



Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips

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The Athletic / Mike Babcock and the Blue Jackets: This is what the NHL will investigate

By Aaron Portzline – June 11, 2026

Across the Columbus Blue Jackets' quarter-century of play — the too-few triumphs, the too many tragedies and a millennium's worth of drama — the final days of Mike Babcock's coaching tenure in September 2023 might be the most bizarre interlude.

When news first broke on the "Spittin' Chiclets" podcast that Babcock had been using his one-on-one meetings with Blue Jackets players to look through their cellphone pictures as a way of judging their off-ice lifestyle, the news was roundly and firmly dismissed by the NHL, by Blue Jackets management and by veteran players Boone Jenner and Johnny Gaudreau.

But in the days that followed, even as the Blue Jackets sent their prospects to rookie camp and prepared for training camp as if everything were normal, the NHL Players' Association continued to speak with players who'd met with Babcock, both in his Nationwide Arena office and his residence in suburban Detroit.

A clearer picture began to form, one that was more damning of Babcock's actions.

Other players on the roster, especially the Blue Jackets' youngest players, either had far different interactions with Babcock than Jenner and Gaudreau did, or they weren't willing to toe the company line quite like their veteran teammates.

On Sept. 16, 2023, just 78 days after Babcock was signed to a two-year contract and just four days before the start of training camp, Babcock resigned from the Blue Jackets before he ran a single practice or stood behind the bench.

All of this is about to be unearthed again.

The NHL is set to investigate Babcock's time with Columbus to determine whether the league will allow the Edmonton Oilers to hire Babcock, now that their pursuit of former Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy has been blocked by the Golden Knights.

A lot has changed in Columbus in the not-quite-three years that have passed, so the key people the NHL will want to meet with this summer are now scattered all over North America and the world. President of hockey operations John Davidson has mostly retired, other than stepping in periodically as the color analyst in TV broadcasts. General manager Jarmo Kekäläinen was fired the following summer and is now managing the Buffalo Sabres. Only 10 players who were on the Blue Jackets' opening-night roster in 2023 remain with the club.

The Athletic sent text messages to several players this week seeking comment on their experiences with Babcock, as well as their thoughts about his possible return to the league, but none have responded.

The controversy started with the Sept. 12, 2023, episode of the "Spittin' Chiclets" podcast, on which former NHL tough guy Paul Bissonnette, now one of the NHL's most recognizable faces as a broadcaster,

mentioned almost flippantly that he'd heard Babcock was going through players' phones during his get-to-know-you meetings before camp.

"He gets to Columbus," Bissonnette said on the podcast, "and one of the first things he does is he calls in Boone Jenner, the captain of the f—ng team, and says, 'I want to see the photos in your phone. I want to know what type of person you are.'"

According to Bissonnette, Babcock would use AirPlay to show photos from players' phones on a large-screen TV in his office. Both the Blue Jackets and Jenner issued statements on social media saying that Bissonnette was unfairly portraying the interaction.

"I thought it was a great first meeting and good way for us to start to build a relationship," Jenner said in a statement issued via the Blue Jackets on the day that Bissonnette's report surfaced. "To have this blown out of proportion is truly disappointing."

Babcock, in a brief conversation that day with *The Athletic*, said he merely looked through his new players' pictures to get to know them better.

"(Bissonnette's version) couldn't be anything further from the truth," Babcock said. "They sit in my office, their phone in their hand, and they scroll through." Babcock said it was always "100 percent" up to the player which pictures to share.

That was the experience of veteran Blue Jackets players who spoke at the time, including Jenner, Gaudreau and Zach Werenski. Many of them met with Babcock early in the summer, while the meetings with younger players were pushed closer to camp.

"For me and Boone and some other guys, our interactions were early July, right?" Werenski said shortly after Babcock resigned. "So summer goes on and you don't really talk about it, and then you come to camp with other things on your mind."

"Nobody really talked about it in the room, and then stuff kind of started to come out and the PA got involved. Now more things came to light and from there, they just kind of took over and did their job."

Not only did the players' association get involved, but other players in the Blue Jackets' dressing room started to come forward. Their interactions with Babcock were either different than that of the veteran players, or they perceived them differently.

For many players, the contents of their cellphones — private pictures, text messages, etc. — are deeply personal items, and they viewed the interactions with Babcock to be an invasion of their privacy, tantamount to digging through their wallets or searching their laptops.

The NHLPA had hired a new executive director, Marty Walsh, earlier that year, and this flare-up in Columbus was seen by many as Walsh's first major challenge on the job. He flew to Columbus along with others from the union to meet with players.

Jenner, Gaudreau and Werenski would say later that their initial comments were based purely on their interaction with Babcock, but that listening to the union and their teammates discuss other experiences made them feel differently.

“Of all the conversations I’ve been a part of, I feel like it’s been great for team bonding,” winger Patrik Laine, who now plays for the Montreal Canadiens, said then. “It’s obviously not something anybody wants to go through a week before training camp starts, but I feel like we’re a tight and supportive group right now and everybody’s excited to get camp going.”

From the very top of the Blue Jackets’ organization came a series of apologies to players and fans, including one from the ownership group, which rarely comments publicly, but said they were “deeply frustrated and disappointed by the events of the past week.”

The Blue Jackets promoted Pascal Vincent to replace Babcock, even though Vincent had been passed over in each of their previous two coach searches. Davidson and Kekäläinen said they were reevaluating their hiring process.

“I am very disappointed,” Davidson said at a press conference two days after Babcock resigned. “We went through a process earlier this summer prior to hiring Mike Babcock as our head coach. But we got it wrong, and that’s on us.

“I can promise you we will learn from this moving forward. I also understand the criticism we are getting. It is deserved. All we can do now is learn from it and do everything we can to help our players and coaches get ready for the season.”

Babcock never apologized and never admitted wrongdoing.

“Upon reflection, it has become clear that continuing as head coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets was going to be too much of a distraction,” Babcock said then in a statement through the club. “While I’m disappointed to not have had the opportunity to continue the work we’ve begun, I know it’s in the best interest of the organization for me to step away at this time. I wish everyone in the organization well in the upcoming season.”

Blue Jackets players declined to discuss the matter as training camp opened and preseason games turned into the regular season. After a while, it became another unfortunate era in Blue Jackets history, just another chapter in their bizarre and continuing struggles.

The issue remained quiet until news broke this week that Edmonton was interested in hiring Babcock, who hasn’t coached in an NHL game since early in the 2019-20 season.

Many Blue Jackets executives, players and staffers will be asked to recall details when the NHL begins its investigation. It will be interesting to see if the NHL uncovers anything the NHLPA did not.

Maybe players will be more open to discussing what happened, either due to the passage of time or the fact that they don’t play in Columbus anymore. Maybe players will share even less, as the passage of time has them feeling more intensely about simply moving on with their lives and careers.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Werenski, Potential Moves & More

By Mark Scheig – June 12, 2026

We are exactly two weeks out from the 2026 NHL Draft in Buffalo. This time is known to some as the “calm before the storm.”

While there are certainly some big headlines in the hockey world such as the Oilers and Mike Babcock and who will be the next Maple Leafs’ head coach, teams are preparing their offseason plans. Scouting meetings are well underway to finalize their lists. It may seem calm on the outside. It’s anything but calm inside the walls.

The Columbus Blue Jackets have a lot on their plate. They have decisions to make on contracts. They have to decide their plan of attack for this offseason including who to target in trades and free agency. They’ll eventually need to hire a new head coach for the Cleveland Monsters. They have to finalize their TV plans for next season. Yes, the to-do list is longer than a CVS receipt.

