



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 8, 2026

The News & Observer

Amid a career backslide, Canes' Kotkaniemi still believes he can contribute

By: Chip Alexander

Carolina Hurricanes center Jesperi Kotkaniemi (82), during practice on Tuesday, May 12, 2026, at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Raleigh

There's something people should know about Jesperi Kotkaniemi: he believes he can be a good player in the NHL.

The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) forward realizes he has taken some backward steps recently in his career. He did not appear in a single Stanley Cup game in the Canes' championship run. He knows there are doubters.

The video player is currently playing an ad. You can skip the ad in 5 sec with a mouse or keyboard

At the same time, Kotkaniemi has an unshakable belief in himself, in what's still possible in his career at age 26, in his ability to start taking steps forward again.

"I do," he said in an interview. "I can see myself playing in the first few lines. I think I'm still a little too young to start that fourth-line career. I feel I've got more to give."

On that last point, nearly everyone agrees. Kotkaniemi, at 6-3 and 212 pounds, has a strong frame and can play a physical game when he has the right disposition. He can hit. He can be a big body around the crease at both ends of the rink. He has more to give.

The Montreal Canadiens made the Finnish center the No. 3 pick of the 2018 NHL draft, believing in his potential. The Hurricanes tendered him an offer sheet in 2021 and later signed him to an eight-year contract extension that runs through 2029-30 and pays him \$4.8 million a year. They, too, believed in his potential.

Attitude has never been a problem. Even when not playing, the guy they call "KK" is always upbeat, always has that quick smile, as if he knows something you don't.

"He's always had a great attitude," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said this week. "It's not easy. You want to play. Everybody wants to play."

"But we've got a deep group. You've got to have You control what you control. When you get in there, you have to play well."

Kotkaniemi said his confidence took a "little beating" last season and that he came to preseason camp last month unsure what his role on this year's team would be.

The short offseason was filled with social-media chatter about Kotkaniemi possibly being traded or having his contract bought out. Kotkaniemi said he ignored the noise, and when preseason camp began, No. 82 was back and on the ice.

"All that and here we are again," he said, breaking a smile.

"It was a little different," he added. "You kind of knew there probably wasn't a spot for me in the lineup, coming in here. It doesn't mean I'm not going to work my (butt) off to try to get back there, and hopefully get a bigger role at some point and get back on the level I know I can play. Try to work towards that and be ready for when the moment comes."

Kotkaniemi played in 42 games last season, the fewest since his second year in the league, with Montreal. Five of those games came in April, at the end of the regular season, when Brind'Amour was looking to rest up some lineup regulars.

Those were his first games in a month as the Canes clinched the Metro Division and finished first in the Eastern Conference.

Come the playoffs, Kotkaniemi sat. He was a healthy scratch, game after game.

"That was a killer," he said. "But we won the Cup, so I'll take it."

Kotkaniemi has a championship ring. More importantly, his name is on the Cup.

"That means everything," Kotkaniemi said. "I'm surprised there aren't many Finnish guys on the Cup, so it's great to be on that list. A great group of guys took me along and got my name on it. So that's pretty special."

Until Seth Jarvis is cleared medically to play, there remains an open spot at forward in the lineup. Kotkaniemi sat out the first two games this season as the Canes lost to Florida and Washington as Nicolas Deslauriers drew into the lineup, then made his season debut Saturday in Philadelphia as the Canes took a 3-2 overtime victory in their first road game.

"It was fun. Playing is always fun," he said. "A little tough early on. It had been a while in a real game."

"My eyes were rolling around like a slot machine in the first period. It feels like everyone's on you. It's a shock to the body. Then it slows down, calms down after that."

Kotkaniemi was back in the lineup Tuesday as the Canes went to Montreal and took a 6-4 win. He was playing the wing on the fourth line with Mark Jankowski and Eric Robinson, who each had a goal and an assist.



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Kotkaniemi's ice time (6:53) was the lowest on the team, but he now has played two games, both wins.

Any trip to Montreal stirs up memories for Kotkaniemi, including his return soon after the offer sheet drama in 2021. The Canes had trolled the Habs on social media about the signing. There were signs and some boos and jeers that night at Bell Centre.

"I took it as a compliment," Kotkaniemi joked.

"No, it's always special going back there, then and now."

The Canes won, 4-1. Kotkaniemi scored his first goal as a Hurricane.

A lot has happened to Kotkaniemi, and the Hurricanes, in the five years since that October night in Montreal. The Canes had hoped Kotkaniemi would emerge as their second-line center, be productive. That hasn't happened and his playing time decreased to the point of being a healthy scratch.

And his goal this season?

"There's always time to bounce back," he said.



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Preview: October 8 vs. Vancouver

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

Hot diggity dog, it's \$2 hot dog night at Lenovo Center

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes are back on home ice and eyeing up a third straight win on Thursday, as they host the Vancouver Canucks.

When: Thursday, Oct. 8

Where: Lenovo Center

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: 2-1-1 (5 Points - 2nd, Metropolitan Division)

Canes Last Game: 6-4 Win over the Montreal Canadiens on Tuesday, Oct. 6

Canucks Record: 2-2-0 (4 Points - T-3rd, Pacific Division)

Canucks Last Game: 3-2 Loss to the Vegas Golden Knights on Sunday, Oct. 4

Last Time Out...

Although they allowed three goals in the first period for the second time in their last three games, the Canes put on the work boots and dug in to earn a 6-4 win on Tuesday in Montreal.

Taylor Hall had a pair of goals in the effort, and Sebastian Aho (1G, 2A) posted a second straight three-point game.

In net, Brandon Bussi earned his first win of the season, stopping 16 out of 20.

The Power Play...

Carolina's power play struck for the fourth time in as many games in its latest outing, keeping a hot start to the season going.

Ranking tied for third among all NHL teams through the early portion of the season, only the Utah Mammoth (8), Vegas Golden Knights (5) and Anaheim Ducks (5) have more.

Flying Fish...

With four goals in four games, Sebastian Aho ranks tied for second among all NHL skaters. Only Evan Bouchard of the Edmonton Oilers (6), Nick Schmaltz of the Utah Mammoth (5) and Kyle Connor of the Winnipeg Jets (5) have more entering Thursday's play.

Having tallied in three straight, Aho is up to four goals in four games this season. The only players in franchise history with more through the team's first four games in a campaign are Andrei Svechnikov (6 in 2022-23), Seth Jarvis (5 in 2025-26), Eric Staal (5 in 2005-06), Geoff Sanderson (5 in 1993-94) and Ron Francis (5 in 1989-90).

Carolina's star center also enters tonight with 18 career points in 17 regular-season games against Vancouver.

In Net...

Pyotr Kochetkov will likely have the net this evening after Brandon Bussi got the nod Tuesday night in Montreal.

Kochetkov dressed in his first regular-season game since Dec. 20, 2025, on Saturday in Philadelphia, backstopping his team to a 3-2 overtime victory. Mostly sharp throughout, he finished the evening with 16 saves on 18 shots.

On The Other Side...

Starting a six-game road trip, the Canucks come to town having alternated wins and losses through the first four games of the season.

Paul Cotter (4G, 2A) and Elias Pettersson (2G, 4A) have been bright spots for the team, posting six points in the four outings.

In net, Kevin Lankinen has started three of the four. It's early, but allowing 16 goals and a 6.50 goals-against average is not how he wanted to start his campaign.

Vancouver's 18 total goals allowed are the most by any NHL team entering Thursday's play.

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 red uniforms.



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What's Next After This Game?

The Canes are scheduled to practice on Friday before flying to Chicago, where they'll begin a weekend back-to-back set on Saturday against the Blackhawks.

Next Game: Saturday, Oct. 10 at Chicago | 7:00 p.m. ET | Hurricanes Hockey Network | How To Watch

Next Home Game: Tuesday, Oct. 13 vs. Washington | 6:45 p.m. ET | Hurricanes Hockey Network | How To Watch



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Canes Embracing The Target On Their Backs As Defending Champs

By: Walt Ruff & Peter Dewar

"When you think about the respect that other teams have for us around the league, it's going to be hard games every night. But we're looking forward to that."

RALEIGH, N.C. - The Carolina Hurricanes have moved on, or at least tried to move on, from their Stanley Cup victory.

They reached the mountaintop in June, celebrated all summer, and put a bow on things with a banner before opening night.

To them, it's all over now. Last year's success guarantees nothing about the road ahead.

But as much as they want to turn the page, their status as the defending champs isn't something that just goes away.

Every road building they go into this season, there will be some opposing fans who show up specifically because they want to see their team take on the NHL's reigning top dogs. To his chagrin, media in other cities will continue to ask Rod Brind'Amour about it.

And certainly, their foes will need no reminders. To be the best, you've got to beat the best, and it'll be a game that teams need no motivation to get up for.

It's not something that's just going to change.

Every night, from now until April, and then certainly beyond, they'll be on the receiving end of the best effort possible from their opposition.

Challenge accepted.

"I think we're going to see every team's best this year, right? We earned that right. So, we've got to get used to it," Brandon Bussi told reporters following the team's opening night battle against Florida. "But I'm confident in our group."

Already evident from their close contests with the Panthers, Flyers, and Canadiens, no team is going to take the Canes lightly.

Why would they? It's essentially the same roster and the same staff, with the plan of running it back.

"This is the team we won with," Logan Stankoven said with a quiet confidence. "We're the best team in the world for a reason."

It's not as if the success came out of left field, either. Carolina has been perennial contenders across at least the past five-plus seasons, ranking first (306) in combined regular-season and playoff wins during that span.

"Everyone has known how we play for years now. Really, that hasn't changed that much. Everyone has kind of already expected what we're going to bring," Sebastian Aho explained.

Part of achieving that success has been approaching every game like they're going to get every team's A-game, every single night, as they have been throughout the Brind'Amour era. Whether the opponent sits first or last in the standings, the plan centers around three things: forechecking, possessing, and limiting chances.

"You've got to always play with the mindset that the other team is bringing their best," Aho continued. "You're the Stanley Cup Champion. You know from past years when you play that year's Stanley Cup Champion that you know you definitely want to beat them."

That same hunger they had when they were one of the other 31 teams doesn't just go away either.

"When we've played (Stanley Cup-winning) teams in the past, you want to prove yourself," Jordan Martinook shared. "The most recent Cup champion is usually pretty much the standard of what you want to beat. I'm assuming most teams are going to be giving us their best, but I think that can bring the best out of our team as well."

Motivated by being the hunted instead of the hunters, Carolina knows its "stress game" can lead to success, and doesn't plan to stray away from it now.

"We can drag some teams into some tough places, and I think it could be a big confidence booster for our group if teams are throwing their knockout punch at us and we can kind of counter it," Martinook continued. "As a competitor and as a hockey player, you want teams' best. You don't want anybody to take it easy on you. In the end, (facing their best) will help us in the long run."

"It just seemed like it was their time. They were rolling."

The Hurricanes dominated from wire to wire this playoffs !!
pic.twitter.com/IW0MCotDN2

— Wingmen with Matthew and Brady Tkachuk (@Wingmenpod) June 18, 2026

Strapped in for an 84-game regular season, the Canes understand that there will be no off nights.

"Every team in the league is going to be ready for us. It's going to be a long year," Taylor Hall said. "When you think about the respect that other teams have for us around the league, it's going to be hard games every night. But we're looking forward to that."

Turn the page, remain unsatisfied, and do it all again.

"It's a new year, and we've got to put that behind us and in the past. Every night we're going to expect the other team's best," Stankoven closed. "We have a target on our back. That's just the way it's going to be all year, and we've got to step up to the plate."



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Canucks open six-game road trip vs. Hurricanes

By: FLM

Carolina looks for its first home victory of the season after back-to-back road wins, while Vancouver leans on Paul Cotter's four-game point streak to bounce back from a loss to Vegas.

The Vancouver Canucks and Carolina Hurricanes didn't have much in common entering the season.

Now in the second week of the schedule, they've both experienced similar doses of successes and failures.

That's the backdrop as Vancouver and Carolina head into Thursday's meeting in Raleigh, N.C.

The Hurricanes have won a pair of road games since beginning the season with a 0-1-1 mark in two home outings.

The Canucks have alternated wins and losses, with a break since Sunday's 3-2 setback to visiting Vegas.

So this means that Vancouver has back-to-back games against last season's Stanley Cup finalists, with the game at Carolina the beginning of a six-game road trip to Eastern Conference locales.

"We've had a couple great teams we've played against here early and going to continue to try and be better, and I think a road trip will help us," Canucks forward Paul Cotter said.

Veteran defenseman Luke Schenn said the trips tend to be good for bonding, though winning games along the way tends to help.

"Getting to know one another a little bit on a personal level," he said of time away from home. "I think the closer you are off the ice, the easier it translates on the ice."

The Canucks are adjusting in several ways under first-year coach Manny Malhotra, who has generally expressed an encouraging tone by what he has seen so far from the team.

"We're definitely seeing progress in different areas of the game," Malhotra said. "Playing a different system takes a while to get used to.

The Hurricanes have most all of their roster in place since winning the Stanley Cup in June. But a new season has already brought certain challenges.

There have been encouraging signs for the Hurricanes since the lackluster beginning to the season. Special teams have been looking up.

"I think our penalty kill is kind of picking up where they left off in the playoffs," forward Taylor Hall said.

Forward Sebastian Aho said the Hurricanes need to find ways to get rolling while parts of their attack are taking time to get untracked. So perhaps it's the penalty killing that can ignite a spark.

