



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 6, 2026

The Athletic

Jacob Slavin isn't complacent after a historic season: 'I hold a high standard'

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — "It was one of those games where it's just like, 'What the heck was that?'" Jacob Slavin said of Game 1 of last spring's Eastern Conference final. "I think my dad said the same thing: 'What the heck was that?'"

For the third time in four seasons, the Carolina Hurricanes had advanced to the NHL's final four, this time against the upstart Montreal Canadiens. But even though Carolina swept Ottawa and Philadelphia in the opening two rounds, the ghosts of past Eastern Conference finals were lurking in the shadows.

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"I was out there for, what, four goals?" Slavin said last week as the Hurricanes started the defense of their Stanley Cup title.

More than four months later, Slavin recalled his minus-4 night, taking blame for some of the goals in a game he called the worst of his career.

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Following the Canadiens' stunning 6-2 win — the Hurricanes, remember, had allowed just 10 goals in their previous eight playoff games — confidence swelled in Montreal while dread emerged in North Carolina.

But not for Slavin, even with the "what the heck" nature of Game 1.

"It was one of those things where, as much as it was the worst game of my career, I knew the mistakes I made," he said. "I knew they weren't normal mistakes."

Slavin credits his faith for keeping him grounded regardless of what happens on the ice on any given night.

"I think a lot of guys, when you have a game like that, can spiral though when their identity is found in hockey," Slavin said. "And so for me, it wasn't as much about spiraling and focusing on the game that just happened. It was more so just, 'OK, where's my identity found?' It's found in being in

who God says I am in my relationship with Him. ... And so that was really comforting for me."

Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal, who's had a front-row seat since Slavin debuted in the league in 2015, said no one should perceive Slavin's unfazed attitude about any on-ice struggles as a sign of someone who doesn't grit his teeth after a bad game.

"It's not that he's not hard on himself, though — he's incredibly hard on himself," Staal said. "So it's not like he sat at home like, 'All right, I played an OK game.' No, he's raring and ready to go to back it up and be the player that he wanted to be."

Slavin and the Hurricanes quickly turned around the series, winning the next four games in dominant fashion to advance to the Stanley Cup Final, where the team beat Vegas in six games to win its second title.

It capped a season that put Slavin in rare company — a Stanley Cup championship and Olympic gold in the same year — even though, by his own account, he wasn't at his best for much of it.

The Hurricanes were without the injured Slavin for much of the first half of the season, the first time in his career he missed more than six games.

"Our record wasn't terrible without him, but my goodness, we missed him a lot — especially our PK for sure," Staal said.

Carolina's penalty kill, consistently in the top five in the league since Brind'Amour took over as coach, ranked 19th in the NHL when Slavin returned to the lineup for good on Jan. 10. For the rest of the season, the unit ranked fourth in the league — finishing 11th overall — and was nearly impenetrable in the playoffs, killing off 91.5 percent of opposition power plays.

"You saw there was a huge boost when he showed up," Brind'Amour said. "There's a reason. ... He's an elite defender, and that's no different than having an elite goal scorer, what it can do to a power play or kill — it's the same. And I think that's the value."

Slavin also had huge value to Team USA at the Olympics. Paired with Minnesota's Brock Faber, Slavin helped shut down opponents all the way through the gold medal game.

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That's a scary thought for the rest of the league, if anyone believed the Hurricanes couldn't play better than they did during their Cup run.

"When he came back, we were that much better, even if maybe not to his standard, whatever that is," Brind'Amour said. "It still was way better than when he wasn't in there."

That high standard makes analyzing last season particularly interesting for Slavin. On one hand, he became the first player in a dozen years — and the first American since 1980 — to win both Olympic gold and the Stanley Cup in the same year.

On the other hand, he had his first injury-filled season and thought he lacked his normal consistency when in the lineup.

"Yeah, that's, I guess, the yin and yang of not playing necessarily my best hockey but having a really successful

year team-wise," he said. "That's just God's blessing, I guess. And I'm just thankful for it. It's fun to be a part of winning teams, and that just happened to work out to be that way last year with two different wins."

Brind'Amour thinks Slavin, at 32, still has several years left at an elite level.

"I think you've got to take care of yourself, and he clearly does that and works hard," Brind'Amour said of the key to longevity in the NHL. "But the hockey sense doesn't leave you. Guys that are smart can probably play a little longer."

And the Hurricanes have brought back nearly all the lineup that bulldozed its way through the playoffs last spring.

"It's exciting for our whole team because we had a lot of guys who I think could have been a lot better last year," Slavin said. "We were as good as we needed to be to win, but I think we still had another level to get to."



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Preview: October 6 at Montreal

Carolina faces a 2026 playoff foe for the second time already this season

By Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

MONTREAL - The Carolina Hurricanes have crossed the border for the first time this season, arriving at Bell Centre for a meeting against the Montreal Canadiens.

When: Tuesday, Oct. 6

Puck Drop: 7:00 p.m. ET

Watch on HHN: Prime Video, Spectrum, Fubo | Full Broadcast Info

Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes App

Canes Record: 1-1-1 (3 Points - 3rd, Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 3-2 Win (OT) over the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday, Oct. 3

Canadiens Record: 1-0-1 (3 Points - 5th, Atlantic Division)

Canadiens Last Game: 6-5 Loss (OT) to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday, Oct. 3

Last Time Out...

After being displeased with their first two performances of the season, the Canes "played their game" on Saturday in Philadelphia. Outshooting the Flyers 40-18, the Canes needed overtime, but in the end, they walked away with their first victory.

Sebastian Aho scored both goals in regulation, and Shayne Gostisbehere ended things in the bonus frame.

In his first regular-season game since Dec. 20, 2025, Pyotr Kochetkov picked up the win in net, turning away 16 of 18 shots.

The Power Play...

Scoring has been a hurdle for the Canes through three games, but they've found one area of success so far with it - the man advantage.

Of their five goals this season, three have come on the power play, including two in Saturday's victory in Philadelphia.

Among all 32 teams, their three power-play goals this season rank tied for fifth.

In Net...

Victorious on Saturday, Pyotr Kochetkov was in the crease typically manned by the next day's starter at Monday's practice.

However, with the day-before indicator serving as less of a sure-fire sign than in previous seasons, the team could also opt to go with Brandon Bussi for a third time in four games.

On The Other Side...

After earning a win on opening night in Toronto, the Habs nearly pulled a rabbit out of a hat for a second victory on Saturday. Trailing 5-1 in Pittsburgh, four unanswered goals forced overtime, earning them a point before the Penguins thwarted the comeback bid.

Captain Nick Suzuki leads the production in the early going, scoring once and adding three assists.

In net, Jakub Dobes has started both games.

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 white uniforms.

What's Next After This Game?

The Canes will fly back to Raleigh immediately after the game. They're scheduled to practice on Wednesday and take on the Vancouver Canucks at Lenovo Center on Thursday.

Next Game: Thursday, Oct. 8 vs. Vancouver | 7:00 p.m. ET | Hurricanes Hockey Network | How To Watch



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Canes Recall Valimaki From Chicago

Canes PR

2–3 minutes

Blueliner posted 23 points (7g, 16a) in 27 AHL games with Chicago and Tucson in 2025-26

By Canes PR

October 05, 2026

RALEIGH, N.C. - Eric Tulsy, General Manager of the National Hockey League's Carolina Hurricanes, today announced that the team has recalled defenseman Juuso Valimaki from the Chicago Wolves of the American Hockey League (AHL).

About Juuso Valimaki:

The 27-year-old has appeared in two games with the Chicago Wolves this season.

The Tampere, Finland native split the 2025-26 season between Tucson and Chicago in the American Hockey League (AHL), totaling 23 points (7g, 16a) in 27 regular-

season games, and adding 14 points (5g, 9a) in 21 playoff games to help the Chicago Wolves reach the Calder Cup Final.

Originally selected by the Calgary Flames in the first round, 16th overall at the 2017 NHL Draft, Valimaki has appeared in 271 career NHL games with Calgary, Arizona and Utah, totaling 72 points (11g, 61a).

The 6'2", 201-pound blueliner has registered 55 points (13g, 42a) in 85 career AHL games with Stockton, Tucson and Chicago.

Prior to turning professional, Valimaki spent three seasons in the Western Hockey League (WHL) with Tri-City, tallying 138 points (40g, 98a) and 92 penalty minutes in 159 games.

He was named to the WHL West Second All-Star Team in 2017 and 2018.

Valimaki was acquired by the Hurricanes on Jan. 5, 2026, in exchange for future considerations, and he re-signed a one-year contract with the club on June 24, 2026.



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yahoo!sports

Carolina Hurricanes' 3-Team Trade Pitch Acquires \$59.9 Million Goaltender

By: Maria Aldrich

The Carolina Hurricanes have been one of the top franchises floating in trade rumors this year.

Some of the NHL's most notable stars are on the verge of shipping out, and the Hurricanes haven't held back their interest.

In a recent trade proposal, an NHL writer suggested a massive three-team trade involving Carolina, which would allow them to land a valuable goaltender.

Carolina Hurricanes' Trade Pitch Lands Winnipeg Jets' Connor Hellebuyck

Connor Hellebuyck

Adam Gretz of Bleacher Report pieced together a major trade proposal involving 33-year-old Hellebuyck.

Per his suggestion, the Hurricanes, the St. Louis Blues and the Winnipeg Jets would enter a three-team trade.

Carolina would receive Hellebuyck from the Jets; the Blues would receive defenseman Alexander Nikishin and goalie Pyotr Kochetkov, while Winnipeg would acquire goaltender Joel Hofer, prospect Felix Unger Sorum, a first-round pick from Carolina and a first-round pick from St. Louis.

Considering Nikishin and Hellebuyck are two of the top names circled on the trade block right now, this would be a significant transaction.

