



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 23, 2026

The News & Observer

Seth Jarvis makes his 2026-27 debut for Hurricanes against Oilers

Chip Alexander

For the first time since the Stanley Cup Final, Seth Jarvis was back on the ice Thursday and playing hockey for the Carolina Hurricanes.

The winger, fully recovered from shoulder surgery and cleared to play, made his 2026-27 debut in the Canes' road game against the Edmonton Oilers, scoring his first goal in a 6-5 shootout loss.

Jarvis, who led the Canes with 32 goals last season, underwent the surgery soon after Carolina closed out the Vegas Golden Knights to cap Carolina's Stanley Cup run in June. The initial timeline for his rehab was 4 to 6 months, but Jarvis has gotten back sooner rather than later.

Jarvis scored his first goal of the season 13 minutes into the second period to give the Canes a lead. Spinning around defenseman Evan Bouchard with the puck, he quickly went forehand, backhand, forehand to beat goalie Devon Levi.

"What a great goal," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I wasn't sure how he was going to handle the pace and everything, but I thought he did great."

Jarvis was later stopped in the shootout by Levi as the Oilers sealed the win. He had 15:15 in ice time in his first game and was credited with four hits.

"The first period I was feeling too great. Just kind of catching up to the game," Jarvis said. "But after that I thought I got my legs back and felt a lot better. One of my biggest things is defense and being responsible, and I thought that part was kind of lacking tonight, and that's a big reason we didn't pull this one out."

"Obviously some things to clean up, but I kind of expected that."

Jarvis has joined the team in recent practices and morning skates, shedding a yellow no-contact jersey for a regular jersey, but was not activated off the injured non-roster list until Wednesday.

The Canes also called up Skyler Brind'Amour from the Chicago Wolves of the AHL while reassigning forward Brady

Nadeau to the Wolves -- Brind'Amour also was in the lineup Thursday.

Jarvis has been antsy in recent days to get back to playing.

"Body-wise, I feel great," he said. "I think mentally I'm ready to go. I've just got to adjust to game speed. I'll give 100 percent on my first shift, for sure."

Jarvis' return comes with the Hurricanes dealing with injuries to captain Jordan Staal and forwards Taylor Hall and Mark Jankowski. Rod Brind'Amour has had to mix up his lines in the first three games of the five-game road trip, using Jordan Martinook at center after Jankowski went out.

Jarvis' absence has been felt — on the power play, the penalty kill and at even strength — although others have stepped in. Jankowski had scored goals in six straight games before his injury, Jesperi Kotkaniemi has two goals and an assist in the past three games and Nicolas Deslauriers scored a pair of goals in a 6-3 win at Vancouver.

Jarvis dealt with the right shoulder ailment the past two seasons but produced 32 goals each year, scoring nine times shorthanded. Jarvis had seven game-winning goals last season, then 11 points in the Canes' 19 playoff games.

"In my opinion, he has become a special player, an elite player, because he can do everything for your team," Brind'Amour said.

Jarvis started on a line centered by Kotkaniemi, with Martinook on the left wing.

Freddie Andersen gets his ring

The Hurricanes, playing in Edmonton, had a chance to present Oilers goalie Frederik Andersen with his Stanley Cup championship ring.

Andersen started the first 16 games in the Canes' Cup run and won 13 before giving way to Brandon Bussi during the Final. The veteran goaltender signed a free-agent contract with the Oilers after the season.

"He'll always be a Hurricane," Brind'Amour said.

Andersen suffered a knee injury in the offseason and has not played this season for the Oilers.



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Recap: Canes Pick Up Point In High-Scoring Slugfest

Peter Dewar & Walt Ruff

After Leon Draisaitl and Jackson Blake traded power-play goals in the first period, Carolina took brief control with a three-goal second stanza.

Sebastian Aho potted the first of those just 30 seconds into the middle frame, flying past Mattias Ekholm to pick up a loose puck and tuck it through the legs of Devon Levi. Another man-advantage marker put Edmonton back on level terms, but a returning Seth Jarvis made up for lost time with a dazzling solo effort to dance past Evan Bouchard and restore his team's lead. Logan Stankoven tacked on another before the buzzer, boosting that advantage to two heading into the final frame.

On the other side of the break, though, the high-octane Oilers had more to say before the game was decided. Connor McDavid, en route to a five-point night, scored to halve the deficit, then set up Draisaitl's second of the evening to knot things up before the third period was three minutes old.

As the clock ticked down to just 2:40 remaining in the back-and-forth, Juuso Välimäki stepped up in his second game as a Hurricane to give the visitors one more late lead, but McDavid worked his magic again with 88 seconds to spare as his seeing-eye pass slipped through traffic and sent the contest to overtime.

An action-packed extra frame featured chances galore, but no goals. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins then scored the shootout's only goal in the third round after Brandon Bussi turned aside both McDavid and Draisaitl. Shayne Gostisbehere, Andrei Svechnikov and Jarvis were the shooters for Carolina.

Bussi made 16 saves through 65 minutes as he backstopped his team to a point for the fourth time in six starts.

CAR at EDM | Recap

Stats & Standouts

Seth Jarvis made his season debut after missing the first 11 games while recovering from shoulder surgery, and marked the occasion with his first goal of the campaign.

Sebastian Aho and Logan Stankoven each scored their seventh goals of the season, tied for both the team lead and the eighth-most in the NHL at the time of publication.

Aho added an assist, giving him a team-leading five multi-point games on the year. Stankoven, meanwhile, now has three goals and four points in his last two outings.

Nikolaj Ehlers set up Stankoven's strike to become the first Danish player in NHL history to record 600 career points

(254 G, 346 A). He was also the first and only Danish skater to reach the 500-point mark on Jan. 24, 2025.

Jackson Blake scored and now boasts 12 points (2G, 10A) on the year, giving him sole possession of the second-most among Hurricanes skaters. His 10 assists rank T-7th in the NHL at the time of publication.

Jordan Martinook recorded two assists, his second multi-point performance this year.

Shayne Gostisbehere also added a pair of helpers and has posted four assists in his last four games.

Juuso Välimäki scored his first NHL goal since Dec. 10, 2024, when he was a member of the Utah Hockey Club.

Skyler Brind'Amour made his season debut against the team that drafted him in 2017. The 27-year-old skated 8:10 and went 3-for-5 (60%) in the faceoff dot.

They Said It...

Rod Brind'Amour giving his blunt assessment...

"If you take away the five penalties, the game was pretty good. We did a pretty good job. That last one should never go in; everyone knows that. It's just a bad bounce. We probably should've had two points, but that's the way it goes."

Seth Jarvis sharing his review of the contest...

"We did a lot of good things, but you can't take that many penalties against a team like that. They have so many skilled players and such a good power play that it's going to hurt you. Obviously, there's other aspects of our game that we need to clean up, but I thought we fought well. We held in there, but there were some mental mistakes that kind of cost us a little bit."

Juuso Välimäki echoing similar thoughts...

"Just too many penalties. Obviously, their power play is really good. In the first 40 (minutes), we didn't really give them much other than the power plays. If we limit that a little bit, they don't kind of feel like they're going like that. The start of the third, we've got to come out better than that. We gave them life there. We could have taken it all away. A couple of learning things."

Seth Jarvis after Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl combined for 10 points...

"They're incredible. They're two of the best players in the world, and it takes everyone in here. Everybody got their chances with them and just making sure we're aware when



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they're on the ice. Some nights that's going to happen. You can see why they're so highly regarded."

Seth Jarvis on how he felt about his game...

"The first period, I wasn't feeling too great. I was just kind of catching up to the game. After that, I thought I got my legs back and got a lot better. One of my biggest things is defense and being responsible. I thought that part was kind of lacking tonight, and that's a big reason why we didn't pull this one out. Obviously, there's some stuff to clean up, but I mean, I kind of expected that coming into my first game."

What's Next?

The Canes will fly to St. Louis on Friday. They'll close out their five-game road trip against the Blues on Saturday.



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McDavid scores twice and has 3 assists in the Oilers' 6-5 shootout victory over the Hurricanes

EDMONTON, Alberta (AP) — Connor McDavid forced overtime with a late goal for his fifth point of the night, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had the lone shootout score and the Edmonton Oilers beat the Carolina Hurricanes 6-5 on Thursday night.

McDavid had two goals and three assists to give him a whopping 31 points in the first 10 games of the season. He joined Mario Lemieux, Mike Bossy and Wayne Gretzky as the only NHL players to reach the 30-point mark in 10 games or fewer.

Leon Draisaitl also had two goals and three assists, and Nugent-Hopkins had a goal and an assist.

Edmonton tied it with 1:28 and goalie Devon Levi off for an extra attacker. McDavid sent a shot on net that deflected off Jesperi Kotkaniemi's skate for his eighth goal.

The Oilers (8-1-1) have won three straight and seven of their last eight. Levi made 22 saves.

Jackson Blake, Sebastian Aho, Seth Jarvis, Logan Stankhoven and Juuso Valimaki scored for the the Hurricanes (8-2-2). The defending Stanley Cup champion Hurricanes have lost two of their last three.

Brandon Bussi made 16 saves for Carolina.

Nugent-Hopkins made his season debut, returning after sustaining a lower-body injury during training camp. The 33-year-old became the franchise leader for seasons played with the Oilers at 16.

Jarvis scored in his first game of the season, making his debut following offseason shoulder surgery.

Up next

Hurricanes: At St. Louis on Saturday night.

Oilers: Host Toronto on Saturday night.



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Nikishin not part of Hurricanes' trade offer to Jets for Hellebuyck

Sportsnet Staff

Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas discussed the latest in the star goaltender's trade-request saga on Thursday's episode of 32 Thoughts: The Podcast.

"You're hearing that (Carolina is) entertaining another offer to try and lure the Vezina and Hart Trophy winner out of Winnipeg that would not involve a package including Alexander Nikishin?" Bukauskas asked Friedman.

"Yeah, so I've been saying this a lot ... if Nikishin was going to go to Winnipeg, this deal might be done already," said Friedman, "but I did have a couple people tell me on Wednesday that Carolina does have an offer for Hellebuyck that no longer involves (Nikishin) because it's just a waste of time, right."

Nikishin, 25, is currently an unsigned restricted free agent after completing a two-year entry-level contract with the Hurricanes, with the 2026-27 season underway.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

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

Latest episode

The defenceman scored 11 goals and totalled 33 points in 81 regular-season games in 2025-26. During Carolina's run to a Stanley Cup championship, Nikishin had one assist in 17 games.

He did not report to the Hurricanes' training camp in September after making a trade request over the summer.

"So I think whatever Carolina's got out there is a non-Nikishin package," added Friedman. "Now, if it was so spectacular to the Jets, this trade would be done probably. ... I just thought it was interesting that Carolina, I think, has something out there that's a change from where they originally were, and they remain interested."



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Nugent-Hopkins scores shootout winner to give Oilers victory over Hurricanes

Canadian Press

Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid both shone with two goals and three assists apiece for the Oilers (8-1-1) who have won three straight and seven of their last eight.

Nugent-Hopkins, who also had an assist, scored the other goal in regulation.

Oilers goalie Devon Levi made 22 stops.

Jackson Blake, Sebastian Aho, Seth Jarvis, Logan Stankhoven and Juuso Valimaki replied for the Hurricanes (8-2-2). The reigning Stanley Cup champions have lost two of their last three games.

Brandon Bussi recorded 16 saves for Carolina.

Takeaways

Hurricanes: Jarvis scored in his first game of the season, making his debut following off-season shoulder surgery. The 24-year-old has had more than 30 goals in each of the last three seasons.

Oilers: Nugent-Hopkins also scored in his season debut, returning after sustaining a lower-body injury during training camp. The 33-year-old became the franchise leader for most seasons played with the Oilers at 16.

Key moment

Edmonton tied the game with their goalie pulled with 1:28 to play. McDavid sent a shot on net that deflected off Jesperi Kotkaniemi's skate for his eighth goal of the season.

Key stat

McDavid, who has points in every game this season, extended his league-leading point totals to 31 in just 10 games. He joined Mario Lemieux, Mike Bossy and Wayne Gretzky as the only NHL players to reach the 30-point mark in 10 games or fewer.

Up next

Hurricanes: Conclude a five-game road trip in St. Louis on Saturday.

Oilers: Continue their homestand against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday.



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yahoo!sports

Elliott Friedman Confirms Have Made an Offer for Connor Hellebuyck Without Alexander Nikishin

Jake Tye

On Thursday, Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman said on his podcast, 32 Thoughts, that he has heard the Carolina Hurricanes have made a formal offer for Winnipeg Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, the three-time Vezina Trophy winner.

Friedman noted that the offer hasn't wowed the Jets enough to pull the trigger on a trade. He did add context on what the package would not include in Hurricanes restricted free agent Alexander Nikishin.

"I did have a couple people tell me on Wednesday that Carolina does have an offer for Hellebuyck that no longer involves him," Friedman explained. "I just thought it was interesting that Carolina has something out there that's a

change from where they originally were, and they remain interested."

Friedman also offered insight into how Carolina general manager Eric Tulsky approaches trades.

"Carolina's way under Eric Tulsky is they don't necessarily come in hot. They'll negotiate with you. They don't say this is our first offer and our best offer. They don't do that," Friedman said. "What they do have is a book on them: if they tell you it's time, it's time. Either you make the deal or you don't."

With the Jets facing a Friday decision point on Hellebuyck, there could finally be movement on the goaltender, depending on whether Winnipeg likes what Carolina has put forward.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Oilers earn shootout win over Canes in game of the year so far

Al Hood

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl each notched two goals and three assists for five points on a night where they didn't have to go up against Jordan Staal. Meanwhile, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had the other goal plus the shootout winner, and despite some truly spectacular goals by the Hurricanes including one all-timer from the returning Seth Jarvis, the Carolina Hurricanes fell to the Edmonton Oilers in the shootout, 6-5.

This game was set up as the marquee game of the road trip, as the Oilers were 7-1-1 coming in, and that was before it was going to be the first game back for Jarvis, who had missed the first part of the season recovering from offseason shoulder surgery. Nugent-Hopkins also was playing his first game after injury, and the stars shone bright on a night that saw several goals that'll be seen over and over. The luster was off this game a little with the Canes down two centers in Jordan Staal and Mark Jankowski, and their absence was felt most on the penalty kill.

The first period showed just what sort of game this would be, as both teams got rushes right on top of the opposing goaltender, who both stood strong to start. The ice was broken by Draisaitl on the first power play of the night, and done so in three seconds of said power play. Without Jordan Staal on the ice, the Canes quickly lost the faceoff, and on a set play the puck was won over to McDavid, who passed up to Evan Bouchard. Bouchard shot it from the point at Draisaitl, who easily deflected it by Brandon Bussi. The Canes, though, fought right back on the power play themselves as Jackson Blake finally was rewarded for the hard work he put up during the road trip. Blake took the pass off the faceoff win, drove to the net and delivered the puck over to Shayne Gostisbehere. Gostisbehere shot it, and Blake was out front of the net to slam home the rebound, tying the score at one.

The second period would start quickly for Carolina, as some hard work by Sebastian Aho led to him racing past some Oilers defenders, getting a breakaway, and scoring via the five-hole on Devon Levi.

Edmonton wouldn't trail for long as they would once again get a chance on the power play, and thanks to a shot by the returning Nugent-Hopkins they were able to tie it at two. From there, though, the Canes took over the period. About seven minutes after the Oilers evened it up, Seth Jarvis announced to Canes fans and the NHL that he not only was back, he was feeling great with the shoulder finally repaired after two years. It was another breakaway chance, and he just put on a clinic with a goal that will be on his highlight reel for the rest of his career.

As the second wound down, the Canes continued their push and showed off their skill with an incredible goal. Nikolaj Ehlers grabbed the puck behind the net and feathered a perfect pass over to Logan Stankoven, even using the goal post to feed it right onto his stick. Stankoven banged it home and took a 4-2 lead into the locker room.

The Canes unfortunately let the Oilers back into the game in the third period by doing the thing you can't do against this team—give that top line room to operate. The first goal came as Aho made an unfortunate gamble in the neutral zone where he was trying to get another breakaway chance. That gamble allowed Edmonton to enter the zone with an odd man rush, and when the Canes overcompensated to try and separate Draisaitl from the puck behind the net, he fed a perfect pass over to McDavid all alone. Bussi had no chance, and it was 4-3. Shortly thereafter Sean Walker was sent to the box for a slash, and for the third time Edmonton's Power Play made Carolina pay, and this one was Draisaitl off a feed from McDavid. Less than three minutes in, the score was tied at four.

The Canes tightened up the rest of the period, however, and were able to keep the Oilers off the board. Then an unlikely hero, Juuso Välimäki would come in and off his first NHL goal since December 2024, give the Canes a lead. The play was thanks to a great keep in by Gostisbehere who managed to keep the speeding puck inside the blue line, and the pass went over to Martinook. Martinook fed the open Välimäki for the shot and score.

Unfortunately, being down with two minutes left in the game meant the Oilers could go with the empty net and six skaters, two of which were the Draisaitl and McDavid pairing. One puck went in the net but did so as the officials were calling it being touched with an Oilers high stick. Unfortunately a few seconds later, McDavid would feather a pass in the zone that would deflect off Jesperi Kotkaniemi's skate and past Bussi on the worst goal he let in on the night. Hats would rain down as fans thought it was off Draisaitl for his third, but the replays clearly showed it was off Kotkaniemi's skate.

Both teams would get chances in overtime with both goalies making some good saves. In the shootout, Bussi managed to stop McDavid and Draisaitl, but couldn't stop the third shooter in Nugent-Hopkins. Meanwhile, Gostisbehere, Andrei Svechnikov, and Jarvis all were blanked by Levi, and the Oilers skated away with the extra point.

