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## The Athletic / How Sidney Crosby helped the Blue Jackets land their new head equipment manager

**By Aaron Portzline – July 15, 2025**

When it comes to interviewing for jobs in the hockey world, having Pittsburgh Penguins superstar Sidney Crosby on your resume as a reference might be the ultimate flex.

The Columbus Blue Jackets received scores of applications for their head equipment manager vacancy beginning earlier this summer, GM Don Waddell said, but one name — Paul DeFazio, who has spent 25-plus years in the Penguins' organization — elevated above the rest.

And a certain endorsement pushed him even higher.

Columbus made the hiring of DeFazio official Tuesday, but it might have been a done deal from the moment Crosby, a future Hall of Famer, placed a call to Blue Jackets director of hockey operations Rick Nash, who works closely with Waddell.

"You've heard all of the talk through the years that (DeFazio) was Sid's guy, that he did everything for Sid, and that he kind of took Sid under his wing when he got to Pittsburgh (in 2005)," Nash said. "So when Sid called, I said, 'What are you gonna do now if we take him?'"

"He said he'd figure things out, but he'd be more than happy for this guy to get his shot as the head guy. That's a pretty good endorsement, I guess, right?"

DeFazio joined the Penguins as an assistant equipment manager in 2001 and served in that capacity until 2013, when he left to become the head equipment manager at Pittsburgh's American Hockey League affiliate in Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Crosby's phone call wasn't the only recommendation. Waddell said Penguins GM Kyle Dubas called him, too.

"It's the opportunity to be a head guy that's drawn him here to us," Waddell said. "He had a great situation in Pittsburgh. He's from there, he had great relationships, the players respect him, obviously. But he wants to be the head guy."

"(Dubas) called and said, 'I don't know where you are in the process, but our No. 2 guy has been very loyal to this organization and would really like a chance at the No. 1 job.'"

Waddell, who worked as a pro scout for the Penguins from 2011-14, also made a few outgoing calls. Tom Fitzgerald, Jason Botterill and Bill Guerin all spoke highly of DeFazio, he said.

"Not one negative thing," Waddell said.

The hiring of DeFazio is made all the more interesting because the Blue Jackets and Penguins have been on-again, off-again rivals since the Blue Jackets moved to the Eastern Conference and landed in the Metropolitan Division with Pittsburgh.

The two cities are only three hours apart, and the two clubs have met twice in the Stanley Cup playoffs. Pittsburgh won both meetings, winning in six games in 2014 and five games in 2017.

Nash was traded by the Blue Jackets in 2012, so he missed both of the playoff series. But he and Crosby played for Team Canada in 2010 and 2014, winning a gold medal both times. They've also played together several times for Canada at the IIHF World Championships.

"I wouldn't say we have a major friendship, but we have a relationship, for sure," Nash said.

The Blue Jackets also announced the hiring of former Bowling Green coach Ty Eigner as a special assignment scout. He'll scout mostly U.S. colleges and the OHL clubs in Michigan, plus the U.S. National Team Development Program, which is based in Plymouth, Mich.

Eigner, who worked as a consultant for the Blue Jackets last season, will also be available, Waddell said, to jump in for special circumstances, such as trades, free-agent signings, recalls from the minor leagues, etc.

Meanwhile, Aron Augustitus has been promoted to video coach, while Cam Briere was named assistant video coach.

Anthony Donskov and Matt Donskov, who have been on-ice coaches for the last two Blue Jackets' summer development camps and have operated a highly regarded hockey training facility in Columbus for years, were hired as development coaches. They'll join Tommy Cross as development coaches and will report directly to Nash.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Believe Sergei Ivanov Will Come to North America After Next Season

**By Mark Scheig – July 14, 2025**

At this point in the 2025 offseason, the Columbus Blue Jackets are still looking for goaltending help within the organization. The departure of Daniil Tarasov to the Florida Panthers has provided an opening for a potential number three that can split time between the NHL and AHL.

With Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves seemingly ready to patrol the Blue Jackets' crease in 2025-26, their performance will be one of the major storylines of the season. With most of the key players back from the team that fell just short of the playoffs last season, they expect to make the playoffs. That means someone has to take charge in net.

Beyond that, there have been significant questions asked about the state of the goaltending within the Blue Jackets' organization. They used a first-round pick at this past draft in taking Pyotr Andreyanov. He has a five-year commitment in Russia so he seemingly will not be available to the team until he is 23. He did take part at Development Camp at the beginning of July.

In the midst of the questions, we may be starting to get some clarity on where things stand. In particular, one Blue Jackets' prospect could be ready to come to North America starting next season.

### **Ivanov Could Be Ready**

Blue Jackets' prospect Sergei Ivanov, who was drafted in the fifth round in the 2022 NHL Draft, has one more year committed in Russia. But after that, the expectation is that he will come to North America.

In a text exchange with the Hockey Writers, GM Don Waddell confirmed their belief in Ivanov coming over saying that his agent has advised the team he will be ready to come over after the 2025-26 season.

If Ivanov does come over as the Blue Jackets are expecting, that will add a level of competition to the goaltending room. Merzlikins would have one more year left on his current contract. Assuming he plays enough games this season, Greaves would be an RFA needing a new contract.

Ivanov would have every opportunity to compete and prove he's ready for the NHL.

Although Ivanov's record doesn't reflect it, he's played very well in Russia. His last two seasons in the KHL have yielded a .928 and a .911 save percentage. The issue has been the teams in front of him haven't been good at all.

Ivanov will play for SKA St. Petersburg this season which is a better and more competitive team. The Blue Jackets coaches are very high on his potential.

Recall in the 2022 NHL Draft, the Blue Jackets made a trade to get to the place to draft Ivanov. They swapped fifth-round picks with the San Jose Sharks. The Blue Jackets traded their 2023 fifth rounder to the Sharks. He was a player they had targeted.

The challenge will be overcoming the size discourse. At just 6-feet, Ivanov relies on his athleticism. How would he handle the adjustment to the game here?

### **Why This is a Big Deal**

You may have noticed how bone dry the market was for goaltenders both in trades and in free agency. Teams understand the need for goaltending depth so they're not out actively trying to trade them.

Meanwhile, there were very few options available on the open market. Jake Allen was there but elected to re-sign with the New Jersey Devils on a five-year deal.

That's what makes Ivanov's potential arrival next season a big deal. The Blue Jackets wouldn't have to depend on a soft market to find significant help in net. Instead of waiting 4-5 years for Andreyanov, they need to wait just one for Ivanov.

While it still leaves questions about 2025-26 for the Blue Jackets, the need to pursue someone outside the organization for beyond this season isn't as dire as it first seemed. They still need to find help to supplement Merzlikins and Greaves. But it appears that all parties are on the same page about the potential for next season with the agent advising the team the possibility exists.

If it happens as expected, it would be much-welcomed news for the Blue Jackets in one of their biggest areas of need.

## The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets 2025-26 Prospect Pyramid

By Matthew Buhrmann – July 15, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets head into the 2025–26 season with one of the NHL’s most well-rounded and promising prospect pools. It features top-end talent like Cayden Lindstrom and Jackson Smith, along with intriguing late-round swings such as Jérémy Lorange. Across all positions, the organization has built a system loaded with upside and long-term potential.

