



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips**  
**June 16, 2025**

**Columbus Blue Jackets**

- PAGE 02: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Monahan Wins Masterton, Marner Interest & More
- PAGE 05: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski 2nd in Norris Trophy voting for NHL's best defenseman
- PAGE 06: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski, Denton Mateychuk named to all-NHL teams
- PAGE 07: Columbus Dispatch: Meredith Gaudreau's letter to her late husband Johnny is an ode to Father's Day
- PAGE 09: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets free agency glance: negotiations ongoing with July 1 looming
- PAGE 12: The Athletic: Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Building a physical, Panthers-like roster
- PAGE 16: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell not weighing buyouts for Merzlikins, Severson

**Cleveland Monsters/Prospects**

**NHL/Websites**

- PAGE 18: NHL.com: Latvia names 1st 6 players to preliminary Olympics roster
- PAGE 20: The Athletic: NHL Draft 2025: What's each team's biggest positional need for the future?
- PAGE 24: The Athletic: NHL free agency 2025: One player each team should target this offseason
- PAGE 30: The Athletic: Every NHL team's best value contract in 2024-25

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Monahan Wins Masterton, Marner Interest & More

**By Mark Scheig – June 11, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets are about to kick their offseason into high gear. With the NHL Combine in Buffalo over, they can turn their attention to final preparations before the NHL Draft in Los Angeles which is now just 16 days away. Then before they know it, the free agency period will be open.

Welcome back to Blue Jackets' News & Rumors. Before we dive into what could be going on this offseason, we look back at an emotional win that he didn't see coming.

### **Monahan Wins Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy**

The NHL will still have an awards show. That will take place on June 12 in advance of Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Final at 6 P.M. eastern. However, there has been a major change in how some awards have been announced.

In an effort to be more creative with their presentation, the NHL has released videos of winners being surprised with their respective award. In the case of Sean Monahan, there was not a dry eye to be found after watching him win the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

Meredith Gaudreau surprised Monahan and presented him with the trophy at his house in Toronto. He played the 2024-25 season with the heaviest of hearts after losing his best friend Johnny Gaudreau in August.

For Monahan, this moment will last a lifetime. He was there on numerous occasions throughout the season for the Gaudreau family especially on nights when there was a tribute to the Gaudreau brothers. Meredith couldn't wait to deliver this surprise as it was a celebration of who Monahan the person was.

"Having Meredith here to present it to me is something I'll remember for the rest of my life," Monahan said.

"You persevered through one of the hardest things and you lead by example and this one's celebrating your character and how good of a person you are. I know John is so proud of you," Meredith said.

In order for this surprise to come together, Meredith told Sean's wife Brittany a few days in advance. Brittany then proceeded to trick Sean into thinking they were taking family photos.

Monahan had no idea this was coming.

"I had no idea. I was waiting around all dressed up for a while because I was told we were doing family photos," Monahan said. "It was presented in a special way. They did a great job to surprise me."

Monahan received 75 first-place votes on way to his win. Gabriel Landeskog received 58 first-place votes followed by Marc-Andre Fleury with 32 first-place votes. In all, 17 different players received at least one first-place vote.

The Masterton is given to the player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. Monahan admitted early in the season he almost gave up on hockey. He used this season to not only honor the Gaudreau's, he was a leader and mentor inside the Blue Jackets' locker room.

Indeed, as Meredith said, John would have been so proud.

### **Blue Jackets & Marner**

All indications point to Toronto Maple Leafs' star Mitch Marner testing free agency. According to one report, the Blue Jackets could be involved.

According to the Athletic's Aaron Portzline, the Blue Jackets are expected to pursue Marner, but they'll have plenty of competition. (From Could Blue Jackets pursue Mitch Marner via free agency? They've tried before, The Athletic, Aaron Portzline, 6/10/2025)

It's not often 100-point players become available on the open market. It would make sense for 31 other teams to at least explore the possibility. The question to consider here is does it make sense for the Blue Jackets to pursue Marner?

There's no question the Blue Jackets have the needed cap space on hand if things get serious enough. It would likely take him being made one of the highest paid players in the NHL to make it happen.

Adding Marner to the top-six would turn an already exciting offense into an elite one. The Blue Jackets could boast the 3M line in that situation with Marner playing with Monahan and Kirill Marchenko. Then Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson could be their high-upside second line with the rest of the roster shaking down from there.

Here's where there would be significant questions. The Blue Jackets have to consider if it's the best use of their cap space. There is no question adding Marner would make them better. However, they have other glaring holes on their roster. Ideally, they'd like to address the defense and goaltending.

If it takes paying Marner one of the highest cap hits in the league, they could do it. The consideration here is that the Blue Jackets can't spend every penny they have. They have their own to take care of in short order. They need to ensure they have enough space to keep their young core together. Fantilli, Johnson and Cole Sillinger will all get significant raises. Zach Werenski will soon need a new contract that will likely exceed \$10 million.

The Blue Jackets will have to decide what is the best way to use their cap space. The reason they missed out just barely on the playoffs was goals against. We'll see what happens with Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro. If both come back, that likely costs them over \$10 per season total.

The other consideration is what does Marner want in all of this? Rumors are flying he'd want to join a place like Vegas or Florida. We'll ultimately see what his desires are. But he would need to express an interest in coming to Columbus. We just don't know if they're on his consideration list.

If Marner does eventually say he wants to sign with the Blue Jackets, expect to see a domino effect of other moves in order to make it happen. The one thing we can say for certain? GM Don Waddell will

consider all options in order for his team to be in the playoffs next season. Marner would be a huge add. But they must consider all ramifications if they do make a serious pursuit of him.

### **Side Dishes**

Coming out of the Combine, I really didn't hear the Blue Jackets much in the "rumor mill." Make no mistake. They are capable of making a big move this offseason. A willingness to trade both their first rounders in the right deal signals that.

News story to watch? The goalies. Do the Blue Jackets really want to enter 2025-26 with three goalies who would all need waivers?

If I had a penny to bet, I would expect the Blue Jackets to pick one player and trade their other pick. Waddell said there were talks at the trade deadline that would pick back up now. There will certainly be effort. It's just a matter if anything can cross the finish line.

As I said in my Combine notebook, Blake Fiddler had lunch with the Blue Jackets. At 6-foot-4 and over 220 pounds as a right-shot defenseman, that's a perfect fit given what the organizational depth needs. And don't rule out a goalie either. They do like Joshua Ravensbergen.

Remember that with the de-centralized draft, teams will stay in their local market. We should be meeting with Waddell for a predraft availability soon. We'll share details once that is known.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski 2nd in Norris Trophy voting for NHL's best defenseman

**By Brian Hedger – June 11, 2025**

Zach Werenski won the 2024-25 Norris Trophy, awarded to the NHL's best defenseman.

Werenski led the league in ice time, averaging 26:45 per game.

He set career highs in goals (23), assists (59), and points (82).

The best season of Zach Werenski's career now includes a second-place finish in the voting for the 2024-25 Norris Trophy given to the NHL's top defenseman.

After a vote by the Professional Hockey Writers Association, the Blue Jackets star finished behind Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche.

Makar received 176 first-place votes, 13 for second place and two for third. Werenski received 13 first-place votes, 132 for second, 38 for third, seven for fourth and one for fifth. Makar had 1,861 points, followed by Werenski's 1,266 and Vancouver's Quinn Hughes' 918. Hughes got two first-place votes.

Werenski, the only Blue Jackets defenseman ever named a finalist for the Norris Trophy, led the team in scoring in 2024-25 by setting career highs in goals (23), assists (59) and points (82) to average a career-best 1.01 points per game. He also led the NHL's mid-season 4 Nations Face-Off in scoring and helped the U.S. win the men's world championship gold medal on May 25 in Stockholm, Sweden.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) skates around Buffalo Sabres center Sam Lafferty (81) during the third period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on April 10, 2025. The Blue Jackets won 3-2.

Werenski also played a lot of hockey. He led the NHL in ice time with 2,166:22 and averaged 26:45 per game, 1:02 more per game than the next closest player (Makar 25:43). He also put together a 22-game home point streak that ended Feb. 25. It tied the third-longest point streak by a defenseman in NHL history. Phil Housley had a 22-game stretch in 1991-92 for the Buffalo Sabres.

Off the ice, Werenski acted as the Blue Jackets' stand-in captain for more than half of their resurgent season after Boone Jenner underwent shoulder surgery for an injury that occurred during a preseason practice.

Among his offensive exploits, Werenski netted five power-play goals while quarterbacking the top unit and scored one shorthanded goal. He also scored five game-winning goals and put a career-high 298 shots on net among 638 attempts.

Defensively, Werenski played regularly against the opposing team's top line and played a top role killing penalties. He blocked a career-high 131 shots, which ranked second on the team behind defense partner Dante Fabbro's 136, and the Blue Jackets generated 52.3% of all even-strength shot attempts with Werenski on the ice.

Makar led all NHL defensemen in goals (30), assists (62) and points (92) while posting a +28 plus/minus and logging 25:43 per game for the Avalanche.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski, Denton Mateychuk named to all-NHL teams

**By Brian Hedger – June 12, 2025**

Zach Werenski and Denton Mateychuk were named to the NHL's first All-Star and All-Rookie teams, respectively.