Hellebuyck is now in his 12th NHL season, but he's not on the ice. Instead, he's suspended for failing to show up for training camp.

He's been vocal about wanting a trade, but he has no choice but to play the grueling waiting game.

During his 2025-26 campaign, he appeared behind the crease in 57 games and posted a 2.86 goals-against average with a .895 save percentage.

His entire career has been spent in Winnipeg after they selected him ninth overall in the fifth round of the 2012 NHL draft.

But would the Jets jump on the offer?

"The question would be if this is enough for Winnipeg," Gretz wrote. "Hofer is a solid goalie, but he's not Hellebuyck. He's younger, but he's also a restricted free agent after this season and there is always that question if he would sign there."

Last year, Hofer appeared in 46 games and registered a 2.61 goals-against average with a .910 save percentage.

He comes with less experience than Hellebuyck, which could also deter the Jets from making a splash.

Ultimately, for this proposal to come to fruition, Winnipeg must be on board. But at face value, there seems to be more in it for Carolina.

Where Do the Hurricanes Stand Right Now?

Rod Brind'Amour

The Hurricanes are coming off a tight 3-2 overtime victory over the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday, Oct. 3.

They are now riding a 1-1-1 overall record to start their 2026-26 campaign.

Once Tuesday, Oct. 4 rolls around, they will be back on the ice, this time at Centre Bell to take on the Montreal Canadiens at 7 p.m. ET.

Montreal is now 1-0-1 after their Saturday night 6-5 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

While the Hurricanes plan for their potential Hellebuyck move, they have a tough schedule up ahead.



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Red Wings Solve Edvinsson, Nikishin, Hellebuyck All in 3-Team Trade Idea

By: Billy Heyen

The Detroit Red Wings, Carolina Hurricanes and Winnipeg Jets all have a problem.

Those problems, by name, are Simon Edvinsson, Alexander Nikishin and Connor Hellebuyck.

In an incredibly simple three-team trade proposal by Bleacher Report's Adam Gretz, those would all get solved in one fell swoop.

The trade proposed by Gretz in his new article on Monday would look like this:

Red Wings get: D Alexander Nikishin

Hurricanes get: G Connor Hellebuyck

Jets get: D Simon Edvinsson

The problems aren't necessarily created equally, but this trade would be about a solution, and a solution, and a solution.

"I am just going to call this the Tylenol trade because it is an attempt to solve everybody's headaches," Gretz writes.

The Red Wings would still have Dylan Larkin hanging over their head, but at least they'd have Edvinsson resolved.

In the process, the Red Wings would get a strong defenseman in his own right in Nikishin.

The Hurricanes, defending Stanley Cup champs, certainly wouldn't complain in ending up with the gold medalist Hellebuyck in net.

Why This Would Work

There are cases to be made both for this trade working and against it working.

On the for side, it's mostly about solving all those issues all at once.

"Hellebuyck wants out of Winnipeg," Gretz writes. "Carolina cannot get Nikishin signed and wants to use him as a trade piece for Hellebuyck, but Winnipeg does not want him. Detroit cannot get Edvinsson signed, and now he reportedly prefers a trade away from the Red Wings."

It throws all the problems into one bowl, mixes them up, and spits them out.

It certainly is a great way for everyone in these franchises to breathe a little easier, although who knows if that actually solves all the drama with these players to begin with.

Why This Wouldn't Work

The problem here is that it isn't a given that each of the three players would be happy with the solution.

Hellebuyck likely would enjoy playing in the U.S. for a powerhouse team.

Nikishin may not mind Detroit, although it's certainly not as talented a roster as Carolina.

Would Edvinsson be up for going to Winnipeg and signing an extension there? There'd be doubts, for sure.

"Is it perfect? No. Probably not," Gretz writes. "But somebody has to get something done here."

Even if this wouldn't be the final trade package, it does capture a lot of the right ideas. The best way for these teams to solve their own problems is to identify problems elsewhere.

If they do that properly, then they can see where their problem becomes someone else's solution, and vice versa.

Would a three-team trade with three total players be too good to be true? Probably. It might be the right place to start thinking, though.



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LINKS

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<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/canes-recall-valimaki-from-chicago>

<https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/carolina-hurricanes-3-team-trade-163917546.html>

<https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/red-wings-solve-edvinsson-nikishin-175718000.html>

SportScan

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

1225004 Carolina Hurricanes

Jacob Slavin isn't complacent after a historic season: 'I hold a high standard'

Cory Lavalette6-8 minutes 05/10/2026

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That high standard makes analyzing last season particularly interesting for Slavin. On one hand, he became the first player in a dozen years — and the first American since 1980 — to win both Olympic gold and the Stanley Cup in the same year.

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The Athletic LOADED: 10.06.2026



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The Athletic / NHLPA, agents on Gary Bettman no-trade comments: 'An attack on players' rights'

By Pierre LeBrun

Morgan Rielly might not be on the Toronto Maple Leafs if it weren't for the no-move clause in his contract.

He knows that. And even when he opened the door — with a nudge from the Maple Leafs — to the possibility of a trade during the offseason, he controlled the short list of teams via that clause. In the end, he stayed put, which is what he wanted anyway.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman kicked a hornet's nest on Thursday, suggesting the league could talk to the NHL Players' Association about tweaking no-move and no-trade clauses because, he feels, they're being used in ways that weren't originally intended — namely players requesting trades and controlling the ensuing process.

But the attention on those trade requests overshadows all the players who do use their trade or movement protection for the stated purpose. Like Rielly.

When he signed his deal in October 2021, it was a good contract for the Leafs: eight years at a \$7.5 million cap hit. There's no question he could have fetched more on the open market the following summer. But in return, he wanted peace of mind, which a full no-move gave him.

"That's what it is when you're negotiating a contract — there's give and take," Rielly told The Athletic on Friday. "You put a lot of value in trade protection because you're happy where you are and you want to play for that team you have played on or (are) about to sign with. You may have to give something up when it comes to salary. If that's important to you (a no-trade clause), then it's worth something. It's like anything in bargaining or in negotiations. There's give and take."

"I know for me, when I was negotiating my contract, it was important for me to be in Toronto. I didn't want to sign and end up playing somewhere else a year or two later. It was important to me because this is where I wanted to be."

Why the Sharks went No. 1 in our NHL Franchise Draft

Scott Wheeler, Corey Pronman and more

For the vast majority of players, this is what no-trade clauses are about.

And that's why the NHLPA, which until now hadn't commented on Bettman's words, does not agree it's a subject worth re-examining.

"First, we think the no-trade, no-move clause is being used as originally intended," Ron Hainsey, the assistant executive director at the NHLPA, told The Athletic this weekend. "It's a player's right to negotiate salary, salary structure, term, as well as a no-move or no-trade with their club if they're able to do so and bargain in good faith. It's pretty simple if you've negotiated a no-trade. Whether it's 10 teams or 15 or 32, the club isn't able to trade you to those teams without your consent."

"Our position is that the clauses are acting as they were intended to work."

Hainsey added that the NHLPA does not appreciate that this is even a conversation at the moment.

"The beginning of this conversation about no-move and no-trade clauses, we do take as an attack on players' CBA-negotiated rights," Hainsey said. "And we will treat it as such."

Now, to be fair, Bettman was answering a question about no-trade clauses on a Sportsnet radio show. I don't think he has decided this is a cause he wants to trumpet at all costs. And he did point out that he doesn't think "one offseason a problem makes."

Still, he did say if this continues to be a trend, then the league might want to look at it with the NHLPA. And that mere suggestion frayed some nerves around the league.

The Athletic reached out to the NHL to see if Bettman wanted to further clarify his comments, and a league spokesman politely said the comments stood.

Rielly's agent is J.P. Barry of CAA Sports, whose firm with Pat Brisson, James Nice and other agents represents the most players in the NHL — including the likes of Sidney Crosby, Macklin Celebrini, Nathan MacKinnon, Dylan Larkin and the Hughes brothers, among many others.

Barry has been in the business for more than 30 years and in fact worked in the NHLPA offices before becoming an agent. The dude has CBA DNA.

Bettman's comments sparked a detailed response from Barry.

"Almost every potential negotiation element that other sports use has been eliminated in the NHL over the past several CBAs," Barry told The Athletic on Friday. "We currently have no performance bonuses outside of rookie contracts, no player or club options, no voidable years, no renegotiation clauses, and the maximum length of contracts has been ratcheted down to six or seven years maximum."

"Players give up significant compensation demands to obtain a no-trade clause. They are 'purchased' by the player. If they are going to try to eliminate no-trade clauses, then we should also discuss elimination of the buyout and the hard cap at the same time."

And there you have it.

Lost in some teams' and fans' support of tweaking no-trade clauses is the reality of the cost that would be attached. You want players to give up no-trade clauses or limit their reach? Well, get ready to CBA horse-trade.

Sure, let's get rid of the salary cap, too, as Barry said. You know that's not happening. That's the most important part of Bettman's legacy in the eyes of NHL owners.

When a veteran agent like Barry pushes back like that, you understand the minefield that Bettman walked into with his comments.

Octagon agent Andy Scott — who represents Leon Draisaitl, Mikko Rantanen and Jason Robertson, among others — feels there are two separate issues at play.

"No-trade protection is a negotiated contractual right, earned based on a player's bargaining position," he said Saturday. "If a player later asks to be traded, the team is always free to say no. And we are seeing examples of that now. Where I disagree with Gary's comments is the suggestion that no-trade clauses have somehow moved away from their original purpose. If anything, I think the current system falls short of that purpose. Many of the league's top young players are signing long-term contracts that extend well into their UFA years, yet they cannot receive no-trade protection until the date they otherwise would have become unrestricted free agents."

"If the objective is to give teams the ability to lock up their best young players long-term, while giving those players certainty that they will actually remain with the organization they committed to, then no-trade protection should be permitted during the RFA years when a player signs a medium- or long-term deal extending into UFA years."

