



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 2, 2026



Preview: October 2 vs. Washington

Hurricanes Hockey Network to make its official debut as the Canes host Ovechkin and the Caps

By Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes eye their first win of the season on Friday as they host the Washington Capitals at Lenovo Center.

When: Friday, Oct. 2

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch: Hurricanes Hockey Network; WRAL (Raleigh), WAXN (Charlotte)| How To Watch

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 0-0-1 (1 Point, 2nd, Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 1-0 OT Loss to the Florida Panthers on Tuesday, Sept. 29

Capitals Record: 0-0-0 (0 Points, T-7th, Metropolitan Division)

Capitals Last Game: N/A

Gameday Central

Gameday Central

Get ready for your trip to Lenovo Center with the Canes' gameday hub! Find out when doors/lots open, purchase parking, check out activations and more.

[Click Here](#)

Last Time Out...

The two most recent Stanley Cup Champions went toe-to-toe on Tuesday night at Lenovo Center, needing nearly 65 minutes for either side to find the twine. In the end, it was Gustav Forsling's point blast that found a home with just 4.3 seconds remaining in overtime.

Brandon Bussi was perfect to that point for Carolina, turning in a commendable 19 saves.

Shaking Off The Rust...

Rod Brind'Amour's synopsis of his team's outing on Tuesday was that they did not adequately handle the pressure applied by Florida. Crediting them for being the good team that they are, he mentioned that style of game just can't be replicated in practice or preseason.

The silver lining is that Carolina was right there with the 2024 and 2025 Stanley Cup Champions, and it came down to one shot in overtime. More game reps will only help the team hone their sharpness, something in which they should have an edge over tonight's foe, given that Washington has yet to play a game this season.

Taking That Step Forward...

On the positive side of the coin, Carolina's penalty kill went seven-for-seven in the season-opener, holding a potent Panthers power play off the board.

The other side of the coin, unfortunately, reveals that Carolina's power play went zero-for-six themselves. Players talked about the need to execute better post-game, knowing that failing to capitalize in advantageous situations such as that will cost them games at any point in the season.

In Net...

At Thursday's practice at Lane Arena, Pyotr Kochetkov manned the crease commonly held by the next game's starter.

Kochetkov is looking to get back on track after missing most of the last year with lower-body injuries. Now healthy, he was rewarded with a two-year contract extension last week and is eager to earn his share of the responsibilities with Bussi as the new campaign begins.

With the club likely in need of both backstops as it begins a home-road back-to-back set tonight, should Kochetkov have the green light this against the Caps, Brandon Bussi would be in line to take on Philadelphia in the City of Brotherly Love on Saturday.

On The Other Side...

The Capitals finally play their first game tonight after being idle through the first three days of the league's season.

Looking to return to the Stanley Cup Playoffs after a year away, their front office retooled Spencer Carbery's roster and added some big pieces. Boone Jenner came aboard from the Columbus Blue Jackets, Jordan Kyrou was acquired from the St. Louis Blues, and Alex Tuch joined from the Buffalo Sabres.

Dealing with a lower-body injury for most of training camp, the league's all-time leading goal-scorer, Alex Ovechkin, is expected to be good to go tonight.

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Injury Updates

Forward Seth Jarvis is practicing in a yellow, no-contact jersey after offseason shoulder surgery. He was initially scheduled to miss "probably four to six months" from the end of June.

What Are We Wearing?

The Canes are scheduled to wear their red uniforms.

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes will fly to Philadelphia post-game. They'll take on the Flyers at Xfinity Mobile Arena on Saturday to complete the back-to-back set.

Next Game: Saturday, October 3 at Philadelphia | 7:00 p.m. ET | Hurricanes Hockey Network



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NHL Tonight: What to watch, stats, betting info for Friday - ESPN

ESPN staff

The 2026-27 NHL season is not yet a week old, but it's been a bit of a roller-coaster ride:

Nathan MacKinnon fought Brandt Clarke, then fired his helmet at the boards in celebration.

Evan Bouchard had three goals and two assists on opening night ... and somehow that wasn't enough to beat the Canucks. Connor McDavid equaled his five points on Thursday, and the Oilers won 9-7.

Igor Shesterkin scored the first goalie goal in Rangers history.

And commissioner Gary Bettman cautioned about the further use of no-trade clauses after they became the story in hockey this summer.

So much for easing into the campaign!

There's no slowing down Friday, as the five-game slate includes some more season debuts. That includes Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals, who take on the defending Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes. Both teams are expected to contend for the Metro Division crown, and every result counts.

Here's what else to watch in each game this evening:

New York Rangers at Detroit Red Wings

6:30 p.m. ET (TNT) | DET -142, O/U: 5.5

The Rangers' season didn't get off to the best start, as they couldn't get a puck past Jeremy Swayman while the Bruins put two past Igor Shesterkin and one into an empty net. It could be worse, though; just ask a Red Wings fan.

Detroit's captain, Dylan Larkin, asked for a trade, then was stripped of his captaincy upon his return to camp following the lack of a deal and is now out with an upper-body injury; rising star defenseman (and restricted free agent) Simon Edvinsson is without a contract; and the club has not named a permanent GM to handle these matters. Of course, the Wings do have some exciting players that will be taking the ice, including Moritz Seider, Lucas Raymond and Alex DeBrincat. Let's see how they can tune out the off-ice issues.

Washington Capitals at Carolina Hurricanes

7 p.m. ET (ESPN+) | CAR -148, O/U: 6.5

Despite an overtime loss to the Panthers on Tuesday, the Hurricanes look just as strong as the group that won the Cup last season; that makes sense, since the majority of the

roster is back and ready for another run. Meanwhile, the Capitals spent the summer making bold move after bold move -- and welcomed Ovechkin officially back for one more season as well. This early clash could set the tone for the battles to come. (Round 2 will be Oct. 13, again in Raleigh.)

Boston Bruins at Winnipeg Jets

8 p.m. ET (ESPN+) | WPG -122, O/U: 5.5

This will be the season debut for the Jets, and they'll be playing without Connor Hellebuyck, the 2025 winner of both the Hart Trophy as league MVP and the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's top goaltender. Hellebuyck's trade request has thus far gone unaccommodated, leaving Stuart Skinner in the Winnipeg crease.

On the other side, the B's got off to a steady start with a 3-0 win over the Rangers on opening night and hope to carry some momentum into this cross-conference tilt before a matchup against the Wild on Saturday.

St. Louis Blues at Dallas Stars

9 p.m. ET (TNT) | DAL -205, O/U: 5.5

This game will be the season debut for both clubs and the first regular-season game with Robert Thomas serving as Blues captain. The Blues have become a popular hipster pick to earn a wild-card playoff spot this season, while you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone not predicting the Stars will finish among the top three in the Western Conference -- particularly now that Jason Robertson is officially back (at least for this season).

Anaheim Ducks at Vegas Golden Knights

10 p.m. ET (ESPN+) | VGK -185, O/U: 6.5

The last time these two teams met was May 14, when the Golden Knights closed out their second-round playoff series with a 5-1 win. In the time since, Vegas lost in the Stanley Cup Final, elected not to continue John Tortorella's tenure as head coach (opting for Ryan Craig) and traded its top goal scorer from last season, Pavel Dorofeyev, to the Rangers.

The Ducks lost their three veteran blueliners from last year's squad (John Carlson, Jacob Trouba and Radko Gudas), weathered the Leo Carlsson offer sheet storm, then signed long-term new deals with Cutter Gauthier and Tristan Luneau. How will the two Pacific Division rivals look Friday?

Reminder: Fans can catch all of the action in the NHL streaming hub and on the ESPN App.

Jump ahead:



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[Top NHL stories](#)

[Last night's scores](#)

[NHL stats leaders](#)

[Today in hockey history](#)

[Top stories around the NHL](#)

[Here's what you need to know:](#)

Greg Wyshynski predicts the future for all 32 teams with his full standings projections.

Emily Kaplan runs down all the big storylines across the NHL for opening week.

Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton went deep with all the intel you need on all 32 teams.

Panthers captain Aleksander Barkov exited the Panthers' game on Thursday with a lower-body injury.

The Sabres have signed defenseman Louis Crevier to a four-year, \$16 million contract extension.

Rangers backup goaltender Joonas Korpisalo is week-to-week with a lower-body injury.

The Avalanche have extended coach Jared Bednar's contract through 2030-31.

Wild defenseman Brock Faber had surgery on his fractured skull, with his return TBD.

[Thursday's scoreboard](#)

Columbus Blue Jackets 6, Buffalo Sabres 3

New Jersey Devils 3, Philadelphia Flyers 2 (OT)

New York Rangers 5, Tampa Bay Lightning 1

Minnesota Wild 3, Nashville Predators 1

Seattle Kraken 6, Calgary Flames 1

Utah Mammoth 6, Chicago Blackhawks 0

San Jose Sharks 4, Florida Panthers 3 (OT)

Edmonton Oilers 9, Vancouver Canucks 7

[play](#)

1:08

[Jack Hughes nets OT winner in Devils opener](#)

[NHL scoring leaders](#)

[Click here for full list of stats leaders.](#)

[NHL goaltending leaders](#)

[Click here for the full list of goaltender stats.](#)

[Today in hockey history](#)

Longtime hockey fans are well aware that the NHL has not always had the 32 teams it does for the 2026-27 season. Multiple rounds of expansion and relocations have yielded the current array.

On this day in 1999, a new team made its debut: the Atlanta Thrashers.

The Thrash had some of the most instantly recognizable uniforms in the league during their existence from 1999 to 2011, and won one division title (2006-07), though their playoff run was over in four games after a sweep by the New York Rangers.

The franchise relocated to Winnipeg in 2011, ending the NHL's second run in the city.



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Trade Idea Sees Canadiens Acquiring Impact Defenseman in Bold Move

Cole Shelton

Trade idea has the Canadiens acquiring Alexander Nikishin.

The Montreal Canadiens are one of the top teams in the NHL and could look to bolster their lineup through the trade market.

Montreal could use some more help on the blue line, as the Canadiens should be looking to bolster their roster ahead of the trade deadline.

The Canadiens are off to a 1-0-0 start as they beat the Toronto Maple Leafs on the road on Tuesday.

Trade Pitch Has Canadiens Acquiring Alexander Nikishin

Montreal Canadiens

Trade idea has the Canadiens acquiring Alexander Nikishin.

The Carolina Hurricanes are looking to trade Alexander Nikishin, who is unsigned and has requested a trade. With that, Heavy.com has a trade idea that sees the Canadiens acquiring the Stanley Cup-winning defenseman from the Hurricanes.

Canadiens acquire:

Hurricanes acquire:

2027 first-round pick

The proposed deal is an intriguing one as Montreal would acquire Nikishin with a lucrative extension in place. In return, the Canadiens would give up a first-round pick and Guhle, who has struggled to find his footing with the Habs and could use a change of scenery.

Nikishin skated in 81 games in his rookie year in the NHL, recording 11 goals and 22 assists for 33 points. He's a top-four defenseman, and at age 24, he fits in nicely with the

Canadiens' young core. The Russian would add some more offense to the backend, but he also plays well defensively.

In return, the Canadiens would give up a first-round pick and Guhle, whom the team selected in the first round of the 2020 NHL Draft. Guhle has appeared in 208 career games, recording 18 goals and 51 assists for 69 points. He is dealing with an injury that will keep him out for a few weeks, but he should be a solid third-pairing defenseman for the Hurricanes. Guhle is in the second year of his six-year, \$33.3 million deal.

The proposed trade makes sense for both sides as Montreal gets an upgrade on defense, while Carolina gets a solid defenseman and a first-round pick they can use as a trade chip.

Montreal Has Stanley Cup Aspirations

The Canadiens made it to the Eastern Conference Finals and have Stanley Cup aspirations this season.

Montreal is one of the best teams in the NHL and is coming off a season-opening road win over the Maple Leafs.

"I saw a group just trying to find a way to win a game," Montreal coach Martin St. Louis said. "We don't play until Saturday (at the Pittsburgh Penguins). We're going to get together and spend some quality time and team bonding. To go get a win in the first game, I'm really happy.

"Do we have things to address and correct? I'm sure we do and it's nice to be able to do that after a win. The tone of positivity can stay around and (we can) still do some teaching."

The Canadiens have the 10th-best odds of winning the Stanley Cup.



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Cayden Primeau Placed On Waivers

Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes have placed goaltender Cayden Primeau on waivers.

The 27-year-old netminder was on the team's initial 23 man roster to open the year, but it seemed to be simply a move to try and avoid the waiver frenzy that the start of the year presents.

Now that the year has started for nearly everyone, the Hurricanes are hoping to pass him through to the AHL and not lose him like they did last year.

"The mechanics of an opening night roster is always a little complicated and Cayden had a great camp and we have a lot of trust in him," said Carolina GM Eric Tulsky. "We see him as an important part of our organizational depth at that position."



