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## **1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Meet Your New Jackets: Four Forwards Added To The Fold In Advance Of 2025-26 Season**

**By Ed Francis – September 3, 2025**

Hockey is right around the corner.

So to help get you ready for the Columbus Blue Jackets 2025-26 season, we give you the first of a quick, two-part series to help get you acquainted with the new faces on the team. Our Will Chase will have part two — the defenseman — on Thursday.

First: the forwards.

Long an area of opportunity for the franchise, the Blue Jackets' forward groups flipped the script in 2024-25 and had long stretches where they could essentially score at will. They finished with a club-record 267 goals, tied for 7th with the Toronto Maple Leafs amongst NHL clubs last season. Make no mistake about it: aside from Jet Greaves' sensational last two weeks in net, it was Columbus' offense that propelled them to be one of the league's biggest surprises.

Still, the Blue Jackets made several changes to their group of 12 (or more). Gone are veterans Sean Kuraly, James van Riemsdyk, and Justin Danforth. All three had regular spots in the lineup, and with no obvious answer of who comes up from the AHL's Cleveland Monsters to replace them, president of hockey operations and general manager Don Waddell played an active role in acquiring replacements for all three.

Here's a look at those faces — and more — in part one of Meet Your New Jackets:

### **Charlie Coyle**

Coyle gives the Blue Jackets something they sought after this offseason: a veteran, middle-six center with a right shot who can find the back of the net.

The 33-year-old was acquired just before the draft in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche and further strengthens the Blue Jackets up the middle. (That's a sentence that's been a long time coming, isn't it?)

There's little question where the 6-foot-3, 215 lb will be inserted: Coyle has third-line center written all over him. Who he plays with is still a question without an answer, but it's hard not to see Cole Sillinger on one side of him. Yegor Chinakhov, Dmitri Voronkov, and Boone Jenner are possible options to play on the other side — probably in that order.

Coyle scored 17 goals and had 18 assists for 35 points last season, his fifth straight season (minus the Covid year) of 15-plus goals and 35-plus points.

This was a good addition by Waddell and company, and gives the Blue Jackets an upgrade at center over Kuraly.

Coyle has one year remaining in a six-year, \$31.5 million contract. His average annual value this season checks in at \$5.25 million.

### **Miles Wood**

In that same trade with the Avalanche, the Blue Jackets also acquired winger Miles Wood.

Injuries soured Wood's 2024-25 campaign, where he scored just four goals and added four assists in 37 games. But Wood, who spent the first eight seasons of his NHL career with the New Jersey Devils before departing for Colorado two years ago, is looking for a bounce-back in a Blue Jackets sweater.

That will almost certainly come as the team's new fourth-line left winger. The fourth line can (and will) be a bit of a revolving door, but it shouldn't come as a surprise when he's playing opposite of Mathieu Olivier and centered by Isac Lundestrom, another new Jacket who is previewed next.

The 6-foot-2, 195 lb Wood has four years left on his contract, with an average annual value of \$2.5 million per year.

### **Isac Lundestrom**

As previously mentioned, Lundestrom appears most likely to take the spot of Kuraly as the team's primary fourth-line center.

In 2024-25, the 25-year-old had 15 points (four goals, 11 assists) in 79 games.

A former first-round pick, Lundestrom spent the first seven seasons of his NHL career with the Anaheim Ducks, picking up 35 goals and 49 assists (84 points) in 337 career games. His best season was undoubtedly in 2021-22, when he scored 16 goals and added 13 assists for 29 points in a total of 80 games.

"Lundestrom is a center who skates very well, is strong on the puck, and plays a sound two-way game," Waddell said after announcing the signing. "He will provide additional depth to our forward group, and we are very pleased to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family."

### **Hudson Fasching**

Of this group, it's Fasching who signed a two-way deal, meaning that he can rotate between Cleveland and Columbus without concern.

Fasching, 30, has spent the last three seasons with the New York Islanders organization. The 6-foot-3, 210 lb winger has two goals and two assists (four points) in 43 games with the Isles in 2024-25.

His best NHL season came in the 2022-23 campaign, when the Apple Valley, Minnesota native scored 10 goals and added nine assists (19 points) in 49 games with a +10 plus/minus.

With youngsters like Luca Del Bel Belluz and Jordan Dumais needing to play big minutes to continue their development, a player like Fasching has "13th forward" appeal. He'll certainly play some games with the Blue Jackets this season, but could find himself in the "mostly healthy scratch" role.

That said, Waddell was clear about why he was brought into the organization.

"Fasching is a hard-working, responsible winger with size who plays with a great deal of energy," Waddell said. "His high character, experience, and versatility strengthens our organizational depth up front."

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets & Flyers Start New Season With Plenty to Prove

**By Mark Scheig – September 1, 2025**

We are almost at the end of our summer Blue Jackets series comparing them to their rivals in the Metropolitan Division. As the calendar flips to September, we turn our attention to the Philadelphia Flyers.

Last season for the Flyers was one to forget. Coach John Tortorella didn't finish the year. The team finished last in the Metropolitan Division. Thanks to a few key changes, there is a renewed excitement around them.

The Blue Jackets and Flyers do have one important thing in common as they begin the 2025-26 season. Each have significant questions they need to answer. Let's explore.

### **The Michkov Factor**

As with any team, you have to start with their stars. The Flyers have a shining star that has much of their fanbase eagerly anticipating what he'll do for an encore.

Matvei Michkov was nothing short of impressive as a rookie. He scored 26 goals and 63 points in 2024-25. Yet somehow, he finished fourth in the Calder Trophy voting. (Author's note: Yes, I had Michkov fourth. Didn't feel great about it but it showed how strong the other three players were.)

Michkov is one of those players that is worth every penny of the price of admission. His skill can pop off at any time. He also plays the game with a swagger because of the confidence he has in himself. Seriously, how many guys after being tossed from a game sign autographs before leaving down the tunnel? That's some major rockstar energy.

Even under a defensive-minded coach in Tortorella, Michkov scored 63 points. He has the talent to eventually become a 100-point scorer. We'll see how the team around him develops over time.

When considering the Blue Jackets, the Michkov/Adam Fantilli matchup will be must-see TV. They are two of the best from the 2023 NHL Draft. Don't be surprised if this develops into some great individual matchups between the two young stars. The games should be great too.

The Blue Jackets did a nice job on Michkov last season, limiting him to 0-2-2 and 8 SOG in four games played. The Blue Jackets must prioritize taking this talent away on any given night.

### **Trevor Zegras**

It only felt like a matter of time before Trevor Zegras would have a new home. After five seasons and 268 games in Anaheim, he was traded to the Flyers in exchange for Ryan Poehling and two draft picks.

Two big questions coming into the season for Zegras and the Flyers. What can we expect from him after he got his fresh start? And where in the lineup will he play?

Health will be a major factor for Zegras as well. In 2024 alone, he dealt with both a broken ankle and a torn meniscus. He's played just 88 games combined the last two seasons.

Many believe Zegras will get every opportunity to find his offensive form at center ice. A potential of playing with Michkov could bring a level of excitement to most every game assuming Zegras is able to regain his form.

Zegras' best days with the Ducks were when he played at center. It remains to be seen if he'll start at top center or if the Flyers will start veteran Sean Couturier there. How the lines look at the start will be among their top storylines at camp.

If Zegras can regain his form, that'll be a massive help to a Flyers team who finished last season 23rd in goals for and third-worst in the Eastern Conference. Will their depth scoring be able to pick up any of the slack?

### **Rick Tocchet**

The other big story coming into the season for the Flyers was the hiring of Rick Tocchet. He left the Vancouver Canucks in order to return to a team he is very familiar with.

Tocchet guided the Canucks to the playoffs in 2023-24 that saw them defeat the Nashville Predators in six games before ultimately losing to the Edmonton Oilers in seven games in the second round. The Canucks' drama ultimately caught up to everyone leaving them outside the playoffs last season.

Tocchet's main job will be to find a way to get the most out of the Flyers' young, offensive talent. How will he unlock Michkov's full potential? How can he get Zegras back to form?

Perhaps just as important to all Flyers fans, can they figure out their power play once and for all? It was just 15% last season which was third-worst in the NHL. Tocchet's Canucks were at 22.5% for comparison sake which was 15th overall. Even that kind of jump in production would bode well for the Flyers' chances.

In watching several Flyers' games last season, outside of Michkov and occasionally Travis Konecny and Owen Tippett, there just wasn't a lot of creativity out there. With Tocchet in and Tortorella out, there should be more offense untapped. We'll see how long it takes them to figure that part out.

Tocchet is the right kind of coach for a young Flyers' team who needs to establish a winning culture. Not much will shake Tocchet given what he encountered in Vancouver. He will be given ample time to establish the culture he wants there.

### **Other Key Stories**

Here are a couple of other key stories for the Flyers we are watching in the new season.

- Goaltending: Samuel Ersson will be joined by a new acquisition in Dan Vladar. The Flyers gave up the fifth-most goals in the NHL last season with 286. They rotated through three goalies most of last season. Can Vladar be a stable-enough backup?
- Jamie Drysdale/defense: Drysdale was the return in the Cutter Gauthier trade. He scored seven goals in 70 games last season while showing some flashes after coming back from injury. But the defense was always a work in progress. Can he find a new level where he's more responsible? Cam York and Travis Sanheim will have a lot on their plate as the Flyers' top defensive pair.
- Porter Martone is at Michigan State. But how close is Jett Luchanko to the NHL? He played four games in the NHL last season and spent some time in Lehigh Valley as well.
- What's next for Tyson Foerster? His last two seasons have been 20 goals and then 25 goals. Can he challenge for 30 goals while giving the Flyers a second dangerous offensive line?