Oof, that's the last thing teams would want — to give even younger players no-trade protection. But you get where Scott is coming from.

Eliminating or tweaking hard-earned bargained tools is not a simple conversation. It opens a can of worms.

"I don't make anything of it," said Judd Moldaver, who reps Connor McDavid, Auston Matthews, Zach Werenski and Roman Josi, among others. "Teams agree to these deals, and if they didn't understand the purpose, then that is on them, not the player all of a sudden. All are privy to the same CBA, of course. The membership and PA can certainly explore elasticity to the system if we're going to talk about ways to tweak the system. It goes both ways."

Agent Matt Keator, who dropped a grenade on the NHL cap landscape this summer when his client Leo Carlsson agreed to the Philadelphia Flyers' offer sheet, doesn't get why there's an issue with no-trade clauses to begin with.

"It's a freely negotiated portion of the contract, of any contract — the terms," Keator said. "What's the issue here? If guys can negotiate with teams, they can negotiate these no-trades."



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And teams can decide not to include them. Of course, that's a hard thing to do with the proliferation of no-trades around the league. They've become a staple. If a team wants to lure a top player, the no-move or no-trade is usually baked in. Maybe the most logical tweak would be for any player with a full no-trade asking for a trade to have to at least list a handful of teams — not just one or two. But again, that's a bargaining issue.

The unspoken part of what Keator said, I think, is that Bettman may want to save teams from themselves by limiting no-trades.

Good luck with that.

Hainsey pointed to cases over the past 10 months that have ignited this debate. First, the trades of Quinn Hughes from the Vancouver Canucks and Brady Tkachuk from the Ottawa Senators.

"In two of the cases that have made news, the clubs initiated contact with the player two years in advance of the expiration of their contracts to get a pledge, for the lack of a better word, that they would stay and sign a new contract when they were able to," Hainsey said. "When the players chose not to give that pledge, the clubs decided, as is their right, to go ahead and move the player two years before the expiry of their contracts, knowing full well going into those conversations that the player had negotiated a no-move and that would be part of the equation of moving the player."

Then there's Dylan Larkin and Connor Hellebuyck, both of whom have asked for trades and both of whom still have not moved but will have great influence over where they end up because of their no-trade protection. Yes, that limits the field for the Detroit Red Wings and Winnipeg Jets, respectively, to maximize trade return.

"For two unique individual reasons, the players have decided at this point as a last resort that the relationship no longer works," Hainsey said. "To this point, to no one's happiness, those two cases haven't been resolved. ... Sometimes, a long-term relationship doesn't work for the player or the club, and they work together in order to find a resolution."

On the flip side of the Larkin and Hellebuyck situations is the St. Louis Blues trying to trade Colton Parayko to the Buffalo Sabres last season. Parayko nixed it, as was his right via his no-trade. But in the process, he sure felt a lot of pressure to make a massive decision. Not a lot of fun.

Point being, it cuts both ways.

John Tavares is in Year 2 of a four-year, \$4.39 million average-annual-value deal that was a hometown discount even before this summer's contract explosion. It was important for the former Leafs captain to get a full no-move for the first two years. The trade protection drops to a modified no-trade after.

Take less money? Sure. But give the guy some trade security in return.

"Two sides bargain," Tavares said Friday. "You earn or you fight for those rights in your contract, and you use them when they're applied. ... Obviously when you have more teams on trade protection, (it gives) more leverage to the player, right? At the end of the day, it comes down to a negotiation between the club and the player. However that works out, the contract is in place to deal with those situations if and when they arrive. If you want to start taking away some of these clauses or things that players earned or fought for, I think it becomes a bigger issue."

And why do we need to even have this fight at a time when revenues are soaring?

"I think we see the league is in a good place," Tavares continued. "The cap is growing. Salaries are rising. The league is really prospering. So to me, we're in a good place. Whichever way things were interpreted this offseason, I think it can be looked at in a number of different ways."

Which is to say, there's no simple fix here. Is a fix really needed? Be careful opening that door.

"From our point of view, there's no valid reason to even be having this discussion," Hainsey said. "Again, we take it as the beginning of an attack on players' rights."

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The Athletic / The Hockey 100: Why a young Cale Makar 'didn't look like the rest of the guys'

By Peter Baugh

As part of our kickoff to the 2026-27 NHL season, we are publishing excerpted chapters from The Hockey 100, The Athletic's definitive book on the 100 greatest men's players of the expansion era, courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers. The book is available for preorder now, with an Oct. 27 release date.

Today, in our initial extract, we look at the origin story of Cale Makar, already one of the top defensemen in league history.

Entering his key developmental years as he grew up in Calgary, Cale Makar was far from a phenom prospect.

"He never made the Alberta Cup team, never got invited to the Hockey Canada camps or anything," his father, Gary, said.

But in 2013, the Medicine Hat Tigers selected Makar in the eighth round of the Western Hockey League Bantam Draft, putting major junior hockey on the table as a potential developmental route. It was validating, his dad said. Somebody had noticed there was talent that outweighed his son's 125-pound body.

But it wasn't the right path for him. Makar enjoyed two camps in Medicine Hat, but Gary said joining the Tigers was never a serious consideration. Had he played in the WHL, he would have forfeited NCAA hockey eligibility, and the Makar family — with Cale an active part of the decision-making process — viewed college as the best plan. If he chose not to play major junior, he could have multiple seasons at Junior A, then a maximum of four years in college, where scouts could see him play.

The Brooks Bandits in the Alberta Junior Hockey League gave Cale a longer runway.

Brooks coach Ryan Papaioannou first saw Makar in 2014 while scouting a Mac's World Invitational Tournament. Makar was playing for the AAA Calgary Flames and "looked like someone's little brother on the ice," Papaioannou said. But there was something different about him. His skating was dynamic. His hands were deceptive.

"He didn't look like the rest of the guys," Papaioannou said.

Papaioannou gave Makar a chance to join the Bandits for the end of the 2014-15 season and playoff run. The defenseman, who was 16 at the time, jumped on the opportunity.

Gary remembers how tiny his son looked on the ice — how he worried he was going to get crunched by bigger bodies. But Makar held his own, posting seven points in 20 playoff games.

"Outside of being way smaller than everyone else, he was doing things that a lot of guys probably didn't have the confidence to do," Papaioannou said. "He would be up at the blue line, one-on-one with guys, backhand, toe drag guys — just stuff you wouldn't see a defenseman normally do."

That's been a constant throughout Makar's career. No one operates quite like him.

Over 157 combined regular-season and postseason games with Brooks, he had 44 goals and 172 points. He worked to improve defensive deficiencies in his game, and his NHL Draft stock skyrocketed.

Wade Klippenstein, then scouting for Colorado, considered him a top-three round pick on first viewing, but he was hard to evaluate because he wasn't playing against a ton of future NHLers as he would have in the WHL. But six months before the draft, Makar wowed scouts representing Canada West at the 2016 Junior A Challenge.

In his report from the game, Klippenstein wrote that he was the most skilled defenseman in the draft.

"Nobody skates like this guy and no one can match his pace of play," he emailed Alan Hepple, then the Avalanche director of amateur scouting. By that point, Klippenstein viewed him as a top-10 NHL pick.

The 2016-17 Avalanche, meanwhile, were in the midst of what was at the time the worst season in the salary cap era. The draft lottery didn't reward them, though. They fell to the No. 4 pick, which at the time felt like one final loss in a season full of them.

Little did the Avalanche know, it was a franchise-altering break. Had they gotten the No. 1 pick, they almost certainly would have been tempted by

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The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: We're back, it's too early and the Oilers are being weird

By Sean McIndoe

Welcome back to the Weekend Rankings. How was your summer? Go anywhere interesting? Do anything fun? Demand any trades? Cool, cool, let's get back to business.

If you're new to this column, the Weekend Rankings will appear every Monday morning throughout the regular season. It will feature my picks for the league's top five and bottom five teams, plus a closer look at two teams who didn't make either list and a bonus top five covering whatever else is worth looking at.

Importantly, this will be one of two sets of rankings you'll see on our NHL pages, and those two features are doing very different things. On Fridays, you'll get rankings from Dom and Other Sean. The Monday version will cover some of the same ground, but it's different in two key ways. First, and most crucially, it will include far fewer Taylor Swift references. And second, while the Friday rankings are meant to capture a snapshot of which teams are playing the best at a given moment, the Monday edition takes a longer-term view.

That means that we're basically spending the season trying to answer two questions: Who's going to win the Stanley Cup, and who's going to finish dead last? Obviously, wins and losses will move the needle on those questions. But not as much as you might expect, because this is a long season and weird things will happen. We try not to overreact to small samples, filtering through the noise to try to figure out what the signal is.

That means that a team won't necessarily be ranked in the top five just because they beat the Carolina Hurricanes and Colorado Avalanche in the same week. Big jumps up or down the list should be rare, barring a major trade or injury. A three-game streak doesn't automatically rewrite a team's expectations. Fair warning: If you run down to the comments to have a meltdown because your favorite team is ranked behind someone they just beat, you will be made fun of.

And to answer your other question: Yes, it's too early for this. Maybe more than ever — we're used to 82-game seasons, and one team (the Ottawa Senators) still has more games than that left to go. So yes, some of this is going to look ridiculous once we get a few more games that matter. But then again, that's half the fun, so off we go.

Asking NHL coaches who will win the Stanley Cup

Pierre LeBrun

Before we get to the first batch of power rankings, here are five observations from a busy first few days.

Bonus Five: Too-early observations from Week 1

5. The shortened preseason is a factor — We're just not sure how much of one, or in which direction. With teams playing just four exhibition games, and most players appearing in only a couple, the rust should be evident. So far, we've seen it blamed for the borderline unwatchable 1-0 Hurricanes/Panthers game that opened the season, as well as the 9-7 debacle between the Oilers and Canucks. This feels like the sort of factor we shouldn't just ignore. But it's also the kind of thing teams can lean on, a way to handwave away disappointing performances. In the end, it will matter — but it might take us a year or two to understand how, and how much.