"It's just so huge and gives us so much momentum," Aho said.

Aho has four goals out of the team's 11 total goals this season.

For Vancouver, Cotter also has four goals to go with two assists. Teammate Elias Pettersson also has six points, with two goals and four assists.

Cotter has at least one point in all four games.

"Obviously, the points are nice," Malhotra said. "When you can contribute on that end of things, makes you feel good. The expectation of his game doesn't change. We're not expecting him to be on pace for 82 goals."

This matchup will mark the lone home outing for the Hurricanes amid a five-game stretch. Last season, they didn't experience a third home setback until mid-November, something they'll look to avoid Thursday.

--Field Level Media



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Carolina Hurricanes Game 5: Lines, Notes, Goalies, and How to Watch vs. Canucks

By: Rachel Barkley

Carolina Hurricanes Game 5: Lines, Notes, Goalies, and How to Watch vs. Canucks

Thursday, the Carolina Hurricanes return home for one more game – facing the Vancouver Canucks – before embarking on a weekend back-to-back Metropolitan division road trip.

Not only that, but Thursday is also two dollar hot dog night in Lenovo Center. (You really thought you would escape this preview without hearing about it? C'mon, son!)

The game is scheduled for 7:00 PM EDT.

The Hurricanes' last game was exciting, entertaining...and also a bit frustrating. Carolina not only had to contend with the Montreal Canadiens, but also the referees in a bizarrely officiated game.

The match saw a goalie interference call against Jackson Blake for skating into Jakub Dobes, while Florian Xhekaj actually punched Brandon Bussi – and a call against Taylor Hall despite the fact the Hurricanes' winger was bleeding due to an evident high-sticking infraction to him.

Nonetheless, the Hurricanes still came out on top in a 6-4 win. You can read all about the game here!

Meanwhile, the Canucks' last game was a 3-2 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights on Sunday – a game which they led early and kept close until the eventual game-winning goal with less than two minutes left in the game. This upcoming game will be the start of their own Eastern Conference road trip, which will span six games and end on October 17th.

In the Crease

With Brandon Bussi having played Tuesday night against the Canadiens, the likely choice for the Hurricanes in net will be Pyotr Kochetkov. Of the four games played this season, Kochetkov has only started one – the game versus the Philadelphia Flyers, and he did very well despite not seeing any true action since December of last year due to injury.

This season, Kochetkov's goals against average is 1.91, with a save percentage of .889.

As for the Canucks, they have a Finnish goaltending tandem of Kevin Lankinen and Leevi Merilainen – both of which are very capable. With that being said, it is most likely that Lankinen will start against the Hurricanes, since he appears to be the general starter, and has had three days of rest since playing the Golden Knights.

This season, Lankinen's goals against average is 6.50, with a save percentage of .824.

Projected Carolina Hurricanes Lines

William Carrier – Sebastian Aho – Andrei Svechnikov

Taylor Hall – Logan Stankoven – Jackson Blake

Nikolaj Ehlers – Jordan Staal – Jordan Martinook

Jesperi Kotkaniemi – Mark Jankowski – Eric Robinson

Advertisement

Defense

Jacob Slavin – Jalen Chatfield

K'Andre Miller – Sean Walker

Shayne Gostisbehere – Mike Reilly

Goaltenders

Pyotr Kochetkov / Brandon Bussi

Projected Vancouver Canucks Lines

Jake DeBrusk – Elias Pettersson – Jonathan Lekkerimäki

Paul Cotter – Marco Rossi – Brock Boeser

Liam Obergren – Max Sasson – Linus Karlsson

Arshdeep Bains – Drew O'Connor – Brendan Gallagher

Defense

Zeev Buium – Filip Hronek

Jamie Oleksiak – Tom Willander

Elias Nils Pettersson – Victor Mancini

Goaltenders

Kevin Lankinen / Leevi Merilainen

Special Teams

Carolina Hurricanes power play: 19.0% (19th, down four spots from previous game)

Carolina Hurricanes penalty kill: 89.5% (8th, up eight spots from previous game)

Advertisement

Vancouver Canucks power play: 23.1% (16th)

Vancouver Canucks penalty kill: 68.8% (25th)

The Hurricanes did not practice Wednesday morning, as expected anytime they travel back home after a night game on the road.

How To Watch

TV: Hurricanes Hockey Network

Streaming: ESPN+

Radio: 99.9 The Fan



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

1225147 Carolina Hurricanes

Amid a career backslide, Canes' Kotkaniemi still believes he can contribute

Chip Alexander

Raleigh

There's something people should know about Jesperi Kotkaniemi: he believes he can be a good player in the NHL.

The Carolina Hurricanes forward realizes he has taken some backward steps recently in his career. He did not appear in a single Stanley Cup game in the Canes' championship run. He knows there are doubters.

At the same time, Kotkaniemi has an unshakable belief in himself, in what's still possible in his career at age 26, in his ability to start taking steps forward again.

"I do," he said in an interview. "I can see myself playing in the first few lines. I think I'm still a little too young to start that fourth-line career. I feel I've got more to give."

On that last point, nearly everyone agrees. Kotkaniemi, at 6-3 and 212 pounds, has a strong frame and can play a physical game when he has the right disposition. He can hit. He can be a big body around the crease at both ends of the rink. He has more to give.

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"All that and here we are again," he said, breaking a smile.

"It was a little different," he added. "You kind of knew there probably wasn't a spot for me in the lineup, coming in here. It doesn't mean I'm not going to work my (butt) off to try to get back there, and hopefully get a bigger role at some point and get back on the level I know I can play. Try to work towards that and be ready for when the moment comes."

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"That was a killer," he said. "But we won the Cup, so I'll take it."

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"I took it as a compliment," Kotkaniemi joked.

"No, it's always special going back there, then and now."

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A lot has happened to Kotkaniemi, and the Hurricanes, in the five years since that October night in Montreal. The Canes had hoped Kotkaniemi would emerge as their second-line center, be productive. That hasn't happened and his playing time decreased to the point of being a healthy scratch.

And his goal this season?

"There's always time to bounce back," he said.

This story was originally

Published October 7, 2026 at 5:30 AM.

Profile Image of Chip Alexander

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

News Observer LOADED: 10.08.2026



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1225250 Websites

The Athletic / Nobody understands the Sabres, and other lessons from the NHL prediction contest

By Sean McIndoe

Oct. 7, 2026

We're barely a week into the NHL season, and you've already seen my team tiers, my oddly specific predictions, my most intriguing players, and my first batch of power rankings. Oh, and hopefully you've signed up for the newsletter.

Are you sick of me yet? You should be. So I'm taking the day off.

Instead, this post is about you, and what you think. Specifically, it's about the 1,258 of you who entered this year's prediction contest. That number was the highest in the contest's seven-year history, by the way, so thanks to everyone who spread the word.

It's obviously way too early to start keeping score. It's only been a week, and history tells us that most of your entries won't be completely dead in the water until it's been two weeks. But one of my favorite things about the contest is that it doubles as an informal survey of what hockey fans are expecting. There are usually some interesting insights to be found in there.

Is October the best sports month?

Chris Branch

So today, we're going to dive into those 1,258 entries and see what they tell us about what expectations look like among the smartest hockey fans out there. And also you.

The teams

The contest features three questions about team success, or lack thereof. And there's a fourth question that isn't asked that may be the most interesting of them all.

First, the basics. When asked to name teams that will make the playoffs, you were close to unanimous on two: the Carolina Hurricanes and Colorado Avalanche, both at 95 percent of entries. The Dallas Stars were next at about 75 percent, and then there's a big drop down to the next tier of the Montreal Canadiens, Vegas Golden Knights and Edmonton Oilers, all under 50 percent. That's fewer sure things than most years, which suggests more uncertainty than we're used to seeing.

On the flip side, there was almost no confidence in several teams, including two that made the playoffs last year. The Boston Bruins and Pittsburgh Penguins were both named just twice, ranking them behind the three entries that listed the NFL's Carolina Panthers. So ... not great.

For teams that will miss the playoffs, the Vancouver Canucks led their field, appearing on 96 percent of entries. The Calgary Flames were close behind, followed by a drop to the Seattle Kraken and Chicago Blackhawks, who were the only other two teams north of 50 percent. The Detroit Red Wings were close, at about 42 percent, and then another drop to the rest of the league. Nothing really stood out in that last group, although I was mildly surprised to see just 21 of you pick the Toronto Maple Leafs to miss the playoffs despite a 20-point gap last year.

You had far less confidence in the mushy middle teams, defined as those that would finish between 9th and 24th. That's been typical for this question, and this year didn't see any team even make it to 50 percent of entries. The bad news is that your leading team was the Philadelphia Flyers, who showed up on 41 percent of entries, and may need to get their game together soon to even chase down 24th.

And finally, the hidden question that can tell us a lot: Which teams showed up on the fewest entries across those first three questions? In other words, which teams did you collectively have the least confidence in predicting?

You're developing an interesting track record with this question — in both 2023-24 and 2024-25, you were least confident about the Bruins, who

spent those years plunging from 135 points to 109 and then all the way to 76. Last year, your least-picked team was the Winnipeg Jets, who went from Presidents' Trophy winners to one of the league's worst teams.

That's not a great sign for this year's team: the Buffalo Sabres, who were named only 192 times across the first three questions. Most of that was in the middle, where they were listed 167 times compared to 23 for making the playoffs and just two for missing. But coming off a 109-point season, you don't seem to believe in them. And unfortunately for Sabres fans, history suggests you're often right.

The hot seats

Questions 4 and 5 ask you to name coaches and GMs who won't lose their jobs. You're not allowed to pick recent hires, but otherwise these questions tend to be relatively easy points.

This year's answers didn't have much in the way of surprises. Rod Brind'Amour and Martin St. Louis finished in a dead heat for top spot among the safe coaches, each appearing in 78 percent of entries. Jon Cooper and Paul Maurice were next, both at just over 50 percent, while Spencer Carbery was a bit below. After that group of five, things spread out considerably, and it was notable that barely a quarter of you listed Jared Bednar (who signed his extension right after the contest closed).

As you'd probably expect, the GM question mostly landed on the same teams as the coaches, with Montreal's Kent Hughes barely edging out Carolina's Eric Tulsky and the Florida Panthers' Bill Zito. Mike Grier, Bill Guerin and Jim Nill were up next, meaning the Tampa Bay Lightning's Julien BriseBois was a mildly surprising seventh, just ahead of Kyle Dubas.

Of course, it's also interesting to see which coaches and GMs earned the least confidence from all of you. Among eligible answers, you were most nervous about Seattle's Lane Lambert, who was named just twice. That put him one behind Andrew Brunette, at three, and the duo of Todd McLellan and Scott Arniel, both at four. For the GM question, the news is grim for Chris Drury, who was named as a safe GM by only seven entries. That put him just a couple of votes ahead of Lou Lamoriello, Brian MacLellan, Doug Armstrong and Steve Yzerman, all of whom received multiple mentions even though none are current NHL GMs.

Speaking of which: Welcome back to the GM question, Joe Sakic! It's been a running joke that contest entrants kept listing Sakic as the Avalanche GM despite him handing that job over to Chris MacFarland since way back in 2022. Well, Sakic is now back in charge in Colorado. He was not, however, eligible for this year's contest, since he'd only been on the job a few weeks. That didn't stop 20 of you from listing him, probably out of force of habit. That ties him with Don Waddell and puts him ahead of Stan Bowman, who had the confidence of just 13 of you.

The stars

Questions six through nine focus on the players who'll excel this year, and you don't tend to throw too many curveballs here.

Among the goalies who'll start at least 50 games, you were notably less confident than in previous years; your top pick was Andrei Vasilevskiy, who only clocked in at just north of 60 percent of entries. Ilya Sorokin and Igor Shesterkin were the only other two to appear on over 50 percent of entries, with Jeremy Swayman and Jake Oettinger falling just short. For what it's worth, only 14 of you went with Connor Hellebuyck, which still left him tied with Jakub Dobeš and ahead of Dan Vladar.

Question seven is always a tricky one, asking you to name rookies who'll finish in the top 10 of Calder voting. You were pretty chalky here, with Porter Martone leading the way at just short of 90 percent, a few points ahead of Gavin McKenna. There was a drop to Ivar Stenberg, and good support for Cole Hutson and Anton Frondell. Also, one of you picked Matthew Schaefer, presumably because you accidentally skipped a cutscene last year.

When we get to defensemen who'll finish in the top 10 in Norris voting, we find the most common single answer in the contest: Fully 98 percent of you named Cale Makar. That's extraordinarily high, given game theory would suggest that some of you would leave the favorite off your entry just for insurance purposes. Quinn Hughes was next at 87 percent, with Zach Werenski, Rasmus Dahlin and Lane Hutson all over 50 percent. For what it's worth, early scoring star Evan Bouchard was sixth, but well back of the big five at just 16 percent of entries.



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The ninth question asks you to name players who'll finish in the top 15 of Hart voting, and as always, it was Connor McDavid leading the way. Somewhat fittingly, he came in at 97 percent. Nathan MacKinnon (92 percent), Macklin Celebrini (84 percent) and Nikita Kucherov (65 percent) were next, and then there's a big drop to Leon Draisaitl at just 16 percent. Most of you aren't buying the Auston Matthews comeback hype, as he was mentioned on just 9 percent of entries. Also, shout out to the 74 of you who picked Aleksander Barkov; there's a chance you've already eaten the contest's first zeroes.

