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**Columbus Blue Jackets**

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## **Columbus Dispatch / 5 tasks on Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell's offseason 'to do' list**

**By Staff Report – April 22, 2025**

The Stanley Cup Playoffs began April 19 without the Blue Jackets, who finished two points shy of claiming the final wild card spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference.

Now, Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/GM Don Waddell and his staff take center stage.

After watching his team take a heated playoff race down to the wire, Waddell and his front office find themselves in a great spot starting another busy spring/summer.

**Here are five items on Waddell's offseason "to-do" list:**

### **Columbus Blue Jackets have staff decisions to make**

Along with working on expiring player contracts, Waddell has a slew of expiring staff contracts he still needs to hash out.

Coach Dean Evason is signed, but multiple assistant coaches and other support staff members who work closely with players had one year left on their contracts starting the season. That was also the case with multiple front office staffers. Evason's only assistant hire after taking the job was Scott Ford, whom he had known from his time coaching the AHL's Milwaukee Admirals.

Look for staff decisions to be a high priority on Waddell's checklist.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets have decisions to make on 12 free agents including Ivan Provorov, James van Riemsdyk**

The Blue Jackets finished the season with 27 NHL players, including three restricted free agents and nine unrestricted free agents.

Starting the offseason, they have 15 players under contract for roughly \$51.5 million. That leaves approximately \$36.5 million in salary-cap space against next season's \$88 million ceiling to re-sign players and/or find replacements through trades and free agency.

Defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro are prominent UFAs, along with forwards James van Riemsdyk, Justin Danforth and Sean Kuraly. The RFAs are power forward Dmitry Voronkov, backup goalie Daniil Tarasov and defenseman Jordan Harris.

"We put everything on hold probably a month ago," Waddell said. "There's a few obvious (free agents) that we'd like to have back that we've talked about, Provy and Fabbro. There are some other guys we'd like to have back, too, but we haven't made any of those determinations yet."

Having that much cap space creates a lot of pathways for Waddell to explore. Leading up to the July 1 start of free agency, the Jackets are a team to watch.

"The good and bad (News) is we're done April 17, so we've got time on our hands here where we can really look at it," Waddell said. "It also gives us time to study the market and say, 'OK, if we don't sign player X, can we replace him with player Z?' All of that will happen over the next 4-to-6 weeks."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets can start extension talks with Adam Fantilli**

As of July 1, the Blue Jackets can officially open talks with center Adam Fantilli on a contract extension. Fantilli's breakout second season included him rallying late with six goals in four games to push his season total to 31 during the Jackets' six-game winning streak to close out.

Fantilli also finished with 40 points on 25 goals and 15 assists in his final 45 games, including a two-month stint filling the top center role impressively while Sean Monahan recovered from wrist surgery in January.

Look for the Blue Jackets to explore longer-term contracts, which require a much higher salary number with the league's cap ceiling set to skyrocket over the next three years to \$113.5 million for the 2027-28 season. Fantilli is only 20, but he played like a developing NHL superstar this season.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets to assess goaltending after Elvis Merzlikins' rollercoaster season**

Elvis Merzlikins had another rollercoaster ride of a season, experiencing memorable highs and lows.

He stole several games for the Blue Jackets, including the March 1 NHL Stadium Series matchup in front of 94,751 at Ohio Stadium. The issue is consistency. Merzlikins is still searching for it, and his numbers continue to lag because of it.

The same can be said for Tarasov, whose struggles with consistency damaged the coaching staff's trust in him. That's why rookie Jet Greaves was recalled on two separate occasions to be the primary starter while Merzlikins was out injured, including a memorable stint in which he backstopped the Jackets during five games of their late six-game winning streak.

Merzlikins has two years left on a contract that carries a \$5.4 million annual cap charge, but Waddell said the team isn't considering any buyouts. A buyout of Merzlikins' remaining contract would cost the Blue Jackets \$1.7 million for the next four years, all counting toward the salary cap.

Waddell said the Jackets' goaltending will be closely examined to determine whether and what changes might be necessary.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets mulling options with two first-round picks in 2025 NHL draft**

After gaining the Minnesota Wild's first-round pick in this year's draft as part of the return package in a trade for defenseman David Jiricek, the Blue Jackets have two first-round selections in June.

They have their own pick, 13th overall, and the No. 20 pick from the Wild, but both could change depending on the outcomes of the NHL's draft lottery and playoffs. Keeping those picks would further bolster a stocked developmental system, but Waddell described those picks and others the Jackets own as "draft assets."

Trades for established NHL players occasionally happen during the NHL's two-day draft or the days leading up to it. Waddell, for instance, traded Alexandre Texier to St. Louis before the start of the first round last year.

"We have a lot of assets we could use for trades," Waddell said. "We have two first-round picks this year, so our goal is to make sure we do everything that we're capable of doing with (them) to try and make this team better."

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets make several changes to support staff, re-sign assistant coaches

**By Aaron Portzline – April 22, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — After one season on the job, Columbus Blue Jackets president and general manager Don Waddell is ready to put his stamp on the franchise.

Waddell confirmed to The Athletic on Monday that several longtime employees were informed over the weekend that they would not return, most notably strength and conditioning coach Kevin Collins, who had been with the Blue Jackets since 2010.

Also let go were two employees who have been with the Blue Jackets since they arrived as an NHL expansion team in 2000: equipment manager Jamie Healy and video coach Dan Singleton. Naoto “Nates” Goto, who worked under Collins as an assistant athletic trainer since 2012-13, also was told he won’t return, Waddell said.

Meanwhile, Waddell told The Athletic that assistant coaches Niklas Backstrom (goaltending), Jared Boll and Steve McCarthy, all of whom spent the 2024-25 season in the final year of their contracts, have signed extensions. He would not specify the terms.

Collins’ departure is most notable. The Blue Jackets frequently have been among the NHL leaders in man-games lost due to injury, and previous administrations — GM Jarmo Kekalainen and his predecessor, Scott Howson — have done offseason deep-dives in attempts to find out the cause.

Mostly, it was dismissed as bad luck.

This season, the Blue Jackets lost 324 man-games, with veteran leaders Boone Jenner (shoulder, 56 games), Erik Gudbranson (shoulder, 66) and Sean Monahan (wrist, 28) all missing extended time, along with young winger Yegor Chinakhov (back, 44).

It marked the third straight season the Blue Jackets totaled more than 300 man-games lost. In 2022-23, the Jackets set a franchise record with 565 man-games lost to injury.

## BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets rewrote the team record book in 2024-25

By Jeff Svoboda – April 22, 2025

If you're the Blue Jackets public relations department, get ready for a busy offseason.

The team's media guide is going to take a little longer to update this summer.

A memorable season saw the team improve from consecutive last-place finishes to the cusp of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and along with it came some historic performances from a number of CBJ players as well as the team itself.

Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko, Adam Fantilli, Mathieu Olivier and others had fantastic campaigns that put them among the top players in team history, while the Blue Jackets as a unit accomplished some feats that will go down in the team record books as well.

While the Blue Jackets' 89 points (40-33-9 record) finished just two points short of a postseason appearance, it was a season we'll long remember for a lot of reasons. Here's a look at some of the performances that most stood out.

### **Werenski Posts Historic Campaign**

From day one of the season all the way through game 82, if there was one player who best exemplified what the Blue Jackets were all about, it was Werenski.

The defenseman's numbers and accolades are almost too numerous to list, as he broke his own franchise records for goals (22), assists (59) and points (81) among defensemen. He placed second in the NHL among blueliners in all three categories, led the NHL in average ice time (a CBJ-record mark of 26:45) and distance skated (320.25 miles), and was third in the league with 298 shots on goal. In addition, Werenski became just the ninth NHL defenseman since 1997 to finish a season with at least 80 points.

His 22 multipoint games finished third in team history and first among defensemen, behind only Artemi Panarin (25, 2018-19) and Rick Nash (2008-09), led by a team record-tying five-point game Nov. 21 vs. Tampa Bay. When it was all said and done, he also placed among team franchise leaders in points and assists in a single season.

### **Most Points, CBJ single season**

1. Artemi Panarin	87, 2018-19
T-2. <b>Zach Werenski</b>	82, 2024-25
T-2. Artemi Panarin	82, 2017-18

### **Most Assists, CBJ single season**

T-1. Artemi Panarin	59, 2018-19
T-1. <b>Zach Werenski</b>	59, 2024-25

A contender for the Norris and Hart Trophies, Werenski was also the team's Community MVP and its nominee for the King Clancy Memorial Trophy, awarded annually to the NHL player who best exemplifies leadership on and off the ice and has made a noteworthy humanitarian contribution to his community.

