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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan voted Masterton Trophy winner

By Brian Hedger – June 5, 2025

Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan is the winner of the 2024-25 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

It's the first time a Blue Jacket has won the award, which is presented annually to the NHL player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. No player in the league exemplified those qualities more than Monahan, who was voted the Masterton winner by the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

Monahan, 30, signed with the Blue Jackets on July 1, 2024, primarily to reunite with Johnny Gaudreau. The two were close friends after playing nearly a decade together in Calgary, so Monahan jumped at a chance to rekindle that spark as a free agent — two years after Gaudreau stunned the NHL by picking the Blue Jackets.

Instead, an offseason tragedy that took the lives of Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, on Aug. 29, 2024, in Oldmans Township, New Jersey dashed those plans, leaving Monahan emotionally gutted. His Columbus debut began with a heavy heart, forcing Monahan and his new teammates to bond through shared grief and fond memories of Gaudreau.

"John's someone who brings people together," Monahan said after the the NHL announced him as the Masterton winner June 5. "So, going to a new team, everyone knew him well, and I said it plenty of times this year ... I felt like that was where I was supposed to be, playing in Columbus. And I don't take that for granted. Being a Blue Jacket, what it means to be a Blue Jacket and the guys I'm surrounded with every day in the organization and my teammates, it's a real special place to play."

Monahan became a special part of the Blue Jackets' lineup while centering the top forward line and playing the critical "bumper" position for the first power-play group. Together, Monahan and the Blue Jackets became the NHL's most improved team, improving by 23 points from 2023-24, and nearly qualified for the Stanley Cup Playoffs under new head coach Dean Evason.

Monahan, who missed more than two months with a wrist injury, was a driving force with 19 goals, 38 assists and 57 points in just 54 games.

"I was playing with some great players, and I was confident in my game," Monahan said. "I worked really hard to get back to where I wanted to be, and I think I've still got a lot to prove and a lot to prove to myself. I think we should be a playoff team every year. This year was a bit of a step forward, but we didn't get where we wanted to, so ... it's a big summer for our group to get ready for next season."

Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny Gaudreau's widow, presented Monahan with the trophy in a surprise visit to his offseason home near Toronto. The NHL shared a moving video on social media of her surprising Monahan with the award, and both had tears flowing.

"I had no idea," Monahan said. "I was kind of waiting around all dressed up for a while because I was told we were doing family photos, and my mom was here and was going to help us with the little guy (1-year old Leo) and to get set up. It definitely caught me off guard, so it was just presented in a special way, and they did a great job to surprise me."

Monahan is the sixth person in Blue Jackets history to win one of the NHL's major awards.

The other five are:

Rick Nash — 2003-04 Maurice "Rocket Richard Trophy (NHL goal leader), 2008-09 NHL Foundation Award

Steve Mason — 2008-09 Calder Memorial Trophy (top rookie)

Sergei Bobrovsky — 2012-13 and 2016-17 Vezina Trophy (top goalie)

Nick Foligno — 2016-17 Mark Messier Leadership Award, 2016-17 King Clancy Memorial Trophy (leadership, community contributions)

John Tortorella — 2016-17 Jack Adams Trophy (coach of the year).

Center Sean Monahan had 19 goals, 38 assists and 57 points in 54 games with the Blue Jackets this season.

Foligno (2018-19) and Kevin Dineen (2000-01, 2001-02) preceded Monahan as Blue Jackets finalists for the Masterton Trophy.

Runners-up to Monahan for the 2024-25 Masterton are Minnesota Wild goalie Marc-Andre Fleury, who's retiring after a distinguished career, and Colorado Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog, who returned in the playoffs after a three-year absence due to a knee injury.

Monahan also went through injury difficulties prior to signing with the Blue Jackets, playing just 90 games combined for the Calgary Flames and Montreal Canadiens between 2021 and 2023 due to multiple health challenges that included two hip surgeries, a groin surgery and a broken foot. A wrist surgery kept him out for two-plus months with the Blue Jackets, while at the same time grieving Gaudreau.

"It's definitely special to get the award," Monahan said. "I've said it before. I don't need the recognition. Everybody's going through different things in their life, but I worked hard to get where I am, and I went through ups and downs. And to be in Columbus and be healthy and able to play the game I love is something I don't take for granted."

NBC4i.com / Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan surprised by Meredith Gaudreau with prestigious NHL award

By Orri Benatar – June 5, 2025

A Columbus Blue Jackets center has won one of the most prestigious NHL awards and received the trophy during an emotional surprise visit from Meredith Gaudreau.

Sean Monahan, 30, was named the winner of this season's Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which is given to the NHL player that "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication to hockey." The first-year Blue Jackets player found out he won when Meredith Gaudreau, the wife of the late Johnny Gaudreau, came over to his house in Toronto to deliver the trophy.

He specifically came to play for Columbus this season to be with his friend Johnny, who played with Monahan in Calgary for nine seasons.

"Sean stood by my side for every tribute, every walkout," Meredith Gaudreau said. "I dragged him out there to cry with me on national television so many times."

Monahan's wife Brittany was in on the surprise and told Sean they were taking family photos. Instead, Meredith showed up with the trophy that has been won by such NHL greats as Henri Richard, Mario Lemieux, and Jaromir Jagr.

"I know John is so proud of you," Gaudreau said emotionally when giving Monahan the award.

"John knows I don't like the spotlight or attention, so I feel like he's, he was probably watching down on that moment laughing at me," Monahan said.

Monahan is the fifth Blue Jackets player in franchise history to win an individual NHL award. The others include Steve Mason, Nick Foligno, Rick Nash, and Sergei Bobrovsky. He's the first Blue Jacket to win the Masterton Trophy.

ABC 6 / Columbus Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan wins Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy

By Adam Dell – June 5, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Sean Monahan has been awarded the 2024-25 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, the National Hockey League and the club announced today. The award is presented annually to the player who best exemplifies perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication to hockey.

Monahan, 30, becomes the first player in Blue Jackets history to win the award, following in the footsteps of previous finalists from the team, including Nick Foligno in 2018-19 and Kevin Dineen in the club's inaugural season.

The Brampton, Ontario native had an impressive season, registering 19 goals and 38 assists for 57 points, along with 20 penalty minutes and a +19 plus/minus rating. He averaged 19:01 of ice time per game and won 52.6 percent of his faceoffs in 54 appearances during his first season with the Blue Jackets. Despite missing 28 games due to a wrist injury, Monahan set a career high in points-per-game (1.06) and led the NHL in 5-on-5 assists-per-60 minutes (2.18, min. 25 GP).

Monahan was signed by the Blue Jackets as a free agent on July 1, 2024. Over his 12 NHL seasons, he has accumulated 263 goals, 332 assists, and 595 points in 818 career games with the Blue Jackets, Winnipeg Jets, Montreal Canadiens, and Calgary Flames. He was originally drafted by the Flames as the sixth overall pick in the 2013 NHL Draft.

With this accolade, Monahan joins a distinguished group of Blue Jackets who have captured major NHL awards, including Rick Nash (2003-04 Maurice "Rocket" Richard Trophy; 2008-09 NHL Foundation Award) Steve Mason (2008-09 Calder Memorial Trophy), Sergei Bobrovsky (Vezina Trophy 2012-13; 2016-17), Nick Foligno (2017-17 Mark Messier Leadership Award; 2-16-17 King Clancy Memorial Trophy) and John Tortorella (2016-17 Jack Adams Trophy).

WBNS 10TV / 'I know John is so proud of you': Meredith Gaudreau surprises Sean Monahan with prestigious award

By WBNS Staff – June 5, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan won a prestigious award on Thursday.

Monahan won the 2024-25 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, an award that goes to the player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey.

In a video posted by the NHL on X, Meredith Gaudreau, the widow of the late Johnny Gaudreau, showed up at Monahan's home with the trophy to announce he won.

Monahan has known the Gaudreau family since his days with the Calgary Flames. The two played together for eight seasons from 2013-22.

Monahan signed a five-year contract with Columbus in July 2024, reuniting him with Johnny. Less than two months later, Johnny and his brother Matthew Gaudreau died after getting hit by a car while riding bicycles in New Jersey.

"When I was asked to be a part of this surprise, I was so honored, so excited. Sean stood by my side for every tribute, every walkout and I dragged him out there to cry with me on national television so many times but I am so excited about this one, because this one celebrates Sean," Meredith said.