The trades

After a one-year absence (to make room for an Olympic-themed question), we're back to asking you to name players who'll switch teams between opening night and July 1.

First things first: After consulting with the contest's board of governors (i.e., me arguing with myself in the shower), we've decided that anyone who listed Matthew Knies or Kirill Marchenko won't be punished for what's technically a wrong answer. That trade happened outside the contest window, meaning before opening night. Since neither guy is likely to move again before July 1, they're "wrong" by the rules. But we don't want to punish anyone for getting their entries in early, so any mention of Knies or Marchenko will be ignored, rather than marked right or wrong.

With that out of the way, your most common answer here is no surprise. It's Hellebuyck, mentioned on 70 percent of entries. That's higher than just about any player has ever had on this question, while still being maybe a bit lower than I'd have guessed. Dylan Larkin is next, but barely cleared 50 percent, and Marchenko was the only other name to end up north of 15 percent. Among some other names that have featured in the rumor mill, only 178 of you were confident that Alexander Nikishin would be moved, just 132 named Alex DeBrincat, and there was little support for either Quinn Hughes (37 entries) or Jason Robertson (32).

(Also, only three of you even mentioned Knies, which is the same number as McDavid. Apparently you all figured the Leafs were bluffing. Me too. Ah well.)

The bonus

There were a couple of twists on The Dreaded Bonus Question™ this year. As a reminder, this is the optional question that lets you earn 15 bonus points while risking your entire entry. The question was to simply name someone who'll score 50 goals this year, and the twists were that this time there were no team-based qualifiers and you could legally answer "nobody" if you wanted to.

In all, about 62 percent of you foolishly took the bait were brave enough to opt in. Of those, the most common response was Nathan MacKinnon, who was listed 165 times. Draisaitl was at 129, barely beating Celebrini's 123. Matthews (90), Cole Caufield (77) and McDavid (75) also had significant support, before a drop down to a next tier of names such as Jason Robertson, Kirill Kaprizov and David Pastrňák.

As for the "nobody" option, 27 of you went for that, and will no doubt be hoping for a return to the dark ages of the Dead Puck Era.

Finally, not many of you were willing to wager your entry on youth being served, although 10 of you took Cutter Gauthier and eight had Matt Boldy. And then there's the usual motley crew of one-entry names, which this year include Brady Tkachuk, Kyle Connor, Steven Stamkos, Jesper Bratt and Dylan Holloway. Also, someone took Collin Graf, which is cool, because I didn't know his mom read my column.



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The Athletic / Macklin Celebrini, Kirill Marchenko and more rising Player Tiers stars to watch

By Shayna Goldman

Oct. 7, 2026

The Player Tiers project is a balancing act of sorts. No two lists are identical — not from The Model, not from the five of us who worked on it, or from any member of the insider panel. And it's because no two hockey minds prioritize the same characteristics or traits.

But within all of the differing opinions, there tends to be some consensus. A lot of that, this year, had to do with rising talent. The NHL is getting younger, faster and more skilled, and that was clearly represented in this year's Top 150.

But with rising talent comes another balancing challenge: finding the right spot for a player based on their projected value for this season versus their long-term trajectory. The former is more influential in each player's final Tier placement for 2026-27. But the latter gives us something to watch for moving forward, thanks to our panelists pinpointing a few players who could rocket up the ranks in the very near future.

Why haven't the Red Wings signed Simon Edvinsson?

After making his Player Tiers debut last fall, it only took Macklin Celebrini one year to rocket up this list, from 3B to 1C. It's one of the biggest year-to-year rises of anyone currently in the top 150.

One executive predicted this would be the case last summer, saying he would "perennially be in Tier 1, possibly as soon as next year."

Celebrini set expectations high for the 2026-27 season. He quickly looked like the budding superstar the Sharks drafted him to be as a rookie, showing proof of concept of his pedigree. But he didn't just progress in Year 2 — he leaped into an elite tier of game-breaking talent. Now, he isn't getting measured up to other young guns; he jumped into a league with Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Nikita Kucherov, and finished fourth behind them in Hart Trophy voting. And he did it without much help on a rebuilding Sharks team.

Celebrini's 45 goals and 115 points were nearly double the next-best Shark, Will Smith, in both categories. San Jose outscored opponents 73-56 in his five-on-five minutes thanks to his all-around play — especially how he sparked the Sharks' rush attack, generated dangerous scoring chances and started to level up without the puck. Add in some of his clutch scoring, and it was almost enough to drag the Sharks into the playoff picture.

Some of our insider panel, who all spoke on condition of anonymity to speak freely about players, felt that was already enough to move higher in Tier 1.

"I would definitely have him 1B right now, and you could make an argument for him to be in 1A," one former player said. "He's awesome — what a player."

"Celebrini goes right into 1A, with MacKinnon," an executive added. "To me, McDavid is still a different level, but I'm not sure I'm not taking Celebrini (No. 1) overall right now."

Others want to see another gear first before moving him up the ranks. But there is a strong feeling that the next level is coming. The more Celebrini matures physically, the more he should be able to dominate play. Plus, he should gain more support as the Sharks develop around him, and that should cement him as a top-five player in the NHL.

"This will be the last year that Celebrini's anything but 1A," another executive said.

From one No. 1 pick to another. Matthew Schaefer's jump was the most significant, from off the list entirely to leading off the franchise tier as the only defenseman in 2A. That is the best rookie debut ever in this project, even ahead of Cale Makar, who debuted in 2B back in 2021.

And this is far from his peak placement. Schaefer is only scratching the surface after an unprecedented rookie season.

Schaefer quickly took on big minutes on Long Island and adapted on the fly as the coaches threw more challenges his way. As the 2025-26 season rolled on, he learned to play in matchup minutes and still found ways to take over shifts. His skating, between overall speed and maneuverability, proved to be elite at this level. So did his offensive quarterbacking, after notching 23 goals and 59 points. Similar to Celebrini, it was a major reason why his team was in the playoff picture against the odds.

"He's got this fire that you can see when you watch him," one former player said. "When he does a few things every single night, no 18-year-old defenseman should be doing it, but really, no defenseman should be able to do what he's doing."

His current 2A placement is already impressive in Year 1, especially when looking at some of the defensemen he's ahead of: Miro Heiskanen, Moritz Seider, Jake Sanderson, Adam Fox and Lane Hutson, among others. But the consensus among the insiders was that this placement is a quick stepping stone to MVP territory.

"I think Schaefer is gonna be red [in Tier 1]. I think he's gonna have a red year. I just think he is that f—ing good," one executive said. "I can't remember somebody coming in and being that good right away."

"He's already one of the best defenders on the planet," another executive added. "It might even be next year that he's in that Tier 1, 1A conversation."

A few think he could have made the Tier 1 cut after just one season of NHL action. One executive thought he could be placed as high as we wanted. A scout called him generational.

The sky is the limit for Schaefer. Another year of physical maturation should help him grow into that No. 1 role and put him in elite company with players like Rasmus Dahlin, Zach Werenski, Quinn Hughes and even Makar.

Similar to last year, Jackson LaCombe's current placement seems like a temporary stop on his path up the ranks. The sentiment was similar when he debuted in 5A after a breakout 2024-25 season.

LaCombe's meteoric rise to becoming a No. 1 defenseman over the last couple of seasons has been fueled by his all-three-zones play and ability to shoulder a tough workload in a pretty chaotic environment. He retrieves a ton of pucks to get his team out of danger and transports play up the ice with his elite transition game and skating to spark offense.

"He's sort of that every-single-tool type of defenseman, and he's got the range to defend against the best players in the world. And obviously, what he did against McDavid in the playoffs really helped catapult him," a former player said.

While LaCombe didn't have to face peak McDavid in the playoffs, his shutdown play was still impressive. In 66 head-to-head minutes between LaCombe and McDavid at five-on-five, the Ducks had a 42-19 edge in shots and went up 6-2 in scoring. What stood out above all else was how his skating allowed him to keep pace with the best player in the world and take away his lanes.

"When you look at his age, and you look at the curve that he's on, I absolutely can see him moving up at this time next year into that category of a guy that is a true all-around defenseman and good in every single area of the game," the former player added.

LaCombe, 25, is just entering what aging curves point to as a defenseman's peak, so there may still be even more in the tank. And many insiders think that next level will take him to Tier 2. One executive sees him profiling similarly to Heiskanen.

"Lacombe's going to end up being like a 2A guy, 2B, next year," one former player said. "He's going to take a huge step. I think he's a total stud."

Another former player stressed that Anaheim's offseason losses are going to make him even more important there this year.

Last year, an analyst said Kirill Marchenko has the trajectory to be an All-Star. While he didn't start there on the first draft of this year's list, he was argued up to 3C.



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Marchenko has gotten a lot of panel support over the last couple of seasons, and for good reason. One executive called him “sneaky good” this year. A coach noted that “he’s good at everything” between his rush play, forechecking, offensive-zone reach and under-the-radar defensive impact.

“I don’t think there’s too many people around the league that don’t dream of being able to have this guy in their lineup,” another coach explained. “And he’s just scratching the surface.”

Keep in mind, all of these conversations about Marchenko took place before he was traded to the Toronto Maple Leafs. He was undoubtedly fantastic in Columbus and earned all of this hype playing there. Marchenko developed into a 70-point threat there and was a major reason why the team had the edge in xG and scoring in his five-on-five minutes over the last few seasons.

But he also had to be The Guy up front in Columbus, when he probably fits better as a No. 2 or 3 forward. When the season started, there were at least 20 teams with a stronger No. 1 to kick off their forward group. So this move to Toronto should suit his game even more. While he won’t have an MVP-caliber defenseman like Werenski to support his game, there is a lot more star power around him up front. Having a center like Auston Matthews (ahead on the depth chart and on his line) is a lot different from Sean Monahan and Adam Fantilli. Maybe it will be the difference that finally powers him up to the top of Tier 3, or higher.

“He’s one of the most underrated players in the league,” a coach said. “He always has the puck, makes great plays. I’d argue him as high as the 3As.”

Another coach thinks he could jump into the top-10 winger conversation next year.

“He’s a super dynamic player. I feel about him the way I feel about those guys at the top — the Pastrňáks, the Kaprizovs,” the coach said. “All of a sudden, he just makes a play. He’s got speed and a big body.”

Beckett Sennecke, Anaheim Ducks

2026: 4C (Debut)

There was a very clear consensus among the insider panel when it came to Beckett Sennecke.

As one former player put it, “That Sennecke kid’s really good, I could see him jumping up.”

A 60-point rookie season was a great start to his NHL career. Adding another five goals in his first taste of playoff action was another impressive feather to his 2025-26 season. While he had an assist from some high-danger passing last season, he proved what a dangerous shot he has on the Ducks’ second line.

At 20, there is still a lot of runway. Aging curves point to a lot of growth between ages 21 and 23, before a forward even enters the prime of their career. What adds to his potential is having a unique combination of skills. At 6-foot-3, he fits the power forward archetype, but he brings so much more to the table thanks to his speed and puck-moving ability and could develop into something of a unicorn.

Sennecke’s zone-entry rate was already elite in Year 1 in Anaheim. And he didn’t waste those opportunities, either: AllThreeZones tracking showed he was one of the best rush threats for the Ducks last season, with a rate of scoring chances off entries that stacked up to players like Brandon Hagel and Nikolaj Ehlers.

“He had a late growth spurt, and it shows up in his game,” a scout explained. “He has all the small-guy skills, with the body positioning and skill, but in a power forward body. He’s special.”

Originally, he started in Tier 5, but there were numerous calls to boost him up to Tier 4. One scout thinks he’s already ahead of Andrei Svechnikov, Travis Konency, Ivan Demidov and Pavel Dorofeyev. Another executive had him ahead of Demidov as well, and thinks he could take another step this season. A coach thinks he could explode. A scout sees even more potential if he eventually moves to center and becomes even more versatile.

“He’s going to move up after next year,” a former player said. “I think he’s going to be elite.”

The Athletic LOADED: 10.08.2026



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The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Gretzky on Ovechkin's farewell tour, plus latest on Hughes, Laine, Perron, more

By Pierre LeBrun

Oct. 7, 2026

Wayne Gretzky did it differently, but that's OK.

While Alex Ovechkin announced this week that this would be his final NHL season, giving fans in rinks around the league a chance to say goodbye when the Washington Capitals come to town, No. 99 tried to keep his retirement a secret until the very end back in 1998-99.

Word leaked out in his second-to-last game, in Ottawa, before his final game at Madison Square Garden capped off the Great One's career.

"Everybody's different. I didn't want to talk about it. I knew if I told my dad, he would tell the world, so I didn't tell my dad," Gretzky told The Athletic this week, laughing. "I told (my wife) Janet first, then I told my mom. I knew she could keep it quiet. Because I didn't want to go on a (farewell) tour, and I didn't want to offset the games for the guys.

"But you know for Alex, every city is an event, you know? Because you only go there once or twice. So it's a big event for him coming to town. So him announcing it isn't going to change all that. Except now people will realize if they have a ticket for a Capitals game in January, they could sell it for 10 times the money (laughs)."

Gretzky said the 41-year-old Ovechkin's farewell tour will be great for the NHL.

"I kind of thought that it would be his last year," Gretzky said. "It's hard when you get over the age of 38. That's why Gordie Howe was so unique. Chris Chelios, playing as long as he did. And listen, what Sidney (Crosby) is doing now is incredible. I can't imagine those two guys would retire the same year, so that's why I think Sid has at least another year in him. They both deserve their own (farewell) tour."