But we are going to begin today with the big, overarching question that will surround the Blue Jackets. What does the future of Zach Werenski look like? One prominent insider wrote about it on Thursday.

Werenski’s Future

TSN’s and The Athletic’s Pierre LeBrun wrote in his rumblings column about Werenski in the wake of Dylan Larkin’s trade request. Here’s what the insider had to say.

“But I can tell you as of Wednesday afternoon, I’m told there has not been any communication to the Columbus Blue Jackets indicating that kind of thing on Werenski, who has two more years on his deal,” LeBrun said.

“Now, having said that, I’m not ready to say that it couldn’t happen before the end of the summer, either, just based on the fact that at some point the team and player will want to talk about the future and whether or not he sees himself in Columbus long term. And I don’t know what the answer to that question would be.” (From *NHL Rumblings: Larkin Trade List Expanding, plus Latest on Matthews, Werenski, Tuch, Lee, more*, Pierre LeBrun, The Athletic, 6/10/2026)

Let’s talk through this one. Werenski is coming off a monster season that saw him win a pair of gold medals and a Norris Trophy. Yet, his team fell short of the playoffs despite being in the race since coach Rick Bowness took over.

That marked the sixth-consecutive season the Blue Jackets missed the playoffs. Recall at media day prior to the season that Werenski mentioned the importance of winning. He admitted missing what that felt like. Still, there was confidence from the room that the team was ready to take the next step.

There were days that it felt like that was coming to pass. Then the end-of-season collapse happened. Bowness had his rant after Game 82 questioning the culture. While the players didn’t all agree with what the coach said, they appreciated his emotion. Many of them hoped Bowness would return. He did.

That brings us to today. Werenski spoke to the media after winning the Norris Trophy. He said after taking some time to celebrate that win, it would be back to business getting ready for next season. He did say he wasn't too focused on the future yet.

"I've honestly gotten away from the game for a while now," Werenski said. "Back in the gym. I skated a little bit, but it's been nice to just kind of decompress and not really focus about the future too much and just kind of enjoy these milestones. I feel like you can get so caught up in focusing on the next thing, you don't really get to enjoy the moment. So I've really done that this summer. I really enjoyed being present with my family and now this. My focus will start to shift a little bit and start to focus on next year in the coming weeks and days."

Motivation won't be a question for Werenski, especially now that he's a father.

"I don't want to stop here. I feel like the second you get complacent is the second you get passed up. I want to keep playing for a long time. I want to play for my son, for my family. There's so much motivation out there and I still haven't won the ultimate goal, which is a Stanley Cup. I haven't played in the playoffs or had much success in the playoffs ever. So there's more motivation than ever for me to be even better next season to try and play in the playoffs."

Two things here. First, as LeBrun said, there hasn't been anything communicated to the Blue Jackets about a trade request in light of Larkin's. Werenski has spent his entire career with the Blue Jackets and has had nothing but positive things to say about his time. Unless something comes out to the contrary, we have no reason to believe Werenski won't be back with the Blue Jackets next season with two years left on his deal.

Second, assuming he plays with the Blue Jackets but they fail to make the playoffs again, then it becomes a fascinating question. It has always been our understanding the team has been preparing in advance of Werenski's next contract. Now a Norris winner and with a rising cap, we could be talking \$15 million/season on his next deal give or take.

That's what makes next season paramount for the Blue Jackets. They have to start showing that they have the talent and ability to not only make the playoffs, but do damage in them. If Werenski isn't convinced he could do that with the Blue Jackets, it's fair to wonder what would come next.

For now though, everything appears to be status quo. The Blue Jackets face an important offseason that will have lasting ramifications on what the next several seasons will look like.

Werenski has said repeatedly on record how much he loves Columbus and the Blue Jackets. But another failed season seems to point to all bets being off going into the final year of his deal.

My take? The Blue Jackets would be wise to do right by Werenski to give him every opportunity to win now.

Potential Moves

Waddell knows what's at stake. This offseason will be his opportunity to really put a stamp on the team now in going into his third season as President of Hockey Operations and General Manager.

The Hockey Writers is planning to speak to Waddell next week in advance of the draft. But he did speak to Jackets Insider Jeff Svoboda this week. This quote stood out as shared by Svoboda.

The key phrase is “I truly believe we’ll be able to do something.” It has never not been about not wanting to make bigger moves. It’s been about closing them.

The Blue Jackets were in on Noah Dobson. With more cap space and a desire to get better, it’s reasonable to believe the team will explore all their options.

But of course, fans want action. Waddell admitting he truly believes we’ll be able to do something is interesting. It sets the bar from an expectations standpoint.

The Blue Jackets would love to be able to add a top-six winger and a shutdown defenseman if possible. We’ll see what transpires over the next couple of weeks. But the GM is confident some moves will happen.

Side Dishes

- A couple of prospects are on the move. Owen Griffin was traded from Oshawa to Guelph in the OHL. He now gets the chance to play for a Memorial Cup with Guelph being the host.
- Nikolai Makarov will remain in Russia as he has re-signed to stay in the KHL.
- Defenseman Stanislav Svozil will be leaving the Monsters and will play in Czechia in 2026-27. He agreed to a two-year deal.
- Nothing new to report on Sergei Ivanov as of yet. His contract did expire at the end of May. We’ll see if there’s an update when we speak to Waddell next week.

WSYX / 3 big questions for the Blue Jackets heading into the NHL off-season

By Dylan Kerns – June 15, 2026

Monday marks the first day of the NHL off-season after the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup Final late Sunday night. The win marks the second cup for the Hurricanes in franchise history.

Two years ago, the Columbus Blue Jackets had an opening for the President of Hockey Operations in the front office. After several months of interviews with candidates the Jackets landed on Don Waddell, the then General Manager for the Carolina Hurricanes. Although Waddell didn't hoist the cup Sunday night, his fingertips were all-over the crafting of that championship roster.

Now entering his third year in Columbus, Waddell is facing pressure to build a roster that reaches the playoffs for the first time since the 2019-20 season.

The Blue Jackets fell just six points shy of making the playoffs last year, and just two points shy the year prior. The team's young core remains intact, but there will be some tough decisions to make on some popular aging veterans.

1. What does the future look like for Boone Jenner?

There's no denying the impact the Blue Jackets' captain has made both on and off the ice during his time in Columbus. He's called Columbus home for 13 seasons and has been a leader in the locker room. Jenner is one of many unrestricted free agents over the age of 30.

Last year was an odd year for Jenner, he bounced around from the top line to the fourth line and saw special teams minutes as well. He finished the season with 38 points in 67 games played.

The production is serviceable, but the inability to stay healthy may become red flags for an aging player. No matter what the Blue Jackets decide to do with Jenner, it's fair to say he will go down as one of the best players in Blue Jackets history.

2. Who is the real Kent Johnson?

When the Blue Jackets took Johnson in the first round of the 2021 NHL draft, it appeared the team was getting a young phenom who averaged a point-per-game in the Big-Ten for That Team Up North. Since breaking into the NHL, it's been a little bit of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde. He has shown flashes of brilliance but has also looked timid or lost at times on the ice.

Johnson's best season came in 2024-25, where he scored 24 goals and had 33 assists in 68 games. That kind of production led many Fifth liners to believe the real Kent Johnson has finally arrived. He followed up the productive season with just 22 points in 76 games last year and spent some time in the press box as a healthy scratch.

The silver lining is that Johnson is still only 23-years-old and has proven he can produce in the NHL. The Blue Jackets will have an off-season to decide whether a change-of-scenery move could help the team or seeing how they can get the most out of their former first-rounder.