Seven Hurricanes in total would get a point on the night, with Jordan Martinook joining Aho with two by assisting on two goals.

Carolina will finish the State Fair Road Trip in Saint Louis on Saturday Night, and they'll do so without a practice on



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Friday, then finally come home to play four of their last six in Raleigh before heading out to Finland.



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1403234 Carolina Hurricanes

Seth Jarvis makes his 2026-27 debut for Hurricanes against Oilers

Chip Alexander

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The winger, fully recovered from shoulder surgery and cleared to play, made his 2026-27 debut Thursday in the Canes' road game against the Edmonton Oilers, scoring his first goal in a 6-5 shootout loss.

Jarvis, who led the Canes with 32 goals last season, underwent the surgery soon after Carolina closed out the Vegas Golden Knights to cap Carolina's Stanley Cup run in June. The initial timeline for his rehab was 4 to 6 months, but Jarvis has gotten back sooner rather than later.

Jarvis scored his first goal of the season 13 minutes into the second period to give the Canes a lead. Spinning around defenseman Evan Bouchard with the puck, he quickly went forehand, backhand, forehand to beat goalie Devon Levi.

Jarvis was later stopped in the shootout by Levi as the Oilers sealed the win. He had 15:15 in ice time in his first game and was credited with four hits.

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"Body-wise, I feel great," he said. "I think mentally I'm ready to go. I've just got to adjust to game speed. I'll give 100 percent on my first shift, for sure."

Jarvis' return comes with the Hurricanes dealing with injuries to captain Jordan Staal and forwards Taylor Hall and Mark Jankowski. Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour has had to mix up his lines in the first three games of the five-game road trip, using Jordan Martinook at center after Jankowski went out.

Jarvis' absence has been felt — on the power play, the penalty kill and at even strength — although others have stepped in. Jankowski had scored goals in six straight games before his injury. Jesperi Kotkaniemi has two goals and an assist in the past three games and Nicolas Deslauriers scored a pair of goals in a 6-3 win at Vancouver.

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Freddie Andersen gets his ring

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Andersen started the first 16 games in the Canes' Cup run and won 13 before giving way to Brandon Bussi during the Final. The veteran goaltender signed a free-agent contract with the Oilers after the season.

"He'll always be a Hurricane," Brind'Amour said.

Andersen suffered a knee injury in the offseason and has not played this season for the Oilers.

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1403235 Carolina Hurricanes

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins leads Oilers over Hurricanes with shootout goal

Field Level Media

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins converted for a shootout goal to complete a special return to the lineup as the Edmonton Oilers defeated the visiting Carolina Hurricanes 6-5 on Thursday night.

Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid each provided two goals and three assists, and Nugent-Hopkins also notched a goal and an assist in regulation in his season debut for the Oilers.

Both of Draisaitl's goals came on power plays. McDavid added to his record-setting assist total -- now at 23 -- across the first 10 games of the season.

Carolina's Seth Jarvis scored in his first outing of the season, Sebastian Aho had a goal and an assist, and Jackson Blake, Logan Stankoven and Juuso Valimaki also scored for the Hurricanes. Jordan Martinook and Shayne Gostisbehere each assisted on two goals.

Oilers goalie Devon Levi stopped 22 shots. Brandon Bussi made 16 saves for Carolina.

With McDavid and Draisaitl converting, the Oilers scored twice in the first three minutes of the third period to pull even at 4-4.

Valimaki, in his second game for the Hurricanes, put Carolina up 5-4 with 2:40 remaining in the third period. McDavid tied it with 1:28 left.

Jarvis, a winger who was Carolina's leading goal-scorer last season and was activated for the first time since offseason shoulder surgery, broke a 2-2 tie with 7:01 remaining in the second period. He made a spin move from the right side around Edmonton defenseman Evan Bouchard and then beat Levi for the goal.

The offense began early. With Carolina's Nicolas Deslauriers in the penalty box for tripping, the Oilers converted on the game's first power play with Draisaitl scoring 8:07 into the game.

Less than 2 1/2 minutes later, the Hurricanes countered with Blake's power-play goal. At that juncture, Blake had half of Carolina's six shots on goal.

The Oilers finished the first period with four shots.

After Aho put the Hurricanes ahead with an unassisted goal 30 seconds into the second period, Nugent-Hopkins countered with a power-play goal at 4:20 of the second period.

Jarvis and Stankoven scored later in the period for Carolina's 4-2 lead.

The Hurricanes had Skyler Brind'Amour, son of coach Rod Brind'Amour, in the lineup for the first time this season.

--Field Level Media

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1403376 Websites

The Athletic / A hockey player's interview went viral. It's a perfect lesson in mental performance

By Jesse Granger

This story is part of Peak, The Athletic's desk covering the mental side of sports. Sign up for Peak's newsletter here.

Calgary Flames goalie Devin Cooley went viral on Sunday, less for his stellar effort in an upset win over the defending Stanley Cup champion Carolina Hurricanes than for his interview moments after the game.

"I felt... nothing," Cooley, still in full uniform, said to Sportsnet's Brendan Parker. "The problem with me is that I have a lot of fun playing, but when I start having too much fun, it (takes) me from an unconscious goalie to a conscious goalie, and my conscious brain is really bad at playing goalie."

"I have to let my unconscious brain do the work, because it reacts a lot quicker. When I'm having too much fun and I'm smiling and I'm talking to everybody and I'm hanging out, what happens is that shifts me into more conscious-brain goalie. Then I can't react in time, I'm slow, I'm behind the play, and then I give up seven goals."

Cooley's comments were widely received online as entertaining, especially since goalies are known for their quirkiness. But in fact, Cooley articulated a powerful psychological concept that allows many of the world's top athletes to perform at their best.

"Dude, this guy is telling you about the Holy Grail," said Jeff Troesch, a mental performance specialist with 40 years of experience working with elite athletes.

The state of mind Cooley described goes by different names. Some call it flow state. Some call it being in the zone. Andrei Vasilevski, a two-time Stanley Cup champion goaltender for the Tampa Bay Lightning, calls it "nirvana."

How an NHL player held onto motivation while feeling burnt out

Elise Devlin

In less than two minutes during a standard postgame interview, Cooley offered a rare and revealing glimpse into the psychology behind peak athletic performance and how the best athletes in the world operate between the ears.

What makes the concept even more interesting is that most everyone has experienced this feeling, even people who have never played sports.

The most relatable example happens while driving a car. Learning how to operate a vehicle requires conscious thought. How hard to press the gas pedal. How to properly brake to bring the car to a smooth stop. Where to put your hands. When to use the blinker.

Once someone has consciously mastered those specific skills, they rarely think about these actions again. The body performs them automatically while the driver listens to music, talks with a passenger or eats a sandwich. Sometimes the driver even arrives at the destination without remembering much of the drive at all. Not only did the brain perform automatically, it likely did so with better precision and grace than with conscious thought.

That's exactly what Cooley meant when he said, "If you ask me how I made a save, I have no idea. My unconscious brain does it, and that's what you work and practice for."

Practice builds muscle memory through repetition. While training, athletes must think about specific movements their bodies need to make in order to improve technique. It would be impossible to become better without that conscious processing about movement and technique.

But over time an issue can develop with that type of preparation.

"Far too many athletes use that consciousness as sort of a safety net or some sense of security," Troesch said. "They feel more reassured that they're putting their attention on those things. However, that doesn't

always translate into fluid action, and it often inhibits the organic, instinctive athlete they've actually trained themselves to be."

In game competition, athletes must shift their focus externally to the signals and cues around them that inform their brain how to react. Things such as where players are positioned on the ice, their body language as they approach with the puck or the angle of their stick blade.

"What we want to do is get out of the thinking part of the brain and get into our senses," Troesch said. "When we're in sensory awareness, our brain wave activity slows down, so we become more likely to make quality decisions and pick up cues more effectively."

Quick reactions are the backbone of goaltending, and there's science behind Cooley's comment that he reacts quicker while playing "unconsciously."

Studies in neuroscience have proven that the brain subconsciously processes millions of bits of sensory information every second, and at a much faster rate than the conscious mind. Introducing conscious thoughts actually disrupts this flow and slows down the process.

Giving up that control feels counter-intuitive, but it allows the body to perform more fluidly.

"I totally agree (with Cooley)," Vasilevski, the Lightning goaltender, told The Athletic. "You don't want to think too much during the game. You want to enter that nirvana, if you will. Your golden nirvana, and just go with the flow. Once you start thinking too much, at least in my experience, it doesn't work."

A challenge to reaching and maintaining this state of mind, especially when the stakes are high, is that human brains are wired to identify threats as a survival instinct. Recognizing danger quickly was essential to survival for most of human history, as missing a threat could mean death.

Because the outcome of sporting events holds significance to the athlete, the brain doesn't distinguish between the threat of letting a team down by allowing a game-losing goal and a predator in the wild.

To go back to the driving example, a perceived threat could be a police cruiser pulling up closely behind. Suddenly, everything that the brain was handling automatically becomes a conscious thought. The driver's thoughts to go where their hands are placed on the steering wheel, or how centered their vehicle is in the lane you're traveling. It almost brings the driver all the way back to the clunky, less-coordinated mindset from when they were learning to drive.

"When we introduce threat potential, our brain goes to a more conscious state," Troesch said.

Avoiding that rigid, conscious state of mind is easier said than done. The antidote, he said, is a change of perspective and mindset.

"If I'm an NHL goalie, my first thought may be about not getting scored on, not losing my job, or trying to avoid a threat," Troesch said. "The best players immediately counter that by putting their attention on the opportunity that's in front of them."

It's a constant internal battle for every goalie.

"The easiest example I can give is in the shootout," said Adin Hill, the Vegas Golden Knights goalie and a 2023 Stanley Cup champion. "If you're thinking, 'This guy normally shoots five-hole,' and then he fakes a shot five-hole, you're kind of screwed because you're thinking too much and focused too much on that thought rather than reacting."

The nature of the goalie position means more time spent alone with one's thoughts. During a quick shift, skaters have far less time for their minds to wander. Goalies often stand in their crease for minutes on end while the action is nearly 200 feet away.

"You just play better when you're in that flow state," said Dallas Stars goalie Jake Oettinger. "Every goalie knows what that feels like, especially when you're getting peppered with shots. You don't even have time to think. It's just chance after chance. That's when you see guys go crazy. Some of the hardest games I've played in my career have no shots for 10 minutes, and then all of a sudden a breakaway."

Each goalie has their own preferred tricks to get their mind right when needed.



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For Hill, it's taking a few deep, intentional breaths to refocus his mind. That's probably the most commonly used technique. Vasilevskiy said he talks to himself between the whistles.

Cooley, meanwhile, hinted that even smiling or chatting with teammates can take him out of that preferred mindset.

Whatever he did to stay in the zone, he played with a visible freedom through the final seconds on Sunday. Protecting a one-goal lead, he tossed technique aside and reacted athletically, lunging headfirst onto his stomach, dropping his stick in the crease, and using his blocker glove to snatch the puck off the blade of Hurricanes forward Jackson Blake's stick to seal the 3-2 victory.

Then, and only then, did he relax his focus.

"When the buzzer went, that's when you can let all of that go," Cooley said, finally allowing himself to smile. "So you get a huge rush of dopamine, serotonin and adrenaline, and just like goosebumps. It's the best feeling in the world. It's the biggest reason why I love to play."

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The Athletic / Isolation and identity crises: For injured NHLers, the mental grind is worse than the physical

By Mark Lazerus

Professional athletes are among the most focused human beings on the planet. They are singularly driven, incomprehensibly dedicated. Their bodies are precision machines, and their minds can process an onslaught of information at near-superhuman speeds. They can often seem like another species, the next step in human evolution. Something greater, something more.

And everywhere they go, and in nearly everything they do, they are treated like toddlers.

NHL teams have a small army of employees whose entire job is to organize their players' lives. Be at the rink by 9:45 a.m. sharp. Be on the ice at 11:30. First bus back to the hotel is at 12:10 p.m. Pick up a pre-ordered boxed lunch on the way. Finish your nap by 4 p.m. because a carefully prepared team dinner is available at 4:15. Bus leaves the rink at 10:45. Straight to the airport. Bus parks at the base of the stairs to the chartered plane. Food is waiting on board.

Their meals are handled for them. Their flights are set up for them. Their hotels are booked for them. Their workouts are planned for them. They're told where to sit, when to eat, where to be. Their day-to-day lives are scheduled down to the minute, with someone always reminding them what's next.

First bus at 12:10! First bus at 12:10!

Dallas Stars winger Tyler Seguin smiled when he heard that familiar refrain echoing off the blank walls of the spartan locker room next to Rink 3 at the Chicago Blackhawks practice facility. He had just finished a run-of-the-mill practice on a run-of-the-mill off day. He was peeling off tape securing his shin pads for the umpteenth-thousandth time in his life, being told to hop on a bus yet again, to sit through Chicago traffic yet again, to go back to a generic hotel room yet again, to wait for yet another hockey game — the 1,175th of his career, not counting preseason, scrimmages or the countless games he played before he was drafted with the No. 2 pick by the Boston Bruins in 2010.

It couldn't possibly be more routine. And Seguin couldn't possibly enjoy it more. For the better part of the last two seasons, as he rehabbed first from a torn labrum in his hip and then a torn ACL in his knee, Seguin had nothing but time. Time to spend with his wife and newborn daughter, yes. Time to spend strengthening his hip and his knee, sure.

But also time to think of everything he was missing.

"It's not so much 5 a.m. to noon when you're injured," Seguin said. "It's what happens after that, when it's 12:30 in the afternoon and you have a whole day to yourself. You're almost like a retired older guy. You're just normal. And we're not used to normal. We're used to what's next, where's the next city, where's the next dinner. You're always surrounded by people, always surrounded by conversation, always surrounded by men that you care about. And then all of a sudden, that's just gone."

Perhaps no profession in the world consumes your entire personality the way being an athlete does. Your whole identity is wrapped up in it. Everything you wear is emblazoned with your team's logo, everything you eat and do is designed to optimize your ability to endure it, everyone you meet already knows you.

So, when a long-term injury removes you from that world — from that purpose, that identity — the physical pain pales in comparison to the mental and emotional isolation.

Most people care about their jobs. Few people are their jobs.

"It was hard, obviously, to be out," said Florida Panthers center Aleksander Barkov, who missed his team's Stanley Cup defense last season with a torn ACL and MCL suffered on the first day of training camp. "Not to be able to play, not to be able to help the team at all. Not to

live life as a hockey player for the Florida Panthers. That was the toughest part for me."

The star center missed all of 2025-26 with MCL and ACL tears, suffered on the first day of Florida's preseason practice last September.

Sometime during those interminable 346 days when Jack Eichel's career was on hold, his autonomy in dispute and his future in limbo — who could remember when exactly, the days all blurred together at that point — the then-Buffalo star was chatting with Hall of Famer Adam Oates. Lord knows Eichel had the free time for idle conversations as he fought for a neck surgery the Sabres didn't want him to get.

"(Oates) was just like, 'What would you give up right now to be minus-3 and lose 6-1?'" Eichel recalled. "I was like, 'God, I'd do anything just to be a part of that again.' Even those moments where, at the time, they suck. It's the little things you really miss when you're away from it."

Injured players miss the games, of course. The battle, the competition, the elation of success and the devastation of failure. Their bodies and brains have been rewired to be running at their peak level in the evenings, and when 7:08 p.m. passes night after night after night with no outlet for all that energy, the adrenaline in their veins quickly turns sour in their stomachs. Watching your teammates fight without you in your home rink from the press box is excruciating. Watching them do so in a road rink from the couch is even worse.

But for players going through extended rehabs, there are ways to channel that fire and that motivation. Rehab itself becomes a competition. The Colorado Avalanche's Gabriel Landeskog did just that for three long years as he desperately tried to work his way back from an injury to his right knee. He set himself goals, both short-term and long-term, with a regimen and a path back to the ice at Ball Arena.

It almost drove him mad. A player might take a bad game home with him, but there's always another game right around the corner that forces a player to move on. When there isn't another game for months — or years, in Landeskog's case — how do you move on from a bad day at the office?

"I made it my job for my knee to feel good, and then that became just the worst thing for me," Landeskog said. "Because then you're going to the gym, and then you come home, and now you're thinking about how your knee's doing at home. But when your knee's not going good, you're just putting yourself in this rabbit hole. It's not easy and it's something that you are left to battle with."

To battle with alone. There's the rub. Oh, sure, management and the coaching staff check in regularly. Players are often working with team doctors and team strength trainers during the rehab process. And they're still around the rink, even if they're not on the ice. They still see the guys.

But only to a small extent. The isolation of long-term injury is the part that truly scares athletes. You're not there for practices, working hard on the ice and then goofing around in the room. You're not always in the building for video or pre-scout sessions. You're not on the bus or the plane. You're not in the hotel or at a road dinner.

You're missing games, yes, but also the inside jokes and funny stories over a beer with the boys. You're missing everything.

"You're kind of on your own island," Seguin said. "Home life's obviously great. I've got a kid at home and another on the way, so that's fun. But the days when everyone's on a road trip and you're just training by yourself in a gym with one guy, then rehabbing with one trainer, that's where you get isolated. That's the hard part."

Because of their geographic location, the Stars always have had one of the toughest travel schedules in the league. Nearly every road game is at least a two- or three-hour flight away, and Stars players have been muttering about it since the team first moved from Minnesota some 33 years ago. Seguin very much included.

"Not anymore," Seguin said with a big smile. "I love long flights now. Get to play some cards with the boys."

Indeed, with great pain comes great appreciation. Missing an extended period of time doesn't dull a player's desire to win or his hatred of losing. But it does offer some perspective.