And nothing about the 39-year-old Crosby's game suggests to Gretzky the end is near.

"Sid is playing as well as I've ever seen him play," Gretzky said.

He said he turned to his TNT colleagues Anson Carter, Paul Bissonnette and Henrik Lundqvist last week off air and said, "You know, when you see a guy at 31 and he's a great player and then you watch him at (39), you go, 'OK, he's slower now. He's missing a step. His hands aren't as good.' But if you watch a tape of the game Sidney played tonight, you wouldn't know if he was 31 or 39. He plays the exact same way. He has the same speed. Obviously, he's a way smarter player because of his years of experience.

"He might be a better player today than he was at 32. Which is incredible. He's like Tom Brady or LeBron James. There are only a few athletes who can do that, right?"

Yup.

Caps coach Carbery reflects on Ovechkin's impact

Sean Gentile

Laine still looking

I'm mildly surprised that unrestricted free agent winger Patrik Laine hasn't found a home yet. I get that some teams have concerns about his five-on-five play. But man, he could surely still help a power play?

Because Laine spent time on long-term injured reserve last season in Montreal, the allure of taking a gamble on him on a one-year deal is that it can be a performance-bonus contract with a low base salary. There'd be limited financial investment, and there'd be an easy walkaway if he doesn't pan out. You're talking about \$150,000 a month for a seven-time 20-goal scorer.

In any case, Laine continues to patiently wait for his next NHL opportunity, skating in Florida with a few other unsigned NHLers, including Vladimir Tarasenko and Alexander Nikishin.

"Patrik is healthy, skating every day and feels really good," his agent, Andy Scott, said this week. "He's only 28, has a lot of good hockey ahead of him and remains excited about his next opportunity. He's focused on staying ready so that when the right situation presents itself, he can step in and contribute right away."

The Calgary Flames were last in the NHL in scoring last year, but even more importantly, they were 31st on the power play, which is where Laine could help. My understanding is that the Flames have indeed talked about Laine internally, but I think for now they want to take a longer look at their younger guys early in the season.

The Detroit Red Wings are another team that has had talks with the Laine camp, but the Red Wings, in case you haven't heard, have a lot going on these days.

The Seattle Kraken looked at Laine early in the offseason, but they didn't have a roster spot for him after re-signing Bobby McMann and trading for Mackie Samoskevich.

Perron, too

David Perron hasn't hung up his skates, either. The 38-year-old UFA winger is awaiting the right fit.

"Perron is actively looking for the right situation for him and his family and is committed to playing this season," his agent, Allan Walsh, said this week.

Perron, who is skating back home in Sherbrooke, Quebec, staying in shape, had 13 goals in 65 games split between the Ottawa Senators and the Red Wings last season. I wouldn't rule out the Red Wings as a potential reunion fit, but again, Detroit has a few things going on right now.

There was a huge sigh of relief throughout the Florida Panthers organization after team doctors gave their prognosis on captain Aleksander Barkov: He's out six to eight weeks and is avoiding surgery. It's about the best-case scenario, given how it looked when he was injured. For sure, it's night and day from a year ago, when the Panthers were finding out that they'd lose Barkov for the full season with a torn ACL and MCL, suffered on the first day of training camp.

All of which should quell the speculation tying the team to Dylan Larkin. My understanding is that there wasn't validity to that speculation in the first place. But with the news Tuesday, it becomes a moot point anyway.

Because Barkov will be back this season, it's not like the Panthers can go out and spend his cap hit. Florida is also loaded at the center position already. And finally, in terms of planning out a bit further, the Panthers need to save for a rainy day — needing to extend Brady Tkachuk next summer, one year before the expiry of his deal. Which is to say, there's a limit to how many shiny new toys the Panthers can go out and purchase.

Never say never. Things can change. But right now I don't see the fit for Larkin on the Panthers.

Hughes in no rush

The Minnesota Wild are in Week 2 of the regular season, and Quinn Hughes still hasn't been extended — not what general manager Bill Guerin was hoping for back in July. There have been multiple conversations between the sides, but until the player himself greenlights his agent, Pat Brisson, to take it further, it's status quo.

A year ago on Sept. 30, Kirill Kaprizov was signed to his big extension a week before the season after a tense negotiation. That didn't happen with Hughes. My understanding of the situation is that it's rather simple: He's in no rush. This could take months before he decides his future. It's a tough situation for the all-in Wild, as our writers Michael Russo and Joe Smith chronicled last week, especially given how much they gave up for him in that blockbuster with the Vancouver Canucks last December.

But all Minnesota can do is wait. It's a story that isn't going away.

Hockey Canada is expected to announce the next general manager of Team Canada's best-on-best men's team in January. You may remember Doug Armstrong stepped down in March.



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The plan is for Hockey Canada executive Scott Salmond to meet with GM candidates in and around the Nov. 10 GMs meeting in Toronto to pick their brains. Those candidates include Jim Nill, Kyle Dubas, Julien BriseBois and Don Sweeney, who were all part of Armstrong's Olympic management team. Sweeney was Team Canada's GM for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

It remains undecided at this juncture whether Hockey Canada will name a GM who covers both the February 2028 World Cup of Hockey and the February 2030 Winter Olympics or divide those decisions and assignments and announce for the World Cup only, followed by an Olympic GM announcement after the World Cup. I'm betting on the latter. One thing to remember: 4 Nations was just 12 months before the Milan Olympics. There are two years between the World Cup and the Olympics this time around.

Also of note, there's no decision yet on whether or not Jon Cooper will be back as head coach. That will be up to the new GM. Perhaps there's a push for Cup champion coach Rod Brind'Amour or two-time Cup champion Paul Maurice? As always, there are plenty of great candidates.

As for Team USA, Olympic gold medal-winning GM Bill Guerin is interested in staying on board as GM if USA Hockey wants him back, and it's my understanding that it does. I also think USA Hockey will want to divide the World Cup and Olympic announcements — not name both at once but wait on the Olympic GM announcement. That doesn't mean it won't be the same person as GM for both.

Does Zacha get signed or traded?

I'm intrigued to see where things eventually land with Pavel Zacha.

His name came up in conversations between the Boston Bruins and Columbus Blue Jackets when the Bruins inquired about Kirill Marchenko. It goes without saying that the Blue Jackets were smart to go the Matthew Knies route instead — getting a younger player who's signed long-term on a great contract.

But that doesn't mean Zacha isn't a really good player. As far as I can tell, though, the Bruins haven't been close in talks with his camp over the past three months on what an extension should look like. I think they had some sticker shock in June when they heard what the player might be looking for. But as the summer has gone on and salaries skyrocketed around the league, I bet that number doesn't seem as high.

The sides have kept the dialogue going, which is good. So there's still a chance the Bruins eventually extend Zacha.

But in the meantime, teams are naturally calling about him. So few centers ever become available.

He's 29 years old, and I think the Bruins are worried about a long-term commitment and how it will age — perhaps sensitive to living with the Elias Lindholm contract already.

This one could absolutely go either way over the coming months. But if the Bruins aren't in a playoff spot closer to the March 1 trade deadline and Zacha still hasn't signed, I think you know how it ends.

March 1 trade deadline

The NHL's March 1 trade deadline falls on a Monday this season, a departure from the past few years, when it fell on a Friday.

The trade deadline was on Friday, March 6, last season. It was on Friday, March 7, for the 2024-25 season. It was on Friday, March 8, in 2023-24.

The regular season beginning a week earlier this year is part of the reason the deadline is a bit earlier. As per the CBA, the trade deadline is supposed to fall 40 days from the end of the regular season, which is exactly what March 1 is this season. But in the past, the league and NHL Players' Association have sometimes agreed to move it to another day if they felt there were too many games on its original day.

This season, there are seven games on March 1, which isn't light, but every day that week is busy. There are eight games on Friday, March 5, for example. So both sides decided to keep it where it is. It should make for a busy last weekend of February.

And a final thought ...

As the Connor Hellebuyck and Dylan Larkin situations drag out, let me share this opinion, with the caveat that I've never been an NHL GM and so I've never had any skin in the game that way. So it's easy for me to opine from the cheap seats.

However ... let's compare Brady Tkachuk's forced exit from Ottawa and the ongoing situations with the Winnipeg Jets and the Red Wings.

Notice how quiet it is around the Senators as they enjoy a nice start to the season? Tip of the hat to GM Steve Staios and owner Michael Andlauer for deciding to accept a brutal reality and cut their losses as soon as possible early in the offseason rather than let the Tkachuk situation drag out. The Senators made as good a trade as they could have hoped for with Florida given the short list of teams, and let's be real, it came down to Tkachuk wanting to go to one team.

Can you imagine how things would be around the Senators if Tkachuk were still around and the team was playing hardball to force more teams onto his list? Imagine how teammates would feel about it.

Listen, I get why for the Jets, this isn't just about Hellebuyck. It's about protecting the brand and sending a message for the future. It's already hard enough to lure players to Winnipeg. The franchise is naturally sensitive to that part of it all.

Jets chairman Mark Chipman is about as good an owner as you'll ever meet. He loves the Jets and his city so much. But also true is that the team knew a long time ago Hellebuyck wanted out. It could have made a trade with Buffalo at the June draft. Of course it's a trade the Sabres likely would have won. But at some point, as hard as it is to digest, I think you have to cut your losses. And the tough part about goalie trades is historically, no matter how good the goalie is, it's hard to get equal value back. Again, easy for me to say.

Same goes for Larkin. The Red Wings had all summer to move him. I get that they wanted apple-for-apple in a trade, not a futures return. And the teams on his list, which has grown to nine or 10 teams, are all contenders that don't really want to take away from their cores.

Maybe interim GM Shawn Horcoff will be able to convince Larkin to change his mind. One can't discount that possibility. But I think it's more likely Larkin will stick to his guns. At some point, especially if the season gets away from the Red Wings, a futures deal might be the best option.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.08.2026



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ESPN / Jets, Canadiens unveil NHL Heritage Classic sweaters - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

Oct 7, 2026

After taking a three-year break, the NHL Heritage Classic returns with the Montreal Canadiens and Winnipeg Jets meeting outdoors at Princess Auto Stadium in Manitoba, Canada, on Oct. 25 -- and both teams will be dressed to impress with new sweaters.

The Jets are wearing white throwback jerseys that harken back to the original incarnation of the franchise in the 1980s and 1990s. It's a callback to their 2016 Heritage Classic sweater, which was also white with the team's legacy crest. This time, the crest is "rendered in felt with chain-stitched detailing, and the back numbers carry the same two-layer felt treatment," according to Fanatics, the NHL's authentic on-ice outfitter, which worked with the league and both teams on their jersey designs.

The Montreal sweaters feature several elements from other uniforms in the team's history while adhering to the franchise's iconic "bleu, blanc et rouge" color scheme. The Canadiens' logo is slightly redrawn and features running-stitch detailing.

As an Easter egg for fans, the words "Les Habitants" appear in the back collar for the first time, a reference to the team's nickname. There's also a fleur-de-lis on the team's loop label to honor their home province of Quebec.

The Heritage Classic is the NHL's Canadian-exclusive outdoor game series, launched in 2003 with a game between the Canadiens and the Edmonton Oilers. This is the fifth outdoor game for the Canadiens (three Heritage Classic, one Winter Classic and the NHL 100 game). It's the third outdoor game for the Jets, all Heritage Classics.

ESPN LOADED: 10.08.2026



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ESPN / Why expansion to Houston makes too much sense for the NHL - ESPN

Ryan S. Clark

Oct 7, 2026

HOUSTON -- Houston has been talked about as an NHL city before. There have been conversations, in group chats, on message boards and social media. Hockey fans have done it. So have Houston sports fans watching a game at any one of the several venues -- even during the time when the AHL was playing at Toyota Center.

The conversations still exist, but now they're louder and more real because the voices include the NHL, its stakeholders, a potential owner and figures within Houston's political and sports landscape about how the city could land an expansion team.

"I'm a big believer in that everything happens for a reason, right?" Harris County-Houston Sports Authority CEO Ryan Walsh said. "The right time, the right place, etc. Houston has been talked about as a destination for hockey for a long time. But I think Houston really is and has become a true destination for sports."

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said in late June the league is exploring adding a second team in Texas, with Houston and Austin as potential targets.

Bettman said the league entered into an agreement with The Friedkin Group that gave them six months to explore putting a team in either city. It included agreeing to a \$3.5 billion investment, including an expansion fee and building costs for an NHL arena.

In late September, Bettman said the NHL is not in a formal round of expansion, noting that the NHL board of governors has taken a "wait-and-see attitude" when it comes to adding expansion franchises. He said there is an expectation that he'll know whether the board of governors prefers Austin or Houston as a potential expansion target by the end of the year.

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said there's a chance there might not be a vote on The Friedkin Group's bid by the NHL's next board meeting in December when the six-month exploration process has finished.

Houston's viability as an option is concrete. As is the interest from influential figures in the city. But, much remains fluid when it comes to whether the NHL chooses to go to Houston, Austin or remain with 32 teams until a later time.

For now, Houston remains the largest market in the U.S. without an NHL franchise. To get one would add to the city's distinction as one that heavily consumes sports. It already has MLB, the NBA, NFL, MLS and NWSL. Houston will see the return of the WNBA in 2027, with the Connecticut Sun relocating and becoming the Houston Comets.