No matter how you break it down, Werenski posted one of the most impressive campaigns in team history.

### **Marchenko, Fantilli fill up the net**

Coming into the season, just seven different players had reached the 30-goal mark during a campaign for the Blue Jackets.

You can now add two more names to the list in Marchenko and Fantilli, who posted matching totals of 31 goals on the season for the Blue Jackets. Marchenko was a consistent scorer all season, scoring at least five goals in three months and four two other times, while Fantilli came on at the end to join the list. The second-youngest 30-goal scorer in CBJ history and the NHL's youngest this season, Fantilli scored six times in the last four games and nine times in 10 April games to make it to the 30-goal mark.

### **CBJ 30-goal scorers, single season**

T-1. Cam Atkinson	41, 2018-19
T-1. Rick Nash	41, 2003-04
3. Rick Nash	40, 2008-09
4. Rick Nash	38, 2007-08
5. Cam Atkinson	35, 2016-17
6. Geoff Sanderson	34, 2002-03
T-7. Ryan Johansen	33, 2013-14
T-7. Rick Nash	33, 2009-10
9. Rick Nash	32, 2010-11
T-10. <b>Adam Fantilli</b>	31, 2024-25
T-10. <b>Kirill Marchenko</b>	31, 2024-25
T-10. Brandon Saad	31, 2015-16
T-10. Nick Foligno	31, 2014-15
T-10. Rick Nash	31, 2005-06
T-15. Boone Jenner	30, 2014-15

T-15. Rick Nash 30, 2011-12

T-15. Geoff Sanderson 30, 2000-01

Marchenko and Fantilli became just the second pair of CBJ teammates to get to 30 goals in a season, joining Foligno and Jenner in 2014-15. Marchenko's 74 points also tied Johnny Gaudreau's mark from 2022-23 for the sixth-most in team history, and he's just the second CBJ player to have a season in which he posted 30-plus goals and 40-plus assists (Foligno, 2014-15).

We can also say hats off to the only two players on the season to post hat tricks as well. Fantilli had two to tie the franchise record, while Marchenko had a three-goal game for the third year in a row.

### **The Cannon Didn't Stop Firing**

Those three players were far from the only Blue Jackets to have standout campaigns. The team's five 20-goal scorers (Marchenko, Fantilli, Werenski, Kent Johnson with 24 and Dmitri Voronkov with 23) tied a team record with the 2018-19 campaign, as did its mark of five 50-plus point scorers (Werenski, Marchenko, Johnson with 57, Sean Monahan with 57 and Fantilli with 54) also tied for its most with 2009-10 and 2016-17.

As a result, the Blue Jackets kept the goal cannon firing all season long. When it was all added up, the team's 267 goals set a new franchise record.

### **Most Team Goals, single season**

- |            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| 1. 2024-25 | 267 goals |
| 2. 2021-22 | 258 goals |
| 3. 2018-19 | 256 goals |

Included were 161 goals at home, a team record and the most in the NHL, nudging one past Tampa Bay's total of 160. In addition, the Blue Jackets' 202 goals at 5-on-5 finished first in the NHL, 12 clear of second-place Washington.

Earlier we said the PR department will have a busy offseason on its hands; the cannon operators will also have to find a new supply of charges and cannonballs for the 2025-26 season as well.

### **Oliver, Monahan, Others Stand Out**

There are a number of other marks that will keep it a busy offseason for record keepers. Here's a list of some other notable team and player accomplishments this season.

- Olivier brought the boom all season, and his total of 306 hits broke Brandon Dubinsky's team record of 248 set in 2016-17 (though the stat has only been kept since 2005-06). Olivier finished second in the NHL in the stat and was the only player in the NHL to have at least 15 goals, 100 penalty minutes and 250 hits.
- Monahan missed 28 games with an upper body injury, which is a shame because it would have been fun to see where he would have landed in the team's all-time single-season stat marks had he stayed healthy. His 19-38-57 line gave him the most points ever for a CBJ player in his first 54 games with the franchise and made him one of four players in team history to play at least 50

games and average more than a point per game in the season (Panarin, 2017-18 and 2018-19; Werenski, 2024-25; Nash 2008-09).

- Johnson's 24-33-57 line was a breakout season for the talented winger taken fifth overall in the 2021 draft, and he and Fantilli became just the eighth players age 22 or younger in team history have 50-plus-point seasons. He'll also go down in the record books as second overall in CBJ history with a shooting percentage of 19.5, second to Sonny Milano's mark of 20.3 in 2017-18.
- The Blue Jackets tied a franchise record with 57 standings points at home on the season, going 26-10-5 at Nationwide Arena -- and one game in Ohio Stadium -- to match the 2016-17 team.



## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Declines Offer To Play At World Championships

**By Spencer Lazary – April 22, 2025**

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski has declined the offer to play for Team USA at the 2025 World Championships in May.

After an impressive season with the Blue Jackets that saw him score 23 goals, 59 assists for a total of 82 points. The team unfortunately fell short and wrapped things up earlier than he would've liked. Werenski has decided to take the summer off and focus on personal matters.

During his end-of-season media availability, he opened up about the decision. He cited his upcoming wedding — along with a close friend's wedding — as the main reasons. It makes total sense. It's already shaping up to be a packed summer for him, and adding a two-to-three-week tournament overseas would've only made things more hectic.

For Blue Jackets fans, they won't get to see Werenski suit up for Team USA this spring. But there's still a chance other players could represent their countries.

So far, no one else from the team has confirmed whether they'll accept or decline invites — but we might see a few Jackets playing overseas next month.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets' Merzlikins Will Not Play For Latvia At The World Championship

**By Spencer Lazary – April 22, 2025**

In a Latvian article published this morning, it was confirmed that Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins will not be joining Latvia at the World Championships in May.

Merzlikins cited family and personal matters as the reason for opting out of the tournament. He recently welcomed another child to his family and feels that spending time with them—along with working on himself—is more of a priority this summer.

He has previously played in six World Championships for his home country and will now pass on what would have been his seventh.

This season, Merzlikins helped backstop the Blue Jackets to meaningful games in April. While they ultimately fell short, being eliminated on the second-last day of the regular season, there were moments where he stepped up and kept his team in games.

In 53 appearances, he posted a 26-21-5 record with a 3.18 goals-against average and a .892 save percentage—marking the most games he's played in a single NHL season.

That said, questions remain about Merzlikins' future in Columbus. A recent report suggested that the Blue Jackets may be considering an overhaul in goal, potentially making this an offseason to watch.

## The Hockey Writers / 13 Takeaways From Blue Jackets' Exit Interview Day

By Mark Scheig – April 22, 2025

Oh so close.

That's where the Columbus Blue Jackets finished relative to the playoff race in 2024-25. They were the last team to be eliminated from the playoffs when the Montreal Canadiens defeated the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Blue Jackets didn't let the disappointment of Wednesday stop them from giving their fans one last chance to celebrate a win. With their 6-1 win over the New York Islanders, the Blue Jackets finished the season winning six in a row while going 7-3-0 in their last 10 games.

As great a late-season run as that was, the Blue Jackets still fell two points plus the tiebreaker short of their goal of making it to postseason. At exit-interview day on Friday, you could see and hear the disappointment in the players as they walked into the conference room to talk about their season.

We will have all offseason and then into the summer to go over everything said on Friday. But right here, we will focus on 13 of the biggest takeaways from the availabilities. Among those that spoke were GM Don Waddell, coach Dean Evason, the leadership group and then several other players.

As for where we will begin our takeaways, look no further than the disappointment of missing the playoffs.

### **13 Takeaways From Exit Day**

#### **1. Frustration of coming oh so close.**

One of the main questions of the day was if 2024-25 could be considered a successful season given what was expected but also missing the playoffs at the same time. As you might imagine, the answer to that question was 'yeah, but...'

"You absolutely have to say it's a successful season," Waddell said. "Now in saying that, you're never happy when you're not in the playoffs. On April 16, we were still alive in the playoffs with the season ending on the 17th is pretty remarkable for these guys."

"Well, we're not far enough because we're not playing. We're not preparing to play," Evason said. "So I want to make that clear. I know we're going to get some accolades and all that kind of stuff. But at the end of the day, we're not in the playoffs. That was our first step to get into the playoffs and we didn't get there. So are we happy with the foundation that we are continuing to build on here this year? Sure. But it's extremely frustrating because we had a stretch where we didn't do what we did in the last six hockey games in order to put ourselves in a spot to be playing in the playoffs. We're extremely positive but there's some negativity too that we're not playing tomorrow or preparing to play in the next few days."