Landeskog finally returned from his three-year knee rehab during the first round of the 2024 playoffs against Dallas. He scored in his second game



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back, sending Ball Arena into utter delirium. But more than a month and 16 games into the following season, Landeskog was still sitting on zero goals, and in the cruelest of fashions. A 22-year-old Landeskog probably would have been beating himself up.

Not the 32-year-old Landeskog, though. He knew what real frustration looked like, and being goalless on a 10-1-5 team sure as hell wasn't it.

"My first goal was called back, and the second goal was called back, and then the third goal was called back, all because of offside or goalie interferences," Landeskog said. "And I remember I'd have teammates (say to me), 'You don't really seem bothered.' And I'm like, 'No, I'm not bothered. Because it's really not that important.' Yeah, I'd like to score, because I like the feeling of scoring and helping the team. But to me, I've already won. I'm playing with the house's money. I'm enjoying everything that comes along with this great game."

"Whether that's the repetitive stuff that we do every day that you don't necessarily hear about, or with the late nights or the practices when you're sleep-deprived — things like that that an NHL player probably wouldn't list of the top things to do — (I'm) just enjoying it all, even the tough losses and the downturns in a season. It's understanding and realizing how blessed you are to be doing what you love, and to be feeling good doing it."

Seguin went through a 4 1/2-month rehab from hip surgery in the 2024-25 season. When he came back for that same Stars-Avalanche series and the rest of Dallas' run to the Western Conference final, he spoke with joy and appreciation throughout the grueling and mentally grinding postseason. He carried that positive attitude into the 2025-26 season, endured a slow start with a smile on his face and started taking off in November.

Then his knee buckled during an awkward but seemingly harmless low-speed collision with New York Rangers defenseman Vladislav Gavrikov on Dec. 2, and his world crumbled around him. Again.

"The thing is, for me, I was already appreciating all those little things last year before the ACL," he said. "I'm kind of a special case."

Seguin's return trip to the long-term injured list was far worse than his first. The severity of an ACL tear and the possible yearlong recovery timeline were daunting, especially as he hit his 34th birthday. But to face that lonely road back so soon after already having walked it was emotionally crushing. He said the seeming randomness of the injury somehow made it worse — that he couldn't blame it on someone or couldn't have done anything to prevent it.

Seguin was able to stay positive during his hip rehab by finding the silver lining: that he could spend time with his newborn daughter and be a family man for a little while. It was tougher to cling to that silver lining the second time around. Not because of what he had found while hurt, but what he had lost.

"The thing for me personally is, I was in that mindset two years ago when I had my hip done," he said. "Then last year was such a shock and so out of nowhere, with such a severe recovery timeline, that it was just more difficult. It took me a long time to (come to grips with it)."

For some injured players, being around the team is torturous. Wearing a suit while everyone else is in their uniforms, feeling like an interloper in your own locker room, it's all too much to bear. But Seguin soaked in every moment he had with his teammates. He loved getting texts from the guys when they were on the road. And when they returned to Dallas, Seguin would pepper them with questions about the road trip, and sit back and laugh hysterically as they regaled him with all the details of the road trip — a teammate tripping over a curb, a hyper-intense conversation over dinner, the frustration after a bad loss and the glee after a stirring victory. Hearing it secondhand was still better than missing out completely.

And when Seguin was healthy enough to join the team on the road for the last couple of trips of the season and the playoffs, he jumped at the chance. He was a regular in the Stars locker room before and after games, sharing his knowledge and his perspective with teammates — particularly younger ones — during Dallas' first-round loss to the Minnesota Wild.

"You help out where you can," he said. "If someone has a question about a faceoff against Joel Eriksson Ek or something where you can help and converse and just be there and be part of it as much as you can — that's

the key to making it through. You just want to be a part of it. Even if it's a very small part."

Eichel used to be like just about everybody else in the league. Hockey was his whole life, his whole personality, his whole *raison d'être*. His world revolved around the game.

And then his world stopped spinning. That's when he realized he was something more.

"We do it as hockey players, as athletes — you tie your identity to what you do," he said. "But my identity? I'm not a hockey player. That's what I do, right? When you're able to separate those things as a being, that's important. It's interesting, actually: During my time away from the game, that's when I kind of found that. Hockey is what I do, it's what I love, it's my passion. But it's not who I am as a person. Jack Eichel as a person is different than a hockey player. ... There's a lot more to us as people. It's what I do, and of course it's how I'm identified. But I don't consider that my identity."

Eichel is a dad now, after his first daughter was born over the offseason. Fatherhood tends to offer players a wider perspective on their lives and careers, knowing that no matter how mad they are about what happened at the rink that night, there's someone at home waiting for them who doesn't care about that at all. They're just happy Daddy is home.

Landeskog, who had two kids at home during his endless rehab and had a third after his return, came to the same realization as Eichel. It took a long time. But time was one thing Landeskog had plenty of.

"(Hockey) is something we've done for so long that it becomes who you are," he said. "I tried to reframe it and rephrase it to myself and to other people. 'I'm not a hockey player, I'm a family man that plays hockey.' Instead of, 'Oh, I'm a hockey player that has a family,' you flip it around. For me, it's one thing to say it, but then to actually feel it and live it is different. I was fighting that every day. To be able to fill that void (when) all of a sudden you take something away that you've done and have had the pleasure of doing for so long."

Barkov looked at his year off the same way. A chance to "recharge and regroup" after three runs to the Stanley Cup Final, yes, but also a chance to spend more time with his son. He tried to turn it all into a positive. But he said he felt weird not setting an alarm, not having somewhere to be, somewhere to go, someone to go to work with. He didn't find any hobbies that suited him or that he had the motivation to fully invest himself in. And that itch to return to action only intensified as the season dragged on and the Panthers struggled without him.

So, once the Panthers missed the playoffs, he turned his attention to another goal: to return in time for the World Championships in May. Sure enough, he led Finland to the gold medal, posting a team-high 11 points in 10 games. He felt great, mentally and physically.

Armed with all that rest and all that perspective, Barkov couldn't wait to get going this season. Then, in the second game of the year, Barkov hurt his left leg and had to be helped off the ice.

Seguin flinched at the news, knowing everything going through Barkov's mind — the fear, the uncertainty, the looming isolation, the loss of purpose.

"That was hard to see," Seguin said.

Barkov hasn't played since but isn't expected to miss nearly as much time as last year. He could be back in just a few weeks. And when he does, he'll look forward to every bus ride, every bag skate, every cross-continent flight, every inside joke and every moment. He'll look forward to, as he put it, "life as a hockey player for the Florida Panthers."

"I'm really excited about being back as a hockey player," he said.

And he'll surely appreciate it more than ever.

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The Athletic / An ex-NHL enforcer joins the fight to diagnose CTE in living brains: 'I'm the guinea pig'

By Fluto Shinzawa

BOSTON — As an MRI technologist, Andy Ellison has an easier job if his patients are calm and still. This helps the machine produce clear images while they lie on their backs for the 50-minute test.

On Aug. 10, in the basement of Boston University's Evans Biomedical Research Building, Ellison checked his desktop monitor as one of that morning's scans progressed. He was pleased with the results: crisp black-and-white captures of the 66-year-old patient's brain.

"He's doing a very, very good job of not moving," said Ellison.

It turned out that Jay Miller was asleep. This was no small feat, considering the machine's whirring and whooshing and clanking and thumping, not to mention the claustrophobia that its tight quarters can trigger in some occupants.

But his stillness was even more remarkable considering the gravity of the situation. A former NHL enforcer, Miller is enrolled in BU's Health Outreach Program for the Elderly (HOPE) study, a longitudinal effort to track cognitive decline. With some 400 volunteers, including athletes who played contact sports, the HOPE study puts particular focus on examining chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the degenerative brain disease primarily caused by repeated head trauma.

Currently, only postmortem analysis of a brain can produce a CTE diagnosis. Researchers hope the results can help on the long road toward identifying it during life.

"Once we can do that," said Michael Alosco, co-director of clinical research at BU's CTE Center, "we can start to think about how we can treat it."

Former NHL enforcer hopes CTE study can answer health questions

Fluto Shinzawa

For his part, Miller does not suffer from symptoms that can be associated with CTE, such as headaches, mood swings or aggression. He has previously-diagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder, which he treats with medication. But his short-term memory is declining, among other issues. He wonders whether his on-ice specialty could have triggered what he is experiencing now.

"Why am I going to BU and the CTE scans?" Miller asked. "Because I have a fear now that I never had before that it is deteriorating. And I want to slow it down."

Miller played 446 regular-season NHL games for the Boston Bruins and Los Angeles Kings, logging 1,723 penalty minutes. According to HockeyFights.com, he had 174 regular-season and playoff fights.

"Think about 10, 20 punches a game twice a night for 10 years. Average it out. It's not fun," said Miller. "It had to have formed some kind of injury."

For his initial assessment in August, in addition to the sleep-filled MRI, Miller underwent a blood draw, a neurological exam and a memory test, among other exams. It was possible he could gain insight on his condition; for example, the MRI could identify lesions consistent with brain damage.

But the possibility that he already has or could develop signs of CTE — something he can't know for sure, given its current diagnostic limitations — does not keep Miller up at night. He simply wants to do his part in the search for answers while he can. Considering the physical trauma he underwent as an NHL fighter, the data from his tests could be critical for researchers as they work towards diagnosis in living subjects.

"I'm the guinea pig that's taking it under my belt and trying to go with it. Because I have time now," Miller said. "I have time. I can do this. I can process it slowly."

And not just with himself in mind.

An enforcer's life

Miller, who hails from Wellesley, Mass., was picked in the fourth round of the 1980 NHL Draft by the Quebec Nordiques, following a 19-point freshman season at the University of New Hampshire. But the Nordiques never signed him, leaving Miller to toil in the minors for three seasons before he got his break.

That came in 1985, when his hometown NHL club invited him to training camp. There, during an informal scrimmage before practices officially started, Miller unintentionally ran over one of the Bruins' first-round draft picks. John Blum, Brian Curran and Gord Kluzak saw it happen. Miller cannot recall the order in which the trio of enforcers challenged him. He remembers each outcome.

"Next thing you know, one of the guys jumps me. Buh-buh-buh-buh. The guy's down and out. They're picking him up off the ice," said Miller. "There's no refs. No coaches. I go to the bench, get back on the ice. The (next) guy came at me. Do-do-do-do. He goes down."

The third bout followed a similar script. Harry Sinden, then the Bruins general manager at the time, saw everything.

"They signed me on the spot," Miller said.

It didn't take long for Miller to become a favorite among teammates and Bruins fans alike, with 178 penalty minutes in 1985-86, 208 in '86-87, and a team-high 304 the following season as the Bruins advanced to the Stanley Cup Final. Miller joked that one of the reasons he fought was to impress Paula Perini, a Framingham woman he met who was the daughter of a Bruins season ticket holder. He and Paula later married.

"He was a bit of a mauler, the way he fought," said ex-Bruins winger Andy Brickley. "He could hurt you with his short punches from in tight. I saw him take a couple good shots from heavyweights. He just shook them off. It was pretty defeating for the other guy to be like, 'Wow, I can't hurt him.'"

In 1989, the Bruins traded Miller to the Los Angeles Kings. Mourning the loss of their beloved on-ice protector, his former teammates wore black armbands in their first practice after the trade. In L.A., Miller's job was to keep bruisers away from a pair of eventual Hockey Hall of Fame inductees.

"Wayne Gretzky got on the ice — and he'll tell you this, and Luc Robitaille — he didn't get a standing (ovation)," Miller said. "Jay Miller got a standing O as soon as he hit the ice. Because it was part of the entertainment of the game."

As good as Miller was at his craft, he still fretted about the enforcers he would likely have to fight. The night before each game, he never slept well.

It was helpful, then, to have company. In 1987-88, before their Cup Final run, Lyndon Byers ranked second to Miller on the Bruins with 236 regular-season penalty minutes. They were not just teammates and fellow fighters; Miller and Byers were roommates and best friends.

After his NHL career, which included 1,081 penalty minutes in 279 games, Byers' outgoing personality made him a natural on the "Hill-Man Morning Show," the radio program he co-hosted with Greg Hill on greater Boston's WAAF-FM.

Byers' quality of life, however, suffered in his later years. According to his widow Annie Byers, he suffered from chronic pain and nerve damage. He experienced hallucinations. He became forgetful and confused. He did not want to leave his house to meet or speak with friends.

"It made it difficult for me to leave him alone safely," Annie Byers said of her husband's condition. "And hard for him to deal with, knowing this deep-seated feeling that something was really, really wrong, but it's not within your control and it's not something you can even really verbalize or identify. It's a very difficult way to live."

Byers died on July 4, 2025, at age 61. The official cause was a heart attack, but Annie Byers termed her husband's death as "multi-system failure," citing two strokes he suffered in his last year of life.

Before his death, he had promised to donate his brain to BU's CTE Center. His family ensured his wish was fulfilled.



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Long research road

Compared to CTE, doctors know significantly more about other neurodegenerative conditions. A patient with Alzheimer's can be diagnosed following a positron emission tomography (PET) scan of the brain. Biomarker proteins in spinal fluid and blood can also signal the existence of the disease.

For now, with CTE, retrospective pathology provides the only path to diagnosis. That process takes place at two Boston-area VA medical centers, where Ann McKee, director of BU's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center and CTE Center, and her colleagues mount and stain frozen slices of bisected brains on glass slides. They then study each slide under a microscope to rate the amount of tau protein, accumulating approximately 400 data points per brain. The buildup of tau in regions such as the frontal lobe, cortex and cerebellum is a telltale CTE sign.

Depending on how many brains are at the labs, it usually takes eight to nine months following intake to draw conclusions. As of this week, CTE Center had studied the brains of 20 former NHL players, including enforcers such as Derek Boogaard, Bob Probert and Chris Simon. Nineteen were found to have died with CTE — including Byers, whose diagnosis was announced in late May. Annie Byers called the CTE Center's conclusion a relief that provided closure on her husband's condition.

"For the other diseases, we have a sense that (one's) environment plays a role, an important role. But there's genetic and other aspects that kind of influence it," said Thor Stein, director of molecular research at the BU CTE Center. "Here, we have a clear environmental risk factor with a dose-response (relationship) that leads to this pretty devastating degenerative disease."

Lemieux, 60, died just days after carrying the ceremonial torch at Montreal's Bell Centre ahead of Game 3 of the Eastern Conference final.

On the same day that Byers' diagnosis came out, former NHL agitator Claude Lemieux died. (Soon after, Lemieux's family announced they would donate his brain to the CTE Center.) Miller and Lemieux were acquaintances, having overlapped in the league as players for all of the former's seven seasons. The one-two punch of news flattened Miller, who was already confronting issues within himself that made him wonder about his long-term neurological health. In particular, Miller describes his short-term memory as "terrible."

"I have a really bad, very bad, attention span," Miller added. "I interrupt a lot. I forget some of the stuff I'm supposed to remember. I have to write everything down."

He also recounts abusing alcohol and drugs, specifically cocaine, in his early 60s following more than a decade of sobriety.

"Why? I don't know. I still don't know to this day," said Miller, who noted that he has been sober for the past year, when asked what led him to develop the dependence. But he can't help but speculate about the role his hockey career might've played. "I think there's a lot of correlation to it."

All of this convinced Miller to call Annie Byers and ask how he could help past, present and future players. She put him in touch with Chris Nowinski, cofounder and CEO of the Concussion & CTE Foundation. Nowinski pointed Miller toward the HOPE study.

Following his initial assessment in August, Miller is scheduled to return annually for more interviews and cognitive and neurological exams, plus a blood draw. He will also receive another brain MRI every three years, with the study tracking Miller for the rest of his life.

As with every HOPE volunteer, roughly a third of whom report experiencing repeated head hits from contact sports or other sources, Miller has also agreed to donate his brain after death. Only then can researchers begin connecting the dots between the results from the study and what they see under the microscope.

"The hope is that as we collect enough of that data and we compare it to the individuals when they do pass away, we can find the biomarker signature," said Jesse Mez, co-director of medical research at the BU CTE Center.

Which, of course, means that Miller may never truly learn how his contribution may have helped.

An unknown future

Hockey took its toll on Miller. He required two knee replacements. He has a pin in his shoulder. He rushed to the emergency room this July because numbness on his left side made him fear he was having a heart attack. (It was a pinched nerve in his back.)

But he feels relatively good. He likes to walk, golf, fish and hunt. He has made a comfortable living as a businessman in hospitality and residential real estate on Cape Cod, and sold some of his holdings to spend more time at his leisure, including at his second home in Boynton Beach, Fla. He credited his generous end-of-summer tan to his time spent on the water.

"I ended up playing 280 games in Boston. Another 300 games in L.A. protecting Wayne Gretzky," said Miller. "I never took it for granted. I always did my job. I got lucky."

Miller thinks of his NHL contemporaries such as Byers and Lemieux, along with today's young hockey players, as the main reason for his study participation. But he also wants insight into his health and how his future might look. He comes across as inquisitive, rather than scared, about what the study's annual follow-up tests may reveal.

"Like an old car. It's been run hard," Miller said of himself. "I've been run very hard."

Alosco emphasizes that he leads a research team, not a clinical one. But he and his colleagues can recommend doctors to help volunteers like Miller with their symptoms. For example, sleep, exercise and diet can improve cognition. Clinicians can prescribe medication to help with mood swings.

"We know how to treat depression. Let's treat depression," Alosco said. "We can manage some of the thinking and memory symptoms. We can manage sleep apnea, a lot of factors that influence thinking and memory and mood. There's a lot you can do, regardless of whether or not we know for sure what's going on."

Approximately one month after Miller completed the first part of his initial assessment, he received a call from Alosco. As expected, the results were not definitive. Miller said the tests revealed "some issues." He declined to specify the details. BU researchers are not authorized to disclose individual patient diagnoses.