3. Is the team one goal scorer away from the playoffs?

Last year the Blue Jackets struggled to get scoring from their best players down the stretch of the season. Kirill Marchenko led the team in goals with 27 and was the top scoring threat all season but only found the back of the net twice in the last 16 games of the season. It's hard to put it all on one player, injuries are a thing and the NHL is known to be hush about what players are going through during a season so that could be a question many fans are wondering.

Don Waddell was aggressive in-season by acquiring Mason Marchment, who is also an unrestricted free agent, and Conor Garland from the Canucks. Both players contributed in the scoring department when they got to Columbus.

Now the team has to decide if going after a top-line forward is necessary to take the next step into making the NHL playoffs.

1st Ohio Battery / Separating Pretenders From Contenders: How The Blue Jackets Need To Adjust

By Will Chase – June 13, 2026

Built for the regular season versus built for the playoffs.

In 2022, Dan Dukart wrote about the differences between building a 'playoff team' and a 'team that can win the Stanley Cup.'

I've thought quite a bit about that concept over the last few years, and the types of players you see that are an engine when it matters this time of year. Jordan Staal, a 2009 Stanley Cup champion with the Penguins, is 37 years old and one win away from lifting his second Stanley Cup with the Hurricanes.

His NHL.com player profile page starts with Staal "embodies what it means to be a Hurricane." Don Waddell, the former general manager of the Hurricanes, said that in 2023, when Staal signed a four-year contract extension. In this year's playoffs, Staal has 12 points (eight goals, four assists), with six of those goals coming against the Golden Knights in the Final. He's the first player in 70 years to score goals in the first five games of a Cup Final.

Legendary performance. Conn Smythe-level execution.

The Columbus Blue Jackets are trying to break through and surpass the playoff dividing line for the first time since 2019-20, when John Tortorella last coached Columbus to the playoffs. When watching the Stanley Cup playoffs year in and year out, it's not hard to see the skill that separates pretenders from contenders.

Of course, these are the Stanley Cup playoffs where the best shine on the brightest stage.

There were times this past season when the Blue Jackets under head coach Rick Bowness looked like a juggernaut. When they were scoring goals and winning with regularity in January before the Olympic break, they could do no wrong.

Two points in the standings mean as much in January as they do in March and April.

The NHL schedule is grueling. Next season, the schedule will increase to 84 games from 82. Maybe that benefits the Blue Jackets, who missed the playoffs two seasons ago by two points and by six points in the division this past season. Slumping at the wrong time of the year cost them again.

Columbus is improved now versus where they were three years ago. Going from last place in the Metropolitan Division in 2022-23 and 2023-24, before the surprise season with 40 wins and 89 points under Dean Evason in 2024-25, and finishing with 40 wins and 92 points this past season.

In actuality, the year under Evason was a surprise story that ended strong. The past season under Bowness ended in a whimper. Two different ways to miss the playoffs. The players said all the right things through the highs and lows of 2025-26. Now they have to back up their words on the ice.

Just as Waddell helped put together a winner with the Hurricanes, a team that has become a power in the league and made the playoffs every year since 2018-19, Waddell is tasked with adding to and fine-tuning his Blue Jackets roster for the season ahead. Bowness has to put into practice what he preached at the end of the season to ultimately change the culture and get the most out of his players at the most critical time. The players have to come through in March and April, just as they do in the months leading up.

Kirill Marchenko, one of the Blue Jackets' best players and their best forward, finished the 2025-26 season with 67 points (27 goals, 40 assists) in 76 games. He had three goals over the final month of the season.

As the season wore on and the playoff races intensified, teams increasingly targeted Marchenko, shutting him down and rendering him ineffective at critical moments down the stretch. The result is twofold: a testament to the respect he's earned around the league and a valuable lesson as he continues to evolve into the superstar he's shown he can become.

As a whole, the Blue Jackets slogged their way through a 3-9-1 stretch to close the season, fighting through a prolonged scoring malaise. The team scored 10 goals over a five-game stretch to close out March, going 1-4-1. That stretch came on the heels of a four-game winning streak in which Columbus scored 18 goals.

In April, *The Athletic's* Aaron Portzline referenced the end-of-season scoring slumps by the team, notably, both Marchenko and Zach Werenski. A team desperate for offense wasn't getting its usual offensive firepower from its two best players. Werenski, this year's Norris winner, is the engine on the back end for Columbus. When he's involved in the play and producing offensively, the team has a good chance to win on most nights.

Columbus goes as he goes.

Throughout the season, it was rare for Werenski to go more than three consecutive games without a point — it only happened twice. But he was a different player after the Olympics and only registered six points (two goals) between Mar. 22 and the season finale on Apr. 14. His shootout goal on Apr. 7 helped end an 0-5-1 losing streak in Detroit.

Columbus could use more high-end talent to pair with Marchenko and Werenski, but those players don't just grow on trees. When we talked about Werenski's year in review last week, we said the time was now to build a contender around Werenski. He has two more years before he's an unrestricted free agent. Marchenko is a restricted free agent next summer.

The Blue Jackets have elevated themselves from the doldrums of the league standings into late-season playoff races. Now they're at a point where they have to show consistency from October through April.

The foundation is in place — now it's about turning incremental progress into true contention.

[The Athletic / 2026 NHL Staff Mock Draft 2.0: Gavin McKenna goes to Toronto, but what comes after that?](#)

By The Athletic NHL Staff – June 15, 2026

The 2026 NHL Draft is less than two weeks away. Are the options for teams in each of their respective slots becoming at least a little clearer?

Immediately following the lottery in May, we convened our beat writers to make the first 16 picks of the draft. Now, we're expanding the mock to the full first round.

Trades were permitted in this exercise, and while a few involving first-round picks got close, none ultimately came to fruition. However, in the spirit of deal-making, the San Jose Sharks and New York Rangers agreed to a trade involving two young NHL players and a third-round pick. Those details can be found within the draft analysis below.

1. Toronto Maple Leafs: Gavin McKenna, LW, Penn State (NCAA)

If I'm the Maple Leafs management group, I think long and hard about trading this pick and listen to any offer I get. Any time there isn't a slam dunk, generational Connor McDavid-type player available at No. 1, that's what any GM should be doing.

Plus, the idea of trading down and still drafting Chase Reid, the possible future No. 1 defenseman the Leafs haven't had for far too long, is very tempting.

But that can all get very complicated. Taking McKenna is a tap-in. Ultimately, turning away a gift of a No. 1 pick is one thing this new management group likely wouldn't end up considering. Select the most likely superstar in the draft and do everything possible to ensure he flourishes in Toronto. McKenna has the tools to change games for the Leafs. And change for the better is what the Leafs need more than anything, right now. — *Joshua Kloke*

2. San Jose Sharks: Ivar Stenberg, LW, Frölunda (SHL)

Moving this pick for an instant upgrade in the defense corps was seriously explored. The aim was high in terms of proven blueliners with plenty of term left on their deals. The trade packages didn't quite come together, so going with the super-skilled Stenberg allowed me to deal William Eklund to the Rangers for right-shooting Braden Schneider and the best of New York's four third-round picks to replace one San Jose doesn't have. Schneider, 24, is young enough to grow with the Sharks' young core. Losing Eklund was tough, but the bet is that Stenberg is advanced enough to help immediately while having a bigger offensive upside when San Jose is ready to contend for the Stanley Cup. — *Eric Stephens*

3. Vancouver Canucks: Caleb Malhotra, C, Brantford (OHL)

The Canucks are at the start of their rebuild, and need just about everything. In the middle of their lineup, however, this club is lacking significantly in high-caliber center prospects and seems intent on taking Malhotra, the consensus best center on the board, even if there are reasonable concerns about his scoring profile, given that he's really only produced at the level of a top-five pick across about six months toward the end of his draft year. — *Thomas Drance*