4. The New York Rangers might be feisty — Three wins in four games is enough to boost them into top spot in the Metro. And while you wouldn't expect that to last especially long, wins against good teams like the Utah Mammoth and Tampa Bay Lightning are nice confidence boosters. One year ago, they were a punchline because they couldn't score at home. Now even the goalie is out there sniping.

3. Speaking of New York — The statement game of the weekend might have been the New York Islanders embarrassing the New Jersey Devils.

There hasn't been a ton of buzz around the Isles heading into the season, but a few more games like that 6-0 win would change that. Ilya Sorokin has a .968 save percentage through two games, which has to make you at least a little nervous if you're fighting for one of those Metro spots.

2. Man, the Aleksander Barkov news just stinks — The Panthers star hurt his knee early in his second game and is on LTIR. We don't know an exact diagnosis yet, but it's not good. The injury leaves the Panthers' season in limbo, given how badly they fell apart last year without their captain. Worse, it means hockey fans won't get to see one of the game's best players for another extended period. Just brutal all around.

1. Detroit Red Wings fans made themselves heard — And it wasn't just Dylan Larkin who took the brunt of it. Detroit fans are hardly the first to express a little preemptive frustration before a home opener. But this may be a situation worth watching. Last year's Buffalo Sabres success didn't just hand the Wings the honor of owning the longest playoff drought, it opened up a vacancy for the "most frustrated fan base" title. The Red Wings may be the early favorites to take the crown.

On to the inaugural rankings...

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

Good news everyone, the Toronto Maple Leafs identified their problem and got it fixed.

5. Montreal Canadiens (1-0-1, +0 true goals differential*) — The Saturday night comeback to salvage a point in Pittsburgh was one of those two-sided coins for a young team. You shouldn't be giving up six goals against a middle-of-the-pack team like the Penguins. But those two quick-strike goals were also a nice reminder of how scary this offense can be when it clicks. Meanwhile, the Barkov injury and so-so starts by the Lightning and Sabres help establish the Canadiens as a modest Atlantic favorite.

4. Vegas Golden Knights (2-1-0, +3) — Somebody has to rep the Pacific, and we're not ready to trust the San Jose Sharks yet. As far as the Oilers ... well, meet me down below.

3. Minnesota Wild (2-0-0, +5) — I'm going to try very hard to avoid the dreaded "three Central Division teams in the top five" problem this year. With the Stars off to an 0-2 start, that clears the spot for the Wild on the strength of a pair of workmanlike wins.

2. Colorado Avalanche (2-0-0, +9) — What's scarier, the defending Presidents' Trophy winners putting up 14 goals in their first two games, or Nathan MacKinnon breaking out the Muay Thai just in case anyone thought he couldn't get any more intense?

1. Carolina Hurricanes (1-1-1, -3) — Not a great start for the defending champs, but nothing to panic about either. They've got gimmes against the Canucks and Blackhawks coming up, but not before a conference final rematch with the Canadiens tomorrow night in Montreal.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Edmonton Oilers — Yeah, I have no idea what that was.

None of us were quite sure what to expect from the Oilers this year, especially early on. We knew they needed a strong start. And we knew the spotlight would be on Mike Babcock. But what would it all look like? Would we finally see a disciplined, structured Oilers team built for playoff success instead of highlight reels?

Gentle reader, we did not see that.

At least not right away. A season-opening home-and-home with the Canucks seemed to serve up the perfect warmup to the season. You know, take a couple of laps around the tutorial level before the difficulty ramps up.

Instead, we got a wild mini-series that saw both teams score at will. A 6-5 Canucks win in the opener was followed by a 9-7 Oilers reply, and the whole thing felt like we were back in the mid-'80s Smythe Division.

You could make the case that we didn't learn anything from those two games, other than "maybe the preseason mattered more than we thought." But it does feel like we can dismiss a couple of early-season



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hopes Oilers fans may have had: No, Babcock can't work miracles overnight, and no, the goaltending didn't miraculously fix itself over the summer (at least pending an eventual Frederik Andersen return).

Viewed optimistically, Saturday night's win over the Seattle Kraken represented a return to normalcy. It took late goals from Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid, but they got the win and did it without having their own net filled up. Babcock probably doesn't want to play McDavid 26 minutes a night (and first-week scoring star Evan Bouchard a team-leading 27), but you do what you have to do.

Add it all up, and the Oilers come out of Week 1 with five of a possible six points, sitting in first place in the Pacific. The path they took to get there was weird, but the landing spot feels about right. So what do you focus on: the scoreboard, or the vibes?

Either way, the Oilers sure seem to have planted their flag: They will not be boring this year. Good? Bad? We're still not sure. But a team that was already among the league's most fascinating heading into the year has now pushed to the very front of that line. Next up is the three-team California swing against the Ducks, Sharks and Kings, which is to say the ghosts of Pacific Division present, future and past. Let's see what Babcock and his Oilers can do with it.

Embrace the chaos. You're not an NHL coach, you're allowed to enjoy it.

Does Mike Babcock's style work in the current NHL?

Sean Gentile and Sean McIndoe

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last and the best lottery odds for the top pick in this year's draft and a shot at Landon DuPont.

RIP to longtime defenseman Lyle Odelein, who passed away on Friday. Odelein played for the Canadiens and Devils as well as six other teams, including serving as the first captain in Columbus Blue Jackets history.

5. Seattle Kraken (2-1-0, +8) – Both wins came against the Calgary Flames, but you can only play who the schedule-maker gives you. They host Vegas tomorrow in a nice early-season test.

4. Detroit Red Wings (0-2-0, -3) – Man, it was fun to watch Team USA heroes Dylan Larkin and Connor Hellebuyck go head-to-head last night, wasn't it? (Note to editors: I wrote this in May, remind me to update it if anything weird happens.)

3. Vancouver Canucks (2-2-0, +1) – They were decidedly fun against the Oilers, then handled business against the Flames and gave the Knights a tough game. And maybe the best news of all: Elias Pettersson (the forward) has looked dangerous again.

2. Chicago Blackhawks (0-3-0, -10) – The early question was always going to be whether the Hawks could tread water long enough to still be in the mix when Connor Bedard returns. The early returns: Nope. Three losses, all in regulation, have them already chasing the rest of the division. The good news is that eight of the next nine are at home, but it's already getting late early in Chicago.

1. Calgary Flames (0-3-0, -13) – If the season is going to be about securing a high pick (and it should be), losing in regulation to the Kraken and Canucks is a solid start. Now they face six of last year's playoff teams in a row, starting with the Avs on Thursday. As far as playoff chases go, this one has a chance to be over before it ever gets started.

Not ranked: Philadelphia Flyers – We promised we weren't going to overreact to small samples, so we won't panic over an 0-1-2 start in Philadelphia.

Instead, we can just state facts: They got absolutely embarrassed by the Pittsburgh Penguins in the opener, then earned a pair of loser points thanks to Joseph Woll, who faced down 84 shots over his first two starts as a Flyer and got them to overtime both nights.

Records can lie, especially early on, but I'm not all that sure this one is. Maybe you consider the opener to be a burn-the-tapes sort of debacle and move on. But the team was lacking in both OT losses — specifically, lacking cohesion against the Devils, and lacking urgency against the Hurricanes.

Woll's been a bright spot, but he may be the only one, as the Flyers' youth are off to tough starts. Super-rookie Porter Martone is scoreless,

while Matvei Michkov and Trevor Zegras have just one point each. And of course, the less said about Dan Vladar's first start, the better.

Still, it's three games. The Flyers now head to the road for a quick trip through the Atlantic, visiting Tampa, Ottawa and Boston before closing off their week with a rematch against the Hurricanes. By then, we'll have a better sense over whether this start is a stumble or a full-fledged Problem. For now, we'll keep it lowe

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Sportsnet.ca / What's next for Flames' Connor Zary after being placed on waivers

Eric Francis

CALGARY – Is Connor Zary about to be the next Sam Bennett, or the next Greg Nemisz?

Is the decision to place the 25-year-old Calgary Flames forward on waivers on Monday the beginning of the end of his NHL career, or is it simply a new beginning elsewhere?

Does another team see the merits of taking a chance on a middle-aged, middle-six forward with low production and a salary of \$3.77 million over the next two seasons?

Or does he clear waivers and get sent to the minors where he'll have a chance at regaining the confidence and touch that made him a junior star, worthy of being selected 24th overall in 2020?

So many questions in Calgary Monday, but none will be answered until the deadline to make waiver claims hits at noon MT / 2 p.m. ET Tuesday, when we find out where his next hockey game will be played.

It won't be with the Flames, as the coach and management have grown tired of waiting for the offensive production he was drafted to provide to emerge.

If it all sounds eerily similar to Bennett's situation, it's because it is: Junior phenom with skill to burn is drafted as a centre, but spends several years in Calgary unable to contribute offensively on the wing, let alone up the middle.

Clearly, they gave up on him too early.

Bennett was eventually traded to Florida, where the rejuvenated buzzsaw blossomed into a Conn Smythe Trophy winner.

It's a bit of an unfair comparison, as Bennett went fourth overall and had an expansive toolkit that included the type of moxie that can turn a game in several other ways.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the Flames and Zary has been every bit as fruitless and frustrating for both parties, leading to Monday's decision.

In a pre-season chat with Sportsnet.ca, Zary said he was fully aware of the fact that he needed to flip the narrative on a career that has seen him fail to produce with regularity outside of his initial call-up to the team three years ago when he, Nazem Kadri and Martin Pospisil appeared to catch lightning in a bottle.

