibility comes with that, and I feel like we come in each and every day living up to our own standards and what we’ve built.”

Now the task is to remain grounded and keep doing it.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Vibes are high': Why these Maple Leafs should be fun — and better

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Training-camp rust was still clinging to the Toronto Maple Leafs' skates as Auston Matthews found himself fielding a long-view question about lottery prize Gavin McKenna, an 18-year-old of tantalizing potential and zero professional games played.

Matthews, busy rewriting the 109-year-old franchise's record book before his 30th birthday, was asked if Toronto's next No. 1—overall draftee is destined to become the face of the franchise.

Will the Maple Leafs one day be McKenna's team?

"Absolutely. I think that time will eventually come," replied Matthews. Then the captain flashed that sardonic smile, the one that wants to pump the brakes on a reporter's premise.

"I think that's looking a little bit into the future, as you guys love to do. But he's got a great head on his shoulders. He's extremely humble, confident in himself. He's going to continue to learn, continue to grow and get better each and every day."

Yes, McKenna is something special. Fast and smart. Hands of David Blaine. Feet of Fred Astaire. The Maple Leafs plumbed great luck when they were down on theirs, again.

But Matthews has lived through all this anticipation and hype. And he wants to send a clear message to McKenna, his teammates, and all you fans and critics who will watch with great interest as the tale of the 2026-27 Toronto Maple Leafs is written.

Focus on the present.

Channel your power of curiosity.

Because, for the first time in a long time, the regular season means something in these parts. So many things look and feel different around what Lightning coach Jon Cooper memorably called "the same cast of characters." Finally. Joyfully.

For too many Septembers, Matthews, Morgan Rielly, William Nylander, John Tavares, and the high-expectations Leafs would reconvene after post-season disaster. Another round of heartbreak and consensus underperformance when it really matters.

No one hoists the Stanley Cup in November, so those camps felt like the beginning of a six-month slog of dress rehearsals before the real show began.

But what was once the NHL's longest active playoff streak (nine years) exploded to shambles in the great tire fire of 2025-26. Personnel was gutted from the front office, the bench, and virtually every other department on the ol' org chart. A couple goalies got traded. Eleven(!) new roster players were recruited.

Lightened baggage and cleaner slates.

"Vibes are high," Rielly enthuses.

This is what you get when you freefall from top five to bottom five and get (accurately) labelled as the most disappointing team in hockey. When your defence is porous and your culture smells putrid. When the sum is so much less than the parts, it's time to find a whole new equation.

Alas, from haplessness springs hope. Can't get any worse, right?

"It's interesting," says Jake McCabe, a rare Leaf who played both excellent and healthy last season. Before getting traded north in 2022, the veteran spent nine years toiling for crummy teams in Buffalo and Chicago. He is in a reflective mood. "You know, it took me 500 games of missing the playoffs in my career — until I got here (and made them). So, last year was a reminder of not taking things for granted."

"Auston and Mo and John and Will, it's expected to make the playoffs — which is how it should be. But you can't take it for granted."

To a man, the Leafs leadership group is quick to credit new GM John Chayka's off-season aggression.

McKenna is the best kind of fluke, the quality of top-six, playmaking winger that rarely hits the open market and that executives can seldom afford to trade for.

In comes Darren Raddysh, the best offensive defenceman available in free agency and a 22-goal, 70-point right-shot point bomb that could pound the Leafs power-play back to elite.

Top-six scoring dynamo Kirill Marchenko, the Blue Jackets' leading goal-getter three years running, is an upgrade in speed and (for one season only) cap hit from power forward Matthew Knies. He has the potential to spark a debate and create a highlight every time he hops the boards.

Jack Roslovic is an intriguing flyer, what with his history of chemistry bursts alongside the elite and longstanding friendship with Matthews. He's also here after things didn't work out with his previous five teams.

We see a remodelled, veteran bottom-six (Nick Paul, Colton Sissons, Brandon Duhaime, Teddy Blueger, Zack McEwen) with multiple centre options and multiple pre-season fighting majors.

And, looky here, a Hall of Fame-bound, two-time Cup-winning goaltender who routinely stays healthy enough for a real starter's workload. Sergei Bobrovsky, 38, ain't young. But for the first time in four summers, he's had a five-plus months to rest and train. If only one Atlantic power bounces back to contender status, Bobrovsky wants it to be his new one.