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Carolina Hurricanes Game 2: Lines, Notes, Goalies, and How to Watch vs. Capitals

Rachel Barkley

Friday, the Carolina Hurricanes will open a weekend back-to-back series, beginning with the Washington Capitals in Raleigh before taking a trip up north to the City of Brotherly Love to face the Philadelphia Flyers. Friday's game, which will also be the Capitals' season-opener, is scheduled for 7:00 PM EDT.

For the Hurricanes, their season opener didn't quite go as they'd hoped – though it was far from bad. Facing their rivals in the Florida Panthers, Brandon Bussi held out for Carolina and pushed them to overtime as the score remained 0-0, securing one point in the standings. Ultimately, the game-winning goal came with just four seconds (and some change) left in the additional frame on a blast from the blue line by Gustav Forsling.

There was some rust for Carolina, who put just 15 shots on goal throughout the game, but overall they played very well against an opponent who has become their most bitter rival of the 2020s. They managed to keep up physicality against the Panthers without sacrificing plays or creating defensive lapses, while also having a sharp look on both the power play and penalty kill.

In the Crease

Bussi played fantastic in the last game – he could absolutely take the pipes Friday. However, I believe we may see Pyotr Kochetkov – who practiced in the starter's crease Thursday – get his season debut versus the Capitals, with Bussi playing the Flyers the following day.

Meanwhile, Logan Thompson will likely be the starting goalie for the Capitals. Last season, he took the lion's share of starts – it would only make sense that he is the man to mind the pipes to kick off this season for Washington.

Projected Hurricanes Lines

Eric Robinson – Sebastian Aho – Andrei Svechnikov

Taylor Hall – Logan Stankoven – Jackson Blake

Nikolaj Ehlers – Jordan Staal – Jordan Martinook

William Carrier – Mark Jankowski – Nicolas Deslauriers

Defense

Jacob Slavin – Jalen Chatfield

K'Andre Miller – Sean Walker

Shayne Gostisbehere – Charles-Alexis Legault

Goaltenders

Pyotr Kochetkov / Brandon Bussi

Projected Washington Capitals Lines

Alex Ovechkin — Dylan Strome — Ryan Leonard

Alex Tuch Pierre-Luc Dubois Tom Wilson

Aliaksei Protas Ilya Protas Jordan Kyrou

Boone Jenner Justin Sourdif Anthony Beauvillier

Defense

Jakob Chychrun Matt Roy

Cole Hutson Vincent Desharnais

Martin Fehervary Timothy Liljegren

Goaltenders

Logan Thompson / Charlie Lindgren

Special Teams

Carolina Hurricanes power play: (N/A)

Carolina Hurricanes penalty kill: 100.0% (5th)

New Jersey Devils power play: (N/A)

New Jersey Devils penalty kill: (N/A)

Friday's game will be the first (officially) broadcast through the Hurricanes' new channel and streaming service, Hurricanes Hockey Network. The channel is available through Spectrum and Fubo, while the stand-alone streaming service is available through Amazon Prime as an add-on.

Thursday, Mike Reilly practiced as the seventh defenseman with Charles-Alexis Legault manning Alexander Nikishin's old spot next to Shayne Gostisbehere. Meanwhile, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Seth Jarvis practiced as extra forwards, with the latter wearing a yellow no-contact sweater.

After being placed on waivers with the purpose of assigning to the AHL on Wednesday, goaltender Cayden Primeau cleared them Thursday, making his return to the Chicago Wolves ahead of their season-opener Saturday.

How To Watch

TV: Hurricanes Hockey Network

Streaming: ESPN+

Radio: 99.9 The Fan



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Hurricanes Learn the Waivers Fate of Seven-Year NHL Veteran

Nathan Smith

The Carolina Hurricanes are entering the 2026/27 season on the back of their second Stanley Cup victory in franchise history, and while the Eastern Conference is absolutely loaded, this is a team that has plenty of confidence in repeating as Stanley Cup Champions.

Their home opener didn't quite go the way the team expected, as they fell 1-0 to the rival Florida Panthers, picking up an overtime point in the process, and given the depth and talent in the organization, they're among the best teams in the league. Unfortunately, the team needed to make some decisions on key depth pieces, and ahead of game No. 2 on the season, they've learned the fate of a recent waived player.

Cayden Primeau Clears Waivers for the Hurricanes

The player in question is goaltender Cayden Primeau, who came to the Hurricanes this off-season after spending the 2025/26 season split with the Toronto Maple Leafs and the 'Canes AHL affiliate the Chicago Wolves.

This year, he was hoping to push for a full-time NHL role following the departure of Frederik Andersen, but instead, it's Pyotr Kochetkov who will serve as the primary backup to Brandon Bussi this season. As a result, Primeau was placed on waivers yesterday, and on Thursday, Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman revealed that he had cleared waivers, meaning he will head back to the AHL to lead the Wolves once again.

Once upon a time, Primeau was seen as a full-time NHLer with the Montreal Canadiens, but since struggling there, he's failed to catch on at the highest level, and now, after 56 games in the AHL a year ago where he posted a 2.41 GAA and a .916 save percentage, he's likely to settle into a role there again.

Will Primeau be Needed by the Hurricanes This Year?

Of course, injuries play a key role in any team's failure or success at the NHL level, and if either Kochetkov or Bussi were to go down, Primeau has 58 games of NHL experience under his belt. In that time, the 27-year-old has posted a 3.73 GAA and an .883 save percentage, and while he's shown flashes of potential, those numbers simply don't hold up at the highest level, and it may end up holding him back from a full-time role in the league.

However, there's nothing wrong with being a very, very good AHL goaltender, and given how many NHL teams out there will need goaltending over the next eight months, there's a chance that a team could come calling.

Ultimately, Primeau was once hyped up as a potential piece of the Canadiens rebuild, but now, he's down in the AHL for the Hurricanes, with no team willing to pick him up on waivers, but with another strong season down in the AHL, there's a chance we still see him get a significant opportunity in the NHL one day.



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Report: Hurricanes Eyeing Offer Sheet for Simon Edvinsson

Glenn Kaplan

Simon Edvinsson is back in Sweden without a contract, and that has put an offer sheet back into the Detroit Red Wings conversation. Edvinsson remains a restricted free agent. If he is not signed by 5 p.m. ET on Dec. 1, he will not be able to play in the 2026-27 NHL season.

Edvinsson spent training camp with the Red Wings, an unusual step for an unsigned restricted free agent, and went home once the two sides could not agree to terms. He is now skating with Frölunda in his hometown of Gothenburg, TSN reported on Sept. 30.

Edvinsson is only 23 years old. He played in 72 games last season with Detroit. He scored nine goals and recorded 16 assists, along with a plus-12 rating. There is a real chance that Edvinsson never plays for the Red Wings again. Will other teams put the pressure on Detroit and offer sheet him?

Friedman Linked Simon Edvinsson to Carolina in July

Elliott Friedman raised the idea on Sportsnet's 32 Thoughts podcast in the summer, tying Carolina's interest to its own unsettled blue line. "He's a really good player, and if they lose Nikishin, they're gonna need a defenseman, right? And I think Edvinsson would be excellent for their system," Friedman said.

That condition still holds. Alexander Nikishin is still unsigned in Carolina, where general manager Eric Tulsky says the two sides are "trying to find a resolution". A team staring at the loss of its own young defenseman has every reason to go find another one.

It would be interesting to see what Carolina could potentially offer Detroit. After that, the Red Wings would have seven days to match the offer.

What an Offer Sheet Would Cost the Hurricanes

Would the Hurricanes be willing to give Edvinsson more than \$11,939,166 a season? That is the line where the compensation tier jumps to four first-round picks, so Detroit could decide not to match and take the picks back from Carolina instead. Offer sheets can only be signed between July 1 and Dec. 1, so the Hurricanes have two months to pick their moment.

Detroit Has the Room to Match

The Red Wings currently have \$19.57 million in cap space, according to Spotrac. There would be no excuse for Detroit not to match the offer sheet if Carolina or anyone else made an offer for him. With that being said, the Red Wings may decide to take the draft picks and let him walk. It would be inexcusable, however, to give up early on a defenseman who has this much upside.



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Hurricanes host Capitals—Preview, How to Watch, Game Thread

Al Hood

In a weird way it feels like the season actually begins tonight.

You almost want to write off the first game as with all of the ceremony around it plus the fact that it was the only game in the league for the first two periods. Honestly with the way both teams played you'd be forgiven if you just want to move on from it. Raising the banner and seeing the Storm Surge with the Cup at center ice was great, but that's now all done and there are still 83 games left.

If you're Washington, it's 84 as tonight starts their season. Many thought they would be starting their post-Ovechkin era, but instead he starts his 22nd year with the team on a year-by-year basis. They spent this offseason trying to give him a better year than last.

While Washington made the playoffs by winning the Metropolitan Division in 2025, they missed them entirely in 2026. With Ovi back, the Capitals tried to bolster the team up and down the lineup by acquiring Alex Tuch and Jordan Kyrrou via trades and signing Boone Jenner and Vincent Desharnais. That's a lot of new firepower and their contracts will surely keep them in DC long past the time Ovechkin leaves.

Still, as Tom Gulitti noted in that post, with the condensed preseason and training camp that leaves a lot less time for players to get acclimated to their new linemates and positions. However, they have a solid coach in Spencer Carbery who got a nice contract extension this summer. It also helps they are playing in a division that, on the surface, looks like it may be more forgiving than the Atlantic.

Fortunately Carolina won't have to wait until the morning skate to know the starter, as Washington is starting the season on a back-to-back road trip, so Carbery had to go ahead and prep for who was going to start both games. Tonight, it'll be Logan Thompson. Since he's been in Washington, the Canes are 1-1-1 against Thompson, including going 1-0-1 against him last season as both meetings were before the end of 2025. He only surrendered a total of three goals during those two games, and only gave up one in the shootout. It was a logical choice.

As for the lines, barring a change at morning skate here's what they're starting with.

On Carolina's side, we'll see how Rod Brind'Amour wants to use last change to line up the matchups. Practice on Thursday had the same lines and pairings as we saw on Tuesday night, and it seems pointed that Deslauriers is still going to be out there with Tom Wilson skating around. It's doubtful that line would match up with them, but it's more of an insurance policy against someone who likes to throw his weight around.

Pyotr Kochetkov manned the starter's crease on Thursday, but Brind'Amour wouldn't necessarily commit to the starter. Carolina also has a back-to-back, and they'll be hopping a plane to Philadelphia as soon as this game is done. That's worth noting because, typically, Brind'Amour doesn't like doing a morning skate on a back-to-back so it's possible he would view this as the only chance to get PK some action in that crease before starting him Saturday instead of Friday. That said, we should know after morning skate today who'll man the crease tonight and who'll take on Philly tomorrow.

The other part to know here—tonight is the debut of the Hurricanes Hockey Network for fans inside the Hurricanes broadcast footprint. As a quick reminder—the NHL is the one leading the negotiations for carriage of this and the other three teams (Columbus, St. Louis, and Minnesota) that are utilizing the NHL Central Production unit. As of this writing they have been able to come to an agreement with Spectrum Cable and Fubo if you prefer to get your cable networks through a streaming provider. If you don't have either, you can subscribe to the HHN through Prime Video for \$19.99/month or \$99/year. The league will continue to negotiate with other providers and supposedly their satellite carrier is set to be announced soon.

That said, if you aren't sure you want to subscribe or you just outright forget before the puck drop, you're likely still going to be able to watch it in North and South Carolina thanks to agreements with WRAL in Raleigh, as well as Cox and Gray Media throughout the Carolinas. This will be a simulcast of the HHN, and together these entities will provide simulcasts of ten Hurricanes games, the other nine being on Saturdays.

As usual if you live outside the footprint, you'll need to have access to ESPN Select (used to be ESPN+, part of ESPN Ultimate and dear God can they just stop with all these names). You can also subscribe to NHL Center Ice if your preference is to avoid ESPN at all costs.

It's always a fun one when the Caps are in town, if you aren't going to be in Lenovo tonight, here's how to catch the action:

Time: 7 PM Eastern

Location: Lenovo Center—Raleigh, NC

TV: Hurricanes Hockey Network. New name, same faces as Hanna Yates and Shane Willis handle the pregame duties at 6:30, and then Mike Maniscalco handles play-by-play with Tripp Tracy providing color. This is also one of the ten "Saturday Night Hockey" broadcasts. Tonight you'll be able to see the simulcast of the HHN on WRAL (Raleigh), WAXN TV64 (Charlotte), WECT 6.1 and 6.2 (Wilmington), WITN 7.1 (Greenville/New Bern), WHNS 21.2 (Greenville SC, Spartanburg SC, Asheville NC), WMBF 32.1 + 32.2 (Myrtle Beach SC), WCSC 5.1 + 5.3 (Charleston SC), and WIS 10.1 + WPAM 18.1 (Columbia SC).



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Streaming Video: Hurricanes Hockey Network on Prime Video in the Hurricanes Footprint. Outside you'll need to use the ESPN app and have at least an ESPN Select subscription, which comes with ESPN Ultimate.