The video shows Meredith knocking on the door of Monahan's Toronto home where she congratulated him. Monahan thought they were doing family photos with his wife and kids.

Meredith told Monahan that Johnny would be so proud of him.

"Sean, you mean everything to John. So it's just really special that I could be a part of this because this one is about you. You persevered through one of the hardest things and you lead by example," Meredith said. "This one is just celebrating your character and how good of a person you are."

Monahan is the first Blue Jacket to win the award.

"It's a real big honor. It's a lot of special names on that trophy and the meaning behind it is something I take great pride in in day-to-day life —being on a team, being a father, a husband. It's a special thing and obviously fresh right now, but it's something I'm definitely going to be reflecting on a lot," Monahan said.

Meredith said Johnny was a big prankster and would have loved how they announced Monahan's award.

"He's so proud of Sean. I know he would have loved the way that this happened. He's Sean's biggest fan," Meredith said.

Spectrum News One / Blue Jackets Sean Monahan first in team history to receive Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy

By Madison MacArthur – June 5, 2025

Blue Jackets forward Sean Monahan has made team history after winning the 2024-2025 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

Monahan was a finalist for the trophy alongside Marc-Andre Fleury of the Minnesota Wild and Gabriel Landeskog of the Colorado Avalanche.

The 30-year-old is the first Blue Jackets player in history to receive the award, which is given annually to the player that best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey.

According to the NHL, Monahan received the award on Thursday from Meredith Gaudreau, the widow of Blue Jackets' Johnny Gaudreau who died alongside his brother Matthew while on a bike ride when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver ahead of the season.

"This is so important to me because Sean is so important to John, and John is so important to Sean," she said in a news release. "You don't hear John's name without thinking of Sean and you don't hear Sean's name without thinking of John. They're best friends, they're brothers."

Monahan played in 54 games this season and registered 19 goals and 38 assists for 57 points. He had 20 penalty minutes, 128 shots on goal and a +19 plus/minus rating. Monahan tied for third on Columbus for scoring.

"John knows I don't like the spotlight or attention, so I feel like he's probably watching down on that moment and laughing at me," Monahan said in a news release. "Having Meredith come down, having three kids at home to surprise me, is something that I'll be thankful for forever. Was a lot of emotions right away and very special for her to come and make the effort to come present that to me."

For winning the trophy, a \$2,500 grant from the Professional Hockey Writers' Association was awarded to the Bill Masterton Scholarship Fund in his name.

"Winning that Bill Masterton Trophy means a lot to me," Monahan said. "It's a real big honor. It's a lot of special names on that Trophy and the meaning behind it is something I take great pride in day-to-day life being on a team, being a father, a husband. It's a special thing and obviously fresh right now, but something I'm definitely going to be reflecting on a lot."

Monahan is now the sixth Blue Jacket player to capture a major National Hockey League award.

The Athletic / Sean Monahan wins Masterton Trophy, presented in an emotional surprise by Meredith Gaudreau

By Aaron Portzline – June 5, 2025

Sean Monahan's only goal this season, he said in September, was to play in a way that honored the memory of his best friend, Johnny Gaudreau. Monahan and the Columbus Blue Jackets did exactly that despite immeasurable grief, and the hockey world took notice.

On Thursday, the NHL announced Monahan as the winner of the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which honors the player who "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey." The 30-year-old center, a 12-year NHL veteran, embodies all of those traits.

Marc-Andre Fleury of the Minnesota Wild and Gabriel Landeskog of the Colorado Avalanche were the other finalists for the award, which is voted on by members of the Professional Hockey Writers Association, including the Columbus chapter, which nominated Monahan.

One of the biggest reasons Monahan signed with the Blue Jackets as a free agent last summer was a desire to be reunited with Gaudreau, with whom he played nine seasons on the Calgary Flames. But tragedy struck three weeks before the start of training camp when Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were struck by a car and killed while riding bicycles in Oldmans Township, N.J., approximately 30 minutes south of Philadelphia.

Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's wife, flew to Toronto to surprise Monahan this week, presenting the trophy to him as he opened the door. The moment was captured in an emotional video distributed on Thursday by the NHL.

"Sean stood by my side for every tribute, every walk-out. I dragged him out there with me to cry on national television so many times, but I'm excited about this one, because this one celebrates Sean," Gaudreau says in the video.

Then, speaking to him as he stands beside the trophy, Gaudreau addressed Monahan directly. He wiped away tears as she spoke: "Sean, you mean everything to John. It's just really special that I could be a part of this, because this one is about you. You persevered through one of the hardest things. You just lead by example. This one is celebrating your character and how good of a person you are. I know John is so proud of you."

In a video conference with reporters on Thursday, Monahan said, "I've known for a little bit now. It means a lot. I've said it plenty of times, that I don't need the recognition or anything like that. To get an award in the way I did, and the meaning behind it, it's super special. Having Meredith here to present it to me is something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

He had one of his best seasons in what already had been a stellar career. While centering the Blue Jackets' top line, Monahan had 19 goals and 38 assists in only 54 games, a 1.06 points-per-game rate that was the best of his career.

Monahan and the Blue Jackets were enjoying a surprising successful season until a wrist injury on Jan. 7 vs. Pittsburgh forced Monahan to miss 28 games. When he returned to action in late March, the Jackets won nine of their final 13 games, including six in a row to end the season. They finished ninth in the Eastern Conference, narrowly missing the playoffs.

“A lot happened pretty quickly,” Monahan said. “Joining a new team under those circumstances and having a young baby, it changes the way you look at life. I was lucky to have such a great support system — my family, my wife, my son — it was definitely a big help from them, the strength that I had every day.”

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said Monahan’s presence and play will have benefits well beyond the 2024-25 season. He’s been credited with playing a crucial role in the breakout seasons turned in by young standout forwards Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko.

But the composure and grace he exuded off the ice was perhaps even more impressive.

Monahan spoke openly and emotionally about Gaudreau in almost every road city in the NHL, often taking a deep breath before he started to answer or pausing to gather himself mid-response. In Columbus, he would hold court in front of the locker next to his, where Gaudreau’s sweater still hangs.

There were some incredible, heartbreaking moments along the way.

When the Blue Jackets opened the home season on Oct. 15 vs. Florida, the Blue Jackets took the ice with only two forwards, leaving open a spot on the ice where Gaudreau likely would have aligned beside Monahan.

When Monahan “won” the opening faceoff, he skidded the puck to the vacated space as a sold-out crowd in Nationwide Arena first gasped, then stood and applauded. Several fans were seen crying and hugging each other as the clock froze 13 seconds into the game.

During the Blue Jackets’ home opener, Monahan scored a goal and immediately pointed to the Nationwide Arena rafters, at a No. 13 banner hung to honor Gaudreau.

Then, on Dec. 3, Monahan stood crying at center ice during a pregame ceremony to honor Gaudreau in Calgary, where his NHL stardom was born.

Monahan is the first Blue Jackets player to win the Masterton Trophy. Nick Foligno (2018-19) and Kevin Dineen (2000-01 and 2001-02) were finalists.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan Wins 2024-25 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy

By Nicholas Arnold – June 5, 2025

As the Stanley Cup Final rolls on, so does the NHL's award season. The Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which is awarded "to the player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey," has traditionally been given to players who've experienced some form of hardship like a life-threatening medical diagnosis or a mental health struggle, and still returned to play.

Sean Monahan from the Columbus Blue Jackets was announced the winner for 2024-25 on Thursday. He earned the award, in large part, for continuing to play after the loss of his long-time teammate and best friend Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed along with his brother Matthew while biking in August, and also for returning to elite form after dealing with injury issues over the past several seasons.

Monahan beat out Minnesota Wild goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury, whose dedication to the game and its players has been evident through the highs and lows of his 21-season career, and Gabriel Landeskog of the Colorado Avalanche, who had been sidelined by injury since 2022 and played his first NHL game in 1,032 days on April 26.

How Monahan Fits the Masterton Criteria

While the Blue Jackets had a good campaign, almost making the playoffs for the first time post-COVID, it was a tough one off the ice. Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau's untimely deaths loomed large over the season, and Monahan was heavily affected.

Monahan and Gaudreau were Calgary Flames teammates for nine seasons. The two were very close and often described as brothers. When Monahan became a free agent last summer, the opportunity to reunite with Gaudreau was a big reason he signed a long-term deal with the Blue Jackets. Tragedy prevented them from reuniting on the ice.