"He's been all the way and won it," Nylander says. "So, that's something that you want to bring here."

"Someone we've seen a lot of over the years, and someone that's stolen games, frankly, and been the best part of that team," McCabe adds of the ex-Panther.

"So, just a ton of great pieces that we've added, a lot of great people that we've added. These last two weeks have been kind of seamless with these new guys, and I hope they feel the same, because it's an exciting group. Love the optimism."

A strong source of that optimism when the puck drops against divisional favourite Montreal Tuesday won't be in uniform.

Jim Hiller, Chayka's surprise choice for coach, envisions a swarming possession attack that frees his blue-chip forwards to flex their creative muscle and props Rielly and Raddysh in position to push offence. Hiller has been light on criticism, but that's easy to do when you haven't lost a game yet.

"Very positive," says Chris Tanev, one of several healthy and important bounce-back candidates on the roster. "Not a ton of yelling or screaming."

Bag skates and punishing battle drills have been supplanted by rush offence and diligent backtracking.

"We want to be a fast, hard-skating team," declares Matthews, who looks up to speed for a guy coming off knee surgery and two years of wonky-backitis.

The Maple Leafs — aging and against it; refreshed and eager to rebound — don't want to dwell on the past. Nor do they wish to gaze into their McKenna-led future.

They are here and now, staring at portals to two divergent multiverses. This season is their sliding-doors moment.

Do enough of the piling question marks — a GM and coach hired among raised eyebrows; a superstar whose 69-goal best self is drifting to the rearview; a past-prime D corps that disappointed; a marquee defenceman with one great year, and another whom they tried to trade; a goalie they're paying till age 40; a phenom who will require patience and growth — result in affirmative answers? Will they rally back to relevance?

Or does health and age and unfamiliarity and a deep division and a risky, run-and-gun play style undo Hiller and Chayka's best laid plans?



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If that's the case, Matthews (UFA 2028) may be handing the mantle to McKenna sooner than anyone in this town wants him to.

But that's a problem for tomorrow's Maple Leafs, if it becomes one at all.

Today's Leafs still have a chance to jump through the sunnier multiverse, one with a 50-goal sniper, the best setup man since the last one ducked out, and the true No. 1 goalie and power-play quarterback they've been seeking for years.

Our only guarantee: This edition of the team will be the most fun and fascinating since ... well, since Matthews was about McKenna's age.

"It is exciting when you bring in some new faces," Matthews says. "There is always a level of excitement when there is change, and we have experienced quite a bit of it this year. But I think it has been a lot of good change.

"Everybody seems excited, on the same page, and ready to get going and hit the ground running."

Don't fret the finish line just yet.

Take one step at a time. Enjoy the race.

It's been a minute since Leafs Nation could do that.

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Sportsnet.ca / Manny Malhotra prepares for new challenge behind Canucks bench

Iain MacIntyre

EDMONTON — Manny Malhotra can be forgiven for not remembering much about his first National Hockey League game as a player, because it followed the memory that dominates from that New York Rangers training camp 28 years ago.

"Gretz took me out to dinner on Day 1 or 2 of training camp," Malhotra recalled for Sportsnet in an interview last week. "I don't think I said a word the whole evening other than to answer his questions. But I was just so excited, like, 'I'm sitting at dinner with Wayne Gretzky.' I was in awe of him. My first year was Gretz's last, and just being in the same room as Wayne, sitting beside him, I was just starstruck and not really processing everything that was going on around me."

Malhotra was an 18-year-old draft pick from Toronto, chosen seventh overall by the Rangers in 1998 and projected to be a star first-line centre. Gretzky was 37 and, well, the greatest who ever played, and about to start his final season in the NHL before retiring in the spring of '99.

"Training camp was in Vermont, and I was alone in my hotel room," Malhotra explained when pressed for details about dinner with Wayne. "My roommate had gone out with some of the older guys, but he was a massive Gretzky fan. That's all we talked about. He wanted to talk to Gretz, just wanted to be around him. I got a call in my hotel room, and I picked up. 'Hi, is Manny there?' And I knew right away who it was. 'Hey, Manny, it's Wayne. You want to go to dinner tonight?'"