With that many professional teams, two FBS programs in Houston and Rice, one of the nation's strongest high school sports scenes and a host for other major events such as the World Cup, Houston's status can be viewed as a double-edged sword. There's an argument that adding the NHL would make it one of the most complete sports cities in the nation. Another suggests there could be such a thing as too much sports, and how it would be challenging for an NHL team to find its footing.

Mainly, there are two questions at the heart of how Houston finds itself in this current position even when taking those differing perspectives into account.

Why Houston? And why now?

"Houston sells itself," Houston mayor John Whitmire said. "There are a lot of really fine cities, but there's only one Houston."

Houston's hockey history

Minor league hockey first came to Houston in 1946, but the team ceased operations in 1949. It returned in 1965 with the Houston Apollos. They

were the Montreal Canadiens' farm team until 1969 when the team shuttered. The city got hockey back for a third time in 1972 with the arrival of the first iteration of the Aeros in the World Hockey Association.

The Aeros were in Houston for six seasons, won two league titles and were led by Gordie Howe along with his sons Mark and Marty.

"We knew absolutely nothing about Houston," Mark Howe said. "The first day we moved in -- Marty and I were still living at home at 18 and 19 -- I want to say there was a hurricane and you couldn't even see the house across the street. Then you go to the first day of training camp and it was 104 degrees outside. I think I sweated out 12 pounds."

Howe said the front office had the players out in the community to attract fans while teaching people more about hockey. It worked; the Aeros were in the top five of WHA attendance three times over a five-year period.

At the time, few U.S. cities had as many professional teams as Houston. The city was home to the Houston Astros, the Houston Oilers and the Houston Rockets.

"Football, for me, is obviously the biggest thing down in Texas," Howe said. "All the high schools played on Friday nights. If the Aeros played on a Friday night, we would probably be on page five or six of the sports section because of high school football. That's the way it was."

The Astros and Oilers called the Astrodome home. Even as Houston has changed and become much larger, there are still strong feelings about how the monument to advancement, which officially opened in 1965, remains the city's greatest achievement.

For some people, the Astrodome is what put Houston on the map at the same time as the city was putting a man on the moon. This is what sports means to Houston.

"They support everything and they're very proud of being Houstonians," said Tom Garrity, who was the president of the second version of the Houston Aeros for five seasons. "When you look at all their franchises, it's like anything. You have your ups and your downs. But I'd put Houston at the top of the list of supporting whatever is in town."

The WHA played its final season in 1979, with four teams -- the Edmonton Oilers, Hartford Whalers, Quebec Nordiques and Winnipeg Jets -- joining the NHL.

The Aeros disbanded a year earlier following the 1977-78 season.

In 1994, the IHL granted Houston an expansion franchise, reusing the Aeros name in homage to the former WHA team. The new Aeros won a league championship in 1999 -- but the IHL folded in 2001. The Aeros joined the AHL, and became the farm team for the Minnesota Wild. The Aeros also spent one season as a farm team for the Dallas Stars.

"It was a pretty traditional minor league hockey market. Weekend games were a way easier sell than a Tuesday night game," said Minnesota Wild broadcaster Joe O'Donnell, who spent five seasons with the Aeros. "You had a hardcore fanbase, a booster club, a season ticket holder base that was super passionate. Then, from a marketing standpoint, it was about how do you find a way to separate yourself and get the word out there."

Drawing fans was a gradual process. Eventually, the team reached the top five in AHL attendance. O'Donnell said one of the items that helped was the team playing its games at Toyota Center, home of the Rockets.

On the surface, the Aeros were playing in what might have been the nicest building in the AHL. They had future NHL players on their roster, won a league title in their second season and missed the playoffs only twice during their time in the AHL.

Why leave Houston?

"This is where the history of the owners of the Rockets and old Aeros comes into play," said David Walsh, a professor in the sports and fitness administration program at the University of Houston. "They were at each other's throats, egos, what have you. The old owner of the Aeros was Chuck Watson and the old owner of the Rockets was Les Alexander."

An arena rights battle... and the end of the Aeros

Watson owned the Aeros, and also operated The Summit, the arena where the Aeros and the Rockets played before moving to the Toyota Center. Alexander, who purchased the Rockets in 1993, tried breaking



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the lease agreement. Watson denied the move, and Alexander was forced to honor the original lease agreement that was set to end in 2003.

Alexander and Watson agreed to an arena deal in 1997 that gave both teams equal control, but Harris County voters rejected it in a 1999 referendum.

Around this same time, Alexander sought to purchase the Edmonton Oilers with the intent of moving them to Houston. The NHL already had expanded to seven markets before 2000, while three franchises moved to new cities. Moving the Oilers would have been part of a wave that saw two Canadian cities, Quebec City and Winnipeg, lose their teams to cities in the United States. The Oilers remained in Alberta with the Edmonton Investors Group purchasing the club in 1998.

In 2001, Alexander reached an agreement with the city to build the Toyota Center. The Summit, which was renamed the Compaq Center, was sold right as the original lease agreement ended in 2003. The same year, Watson sold majority ownership of the Aeros to the Wild's parent company, while staying on as a minority owner.

The Aeros moved to the Toyota Center, signing a three-year lease to become tenants of Alexander and the Rockets until 2006. Their second lease agreement was for a seven-year deal that ran through the 2012-13 season, but came with a significant rent increase.

Upon the expiry of the seven-year deal, it was reported that Alexander was seeking a 550% rent increase; instead, the Wild relocated the team to Des Moines, Iowa. Alexander later sold the Rockets to Tilman Fertitta, in 2017.

"I think he was very against any NHL team coming into Houston unless he owned it or owned part of it," David Walsh said.

How the HCHSA stabilized the market

Although the Rockets won back-to-back NBA titles, Houston's professional sports landscape was going through a challenging time during the 1990s.

Venues such as the Astrodome and The Summit were outdated. That led to tension between team owners and the city. In 1995, the Astros considered leaving for northern Virginia. In 1996, the Oilers relocated to Nashville to become the Tennessee Titans. Plus, there was the struggle between Alexander and Watson.

That led to Whitmire, then a state senator, helping establish the Harris County-Houston Sports Authority. The HCHSA was created to serve two purposes: Managing debt for professional sports venues, and attracting major sports events.

It became instrumental in the Astros building a new stadium, the NFL awarding Houston the Texans and the Rockets building a new home.

The venues for those three teams -- Daikin Park (named Enron Field when it opened), Reliant Stadium and Toyota Center -- opened within three years of each other in the early 2000s. The HCHSA oversees Shell Energy Stadium, home of the Houston Dash and the Houston Dynamo, which opened in 2012.

Houston has also hosted the NCAA men's basketball Final Four, the College Football Playoff National Championship game, the Super Bowl and the men's 2026 World Cup.

The HCHSA has supported 130 sporting events since 2011 that have generated an estimated \$4.3 billion in economic impact for the region.

"All in all, the sports authority has really helped create the fundamental parts and pieces of that foundation that make Houston a sports city," CEO Ryan Walsh said. "I think it's naturally a sports city anyway just based on our location, based on the interests that Houston has and the economy that we got certainly lends itself toward those participatory sports as well as consumer and spectator sports."

Don Lee, another professor in the sports and fitness department at UH, explained that there are several items that make Houston a viable option for an NHL franchise.

Houston has a proven professional sports infrastructure, further strengthened by the frequency of hosting major events.

The city also has the financial strength to support another team because of how much the city has grown economically over the past decade.

Greater Houston's economic output has increased from \$584.5 billion in 2014 to \$785.3 billion in 2024, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. It makes Houston the sixth-largest economy in the nation.

Census estimates put Harris County as the third largest in the nation behind Los Angeles County, California, and Cook County, Illinois. Those figures also reveal that Harris County has had the most population growth of any county in the nation since 2020, while Greater Houston has also had the most growth of any metropolitan area within the same window.

Greater Houston is the only metro in the top six that doesn't have an NHL team. Atlanta is the only other market in the top 10 that doesn't have one.

Adding Houston as a market could also serve another purpose for the league.

"The TV market is a big, big selling point for the NHL as they're going into negotiations for the next TV contract," David Walsh said. "That seems very coincidental of looking at this in the here and now, and things starting to line up in places where in the past there were hurdles that were too tough to overcome, and other cities that might have been more palatable to go to."

The NHL's U.S. broadcasting rights deals with the Walt Disney Company and Turner Sports are set to expire after the 2027-28 season.

Lee pointed out that expanding to Houston would come at a time in which the league is seeing its Sun Belt teams thrive; six of the last seven Stanley Cup champions are from that part of the league's regional map.

"I think it can be a really interesting approach," Lee said.

Why an NHL team in Houston might not work

Houston has its strengths -- economic prosperity, population growth and countless entertainment and sports options -- but there are also disadvantages.

Whitmire admitted the city has its challenges much like other major U.S. cities. Houston has traffic problems, education challenges in its public schools and an aging infrastructure in a city that keeps growing.

"To solve problems you have to admit you have problems, and I'm not in the denial business," Whitmire said. "We've got challenges. ... We didn't get like this overnight. I know I've spent time saying what a great city it is and how prepared we are, but I am also honest enough to say that's why we would welcome a franchise because they will be our partners going forward."

"You'd like to think they need us and we definitely need them because that would contribute to that quality of life issue."

Another concern: Where the team fits within the overall entertainment and sports landscape.

Houston has developed a reputation of being a city that musical artists skip in favor of other cities such as Dallas or Austin. One of the items outlined in a Houston Chronicle story was how Houston has a "walk-up" mentality that sees fans deliberate if it's worth going to a concert.

David Walsh described it as "a psychic cost" fans throughout Greater Houston must weigh when it comes to their entertainment options.

"Let's say you want to go to a Texans game. Some things start running in your mind," he explained. "Obviously, the actual cost of the ticket. But then it's, 'How do I get the ticket? What about traffic? What about parking? What about food costs? I don't like crowds. Do I have to stand in line?' These are all these little hurdles that financially, mentally that might make that person say, 'Eh, I'd rather go to a movie tonight because it's right down the road.'"

Professional sports fans in Houston have been conditioned to drive downtown -- or just south of downtown -- to watch games. The Astros, Dash, Dynamo and Rockets play within two miles of one another in downtown Houston, while the Texans play eight miles south. And that can involve a frustrating amount of time in the car.

"In terms of a joking answer, it's every Houstonian's God-given right to be in traffic for an hour to go three miles," Ryan Walsh said. "Houston is known for a lot of things and one of them is we have a very expansive area. The area is growing even more. I've joked that College Station is



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going to be a suburb of Houston. But I don't think people mind traveling to see something they want to do."

The discussion around a potential arena site is one of the more intriguing questions. The Friedkin Group, which didn't respond to requests for this story, have remained tight-lipped regarding potential expansion.

Market saturation is another potential problem. After adding the NHL, the city would have seven teams in the major professional men's and women's leagues in addition to the collegiate and high school teams.

Ryan Walsh noted that each sport can attract a unique audience -- along with Houstonians who want to support the local team regardless.

"I was driving in this morning and saw a truck with a tow hitch cover that must have been custom made because it had the Rockets logo, the Texans logo, the Astros logo and the Dynamo logo on it," he said. "You're playing all the bases on that one, right? People in Houston just like sports."

Is Austin still in play?

There's also another potential obstacle facing Houston's bid for an NHL team: Austin.

The state capital has drawn interest for a number of reasons, principle among them growth.

The city of Austin reported that its population has gone from 656,562 residents in 2000 to what is expected to be 1,137,983 by 2030. Right now, 32% of residents came from other states, which would hypothetically include those who grew up in a hockey market.

One of the reasons for the growth is Austin's emergence as a tech hub. Dell Technologies, the Oracle Corporation and Tesla Inc. each have their respective headquarters either in Austin or its suburbs. The region has a \$248.1 billion economic output, per the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Professional sports also work differently in Austin compared to Houston. Austin FC is the area's lone professional franchise, having begun play in MLS in 2021. The NHL would have a chance to be first of the largest four major professional men's leagues to be in the state capital.

"We look at the Chicago Bears. Would you have thought 20 years ago they would have gone to Indiana? No way," David Walsh said. "I promise you Hammond, Indiana, was a plan B or plan C. They will never admit it. ... But they gave them everything they wanted and more. And so if you don't treat Austin as a serious threat, then you're not understanding the sports world. So they are a serious threat because they can come in and say, 'We're going to give you everything and more.'"

The city is also home to the University of Texas, with one of the most passionate followings of any college or university in the nation. Austin hosts major events such as the annual Formula 1 United States Grand Prix and the NASCAR Texas Grand Prix at the Circuit of the Americas.

"If you're a UT fan, that's where you want to be," Whitmire said. "And UT sports is pretty outstanding. But they're not ... I'd say they're not professional sports. But now what they pay their football players is going to be hard to say it's not professional sports. Austin is a great city, but it's not Houston. It doesn't have our international communities. It doesn't have our diversity, and it doesn't have our sports venues."

As for Houston's chances? Whitmire said that there are no limits to what the city and the stakeholders will show as it relates to getting a team.

"I can't think of anything off the top of my head as long as it's lawful," Whitmire said. "We're not going to start selling dope out of an arena or anything. But if it's lawful, we'll pull that trigger."



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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers flip script on Ducks with dominant final 40: 'We got competitive'

Mark Spector

ANAHEIM — It looked like last spring. And then all of a sudden, it didn't anymore.