Radio: The pregame Storm Watch with Adam Gold on 99.9 The Fan starts at 6:30 PM, At 7 PM the Hurricanes Radio

Network (consisting of 99.9, 730 The Game in Charlotte, ESPN New Bern 107.5/1490, and ESPN Greenville 107.5/1570) will pick up the Mike Maniscalco and Tripp Tracy HHN simulcast.



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LINKS

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

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The Athletic / NHL commissioner Gary Bettman says trade protection has gone past 'original intention'

By Julian McKenzie

Oct. 1, 2026 Updated 7:30 pm EDT

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman expressed concern over the recent wave of trade requests from players with trade protection in their contracts, saying, "I don't think that's a good thing," in a radio interview on Sportsnet 590 The FAN on Thursday afternoon.

"I don't think it's good for the player. I don't think it's good for the club," Bettman said on The FAN Hockey Show on Thursday. "And I don't think it's good for fans watching and their connection to the game. The no-trade clause was originally put in place for the following situation. You're going to sign a long-term contract to be in a place you want to be. Maybe you're giving a hometown discount, and you wanted to make sure that you could be where you wanted to be and where you were signing up to be."

Bettman's comments come after a busy offseason highlighted by former Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk being traded to the Florida Panthers despite having a no-movement clause in his contract. Tkachuk provided a list of four teams he wanted to be traded to, including the Panthers, Minnesota Wild, Carolina Hurricanes and Vegas Golden Knights. Tkachuk's fellow gold-medal-winning Team USA teammates,

Dylan Larkin and Connor Hellebuyck, also requested trades from their respective teams this summer despite having no-trade or no-movement clauses in their deals.

Bettman said it may lead to a conversation with the NHL Players' Association over this matter.

"This notion now where A) you can select where you want to go to and B) you can demand the trade, that was never the original intention," Bettman added. "And you know, if this becomes a problem, I don't think one offseason a problem makes. But if this becomes a problem, it's going to become something we're going to have to discuss with the players' association."

"Because while it may be good for a player in a particular case, although based on what we're witnessing now, I'm not so sure it's good for the player either. But we have to look at what's good for the game, good for the players overall, good for the league. And so it's something we're going to keep an eye on. But I think we've gotten past the way no-trade clauses were originally intended."

The NHLPA did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

No-trade and no-movement clauses were first introduced in the 2005 collective bargaining agreement, ratified following the 2004-05 NHL lockout. However, there are reports that players as far back as the 1970s, possibly earlier, negotiated for trade protection in their contracts.

According to PuckPedia, 279 NHL skaters have some form of trade protection in their contracts. By comparison, only 11 players in NBA league history have had some kind of trade protection. Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard recently obtained one in his three-year deal with the franchise, signed in July 2025.

Nearly a quarter of the NHL (245 of 965 players) now has some form of trade protection, a number that's risen 44.1 percent in six seasons.



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Any change to players' trade protection would have to be negotiated for the next collective bargaining agreement and would most likely require a significant concession from the NHL. The most recent CBA, which took effect on Sept. 16 of this year, expires on Sept. 15, 2030.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.02.2026



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The Athletic / Rogers becomes sole owner of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment after purchasing remaining stake

By Chris Johnston

Oct. 1, 2026 Updated 7:11 pm EDT

TORONTO — Rogers Communications Inc. has completed a full takeover of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, which owns the Toronto Maple Leafs and Toronto Raptors, after purchasing the remaining 25 percent ownership stake from Kilmer Sports Inc. for \$4.35 billion Canadian dollars on Thursday.

The deal was first announced on July 6 and required league approvals to close before the end of 2026.

It gives the telecommunications giant total control over the Maple Leafs, Raptors, Toronto FC of the MLS and the CFL's Toronto Argonauts, plus Scotiabank Arena. That adds to a portfolio that already included the Toronto Blue Jays, Rogers Centre and a large network of media properties, including Sportsnet.

"We're proud to bring these beloved teams together with the rest of Rogers to deliver more for fans, audiences, and customers," said Tony Staffieri, Rogers President and CEO. "We know how much these teams mean to fans and we are fully committed to investing to build championship-calibre teams, to enhancing the fan experience, and to delivering compelling experiences for our customers."

Rogers previously said it plans to sell a minority stake in its sports, media and entertainment assets in the next year, but the company didn't elaborate on those plans as part of Thursday's announcement.

In the meantime, MLSE will be controlled by one owner for the first time. Rogers became the majority stakeholder when it bought out fellow telecommunications giant Bell's 37.5 percent share in 2024, giving Rogers 75 percent.

The company plans to create a new business unit called Rogers Sports for its sports, media and entertainment businesses. While an operating model is finalized, Rogers announced that Keith Pelley will remain President and CEO of MLSE, and Mark Shapiro will remain President and CEO of the Toronto Blue Jays. Pelley also takes on additional accountability for Rogers Media, effective immediately.

What it means for the Leafs and Raptors

Rogers has already made significant changes since gaining majority control of MLSE, firing Leafs president Brendan Shanahan in May 2025 and Raptors president Masai Ujiri a month later.

The Leafs front office has since been completely rebuilt, with general manager John Chayka and senior executive adviser Mats Sundin making sweeping offseason changes following their hiring in May.

That included a significant amount of roster turnover, with a \$21 million, three-year contract given to goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky in free agency and a \$68 million sign-and-trade for defenseman Darren Raddysh among the big moves over the summer, before Chayka completed a blockbuster deal to acquire winger Kirill Marchenko on Monday that included a \$75 million contract extension.

Chayka has spoken often of ownership's desire to win a Stanley Cup and expressed gratitude for the resources made available to him to pursue that goal.

There's been a little more stability with the Raptors, where Ujiri's second-in-command, Bobby Webster, remained with the franchise as its top basketball decision-maker. After the Raptors finished fifth in the Eastern Conference last season, MLSE gave Webster a new long-term contract and added executive vice president to his title.

The team also made a major splash this offseason by reacquiring Kawhi Leonard in a trade and signing him to a two-year extension worth \$115 million. Leonard was the centerpiece of the Raptors' 2019 NBA championship team.

The directors lounge that sits between the Leafs and Raptors dressing rooms on the event level was remodeled this week. (Chris Johnston / The Athletic)

Away from the playing surface, the ownership change has resulted in some new looks at Scotiabank Arena. The formerly wood-paneled directors' lounge that sits between the Leafs' and Raptors' dressing rooms on the event level was remodeled this week to feature a red finish and a Rogers logo.

It was also renamed the Ted Rogers Lounge in honor of the company's founder.

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The Athletic / Ranking the top 40 freshmen in NCAA hockey for the 2026-27 season

By Scott Wheeler

Oct. 1, 2026 Updated 10:09 am EDT

The 2026-27 NCAA Division I men's college hockey season starts on Friday. When it does, it will mark the beginning of the second full season since opening up eligibility to Canadian Hockey League major junior players.

This new era of college hockey has ushered in intense recruiting and more robust freshman classes. The result is a college game that now has more young talent than ever.

As a larger number of hockey's top young prospects choose the NCAA path, The Athletic is introducing its inaugural ranking of the top freshmen in men's college hockey.

To get you set for this college season, here are the top 40 first-year players, plus some honorable mentions.

1. Landon DuPont, RHD, Michigan (2027 NHL Draft)

DuPont — the WHL's first exceptional-status defenseman and an early front-runner for No. 1 in the 2027 NHL Draft — joins the Big Ten superpower Wolverines fresh off a season in which he broke 100 points across all competitions with the Everett Silvertips and won a WHL title. Expect DuPont to fit in well on a Michigan team that encourages a high activity level from its D. His strength, feet and smarts should allow him to defend against older college competition, too.

2. Chase Reid, RHD, Michigan State (Kraken — No. 7, 2026)

Reid is one of the top D prospects in the game and should supercharge the Spartans' offense with his high-end skating and shot. He made significant progress in his defending last year, too, and if it can hold up against bigger, stronger competition, he has the ability to make the kind of impact as a freshman in East Lansing that Artyom Levshunov did three seasons ago. They've missed that element/player since Levshunov's departure. Reid will be a top D as a returnee for Team USA at the World Juniors in December as well.

3. Caleb Malhotra, C, Boston U. (Canucks — No. 3, 2026)

Malhotra is the top freshman forward in this class. He was Brantford's best player between the regular season and playoffs as a rookie last year in the OHL, a standout at the CHL-USA Prospects Challenge, and you can expect him to be one of the Terriers' best players as a freshman. He needs to fill out and get stronger, and that's going to show up in some games, but he has all of the rest (smarts, skill, skating, feel, detail, intangibles) and doesn't have the off games most players his age do.

4. Carson Carels, LHD, North Dakota (Flames — No. 6, 2026)

Carels was one of the best players in the WHL last season, playing his way onto the Canadian World Junior team with his strong-skating, firm, physical brand of hockey while hitting 20 goals as a defenseman. With his strength and style of play, he should have less of an adjustment period to the college game than some of his top peers on this list. He suffered a concussion at the end of last season in the WHL playoffs, but he should be fully healthy entering his freshman year and has looked good in NoDak's camp. He has legit offense, too, and will beat the first layer and be direct, instead of overhandling it.

5. Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Denver (Sabres — No. 4, 2026)

Rudolph headlines a freshman D class for the Pioneers that includes four players on this list. Their back end is going to be young, but it'll be talented, and Rudolph has silky skill and smarts for a 6-foot-3 D. He'll need to learn to be a little firmer defensively against college competition and he doesn't skate like DuPont, Carels or Reid, but he's joining a program with a track record of developing high-end D in-season, and he's going to be well-coached.

Is Wyatt Cullen the future of USA hockey?

Corey Pronman, Scott Wheeler and more

6. Wyatt Cullen, C, Minnesota (Predators — No. 10, 2026)

If Malhotra is the No. 1 freshman forward in this class, Cullen might not be far behind. He's also the most purely skilled with the puck. After playing the wing at the national program, he's also expected to make the move to center for both Minnesota and Team USA at the World Juniors. His one-on-one game and skating are going to excite fans at Mariucci. He's the Gophers' most exciting prospect since Logan Cooley.

7. Joshua Ravensbergen, G, Michigan State (Sharks — No. 30, 2025)

Ravensbergen is one of the top goalie prospects in hockey, and he has big shoes to fill stepping in to replace three-year starter Trey Augustine, but he has the talent and upside to live up to the billing. The gym is his area of focus, and I'm sure he'll be spending a lot of time with Spartans strength and conditioning guru Will Morlock. He has untapped potential on and off the ice still and is an exciting goalie to watch.

8. Ryan Lin, RHD, Denver (Sharks — No. 21, 2026)

Lin is an extremely polished three-zone defenseman whose IQ, reads and decision-making define an excellent all-around game. He doesn't have the size of the other D ahead of him here, but he competes and is as college-ready as any player on this list. It sounds like he has added a step, too, which could really elevate him. He should be an excellent freshman D for the reigning national champs.

9. Sammy Nelson, C, Notre Dame (2027)

Nelson is a projected first-rounder in the 2027 draft who starts the year as a potential top 10-15 pick. He will be the youngest forward in college hockey this season, but he won't look it. He's a pro-sized center who has all of the tools to succeed as a freshman in college. His playmaking isn't dynamic per se, but he's a very good player who should make an impact.

10. Ethan Belchetz, LW, Michigan State (Mammoth — No. 17, 2026)

Belchetz was a No. 1 pick into the OHL, and his brawny build combines with an NHL shot and skill to form a compelling package. His feet and consistency have both been talking points, and he's coming off a broken clavicle, but he has a chance to be a unique player for the Spartans. If he can establish himself as an impactful top-nine guy right away, it'll go a long way toward strengthening their championship aspirations.

11. Cameron Reid, LHD, Michigan (Predators — No. 21, 2025)

Reid captained the Kitchener Rangers to a Memorial Cup title last season and is a potential returnee for Team Canada at the World Juniors. When Flames prospect Henry Mews went down early on last season, the Wolverines' blue line lacked a high-end D prospect. With Mews' return and the additions of DuPont and Reid, they now have three and should be able to play as the five-man unit coaches Brandon Naurato and Chris Lazary want. Reid's smarts and mobility define his game. The Children of Yost are going to like the player and the person.

12. Tommy Bleyl, RHD, Michigan State (Predators — No. 31, 2026)

A high-end skater and thinker of the game who won CHL Rookie of the Year and QMJHL Defenseman of the Year last season, Bleyl told The Athletic pre-draft that he was planning to return to Moncton before he was ultimately talked into making the jump to MSU. The Spartans' blue line lacked puck movers and transporters who could really drive offense from the back end, and they now have two of them in Reid and Bleyl. The physical test of college hockey will be his biggest hurdle because he's known as a bit of a passive stick-on-puck defender.

13. J.P. Hurlbert, LW, Michigan (Red Wings — No. 23, 2026)

The WHL's fourth-leading scorer last season, Hurlbert's an offensive thinker of the game whose style of play will mesh well with Michigan's staff. His pace (he looked a step behind at this summer's World Junior Summer Showcase) and power-play opportunity within a crowded forward group will determine the kind of freshman year he has.