This prospect pyramid breaks down where each player stands based on their projected NHL impact.

To be eligible for this pyramid, a player must have played fewer than 25 NHL games. Anyone who has crossed that threshold is considered graduated from prospect status. Additionally, the player must either be signed to an NHL contract or have their rights still held by the Blue Jackets. Under the new Collective Bargaining Agreement’s rules, rights to drafted players expire at age 22, so any unsigned player older than that is excluded. Players on American Hockey League (AHL)-only contracts are also not eligible, as this pyramid focuses on those with a legitimate path to NHL contribution. With these criteria in place, Columbus has a healthy mix of forwards, defensemen, and goaltenders in the system.

33 players qualify for this year’s pyramid.

### **Tier Explanation**

**Tier 1: Potential Star** – This tier is reserved for prospects who project as top-line forwards, number-one goaltenders, or top-pairing defensemen who could make an immediate impact at the NHL level. These are the players you build a franchise around; elite talents with the potential to become stars in the NHL.

**Tier 2: Top-Six / Starting Goalie / Top-Two Defenseman** – Players in this tier are expected to become top-six forwards, starting netminders, or top-four defensemen. They may not be franchise stars right away, but they’re reliable contributors who can play big minutes and get results within a couple of seasons.

**Tier 3: Middle-Six / Second Pair Defenseman / Backup Goalie** – This group includes second-to-third-line forwards, second-pairing defensemen, and backup goalies who could fill in as starters. These players are valuable support pieces who round out a competitive roster.

**Tier 4: Depth Contributor** – Tier 4 prospects are likely to become bottom-six forwards, third-pairing defensemen, or swing goalies who move between the AHL and NHL. They may not be everyday players, but they can fill roles when needed.

**Tier 5: Long Shot** – These players are unlikely to see NHL time. They may get called up due to injuries or rest, but they’ll spend most of their careers in the AHL or overseas. Still, every year, a few long shots surprise.

### **Tier One: None**

Not many teams have a potential star in their system, and the Blue Jackets are no exception, at least for now. They got the fourth-overall pick in 2024, but I’m not sure if Lindstrom can become a star or not. I could be putting him in this tier next summer. Luca Marrelli as well, perhaps?

Smith is close as well, but I’m just not sure yet.

No players go in this tier just yet.

**Tier Two: Cayden Lindstrom, Jackson Smith, Luca Marrelli, & Pyotr Andreyanov**

Lindstrom missed the entire 2024–25 regular season with a back injury but returned for the playoffs, where he had two goals and two assists in four games for the Western Hockey League's (WHL) Medicine Hat Tigers. After the season, he committed to Michigan State for the 2025–26 season and remains unsigned with the team. I'd imagine if he develops at the rate Columbus is hoping for, we'd see him earn an entry-level contract (ELC) next offseason or the next, hopefully next summer.

At this summer's development camp, Lindstrom said, "I think just being an older guy being a leader for these younger guys coming in the new draft picks, you have to go on that leadership role and just help your team and future teammates out. Just show them the ropes, and I've been here for a while now. I know a few things, so it is good just to teach them and show them around." He added, "I feel great. I'm pretty much 100%. There's a lot of things I need to work on, from missing a year, just little things, just getting back in shape, the endurance, the timing, just stuff like that. It will come over time."

Smith is one of the best defensemen in the 2025 Draft class and is now part of a high-end defensive prospect group, after Columbus picked him 14th overall. He had 11 goals and 43 assists (54 points) in 68 games with the WHL's Tri-City Americans, then added a goal and two assists in five playoff games. Smith's transition game is elite, as he controls exits and entries with ease and makes smart, timely decisions. He's not flashy, but he supports the attack well and rarely forces plays.

Smith is heading to Penn State University this fall, which is a great fit development-wise alongside projected first-overall 2026 pick Gavin McKenna. He has a chance to push up the defensive depth chart quickly with his two-way talent and be a top-pairing defenseman.

Marrelli is signed through 2027–28 and is expected to head to the Cleveland Monsters this season. He had a breakout season with the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) Oshawa Generals, posting 19 goals and 55 assists (74 points) in 67 games, then adding a historic 36 points in 21 playoff games. He's a mobile, right-shot defenseman with good size and a knack for jumping into the play without giving up odd-man rushes. I have him as the best defensive prospect right now in Columbus' system and could also become a top-pairing defenseman.

Pyotr Andreyanov was a surprise first-round pick at 20th overall, as most had him projected in the second or third round, but NHL Central Scouting had him ranked No. 1 among international goalies. He didn't get any Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) time last season but was lights out in the MHL with a 23-6-6 record, 1.75 goals-against average (GAA), .942 save percentage (SV%), and three shutouts in 37 games. Recently, he had a good showing at the Blue Jackets Development Camp.

"He's one of those guys who jumps off the screen right away on video. In Russia, especially in the numbers he was putting up in the league over there, dominating the way he did. You can only get so much by watching video. And so Jimmy (Viers) and I went down to that Gold Star camp. And the first day you see him on the ice, that guy's different," said goalie coach Brad Thiessen. "He's got a presence about him on the ice that he looks like an NHL goalie when you see him right away. Then the game started happening, and then practicing the drills started happening. Everything is slow for him. It's the way he reads the game and the way he thinks the game. He's one step ahead of everybody all the time. That was something we were drawn to right away. It's just as an 18-year-old kid, someone who can see the game the way he does. At that level, combined with his athletic ability. That was someone where we watched it for two days there."

Even though he won't be here for a while (five years), I like the long-term play from the staff.

**Tier Three: Luca Del Bel Belluz, Luca Pinelli, Jack Williams, Owen Griffin, Oiva Keskinen, Malte Vass, Jérémy Loranger, Jordan Dumais, & Sergei Ivanov**

Luca Del Bel Belluz played 15 NHL games during the injury bug in early 2025 and earned trust in big moments from head coach Dean Evason. He's a smart, two-way center with middle-six upside and could make the roster as a depth contributor this season.

Luca Pinelli had 71 points in 52 OHL games and joined the Monsters for the Calder Cup Playoffs, adding four points in six games. He also represented Canada at the 2025 World Junior Championships. He's a fourth-round steal who's been outperforming his draft slot ever since 2023.

Jack Williams was signed as an undrafted free agent out of Northeastern University; he posted 41 points in 37 NCAA games last season and played one NHL game in the 2024–25 season finale. His maturity and motor skills give him a real shot at cracking the NHL roster as a full-time player sometime later this coming season, where I think he could be a middle-six forward. He is the perfect guy to have available to call up in case of injuries.

Owen Griffin was a breakout performer in the OHL playoffs, putting up 29 points in 21 games. He was a fifth-round pick in this year's draft who plays a good 200-foot game and could be a middle-six centerman one day.

Oiva Keskinen had a good showing in the Liiga last season (35 points) and will head to Cleveland later this year. The 2023 seventh-rounder is a smart, versatile Finnish forward with depth scoring potential, and could very well end up as a steal from that draft.

Malte Vass is a physical, simple Swedish defender bound for Boston University. He's not flashy, but he's an effective stay-at-home guy who was picked in the third round of this year's draft. He also had a great development camp earlier this month.