### **Blue Jackets/Flyers Compared**

As you can see, the Flyers have a lot of questions. But so do the Blue Jackets as we've talked about. They each have similarities to their situation.

- Both teams have a young star to build around for years to come (Fantilli/Michkov).
- Both teams have questions in goal. We don't know who starts Game 1 for the Blue Jackets yet between Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves.
- Both teams have questions on defense as they each need to dramatically reduce their goals against.
- Both teams believe they're on the way up and are hoping to be good enough to knock on the door of the playoffs.

The Blue Jackets get the checkmark on offense. Their young talent was among the best last season at scoring goals with most everyone back. Another year of familiarity and chemistry will do wonders for them.

The Flyers have talent and skill just perhaps not quite as much as the Blue Jackets do. The Blue Jackets' center depth and wingers led by Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson give them a clear advantage.

The Blue Jackets get the checkmark on defense as well. Zach Werenski is the best defensive player on both sides and proved what he is capable of last season. York and Sanheim is a good top pair. Beyond them, there are questions they have to answer. The Blue Jackets have to stay healthy on the blue line and get some better overall performances.

Goaltending for now is a wash. Both situations face significant enough questions that it's the ultimate wildcard. Good goaltending can put both teams in the playoff hunt whereas poor goaltending could have them in the draft lottery. The Vladar acquisition does help the Flyers. It'll be interesting to see what kind of improvement Merzlikins and Ersson have.

The Flyers should be better than last season. But the combination of the teams ahead of them in the Metropolitan Division coupled with significant questions they must answer have the Blue Jackets projected ahead of them in 2025-26.

Stay tuned for the last part of our series. We will look at the state of the Pittsburgh Penguins.

## The Hockey Writers / 3 Bold Predictions for the 2025-26 Blue Jackets

By Matthew Buhrmann – August 31, 2025

The offseason continues to slowly chug along, and we continue our Columbus Blue Jackets season preview series here at *The Hockey Writers*. At least college football is back, right?

Given that most Blue Jackets fans are likely Buckeyes fans, I envy your enjoyment as a Bearcat student and fan, but I digress.

It does help pass the time until hockey returns, and the wait is not much longer. Training camp opens in roughly three weeks, the first preseason game is just 22 days away from the day I'm writing this (Aug. 30), the regular season begins in 40 days, and the home opener follows only four days later.

We are not far away at all, and what better time for me to drop my three bold predictions for this team looking to build off of last season's crushing finish.

### **Blue Jackets Break Playoff Drought**

It would be the first time since 2020 and they nearly made it happen last season, in what was the highest scoring season in franchise history with 273 goals.

My colleague, Mark Scheig, here at *THW*, spoke with captain Boone Jenner earlier this week. He covered plenty of ground, but on improvement and building off last season, he made his points clear.

"I think we believe in each other in that room where it's all about the team, the way we built that last year. I think we're going to continue to grow on that and learn from lessons, whether it's a point here or there, and how much of a difference that is in November or December, and how that impacts what could be a spot in the playoffs. I think you have to learn from that as a group. I love the way we fought right to the end, but we came up short. For us, it was extremely disappointing. We want to get into the playoffs and do some damage. I think that's where our heads are at.

We took a good step last year, but we're taking a bigger one this year. We know it's going to take a lot of work. That's what I'm excited for coming to training camp: getting it right I know the guys have been putting in tremendous work this summer, and guys will be ready. We're going to push each other. We're going to push ourselves as a group of, let's go, we have to get in. We have to make some noise this year."

I think the Blue Jackets could work their way into third place in the Metropolitan Division, though a wild card spot feels more realistic. Cracking the top three will be no easy task with the Carolina Hurricanes, New Jersey Devils, and Washington Capitals all in the mix. I wouldn't rule out the Philadelphia Flyers, New York Rangers, and New York Islanders from all being competitive for that third spot either, all teams spoken about on the latest Blue Jackets 2025-26 Season Preview on the *THW* YouTube channel.

That said, I could see the Blue Jackets staying in the hunt for third place, especially if one of those teams stumbles. If I had to single out the most likely candidate, it would be Washington, as their 2024-25 season felt a bit like an outlier, capped off by a five-game exit at the hands of the Hurricanes in the second round.

Also, it is going to come down to consistency on special teams all season. The power play was too inconsistent last season, and the penalty kill struggled for most of it, too. They finished 2024-25 with a power play success rate of 19.5%, which placed them 22nd best in the league. The unit struggled

immensely in the final two months of the season during their playoff push, a time when all weapons are needed.

During the six-game losing streak in March, the power play scored zero goals, a big reason why they could not catch back up in the playoff race despite a six-game winning streak closing out the season. The penalty kill also finished 22nd best in the NHL at 77%, allowing a total of 45 power play goals.

Looking at per-game stats, the Blue Jackets took 7.52 penalty minutes per 60 minutes of play in all situations, according to MoneyPuck. That was a little high when looking around the league, ranking as the 10th worst in the NHL.

Defensively, they have to limit goals against and be more consistent. They allowed 267 goals, eighth most in the league last season. A healthy Erik Gudbranson will certainly help in the physicality department. Damon Severson needs to bounce back from an inconsistent season, while Denton Mateychuk can take a step forward physically, rounding out his two-way game at the NHL level.

Zach Werenski can totally have another Norris Trophy finalist season, as he leads the blue line on the first pairing, likely with Dante Fabbro. Ivan Provorov and Fabbro are back after both were extended this summer and are two players who are reliable on the back end.

The team added Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood, and Isac Lundestrom, at forward. All are good depth players, with Coyle and Lundestrom strong in the faceoff circle and capable penalty killers. Wood is a solid left-wing fourth liner who can chip in with depth production.

Jenner said of the additions, "Yeah. Very, very excited. Those are huge pickups for us. I don't know any of them on a personal level, but the hockey world's small and everything I've heard from guys who have played with them or crossed paths with them are just tremendous things. First and foremost, tremendous teammates and guys in the locker room that care about team first. That's exactly what we want and take pride in in our locker room. So, there's no doubt they're just going to fit in well there.

But what they bring on the ice playing against them for years now. You know how tough of an opponent they can be and what they brought to their teams. To add those three guys, I think that's huge for us up front. They're experienced guys. Coyle's almost up to a thousand games and had a great career in what he's done on every team he's gone to and the impact he has there. I think all three of them will come in and have that impact with us. Knowing they're great teammates, they're going to fit in no problem."

Team conditioning also has to be better this season. They had 12 back-to-back sets last season and went 2-9 in the second games. This season, they have 15 sets of them. The team brought back Barry Brennan as strength and conditioning coach, a role he held from 2005 to 2010, after the team moved on from Kevin Collins earlier this offseason.

Looking holistically, I think these are all areas that can and will be cleaned up this season. Hopefully, the injury bug stays away, but even if it doesn't, I'm confident they have the necessary depth both in Cleveland and within the NHL lineup to handle those situations.

### **Fantilli Reaches 35 Goals, Johnson Dishes 45 Assists**

Much like Kirill Marchenko last season, Adam Fantilli looks ready for a significant jump in offensive production. He and Kent Johnson will likely open the season together on the second line, and their chemistry is already well established.

Johnson finished last season with 33 assists and scored 24 goals (57 points) in only 68 games, while Fantilli played all 82, scoring 31 goals and 23 assists (54 points), firing 191 shots, converting on 16.2% of



them. If they see consistent time on the second power play unit, reaching the marks of 35 goals for Fantilli and 45 assists for Johnson is very realistic.

Fantilli proved in his sophomore season that he can be relied upon every night. He averaged 17:28 of ice time, took the second most faceoffs on the team, and played with more edge, registering 113 hits, taking 100 himself, and blocking 56 shots. His work in the gym this offseason should help him win more battles around the net, forecheck without being pushed around as much, and generate more offense in the difficult areas of the ice.

Johnson returned to start the season after surgery for a torn labrum suffered in Feb. 2024. He was then sidelined again with an upper-body injury on Oct. 12 and returned 14 games later in November. Over a full season, he was on pace for 69 points, an impressive total for his third season in the league.

Johnson reflected after the season, saying, "It was definitely a good year for me in terms of growth and some good takeaways, and I think how I battled throughout the year, even with injury and whatnot, just coming back and playing good right away. There's a lot of good things for me to take away, but I think I have a lot more in this league and can get a lot better. There's still a lot of areas to get better at."

If both players build on last season and continue to feed off one another's strengths, they could quietly become one of the most dangerous and productive second-line duos in the NHL this coming season.

### **Greaves Takes Over the Crease by Late November**

This might be one of my more controversial predictions, but I think it will happen unless Elvis Merzlikins comes out of the gate with an amazing start in the October gauntlet. Jet Greaves is another player I have written a ton about this offseason, and rightfully so. He has been mentioned in many of my pieces, most recently as one of my three breakout candidates along with Fantilli and Mateychuk.

I expect the season to open with a 60/40 split in favor of Merzlikins. It appears the staff does like him, and he is an amazing locker room guy. I just see this being a good tandem, and potentially an even better one with Merzlikins in the backup role. Starting the season, this way could also give Greaves some time to settle in and find himself at the NHL level again, given that he's only played in 21 career NHL games.

Last season, the workload broke down like this: Merzlikins played 64.6% of the games, Daniil Tarasov (now with the Florida Panthers) played 24.4%, and Greaves played 13.4%. There will not be a three-goalie battle this season; it will be just the two of them.