In addition, Monahan spent many seasons fighting through injuries to return to top-line center status. Just a couple of seasons ago, the Flames paid the Montreal Canadiens a first-round draft pick to get his salary off the books because his production had dropped, and he had suffered a myriad of injuries. Many thought his time as a top-six center was over. But, since then, his career has had a resurgence. This season, he scored at over a point-per-game pace and played over 19 minutes a night as one of the team's most reliable pieces.

Presenting Blue Jackets' Monahan With the Masterton

Instead of the formal awards ceremony that took place annually in Las Vegas, the league has decided to present their year-end awards just before the playoffs end in various ways. For the Masterton, the NHL asked Johnny Gaudreau's widow, Meredith, to present him with the trophy at his home. They shared a video of the presentation with the formal announcement.

Meredith Gaudreau said, "Sean fits the description for this award. All the little things he does behind the scenes, and everything he means to the Blue Jackets, to the NHL, and to my family." She elaborated on how important Monahan was to her as she dealt with the loss of her life partner in a very public setting. "When I was asked to be a part of this surprise, I was so honored, so excited. Sean stood by my side for every tribute, every walk-out, and I dragged him out there to cry with me on national television so many times," Gaudreau said. "I'm excited about this one because this one celebrates Sean."

In the presentation video, Monahan said, “Winning the Bill Masterton Trophy means a lot to me. It’s a real big honor. There’s a lot of special names on that trophy. The meaning behind it is something I take great pride in in my day-to-day life. Being on a team, being a father, a husband. It’s a special thing and obviously fresh right now, but something I’m definitely going to be reflecting on a lot.”

Monahan also reflected on what Johnny Gaudreau would have thought of him winning the award: “John knows I don’t like the spotlight or attention, so I feel like he’s probably watching down on that moment laughing at me.”

Monahan is the first Blue Jacket to win an NHL award since Sergei Bobrovsky won the Vezina Trophy as the league’s best goaltender in 2016-17. That was the same season that former Blue Jackets head coach John Tortorella won the Jack Adams Award as the league’s best coach.

Sportsnet / Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan captures Bill Masterton Trophy

Sportsnet Staff – June 05, 2025

Sean Monahan, who dealt with a challenging season both on and off the ice with the Columbus Blue Jackets, has won the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy for perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey.

Monahan, 30, rediscovered his play on the ice with 57 points in 54 games, his first point-per-game season since 2018-19 after multiple injuries disrupted his career.

And he did it with a heavy heart following the death of close friend Johnny Gaudreau. Monahan and Gaudreau became friends while playing in Calgary, and this would have been their first season together as teammates in Columbus.

“Just the way Monny has persevered through really, really hard times. It’s been inspiring to me and to the whole group,” Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said in a press release from the NHL. “The way he’s handled himself, just stepping in here under those circumstances. He’s been a leader in the room and a leader on the ice. He’s a true pro. Everyone can learn from him.”

A \$2,500 grant from the PHWA is awarded annually to the Bill Masterton Scholarship Fund in the name of the Masterton Trophy winner.

In wake of Gaudreau’s passing, Monahan was a steadying presence in the Blue Jackets locker room.

“I just think if you look at the situation he came into with everything that happened, you add that with the way he played and the way he led our group,” said Blue Jackets defenceman Zach Werenski told NHLPA.com. “Just been so impressed and learned so much from watching how he has gone through and handled this season.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Lindstrom thankful for juniors finish, eager for Spartans future

Brian Hedger – June 5, 2025

Cayden Lindstrom's final game with the Medicine Hat Tigers didn't end with a dream finish, but the Blue Jackets' top prospect accomplished a huge goal just by playing.

After a frustrating season dealing with a back injury in Columbus, the fourth overall pick of the NHL's 2024 draft rejoined his junior teammates to finish the season with a Western Hockey League championship run, plus an impressive showing at the Memorial Cup — the crowning tournament for the Canadian Hockey League's three circuits.

Medicine Hat lost to the London Knights on June 1 in the championship, but Lindstrom left Rimouski, Quebec, Canada, thankful for the experience and better prepared to embark on a new challenge next season at Michigan State.

"It was my goal all season to come back for the (WHL) playoffs and play, and win a championship with the Tigers, so that's what I did," Lindstrom said. "It felt really good mentally, and physically, the body felt good as well. So, it was overall good."

Lindstrom's back held up, but a hit to his left leg in the third game of the WHL championship series caused a painful "charley horse" tissue bruise that limited him significantly for the remainder of the Tigers' postseason. He missed Game 4 of the WHL championship, played sparingly in Medicine Hat's Game 5 clinching win and then missed the Tigers' Memorial Cup opener following a long flight that caused issues in his injured leg.

Still, Lindstrom played the final three games for the Tigers to finish his season in uniform. There were multiple points during the season that didn't seem like a realistic outcome, especially after his back surgery to repair a herniated disc in November 2024.

He could've shifted his focus to starting his offseason training early, eschewing any thoughts of returning to Medicine Hat, but playing again for the Tigers never dropped from Lindstrom's list of priorities.

"It felt great," Lindstrom said. "They kept in touch with me all season and asked when I was coming back, so it was just, overall, such a good experience to go through with those guys. To battle through the rest of the playoffs and the Memorial Cup, just to do that with them meant a lot to me."

It was also a form of closure.

Lindstrom has decided to take advantage of a change in NCAA eligibility allowing players from the CHL's three Canadian junior leagues to join U.S. college teams. The change officially begins in August 2025, allowing Lindstrom to switch his development path next season from Medicine Hat to Michigan State, which has become one of the NCAA's top programs.

The school has state-of-the-art facilities now at Munn Ice Arena. Head coach Adam Nightingale has also assembled an impressive staff, including highly regarded strength and development coaches. Combine those draws with playing fewer games than junior teams, and Lindstrom's move to the NCAA makes a lot of sense.

Considering his NHL size and impressive talent, Lindstrom could potentially play just one season for the Spartans before starting his professional career.

"I'm always trying to challenge myself as a player, so I think, for me, playing against older guys (in college) would be beneficial for me, just the 'compete' level," Lindstrom said. "I love to compete against really good players and strong players. I think that builds me as a better player and a more confident player and is a really big reason I chose college (hockey)."

Having more practice time at a college program was another selling point.

"I think the practices will help me get everything I need back and help me become a really good player and a long-term player," Lindstrom said. "We'll have so much time to go over video and stuff like that, so I think that will really help me out as a player."

Lindstrom probably could've gone to any NCAA program, but his visit to Michigan State sold him on East Lansing, Michigan.

"They run their practices like an NHL team," he said. "I mean, their coaches are unbelievable, and just the whole team ... I really love the atmosphere around there. They were just so dialed in, and that's what I like. All the guys there just trained and worked so hard, and that really caught my eye."

Enough to push aside some nudges from the Blue Jackets' locker room, where four Michigan Wolverines alumni hung their gear in the 2024-25 campaign.

"I heard a lot about the University of Michigan from those guys, but they actually really helped me with my decision," Lindstrom said. "They weren't pushing me too hard about it. They obviously wanted me to go (to Michigan), but they just said, 'Go wherever fits you best,' and I thought Michigan State fit me best."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets prospect Cayden Lindstrom looks forward to 'long career,' with his next stop at Michigan State

By Aaron Portzline – June 5, 2025

Cayden Lindstrom was flying home to Vancouver on Wednesday, ready to enjoy a full offseason of conditioning and buoyed by the knowledge that the worst of his medical issues — fingers crossed, knock on wood, etc. — were finally behind him.

His surgically repaired back has healed and is continuing to strengthen. That much was proven by Lindstrom's late-season return to action with the Western Hockey League's Medicine Hat Tigers, first in the WHL championship series and then in the Memorial Cup, where Medicine Hat lost in the championship game.

Lindstrom, the Columbus Blue Jackets' No. 4 overall pick last summer, will need to pay attention to a summer workout program designed to avoid putting too much stress on his back. But he is cleared to return to the routine of being a full-time hockey player.

"Playing those games really helped me (determine) where I'm at physically and mentally," Lindstrom told *The Athletic* on Wednesday. "Now I know what I need to work on during the summer. Now I know I can play games and push myself through some of the effects and it won't harm me in any way.