The players shared in this feeling. There was success. But only playing 82 games and then not having a tomorrow takes away some of the good feeling of the season.

Zach Werenski said at the beginning of 2024-25 that there needed to be some level of success during the season. During his availability, he said the Blue Jackets were better and more competitive this season. They were in most every game. They also defeated several playoff teams. But...

"I feel like it's hard as a competitor to say it was successful when you miss the playoffs," Werenski said. "At the end of the day, that's your goal and you want to be competing for the Stanley Cup and we're not

doing that although we're just short. It's still short of it. So definitely feel like in a sense we made huge progress this year and took steps in the right direction. But I don't know if I'd use the word successful. I feel like it's still a process and still a long ways to go to get to where we ultimately want to be and just continue to work at that."

The experience will help the Blue Jackets in the future. But right now, they are feeling the pain of missing out on the real fun. That should be plenty enough motivation to put in the work this offseason to get into the playoffs in 2025-26.

## **2. Defense and goaltending**

Waddell was asked how aggressive does he want to be this offseason and then how big a challenge fixing from the red line back would be wondering if this would be the team's focus. He agreed with the question.

"Yeah, I would agree with that," Waddell said. "We've had lots of meetings already. We just had a big meeting the other day about you look at different avenues you can explore. One is obviously through trades. We have a lot of pick assets that we can use for trades. And the other is the free agent market this year with the cap going up, a lot of teams have locked up their players for numerous amounts of years. You guys can see the same list we're looking at. So there's going to be some challenges there."

"But I think every summer there's deals to be made. It's just what pieces you're willing to give up for. Having the draft capital is always important. We got two first-round picks this year so our goal is to make sure we do everything that we're capable of doing to try to make this team better."

Recall Waddell after the trade deadline said there were talks of other deals that didn't come together but could be revisited in the summer. Nothing was said to indicate that the Blue Jackets would be quiet in the offseason. They know they need to get better. The question is not if there will be deals, but how many and to whom.

## **3. No buyouts, for now.**

Waddell was also asked flat out if the Blue Jackets would consider buyouts citing the cap space the team has. Things can change quickly. But don't count on any buyouts.

"That's not something we're looking at," Waddell said. "I can't say how the summer's going to play out but as of now, we haven't talked about it."

Many have wondered if this would be the time to buyout the rest of Elvis Merzlikins' contract. He was better in 2024-25, but still was not good enough from a number's standpoint.

Waddell's comments here seem to point to Merzlikins being back in 2025-26 unless there is a trade. This puts a question over what's next for Daniil Tarasov? Waddell said they must examine the position but said things could stay status quo too.

Tarasov is a pending RFA with arbitration rights. He just finished a three-year deal that saw him relegated to third-string goalie when Jet Greaves was called up. Just feels like something is going to change given the need to reduce their goals against.

## **4. Merzlikins opened up about he was impacted by Kivlenieks' passing.**

Merzlikins discussed a few different things on Friday. He said he missed the end of the season due to a concussion. We asked him what he will remember most about this season. He then opened up about Matiss Kivlenieks.

“The team,” Merzlikins said about what he’ll remember most about this season. “When Matiss passed away, I kind of lost my mind. It’s something that you don’t control. I had great people who worked with me. I had the organization helping me a lot and helping my family, my wife and the people who I talked to. They’re helping me a lot. But it took me a while to find myself. Last summer when I was back in Europe...but when I went back home (in Europe, Columbus is his home) and I actually saw my friends and family, I feel happy.”

“And when I came here for the start of the season, the training camp, the locker room was different. I saw locker room was completely different. This locker room, what we have today, we have love going on there. And from start of season to the end of season, it got just better and better and better. Two or three years ago, I didn’t feel that, maybe it was me because I was kind of closed in, in my own world.”

“But here, we have family here. The guys right now, they care about each other. They work their asses off. I think what I’m going to remember is that we became a family. We grew together. We did good things this year.”

The team had said all year how Merzlikins grew as a leader in the locker room. He admitted being closed in his own little world in the aftermath. But thanks to the state of the room, he was able to say “we have love going on there.”

Overcoming tragedy is never linear. Merzlikins’ situation is a good reminder that everyone handles situations differently.

## **5. Monahan sees Columbus as potential forever home.**

We will have much more on Monahan in the coming weeks. But on Friday, he admitted loving everything about Columbus. Considering everything he has been through, that puts into perspective what he’s had to overcome losing his best friend in Johnny Gaudreau.

“I love it. My family loves it,” Monahan said. “I have a lot of good intel from some good friends to come here and told me all about the city. It’s a special place. I’ve said it since I’ve got here. It feels like home from day one and it’s most likely potentially my forever home. We really enjoy living here and representing the Blue Jackets for sure.”

Monahan is just the latest example of a player who sees the value in what all Columbus has to offer from a living perspective.

## **Other Takeaways**

- **6.** World Championships. Werenski said he won’t be playing for Team USA. He is getting married this summer along with two of his good friends. Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson haven’t been asked yet for Team Canada (as of Friday.) It wouldn’t be surprising to see one or both go if asked.
- **7.** Waddell has a lot of free agents to make decisions on. Of note, he called out both Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro as two players he would like to bring back. Both players said they’d be interested in staying. Provorov: “I don’t think I was hiding it that I would like to stay.” Fabbro: “I think I’ve made it pretty clear I’d love to stay.” Waddell indicated there are others they’d like back too but said he wants to sit with the coaches to discuss.
- **8.** Obviously things can change but it sure seems like we may have seen the last of Sean Kuraly with the Blue Jackets. He was asked if he was thinking if Thursday against the Islanders could be his last game. Kuraly: “I was trying to go out there and enjoy it and soak it all in and maybe take a few more looks than (I) normally do. But yeah, you really never know what’s next so how do

you stay in the moment but realize that there's some reality to these things. I think it was a fun night for me to try to enjoy it with my teammates and the fans."

- **9.** James van Riemsdyk said while no discussions had happened yet as of Friday, he'd be interested in re-signing with the Blue Jackets if the opportunity presented itself.
- **10.** Waddell called offer sheets "a tool in the toolbox." While he indicated if they didn't explore them they wouldn't be doing their job thoroughly, he said it's hard to say if they'll offer one in the offseason.
- **11.** Evason said he prefers his exit interviews with players to be as a team with a couple exceptions depending on the situation. He's not someone "who puts guys on the board and meet every five minutes." He and Boone Jenner could be meeting for lunch in the coming weeks as opposed to a few minutes in a meeting room.
- **12.** Fantilli has the right attitude for someone coming off his first 30-goal NHL season. He played in all 82 games and realizes he still has a lot to learn. "I'll never get to a point where I can say I figured out the NHL and I can just sit back and relax. That's never gonna happen. Gonna continue to learn and continue to get better and something I'm really excited for the next however many years I can do it."

### **Gaudreau Forever**

#### **13. Johnny Gaudreau will always be around the Blue Jackets.**

We saved the 13th takeaway for number 13. Evason made one thing clear on Thursday that resonated with everyone as soon as he said it.

"But I'll tell you this. He will not be leaving our dressing room as long as I'm here," Evason said. He will be in there and he will be a presence and he'll help us win hockey games and he'll hopefully get us to where we want to be. And that's to win a Stanley Cup."

Jenner echoed those same feelings on Friday.

"We played for Johnny all year," Jenner said. "And we'll continue to. He's a part of our dressing room and a teammate forever. It's special that way this year playing for him. We've mentioned it so much. He's continued to be a part of our group and even (Thursday) me with the kids at the game and know Johnny would be so proud of that...We'll continue to honor him. He's a part of it and we miss him everyday on and off the ice."

The Blue Jackets made a promise. They said Gaudreau would always be around. No matter where you look whether it's outside Nationwide Arena on your way in, inside the arena at his memorial, in the rafters where number 13 is high above or in the locker room where his jersey hangs in his stall, the team kept their promise. Gaudreau's presence will remain around the Blue Jackets forever. Promise kept.

## The Athletic / NHL playoffs overtime: How does it work? What's the longest game in history?

By Rob Rossi – April 22, 2025

“Sudden Death” isn’t just a hockey-themed action movie. It’s a term commonly associated with overtime in the Stanley Cup playoffs — and it makes the NHL’s postseason different from not only the league’s regular season, but also the postseasons of North America’s other major professional sports leagues.

As in a regular-season game, an NHL playoff game tied after regulation extends to overtime, where a team can win by scoring the next goal. But this is where the similarities end.