By the middle to end of November, my bold prediction is that Greaves will take over as the main starter in a 65/35 split. Also, the Blue Jackets are actively looking for a third goalie who can play with the American Hockey League's (AHL) Cleveland Monsters and be good enough to step in if there are injuries to either Greaves or Merzlikins.

I will be writing an article soon on three goalies who could fill that role once training camp rolls around, so stay tuned.

If these three bold predictions come to life, the Blue Jackets will not only take a big step forward but could turn the coming season into one of the most memorable in franchise history.

## The Hockey Writers / The NHL's Best Farm Systems Ranked – 2025-26 Preseason Update

By Logan Horn – September 1, 2025

If you want to be one of the best teams in the NHL in the Salary Cap Era, you have to draft and develop your own prospects so you can build for the future with young contributors on cheap entry-level contracts. When you look at some of the top teams in the league like the Carolina Hurricanes, New Jersey Devils and the Minnesota Wild, you see teams that have developed through the draft and that continue to build their prospect systems for the future.

Some of the top teams on this list year in and year out, like the Detroit Red Wings, Buffalo Sabres and Anaheim Ducks continue to develop and compete for the future, while other teams like the Montreal Canadiens and Columbus Blue Jackets are competing for the playoffs while also having great prospect pools. Having a deep farm system can go a long way toward a team's long-term success. Without further ado, here are the midseason farm system rankings at roughly the halfway point of the 2024-25 season.

Much like the top 100 prospects article, this ranking is going to be based on the quality and potential of each team's prospect pool. Players are listed in no particular order. I will be using Corey Pronman's definition of "prospect" for this, so if you're confused about why players like Simon Nemec or Olen Zellweger aren't on the list, this is why. "A skater no longer qualifies as an NHL prospect if he has played 25 games in the NHL in any campaign, regular season and playoffs combined, or 50 games total; or reaches age 25 by Sept. 15. A goalie no longer qualifies as an NHL prospect if he has played 10 games in the NHL in any campaign, regular season and playoffs combined, or 25 games total; or reaches age 25 by Sept. 15." (From: "Pronman: 2019-20 NHL Farm System Rankings").

### **32. Florida Panthers**

**Previous Ranking: 32**

**Top Five Prospects: Gracyn Sawchyn, Matvei Shuravin, Simon Zether, Jack Devine, Linus Eriksson**

The Florida Panthers certainly don't have the deepest prospect pool, and the top prospect in the their pool over the last few seasons, Mackie Samoskevich, had a strong year rookie season in the NHL, graduating himself from this list. The Panthers have moved several valuable picks and prospects in recent years, but it has all been worth it for their back-to-back Stanley Cup victories. Their prospect pool has certainly seen better days, but I doubt they are too upset about that these days.

I was a big fan of Gracyn Sawchyn in his draft season and I like what I've seen from him at the junior level since. His ability to play through contact and draw penalties is admirable and I believe it will translate to higher levels as well. Linus Eriksson is another under-the-radar prospect who could be a factor for the Panthers in the NHL. He is a hard-worker who has the skating and tenacity to push for a spot in Florida's bottom-six in the next few years.

### **31. Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Previous Ranking: 29**

**Top Five Prospects: Ethan Gauthier, Sam O'Reilly, Dylan Duke, Niko Huuhtanen, Dylan Gill**

The Tampa Bay Lightning narrowly avoided hitting the bottom spot here for a sixth consecutive time (landing in the bottom 5). Tampa has gone all in several times now and they're clearly trying to find a new balance of young talent on cheaper deals. If Conor Geekie hadn't established himself in their NHL

lineup yet, Tampa might have found themselves a few spots higher, but I'm sure they're happy with him where he is.

Ethan Gauthier is a solid prospect, combining a high-skill game (he challenges and beats a lot of defenders one-on-one) with a very competitive and physical style. He works incredibly hard which manifests in his ability to win 50/50 puck races, gaining position in front of the opposing net, and getting under his opponents' skin at will. Sam O'Reilly (acquired in exchange for Isaac Howard) is a nice center prospect for the Lightning, with the skating and two-way effort to become a reliable bottom-six piece if his development continues well.

### **30. Colorado Avalanche**

**Previous Ranking: 19**

**Top Five Prospects: Mikhail Gulyayev, William Zellers, Gavin Brindley, Ilya Nabokov, Francesco Dell'elce**

The Colorado Avalanche moved plenty of prospects and draft picks over the last few years, and their prospect pool has begun to really reflect that. After trading Calum Ritchie and their 1st round pick in either the 2026 or 2027 Drafts, it's unlikely that the Avalanche will work their way back up this list anytime soon. One positive was their offseason trade for Gavin Brindley who they received from the Columbus Blue Jackets, but that wasn't nearly enough to stop them from falling massively on this edition.

Brindley is a 5-foot-9 forward who was excellent in the NCAA as an 18-year-old freshman in his draft year. His skating is great and his high energy level makes him a possession beast. Brindley's combination of speed and effort will make him a very flexible player who can fill in whatever role is needed of him, which has earned him lots of ice time at various levels. He is a coach's dream as a player with great skills on both sides of the puck and a never-quit mentality. Brindley was phenomenal at the 2024 World Juniors where he was often one of the best and hardest working American players each and every game. He made the surprising decision to join the Cleveland Monsters in the AHL last season (I still believe he would've been better off with another NCAA season), and struggled quite a bit with the physicality of the pro game.

### **29. Vegas Golden Knights**

**Previous Ranking: 27**

**Top Five Prospects: Trevor Connelly, Jakob Ihs-Wozniak, Lukas Cormier, Mathieu Cataford, Carl Lindbom**

In the past I have been very critical of the Vegas Golden Knights' tendency to trade their best prospects and picks to win-now, and I'm willing to admit when I'm wrong. I was wrong in thinking that Vegas' "it's just business" mentality wouldn't work and that they should have held onto more of their futures. Obviously it all worked out for them with their first Championship in franchise history and that's not even mentioning the fact that they're still ranked higher than a handful of teams on this list.

Vegas held onto their first rounder in the 2023 Draft which they used to select David Edstrom 32nd overall. I was a big fan of Edstrom as the draft approached, and so naturally I loved the pick for Vegas . . . and then they traded him. Trevor Connelly comes with his fair share of baggage, but Vegas hasn't been afraid to take on a little bad publicity if it means they have a better chance of winning tomorrow than they did yesterday. He's got a ton of skill and the type of game that makes him look like a potential top-six winger, just don't count on him doing that in Vegas.

## **28. Dallas Stars**

**Previous Ranking: 30**

**Top Five Prospects: Cameron Schmidt, Ayrton Martino, Emil Hemming, Aram Minnetian, Christian Kyrrou**

The Dallas Stars have had one of the best groups of young players for several years now, though that strength has draining out of their prospect pool as youngsters like Lian Bichsel, Mavrik Bourque and Wyatt Johnston have establish themselves as NHL players. As a result of their success at the NHL level, the Stars have only used a total of two picks in the first two rounds of the past three combined drafts, so it makes sense that they don't rank very high here.

While a few other prospects here project as possible NHLers, I think the most intriguing player in their group at the moment in Cameron Schmidt, the 5-foot-7 winger out of the WHL. Schmidt is an elite skater and has great puck skill, a combo that allows him to knife through junior teams at will. The questions regarding his size and ability to translate his offense up levels with much bigger and stronger opponents led to him falling to the third round of the 2025 Draft, and I expect that pick to age pretty well for Dallas.

## **27. Edmonton Oilers**

**Previous Ranking: 28**

**Top Five Prospects: Matthew Savoie, Roby Jarventie, Paul Fischer, Beau Akey, Isaac Howard**

About a year ago, the Edmonton Oilers' prospect pool was in as rough of a spot as it ever has been during the Connor McDavid era (and probably still going back to the pre-Taylor Hall era as well). The Oilers have been doing the only sane thing a team with McDavid and Leon Draisaitl can do, going all-in by trading prospects and picks year after year. However, that leaves the cupboards pretty bare after a few years. Luckily for Edmonton, the Buffalo Sabres believed they had too many undersized, skilled forwards last summer and traded Matt Savoie to Edmonton in exchange for Ryan McLeod and then Tampa Bay couldn't justify giving Isaac Howard a roster spot and they nabbed him on the trade market this offseason.

Savoie immediately became the Oilers' top prospect (by a good margin) when they added him, and I think he'll prove the Sabres foolish. He's a highly creative forward with a high-end skill set. The combination of speed, hands and stick handling makes him an offensive catalyst and he maintains offensive zone possession extremely well. Howard is a great offensive player who can struggle a bit when it comes to the harder areas of the ice and is going to need to play with a strong playmaker. If he can earn a spot on the wing of either of Edmonton's superstar centermen, then he's likely to rack up points.

## **26. Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Previous Ranking: 25**

**Top Five Prospects: Easton Cowan, Ben Danford, Nikita Grebyonkin, Dennis Hildeby, Artur Akhtyamov**

The Toronto Maple Leafs are firmly within their competitive window so it would be a shock to see them land much higher on this list since they've traded several high picks and good prospects in recent years. Matthew Knies is now a full time NHL player (to nobody's surprise) and is no longer eligible for this list, and their ranking wasn't helped when they traded away Fraser Minten to the Bruins along with their 2026 1st round pick (2025 1st was already traded at the time as well).

While his performance didn't exactly impress at the 2025 World Junior Championship, Easton Cowan is still a really good NHL prospect who is set to make the jump to the pro level after dominated the OHL for several seasons. He rarely comes to a full stop, always poised to take action and work for the puck, something that will likely endear him to Toronto's head coach Craig Berube. Cowan has already made Toronto look really savvy for picking him up in the first round in 2023, and if he can develop into a top-six wing for the Leafs it will make the loss of Mitch Marner sting that much less.