"Uh, yep. He said, 'Just grab your roommate and meet me in the lobby at 6.' But my roommate was gone all afternoon, so he didn't get a chance to go. So I called a guy that I knew from playing (in the Ontario Hockey League), Wes Jarvis. I said, 'Jarvey, what are you doing for dinner? You want to go to dinner with Gretz? He's like, 'Shut up!' I said, 'No, for real. He just invited me and my roommate, but my roommate's not here. So if you want to go, we can go.' So we went to dinner with Gretz."

About a month later, Malhotra played his first NHL game, logging 17 minutes in a 7-1 road loss to the Montreal Canadiens.

The roommate who missed out on dinner was Andrew Proskurnicki, a rugged defenceman from Hamilton who had been an eighth-round pick of the Rangers in 1996 and whose professional career consisted of 87 games in the minors.

A second-round Rangers pick in 1997, Jarvis split three years between the American and East Coast Leagues, then played four seasons in France and Britain.

Malhotra went on to play 991 NHL games for seven teams, extending his career to 17 seasons after former Vancouver general manager Mike Gillis, fearful for his player's well-being after Malhotra suffered a gruesome eye injury in 2011, told him nine games into the 2012-13 season that he would no longer be allowed to play for the Canucks.

Malhotra and his wife, Joann, wept at the news.

Malhotra never met the lofty projections attached to him as a seventh-overall draft pick, but he did build a noble career as a dependable matchup centre valued for his hockey IQ, tradecraft and character.

All of this was part of the foundation on which Malhotra, 46, has built a coaching career that has him Tuesday night behind the visitors' bench in Edmonton, working his first game as an NHL head coach for the same Canucks organization that tried to end his career as a player.

Against the Oilers, who once belonged to Gretzky but are now Connor McDavid's team.

"No, that wasn't on the radar," Malhotra said when asked if he could have envisioned in 2012 eventually coaching the Canucks. "I was definitely jaded. Having something taken away from you is never an easy thing. But the fact that I continued my career after that (with seasons in

Carolina and Montreal), you know, that for me was the determination of ... just focusing on what I needed to do to continue to play. And as far as, in your words, poisoning my desire to want to be a coach, I always knew towards the end of my career that I really enjoyed the teaching part of it. So it was definitely something that I wanted to continue."

Malhotra and his newly formed coaching staff picked their first team on Monday — 23 players who are widely expected to finish near the bottom of the league again after last season's last-place finish tilted the Canucks into a rebuild and regime change.

Malhotra and new general manager Ryan Johnson have wisely avoided setting competitive targets — or a timeline for the rebuild — but have vowed the team will be closer, better structured and harder to play against this season.

"First and foremost, for us, it's about the energy that we bring to the game and the tenacity that we play with," Malhotra told reporters on Monday. "And within the game, we realize structurally there's going to be breakdowns, there's going to be mistakes made on the ice. But I never want those mistakes to be for lack of effort. We want our team committed to being hard to play against, being heavy in puck battles, and ... willing to get to net fronts. For us, it's about the effort that we put in every day."

This is the start of the Canucks' most ambitious rebuild since they joined the NHL in 1970.

"There's an understanding of what comes with being in a Canadian market," Malhotra said in his interview with Sportsnet. "Knowing the fan base ... they want to be able to have pride in the way we play and the on-ice product. I'm not saying that shapes what we're trying to do, but there's an understanding that the quality of hockey needs to improve, the level of intensity needs to improve. But before we get to the wins and losses and wanting to get to where we want, it's about playing like a team that the fans can be proud of."

The most notable thing about the Canucks during training camp and the pre-season was the palpable energy and excitement emanating from the team.

As goalie Kevin Lankinen told us Saturday night, after Vancouver's only pre-season win: "We have a good chemistry, a good group of guys here. Of course ... it's going to be a roller-coaster like any other year. But the most important thing is we're pulling the same rope. Everybody's on board, and we're having fun doing it."

Music to the ears of the rebuild architects.

As Canucks players, Malhotra essentially replaced Johnson in 2010 as a veteran-leader type of centre who killed penalties, won faceoffs, could defend against the opposition's best players and was an excellent teammate.

By 2016, Johnson was working in the Canucks' player-development department when the organization, under GM Jim Benning, hired Malhotra as a skills and development coach. Malhotra soon became a full-time coaching assistant on Travis Green's staff, which earned him an elevated coaching role with the Toronto Maple Leafs for four seasons.

After Johnson became the Canucks' assistant GM, in charge of their American Hockey League team, he targeted and recruited Malhotra in 2024 to be the head coach of the Abbotsford Canucks.