"(My back) is a lot better. It's still going to take some time to fully feel (like) myself again. That's what it's like when you miss a full year of hockey. But the rest of it (the herniated disc in his lower back) is behind me."

This is, quite obviously, a huge sigh of relief for the Blue Jackets, who expected Lindstrom to miss the entire season after he had surgery in late November. Medicine Hat's long postseason run and Lindstrom's patient relentlessness in rehabilitation, made it possible.

"We were all watching nervously, of course," Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said, referring to the club's hockey operations staffers.

"It was important for him to play for multiple reasons. But psychologically, after being out so long and putting in all that work, he could get back into a game and find out he can play without having any issues going forward. That's big for him."

On Wednesday, he confirmed *The Athletic's* report in April that he has committed to attend Michigan State University in the fall, making the leap from Medicine Hat — and the Canadian junior ranks — to the NCAA, a move that was forbidden by NCAA rules until recently.

The Blue Jackets have known this was a consideration since they drafted him, which explains why they didn't rush to sign Lindstrom to his three-year, entry-level contract. If he had signed a pro contract, he would have been ineligible for college.

It will be easier for the Jackets to keep a close eye on Lindstrom in East Lansing, Mich., than it was in Medicine Hat. For Lindstrom, 19, the challenge of playing against older players will help get him ready for the rough-and-tumble world of the NHL, where he's projected to play center as a power forward.

"It was a really hard decision to leave Medicine Hat," Lindstrom said. "(GM and coach) Willy Desjardins, and (assistant coaches) Joe Frazer and Josh Maser were such great supporters for me in my career. It was super hard, but I'm heading to Michigan State. I committed there, and that's where I'll be playing.

“The travel is so much easier (in college). The facilities (in East Lansing) are great. It’ll help me recover my body and put me in a position to have a really long career.”

As Lindstrom spoke on Wednesday, he sounded more relaxed and at ease than he had in previous interviews. He’s in a better state of mind, it seems, after returning to hockey after more than a year-long absence.

Lindstrom had two goals, two assists and a plus-3 rating in four games during Medicine Hat’s series win over Spokane, and was a dominating force early in the tournament. In Game 3, however, he turned into a leg-on-leg hit with Spokane’s Saige Weinstein that caused a few skipped heartbeats within the Blue Jackets’ front office.

The resulting injury was a charley horse, and Lindstrom was saddled with it the rest of the way. When Medicine Hat flew to Rimouski, Quebec, for the Memorial Cup, he suffered significant swelling in the leg during the flight, and the decision was made to sit him out in Game 1.

He returned for the final three games, but he wasn’t 100 percent. The Blue Jackets received daily updates from Lindstrom, and Waddell said they were pleased with how Medicine Hat and Lindstrom handled the situation.

“It was pretty bad,” Lindstrom said. “I tried to play through it (in Game 5 of the WHL championship series), but I didn’t want to start compensating, because when you start compensating, it leads to other things.

“I want to play more than anything, but there’s a risk-reward in that situation that wouldn’t benefit me or the team in any way.”

But his back was never the issue, Waddell said. “He felt good,” he said. “Back-wise, he’s had no complaints at all.”

Lindstrom will spend the next three weeks in Vancouver, he said, then fly to Columbus in advance of the Blue Jackets’ development camp. After barely skating last year, Lindstrom will be a full participant this year, Waddell said.

He will stay in Columbus after development camp, then head to Michigan State in early July for a six-week summer camp with many of his new teammates. Then he’ll get a week back home in Vancouver before returning to Michigan State for the start of classes in the fall.

Lindstrom is still a long way from the NHL, but he’s now back on the road.

“Missing the whole season was tough,” Lindstrom said. “But this was kinda my goal the whole year. I knew Medicine Hat was going to go far in the playoffs because we had a really good team, a skilled team. It was my goal to push and help the team for the playoffs.

“Don Waddell and (director of hockey operations) Rick Nash and (trainers) Mike Vogt and Dylan Dewey, they all put so much time and effort into me, and that really means a lot to me. They’ve helped me get better and get started on a long career.”

The Athletic / The Mitch Marner UFA villainy rankings: Which destination would hurt Leafs fans most?

By Sean McIndoe – June 6, 2025

Mitch Marner's run as a Toronto Maple Leaf is all but over, with all signs pointing to his departure as an unrestricted free agent on July 1. That reality raises all sorts of questions, including how it came to this, whether a breakup is really the right move for either side, and whether this all could have been avoided. But the more pressing question right now is: Where does he wind up?

James Mirtle took a crack at that question a few days ago, ranking all 32 potential landing spots from most likely to maybe to probably not. If we're being honest, James was probably being kind on the "probably" for that last group, none of whom seem like realistic fits. Still, almost half the league appears to at least theoretically be in the running, which you'd expect for a player with as much talent and upside as Marner can offer.

Great. But all that analysis is leaving out the most important part of any great drama: the villain.

If Marner truly is going to betray a Toronto fan base that never had a bad word to say about him – don't search any social media, just go with it – then he might as well embrace the heel turn. Really kick Leafs Nation through the barbershop window, you know? There may even be a very small minority of you out there in other fan bases who'll be rooting for it to happen.

OK, so let's figure this out. Today, we're going to rank Marner's potential destinations based solely on how much it would twist the knife on his former team and its fans. I've used Mirtle's list as a starting point and taken all the teams that he ranked as having at least a quasi-realistic shot at landing the best UFA the league has seen in years. That leaves us with 16 candidates; let's count them down from least to most painful for Leafs fans.

16. Columbus Blue Jackets

You knew they'd be one of the first teams to show up, right? After all, I've been pushing them as your second favorite team for most of the last year. Their long-suffering fans certainly deserve a few wins, and after last summer's Johnny Gaudreau tragedy, it's impossible not to wish for some joy in Columbus. The team almost delivered it with a miracle playoff push before falling just short. If Marner wanted to try to be the final piece of that feel-good puzzle, who could root against him?

15. Utah Mammoth

The Mammoth are one of several teams on this list that would make it hard for Marner to play the old "I just want to win a Cup" card that UFAs love so much. But after nine years of being ground down in Toronto, going to a brand new market that would probably be happy to have a legitimate star in town would be completely understandable.

14. Anaheim Ducks and 13. San Jose Sharks

They're two very young teams headed in the right direction, and he wouldn't have to hear about playoff disappointment for at least a few years because the Sharks and Ducks would be happy just to be there. Both markets are also just about as far away as you can get from Toronto, which might be a big plus for Marner. (And for Leafs fans, who might find it easier to deal with his inevitable 2026 Art Ross win when most of those points come in the middle of the night.)

12. Chicago Blackhawks

Hey, where else is he going to get the chance to play with a generational No. 1 pick in his prime? Right, sure, fair enough, but where is he going to get to do that without having waffles thrown at him?

11. Los Angeles Kings

The third California option shares a lot of the pros and cons of San Jose and Anaheim, with a bit more big-market appeal and a little less win equity for down the road. The Kings should probably be grouped in there with the Ducks and Sharks, unless you're one of those pathetic lunatic fans who're still somehow holding a grudge about Wayne Gretzky's missed high stick in 1993. So... yeah, L.A. is ranked here.

10. A Mystery Team

I said we wouldn't count the teams in Mirtle's "probably not" category, and we won't, at least individually. But hey, surprises happen. Nobody thought Gaudreau was headed to Columbus until the deal was signed, so we have to keep the door open to an unexpected landing spot. And if that were to happen here, I think most of the destinations would be fine. Other than Montreal, and maybe Ottawa, and probably also Pittsburgh just because of the Kyle Dubas discourse, none of Mirtle's long-shots would be especially painful. And any lingering hurt would at least be slightly mitigated by having Marner throw us a curveball.

9. Nashville Predators

Oh good, more tax rate discourse. Thanks, Mitch.

8. Colorado Avalanche

It's not hard to see the appeal of going to a team like Colorado, where Marner could basically slot right into Miko Rantanen's old spot in the lineup on an established Cup contender. In a sense, this would feel like a concession on Marner's part, where he was throwing in the towel on ever being The Guy on a championship team and instead offering to slide in as a distant third in terms of his importance on the roster. But we've seen that before in various sports over the years, including with this very team, and a ring is a ring.