## **25. Ottawa Senators**

**Previous Ranking: 24**

**Top Five Prospects: Carter Yakemchuk, Leevi Merilainen, Zack Ostapchuk, Logan Hensler, Xavier Bourgault**

This might be lower than some would expect for the Senators to land, but come on, look at that list. Now, there's no reason to panic, the reason their prospect pool looks so bare is simply because most of their best young players have graduated from this list and into the NHL full-time. If this were a ranking of the best young cores then the Senators would find themselves significantly higher on this list (closer to top-10 than bottom-10 for sure) on the backs of players like Jake Sanderson, Ridley Greig and Tim Stutzle.

I am a very big Carter Yakemchuk fan. I know he didn't exactly wow NHL teams with his athleticism at the 2024 Draft combine, and was snubbed for Team Canada at the 2025 World Junior Championship, but I see a defender of his size who moves through traffic like that and I see someone who could possibly be the next Brent Burns. Despite my very high opinion of him, Yakemchuk was not enough to raise the Senators very much in this league-wide ranking.

## **24. Los Angeles Kings**

**Previous Ranking: 23**

**Top Five Prospects: Carter George, Henry Brzustewicz, Koehn Ziemmer, Hampton Slukynsky, Liam Greentree**

The Los Angeles Kings' prospect pool is a shadow of its former self, with prospects like Brandt Clarke, Quinton Byfield and Arthur Kaliyev establishing themselves as NHLers and other young players like Brock Faber and Rasmus Kupari being traded for more established players. Clarke has been a mainstay on this list for LA since he was drafted back in the 2021 Draft, so it's not surprising the Kings' ranking took a bit of a hit now that he's a regular in their lineup.

Liam Greentree is a big winger who looks like he could be a great all-round player in the NHL someday if he can make some improvements to his speed and acceleration. Greentree does most things well, fighting hard in puck battles, making smart passes, and handling defensive responsibilities well. His greatest strength is his shot which looks like a quality NHL tool though his skill with the puck is worthy of mention as well. Greentree has been a dominant offensive force in the OHL, scoring over 200 combined points in his past two seasons (209 points in 128 games played).

## **23. Pittsburgh Penguins**

**Previous Ranking: 22**

**Top Five Prospects: Rutger McGroarty, Owen Pickering, Harrison Brunicke, Bill Zonnon, Benjamin Kindel**

The Pittsburgh Penguins have been in a constant state of mortgaging the future for current success for the last decade or two as they tried to make the most of the primes of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni

Malkin's careers (quite successfully I might add). As a result they only selected in the first round three times in the 10 drafts from 2015-2024. However, this past season seemed to be a bit of a turning point, with the Penguins yet again missing the playoffs and selling at the trade deadline. This ended up allowing them to make three picks in the first round of the 2025 Draft, giving their prospect pool a nice infusion of talent.

Rutger McGroarty is a true power forward, strong and determined enough to win pucks with great playmaking skills that allow him to make smart plays with the puck once he wins it. He's a natural leader, shoots well, and does just about everything else you could hope for from a top prospect. McGroarty won't lead the Penguins in scoring, but he'll do a whole lot of other things at a very high level. After a bit of an adjustment period, he looked really strong in the AHL and should seriously challenge for a roster spot at this year's training camp.

## **22. New Jersey Devils**

**Previous Ranking: 20**

**Top Five Prospects: Anton Silayev, Seamus Casey, Herman Traff, Lenni Hameenaho, Mikhail Yegorov**

Luke Hughes making the New Jersey Devils full time out of training camp last year was great news. Ever since the 2021 Draft, Hughes has looked like a significant piece of their future defensive group, with much of the agility and edgework of his older brothers and a much more typical NHL frame. With him and Simon Nemec moving on to the NHL, the rest of the prospect pool looks a deal weaker by comparison. However, I did love the Anton Silayev pick for them in the 2024 Draft, and guys like Seamus Casey and Lenni Hameenaho both look like future NHLers to me as well.

Silayev was the story of the year early on during the 2023-24 season, going from an unknown defender in Russia's junior system the prior year to an elite defensive prospect who was tearing up the KHL. He's been a difficult player to scout because the sample size of his great play is still relatively small, but his potential is as high as any defensive prospect we've seen in the past few years due to his abnormally strong skating for a defender of his size (6-foot-7).

## **21. New York Rangers**

**Previous Ranking: 18**

**Top Five Prospects: Gabe Perreault, Brennan Othmann, Malcolm Spence, EJ Emery, Dylan Garand**

The New York Rangers have many incredibly talented young players who have already broken into the NHL full time which is why they aren't higher on this list, although they still have a good number of players I think will have real value in the NHL someday. Adam Sykora looks like he could factor into the Rangers' bottom-six forward group in just a few years while Gabe Perreault and Brennan Othmann each have a chance at cracking the top-six group.

Gabe Perreault was a prospect I was quite high on entering the 2023 Draft, but I understand why he fell to the Rangers at 23rd overall. His skinny frame and questionable skating were certainly worrisome from an NHL projection standpoint, but in the late-teens to early 20s of the first round I really think teams were leaving a lot of potential on the table by passing on Perreault. He's got high-end skill and hockey sense which should make him an imposing figure on the Rangers' power play someday even if he can't be a dominant player at even strength. He has dominated offensively in the NCAA over the past two seasons, not skipping a beat when running-mate Will Smith made the jump to the NHL a year ago.

## **20. Boston Bruins**

**Previous Ranking: 31**

**Top Five Prospects: James Hagens, Fabian Lysell, Dean Letourneau, Fraser Minten, Will Moore**

After making just 31 selections in previous six NHL Drafts combined (5.1 selections per year), with only five of those being in the first two rounds (three first rounders and two seconds), the Boston Bruins made a full 7 picks in the 2025 Draft for the second time since their infamous 2015 Draft class. That lack of draft capital is bound to leave you near the bottom of a list like this, but their injury issues and a few savvy trade-deadline moves have given them a good bit more talent, with their first true top-end prospect in a decade with James Hagens.

Boston's prospect pool earns a good bit of respect on the back of Hagens alone, who has the skill and skating to be a high-end top-six forward in the NHL. Hagens can create for himself with his agile skating or for his teammates with his excellent playmaking game, and I'm not particularly concerned about his size (5-foot-10) because of his skating and work rate. One other prospect who I think deserves attention is Dean Letourneau, a massive forward with excellent hands and agility for someone of his size. His initial plans were to spend all of last season in the USHL but he decided to take a swing at the NCAA with Boston College at the last minute. While that transition has been slow, and he struggled to earn minutes, there's still a ton of potential in his game given his size and hands.

## **19. Vancouver Canucks**

**Previous Ranking: 17**

**Top Five Prospects: Jonathan Lekkerimäki, Tom Willander, Sawyer Mynio, Braeden Cootes, Alexei Medvedev**

The Vancouver Canucks have risen significantly in this ranking over the past two years, rising all the way to from 30th, with the addition of Tom Willander and the resurgence of Jonathan Lekkerimäki as a legitimate top-six potential prospect standing out as the main reasons. Lekkerimäki has been through the wringer since being drafted back in 2022, but his final season in Sweden was an excellent one, leading all U20 players in goals and points in the SHL, as well as earning tournament MVP at the 2024 World Juniors in Gothenburg.

Tom Willander is an excellent defensive prospect, with the skill and defensive chops to be a great top-four defender for the Canucks down the road. He is also a phenomenal skater and will likely take a decent amount of pressure off Quinn Hughes once he establishes himself in the NHL. Willander's skating allows him to remain solid defensively even on off nights, making him a remarkably consistent game-changer, much like Vancouver's Filip Hronek can be.

## **18. Philadelphia Flyers**

**Previous Ranking: 21**

**Top Five Prospects: Porter Martone, Jett Luchanko, Jack Nesbitt, Oliver Bonk, Emil Andrae**

With Matvei Michkov making his NHL debut this year, the Philadelphia Flyers' prospect pool quickly became less exciting. Guys like Jett Luchanko and Oliver Bonk project as meaningful contributors down the line, but there isn't exactly anyone who should be expected to seriously move the needle in Philly anytime soon. That was, until they landed Porter Martone with the sixth selection of the 2025 Draft, adding another premium offensive talent to their prospect pool.

Martone is a skilled power forward who dominated the OHL last season. His size and high-end skill make him a handful for junior defenses, and I think it was a great decision for him to move on to the NCAA.

next season with Michigan State University. Martone's size is great and all (6-foot-3), but the real reason it excites scouts is his excellent playmaking, high-end compete level, and his great hands. In the draft process, Martone compared himself to the Tkachuk brothers, and while I think he's got a lot of their DNA as a high-skill power forward, he isn't a pest like the Tkachuks. He battles hard for pucks and doesn't back down from a challenge, but he doesn't quite have that Rat X-Factor (Rat-Factor, if you will) to get under opponents' skin.

## **17. Winnipeg Jets**

**Previous Ranking: 6**

**Top Five Prospects: Brayden Yager, Kieron Walton, Brad Lambert, Elias Salomonsson, Colby Barlow**

The Winnipeg Jets have a good group of forward prospects, with very little to show when it comes to prospects on the backend. Brad Lambert, Kieron Walton, Brayden Yager and Colby Barlow all have good chances to become at least top-nine mainstays for the Jets someday, with each of them having varying levels of top-six upside. They will need to diversify their prospect pool sooner than later unless they want to be left with no young options on the backend internally.