4. Chicago Blackhawks: Chase Reid, RHD, Sault Ste. Marie (OHL)

The Blackhawks would ideally draft one of the top three forwards at No. 4, but with none of them available in this mock draft, they would likely select one of the top defensemen. Who the top defenseman is probably depends on who you ask. Reid has been the highest-ranked defenseman on our experts' lists of late. There might be some overlap with the Blackhawks already having Artyom Levshunov and Sam Rinzler as right-hand shots, but that won't likely stop Blackhawks general manager Kyle Davidson from taking someone who might have the highest ceiling among the players left on the board. — *Scott Powers*

5. New York Rangers: Carson Carels, LHD, Prince George (WHL)

The Rangers would love the chance to snag Malhotra, but if the board falls the way many expect it to, my sense is their decision will come down to Carels and Latvian defenseman Alberts Šmits. The latter is considered the most pro-ready, which has appeal for a New York team that's looking to turn things around quickly, but I'll give a slight lean to Carels for his combination of skating, physicality and production. (While reserving the right to change my mind in a week!) — *Vincent Z. Mercogliano*

6. Calgary Flames: Viggo Björck, C, Djurgården (SHL)

The Flames are starved for talent in their prospect pool. They could make the safe pick and grab Keaton Verhoeff and get a two-way defenseman with size and call it a night while adding to their stocked defensive group. But Björck has turned heads in recent weeks and months, particularly at the World Championship, where he picked up points and held his own against NHL players.

Considering how small players such as Brayden Point, Logan Stankoven and now Zach Benson have found ways to energize teams in the playoffs while contributing at both ends of the ice, the Flames shouldn't be afraid to add another talented center, despite his size. Especially if his motor is a driving force in his play, he's unafraid to go into the dirty areas, has shown proficiency at both ends of the ice and has proven he can play well in games that matter. — *Julian McKenzie*

7. Seattle Kraken: Alberts Šmits, LHD, Munich (DEL)

The Kraken need stars above all else, but at this point in the draft, scooping the best value prospect still on the board seems like a sensible course of action. Šmits is the most NHL-ready of the defenders in this class. There's a real chance that the Kraken will have added a top-four caliber contributor for the duration of his entry-level contract. That has to be an attractive proposition for a Kraken team that improved its defense significantly under Lane Lambert in his first season, and needs to find a way to show some expedited signs of progress in a competitive Seattle sports market. — *Drance*

8. Winnipeg Jets: Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, North Dakota (NCAA)

Winnipeg explored multiple trades but ultimately decided that a big, right-shot defenseman was too good to pass on with the No. 8 pick. Verhoeff projects as a tough-minutes, top-pair defenceman, according to Corey Pronman, and our scouts love his mobility, size, physicality and ability to add to the offense with a great point shot. — *Murat Ates*

9. Florida Panthers: Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Prince Albert (WHL)

The Panthers had a trade framework in place to deal this pick away for a big splash in goal, but it fell apart when Björck went off the board, so Florida instead pivots to snagging one of the top offensive blueliners in the class in Rudolph. He can both score and distribute, will run a power play, and at 6-foot-2, he does so with prototypical NHL size. — *Max Bultman*

10. Nashville Predators: Tynan Lawrence, C, Boston University (NCAA)

Lawrence checks the competitive, well-rounded box the Predators have prioritized while profiling as a surefire center (something not everyone is convinced Brady Martin will be). They need that more than another winger. — *Scott Wheeler*

11. St. Louis Blues: Malte Gustafsson, LHD, HV71 (SHL)

This was tough. With Björck and Lawrence off the board, wingers Wyatt Cullen and Ethan Belchetz were more than tempting. But for the Blues, a future top four of Philip Broberg, Adam Jiricek, Logan Mailloux and Gustafsson would be enticing. Plus, the club could still swing back at No. 15 and get a solid winger, or the next best center. — *Jeremy Rutherford*

12. New Jersey Devils: Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor (OHL)

Pronman picked Belchetz to go here in his recent mock draft, and it makes a lot of sense. His 6-foot-5 frame is compelling, and he had 34 goals and 59 points for Windsor this season. The Devils' top three prospects are either defensemen or a goalie, per Scott Wheeler's recent rankings, so this would throw a potential high-end forward into the mix for them. — *Peter Baugh*

13. New York Islanders: Wyatt Cullen, LW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

This feels like it's the right range for Cullen, son of three-time Cup champion Matt Cullen. The Islanders can keep stockpiling forwards with upside as Mathieu Darche continues to build his young, Matthew Schaefer-led core. — *Baugh*

14. Columbus Blue Jackets: Oscar Hemming, LW, Boston College (NCAA)

The Blue Jackets were hoping to get phone calls on this pick, but the middle of the first round might not move the needle. The Jackets would be delighted to add Hemming to the mix. He projects as a power forward with size and physicality, which is an element the Blue Jackets are always seeking, especially with smallish wingers Kent Johnson and Conor Garland in the top nine. — *Aaron Portzline*

15. St. Louis Blues: Oliver Suvanto, C, Tappara (Liiga)

With the Blues having two selections in a span of five picks, hopefully the strategy of going with Gustafsson at No. 11 and getting a quality forward at No. 15 paid off. It wasn't a surprise that Belchetz and Cullen went back-to-back at 12 and 13, but center was a bigger need than winger in the pipeline and Suvanto suits that well. — *Rutherford*

16. Washington Capitals: Alexander Command, C, Örebro (SHL)

The Capitals select one of the best centers in the draft in Command, who instantly becomes the best center prospect in their system. He's a physical pivot with decent size while also having the skill and speed to score at higher levels. — *Corey Pronman*

17. Los Angeles Kings: Ilia Morozov, C, Miami (NCAA)

This just feels like a Kings pick, and Morozov fills a serious need for a center with a first-round pedigree in their system. Until Hemming came along for BC, Morozov was the youngest player in the NCAA and handled himself well as a strong defensive pivot with more offensive upside to tap into. He had eight goals and 20 points as a freshman. At 6-foot-3 and 205 pounds, he's got NHL size while already adapting to the game and lifestyle in North America. — *Stephens*

18. Washington Capitals: JP Hurlbert, RW, Kamloops (WHL)

Washington selects one of the more offensively dynamic players in the draft in Hurlbert. He's an excellent playmaker and finisher with a high skill level. The Capitals have picked a lot of wingers in recent years, but he would arguably be the most purely skilled of the group. — *Pronman*

19. Utah Mammoth: Gleb Pugachyov, LW, Torpedo (KHL)

The Mammoth have a pretty strong system at every position, so they take the shot on the premium athlete in Pugachyov, a big-bodied forward who skates well, uses his physicality and has offensive touch as well. — *Bultman*

20. San Jose Sharks: Ryan Lin, RHD, Vancouver (WHL)

Passing on Reid, the draft's top defense prospect, might come back to haunt San Jose if he becomes a high-level No. 1, so snapping up Lin here is a good fallback. With a sea of cap space, taking a free agency swing on cannon-shot Darren Raddysh is worth it after adding Schneider. On many projections, Lin was supposed to go in the middle of the round, so this could be a steal. Even if Raddysh can't be landed, the Sharks can have the Denver-bound Lin or Hobey Baker Award finalist Eric Pohlkamp battle it out to run the power play with Macklin Celebrini. — *Stephens*