"I like to maybe get my hands dirty sometimes," Vass said with a smile. "I always get in the corners. I want to win the puck and play it to my forwards. I'm best at that job, and that's the job I want to do."

Jérémy Loranger was the British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL) MVP last season, recording 119 points in 62 games. The Nebraska-Omaha commit had a very good development camp. Asked where that skill comes from, Loranger said, "I will say practice behind the scenes. Just working on my skills. I had to go to a private school when I was younger. The practice was just everyday skills, smaller games, and edges. I think that's where I got that from." He also shared that he had no idea Columbus was considering him in the draft: "They just drafted me and I like what they sell."

When looking at his future development, I think it is going to be tough heading into the NCHC for him due to its physicality, but he just seems to have a knack for being in the right places at the right time. I think he could maybe surprise a lot of people, which is why I put him here in tier three.

Jordan Dumais returned from injury this past season and posted 11 points in 23 AHL games. He'll need to regain his offensive rhythm, but his vision and creativity still flash. However, the 2022 third-round right-winger has a lot of untapped potential in my book and has shown good upside during his limited time at the professional level.

Sergei Ivanov spent last season on loan with HK Sochi in the KHL, the highest level of Russian hockey, and posted a 3.00 GAA and a .911 SV% across 38 games, with three shutouts and an 11-21-3 record on a struggling team. The Blue Jackets are expecting that Ivanov will come to North America after next season, most likely heading straight to Cleveland to start. He could be a backup option in a few years, possibly behind Jet Greaves. I don't think Elvis Merzlikins is the guy long-term, so having a solid backup plan in Ivanov is great in my book.



**Tier Four: Charlie Elick, Guillaume Richard, James Malatesta, Hunter McKown, Kirill Dolzhenkov, Victor Hedin Raftheim, Stanislav Svozil, William Whitelaw, Caleb MacDonald, Andrew Strathmann, Tanner Henricks, Luke Ashton, Aidan Hreschuk, Nolan Lalonde, Evan Gardner & Melvin Strahl**

Charlie Elick was traded midseason to the Tri-City Americans (WHL), where he became teammates with Jackson Smith. Elick said, "Brandon was a great place for me to play. I loved it there. It was one of the best years of my life. It made me be able to get drafted by Columbus. So, I'm proud of that. Things are going to line up and eventually the trade got confirmed. They really liked me. They wanted me earlier before that. I think it was a good move. Playing with Smith and Terrell Goldsmith on that team was a good step because I knew the guys before. I think just growing in the role there and being a leader on that team helps for sure." He's a big, physical shutdown defender who will start in Cleveland this coming season.

Guillaume Richard signed after finishing his NCAA career at Providence College. He's a steady, low-risk defender who could fill a third-pairing role in the future.

James Malatesta has played 13 NHL games and brings good energy. He's a bottom-six contributor who can kill penalties and chip in offensively when injuries occur on the NHL squad moving forward.

Hunter McKown is still just 22 years old and coming off a full season in Cleveland, where he posted 31 points in 68 games, plus two points in six playoff contests. He's a responsible, versatile forward who can play center or wing and has shown flashes of offensive upside. McKown fits the mold of a player who could be called up from Cleveland if injuries occur.

Kirill Dolzhenkov is a 21-year-old massive winger at 6-foot-6, 223 pounds, with limited KHL minutes so far but strong VHL production. He's a long-term project with bottom-six potential that still remains unsigned.

Victor Hedin Raftheim, Columbus's 2025 sixth-round pick, is a raw Swedish defender with size and mobility. He'll stay in the Brynäs system in Sweden and work on refining his structure and reads.

Stanislav Svozil played two NHL games in the 2022-23 season and was solid in Cleveland last season. He's a reliable two-way defender who could maybe earn a depth role soon.

William Whitelaw transferred to the University of Michigan this offseason from the University of Wisconsin. He's a speedy and skilled forward, but needs to round out his game to make it in professional hockey.

Caleb MacDonald signed out of the University of North Dakota this offseason and adds size to the Cleveland blue line. He's a depth piece with a physical edge, but he produced very little offensively in his two-season NCAA career. He has great size at 6-foot-4, 229 pounds, and could maybe be a depth piece one day in the NHL after developing at the AHL level.

Andrew Strathmann, a 20-year-old defenseman, is returning to the University of North Dakota for this coming season and hopefully can impress enough to earn an ELC next offseason. He only produced four points in 30 games last season, but played a solid, reliable defensive game in most games. I think he could maybe become a bottom-pairing defenseman on an NHL roster one day.

Tanner Henricks is a puck-moving defenseman committed to St. Cloud State. He'll need time to develop, but the tools are there, and he has proven to be a two-way defenseman, recording 35 points in the United States Hockey League (USHL) this past season. I like the upside of him being in an elite conference like the NCHC.

Luke Ashton is transferring to Cornell University after a decent season for Minnesota State. He's massive and plays a simple, physical game. He'll need to improve his mobility and production to climb the depth chart, but could maybe one day find himself in a depth role at the NHL level.

Aidan Hreschuk's rights are still held after his fourth season at Boston College ended last season. I am unsure of what the plan is with him moving forward. He could maybe be a future depth piece down the road if he is signed.

Nolan Lalonde is turning pro after a decent OHL season. He was traded to the Soo Greyhounds and finished strong. "Everyone's development path is different," said a team staffer. "We felt like last year it was best for him to go back to junior. He had a good year in junior. Late in the year, I think he played his best hockey with them. I'm excited about him coming into pro now. He's come a long way in terms of his skating and his off-ice habits and just the way his body is athletically."

Evan Gardner had a decent WHL season and signed with Columbus in March. He played one game for the Monsters at the end of the season and credited his time with goalie coach Thiessen for building confidence. "Getting into that game was great for my confidence and kind of reassuring me that I'm able to compete at that level right now," Gardner said. "I got to learn from a guy like Jet who was lights out to end the season here. To watch him and be around him all the time down there was awesome for me. He was great to me." The staff added, "There are definitely some ups and downs for him... He came back strong at the end of the season. It was awesome to have him in Cleveland. He gets a front row seat to see a guy like Jet and how he prepares and goes about his business."

Melvin Strahl is headed to Michigan State after a strong USHL regular season in Youngstown, but had a rough two Clark Cup Playoff games.

"The schools were all over him," said a team source. "Going to Michigan State is going to be a perfect opportunity. He's going to be in a situation where the team that they're building, every day in practice, he's going up against the best of the best." Strahl will compete with Trey Augustine for playing time and is already restarting his summer program with the Spartans. "It gives him the opportunity to work on some things off ice and on ice. I'm excited about his path there."

Strahl likely won't see much playing time this coming season behind a brick wall in Augustine, but I do like the long-term development track at Michigan State.

#### **Tier Five: Max McCue, Corson Ceulemans, Nikolai Makarov, & James Fisher**

Max McCue had eight points in 46 AHL games. He's a checking-line candidate but needs more offense to stick. He will most likely be a long-term AHL player.

Corson Ceulemans has all the tools but hasn't put them together. This is a make-or-break year in Cleveland. If he can find consistency, he could push for NHL time down the road, but it is unlikely. For a first-round, 25th-overall pick in 2021, he has been very disappointing from a production standpoint.