Brayden Yager was talked about in the scouting world for nearly as long as Connor Bedard, being drafted third overall in the 2020 WHL Bantam Draft and winning the CHL Rookie of the Year award following the 2021-22 season on the back of a remarkable 34-goal, 59-point rookie season. His transition game, defensive play, and wicked wrist shot make him an all around threat at the junior level. After being traded one-for-one for Rutger McGroarty to the Jets, Yager looks poised to remain in the Canadian Prairies for the foreseeable future. He grew up in Saskatchewan, played his junior hockey there (in Moose Jaw and now Lethbridge, Alberta), and will now make the jump to the AHL (Manitoba Moose) with his WHL career behind him.

## **16. Nashville Predators**

**Previous Ranking: 16**

**Top Five Prospects: Brady Martin, David Edstrom, Matthew Wood, Tanner Molendyk, Cameron Reid**

The Nashville Predators have been in a weird position over the last few seasons, with their best players aging and slowing down a bit despite Juuse Saros being one of the league's best goalies on a yearly basis. They ultimately looked poised to take a bit of a step back two seasons ago, trading guys like Mattias Ekholm and Tanner Jeannot each for massive returns. Regardless, they went all in on the 2024 Free Agency Class, handing out a lot of money that has already not aged particularly well.

After extending Saros to a long-term contract, Yaroslav Askarov quietly requested to be traded as he saw no future for himself in Nashville with the starter's net filled for another eight years. Askarov was Nashville's top prospect by a solid margin, but they managed to net some good value in return for him in David Edstrom and a first round pick in the 2025 Draft that they used to add the highly skilled Ryker Lee. They also selected Cameron Reid in the first round of the 2025 Draft, a steady two-way defender who doesn't project as a star but who could be a meaningful piece on the backend in the near future.

## **15. Columbus Blue Jackets**

**Previous Ranking: 11**

**Top Five Prospects: Cayden Lindstrom, Stanislav Svozil, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Jordan Dumais, Jackson Smith**

The Columbus Blue Jackets have made some massive changes over the last few years, from trading away Seth Jones for the picks that became Cole Sillinger and David Jiricek, to landing the late Johnny



Gaudreau in the biggest surprise of the 2022 Free Agency period. Several of their best young players have already entered the NHL like Adam Fantilli and Denton Mateychuk, but the Blue Jackets still have a good pipeline, led by Jackson Smith and Cayden Lindstrom.

Cayden Lindstrom is a massive power forward (6-foot-3, 205 pounds) who is incredibly quick and difficult to knock off the puck. His size advantage is part of what made him a nearly immovable object in the WHL, but he also has great hands, a strong shot, and really good puck protection instincts. Lindstrom has missed significant time in two consecutive campaigns due to a back injury, and that missed time has really started to add up. I sincerely hope he recovers and gets back on track because making the move to the NCAA next season (with Michigan State University) seems like a great move for such a physically advanced player.

#### **14. New York Islanders**

**Previous Ranking: 26**

**Top Five Prospects: Matthew Schaefer, Calum Ritchie, Victor Eklund, Cole Eiserman, Kashawn Aitcheson**

Before the 2024 Draft, the New York Islanders hadn't made a first round selection since they took Simon Holmstrom 23rd overall in the 2019, and it showed in their prospect pool. In the two years since they have selected four times in the first round, adding the four most talented prospects in their pool with the crown jewel being first overall pick Matthew Schaefer, and added Calum Ritchie in a trade. Obviously, winning the draft lottery like they did certainly helped, but the two mid-firsts that they acquired look like they're going to turn into serious pieces for their future as well.

Schaefer is their clear best prospect, as a smooth-skating defender who has the potential to become a great number-one defender for them. He skates as well as just about any defender in the world at this point which makes him a consistent factor on both ends of the ice, and he has the ability to take games over on the offensive end that few guys can replicate. Victor Eklund and Kashawn Aitcheson were the Isles' other picks in the first round of the 2025 Draft, and they both look like real players who will add a level of skill, power and grit to the Islanders' lineup for years to come.

#### **13. Calgary Flames**

**Previous Ranking: 15**

**Top Five Prospects: Zayne Parekh, Samuel Honzek, Hunter Brzustewicz, Cole Reschny, Cullen Potter**

The Calgary Flames are going to look very different over the next couple of seasons, and they've begun to build a really solid group of young players. The Flames have quietly done a really solid job of managing their assets during a massive fire-sale (pun-intended) over the two years or so, trading Jakob Markstrom, Elias Lindholm, and Chris Tanev amongst other players. As a result, the Flames have added some nice young talent like Cole Reschny (1st round pick received in Markstrom trade) and Cullen Potter (1st round pick received in Matthew Tkachuk trade).

Zayne Parekh will be a massive piece for Calgary's future, and I do think he's a solid defender when he's properly engaged, cutting off passes and angling opponents toward the boards. Parekh is a remarkable talent, with Quinn Hughes-like offensive upside if his development goes well, but his defensive game could certainly get more consistent. He's talented enough and looked strong enough defensively in the Memorial Cup a few years ago that I think he'll figure it out in his own end at the NHL level though, becoming an imposing figure on the Flames' blue line for years to come.

## **12. St. Louis Blues**

**Previous Ranking: 13**

**Top Five Prospects: Jimmy Snuggerud, Adam Jiricek, Dalibor Dvorsky, Justin Carbonneau, Theo Lindstein**

The St. Louis Blues began their retool in the 2022-23 season, and committed to giving themselves the best chance to succeed in the future, entering the 2023 Draft with three first rounders. Dalibor Dvorsky, Otto Stenberg, and Theo Lindstein are all legit NHL prospects and adding them to a pipeline that already had a guy like Jimmy Snuggerud gave their prospect pool a huge boost. They've done well since then as well, adding Adam Jiricek and Justin Carbonneau with first round picks.

Adding Adam Jiricek was the 16th pick of the 2024 Draft, and while he has had serious injury troubles over the past two seasons, he's still very much a serious NHL prospect. Jiricek is very engaged physically, and has a penchant for taking big point shots. He produces a ton of chances on offense from the blue line, readily activating into play to support his teammates and keep the puck moving. Unfortunately, his excitement to join the play offensively means that he takes a lot of risks, leaving himself in really poor positions to recover defensively if things don't go according to plan. Jiricek is really great at scanning the play off puck and he persists through pressure quite well so I think he will be able to cut down on the over-the-top risks in time.

## **11. Anaheim Ducks**

**Previous Ranking: 14**

**Top Five Prospects: Beckett Sennecke, Lucas Pettersson, Maxim Massé, Stian Solberg, Roger McQueen**

The Anaheim Ducks looked to be on the rise a few years ago when they came out hot with a rookie Trevor Zegras and a breakout year from Troy Terry. Ultimately that season fell apart in the new year and then the past few seasons have been forgettable for the Ducks. That appears to have been the an okay option for Anaheim as they have continued to build a strong pipeline through the draft, with difference makers at every valuable position. However, the majority of those players (Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Cutter Gauthier, Olen Zellweger, etc.) have graduated to the NHL and the Ducks' prospect pool is finally starting to look a bit more pedestrian. The 2024-25 season didn't look too hot down in Anaheim, but that meant they got the chance to add another high-upside piece in Roger McQueen with the 10th overall pick.

Anaheim surprised a ton of people taking Beckett Sennecke 3rd overall in the 2024 Draft but the pick has already aged quite well, giving them yet another high-end wing prospect to play next to their young renters of McTavish, Zegras and Carlsson. Sennecke is a big winger with very impressive puck skill that allows him to regularly deke through several layers of defense. He can get a bit of tunnel vision and try to play hero-puck a bit, losing sight of the best play and turning the puck over by trying to deke too much, but I do think he's made some progress in that department. Sennecke was phenomenal in the OHL last season, and was a late addition to Team Canada's selection camp for the 2025 World Junior Championship as a result.

## **10. Washington Capitals**

**Previous Ranking: 12**

**Top Five Prospects: Ryan Leonard, Cole Hutson, Andrew Cristall, Lynden Lakovic, Terik Parascak**

The Washington Capitals have been going all-in for more than a decade and while it was ultimately a success with their Stanley Cup victory in 2018, their prospect pool was a sight for sore eyes for a very

long time. The Capitals have flirted with the NHL's mushy middle since their Cup win, but blew away all expectations for them last season by winning the President's Trophy. Despite all this, they have done a great job of compiling some really great prospects through the draft, who should help them with the franchise's upcoming transition at the end of the Ovechkin-era.

The past few drafts have seen Washington's prospect pipeline improve significantly, with the crowning piece of their future coming with the eighth overall pick in the 2023 Draft where they selected Ryan Leonard, a remarkable offensive talent who makes his teammates better at every turn. Leonard works incredibly hard and has a knack for scoring big goals in dirty areas and winning puck battles. Cole Hutson had himself an excellent showing at the 2025 World Junior Championship, where he led the tournament in scoring, and several other Capitals prospects such as Andrew Cristall, Ilya Protas, and Terik Parascak are all developing extremely well.

## **9. Seattle Kraken**

**Previous Ranking: 10**

**Top Five Prospects: Jake O'Brien, Carson Rehkopf, Berkly Catton, Jani Nyman, Jagger Firkus**

The Seattle Kraken are in a really strange place for a team that has only played a handful of seasons in franchise history. Typically, expansion teams are really bad for several years until their accumulation of draft picks turns into a strong prospect pool which eventually grows into a good NHL team. The Kraken, however, have bounced around the standings in their first four seasons making high draft picks something that they couldn't rely on. They have done an admirable job of accumulating talent anyway, with 2024 first rounder Berkly Catton leading the way as their clear top prospect.