21. Philadelphia Flyers: Maddox Dagenais, C, Quebec (QMJHL)

Dagenais would have fit right in with the Flyers' 2025 draft class as a player with good size (6-foot-4, 196 pounds) and who needs to continue to work on his skating. While the Flyers already have a few centers like that in their system (Jack Nesbitt, Jack Berglund), adding another wouldn't necessarily be a deterrent — particularly for a team that's probably going to have to trade at least one or two prospects in the future to procure more high-end NHL talent. — *Kevin Kurz*

22. Pittsburgh Penguins: Tommy Bleyl, RHD, Moncton (QMJHL)

This might seem like a slight reach, but then again, people said the same of Ben Kindel. This is an immensely talented though undersized defenseman. There are mixed feelings on him, but he's a PP QB waiting to happen, and Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang are old. As good as Harrison Brunicke is going to be, he's not a power-play guy. Bleyl is, and he strikes me as a player Kyle Dubas would love. — *Josh Yohe*

23. Boston Bruins: Casey Mutryn, RW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

The Bruins keep the Boston College pipeline active. Mutryn, who will be a BC freshman, aims to become the next version of James Hagens. Mutryn is a different type of forward than the explosive Hagens, but he projects to be a dependable middle-of-the-lineup wing/center with a pro game. — *Fluto Shinzawa*

24. Vancouver Canucks: Mathis Preston, RW, Vancouver (WHL)

The Canucks have very rarely selected Vancouver Giants players, but the club has been around the Giants over the past year and has been linked to Preston, an athletic scoring forward hailing from Penticton, B.C. Preston dealt with some injury issues in his draft year, but he's got the sort of smash-mouth, high-octane style of play that the Vancouver market adores, and that the Canucks desperately need to add to their prospect pool. — *Drance*

25. Seattle Kraken: Elton Hermansson, RW, MoDo (SHL)

This might be one of the best value picks of the first round. Hermansson is a high-end scoring winger — one of the five most productive 17-year-old players in Allsvenskan history — with NHL size and a solid right-handed shot. He's also a solidly well-rounded player with a legitimately conscientious two-way game. Given Seattle's desperate need for high-end skill, Hermansson provides a real shot at it, with a very high floor as well, in the late first round. — *Drance*

26. New York Rangers: Jack Hextall, C, Youngstown (USHL)

I debated between Hextall and winger Nikita Klepov, who led the OHL in scoring this season and would infuse much-needed skill into New York's pipeline. But the Rangers haven't used a first-round pick on a center since 2017, which is why I found it hard to pass on the top-ranked available pivot, according to both Pronman and Wheeler. (I think 6-foot-7 center Brooks Rogowski is another option the Blueshirts like and could consider here.)

The decision was solidified after negotiating for an offensive-minded winger in a draft-day trade with the Sharks. Adding Eklund, Carels and Hextall jolts the organization with young talent at multiple positions and puts the Rangers in a strong position with four picks remaining in the top 92. — *Mercogliano*

27. Buffalo Sabres: Adam Novotný, LW, Peterborough (OHL)

We came close to pulling off a trade that would have sent this pick, Jack Quinn and Vsevolod Komarov to the Rangers for Vincent Trocheck. The Rangers wanted Michael Kesselring, Adam Kleber or Maxim Strbak instead of Komarov, so we decided to make the pick. Novotný was the consensus best player on the board and gives the Sabres a bigger winger in their prospect pool, filling a need. — *Matthew Fairburn*

28. Montreal Canadiens: Nikita Klepov, LW, Saginaw (OHL)

The Canadiens will always swing on forwards with top-six upside, and while Klepov has some evident flaws — which is the reason why the OHL's leading scorer is still available at this slot — he clearly has that upside. Last year, the Canadiens aggressively traded up to grab Alexander Zharovsky early in the second round despite concerns about his physical immaturity. This would feel like a similar swing, with the bonus that Klepov is heading to powerhouse Michigan State in the fall, giving him a long development runway, and he's still very young, with his 18th birthday coming on Day 2 of the draft. — *Arpon Basu*

29. St. Louis Blues: Maksim Sokolovskii, LHD, London (OHL)

With the Blues already picking twice in the first round, they grabbed a puck-moving defenseman with top-four potential in Gustafsson at No. 11 and an ultra-competitive center in Suvanto at No. 15. That will

allow them to take a bit of a swing here with Sokolovskii, a left-shot Russian defenseman. At 6-foot-7, 240 pounds, he can move, and many believe he's moving up the draft boards of some teams after the NHL combine. — *Rutherford*

30. Calgary Flames: Marcus Nordmark, LW, Djurgården (SHL)

We're going into best player available territory here with Nordmark, who's seen as a high-skill winger with goal-scoring ability. The Flames could still use size on defense. But more important than ever, they need talented players who could elevate to game-breakers. Nordmark likely fell in our mock draft because of questions regarding his consistency. But when he's on, he's on. And the Flames need those players in their system. It's a risk they can afford to take with multiple first-round picks at their disposal. — *McKenzie*

31. Carolina Hurricanes: Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW, Örebro (SHL)

Both Aaram-Olsen and Xavier Villeneuve scream Hurricanes draft pick, but the Canes don't tend to take D in the first round. Aaram-Olsen, a bubble first-/second-round guy who can skate, handle and shoot it like a first-rounder, has the skill they prioritize. If they were on the fence about taking him with this pick, I wonder if his impressive display in testing at the combine helps them feel that extra little bit more confident about it. — *Wheeler*

32. Ottawa Senators: Liam Ruck, LW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

We didn't think the Senators would get a first-round pick until the NHL gave it back to them in March. With that pick, the Sens select one of the best shooters in the draft. His goal-scoring ability, motor and willingness to play in traffic and along the boards make him an enticing prospect for the Senators, who are short on NHL-bound prospects. And if GM Steve Staios is up for it, maybe he trades some of his three third-rounders for a second-round pick so he can obtain twin brother Markus. — *McKenzie*

[The Athletic / Why these 8 NHL teams could be aggressive on the trade market this offseason](#)

By Harman Dayal – June 13, 2026

The NHL is about to enter one of the most uncertain offseasons in recent memory.

On one hand, you have one of the worst unrestricted free-agent classes in league history. That could result in some desperate, regrettable contracts being handed out, but last year, most teams that were flush with cap space showed a surprising level of discipline and restraint. They weren't spending money just for the sake of it, which meant there were barely any July 1 fireworks and several teams entered this past season with their ample cap space still intact.

Free agency looks awfully bleak for clubs targeting major upgrades this summer, which means the trade market is the primary way for teams to find external additions. This year's trade market could be legitimately fascinating. Dylan Larkin and Darnell Nurse have already requested trades, and they may not be the only big names to follow the league's new player empowerment trend.

However, if fewer big-name players than expected shake loose on the trade block, we could be looking at offseason market dynamics similar to last summer, in which the number of teams looking to upgrade for next season significantly outpaces the number of impact players available. And if that scenario unfolds, we'll be left with several teams that strike out on their primary trade/free-agent targets and then are left unable to make major moves despite their aggressive intent.

With that in mind, let's analyze some teams that could go wheeling and dealing this summer. This list will include franchises with clear incentives to make a buying move or two, cap flexibility, and ideally some meaningful trade chips to deploy if the right piece becomes available. We won't be including teams like the Edmonton Oilers, Toronto Maple Leafs and Los Angeles Kings, who have the ambition to make a splash but lack ideal trade and cap resources.

Not every team on this list will achieve its offseason goals, and a few may change course and opt for a quieter summer if the right trade options don't emerge, but these are clubs at least worth monitoring over the next month.

Montreal Canadiens

Montreal took impressive strides this past season but there's clearly still room to upgrade as it pursues perennial Stanley Cup contention.