14. Xavier Villeneuve, LHD, Boston U. (Blackhawks — No. 34, 2026)

The biggest wild card on this list, Villeneuve is a small but highly skilled offensive defenseman who takes risks, makes plays and will compete, but is quite likely going to face some real practical challenges defending



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early on in his college career. He's also coming off a season that was affected by hip issues. He's going to pull Terriers fans out of their seats, but he may not be Hutson 3.0.

15. Tobias Trejbal, G, UMass (Flames — No. 42, 2026)

The first goalie taken in the 2026 NHL Draft, Trejbal is making the jump directly to college after just one season in the USHL, in which he won USHL Goaltender of the Year and posted a .916 save percentage across 42 games. Trejbal replaces departed Czech countryman Michael Hrabal in the Minutemen net. Only a select few goalies establish themselves as college hockey starters as teenagers, but Trejbal has the ability to do it.

16. Jack Nesbitt, C, Michigan (Flyers — No. 12, 2025)

Nesbitt is the third-highest drafted forward in this class and 6-5 with some skill and toughness to his game. But he's also coming off a mediocre post-draft season in which he registered 68 points in 68 combined regular-season and playoff games in the OHL, and there is some doubt about his feet and the kind of role he could play on a deep Wolverines team.

17. Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW/RW, Boston U. (Canucks — No. 41, 2026)

After leading goal scorer Cole Eiserman turned pro, the Terriers are going to have to replace his goals by committee this season. I expect sophomores Ryder Ritchie and Jack Murtagh to step up, but Aaram-Olsen's combination of speed, skill, shooting and athleticism should allow him to make an impact on the power play and potentially even flank centers Tynan Lawrence or Malhotra. The Norwegian has the ability to score from distance and attack in cuts.

18. Adam Benák, C, Western Michigan (Wild — No. 102, 2025)

A star in the OHL and the USHL the last two seasons and with Czechia's '07 age group for years, Benák is a diminutive forward who uses high-end skating and smarts to speed around the ice, making plays for his linemates. The size of the college game will obviously be an adjustment, but with his ability to play at different paces and read the game, plus a willing work ethic, I'd bet he continues to surprise and has a LJ Mooney-esque (30 in 34) freshman year. He'll also be a front-line player for the Czechs as a returnee at the World Juniors, after a big showing for them this summer.

19. Matias Vanhanen, LW, Boston College (Devils — No. 37, 2026)

One of the top forwards in the WHL last season, Vanhanen is a WHL champion and Memorial Cup All-Star who registered 119 points in 85 games with the Silvertips last year to get picked in the second round as an overager. The talented Finn is revered for his poise, vision and playmaking with the puck and should be a focal point of his line's five-on-five offense and the Eagles' power play as a freshman. He's eligible to return for the Finnish World Juniors team as well.

20. Maxim Massé, RW, UMass (Ducks — No. 66, 2024)

A reigning QMJHL MVP, CHL Player of the Year and QMJHL champion, Massé exploded for 58 goals and 127 points across 87 combined regular-season, playoff and Memorial Cup games in his final year of junior. His pace has always been the question, but he works hard and has enough offensive skill to contribute right away at UMass.

21. Egor Barabanov, C, UMass (Flames — No. 100, 2026)

Barabanov was a breakout star in the OHL last year, finishing fourth in the league in scoring (91 points), second in assists (63) and earning the respect of his peers and opposing coaches for his skill level and offensive IQ. He's the first 20-year-old to appear on this list and should be a key piece of UMass' offense.

22. Cooper Simpson, LW/RW, North Dakota (Bruins — No. 79, 2025)

A first-team All-Star in the USHL last season, Simpson had a breakout year in Youngstown. Now he arrives at NoDak as a rangy, talented gamer who can score off the wing with his NHL-level shot. He's exactly the kind of player the Fighting Hawks needed to add in their top nine as well and should provide valuable secondary scoring behind Cole Reschny and fellow Bruins prospect Will Zellers. Don't sleep on him.

23. Mason West, C/RW, Michigan State (Blackhawks — No. 29, 2025)

West is a 6-6 source of intrigue who had a disappointing and disjointed post-draft season but showed enough at the World Junior Summer

Showcase to keep people (myself included) interested in what his freshman year might look like. On a deep Spartans team, he risks getting lost in the shuffle a la Dean Letourneau as a freshman, but he's an impressive athlete, he has some vision and he's learning how to play to his big frame.

24. Jack Hextall, C, Michigan State (Flames — No. 30, 2026)

Hextall is an extremely well-rounded forward who impressed scouts and USHL folks alike in Youngstown with his strength on his stick, his pro details and his intangibles, while offering secondary skill. He'll be a bottom-six guy as a freshman for the Spartans but should still be able to make an impact in that role.

25. Ryder Cali, C, Providence (Panthers — No. 48, 2026)

One top prospect in last year's draft told me Cali was the most college-ready player he'd played against in junior. He's a big, strong, heavy-on-pucks forward whose wall/cycle game will translate to the NCAA on Day 1, and whose style of play suits Friars head coach Nate Leaman to a T.

26. Casey Mutryn, RW, Boston College (Kraken — No. 38, 2026)

One of the top '08s in a weak NTDP age group, I'm a little lower on Mutryn than most, but he's a college-built, athletic forward who can play an honest, straight-line, physical game but also has just enough secondary skill that he should be able to contribute in college as a freshman, even if he's more of a support piece to start. He has worked hard to make himself valuable as a net-front guy on the power play, too, which could give him some offensive utility for the Eagles. He'll be a BC freshman with his brother Teddy, a Moncton Wildcats standout and Sharks prospect, too.

27. Alex Huang, RHD, Harvard (Predators — No. 122, 2025)

I've always had a soft spot for Huang, and he's coming off a season where he won a QMJHL title, registered 90 points across all competitions for Chicoutimi and earned an invite from Hockey Canada to the World Junior Summer Showcase. He's a smart, talented puck-mover who has worked to get stronger, improve his shot and play harder. He immediately becomes Harvard's most talented D and was recruited by top programs like Michigan before choosing the Ivy League path.

28. Samu Alalauri, RHD, UMass (Blackhawks — No. 66, 2026)

Alalauri is a big, talented offensive D who should immediately drive offense from UMass' back end. He needs to improve his consistency and work to get into better shape, but the lighter college schedule will allow for that, and the tools are there.

29. Ben Macbeath, LHD, Denver (Rangers — No. 64, 2026)

A riser in last year's draft, Macbeath's balanced skating posture jumps out at you right away. He's not going to get immediate offensive opportunity behind Rudolph and Lin in Denver's freshman class, but the Pioneers are going to need all four of their top freshmen D to make a positive impact, and he should be able to play a two-way game at five-on-five for them.

30. Mikey Berchild, LW, Denver (Hurricanes — No. 105, 2026)

Berchild is a short but stocky winger with interior skill and feel around the net. I think he's going to surprise some people and develop into an excellent top-six college forward.

31. Ethan MacKenzie, LHD, North Dakota (Maple Leafs — No. 69, 2026)

MacKenzie played his way into an early third-round selection as an overager last year with his play in the WHL, earning his way onto Team Canada's World Junior team. His skating, smarts and athleticism define his game and will allow him to play at NCAA pace from the jump.

32. Nathan Behm, LW/RW, Arizona State (Blackhawks — No. 66, 2025)

Behm is a highly talented player who was told he had to work on his play away from the puck and his commitment to the details in his post-draft season. After a season of growth and change, he's better positioned to make the most of his talent at ASU.

33. Blake Fiddler, RHD, Denver (Kraken — No. 36, 2025)

A rangy, good-skating two-way D, Fiddler's game can look a little vanilla, but he has pedigree, size and mobility, and should be able to defend



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against NCAA opposition right away. The development of his puck play at Denver will be crucial in positioning him for an NHL contract.

34. Jack Pridham, RW, Denver (Lightning via Blackhawks — No. 92, 2024)

Pridham is an excellent skater and shooter who was up and down in the OHL playoffs last season and forced a trade from Chicago to Tampa Bay, but scored 53 goals across all competitions and finished strong at the Memorial Cup as a tournament All-Star and the OHL's Overage Player of the Year. His speed and scoring should be noticeable throughout his freshman year at Denver.

35. Timmy Runtso, RHD, Miami U. (Canadiens — No. 57, 2026)

Runtso impressed people around hockey last season — I got unsolicited positive notes about him from folks in the WHL, USHL and NHL — and there are some who believe he's ready to play 20 minutes per game in college as a freshman. He's a strongly built two-way right-shot D with pro attributes.

36. Jacob Kvasnicka, RW, Minnesota (Islanders — No. 202, 2025)

Kvasnicka is an extremely likable, hardworking winger who also offers speed and some skill around the slot. He doesn't take shifts off or have bad games and can play anywhere in a lineup. I'm betting he makes the U.S. World Junior team, too.

37. Tarin Smith, LHD, Minnesota (Ducks — No. 79, 2024)

The captain of the WHL champion Everett Silvertips last year, Smith was a big-minutes, all-situations D for a team with Memorial Cup aspirations before injuring his left shoulder and ending his junior career early. He now returns to that layoff at the college level, where I expect him to be a solid depth D to start and eventually a top-four blueliner in college.

38. Haoxi Wang, LHD, Boston U. (Sharks — No. 33, 2025)

Wang is one of hockey's most fascinating case studies as a towering D with excellent skating and overall mobility. Though it didn't necessarily show up in the stat sheet, he took a step by playing against tougher competition in his second year in the OHL. His decision-making and reads are still very much a work in progress, and he's going to have some ups and downs this season at BU, but he has a chance to put it all together over time.

39. Zac Olsen, RW, Colorado College (Maple Leafs — No. 73, 2026)

Olsen was viewed as one of the hardest players to play against in all of junior hockey last year, and he now takes his physical, competitive, hardworking, honest game to the Tigers. He'll need to show he can produce at the college level to get signed as an upperclassman, I'd think, but he has a real path to a bottom-six NHL career if he does.

40. Victor Plante, LW, Minnesota-Duluth (Red Wings — No. 47, 2026)

The Plantes (eldest Zam, Hobey Baker winner and fellow Red Wings prospect Max, and now Victor) will be one of the stories of this college hockey season at Minnesota-Duluth. Victor offers skill and work ethic in a small package.

Honorable mentions: Oliver Mürnieks (Boston College), Jonas Woo (Arizona State), Shea Busch (Penn State), Thomas Vandenberg (Providence), Luke Schairer (Boston College), Brady Peddle (Michigan State), Teddy Mutryn (Boston College), Charlie Morrison (UConn), Blake Zielinski (Providence), Landon Hafele (Arizona State), Ryder Fetterolf (Penn State), Brent Solomon (Wisconsin), Evan Jardine (Ohio State), Tommy Lafrenière (Western Michigan), Max Heise (Denver), Quinn Beauchesne (Boston College), Beckham Edwards (Notre Dame), Carter Klippenstein (Providence)

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ESPN / After a shocking offseason, the Flyers fight regression - 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 Vasilevski (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 Vasilevski 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. JpgMitch 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 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, Chára 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



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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 Jaccob 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 Tulsky 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.

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.



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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 Cuyille 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 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 stomping 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, toplined 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.

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).



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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 Stammer'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 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



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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.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers lucky to overcome weak defence, goaltending for win over Canucks

Mark Spector

VANCOUVER — "It was weird to be excited about the ninth (goal)," mused Connor McDavid. "But given the situation ..."

After dropping a 6-5 game in overtime against the Canucks on Opening Night in Edmonton, the Oilers came back with a 9-7 win in Vancouver on Thursday that left absolutely no one satisfied. Even when Leon Draisaitl made it 9-6 with just over 10 minutes to play, this one was in doubt.

But, there are a lot of reasons to doubt the Oilers right now, a leaky ship that sails home for repairs now before hosting Seattle on Saturday.

The goaltending is at an ECHL level through two games, the defensive structure simply nonexistent. If new head coach Mike Babcock is teaching a defensive system, he may need a fresh chalkboard. Because no one here is picking up whatever he's laying down when it comes to D-zone coverage.

Things felt pretty sweet when it was 8-2 for Edmonton halfway through the game, two four-goal periods seemingly putting this one to bed by the 30-minute mark.

But by the time McDavid faced the microphones, most of the good had been washed away by five more Vancouver goals, and the realization that Edmonton has allowed 12 regulation goals in the opening two games of the season.

"For 30, 40 minutes, it was what the game should look like for us. What it could look like for us," said McDavid, who had a goal and four assists. "Offence has never been the real problem around here. We understand that. You'd like it to be a lot cleaner than that coming down the stretch, but ultimately, a win's a win in this league."

An uglier win you'll seldom see.

"No one's in here saying 'Way to go!' We understand the game's got to look a little bit different," agreed the captain. "But I thought the first 40 is what it could look like a lot of the time. What it should look like a lot of the time."

With Zach Hyman the latest Oiler to find his way to the injury list, Edmonton trotted out a first line of McDavid between Draisaitl and Vasily Podkolzin. While that unit would pile up four goals and 10 points Thursday, the other three lines — a collection of third lines at best — chipped in mightily, scoring three goals, including the first of Owen Michaels' pro career.