Berkly Catton is a remarkably intelligent player, creating chances and advantages for his teammates through clever manipulations rather than through physical force. The Spokane Chiefs severely lacked high-end talent during most of Catton's WHL tenure, so he has been leaned upon heavily. Luckily for the Chiefs, Catton has more than been up to the task of leading the team, scoring points at an absurdly high rate throughout his junior career. He is a very skilled player with a ton of speed and a high-end motor. I think his offensive versatility and his potential while attacking off the rush will make him an excellent addition for the Kraken.

## **8. Carolina Hurricanes**

**Previous Ranking: 9**

**Top Five Prospects: Alexander Nikishin, Scott Morrow, Bradly Nadeau, Dominik Badinka, Felix Unger-Sörum**

Teams that are as good as the Carolina Hurricanes shouldn't have prospect pools as good as this team does. Despite being one of the best teams in the NHL over the past five years, the Hurricanes keep finding ways to improve their prospect system. Some of that is through shrewd scouting, which led to them drafting Bradly Nadeau near the end of the first round and Felix Unger-Sörum late in the second round of the 2023 Draft, and some of it is through remarkable development curves with prospects like Alexander Nikishin.

Nikishin is a remarkable defensive prospect who has exploded offensively, leading all KHL defenders in scoring twice in the past three seasons. He is big (6-foot-4), has a heavy slapshot, and skates remarkably well for someone of his size. Nikishin has proved that his breakout was no fluke, and made his North American debut in the 2025 Playoffs for Carolina. With Dmitry Orlov and Brent Burns moving on from the Hurricanes this offseason, there should be a much bigger role available for Nikishin in the 2025-26 season.

## **7. Buffalo Sabres**

**Previous Ranking: 7**

**Top Five Prospects: Radim Mrtka, Noah Östlund, Konsta Helenius, Devon Levi, Isak Rosen**

The Buffalo Sabres' young core has a huge amount of talent, with an embarrassment of riches on their NHL roster with guys like Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power holding down the fort on the backend and Tage Thompson consistently performing like a star centermen. Following the 2024 Draft, the Sabres decided that prospect Matthew Savoie was not needed, given the large number of undersized, skill-based forwards in their prospect pool. That certainly dropped them in this ranking, but they still have a good number of high-end prospects waiting in the wings.

Konsta Helenius is an excellent playmaker who competes hard enough to succeed in the Finnish Liiga as a 17-year-old in his draft year. Helenius is level-headed under pressure and makes difficult passes look routine, setting his teammates up for success. He was good (though not spectacular) for Finland at both the 2024 and 2025 World Junior Championships, though the stat sheet might not give you the best idea of how impactful he was. Helenius' two-way play against pros as a teenager has been very impressive, especially in transition where he is able to keep up with the pace of play both physically and mentally.

## **6. Minnesota Wild**

**Previous Ranking: 2**

**Top Five Prospects: Jesper Wallstedt, Zeev Buium, Danila Yurov, Liam Öhgren, Riley Heidt**

The Minnesota Wild have had one of the best prospect pools in the NHL for a very long time, dating back to when they had dreams of signing Kirill Kaprizov and were left waiting for a few extra years. Now that he has broken several franchise records and established himself as a superstar in the NHL, the Wild still have a really solid pipeline with offensive talents like Zeev Buium, Liam Öhgren, and Danila Yurov as well as one of the hockey world's most exciting goaltending prospects in Jesper Wallstedt.

Zeev Buium is a complete defenseman who had a ton of success early in his collegiate career, scoring well above a point-per-game and winning an NCAA championship as a freshman defender in the 2023-24 season. He is an excellent skater and has excellent hockey sense which allows him to defend incredibly well in the NCAA, and likely in the NHL as well. It's becoming increasingly common to see NHL defenders succeed through puck skills and clever positioning rather than simply through physicality and I think Buium could fit that mold. Buium has a great motor and always finds himself in the thick of the action on both ends of the ice. He has good skill with the puck but his calling card will be his skating and sense which he uses to his advantage best on the rush both as a passer and a scoring threat.

## **5. Montreal Canadiens**

**Previous Ranking: 3**

**Top Five Prospects: Ivan Demidov, David Reinbacher, Michael Hage, Owen Beck, Jacob Fowler**

The Montreal Canadiens have continued to build their prospect pool despite several important players, like Lane Hutson, Kaiden Guhle and Juraj Slafkovsky, graduating into full-time NHL spots. The Canadiens have a great young core already in the NHL, which is largely how they made the playoffs last season, so having such a strong prospect pool as well means that they are quite likely to be a dangerous team in the NHL for a long time. The Habs did well to land two quality forward prospects in the 2024 Draft with Ivan Demidov and Michael Hage, and Jacob Fowler is one of the most promising goaltending prospects in the NHL at the moment.

Ivan Demidov is an incredibly talented offensive player, with phenomenal hands, a zippy shot, and some sneaky-good playmaking instincts. Demidov is a legit top-end talent who has clear top-line potential in the NHL. There aren't many players who can handle the puck quite like Demidov. He led all U20 KHL players in scoring last season, and I'm increasingly confident he'll score a ton of points in the NHL, it's just a question of how effective of a player he can be at even strength given his smaller frame and slightly odd skating stride. It won't be long before we find out, since Demidov looked electrifying offensively in his brief NHL debut in Montreal last Spring.

#### **4. Utah Mammoth**

**Previous Ranking: 8**

**Top Five Prospects: Tij Iginla, Caleb Desnoyers, Dmitri Simashev, Daniil But, Maveric Lamoureux**

The Arizona Coyotes are no more, and in their place, the Utah Mammoth holds their spot on this list. The team showed improvement last year, scoring 89 and finishing 20th in the league, largely due to the continued excellence of Clayton Keller, and both Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther shining as solid supporting pieces. The Mammoth are set to capitalize on the high-end prospect pool created by the now-defunct Arizona Coyotes, though winning one of the draft lotteries for the 2025 Draft certainly helps as well, leading to the addition of Caleb Desnoyers as a future leader down the middle for Utah.

Under new ownership, the Utah Hockey Team looks poised to take another significant step forward in the coming season, led by a youth movement that should make them an imposing group for many years to come. Tij Iginla will certainly help push the team in that direction. His game relies heavily on speed and he's able to do a ton of damage on the rush at the junior level because of it. Iginla has an excellent wrist shot as well, but he isn't the most gifted playmaker or physical guy. Regardless, he works hard and is often the first guy in on the forecheck.

#### **3. Detroit Red Wings**

**Previous Ranking: 5**

**Top Five Prospects: Carter Bear, Michael Brandsegg-Nygård, Nate Danielson, Axel Sandin Pellikka, Sebastian Cossa**

The Detroit Red Wings haven't had much to celebrate over the last seven or eight years, except for their prospect pool. Although many of those players haven't panned out (I'm looking at you Filip Zadina and Joe Veleno), the Red Wings have continued to develop one of the league's deepest pipelines in terms of both NHL quality and star potential. Nate Danielson projects to help fix the team's questions at center going forward, while Axel Sandin Pellikka is looking like a potential star on the backend.

Axel Sandin Pellikka is a right-handed offensive defenseman who has been an offensive leader in the SHL as a teenager. Sandin Pellikka had a great showing for Sweden at the World Juniors in his draft year, improving his draft stock considerably, and has represented Sweden in two more World Junior Championships since, even being named the tourney's top defender in 2025. He is a force on offense but don't let that fool you, he is a hard-working defender who makes a lot of stops despite his 5-foot-11 frame, especially off the rush. I expect he'll join the Grand Rapids Griffins in the AHL for the 2025-26 season before making his NHL debut behind Detroit's high-end top defenders of Simon Edvinsson and Moritz Seider.

## **2. Chicago Blackhawks**

**Previous Ranking: 1**

**Top Five Prospects: Artyom Levshunov, Anton Frondell, Oliver Moore, Sacha Boisvert, Sam Rinzel**

The Chicago Blackhawks were obviously not going to stick at the top of this list for long after Connor Bedard joined the NHL, but the development of their group and a couple more top-3 draft picks have made sure they didn't fall far. Chicago has learned the hard way that tearing a team down and tanking is easy, but building the group back up to the point they can compete for the playoffs is much tougher. Thankfully, they are set to have a steady stream of high-end young talent joining their roster for the next few seasons, all over the lineup.

Artyom Levshunov has an incredibly exciting toolkit as a big, right-handed defender who skates incredibly well. Levshunov has a very projectable game, with the size, skating, and offense to be a great NHL defender. He involves himself in every play possible, which can be a double-edged sword as he reacts and activates before thinking sometimes. Levshunov's offensive game is dynamic, with his smooth skating serving as the catalyst for each thing he does well. He's strong in breakout/entry situations, has some clever stretch passes in his toolkit, and walks the blueline with confidence. His decision making is still a bit raw, but he has made encouraging strides there since being drafted out of the NCAA.

## **1. San Jose Sharks**

**Previous Ranking: 4**

**Top Five Prospects: Igor Chernyshov, Sam Dickinson, Luca Cagnoni, Michael Misa, Quentin Musty**

The San Jose Sharks had made some big moves to vault themselves up this ranking, but the calculations changed entirely when they won the 2024 draft lottery and traded for goaltender Yaroslav Askarov, one of the world's best goalie prospects. Landing a no-doubt top-line center in Celebrini and someone with a high chance of becoming a strong starting goalie in the matter of two months gave them a huge boost. However, both of those prospects, as well as Will Smith, have made the leap into the NHL and are no longer eligible for this list. The fact that they still rank this high is a testament to the massive influx of young talent set to hit the Sharks' lineup over the coming seasons.