7. Detroit Red Wings

In a sense, Detroit would be a weird option because they don't seem to check any of the boxes we think of as being attractive to a big-time UFA. There's little in the way of elite talent to play with. There's no clear path to a championship anytime soon. They don't have palm trees. And while it's not Toronto, it's still an Original Six market with a frustrated fan base that can be tough on its stars.

Presumably, Steve Yzerman could do a better sell job than I just did. But if Marner landed in Detroit on a mega-deal, you could forgive fans for concluding that this was just all about the money all along. (And to be clear, that's a perfectly valid reason to sign somewhere. It's just a little tougher to sell as a feel-good story.)

6. Boston Bruins

Look man, we get that the nonstop nitpicking about your playoff performance probably wore on you, but that's no reason to sign with a team that isn't going to make it again for a decade.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs

I'm not even sure which scenario would be more infuriating: Marner somehow convincing Leafs management to once again open the vaults on yet another above-market mega-deal (for Toronto fans),

or him signing a hometown discount deal in Toronto while confessing that he never wanted to leave in the first place (for everyone else). Let's just say it doesn't sound like we'll have to worry about it. But if it ever did happen, it would be a good day to stay off social media.

4. Carolina Hurricanes

I'll be honest, I went into this assuming the Hurricanes would end up as the top-ranked team on the list. After all, we know the Leafs and Hurricanes talked about a deadline deal involving Marner and Rantanen. According to reports, Marner was approached about the possibility of waiving his no-trade clause to go to Carolina, and declined to do so.

If he were to decide, just a few months later, that he wanted to be a Hurricane after all – but to do it in a way that left the Leafs with nothing to show for it, instead of with an all-star replacement – then we'd have a near-perfect storm of spurned fan base fury, right?

Well, maybe. It would be an easy narrative to steer into, for sure. But then you remember one small detail: When he turned down that deadline trade, Marner's wife was seven months pregnant with their first child. Was he really going to uproot his family in that moment, or leave them behind while he headed off to Carolina? Would you?

That doesn't mean the Leafs were wrong to approach Marner with the possibility (and let's hope nobody in his camp is dumb enough to actually try to float [that ridiculous messaging](#) out there). But no matter how badly you may want to paint Marner as the villain for how things are ending in Toronto, it seems like a stretch under the circumstances.

I've still got the Hurricanes reasonably high on the list, in part because they check some of the other boxes and in part because the "what if?" factor of a Rantanen trade would linger well after the details were largely forgotten. But the reality is that a soon-to-be first-time dad made the right call, the same one any of us would have made.

3. Vegas Golden Knights

It's hard to see how it would work under the cap... unless, of course, Marner decided to take a discount to play on an established winner. That would be his right, obviously, but wouldn't go over well with Leaf fans after he basically held the franchise upside down and shook it until every nickel fell out back in 2019. Watching him finally realize that leaving a bit of cap space for his teammates is a good thing would be a nice groin-kick for Toronto fans.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning

We could pretty much cut-and-paste the Vegas entry here, except the Lightning are also a division rival with a decent chance of running into the Leafs in the playoffs soon. Speaking of which: If and when Marner faces Toronto in the playoffs, do you think he breaks Darryl Sittler's 10-point single-game record in the opener, or does he wait for Game 7?

1. Florida Panthers

No. Absolutely not.

Look, it's one thing to fail in the playoffs. It's another to concede defeat entirely, running up the white flag and signing with the team you couldn't beat. Fleeing the Toronto pressure cooker is understandable, but not if it's to go eat Dairy Queen with Brad Marchand. Mix in the tax situation – they don't have income tax in Florida, did you know that, Canadian fans don't bring it up often – and this would be Sting joining the NWO levels of betrayal.

It would also be incredibly risky for Marner, since if he joined a Panthers team that's won the conference for three years running and they took any kind of step back, he'd get the blame. Don't do it, Mitch. Nobody wins here. (Except the Panthers, and they do enough of that already.)

The Athletic / Russian hockey teams remain banned from 2026 Olympics. What does it mean for NHL players?

By Peter Baugh and Rob Rossi – June 5, 2025

The NHL is not expecting Russian participation in the 2026 Milan Cortina Winter Olympics, deputy commissioner Bill Daly said Wednesday in a news conference before Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Final. His statement came on the heels of the International Olympic Committee confirming last week its stance that both Russia and Belarus should be barred from fielding teams of athletes.

The IOC Executive Board recommended sanctions for Russia after the country invaded Ukraine in February 2022 with support from Belarus, its western neighbor. The recommendations to international sports federations were first announced in 2023, leading to Russia and Belarus missing out on the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The IOC requested an Olympic hockey schedule and groupings from the International Ice Hockey Federation in early May, IIHF president Luc Tardif recently told reporters. The IOC then reaffirmed its recommendations in a statement at the end of the month.

Neither the IOC nor the IIHF have released official decisions on Russia's involvement in the 2026 Olympics, which will be held next February. But the recommendations are not expected to change, as Daly's comment indicated. The chances of a Russian team taking the ice for the Olympic hockey tournament are slim, if not zero.

Here's a look at the situation and its particular impact on the men's hockey tournament, which will see active NHL players competing in it for the first time since 2014.

What is the historical precedent here?

There has been a long history of countries not being allowed to compete at the Olympics. In the wake of World War II, Germany and Japan were not invited to the 1948 Olympics. The IOC barred South Africa from the Olympics from 1964 until the 1992 Games due to apartheid. Yugoslavia didn't have a team while under sanctions in 1992 for military aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Olympics historian David Wallechinsky said that historically, the IOC has banned countries on a case-by-case basis that has not always been consistent. He mentioned that the U.S. did not get sanctioned when it went to war in Vietnam. The idea didn't even come up.

"If you look at South Africa and Russia, it took outside pressure to even get (the IOC) to act seriously," Wallechinsky said. "They do have this philosophy, long-standing: Don't punish athletes because of the actions of their government. They'll kind of bend over backwards to allow that. But if there's enough outside pressure, like South Africa and Ukraine, then they act."

What impact does the ban have on Russian NHL players?

Russia is a traditional Olympic power in men's hockey. The Soviets won gold seven times, as did the 1992 Unified Team (a group of athletes from Russia and four other former Soviet states) and the 2018 Olympic Athletes of Russia.

The NHL hasn't sent players to the Winter Olympics since 2014, when Canada defeated Sweden to win gold in Sochi, Russia. The Russian men's team did not medal on home ice, a source of national embarrassment so bitter that some players from that team did not attend the closing ceremonies.

NHL stars Nikita Kucherov, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Artemi Panarin, all of whom are at least 30 years old, have never competed in the Olympics. With the IOC's recommendations intact, it's possible they never will.

The exclusion of Russian teams also means Alexander Ovechkin and Evgeni Malkin might never play in the Olympics together and both of their decorated careers could end without an Olympic medal. Russia hasn't reached the podium with active NHL players since taking bronze in 2002, before either star was on the team.

Could Russian hockey players compete as a neutral team?

Before the sanctions for its invasion of Ukraine, Russia faced discipline for what the IOC referred to as "systematic manipulation of the anti-doping system." But while the IOC banned the Russian Olympic Committee, athletes from the country were allowed to participate at the 2018 Winter Games under the Olympic flag and a new name: "Olympic Athletes of Russia." That year, in Pyeongchang, South Korea, a team of Russian players won gold in men's hockey.

At the 2020 Summer Games in Tokyo (which were delayed until 2021 because of COVID-19) and the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, meanwhile, Russians competed as the Russian Olympic Committee — rather than as Russia — because of continued fallout from the doping scandal. At the latter Olympics, the Russian Olympic Committee men's hockey team took silver.

Multiple Russians who play in NHL and KHL, speaking on condition of anonymity because the Russian Federation did not approve their comments, said they would not want to compete in the Olympics under these altered titles in Milan Cortina.

"We are Russian," one of those players said. "If we play it's Russia flag, Russia name. Like other countries."

At the 2024 Paris Olympics, 32 individual Russian and Belarusian athletes were allowed to participate under the title "Individual Neutral Athletes." There are set to be neutral athletes again at the 2026 Games with the same recommendations as 2024 in place, including that athletes who actively support the war or who are contracted to the Russian or Belarusian military cannot compete. But, as of now, there will not be a men's or women's hockey team with a neutral name.

"It is based on the fact that, by definition, a group of Individual Neutral Athletes cannot be considered a team," the IOC said in a statement. "We take note that the IIHF has confirmed that it will follow this recommendation."