Werenski finished second in Norris Trophy voting and led all NHL defensemen in several statistical categories.

Mateychuk impressed in his rookie season after being called up from the AHL.

Two more Blue Jackets joined Sean Monahan in earning NHL recognition for their contributions toward a surprising season that finished just shy of the playoffs.

During the NHL Awards show televised before Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Final on June 12, defensemen Zach Werenski and Denton Mateychuk were named to the league's first All-Star and All-Rookie teams, respectively.

Werenski, who finished second to Colorado Avalanche star Cale Makar for the Norris Trophy as the NHL's top defenseman, joined Makar as the top two blueliners for the league's first of two All-Star teams. Mateychuk joined the Montreal Canadiens' Lane Hutson, who was awarded the Calder Trophy as the NHL's top rookie, as the only two defensemen named to the league's all-rookie team.

Prior to the awards show, in early June, Monahan became the first Blue Jackets player to ever win the Masterton Trophy for being the NHL player who "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication to hockey."

The Masterton, Norris and Calder trophies, plus the NHL all-star teams and all-rookie team, are determined by voting members of the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

Werenski had a career-best season to lead the Blue Jackets' effort to stay in the playoff hunt for all but the final game in the NHL's 82-game regular season. He set single-season records for defensemen that he'd already held with 23 goals, 59 assists and 82 points while putting a career-high 298 shots on net and skating an NHL-leading 26:45 average ice time per game.

He led the Blue Jackets in assists, points, multi-assist games (14) and multi-point games (22), along with topping the team in shots. Werenski led all NHL defensemen in even-strength goals (17), even-strength points (T-54) and shots on goal, and led all scorers at the league's first 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February 2025 with six points on six assists to help the U.S. win the silver medal. He also helped the U.S. win an elusive gold medal at the men's world championships in May 2025.

Mateychuk also impressed after starting the season with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters.

The 20-year-old rookie finished with 4-9-13 in 45 games while cementing a role on the second defensive pairing following his NHL debut Dec. 23, 2024, against the Montreal Canadiens. Mateychuk, selected 12th overall in 2022, finished second among all NHL rookie defensemen in even-strength points (13) and tied for second in goals, assists, points and plus/minus with a +4 rating.

## Columbus Dispatch / Meredith Gaudreau's letter to her late husband Johnny is an ode to Father's Day

**By Michael Arace – June 15, 2025**

Meredith Gaudreau wrote a tribute to her late husband, Johnny, for Father's Day, published in "The Players' Tribune."

Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed by a drunk driver in 2025, the same date as Johnny's proposal four years earlier.

Meredith's tribute includes personal photos and a video, and expresses her grief and love for Johnny.

Happy Father's Day, fathers. There are many ways to celebrate here in Columbus, as a quick search reveals – Cigar Fest Smoke Out, R&B Father's Day Brunch, Bourbon & Bites: A Fathers' Day Tasting, Popsicles with me, DAD, and Bluey! ... and so forth. The Father's Day I remember most dates to 1997 or 1998, when Mrs. Arace regripped my golf clubs.

What does Father's Day truly mean?

We are lucky to have Meredith Gaudreau to illuminate.

It is amazing how this woman, who was pregnant for the third time when her husband, Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau, and his brother, Matthew, were killed on Aug. 29. They were riding bicycles when they were struck by an accused drunk driver on a rural road in South Jersey. Their sister was to be married the next day.

There are so many layers to this tragedy. Meredith Gaudreau revealed yet another in a piece she wrote for "The Players' Tribune": Johnny died on the very same day, four years earlier on Aug. 29, that he proposed to her.

"The Players' Tribune," founded by Hall-of-Fame shortstop Derek Jeter in 2014, is a platform for professional athletes to post their own first-person content. Meredith's piece, "Thank You For Being Perfect, John," went online June 12.

It's close to 1,000 words. It is breathtaking.

Meredith writes:

"To go from getting ready for a beautiful wedding all week with your sister, to being in a funeral home with Madeline trying to figure all these things out — it just hurt so much. It was weird and it was awful. I had to go to the doctor for our third baby. The first of my appointments where you weren't holding my hand.

"I looked at Noa and baby Johnny and I felt a pain that I hadn't felt before. Our two babies who have to grow up without their dad, without their amazing uncle.

"I don't know.

"What was I supposed to do without you?"

There are pictures:

The couple, on a foggy day at the beach, embracing and mugging for a selfie.

Johnny on his knee, proposing to Meredith. Of course, Johnny has a ballcap on his head, and he is wearing a T-Shirt and track pants, and his high-top sneakers are untied. Johnny.

Meredith, holding baby Noa, who is looking through the glass at Nationwide Arena at her father, who is in full gear and grinning ear-to-ear.

Pictures of the kids, more than a few of them, including Noa, Johnny Jr. and the newest child, Carter.

And there is a short video. It shows Meredith and Johnny's best friend, Sean Monahan, from behind. They are holding the Gaudreau babies. In the background, a banner with Johnny Hockey's No. 13 is being raised to the rafters at Nationwide.

Monahan on June 5 was awarded the Bill Masterton Trophy, which goes to the NHL player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. Meredith surprised Monahan by showing up on his doorstep in suburban Toronto, hardware in hand. That said much – not the surprise, which made for engaging viewing, but the personal nature of the gesture. This was Meredith, representing those who voted for Monahan, saying "Thank you." Thank you for celebrating Johnny's spirit and keeping it at the forefront in the wake of a terrible tragedy. Well done.

Meredith's love letter is something else. It is a vivid trip down memory lane, at times heartbreaking. In the end, it is a celebration of richness of life – a richness so many of us take for granted, but Meredith cannot.

"John, I loved watching you and Matty take care of the kids together. Especially knowing Matty was going to be a dad, you did your best to show him the ropes and it was just ... the cutest thing to me. And so funny when you would pass off the baby with the dirty diaper to Uncle Matty and teach him how to change diapers. You were so proud to teach him your little tips and tricks. I miss these, too. It is so unfair that you are both gone.

"You were the best spouse, my life partner forever.

"Happy first Father's Day as a father of three!

"Thank you for the very best years of my life. Thank you for making us a family. Thank you for being my best friend, my favorite person, the man of my dreams.

"I love you so much. Forever and ever."

Happy Father's Day.



## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets free agency glance: negotiations ongoing with July 1 looming

**By Brian Hedger – June 15, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets have nine unrestricted free agents and less than three weeks to re-sign them before free agency begins.

GM Don Waddell has over \$42 million in cap space to work with, giving him flexibility to re-sign players, explore free agency, or make trades.

Key free agents include defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro, and forwards Sean Kuraly, Justin Danforth, and James van Riemsdyk.

Waddell has stated that re-signing Provorov, Fabbro, and forward Dmitri Voronkov are priorities.

The NHL's window for free agency opens July 1, which gives the Blue Jackets less than three weeks to reach contract agreements with any of their nine unrestricted free agents.

That's enough time to negotiate new deals with those who've been assigned "priority" status by Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell, but the countdown clock is now ticking.

The good news for those hoping he retains key members of an upstart team that made a stunning surge into playoff contention is how much salary room Waddell has at his disposal. With the rise of the NHL's salary-cap ceiling from \$88 million in 2024-25 to \$95.5 million in 2025-26, the Blue Jackets are working with more than \$42 million in cap space.

In other words, they have plenty of options to build off a surprising climb up the standings in the Metropolitan Division and Eastern Conference, whether it's re-signing their own free agents, tapping the open market or adding via trades.

"We've already had our pro meetings, so we've got a pretty good idea of what's out there (in UFAs)," Waddell said. "Some guys might get signed between now and then, because everybody's trying to do the same thing we are by signing some of their guys, so we'll just keep monitoring it daily."

Here's a glance at the Blue Jackets' pending free agents:

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov (9) warms up prior to the NHL hockey game against the New York Islanders at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on April 17, 2025.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets free agents: defensemen**

The Blue Jackets have three pending UFA defensemen in Ivan Provorov, Dante Fabbro and Jack Johnson. They also have one RFA defenseman, Jordan Harris, who was acquired in the trade Aug. 19, 2024, that sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens. Provorov and Fabbro had the biggest roles among the four.

Fabbro, a right-handed shooter, skated almost exclusively on the right side of the top defensive pairing with star Zach Werenski as his partner on the left. Provorov, a lefty, played much of the season skating on his "off" side on the right. He logged time early with Werenski on the first pairing, but Fabbro's addition off waivers in November moved him to the second pairing as a steady, reliable partner for veteran Damon Severson followed by rookie Denton Mateychuk.

Provorov is 28 and Fabbro will turn 27 on June 20, and both are solidly in the prime of their NHL careers. Both were also picked in the first round of the NHL draft.

Provorov was selected by the Philadelphia Flyers seventh overall in 2015, just one pick ahead of Werenski, and was acquired June 6, 2023 in a three-team trade that included the Los Angeles Kings. Fabbro was taken 17th overall in 2016 by the Nashville Predators, who had him for parts of seven seasons before making him available to the rest of the NHL via waivers Nov. 9, 2023.

Both carved out niche roles with the Blue Jackets, who now must decide whether to retain one or both before the NHL's free-agent market flings its doors open for business. Quality NHL defensemen at their ages tend to garner sizable long-term contracts as UFAs because they're available to negotiate with all 32 teams and are seen by virtually all GMs as valuable commodities.