A playoff game with no winner after the third period will pause for 15 minutes — an “intermission” during which teams return to their dressing rooms and the ice surface is cleaned by machines.

Upon returning, the teams will resume play at five-on-five for 20-minute periods, each followed by another 15-minute intermission, until a goal is scored. The team that scores is declared the winner, bringing a “sudden death” to the losing team.

### **Some other factoids about overtime in the Stanley Cup playoffs:**

Periods begin with a faceoff at center ice.

Play is contested at five-on-five unless dictated otherwise by penalties (unlike three-on-three in regular-season overtime).

Remaining time from a penalty assessed at the end of regulation, or from the previous overtime period, carries over into the overtime period.

Teams attack/defend a different end of the ice at the start of overtime. A home team will shoot at the same end as it had for the second period during the first overtime period, then shoot at the same end as it had for the first and third periods if a second overtime period is required. That rotation will continue until the game is over.

After a stoppage in play, the home team is granted “last change” of on-ice players before the ensuing faceoff. A visiting coach is required to deploy his skaters first.

There are no TV timeouts.

There is no shootout, which is how a regular-season game is decided if it remains tied after a five-minute overtime period.

### **When was the first sudden-death overtime game in the playoffs?**

Game 4 of the 1919 Stanley Cup Final between the Seattle Metropolitans and Montreal Canadiens ended in a 0-0 tie after two overtime periods. Players from each team had reportedly collapsed from exhaustion at the end of the second overtime period, and the tie result was ruled as final.

Before Game 5, it was decided that future playoff games would be played until a winning goal was scored.

### **What are the longest playoff games in NHL history?**

**A playoff game has been extended beyond four overtime periods on only five occasions:**

**March 24, 1936:** Detroit Red Wings 1, Montreal Maroons 0 (sixth OT, 116 minutes, 30 seconds)

**April 4, 1933:** Toronto Maple Leafs 1, Boston Bruins 0 (sixth OT, 104:46)

**May 4, 2000:** Philadelphia Flyers 2, Pittsburgh Penguins 1 (fifth OT, 92:01)

**April 24, 2003:** Anaheim Ducks 4, Dallas Stars 3 (fifth OT, 80:48)

**Aug. 11, 2020:** Tampa Bay Lightning 3, Columbus Blue Jackets 2 (fifth OT, 90:27)

**Has the Stanley Cup ever been won with an overtime goal?**

The Cup winner has been determined with an overtime goal 17 times. The most recent was Alec Martinez's goal in double-overtime for the Los Angeles Kings in Game 5 of the 2014 Final. The first example was Bill Cook of the New York Rangers in the first overtime of Game 4 of the 1933 Cup Final.

**How many overtime games were played in the 2024 playoffs?**

There were 16 overtime games in the 2024 playoffs. Twelve were decided in the first overtime period, four in the second overtime.



## The Athletic / NHL playoff upsets coming? Plus, 3 questions about Team USA's World Championship win

By Sean McIndoe – April 22, 2025

Good morning! We're two days into the playoffs, and five of the series have begun. Are you mad yet? You should probably be mad. Let's see if we can make that happen.

### **While You Were Sleeping**

Wait, you were sleeping? Unacceptable. It's Round 1 of the NHL playoffs — there's no time for sleeping. If you need some shut-eye, that's what Monday afternoon meetings are for. Other than that, keep your eyes open and your head on a swivel.

### **Home teams hold serve**

**Yesterday's story, in one sentence:** Three games, three big wins by home teams.

The day began with the Hurricanes hosting the Devils in an afternoon tilt. Carolina comes in as a big favorite, but with a recent history of falling short of expectations in the postseason and the sting of the Mikko Rantanen saga still on its mind. The Hurricanes looked good in the opener, pouring 45 shots on the Devils on the way to an impressive 4-1 win.

Speaking of playoff underachievement, we all know the history in Toronto. But for one night at least, it all came together for the Maple Leafs in a series-opening win over the Senators. The big stars scored, the power play clicked, their goaltending was better and it all added up to a 6-2 win. Now the young Senators have to shake off a tough start and figure out how to fight back without taking penalties.

The late game saw the Golden Knights hold on to win a close one over the Wild. It was essentially a one-goal win, although a buzzer-beating empty netter made it a 4-2 final. The Wild stayed in it against a heavy favorite, but moral victories only go so far in the playoffs.

Add it all up, and with the only road win coming from the stacked Avalanche over a decimated Stars team, you could argue we haven't seen an upset yet. With four games tonight, it shouldn't take us long to get there.


### **Women's World Championship**

#### **Team USA captures gold in OT**

One thing missing from the NHL playoffs so far: the drama of sudden-death overtime. Luckily, yesterday's Women's World Championship gold medal game was there to provide the OT magic we were missing. Although it's fair to say American fans probably enjoyed it a lot more than Canadians did.

That's Tessa Janecke burying the biggest goal of her life to give Team USA the gold. Our own Hailey Salvian was on the scene in Czechia to cover the tournament, and she took the time to answer a few questions for Red Light readers.

Was there any point in the game — or even the tournament — when you had any doubt Team Canada and Team USA would end up deciding gold in overtime?

 For the 52 seconds Team USA had a 2-0 lead in the second period, I thought, "Oh, this might be over" and "maybe I can start writing my postgame story."

That was very stupid of me. Because 52 seconds after Abbey Murphy gave the U.S. that lead, Danielle Serdachny cut it in half. Not even one minute later, Jennifer Gardiner tied it 2-2.

That's typical of this rivalry, though. Any way you might think a game is going to go, you're probably wrong!

As dramatic as the ending was, the goal also had a bit of a stench to it. What exactly happened in Canada's end to lead to Janecke's winner?

For Canada, it started with a questionable line change, with Sarah Fillier heading off and Jocelyne Larocque holding the puck behind the crease. Janecke went hard on the forecheck against Larocque and disrupted her breakout pass, which was pretty easily intercepted by Taylor Heise. She made the shot-pass to find Janecke back door, and there you have it.

We nearly saw an upset in the semifinal, when Team USA needed a comeback to earn a 2-1 win over Czechia. How important is that for the Czechia program, and how close are they to disrupting the USA/Canada stranglehold on gold medals?

They're getting close. At least head coach Carla MacLeod said so in this incredible postgame speech after that semifinal loss.

Czechia has a lot of talent on the roster. Kristýna Kaltounková was a top-10 finalist for the Patty Kazmaier Award, given to the best player in women's college hockey, this season. Tereza Vanišová is among the top scorers in the PWWHL. Tereza Plosová, who scored the opening goal against the U.S., is headed to the University of Minnesota and will only get better in the NCAA.

But what makes the state of the women's game so exciting is that while Czechia gave the eventual champions a scare, they didn't even medal at this tournament. Finland beat them 4-3 in overtime earlier on Sunday, setting up a pretty solid top-four nations (and some rivalries) heading into the Milan Olympics, which are somehow only 10 months away.

I should also mention: Czechia was an unbelievable host nation and set a record for the most fans ever at a Women's World Championship (122,331), passing the 2007 tournament hosted by Winnipeg.

## **What to Watch**

### **Canadiens @ Capitals**

**7 p.m. ET on ESPN / SN**

On paper, this is the biggest David vs. Goliath matchup of the first round. Now we find out if the Habs are just happy to be there or if they can shock the top seed. An upset win in the opener would go a long way to changing perceptions.

### **Blues @ Jets**

**7:30 p.m. ET on ESPN2 / CBC**

The underdog Blues had the Jets on the ropes in Game 1, but a late Winnipeg comeback sealed a win. Now we wait to see if that was a case of the Jets taking the Blues' best shot and shaking it off, or if St. Louis has shown it can hang with the Presidents' Trophy winners.

### **Avalanche @ Stars**

**9:30 p.m. ET on ESPN / SN360**

Is it too early to call this a must-win for Dallas? Maybe, but after the Avalanche rolled to a Game 1 win, the Stars are now on an eight-game losing streak counting back to the regular season. If they head to Colorado down 2-0 in the series, they may not even make it back to Dallas for a Game 5.

### **Oilers @ Kings**

**10 p.m. ET on ESPN2 / SN**

This is the fourth year in a row these teams have met in the first round, with the Oilers winning the previous three. But this time the Kings have home ice advantage to go with a league-best record on home ice. Will that matter? It should, but the Oilers can squash that narrative quickly with an early win.

The full NHL playoff schedule is here. Try streaming games like these for free on Fubo.

### **In celebration of the noble OGWAC**

Ah, the OGWAC — or for you newbies, the Old Guy Without a Cup. That's the beloved playoff archetype of the grizzled veteran who's done it all over the course of a long career, except win a ring. With time running out, we watch and wait to see if they can finally break through and get their lap with the Cup.