No matter what the doctors may observe moving forward, Miller remains matter-of-fact about what the doctors may observe, curious but without regret.

"I am not complaining of what I did, how I did it," Miller said, referring to his hockey career. "I just want to live my life, after 66 years old, better. I'd like to live a little bit longer."

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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ESPN / Wysh List: The state of fighting in the NHL in 2026-27 - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

The boys are fighting.

According to the NHL, there has been an uptick in on-ice fisticuffs this season. Through 120 games, there were 34 games with one or more fights. That's up over last season (25) and the 2024-25 season (26).

"Definitely way more fights," one NHL veteran player told ESPN. "Way more physicality and competitiveness. Which I think is great for the league, because it's something that sets the NHL apart from all the other major sports leagues."

This is true. I'm not sure how many people tuned into NBA opening night to see if LeBron was going to throw hands with Karl-Anthony Towns to make an impression on his new teammates in Philly. The NHL's biggest stars will, however, punch people in the face.

Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche led the NHL with 53 goals last season and was second in ESPN's top 100 player ranking for this season. Last Tuesday, he sat in the Colorado dressing room with stitches across his bloody nose and a throbbing bruise under his left eye after a fight with Dallas Stars center Roope Hintz.

"That was crazy," said Matt Rempe of the New York Rangers, a noted pugilist that was in awe of MacKinnon-Hintz I. "They were both just chucking there, they were both just throwing bombs. Two skilled guys who were throwing, so it was pretty awesome."

It was MacKinnon's second fight of the season, having previously traded blows with Los Angeles Kings defenseman Brandt Clarke.

"The way we all grow up in the Maritimes is pretty gritty. Most guys from that area are feisty. I think it's good to do it sometimes. I might be done for the year, but I guess you never know," MacKinnon said after his second bout. "Getting punched is not that fun. But the guys seemed to like it, so maybe I'll do it a couple more times."

ESPN analyst Erik Johnson played with MacKinnon for 11 seasons and won the Stanley Cup with him in 2022.

"I'm actually surprised he doesn't fight more. He's so intense and he'd be the first to admit he has a screw loose. When that screw wiggles loose, you don't want to be in his path," Johnson said.

As Johnson noted, MacKinnon added Muay Thai to his training regimen, which may be a factor in his recent pugilism. He also thinks Nate's two fights might have created a copycat effect in the NHL this season.

"When you see a guy like MacKinnon do it, maybe that has a trickle-down effect to other players being like, 'Oh, I can do this too,'" he said.

There are a lot of theories why fighting might be on the rise in the NHL this season. One veteran player said that it's a surefire way to instantly create chemistry with teammates.

"When you're on a new team and you're trying to establish yourself with that team, you want to show that you're all-in," he said. "You want to have your teammates appreciate you and standing up for your buddy or for the big hits. I think that's part of it, the camaraderie."

Another player told ESPN that fights help snap some players into a more competitive mindset.

"I know there's a few guys around the league that want to make sure they get a fight in early in the season, just to remind them of the physicality. Sort of an, 'I can still do this,'" the player said. "Nobody wants to fight in preseason, because it's pointless. But in your first early regular-season games, if something happens and there's an opportunity, there's a fight."

About that preseason: Daniel Gallant, who runs HockeyFights.com, believes the league's truncated training camps -- thanks to a move to an 84-game season -- could be an influence.

"I think that opened the door for some players to want to make an impact and impression," he said.

According to HockeyFights, last season saw the most unique players register a fight (288) since the 2013-14 campaign. Gallant's theory is that teams are finding talent to fill their lineup that can skate well and set the tone physically.

"To me, fighting in hockey sits at a bit of a tipping point," he said. "With the aforementioned increase in players willing to drop the gloves, the chance for more exciting fights coming on any given night increases."

Of course, the most frequent fighters don't have the ice time or accolades of a Nathan MacKinnon. Players such as Columbus Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier and Boston Bruins forward Mark Kastelic (tied for the league lead with 10 fights last season) drop the gloves with frequency. Gallant cites Arber Xhekaj (Montreal Canadiens), Scott Sabourin (Tampa Bay Lightning) and Jack McBain (Utah Mammoth) as fighters worth watching.

McBain already had a fight of the year candidate with Edmonton Oilers forward Trent Frederic, with both players absolutely unloading haymakers before leaving for their dressing rooms. Oilers star Connor McDavid could be seen smiling widely as he tapped his stick on the boards in appreciation.

It's worth asking: Is hockey fighting having a moment after years of decline?

Maybe for fans outside of the hockey bubble.

Consider that McBain vs. Frederic was the No. 2 TikTok video across all ESPN accounts last week. Not just hockey -- everything, with the NFL, college football and the MLB playoffs in full swing.

The greatest evidence of this uptick in popularity was back in 2025, when three fights in nine seconds between the USA and Canada launched the 4 Nations Face-Off into becoming a massive success ... while launching the Tkachuk brothers into a successful podcasting side hustle. Of course, it helps that the Tkachuks are both stars and among the best offensive players in the NHL.

It's an interesting dynamic when goal scorers fight. The 2004 Stanley Cup Final is known for two things: Existing on the precipice of the lockout, and having been the series where Calgary's Jarome Iginla and Tampa Bay's Vincent Lecavalier had an unexpected and epic throwdown.

I remember talking to San Jose Sharks players about watching Joe Thornton fight, as he averaged one or two annually for his first dozen seasons. They'd get up on the bench and understand that Jumbo had set the tone.

"I think it surprises you when you see guys that you wouldn't expect to fight end up fighting. That would definitely get you fired up," Johnson said. "Don't get me wrong: You're equally pumped when you have a guy on your team known for fighting that does his job. But I think it gives you a little boost seeing one of your best players do it, for sure."

MacKinnon is the unquestioned tone-setter in Colorado. Watching him fight -- twice! -- was as much for the Avalanche as it was for his own catharsis.

I asked one NHL player, who has never been MacKinnon's teammate, about his fights.

"If I'm on Colorado, I'm like, 'Wow, this guy is setting the tone,'" the player said. "He lost in the Olympics last year. [The Avs] lost in the playoffs. It looks like he's a man on a mission and willing to do whatever it takes. It's not like he's just doing it for dumb reasons."

Gallant likes a good superstar hockey fight. "It reminds you of the pure emotion some of these games carry. A guy like Tage Thompson of the Buffalo Sabres has had eight spirited bouts and he doesn't hold back. I imagine he'll have a few more as the years roll on," he said.

As far as stars that haven't fought yet, Gallant would like to see what Oilers center Leon Draisaitl can do. His teammate, McDavid, hasn't had an NHL fight -- his last recorded bout on HockeyFights happened in 2014 while with the OHL Erie Otters. Macklin Celebrini, the consensus choice for the next face of the NHL, doesn't have an entry on his HockeyFights page while playing in his third NHL season. When he has his first fight, that clip probably goes supernova, given Mack's popularity.



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OK, let's make that if he has his first fight. Or ever fights at all.

Teams by and large don't want their star players throwing punches. That goes for MacKinnon, too. "I think as the season goes on, you would see him do it less and less, just because it's very important to be healthy going into the playoffs," Johnson said.

Hockey fights are dangerous. Their infrequency in 2026 in comparison to previous decades should be lauded from a player safety perspective. As late as 2008-09, over 41% of all games featured a fight. That total was just 19% last season. I've written about factors in that decline before, with rules changes and the construction of team rosters as the main drivers.

While there's been a slight uptick in recent years, fighting remains infrequent in relation to how things used to be. I'd argue it's that infrequency that makes bouts like McBain vs. Frederic break through to general sports fans, or puts the spotlight on a player like MacKinnon when he fights. The NHL has gotten to a point where fighting remains part of the game but doesn't define the game, like back in the 1970s when the sport was a caricature of itself.

Many of the people I spoke with about this increase in fighting to start the season expect the trend to ebb by the end of the season. According to HockeyFights, the average number of fights per game has ranged between 0.23 and 0.25 for the last five seasons.

"I also just think it's cyclical, too. Some years are going to be up more than others," Johnson said. "But it is interesting to see that it's up this year."

Brady Tkachuk's return to Ottawa might not have been the most bilious homecoming in recent NHL history -- John Tavares' first game at Nassau Coliseum as a Maple Leafs holds that title belt, what with the rubber snakes tossed at him -- but it came close for sheer nastiness. The Ottawa fans chanted "eff" Brady and his podcast, as well as about him eating crayons; they brought signs mocking his fealty to brother Matthew and his playoff choke job; and, in the greatest tradition of these spiteful nights, they placed totems of Brady in arena urinals, from hockey cards to jersey nameplates.

Brady Tkachuk made the night even more special by leaning into the villainy. He scored Florida's lone goal to give them a 1-0 lead and temporarily mute the crowd. He had a Grinch-like grin when boos rained down during stoppages. By proclaiming in his podcast that he intended to donate any jerseys thrown on the ice to a local charity, he incited Senators fans to throw several of them. What a night. Hockey!

Senators fans let Brady Tkachuk hear it in his return to Ottawa

LOSER: Jumbotron Tributes

What happened to our Revenge Game oasis? When Mitch Marner made his acrimonious return to Toronto as a Golden Knight, the fans parked their booing and chants during his Jumbotron tribute video, even cheering Marner before getting back to the spite soon afterwards.

But on Brady Tkachuk Night, the fans in Ottawa jeered through the entirety of the Senators' video tribute to their former captain, leading to surreal images such as Brady Tkachuk in a surgical mask visiting local children while the soundtrack is overwhelmed by hateful jeering. Again, hockey!

WINNER: Good lookin' Manny Malhotra

The fantasy sports site Rotogrinders did one of our favorite things recently: Creating an arbitrary sports ranking using a convoluted methodology. In this case, they ranked the most handsome NHL head coaches using a recipe of "Google's MediaPipe Face Mesh" and "468 facial reference points" and "four neoclassical and two landmark-based," which does sound better than "we threw a dart."

Based on this intricate system, Vancouver Canucks coach Manny Malhotra was ranked as the league's most handsome coach, followed closely by Vegas Golden Knights bench boss Ryan Craig. It's here we'll note that they're both in their first seasons as NHL head coaches, which explains a lot.

LOSER: Rick Bowness

The problem with putting your team on blast only a handful of games into the season is that a coach runs the risk of (a) not being able to effectively

do it again and (b) potentially losing the team rather than lighting a fire under them.

Bowness has called out the Columbus Blue Jackets in public and in private, and the season is still spiraling. A mutual parting of ways seems like an inevitability if the Blue Jackets serve up a few more stinkers like that effort against Toronto this week.

WINNER: Vancouver Goldeneyes

In last week's column, we confessed our displeasure with the new PWHL Vegas jerseys. So it's only fair that we acknowledge the absolute perfection of these Vancouver Goldeneyes sweaters, built around a top tier hockey logo. A jersey worthy of the greatness that is KK Harvey.

LOSER: Cryptic marketing

<https://t.co/yCvIFtTGQa>

— Toronto Maple Leafs (@MapleLeafs) October 21, 2026

We're very much looking forward to the Fanatics Hometown Remix jerseys that are coming soon. They were teased this week, as 31 teams released images of their new sweaters along with cryptic messages that needed to be descrambled -- like this Maple Leafs one that reads "It's Always About The Leafs."

I don't know ... I guess it works in theory. But it has very strong "Be Sure To Drink Your Ovaltine" energy.

FAVORITE ON-ICE MOMENT

Watching Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Zach Hyman and Evan Bouchard operate in a 4-on-3 power play in overtime is like having someone crank a Jack-in-the-Box that also plays your favorite song. Like, it's just a matter of time before it pops, as Bouchard did with the game winner against Minnesota. It's poetry.

It was also a reminder of a plank in my platform: That we scrap the overtime and shootout for dueling power plays, which is closer to what we watched in the previous 60 minutes. But that's a column for another time.

Evan Bouchard wins it for the Oilers in OT

FAVORITE OFF-ICE MOMENT

We're officially giving Calgary Flames netminder Devin Cooley the "Ilya Bryzgalov Award For Goalie Who Should Absolutely Keep Talking."

After blessing the hockey world with "nothing matters, nobody cares, we're all going to die" as a calming mantra last season, Cooley went viral again for this interview in which he "felt nothing" in a recent game because his "conscious brain" is bad at playing goal in comparison to his "unconscious brain," which is apparently Vezina-worthy. He expanded on this on a Q&A with Sportsnet.

"I have to let my unconscious brain do the work because it reacts a lot quicker." 🧠 Devin Cooley chats with @BParkerTV about the psychology behind his unreal performance vs. the Canes. <https://t.co/Y96IEOFmLn>

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) October 19, 2026

MUST-SEE GAMES

Anaheim Ducks at Philadelphia Flyers

Saturday, Oct. 24, 1 p.m. ET (NHL Network)

Almost-Flyer Leo Carlsson plays in Philadelphia for the first time since the Flyers made him the highest paid player in the NHL this season thanks to their offer sheet. On the undercard: The always interesting matchup between Flyers star Trevor Zegras and his former team. He scored two goals against Anaheim at home last season.

Minnesota Wild at Vancouver Canucks

Sunday, Oct. 25, 10 p.m. ET (ESPN+)

Now that we've seen how Ottawa fans have greeted the return of a former captain who was traded to play with his brother after informing his team he wasn't going to sign a new contract with them, Quinn Hughes plays in Vancouver for the first time following those exact circumstances. Well, save for the whole "playing with his brothers" thing. That comes later.



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Boston Bruins at Carolina Hurricanes

Tuesday, Oct. 27, 7 p.m. ET (ESPN)

The Bruins were 7-2-1 in their first 10 games of the season, with the seventh-best offense and fourth best defense in the NHL during that span. The defending Stanley Cup champions will be a good measuring stick for coach Marco Sturm's Bruins, in their first meeting of the season.

PUCK HEADLINES

Dateline: Winnipeg

Let's talk Connor Hellebuyck.

The Winnipeg Jets goaltender's suspension ends this Friday. That's not an arbitrary end date. According to sources, Hellebuyck informed the Jets on Oct. 2 that he intended to end his training camp holdout and return to the team. They promptly used a clause in the CBA that gives teams power to suspend players who have "not received permission to be absent from training camp," with the suspension being at "a reasonable length."

I had one NHL agent wonder if Hellebuyck and his representation were aware of this CBA clause, given that he's lost upward of \$900,000 and gained nothing insofar as leverage. At least Dylan Larkin had other fanbases desirously chanting his name.

Not a single source to whom I spoke this week believed that Hellebuyck would be traded before Friday, and that he'll end up collecting his paycheck while remaining back in Michigan, where ESPN's Emily Kaplan said he's been training.

It's been interesting to hear Winnipeg players creak the door open for a possible return to the team. Seeking reconciliation with estranged acquaintances is a basic human response -- some might say a character flaw -- and completely understandable when a player who has been in Winnipeg for 12 seasons decides to peace out.

Kyle Connor, a U.S. national teammate with Hellebuyck, has generally seemed devastated by the betrayal -- Hellebuyck was in his wedding party. Captain Adam Lowry has been more diplomatic, while acknowledging the extremely difficult healing that would have to happen should Hellebuyck return.

(Speaking of nuptials: Hellebuyck attended Lowry's wedding in July with a number of current teammates, with his desire to leave Winnipeg already widely reported by that point. I've sort of been obsessed with this. Did the Lowrys keep Hellebuyck at the same table seating for the reception or does a trade request put him in the back with the weird cousins instead of, like, next to Cole Perfetti?)

I've heard two opposing views on why a Hellebuyck deal hasn't happened yet. The first is that it's the player's fault: That Hellebuyck, who has a no-movement clause, wants to play for a Stanley Cup contender. Like, a sure thing team in the Carolina or Vegas or Florida sense. There are teams that have had talks with the Jets like Utah, Buffalo and Los Angeles, but they're not the level of contender Hellebuyck seeks. Again, that's from a few sources.

Other sources have indicated that it's GM Kevin Cheveldayoff holding up things here, as Hellebuyck would accept a move to places such as Buffalo or Los Angeles. But Cheveldayoff wants to hit a grand slam with his most tradable asset, and he's yet to be offered a deal that rises to that standard from a team for whom Hellebuyck is willing to play.

I tend to believe the latter scenario is the catalyst for this stalemate. I've heard the ask from the Jets is astronomical, and frankly that's justified given Hellebuyck's accomplishments. One last note: The NHLPA told me it wanted to see how it played out after his suspension ends before commenting on the Hellebuyck situation. I'd be surprised if there's a grievance filed in the near term, what with Hellebuyck getting paid not to play. There's precedent for that. But the question is how long that'll last.

Dateline: Detroit

As I reported this week, disgruntled former Detroit Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin has now expanded his list of potential destinations to at least 10 teams.

We knew about the first three that he gave Detroit in the offseason: The Florida Panthers, Minnesota Wild and Vegas Golden Knights. The list is now expanded to the Carolina Hurricanes, Colorado Avalanche, Dallas

Stars, New Jersey Devils, Tampa Bay Lightning, Utah Mammoth and Washington Capitals. Again, these are teams to whom Larkin would accept a trade. We don't know how deep talks have gone with any of them.

Toronto-based writer Jeff Veillette noted that Larkin's list includes nine of the top 10 teams in current Stanley Cup betting odds, with only the Edmonton Oilers excluded -- sources have told ESPN that Larkin doesn't want a trade to a Canadian team, despite the desires of Montreal fans.