He finished that year with 14 goals and 34 points in 63 games, but hasn't touched those numbers since.

The last two seasons were marked by injuries and frustration for Zary, who has been part of a chicken-or-the-egg debate ever since: Has he been given enough opportunity to flourish offensively, or has his play dictated he isn't deserving of much more than third-line roles, and the occasional seat in the press box?

Coach Ryan Huska's frustration with Zary has been evident, resurfacing again after Game 1 last week when Huska did everything but name Zary when talking about how unacceptable it is to be careless in the neutral zone with the puck.

He was subsequently benched for Game 2 too, and returned to the lineup for Game 3 Sunday with no effect.

"I think I know who I am as a player, but it's going out there and showing it," Zary said during training camp.

"You've got to produce. You've got to do it on a night-by-night basis, trying to help the team win, and trying to create plays that create scoring chances. That's what I have to do, is prove that to people and prove that to myself, and know I have the ability and the confidence to do that."

In all likelihood, his next step may be the Wranglers.

If so, the watch will be on to see if he can fight his way back, or fade away like Nemisz did when the star junior centreman failed to make his mark after the Flames took him 25th overall in the 2008 draft.

Make no mistake – this move isn't being made just to clear the way for Aydar Suniev to join the big club.

Despite a solid pre-season, Suniev still has to prove he can play the pro game at both ends of the ice before his confidence is challenged even further against the world's best.

Perhaps they'll play together on the farm, with Zary's playmaking ability helping Suniev along.

The Flames would love nothing more for Zary to regain his spark and touch, making him a productive member of the organization.

But patience is clearly wearing thin.

General manager Craig Conroy made it known around the league this summer that Zary was available, but no one bit.

And now, thanks to a humbling start for Zary and the Flames, things have degenerated to the point where a relationship that has not worked out for either side may be over. Or it may just take on a different form.

Progress needs to be made, especially in a rebuild, or changes are made.

Those who aren't pegged as future pillars are seen as placeholders easily swapped out.

It's up to Zary now – wherever he winds up – to prove there are plenty more chapters to be written in his story.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'No reason to panic': Maple Leafs patient despite McKenna line's rough start

Luke Fox

TORONTO — Gavin McKenna's family and friends came to Toronto to watch his first three home games in a Maple Leafs uniform.

"Hopefully, I can get my first something for them," the 2026 first-overall draft choice said ahead of Saturday's 3-2 loss the Ottawa Senators.

Unfortunately for McKenna and his travelling support club, the Wizard of Whitehorse begins Week 2 of his pro career still hunting that first something.

McKenna's stat line through three games: no goals, no assists, no blocks, no hits, three shots, five attempts, one takeaway, four giveaways, with an average ice time of 14:32.

This despite skating on a sheltered scoring line alongside the team's two top point-producers in 2025-26 and seeing 80 per cent of his shifts begin in the O-zone.

The Maple Leafs are certainly doing a better job defending the kid than their talented-loaded second line is, well, defending.

"He's doing really well. Like, he's young, and he just seems unflappable to me. I'm sure he wishes he had more right now. Of course. That's obvious. But I haven't seen it affect him," said Leafs head coach Jim Hiller. "When I talk to him, he's got a smile on his face, and he walks around here the same as he did two months ago and two weeks ago."

John Tavares, McKenna's centreman-slash-billet dad, points out what a unique challenge it is to jump into the rigours of the NHL straight from college.

McKenna is only 18, after all. At 164 pounds, he's a contender for lightest player in the league. He was slow to produce at Penn State last season before tearing up the NCAA. And three games, plus two pre-season contests, doesn't make for a great sample size.

"Continue to support him through it, and that's on me and Willy to help him out," Tavares said. "He's good. I think his smile and the joy being at the rink every day has been excellent."

Although no one is seriously questioning the high-IQ McKenna's ability to adapt and excel at the highest level, the composition of his line is already under fire.

Despite Auston Matthews' top line drawing the opposition's attention and Nick Paul's third unit tackling some tough assignments, the McKenna-Tavares-William Nylander unit has been outshot 19-10, out-attempted 35-18 and outscored 3-0. Worse: high-danger chances favour the opposition 11-1, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Still, Tavares sees "good underlying things" and "no reason to panic" as the trio struggles without the puck and to sustain a cycle game.

And, to be fair, McKenna has made some nifty slip passes and dekes that foreshadow excellence. He's looked particularly comfortable zipping pucks on PP2.

"We're trying to establish more of an offensive game down below the goal line and not just be one and done," Nylander said. "We've been moving the puck well a few shifts. So, I mean, it takes some time. But I feel in practice and through training camp it's been there. And, obviously, when it becomes a game, it's a little bit different. But we just want to keep building off that."

McKenna did not participate in Sunday's optional practice and has not spoken with reporters since Friday. He was requested Monday. The Maple Leafs are trying to ease his responsibilities on the ice and off.

"There's no pressure to produce. He's going to be a great player," Nylander said. "It's going to happen. And when it does, it's going to come in waves. A lot of waves."

Hiller is emphasizing a hard forecheck and puck support in the O-zone. He wants his three forwards — on all lines — tighter together to help puck retrievals, then driving to the next quicker once they get the puck.

McKenna is an elite passer figuring out when it's best to dump and run. Tavares, 36, is seldom first on the puck. And Nylander is better known for his ability to transport the puck. Defence isn't their strongest suit.

So, the question becomes: Is their line set up for success?

"Can we do this better? Are there better combinations based on what we've seen so far?" Hiller said. "But what does that do? There's always unintended consequences."

"Fixing" the Tavares line entails altering either a dangerous-looking Matthews line, Paul's inciting checking line, or both.

Which means Hiller will be patient with his 1-2 lineup heading into Tuesday's home date versus the Nashville Predators, a non-playoff squad last season.

"Had a good practice, so let's see it translate," Hiller said. "And then, you know, we can only be patient for so long. But we'll stick with it for now."

One thing is certain: The Maple Leafs' patience for Line 2 will run out much quicker than its patience for Pick 1.

"He's going to continue to adapt really well," Tavares said. "Be a matter of time before you just really see him do some things that are pretty special. And it's what made him first pick."

Maple Leafs projected lineup Tuesday vs. Nashville

Marchenko — Matthews — Roslovic

McKenna — Tavares — Nylander

Cowan — Paul — Sissons

Duhaime — Blueger — Groulx

McCabe — Tanev

Rielly — Raddysch

Ekman-Larsson — Stecher

Bobrovsky

Stolarz

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Sportsnet.ca / How Travis Green plans to lead Senators in Year 3

Adam Stanley

OTTAWA – Travis Green needed a coffee.

The new NHL season was underway, but his Ottawa Senators would be the last team to play its first game. He was up late last Tuesday and watched part of all the games on the opening-night slate. It was also just over 24 hours after a local radio station's morning show host called the way he was describing injuries as "Pinocchio stuff," forcing the coach to say, "I'm not lying to the media" in a pointed soliloquy. Green's had a near-daily podium address about lines and starters, both the current ones and the dreamers.

So, as the last of the Nespresso foam popped in a small white Styrofoam cup, Green was happy to talk about how he got into hockey in the first place.

Born in Creston, B.C. (best known for being the home of Kokanee beer) Green moved to "the city" as a youngster. Castlegar, B.C. wasn't much bigger – it was technically a village until it officially became a town when Green was four years old – but as far back as he remembers, he said, the dream of being in hockey was the only one he chased.

Green made it to the show and at 30 he said he began to wonder how many years he had left. He was a journeyman, but year after year, there he still was. Green played nearly 1,000 games in the NHL.

"I just loved the game, and I couldn't imagine not being involved," Green told Sportsnet.ca, "so that led me to wonder what I was going to do for the rest of my life."

From his days behind the bench in the WHL with Portland, to four years with AHL Utica, then a half-decade coaching the Vancouver Canucks and a barely-counts stint with New Jersey, Green is now in his third season with Ottawa and in all likelihood will coach his 200th game for the team later this season. The Senators' first game of the season was also Green's 500th as an NHL head coach. He received four first-place votes for the Jack Adams Award last season as the Senators navigated, well, a lot. He said what he's most proud of from last year is simple.

"Just keeping things on the rails," Green said with a little grin. "We really had a stretch where we were playing some good hockey, and we weren't getting the results. Everyone wants answers. Why are you not winning? Sometimes you have to find the answers as a coach and sometimes the answer is don't change anything."

"There's always pressure to win. The pressure to win can't take away from having an honest assessment with your group, because that'll take away from the message you send your team."

Ottawa made it to the playoffs for the second straight season on the back of a tidy 20-6-4 run after Green's now iconic 'white noise' speech after a 7-1 drubbing of the Vegas Golden Knights at home.

"Don't listen to the (expletive) white noise. Don't listen to people outside this (expletive) rink. Zero negativity," said Green. "Let's go on a (expletive) run."

That wasn't his only special night on the mic.

"It's not (expletive) complicated," Green said on April 5 after the Senators defeated the Carolina Hurricanes 6-3. "Skate. Want the puck. Work your balls off. Play harder than the other team. We can (expletive) beat anyone when we play that way."

Alas, the playoff run was cut short in the after an opening-round sweep by the Hurricanes – the eventual Stanley Cup champions. The Senators' core was ready to take the next step, together, until instead a piece broke off.

This summer, captain Brady Tkachuk asked out and got traded to Florida.

"Any time a player asks to be traded or moved it doesn't matter who it is, as a coach you get disappointed. And when it's the captain and someone you've built a relationship with that's the first thing that comes to mind," Green said earlier in September. "He's a good player and you don't want to see that, but that happened and here we are today."

There are, of course, still plenty of questions around these Senators. The captain query was answered last week, when a very deserving Thomas Chabot was given the 'C' stitched on the front of his No. 72. Jake Sanderson, the team's most notable star-in-waiting, played in Saturday's opener, but a nagging ailment through training camp was still present and he only logged 4:29 of ice time.