Nikolai Makarov's rights are still held, but he's unlikely to sign. He's buried in the KHL's CSKA system and hasn't shown much progression in the VHL. At 22 years old, he will most likely go unsigned.

James Fisher is a long shot with no clear development path. He's a depth forward who'll need a breakout year at Northeastern University to stay on the radar and earn a chance at an ELC.

That was a lot of players to cover, but when looking over this pyramid as a whole, the Blue Jackets have built a deep prospect pool. It'll be fun to see which of these guys takes the next step this season.

## **NHL.com / Blue Jackets add depth with trade for Coyle, Wood**

**By Craig Merz – July 15, 2025**

After the NHL Draft, free agency and other offseason moves, NHL.com is examining where each team stands in preparation for the 2025-26 regular season, which starts Oct. 7. Today, the Columbus Blue Jackets:

2024-25 season: 40-33-9, fourth in Metropolitan Division; missed Stanley Cup Playoffs

### **Key arrivals**

Charlie Coyle, F: The 33-year-old was acquired in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche on June 27 and will bring leadership to a young team. Coyle is a right-handed center who should help Columbus in the face-off circle, where it ranked 27th in the NHL last season (47.8 percent). He had 35 points (17 goals, 18 assists) in 83 regular-season games for the Boston Bruins and Avalanche last season and one goal in seven Stanley Cup Playoff games. ... Miles Wood, F: Acquired in a trade with Colorado on June 27, the 29-year-old will utilize his speed on a new-look fourth line. He had eight points (four goals, four assists) and 48 penalty minutes in 37 regular-season games last season and played in one playoff game. ... Isac Lundestrom, F: The 25-year-old signed a two-year contract on July 1 and the fourth-line center job is his to lose. He had 15 points (four goals, 11 assists) in 79 games for the Anaheim Ducks last season. ... Christian Jaros, D: The 29-year-old signed a one-year contract on July 1. He played 94 games for the New Jersey Devils and Ottawa Senators from 2017-22 before playing the past three seasons in the Kontinental Hockey League. He could vie for the seventh or eighth spot on defense.

Miles Wood joins NHL Tonight to talk about his trade from the Avalanche to the Blue Jackets

### **Key departures**

Sean Kuraly, F: Signed a two-year contract with the Boston Bruins on July 1 after four seasons with the Blue Jackets. He had 17 points (six goals, 11 assists) in 82 games last season. ... James van Riemsdyk, F: Signed a one-year contract with the Detroit Red Wings on July 1 after he had 36 points (16 goals, 20 assists) in 71 games last season. ... Daniil Tarasov G: Traded to the Florida Panthers on June 26 for a fifth-round pick in the 2025 NHL Draft, he was 7-10-2 in 20 games (19 starts) with a 3.54 goals against average and .881 save percentage last season. ... Justin Danforth, F: The 32-year-old signed a two-year contract with the Buffalo Sabres on July 2. He had 21 points (nine goals, 12 assists) in 61 games last season playing on the third or fourth line. ... Jordan Harris, D: Signed a one-year contract with the Bruins on July 1. He had five points (one goal, four assists) in 33 games last season. ... Jack Johnson, D: An unrestricted free agent, he had six assists in 41 games last season.

### **On the cusp**

Mikael Pyhtia, F: The 23-year-old, who is a restricted free agent, has 10 points (four goals, six assists) in 66 games for the Blue Jackets since his NHL debut in April 2023. The fourth-round pick by Columbus in the 2020 NHL Draft (No. 114), he had seven points (four goals, three assists) in 47 games for the Blue Jackets last season and has become a dependable bottom-six call-up. ... Luca Del Bel Belluz, F: The 21-year-old forward will be one the first recalls from Cleveland if, as expected, he doesn't make the NHL roster. Selected in the second round of the 2022 NHL Draft (No. 44), he had eight points (two goals, six assists) in 15 games for the Blue Jackets last season and 53 points (27 goals, 26 assists) in 61 games with Cleveland.

### **What they still need**

A right-shot defenseman. The Blue Jackets signed left-shot Ivan Provorov to a seven-year contract on July 1 and right-shot Dante Fabbro to a four-year contract on June 29 to essentially keep the same defense group as last season. A veteran goaltender is sought for Cleveland of the American Hockey League to be ready in case a recall is needed behind Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins.

### **They said it**

"We've got to continue to work on our defense but I think up front, I truly look and think we're a better team up front right now than we were last year. That's nothing against the players that were here last year, just the skill level and what these players bring that we've brought in, I think are going to serve us very well in the future." -- general manager Don Waddell

### **EDGE stat to watch**

Columbus defensemen combined to score 23 midrange goals last season to lead the NHL, and ranked third in midrange shots on goal (158). They were tied for fourth in high-danger goals at the position (10) and were third in high-danger shots on goal (63). Zach Werenski led NHL defensemen in high-danger shots on goal (35) and high-danger goals (seven). Werenski also led the NHL in total distance skated at all strengths (320.25 miles) and ranked in the top three among defensemen in midrange goals (10; third) and midrange shots on goal (78; second). -- Chris Meaney

### **Fantasy spin**

Greaves was one of the unsung heroes of the fantasy playoffs last season, emerging as Columbus' No. 1 goalie down the stretch and winning his final five games with a .975 save percentage and two shutouts. Greaves was 7-2-2 with a .938 save percentage in 11 games last season and has a .924 save percentage in 21 career NHL games. Playing behind the Blue Jackets' high-scoring offense (3.26 goals per game; tied for seventh), Greaves could be a breakout candidate across a full season. -- Pete Jensen

### **Projected lineup**

Dmitri Voronkov -- Sean Monahan -- Kirill Marchenko

Boone Jenner -- Adam Fantilli -- Kent Johnson

Yegor Chinakhov -- Charlie Coyle -- Mathieu Olivier

Cole Sillinger -- Isac Lundestrom -- Miles Wood

Zach Werenski -- Dante Fabbro

Denton Mateychuk -- Ivan Provorov

Damon Severson -- Erik Gudbranson

Elvis Merzlikins

Jet Greaves

## The Athletic / Which NHL teams improved the most this offseason? Ranking all 32

By Dom Luszczyszyn – July 16, 2025

The summer calm has arrived, the time of the offseason where player movement slows to a crawl and most teams look set for next season — for better or worse. Some things can still change, but now feels like a good time to look at which teams improved (or declined) most this summer.

As usual, this article is about external changes only: who's in and who's out. There are a lot of internal reasons as to why a team gets better or worse from year to year, but that's not the focus here. It's all about whether a team looks stronger on paper now compared to where they were at the start of the offseason. That's based on the change in their Net Rating from their current roster to the one they ended the 2024-25 season with (including players acquired at the deadline).

This is not an exact science, nor is it a list of how good each team is expected to be next season — just how much they've changed. A great team with a poor offseason can still be a great team next season. Same with a bad team after an excellent offseason.

From most value added to least, here's how each team has changed this summer.