Under Johnson and Malhotra, Abbotsford won the Canucks franchise's first Calder Cup in their initial season. When new co-presidents Henrik and Daniel Sedin promoted Johnson to NHL GM in May, Johnson named Malhotra his head coach.

"Manny has only been a head coach for two seasons in the American Hockey League," Johnson said Monday. "But I don't see that as inexperienced. He's got a life full of experience, but also a set of foundations and values that make him extremely successful in this position."

"His experience in the game, both as a player and as an assistant coach, obviously set him up to know what he wants to be as a head coach. And apart from that experience, he's an extremely high-quality human being. He knows how to walk the line of being relatable and communicating (with players), but at the same time holding a level of accountability within that."



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Malhotra doesn't remember much about his first game as an NHL player, and said he isn't especially nervous about his first game as an NHL head coach.

"As a player, I felt like you have an opportunity to impact the game," Malhotra explained. "Your physical play on the ice, you're going to be touching the puck, you're going to be doing things on the ice that influence the game. As a coach, you want things to go well, and you plan. You hope that the guys have picked up on what you're talking about, and they're learning what you want them to learn. But other than that, other than encouraging or correcting whenever I can, there's no actual influence on the game. I'm dependent on everybody else. So it's a different type of nervousness.

"But just like a hockey player, (coaching) is taking the next step and growing and wanting to do the next thing and take on the next responsibility. I'm very cognizant of the fact that I'm fortunate to be one of only 32 (NHL head coaches). It's not lost on me. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to work with the people that I'm working with. But when I do look at the macro picture, I can't do this without my family's blessing, right? My wife's blessing, like, 'Hey, you're going to chase the dream, let's go.' We were all in it together. So there's definitely an acknowledgement that there are people around me that are helping me and allowing me to do this. Day to day, there's definitely been moments where I've said, 'Holy smokes, I'm coaching in the National Hockey League.'"

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs acquire Kirill Marchenko from Blue Jackets for Matthew Knies

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Mere hours before Monday's 5 p.m. ET deadline, the Toronto Maple Leafs' 2026-27 roster appeared set. Start writing names in ink.

But John Chayka, arguably the NHL's most aggressive GM over a newsy off-season, had one more big swing in him.

Columbus goalie Elvis Merzlikins and forward Miles Wood are headed to Toronto as well. The recently waived Steven Lorentz, depth defenceman Emil Andrae, and a 2027 second-round draft pick were shipped to Ohio. (Merzlikins is currently injured, and Wood has already cleared waivers.)

This is a blockbuster, and one that will be analyzed for years to come, make no mistake.

The deal hinged on Marchenko — the Blue Jackets' leading goal scorer three seasons running and an impending restricted free agent with arbitration rights — successfully negotiating a contract extension in Toronto.

The 26-year-old Russian sniper and his agent, Dan Milstein, were granted permission by Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell to talk numbers with the Leafs. The sides agreed on a six-year, \$75-million extension that carries a \$12.5-million cap hit.

Marchenko's 2027-28 AAV will exceed William Nylander's \$11.5 million and slide in under Auston Matthews' \$13.25 million.

Trade Details

PuckPedia

TorontoTorontoTOR

Acquire

Kirill Marchenko

Elvis Merzlikins

Miles Wood

ColumbusColumbusCBJ

Acquire

2027 Round 2 pick #46

Steven Lorentz

Emil Andrae

Matthew Knies

September 28, 2026

SIGNING DETAILS

PuckPedia

Length

6 years

Value

\$75,000,000

AAV

\$12,500,000

Expiry

2032-2033

Status

RFA

September 28, 2026

Marchenko had previously told Columbus that he did not intend to re-sign with the club long-term and has been on the trade block all summer. He likes playing hockey. Just not for the Blue Jackets.

As for Knies — a 23-year-old horse coming off a career-best 66-point campaign despite nursing a knee injury — his team-friendly \$7.75-million cap hit gives Waddell a nice piece of cost certainty through 2030-31. And the constant trade rumours have finally been put to rest.

A rare value piece without trade protection, Knies had been dangled as trade bait by former Leafs GM Brad Treliving, who explored dealing the left winger to Montreal for futures at the 2026 trade deadline. Chayka previously spoke to Waddell about including Knies in a potential Zach Werenski whopper around the opening of free agency.