He's been sent home from the road trip and won't play the next two games – starting with Monday's contest in Boston (Sportsnet+, 7:30 p.m. ET / 4:30 p.m. PT) – as he undergoes further testing. Tim Stutzle is the team's best scorer and is set to pad those stats alongside Drake Batherson, who signed the richest contract in team history last month. William Eklund, acquired from San Jose with the No. 9 pick the Senators got as part of the Tkachuk package, was the key addition to the top-six.

Who will take the leap? What will Year 3 of the Green system look like with this particular squad?

Saturday's 3-2 win over rival Toronto was a good start, fighting back from a one-goal deficit and finishing with a strong third period against their rivals.

"There is something to be said for learning and learning to coach," Green said. "You do make mistakes. Any coach who says they don't is a liar. I do know that the mistakes you make become a lot less the more you (coach)."

Steve Staios, the club's GM, was also a former player and Green said "nine times out of 10" the duo agrees when they talk about where the team is at and how they're playing. Green said he's "never enjoyed coaching a team more" than he has with this particular group and all things being equal, they played awfully well last year. The Senators sat second in shot suppression and offensive-zone time percentage, and first in faceoff percentage, to cherry pick some solid team statistics.

They were also 12-5-5 when Tkachuk was not in the lineup.

The Atlantic Division will once again be a tough group to compete in. There may also be some growing pains as the Senators install some new skaters into their established system.

Injuries. Goaltending. Scoring. The variables are hearty. No wonder Green found himself reaching for another hit of caffeine.

But there is excitement too. Starting at the top.

"It's awesome to have the juice," Green said. "You hope your team has learned lessons from the past. You can have all that excitement, but you have to go out and bring it."

"If you don't bring it," he added, "then you're just not going to win."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' search for perfect No. 2 defenceman still a work in progress

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — We talk a lot in Edmonton about the importance of defencemen who can get pucks to Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl — quickly and on the tape.

A high-calibre outlet pass is like oxygen for hockey's top players. Without it, they choke.

But guess what? Don Jackson has left the building.

It's not like the fan bases in other NHL towns are looking for off-the-glass D-men who are holdovers from 1984.

"Every team's got star players," said D.J. Smith, the associate coach in charge of Edmonton defensive corps. "Now, our star players are some of the league's best — if not the best — but it doesn't change. The top players want the puck."

Smith has been around now, from a gig as Mike Babcock's assistant with the Toronto Maple Leafs, to five years as a head coach in Ottawa, to a couple of years with the Los Angeles Kings. He's heard and seen more than most.

"When (Artemi) Panarin got traded to L.A., he's got to get a guy to get him the puck (Drew Doughty). When I was in Ottawa, (Tim) Stutzle and (Brady) Tkachuk and (Drake) Batherson — they needed a guy to get them the puck, which was (Thomas) Chabot. So wherever you go, the top guys are only open for a brief second. If you hold on to the puck too long and you can't move pucks, the big guys don't get the puck."

Here in Edmonton, Evan Bouchard is the one who starts plays in the right direction. He's already played 54 minutes with McDavid in three games, and the reason for that is simple: He's very good at the job.

Through three games Bouchard has averaged 25:41 of ice time per game — 20:09 at even strength. There are likely 15 teams that would kill for a legitimate No. 1 defenceman who can handle those minutes at anything close to the level Bouchard plays at — principally because they do not have even a reasonable facsimile.

"Bouch is a guy that can effortlessly play 27 minutes," Smith said, "and a lot of his minutes are in the O-zone and on the power play. They're not heavy-lifting minutes. But you can't have two guys play all the minutes and the other four watch, that's not what we came here (for). We came here to build a team.

"We've got to build a hockey team and not just five guys or four guys or three guys."

As Smith acclimatizes himself with a D-corps that has been front and centre of a team whose defensive play needs work, project No. 1 revolves around who should play with Bouchard.

Mattias Ekholm, who arrived as the perfect No. 2 and played shift-for-shift alongside the 26-year-old Bouchard for the past four seasons, is now 36. Ekholm can still play, but not 25 minutes a night against the other team's top units.

It was general manager Stan Bowman's wish, as soon as last season came to its merciful conclusion, to find a way to take a few minutes off of Ekholm's average game as he enters a very team-friendly three-year contract that pays him \$4 million annually.

But without another No. 2 walking through the door in Edmonton, we wondered how that might happen.

What we've seen is Smith stealing a few shifts from Ekholm throughout the course of a game.

"There are probably five shifts a game, maybe more, that (Ryan) Shea goes with Bouch. Or Wally (Jake Walman) gets a shift with Bouch. Or it's

four-on-four and Shea goes with Bouch, and Ecky goes against the top line with Murph (Connor Murphy).

"As you as you age in this league, your value is in different areas," Smith said. "Ecky and Murph, you put them out there at the last minute of the game? They're as hard to score on as anyone in the league. So when you get down the last five minutes, is it Shea and Bouch and Ecky and Murph?"

Lost in this is Walman, who has not started the season like he is part of Smith's solution.

We know what Bouchard is, and at 26 he can still be expected to improve. We know what Ekholm is, and that Murphy is a classic No. 4.

Shea has shown an ability to play next to Bouchard and trade pucks with McDavid and Draisaitl, but he is not what we would call a prototypical No. 2 defenceman. He's not Brent Seabrook, who so perfectly complimented Duncan Keith, or the rugged Ekholm, who was perfect in his younger 30s next to Bouchard.

But perhaps it is us who have to change our stereotypes. Maybe a big, burly guy who "protects" your No. 1 is just yesterday's thinking.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL Insider Elliotte Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

Latest episode

"I still like guys who flat out scare you to death. That's not a bad thing to have, you know?" Babcock said on Monday. "So being big, being long, boxing out hard, being ultra-competitive, and if you can move the puck at the same time, that's a special thing."

That's a fair ask, but simply not realistic in today's game. Today, if you can't skate, you can't play.

"That's fair," points out Smith. "But if you can't defend, you can't play either.

"The position has really evolved, because you can't defend if you can't skate. The players are so good, in order to defend them you've got to be able to skate. Before, there was a lot more hooking and holding. You can't get away with that, and you can't afford to be in the penalty box all the time."

It's a work in progress, and perhaps the Oilers will be in the market for the right defenceman come March.

But for now, D.J. Smith has some talent with which to work.

And some time to figure it all out.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / After a stumbling start, Red Wings are in a world of hurt

Ryan Dixon

No franchise in NHL history has lived an all-or-nothing existence quite like the Detroit Red Wings, and the days are only getting darker for a franchise already nearly 10 years removed from its most recent playoff showing.

No three-word chant cuts to the bone quite like the "Sell the team!" cries we heard while the first adult beverages of the season were still being poured at the Wings' home opener on Friday. Detroit dropped that game 2-0 to the New York Rangers and by the time the Wings fell behind the Winnipeg Jets 3-0 five minutes into the second period — eventually losing 3-2 — on Sunday, it felt like Little Caesars Arena might just implode.

In between those games, we learned from Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman that unsigned defenceman Simon Edvinsson — a stud in waiting — would prefer a trade out of town. Of course, former captain Dylan Larkin long ago made his feelings known on that front and Detroit fans responded in kind by booing the bleep out of him when — thanks to an upper-body injury — he was introduced wearing street clothes before the game on Friday night.

To borrow from a favourite meme, "NOT GREAT, BOB!"

In its history, Detroit has been dominant for decades at a time. The Wings were a perpetual contender from the early 1940s basically through the end of the Original Six Era in 1967, then made the post-season for 25 straight years beginning in 1991. Between those heady days, though, the "Dead Things" of the 1970s and early '80s made the playoffs just twice in a 17-year period at a time when the incredibly inclusive NHL post-season format would have almost made a futility streak like that seem mathematically impossible.

Now, after the previous five years have at least brought some bright spots in terms of top-end young players to build around, the team of Ted Lindsay and Gordie Howe seems sapped of all fight and spirit.

What's the solution for a club helmed by an interim GM in Shawn Horcoff? (Geez, welcome to the big chair, Shawn.) Hard as it is to hear for Wings supporters, it might be a one-step-back approach in the hopes a leap forward can be made soon.

Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell stuck to his guns and was able to land what he wanted — an impact NHLer — when he got Matthew Knies from the Toronto Maple Leafs for disgruntled Kirill Marchenko. But how many deals of that nature are there to be made?

Understanding Detroit doesn't want to dim the light at the end of the tunnel given it hasn't had a playoff game since 2016, there's a middle ground between landing established NHLers and a bundle of draft picks that won't be any help for another handful of years. Find teams — because they do exist — looking to improve the roster right now by using prospects in the pipeline who could be making a meaningful impact at the NHL level between six and 18 months from now.

The Wings should strongly consider acquiring assets like that in the hope it can get the organization back up on its feet with serious forward momentum a short time down the road. Detroit once made its bones by being the type of progressive organization that went in on talented Europeans like Nick Lidstrom before the rest of the league got wise.

If the Wings are ever going to make it through to another period of positive puck, they must be astute and open-minded.

Weekend takeaways

- Victor Eklund celebrated his 20th birthday the right way, recording his first NHL goal (and an assist, to boot) in Saturday's 6-0 Islanders' thrashing of the New Jersey Devils. One year after Matthew Schaefer had an all-time debut season for the Isles, New York might see more signs of future hope from Eklund and sophomore Calum Ritchie.

- You figured Chicago would be happy to tread water until Connor Bedard comes back, but this has quickly become a struggle for survival. After losing their first two games of the season by a combined score of 11-2, the Hawks blew a 2-0 lead and one-goal third-period advantage to leave Buffalo with a 4-3 loss on Saturday. Tuesday's home opener at the United Center versus the St. Louis Blues feels like a must-have for this swirling young club.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Montreal Canadiens (1-0-1) The Canadiens play their first three home games of the season this week and need to find their 'A' game at the Bell Centre. Despite not enduring a 60-minute loss, the Habs have yet to put forth a three-period effort.