"The big guys played well. Michaels' line played really good," said Babcock. "Michaels, thank goodness for him. Good for our team."

While a rookie like Michaels has been a revelation, and veteran Trent Frederic (one goal) continued to look like a much-improved player from what he has been thus far in Edmonton, a couple of holes have emerged on the blue line in Jake Walman and Shakir Mukhamadullin.

The two were minus-3 and minus-4, respectively, Thursday, with Walman struggling both with and without the puck. Meanwhile, the six-foot-five Mukhamadullin was once again shaky with the biscuit and soft in front of his own net, with physical play being the one quality the Oilers were hoping to see from a big, rangy No. 6 defenceman.

Either of those two are candidates for a press-box seat Saturday against Seattle, with both Ty Emberson and Spencer Stastney on the Oilers' roster and waiting for the first action of the 2026-27 campaign.

Then there is the goaltending.

On Friday morning the Oilers awoke with a team save percentage of .727, dead last in the NHL. Tristan Jarry, who was horrid in his first start, sits at .739, while Devon Levi — who disintegrated in his maiden start as an Oiler — has a .682 save percentage and a 7.02 goals against average post-Vancouver.

Is Babcock worried about his goaltending?

"If you're Levi here tonight, you haven't really played (with Edmonton), you probably got a little nervous when it got off kilter. The puck bounced off you a little bit," excused Babcock. "If it if it wasn't this early, I might be (worried). But we'll just get back to work and make sure we look after them good. Control what we can control."

At least one facet of the Oilers' arsenal has found traction. They've scored 14 goals in two games, and all the important guys — including Podkolzin, who already has three goals — are firing.

"The first game, we played OK for a little bit," Babcock assessed. "But tonight we played well for a big chunk of time. So we're going to build off that."

Was Vancouver bad? Yes, they were reminiscent of the team that finished dead last in the NHL standings last season.

The Canucks had five shots on net halfway through the game, and late in period two had allowed eight goals while directing only seven pucks at Levi's net.

But let's find a little love for the Oilers too. At least for their work through 40 minutes, before a lazy third resulted in three Canucks goals.

The Oilers lined up without their projected second-line centre (Ryan Nugent-Hopkins), their third-line centre (Jason Dickinson), their top right winger (Hyman) and a Top 6 left winger in Matt Savoie.

That's two-fifths of the power play, and a major chunk of the expected production on a team that scored 14 goals against Vancouver in their season-opening home and home series. The Oilers walked away with three points, lucky considering the level of defensive play and goaltending that has been rolled out to start the Babcock era.

Spec's checks

Two games, two records for Evan Bouchard. On Thursday, he became the first NHL defenceman since 1980 to notch a hat trick on Opening Night. And with one goal and two assists Thursday, Bouchard breaks the record for points in the first two games of the season by an NHL D-man with eight.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'It's embarrassing': Flames fail to rise to occasion in opening-night letdown

Eric Francis

CALGARY – The fear, understandably, is that the Calgary Flames just set the tone for what a tear-it-down rebuild can look like.

It's a fair concern.

Sure, plenty were prepared for multi-goal blowouts, rookie mistakes and losses in bunches.

But the failure to rise to an occasion marked by a stirring pre-game celebration of the Dome they'll depart in six months is a troubling sign.

"It's embarrassing," said Zach Whitecloud, in as plain a term as needed following a 6-1 opening-night humiliation at home against a pedestrian Seattle Kraken club Thursday.

"It's going to test the group's character, and we'll see how we react coming in tomorrow.

"That one, in front of our home crowd, opening night of the last year of the Dome... unacceptable. We have to hold each other accountable for that, and what the result was. And we will, and we'll move forward from it. We'll learn from it, and make sure something like that doesn't happen again. If things start to get out of hand like that, we have to dig ourselves out of that and come together as a group."

Sure, this young, growing squad will be outskilled and outscored on many nights this season.

That's part of starting from scratch.

But to be outworked goes against everything this club has built over the last three years under Ryan Huska.

And for a team that wore T-shirts in camp with the mantra, "get in the fight," the lack of pushback was perhaps the most disturbing development.

Shocking, given how much emotion was in the building following pre-game tributes to owner Alvin Libin and broadcast legend Peter Maher, followed up by a masterful video commemorating 43 years of Dome lore that had the crowd on its feet for a stirring start to the organization's 42-game goodbye to this old barn.

There will be no 43rd game. That much was clear long before the beatdown.

"I had some goosebumps in there, with the national anthem, the C of Red... I was pretty fired up to start the game," said Ryan Strome, whose club saw a solid start erased midway through the first when the Kraken scored three goals on Dustin Wolf before period's end.

"We've got people that pay hardworking money to come watch us and support us in this barn for the last year, and I'm disappointed for the fans and for us because I know that's not the product we want to put on the ice, especially in such a memorable season. You're not going to win every night. We're going to have some tough ones. We're going to have some ups and downs, but I think the work ethic and the compete, and the non-negotiable has slipped away, and that's unacceptable."

Truth is, the best performances of the night came from the lad who made the pre-game Saddledome video, and the two Flames who spoke so eloquently afterwards.

"Super disappointing," continued Strome, who wore an A on his jersey alongside Whitecloud.

"We had a good start, and then kind of just unravelled. We're a team that can't really make any mistakes. We've got to play hard. We've got to play simple. And obviously the end result of getting away from that was what you saw tonight. That one stings. I mean, if you're a professional athlete and you go home feeling good about this one, something's wrong with

you. The good thing is we've got a lot of proud guys, and I know a lot of guys are pretty pissed off."

Goal scoring will be a massive problem all season long, putting a premium on tight defence and disciplined play.

All were absent Thursday.

The reality is, there are going to be many people around the league that will see the score and shrug, knowing just how painful the early stages of a rebuild like Calgary's can be.

Whitecloud was asked what he'd say to those people.

"There's a lot of things I'd say," he said, choosing his words carefully as he navigated the frustrations of such a humbling showing in which his team played shorthanded five times.

"I think the rest of the world is doubting the Calgary Flames and what's in this room. I see it every day. I see the way the guys treat each other. I see the way the guys work for each other in practice, in games, pre-season games, and we have each other's backs. And there's going to be ups and downs. There's going to be some really high ups. There's going to be some really low lows. And we're going to have to pull one another out of that. And nobody else is going to figure it out from the outside world. Those opinions don't matter. People can say what they want. They're not the ones pulling each other out of the mud in here."

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Sportsnet.ca / Would Connor Hellebuyck consider a trade to the Oilers?

Frank Seravalli

No party is willing to comment publicly and sprinkle gasoline on a smoldering fire, but Connor Hellebuyck's clear preference is to continue his career south of the 49th parallel.

And to be fair, sources say none of Canada's other six franchises have made overtures to Winnipeg. Yet.

The Montreal Canadiens, in fact, have too many goaltenders in their crowded crease — which is why Sam Montembeault is a good bet to be one of the first players traded this fall.

The Edmonton Oilers are triaging a shaky start for Tristan Jarry, who allowed six goals in his season debut, the 10th game in his last 12 as an Oiler that he let in four or more.

So as we strategize a resolution to the Hellebuyck saga, there is at least one NHL executive wondering: Is Hellebuyck's decision about Canada an absolute or merely a preference?

If the Oilers continue to reel in goal — Tuesday's opener made Frederik Andersen's December debut feel a long way off — could they consider making a play for Hellebuyck? Would Hellebuyck soften his stance to make it a possibility?

"To me, Winnipeg's biggest weapon here is time," the executive said. "He wants to play. They can wait him out and make it painful for him."

Time is certainly a variable worth watching in this standoff. This is not a decision driven by money, but the tab is running on that too. On Monday, Hellebuyck began to forfeit \$38,659 per day while suspended for failure to report.

The other variables? Significant struggle or major injury in a contender's crease, for one.

The Jets could reshape their ask. As Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman mentioned in 32 Thoughts earlier this week, the Jets may not be as pressed to acquire a goaltender in return in the deal if waiver claim Clay Stevenson fills the void.

The flip side of that is if Stuart Skinner stumbles out of the gate. The Jets are trying to sell a bounce-back campaign; they'd be forced to address goaltending at least in part in a Hellebuyck transaction. For the Oilers, that would mean convincing the B.C.-born Jarry to waive his trade protection to go to Winnipeg, where he'd be in tandem with the guy he was traded for 10 months ago. Jarry would be only one part of the puzzle that is complicated in both cap and player capital; Edmonton is short on both.

In other words, it's not impossible but a real longshot that we see Hellebuyck suit up for a Canadian club again.

Leafs cap maneuvering

While GM John Chayka ponders his next move to improve the Maple Leafs' chances to win now, Wednesday's salary-cap transactions brought additional space.

Newly acquired Elvis Merzlikins (\$4.428 million) and Cade Webber (\$825,000) were added to LTIR before Monday's season-opening submission deadline for early-season cap compliance. Forwards Max Domi (\$3.75 million) and Dakota Joshua (\$3.25 million) were added to LTIR on Wednesday to increase Toronto's cap space to \$7 million.

The world is Chayka's oyster.

Other side of the coin

As much as Adam Fantilli is likely thankful that he waited until after this summer's salary explosion to sign his contract extension in Columbus, how many players are kicking themselves for signing when first eligible?

The undrafted utility knife from Camrose, Alta., is arguably the most valuable fourth-line centre in the league. His new contract kicked in this week, but he signed the extension way back on July 1, 2025 — the first day eligible. His deal was four years at \$1.7 million per year.

Kelly then scored a career-best 21 goals last season. Watching his snipe in Colorado's season opening win over Los Angeles, those 21 goals seem far from an aberration. Hindsight is always 20/20, but that \$1.7 million AAV was the going rate for fourth-line centres almost a decade ago. How much more would Kelly have earned had he played out the year and gone to market? The ballpark is \$5 million per year, a far cry from the \$6.8 million total signed for in 2025.

IIHF to elect new president on Friday

The International Ice Hockey Federation is gathering this week to elect a successor to president Luc Tardif on Friday in a place far from where world hockey power is typically consolidated — the Canary Islands in Spain.

There is no shortage of backroom politicking in the lead-up on Thursday as IIHF sources handicap a two-horse race for a four-year term as president: Franz Reindl of Germany opposing Petr Briza of Czechia.

Briza, 61, is Tardif's current deputy as senior vice president. The former Czech Olympic goalie is the chairman and former owner of HC Sparta Praha.

Reindl, 71, previously ran for president in 2021 but fell short in votes to Tardif. The former German Olympic forward is a longtime executive who also served as Team Germany head coach at the World Cup of Hockey.

It's difficult to say now who will prevail; there are mini coalitions formed among the smaller of 62 national member associations, where the votes of non-traditional hockey countries such as Turkey or Bulgaria count equally as hockey superpowers Canada, Sweden or Finland.

Hockey Canada president and CEO Katherine Henderson is a front-runner to be elected to the 10-member council. Henderson is one of six female candidates for council; a minimum of three women must be elected, according to bylaws. USA Hockey president Mike Trimboli is running unopposed for regional vice president of the Americas and Oceania.

With hockey's spotlight on the world stage, the NHL will be closely watching Friday's results. The IIHF is to partner with the NHL and NHL Players' Association on the 2028 World Cup of Hockey, as well as the 2030 Olympics and beyond, and sources said there are many action items pending the regime change.

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Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Rookies who could earn a big role this season

Jason Bukala

With the puck dropping on a new NHL season this week, much of the attention surrounding the new crop of rookies has revolved around Gavin McKenna (Toronto) and Ivar Stenberg (San Jose). And it's only normal that the top two picks of the most recent draft, who both project to be frontrunners challenging for the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year, would be in such a spotlight.

Porter Martone, the sixth overall picking 2025, is another player getting plenty of Calder attention before the season. That shouldn't be any surprise after he joined Philadelphia late last season and stormed out of the gate with 10 points in his first nine NHL games. Seven of 21 Sportsnet analysts picked Martone to win the Calder in our pre-season predictions, so he is firmly on the Calder radar.

But there are several other rookie players who deserve recognition for breaking camp with their respective clubs.

Beyond McKenna, Stenberg, and Martone, here's a look at some of the other first-year prospects who have potential to play key roles for their teams this season:

Smits was selected fifth overall at the draft in June. He projects as a two-way defenceman who can be deployed in all situations and has potential to contribute secondary offence.

In the first game of his career against the Boston Bruins, Smits was deployed for 16:54 of ice time. All of his shifts came at even strength, and he was credited with two hits and a blocked shot.

Smits is as seasoned as they come for a first-year, recently drafted NHL defenceman. He's only 18 years young, but he's already played pro in Finland and Germany, as well as representing Latvia at the world juniors, Olympics and Men's World Championship.

The Hawks are hoping Kantserov can provide them additional offensive depth. He's coming off an incredible season in the KHL that resulted in 36G-28A playing for Magnitogorsk and Chicago has slotted Kantserov on to their second line to start the season.