One team I'm fascinated by on his list are the Capitals. They're off to a somewhat middling start. GM Chris Patrick has been very aggressive in adding talent to his lineup, from Pierre-Luc Dubois and Jacob Chyachrun to Jordan Kyrrou and Boone Jenner. He has a robust pipeline of young talent that could entice the Red Wings, plus an NHL center that can help them now in Dylan Strome, who is signed through next season (\$5 million AAV) and has no trade protection.

Ultimately, I think the Capitals would rather upgrade their back end in their quest for a second Stanley Cup. But as always, they're one to keep an eye on.

ESPN LOADED: 10.23.2026



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Sportsnet.ca / 'It's just not real': McDavid makes even more history in Oilers' shootout win

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — It's the curse that rides shotgun next to the absolute blessing of watching the sport's finest talent on a nightly basis. Or playing with that player.

After another five-point night by Connor McDavid, in a thrilling 6-5 win over Carolina on Thursday, this scribe was lucky enough/dutybound to perform the task of trying to find a new angle for the "How great a player is Connor McDavid?" storyline.

I could publish or book my columns on this topic (it wouldn't sell), and McDavid isn't even 30 years old yet.

And, of course, his teammates get to relive the weekly task of standing in front of a group of reporters, each of us trying to find a new route into the most travelled destination in Edmonton hockey history. AG — after Gretzky — of course.

"Connor broke a Gretzky record: 31 points now in this first 10 games," a media member said, inside a question for Leon Draisaitl. "Those are video-game numbers!"

Draisaitl had five points Thursday as well. But there he stood, being asked the "How awesome is Connor?" question for about the 2,000th time in his career.

"What do you want me to say? It's just not real," Draisaitl said. "He's maybe the greatest player to ever play, in my books. It's a pleasure to share the ice with him, a pleasure to learn from him every day. He deserves everything."

With a five-point night, McDavid set an Oilers record for the most points through 10 games in a season with 31, surpassing Wayne Gretzky in 1984-85. And McDavid is one of just four players — alongside Gretzky, Mario Lemieux (three times) and Mike Bossy — to start a season with 30 points in the first 10 games.

Lemieux holds the record with 37 points in the opening 10 games of the 1988-89 season, the year he finished with 199 points.

As the Oilers ran their record to 8-1-1 with the shootout win, McDavid had two second assists, a primary assist, and two goals in the third period, including one on a fluky bounce off of Jesperi Kotkaniemi's skate to tie the game at 18:32. But for the second straight night the power play won Edmonton a game the even-strength play likely did not deserve to win, with back-to-back three-for-five nights against Minnesota and the Hurricanes.

"It feels like they're out there the whole game because they're so talented," Carolina head coach Rod Brind'Amour said of McDavid and Draisaitl. "But when you give them the ice, the power plays, that's death. They're two of the best players maybe ever to play when there's that much space. You can't do that."

It's just obscene what McDavid is doing in his 29-year old season, ripping through the competition even more surgically than in years past.

His work on the power play is Michelangelo, his even-strength game more Bo Jackson.

He leads the NHL with a plus-18, has a shooting percentage of 32 per cent, and his 19 even-strength points would put him behind only Draisaitl in NHL scoring. On Thursday he became the second player in NHL history to record three five-point outings in his first 10 games of a season. (Lemieux did it in eight games in 1992-93 and 1988-89.)

Incredibly, McDavid seems to have somehow gotten even better this season, with his 30th birthday due on Jan. 13.

"You learn, right?" Draisaitl reasoned. "When he was 24, he was just as flashy, just as fast. But there are little details that maybe weren't as great.

Now, his game is as complete as it gets, and he hasn't lost a step offensively. I mean, you really just run out of words.

"No pun intended, but I'll leave it at that."

We've told the story 100 times about McDavid and an opposing defenceman's gap. D-men travel through the NHL, night after night, and find their gauge on what kind of gap they need to properly defend a rush by an NHL forward.

Then they arrive in Edmonton, and the math's all wrong.

There's the tenet of hockey, that space is the currency for creativity. Just like Gretzky's buttonhook inside the blue-line created the necessary space for his wizardry back in the 80s, tighter defending and better skaters have forced McDavid to find his space in a far faster game with much less room.

The spin move he made on Sean Walker, who challenged him aggressively on the penalty kill, left the Hurricane facing the other direction and gave McDavid the time he needed to put a puck on Ryan Nugent-Hopkins' tape for a powerplay goal.

For every great McDavid play, there is a precursor — a side step, a cross-over, that patented spin move — that buys the time and space to make the play that ends up in the net. It's his cheat code: make a crazy athletic move to create the time for the unbelievably heady play that makes a goal.

"It's just like any other player," said Carolina's Juuso Valimaki. "You get the feeling, you get hot and you feel like you can do anything out there. Obviously they're special players."

Sorry, Jusso. You're only partly right.

McDavid feels like he can do anything out there right now.

But it's not "just like any other player."

Not even close, kid.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Easy to feel special': Troy Stecher plays hero as Maple Leafs win thriller

Luke Fox

TORONTO — As the final minute of a tied-up barnburner sizzles away, Nick Paul gets hauled down illegally by Tye Kartye in the New York Rangers' zone but keeps the puck alive and the penalty delayed with a second effort.

Brandon Duhaime gathers Paul's loose change and feeds it back to Morgan Rielly.

Thinking pass all the way, the defenceman holds the puck on his blade, drawing in weak-side winger Will Cuylle as long as possible before zipping the thing across to partner Troy Stecher.

Stecher, No. 28, cuts in, snaps his first shot of the game and bulges the back of Dylan Garand's net with just 28 seconds to go.

Then the undersized waiver gem — Brad Treliving's parting gift to a roster his predecessor overhauled something fierce — throws a fist pump high as his shot, hugs his teammates, motions for Scotiabank Arena to raise to its feet, high-fives the line, then waves to the crowd again. This time with both arms.

Stand up.

"Dating back to last year, I've really embraced being a Maple Leaf. So much passion around the city and so much love for the Leafs that, as a player, it's really hard not to feel. Like, it's pretty easy to feel special," says Stecher, explaining his celebration after a 5-4 thriller on Thursday.

"So, just trying to bring the arena together. You know, it's more than just us 20 in here. It's a big-time fan base, and I feel fortunate to be a part of it."

Thing is, Stecher has felt part of something similar, way back when he was playing 20-plus minutes a night in college and earning NHL attention the undrafted way.

"A way different magnitude, but I did play at North Dakota. And I know it's really small, but they're kind of like the Alabama of college hockey for football, you know? And they travelled so well when I was playing at college, and I feel very similar here," Stecher said.

"When we go on the road, like half the arena is blue and Leafs fans. So, it's just such a unique situation to be a part of an organization like that. And I definitely try not to take it for granted."

If some of his previous six NHL teams took Stecher for granted, the Maple Leafs have not.

Not last season, when the Edmonton Oilers castaway gave a slumping bunch a mid-season jolt. Not in the off-season, when new GM John Chayka extended the 32-year-old for two seasons with his richest deal in five years. And certainly not this month, when a string of blue-line injuries has only ratcheted Stecher's importance.

"I love playing with him. He works extremely hard. He moves the puck well. We talk a lot," Rielly says. "It's just a big moment. Troy's a big part of our group. And he shows a lot of emotion, so I think that had something to do with it as well."

Adds Duhaime: "He's awesome. Just a hard-nosed, wily veteran. Plays the game the right way. Doesn't take any shortcuts. Just a real privilege to play with him."

Good or bad, hero or goat, Leafs Nation appreciates Stecher because he wears his heart on his sleeve.

Before the D-man helped extend Toronto's season-best win streak to three games Thursday, he was one of the few Leafs who looked ticked off over Saturday's 4-1 home loss to the New York Islanders, smashing his stick in half over the crossbar when Bo Horvat scored the winner.

"The puck's on my stick. Like, I know more than anybody that was my fault. One hundred per cent that's why I smashed it," Stecher told Sportsnet.ca afterwards. "I wanted to beat their 2-2 forecheck to make sure we had a 3-on-2 the other way. I didn't hit it hard enough; it gets stopped in the zone and they score. So, that's a moment where I'm pissed off at myself because I made a mistake. I hurt the team. But if I can take away those one (poor) moments per game, I think overall my game is pretty good."

Exceptional, especially, on a penalty kill that has scored as often as it has allowed a goal this season (once).

"As a whole, I've actually liked my game as an individual. My strengths obviously are on the kill, and our kill's been really good this year. And I think I've added value to that," he said.

Thursday may have brought Stecher's first goal of the season. Ironically, it was not his first goal celebration. He thought he'd scored on a point shot against the Islanders, but video review would reveal a tip by Colton Sissons.

"I saw the replay after the game. Instantly, I (told Sissons), 'Why didn't you tell me in the huddle?' Because I wanted to lead the skate-by. So, I kind of looked like an idiot."

On Thursday, Stecher simply looked like an overjoyed hero, even if he's an unlikely one.

"I just actually saw the goal on TV, so I got to see the front of the bench," coach Jim Hiller said. "That makes you feel good. They were excited. They were happy for Stech, I'm sure. Happy we scored. Happy we won the game. But that's a lot of emotion for a game that wasn't overtime. That's a regular-season game in October. It was great to see. It's a great sign."

And a great signing.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

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

Latest episode

"It wasn't pretty the whole way through, but we stuck with it as a group — and that's what we're going to take with it. When we play as a collective group, we can find ways to win games when we're not at our best," Stecher said.

Next stop: Edmonton, the city that let him walk to Toronto.

"We've got three in a row now and got some good jam in this room. It feels like guys are not too high, but we're definitely confident in ourselves," Stecher says. "Hopefully we can keep this going on the road."

Fox's Fast Five

• Sergei Bobrovsky tied New York icon Henrik Lundqvist for sixth place on the career wins list (459) — the most by a non-Canadian goalie.

Bobrovsky accomplished the feat in 814 games played; Lundqvist needed 887. Next up: ex-Leaf Ed Belfour (484). Twenty-five more wins and Bobrovsky cracks the top five.

"I'm sure his two Cups mean a lot more to him than that," Stecher said.

"But it's still really impressive. Everybody's talked about throughout the season how pumped we are to have Bob here and the leadership qualities that he brings to the room. Not just like what he does on the ice. So, congrats to him. That's an amazing accomplishment."

• Gavin McKenna notched a power-play assist that moved him into a tie for the lead in NHL rookie scoring (seven points), but the winger saw just two shifts in the third period.

Hiller needs to find the playmaker a few shifts away from linemates Colton Sissons and Vinni Lettieri. Nothing crazy. Just the occasional bump-up to the top six.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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• Enjoyed this thoughtful breakdown of Auston Matthews by Rangers D-man and Leafs draft pick Sean Durzi, who spent early training camps with the Leafs star:

"His physicality, when he's using that to full strength, it's a pretty big task. Physicality can be displayed in different ways. It's not so much the big hit — and he does throw his body — but it's just physically around the net, creating space, all that stuff. As a defenceman, you got to find ways to negate that and get inside of that physicality and not let him use his body to his advantage. But it's a big task, and obviously he's playing at a pretty high level now.

"Something that I realized is, guys really play at the top of their game when they're enjoying themselves. Pay attention to Auston over there. He's got smiles constantly. He's playing well."

• Fourth-liners Teddy Blueger (goal, assist), Duhaime (goal, two assists) and Zack MacEwen (two assists) all registered their first-ever points as Maple Leafs on the same play. They came into the night with a combined zero points and drove home with seven.

"Everybody always loves it when those guys get rewarded with goals and points because they do the dirty work," Hiller said.

• We heard that the Maple Leafs explored acquiring a second Raddysch — Rangers fourth-liner Taylor — over the off-season to go with new top defenceman Darren.

The brothers played three of their junior years as Erie teammates, plus a couple games as Lightning in 2021-22. Much like the Tkachuks and Hugheses, the former Otters have talked about an NHL reunion.

"That was pretty special for the whole family. Mom and Dad got to drive to one city instead of two in the OHL. So, it'd be amazing to play with him, and hopefully maybe have that opportunity one day," Darren smiled at morning skate. "There's no friends out there. Maybe I'm not going to hit him too hard in the corner, but I'll definitely be trying my hardest against him."

The siblings grew up in nearby Caledon, Ont., and frequently attended games at Scotiabank Arena. Their father, Dwayne, had only two seats, so they'd take turns sitting beside Dad.

Dwayne Raddysch died in March after his battle with cancer. A few months later, Dwayne's favourite team offered Darren the biggest contract of his life. He had to tell Taylor.

"Special. We both kind of looked at each other like, 'Is this actually real? Am I going to do this?'" Darren recalled. "He was very happy for the decision I made."

Taylor is an impending free agent in 2027.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks feel fan frustration as losing streak continues

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER — For a city that can feel like the wettest place on Earth sometimes — typically only every November through February — Vancouver once went 58 days without rain. Incredible, but true, we think.

Google says it occurred in 1951 and, lest anyone on the West Coast back then became smug or overly tanned, Mother Nature then unleashed 46 straight days of rain the following winter.

We're guessing one drought was more enjoyable than the other.

Eventually, surely, the Vancouver Canucks will bask in fine weather. But not these days, when even as the sun shines uncharacteristically almost daily here through October, it is only raining inside the hockey rink.

On Thursday, almost inconceivably, the struggling, rebuilding team went 39 minutes and 14 seconds without a shot on goal in a 5-2 home loss to the Detroit Red Wings, a middling National Hockey League team with a middling defensive rank (16th in the league with 27 shots against per game).

Even for a franchise partly known for its 56-year Stanley Cup drought, the Canucks' remarkable shot famine on Thursday will probably linger long in memory. It may show up on Google 75 years from now.

From Elias Pettersson's power-play goal at 7:02 of the first period until Jake DeBrusk's shooting-for-a-rebound effort from the right-wing circle at 6:16 of the third, the Canucks did not force either of Detroit's goalies to make a save.

Red Wings starter John Gibson apparently got something in his eye — it wasn't the puck — which allowed minor-league call-up Michal Postava to make his NHL debut in the third period. DeBrusk's shot in the 47th minute was Vancouver's sixth of the game.

It drew a robust cheer from the home crowd, as did subsequent rapid-fire shots by Zeev Buium and Brock Boeser.

Could players hear the sarcastic eruptions?

"Yes," Boeser said.

And how did it feel?

"Embarrassing."

Postava, a 22-year-old Czech whose day began in the minors, had a different interpretation.

"I just get in my mind like they're cheering for me," he told reporters.

"It's well-deserved for us," Canuck Drew O'Connor said of the cutting cheers. "We didn't give them anything to cheer for."

This was the Canucks' ninth straight defeat, but the most disappointing yet considering the Red Wings scored on three of the first five shots on Kevin Lankinen, essentially clinching the victory nine minutes in, while Vancouver generated only five shots in 46 minutes. This was about effort.

Until an eight-shot frenzy by the Canucks in the final period, Linus Karlsson's sharp-angle backhand in the final minute of the second period threatened to become a talking point; it was initially recorded as a shot (and save by Gibson) but was quickly taken off the scoreboard by the NHL's heartless off-ice officials.

"No, it was wide," Karlsson said. "I should probably just curl up there, find another play. But we had zero shots, and I was just thinking, like, try to throw it to the net to create something."

Vancouver created so little that Marco Rossi's speedy dash through the Detroit zone to beautifully set up Jonathan Lekkerimäki at 10:37 of the final period stood out as something close to magnificent.

"I think there's a lot of things missing in our game," Rossi told Sportsnet after returning to the lineup from a two-game absence due to illness. "I feel like we're just chasing the puck the whole game, and we're not making any plays out there. And, I mean, it's the best league in the world, right? If we continue playing like this, it's going to be a long season."

"Nothing is going on in the offensive zone and in the defensive zone, I mean, we're giving up so many chances."

Rossi said he felt badly for Lankinen, who faced 31 shots but was under a lot more pressure than that due to swaths of the game played entirely in Vancouver's zone.

"We're letting all of us down, right?" he continued. "It's not just Lanks. I mean, everyone, and it's a feeling that sucks, you know? We can't just always talk, talk, talk; we've got to do it and just play the game the right way. We're all good players. We play here for a reason, right? We've got to show it."

The Red Wings, who have points in six straight games, got a pair of early goals from Lucas Raymond, and others from William Wallinder, Michael Rasmussen and Emmitt Finnée. On four of the goals, the Wings simply outnumbered, overpowered or out-positioned Canuck defenders in front of Lankinen.

Vancouver got almost nothing to the Detroit net.

"It's easy to go to the net if you have the puck in the offensive zone," Karlsson explained. "Like, it's hard if you don't have the puck. So we need to start to have the puck in the O-zone. I think that's the problem."

Asked about the message in the dressing room during the second intermission, after the Canucks' first shot-less period in nearly a decade, Karlsson said: "We keep talking about compete, winning board battles, winning 50/50s. We know the tactics, the structure. So, I mean, it's up to us. We need to stop talking about it and start doing it."

The Canucks, now 2-9-1 and last in the NHL in points percentage (20.8) and goal-differential (minus 21), haven't won since Oct. 3.

"The effort level was a little disappointing tonight," coach Manny Malhotra said. "A lot of effort-based things that just weren't there."

"There has to be a level of concern by the players to know that it's not good enough, and it's only going to get harder. And the identity we have as a team is very much a reflection of their attitude and what they're putting forth."

And what they aren't.

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Sportsnet.ca / Devin Cooley's masterpiece sparks Flames to win over Wild

Eric Francis

CALGARY – Amidst his latest post-game sideshow, Devin Cooley stopped dead in his tracks.

"I already know the DMs I'm going to be getting from Team Tank: Just stop winning, idiot!" he chuckled, as if scrawling the words with his hands.

"But we're going to keep doing our best, and keep trying to win."

His Calgary Flames had just won consecutive games for the first time since February, following up a win over the defending champs with a 2-1 squeaker over the Minnesota Wild Thursday.