2. Ottawa Senators (1-0-0) The Captain Thomas Chabot Era began as blissfully as any Senators fan could wish for: with a 3-2 win over the Leafs in Toronto on Saturday.

3. Edmonton Oilers (2-0-1) Edmonton heads to California for three games this week and it already feels like goalie Devon Levi has a chance to grab the starting gig and run with it.

4. Winnipeg Jets (1-0-1) Could this be the year Cole Perfetti performs like the Jets always hoped he would? The 24-year-old had a goal and two apples — all on the power play — on Sunday afternoon when the Jets downed the Wings in Detroit. The 10th-overall pick from 2020 inked a five-year pact with Winnipeg in the summer and, one year after beginning the season sidelined with injury, Perfetti is flying out of the gates.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs (1-2-0) Tuesday's home game versus Nashville feels like a sneaky-important match for the Buds. Win that one and you head out on a roadie — they see old friend Mitch Marner on Thursday in Vegas — feeling pretty good at .500 as all the new pieces fall into place. Lose to a mid Preds squad, though, and you're suddenly 1-3-0 to start the year with four home games already in the books.

6. Vancouver Canucks (2-2-0) What a start to Paul Cotter's Canucks career. The former New Jersey Devil — who inked a one-year deal with Vancouver in the summer — scored his fourth goal of the young campaign during Sunday's 3-2 loss to the Golden Knights. There's been a lot more fight in the Canucks than many expected and Cotter — along with a suddenly feisty Elias Pettersson — are leading the way.

7. Calgary Flames (0-3-0) Losses were expected, but a minus-13 goal differential after three outings is not what any team wants. When Seattle has hung six on you twice already, it's time to dig in.

The week ahead

- Tuesday night brings a rematch of the Eastern Conference Final, as the Carolina Hurricanes visit the Bell Centre in Montreal's first home game of the season. Meanwhile, the "Battle of New York" at Madison Square Garden that same night should have some juice, with the Rangers having won three straight and the Isles coming off their shellacking of the Devils.

- It's official: Wednesday will be Alex Ovechkin's final home opener in the NHL. How appropriate, then, that he'll face Sidney Crosby and the Penguins that night, with both players now in their 22nd — and, for Ovie, final — NHL campaign.

- The Oilers will see an old friend on Saturday when their California trip takes them to San Jose for an afternoon affair versus Darnell Nurse and the Sharks. That same night will see the Robertson brothers — Jason and Nick — square off in Pittsburgh when Dallas comes to town. Nick is the unlikely leader in goals among the siblings, sniping two while Jason is stuck on a goose egg.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Rematch against Hurricanes prompts early lineup dilemma for Canadiens

Eric Engels

BROSSARD, Que. — Halfway through Monday's spirited Montreal Canadiens practice, Florian Xhekaj took repetitions on a line with Jake Evans and Josh Anderson.

It's a line on which you'd bet all your money to stay intact for Tuesday's game — if it wasn't against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Sure, changes are absolutely in order after a sloppy 6-5 overtime loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins Saturday and Xhekaj is one of a few players champing at the bit to get in. Oliver Kapanen is another, and he appears ready after starting the season day-to-day with a lower-body injury.

Then there's Adam Engstrom, who also deserves a look before Kaiden Guhle is fully recovered from the surgery that kept him out of training camp and the first two games of the season. And don't forget about goaltender Samuel Montembeault, who had a hot pre-season and logically shouldn't be left cooling on the sidelines for too much longer — especially after Jakub Dobes was overly generous in the loss to the Penguins.

But pulling Dobes, or any of the other Canadiens who played and lost those games in the Eastern Conference Final to the eventual Cup champion Hurricanes, makes the decision harder for Canadiens head coach Martin St. Louis.

He knows Tuesday's date was circled by every player in his room as soon as the schedule came out. He knows this game offers the Canadiens their first crack at vengeance — in their home opener, no less — and he knows the sting of missing it would feel that much sharper than if this was just one of 84 games.

But it's not, and everyone from St. Louis to Nick Suzuki to Kirby Dach knows it.

We didn't pick that last name out of a hat, by the way. We're mentioning Dach because, from our vantage, he was one of the hardest workers at Monday's practice, following up two solid performances out of the gate.

But we also know Dach is all but guaranteed to be pulled out of the lineup if both Xhekaj and Kapanen enter.

Dach could even be susceptible even if it's only one or the other, despite St. Louis praising his performance against Toronto last Tuesday: "He was hard on the puck, he was physical, he had an annoying stick, he made some plays, and his intentions were very mature."

Even if Dach was less than all that in the loss to the Penguins, he was more than another player fighting to stay in the lineup.

Yes, Alex Texier was far from primed in Pittsburgh.

You know who was, though? Zachary Bolduc — another depth player who actually played a primary role in some of the good we saw from the Canadiens in that game.

Still, Xhekaj needs to get in at some point. And if Kapanen is healthy enough to play, the thought that he'd go from second-line centre to healthy scratch without even having played a game seems far-fetched.

We also can't imagine Engstrom sitting much longer with Guhle (who practised in a full-contact jersey Monday for the first time since this summer's corrective surgery on his adductor muscle) edging closer to returning.

"Ideally, we get on some kind of rotation where we keep everybody engaged, because these players are ready to play, too, and we have to manage that," St. Louis said last week.

He knows that'll be hard to establish under any circumstances, but particularly under the ones directly in front of him.

Should Ivan Demidov, who missed Monday's practice in favour of treatment and rest, not be available, the decision becomes slightly easier.

But that doesn't appear likely, and sorting out the rest of the lineup — against this opponent, in the opening game at the Bell Centre — will require some deep thought.

St. Louis said giving players the opportunity to avenge their playoff loss was "part of the equation."

But he also said "we'll see what (Tuesday) brings," and that all the other factors would be taken into consideration.

On Monday, St. Louis wouldn't confirm Xhekaj's season debut. He didn't comment on the potential changes on the blue line, and he wasn't interested in naming a starting goaltender.

As for facing the Hurricanes, whom the Canadiens beat four times in a row — three times in the regular season and once in the playoffs — before losing four straight last season, St. Louis said "it's going to be a good a challenge."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2026



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TSN.CA / Tavares, Nylander preach patience as Leafs' second line works through issues

Mark Masters

The Toronto Maple Leafs practiced at Ford Performance Centre on Monday.

John Tavares and William Nylander are preaching patience amid a slow start for the Leafs second line.

"There's no reason to panic or just hit that button, I guess, so to speak, extremely quick," Tavares said. "You just stay focused on continuing to get a little better every day."

"I mean, look, I think we've had some good chances and been moving the puck well a few shifts so it takes some time," Nylander said. "I feel in practice and through training camp it's been there and obviously when it becomes a game it's a little bit different, but we want to keep building off that."

Tavares insists there are "some good underlying things" happening for the line, which also includes rookie Gavin McKenna, but most of the numbers aren't pretty so far.

Among the 40 lines that have played at least 40 minutes together, Toronto's second line opened the week ranking last in goal differential (outscored 3-0), slot shot differential (minus eight) and expected goal percentage (15.2), per Sportlogiq.

And yet, Tavares remained between McKenna and Nylander at Monday's practice.

"You can only be patient for so long," said coach Jim Hiller. "But we'll stick with it for now."

Hiller is hoping the nearly hour-long workout on Monday will help jumpstart Toronto's offence not just for the second line but the entire team. Toronto has been limited to just six goals through three games while going 1-2-0.

"Just a little closer together in the O-zone," Hiller said of the focus. "Having three guys close and bringing some pucks to the dirty areas a little quicker. So I think that'll be a focus for not just them but everybody."

Nylander scored twice in the season opener, but the first goal came during a line change and the second was assisted by Easton Cowan, who had replaced McKenna on the line for the shift.

After firing five shots on net in the first game, Nylander has been limited to three in the last two games.

"We're trying to establish more of an offensive game down below the goal line and not be one and done," Nylander said. "I think that's what's happened a few times. I think defensively we've given up some ... fluky goals, you know, shooting through a couple screens and stuff like that."

The other forward lines are performing relatively well. The first unit with Auston Matthews between Kirill Marchenko and Jack Roslovic is showing signs of breaking out while the third group of Nick Paul between Cowan and Colton Sissons is holding its own in tough matchups.

Hiller points out that changing things to spark one line can have "unintended consequences" throughout the lineup.

The Leafs are integrating seven new forwards right now and the players only had two pre-season games to shake off the rust and build chemistry. And with a shorter training camp this year, the Leafs new coaching staff prioritized working on play away from the puck early on.

"We wanted to get that done first," Hiller said. "And I think we've been pretty good that way. Today was a larger emphasis on some offence ... We got it in there today, had a good practice, so let's see it translate."

"It's early on," Nylander said. "Usually training camp would be like, well, what did I have before my first year? Eight games or something. So, you know, the season is kind of starting in one more game."

Tavares still doesn't appear to be up to speed. His top burst so far this season has been 32.56 km/h, which is in the bottom half of the league, per NHL Edge stats. Last year, Tavares reached 36.47 km/h, which was in the 72nd percentile.

Tavares has noted that he liked to get into three pre-season games under the previous longer format, but on Monday downplayed the impact of a shorter training camp.

"I feel good," the 36-year-old centre stressed. "I felt good through it. I've had the experience of playing when we had the shortened season [in 2021] and there were no pre-season games, the bubble experience [in 2020], you know, you had one [exhibition] game after four months off."

Tavares further pointed out that there were also no pre-season games after returning from the lockout during the 2012-13 season.