### 1. San Jose Sharks

Net Rating added: +26

In: Jeff Skinner, Adam Gaudette, Philipp Kurashev, Dmitry Orlov, John Klingberg, Nick Leddy, Alex Nedeljkovic

Out: Nikolai Kovalenko, Marc-Edouard Vlasic, Henry Thrun, Alexandar Georgiev

Addition by subtraction is often the most powerful tool when it comes to meaningful offseason change, especially for the league's worst teams. The Sharks added three new forwards, three new defensemen and one new goalie and even though all but one are below average, they're all upgrades over what's being replaced.

Jeff Skinner is one of the bigger names and he's usually at his best on bad teams. He has the offensive ability to play in the top six, but doesn't have the defensive chops to make it work in the bottom six on a good team. Here, he's home and should fit the Mikael Granlund void fine.

The bigger story here is on the back end. Dmitry Orlov gives the Sharks a legitimate top-four defenseman, while John Klingberg has the potential to be that if he can keep up his playoff turnaround. At the very least, one of the two will give the Sharks a real power-play QB, something they were missing after moving Jake Walman. Nick Leddy isn't more than a third-pair defenseman, but even that is an improvement over someone such as Marc-Edouard Vlasic or Henry Thrun.

San Jose will still likely be one of the league's worst teams next year, but they've given themselves a chance to be more competitive.

The Canadiens acquired Noah Dobson in a trade with the Islanders. (Russell LaBounty / Imagn Images)

### 2. Montreal Canadiens

Net Rating added: +23

In: Zack Bolduc, Noah Dobson

Out: Emil Heineman, Logan Mailloux, David Savard

If you're a Canadiens fan, it's time to get excited. Only one team has improved more over the last summer externally and it's likely that few teams will improve more internally, given the collective age of Montreal's roster.

That doesn't necessarily mean the Canadiens will improve over last year's finish, but it does mean they are far less likely to regress with significantly more substance behind their results.

The big get is Noah Dobson, who has the potential to be Lane Hutson's Devon Toews. Dobson is a true top-pair defenseman, someone who adds tremendous upside to Montreal's back end with his puck-moving ability. He's a substantial get on his own, but the fact that it also means no more David Savard almost doubles the joy. Between the two, it's a 16-goal swing.

It's a similar effect in giving up Emil Heineman for Dobson, and then trading for Zack Bolduc soon after. Heineman is a fine bottom-six player on the rise, but Bolduc showed he's already top-six caliber in his rookie season. What's exciting about Bolduc is his defensive game, a sorely missing element from Montreal's forward ranks beyond Nick Suzuki.

If Montreal stood pat this summer, there was a good chance the team would take a step back after taking several steps forward last season. With Dobson and Bolduc in the fold, Montreal looks poised to build on last year's surprise playoff berth and prove they belong for the long haul.

### 3. Anaheim Ducks

Net Rating added: +15

In: Chris Kreider, Mikael Granlund, Ryan Poehling, Petr Mrazek

Out: Trevor Zegras, Isac Lundestrom, John Gibson

The biggest addition for the Ducks is not one that the model is going to capture. It's the new guy behind the bench: Joel Quenneville. That's likely to be a significant tactical upgrade for the franchise, one that brings about numerous internal improvements.

Beyond that, Anaheim has also fortified its forward group with two major additions and one intriguing trade. Chris Kreider and Mikael Granlund aren't young or without flaws, but they are both top-six caliber players who can bolster Anaheim's attack. Those additions give young centers Mason McTavish and Leo Carlsson some actual help to work with on the wing, enough for the Ducks to start digging out from the league's basement

As for Ryan Poehling, he may not possess the offensive flash that Trevor Zegras has, but he does bring the defensive substance the Ducks desperately need. He provides a big boost to Anaheim's bottom six.

### 4. Carolina Hurricanes

Net Rating added: +9

In: Nikolaj Ehlers, K'Andre Miller

Out: Brent Burns, Dmitry Orlov

At long last, the Hurricanes got their guy. There's no doubt that Nikolaj Ehlers will be a game-changer for the Hurricanes, the exact kind of dynamic offensive talent Carolina has needed for a while. Carolina may still be a 2C short, but the team's winger room is stacked.

The back end is a bit trickier to evaluate, given K'Andre Miller's last season. Miller took a step back along with the rest of the Rangers and doesn't currently grade out as a huge needle-mover relative to what

the Hurricanes lost. The fit, though, is hard to ignore and it wouldn't be a shock to see Miller elevate to his best self in Carolina's system.

With Alexander Nikishin ready to rock, Carolina's defense looks promising, even if on paper it arguably took a step back. It's up to the new guys to deliver, but regardless, the addition of Ehlers is huge. It's enough to make the Hurricanes one of the league's most improved teams this summer, which speaks volumes about a team that's coming off a trip to the conference finals.

## 5. Vegas Golden Knights

Net Rating added: +9

In: Mitch Marner, Colton Sissons, Jeremy Lauzon

Out: Nicolas Roy, Victor Olofsson, Alex Pietrangelo, Nicolas Hague, Ilya Samsonov

No team added a better player this summer than Vegas, snagging a franchise star in Mitch Marner at a fair price. Marner completely changes Vegas' forward dynamic, adding an elite point producer with serious defensive chops at the top of the lineup. Adding Marner to a team that already features Jack Eichel, Mark Stone and William Karlsson is a serious luxury to Vegas' two-way ability.

The Golden Knights are going to be a force next season thanks to one of the league's most stacked forward groups. Losing Nicolas Roy and Victor Olofsson isn't a big deal when the team has so much depth already and they're adding a top 15 forward to the mix on top of that.

Adding Marner wasn't the only news of the summer, though. Vegas' standing took a hit when it was revealed that Alex Pietrangelo's playing days were likely over. While Pietrangelo may not be the player he once was, likely due to injury, he was still a very capable top-four option that brought stability to the back end. It's a hole that will be difficult to fill and while Kaedan Korczak is an extremely interesting internal option, Vegas' defense corps is still obviously worse without Pietrangelo around. He's a big loss that dampens the effect of adding a superstar.

## 6. Seattle Kraken

Net Rating added: +9

In: Mason Marchment, Frederick Gaudreau, Ryan Lindgren

Out: Andre Burakovsky, Michael Eyssimont

Dumping Andre Burakovsky and adding Mason Marchment was tidy business for Seattle. Burakovsky had been floundering the last couple of years for the Kraken while Marchment looked like top-six caliber for the Stars — for \$1 million less, too. Couple that with the veteran presence of Ryan Lindgren pushing Josh Mahura out of the lineup, and the Kraken look a bit more competitive going into next season.

Whether that should've been the plan, given the current league landscape and the prize waiting for the league's worst team at the end of this season, is an argument for another article.

## 7. Buffalo Sabres

Net Rating added: +9

In: Josh Doan, Justin Danforth, Michael Kesselring, Conor Timmins, Alex Lyon

Out: JJ Peterka, Sam Lafferty, Connor Clifton, Jacob Bernard-Docker

There are a lot of folks who haven't been thrilled with Buffalo's offseason and that's understandable. For the third straight year, it feels like it's been time to push the chips in, spend some money and gun

for a playoff spot. Instead, the Sabres made depth moves and shipped off a true top-six scorer without addressing the void afterward.

It feels like a wasted opportunity, which probably makes Buffalo's placement here seem out of touch with reality.