There's a gaping hole at the second-line center position behind Nick Suzuki. The Canadiens filled the 2C role by committee this year, but with all due respect to Jake Evans, who's a terrific depth contributor, it's a clear weakness if you're forced to lean on him as your 2C in the playoffs.

Adding a bona fide second-line center would take some of the pressure off Suzuki to do all the heavy lifting. Equally as importantly, it'd give budding star Ivan Demidov a running mate to help take his game to the next level.

If the Canadiens are uncertain how quickly David Reinbacher will become an impact contributor, they could also be in the market for another right-shot defenseman, as Noah Dobson and Alexandre Carrier are the only NHL right-handed defensemen they have under contract for next season.

The Canadiens enter the summer with roughly \$11 million in projected cap room without any significant new contracts to sign for next season. That figure could climb to over \$20 million in cap space by the time they presumably find trades for Brendan Gallagher (\$6.5 million AAV, one year left) and Sam Montembeault (\$3.15 million AAV, one year left). Zack Bolduc needs a new deal as an RFA and the organization has a decision to make on Kirby Dach's RFA future as well, but neither one will break the bank.

Demidov will officially be extension-eligible on July 1, so signing him long-term is a critical piece of business this summer, but he has one year left on his entry-level contract, meaning any deal he signs won't kick in until 2027-28, and by then, the Canadiens will have an extra \$11 million coming off the books with Phillip Danault and Josh Anderson's expiring contracts.

All of this is to say that the Canadiens boast meaningful cap flexibility in the short and long term. Couple that with Montreal owning all of its first- and second-round picks and a prospect pool that still ranks top-10 in the NHL, and you have a franchise that has the ammo to go big-game hunting if the right difference-maker becomes available on the trade market.

Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets remind me a bit of the situation the Anaheim Ducks found themselves in at the end of last season. Columbus has some legitimate high-end talent (Zach Werenski, Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Denton Mateychuk, Jet Greaves), but the six-year playoff drought is getting long, and there's urgency for the franchise to take the next step and make the playoffs.

Last summer, the Ducks made a couple of splashes by trading for Chris Kreider and signing Mikael Granlund — they were the third-most-improved team in the NHL last offseason, according to colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's model — which, combined with strong internal improvement and a coaching change, powered Anaheim back to the playoffs. That's similar to the formula Columbus will be aiming for: A big acquisition or two and internal growth from youngsters. It'd be huge if Fantilli can take the leap to true stardom next year that Leo Carlsson did.

Werenski's future is an enormous factor that should motivate the Blue Jackets to be active this offseason.

The 2026 Norris Trophy winner only has two years remaining on his contract before being eligible for unrestricted free agency. He'll have a huge decision to make next summer, when he's officially extension-eligible, on whether he wants to stay in Columbus long-term or not. Werenski enjoys playing in Columbus by all accounts, but prime-aged superstars' top priority is winning and that will undoubtedly put pressure on the Blue Jackets to get over the playoff hump.

The Blue Jackets enter the offseason with \$35 million in projected cap space and 15 NHL players under contract. A large chunk of that money will need to go to re-signing RFAs Fantilli, Greaves and Cole Sillinger but the club will still have ample cap room to play with, especially if they find a way to offload Elvis Merzlikins.

In terms of trade chips, Columbus isn't exactly overflowing with prized assets, but there are legitimate pieces to dangle, as the organization's prospect pool is roughly league-average and they own all of their first-round picks. The Blue Jackets look pretty set with their top-four blue line and Greaves is their clear-cut starter, so their top priority should be to land an impact top-six winger.

Minnesota Wild

Many teams have a desire to upgrade down the middle, but there's arguably no contender more desperate for an impact top-six center than Minnesota.

The Wild were widely viewed by league executives as a dark-horse Stanley Cup contender heading into the playoffs, but they're stuck in one of the toughest divisions in hockey, and their five-game loss to Colorado in Round 2 revealed that this is still an imperfect roster. With Joel Eriksson Ek injured, the club was rolling Ryan Hartman and Michael McCarron as their one-two punch at center for must-win games against the Avs, which simply isn't going to cut it.

Couple that with the impetus to win now with Quinn Hughes in the fold, and there's no way Bill Guerin, one of the boldest general managers in the NHL, is going to sit on his hands this summer.

The Wild may not have the proven centerpiece with star potential that's required to win the Dylan Larkin sweepstakes, but they still have assets to make *some* upgrades. Danila Yurov is a promising 22-year-old center coming off a solid rookie year; Charlie Stramel, a first-round pick from 2023, is a 6-foot-3 pivot who finished a productive NCAA season; and the team still has its first-round picks in 2027 and 2028. All of those pieces could be dangled as trade chips.

Minnesota may need to create more cap room to make a splash — it currently has about \$11 million in projected space, but with only 17 NHLers under contract. The good news is that there are straightforward ways to free up more cap room if necessary. The 15-team no trade clause on Hartman's contract (one year remaining at \$4 million) will shift to a 10-team list. Quality but pricey bottom-six forwards Yakov Trenin (\$3.5 million AAV) and Nico Sturm (\$2 million) don't have any trade protection.

Seattle Kraken

Should the Kraken be aggressive buyers? It's debatable. They're not really close to contending and should probably stop making the kind of dicey win-now moves that have pushed them into mediocrity.

However, Kraken CEO Tod Leiweke promised fans a "prolific" offseason in April when former president of hockey operations Ron Francis exited. There's almost certainly some organizational pressure to return to the playoffs and solidify a strong fanbase before the NBA expands back to Seattle. You also can't ignore this team's track record of aggression in recent summers: They made moves for Ryan Lindgren and Mason Marchment last year and signed Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour to big free-agency contracts in 2024.

Couple that with Seattle's all-in pursuit of Artemi Panarin before his departure to Los Angeles and the acquisition of Bobby McMann at the deadline, and it's obvious this franchise wants to take the next step.

The Kraken are armed with nearly \$30 million in cap space and are loaded with trade chips. Seattle owns four first-round picks over the next two years, boasts the seventh-best prospect pool in the NHL and

could leverage Shane Wright as an asset for the right offensive game-breaker. This franchise could desperately use some elite talent up front and has all the resources to make a bold pitch, but it'll require the right target to shake loose and that star to want to play in Seattle.

Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina is uniquely positioned as one of the few already-established Cup contenders that still has an abundance of cap space and trade assets to improve its team.

The Hurricanes have approximately \$12 million in cap space, with nearly their entire roster already under contract for next season — Alexander Nikishin (RFA) and Frederik Andersen are the only notable players who need new extensions. That flexibility could also improve if the club decides to ship out Jesperi Kotkaniemi and his \$4.82 million cap hit, which is widely expected considering he's been a healthy scratch for the entire playoffs. With how weak the center market is, the Canes will probably be able to find a taker for Kotkaniemi's contract because of his age, position and draft pedigree.

Long-term, Carolina has tremendous cost certainty because Seth Jarvis, Sebastian Aho, Jaccob Slavin, Logan Stankoven, Jackson Blake, K'Andre Miller, Andrei Svechnikov and Sean Walker have tons of term left on team-friendly contracts.

In terms of trade chips, Carolina owns all of its first-round picks along with an extra one in 2028 from Dallas. Their prospect pool is also quite respectable for a contending team.

The Canes are in an enviable position where they don't *need* to make moves because their roster doesn't have a glaring hole, especially with Stankoven solving the previous second-line center weakness. However, they do have the opportunity to take a bold, aggressive swing if the right opportunity arises, which the club did with Nikolaj Ehlers and Miller last summer.