"Matthew is a big, strong power forward who combines tough, hard-nosed physical play with outstanding offensive skills," Waddell said in a team release. "He is a young player with great character and work ethic, and we couldn't be more excited to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family."

Knies was enjoying a European summer vacation with his girlfriend and some buddies at Italy's Lake Como and the Greek islands when his name resurfaced in July's rumour mill.

"There's not much you could really do. You know, you could ask: 'What's true? What's not true?' But a lot of it's kind of out of my hands, out of my control," Knies told Sportsnet.ca in a sit-down earlier this month. "I had a pretty important summer just trying to get back to 100 per cent and get healthy. So, that was kind of my main focus.

"I feel like I gotta earn my right to play for this team and show that I'm a valuable piece. You don't want to be parting ways with me. But (rumours) are part of the business. It happens around the league all the time. So, I'm pretty fortunate that I'm still here. I'm still wearing the Blue and White. And that's all I can think about — just this season and staying a Maple Leaf."

Despite those wishes, Knies had what Chayka described as a "quiet camp." He watched as the new GM traded away friends Joseph Woll and Simon Benoit. And he lost his net-front spot on the top power-play to newcomer Jack Roslovic. (Roslovic could now lose that spot to fellow righty Marchenko, no?)

The trade for speedy Marchenko, who is farther along his development curve than Knies, underscores Chayka's designs of turning the NHL's fifth-worst team last spring into a contender immediately.

It also strengthens the executive's vision to assemble a fast group with an emphasis on creativity and rush offence.

The six-foot-three, 201-pound Marchenko is one year removed from his breakout 31-goal, 74-point campaign, and his career shooting percentage is an impressive 13.6 per cent. The man can score. He also has had success playing both his natural right wing and taking shifts on his off side.

Should the younger Knies make good on his vow to bounce back this season and reach the ceiling some expect, there is a world where Chayka regrets this trade.

But on Monday afternoon, the Maple Leafs went out and got a more dangerous player for right now. (They also simultaneously kept arch-rival Montreal away from both Knies and Marchenko; the Canadiens like both players.)

And right now is all that matters for a roster hell-bent on not only returning to the playoffs but jacking up their pace of play and scoring their way into contention.

Fox's Fast Five: Roster Edition

• Kudos to Bo Groulx, who started camp with the Marlies group and appeared a long shot to make the big club, until Lorentz got waived.

Groulx's body of work as an impressive late-season call-up and Calder Cup champion, plus his modest cap hit and ability to play on a third or



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fourth line, won him the gig. Hey, no other 2026 Calder Cup winner got such a promotion.

- We approve of fourth-line enforcer Zack MacEwen starting Tuesday versus Montreal. Those Xhekaj brothers could be running around. Set the tone.

- Andrae was framed as the centrepiece return of the Woll-Benoit trade. He leaves having never played a regular-season shift for Toronto and underwhelmed at camp. PTO Nick Blankenburg walked in and stole his job.

- Dakota Joshua (core injury) has now been labelled week-to-week and will start on injured reserve. Max Domi (LTIR) hasn't skated with the club since last season. Chayka says Domi will address his botched surgery and delayed recovery at some point.

- In speaking with No. 1 goalie Sergei Bobrovsky about his ideal workload for the season, Chayka noted that the 38-year-old stressed the importance of setting No. 2 goalie Anthony Stolarz up for success in his starts as well.

Chayka told reporters that he'd never heard a starter go to bat for his backup quite like that.

Maple Leafs projected 2026-27 Opening Night roster

Marchenko – Matthews – Roslovic

McKenna – Tavares – Nylander

Cowan – Paul – Sissons

Duhaime – Blueger – MacEwen

Extras: Groulx, Joshua (IR), Domi (LTIR)

McCabe – Tanev

Rielly – Raddysh

Ekman-Larsson – Stecher

Extra: Blankenburg

Bobrovsky

Stolarz

Extra: Merzlikins (IR)

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Knies

Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: What each team gets in Marchenko-Knies trade

Marchenko

Games Played

Rory Boylen

240

As NHL rosters were being set by the 5 p.m. ET deadline on Monday, the Toronto Maple Leafs and Columbus Blue Jackets front offices were busy working to complete one last trade.

292

Goals

And, boy, did they ever deliver a blockbuster for us.