The common thread was Cooley, whose latest masterpiece was a 36-save clinic he punctuated with meanderings with the media sure to find their way all over the internet once again.

A sampling from the NHL's Most Interesting Man, who two days earlier went viral trying to explain the difference between playing with a conscious and an unconscious brain:

"Yeah, just a lot of thoughts popping in the head, and say like, 'you know, you can move on - you don't have to stick around here, go away,'" he explained, wide-eyed and abnormally loud, to the assembled press.

"And then sometimes the thoughts stick around and they're in your head for a while, and you're like, 'OK, you can stick around, you can hang out here. I'm not gonna think about you, and you can hang out.'"

What we think he was trying to say was that he maintained a level of chill that somehow allowed him to withstand a third-period onslaught that saw the Wild climb within one, only to be denied with a stop on the final shot while Cooley lay prone on his back.

It gave the Flames their third win in four games, which is a bounce-back few saw coming after the team was outscored by more than a couple touchdowns their first five games.

Cooley said he always felt like it was just a matter of time before his team would return to being the diligent defensive unit it has to be to mask its scoring deficiencies.

What made Thursday's win even more impressive is that it was done with two first-period power-play goals, and a penalty kill that subsequently killed off all four Kirill Kaprizov-led power plays to hold on.

And they did it all without their captain and best defensive player, Mikael Backlund, who is out day-to-day with an ailment.

Rookie call-up Jonathan Castagna played a big part in filling Backlund's shoes defensively, while Martin Pospisil had his best outing of the season.

But this, make no mistake, was a team effort — the kind needed if this team is going to compete regularly through the early stages of their rebuild.

"Unfortunately, it was a bad start for us this year, and I think we've pulled the layers back and found a foundation that works for us - what's acceptable and what's not," said veteran Ryan Strome.

"Those are two pretty good teams. We played well. We played strong. There's a great buy-in. Everyone's committed to doing the things the right way, and it feels much better than the first couple efforts. So I think we're moving in the right direction."

Team Tank needn't worry — there will still be plenty of losses ahead, and top draft picks to select.

But the key to getting through these lean years is ensuring the culture and work ethic remain healthy while playing a structured game.

Mission accomplished against three good teams, including Anaheim, their first victim of the year.

"I think the players are understanding what they have to do, night in, night out," said coach Ryan Huska, who got goals from Aydar Suniev and Joel Farabee as part of the team's increasingly dangerous power play.

"We're getting there."

All fans should really hope for this year is an honest effort and continuous growth from the youngsters — which was on full display against Minnesota.

Zayne Parekh is snapping the puck around on the power play, and Suniev's world-class shot paid off again.

"I'm just happy for the group," said Strome.

"We've had our ups and downs already, but the last couple days feels good. The guys in here deserve a lot of credit — coaches, players, for digging in and figuring out what we need to do and following the game plan. From where we were, 10, 14 days ago... it feels really good. The goaltender was pretty good too."

Here it comes, the kicker that proves they're starting to feel looser:

"I mean, he's unconscious," deadpanned Strome.

"Literally."

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Dragged us into the fight': Fourth line leads Maple Leafs to win

Sonny Sachdeva

TORONTO — There was a moment, five minutes into the night, when it looked like this game might turn.

The Toronto Maple Leafs had struck out to an early lead against the visiting New York Rangers, off another moment of brilliance from young Easton Cowan. But the Blueshirts had started pushing back, piling up chances. A Vladislav Gavrikov point shot had glanced off Mika Zibanejad's stick and beaten Sergei Bobrovsky, quieting the Scotiabank Arena crowd.

Then the blue-and-white's blue-collar trio hopped over the boards and went to work. First it was Zack MacEwen, flying into the offensive zone and barreling into defender Marcus Pettersson behind the Rangers' net. Then it was Teddy Blueger cutting off Will Cuyllé along the wall, forcing the puck back towards the cage once more. The Rangers tried to reorganize, to steady themselves — only to see Brandon Duhaime crash into Sean Durzi and push play back into the depths of New York's zone yet again.

Two more times, the Rangers tried to get the puck to safety, and two more times the Maple Leafs' fourth-liners stuffed it back into their zone. A tone-setting sequence from the depth trio. But it was only the start of a banner night for the three veterans.

A few minutes later, the trio combined for a pivotal go-ahead goal, MacEwen battling behind the net and shovelling the puck up to Duhaime near the right faceoff dot — the winger fought off a Ranger, pivoted, and delivered a heads-up pass to a wide-open Blueger at the netfront.

The Latvian cashed in, and in doing so, earned he and his linemates their first points in a Maple Leafs sweater.

"We see it every day in practice with those three," defender Troy Stecher said late Thursday night, after he himself potted a game-winner with less than 30 seconds left on the clock to end a raucous 5-4 back-and-forth win. "They're ultimate pros. They've been around, they have experience.

"It felt like we were kind of sluggish tonight, and they dragged us into the fight. Kudos to them — they stepped up big."

A period later, the Maple Leafs found themselves wobbling again. Another Rangers push had the visitors leading, off a pair of goals from Oliver Bjorkstrand and Tye Kartye in the opening seven minutes of the middle frame. The fourth-liners hopped back onto the sheet, rolled up their sleeves, and dug in once more, pulling their club back from the brink.

Again, it was a frenetic forecheck that willed them onto the board, MacEwen chasing down a casual Pettersson regroup in the Rangers' zone, Blueger disrupting an outlet pass and throwing it back into the Rangers' side of the ice, before the puck landed on Duhaime's stick as he sprinted down the left wing.

The pride of Coral Springs, Fla., collected the puck, whipped it at netminder Dylan Garand, then beat everyone else to the rebound and shovelled it into the back of the cage. Tie game.

Duhaime finished the night with a team-leading three points — registering an assist on the eventual game-winner a period later, too — the first three-point night of his six-year big-league career. It was a long time coming.

"I think the past four or five games, we've been doing well," he said from the Maple Leafs' locker room after Thursday's win was in the bag. "On the forecheck, creating a few opportunities where we haven't been rewarded. But we've just been playing the right way — simple, hard, just to our identity. I thought tonight was no different."

"Our attitude and mindset didn't change," his centreman, Blueger, added. "That was the biggest thing, that regardless of what happens — it's hard,

because you're judged on results — but you try not to focus on the results.

"Just keep your mentality, your attitude, your work ethic the same, no matter what."

It was a crucial piece of the equation on this night, as Toronto's fourth line wound up an engine that kept the group pressing forward, into the muck, even as the Rangers tried to knock them back and wrestle this victory out of their hands.

"I think that's probably our best game of the year through a 60 minutes for me," head coach Jim Hiller assessed. "The Rangers played good, they pushed us hard. We didn't have those lulls, dips — in fact, I thought we ended up pushing, and we got some momentum back."

The performance from his bottom-of-the-lineup battlers played no small part.

"You know, they've been really good since they've been put together," he said. "Everybody always loves it when those guys get rewarded with goals and points and stuff like that, because they do the dirty work. They're blocking shots, getting all the forechecks going. So I think that's what makes the night extra special.

"The three of them have looked really, really good together. And really give us something. You know, I don't know what you want to call it — but it's something."

Crucial to their success, which has been building steadily, game by game, is clarity of purpose.

"I think it's just fast, predictable, hard hockey," said MacEwen. "We know what each other, each one of us, are going to do with the puck. We want to get it behind their D, we want to wear D down, we want to set it up for the next line. . . . We know what our job is. And I think we're doing a good job of clicking and figuring that out."

On this night, the rest of the team followed suit, that approach filtering through the rest of the lineup. It's why the Maple Leafs were able to push the Rangers back the first time the visitors tied it up, and push back again when the Blueshirts clawed their way to a lead of their own, and again in the game's dying moments, after New York had potted a potentially demoralizing tying goal late in the third.

"We were consistent," Blueger said of his club's resolve. "Our mentality didn't change, our attitude didn't change. Our work ethic. All those things were there. We supported each other, stuck with it. You know, giving up that 4-4 goal, that can be a little deflating, but I think we came right back at them. I think we can learn a lot from that."

The tone-setting performance gives Blueger, Duhaime and MacEwen a collective seven points on the campaign, all collected Thursday under the Scotiabank Arena lights. It gives Toronto a third straight win, erasing the three-game slide that preceded this week's momentum-building victories against San Jose and Columbus.

Now comes another test, a meeting with the red-hot Edmonton Oilers on Saturday, kicking off a four-game Western Canada swing through Alberta and B.C., with a stop in Seattle, too. For the blue-and-white's fourth-line battlers, Thursday night provides something to build off, some proof of concept after weeks of quiet progress.

But the group's focus remains unchanged.

"Just creating opportunities," Duhaime said Thursday. "Our game is not really going to be judged on offence. Our game's going to be more about momentum swings, playing the right way, defending hard.

"Anytime you're on a fourth line like that, you've got to bring it every day. There's no games off."

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Sportsnet.ca / Real Kyper's Trade Board 2.0: Feeling out the best fits for Larkin, Hellebuyck

Nick Kypreos

The NHL season is not even a month old yet, but the trade chatter is already relentless.

That is not unusual in today's league, where player movement, salary-cap pressure, and social media speculation can turn a slow start into a full-blown crisis.

Still, not all trade rumours are created equal. Some are driven by unhappy players, while others are fuelled by struggling teams starting to explore potential answers.

The real frustration around this situation begins with team owner Chris Ilitch. When it was announced in mid-July that former GM Steve Yzerman was "stepping down" from his position, Detroit began looking for his replacement, but one NHL executive described to me that there was a sense the Wings weren't doing business on the player personnel side for a time. After Yzerman's departure, it wasn't well established who would be taking the calls and have the authority to make a deal. Shawn Horcoff wasn't named the interim GM until training camp opened in September, and only then was it clear who could get something done.

Horcoff's mandate is to hit a Larkin trade out of the park, and that's not happening. As of today, I'm told if Detroit wants to make a fair deal, it can turn to three or four teams and make it happen. However, so far, "fair" has not been good enough for the Wings.

Montreal has emerged as a popular rumoured landing spot for Larkin, particularly because the Canadiens could use a proven second-line centre behind Nick Suzuki, who is now out for a few weeks.

The fit makes total sense on paper. Larkin brings leadership, speed and two-way responsibility. However, I'm told Larkin still has no appetite to play for a Canadian team "yet". A Larkin trade to Montreal has a remote possibility of happening.

Meantime, Hellebuyck represents a more serious and complicated situation. The Jets have every reason to seek a substantial return for him, but the market for an elite goaltender is never simple.

The injury to New York Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin naturally created speculation, but the Rangers are interested in a goalie who has a lesser profile, since Shesterkin is expected to return next September. The longer Hellebuyck remains out of action, the more difficult it becomes for Winnipeg to maximize his value, so that's why the Jets need him back, preparing to play.

Then there are the struggling teams.

Philadelphia's poor start created the loudest organizational pressure. When a club cannot score and is consistently being outplayed, trade rumours are inevitable. But the Flyers should be careful not to make a panic move. Before trading core assets, they need to determine whether the problem is coaching, defensive structure, goaltending, injuries or simply poor finishing. Travis Konecny's name will float around even though there's no indication he'd waive his no-movement clause. However, they've now won their past three games, and that early panic has cooled.

Toronto's situation is familiar. Blown leads and inconsistent execution have once again placed the Maple Leafs under the microscope. Every loss produces another round of speculation, but there is no guarantee that another major acquisition would solve the team's problems. Toronto must first decide whether it needs a different player or a higher level of commitment from the players already in the room. The last few wins have helped ease pressure and urgency. Their issue remains the fact they have few assets to move, while all teams ask for Easton Cowan.

There is surely more to come. For now, on to my latest trade board:

When a trade wasn't made over the summer, Hellebuyck didn't show up to training camp or start the season, and was suspended by the team. But now this situation is progressing, if not coming to a head. Hellebuyck intends to come back and will be eligible to do so as of Friday — but what will happen then? The Jets are trying to be patient to find exactly the right trade for themselves.

Speaking of a player who requested a trade away from a team and then had to return, Larkin recorded two points in his first game back with the Red Wings, but has just three points in six games since. The 30-year-old has opened up his list but unfortunately it hasn't driven the price up for Detroit just yet. They are sitting on multiple offers that I'm told are deemed "fair," but they continue to wait for a triple, if not a home run.

Every day that passes without an extension, we wonder what exactly will happen next with Hughes. But the Wild are 6-2-2 and a definite Stanley Cup contender, so having to trade Hughes before he potentially becomes an unrestricted free agent next summer would be a tough one to navigate after they gave up so much to get him a year ago. This remains more of a situation to watch as the season unfolds, or until Hughes signs an extension with the Wild.

Still without a contract, but Nikishin does have a new agent in hopes of cashing in on the new wave of contracts when Carolina decides to finally move him. Nikishin is waiting on the sidelines, but the 8-2-1 Hurricanes won't be feeling pressure to go out of their way to find something. Because Nikishin can't sign an offer sheet and, per reporting from Frank Seravalli, doesn't have to sign a deal by Dec. 1 to be eligible to play this season, there's no deadline forcing the issue. The two sides remain apart in money on an extension and Nikishin is still hoping to land with a team that could give him an opportunity to be a top-three defenceman.

This remains a tricky situation. Robertson is on an expiring contract and isn't eligible to extend until Jan. 1, but even that seems unlikely. As mentioned on the last trade board, since any new contract wouldn't give Robertson trade protection until it kicks in next summer, if he did sign an extension with Dallas, it would open up the chance they could trade him anywhere before then. It's highly unlikely that Robertson will be traded before the new year, but by March we could be talking a lot about him.

The Penguins still have an eye on getting younger even after making the playoffs last season, and a 3-6-1 start has GM Kyle Dubas thinking about moving out some of this roster. The Penguins have been ready to move on from Rakell since the summer, but couldn't close a deal. He's a 33-year-old winger, fits the type of player who could help a contender (48 points in 60 games last season) and could get in return something that will help the Penguins more in the future. Bryan Rust, currently injured, is another player to watch here for similar reasons. He doesn't have a no-trade or no-move clause, however, he's a popular linemate of Sidney Crosby's and that might end up being the best trade protection of all.

A 36-year-old defenceman on an expiring contract, you'd think Karlsson would be a slam-dunk move for the Penguins this season, but his future here is still to be determined. He and his family love it in Pittsburgh, but he also wants to win now and has a no-movement clause. I believe that at some point Karlsson will get traded. The Penguins have right-shot, 20-year-old defenceman Harrison Brunicke ready for an NHL look.

Big and strong with a set of hands, Pittsburgh will try to sell Brazeau off based on the production he had during the first half of last season. With so many prospects in the system, look for the Penguins to potentially use him as a trade chip, though he needs to get healthy first. Brazeau has not played a game this season.

A great start for the Kraken will not have them rushing to trade a defenceman with this skill set — Dunn has seven points in 10 games, and in the past five seasons combined, he's 14th in scoring among NHL blue-liners. However, Dunn is in the final season of his contract, could test free agency next summer, and if Quinn Hughes re-signs before July 1, Dunn could be the best available at his position. If it seems like he won't re-sign, however, the Kraken will have to explore trade options, so Dunn will be on my list until he does commit to Seattle. However, the more likely scenario is Seattle doing what Detroit did with Alex DeBrincat and sign him well before July 1 to get an organizational win.

While Hellebuyck is the big fish in the goalie-trade pond, Binnington is something of a forgotten player available. He's started three games this season, has allowed 14 goals and is 61st out of 65 goalies in goals saved above expected. So, his play isn't doing much to elevate his trade value. However, as injuries occur or weaknesses show themselves at the



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goaltending position around the league, Binnington might become an option.

A point-per-game player in the early going, Pettersson has shown well this season, and it's helping change the perception of him and elevate his trade value. There was an attempt to push for a Pettersson trade in the summer, but nothing came close as many waited on Larkin instead. Now, with how well Pettersson is playing, and with where the salary cap continues to climb to, the Canucks feel there is no longer any reason to eat any money at all of his \$11.6-million cap hit to find a deal that suits them.

This is a longer-term player to watch this season. The Bruins want to compete, so as they sit atop the Atlantic Division, there is no reason for them to move Zacha, one of their top centres. But as is often the case with a player in the last season of his contract, Zacha's future hinges on how the rest of his team's season goes. If the Bruins slow down, they'll consider all options, and if Zacha were made available to the league, he'd be a highly valued asset. As salaries continue to climb, Zacha's ask on his next contract won't be a small one, and whatever that number will be will also be a factor here.

The only reason Rielly is still a Maple Leaf is because they couldn't find one team with interest, all summer long. With his trade value flat-lined and his cap hit just too high for what he brings, the only hope is that he rehabilitates his status as a top-four defenceman in the early going.

Now, when you consider the injury to Chris Tanev and Jake McCabe perhaps not at 100 per cent, it appears Rielly will get that opportunity. So, I'll keep Rielly on the trade board because if the Leafs do add a defenceman, he could be the piece included to make the money work.

Even though he reported to Detroit's training camp, Edvinsson is still without a contract and has to sign one by Dec. 1 to be eligible to play in the NHL this season. The Red Wings don't want to trade him, but the longer this goes on, the more likely a trade becomes. Although Edvinsson is an impressive young defenceman himself, he could also return to Detroit a helpful package to rebuild its rebuild with.

In recent years, we've wondered about the possibility of an O'Reilly trade because he checks off a lot of boxes. A 35-year-old player on a playoff bubble team? Check. Plays a premium position at centre and is highly responsible on the defensive side? Check. Affordable contract at \$4.5 million? Check. And lacks any trade protections at all? Check. Yet O'Reilly remains a Predator because the team has treated him as though he does have trade protection and the player has shown no desire to leave. Will that change this season, his last on his current deal? Time will tell.