What's tricky for Waddell and the Blue Jackets is determining the true value of retaining Provorov and/or Fabbro, which would likely include paying a premium in terms of salary or contract length – or both – to decline free agency. Waddell has spoken to agents for each player recently and said hashing out that situation is near the top of his offseason “to-do” list.

“We know these guys,” Waddell said. “We know what they bring. Sometimes the unknown (with signing new free agents) is they might be good players but don't fit really well in the locker room. ... I've talked about our defensemen before. We have some priority guys we're trying to see if we can get done and know where we are here in the next week or so, before free agency starts.”

Harris, who's 24 and played just 33 games, is another interesting situation to monitor. He's a pending RFA, which means the Blue Jackets must tender him a qualifying offer to keep his exclusive negotiating rights.

In June 2024, Waddell, shortly after being hired, parted with several young defenseman. Among his early moves, he bought out the final year of Adam Boqvist's contract and decided against extending a qualifying offer to Jake Bean. Harris, who didn't gain traction with first-year coach Dean Evason, may be headed down a similar path.

Johnson, 38, played just 41 games as a veteran depth defenseman and would almost certainly have the same role if re-signed to another low-cost, one-year deal. However, the Blue Jackets have multiple young defensemen ready to handle that role, including Jake Christiansen heading into his second full NHL season, so Johnson's return doesn't seem likely.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets free agents: forwards**

There are six UFA forwards unsigned, including Sean Kuraly, Justin Danforth, James van Riemsdyk, Luke Kunin, Christian Fischer and Kevin Labanc. The Jackets also have pending RFA forwards Dmitri Voronkov and Mikael Pyhtia unsigned.

Pyhtia finished the season with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters, so he's got an uphill climb to get back into the NHL mix, but re-signing Voronkov is a priority for Waddell. Voronkov made a good impression as a power forward during his first two seasons, compiling a combined 81 points on 41 goals and 40 assists in 148 games since coming over from Russia's KHL.

“We're talking to his agent,” Waddell said. “I think we've made a lot of progress. We've had a lot of talks this week. There's no timeline on that, but we know that one way or another, we'll get a contract. It'll be negotiated or through other means (arbitration).”

As for the UFA forwards, the three most likely to stick around are Van Riemsdyk, Kuraly and Danforth. All provide veteran leadership that's tough to replace, plus versatility and quality depth in bottom-six

roles. Van Riemsdyk, who had 16-20-36 in 71 games at age 36, also provided quality minutes in the top six after injuries sidelined captain Boone Jenner, center Sean Monahan and skilled winger Yegor Chinakhov.

Losing Kuraly, who's from Dublin, and Danforth would also create a sting. Both are versatile, hard-working depth forwards who play a grinding "playoff" style of hockey.

Kunin has prior experience playing for Evason in Minnesota but couldn't keep a regular lineup role after being acquired in a deal with the San Jose Sharks at the trade deadline. Fischer, meanwhile, got into just one game with the Blue Jackets after Waddell claimed him off waivers from the Detroit Red Wings on March 6.

Labanc, who started the season with the Blue Jackets on a one-year contract, underwent mid-season back surgery and isn't expected to return.

#### **Columbus Blue Jackets free agents: goalies**

Daniil Tarasov, who struggled as Elvis Merzlikins' primary backup in 2024-25, is the Blue Jackets' only unsigned NHL goalie. He's an RFA and should be re-signed after the Blue Jackets refused to expose him to waivers during the season to get him playing time with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters.

Tarasov initially refused an AHL conditioning assignment during a lengthy stretch without playing at the NHL level, which didn't appear to sit well with the Blue Jackets. Eventually, he agreed and gained a spark at the NHL level after playing two AHL games.

Rookie Jet Greaves' sterling play as the Jackets' starter to finish the season on a six-game winning streak felt like a message that he's ready for a full season in Columbus, but Tarasov getting a new contract would delay it again. Merzlikins also has two years left and Waddell still considers him the top option.

Short of Waddell finding a trade partner for Merzlikins or Tarasov, the Blue Jackets' goaltending is likely to remain the same.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Building a physical, Panthers-like roster

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

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

### **Item No. 1: Get physical**

To watch this year's Stanley Cup Final is to marvel at the speed and skill on display from the Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers. But you might recoil or wince at times, too, because the series — like every series involving the Panthers — has been incredibly physical.

The NHL playoffs are always more combative than the regular season. It's just not possible to play 82 games at that pace.

But the Panthers are on the cusp of becoming the NHL's latest dynasty by embracing a sandpaper/sledgehammer style. This is their third straight Stanley Cup Final, and they're on the cusp — a 3-2 series lead heading into Monday's game — of winning the Cup for a second straight season.

They've done so with Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Bennett, Brad Marchand and others — veteran players who know exactly where the fine line runs between hard play and dirty hit, inadvertent contact and subtle malfeasance. They not only toe the line, but stretch it ever so slightly.

Other GMs are paying attention and hoping to emulate that, including Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, who just recently passed his first anniversary in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets have amassed impressive skill since they embarked on a roster rebuild in 2021, and you can see how their top-six is taking shape with centers Sean Monahan and Adam Fantilli, wingers Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Boone Jenner, Dmitri Voronkov and others.

"Regardless of what's going on with the finals, we've talked about this during the last season," Waddell told The Athletic. "I just felt ... some of our better players are not physical players and they're not big players, and we always have to be aware of that as we bring other players in.

"It's not just their skill level (we have to look at), but their stature, too. Certainly, watching these playoffs, the teams that have been more physical have had success. It's changed back and forth through the year. Obviously, Detroit had all that success for all those years.

"But I think you need to have a presence on the ice, for sure."

Waddell would never say it. But he may have learned this lesson at his previous stop, too, when he was president and GM of the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Canes have been regular-season darlings, but they've made it to the conference finals twice in the past three seasons, losing both times to ... you guessed it, Florida. They were swept three seasons ago by the Panthers. This year, they won one game.

Six years ago, the St. Louis Blues bullied their way to a Stanley Cup, and the response across the league was to get bigger, especially on defense.

But this current trend is a little more nuanced. It's not size of frame that matters, but size of heart. Florida's Bennett is 6-foot-1, 200 pounds. Marchand is 5-9, 180. Sam Reinhart is 6-1, 190. Tkachuk is 6-2,

200. So many of the Panthers have coal furnaces in their chests. They play bigger than the roster would indicate.

"It's willingness," Waddell said. "Some guys have that, and some guys don't. You're not going to change certain smaller guys with tremendous skill into physical players. It's not going to happen.

"(Florida's Aleksander) Barkov isn't a physical player. He takes the body, for sure, but I wouldn't consider him a physical player. You need those guys, too."

Keep this in mind as Waddell goes about enhancing the Blue Jackets' roster with moves this summer. Keep it in mind, too, as the Blue Jackets' young talent continues to mature and gain physical confidence as they become established in the NHL.

Fantilli projects as a player who could excel in that environment. So do Jenner and Voronkov. Third-line center Cole Sillinger could get there, too. Mathieu Olivier's a good player to have on your side, but there's not much fighting in the playoffs.

Former Blue Jackets coach Ken Hitchcock wanted an abundance of "heavy" players. Another former Jackets coach, Scott Arniel, now in Winnipeg, wanted "stiffness" throughout his lineup. Winning teams have players who are battle-tested and incessantly competitive.

Carolina, Toronto and others have learned how valuable that is in the postseason.

It's an underwhelming list of free agents this summer, but Waddell will be on the lookout for players who have skill, sense and stature, he said. There is absolutely space in the lineup for a skilled, light player like Kent Johnson, for example, but the roster must be buttressed the right way.

## **Item No. 2: Big challenge**

The Blue Jackets and Voronkov, a restricted free agent, have started negotiations toward a new contract, and Waddell has plans, he said, to speak with agent J.P. Barry this week. Voronkov has arbitration rights, but both sides would rather avoid that process.

"The good thing there is, we know we're going to get a contract done, right?" Waddell said. "He's going to be here. Now, can we work through that process to avoid having to go through an arbitration case? You need two sides to get a deal, but I've always felt arbitration was a last resort."

These are the type of contracts — restricted free agents coming out of entry-level deals — that have caused problems for the Blue Jackets through the years. Sergei Bobrovsky, Ryan Johanson, Pierre-Luc Dubois ...

Voronkov is such an interesting case.

At 6-foot-4, 230 pounds, he has surprisingly soft hands and impressively keen anticipation and hockey sense. He moves pretty well for a big man, too. The issue in his first two NHL seasons has been his conditioning. He's clearly run out of gas late in the last two seasons.

Voronkov was noticeably thinner this past season, but the second-half drop-off was clear. He had 17 goals in his first 32 games and six in his final 41 games.

When asked why Voronkov's physical game seemed to disappear, too, coach Dean Evason suggested that he wasn't "getting there" to initiate contact with opponents, especially late in shifts.

It led to an end-of-season heart-to-heart with the player.

"We had a big meeting at the end of the season," Waddell said. "We didn't give him a target (weight), but a challenge that he's not going to play (next season) until he's in shape."