Two years after we saw Connor Bedard going first overall, and three after Shane Wright went fourth overall, another CHL exceptional status player has gone in the top-5 of the NHL draft in Michael Misa. Misa plays an extremely well rounded game, with a really strong foundation of skills that should make him a great top-six forward in the NHL. Misa is an excellent skater, with the skill and hockey sense to be a great power play asset for San Jose. Misa's fit is going to be very interesting with the Sharks, given they have Macklin Celebrini as a no-doubt first line center and Will Smith as a possible 2C for the future. Smith showed signs of great chemistry with Celebrini as a winger as last season went on so I think that opens the door for Misa to stay at center in the NHL.

## ESPN / Five months from Olympics, here's what you should know about Team USA men's hockey

**By Emily Kaplan – September 3, 2025**

The 4 Nations Face-Off last February was a smash hit and set the stage for an even more competitive 2026 Olympics in Milan in February. With NHL players participating for the first time in 12 years, USA coach Mike Sullivan said "the stakes have never been higher" for the 12-team tournament.

As Team USA gathered for an orientation camp last week in Plymouth, Michigan, the players and management did not shy away from the pressure .

"The expectation is to go to Milan and win the gold medal," Vegas star Jack Eichel said Wednesday at the camp. "I think anything short of that, it would be disappointing."

With the U.S. looking to win its first Olympic gold in men's hockey since the 1980 Miracle on Ice team, the talent pool is deeper than ever. General manager Bill Guerin and his staff have a series of difficult decisions.

"The guys that played in [4 Nations] did a great job, but we have to go back to the drawing board and start over again," Guerin said. "Guys have to be playing well. They've got to be healthy. So it's really tough to say how much is the roster going to change. I don't know. We will see as time goes on, but having the two extra spots is huge."

Five months out, here's what you should know about how Team USA is being constructed.

THE TWO-DAY CAMP -- about three weeks before NHL training camps open -- featured no on-ice sessions, and no systems and strategy were discussed. The focus was building camaraderie and setting expectations. Guerin gathered the 44 players in a ballroom for a talk once they arrived. According to players, the message was this: Team USA had a good showing at the 4 Nations but fell short. The Olympics are a bigger stage, with more tradition. The 2026 Games are a prime opportunity to make a statement on how far the United States has come as a hockey country.

"I think the message is that we can play any style," said Lightning defenseman Ryan McDonagh, joined by Patrick Kane as the only holdover invitees from the 2014 Olympic team in Sochi. "We can go against any team, how they're built and we feel confident that we can win."

"They had a good talk with us," Devils defenseman Brett Pesce said. "The expectation is gold and nothing else -- and I completely agree. Whoever makes the team, the talent pool is insane."

ALL 23 PLAYERS who were named to the 4 Nations team were in attendance except Matthew Tkachuk -- plus Jake Sanderson, Tage Thompson and Pesce who were later brought on as injury/illness replacements. Tkachuk tore his adductor muscle and suffered a sports hernia injury during 4 Nations, which sidelined him for most of the final against Canada, then Florida's last 25 regular-season games before he returned in the playoffs. He had offseason surgery and is expected to sit out the start of the NHL regular season.

This summer was a big one for Tkachuk: he got married back home in St. Louis, then underwent surgery. Guerin said he was "planning and expecting" for Tkachuk to be ready for Milan. Tkachuk's brother, Brady, was even more emphatic. "I think it's a full expectation of him not just to play but be at his best," he said. "It goes back to the injuries that he has had and he's played through, he'll just give you

absolutely everything that he has. I know with his preparation and his work ethic that he'll probably be in the best shape he's ever been in after this surgery."

Matthew and Brady talked constantly during the two-day camp, which Matthew didn't attend because it wasn't a good idea for him to travel. "He's had the most FOMO that I've ever seen him have," Brady said.

THE 44-PLAYER camp roster featured some notable omissions -- but also some surprising additions: young players such as Jackson LaCombe, Frank Nazar, Shane Pinto and Alex Vlasic, all long shots to make the team. What they have in common: they were on the roster in May for the world championships, which the U.S. men's team won for the first time in 92 years. That commitment was rewarded.

"We're doing things differently now, and the world championships are absolutely connected to this. If you're saying no and you don't have a legit excuse, it will hurt you," Guerin said. "I am not afraid to say that we don't look at that with the Olympics coming up. That's the biggest stage. The world championships are huge. They might not be as popular in the United States, but in Europe, in Canada, it is, and it has to be important for us. ... We need to know what you're all about. We need to know that you want to help USA Hockey win."

TAGE THOMPSON SAYS he believes he should have been on the 4 Nations team.

The Sabres star said Guerin called him well before the roster was released to let him know he was on the outside. "When I received the news, obviously it sucked," Thompson said. "That was a big goal of mine and I wanted to be on the team. To be honest with you, I felt like I would do a good enough job last year."

The 6-foot-7 forward says he adds an element Team USA covets: versatility. "In the early stages of my career, I was in a different role and was playing more of a fourth, third line checking, defending role," Thompson said. "As I've progressed in my career, I've been given opportunities to move up, with the ability to score and create plays. If that's something they already have and they don't need, then I also believe with my size and my speed, I can play pretty much any role that they need me to. PK, power play, whatever."

Thompson said he didn't want to project it out loud but acknowledged he did use the snub as motivation. After his call with Guerin, Thompson scored 33 goals and 54 points over his final 57 games. Thompson says he's putting an extra emphasis on consistency and cleaning up some of his game in the defensive zone. But the 27-year-old remains confident.

"You're looking at the 25 best players in the country," Thompson said. "So now it's, what role are you going to play and who is going to do their job the best? I believe I can do any of those roles the best."

JOHN TORTORELLA WAS an unsung member of Team USA's coaching staff at 4 Nations. Sullivan asked his former mentor to take on a different role. "I don't want you to be the hammer," Sullivan told Tortorella. "I'll be the hammer. I want you to be the old wise man. I want you to reveal yourself to the players and the other coaches, to show the John Tortorella that I know, that my wife knows, my kids know, that your kids know. The side you don't show the world very often."

While the younger players loved having Tortorella around, Sullivan credited the former Flyers coach for being his sounding board; it was Tortorella who gave affirmation to Sullivan that they should put the Tkachuk brothers together on a line halfway through the opening game against Finland -- which changed the complexion of the tournament.

Since Tortorella is not on an NHL bench this fall, Guerin has tasked Tortorella with another new role. The 67-year-old will be hitting the road early in the NHL season to scout, with an extra focus on bubble players.



BEFORE 4 NATIONS, it had been a long time since NHL players competed in a best-on-best competition, and even the stars were taken aback by the intensity.

"The game really didn't translate to the NHL game; it was a different skill level, different speed," goalie Connor Hellebuyck said. "When I got back to my NHL game, first I had to shake off losing. Then I had to get back into my routine."

Quinn Hughes, watching at home while injured, noted: "I don't want to say you couldn't notice anyone, but it felt like everyone was just fitting in because guys were so good. I felt like no one could really stand out or you couldn't really put your imprint on the game too much. You might've had one chance or two chances and it's either you take advantage of those chances or you don't, but no one was getting six, seven chances, which you might get in an NHL game."

HUGHES WAS GUTTED to miss 4 Nations because of injury.

"Obviously I feel like I could have made a difference. I mean there's still moments in the game where I feel like I could have taken advantage of some things, but you never know," Hughes said. "The beautiful thing is that I'll hopefully have the chance in February again, so really test myself there."

It was a challenging season for the Vancouver captain, as he managed several different injuries.

"I tore my oblique, then came back a little too early and hurt my groin because my oblique was probably weak," Hughes said. "And then I hurt the ligament in my hand in late December off a one-timer, and I've taken two million one-timers in my career, and for whatever reason that happened."

He was able to play with a cast on his hand, which he said "actually worked out great." It was the oblique, Hughes said, that kept him out of 4 Nations. The good news heading into important season -- both for the Canucks, and Team USA -- is that Hughes said he had a great summer, which he called a mental and physical reset.

THE TRADE FROM Chicago to Florida changed Seth Jones' hockey life. When the 4 Nations roster was submitted in December, Jones was on the Blackhawks and it seemed nobody talked about the 30-year-old as a notable omission. Fast-forward a few months and Jones played the most of any Panther (outside goalie Sergei Bobrovsky) in Florida's dominant 23-game Stanley Cup run. Jones is now firmly back on the radar.

He's careful to compare his situation with the Blackhawks and Panthers, but believed he played "more confidently" with Florida.

"I'm comfortable with where I'm at; over a long playoff run you can show you can play with that physicality, and in different situations over those 2½ months," Jones said. "Hopefully they saw that."

With Hughes, Charlie McAvoy, Jaccob Slavin and Zach Werenski basically locked into the top four, the final spots on the blue line are fierce. Adam Fox is coming off a down season, but talk at USA camp was that the Rangers' defenseman is poised for a major comeback. Sanderson, an up-and-comer, earned his way into a more regular role after being thrust into 4 Nations as a 22-year-old.

"I'm not sure what my chances are," Jones said. "But I'm going to do my best to make it."

IT'S GOING TO be an intense start to the season. With dozens of players across several countries and NHL teams fighting for bubble spots on Olympic rosters, there's a common prediction among players: games over the first three months are going to have extra juice.

"Obviously it's going to be interesting playing for your team, your personal team, then in the back of your mind, you're kind of playing for this as well, right?" Jones said. "Usually you have the first 20 games

after training camp, everyone's getting settled into their system. I think you're going to see a lot more guys look faster early on this season, because they're fighting for something."