For 20 minutes on Wednesday, the Anaheim Ducks did pretty much anything they wanted to the Edmonton Oilers, like they had in that six-game Round 1 win of a season ago. The Ducks took a 2-0 lead on a perfect power play and absolute five-on-five domination against an Oilers team that looked old, slow and inferior.

Truly, the young, big and fast Ducks had picked up where they'd left off. And the Oilers looked like what McDavid so famously described as "an average team with high expectations."

Then, at the intermission, Mike Babcock asked his team a question: "Does anybody feel good about themselves right now?"

"(Anaheim) won every battle, every race, every competitive part of the game in the first period," Babcock said after a 5-2 win at Anaheim. "Then we talked as a group that we needed to be more competitive. Then, when we got competitive, things turned our way."

Oh boy, did they ever.

Evan Bouchard drifted home a shot just 11 seconds into the second period, and before the shift was over, Ducks goalie Lukas Dostal was forced to make a wild toe save on Leon Draisaitl to protect Anaheim's 2-1 lead.

Then Kasper Kapanen buried a power-play one-timer at 6:30. Tie game.

Then Bouchard again. Then Vasily Podkolzin. Then Connor McDavid on a last-minute wrister that would have Dostal watching from the bench after Ville Husso relieved him for the third period.

Edmonton pushed back, and for one night at least, Anaheim did not have an answer. It was the old dog teaching the young dog that he still fancies himself an Alpha, and then showing him why he still thinks that way.

"When you feel that you don't have your legs, you feel like you're getting pushed into your own end by their speed a little bit," began Leon Draisaitl, who had four assists in that five-goal second period. "We're all men; we all want to be better. We want to be at our best. We pushed back hard and we did it the right way."

The Oilers dominated Anaheim for the final 40 minutes, and have now not allowed an even-strength goal in two straight games. A game that started with two Anaheim power-play goals, ended with the Oilers killing off the final five Ducks man advantages — including a lengthy six-on-three with the goalie pulled late in the game.

"Sometimes when you play a team in the playoffs, you need to kind of feel them out a little bit," reasoned defenceman Mattias Ekholm. "We weren't sharp, we weren't skating... I don't know if we respected them (too much). Then after the first, we're like, what can possibly go more wrong? So we just went out there and started working."

Bouchard was at the heart of it all, with two goals and three points on a plus-4 night. His game has been immaculate through four games, and nearly everything he shoots finds the back of the net.

The Oilers defenceman leads the NHL with six goals, trails only McDavid in the scoring race, 12 points to 11, and has almost twice as many points as the next closest defenceman (Mikhail Sergachev with six).

Meanwhile, the Oilers, playing without half of their top-six forwards with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Zach Hyman and Matt Savoie all injured, have collected seven of eight points through their first four games, and likely just beat the toughest opponent to open this three-game California road trip.

"We got really quality goaltending (from Devon Levi), our penalty kill — that started out crazy — was excellent for us, and in the end it turns out to be a good night for our team," said Babcock. "For our group to be good, we're going to have to push each other to be ultra-competitive. We had that in us tonight. In the first period, we didn't, but in the end, we did."

Levi clearly outplayed Dostal, something that didn't happen last spring for Edmonton. The young goalie might be the brightest story of them all for Edmonton, whose goaltending woes are well chronicled.

Meanwhile, it was the first loss of the young season for Anaheim (2-1-0). It was a sight to see how dominant the Ducks were for 20 minutes, and how the Oilers turned those tables for the final 40.

"In the three games, this is the first time we looked like we were in the watching mode instead of the anticipating and the forcing mode," said head coach Joel Quenneville. "We got a market correction today. Let's see how we handle that, which is 'Let's respond in the correct way.'"

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Sportsnet.ca / What's working and what needs work? Early positives, concerns for Maple Leafs

Justin Bourne

TORONTO — Just four games into the Toronto Maple Leafs' season, it can be tough to parse randomness from truth. The team is running out a group that's seen as much turnover as any in the NHL, pre-season has been cut down to about three hard laps and a pull-up (which they're not allowed to measure), and you don't even know the strength of the opponents you're facing.

But, hey, look: that's not gonna stop me from trying.

With a record of 2-2-0, we've seen enough of the Leafs to say there's been a number of positive signs and a few flashing alarms. Let's get into those with three up and three down.

UP

Auston Matthews: One thing nobody disagreed about heading into this season was the sentiment, "If the Leafs are going to get back to being a playoff team, Auston Matthews needs to be closer to peak Matthews than the guy we saw under Craig Berube."

Through four games, and with his most recent showing against Nashville as our backdrop here, he looks like the forceful version of himself yet again. While the points didn't come in the first few games, he was part of a line that controlled the play, they held on to pucks in the O-zone and created opportunities at the net. The numbers for his line with Kirill Marchenko and Jack Roslovic have been superb, ranking third (according to MoneyPuck) in expected goals percentage among groups who've spent at least 20 minutes together:

For Leafs fans, I cut it off at seven so you could see another bright spot there, which leads me to the next point.

Overall forward skill: Through four games, Jack Roslovic has three points and 10 shots, and clearly has the speed and skill to play with good players. It's not that I think he's some significant needle-mover in the long run — he makes some hope passes I don't love, and historically slows down as the games get harder — but he's a clear upgrade on the players they've typically had outside the big names.

More than that, though, we saw what Gavin McKenna is capable of against Nashville, and it's not just the points. He was making more small, skilled plays that keep the puck moving somewhere dangerous for the Leafs, and they missed guys with his kind of vision last year. He's just another guy who can create something from nothing.

Then there's that Easton Cowan-Nick Paul-Colton Sissons group above, who've been incredibly effective at forechecking and winning pucks back, to say nothing of their ability to create once they've got it. Both Cowan and Paul could comfortably slot in higher in the lineup when the need arises, and for some years the Leafs have been light on guys outside the top few who could really make something happen.

Darren Raddysh's fit: Raddysh's first game as a Leaf was an abject mess, as he absolutely could not make a breakout pass. By his own admission, he had nerves being with the Leafs, a team he grew up watching with his dad, whom he lost earlier this year. He was feeling some pressure.

But as the games have gone on, it's clear that he's the fit they hoped he'd be. He's got 11 shots in four games and leads the NHL in "shots between 90-100 m.p.h.," with six (the next highest is three).

He's also just got a better sense of distributing on the power play, he's steady in overtime and, overall, they're just really relying on him. He leads the Leafs in TOI per game at 23:15 (to good results), which is over three minutes more than their next most-used D-man (Morgan Rielly). They'd be in big trouble without him back there.

DOWN

Aging D-corps looks ... aged: The Leafs are lucky to have Chris Tanev back, a guy who was arguably their best D-man in his first year with the team. They need his leadership. After a missing most of last year and not getting any younger, he still looks ... mostly good. Granted, it seems like he's still rediscovering his stride, and some of his reliable breakout passes haven't been as solid as usual, and it's possible he won't quite live up to that first-year standard.

Past Tanev, though, you've got Oliver Ekman-Larsson not being quite as effective as he's looked in the past (he's sixth of six in TOI among Leafs D) and Jake McCabe not being super visible, and suddenly a D-corps that went into the year seeming "mostly steady" has looked shakier than they'd like.

The team, to me, has the feel of a group with firepower and forechecking up front, the type that could win a lot of games when they get to the right half of the rink. But it's hinging on the back end holding up, and I'm concerned about how it's going to go as the season gets on and injuries show up. They need another D who can handle real minutes along with Raddysh. Troy Stetcher — who is fine, serviceable — is playing almost 18 minutes a night, which isn't a great sign about the effectiveness of the rest of the group.

The spot at 2C: John Tavares is a lot of good things. He's on a cheap contract and fresh off a game where he scored them a huge goal that started their rally back from down 3-0 in the season's first "must win" (of many, I'm sure). He's a hard worker and great finisher and all those nice things. But he's also older, and was never fast, and has struggled to stay effective amidst the pace of today's game at five-on-five. Last year, he struggled there too, and so as much as the Leafs don't want to insult the guy, they have to be realistic about how he can best help them.

McKenna would do well to play with Paul, who's still effective at winning pucks and tilting the ice in his team's favour. He can get a line in the O-zone, and flipping him and JT probably gets William Nylander and McKenna on offence more, where Paul can get to the net and finish what chances they create at the net.

If you want to take it further, you could have Sissons move to centre and have Tavares play wing with him and Cowan, just as one random example. The point is, as long as the Leafs have Tavares at 2C, they're going to lose the expected goals (and, in turn, real goals) battle. It's a spot of weakness, and one they don't have to sit idly by and watch when they have options. Let Tavares eat on the power play, and get some softer matchups (and skate less) at five-on-five.

The schedule: It would've been nice for the Leafs to go on the road while they sort things out in the early going, get to know each other better in the hotels and at team meals, and not deal with the expectations out of the gate.

Instead, McKenna immediately felt the weight of the daily media, they lost a couple divisional games at home and, as teams get their feet under them, they now go into Vegas, Colorado and Utah.

None of it is insurmountable, it's just a small "down" part of the season.

That's not bad as far as downs go: the coaching has been fine to good as they showed a willingness to make changes in Game 4, which worked. The goaltending has been mid-pack and kept them in every game. The fourth line has been serviceable, playing hard and killing penalties. In all, for 2-2-0, it's been a pretty good start for the Leafs.

The upcoming road trip will test them, and their player usage will evolve, but in the early going, there are clear signs they've got far more to work with than they did last season.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.08.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / How newfound stability is helping Flames' Wolf keep perspective

Eric Francis

CALGARY — Twelve goals in two games.

That's Dustin Wolf's ugly introduction to a season that was supposed to be about taking another step forward.

Six goals in each of his first two games is hardly the start anyone envisioned for the Calgary Flames' \$52.5-million man, particularly with the start of his seven-year contract now making every soft goal, bad bounce and ugly number that much more scrutinized.

Wolf isn't hiding from any of it.

He's also not panicking, as he feels better equipped than ever to handle the adversity.

"Last year was just a struggle all around for myself," said Wolf in a quiet chat outside the Flames dressing room.

"Whether it was at the rink, or away from the rink, I struggled from a lot of different areas. It's a brand-new year. I like to think I'm in a better place for a lot of different spots. It's important to have your head wrapped around the right things."

That stability away from the rink, he believes, gives him a better chance to find stability inside it.

Asked whether getting engaged has helped settle him, Wolf didn't hesitate.

"Having the best person at home to support you, she's the absolute best," said Wolf of his fiancée, Sawyer Norman.

"I come home to food. She bakes me banana bread, cookies every time I come back from a trip. Anytime I come home the house is always clean. She's just a loving, supporting person.

"If you don't have that, it's really hard to find success at the rink. So certainly very grateful, and I think it's definitely a critical point of me as a person and as a goalie."

It's a candid offering from a 25-year-old goaltender whose job requires the ability to compartmentalize.

Which brings us back to those 12 goals.

"I mean, those are two games that didn't go well," said Wolf, of the pair of 6-1 losses against Seattle he endured.

"From me, top-to-bottom, just nothing went right. It definitely sucked. Didn't feel great in the moment."

He felt he was thinking too much, particularly against the rush, worrying about too many options instead of concentrating on the puck carrier.

"No doubt, after both those games, I'm pissed off," he said.

"At times, you do think the world is falling because you're trying to have a good start to the year, and giving up 12 goals in two games is not a good start. So it's kind of a blessing in disguise to have a few days in between games here and just get ready for the next start."

Despite the obvious rebuild being played out in front of him, Wolf's ultimate goal is still winning games, or at the very least giving his undermanned squad a chance every night.

He admits last season's numbers (2.99 GAA and .899 save percentage) weren't good enough, and told the coaching staff he didn't like his season.

"I'm gonna be ready to have a way better year this year," he told them.

Wolf supplemented his summer workouts by sharing the gym with Norman, and spent a month-and-a-half in Meadow Lake, Sask., where he says being in nature helped reset his mind.

As much as goalie coach Jason LaBarbera wants him to focus on the process, not outcomes, Wolf is driven by wins.

He knows the first two games were terrible.

He knows people will remember the 12 goals.

He also knows there are 81 games left on the schedule and a lot of hockey left to play.

One thing that hasn't changed, is he is hoping to make upwards of 65 starts this year.

That's a lofty target for a goalie who played 53 games last season, especially considering there were legitimate concerns he may have been burned out by being thrown into the fire too much, too early.

Wolf isn't buying the idea that he needs to be handled delicately, but also knows he'll need to rediscover the form he showed two seasons ago if he's going to keep upstart backup Devin Cooley on the bench.

"Whoever's playing well is probably going to play," said Wolf, well-aware his backup's numbers were superior to his last season.

"I'm excited to prove people wrong, that I didn't have my best year, and I'm here to get us wins."

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Sportsnet.ca / Are the Red Wings open to rebuilding the rebuild?

Frank Seravalli

Watching the cinema of Dylan Larkin's season debut on Tuesday was like October in Alberta — three seasons all wrapped into one game.

The former captain was booed mercilessly every time he touched the puck. There were some cheers when his goal gave the Red Wings the lead. And by the end, he skated back out to Little Caesars Arena to mostly applause when selected as first star of the game.

Larkin is one of them, a true Michigander, and that's what hurts. He isn't just their former captain, their emotional leader. He also grew up a Wings fan and has played nearly all of his hockey inside a one-hour radius around Detroit — from minor hockey at Belle Tire to the U.S. National Development Team all the way through the Michigan Wolverines and into the NHL.

"It felt good to be a hockey player again," Larkin said.