Waddell said Voronkov is spending the summer in Moscow, where he's working with a well-known trainer for NHL players. Waddell, Evason and many others within the Blue Jackets are excited to see what he looks like when he arrives in September for his third NHL camp.

"He doesn't know how good he can be," Waddell said. "Or how much money he could make."

### **Item No. 3: Dealmakers**

In 25 years as a franchise, the Blue Jackets have never taken a player to arbitration. One thing we learned this week: neither has Waddell, who was a GM in Atlanta and Carolina before landing in Columbus.

Waddell's distinction, though, may deserve an asterisk.

"I've been on the doorstep probably six or seven times," he said, with a chuckle. "I've actually been in (the hearing) and settled during a break, but you can't do that anymore."

Waddell said he was with Carolina when they reached a point where a third party had to settle a contract impasse with a player, and they had already met at the table to start presenting their cases.

"The agent said, 'I need a 10-minute timeout,' and we went outside and worked it out," Waddell said. "So, I guess I've been to arbitration for about 10 minutes."

But he's never needed the process, technically, to get a deal done.

"Another time we had a goalie fly over from Finland (for the hearing)," Waddell said. "I ran into him at breakfast, so, of course, I went over to talk with him. We're sitting there talking and he says, 'You made me come all the way over here in the summer!'"

"I said, 'I didn't make you do anything.' We were joking, but we started talking and we got the deal done."

The NHL and NHL Players' Association have agreed to changes in recent years that would make both of those stories impossible today.

"It used to be that you could settle until the arbitration was awarded," Waddell said. "Now, once the arbitration hearing gets started, you can't settle."

"And players don't have to come over anymore, either. They don't have to attend the hearing."

In addition to Voronkov, Blue Jackets defenseman Jordan Harris and goaltender Daniil Tarasov are restricted free agents with arbitration rights.

### **Item No. 4: Snacks**

- Contract talks with Blue Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro, an unrestricted free agent on July 1, appear headed in the right direction, with more talks between Waddell and Fabbro's agent, J.P. Barry, set for this coming week. It's been a much slower go with another pending UFA defenseman, Ivan Provorov.

- Zach Werenski capped the best season of his career by finishing second in voting for the Norris Trophy and seventh in voting for the Hart Trophy. For the Norris, which went to Colorado's Cale Makar, Werenski received 13 first-place votes, along with 132 for second, 38 for third, seven fourth-place votes and one fifth, appearing on all 191 counted ballots. For the Hart, which went to Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck, Werenski received one first-place vote, along with one second-place vote, three for fourth place and 19 for fifth place. It's the highest a Blue Jackets player has ever finished in Norris voting.

- Werenski also earned a spot on the NHL's postseason All-Star team for the first time in his career. He was a first-team pick, becoming the first Blue Jackets' skater to achieve that lofty spot. Goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky was an NHL first-teamer in 2013 and 2019, while goaltender Steve Mason (2009) and defenseman Seth Jones (2018) were second-team picks.
- Rookie defenseman Denton Mateychuk earned a spot on the NHL's postseason all-rookie All-Star team. He joined previous Blue Jackets' first-year players Rostislav Klesla (2002), Rick Nash (2003), Mason (2009), Werenski (2017), and Elvis Merzlikins (2020).
- The Jackets, like all NHL clubs, have minimal contact with players during the offseason, but they can check in on players who were injured in the previous season. Waddell said he received a positive update on winger Yegor Chinkahov, who was saddled with a back injury in recent seasons. Chinakhov has played in 113 games and missed 112 games with injury over the last three seasons. Not a good ratio. But Waddell said there was good news last week: "I just got a report that everything is going well for him," he said. "Everything is going well for him. He's training. No issues at all. I don't worry about him. He's always been in pretty good shape, and the report said no issues at all." Chinakhov mentioned to reporters late last season that he needed a procedure on his back that was only available in Russia, but it's unclear if he's had any procedure since the season ended.
- NHL clubs that wish to retain their rights to restricted free agents must extend a qualifying offer by the Monday following the draft, which, this year, is June 30. Teams know which player they're going to "qualify" before the draft, but the process typically plays out in the hours and days after the final pick is made. Blue Jackets forward Mikael Pyrytiä already has his qualifying offer (\$942,375), however. Why? Pyrytiä played for Finland in the IIHF World Championship last month in Sweden and Denmark. He wouldn't have played if he didn't have insurance — no player does — and the qualifying offer, which assures him of a contract next season, was enough to get him covered.
- Waddell said he's "very close" to hiring an equipment manager to replace longtime staffer Jamie Healy, who was let go after the season. A new guy should be in place this week, he said. That's important, with the Blue Jackets' development camp coming up early next month. Waddell expects interviews to begin soon for a new strength and conditioning coach to replace Kevin Collins. Team sources told The Athletic that assistant strength and conditioning coach Ryan Gadbois, who has been handling the top job so far this summer, is a candidate.
- Happy Father's Day. Best job ever.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell not weighing buyouts for Merzlikins, Severson

**By Brian Hedger – June 16, 2025**

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell says the team is not considering buying out any players.

Waddell prefers to give goalie Elvis Merzlikins and defenseman Damon Severson another chance to succeed in Columbus in 2025-26.

Buying out Severson's contract would require payments for 12 more years, while a Merzlikins buyout would stretch to four years.

The team's focus is on improvement rather than navigating complex buyout scenarios.

Those harboring hopes of the Blue Jackets dipping into a salary-cap pool of roughly \$42 million to buy out a “bad” contract or two should probably ditch that fantasy.

Buyouts aren't something Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, is considering, even with goalie Elvis Merzlikins on a contract with only two years left at \$5.4 million per season.

Three times since the 2024-25 season ended, The Dispatch has asked Waddell about utilizing buyouts this summer. His answers haven't wavered.

“No, not at all,” Waddell said most recently during a June 13 interview. “We're not looking at it at all.”

Assuming his sentiment doesn't change, and there's no reason to think it will, Merzlikins and veteran defenseman Damon Severson aren't going anywhere without trades – and Severson has a full no-trade clause for the next two years. Merzlikins has a 10-team no-trade clause for his last two contract years, but Waddell hasn't indicated he's even seeking trades involving either player.

His focus, instead, is giving each player a new shot to thrive with the Blue Jackets in 2025-26.

The NHL's first summer buyout window will open 48 hours after the conclusion of the Stanley Cup Final, which the Florida Panthers lead, 3-2, over the Edmonton Oilers, with Game 6 on June 17 in Sunrise, Florida. It closes at 5 p.m. June 30. Don't expect Waddell to use this year's buyout period like he did in June 2024 to purchase the final year of former defenseman Adam Boqvist's contract.

Unlike Merzlikins and Severson, Boqvist had just one year left on a three-year contract with a \$2.6 million cap charge. The Blue Jackets were obligated to pay Boqvist \$533,333 for 2024-25 and 2025-26 to buy it out, which means they have only one more season before they're clear of paying Boqvist to leave.

It's a different scenario with Merzlikins and Severson, both of whom finished the season watching the Blue Jackets string together a six-game winning streak. Merzlikins was out with a concussion, replaced by dazzling rookie Jet Greaves, while Severson sat as a healthy scratch. Both players make significantly more money than Boqvist did, and both have multiple years left on their contracts, including a whopping six years for Severson.

Buying out either one just doesn't add up for Waddell, and here's why:

Buyout would require Columbus Blue Jackets to pay Damon Severson for 12 more years

Severson held all the leverage when former Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen acquired him June 9, 2023 in a trade with the New Jersey Devils. He had nine years of NHL experience and helped



the Devils qualify for the playoffs with seven goals and 26 assists, setting himself up for a possible windfall on the open market.

Kekalainen agreed to a sign-and-trade swap, in which Columbus acquired Severson and his signing rights for a 2023 third-round pick. The Blue Jackets then gave Severson a maximum term of eight years, which only teams re-signing their own free agents are allowed to extend via the league's collective bargaining agreement with the NHL Players' Association.

Otherwise, Severson's term cap would've been seven years as a free agent. Instead, he got \$50 million over eight years from the Blue Jackets, who now have six years left on a deal with a \$6.25 million cap charge through 2030-31. According to PuckPedia, the Blue Jackets owe Severson \$27.2 million over the next six years.

They'd have to pay 67% of it in a buyout, plus 100% of his remaining signing bonus valued at \$2 million each of the next two seasons, as well as \$1.8 million in 2027-28 and \$1 million in 2028-29.

Buyouts lessen the amount a team is required to pay a player overall and count toward its annual salary-cap number, but the new amount owed is spread out evenly over twice the length of the remaining years on the deal. That means, in Severson's case, the Blue Jackets would be required to count reduced cap charges for 12 more years, stretching through 2036-37 while he becomes an unrestricted free agent.

Waddell feels the best option is to simply bring him back and hope next season turns out better.

"Maybe things didn't go well this year for him, for multiple reasons, but we're going to clear the air this summer ... and when he comes back, be ready to compete for one of those top (blue line) jobs," Waddell said. "We know he's capable."

Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins has two years left on his contract.

Buying out Merzlikins would keep him on Columbus Blue Jackets' payroll through 2028-29

Merzlikins has two years left on his contract, a deal which carries a \$5.4 million charge against the cap. Buying him out is easier than buying out Severson but extends the Blue Jackets' responsibility to pay him by two additional years (albeit at a reduced cost).