4 NATIONS MARKED the first time Brady and Matthew Tkachuk were teammates, outside of an All-Star game. "It was the little moments -- going back to the hotel and going to each other's rooms, hanging out, getting dinner, I felt like we were just inseparable for the two weeks. It felt like we were kids again," Brady said. "It was just so special in the locker room, looking across the room and seeing him and hearing what he has to say and his Stanley Cup experience of giving it to everybody."

Now, the Hughes brothers, who are good friends with the Tkachuks, have a chance to do the same. Quinn Hughes has already been named to the team; Jack and Luke hope to join him. Quinn and Jack were teammates for a World Juniors team. Jack and Luke are teammates in New Jersey. But Quinn has never played with Luke, who is 23.

"It's something we've always dreamed of, to play with each other and wear the crest," Luke Hughes said. "The three of us to do that together would be such an honor. So it will happen someday. I think it will happen someday."

The Hughes brothers enjoyed being together at camp last week, and they were together ... a lot.

"It's like three brothers, they bicker back and forth," said Pesce, Luke's defense partner in New Jersey. "And then you add Quinn, he's the older brother. I feel like he's kind of the middle man. They're always barking at each other. Sometimes it's hockey, sometimes it's the Chipotle bill. They're always goofing on each other; it's fun."

## [The Athletic / Ranking the best NHL players and prospects under 23: Celebrini, Bedard top the list](#)

By Corey Pronman – September 2, 2025

Welcome to this year's edition of the under-23 NHL player rankings.

After ranking every organization's best young players in the NHL Pipeline Rankings, we now turn to a ranking of the best young players overall on teams' reserve lists, meaning within an NHL organization, in or outside the league. This is a ranking meant to show who I think will have the best pro careers, not who I would take in a game tomorrow. This is also a good exercise to show how the last five age groups compare to each other, as this largely spans the player pool from the 2021 through 2025 NHL Drafts.

A player must be 22 years old or younger as of Sept. 15, 2025 to qualify.

Ranked players are placed into tiers and given tool grades. Tool grades are based on a scale with six separate levels, with an eye toward how this attribute would grade in the NHL (poor, below-average, average, above-average, high-end and elite). "Average" on this scale means the tool projects as NHL average, which is meant as a positive, not a criticism. Skating, puck skills, hockey sense and compete for every projected NHL player are graded. Shot grades are only included if a shot is notably good or poor.

*\*Includes CBJ players only. For full 173 player list, click [hyperlink to article](#)\**

### **Tier 2: NHL All-Star**

#### **4. Adam Fantilli**

C – Blue Jackets

DOB: 10/12/04 Drafted: '23 - 3

Fantilli took positive steps in his second NHL season, highlighted by hitting the 30-goal mark. He's had ups and downs to start his career, but he has the makings of a future star. He's got a huge frame, skates well and competes hard. He wins a lot of battles, will lay into opponents and gets to the net to create offense. He has excellent hands, often beating defenders with his one-on-one play, and the pace at which he can get by players can break open shifts. His playmaking isn't the main thing that gets you excited about his game, but Fantilli can make difficult passes. He's more of a goal scorer, with an excellent wrist shot that can and has beaten NHL goalies from range.

### **Tier 4: Top of the lineup player**

#### **23. Kent Johnson**

LW – Blue Jackets

DOB: 10/18/02 Drafted: '21 - 5

Johnson took major steps forward this season, becoming a very important part of Columbus' offense. He's a player with truly dynamic offensive touch. He has elite hands, beats defensemen one-on-one at a high rate and has the ability to create chances out of nothing. He can consistently make difficult plays to others and has a good shot from range. The pure athletic tools in his game aren't amazing. He has average size and foot speed, isn't overly physical and plays too much on the outside. The pure puck game will allow him to score a lot and play high in a lineup with potential star upside, even if his style of play will frustrate coaches at times.

#### **Tier 5: Bubble top and middle of the lineup player**

##### **49. Jackson Smith**

D – Blue Jackets

DOB: 5/13/07    Drafted: '25 - 14

Smith is a 6-3 defenseman who skates quite well. He's funky-looking at times, going 10-2 with his edges a bit too much, but he's a powerful, fluid skater who can easily get by checkers and skate pucks up ice. Smith often tries to attack with his skill and can break down players one-on-one easily. Smith's decision-making isn't the best at times, and I wouldn't call him a natural playmaker, but he creates a lot of offense and has a good point shot. Defensively, he's decent due to his frame and feet, and when he's leaning into checks, he can be a two-way force. His defensive play is inconsistent, in part because he's often up in the attack, but he has the potential to be a top-four defenseman who can play on both special teams.

##### **51. Cayden Lindstrom**

C – Blue Jackets

DOB: 2/3/06    Drafted: '24 - 4

Lindstrom missed almost the entire season due to a back injury and corresponding surgery, but he came back right at the very end of Medicine Hat's playoff run. When healthy, he's an elite athlete. He has the quick-twitch feet of a smaller forward who could blow by NHL defenders. He's a big, powerful center with a ton of physicality in his game. Lindstrom has good offensive skills and can score goals. His playmaking is something I've questioned at times, though. He projects as a highly likable top-two-line forward who can be a playoff-style player, even if he's not a for-sure center in the NHL.

#### **Tier 6: Middle of the lineup player**

##### **77. Cole Sillinger**

C – Blue Jackets

DOB: 5/16/03    Drafted: '21 - 12

Sillinger had his best season in the NHL to date. He played a lot of minutes, including on both special teams, for Columbus. Sillinger is a skilled center who can provide offense, but what makes him truly appealing is his compete. He plays with an edge and isn't afraid to throw around his body. He creates offense at the net and is responsible off the puck. He has a scoring touch, even if the natural offense in his game is a minor question in terms of whether he'll be a big-time scorer who makes a ton of plays. His foot speed is also not great. He's a player coaches will want to play a lot due to his compete and could be a great long-term second-line center.

##### **78. Denton Mateychuk**

D – Blue Jackets

DOB: 7/12/04    Drafted: '22 - 12

Mateychuk impressed in his first pro season. He stood out in the AHL and quickly earned a call-up to Columbus, where he stuck. He's an excellent skater, with clear NHL edge work and speed to be able to skate pucks up ice at the top level, evade pressure and close on checks. Mateychuk is a skilled puck handler who makes a lot of tough plays at full flight. I wouldn't call him a true top-tier playmaker, but he projects to get his points in the NHL due to having enough skill and sense and a big point shot. He gives a

good effort, and with his feet, he should be a competent defender as a pro, even though he's on the smaller side. Mateychuk projects as a top-four defenseman.

## The Athletic / NHL to have salary cap for 2026 playoffs per new agreement with NHLPA on rolling CBA implementation

**By Chris Johnston and James Mirtle – September 2, 2025**

After introducing a new playoff salary cap as part of its recent extension to the collective bargaining agreement with the NHL Players' Association, the NHL is going to bring that new rule into effect immediately, according to league sources.

That means the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs will be played with teams limited to icing a 20-man roster that is cap-compliant for each game and includes changes to how the long-term injury exception will be applied in cap accounting before the playoffs.

The changes are being introduced before the existing CBA expires on Sept. 15, 2026.

The NHL and NHLPA have agreed to a rolling implementation of the new rules included in the four-year CBA extension they signed in late June.

In addition to the playoff salary cap, other immediate changes include: no deferred compensation in contracts and no double salary retention in trades; a new mandate that prevents teams from implementing a player dress code; and the removal of a rule preventing players from endorsing wine and spirits.

Other agreed-upon changes to player contracting issues, including reducing the maximum length of contracts to seven years for a player re-signing and six years for a player signing with a new club, won't take effect until Sept. 16, 2026, meaning that Connor McDavid, Jack Eichel, Kirill Kaprizov and everyone else with one year remaining on an existing contract are still eligible to sign eight-year extensions in the meantime.

However, the introduction of a playoff salary cap and changes to the rules around cap accounting will likely have an immediate impact on how teams do business this season.

### **What this means for the cap**

The main impact of adding a postseason salary cap will be an end to teams being able to stash players on long-term injured reserve and use that additional cap space to add more talent before the playoffs.

The Chicago Blackhawks (2015), Tampa Bay Lightning (2021), Vegas Golden Knights (2023) and Florida Panthers (2025) are all examples of teams that employed LTIR to remove injured star players from the cap temporarily, only to have them return for the postseason. All four won the Stanley Cup that season.

Having a salary cap in the playoffs will also impact the way teams behave during the season in other ways. Previously, NHL teams were able to accrue extra cap space by remaining under the cap for stretches of the season. They could then acquire players midseason and only account for the portion of their salary that remained during the year (i.e., roughly one-quarter of their salary at the trade deadline).

Under the new playoff salary cap, however, players' full-season salaries will be used to calculate if a team is cap compliant in the postseason, even if players were only on a team's books for a small portion of the season.

In other words, acquiring a \$6.1 million player like Brad Marchand at the deadline, as the Panthers did last season, will require having much more cap room than it did previously in order to allow for the

added player to play in the postseason. This change makes accruing cap space a far less effective tool than it has been in the past, as the accrued space doesn't benefit a team in the playoffs.

The only way to reduce a player's cap hit in a trade will now be using salary retention, although even that mechanism has been limited in the new CBA. The new rules will prevent the majority of double retention trades — where players had salary retained by a third-party team in deals — which will also make freeing up cap space before the deadline more complicated.

Both of these changes will likely make it more difficult for GMs to make trades. The fact that the cap has risen considerably to \$95.5 million for 2025-26, however, does mean more teams have flexibility than during the league's pandemic-induced flat-cap era of the past six seasons. — *James Mirtle, senior NHL writer*