Collecting two points and a win was also a reminder of the tightrope the Red Wings, owner Chris Ilitch and interim GM Shawn Horcoff are trying to walk.

They have been steadfast in their ask for Larkin, that they want young, NHL talent to remain competitive now.

But something shifted in their conversations over the weekend with teams after Simon Edvinsson's trade preference came to light via Elliotte Friedman on Rogers Saturday Night Hockey. Sources say teams were told that the Red Wings would still rather have NHL-ready talent for Edvinsson, of course, but are open to considering the right package for Edvinsson that is more futures-based with prospects and draft picks.

That departure has left teams wondering: is Detroit internally coming to grips with the notion that the rebuild needs to be rebuilt?

The Red Wings have missed the playoffs 10 straight years — and that is with the core of Larkin, Lucas Raymond, Moritz Seider, Edvinsson and Alex DeBrincat.

If a 23-year-old Edvinsson is out the door, Larkin is soon following, and DeBrincat is seemingly third priority now as a pending UFA...then what?

Nathan MacKinnon was right: You can't fight reality.

Oilers keeping tabs on right-shooting, fourth-line centre

Count the Edmonton Oilers among those who have kept tabs on Boston Bruins forward Matthew Poitras in their quest to find a right-shooting centre to anchor their fourth line.

Poitras' biggest supporter internally is coach Mike Babcock — and that worked out well for Alex Formenton in September.

Poitras, 22, requires waivers now after back-to-back solid seasons in AHL Providence. He's played in just one of the Bruins' first four games and registered just over 11 minutes of ice time.

The Oilers recognize the solution may be internal and have been encouraged by early returns from Owen Michaels, one of the pleasant surprises of a truncated training camp.

We've reported Edmonton's interest in Kirby Dach, another right-shooting centre candidate. Calgary has also kept tabs on Dach. The Canadiens are trying to juggle Dach's value with his tenuous spot in their lineup and their push to make a big trade splash this season.

What's different about Nikishin's status

One added wrinkle to the Edvinsson negotiations is that the first year of his new contract will come at an increased salary cap hit with an in-season signing, now that we're a week into the season.

To use round numbers, if Edvinsson agreed to a seven-year, \$70 million extension today, the first year of that contract would hit the books at \$10.4 million instead of the usual \$10 million.

It increases for every day missed in the season. The calculation: cap hit (\$10 million) divided by the number of days remaining in the season (185), and then multiply that number by total days in the season (194).

It's less of an issue for the Red Wings, who have space, than for an acquiring team.

Interestingly, the same formula does not apply for Carolina's Alexander Nikishin, as he is not a true restricted free agent by the definition in the CBA. He is a "10.2(c)" player without the right of first refusal via an offer sheet, and therefore, whatever he signs now in-season will have the same effect on the cap as a typical contract.

The Hurricanes have been working with Nikishin's new agent, Paul Theofanous, to try and execute a trade.

The deadline for RFAs to sign and be eligible for the season is Dec. 1 at 5 p.m. ET, but that also does not apply to Nikishin.

Slap Shots

- Before they dropped the gloves, when Islanders' Brayden Schenn lined up across from J.T. Miller on Tuesday night inside Madison Square Garden, Schenn told Miller: "I've gotta welcome myself to the rivalry."

- Patrik Laine isn't the only free agent forward the Calgary Flames are in conversation with after a rough start to the season. Still unsigned: Vladimir Tarasenko, David Perron, James van Riemsdyk, Jonathan Drouin.

- Re: Flames expectations — I'm not sure we've properly accounted for a team that has said goodbye to Nazem Kadri, Blake Coleman, Rasmus Andersson and Mackenzie Weegar in the last nine months. That's a lot.

- As the Flyers scour the defence market, wouldn't Edvinsson be a great fit in Philadelphia? He checks the box on size (6-foot-3), age (23) and high-end potential.

- Early predictions for deadline players in-demand if their team is selling: Vancouver's Paul Cotter, Philadelphia's Nick Seeler and New Jersey's Brenden Dillon.

- The uptick in fights to begin the season has brought added juice. But should linesmen stop a fight when the opponent has pulled a jersey overhead and keeps wailing away? That's what happened to Dillon on Tuesday, his forehead covered in welts after being blindfolded by Jack McBain.

- According to Sportsnet Stats, Tuesday's Leafs-Predators game was the fourth in NHL history to have four No. 1 overall picks each score a goal (John Tavares, Auston Matthews, Gavin McKenna and Steven Stamkos). We've got the potential for five in one game this season: Blackhawks (Patrick Kane, Connor Bedard), Oilers (Connor McDavid, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins), Sabres (Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power) and Devils (Nico Hischier, Jack Hughes).

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.08.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers notebook: Low-risk Hallander adds depth, compete to forward corps

Mark Spector

ANAHEIM — So long, Stastney; hello, Hallander.

Rather than lose defenceman Spencer Stastney on waivers, Edmonton Oilers general manager Stan Bowman recycled him into a six-foot-two Swedish forward, nabbing Filip Hallander in a one-for-one with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"We've been interested in his game for a while," said Bowman. "He played a really offensive style when he was in Sweden. It's good to see that he's got that ability to make plays. But in addition, we like the fact that he's a worker and he competes. He plays at a high pace. I think he's going to fit in well with the way that Mike wants our players to play."

We asked around about the player, and if you keep in mind the cost of acquisition — an eighth defenceman — an 11th or 12th forward coming back is likely a fair return.

Hallander will join the team in San Jose Thursday. He is said to be a better-than-decent penalty killer, with average boots and above-average skill. One scout said the more he watched him, the more he liked the player — but there isn't anything that knocks you over on first viewing.

A Swedish scout called Hallander "a little bit of a heavy skater. But powerful, with decent hands. Quiet kid and very serious."

Hallander missed most of last season when he was diagnosed in November of 2025 with a blood clot in his leg after being struck by a puck. He rehabbed for 10 months before being cleared to play, and made his comeback this season with Pittsburgh — who originally drafted him in 2018, traded him away in a deal that brought Kasper Kapanen in from Toronto, and then the Pens brought him back.

Hallander had a goal and three points in his first two games this season with the Penguins before being dealt to Edmonton. Bowman said the blood clot issue has been cured, according to their medical reports.

Max Jones figures to slot onto the left side of the Colton Dach line, as Bowman moved the centre to IR Wednesday afternoon in order to activate Jason Dickinson.

Getting a proper, experienced third-line centreman back into his lineup would make any coach happy, and Mike Babcock is no different.

"He's a real intelligent, useful player for us," Babcock said. "When you look at our Top 6, he really gives us a different complexion. We look forward to him getting up and rolling. It's probably going to take him a bit of time."

Babcock admitted that his best-laid plans have been changed somewhat by the Oilers' injury woes. He'll keep Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl on the same line in Game 1 of this three-game roadie, even though his plan may have been to split them up on the road, where he does not have the last change.

"Before I started, when I thought we were going to have a full roster, I would have maybe divided them (on the road)," Babcock said. "And you'd say, 'Well, now you've just got even less (to work with).' Well, we've got to have (one line) going real good."

Babcock's theory worked to perfection last game against Seattle. Owen Michaels scored once on behalf of the rest of the team, while McDavid and Draisaitl combined for the game-winner late in the third period and an empty-netter.

That's the model for a bit of a one-line team these days, offensively at least. A goal from the top line, a goal from the rest of the team, and if the power play kicks one in, you've got three goals, and that should be enough to win.

Duck and cover

Two things did the Oilers in last spring in their six-game, Round 1 loss to the Ducks: Their penalty kill, which went a pathetic 50 per cent against the Ducks, allowing eight power-play goals. And the fact the Oilers could not keep the series from becoming a track meet.

Anaheim was simply too young, too big and too fast for an Oilers team damaged down the middle, with centremen McDavid, Draisaitl, Dickinson, and Adam Henrique all playing injured or not playing at all.

"Last year was just run-and-gun for both teams. Both teams were scoring a lot," said Kapanen, Edmonton's best player in that series. "That's not the game that we want to get into tonight, so it's going to be a good test for us to kind of play the way we want to play."

Everyone in the Oilers dressing room knows that the team Anaheim ran away from in that series did not represent anything close to the Oilers' best. Whether or not they prove that tonight, or in a playoff series come springtime, remains to be seen.

"This team, when it's healthy and everybody's playing, is certainly a different team that it is right now. We're missing some key players in the lineup," Kapanen said. "We all know last playoff series wasn't our best, and we weren't playing the way we were supposed to."

"Like [McDavid] said, we were expecting the team to kind of just turn it on in the playoffs, and that's not how that's not how hockey works. That's not how sports works in general."

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Sportsnet.ca / How the Panthers can navigate Aleksander Barkov's absence

Rory Boylen

A popular pre-season pick as this year's 'bounce-back team,' the Florida Panthers are 2-0-2 out of the gate. That started with a low-event 1-0 win over Carolina, then had a couple of come-from-behind games that ended in an extra-time loss, before grinding out a regulation win Wednesday to end their California road trip.

Very Florida-like.

Some of the early questions about this team were beginning to be answered, and mostly in the positive.

- Will Jacob Markstrom (turning 37 in January) be good enough to backstop a Cup contender? So far he has a shutout, a .927 save percentage, and is fifth in Goals Saved Above Expected, per MoneyPuck.
- A year older now, is this veteran team really going to be able to hang with or even dominate younger, faster teams the same as they did two years ago? So far they are second in the league in expected goals percentage, third in Corsi percentage, and have surrendered the second-fewest high-danger chances at 5-on-5.
- Will they get overly aggressive and take too many penalties? Well, so far this has rung true as the Panthers are tied with Carolina in times shorthanded. But it's also true that no team has had more power plays than Florida, but they have only converted on 4.3 per cent of those opportunities so far.

But for all those good underlying statistics, one of the worst things that could happen to this team did in just its second game. When Aleksander Barkov left the ice in a heap of frustration after falling awkwardly on his left leg, it recalled last season when the captain had to miss the entire season with a knee injury. Losing Barkov for another year would have been catastrophic to Florida's playoff chances.

The "good" news came Tuesday that Barkov will miss the next six-to-eight weeks and will not have surgery.

"That's our best window," said head coach Paul Maurice. "Could be a little less, could be a little more, but we think six-to-eight is the right rehab time."

This timeline would put Barkov on track to return some time around the holiday season in December and have him miss around -- or just less than -- half of the season.

Florida has played two full games now without Barkov, picking up three of a possible four points, and have adapted the roster. But Barkov is still one of the NHL's best two-way players, and there is no direct replacement for him, so can the Panthers still end up as this year's bounce-back team if they have to play without him for so long?

Here's how they might navigate the time without him, and the options they have.

How are the Panthers replacing him in the lineup?

When Barkov went down midway through the game against San Jose, the Panthers put Lars Eller in between Brady Tkachuk and Sam Reinhart, but that was only a temporary bandage. When they took the ice three nights later in Anaheim, Brad Marchand had returned to the lineup and was placed at right wing on the top line, while Sam Reinhart moved to the middle.

"Almost three moving parts," Maurice said of the new top line. "Brady's new, Sam Reinhart's playing a position he hasn't played very much recently, and Brad would tell you the game was a whole lot different last night than his last 4-5 months of practice, so we think that line will continue to get better."

In the first game together, the Tkachuk-Reinhart-Marchand line outshot their opposition 4-0 at 5-on-5 and had an expected goals for percentage of 100 even though they did not score at even strength. In their second game together, they were dominant again, outshooting the opposition 4-1 and having an expected goals percentage of 76.9 -- although they did get outscored 1-0 on a play down low in the zone that, perhaps, Barkov would have checked.

"It's really a different look," Reinhart said of moving back to centre. "You see the game in different areas. You pick up the puck with a little bit more speed at times, and you get it on your stick a little bit more. It's a position I've switched a lot back and forth with, and the more time you're able to play there, the more comfortable you are."

This was supposed to be the setup for now, but Tuesday's game brought even more bad news after Brad Marchand left with a leg injury near the end of the second period. Frank Seravalli cited reports that Marchand was seen post-game with a knee brace and crutches, but we'll have to likely wait for Thursday to get an update on Marchand's status.

In the meantime, with Barkov removed, Florida has been without a player they often use to match up against the best the opposition has. And since all four of Florida's games so far have been on the road, they also haven't been able to line match as well as they would at home. In this sense, the coach noted the line of Sam Bennett between Matthew Tkachuk and Carter Verhaeghe has been key to their success so far.

"Credit to that line on this road trip. Barkov has always been the guy who played against the other team's best, and a lot of times it's (Anton) Lundell, but it's four straight games where that line's played against the other team's best," Maurice said. "And they've come out as a plus line. That's huge for us."

The salary cap implications

As long as Barkov's on LTIR without being ruled out for the entire season and playoffs, the Panthers will not get the full \$10 million of cap relief from his full contract. Under new CBA rules, the Panthers are only getting a maximum of \$3,973,228 (the average value of all league contracts from last year) in relief.

In basic terms: The Panthers have \$2.248 million in "current cap space" according to PuckPedia, and that's with Barkov and Jonah Gadjovich on LTIR. When Barkov is activated again, that maximum \$3,973,228 in relief will be added back to Florida's number, which would put them over the cap by roughly \$1.7 million without any further transactions. They could get under again by sending Sam Lafferty and Alex Petrovic -- the two players they called up when Barkov was placed on LTIR -- back to the AHL. Marchand's activation for the very first game Barkov missed was not a suspicious thing. Marchand was on IR, not LTIR, so his number was already counting towards the cap when Barkov was active. Florida is under the cap with a healthy 21-man roster.