In Wood and Lorentz, the Jackets and Leafs swapped two players who had both passed through waivers last week. They are capable bottom-six forwards and secondary parts of this deal. Meanwhile, Andrae was previously acquired by Toronto in the trade that sent Joseph Woll to Philadelphia, but after Nick Blankenburg and Troy Stecher earned jobs on Toronto's blue line, Andrae became the odd man out.

67

102

Assists

In Merzlikins, the Maple Leafs picked up an injured netminder who will count against their cap for \$4.428 million when activated. However, he will likely begin the season on LTIR and his inclusion in the deal has more to do with making the salaries work than any role he might play on the NHL roster this regular season. Merzlikins will be a UFA next summer.

93

106

Points

What this deal will really come down to is Knies vs. Marchenko. Knies is the younger player, turning 24 in October, while Marchenko is 26 and has helped drive the Blue Jackets' top line for a couple of years. He broke out with a 74-point season two years ago and followed it up with 69 last season in three fewer games.

160

While the newest Leaf is the more dynamic, offensively dangerous player, the newest Blue Jacket is the more physical player on a cheaper contract. While Knies will make \$7.75 million against the cap through 2030-31, Marchenko arrives in Toronto with an extension — he will make just \$3.85 million against this year's cap, but start earning \$12.5 million a season next year through 2032-33.

208

Points Per Game

It will be fascinating to watch these two players as they hit their primes, but this was a deal Columbus was going to have to make eventually. Marchenko had made it clear he wasn't interested in staying with the Blue Jackets long-term, and would have been going into a contract year similar to Jason Robertson's with Dallas last season — Marchenko would have been an RFA next summer, but one year away from unrestricted free agency.

0.66

0.71

Plus/Minus

This deal helps Columbus avoid those distractions as head coach Rick Bowness strives to have a better culture of compete than he got out of the group at the tail end of last season. For Toronto, this deal puts an end to months-long speculation and trade rumours around Knies, and sees them land a dynamic player to add more speed and skill to the top of the lineup.

-13

+8

Shots

For a closer look at this deal, we turn to our scout Jason Bukala.

Scout's Analysis

411

After a whirlwind off-season in Toronto, where the Maple Leafs made major changes to the front office, coaching staff and roster, GM John Chayka had one more move up his sleeve as rosters were finalized on Monday.

749

Powerplay Goals

Only a few years ago, the Maple Leafs started adding more power to their group in a quest to chase playoff success. But by moving out Matthew Knies in a trade that brings in Kirill Marchenko from Columbus, Toronto acquired a different style of forward to add to their top six.

11

Here are my thoughts on the big trade.

Comparing Kirill Marchenko to Matthew Knies

24

When comparing the offensive statistics of Marchenko and Knies, the results marginally favour the former. Here's how the two forwards compare in key head-to-head categories overall:

Powerplay Assists

22



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39

Hits

505

205

Shot Blocks

105

156

Time On Ice

16:56

17:37

For Toronto fans, it's key to note a few stylistic differences. Marchenko is much more aggressive directing pucks on net and the Leafs' power play should also get a boost with Marchenko rolling over the boards, presumably on the first unit.

Knies pushes back more physically than does Marchenko, which isn't surprising. Knies is a power forward, whereas Marchenko is more of a puck possession play driver. Still, although Marchenko isn't as physical as Knies, he has displayed a willingness to get in front of shooters and block shots.

Neither Toronto nor Columbus made the playoffs last season as both teams disappointed, so I decided to take a closer look at how both performed under these circumstances in 2025-26:

- Knies played 79 games and produced 23 goals and 43 assists. He averaged nearly 19 minutes of ice time per game and was deployed in all situations. But Knies finished with a team-worst minus-30 rating. He did average 1.92 hits and 0.4 blocks per game.

- Marchenko also averaged nearly 19 minutes per game in ice time last season and suited up for 76 games, contributing 27 goals and 40 assists. Marchenko doesn't kill penalties but he did average three minutes per game on the power play. He averaged 0.8 hits and 0.53 shot blocks per game, which aren't exactly "belligerent" numbers, but he finished the season plus-7, which stands out compared to Knies.

It's also worth pointing out the playoff experience of both these players. While the 23-year-old Knies has already suited up for 27 post-season games, scoring 14 points and engaging physically at the hardest time of year, the 26-year-old Marchenko has never played a Stanley Cup playoff game.