GM Eric Tulsky could opt to keep his powder dry for opportunities beyond this summer, but keep the Hurricanes in mind as a team with the resources to make noise.

San Jose Sharks

The Sharks aren't going to make reckless, short-sighted moves just to expedite their rebuild. However, there should be smart ways to target meaningful upgrades that fit the team's short- and long-term goals and timeline.

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San Jose has tons of top-nine forward talent, but the blue line needs major work. Dmitry Orlov and Sam Dickinson are the only NHL defensemen under contract for next season. Shakir Mukhamadullin, a pending RFA, will likely be back, but the team needs to add at least one, and ideally multiple, top-four defensemen who can eat big minutes next season.

San Jose rolled out arguably the worst top four in the NHL this past season as Orlov, Mario Ferraro, John Klingberg and Timothy Liljegren (who's now on the Capitals) led the Sharks' back end in average ice time. For context, the Sharks had to use Vincent Desharnais on their top pair in some critical games with playoff implications down the stretch when Klingberg was injured. That kind of situation will be inexcusable moving forward.

Young defensemen with upside — such as Michael Kesselring, Simon Nemec, Olen Zellweger and Pavel Mintyukov — could be sensible targets. Kesselring in particular could be an awesome buy-low fit. San Jose's decision with the No. 2 pick also looms large. If the Sharks take Ivar Stenberg, they'll suddenly have an excess of talented wingers that they can dip into to acquire a top-flight defenseman.

The Sharks have over \$40 million in projected cap room and will need to spend several million more just to hit the \$76.9 million salary cap floor for next season.

Boston Bruins

The Bruins are stuck in somewhat of a bind.

On one hand, it's nearly impossible to envision how they can realistically contend in the Atlantic Division when Montreal, Buffalo, Florida and Tampa Bay are all superior teams on paper, especially because it feels like Boston overachieved in the regular season just to reach 100 points. On the other hand, there's pressure to capitalize on the primes of David Pastrnak, Jeremy Swayman and Charlie McAvoy, who are all in the 27-30 age bracket.

Boston has grown its stable of prospects and young players over the last couple of years with some savvy moves, but it's not as if their under-23 talent pipeline is exceptional. This leaves the Bruins caught between the present and future.

President Cam Neely made it clear what direction the organization is prioritizing, though, telling local reporters that he's "all about being aggressive if it's going to help us today, tomorrow and the next day."

The Bruins have trade assets — they own all of their first- and second-round picks moving forward and have future first-rounders from Florida and Toronto in their back pocket. Cap space won't be an issue either, as Boston has over \$15 million in projected room with most of its roster already signed. The wish list is also pretty straightforward: They need a true No. 1 center and could use another top-four right-shot defender on the second pair behind McAvoy.

Boston has the pieces and ambition to make a splash. We'll just have to see whether the right target comes along.

New York Rangers

On the surface, the idea of the Rangers making a splash this offseason sounds a bit silly. This is an organization that should focus on stockpiling draft picks and prospects and on making moves that prioritize the team's long-term future.

However, GM Chris Drury's letter to fans in January stressed that the Rangers are targeting a quick turnaround rather than a full rebuild. Colleague Vince Mercogliano also recently reported many executives and agents believe "Drury would like to be active" and take a big swing this summer.

It's doubtful this plan will work, especially based on Drury's underwhelming track record, but the team's closing contention window didn't stop him from making a desperate move for J.T. Miller last year. The Rangers seem to think they can pull off a quick retool around Igor Shesterkin (30) and Adam Fox (28). The urgency to make moves this summer could be ratcheted up by Drury's self-interest; there's no guarantee he'll keep his job if New York misses the playoffs for a third consecutive year next season.

The Rangers are projected to have nearly \$30 million in cap space with nearly all of their players signed; Braden Schneider is the only notable skater who needs a new deal.

New York has legitimate trade chips it could use as well. Vincent Trocheck is widely expected to be dealt and should command a strong return. The Rangers could target young, NHL-ready contributors in that deal, or immediately use the futures acquired in a Trocheck move as trade pieces. Schneider could also be a coveted asset. On top of that, the club has 11 draft picks this year, including an extra first-rounder from the K'Andre Miller trade last summer.

Mercogliano and Peter Baugh highlighted younger players with untapped upside who could be targets, as well as intriguing buy-low/cap-dump targets the Rangers could consider. We'll see if Drury can thread the needle by adding young, impact players without compromising the team's long-term future, or whether they'll make more questionable moves.

The Athletic / What can Darnell Nurse offer as a trade target? The risks, rewards and suitors

By Shayna Goldman – June 13, 2026

With Darnell Nurse, one thing comes to mind above all else: A \$9.25 million cap hit.

When his defensive lapses end up in the back of the net. When he takes an undisciplined penalty at an important time. When the Oilers' maneuverability and cap flexibility are too limited to make meaningful improvements.

Nurse's contract is far from the only problem in Edmonton. But it's obviously a much more costly one compared to players such as Trent Frederic or even Tristan Jarry. And it looked like an overpayment on Day 1 of the contract.

That \$9.25 million cap hit was worth 11.2 percent of the cap back in Year 1 of the deal in 2022-23. That's territory for franchise cornerstones and elite talent. It sets lofty expectations that were impossible for him to ever meet.

Set the cap aside, though, and there's still a pretty capable defender there, in the right role and usage. It just will never be a \$9.25 million caliber one. A move from Edmonton may give him his best chance to prove that.

All signs were pointing to a breakup between Edmonton and Nurse this summer. The Oilers need to clear some contracts this summer, and his was an easy target. The player just beat management to the punch and requested a trade first. With a full no-movement clause, he has a lot of control in this situation.

Moving Nurse won't be easy, especially if he puts strict restrictions on where he is willing to go. But with his request in the open, he could be a reclamation project for some.

What's the blueprint for this kind of trade?

The new CBA complicates things. Edmonton can't rely on a third team to play broker in this situation and just take on a chunk of his salary; 75 regular-season days have to pass between trades. So the bones of a Nurse trade all revolve around how much cap the Oilers are willing to retain. That's really the only way for the Oilers to get any needle-moving return.

Take the Jacob Trouba deal. Anaheim absorbed all of Trouba's \$8 million cap for two years, but the Rangers only got a fourth-rounder and Urho Vaakanainen in return. Chris Kreider had more value and bounce-back potential, and only one year (at \$6.5 million) remaining, but to clear that cap, New York only got a third and an iffy prospect.

Because Anaheim was willing to retain 38.5 percent of Cam Fowler's deal, which had two seasons left at \$6.5 million, the Blues' return was a little stronger: A second plus a lower-end prospect.

Ideally, Edmonton would retain 50 percent and make him a \$4.63 million man. Twenty or 30 percent is more realistic and could grease the wheels of a deal. Still, the Oilers may also have to take back a bad contract to move the needle here.

Why would teams be interested?

Nurse's value has understandably plummeted over the past few years. The mistakes are less forgiving in Edmonton, considering its goaltending situation over the years. The Oilers' deep runs over the last few seasons put those lapses even more front and center.

A playoff-caliber team can't afford to have Nurse playing matchup minutes; he's far too risky with the puck and undisciplined. His penalty differential has been in the negatives every single regular season of his career, and all but one postseason. The fact that the Oilers' offense cratered in his minutes this year hurts his value even more.

His comps point to some dicey outcomes, too — Michal Rozsival, Derek Morris, Jake Muzzin and Erik Johnson are potential cautionary tales.

Separate the player from that \$9.25 million contract, and get him out of Edmonton (where defense was a team-wide struggle most of this year), and there could still be something left to extract. Maybe he becomes the next Brayden McNabb and extends his career. A Brad Stuart path would be pretty neutral, too.