Speaking of the IIHF, what has its role been?

According to the IIHF website, "The decision whether Russia participates in the 2026 Winter Olympic Games will remain under the International Olympic Committee's jurisdiction."

The IIHF Council did, however, announce in February that Russia and Belarus would not be reincorporated into its championships in the 2025-26 season, which includes events like the World Championship and World Juniors.

"As the current security conditions do not allow the necessary requirements for the organization of tournaments guaranteeing the safety of all, the IIHF must maintain the current status quo until further notice," it said in a statement.

Tardif, speaking at world junior championships in January, said he wants Russia back in competitions as soon as possible.

“It will mean the war will be over,” he said. “(Russia) is missed for any competition. But let them come too early, that’s not going to be good.”

How has Russia and its hockey federation responded?

The Russian Ice Hockey Federation said in a statement that it hopes the IOC’s recommendations will be revised. A spokesperson said the federation cannot appeal recommendations but “as soon as we receive a specific decision, we will be able to decide on our possible actions against it.”

Based on recent precedent, a successful appeal seems close to impossible. In July 2022, the Court of Arbitration for Sport dismissed Russia’s appeal of FIFA and UEFA’s decisions to ban Russia from national and club competition.

Beyond the Olympics, the Russian federation also disagreed with the IIHF’s decision not to reincorporate Russia into its 2025-26 events, taking objection to the IIHF citing security concerns as its primary reason.

“The successes of Russian athletes in the NHL, AHL, NCAA and other leagues in various countries, the attention they receive and the friendly atmosphere around them prove that we do not pose a security threat, as many federations state, and that sport can still exist beyond politics, despite the position of individual sports officials,” the Russian federation said in its statement.

What country will compete in hockey instead of Russia?

If the recommendations remain in place, France will replace Russia in both the men’s and women’s hockey tournaments.

Russia is currently second in the IIHF men’s rankings and sixth on the women’s side, while France is No. 14 and No. 15, respectively. At the most recent men’s world championships, the French roster included St. Louis Blues forward Alexandre Texier, Washington Capitals goalie prospect Antoine Keller, and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, who played 700 NHL games before going to the Swiss league this season. It was the only team at the tournament that failed to win a game, though it picked up a point for an overtime loss.

The French were not at the 2025 women’s world championships.

How do NHL players feel about Russia likely missing the 2026 Games?

The Russian NHL and KHL players who spoke to *The Athletic* said they are not surprised by the recommendations remaining in place but remained hopeful a resolution could be reached. One player, speaking on condition of anonymity because the Russian Ice Hockey Federation did not approve his comments, said that he’s received “hidden support” from non-Russian NHL players citing Russia’s status as a historic rival to many Olympic countries — specifically Canada, the U.S. and Czechia.

“If you ask the athletes, we want to play the best,” one non-Russian NHL player said. “I think that’s in any sport. But they’re not asking us what we want. I think these decisions have nothing to do with the hockey or other sports. It’s not about the players, the athletes. It’s above us.”

That feeling is not universal. Hall of Fame goalie Dominik Hašek, who is from Czechia, has been adamantly opposed to Russia competing in the Olympics, recently tweeting approval for the IOC’s stance.

The Athletic / As NHL free agency nears, how will players age on their new contracts?

By Dom Luszczyzyn – June 5, 2025

Arguably, one of the most important aspects of signing a player to a new contract is estimating how he will age. It's also the hardest thing to get right.

That's mostly a product of how volatile a player's potential path can be. This is a sport where figuring out what happens next year is challenging enough, let alone three, five or seven years out.

Still, it's work worth doing because the goal is to be less wrong, not perfectly accurate. With free agency less than a month away, being "less wrong" is the key for every team ready to fork over millions of dollars for many years to come.

From the perspective of the work on aging I've been doing here for years, there are three key areas of improvement which should strengthen our player forecasts (and their contract valuations).

Those areas of improvement: context, uniqueness and variation.

The missing context problem

One of the earliest analytics breakthroughs was the discovery that a player's prime is much younger than conventional wisdom suggested. It is true that the average peak of hockey players is not as old as 27 to 29, but it's also likely that we swung too far in the other direction — it's probably not as young as 23 to 25 either.

That's close to how I previously observed it with a peak around 24 or 25, right in line with what many other analysts have found. But I do believe that observation has been missing context.

Back in 2014, when current Hurricanes GM Eric Tulskey was doing this research, he came to a similar idea. When figuring out that a player's per-minute scoring peaked at 24 — a shade lower than Gabriel Desjardins, who found that a player's points-per-game peaks at age 25 — Tulskey said this:

"You could conclude that coaches should trust younger players more and be more willing to give 21- and 22-year-olds as much ice time as they'd give 26- and 27-year-olds.

Alternatively, it's possible that coaches are (on average) giving out ice time correctly, and that the defense and other non-scoring facets of a 21-year-old's game aren't as good as that of a 27-year-old. In general, I'm inclined to assume NHL decisions are (on average) correct unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, so I'll choose the latter for now."

After adjusting for context, I believe that 11-year-old assumption to be accurate. By my estimation, the average peak of an NHL player is probably closer to the 25-to-27 range for both forwards and defensemen. That's where they maintain 98 percent of their value or higher. Add two more years to each end for around 90 percent — or 23 to 29.

The above chart shows the average change in projected Offensive, Defensive and Net Rating from year to year. I used the same delta method Tulskey did, looking at how individual player values changed depending on their age. I used their projected output rather than their actual output to help strip out the element of luck that can add volatility to this kind of research.

While some may want to ignore how a player is used when it comes to estimating how they age, I believe it's crucial information because I trust the intuition of the average NHL coach.

One of the reasons that previous analysis figured a player peaked at a younger age was likely because it didn't account for a player moving up the lineup, as young players often do. Their job is harder there and that could mean that they look a lot less efficient on the surface or worse defensively as they adjust to the harder challenge. That's a massive factor for defensemen who jump from third-pairing roles early in their careers into the top four. The same is true at the opposite end of the spectrum, where elder statesmen are often lauded for their newfound defensive prowess that often coincides with a shift down the lineup.

All of that should offer a bit more solace when signing unrestricted free agents. Yes, the decline is sharp after 30 and even sharper after 33 for forwards and 32 for defensemen. Yes, a player at UFA age is still probably on the wrong side of the age curve. But with the understanding that a player's peak probably isn't as young as the current wisdom suggests, signing a player in his late 20s might not be as big of an issue as previously thought.

And there's other context to account for on top of that.

The one-size-fits-all problem

Mitch Marner, this year's most highly coveted free agent, is 28 years old. So too are Lawson Crouse (June 23), Anthony Beauvillier (June 8) and Tanner Jeannot. One of the major complaints with age curves is assuming that all four of those players will age in the exact same way, despite obvious differences in their size, ability and style. That's the biggest issue stemming from using a population average when there's a lot of variation within that population. Every player is unique and applying the trajectory of a vastly different player is probably not wise.

There's no way to perfectly solve for this. Marner's future path is his own and is yet to be written, and that thought applies to every player. But there is a way to be less wrong and move in the right direction: by finding comparable players. Past 28-year-old players that are the most similar to Marner are probably most relevant to how he likely ages. Grading how similar they are also allows us to give more weight depending on just how close the match is.

Again, every player is unique, but it's probably more useful to know how other star playmakers with strong defensive instincts turned out, while also considering Marner's smaller stature and lack of physicality. Some comps may be better versions of Marner, some may be worse, but the idea is that finding enough similar traits should lead to a stronger forecast. How Taylor Hall, Claude Giroux, Sidney Crosby, Nicklas Backstrom and Artemi Panarin aged, among others, is more relevant to Marner's future than how guys such as Mike Brown, Colton Orr and Zack Kassian did.

This was a method used by FiveThirtyEight for their NBA RAPTOR model back in the day, and one I previously implemented with an older version of the model (GSVA) using the same methodology. The idea is to measure how much variation there is from the population using each of the model components (weighted by how important those components are), and then combine those measurements to see which past players most resemble the target player. It's taken some time to get that back up to speed with Net Rating, but now that we're back online, I can show just how much it helps.

I should note that the following is not definitive, as I only measured one year ahead (because boy, did it take a long time to do even that) and many forecasts obviously go a lot longer. But if the starting point offers a stronger projection, it stands to reason that so too will the years that follow.