I'm not trying to take the easy way out with my conclusion between these players, but I believe both Columbus and Toronto walk away pleased with this transaction.

There's always risk involved with any NHL transaction, but the only thing that concerns me about this move for Columbus is the fact that Knies struggled with consistency, especially on the defensive side of the puck, last season and desperately needs to bounce back in that end of the ice.

Knies' contract (\$7.75 million AAV through 2031) provides more cost certainty for the Blue Jackets moving forward, while the Maple Leafs will start paying Marchenko a \$12.5 million AAV next season. The good news is that with the rising cap, that contract will provide better value as it ages.

What the swap of Marchenko for Knies comes down to is this: The Maple Leafs receive a faster, play-driving, more dynamic forward in Marchenko,

while the Blue Jackets receive a power-forward to potentially ride shotgun with Adam Fantilli.

What about the rest of the trade?

- As soon as Toronto signed PTO invitee Nick Blankenburg to a contract, something had to give with the makeup of their blue line. The team couldn't afford a roster that included Troy Stecher, Emil Andrae and Blankenburg.

- I trust Blankenburg more than Andrae overall, so it's a wash between those two in my opinion. There will undoubtedly be injuries throughout the season and having three undersized defenders doesn't provide a recipe for success against teams like Florida or Washington.

- There's room for players like Steven Lorentz and Miles Wood on NHL rosters as depth forwards. Lorentz plays a straight-forward, simple game, while Wood plays fast on straight lines and can create turnovers when he arrives first on the scene of the forecheck. Swapping Lorentz and Wood in this deal feels like a shuffling of the deck chairs.

- Toronto also adds goaltender Elvis Merzlikins from the Blue Jackets, who is currently on the shelf recovering from off-season shoulder surgery. He had the surgery on Aug. 17 so it's unlikely Merzlikins will be available until towards the end of the regular season, if at all. He's in the last year of his contract that counts \$5.4 million against the cap. Merzlikins will be headed to LTIR.

As a scout, I have a bias when it comes to trading away draft capital, so I couldn't help but notice the conditional second-round pick (2027) Toronto also sent Columbus in the trade. It's very difficult to make the Stanley Cup Playoffs and the Atlantic Division is loaded with teams that could realistically contend for a Stanley Cup. If Toronto fails to make the playoffs this season their draft grid isn't exactly flush with picks for the next several cycles. They do, however, still have Colorado's first-round pick in 2027 (top-10 protected).

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TSN.CA / Chayka believes Marchenko can 'single-handedly dictate outcomes'

Mark Masters

TORONTO — The Maple Leafs held an optional skate at Scotiabank Arena on Tuesday.

The Leafs believe Kirill Marchenko will be a big difference maker in their quest to return to Stanley Cup contention.

"There's a lot of good players in the NHL," general manager John Chayka said. "Very few that can impact winning and can single-handedly dictate outcomes of games and we believe that Kirill is one of those players for us."

Toronto acquired the winger from the Columbus Blue Jackets on Monday afternoon in a deal that saw winger Matthew Knies heading to the Ohio capital.

Marchenko led the Blue Jackets in goals in each of the past three seasons. He produced 27 goals and 67 points in 64 games last season.

According to agent Dan Milstein, Marchenko has agreed to terms on a six year, \$75-million contract extension with Leafs, carrying an average annual value of \$12.5 million.

"Just a unique, unique player," Chayka said. "Obviously a combination of size and skill. You know, his ability to be a dual threat, make plays and score goals. The right shot, honestly, balanced out some of the handedness for us and just gave us different options in the power play throughout the offensive zone, hopefully. And get the top scorer on a team in his prime, be able to lock him up through those prime years at a number that we think is effective for us. Put that all together, we thought it was a special opportunity."

Marchenko, who carries a \$3.85-million cap hit this season, was due to become a restricted free agent at the end of this season and had let Columbus know he was not planning to sign an extension with them.

The Leafs believe the 26-year-old will be able to reach a new level in Toronto where he would seem to be a perfect linemate for centre Auston Matthews.

"With the centre group we have, some of the linemates we think we can match him with, and the situation we can put them in here, we think there's more upside," Chayka said.

Jim Hiller has made skating hard both ways a staple of his system in Toronto and he believes Marchenko will be a good fit.