It just requires finding the right situation and partner. He needs to play with a partner with puck skills who can handle defensive-zone puck touches, such as retrievals and breakouts. Then, it's easier to focus on what he brings. He's battle-tested, hard-nosed and can absorb big minutes. Nurse has a long reach, can still burst up the ice with speed to join the rush, plays with an edge, kills penalties and can be counted on for leadership. General managers of playoff teams often look for players with exactly those qualities.

Nurse needs more structure around him and a simplified role as a No. 4 or five.

Past reclamation projects show potential. Fowler and Trouba upped their game with new teams. Rasmus Ristolainen has played some of his best hockey in Philadelphia because the team's structure insulates him so much, even when he manages the puck poorly. Seth Jones' game was revitalized in Florida, thanks to their defensive foundation and a role change from a No. 1 to a second-pair player.

So a change of scenery (and salary retention) could be a game-changer.

Which teams make sense as landing spots?

Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks only have two defensemen signed for the 2026-27 season. RFA Olen Zellweger is bound to be the third. Pavel Mintyukov is a wild card, since his name was in trade rumors this year. If he's not a long-term option, it could open space for Nurse on the left.

General manager Pat Verbeek has taken swings on big-name defensemen on the decline before, even with pricey contracts, such as Trouba. With that contract expiring, along with Radko Gudas and John Carlson's, Nurse could be the veteran replacement.

The Ducks may have about \$44 million in cap space for next season, but a lot of work to do. Leo Carlsson and Cutter Gauthier's new contracts could cost a combined \$20 million (based on AFP Analytics' projections). Plus, the team still needs to sign a few forwards and at least five defensemen. In the early stages of this playoff window, Anaheim has to keep the big picture in mind; Nurse's contract in two or three years could become an obstacle. But with almost \$13 million in cap space opening up in a year when Chris Kreider and Alex Killorn's deals expire, and more entry-level talent likely joining the fold, the team should be able to balance the books with some retention.

San Jose Sharks

The Sharks have some experience taking on the Oilers' cap casualties. In August 2024, San Jose took on Cody Ceci's contract and traded him (along with another cap dump in Mikael Granlund) to Dallas for a first- and a third-rounder.

This could work out similarly. The Sharks could help Nurse replenish his value as they did with Ceci, and then flip him at the deadline to a contender looking for cheap help on defense. The difference here would be that Nurse wouldn't be a rental like Ceci was for Dallas. But it's pretty much the only way to really get his salary down with the new retention rules. While there's no traditional third-party brokering, the Sharks, at least, have experience being a middleman if need be.

The other option is just adding Nurse and keeping him for the season (or beyond), and figuring out the next steps when the time comes. The Sharks only have three defensemen signed for next year: Dmitry Orlov, Sam Dickinson and Luca Cagnoni. In theory, that could fill out the left side of the blue line, if those two young guns are ready for full-time roles or Mario Ferraro extends. If not, Nurse could fill that gap.

While the Ducks' playoff window is officially open, the Sharks are on the verge of taking that next step. A reclamation project such as Nurse makes sense from a rebuilding perspective if Edmonton sweetens the deal. And his playoff experience could help as this team tries to turn the corner.

Los Angeles Kings

At first glance, L.A. may not seem like a fit considering the aging defenders the team already has locked up. The idea of potentially reuniting Ceci and Nurse, who are both older at this point, is diabolical.

But what if the Kings could move out the Brian Dumoulin contract (\$4 million), or Joel Edmundson (\$3.85 million), and swap in Nurse?

It makes sense for two reasons: Ken Holland, the general manager who signed Nurse, is running the Kings. Second, Peter Laviolette was just hired as head coach.

Laviolette's system requires defensemen to be a lot more active in all three zones. It can be really taxing on players who don't have a ton of speed. And as his New York tenure showed, he wasn't exactly adaptable to the players he had on his roster. So it's in management's best interest to find skaters who can actually skate, such as Nurse, who would be an upgrade speed-wise on either Dumoulin or Edmundson. As much as Holland *should* be looking for younger, more dimensional options, he has his tendencies, and it's to go after veterans such as Nurse.

Utah Mammoth

Shift to the Central, and one team could make sense as a trade partner: the Mammoth. Ian Cole is 37 years old. He's also coming off a pretty underwhelming Round 1 series; the third pair of Cole and Sean Durzi were outscored 2-1 and earned a sub-37 percent xG rate. So it wouldn't hurt to look at other options.

The Mammoth could actually come into next year with a completely new third pair, depending on how management plays things this summer. Dmitri Simashev and Maveric Lamoureux are both right-handed, so if either looks ready for the big leagues full-time, management could move out Durzi's \$6 million cap hit.

That may be the key to even considering Nurse; if there's salary retained, pairing him with an entry-level righty could make for a more cost-effective third pairing than Cole and Durzi. That would give the team more room to upgrade their center situation up front. While Nurse obviously has some instabilities in his own game to work out, he's a veteran presence who could help lead up-and-coming talent on the back end.

Philadelphia Flyers

Elliott Friedman said on Friday's 32 Thoughts that an Eastern Conference team could be Nurse's preference. Pair that with Allan Mitchell writing yesterday that both Pennsylvania teams are rumored as favorites, and that brings up two more potential destinations.

Between Travis Sanheim (a lefty who can play both sides), Cam York and Nick Seeler, Philly has what it needs to fill out that side of the lineup. But say management decides to flip Ristolainen now that he is in the last year of his deal, which could open the door to someone such as Nurse stepping in.

The rebuild isn't over after this team went on a modest run to the playoffs, so management still may want to cash in on Ristolainen while they can. The durability factor here for Ristolainen could also sway the Flyers to move him sooner rather than later. So could Nurse's experience, and the fact that the Flyers know how to revitalize a risky defenseman within their system. He could be the exact type of player Rick Tocchet would appreciate in an up-and-coming lineup.

A Ristolainen move could shift Sanheim to his off side and open space on the left for Nurse. Or the team could keep Sanheim on his natural side and flip Seeler, whose no-trade clause expires on July 1. He is 33 years old, but his \$2.7 million cap hit should be enticing to a cap-strapped contender.

Pittsburgh Penguins

The Penguins' best course of action is just extending Ryan Shea to play with Parker Wotherspoon and Sam Girard on the left. Adding a 31-year-old with another four years doesn't exactly line up with Pittsburgh's process under Kyle Dubas, either.

Then again, Dubas did fleece the Oilers in the Jarry trade, and has history with Nurse, so maybe there's something here — especially if it's a means to shedding Ryan Graves' \$4.5 million cap hit for the next three years.

Pittsburgh really doesn't need to make its blue line any older, but the team does have a lot of money coming off the books in 2027-28. Maybe this is the kind of contract that can help the team stay above

the cap floor in the long run if the organization goes for a tear-it-down kind of rebuild. Or, maybe by then, Nurse will have regained some value to be traded again to a playoff team in need, too.

Columbus Blue Jackets

A left side of Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov and Nurse, even with money retained, would be pricey. But with Erik Gudbranson's \$4 million cap hit expiring this summer, Nurse with retention wouldn't be that outlandish — especially not in today's NHL that has been overpaying the middle class.

The Blue Jackets should have the cap space to absorb part of Nurse's hit, extend Adam Fantilli long-term and fill out the rest of the lineup. Maybe there's a way for the Blue Jackets to actually make cap space in the process, too.

What if a Nurse deal allows the team to clear Elvis Merzlikins' \$5.4 million AAV? He could be an interesting 1B in Edmonton if the Oilers can find a way to dump Jarry's remaining two years.