Kantserov has the ability to play the middle or the wing, but I personally believe he's better suited to play as a winger early in his career. It's very difficult for scoring forwards to grasp the nuances of playing centre at the NHL level without stalling their development offensively. Unfortunately for Chicago, Connor Bedard is on the shelf recovering from injury to start the year so the Blackhawks are asking Kantserov to play centre until Bedard returns. In Chicago's first game versus Vegas Kantserov was on the ice for 17:07, including 2:36 on the power play. He registered one shot on goal.

Fronnell was selected third overall in 2025 and is coming off a season that saw him score 20 goals for Djurgardens in Sweden's top league, the SHL. Frondell dressed for 12 games with Chicago last spring and looked comfortable at the NHL level. He produced 3G-6A in that span and starts the year on the Blackhawks' top line between Tyler Bertuzzi and Patrick Kane.

Fronnell's a very smart player. He recognizes when to take chances offensively and when to retreat and make sure he is on the right side of the play defensively. It will be interesting to see if Chicago uses him on the weak-side flank on the power play because Frondell has an incredible one-timer and the ability to beat goalies clean from the weak-side circle.

The Golden Knights haven't exactly been recognized as an organization that drafts and develops their own prospects that graduate to the NHL roster, but Connelly could end up being the exception. The darting forward was selected 19th overall by Vegas in 2024, and he starts the season skating on their third-line with veterans Tomas Hertl and Victor Olofsson.

Connelly produced excellent results at the AHL level last season (14G-35A) and has already hit the scoresheet this season. He skated 11:22 of ice time in the Golden Knights' home opener versus Chicago, was credited with four shots on net and was rewarded with his first NHL goal. Connelly has fantastic puck touch around the net and the speed to make plays off the rush.

Hagens is another young prospect entering the league who can play centre or the wing. The former college standout at Boston College was drafted seventh overall by the Bruins in 2025. He starts the season playing the wing on a line with Fraser Minten at centre.

Hagens had a cup of coffee in the NHL and AHL last spring after leaving school at the conclusion of Boston College's season. He produced 23G-24A for the Eagles in his sophomore season. Hagens has become a much more well-rounded player over the course of his development and has top-six NHL scoring upside.

The Capitals are one of the top drafting organizations in the league and they have a potential top-pairing NHL defenceman in Cole Hutson, who they took 43rd overall in 2024.

Hutson is a transitional defenceman and power play quarterback. He averaged a point per game over two seasons at the college level playing for Boston University and then played 14 games for the Capitals last spring, scoring 10 points. He's highly competitive on and off the puck, and the kind of prospect who can easily log over 20 minutes of ice time per game.

Protas is a massive forward who can drive play with his speed and creativity, and he's exceptionally difficult to defend due to his height and strength. Protas is another prospect who has the ability to play either centre or the wing.

Protas, like Hutson, could end up as one of the steals from the 2024 draft. Washington selected Protas 75th overall and he's coming off a rookie year in the AHL that resulted in 29 goals and 37 assists. It appears the Capitals are going to start the season with Protas playing the middle alongside his brother (6-foot-6, 250-pound Aleksai) and Jordan Kyrou.

What about goalies?

A couple of young goaltenders could end up playing massive roles for their teams this season and their contribution might determine if their clubs make the playoffs or even win a round in the spring.

Cossa is an interesting prospect. He was originally drafted in the first-round (15th overall) by the Detroit Red Wings in 2021, but the Wings dealt him to the Mammoth in the off-season for the 23rd pick at the draft.

Goaltenders generally take a bit of time to become the best version of themselves at the NHL level and the 23-year-old Cossa is coming off a fantastic season at the AHL level. He posted a 26-8-4 record in Grand Rapids last year and paired those numbers with a .913 save percentage and 2.33 goals-against average.

The Mammoth identified Cossa as a goalie who could challenge veteran Karel Vejmelka, who played 64 games last season and posted a 38-20-3 record, 2.75 GAA, and .896 SV%.

If Pittsburgh is going to make another run at a playoff spot, they will require elite goaltending. Incumbent Arturs Silovs can run hot and cold at times so the arrival of homegrown Murashov (selected 118th overall in 2022) is intriguing.

Murashov is a south-paw goaltender with good size and athleticism. He's coming off a season in the AHL that resulted in a 24-9-4 record, an elite 2.20 GAA and .919 SV%. At worst I see Murashov splitting games with Silovs, but there's also an opportunity in front of him to earn more of the net. The Penguins are counting on the latter and Murashov could play a large part in their push towards the playoffs again this season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Rebuilding Flames still to feature plenty of feel-good stories

Eric Francis

CALGARY — Zayne Parekh will be in the lineup when the Calgary Flames' season opens Thursday, marking a vastly different scenario than the one a year earlier when he was a healthy scratch.

Unlike last season, when the highly touted first-rounder was sheltered following a poor pre-season, Parekh enters this season as the player fans and management are most excited to see.

A rigorous off-season with workout guru Gary Roberts, followed by a dynamic pre-season, appears to have the bulked-up defenceman back on track, and positioned to be one of the biggest feel-good stories of the upcoming season.

"It's been night and day from last year to now," admitted the 20-year-old freewheeler, who has regained the confidence he lost through a nightmarish rookie season that included injury and plenty of press-box popcorn.

"I feel like a completely different player. Just the strength and the work I put in this summer has really helped me."

When he's at his best, like he was at the world juniors last Christmas, he's a whirling dervish, who circles around the offensive zone making plays like he owns the place.

Heading into a rebuilding season in which there promises to be extensive short-term pain for long-term gain, Parekh headlines the list of good stories Flames fans can focus on.

Here are a handful of others:

Farewell to the Dome

The Saddledome will play host to its 44th and final season as home of the Flames, prompting a season-long celebration sure to stir up all sorts of memories fans have of the iconic building.

The organization promises to take fans through an extensive trip down memory lane, saluting the great moments and players who helped shape the tremendous history of the saddle-shaped barn.

"I think our players are very fortunate to be part of this year," added coach Ryan Huska, who remembers the seats he sat in when his uncle brought him to a game as a kid.

"This building has seen so many great moments. I think it's going to be a step up this year with the energy and atmosphere in the building. And I think the players are going to feed off what the crowd is going to bring."

Tickets for the final game against Vancouver on April 10 are already going for a king's ransom, as sentimental fans look to say goodbye to a building that has seen a bit of everything over the years.

The Flames gave up a boatload to land the 22-year-old defenceman who was picked second overall by the New Jersey Devils in 2022, so there will be plenty of eyes on him as he showcases the skillset that will have him on the top pairing on opening night.

"He's gonna play a ton, and in every scenario, so we are looking forward to seeing what we have in him this year and for many years to come," said Conroy of the cornerstone acquisition. Conroy signed Nemec to a five-year, \$36-million contract right after giving up two first-rounders and a second for the Slovak.

"I feel really comfortable — the guys and coaches and everyone in the organization is great, so I feel good and want to play my best hockey," added Nemec, who feels having fellow countrymen Martin Pospisil and Sam Honzek on the team has made the transition easier.

"I want to play in every situation, and I feel I can do that here."

Collegians on the horizon

Four of the most exciting prospects in the organization — Carson Carels (sixth overall in 2026), Cole Reschny (18th in 2025), Ethan Wytenbach (last year's leading collegiate scorer) and Cullen Potter (32nd in 2025) — have all pledged to turn pro and join the Flames at the conclusion of their season at their respective U.S. colleges.

"When I talk to them, that's the goal for each guy, to have a great year, win a national championship, and then turn pro," said Conroy.

"The problem is they are on good teams, so they could go right until the end of our year, which would make it a little trickier."

Their progress will be monitored by Flames fans throughout the year, leading to season-ending sit-downs with Flames management to decide what's best for each of the lads long-term.

"I always bring it back to Johnny (Gaudreau)," said Conroy.

"He said, 'Hey I'm going to go back for my third year and be the best player in college hockey, and then I'm coming out — and I don't want to go to the minors.' He felt that gave him the best chance. And I give him credit — he did it.

"So I think where these guys could overcook a little bit and be completely ready to come that much stronger, faster and it's still going to be a huge step. Are they all going to be able to do it? I don't know. But you know what — I didn't know Johnny was going to be able to do it."

Captain chasing history

Captain Mikael Backlund is just 72 games away from breaking Jarome Iginla's franchise record of 1,219 regular-season games as a Flame.

If he remains healthy all season, the 37-year-old will establish the new mark for longevity on March 17 at home against Dallas — giving fans one of the last great moments in Dome lore.

"Well, Jarome will want me to sit Backs a few times or trade him," joked Conroy.

Punched-up power play

Assistant coach Dave Lowry takes over a unit that has been near the bottom of the league the last few seasons, and promises to add a few new wrinkles.

The big difference will be the two lads heading it up — Parekh and Nemec.

"No disrespect to the guys that were here before, because they were all great players out there, but these are two power-play defencemen — they really are," said Huska of the two youngsters who offer up a much more dynamic approach to the point position with the man advantage.

"When you look at the way they walk the blue line, and when you look at the way they see where the open man is. ... You're a special breed to be a power-play quarterback and I feel like these two guys are that. That's one of the big reasons why I feel like our PP is going to be better this year, because both units have someone who can take charge from the top, and it makes everybody's job easier."

Internal competition between the two will dictate which player runs the top unit, with the possibility that, at times, they may both play together on it.

Gridin promises productivity

Matvei Gridin, a Flames first-rounder in 2024, finished with a flurry last season when he was given a prominent scoring role. He delivered, leading the uber-confident young Russian to declare at exit meetings he would lead the team in scoring this year.

He'll get every opportunity to do just that, as he'll start on the top power-play unit and top line with Morgan Frost and Matt Coronato.

The youngster, who scored 36 goals in 56 games as a QMJHL rookie, is an exciting prospect for a team that has had trouble scoring the last few years.

Frost watch

Unlike Conroy's previous three seasons, there is no significant drama surrounding pending free agents with their eyes set on bolting elsewhere.



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Conroy finds that refreshing, as he continues trying to build a team of players who want to be here.

Frost is the only significant pending UFA on the roster, which should make for an interesting decision on his future before the trade deadline.

Either outcome seems favourable for Flames fans, as he either excels as the team's first-line centre and is signed to an extension as a building block, or he is traded on an open market that always pays significant sums for skilled middlemen.

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Sportsnet.ca / Anderson, Carrier reinforce value to Canadiens in strong start to season

Eric Engels

PITTSBURGH — We left off with a 3-2 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs that Montreal Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis said he'd take, but not one he was particularly satisfied with.

What St. Louis did like — aside from goaltender Jakub Dobes, whose performance he deemed "excellent" — was the play of his depth players.

Two of them — Josh Anderson and Alex Carrier — came up with a goal and an assist each, but that wasn't all they did to reinforce their value to the Canadiens on opening night.

Anderson also had three shots on net, four hits and played a key role in a perfect first outing for the revamped penalty kill. He "played to his DNA," said St. Louis, and the coach may as well have also been talking about Carrier when he said that.

There are several things linking these two players, who couldn't be more different in some respects.

But while it's true that Anderson is a big, bullying, power-forward and Carrier is an undersized defenceman often on the receiving end of some bullying, both are veteran depth players who consistently play effectively, play to their identity — with hearts embroidered on sleeves — and therefore play essential parts in the Canadiens' success. They also both happen to be playing out the end of their contracts on a team that has plenty of incentive to keep them, but perhaps not as much as some other teams might have to overpay them.

Anderson is in Year 7 of a deal that's paid him \$5.5 million per year on average. He'll be 33 and staring at his last opportunity to hit it big in free agency when it expires, and his chances of doing exactly that (with his unique profile, in a marketplace flush with cash thanks to dramatic, year-over-year rises in the salary cap coming) are as good as they'll ever be.

Outside of being right-handed, Carrier's profile — a reliable, versatile, two-way defenceman — isn't nearly as rare. But coming out of a three-year deal at just 30, coming off a salary of just \$3.75 million per year on average, he'll be looking at the best chances he's ever had to secure a prosperous future for himself and his family.

Both Carrier and Anderson love Montreal, and they both love playing for the Canadiens. For Carrier, a native of Quebec City, pulling on that sweater was "a childhood dream," he said upon landing in his home province after the 2024 trade with the Nashville Predators. Anderson, who grew up in Burlington, Ont., was raised as a die-hard Canadiens fan by his father, Gary, who's from the West Island of Montreal.

The six-foot-three, 225-pound winger has been through the highest highs and lowest lows with the team since being traded from Columbus for Max Domi in the summer of 2020. He was a key cog in their 2021 run to the Stanley Cup Final before he was a lost, snake-bitten shooter on a punchless, rebuilding version of the team.

Now Anderson is coming off two redeeming seasons — and an excellent showing in the 2026 run to the Eastern Conference Final — on the resurgent Canadiens, and he's brimming with newfound appreciation for just how special his entire experience with the team has been.