Merzlikins is owed \$9.75 million, so the buyout amount for the Blue Jackets would be two-thirds of that, or roughly \$6.5 million.

Spreading that out evenly over four years results in annual buyout costs of \$1.625 million per season through 2028-29. Considering the volatility that Merzlikins has displayed as the Blue Jackets' top goalie the past three years, there are probably fans and analysts who feel it's worth it.

Waddell disagrees, and it's his call.

"Until things kind of burst there in March, if you think about the outdoor (Stadium Series) game and how he stole that game, he won us more games than he lost us," Waddell said. "Things didn't go well for a couple of weeks in March, and it also didn't go well for our whole team. So, overall, I think he made big strides, and more importantly ... as a teammate to the rest of the guys."

## [NHL.com / Latvia names 1st 6 players to preliminary Olympics roster](#)

**By NHL.com Staff – June 16, 2025**

The 12 countries participating in men's hockey at the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026 are naming the first six players to their preliminary rosters Monday.

The men's tournament will start with preliminary games Feb. 11, with the gold medal game scheduled for Feb. 22.

The remainder of the rosters will be announced later this year.

This is the first time NHL players will participate in the Olympics since 2014.

Here are the first six players on Team Latvia's preliminary roster (listed in alphabetical order):

Rodrigo Abols, F

The 29-year-old from Riga had five points (two goals, three assists) in 22 games for the Philadelphia Flyers this season, his first in the NHL. Abols had two points (one goal, one assist) in four games for Latvia at the 2022 Beijing Olympics and has competed in the IIHF World Championship eight times, including six straight from 2018-24.

Uvis Balinskis, D

A 28-year-old from Ventspils, Balinskis has 21 points (five goals, 16 assists) in 102 NHL games with the Florida Panthers the past two seasons. He played for Latvia at the 2022 Olympics with three assists in four games and has competed at the World Championship five times, most recently with two assists in 10 games in 2023.

Teddy Blueger, F

The 30-year-old has 152 points (49 goals, 103 assists) in 418 games across seven NHL seasons since being drafted by the Pittsburgh Penguins in the second round (No. 52) in 2012 and had 26 points (eight goals, 18 assists) in 82 games for the Vancouver Canucks this season. From Riga, Blueger competed at the World Championship from 2017-19 and had eight points (three goals, five assists) in 19 games.

Zemgus Girgensons, F

An NHL All-Star in 2014-15, the 31-year-old has 194 points (91 goals, 103 assists) in 770 games, playing his first 10 seasons with the Buffalo Sabres before having six points (two goals, four assists) in 82 games for the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2024-25. A native of Riga, Girgensons had two points (one goal, one assist) in five games for Latvia in the 2014 Sochi Olympics and hasn't competed internationally since the 2017 World Championship.

Elvis Merzlikins, G

A 31-year-old from Riga, Merzlikins is 94-100-35 with a 3.20 goals-against average, a .902 save percentage and 11 shutouts in 244 NHL games for the Columbus Blue Jackets since 2019, including 26-21-5 with a 3.18 GAA and an .892 save percentage this season. He was 4-2 with a 1.49 GAA and a .940 save percentage for Latvia at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and has represented it at the World Championship six times.

Arturs Silovs, G

The 24-year-old is 8-8-2 with a 3.13 GAA and an .880 save percentage in 19 NHL games (18 starts) with the Canucks the past three seasons. A native of Ventspils, Silovs was 2-2-0 with a 1.22 GAA and a .952 save percentage at the 2022 World Championship and 7-2-0 with a 2.20 GAA and .921 save percentage in the 2023 tournament.

## The Athletic / NHL Draft 2025: What's each team's biggest positional need for the future?

**By Corey Pronman – June 16, 2025**

Today, we discuss each NHL organization's biggest internal need ahead of the 2025 NHL Draft. "Biggest need" in this context is not strictly about the NHL roster. This is about projecting five years down the road, and mostly focusing on what teams have in their farm system.

Anaheim: Defenseman

The Ducks have one of the best groups of young forwards in the league and have invested a lot of high picks in recent years in forwards. They also have young defensemen who are developing well in Pavel Mintyukov, Olen Zellweger and Tristan Luneau, but the high-end talent is heavily tilted toward their forward group.

Boston: Defenseman

Mason Lohrei is a promising young defenseman, but since the Bruins picked him at 58th in 2020, they haven't selected a blueliner in the top three rounds. Their system is light at all positions, but defense is probably their biggest need.

Buffalo: Goaltender

Buffalo has made a lot of high picks in recent years and has a lot of talented young skaters. They score a lot of goals, but don't keep them out of their net. Devon Levi and Ukko Pekka-Luukkonen are fine young goalies, but they're not sure things to be legit No. 1s.

Calgary: Center

Last year, Calgary's system had a pressing need for centers and defensemen, as it had drafted a bunch of wingers with high picks. In 2024, the Flames picked Zayne Parekh ninth, who is a top defense prospect. This year, the attention turns to the middle of the ice as they lack clear centers of the future.

Carolina: Center

Carolina has drafted a lot of skilled wingers in recent years and has some good young defensemen, too. Ryan Suzuki was a promising center prospect at one point, but his development has gone sideways, and the Hurricanes just traded Jack Drury. It's not clear who in their system could realistically play the middle in the NHL.

Chicago: Scoring

Chicago has had a lot of picks in recent years and drafted excellent young centers and defensemen. Connor Bedard is a game breaker, but otherwise, a lot of the centers the Blackhawks have picked have been similar with a focus on speed, compete and two-way ability. Center and defense are the hardest positions to find, so I don't fault this strategy, but eventually, they need to find some guys to put the puck in the net.

Colorado: Center

Colorado has a lot of needs due to its very thin farm system. The only prospect the Avalanche have that looks like a potential NHLer is defenseman Mikhail Gulyayev. Given that Colorado dealt center Calum Ritchie to the Islanders this spring, I would lean toward getting some form of talent at center as a priority.

#### Columbus: Defenseman

Columbus has had a lot of high picks in recent years and has acquired talent at all positions, so I don't see a clear pressing need. After 2022 No. 6 pick David Jiricek didn't pan out for the Blue Jackets, though, there is more of a need to shore up the young depth on the blue line than there is up front.

#### Dallas: Forward

Dallas has some good young players up front and on defense, but I wouldn't call its pipeline overly deep. Among the prospect pool, there is a lack of high-end skill, especially after dealing Logan Stankoven in the Mikko Rantanen trade.

#### Detroit: Skill

Detroit has done a good job building out its premium positions. The Red Wings have centers and defensemen of the future, and a strong goalie prospect in Sebastian Cossa. I like their young forwards they have coming, but they truly lack guys in their system who can put the puck in the net and put up points.

#### Edmonton: Defenseman

Edmonton's farm system is very light, but it has some potential NHL forwards in Matt Savoie and Sam O'Reilly. The blue line is another story. Beau Akey has a chance to make it, but after him, there's not much else coming.

#### Florida: Defenseman

Florida has sold almost every major pick and prospect it had in recent years to win now. The Panthers do at least have some young forwards of interest in Anton Lundell and Mackie Samoskevich. There's nothing coming on defense, though, and there hasn't been for a while.

#### Los Angeles: Defenseman

Quinton Byfield's positive development has shored up the center depth in L.A. for the near- and long-term, even if there's no clear pivot coming up in the system. The Kings have some good young defensemen on their team, too, but adding another high-echelon talent on defense is more of a priority for them than adding more skill up front.

#### Minnesota: Skill

Minnesota was a tough team for this exercise because I don't see a clear need currently. The Wild have good young centers and defensemen, and although goalie prospect Jesper Wallstedt struggled this season, I wouldn't call a goalie a need for them. I look at their pipeline, and while they have some high-end skill, they could use more, as they have a lot of hardworking two-way types.

#### Montreal: Center

Montreal has a strong group of young defensemen and wingers coming up. While Nick Suzuki is a great player, the Canadiens are missing quality players up the middle, especially with the up-and-down development of Kirby Dach.

#### Nashville: Everything

Nashville is at a rather bleak period as an organization. The Predators had a tough season, and there aren't a ton of high-end pieces on the way to get excited about in the pipeline. They need talent, plain and simple, and they need it at every position.

#### New Jersey: Forward

The Devils addressed their need in goal in the last draft with Mikhail Yegorov, who looked excellent this season between the USHL and Boston University. It would be hard to justify that the Devils need more defensemen, given they don't have enough room for the ones they have, so if I had to pick a position, it would be to add more skill and scoring to their young forward group.

#### New York Islanders: Defenseman

The Islanders have a lot of needs in their system, so you could probably list any position for them here, quite frankly. But given that the Islanders picked a potential bottom-six center in Danny Nelson last summer, I would lean toward them needing a bit more defense depth.

#### New York Rangers: Center

The Rangers have done a good job building up depth on defense and on the wing in their organization, but they haven't meaningfully addressed the center position since the 2017 draft. Their current NHL centers are good, but they aren't young, especially with Filip Chytil being dealt.

#### Ottawa: Forward

Ottawa has a thin system, so it could use more depth at every position. My slight preference would be up front, though. The Senators have good young players at forward and defense, but the youth is tilted toward the blue line, and the fact that their 2021 first-rounder Tyler Boucher hasn't developed well has led to a lack of upcoming depth at forward.