"So, I have some experience with that," he continued. "And, obviously, it's league wide, it's not just team based. So, not trying to put a whole lot in that. I think just trying to continue to work on my game, be sharp, be ready to go, and execute when you're out there."

Tavares has two secondary assists through three games. He also had two assists through three games last season. He then had three points (one goal, two assists) in the fourth game of the season against the Nashville Predators.

The Leafs will host the Predators, again in their fourth game of the season, on Tuesday night.

Asked a general question about his line sustaining more offensive-zone pressure, Tavares brought up the challenge facing McKenna.

"It's not like he's jumping into a situation where he's put in every scenario to have every opportunity and learn from mistakes," Tavares said. "Obviously, as a team, believing, wanting to be contenders ... it's a different challenge for him, feeling his way through that."

McKenna had hoped to hit the scoresheet for the first time before his family headed home to Whitehorse on Sunday, but was again held without a point during Saturday's setback to the Ottawa Senators.

The last time the first overall pick was held without a point through his first three NHL games was winger Alexis Lafreniere with the New York Rangers in 2021.

"I mean, there's no pressure to produce," Nylander said. "I mean, you know he's going to be a great player, so it's going to happen in waves. A lot of waves."

Nylander was also held without a point through his first three NHL games when he was called up after the trade deadline during the 2015-16 season. He scored in his fourth game. Of course, the Leafs were on their way to a last-place finish at the time. As Tavares noted, this year the plan is to be a playoff team.

"He's going to continue to adapt really, really well," Tavares said. "So, yeah, it will be a matter of time before you just really see him do some things that are pretty special and what made him the first pick."

McKenna was not made available to the media on Monday despite requests. The 18-year-old last spoke to reporters after practice on Friday.

"I think he's handling it well," Hiller said. "I thought last game was his best game. He had a really good practice. I think his favourite time is power-play time (smile). Boy, when he gets the puck there, it's like ... 'Okay, finally, a little time and space, and I get to do my thing.' And you can just see how incredibly talented he is."

Hiller noted that McKenna "seems unflappable."

"I'm sure he wishes he had more right now," the coach continued. "Of course, that's obvious. But I haven't seen it affect him when I talk to him. He's got a smile on his face, and he walks around here the same as he did two months ago and two weeks ago. So, I think that's a really important quality for him."



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Tavares is hosting McKenna at his house this season and also sees no change in demeanour.

"His smile and the joy of being at the rink every day has been excellent," Tavares said.

Matthews, Marchenko and Roslovic all hit the ice during Sunday's optional skills practice in order to work on some details.

"The offensive-zone positioning for us is key," Roslovic revealed. "We need to really know where each other are outside of battles. So, just being able to get the puck in the corner and feel comfortable where the other two are going to be is the biggest key for us."

Matthews deflected home a Morgan Rielly point shot for his first goal of the season on Saturday although it came with Marchenko sitting on the bench due to an equipment issue. So, the line hasn't connected for a goal at even strength yet.

"Just the ability to hold onto pucks, I think we need to show a little bit more of that," Roslovic said. "We can definitely excel at that. Off the rush, the plays are there, they're going to be made, but it's staying patient and really working in the O-zone."

Per Sportlogiq, Toronto's top line is leading the way in slot-shot differential (plus-14) and expected goals percentage (84.3). It feels like only a matter of time before it all leads to actual goals.

"I think that's just the way it goes sometimes," Hiller said. "Those are really good looks. Some have been crossbars and posts and stuff on top of that. Those are just really good looks. Those will start to go. If you create those types of Grade-A chances, they're going to go."

Monday marked only the second full team practice for Marchenko since being acquired in a trade from the Columbus Blue Jackets last week.

"Oh, it's helping a lot," the 26-year-old Russian said. "I just more know, like, everybody here. We meet [more] with everybody in locker room, and it's way more comfortable for me. I just feel better and better every day."

The chance to play with Matthews means a lot to Marchenko, who has been tracking the star centre since the Arizona native made the bold decision to play in Switzerland during his draft season.

"When I was in Russia, I'm wearing 34 number," Marchenko said with a smile. "You can find the pictures in the junior team ... Because he starts to score the goals, I think, 'Okay, if I wear this number, I score goals too.'"

But Marchenko didn't have the year he hoped so he changed to his current No. 86.

"[Nikita] Kucherov play nice too," Marchenko said of the Tampa Bay Lightning winger who wears 86. "Just try it and after it stay with me for my full career. Now I love it."

Lines at Monday's practice:

Marchenko - Matthews - Roslovic

McKenna - Tavares - Nylander

Cowan - Paul - Sissons

Duhaime - Blueger - Groulx

MacEwen

McCabe - Tanev

Rielly - Raddysh

Ekman-Larsson - Stecher

Blankenburg

Bobrovsky

Stolarz

Bonello

Power play units at Monday's practice:

Raddysh

Matthews - Marchenko - Nylander

Tavares

Rielly

McKenna - Paul - Roslovic

Cowan

TSN.CA LOADED: 10.06.2026



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 6, 2026

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TSN.CA / Flames are off to a stunningly bad start

Travis Yost

The Calgary Flames are winless through the first week of the regular season, losing by scores of 6-1, 4-1 and 6-1. The games have been every bit as ugly as the box scores indicate.

Expectations were low to start the year in Calgary – in fact, no team had longer odds to win the Stanley Cup this season than Ryan Huska's Flames. And for good reason. This is an organization deep in the throes of a rebuild, one that is thinking more about next year's draft lottery than sneaking into a wild-card berth.

But even by rebuilding team standards, this has been a harrowing start. The Flames looked noncompetitive in these three games, all three of which came against non-playoff teams from a season ago (a pair of games against Seattle, plus one against rival Vancouver). The offence was punchless, the defensive results just as putrid, and the level of concern across the organization must be higher than where it was to start the year.

Let's go through all three phases of this nightmarish start: offence, defence, and the goaltending, and see if there's any hope of a rebound.

Offence

Three goals (one apiece from Morgan Frost, Ryan Strome, and Matt Coronato) in three games isn't going to cut it, and what's even more concerning is two of these three goals came on the power play. That means Calgary's managed just one even-strength goal in 154 minutes of play.

What might be a bit encouraging here is that Calgary was able to find moments of sustained pressure against the Kraken and Canucks; a complete absence of puck luck might be contributing to this futile start.

Consider expected goal rates from the first few games of this year versus the prior two seasons at even strength. If nothing else, Calgary has been more active in the offensive third, though score effects (and how decisively they've been losing these games) is likely contributing somewhat here:

Yost1 Yost

Expected goals are only interesting to the extent they translate to real goals, and it goes without saying Calgary's expected goal numbers (as well as scoring chances) are being uplifted by how decisively they have trailed in these games. Opposing defences simply don't need to play with the same vigour and intensity when protecting big leads, and that means simply pushing the Calgary attack to the perimeter, where goal scoring falls.

A heat map of shot production (via HockeyViz) captures this well. Though Calgary is doing a good job of generating volume, a lot of it is coming from the point and well outside the circles – and too little of it is coming inside of the circles, where scoring probabilities surge:

Yost2 Yost

We'll need a few more games to better understand the capabilities of this offence. The Flames seem capable of gaining the offensive third, but less so at funnelling the puck into dangerous areas and converting on those chances. They simply may not have the horses to make it work this year, but it's something worth monitoring.

Defence

It has been ugly. Full stop. The Flames have already conceded 14 goals at even strength; compare that to the Seattle Kraken (three), Boston Bruins (three), and Florida Panthers (two), and it feels like a five-alarm fire.

We will get to the goaltending component in a moment. What's concerning to me about Calgary's defence is if you strip away the

goaltending impact (which has been terrible) to start the year, the Flames still look like a sieve.

Expected goal rates for Calgary this season compared to years past is veering towards "off the charts," and not in a good way:

Yost3 Yost

Given how much Calgary has trailed by in these games, the expected goal numbers against are alarming. The opposition doesn't have nearly the same incentive to play aggressive and attack while protecting big leads, and yet the Kraken and Canucks had little problem putting pressure on Dustin Wolf and Devin Cooley.

The Flames' blueline is, like the rest of the team, a work in progress. The two regular pairings have been Zach Whitecloud with Kevin Bahl, and Jacob Middleton with Zayne Parekh. The recently acquired Simon Nemec has split his minutes with Bahl and Yari Kuznetsov.

In contrast to the offence, volume isn't so much the problem defensively – it's how easy the shots are being generated from the net mouth and between the circles against Wolf and Cooley. I don't care who your goaltenders are, when shots are being hurled from this area of the defensive third, it's going to be a problem:

Yost4 Yost

Goaltending

To say Calgary's goaltenders have a difficult task so far this year would be an understatement. The offence is thin on scorers, the defence is young and developing, and the division is full of teams who can score at will. Calgary has a solid goaltending tandem headed by the 25-year-old Wolf, who was extended to a \$53 million contract one year ago.

But over the first three games, Wolf and Cooley have been -4.6 goals worse than a replacement-level goaltender (via Evolving Hockey) given the shot profile they have faced. For Wolf specifically, that's in stark contrast to years past, where he finished +26 goals saved versus expected in 2024-25 (seventh in NHL), and +18 goals saved versus expected in 2025-26 (27th in NHL) – in both instances, playing behind similarly weak Flames lineups.

This is the one group you would hope to be optimistic about even in a challenging year like this, but so far there's been little help from the goalies, and it's why you have seen some ugly scores at the end of these games.

Let's hope the weeks ahead reveal a bit more fight from this rebuilding Flames roster. It's one thing to embrace a rebuild and maintain realistic expectations, but it's another to spend an entire season getting your clock cleaned.

History would suggest that teams that bottom out this violently often take a long time to return to a competitive state, and that's the last thing Flames fans want to think about right now.

TSN.CA LOADED: 10.06.2026