Out with a broken bone in his hand since the third game of the season, the 31-year-old Ristolainen is now in the final season of his contract. A right-shot blue-liner and a big body, it's growing more and more likely that this is the year the Flyers will trade him, especially if they continue to chase the pack of playoff teams ahead of them.

DeBrusk is off to a good start with seven points in nine games, but he's also 30 years old now and signed for another four years past this one. The question around DeBrusk, simply: Does he really fit into the team's long-term plans? The Canucks are rebuilding and there's no telling if they'll be ready to compete again over the life of this contract. DeBrusk is certainly a player Vancouver will explore trading and would have to work with him on it since he has a no-movement clause in place this season. That changes to a modified no-trade next season. I'll mention here too that teammate Brock Boeser is in a similar boat to DeBrusk.

A physical, defensive defenceman who is not afraid to block shots, Whitecloud has a 15-team no-trade list and three years remaining on his contract. This is a player who could be acquired and be part of a team for a few years. He brings character and toughness, valued "final pieces" for a Cup hopeful. Still, Calgary needs some veteran know-how in their dressing room, and since he has so much time left on his contract, it may yet decide to hold onto him for now.

A healthy scratch for two games in a row last weekend, Voronkov will be an RFA next summer, but his career trajectory is just not rising to a new level. Two years ago, he scored 23 goals and 47 points, and then his points per game declined in 63 games last season.

If the Sabres are able to pull off a trade for Hellebuyck, odds are that Luukkonen will be part of the return as they try to upgrade the position. Luukkonen has allowed four goals or more in four of his seven starts and

has an .863 save percentage. His contract is not bad, and he's had decent seasons before, but do the Sabres feel they can win playoff rounds with him as their No. 1?

The Mammoth are not sold on Vejmelka being the No. 1 who can get them through the playoffs so, like Luukkonen, if a deal can be found here to bring in Hellebuyck — or someone with experience to take over the No. 1 job — Vejmelka would become a movable piece. He's also on a multi-year contract at 30 years old.

Wright was a regular on the trade board last season, and he returns for 2026-27. The Kraken are looking for ways to make a trade work here, and it's only a matter of time to find out where his next stop will be. Wright has four points in 10 games this season.

The seventh-overall pick of the 2022 NHL Draft, Korchinski returned to junior for one season after his draft year and then went right into the NHL. After playing the entirety of his first pro year in the NHL, Korchinski spent most of 2024-25 and 2025-26 in the AHL, and played a combined 29 NHL games through those seasons. This season, he's on the NHL roster but has been scratched for every game but one. His development has been stunted, but the Hawks do not want to send him to the AHL because he'd have to go through waivers, where he'd surely be claimed. He's the type of guy Vancouver or Calgary would take a chance on. A project player at this point.

Dach has become an expendable player on the Habs' roster and someone they'd like to find a move for. Injuries have plagued his career, but he's still just 25 years old. What we're looking out for here is Dach to be included in a package as part of a bigger trade that brings Montreal back a notable player. His \$3.6 million cap hit could help make the money work in such a trade.

Frost is in the same boat as Dach, though he hasn't missed nearly as much time to injury and is coming off a 22-goal, 43-point season. He could also be a UFA at the end of this season and so the rebuilding Flames will look to flip him for another future asset if they can find a match. Between Philadelphia and Calgary, Frost just hasn't found a complete fit yet.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Is it ever going to happen?': What life is like for an NHL holdout

John Matisz

This past off-season was an inflection point in NHL power dynamics. The player pool imposed its will in a way we've never seen in the salary cap era, forcing trades and signing multiple record-breaking contracts, including a monstrous offer sheet.

Then training camps opened and outstanding business bubbled to the surface. The 2026-27 season is three weeks old and four high-profile cases remain unresolved – trade requests from Connor Hellebuyck and Dylan Larkin have gone unfulfilled, and restricted free agents Simon Edvinsson and Alexander Nikishin have yet to sign.

Larkin, the only one of the four to appear in a game thus far, no longer has a "C" on his Red Wings jersey. Hellebuyck is nearing the end of a Jets-issued suspension (nearly \$1 million in lost salary!) yet is still very much in limbo. The Wings' Edvinsson and Hurricanes' Nikishin have spent time in Sweden and Florida, respectively.

The volume spikes any time a contract stalemate nears a crucial deadline.

Fans wonder why the two sides can't get along, which party should be blamed, what kind of outcome is around the corner, and how that outcome will impact their favourite team.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

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What's it actually like to be a player on the outside looking in, though?

What's their reality?

We asked a handful of people with experience navigating contract impasses for some perspective on what the sidelined Hellebuyck, Edvinsson, and Nikishin may be dealing with day to day.

Fighting for miles, yards, or inches?

Ten years before the Hellebuyck mess, there was the Jacob Trouba saga.

Trouba, then a 22-year-old RFA, submitted a trade request to Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff in May 2016. The team tried to move the promising 6-foot-3 defenceman in the off-season but didn't like the return packages, pausing progress.

In late September, Trouba's agent, Kurt Overhardt, released a statement confirming the request and made it clear his client would not be attending training camp. The standoff dragged on for weeks. The two parties eventually agreed on a two-year, \$6-million deal in early November, and Trouba made his debut in Game 14 of 82.

"You want to play hockey. You're a hockey player," Trouba said Monday in an interview with Sportsnet.ca. "Then all this other stuff comes into it and it's ... Frustrating is not the right word. But you want to play, so you're disappointed in that sense. But you also have to feel confident in the choices you're making and why you're doing it."

Trouba felt stuck on the right side of a blue line that featured well-compensated and locked-in veterans Dustin Byfuglien and Tyler Myers. The ninth overall pick in 2012 craved a top-four role and didn't envision a scenario in which he could grab one in Winnipeg.

Those 49 days from the opening of camp on Sept. 23 to his Nov. 11 debut were strange. Trouba, a Michigan native, trained with the U.S.

National Team Development Program back in Ann Arbor, though nothing compares to NHL practices and games so it took a while to regain normal speed and endurance levels. Trouba watched Jets games on TV from home, which was a "little bit" weird, as was being the subject of constant rumours and speculation in a Canadian market.

Teammates would occasionally ping Trouba with a check-in text – How are you doing, man? – but otherwise No. 8's communication with Jets personnel was muted. Trouba tried to strike a balance between keeping in touch and maintaining a healthy distance, in part because he knew returning to the club was one likely outcome.

"You're not physically there, so you don't want to be a distraction," Trouba said.

Cheveldayoff finally pulled the trigger on a trade in 2019, sending Trouba to the Rangers amid another difficult negotiation. The hard-hitting defender spent five-and-a-half seasons in New York, one-and-a-half in Anaheim, and is currently 10 games deep with San Jose.

While the Winnipeg exit wasn't fast, fun, or smooth, Trouba knew from the start the various risks and rewards associated with trying to take control of his career.

"It's a process," Trouba said. "You know what could possibly happen, so I don't think you're caught off guard by what you're going to have to deal with during (the standoff) and going back to the team." People stand up for themselves professionally in every industry, he noted, and athletes just happen to have a public-facing, heavily scrutinized job.

Overhardt, a veteran NHL Players' Association agent with a law background, also represented Kyle Turris. The now-retired forward missed 23 regular season games in 2011-12 due to a contract dispute with the Phoenix Coyotes. Weeks later, he was traded to the Senators.

These tense situations don't arise overnight, Overhardt said, and no holdout "should be done unadvisedly or hastily." Months of planning and forecasting pass before a player misses even a day of camp. The client must know both parties' leverage points and be willing to face the uncertainty and scrutiny if contract talks stall.

"You really have to do a costs-versus-benefits (analysis) based on the specific situation and where things lie," said Overhardt, who's currently an executive vice-president at The Team agency. "If you don't do that, mistakes are made and you can really jeopardize and hurt your client's opportunity to move forward."

"That's why you've got to know your client. That's why you've got to know what you're fighting for," the player rep added. "Are you fighting for inches? Are you fighting for yards? Are you fighting for miles? You've got to be smart."

'Confidence goes a long way in life'

NHLers are creatures of habit with daily routines, on-the-job superstitions, and overall, a very particular way of moving through the world. The stakes are high in a short career and routine allows players to focus on preparing for and playing games.

"You're used to the structure, and it can be very challenging when that structure, created by the team environment, is gone. You have to try to create your own," said ex-defenceman Mathieu Schneider, who dressed for 10 teams over 21 seasons.

Schneider didn't have a contract through Maple Leafs training camp in 1998. He chose to stay in Toronto through the process, working out at a public gym early in the morning to avoid crowds and skating with the St. Michael's College high school team in the afternoon.

"The waiting is the most difficult part," Schneider said of missing two regular season games before leaving the Leafs for the Rangers in an October trade. "Every day gets a little bit longer when you're in those situations as a player. Every night your brain starts to go to different places. You're thinking, 'Is it ever going to happen?'"

Schneider, who recently joined 3G Sports as an agent following 13 years at the NHLPA, is grateful social media didn't exist during his standoff. Still, he had to contend with the Toronto market's intense TV, radio, and print coverage. "You had 30 guys covering the Leafs every day," he said, "all with differing opinions of me."



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Current Leaf William Nylander missed a salary cap era-high 28 regular season games in 2018. The flashy Swedish winger came perilously close to sitting on the sidelines for all 82 contests, too, signing a six-year extension with only minutes to spare before the annual 5 p.m. ET Dec. 1 deadline for RFA contracts to be filed.

"Confidence goes a long way in life, and Willy is extremely confident, not only in himself and his ability, but just in his beliefs," said Lewis Gross, Nylander's agent. The longtime player rep laughed as he recalled the hectic finish to a drawn-out negotiation: "I said to him, 'Willy, I know you might be the coolest guy in the world, but this is not the time to be so cool. Get that contract back to me in time here.'"

Gross educates clients on the marketplace and where the player fits into the NHL landscape ahead of any serious contract talks. The odd time Gross and a GM will have vastly different stances on what's fair money and term. Some clients have the stomach to dig their heels in and fight with the club. Others don't believe a fight is worth it and will advise Gross to find common ground sooner than later.

"We're not here to tell the client what to do. We work for the client," Gross said.

"It relates to how important the relationship is between player and agent," he added of standoffs that have escalated, namely Nylander and Jeremy Swayman, in 2024 with the Bruins. "You have to be on the same page, working together, understanding all the dynamics, and why what we're asking for really does make a lot of sense."

Part of an agent's job, Gross said, is to control the flow of information – which can often mean minimizing communication with people outside of the player's inner circle. For instance, there were no reports about Nylander's backup plan, despite the possibility of him playing overseas increasing by the day, because Gross went silent.

Overhardt believes agents must manage the client, the team, and the media with a level of stoicism and restraint. "If you're emotional as an agent, I think you've really got to step back because I think you're doing your client a disservice," he said.

Bolder and better educated player pool

Every movement needs a disruptor, or two, or three. Jack Eichel and the Sabres butted heads over neck surgery options, leading to a trade to the Golden Knights in 2021. Matthew Tkachuk told the Flames he wouldn't be signing an extension, triggering a trade to the Panthers in 2022. Cutter Gauthier refused to sign with the Flyers out of college, sparking a trade to the Ducks in 2024.

In less dramatic fashion, Jason Robertson missed the Stars' training camp and entire pre-season in 2022 before inking a deal in time to make the regular season opener.

"It was important to me and important to the team that I didn't miss games," said Robertson, who's still with the Stars four years later, albeit on an expiring deal.

Like Trouba, Robertson hails from Michigan. He too skated with the U.S. NTDP group to stay sharp as camp opened and he remained an unsigned RFA. Interestingly, Robertson headed to Little Caesars Arena one night with a local coach to catch a Red Wings pre-season game.

"I had nothing else to do. I was bored. I wanted to see the pace live," the straight-shooting left winger said with a smile, later admitting, yes, his stress levels rose slightly during his time away. After all, the Stars had a new coaching staff and he was missing the early days of implementing a different system and style.

Nevertheless, Robertson and linemates Roope Hintz and Joe Pavelski picked up where they left off the season prior. Robertson finished 2022-23 with career highs in goals (46) and points (109) while appearing in all 82 games.

Time away can hamper a player's performance, like we saw with Nylander. It can also be a non-factor, like in Robertson's case. Schneider emphasizes that every situation – including the three currently in flux – is wholly unique. Different personalities, on-ice impacts, and set of team circumstances are involved, which means different variables are influencing negotiations positively and negatively.

Still, you can bet agents' phones will be lighting up with messages once the Hellebuyck, Edvinsson, and Nikishin files are sorted. The modern

player grew up in a data-driven society and is paying close attention to the changing landscape.

"If you have 10 or 15 years to play, every year really does mean a lot. So, missing time can hurt. Taking a contract that doesn't come close to paying you fairly can hurt too," said Gross, who's been representing NHLers since 1987. "But, ultimately, you want to win a Stanley Cup and you're not going to have a ton of chances to make that happen, either. Times are different. The players are much, much more educated because there's so much more information out there than there used to be."

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Eric Engels

CHICAGO — Nick Suzuki will miss the next two-to-four weeks with an upper-body injury, the Montreal Canadiens announced before departing for Chicago on Thursday.

This is adversity. The kind this team hasn't faced since the onset of their rebuild four-and-a-half years ago and the kind they need least right now at 4-3-2, sitting in sixth place in the Atlantic Division and 20th in the National Hockey League.

But it's here now, and how the Canadiens handle it could very well determine their fate this season.

If that seems hyperbolic, consider what Suzuki means to them.

He's their captain, their most complete player, their current leading scorer and, without question, their least replaceable player, so when Juraj Slafkovsky called Suzuki "one of the biggest parts of this team," just moments after the injury news broke, he was understating it.

"It's a huge loss; nobody can really fill Suzy's shoes," Cole Caufield told reporters at the team's practice facility just hours before the team departed for a four-game road trip that begins against the Blackhawks Friday, because he knows it's true.

It's a jarring reality for Caufield and his teammates to face knowing they've been fortunate to have had Suzuki available to them for every game he's been eligible to play since he stepped into the league for his first one in 2019.

But now Suzuki's 546-game ironman streak, which was the second-longest one in the NHL behind Colorado's Brent Burns (1017), is over.

It was under threat from the second he blocked Michael Kesselring's shot with the back of his left hand, even if he somehow didn't miss a shift after that happened in the 15th minute of the third period in Tuesday's 4-3 overtime loss to the San Jose Sharks.

But now the 27-year-old will officially miss the next seven games, and that's if he's fortunate enough to only be out two weeks.

The Canadiens could be without Suzuki for as many as 14 games if he needs the full month to recover, and that could feel like an eternity to them if they struggle in his absence.

They're at serious risk to do exactly that, with top-six winger Ivan Demidov also still sidelined by a lower-body injury — and with Oliver Kapanen stepping into Suzuki's slot less than one week after returning from a knee injury that kept him out of action through the first 18 days of the season.

"I feel really good now," Kapanen said.

He could feel his very best, but he'd still be challenged stepping in for Suzuki as the first-line centre when he hasn't yet nailed down a role as second-line centre — despite reasonable success from that chair last season — and has been playing fourth-line wing.

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Still, this presents opportunity to both Kapanen and the Canadiens, and their ability to seize it would be just as determinant for their season as a collapse in Suzuki's absence would be.

Coach Martin St. Louis believes they can step up.

He said Kapanen, who had 22 goals and 37 points as a rookie, should feel at home with talented players like Slafkovsky and Caufield — especially after playing between Slafkovsky and Demidov for more than

half of last season — and he talked about how the Canadiens can band together to overcome this challenge.

"Just fall back on the collective game," St. Louis said. "We're just going to keep going. It's a big piece, but we'll be ready... And we're always going to fall back on our collective game."

It's been strong for the Canadiens, despite their record. Particularly at five-on-five, where they rank fifth in the NHL in shot attempt percentage and ninth in expected goals.

There should be a natural dropoff in Suzuki's absence in both categories, but not so much of one that the Canadiens shouldn't be able to sustain a high level of play.

Still, they'll miss Suzuki in key moments. They'll miss him on the power play, on which he produced 43 of his 101 points last season. They'll miss him on the defensive side of the puck, where he excels as the reigning Selke Trophy winner.

And the Canadiens will have to figure out how to manage their room without him right now.

St. Louis believes that's the least of their challenges.

"I know Suzy's our captain, but we have a lot of leaders," he said. "Our culture will help us come through this. For sure, you lose a huge piece, but I think we'll be able to continue."

The Canadiens must.

They're already barely keeping pace in the NHL's most competitive division and falling further behind could prove disastrous.

It's a test the Canadiens don't currently need.

"But we can't do anything about it," said Slafkovsky. "Just gotta wait (for Suzuki's return) and fight for him. Just be ready for the game, be ready to play hard and win games when he's not playing so when he comes back, we're in a good spot."

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Checking in on the new guy

Emily Sadler

Not every team reeled in a big catch via free agency or trade this off-season — just look at the defending champs, who remain atop our rankings in the early-goings of the season — but as we learn every year, even the smallest adjustments can have an impact.

After a few months of speculation, we're seeing familiar faces in new places hit their stride. Some struck chemistry right out of the gates. Some have taken a little time to warm up. Others have had to be patient as injuries have gotten in the way.

With that in mind, we're focusing this week's Power Rankings on the new guy. (You'll notice, we're not including rookies in our roundup.) From blockbuster trade targets and significant summer hauls to depth signings and under-the-radar additions, we're checking in on how newcomers are faring thus far.

1. Carolina Hurricanes (8-2-1) Tuesday's win over Vancouver saw Juuso Valimäki make his Hurricanes debut, and the rearguard got off to a good start with an assist. A nod, also, to Nicolas Deslauriers, who despite joining Carolina last spring, still feels like the new guy. (Considering the champs' quiet off-season, he remains one of the newest additions.) Deslauriers scored his first two goals as a Hurricane Tuesday night.