When it happens, it's the best.

The all-time king of the OGWAC story is Ray Bourque, who needed 22 seasons before finally winning the big one in his very last game with the Avalanche in 2001.

Other legendary OGWACs include Teemu Selanne with Anaheim in 2007, and (for you old-timers) Lanny McDonald with Calgary in 1989.

Last year, we saw Kyle Okposo win with Florida in what turned out to be the last game of a 17-year career.

Of course, sometimes the moment never comes. That was the case for Joe Pavelski, who retired last summer without ever getting his hands on the big trophy. His former Sharks teammate Joe Thornton played 24 seasons but never won it all. Neither did Jarome Iginla, or Marcel Dionne or Henrik Lundqvist.

This year, as always, the playoffs start with plenty of potential OGWAC stories. So who are the best?

You could go with the league's oldest skater, 40-year-old Blues defenseman Ryan Suter. Maybe you prefer Carolina's Brent Burns, the bearded 40-year-old who's been in the league since before there was a salary cap. Claude Giroux, 37, is trying to write an OGWAC story for his hometown team in Ottawa. Stars captain Jamie Benn, 35, might be on his way out in Dallas, while Jeff Skinner, 33 next month, is the rare OGWAC who's making his playoff debut.

There are so many candidates that it's impossible to rank them all. So of course I tried anyway, in my annual OGWAC rankings. With Pavelski retired, the top spot he'd held down for years is now up for grabs. It's not quite the biggest prize these guys are chasing right now, but it's probably a close second.

## ESPN / Ranking the top 50 players in the Stanley Cup playoffs

By Neil Paine – April 22, 2025

As the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs began, a number of storylines dominated the conversation: Can Connor Hellebuyck turn his historic regular season into a Dominik Hašek-esque postseason run for the ages for the Winnipeg Jets? Will the Colorado Avalanche-Dallas Stars showdown be a quasi-Cup Final right away in Round 1? Is it finally the year for Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl to win it all, after the Edmonton Oilers came so close last season?

But beyond the matchups and narratives, it's also a good time to take stock of which players bring the most value into the postseason.

That's where goals above replacement (GAR) comes in -- my evolved spin on earlier all-in-one value stats like Tom Awad's goals versus threshold and Hockey-Reference's point shares. The core idea of GAR is to measure a player's total impact -- in offense, defense or goaltending -- above what a generic "replacement-level" player might provide at the same position. It also strives to ensure the league's value is better balanced by position: 60% of leaguewide GAR is distributed to forwards, 30% to defensemen and 10% to goaltenders.

To then assess who might be most valuable on the eve of this year's playoffs, I plugged GAR into a system inspired by Bill James' concept of an "established level" of performance; in this case, a weighted average of each player's GAR over the past three regular seasons, with more emphasis on 2024-25. And to keep the metric from undervaluing recent risers, we also apply a safeguard: No player's established level can be lower than 75% of his most recent season's GAR.

The result is a blend of peak, recent and sustained performance -- the players on playoff-bound teams who have been great, are currently great or are still trending upward -- in a format that gives us a sense of who could define this year's postseason.

One final note: Injured players who were expected to miss all or substantial parts of the playoffs were excluded from the ranking. Sorry, Jack Hughes.

With that in mind, here are the top 50 skaters and goaltenders on teams in the 2025 playoff field, according to their three-year established level of value, ranked by the numbers:

**Note:** All stats are as of Tuesday, April 15. Three-year averages split up into offense, defense and goaltending in display for the top 20.

### **1. Connor Hellebuyck, G, Winnipeg Jets**

**GAR: 2024-25: 30.4 | 2023-24: 28.1 | 2022-23: 28.0**

**Three-year avg: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 29.2 | Total: 29.2**

Hellebuyck is the greatest goalie of his generation, with nearly 30 more GAR than the next-highest-ranked netminder (Andrei Vasilevskiy) since 2017-18. Not only is he the overwhelming favorite to win the Vezina Trophy as the top goalie in the NHL, but he recently surpassed Leon Draisaitl as ESPN BET's favorite to win the Hart Trophy as league MVP.

Among his many selling points is his otherworldly consistency: He led the league in quality starts (44), recording a league-best 72% of the time. His Jets might have a President's Trophy curse on their hands, but Hellebuyck is the most important weapon of the playoffs if he plays to his usual standards.

**Playoff outlook:** Curses aside, the biggest element weighing against Hellebuyck and the Jets is that he hasn't always played to his usual standards in the playoffs. Last season, Winnipeg allowed nearly as many games of five or more goals to the Colorado Avalanche in a five-game, first-round series loss as they did in the 82 games of the regular season.

Hellebuyck's save percentage over the past two postseasons is 30% worse than league average, compared with a mark 17% better during the regular season. He needs to reverse that -- maybe having his own version of a Hašek-style 1999 postseason -- if the Jets are going to cash in on this special season.

## **2. Nathan MacKinnon, F, Colorado Avalanche**

**GAR: 2024-25: 24.2 | 2023-24: 31.0 | 2022-23: 24.5**

**Three-year avg: O: 21.2 | D: 5.3 | G: 0.0 | Total: 26.5**

The Avalanche have a lot of high-end talent on their roster, but none grabs your attention quite like MacKinnon when he has the puck on his stick with a full head of steam. Though his production dipped a bit in 2024-25 from last year's MVP-winning effort, MacKinnon remains the engine that makes Colorado's fifth-ranked offense run, with the team's share of all shots at 5-on-5 improving by 8.1 percentage points with him on the ice versus off.

Stopping MacKinnon is at the top of the list for any Colorado opponent in a playoff series.

**Playoff outlook:** Much has been made of the unfairness that either Colorado or the Dallas Stars -- both legitimate Stanley Cup-caliber squads -- will be immediately ousted from the playoffs, thanks to the NHL's division-based postseason format. So unfortunately, there is a very real possibility that we'll get to see MacKinnon for only a short time in these playoffs.

But before that happens, he and the Avs' offense could make life difficult for Dallas and its D corps, which ranked 13th in total GAR during the regular season.

## **3. Leon Draisaitl, F, Edmonton Oilers**

**GAR: 2024-25: 28.0 | 2023-24: 23.3 | 2022-23: 27.9**

**Three-year avg: O: 21.7 | D: 4.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 26.4**

As has been the case over the years -- trading off status for the best player on the Oilers, if not the league -- it was Draisaitl's turn to take the reins from Connor McDavid in 2024-25. Leon produced the best goal-scoring season of his career after adjusting for league scoring environments.

Draisaitl has now put together a remarkable (and perhaps still somehow underrated) stretch of seven consecutive seasons with at least 104 adjusted points, according to Hockey-Reference's metric, joining McDavid, Wayne Gretzky and Phil Esposito as the only players in NHL history in that club. Until Hellebuyck's candidacy came on strong over the past month or so, Draisaitl was looking like a good pick for his second MVP -- and it still might happen.

**Playoff outlook:** Draisaitl is no slouch in the postseason, producing 81 points in his past 53 playoff contests. With the Oilers set to play the Kings yet again in Round 1, Draisaitl will attempt to keep victimizing the opponent against whom he had a team-high 17 goals in 18 games over the previous three playoff runs.

## **4. Nikita Kucherov, F, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**GAR: 2024-25: 26.1 | 2023-24: 29.9 | 2022-23: 19.6**

**Three-year avg: O: 22.5 | D: 3.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 26.3**

In winning his second straight Art Ross Trophy (and third overall) as the NHL's leading scorer, Kucherov continues to be one of the most creative and dangerous offensive threats in hockey -- and his Lightning are back to looking like one of the top Stanley Cup threats in the league.

Behind the top-rated offense in the league by goals per game, Tampa Bay had a better goal differential in 2024-25 than in either of its recent Cup-winning seasons (2019-20 or 2020-21), and Kucherov was the straw that stirred the drink as the Lightning's lone scorer over 94 adjusted points. (He had 124, his third-most ever in a season.)

By any measure, Kucherov is a special player in his absolute prime.

**Playoff outlook:** As a multitime champion and league leader in playoff scoring, with a career total of 167 points in 147 games, there are no concerns that Kucherov won't produce when the lights are brightest. He even had seven points in five games during Tampa Bay's otherwise disappointing loss to the rival Panthers in Round 1 last year.

The Bolts will try to get their revenge this year, and Kucherov might fare even better against a Panthers team that fell from first to seventh on defense this season.