Maybe it is — betting on the Sabres has been a terrible idea for over a decade. But maybe this is the year Buffalo does turn the corner, thanks to internal jumps buoyed by cleaned-up depth.

Josh Doan is not as good as JJ Peterka. That's a downgrade without question. But his underrated defensive game compared to Peterka's issues without the puck does mean the gap might not be as large as their point totals suggest. Add more Justin Danforth and less Beck Malenstyn on the fourth line and it's possible the Sabres can cover up the loss in the aggregate. There is arguably enough young, developing forward depth to sustain a Peterka-sized loss.

The more important factor, though, is that the jump from Connor Clifton to Michael Kesselring is substantially larger than the drop from Peterka to Doan. Buffalo's defense corps was a major weakness last season, one that Kesselring's presence can help fix. He did well in a top-pair role when Utah ran into injuries last season, enough to believe he's a true top-four defenseman. Pair him with Owen Power and Buffalo's top four looks genuinely decent for the first time in a long time.

The addition of Conor Timmins should help with things as well. He showed some promise in an elevated role with Pittsburgh, enough to believe he can form an actually good third pair with the defensively stout Mattias Samuelsson. Timmins isn't much, but he's probably a better option than what Buffalo was toiling with last year in the same role.

Defensive depth is something this team has been missing for a while. If everything goes according to plan after this offseason, it'll finally be a source of strength for Buffalo. And that could be what changes everything for this team. The Sabres have gone from one good pair led by Rasmus Dahlin to potentially three.

#### 8. Ottawa Senators

Net Rating added: +7

In: Lars Eller, Jordan Spence

Out: Adam Gaudette, Travis Hamonic, Anton Forsberg

One of Ottawa's biggest issues last season was a wretched third pair. No matter what combination of Tyler Kleven, Nikolas Matinpalo and Travis Hamonic was out there, things did not go well. The addition of Jordan Spence helps alleviate that. He's someone with a proven ability to crush sheltered minutes. Some may scoff at the idea of a third-pair powerhouse, but the Senators weren't getting anything close to what Spence can offer in the same role.

Spence, based on his numbers after accounting for usage, looks like a player who has the potential to make a top-four jump. That's the best-case scenario, which would push Nick Jensen to a more appropriate role. If the worst case is that Spence can't (likely due to his smaller stature), but keeps crushing soft minutes, that's still a big win that has moved the needle considerably for the Senators.

Ottawa may not have filled its biggest need (a top-line forward), but cleaning up the edges of the roster has put them on more stable playoff footing going into next season.

#### 9. Detroit Red Wings

Net Rating added: +6



In: James van Riemsdyk, Mason Appleton, Jacob Bernard-Docker, John Gibson

Out: Vladimir Tarasenko, Tyler Motte, Jeff Petry, Alex Lyon, Petr Mrazek

The Red Wings may have mostly operated around the edges, but the team looks better because of it, even if none of the players the team brought in look like they bring a lot to the table. James van Riemsdyk and Mason Appleton aren't anything special, but it beats playing someone such as Tyler Motte. Jacob Bernard-Docker doesn't look like much either, but if the alternative is Jeff Petry or Justin Holl, that's a small win for the Red Wings, too.

The biggest change, though, is between the pipes. John Gibson's track record has been spotty of late, but he looked genuinely locked in last season and should provide a more stable presence over Alex Lyon.

It's a patchwork job and the team still needs work overall to make the postseason, but the Red Wings do look incrementally more competitive.

#### 10. Tampa Bay Lightning

Net Rating added: +6

In: Pontus Holmberg, Jakob Pelletier

Out: Luke Glendening, Nick Perbix

Just how bad was Tampa Bay's depth last year? The simple addition of two slightly more competent bottom-six forwards, Pontus Holmberg and Jakob Pelletier, looks like a major contribution for a contending team. Holmberg, in particular, is a massive upgrade over Luke Glendening, whose Net Rating drifted below minus-10 last year, one of the worst marks in the league. With the Lightning's elite top six still in place, a couple of fixes at the bottom has them looking like one of the teams to beat this year.

#### 11. Boston Bruins

Net Rating added: +4

In: Viktor Arvidsson, Tanner Jeannot, Sean Kuraly, Michael Eyssimont

Out: Cole Koepke, Parker Wotherspoon

The Bruins look better for just one reason and that's the addition of Viktor Arvidsson. His presence as a top-nine level player helps push one of Boston's lesser options out of the lineup. The rest? They mostly just replace other similarly poor players at a much higher cost. Between Tanner Jeannot and Sean Kuraly, the Bruins are spending \$5.25 million on two replacement-level players. If only there were a smarter way to spend \$5.25 million ...

#### 12. New York Rangers

Net Rating added: +3

In: Taylor Raddysh, Vladislav Gavrikov, Scott Morrow

Out: K'Andre Miller

At the very least, Vladislav Gavrikov looks like he can be a significant upgrade over K'Andre Miller. Gavrikov was a true top-pair defenseman for the Kings last season and a defensive beast. He should look great on a pair with Adam Fox, or drive a matchup pair behind him — something Miller struggled to do last season.

Still, it would've been nice to add Gavrikov to a blue line that still had Miller rather than choose one over the other. The Rangers went from being short two top-four defensemen to being short two top-four

defensemen. It's possible that Scott Morrow can step in and be that right away for them, but it doesn't feel like a likely bet in Year 1, considering how green he looked during the playoffs for Carolina.

As for the forwards, things still look really thin. Taylor Raddysh is probably a fourth liner and the Rangers already have enough of those.

### 13. Chicago Blackhawks

Net Rating added: +3

In: Andre Burakovsky, Sam Lafferty

Out: Philipp Kurashev, Patrick Maroon, Alec Martinez, TJ Brodie

It's probably not a good sign that one of the league's absolute worst teams only marginally improved compared to last season. Andre Burakovsky is not the top-six forward he once was and is probably only a minor upgrade over what was already here.

A lot is riding on internal improvement for Chicago this year. With no reinforcements coming in, it's up to the youngsters to step up. Good luck.

### 14. New Jersey Devils

Net Rating added: +2

In: Connor Brown, Evgenii Dadonov

Out: Erik Haula, Curtis Lazar, Brian Dumoulin

With Connor Brown and Evgenii Dadonov in the fold, New Jersey's bottom six is slightly better. Slightly. There's still a lot of work to do in order to make this team a contender, though. The Devils desperately need one more top-six forward to move up a tier.

### 15. Philadelphia Flyers

Net Rating added: +1

In: Trevor Zegras, Christian Dvorak, Dan Vladar

Out: Ryan Poehling

Sorry, but it was really funny to see the Flyers address their biggest problem, goaltending, with one of the worst options around. Hopefully, Dan Vladar can do well here, but his track record is rough.

Trevor Zegras and Christian Dvorak are a lot more interesting. Zegras offers a potential offensive spark that's seriously missing among the team's forward group, while Dvorak should help replace some of the depth defense that was lost when the team dealt Ryan Poehling for Zegras.

The Flyers probably won't be much better than last year, but the addition of Zegras is at least intriguing. The upside there is obvious — he just needs to make due on his promise.