"I don't have to tell you guys how much I love this city, how much I love this team," Anderson said upon being named an alternate captain back on Sept. 14. "I think that the culture that we've been building over the last four, five years with Marty and (president of hockey operations Jeff Gorton) and (general manager) Kent (Hughes) has obviously been something pretty special... This city has just been unbelievable. My daughter was born here, been playing close to home, and just the people you get to work with over the last seven years has been great..."

When asked if he wants more, Anderson responded, "I'm a big believer in things will work out. I really do see myself being in Montreal, and I'm sure those conversations will start picking up soon."

They're going to be challenging conversations for Hughes to navigate.

He values Anderson, but he's also managing a roster of core players aged 20-28. He has put the Canadiens on the precipice of opening a wide contention window thanks to his savvy cap manipulation with that core. And because he's been so efficient so far, he has money to play with.

But not so much of it to compete with a market that would overpay an aging winger with a lot of miles on his odometer.

Hughes could perhaps do it for two years, over which Anderson has his best chance to still be close to as effective as he was on opening night in Toronto. He could probably beat the market just on dollars over that shorter term — and we'd think he'd want to, considering how essential players like Anderson are to playoff success.

Considering Anderson appears to be prioritizing playoff success, that he said, "Being on a great team right now is something you want as a player," and that he said, "We're just getting started here," at least leaves hope he'll be receptive to that.

But until the player's signature ends up on a contract, there's no way of knowing how he'll feel about turning away from a market that could potentially offer him four or five more years of security.

That might be as much term as Carrier can obtain out there, but it's almost certainly more than the Canadiens would give him to stay, especially given their depth on the back end. Even if Carrier's handedness is an edge, it's not that sharp of one with righties David Reinbacher and Bryce Pickford emerging.

Still, there's plenty of time before either of those prospects prove as reliable at this level as Carrier has. There's also an entire season ahead to see how Carrier fares.

Both he and Anderson were among the best players on the ice in Toronto, but that was just one game.

Though if they continue to be as effective — and there's no reason to doubt they will be — and continue to maintain good health, their uncertain future status with the Canadiens will become more topical by the day.

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Sportsnet.ca / Ranking all 32 NHL centre-ice logos for 2026-27 season

David Morassutti

There aren't many things hockey fans are more willing to do than literally watch paint dry.

Every off-season, ice crews work hard to get the surface ready for the grind of a full season, with hours of work that end with the blank white canvas turned into something that captivates every fan as they enter the arena.

For the majority of teams, the centre-ice logo allows for some creativity. Others try to keep it simple.

We've even seen a junior hockey team do away with the traditional paint in recent years as the OHL's Guelph Storm use an LED projection technology to transform their centre-ice surface.

With an animated projection screen below the ice surface, Guelph is showing just how much innovation is possible when teams start treating the ice as more than simply a playing surface.

In the NHL, however, most teams continue to lean heavily into decades of history and iconic logos, while others have embraced more modern designs, special-event graphics and increasingly creative presentations.

For the 2026-27 NHL season, there are also some notable changes around the league. We've gone through the designs for every team and ranked the centre-ice logos based on visual impact, creativity and identity.

1. Vegas Golden Knights

It's hard to believe, but the Golden Knights are celebrating a decade as an NHL franchise.

As it prepares for its 10th season, Vegas has seen a big transformation from the original "Golden Misfits" to a perennial contender in the league.

It's no surprise, then, that the franchise is going with a centre-ice logo that leans into the Vegas theme in more ways than one.

Rather than simply having the team's standard shield, the design features a roulette wheel, the Golden Knights helmet crest, a sword, and a nod to 10 years in the league with the roman-numeral 'X.'

It will certainly stand out every time it comes into view and you can bet that's what Vegas intended.

2. Carolina Hurricanes

The Carolina Hurricanes are taking full advantage of being the reigning Stanley Cup champion with their design.

Coming off their latest championship, the Hurricanes unveiled a centre-ice design featuring the team's logo surrounded by a coloured overhead view of the Stanley Cup bowl. It's a fitting way to keep the celebration going long after the championship parade is over.

Carolina also added a distinctly local touch to the design as hurricane-warning flags are worked into the red line.

For the defending champions, there's no better way to start the season than with a daily reminder of exactly what they accomplished.

3. Toronto Maple Leafs

The Maple Leafs are taking a trip down memory lane, 100 years to be exact, with their design.

Instead of using their more familiar modern mark, Toronto brought back a classic Maple Leafs logo as part of the franchise's celebration of an important anniversary. This season marks 100 years since the club adopted the Maple Leafs nickname, moving on from the St. Patricks name it used from 1919 to 1927.

The throwback logo gives centre ice a noticeably different look, but it's also a fitting visual as the franchise begins another chapter, with Mats Sundin and John Chayka in charge.

For a team with such a deep visual history, going back to an old logo is a nice ode to the past.

4. Montreal Canadiens

The Canadiens are giving centre ice another makeover.

Last season, Montreal replaced the oversized Canadiens logo that had occupied centre ice since 2018 with a full-colour, 3D-inspired design that filled the entire face-off circle in Canadiens red. While some liked the bold look, others thought it made it tougher to see where the puck was on the ice.

This time around, they decided to go with a white background, while adding a three-dimensional effect that makes the Canadiens' crest appear to rise off the surface. The bright red of the logo immediately jumps out.

The blue outlining around the lettering also helps sharpen the overall look, creating a centre-ice logo that feels both familiar and noticeably different from what Canadiens fans have seen in recent seasons.

Credit Montreal for trying something different last season, but this is a nice refresh for a team that has high hopes.

5. San Jose Sharks

The Sharks continue to lean into the teal rebrand after celebrating their 35th anniversary last season.

It's nice to see San Jose try something new with their traditional logo. It's easy to forget when they tried the fin logo, which was a nice touch, but not worthy of replacing the traditional Sharks logo, which is a trademark that should remain a staple at centre ice.

What also make this design worthy of its ranking are the intricate designs along the red line with the 'SJ' Shark alternating red and white.

The fade in the colour on the centre-ice paint also avoids having the colour be too strong, and the white touches on the shark make it stand out nicely.

6. Calgary Flames

The Flames will be in a new home next season, meaning they will spend at least the next 84 games saying goodbye to the Saddledome.

To mark the occasion, Calgary unveiled a special design that pays tribute to the building and the generations of fans who have filled it.

The logo features a unique upper border that mirrors the distinctive slope of the Saddledome's roof, while the years the Flames have called the building home are incorporated into the design.

It's a subtle touch, but an effective one. The design doesn't just feature the Flames logo — it makes the building itself part of the logo.

The Flames begin their farewell campaign at home against the Seattle Kraken on Thursday before closing out the regular season against the Vancouver Canucks on April 10.

7. Seattle Kraken

The Kraken unveiled this logo last season and really haven't had a reason to change.

The deep blue and red colour combination gives the logo a completely different appearance from many of the league's more traditional designs.

Instead of the lighter logo that is used on the primary jersey, Seattle is embracing the way this darker theme really stands out.

The Kraken crest also has enough detail to remain interesting.

8. Los Angeles Kings

The Kings have gone with a centre-ice design that leans heavily into their modern black-and-silver identity for their 60th season. In 2024, they went back to the core identity from the 90s era, and it's front and centre in this anniversary season.



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The design puts "60" front and centre in black, with the franchise's original crown logo worked into the bottom of the numbers. Above it sits "Los Angeles," while "Est. 1967" anchors the bottom of the crest.

The crown is particularly fitting for the anniversary celebration. As the Kings explained when unveiling the logo, their crown has changed throughout the decades but has remained an important part of the team's identity.

The Kings will officially begin their 60th-anniversary celebrations on Tuesday, when they host the Florida Panthers in their first home game of the season.

9. Nashville Predators

The Predators' centre-ice design makes excellent use of one of the most distinctive colour palettes in the NHL.

The combination of yellow and navy makes it stand out, but what makes it worth it is the way it includes 'Smashville' below the logo. The improvement is not having the 'H' cut out like it was in the past.

The surrounding elements add some additional visual interest without completely taking over the centre circle.

10. Florida Panthers

The Panthers are changing things up at centre ice, moving away from the shield-style presentation used previously.

Now, the team did have to move away from the Stanley Cup design after failing to make the playoffs, but they did a nice job of not just reverting back to the old logo.

The new design produces a more colourful centre ice and the new logo immediately stands out against the surface with the Panther as a more dominant feature.

11. Boston Bruins

Sometimes the best centre-ice designs are the ones that don't need to do much. The Bruins' spoked-B is one of those logos. The black and gold combination provides tremendous contrast against the ice, while the familiar design is instantly recognizable from virtually anywhere inside the building.

12. Buffalo Sabres

Buffalo doesn't need a reason to shy away from what works. The crossed sabres and classic blue-and-gold colours provide a distinctly old-school feel.

13. Utah Mammoth

Utah made small tweaks to its centre-ice design, allowing the Mammoth logo to be the focus.

14. Detroit Red Wings

The Red Wings made the right decision to bring back 'Hockeytown' to centre. The only knock is that Detroit's iconic Winged Wheel should stand on its own with the 'Hockeytown' branding not overlapping.

15. Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks logo is iconic and one of the NHL's most recognizable, and it returns as the focal point of the team's centre-ice design after changing things for their centennial season.

16. New York Rangers

Like the Blackhawks, the Rangers always keep their roots as a key element in their centre-ice logo, and after celebrating their 100th season, the team returns to the norm.

17. Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers are sticking with a design that should look very familiar to fans, with the classic crest remaining the focal point. There aren't any major changes to the presentation, making Edmonton one of the teams opting for consistency rather than a major makeover.

18. Pittsburgh Penguins

As part of their 60th season, the Penguins will be painting a commemorative logo at centre ice, but it feels like the number overtakes the moniker itself.

19. Vancouver Canucks

The Canucks' centre-ice design is clean and recognizable, with the orca logo providing plenty of colour and personality without becoming overly complicated. It lands at No. 19 because, while the design works well, it doesn't have the same historical impact or visual creativity as some of the higher-ranked logos.

20. New York Islanders

The Islanders' circular logo is practically tailor-made for centre ice.

The blue, orange and white combination gives the design plenty of colour, while the round shape fits naturally into the circle.

21. Winnipeg Jets

Winnipeg's centre-ice design is clean and recognizable, with the blue-and-red logo giving it plenty of contrast against the ice. It would be nice if the team could get the traditional Jets logo, like the one from the 2019 Heritage Classic, as it would be near the top of this list.

22. Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers are the NHL's lone team to feature the traditional double-logo centre-ice design, with two smaller crests sitting on either side of the red line instead of one oversized logo being split down the middle. It's a nice throwback touch, but it lacks punch.

23. Washington Capitals

The Capitals' centre-ice logo is certainly recognizable, but it lacks some of the visual punch you get from many of the designs higher on this list. The relatively long, horizontal wordmark doesn't fill the centre circle in quite the same commanding way as a bold crest or oversized logo, leaving the overall presentation feeling a little flatter and less dynamic.

24. New Jersey Devils

The Devils haven't really had a reason to change the look of their centre-ice logo, but it certainly lacks unique ways to make it stand out from the others.

25. Minnesota Wild

The Wild have one of the more detailed logos in the NHL, and the combination of green, red and cream gives it plenty of character at centre ice. But like many others, it doesn't provide enough to stand out, especially with the amount of blank white ice around it.

26. Ottawa Senators

The Senators bring plenty of personality to centre ice with a large Roman centurion logo giving it a strong connection to the franchise's identity. It doesn't quite have the visual impact or creativity of some of the other designs, making it a solid but relatively understated presentation.

27. Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks made the right choice to go back to a refurbished logo, but with an orange theme. Despite the logo being a fan favourite, the centre-ice design doesn't quite jump off the page and could use some more orange in the background.

28. St. Louis Blues

The Blues' musical-note logo remains an iconic look, but it would have been nice to include some parts of St. Louis' history in the design.

29. Tampa Bay Lightning

The Lightning's design is simple, clean, and unmistakably Tampa Bay, with the blue-and-white logo standing out against the ice. The team decided not to add any complexity. It would have been nice to add some lettering or other colours, considering past designs from the team had more to offer on the ice.

30. Dallas Stars



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The Stars' design provides the outline of the state of Texas, which is a better look than just the logo, but some fans would still prefer the more traditional design.

31. Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets take a relatively conservative approach. There's nothing particularly wrong with the presentation. It simply doesn't have the same visual punch or creativity as some of the other centre-ice designs around the league.

32. Colorado Avalanche

The Avalanche's centre-ice logo is clean and recognizable, with the burgundy, blue and white combination. The design feels fairly conventional and lacks big-time appeal in comparison to other teams.

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Sportsnet.ca / Steady Stolarz leads new-look Maple Leafs to first victory

Sonny Sachdeva

TORONTO — It's been nearly 11 months since Anthony Stolarz led the Toronto Maple Leafs to a win under the Scotiabank Arena lights. Nearly a year since the netminder got the blue-and-white faithful on their feet and heard his name chanted from the stands.