## **5. Cale Makar, D, Colorado Avalanche**

**GAR: 2024-25: 30.1 | 2023-24: 22.9 | 2022-23: 18.6**

**Three-year avg: O: 18.4 | D: 7.4 | G: 0.0 | Total: 25.8**

If a defenseman was ever capable of winning MVP in the contemporary game -- none has won since Chris Pronger in 2000 -- it might be Makar this season.

Not only has he been battling Hellebuyck for the league lead in GAR for most of the second half, but he was also the first D-man with at least 30 adjusted goals and 90 adjusted points since Paul Coffey in 1985-86, nearly four decades ago. His ability to drive offensive action from the blue line while also not being a defensive liability is what makes Makar the best of a special generation of defensemen in the game today.

**Playoff outlook:** In the titanic battle between Colorado and Dallas, Makar is one of the big reasons behind a key positional edge for the Avs. According to GAR, the Avalanche had the league's most valuable set of defensemen this season, with Makar leading a group that also includes Devon Toews and Sam Girard.

Dallas, meanwhile, ranked 13th, with Thomas Harley and Esa Lindell not receiving as much support after Miro Heiskanen was injured. That difference in blue-line play could be decisive in a series that looks like a coin flip otherwise.

## **6. Connor McDavid, F, Edmonton Oilers**

**GAR: 2024-25: 20.4 | 2023-24: 27.4 | 2022-23: 35.8**

**Three-year avg: O: 20.8 | D: 4.6 | G: 0.0 | Total: 25.3**

Imagine ranking Connor McDavid only sixth in the league... how can that be?? While some of this simply speaks to the quality of other elite players this year, with the likes of Hellebuyck and Makar enjoying the best seasons of their respective careers, McDavid also missed 13 games and posted his fewest adjusted goals (27) and adjusted points (102) in a season since he was a 19-year-old rookie in 2015-16, while the Oilers' offense ranked outside the top 10 for the first time since 2019-20.

All of that doesn't mean McDavid is no longer among the game's top stars -- if anything, it shows how essential McDavid is to Edmonton's Cup hopes -- but a comparatively "down" year by his high standards did cause him to fall back a bit in this type of ranking.

**Playoff outlook:** Having noted all of that ... it's still Connor McDavid. The same guy who scored the winning overtime goal of the 4 Nations Face-Off just a few months ago, and the same guy who led all scorers with 42 points in 25 playoff games last spring.

The latter was part of a three-year stretch when McDavid had 95 points in his past 53 playoff contests. While the Kings are more formidable on paper than in any of their previous three first-round losses to the Oilers, I wouldn't want to be standing between McDavid and another bid for a Stanley Cup.

## **7. Andrei Vasilevskiy, G, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**GAR: 2024-25: 28.6 | 2023-24: 2.9 | 2022-23: 20.6**

**Three-year avg: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 21.5 | Total: 21.5**

Although Hellebuyck is the consensus top goaltender in the game today, Vasilevskiy had a career-best season of his own in 2024-25, with 34.2 goals saved above average and a save percentage 20% better than league average.

Vasilevskiy's résumé speaks for itself; the two-time Cup champion doesn't have anything to prove to anyone. But he still seemed to respond to the doubters this season after what had been an uncharacteristically subpar performance in 2023-24, helping elevate the Lightning in the process to their second-best goals-per-game differential of the Jon Cooper era.

**Playoff outlook:** Few goalies in recent memory have shown a higher ceiling in the playoffs -- in addition to those two Cups, Vasilevskiy owns 66 career playoff wins, a Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP from 2021 and a .920 career playoff save percentage (11% better than average). He is still capable of carrying the Lightning on a deep playoff run if he gets hot.

## **8. Auston Matthews, F, Toronto Maple Leafs**

**GAR: 2024-25: 15.9 | 2023-24: 29.4 | 2022-23: 20.2**

**Three-year avg: O: 17.6 | D: 3.5 | G: 0.0 | Total: 21.1**

Following a near-MVP quality season last year, Matthews battled through early injuries to post his fewest adjusted points (77) since 2018-19 and his fewest adjusted goals in a season (32), full stop. Never in any month of 2024-25 did Matthews match his full-season average of 0.85 goals per game en route to 69 total goals last season.

But Matthews did still rank among the most impactful forwards in the game in terms of on-ice shot attempts -- and besides, it's a testament to how good he has historically been that he could still rank among the top 10 in our weighted three-year ranking despite coming off a big decline in production year over year.

**Playoff outlook:** The postseason spotlight always shines brightly on Matthews in Toronto, and while he has had his moments over the years -- including five goals and nine points in six games as the Leafs finally won a first-round series in 2023 -- he also hasn't been quite as productive in the playoffs as we might expect.

Since 2016-17, Matthews ranks first by a mile in regular-season goals per game, but he ranks only 12th among qualified players in the postseason over the same span. That's still not bad, but it's not unfair to ask for more, starting against Ottawa in Round 1 this year.

## **9. Mikko Rantanen, F, Dallas Stars**

**GAR: 2024-25: 18.1 | 2023-24: 21.5 | 2022-23: 23.7**

**Three-year avg: O: 15.9 | D: 4.3 | G: 0.0 | Total: 20.2**

Rantanen will be one of the most fascinating players to watch in these playoffs. By GAR, he became the best player to ever suit up for three or more teams in a single season, bouncing from Colorado to Carolina and then to Dallas, and his production with the Stars (0.95 PPG) kind of split the difference between his stellar rate with the Avs (1.31) and his disappointing mark with the Canes (0.46).

Despite this season's itinerant nature, there's no reason to see Rantanen as anything other than the well-rounded winger with the wicked wrist shot we've been used to seeing with Colorado in many postseasons gone by.

Playoff outlook: That said, the pressure is certainly on the Stars to finally get over the hump and win a Cup -- and that means a lot is riding on Rantanen as well, particularly given how much Dallas gave up to land him at the deadline.

It's not exactly now-or-never for Dallas (it remains the league's 12th-youngest squad), and Rantanen will be with the club for a long time after signing a \$96 million extension in March, but it will be viewed as a big disappointment if all of that midseason excitement resulted in an immediate loss to Rantanen's former team.

## **10. William Nylander, F, Toronto Maple Leafs**

**GAR: 2024-25: 19.8 | 2023-24: 20.2 | 2022-23: 19.0**

**Three-year avg: O: 17.0 | D: 2.8 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.8**

With Matthews' production taking a bit of a step back this season, Nylander stepped up with the best goal-scoring season of his career, notching 47 adjusted goals while leading the Maple Leafs overall with 19.8 GAR in Year 1 of the eight-year, \$92 million contract he signed last January.

The slick Swede sacrificed some of his playmaking in the exchange, dropping to his fewest adjusted assists (40) since 2020-21, but he continued his reputation for consistency by eclipsing 1.00 PPG in five of seven months during the season.

**Playoff outlook:** Nylander has been a roughly point-per-game player (28 in 29 games, with 15 goals) over the past four playoffs, even recovering from migraines early last postseason to notch a team-best three goals in the final four games of the Boston series, scoring the Leafs' lone marker in their Game 7 loss. Ottawa is a top-10 defensive team, but Nylander should get his goals regardless.

## **11. Brayden Point, F, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**GAR: 2024-25: 19.2 | 2023-24: 18.7 | 2022-23: 20.7**

**Three-year avg: O: 16.5 | D: 2.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.3**

There are few NHL players more reliable than Point, who has provided 43-49 adjusted goals, 39-42 adjusted assists, 82-91 adjusted points and 18.7-20.7 GAR in each of the past three seasons.

Centering a line with Kucherov on his wing, the two continued their fruitful long-term partnership, as Point's quick-strike finishing ability and solid playmaking skills provide the perfect complement to Kucherov's world-class creativity. The only downside in Point's numbers was a dip in the relative share of on-ice shot attempts -- but even that was of little consequence to Tampa Bay's bottom line when Point's overall plus/minus improved by 32 net goals (from minus-16 to plus-16) year over year.



**Playoff outlook:** Point was phenomenal during the Bolts' two Cup runs, with 28 goals and 56 points in 46 games across the 2020 and 2021 postseasons. His PPG is down a bit since then, though he did average a point per game in last year's first-round defeat against the Panthers -- and again, with Florida's defense looking a bit less imposing, Point figures to play a central role in the Lightning's hopes of adding another Cup to their extended dynasty.

## **12. Sam Reinhart, F, Florida Panthers**

**GAR: 2024-25: 18.4 | 2023-24: 25.1 | 2022-23: 10.0**

**Three-year avg: O: 14.9 | D: 4.3 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.3**

After a couple of years spent reinventing himself in Florida, Reinhart was one of the league's breakout stars last season, piling up 56 adjusted goals, 92 adjusted points and 25.1 GAR to lead the eventual champ Panthers during the regular season.