2. Vegas Golden Knights (8-3-0) Depth pickup Victor Olofsson took no time at all to find his footing in Vegas, tallying four goals and an assist in his first four games, but an injury suffered against Seattle Oct. 6 brought that early-season hot streak to a sudden stop as he was placed on IR.

3. Edmonton Oilers (7-1-1) After a tough first outing as an Oiler, summer trade target Devon Levi has quickly settled into Edmonton's No. 1 role, his save percentage dipping below .900 just once since his lacklustre debut. With veteran netminder and fellow newcomer Frederik Andersen still sidelined with injury, there remain some questions in the crease moving forward, but Levi's 5-1 record — with his latest win coming in overtime against the Wild in a tough Tuesday-night test — suggests he could be the answer.

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Latest episode

4. Utah Mammoth (7-3-0) Veteran forwards Anders Lee and Vincent Trocheck landed in Utah via different circumstances — Lee as a free agent, and Trocheck as a long-desired trade target who finally okayed a deal to the Central squad — but they have impacted Utah's lineup in similarly positive and immediate ways both in terms of support scoring and leadership.

5. Boston Bruins (7-2-1) Flipped from Utah to Boston for a first-round pick in June, JJ Peterka's production so far — three goals and six points through 10 games, including a goal in each of his first two matchups — has him looking right at home with the surging Bruins.

6. Tampa Bay Lightning (7-2-0) Nine games into his Tampa Bay tenure, it's still jarring to see John Carlson in Lightning threads — but clearly, the chemistry is there. The veteran already has three goals and five points and leads all Lightning defencemen in ice time.

7. Minnesota Wild (6-2-2) Just as he endeared himself in Calgary as a Flames fan-favourite and honorary Albertan, Blake Coleman — who makes his return to Calgary Thursday night wearing Wild threads after being traded this summer — has done much to endear himself to Wild faithful early on in Minnesota. He scored in his debut and has brought a little sandpaper to the lineup.

8. Ottawa Senators (7-3-0) Even more impressive than Ottawa's heated revenge-game win against former captain Brady Tkachuk Wednesday night was the fact they did it without his replacement in the lineup. William Eklund's Ottawa tenure hit an early setback when, two nights after tallying his first points as a Senator with a goal and an assist in Ottawa's third game of the season, the 24-year-old suffered an ankle injury that has prevented him from building on the breakout.

9. Dallas Stars (5-3-1) After spending the past three seasons in Colorado, Joel Kiviranta is back in Dallas. The new-again guy has one goal through five appearances so far in a depth role.

10. Colorado Avalanche (5-4-1) Six points in his first four games in Colorado had Jaden Schwartz looking hot out of the gates, but — much like the team around him, with back-to-back losses — he's since cooled off. Maybe some top-line time can bring a jolt.

11. New York Rangers (7-3-1) Pavel Dorofeyev was quick to make an impact in New York with a goal and an assist in his second game as a Ranger, but after a two-week goal drought between his first and second of the season (he tallied the Rangers' lone marker in a lopsided loss to the Devils last week) it appears he needs a little more time to really hit his stride.

12. Washington Capitals (5-4-0) With so many big additions to the lineup this summer, why choose just one? Alex Tuch, Jordan Kyrrou, and Boone Jenner are all thriving early on with the Capitals, sitting top-five in team scoring. (Tuch's five goals through nine games leads the pack.)

13. Florida Panthers (5-3-2) The boos rained down in Ottawa upon his return, but there's no question Brady Tkachuk is already a beloved fan favourite in Florida. He's clearly happy in his new home, and scoring in bunches — back-to-back hat tricks last week, followed by a third straight multi-point night. His goal against the Senators in Wednesday's loss gives him a team-leading seven on the young season so far.

14. Winnipeg Jets (4-3-2) With Connor Hellebuyck's saga still unresolved, the signing of Stuart Skinner is looking better and better — as are his save percentage (.910) and goals against average (2.65) in the early goings of the season, despite the team around him falling back down to Earth a little.

15. Montreal Canadiens (4-3-2) Chris Kreider's reunion with former teammate-turned-head coach Martin St. Louis is a great story, and it's bound to get better once the veteran really hits his stride alongside his young teammates. A goal and three helpers through nine games is a solid start.

16. Toronto Maple Leafs (5-4-2) Practically half the team can be considered "the new guy," so let's focus our attention on the newest guy. Arriving on the eve the season, Kirill Marchenko has needed little runway to thrive in Toronto. His point-per-game pace through 11 matchups so far has him third in team scoring. He's been held off the scoresheet just twice.

17. Seattle Kraken (6-3-1) After finishing last season with a dozen goals as a Panther, Mackie Samoskevich is well on his way to a career high — he's already got four markers through nine games with the Kraken. Strong early returns on that three-year, \$11.55-million extension he signed after Seattle traded for the 23-year-old prior to the draft.

18. Anaheim Ducks (4-5-0) The Ducks have plenty of young star power, but with all that money dedicated to the top of the lineup, and more to come, Anaheim will need depth guys like A.J. Greer to step up, too, in both offence and obstruction. So far, he's come as advertised: a goal, two helpers, and a handful of trips to the penalty box.

19. New York Islanders (5-3-1) Matias Maccelli ranks third on the team in scoring thus far. If the Islanders are to compete in an intriguing Metropolitan Division, they'll need their new winger to find some consistency.

20. Buffalo Sabres (4-4-2) Acquired from Anaheim in a draft-day deal, Olen Zellweger has quickly gotten up to speed with his new team in a top-four role. The Sabres have themselves some elite young rearguards, and Zellweger's growth should be fun to watch.

21. New Jersey Devils (5-4-0) After surpassing 50 points in a season for the first time in his young career last year in Nashville, Luke Evangelista could take another step forward with the Devils. Through six games, he's got three goals and five points in a top-six role.



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22. San Jose Sharks (5-4-1) Trading for Darnell Nurse and signing Jacob Trouba this off-season sent a message to the league that the Sharks are ready to win now — and they're not to be pushed around. While Nurse ended up on the wrong side of a Juraj Slafkovsky highlight-reel goal Tuesday night, he and Trouba have helped set the tone on the back end of a team looking ready to jump into the fray.

23. St. Louis Blues (4-4-1) The Blues' draft-night trade for Mason McTavish is looking pretty good so far. The 23-year-old former Duck leads his new squad in goals (five) and points (nine) through nine games.

24. Nashville Predators (3-2-3) Mavrik Bourque was the headliner of Nashville's summer trades, but after the young centreman suffered an upper-body injury in just his fourth game with the Predators, he'll need a little more time before he hits his stride.

25. Pittsburgh Penguins (3-6-1) Nick Robertson's fresh start in Pittsburgh proved fruitful for both the player and his new team — the 25-year-old winger scored twice in his Penguins debut and four times within his first seven games — and yet, despite sitting second in team goal-scoring, he's fallen down the lineup. Just like in Toronto, his deployment in Pittsburgh going forward will be something to monitor.

26. Detroit Red Wings (3-3-3) With so much up in the air in Detroit, newcomer Viktor Arvidsson's play has been a steady presence. He's second in both goals (four) and points (six) behind Alex DeBrincat.

27. Philadelphia Flyers (3-6-3) It's been a rough start to the season for Joseph Woll — and for the entire Flyers organization. Splitting starts with Dan Vladar, Woll has just one win in six appearances so far but better numbers (2.64 GAA, .917 save percentage) than his tandem partner. That the victory came against Colorado as part of the Flyers' three-game win streak should be a confidence boost for both player and team.

28. Columbus Blue Jackets (3-5-0) After scoring twice in his Blue Jackets debut, Matthew Knies has cooled off. He's been held off the scoresheet six straight games, including Tuesday's Maple Leafs reunion, as Columbus, too, has struggled to hit its stride.

29. Chicago Blackhawks (3-6-0) Already Chicago's ice-time leader (and it's not particularly close), Bowen Byram's usage is living up to his billing. An upper-body injury held him out for the Blackhawks' last two games, and his absence was felt in a 4-0 loss to Dallas.

30. Calgary Flames (2-6-0) It's a season of moral victories ahead in Calgary — one of which will be the play of Simon Nemec, if the 22-year-old can prove himself to be a cornerstone rearguard to build around. Like the team, this could take a little time to really gel.

31. Los Angeles Kings (1-4-2) His presence is missed in Minnesota, but we have yet to really see what Mats Zuccarello has in store for his L.A. stint. An injury sidelined him a few games, but he returned ahead of the Kings' first win of the season Tuesday night and now that he's back we should get a sense of where he slots in best — and whether he can help the Kings find their footing.

32. Vancouver Canucks (2-8-1) It's probably going to be a long season in Vancouver, which is why performances like Paul Cotter's season-opening six points in four games are so important to savour.



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TSN.CA / 'Vintage Auston': Leafs see Matthews returning to 69-goal form

Mark Masters

Auston Matthews has scored eight goals in nine games and is looking more and more like the guy who scored seemingly at will during a crazy 69-goal run during the 2023-24 season.

"He's back to the Auston I remember when I first came into the league and going up against him when he was trying to get 70 that game, last game of the season," said defenceman Darren Raddysh, who signed with the Leafs in the summer after five seasons with the Tampa Bay Lightning. "It was all hands on deck to try and stop him for that one. That's vintage Auston and I'm glad to see he's back to his old self."

William Nylander, who has played with Matthews throughout his career, goes even further.

"Maybe even better than at that point," the winger said of Matthews' current level. "So, I mean, we'll see. I think 70 goals is, you know, crazy, but I mean just the way he's playing is about the same probably."

Matthews is currently on pace for 61 goals.

The Leafs captain posted a career-low 27 goals in 60 games during an injury-shortened 2025-26 season. He used the longest off-season of his professional career to get leaner and lighter. That hard work is now paying off.

"He's skated from the first day of camp," observed coach Jim Hiller. "That's what I've noticed. Now to start the season, he played really well, didn't score a lot of goals and it didn't change. He just kept skating and skating. So now, you know, he's going to score. We know that he's a world-class goal scorer."

Matthews trails only Minnesota's Kirill Kaprizov, who has scored 11 goals this season.

Matthews has piled up 18 points, trailing only Connor McDavid in the league scoring race.

On Tuesday in Columbus, Matthews set up a Kirill Marchenko power-play goal by going hard to the net. Rangers defenceman Sean Durzi points to physical play as an indicator of when Matthews is at his best.

"Physicality can be displayed in different ways," said Durzi, who was drafted by the Leafs in 2018. "It's not so much the big hit, and he does throw his body, but it's just physically around the net, creating space, all that stuff. As a defenceman you got to find ways to negate that and get inside of that physicality and not let him use his body to his advantage. But it's a big task and obviously he's playing at a pretty high level now."

Matthews seems to be more relaxed in his meetings with the media. He's staying out late at skates and working with first overall pick Gavin McKenna and sharing laughs with newcomers like Nick Paul.

"Something that I realized is guys really play at the top of their game when they're enjoying themselves," Durzi said. "Pay attention to Auston over there, he's got smiles constantly, he's playing well."

After leaving Tuesday's game against the Jackets after taking a high stick to the face from Kent Johnson, defenceman Jake McCabe was back on the ice Thursday morning and appears good to go for the game against the Rangers.

"Certainly panic for a couple seconds," the 33-year-old said. "Was able to open it up quick and see that I could see still. [Head athletic therapist] Paul [Ayotte] always takes good care of us and our training staff and the docs. So, yeah, just a little bit of swelling right away and yesterday, but it feels a lot better today."

"Jake's a tough character," said Raddysh. "After I saw the replay of that, I thought, 'Oh my God, that didn't look good.'"

McCabe was frustrated that the 24-year-old Johnson was so careless with his stick.

"A little bit, yeah," he said. "I'll be honest. Yeah, I think guys can take better care of their sticks for sure. But, obviously, it's an accident. You know, I'm not going to fault him for that ... I've gotten a couple high sticks the last three, four games and they seem to be from younger players. So, keep your stick down."

The Leafs, who are already missing defenceman Chris Tanev, were grateful to see McCabe escape any serious injury. It's hard to replace what he brings to the table.

"Just his pure competitiveness out there, and every night laying his body on the line for us to win," Nylander praised. "Just an ultimate leader. It's something that you know is always missed when he's not in the lineup."

McCabe led the NHL in blocked shots last season and is again leading the Leafs in that department this season.

Raddysh led the stretch at the end of the skate as he prepares to face younger brother Taylor Raddysh in the NHL once again. But this meeting will be special as it comes in Toronto.

"It'll be special," Darren, 30, said. "We've talked about it for a long time and both to be on the ice here, it will be special and bring back some memories."

"It's a pretty special day for our family," said Taylor, 28. "This whole season, just his first year being in Toronto, it's been pretty cool for all of us and family friends and stuff like that. For us to play our first game [against each other] in the NHL in the building we kind of grew up in is a cool feeling."

The brothers went to games at Scotiabank Arena as kids, but rarely together because dad Dwayne only had two seats.

Dwayne Raddysh passed away in March after a battle with cancer, which made Darren's decision to sign with his hometown team even more meaningful. What was the moment like when Darren told Taylor?

"We both kind of looked at each other and 'Is this actually real? Am I going to do this?'" Darren recalled. "It's something that we talked about, just me and him."

"At the start, it was kind of weird," Taylor admitted. "Just thinking about your childhood and this is a team we watched, so when he finally signed with them it was kind of a weird feeling. But as the summer went on it was cool to think about and very happy for him. I know he's enjoying it so far."

Neither brother was sure who had the edge in their previous NHL showdowns.

"We're pretty close, but I think he might have the bragging rights," Darren said.

Taylor's Rangers won two of three games against Darren's Lightning last season. But Darren did have three assists in the one Tampa Bay win while Taylor was held off the scoresheet in all three meetings.

"There's no friends out there," said Taylor. "Maybe I'm not gonna hit him too hard in the corner (smile), but I'll definitely be trying my hardest against him."

What will it be like for the family watching in the stands?

"I feel like they've always had that Leaf background so maybe have a little more going that way," Taylor said. "But I know our mom and close family, they don't really care, they just want us to do good and they're proud of us."

After picking up his first home win of the season on Monday, Sergei Bobrovsky gets the start against the Rangers and should be well-rested after skipping the trip to Columbus.

The Leafs called up Artur Akhymov from the American Hockey League and he made the late-night flight to the Ohio capital on Monday before dressing as the back-up to Anthony Stolarz against the Blue Jackets on Tuesday.



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"It's smart," said the 38-year-old Bobrovsky. "If we got that opportunity, I think it's smart. I got the time to recover, reset, get my food, sleep, be in the structure. Yeah, I think it's just one situation. I like it a lot."

Bobrovsky is looking to pick up career win No. 459 on Thursday, which would tie Rangers legend Henrik Lundqvist for sixth place on the all-time list.

Bobrovsky will want to keep his eyes out for winger Alexis Lafrenière, who leads the Rangers in goals (seven) and points (13).

"Just seems to be taking the next step in his career," said Rangers captain J.T. Miller. "He's at a point in his career, he just turned 25, where you can take a really big jump and really start to take your game to another level. He's been a really big driver offensively for us, but his 200-foot game has also come a long way. I'm happy for him. He seems to be taking the next step and we need him to."

Upon taking the Rangers job last season, Mike Sullivan challenged Lafrenière to improve his grind game down low and the coach started seeing progress in the second half of last season, which is carrying over into this season.

"He's a lean guy, but he's hockey strong," Sullivan said. "He's so capable of creating offence from below the goal line, hanging onto pucks, rolling off of checks and making next plays, getting inside at the net and creating off a loose puck at the net front."

Sullivan also noted that Lafrenière is practising with "more intention" and is taking advantage of every opportunity to improve on the ice.

"He plays with a lot of pace," said McCabe. "He's got a really good shot, really good release, just a good offensive mind. Obviously, playing with a ton of confidence, so it's going to be a really good test for us tonight against him. And their group, in general, has been playing with a lot of confidence this year."

After finishing 30th overall last season, the Rangers are 7-3-1 to start this season and sit second in the Metropolitan Division.

"It's a consistent game we're playing," Miller said. "A game we can bring every night. It doesn't feel like it's hard to do. It feels like we can work hard, play 200 feet, keep the game simple and we're defending well."

Durzi, who was traded from the Utah Mammoth to the Rangers in July, is off to a good start with his new team with two goals and two assists and a plus-two mark through 11 games.

"The beauty of it is I don't think I've really played my best hockey yet," the 28-year-old said. "I think there's a lot more for me to contribute on both sides of the puck."

Durzi credits former Ontario Reign teammate turned TSN analyst Cameron Gaunce for helping him establish this approach.

"I heard a good quote once from Cameron Gaunce, 'If you're not getting better, you're getting worse,' and that's the mindset," Durzi said. "If you think you've hit your peak, you're in trouble. That mindset of constantly getting better is something I'll carry with me forever and a nice piece of advice from a familiar face."

Defenceman Marshall Rifai left the morning skate early.

"He's dealing with something, so we're gonna have to wait and see on that," Hiller said.

Rifai played more than 19 minutes and scored his first career NHL goal on Tuesday.

Nick Blankenburg is set to draw back in if Rifai is unable to play.

Leafs lines at Thursday's skate:

Cowan - Matthews - Roslovic

Marchenko - Paul - Nylander

McKenna - Sissons - Lettieri

Duhaime - Blueger - MacEwen

Groulx

McCabe - Raddysh

Rielly - Stecher

Rifai - Ekman-Larsson

Blankenburg

Bobrovsky starts

Stolarz

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