Does this make Dylan Larkin a trade target they could acquire?

In a word: no. Since Barkov is on track to return this season, the Panthers will not get full cap relief, and they have to account for the captain's return. The complications of a Larkin trade involving Florida remain the same as they were when Barkov was healthy: how would the Panthers make the cap number fit, and what exactly do they have to move to make it worthwhile for Detroit?

If a Larkin-to-Florida trade were to happen, it would seem Lundell would be a key part in a deal. His \$5 million cap hit is extremely valuable and runs through the 2029-30 season, plus at 25 years old he's one of the younger players in this core and is highly valued by the coach for his shutdown skills.

There is the one added wrinkle now with Marchand's status uncertain. If he were to go on LTIR, the Panthers would get the same maximum cap relief as they do with Barkov, and they'd have to have enough space to add Marchand back when healthy.

But if the worst-case scenario happens and Marchand is ruled out for the regular season and playoffs, only then would Florida get the full \$5.25 million in cap relief from his contract. For those keeping track at home, Larkin makes \$8.7 million against the cap, so the math is still difficult to line up without a significant player being moved off the roster.

Is this as bad as last year yet?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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While the 2-0-2 record to start is exactly what the doctor ordered, the monkey's paw curled, and now two key contributors are hurt again. But the Panthers are mindful of not letting things spiral and go off track like last season and, for now, the list of injuries is still much shorter than it became in 2025-26.

"We had a little experience with Sasha going down, so it wasn't as shocking the second time it happened," Maurice said. "We know we have good depth. There's a threshold with any team, a number of injuries you just can't survive, and we passed that early last year so we have real good resolve here. The tank is deep right now. We had a big summer off, so we're strong."

Their home opener is up next, this Saturday against Kirill Kaprizov, Quinn Hughes, and the Minnesota Wild.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.08.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / Why Red Wings need to sign Simon Edvinsson to a fair deal

Adam Vingan

Friedman previously reported that Detroit's preference is to sign Edvinsson to a bridge contract but said on Monday's episode of 32 Thoughts: The Podcast that the Red Wings have "moved off" that position.

"He remains a priority," Red Wings interim general manager Shawn Horcoff told reporters last week. "We're doing everything (we) can, working closely with the agents. He's a big part of our club, and we'd like to get him signed. But the details of the negotiation, we'll keep private between us, out of respect for Simon and his group, and we can comment on all of that when it's all said and done."

What Edvinsson brings to the table

From afar, it's odd that the Red Wings are playing hardball with Edvinsson, who at 23 has already shown that he can handle big minutes and tough defensive matchups. (Not to mention that he is six-foot-six and 222 pounds.)

Edvinsson and Moritz Seider were on the ice together for nearly 1,100 minutes at five-on-five last season and helped Detroit generate 52.6 per cent of the expected goals (xGF%). The Red Wings also won those hard minutes on the scoreboard 50-38. When both Edvinsson and Seider were off the ice, the Red Wings' xGF% dropped to 44.2 per cent, and opponents outscored them 95-67.

Without Edvinsson, Seider has started the season with Albert Johansson as his partner; Detroit has a 40.6 xGF% at five-on-five, albeit in a small sample.

Individually, Edvinsson profiled as one of the NHL's best young defenders last season, ranking highly in several important categories. He finished inside the top 50 among roughly 200 qualified defencemen (minimum 40 games played) in puck-battle wins, defensive plays (blocked shots, blocked passes, stick checks and body checks) and defensive-zone denials per game.

Edvinsson has not put up big numbers offensively in his short career, but there is reason to believe that he has more to offer in that area. His 18.7 possession-driving plays per game, which include controlled exits and entries, ranked 51st on defence last season.

"I feel like I've grown into my body a lot more, I'm a little bit heavier, and I feel like I've got more control now over the movements," Edvinsson, who averaged 0.37 points per game over the previous two seasons, told reporters during training camp. "I feel like that can make me a better threat on the offensive blue line, and I feel like that can make me a better threat to come out of (my) own zone as well."

What will it take to end the contract stalemate?

Edvinsson's combination of youth, defensive acumen and tantalizing size is difficult to find. That is why the Red Wings would be wise not to alienate Edvinsson any further and sign him to a fair deal.

Zeev Buium's eight-year contract with the Vancouver Canucks (\$9.38-million cap hit) and Tristan Luneau's six-year contract with the Anaheim Ducks (\$7.2 million) provide a road map for Detroit in negotiations. AFP Analytics projects an \$8.8-million cap hit on a seven-year deal for Edvinsson, who would overtake Seider (\$8.55 million) as the Red Wings' highest-paid defenceman.

For one night, at least, the vibes around the Red Wings were not completely toxic Tuesday. Ex-captain Dylan Larkin scored in his season debut, eliciting cheers from the hostile home crowd as Detroit defeated the Ottawa Senators 5-3. Larkin and Edvinsson's situations, however, continue to hang over the team.

"We have some hurdles in front of us that we're going to have to continue to cross and to deal with, but it's probably appropriate that we're

(speaking) inside the locker room because the group in here has come to play hockey," Red Wings coach Todd McLellan told reporters last week. "They've focused on the things that they need to do to get themselves ready. The outside noise through the summer and everything else that's gone on, they've done a good job focusing on what they can control, and that's the hockey part of it."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.08.2026



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TSN.CA / Matthews shows 'will to win' in sparking Leafs' comeback

Mark Masters

TORONTO — The Maple Leafs beat the Nashville Predators 5-4 in overtime on Tuesday at Scotiabank Arena. The team travelled to Las Vegas on Wednesday (no media availability).

Auston Matthews produced four points, including the overtime winner, as the Leafs stormed back to beat the Nashville Predators on Tuesday night.

"There were lots of players that played really well, but I really felt something special from Auston," said head coach Jim Hiller. "If you go back and watch that game, just go shift by shift, you'll see all the great things that have been said about him [during his career]. Really, they're all there in that game."

In the lead up to the game, Hiller and Leafs players had lavished praise on the 29-year-old captain for how he's been setting the tone behind the scenes. On Tuesday night, Matthews showed off his leadership abilities on the ice.

With Toronto trailing Nashville by two in the second period, the 6-foot-3, 214-pound centre made a nice shot pass off the pads of Juuse Saros on the power play to create a goal by William Nylander.

After Steven Stamkos restored the Predators lead to two, Matthews set up rookie Gavin McKenna for his first goal in the NHL. In the third period, Matthews made a nice feed to Jack Roslovic who scored the tying goal.

"Tremendous," said Roslovic of the performance by Matthews. "He [dragged] the team with him. There were a couple shifts where there were two, three guys draped over him and he still made plays."

Matthews almost had another primary assist in the third period, but an offside review wiped out what would have been a second Nylander goal.

Finally, after a chaotic overtime period, Matthews scored the winning goal to ensure the Leafs evened their record at 2-2-0 before heading out on a challenging road trip, which includes stops in Vegas, Colorado and Utah.

Matthews had been solid, but unspectacular in starting the season with one goal in three games. There's no doubt the Arizona native hit a new level on Tuesday.

"It was just a little bit different," Hiller said. "From just a pure hockey perspective, to appreciate his game, it was really a special night for him. Never mind that he scored the overtime winner. I'm not talking about that. Just his game, start to finish."

Asked about his own personal performance, Matthews spoke about the team.

"We were just working," he said after logging more than 25 minutes of ice time. "I don't think it was anything too fancy. I mean, other than the power-play goal, you know, just work, just winning battles, finding open guys and, you know, them making plays as well. I thought the second half of the game, we really just simplified our game and just decided not to lose battles and to be first on pucks and just out-compete the other team."

Matthews won seemingly every battle he was engaged in down the stretch.

Coming off the two lowest-scoring seasons of his career, Matthews looked more like the player who lifted the Hart Trophy in 2022.

"He was humming, all over the puck, you know, winning battles, and creating a lot of offence," Nylander said. "He was cooking."

It was the first four-point night for Matthews since lighting up the Winnipeg Jets on New Year's Day. That was his only four-point night last

season. He didn't have any four-point nights during the entire 2024-25 season.

But for Hiller, the points were secondary to how Matthews looked. He appeared to be a man on a mission.

"It was his will to win," Hiller said in trying to explain exactly what made the performance special. "That was probably the biggest [thing]. He won battles in the D-zone. He played well all over the ice. I thought his will to win was pretty strong."

Off the ice, Matthews is doing his part to help McKenna deal with the ups and downs that come with being a first-overall pick in the centre of the hockey universe.

"I mean, it's a lot of new," said Matthews, who was the top pick in 2016. "I think you're constantly kind of navigating [it]. But, at the same time, he has such an elite mindset and skillset, and a good head on his shoulders. I think all the guys on the team really enjoy being around him. I think he's made himself extremely comfortable in the room with everybody, top to bottom."

McKenna had hoped to hit the scoresheet before his parents headed home to Whitehorse following Saturday's game, but it did not happen. After bidding farewell to his family, the 18-year-old spent Sunday night at Matthews' house.

"We had a little sleepover," McKenna revealed with a big smile. "So, might have to do that, have a weekly sleepover now."

What's a sleepover with Matthews like?

"It's a good time," McKenna said. "Just hung out, had a couple sandwiches, watched some football, and went to bed."

Before Tuesday's game, 2008 first-overall pick Stamkos predicted McKenna would have success in Toronto in part because he's being supported by Matthews and John Tavares, who was the first-overall pick in 2009.

McKenna is living with Tavares this season and it was a goal by the 36-year-old centre that started the Leafs comeback and provided McKenna with his first assist.

"I've learned a lot from him, so for my first point to be from him is pretty special," said McKenna.

"I've learned so much from those two. They've been very special to me, and they've helped me a lot. And I think just being around those guys, learning from them, seeing how they carry themselves every single day on and off the ice, [I've] just implemented it to me in a way. And when you can learn from those guys, it's pretty lucky."

McKenna admitted that getting on the board on Tuesday was "a big monkey off the back."

What did it feel like when the puck went in?

"That's one I'll remember forever," he said "Great play by Auston. Yeah, I didn't even realize it went in. The goalie kind of blocked it a little bit, but then when I saw the puck land, no better feeling than that."

Has he felt anything like that before in his life? "No," McKenna told TSN. "I would say being drafted, but I think that one feels a little bit better."

The Leafs believe the 164-pound winger will be feeling even lighter when the team starts a road trip in Vegas on Thursday night.

"I think you're going to see him go on a bit of a tear now because that kind of weight flipped off your shoulders and you can kind of just go play," Matthews said.

It wasn't just that McKenna scored, but how he scored that resonated with his coach and teammates.

"That goal was a goal scorer's goal," Hiller noted. "We know he's a playmaker. By trade, he's a playmaker, but that was a goal scorer's goal. Got his feet around it on the strong side, and he had some zip on it."

"It was a bullet top shelf," said Nylander, who leads the team with three goals this season. "So, I'd be very happy for that one too."

McKenna's breakthrough moment also came at a time when the team needed a boost.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 8, 2026

"It was a big goal in the hockey game," Hiller highlighted. "That's the one you remember. It was really important. It wasn't the first goal of the game. It was an important moment, and he came up big in an important moment. I like that."

Before the game, McKenna smiled while saying that seeing all the attention his slow start was getting represented his welcome-to-the-NHL moment.

Tuesday's goal served as an encouraging sign that the teenager is built to handle the heat in Toronto.

"I've kind of dealt with it throughout the years," he said. "But, yeah, coming here, it's a little bit more. But I think [it's] just doing your best to try to block it out. And, at the end of the day, you know it's a privilege to have those people always watching you and wanting to see you succeed. So, yeah, try not to look into it too much. At the end of the day, it's a pretty special thing."

After preaching patience early in the season, Hiller finally put his lines in a blender during Tuesday's game. A couple notable adjustments saw Nylander bumped up to take shifts with Matthews on the top line and McKenna shifting down to take shifts on the third line beside Nick Paul.

"It turned out well," Hiller said. "We'll have to decide if we start the next game like that."

With eight new forwards being integrated during a shortened training camp, Hiller had been trying to give the groups time to build chemistry. But after the team managed to score just six goals in three games, questions about potential changes kept popping up in every media availability. "You guys had been asking," Hiller said. "We'd been thinking about it. We'd had many conversations, so it wasn't necessarily something that was a spur-of-the-moment thing. We kind of knew that if we did something, it might look something like what you saw."

After starting the season with four home games, the Leafs will now head out on the road where Hiller will not have the last-change advantage.

The Leafs are hoping to carry the momentum from Tuesday's crazy comeback all the way to the Vegas strip.

"That's a huge win for our group," McKenna said. "I don't think for a second in that room we thought we were going to lose. We were super confident. I think that's the way we got to play every single game. So, yeah, for us to get it done, it was a pretty special win. And for it to be before our big road trip, that's even bigger. So we're looking to just build off of it and hopefully have better starts."

Despite picking up two points on Tuesday, Hiller noted that his team may have actually played better during losses to the Montreal Canadiens and Ottawa Senators.

It wasn't always pretty, but finding a way to win a wild game can be significant when it comes to team building.

"We're still trying to find that identity of being able to play all 60," Roslovic acknowledged. "There's been some parts that isn't to what our standard is, and not that we're trying to figure out our standard still, but I think everyone's getting a really good feel for the way our team is going to be successful."