And while the regression that many expected after such a huge statistical leap did set in this season -- he fell to 40 adjusted goals, 83 adjusted points and 18.4 GAR -- Reinhart still managed to lead the now-defending-champion Panthers in each category as they returned to the playoffs. Some of that was because of injuries that sidelined Matthew Tkachuk and Aleksander Barkov at different times, but mostly it was because Reinhart is legitimately one of the NHL's most valuable all-around forwards now.

**Playoff outlook:** It's surprising given Reinhart's aforementioned career glow-up in Florida, but he was tied -- with Sam Bennett -- for only fourth on the Panthers in playoff scoring during their pair of Cup finals runs in 2023 and 2024, averaging well below a point per game (29 points in 45 contests).

Perhaps it's because his penchant for power-play scoring becomes less valuable when man advantage starts to dry up as the postseason progresses -- but whatever the cause, the Panthers are more reliant on Reinhart than ever, and he needs to improve on those numbers if they're going to repeat.

## **13. Evan Bouchard, D, Edmonton Oilers**

**GAR: 2024-25: 19.4 | 2023-24: 24.1 | 2022-23: 8.9**

**Three-year avg: O: 12.2 | D: 7.0 | G: 0.0 | Total: 19.2**

Following last season's huge breakthrough at age 24, Bouchard enjoyed another strong season on the Edmonton blue line in 2024-25. We tend not to talk about him in quite the same breath as the Makar-Quinn Hughes tier of defensemen, but he owns one of the game's hardest shots and moves the puck well on a team that thrives off of breakout passing, and he ranked among the top D-men in suppressing opponent shot attempts.

While Bouchard's game still has some holes, he continued to establish himself as a crucial part of the Oilers' core alongside Draisaitl and McDavid.

**Playoff outlook:** Bouchard's big breakout was not limited to the 2023-24 regular season -- he was also outstanding in the playoffs, with 32 points in 25 games and a league-best plus-14 plus/minus. Although frequent D-partner Mattias Ekholm is out for at least Round 1 with an injury, which could reduce Bouchard's comfort level, he also had nine points in five games against the Kings last postseason -- he'll likely be a thorn in L.A.'s side throughout this opening series.

## **14. Josh Morrissey, D, Winnipeg Jets**

**GAR: 2024-25: 17.9 | 2023-24: 19.1 | 2022-23: 18.9**

**Three-year avg: O: 11.0 | D: 7.4 | G: 0.0 | Total: 18.5**

If Bouchard flies under the radar, Morrissey struggles to be on the radar at all, despite putting the finishing touches on a third consecutive strong season for Winnipeg.

Among defensemen over the past three seasons combined, only Makar and Hughes have more GAR than Morrissey, who ranks ahead of Adam Fox, Bouchard, Rasmus Dahlin, Victor Hedman and all the rest. Always known for his exceptional skating ability and hockey IQ, Morrissey leveled up as an offensive contributor when he hit his prime, and the result has been the blue-line anchor for the best regular-season team in hockey.

**Playoff outlook:** Like the Jets as a whole, Morrissey -- who has only 14 career points in 42 playoff games -- needs to prove he can carry over his improvement into the postseason. Although he had three goals in five games versus Colorado last spring, his defensive impact was minimal and the series got away from Winnipeg when its normally airtight D sprang some leaks.

As one of the best all-around defensemen of the regular season, it's Morrissey's job as much as anyone's to make sure that doesn't happen again.

#### **15. Filip Gustavsson, G, Minnesota Wild**

**GAR: 2024-25: 24.6 | 2023-24: 4.8 | 2022-23: 23.1**

**Three-year avg: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 18.4 | Total: 18.4**

Gustavsson has had an eventful past three seasons. He went from Ottawa to Minnesota in 2022-23 and established himself as one of the league's best backups in a timeshare with Marc-André Fleury. Then he completely fell off in his performance (posting a sub-.900 save percentage) last season, before bouncing back big in 2024-25, his first season as the primary starter for the Wild.

Gustavsson's 39 quality starts ranked third best in the league, behind only Hellebuyck and Vasilevskiy, which underscored his steady play in net for a playoff team that ranked only 27th in scoring. Another underrated key to Gustavsson's success? He led the league in goals saved above average, per Natural Stat Trick, on shots marked "low danger" -- which sounds like a backhanded compliment, but sometimes stopping the easy ones is just as important as stopping the hard ones.

**Playoff outlook:** Heading into this postseason, Gustavsson had only five career playoff starts to his name, all in 2023, though he did acquit himself well in that opportunity with a save percentage 17% better than league average. The Wild will most likely face a heavily favored Golden Knights squad in Round 1, and any hopes for an upset rest mainly on Gustavsson stealing the series in net.

#### **16. Mitch Marner, F, Toronto Maple Leafs**

**GAR: 2024-25: 19.0 | 2023-24: 17.1 | 2022-23: 19.4**

**Three-year avg: O: 14.7 | D: 3.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 18.4**

Marner's consistency is metronomic, and he seldom strays from his usual baseline numbers, but he did manage this season to set a career high with 102 adjusted points while throwing a slightly new twist into his game.

In the past, Marner had gradually become less of a playmaker relative to his goal totals, but in 2024-25 he improved his adjusted assists from 57 to a career-best mark of 75. (This was despite mostly playing on a line with Matthews, whose own goal production fell off from its sizzling 2023-24 pace.)

All told, it was a strong season for Marner before potentially hitting free agency this summer.

**Playoff outlook:** A late-season ankle injury hampered Marner down the stretch of last season, and it contributed to his much-scrutinized playoff struggles: one goal and three points in seven games as the

Leafs fell to Boston. Lost in the narrative of Marner as a postseason underperformer is the fact that he had 14 points in 11 games the previous playoffs, and he went into the admittedly disappointing 2024 postseason with 47 career points in 50 playoff games.

There is massive pressure on Marner (and Toronto overall) to perform this year, starting against Ottawa, but he is coming off one of his best seasons and hasn't exactly been as horrible in the postseason as his reputation might suggest.

#### **17. Jason Robertson, F, Dallas Stars**

**GAR: 2024-25: 16.8 | 2023-24: 16.7 | 2022-23: 26.6**

**Three-year avg: O: 14.7 | D: 3.7 | G: 0.0 | Total: 18.4**

In some ways, Robertson ranks as highly as he does here because his super elite 2022-23 season -- with 44 adjusted goals, 104 adjusted points, a plus-37 plus/minus and 26.6 GAR -- still falls within the window of our three-year weighted average.

In the seasons since, J-Rob has settled into a level that, while still plenty good, isn't as stellar as we might have expected from a player who was so great in his age-23 campaign. Still, Robertson remains one of the most effective all-around forwards in the NHL, maintaining very good offensive output (36 adjusted goals, 82 adjusted points) despite also seeing a career-high 54% of shifts start in the defensive zone.

Dallas is nowhere near the same well-oiled machine without Robertson helping to lead the way, and he's out for the start of the series against Colorado with a lower-body injury.

**Playoff outlook:** Robertson has put up solid numbers over the past two postseasons, with 13 goals and 34 points in 38 games -- including seven (albeit all assists) in six games against the Avs in last year's second-round victory. But he could use more consistency, particularly as a scorer: He was held scoreless in 15 of his past 17 playoff contests.

Still, the Stars are a better all-around team than Colorado (they rank sixth in the league on defense, their worse side of the puck), and that's a reflection of what Robertson brings to the ice once he returns.

#### **18. Linus Ullmark, G, Ottawa Senators**

**GAR: 2024-25: 15.7 | 2023-24: 13.7 | 2022-23: 35.2**

**Three-year avg: O: 0.0 | D: 0.0 | G: 18.3 | Total: 18.3**

Speaking of players who rise up this list partially based on what they did a few years ago, there's Ullmark -- who hasn't quite been able to recapture his otherworldly form backstopping the record-breaking 2022-23 Boston Bruins, either last season or in 2024-25, his first season with the Senators.

However, expecting a repeat of that performance was probably unrealistic; Ullmark has been perfectly solid the past few years, posting a save percentage 11% better than average this season despite moving to a new team that yielded the league's 13th-most shots on goal per game. Ullmark also faced the league's highest rate of rush attempts per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, per Natural Stat Trick, further illustrating exactly how much pressure he was up against.

And yet, Ullmark backstopped the Sens to their first playoff berth since 2017, ending one of the league's longest postseason droughts.