### 16. Minnesota Wild

Net Rating added: 0

In: Vladimir Tarasenko, Nico Sturm

Out: Gustav Nyquist, Frederick Gaudreau, Declan Chisholm

The Wild spent the summer rearranging deck chairs. Vladimir Tarasenko and Nico Sturm are pretty close in impact to Gustav Nyquist and Frederick Gaudreau. The real wild card here will be how much value

Zeev Buium can bring in from the jump. The Wild moved Declan Chisholm to make room for the rookie defender — will it pay off?

#### 17. Calgary Flames

Net Rating added: 0

In: Ivan Prosvetov

Out: Dan Vladar

Does losing Anthony Mantha count? Probably not. In that case, we get one replacement-level goalie replacing another. Boring!

#### 18. Columbus Blue Jackets

Net Rating added: 0

In: Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood, Isac Lundestrom

Out: James van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly, Justin Danforth, Jordan Harris, Daniil Tarasov

The Blue Jackets shuffled a few things around, mostly to end up in the same place. Miles Wood and Isac Lundestrom dragging things down is the primary culprit for that, though Wood adds some jam that could be helpful for a young team.

At the very least, Charlie Coyle is a stabilizing piece down the middle for the team's top nine. He offers some positional flexibility as a utility player and was a decent get — even if the cost to acquire him felt high.

#### 19. Washington Capitals

Net Rating added: 0

In: Justin Sourdif

Out: Andrew Mangiapane, Lars Eller

After having one of the strongest offseasons last year, the Capitals mostly moved around the edges this summer. The hope is that internal improvements from key young players will be able to replace what the team lost in Andrew Mangiapane and Lars Eller. Ryan Leonard and Hendrix Lapierre look like they can adequately fill those shoes.

Newcomer Justin Sourdif is the wild card here, considering his lack of NHL experience (four games) and Washington's high acquisition cost. I don't currently have a projection for him, but it doesn't feel likely he will move the needle a considerable degree here.

#### 20. St. Louis Blues

Net Rating added: -1

In: Pius Suter, Nick Bjugstad, Logan Mailloux

Out: Zack Bolduc, Radek Faksa, Nick Leddy, Ryan Suter

St. Louis' placement here is not a product of what seems like a decent summer, but rather the lack of a projection for Logan Mailloux. The young defender played just seven chaotic games for Montreal last year and it wouldn't be fair to judge what he can do based on that data. In theory, he's the exact kind of defender the Blues need: one who can bring a lot of offense from the blue line.

In practice, though, Mailloux is a giant question mark. Zack Bolduc isn't — he looks like a potentially strong top-six player with defensive upside. The difference there is what colors the Blues' placement here. If Mailloux can be as impactful as Bolduc already is, the Blues would shoot up considerably. That's still a big if at this juncture, but at the very least, it was probably a worthy bet considering St. Louis' surplus of winger talent. The presence of Jimmy Snuggerud for a full season should help offset the loss of Bolduc internally.

Aside from that, it's easy to like what the Blues did nabbing Pius Suter and Nick Bjugstad. Those two considerably bolster the team's center depth, with the latter being a notable upgrade over Radek Faksa.

#### 21. Pittsburgh Penguins

Net Rating added: -1

In: Anthony Mantha, Justin Brazeau, Matt Dumba, Parker Wotherspoon, Connor Clifton, Arturs Silovs

Out: Matt Grzelcyk, Conor Timmins, Vladislav Kolyachonok, Alex Nedeljkovic

The problem with Pittsburgh's summer is that the Penguins have not become bad enough yet. If they want to be serious about Gavin McKenna, there's still a lot of work to get to Chicago and San Jose territory.

The additions that Pittsburgh did make do look like decent lottery tickets, though. Anthony Mantha, if healthy, looks like a great bounce-back candidate while Justin Brazeau showed some nice promise two seasons ago. On defense, Parker Wotherspoon's underlying numbers suggest he has some upside while Matt Dumba has the name recognition to potentially get flipped for value at the deadline. The Penguins gave themselves a lot of future mid-round pick ammo here.

Until Bryan Rust, Rickard Rakell or Erik Karlsson get moved, though, this has been a very mid summer. There's a lot of room to get worse.

Brent Burns brings borderline top-four value to the Avalanche. (Jared C. Tilton / Getty Images)

#### 22. Colorado Avalanche

Net Rating added: -2

In: Brent Burns

Out: Jonathan Drouin, Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood, Ryan Lindgren

It feels like many are underrating the Colorado Avalanche, at least if Gabriel Landeskog looks as good as he did during the playoffs. He could be the biggest difference between last year's team and this year's, helping to replace some of the void left by Mikko Rantanen. Retaining Brock Nelson is also underappreciated.

In terms of who's in and who's out from this summer, though, the Avalanche did take a small step back. Jonathan Drouin and Charlie Coyle are notable losses from the top nine that will be felt; there's no denying that. But it does help that the Avalanche let Ryan Lindgren walk and signed Brent Burns instead. Even at his advanced age, Burns still has some game left and brings borderline top-four value to the Avalanche as a puck-mover. With the team's second pair being one of the biggest problems last year, Burns is a savvy addition that keeps Colorado in the contender's circle.

#### 23. Florida Panthers

Net Rating added: -2

In: Jeff Petry, Daniil Tarasov

Out: Nate Schmidt, Vitek Vanecek

The defending back-to-back champs are basically running it back. Be very afraid that the Panthers only lost two goals of value and were able to keep all three of their key free agents: Sam Bennett, Brad Marchand and Aaron Ekblad. Florida looked likely to be at the bottom of this list after the parade ended and management's ability to minimize the damage has been commendable.

The only notable difference here is Jeff Petry in to take Nate Schmidt's role. It's a downgrade given what Schmidt was able to do for the Panthers last season, but a small one. Petry wasn't great in Detroit's top four, but should be adequate in a sheltered role.

#### 24. New York Islanders

Net Rating added: -2

In: Jonathan Drouin, Maxim Shabanov, Emil Heineman, David Rittich

Out: Noah Dobson

Noah Dobson — even if he's not exactly beloved by those on Long Island — is a big loss. While he's probably not as good as his 2023-24 breakout, he's probably also not as bad as he looked in 2024-25 (though the numbers don't exactly agree with that sentiment either). He's a top-pair defenseman and any team losing that is going to take a big hit. Until Matthew Schaefer arrives, the Islanders' defense corps is going to be a lot worse.

What's going a bit unnoticed is that the team's forward group looks a lot better. Beyond a healthy Mathew Barzal, the addition of Jonathan Drouin looks like a nice bet given what he's shown in Colorado the last two seasons. It's possible he's completely a product of Nathan MacKinnon, but the reward is worth that risk if he's truly found his game as a top-six forward. Emil Heineman, while not a needle-mover, is a decent bottom-six improvement over a big drag like Kyle MacLean.

The wild card is Maxim Shabanov, who signed with the Islanders after scoring 67 points in 65 games in the KHL. It's hard to know what Shabanov can do in the NHL given his size, but it's worth noting that Maxim Tsyplakov, whose KHL numbers were worse, ended up being a decent third liner. If Shabanov can mirror that, the Islanders' forward group looks a lot deeper than given credit for, even if it lacks high-end upside.