Looking at the 2024-25 season and how each player's value changed from 2023-24, an age curve that uses a population average would've had an average error of 2.14 goals. An age curve that uses a weighted average of comparable players would've been off by 2.09 goals on average instead. That

sounds minuscule, but it adds up. Over the 557-player sample, there's a difference of 30 goals. Essentially, it means each team would've been one goal more accurate if a player's age adjustment was based on his most comparable peers.

Directionally, an age curve based on player comps was closer to the mark 55 percent of the time compared to the population average. In the season prior, the same tests yielded a comp-based age curve that was 20 goals better and 54 percent directionally correct. Not as strong, but still an improvement.

Every edge counts, even if there are larger ones in the grand scheme of things. Again, this isn't definitive, but intuitively it would make sense that only looking at relevant skaters would create a better forecast than using the entire population of same-aged players.

There's one other added benefit to using comps, and that's in how this is all presented.

The path of destiny problem

Everything in analytics is probabilistic at its core.

It's not definitive. It's not "this is exactly what's going to happen." It's not destiny. It's about showing what is most likely to happen while understanding there are a lot of other possibilities that are less likely, but could also happen.

When it comes to age curves, there needs to be a lot more emphasis on the latter, which is an area I know I can improve on.

That means not only showing the range of possibilities, but also discussing it from that perspective. When a contract is signed, it's not necessarily definitively good or definitively bad. But there is a range of good outcomes and a range of bad outcomes that decide which side of the line the deal is on — and in this sport, those ranges can be quite large.

A player on a "bad" deal can return to form and provide value. A player on a "good" deal can slip and stop offering a positive return. It may not be likely, but it is possible. The bet that teams are making when they sign deals is that their side will get more good outcomes than bad ones at a specific price — or that it's a price they can stomach in order to get the player, even if it's not expected to yield positive value (especially if they can make up that ground elsewhere).

It's all about setting the proper expectations while properly presenting the chances of a player exceeding or failing them. And by doing so, it creates reasonable context for just how much we should celebrate a player's ability to chart his own path (or deride them for their disappointing play, if that's what you're into). A 23-year-old fourth-liner breaking through his expected ceiling is awesome. A 33-year-old having a career year is awesome. Knowing just how unlikely those paths were helps contextualize how awesome it is. Outliers are always great stories and treating the future in a more probabilistic manner helps shape those stories. Sean Monahan's leap to stardom after a truly incredible 2024-25 season, for example, was a 1-in-100 outlier given how he performed in the years prior, his age and his comps.

Like the one-size-fits-all problem, one path doesn't fit all, either. It's a safe and conservative outlook that offers a likely track to follow and that is helpful information. But it's the ability to show a potential ceiling and floor on top of that, based on what similar players have done, that offers much more value. What a player is expected to do going forward should be treated as a range, not a single point.

Using Marner again as an example, he has 38 above-average comps since 2008 (most players have 100 or more). Apply their trajectories to his current rating and you can see just how wide his future could be.

There are paths where he stays a star for the entire length of an eight-year deal. There are paths where he falls off quickly into second-line territory. There are paths where he slowly descends into a still good but not great first-liner. There are a lot of possibilities.

The key point is that the paths vary and that's useful information obscured by focusing only on the average outcome. There's a lot more to a player's yet-to-be-told story than the single likeliest trajectory.

When it comes to how a player ages, making a perfect prediction is an impossible mission. Sports wouldn't be sports if we knew exactly what the future holds.

What we can do is make a more informed estimate by adjusting for context, embracing each player's uniqueness, and understanding that every player's future carries a wide range of possibilities.

What happens next is anyone's guess.

The Athletic / 10 NHL teams that could be aggressive buyers this offseason

By Harman Dayal – June 4, 2025

Which NHL teams could be the most aggressive buyers in the free-agency and trade market this offseason? There are a few factors to consider when identifying which clubs could make some noise.

You can't go big-game hunting without salary cap flexibility and premium assets. Hence, excess cap space and robust trade capital (owning extra draft picks and having a strong prospect pipeline to deal from) are the first prerequisites. After that, the team's direction and ambition level are essential, too. Some clubs have a lot of cap room and trade assets, but they're not yet in an accelerated phase of roster building, which makes them less likely to spend lavishly.

We combed the league searching for clubs that matched this bill: Having disposable cap space, rich trade capital, and a strong incentive to make a splash this summer.

In evaluating each team's cap situation, we had to be mindful of key restricted free agents. For example, the Winnipeg Jets have \$26.4 million in cap space right now, which is impressive at first glance, but a large chunk of that will be consumed by the long-term extensions that RFAs Dylan Samberg and Gabriel Vilardi are likely to sign. That means their disposable cap space isn't as high as the other teams on this list, despite the room they technically have on paper right now.

Without further ado, here are 10 teams to keep an eye on.

Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$38.7 million (16 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Mason McTavish, Lukáš Dostál

Notable UFAs: Robby Fabbri

General manager Pat Verbeek stated that he expects the Ducks to "make the playoffs next season" and that he'll be "very active and aggressive" this summer.

There's a lot Verbeek will need to accomplish to elevate Anaheim to the level of a playoff team, but he has a mountain of cap space and assets to help achieve that goal. The Ducks have nearly \$27 million to spend even after you plug in AFP Analytics' contract projections for RFAs McTavish (\$6.8 million AAV) and Dostál (four years, \$5.2 million AAV)

Assets-wise, Anaheim has nine picks at this year's draft and an above-average prospect pool.

Only two Ducks forwards, Troy Terry and McTavish, crossed the 50-point mark this season, and none hit 25 goals. They need to add a top-flight scoring winger or two to give the offense a shot in the arm — Mitch Marner, Nikolaj Ehlers, and Brock Boeser could be potential targets.

It isn't farfetched to think that Anaheim could be in the wild-card race next season if it's able to land an offensive star or two, on top of the potential breakouts you could see from the likes of Leo Carlsson, McTavish, and Cutter Gauthier, among others.

Carolina Hurricanes

Projected cap space: \$28.4 million (20 players signed)

Notable RFAs: None

Notable UFAs: Brent Burns, Dmitry Orlov, Jack Roslovic, Eric Robinson

The Hurricanes have by far the most cap space and trade assets of any active NHL contender.

With Dmitry Orlov and Brent Burns' contracts coming off the books this summer, GM Eric Tulskey will have a whopping \$28.4 million of cap space. Alexander Nikishin and Scott Morrow, two blue-chip up-and-coming defensemen who debuted in the playoffs, should be able to pick up some of the slack that Orlov and Burns' departures could create.

Carolina has all of its own first-round picks and two extra from Dallas in 2026 and 2028 because of the Mikko Rantanen trade. That gives them plenty of ammo to go star-chasing on the trade market.

The Hurricanes have a few needs they could target. Finding a true second-line center behind Sebastian Aho should be a priority. Adding another elite winger to the core — which the Hurricanes attempted to do with Rantanen and Jake Guentzel the last two seasons — would be huge. It'd also make sense to target an offensively-oriented right-shot defenseman to play with Jaccob Slavin, with Rasmus Andersson, Erik Karlsson, and Noah Dobson (if the Islanders decide his next contract will be too expensive) standing out as potential fits.

Carolina has the cap space and assets to address all three of those needs if it wants to.

Utah Mammoth

Projected cap space: \$20.4 million (21 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Jack McBain

Notable UFAs: Nick Bjugstad

Utah was one of the most aggressive buyers in the NHL last summer, swinging a blockbuster trade for Mikhail Sergachev and making a separate move for John Marino. Don't be surprised if we see more fireworks from them this offseason.

The Mammoth have around \$20 million of cap space, with 11 forwards, eight defensemen, and a starting goaltender already signed. GM Bill Armstrong has all of his first-round picks and a whopping 11 picks in 2026 (headlined by three second-rounders) to deal from potentially. Utah's top-10 ranked prospect pool is also a strength that the club can weaponize on the trade market.

Utah ranked 21st for goals scored per game this season, so adding a high-end top-six difference maker or two should be the No. 1 priority. An impact second-line center to upgrade on Barrett Hayton would be the ideal fit, but it'd also make sense for them to take an aggressive run at Marner.