**Playoff outlook:** Ullmark's postseason résumé recalls the old line from "Annie Hall" about a couple of old ladies complaining about a restaurant: "The food at this place is terrible ... and such small portions!"

In Ullmark's case, he has started only nine games, and his career save percentage is 18% worse than average, including a central role in the Bruins' meltdown against Florida in the 2023 first round. The Senators are clear underdogs versus Toronto, so expecting a series upset is a lot, but it's not unreasonable to think Ullmark can perform better than his previous playoff career despite the Leafs being an offensive team.

#### **19. Sebastian Aho, F, Carolina Hurricanes**

**GAR: 2024-25: 15.7 | 2023-24: 21.6 | 2022-23: 15.7**

**Three-year avg: O: 12.4 | D: 5.2 | G: 0.0 | Total: 17.6**

Aho's 2024-25 numbers were down a bit from a year earlier, and he was already a player prone to being overlooked in favor of flashier players with more goals and points. But he still managed to eclipse 30 adjusted goals for the eighth consecutive season, while maintaining most of his playmaking gains from last season as well.

Simply put, Aho provides the Hurricanes with a bit of everything, from shooting and passing to defense, killing penalties and helping to drive Carolina's relentless puck-possession machine. (To the latter point, the Canes had more than 60% of shot attempts with Aho in the game for the first time in his career in 2024-25.) If it is indeed finally time for Carolina to win the Cup with this core, it will be Aho's time to shine even brighter as well.

**Playoff outlook:** As we might expect, Aho is a very consistent playoff performer, too, hitting double digits for points in all six postseason runs of his career -- part of a résumé that also includes 27 goals and 70 points with a plus-21 plus/minus in 74 career playoff games. The Hurricanes' first-round opponents, the New Jersey Devils, are a very good defensive team (No. 4 in the NHL), but Aho thrives in coach Rod Brind'Amour's system of seemingly always having the puck and eventually cashing in on opportunities.

#### **20. Victor Hedman, D, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**GAR: 2024-25: 17.3 | 2023-24: 20.3 | 2022-23: 11.3**

**Three-year avg: O: 11.7 | D: 5.6 | G: 0.0 | Total: 17.3**

Mercifully, the days of Hedman being in a midcareer slump are over. The towering, 6-foot-7 defenseman with the booming shot and Cup-worthy defensive pedigree bounced back from a down season a few years ago to post two of the best seasons in his career, including another vintage Hedman effort in 2024-25 as the Lightning also regained their status among the NHL's top contenders.

Although he contributed plenty to Tampa Bay's No. 1-ranked offense with 16 adjusted goals and 67 adjusted points, Hedman also anchored the D in front of Vasilevskiy, playing a team-high 23:04 per game for a defense that allowed the fourth-fewest goals in the league.

**Playoff outlook:** The 2020 Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP also ranks 12th on the postseason career scoring list among defensemen, so there are no worries around Hedman's playoff bona fides.

He'll still have to contend with a group of Florida forwards who are as dangerous as they are familiar to Tampa Bay -- the Panthers and/or Lightning have ended each other's seasons in three of the past four years -- as well as an overall group of Cats known for their physical play. But I'm not sure there's an active blueliner you'd trust more in a big game than Hedman.

#### **21. Jake Guentzel, F, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**GAR: 2024-25: 18.9 | 2023-24: 16.8 | 2022-23: 13.4**

**Three-year avg: 17.3**

**22. Kyle Connor, F, Winnipeg Jets**

GAR: 2024-25: 22.0 | 2023-24: 12.3 | 2022-23: 12.5

Three-year avg: 17.1

**23. Brandon Hagel, F, Tampa Bay Lightning**

GAR: 2024-25: 20.9 | 2023-24: 13.4 | 2022-23: 12.9

Three-year avg: 17.1

**24. Jack Eichel, F, Vegas Golden Knights**

GAR: 2024-25: 20.2 | 2023-24: 13.7 | 2022-23: 14.3

Three-year avg: 17.1

**25. Kirill Kaprizov, F, Minnesota Wild**

GAR: 2024-25: 13.2 | 2023-24: 21.2 | 2022-23: 16.3

Three-year avg: 16.4

**26. Adrian Kempe, F, Los Angeles Kings**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.8 | 2023-24: 15.4 | 2022-23: 16.4

Three-year avg: 16.3

**27. Darcy Kuemper, G, Los Angeles Kings**

GAR: 2024-25: 21.6 | 2023-24: -1.7 | 2022-23: 11.6

Three-year avg: 16.2

**28. Mark Scheifele, F, Winnipeg Jets**

GAR: 2024-25: 19.1 | 2023-24: 13.5 | 2022-23: 12.1

Three-year avg: 16.1

**29. Jesper Bratt, F, New Jersey Devils**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.9 | 2023-24: 14.6 | 2022-23: 16.0

Three-year avg: 16.0

**30. Matthew Tkachuk, F, Florida Panthers**

GAR: 2024-25: 12.1 | 2023-24: 17.8 | 2022-23: 22.7

Three-year avg: 15.8

**31. Jake Oettinger, G, Dallas Stars**

GAR: 2024-25: 18.7 | 2023-24: 8.3 | 2022-23: 22.0

Three-year avg: 15.8

**32. John Tavares, F, Toronto Maple Leafs**

GAR: 2024-25: 17.6 | 2023-24: 12.5 | 2022-23: 16.1

Three-year avg: 15.7

**33. Alex Ovechkin, F, Washington Capitals**

GAR: 2024-25: 19.7 | 2023-24: 10.0 | 2022-23: 14.9

Three-year avg: 15.6

**34. Roope Hintz, F, Dallas Stars**

GAR: 2024-25: 14.4 | 2023-24: 14.9 | 2022-23: 18.9

Three-year avg: 15.3

**35. Nico Hirschier, F, New Jersey Devils**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.1 | 2023-24: 12.5 | 2022-23: 17.9

Three-year avg: 15.2

**36. Mackenzie Blackwood, G, Colorado Avalanche**

GAR: 2024-25: 20.0 | 2023-24: 4.4 | 2022-23: -0.1

Three-year avg: 15.0

**37. Devon Toews, D, Colorado Avalanche**

GAR: 2024-25: 15.1 | 2023-24: 13.9 | 2022-23: 15.1

Three-year avg: 14.7

**38. Zach Hyman, F, Edmonton Oilers**

GAR: 2024-25: 9.3 | 2023-24: 21.5 | 2022-23: 17.3

Three-year avg: 14.7

**39. Seth Jarvis, F, Carolina Hurricanes**

GAR: 2024-25: 15.9 | 2023-24: 16.1 | 2022-23: 6.7

Three-year avg: 14.4

**40. Aleksander Barkov, F, Florida Panthers**

GAR: 2024-25: 13.2 | 2023-24: 16.9 | 2022-23: 13.2

Three-year avg: 14.4

**41. Martin Necas, F, Colorado Avalanche**

GAR: 2024-25: 17.0 | 2023-24: 9.9 | 2022-23: 14.7

Three-year avg: 14.3

**42. Matt Duchene, F, Dallas Stars**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.7 | 2023-24: 13.3 | 2022-23: 8.7

Three-year avg: 14.2

**43. Gustav Forsling, D, Florida Panthers**

GAR: 2024-25: 13.0 | 2023-24: 17.1 | 2022-23: 9.8

Three-year avg: 13.8

**44. Robert Thomas, F, St. Louis Blues**

GAR: 2024-25: 15.1 | 2023-24: 14.1 | 2022-23: 8.5

Three-year avg: 13.7

**45. Thomas Harley, D, Dallas Stars**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.4 | 2023-24: 15.6 | 2022-23: 1.1

Three-year avg: 13.6

**46. Anze Kopitar, F, Los Angeles Kings**

GAR: 2024-25: 13.1 | 2023-24: 13.5 | 2022-23: 14.6

Three-year avg: 13.5

**47. Kevin Fiala, F, Los Angeles Kings**

GAR: 2024-25: 12.8 | 2023-24: 14.4 | 2022-23: 13.7

Three-year avg: 13.5

**48. Nick Suzuki, F, Montreal Canadiens**

GAR: 2024-25: 16.7 | 2023-24: 11.4 | 2022-23: 7.3

Three-year avg: 13.4

**49. Jordan Kyrou, F, St. Louis Blues**

GAR: 2024-25: 15.4 | 2023-24: 11.1 | 2022-23: 11.5

Three-year avg: 13.3

**50. Brady Tkachuk, F, Ottawa Senators**

GAR: 2024-25: 11.4 | 2023-24: 14.8 | 2022-23: 15.8

Three-year avg: 13.3