"Tremendous skater," the head coach raved. "And he skates very well with the puck. A lot of times a player can skate really well, they get the puck and they slow down a little bit, he's one of those guys that seems to accelerate with the puck. I know he loves having the puck."

Marchenko's speed is all the more impressive when you consider his 6-foot-3, 201-pound frame.

"I think he's a lot bigger than people think," observed defenceman Chris Tanev. "Very fast and very big and strong. He's a handful for sure."

Leafs winger Jack Roslovic also played with Marchenko in Columbus and came away impressed with his off-ice habits.

"His work ethic is really impressive," Roslovic said. "I mention that with all the great players, I think he's one of those. I think being in a smaller market, you don't really get the eyes like you guys. You guys can make the decision for yourself, but I believe in him. I like him as a guy, and he's got skill."

Despite the quick turnaround, Marchenko is expected to make his Leafs debut in Tuesday's season opener against the Montreal Canadiens.

Marchenko has not spoken to the media since the trade.

"He says he's nervous," Roslovic relayed. "And I'm sure he's a little bit nervous. But I know him, [he] will be good."

The trade happened only a couple days after the Leafs returned from a bonding trip in Knies' home state of Arizona.

"It can be sh--ty business, right?" said Tanev. "He's a great guy and very good player, so Columbus is getting a horse with him, and a good person, good player. Obviously he'll be missed here. It's a sh--ty part of the business, but we're welcoming in an amazing player that I've heard nothing but great things about."

Knies had heard his name in trade rumours consistently since the deadline last season.

"Yeah, look, I apologized to him for the noise over the last several months," Chayka said. "I don't think it was necessarily fair to him. This was the only thing we seriously considered as a management group. These things happen. He understands ... He's a professional athlete and he's a smart kid. But he took the news well. It's a good, young team he's going to. I think it's a good fit for him. I think he'll do well."

The Jackets also received winger Steven Lorentz, who recently cleared waivers, defenceman Emil Andrae, and a second-round pick in 2027 as part of the deal.

The Leafs also received winger Miles Wood and goalie Elvis Merzljkins in the trade.

Wood recently cleared waivers and will start with the Marlies in the American Hockey League.

"Lots of speed, grit, simple player, can forecheck, can penalty kill," Chayka said. "So a lot of good attributes. He's going to go down to Marlies ... and get a chance to earn his way back up. But when he's on and he's healthy, which I don't think he has been the last few years, we think he can contribute."

Merzljkins underwent shoulder surgery in August and will start the season on long-term injured reserve.

"The prognosis is four to six months," Chayka said. "I think he's, give or take, a month into his procedure. We'll continue to work with him and his staff to make sure he's getting the right rehab and we're hopeful he can make return."

The blockbuster trade has allowed first-overall pick Gavin McKenna to fly somewhat under the radar ahead of his NHL debut. In an unusual move for a rookie, the 18-year-old left winger did not take the ice for the team's optional morning skate.

"He's got some swag," said Tanev with a smile.

Instead of joining Tanev and 11 other teammates on the ice, McKenna visited with family members in the stands. He looked as relaxed as could be.

"I actually thought it was great," said Hiller. "I really did, because that's an optional skate. It's optional if you think you need it to get ready to play tonight. And when I heard he didn't go out, it didn't surprise me. He just has that way. He knows who he is. He knows what he has to do. And I think how he's adapted in a short amount of time just speaks to who he is and the confidence that he has in himself."

With Marchenko in the lineup, the Leafs will have 10 players dressing who were not part of the team last year.

"What I've been told is that trip to Arizona was worth its weight in gold," Hiller noted. "The night that they had together with Auston at his house really cemented kind of an early foundation for them. So, I think we're good that way."

Matthews, who is from Scottsdale, Ariz., hosted the players at his house last Thursday after they landed.



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The vibes are certainly good off the ice, but on the ice chemistry will likely be a work in progress early in the season.

"Yeah, well, I mean, we'll see, right?" Hiller said. "We liked how we played our last [pre-season games], both in Ottawa and at home. So that was a step for us. But there's no doubt. It might take some time. Well, it will take some time. But I'm confident that at some point, hopefully sooner rather than later, we'll be tight and we'll play together."

Attendance at Leafs optional skate on Tuesday:

Blueger

Cowan

MacEwenGroulx

Paul

Roslovic

Sissons

Blankenburg

Stecher

Tanev

BobrovskyStolarz

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