#### Philadelphia: Center

Even though the Flyers picked quality young center Jett Luchanko in 2024, I would still list this as Philly's biggest need. The Flyers lack high-end talent at the position, and there isn't much coming other than Luchanko. Their blue line depth isn't great either in terms of prospects, but between the two, I would still lean to adding more up the middle.

#### Pittsburgh: Center

The Penguins haven't had many draft picks in recent years, but in the young talent they have acquired, it has been on defense and the wing, especially after trading center Brayden Yager to Winnipeg. They have no substantial prospect in their system at arguably the most important position.

#### San Jose: Defenseman

Even after picking Sam Dickinson, who played great in the OHL this season, with the 11th pick last summer, defense is still far and away the Sharks' biggest organizational need. They have plenty of young, skilled forwards on the way; they need to continue to address the depth on defense.

#### Seattle: Defenseman

Seattle has used a lot of its draft capital since the franchise began to add highly talented forwards through the draft. The Kraken picked defender Ryker Evans high, too, but they need a lot more than him in the prospect pool.

#### St. Louis: Center

I thought defense was the Blues' biggest need going into the last draft, and they picked defenders with each of their first three picks. They have a great center prospect in Dalibor Dvorsky, but it falls off after him, and there isn't much coming at center otherwise.

#### Tampa Bay: Defenseman

Tampa Bay has had so few draft picks in recent years that it's hard to pinpoint one exact need because its system needs everything. The Lightning have at least some decent young talent coming at forward, but they have almost nothing coming on defense.

Toronto: Center

Toronto hasn't had many high picks recently, so the system is thin, but especially after trading Fraser Minten, the Maple Leafs' thinnest position is up the middle with no real NHL prospect on the way at center.

Utah: Defenseman

Utah has a strong group of young forwards led by a lot of recent high picks, including Daniil But, Logan Cooley, Tij Iginla and Dylan Guenther. The Mammoth have good young defenseman as well in Dmitri Simashev and Maveric Lamoureux, but their impact talent is much more prominent up front than in their blue line prospects.

Vancouver: Center

Vancouver hasn't used a top-two round pick on a center since it took Elias Pettersson in 2017. The Canucks don't have a deep farm system, but center is far and away their biggest organizational need.

Vegas: Defenseman

Vegas has been all-in and has traded a lot of picks and prospects in recent years. The Golden Knights don't have much in their system as a result, but they at least have a few good forward prospects led by Trevor Connelly. On defense, they have little in terms of substantive NHL talent.

Washington: Defenseman

Washington has drafted a forward with its last five first-round picks. The result is an organization full of skill up front, but lacking in quality depth on defense. It's the Capitals' clear biggest need entering the draft.

Winnipeg: Defenseman

Winnipeg has drafted a lot of forwards with its high picks in recent years. They, for the most part, are wingers, so I could buy center as a need here outside of Brayden Yager. Defense seems a slightly bigger priority, though, especially given Ville Heinola didn't pan out.

## The Athletic / NHL free agency 2025: One player each team should target this offseason

**By The Athletic NHL Staff – June 14, 2025**

There are just over two weeks until NHL free agency opens on July 1, and teams will be looking to fill holes on their rosters.

Headlined by stars such as Mitch Marner, Aaron Ekblad and Nikolaj Ehlers, there are plenty of pending unrestricted free agents available who could boost franchises in a big way.

This week, The Athletic asked its NHL staff to play free agency matchmaker and list one pending UFA each team should target this summer.

Here's what they said.

Anaheim Ducks

Brock Boeser

If Marner isn't in play, Boeser could be a good Plan B who isn't nearly as costly. He'll get paid and could surpass Troy Terry's team-high \$7 million AAV. But the Ducks' salary scale wouldn't be thrown off, and they would get a shooter whose down year of 25 goals last season would have led Anaheim. Beckett Sennecke, the No. 3 pick in 2024, won't need to be rushed. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Mitch Marner

Who would want to play against a team that rolls David Pastrnak on one shift and Marner the next? The Bruins would be top-heavy with two difference-making right wings. But in a good way. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Aaron Ekblad

The Sabres' biggest need is a right-shot defenseman capable of playing in the top four. Ekblad is the best player available who fits that description. He comes with an established track record playing for a winning team to go with a physical edge. He's also only 29, so he should still have some good seasons left in him. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Nikolaj Ehlers

A goal-scoring winger with speed and skating in his arsenal. He makes a ton of sense for Calgary if he's willing to remain in Canada. Boeser could be another option. The goal is for Calgary to get someone younger and not chase after mid-30s players who keep them away from that goal. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Mitch Marner

Marner would fit the Hurricanes' style and give the team an elite point producer. He's a defensively responsible forward who is hardworking and can be used in all situations. While there is a case for Carolina upgrading at center over another wing, the team could accomplish its longtime pursuit of landing a superstar by landing Marner this offseason. — Cory Lavoie



## Chicago Blackhawks

### Mitch Marner

Marner is probably a long shot, and the Blackhawks may not even sign a significant unrestricted free agent. It's possible they'll be more aggressive in trying to acquire someone through trade. But of the current UFAs, Marner is the one who makes the most sense from age and talent standpoints. — Scott Powers

## Colorado Avalanche

### Dante Fabbro

After signing Brock Nelson to an extension, Colorado has its core under contract, but also very little cap space to work with. The Avs should be looking to upgrade the fringes with a good value signing, and Fabbro could be perfect. He's 26, a strong skater and played well with Norris Trophy finalist Zach Werenski this year. He'd be a great addition if Colorado could find a way to fit his contract. — Jesse Granger

## Columbus Blue Jackets

### Aaron Ekblad

The Blue Jackets want to bolster their blue line, and the right side needs the most help. Ekblad would be a perfect fit, whether he pairs with Werenski on the top pair or with youngster Denton Mateychuk on the second pair. The right side has been a sore spot since Seth Jones was traded to Chicago, but Ekblad could help give the Jackets two major minute-munchers, one on each side. — Aaron Portzline

## Dallas Stars

### Aaron Ekblad

Miro Heiskanen is capable of playing on his off side; he's been doing it for years. But the Stars could use a good right-handed shot, and Ekblad fits the bill. He could slot in alongside Thomas Harley or Esa Lindell and give Dallas a terrific top four. But making the money work will be difficult, especially if Jim Nill plans to re-sign Matt Duchene and captain Jamie Benn. — Mark Lazerus

## Detroit Red Wings

### Vladislav Gavrikov

While a top-line winger would be the more exciting add, Detroit needs a top-four defenseman, and Gavrikov would be the dream fit. He's one of the league's best defensive defensemen, is used to taking tough minutes and has familiarity with Todd McLellan and Trent Yawney from Los Angeles. Putting Gavrikov next to Moritz Seider would make for a fearsome defensive pairing. — Max Bultman

## Edmonton Oilers

### Connor Brown

It's a boring answer, but sometimes there's nothing wrong with boring. Brown has become one of the heartbeats of the team as a penalty killer and role player who can move up in the lineup. He loves being an Oiler, his former agent runs the team and he surely won't break the bank. That's important, considering the Oilers don't have an abundance of cap space. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

## Florida Panthers

### Sam Bennett

Why mess with success? That goes for both sides, too. If Bennett wants to max out — and some team will be more than happy to offer the opportunity — it'll be time to say goodbye. Is it that outrageous to think that Florida paying him, say, \$7 million a season should be out of the question? The fit is perfect, and there (as usual) aren't a ton of plug-and-play down-the-middle options on the market. — Sean Gentile

Los Angeles Kings

Vladislav Gavrikov

With Rob Blake as the Kings' GM, it felt like a foregone conclusion that Gavrikov would be re-signed, but that's no longer the case with Ken Holland. If Holland isn't keen on throwing many years and big money at Gavrikov, the 29-year-old defensive bedrock, trading for the younger Bowen Byram (or perhaps Nicolas Hague) might be necessary if they also make a big move, such as taking a run at Marner. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

John Tavares

The Wild's main need is up the middle, and now they're on Plan B after target Nelson re-signed with the Avalanche. Tavares' priority has been to stay in Toronto, but if he gets to market, he'd give Minnesota the experienced, two-way center who could take some pressure off Joel Eriksson Ek. The Wild need to get Tavares, Duchene or Jonathan Toews to address the position, especially after missing out on Nelson. — Joe Smith

Montreal Canadiens

Dante Fabbro

Fabbro might not make it to July 1, because the reasons why Montreal might want him are the same reasons Columbus would want to keep him: he's young, shoots from the right side, should be relatively inexpensive and did some good things with the Blue Jackets. The Canadiens have a need on the right side of their blue line with the retirement of David Savard. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Sam Bennett

It's doubtful Bennett will end up getting away from Florida and even more doubtful that Nashville would be high on his radar if he did, but the Preds should still be all in on giving it a try. This is exactly the productive, surly, still-in-his-prime player this team needs down the middle. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Connor Brown

The Devils need depth, and Brown is an affordable bottom-six player who has proved useful on an elite Edmonton team. Depth was New Jersey's biggest weakness in the Carolina series, and he'd help address that. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Nikolaj Ehlers