Besides upgrading at forward, the Mammoth may also need a second goaltender, depending on Connor Ingram's status. Ingram re-entered the NHLPA Players Assistance program in March for an indefinite period. Karel Vejmelka was rock solid as Utah's starter, so the club wouldn't need to spend big on adding a backup.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected cap space: \$40.4 million (17 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Dmitry Voronkov

Notable UFAs: Ivan Provorov, Dante Fabbro, James Van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly

Columbus' surprisingly competitive season was one of the best stories in hockey this year. This offseason could be a massive opportunity for the franchise to build around its talented young core and hopefully secure a playoff spot in 2026.

After re-signing Voronkov, who is projected to net a \$6.3 million AAV on a five-year deal according to AFP Analytics, the Blue Jackets will have \$34.1 million of cap space to deploy. Columbus has extra draft picks it can dangle on the trade market, too, with two first-round picks this year and 10 picks for the 2026 draft. GM Don Waddell has already said both of this year's first-round picks are available.

Upgrading the defense and goaltending will be key as the Blue Jackets ranked 25th in the NHL for goals against per game. Re-signing Fabbro would make sense, but adding a high-end top-four defender or two on top of that would go a long way in making the Blue Jackets' blue line playoff-caliber. Their existing goaltending tandem of Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov (an RFA) also isn't good enough.

Realistically, the Blue Jackets could bolster their backend and goaltending and still have ample cap room left over to swing for an elite forward like Marner, too.

Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$29.2 million (21 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Wyatt Kaiser

Notable UFAs: Ryan Donato

Fresh off hiring a new head coach and with Connor Bedard entering year three, GM Kyle Davidson must be feeling pressure to upgrade the Blackhawks' roster significantly. He can't afford another season finishing 31st.

Chicago should be searching for a top-line forward or two for Bedard to play with, regardless of whether that's via free agency or trade. It would also be wise to consider adding a proven, established top-four defenseman to fill the hole created by the Seth Jones trade. The Blackhawks have multiple first and second-round picks over the next two drafts that they can use as potential trade chips.

The Blackhawks already have some middle-of-the-lineup veterans, and they need to keep roster spots open for their emerging group of prospects. Therefore, this offseason's mission isn't about adding a high volume of new players but instead finding a couple of actual difference-makers near the top of the lineup.

Los Angeles Kings

Projected cap space: \$21.7 million (21 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Alex Laferriere

Notable UFAs: Vladislav Gavrikov, Andrei Kuzmenko, Tanner Jeannot

Four straight first-round playoff exits to the Edmonton Oilers cost Rob Blake his job. In comes Ken Holland, who has already told colleague Pierre LeBrun that he plans to be "aggressive" in the GM chair. It makes sense because while the Kings have a deep, hard-working team, they could use a game-breaking star to put them over the top come playoff time.

Los Angeles has \$21.7 million to spend, but that could dwindle if the club re-signs stud top-four defender Vladislav Gavrikov. L.A. would be left with \$10.3 million if it re-signed Gavrikov at a \$7.6 million AAV, and bridged Laferriere on a \$3.8 million AAV, according to AFP Analytics. The Kings could ship out a modest contract, such as Trevor Moore's, to carve out the extra cap flexibility needed to make a serious run at Marner. They also still own all of their first-round picks, which could be valuable trade currency if the right top-six winger becomes available.

Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$21.3 million (17 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Jonatan Berggren, Elmer Soderblom, Albert Johansson

Notable UFAs: Patrick Kane, Jeff Petry

The clock is ticking for GM Steve Yzerman to snap the Red Wings' nine-year playoff drought.

Detroit's first-round drafting has been excellent, but Yzerman's front office has made several blunders in free agency that have hindered the franchise's progress. Armed with over \$20 million of cap flexibility

again this summer — and with Yzerman sounding open to taking bold swings — the Red Wings must hit on their signings and trades to become a playoff-caliber team.

Bolstering the top-four defense, which falls off a cliff after Moritz Seider and Simon Edvinsson, is a critical need. Bringing in another top-six winger to upgrade the team's five-on-five scoring, which ranked 30th in the NHL this season, is essential, too.

If the Red Wings aren't able to land a top-tier, guaranteed solution to those needs in free agency, they should pivot to the trade market. Detroit's inefficient contracts, such as those for Andrew Copp, Vladimir Tarasenko, Justin Holl, and J.T. Compher, stem from overpaying for middle-class talent on the open market. There's no sense doing that when the Red Wings can leverage their complete set of draft picks and rich prospect pool to find better fits via trade.

Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$12.2 million (21 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Aatu Rätty

Notable UFAs: Brock Boeser, Pius Suter

Quinn Hughes only has two years left on his contract and will be eligible to sign an extension on July 1, 2026. The Canucks, after missing the playoffs in four of the last five years, are facing enormous pressure to get back on track next season to maximize their chances of keeping their superstar captain long-term.

Vancouver is going to go all-in this summer to improve its roster. The Canucks desperately need to add a second-line center and a top-six winger, with one of them preferably having star potential (they didn't have a single forward hit the 55-point mark this season).

Jim Rutherford said that he expects the club to make its biggest acquisitions via trade rather than free agency. Vancouver's No. 15 pick this year will likely be traded. The Canucks may also need to ship out one of their top prospects, whether that's Tom Willander, Jonathan Lekkerimäki, Elias Pettersson the defenseman, or Victor Mancini, to complete their offseason shopping.

The Canucks are middle-of-the-road in terms of cap space and trade chips, but the pressure to contend in 2025-26 all but guarantees that they'll make big moves this offseason.

Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$20.0 million (16 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Kaapo Kakko, Ryker Evans

Notable UFAs: Michael Eyssimont

At first, the Kraken didn't stand out as a team that should belong on this list. Yes, they boast ample cap flexibility and trade chips, but they've been stuck in mediocrity for a while and their decision to ship out Oliver Bjorkstrand for a haul at the trade deadline suggested that they might be entering a retool rather than a win-now mode.

However, GM Jason Botterill told reporters at the end of the season that the Kraken are "going to be aggressive again in free agency," one year after they landed Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson.

The Kraken own extra first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 as a result of the Bjorkstrand trade and extra second-round picks. President of hockey operations Ron Francis has stated that Seattle will consider using some of that currency as trade capital.

A lack of elite, star-level offensive talent is currently the franchise's biggest weakness. If the right opportunity to acquire a first-line forward presents itself via trade or free agency, expect the Kraken to make a strong bid.

San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$41.8 million (16 players signed)

Notable RFAs: Nikolai Kovalenko

Notable UFAs: Jan Rutta, Alexandar Georgiev

The Sharks aren't under pressure to make the playoffs anytime soon, but they must be motivated to make some gradual progress up the standings. They also have no choice but to be aggressive to some extent — they're nearly \$17 million shy of the \$70.6 million salary cap floor, with no internal players requiring notable raises this summer.

It'd make sense for San Jose to zero in on quality veterans on mid-range deals, similar to the Tyler Toffoli and Alex Wennberg signings last summer. GM Mike Grier can offer more generous AAVs than other teams, so long as the term isn't too long. A Mikael Granlund reunion is one possible move that would make sense, but they'll need to accomplish more than just that.

Renovating the top four on the blue line should be a particular focus. The Sharks iced arguably the worst backend in the NHL this season, especially after trading Jake Walman to Edmonton at the deadline. Adding a veteran goaltender to pair with Yaroslav Askarov will also be important.

Last offseason's Askarov trade — where they exchanged a younger prospect and a late first-round pick for a player in his early 20s who was closer to making an NHL impact — could also be another template they repeat. The Sharks have four picks in the first two rounds of this year's draft and four picks in the first two rounds of the 2026 draft. They could cash in one or two of those picks to acquire young, NHL-ready contributors.

Honorable mentions

Minnesota Wild: The Wild would have less than \$10 million in cap space if they re-sign Marco Rossi long-term and don't have their first-round pick this year. They'll still be active this summer, however, and will have the upgraded cap space and trade assets to make bigger splashes if they decide to ship Rossi out.

Toronto Maple Leafs: Toronto will have nearly \$20 million of cap space even after re-signing RFA Matthew Knies. The Leafs have tons of cap flexibility, but their lack of assets will likely restrict their ability to make a splash on the trade market. Toronto has already traded away its next three first-round picks and has a relatively shallow pool of prospects.

Teams with cap space and assets that probably aren't feeling pressure to make splashy, win-now moves: Calgary Flames, Philadelphia Flyers, Pittsburgh Penguins, Boston Bruins, New York Islanders, Nashville Predators