#### 25. Vancouver Canucks

Net Rating added: -2

In: Evander Kane

Out: Pius Suter

The trade is one-for-one and it's not a win for Vancouver. Evander Kane looks like a downgrade.

Kane is probably better than his underlying numbers give him credit for and he was a noticeable force during the playoffs ... aside from his penalty box parade, of course. He brings a different element to Vancouver's top six and should add some offensive pop. But it would've been nice to see the Canucks retain Pius Suter on top of that. If it was either or, Vancouver made a questionable choice — especially when factoring for position.

Without Suter, the Canucks remain thin up front and especially down the middle. His defensive presence will be seriously missed. Depending on Filip Chytil to stay available for an entire season is a huge gamble and the Canucks will be in trouble the minute he's out.

It's not a disastrous offseason, but these being the only moves so far doesn't inspire much confidence.

## 26. Dallas Stars

Net Rating added: -4

In: Radek Faksa, Vladislav Kolyachonok

Out: Mikael Granlund, Evgenii Dadonov, Mason Marchment, Cody Ceci, Matt Dumba

The Stars had one mission this offseason: fit under the cap. Dumping Mason Marchment and Matt Dumba fit the bill and what remains should still be a good team. There are internal solutions to both that minimize their losses, especially Dumba, whose game is closer to addition by subtraction territory. Vladislav Kolyachonok looks like a boilerplate third-pair guy, but even that feels like an upgrade on Dumba.

For many, the big loss on paper is probably Mikael Granlund. The Stars are more than deep enough to survive his absence. His empty-calorie points probably won't be missed much — especially if someone such as Mavrik Bourque takes a big step.

## 27. Nashville Predators

Net Rating added: -4

In: Erik Haula, Nicolas Hague, Nick Perbix

Out: Colton Sissons, Jeremy Lauzon

After "winning" the offseason last year, the Predators decided to go in a different direction this summer. Erik Haula isn't much of an upgrade over Colton Sissons, and while Nicolas Hague holds some promise, he doesn't have the top-four experience that Jeremy Lauzon has. Nick Perbix also feels a little redundant to some of the lesser-known options the team already has, too. The end result is more of the same, but probably a little worse.

## 28. Utah Mammoth

Net Rating added: -8

In: JJ Peterka, Brandon Tanev, Nate Schmidt

Out: Matias Maccelli, Josh Doan, Nick Bjugstad, Michael Kesselring

Of all the team placements on this list, Utah's might be the most perplexing. JJ Peterka was one of the biggest additions of the summer, but he's far from a perfect player and it did come at a depth cost.

Peterka has a bit of defensive baggage that limits his overall value. The upside is there for him to be a star and make the trade a big win, but cleaning things up without the puck is a priority. Stylistically, he's a strong fit for a rush-oriented team, but Utah's depth has taken a hit in the process. Josh Doan looks like a capable top-nine player, while Michael Kesselring has proven he has top-four upside.

In the grand scheme of things, it's always better to get the best player in the deal. But in this case, the Mammoth's depth options aren't strong enough to make up the difference. The loss of Matias Maccelli exacerbates that up front, while the addition of Nate Schmidt doesn't do enough to cover Kesselring's departure. Adding to that is a seemingly small swap with notable ramifications. Going from Nick Bjugstad to Brandon Tanev is a three-goal drop itself, considering Tanev's recent decline over the last two years.

Utah's top six is stronger now and some internal growth should still put the Mammoth in the thick of the playoff race. But this team isn't as deep as it was at the start of the summer.

#### 29. Edmonton Oilers

Net Rating added: -8

In: Andrew Mangiapane, Ike Howard, Curtis Lazar

Out: Evander Kane, Viktor Arvidsson, Connor Brown, Corey Perry, John Klingberg

For the Oilers, everything hinges on their two rookies. They need one or both of Ike Howard and Matthew Savoie to be good from the jump.

That's because a lot of their forward depth has been turned over this summer. Gone are Evander Kane, Viktor Arvidsson, Connor Brown and Corey Perry — all of whom looked like serviceable middle-six talents. In their place is only Andrew Mangiapane, who could have some upside in a bigger role, but is coming off a down year with the Capitals.

The Oilers have lost a lot on paper. They're still an elite team, but how Edmonton responds internally — with the rookies as focal points — will dictate how far the Oilers can go next season.

#### 30. Winnipeg Jets

Net Rating added: -13

In: Gustav Nyquist, Jonathan Toews, Tanner Pearson

Out: Nikolaj Ehlers, Mason Appleton, Brandon Tanev

If it makes Jets fans feel any better, this is roughly where the Jets ended up on last year's list — mostly as a result of being unable to retain several key deadline additions. This time around, it's harder to see a silver lining, not after losing one of their most important forwards in Nikolaj Ehlers. He's a true top-six scorer, one whose absence will be felt heavily in the team's top six. Gustav Nyquist is far from an ideal stop-gap.

On top of that, the Jets are betting heavily on hometown hero Jonathan Toews. It's a wonderful story for Manitobans, but it's fair to be skeptical about how much on-ice value Toews can actually provide, given his age, a significant absence from hockey and what he already was when he left. The best guess based on his previous trajectory is that Toews can be an OK 4C for the Jets this season. Winnipeg seems to be penciling him in as the team's 2C, an incredibly ambitious goal that Toews will likely have a hard time reaching.

#### 31. Toronto Maple Leafs

Net Rating added: -13

In: Matias Maccelli, Nicolas Roy

Out: Mitch Marner

There is a gigantic Mitch Marner-sized hole in the Leafs' forward group that remains unfilled. The Leafs badly needed a true top-six forward to fill that void, but didn't have a lot of options to do so. What they did to get Matias Maccelli and Nicolas Roy was savvy and has bolstered the team's forward depth, but it obviously doesn't come anywhere close to equaling the value Marner brings.

Without Marner and without an adequate top-six forward replacement, the Leafs enter the 2025-26 season a lot worse on paper. They're still a quality playoff team, but they've fallen outside the

contending tier. Toronto is now arguably closer to the Ottawa and Montreal tier of the Atlantic than it is to the Florida and Tampa Bay tier.

### 32. Los Angeles Kings

Net Rating added: -18

In: Corey Perry, Joel Armia, Cody Ceci, Brian Dumoulin, Anton Forsberg

Out: Tanner Jeannot, Vladislav Gavrikov, Jordan Spence, David Rittich

You've heard of addition by subtraction? Well, the Kings pulled off the rare feat of subtraction by addition. On defense, the team turned Vladislav Gavrikov, an actual top-pair defenseman, into Cody Ceci and Brian Dumoulin, two low-end third-pair defensemen — at best. They also parted ways with Jordan Spence, an undersized defender who looked promising in a sheltered role last year.

The series of decisions is among the strangest in recent memory, where the team ended up paying the exact same amount of money (\$8.5 million total) to downgrade their blue line by 18 goals.

It is possible that The System is all that matters in Los Angeles, that both Ceci and Dumoulin will be better than they look because of it and vice versa for the departed. Given the age and track record of the two new guys coming in, consider me highly skeptical of the bet the Kings made here — one where they saved zero dollars and got a lot worse in the process.