The last time he was in the cage with the Maple Leaf on his chest, the 32-year-old saw his outing end after just two-and-a-half minutes, a groin injury forcing him out of the lineup and into a summer of difficult rehab. This after a tumultuous 2025-26 campaign made no easier by the uneven play of the group in front of him.

Wednesday night, with his Maple Leafs looking for redemption in the second half of a season-opening back-to-back, the netminder stepped back into the cage, led Toronto to its first victory of the season, and reminded fans how valuable a contributor he can be.

"It was good," he said from the Maple Leafs' locker room after the dust settled on a 2-1 win over the visiting New York Islanders. "First win of the season — it's a great feeling. Something for our team to grow on, expand on, and continue to go forward. Obviously you want to win the first one last night, but to come out the way we did, respond the way we did, was extremely encouraging."

The six-foot-six netminding behemoth played no small part in Toronto claiming that first victory. While the Maple Leafs came up with a cleaner performance than they did Tuesday night against Montreal — stringing together some more offence, limiting the self-inflicted errors in their own zone — the Islanders still managed a decent collection of dangerous chances on the home side.

It was in the latter half of the tilt, especially, that Stolarz found his rhythm.

His squad had built up a 2-0 lead — Colton Sissons potting his first goal as a Maple Leaf, and Easton Cowan doubling the lead on the power play — when the Islanders started to make a push. The visitors started collecting chances, found their way to the power play and kept the pressure on. But the veteran in the cage stood his ground. Midway through the second period, as he sprawled out to hold the Isles at bay on the heels of a man-advantage, the Scotiabank Arena crowd made their appreciation known, raining chants of 'STO-LY! STO-LY!' down on the ice.

Early in the third came another moment of quality, when New York's Anthony Duclair cut across the crease, tried to wait Stolarz out and flip the puck over him, only to see the netminder contort himself and thwart the winger with a raised pad — a move he later dubbed a "half scorpion."

"He just kept dragging it, and dragging it — you know, you're just trying to do whatever it takes to make that save," Stolarz said of the play late Wednesday.

It's no doubt a positive sign for the Maple Leafs as they look to return to their former place near the top of the Atlantic Division this season. The campaign in the rearview was as much a dip for Stolarz as it was for the club as a whole — the goaltender put up a league-leading .926 save percentage one year prior, only to see it slip to .893 last season.

When the disappointing year had finally come to a close — with his Maple Leafs missing out on a return to the post-season — Stolarz admitted the pressure of being the club's No. 1 option had been difficult to bear.

"From a physical standpoint, I felt fine. I think it was more or less just putting too much pressure on myself and trying to be perfect," he said as the club closed out their season last April. "Obviously it was the first time in my career where I had the ball in my court and was able to run with it. I was trying to be this perfect goalie and kind of strayed away from what made me successful."

A summer to clear his head — and rediscover his game — did wonders.

"Just forget about last season," he said Wednesday of his mindset this summer. "Just go out there and rehab. I had to first and foremost get healthy. I put a lot of work in there, tried to put on a lot of muscle just to keep my body strong. Once I got the okay to go back and skate, I was just working on simplifying my game, just staying patient. I worked on some hand-eye and movements around the crease, just trying to be as calm and collected as possible."

Wednesday night brought the first test since, and Stolarz no doubt passed with ease. Key to the equation, it seems, has been the arrival of Sergei Bobrovsky. The two-time Vezina Trophy winner paired with Stolarz during their Florida Panthers days, the duo winning the Stanley Cup together in 2024.

And while the arrival of the Russian phenom has allowed Stolarz to slide back into a more natural role as the club's No. 2 — unlike the past two seasons, in which he and Joseph Woll went toe to toe for the top job in the cage — the relationship between the two former Cats has been just as crucial.

"It's hard for me, because I don't know the players that well, but I mean, whatever he's done, it's been outstanding," head coach Jim Hiller said of Stolarz after Wednesday's win. "You know, I was just talking to Bob about him. They have a good relationship — Bob was just so happy, he thought he played remarkable. Maybe that has some effect on the guy too, just the comfort level with the two of them."

The decision by the new Maple Leafs brass to keep Stolarz in town — the club chose instead to trade Woll to Philadelphia in June — helped, too.

"It's a vote of confidence for me," Stolarz said. "You know, you look at the turnover, and they wanted to keep me around. For me, it's exciting. I want to be here, I want to play here. You want to win hockey games. And just seeing all the fresh faces, the personalities and the work ethic, the pedigree of all these players that we brought in, it's high calibre. We think we can do something special in this room."

There's a long road to navigate before then. The first win of the new campaign sets these Maple Leafs on the right path. There's still chemistry to find, a system to learn, an identity to hone. But after reigniting some doubt among the fanbase Tuesday, Wednesday's blue-collar victory comes as a sign of progress for the group.

"It's great to see that type of a win," Hiller said of the night. "You like to see the easy ones, trust me, when you're standing behind the bench. But you appreciate the hardness — the blocked shots, the desperation at the end. Those always feel pretty good too."

For Stolarz, and the half of the locker room that was here for the disappointing rollercoaster that was 2025-26, it's the true start of a new chapter. One win on the board, much still to prove, and another chance to keep building around the corner.

"It's a new season," Stolarz said Wednesday. "There's a lot of fresh blood. Whatever happened last season happened — we're not worried about that. We're just focused on this year. Just to be able to get the first one out of the way, in front of our home fans, is nice."

"It's a good stepping stone for us. We've just got to continue to build on it, and just get ready for Saturday."

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TSN.CA / Grateful Stolarz repays Leafs' confidence with first win of season

Mark Masters

Anthony Stolarz is grateful to still be in Toronto.

"It's a vote of confidence to me," the 32-year-old goalie said. "You know, you kind of look at the turnover, and they want to keep me around and, for me, it's exciting. I want to be here, want to play here."

New general manager John Chayka traded away goalies Joseph Woll and Dennis Hildeby as part of a busy first few months on the job. The Leafs had 10 newcomers in the lineup in Tuesday's season-opening loss to the Canadiens, including starting goalie Sergei Bobrovsky.

"You want to win hockey games and just seeing all the fresh faces and the personalities and the work ethic and the pedigree of all these players that we brought in, it's high-calibre," said Stolarz. "So we think we can do something special in this room."

Stolarz started last season as Toronto's starter after signing a four-year extension during training camp. That contract, which carries a \$3.75-million cap hit, starts this year.

With Woll away on personal leave, Stolarz struggled under the weight of a heavier workload at the start of last year. The New Jersey native left a game on Nov. 23 with what he called a "nerve issue" and did not return until Jan. 23. He then sustained a groin strain on April 8, which ended his season.

Stolarz posted a career-worst .893 save percentage while playing in just 26 games.

"Just forget about last season," he said of his mindset in the summer. "Just kind of go out there and, obviously, rehab. Have to first and foremost get healthy and put a lot of work in there. Tried to put on a lot of muscle to keep my body strong. Once I kind of got the okay to go back and skate, it was just kind of working on just simplifying my game and just staying patient, working on some hand-eye [coordination] and movements around the crease and just trying to be as calm and collected as possible."

Stolarz looked calm and collected during his season debut on Wednesday stopping 26 of 27 shots to pick up Toronto's first win, a 2-1 victory over the New York Islanders.

"Yeah, it was good," Stolarz said. "Been locked in in pre-season practices, so I just kind of let that roll over, carry over, and just tried to play a simple game."

Fans appreciated the effort and chanted 'Stollie! Stollie' after a couple of big saves.

"I was just talking to Bob[rovsky] about him, and they have a good relationship," said coach Jim Hiller. "Bob was just so happy and thought he played remarkable. You know, maybe that has some effect on the guy too, just the comfort level with the two of them."

Stolarz served as Bobrovsky's backup in Florida during the 2023-24 season when the Panthers won the Stanley Cup. Stolarz led the NHL with a .925 save percentage that year. He posted a .926 save percentage to lead the league again during his first season in Toronto.

But Stolarz has never played in more than the 34 games he logged during that first season with the Leafs. And now he's back in a backup role behind Bobrovsky.

"He's a great goalie and a hell of a person," Stolarz said of the two-time Vezina Trophy winner. "We get along extremely well. He's been extremely helpful for this team, just his professionalism and the way he goes about his business."

Bobrovsky is already part of Toronto's leadership group. But he's also 38 and coming off a season in which he posted the worst save percentage (.875) of his career. TSN Hockey Insider Chris Johnston notes that it may

end up being close to a 50-50 split in starts this season when it comes to Toronto's tandem.

Based on his first start, Stolarz appears up for the challenge.

"He was sharp," said third-line winger Colton Sissons. "He made some big saves at key moments, especially down the stretch there. He had a great, great game, so that's good to see."

Easton Cowan ended his first season of professional hockey by helping the Toronto Marlies win the Calder Cup last spring.

"It did a lot," the 21-year-old winger said. "I mean, any time you're playing pro in the playoffs helps a lot, so a lot of confidence heading into this year and just want to keep it going."

At the end of the shortened camp, Auston Matthews identified Cowan as someone who deserved praise for a strong performance.

"I think Cowboy's looked really good," the captain said. "I feel like he's taken a step in his game."

It continues to look that way as Cowan leads the Leafs in scoring with three points in two games. His power-play goal on Wednesday proved to be the difference against the Islanders.

Hiller didn't know much about Cowan before getting the job with the Leafs, but is quickly becoming a big fan.

"I just like his trajectory and how mentally he really wants it," the coach said. "And it's easy to say, [but] then there's all these things that you have to do. And when I see him getting to the rink early and stretching and eating and then going into the gym, that tells me he's on the right path."

Cowan spent the summer focusing on winning puck battles and picking pucks off the wall while also packing some more muscle onto his 6-foot frame. The pride of Mount Brydges, Ont. believes 190 pounds is his optimal weight and will allow him to be strong and speedy. He weighed in at 189 pounds at training camp.

Stolarz describes the difference in Cowan from his first year to second year as "night and day."

"He's playing with a lot of confidence," Stolarz continued. "I think the defensive aspect of his game has improved, as well. He's getting some PK time out there. You know, I think that's just maturity and growing as a player."

Cowan, Sissons and centre Nick Paul have the makings of a good shutdown line for the Leafs. Hiller started them against Bo Horvat and New York's top unit on Wednesday night and liked the results.

Sissons scored the game's opening goal with Paul and Cowan picking up assists.

After the game, two reporters attempted to ask Sissons about Cowan at the same time.

"If you're both asking about it, I think he was pretty good," Sissons said with a grin. "Yeah, he was feeling it. Just a dynamic player. He has the puck on his stick a lot and makes a lot of good plays, so really blessed to be playing with him right now."

And Cowan still has room to get better. Much better, in fact.

"Sky's the limit with that kid," Sissons said of the 28th overall pick of the 2023 draft. "Yeah, he's got all the potential in the world."

With first overall pick Gavin McKenna joining the Leafs, Cowan is no longer the youngest player on the team.

"Everyone's been great to us," Cowan said. "Some young juice and some veterans, it goes a long way and we want to keep it going and keep having fun."

Cowan and McKenna played together on Team Canada at the 2025 IIHF World Juniors and are relishing the chance to reunite in Toronto. They are playing together on the second power-play unit and are often spotted smiling and laughing together on the ice before and after practices.



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"It's been great," Cowan said. "I mean, we got to know each other well in Ottawa there a couple years ago and now that we're playing on the same team, it's pretty cool. You guys see what he does on the ice, but off the ice he's just an unbelievable guy. I love hanging out with him and excited to get closer and keep playing with him."

After a nervy minus-two debut on Tuesday, McKenna looked more comfortable on Wednesday night and should've picked up an assist but a 2-on-1 pass to William Nylander somehow slid through the Swede's legs.

"Well, I thought he was better," Hiller said of the 18-year-old rookie. "We talked about that, [about] taking a step ... Almost had his first assist there on that one. Actually, he had three or four plays. On the power play, I thought he was probably most dangerous. So, yeah, a step and better again."

Hiller was happy and a bit relieved to pick up his first win as Leafs coach.

"Well, you want to get it, right?" he said. "I'll be honest with you, you want to get the first one into the column. But it's not just me. We've got a new coaching staff, we've got a new general manager, new players so, really, I think probably all of us feel pretty good about getting the first one."

Cowan declared that "the vibes are great" in the Leafs' room.

"As soon as you get all four lines going, I mean, it's fun to play," Cowan continued. "Everyone's laughing, having fun, which is good."

"It's a great feeling and something for our team to grow on and expand on," said Stolarz. "Obviously, you want to win the first one, but to come out the way we did and respond the way we did was extremely encouraging for sure."

The Leafs will get back on the ice for a practice on Friday, which will be their first one since the blockbuster deal that saw winger Kirill Marchenko arrive from the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Toronto will then host the Ottawa Senators on Saturday.

Lines in Wednesday's game:

Marchenko - Matthews - Roslovic

McKenna - Tavares - Nylander

Cowan - Paul - Sissons

Duhaime - Blueger - Groulx

McCabe - Tanev

Rielly - Raddysh

Ekman-Larsson - Stecher

Stolarz starts

Bobrovsky

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