The Isles' lack of playmakers on the wing, especially those who can skate a bit, is pretty evident. Outside of Marner, there aren't really any potential UFAs with Ehlers' skill set; signing him would allow Mathew Barzal to move back to center. — Arthur Staple

## New York Rangers

### Pius Suter

Suter might be too expensive for the Rangers because of their cap situation, but New York has created a bit of flexibility after the Chris Kreider trade. He's a versatile player who would slot in perfectly at third-line center, allowing the team to keep Mika Zibanejad on the wing. It might not be possible, but he'd be a good fit. — Peter Baugh

## Ottawa Senators

### Nikolaj Ehlers

A speedy winger who can pot 20-25 goals annually. The Sens need speed and goal scoring wherever they can get it. If Ehlers is interested in remaining in Canada and playing on another playoff team, the Sens should go hard after a potential linemate for Tim Stützle and Brady Tkachuk. — Julian McKenzie

## Philadelphia Flyers

### Sam Bennett

If Bennett commands \$10 million a season, as some reports have suggested he might, that will be too much for the Flyers at this stage of their building process. But they want to start pivoting on the rebuild and winning games next season, and that's only going to happen if they find another reliable center who can play in the top six. Bennett would boost the Flyers' biggest position of need. — Kevin Kurz

## Pittsburgh Penguins

### Vladislav Gavrikov

Gavrikov, a steady and dependable player, would help and fit well on the left side of the Penguins' blue line. Plus, he's only 29. — Josh Yohe

## San Jose Sharks

### Aaron Ekblad

Ehlers would further jazz up their forward mix with a consistent, speedy and skilled scorer who doesn't cost a Marner level of money. But Ehlers might block one of San Jose's power forward prospects, and Ekblad would be a serious upgrade for a woeful defense. Sam Dickinson is coming, but they need a high-quality right shot on the blue line, and Ekblad would instantly fit into their top pairing. — Eric Stephens

## Seattle Kraken

### Nikolaj Ehlers

Whether it's Marner or Ehlers, the Kraken have to find a way to get to the front of the line and pitch one of the top offensive wingers on July 1 in unrestricted free agency. A potentially elite, dynamic offensive player who can help this team create some timely goals is the ball game for Seattle this summer. — Thomas Drance

## St. Louis Blues

### Mikael Granlund

There are higher-profile free agents, such as Marner or Bennett, who would certainly help the Blues. But if the club could just secure itself a reliable veteran center such as Granlund, it would serve the Blues well because they'd be much deeper up the middle. At 33, he could help hold the fort down until Dalibor Dvorsky is ready, too. — Jeremy Rutherford

## Tampa Bay Lightning

### Dante Fabbro

The Lightning need help on defense, so management should be looking for low-key adds such as Fabbro. The righty could slot alongside Victor Hedman on the top pair (which would allow J.J. Moser to shift back to his natural side on the third), or he could be a stabilizing force on the third pair. At 26 years old, he's in the right age range for Tampa Bay, and he won't break the bank this summer. — Shayna Goldman

## Toronto Maple Leafs

### Patrick Kane

Kane could slip into Marner's long-time spot on the Leafs' top line and give Auston Matthews a fresh look. He isn't the superstar of his Chicago years, but still kicked in 59 points in 72 games for Detroit at age 36 last year. Kane would bring some swagger and a short-term fix for the Leafs' top six in the wake of Marner's likely departure. — Jonas Siegel

## Utah Mammoth

### Mitch Marner

The Mammoth have seven NHL defensemen and both goalies signed for next season. With \$20 million in cap space, the priority is be up front, and Marner makes a ton of sense to help supercharge what was a below-average offense and give Clayton Keller more help. Getting more star power in a new market couldn't hurt, either. — James Mirtle

Matt Duchene is a versatile, productive top-of-the-lineup player with speed to burn and the ability to contribute at center or on the wing. (Sam Hodde / Getty Images)

## Vancouver Canucks

### Matt Duchene

The Canucks can't let perfect become the enemy of good this offseason. Though he's 34 and struggled in the Western Conference final at five-on-five, Duchene remains a versatile, productive top-of-the-lineup player with speed to burn and the ability to contribute at center or on the wing. If he's willing to come north of the 49th parallel, it's hard to come up with a better, realistic fit. — Thomas Drance

## Vegas Golden Knights

### Mitch Marner

Adding another big contract comes with risk, especially with Jack Eichel eligible for an extension on July 1, but Marner and Vegas could be a perfect match. Strong up the middle and on defense, Vegas' biggest need is scoring on the wing. That, combined with this club's history of aggressively pursuing prized players, means it will be surprising if the Golden Knights aren't in the Marner sweepstakes. — Jesse Granger

## Washington Capitals

### Jack Roslovic

Fun as it'd be to wish-cast someone such as Marner or Ehlers to Washington, this is a team without a ton of money to spend (less than \$10 million), and with faith in the top of its lineup and a glaring need at third-line center. Figuring that out should be priority No. 1. Connor McMichael is an internal option, but Roslovic would be a nice bottom-six fallback plan who can also play right wing. — Sean Gentille

Winnipeg Jets

Andrew Mangiapane

Mangiapane is a good buy-low candidate after a 28-point season from Washington's third line — a step back after 40, 43, and 55-point second-line seasons in Calgary. The 29-year-old is still a dogged forechecker, a pain to play against, and the kind of Nino Niederreiter-plus middle-six play driver Winnipeg needs — especially if Ehlers signs elsewhere. — Murat Ates

## The Athletic / Every NHL team's best value contract in 2024-25

By Harman Dayal – June 15, 2025

Every dollar matters in a league with a hard salary cap.

In today's NHL, players aren't just judged on their ability; they're graded on value and efficiency — how large is their impact relative to their contract?

The more players on your team who outperform their contracts, the more high-end contributors you can fit under the cap. If you're paying everybody on your roster market value, chances are you won't have an elite team.

With the offseason looming, let's analyze every NHL team's best value contracts from this past season. This can help us identify where each club garnered excess value and how that equation could change with expiring contracts and higher-cost extensions kicking in. Here's how we'll conduct this exercise.

- We'll be using Dom Luszczyszyn's Net Rating model as an objective measure. Net Rating provides an all-in-one performance metric that weighs factors such as point production, play-driving, defensive impact, penalties drawn, blocked shots, faceoffs, penalty-kill impact and more. That impact is then translated to a market value — what that player's contributions should be worth — and that market value is compared to their actual cap hit.
- The model overrates the market value of some depth defensemen who drive strong numbers in sheltered roles. In these situations where I felt there was an obvious, egregious flaw in the model's results for the "best" value contract this season, I called an audible and picked another player.
- Players who changed teams midseason will not be included.
- Only skaters with more than 40 games played will be analyzed; no goalies.
- Player bonuses will not be factored in.
- This is only analyzing the regular season, not playoff performances.

Without further ado, let's dive in.

### Anaheim Ducks

#### Best contract in 2024-25: Jackson LaCombe

Jackson LaCombe is a budding star defenseman. The 24-year-old elite-skating defender was by far the Ducks' best blueliner this season, scoring 14 goals and 43 points (despite the Ducks' awful power play), driving star-like numbers on zone exits and zone entries and finishing with a positive five-on-five goal differential despite playing top-pair minutes on a struggling team. He's entering the final season of a two-year bridge deal he signed last year at a steal of a \$925,000 cap hit.

Frank Vatrano cooled off from the shocking 37-goal breakout he had in 2023-24, but he still delivered 21 goals and 45 points this season. It's the third consecutive season he's hit at least 20 goals, which is nice value for under \$4 million.

### Boston Bruins

#### Best contract in 2024-25: Morgan Geekie

Playing first-line wing opposite David Pastrnak, Morgan Geekie exploded with 33 goals and 57 points for just \$2 million. These weren't just empty-calorie goals and points, either; the Bruins controlled nearly 55

percent of scoring chances and had a plus-22 goal differential with Geekie and Pastrnak on the ice together at five-on-five. Those are impressive numbers considering how poorly Boston performed this season.

Geekie unquestionably benefitted from riding shotgun with Pastrnak, but this wasn't a one-sided relationship. Pastrnak controlled less than 48 percent of scoring chances and carried a minus-five goal differential during the 450 five-on-five minutes he played this season away from Geekie.

Speaking of Pastrnak, he probably didn't get enough recognition for scoring 106 points on such an offensively starved team. It marked his third consecutive 100-point campaign, with his \$11.25 million AAV, especially given the salary cap's spike, looking increasingly favorable relative to his superstar production.

#### Buffalo Sabres

Best contract in 2024-25: Ryan McLeod

The Sabres' three best bang-for-buck contributors are all looking for a big payday.

Ryan McLeod, acquired from Edmonton to center the third line in exchange for Matt Savoie, broke out with 20 goals and 53 points on top of his usually reliable defensive play. He should be able to at least double the cap hit on his next contract this summer as an RFA.

Alex Tuch scored 36 goals for just a \$4.75 million cap hit. He has one year left on his deal, but will be eligible to sign a new extension on July 1.

Bowen Byram is a gifted skater and puck mover, although his two-way numbers only looked strong when he played with Rasmus Dahlin. Byram provided substantial value for his modest \$3.85 million AAV, but the Sabres should probably avoid handing him a big-ticket contract, considering the \$19.35 million they already have committed to Dahlin and Owen Power on the left side of their blue line.

Tage Thompson and Dahlin are at least cost-controlled long term — they'll continue to provide surplus value for years to come.

#### Calgary Flames

Best contract in 2024-25: MacKenzie Weegar

If goalies were included in this analysis, Dustin Wolf's contract would have easily stood out as one of the best deals in the entire NHL. Wolf was arguably the Flames' MVP and one of the top 10 starting goaltenders in the league this year, all while making just \$850,000 on a two-year bridge deal he signed last summer.

MacKenzie Weegar was the best bang-for-buck performer among Calgary's non-ELC skaters. He performed like a bona fide No. 1 defenseman despite earning only \$6.25 million, scoring 47 points (16th best among all defensemen) and delivering stellar defensive results. Calgary controlled nearly 55 percent of shot attempts and outscored opponents by 17 goals during Weegar's five-on-five shifts.

Kevin Bahl emerged as a solid top-four defensive defenseman at just a \$1.05 million AAV.

#### Carolina Hurricanes

Best contract in 2024-25: Shayne Gostisbehere

Shayne Gostisbehere quarterbacked the Hurricanes' top power-play unit and scored the 15th-most points-per-game of all NHL defensemen. Combine that with how decisively he won his even-strength matchups further down the lineup, and you get substantial value for just a \$3.2 million AAV.

Seth Jarvis was the Hurricanes' best forward this season. He scored at a 36-goal pace and drove elite two-way results at a sub-\$7.5 million cap hit.

Eric Robinson chipped in with 14 goals and 32 points at under \$1 million.

Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook were dynamite as always on the Hurricanes' suffocating third line at modest prices each.

It speaks volumes about the number of surplus-value contracts the Hurricanes have that Jaccob Slavin, arguably the best shutdown defenseman in the NHL, didn't crack the top five despite owning an ultra-team-friendly \$6.39 million AAV.

#### Chicago Blackhawks

Best contract in 2024-25: Ryan Donato

Ryan Donato was the only Blackhawk not on an ELC who significantly outperformed his contract. Donato erupted for a team-high 31 goals at a steal of a \$2 million rate. His 23 five-on-five goals were tied for the 12th most in the NHL this season with Leon Draisaitl, Brandon Hagel, Jason Robertson and Rickard Rakell.

#### Colorado Avalanche

Best contract in 2024-25: Cale Makar

Cale Makar scored a career-high 30 goals and 92 points en route to winning his second Norris Trophy. He played at the level of a \$14.8 million defenseman, according to Dom's Net Rating model, which is a far cry from his actual \$9 million cap hit.

Artturi Lehkonen is an excellent complementary top-six winger, contributing 27 goals in just 69 games on top of stellar defensive results.

Logan O'Connor had a down year offensively, but his speed play-driving, elite defensive impact and disruptive penalty killing are worth a lot more than the \$1.05 million cap hit he carried in 2024-25.

Joel Kiviranta (16 goals at league minimum) and Parker Kelly were effective depth forwards at dirt-cheap prices.

Jonathan Drouin (37 points in 43 games at \$2.5 million) would have made this list, too, if not for his lack of games played this season.

#### Columbus Blue Jackets

Best contract in 2024-25: Kirill Marchenko

The Blue Jackets are in an enviable position, as their top four bang-for-buck players all have multiple years remaining on their current contracts.

Kirill Marchenko and Sean Monahan were one of the most lethal first-line duos in the NHL. Marchenko scored 74 points at under \$4 million, Monahan eclipsed the point-per-game mark for just \$5.5 million, and the Blue Jackets controlled a dominant 57 percent of expected goals and a whopping plus-26 goal differential during their five-on-five minutes together.

Kent Johnson broke out with 24 goals and 57 points in 68 games — he has two years remaining at \$1.8 million annually.

Zach Werenski's \$9.58 million cap hit seemed hefty when he first signed his deal in 2021, but he's outperformed it by playing at a near-Hart Trophy level, scoring 23 goals and 82 points from the blue line.



## Dallas Stars

### Best contract in 2024-25: Thomas Harley

The Stars had an embarrassment of riches in terms of bargain contracts this season. This top five doesn't even include Wyatt Johnston's ELC, Jake Oettinger's \$4 million cap hit this season, or Mikko Rantanen.

Thomas Harley is a burgeoning star. The 23-year-old scored 16 goals and 50 points, while also driving play like a bona fide No. 1 defenseman, especially when Miro Heiskanen was injured.

Matt Duchene led the Stars with 82 points at a bargain \$3 million AAV. Jason Robertson scored 35 goals and 80 points for under \$8 million.

Esa Lindell is one of the best shutdown defensemen in the NHL and enjoyed a standout year for just a \$5.8 million AAV.

Evgenii Dadonov scored 20 goals and 40 points at a cheap \$2.25 million cap hit.

Unfortunately, the bill is coming due for the Stars. Johnston, Oettinger and Rantanen all have massive extensions kicking in next season. Duchene is a pending free agent. Harley and Robertson will need significant raises next summer, too.

## Detroit Red Wings

### Best contract in 2024-25: Patrick Kane

The lack of bargain contracts on this list is an indictment of the Red Wings' pro scouting.

Patrick Kane's 59 points in 72 games for \$4 million was solid value, and Lucas Raymond led the team with 80 points at an \$8.075 million cap hit that will only look better each year. However, the only major surplus value contributors beyond that were Simon Edvinsson and Marco Kasper on their ELCs.

Detroit has assembled some promising young players, but it needs a better return on investment from its veterans to return to the playoffs.

## Edmonton Oilers

### Best contract in 2024-25: Leon Draisaitl

Leon Draisaitl scored 52 goals and 106 points in just 71 games this season. Most impressively, he did all of that and drove elite two-way results despite being saddled with average wingers for large chunks of the year (Vasily Podkolzin was his most common linemate during the regular season). Draisaitl was named a Hart Trophy finalist during the final year of an \$8.5 million AAV contract he originally signed in 2017.

Evan Bouchard has excelled as the Oilers' No. 1 defenseman at a sub-\$4 million cap hit. He's in line for a massive raise this summer. His partner, Mattias Ekholm, is a terrific defensive presence at a reasonable \$6 million AAV.

Zach Hyman had a down year relative to his extraordinarily high standards, but with 27 goals and strong two-way results, he still delivered plenty of surplus value on his \$5.5 million cap hit.

Connor Brown has been a bottom-six sparkplug with his speed, tenacity, defensive play and secondary scoring for just \$1 million.

Corey Perry also deserves a shout-out for scoring 10 goals through 21 playoff games at a dirt-cheap \$1.15 million rate.

## Florida Panthers

#### Best contract in 2024-25: Sam Reinhart

If this exercise included the playoffs, Sam Bennett would be the slam-dunk answer as the Panthers' best contract this season. Bennett had a productive 25-goal regular season, but like years past, he's evolved into a completely different beast in the playoffs. He's arguably been Florida's best player in this Stanley Cup Final run, scoring 15 goals through 22 games, on top of his usual gamesmanship and physical antics.

But if we strictly focus on the regular season, Sam Reinhart gets the nod. Nate Schmidt's surplus value is technically higher than Reinhart's — and there's no denying the former has been an excellent third-pair contributor since January onward — but Schmidt is an example of the model overrating a depth player on an elite team. Reinhart scored 39 goals and 81 points, and finished second in Selke Trophy voting, for just a hair over \$8.6 million.

What makes the Panthers special is that they seem to get an extra million dollars or two worth of performance from nearly every player on their roster. That includes the back end, where Niko Mikkola, Gustav Forsling, Schmidt and Dmitry Kulikov have been bargains, and it also includes forwards who didn't even crack this top-five list, such as Matthew Tkachuk, Aleksander Barkov and Anton Lundell.

#### Los Angeles Kings

##### Best contract in 2024-25: Warren Foegele

Jordan Spence is a very talented, effective third-pair defenseman, but his Net Rating is slightly inflated by playing sheltered minutes on a strong team.

Warren Foegele was a home-run signing for the Kings. He scored 22 five-on-five goals this season, which led the Kings and ranked top 20 among all NHL players. Foegele didn't produce impressively at even strength; he was a play-driving machine — the Kings controlled over 56 percent of shots and nearly 70 percent of goals during his five-on-five shifts.

Adrian Kempe is the Kings' best player. The speedy Swedish sniper scored 35 goals and a team-high 73 points on a steal of a \$5.5 million cap hit.

On defense, Vladislav Gavrikov was the Kings' best defenseman this season. He was a shutdown force, eating huge minutes and difficult matchups, especially when Drew Doughty was out in the first half of the season. Mikey Anderson performed well relative to his \$4.1 million cap hit, too, but he spent a lot of time playing with Gavrikov, and I'd argue the latter was the main driver of that pairing's success.

#### Minnesota Wild

##### Best contract in 2024-25: Kirill Kaprizov

It's a shame injuries cost Kirill Kaprizov half the season because his 50-goal, 112-point pace would have made him a Hart Trophy candidate. He performed at the level of a \$14.9 million player this year, according to Dom's model, but is paid only \$9 million.

Joel Eriksson Ek is a perennially undervalued player. He is an elite shutdown center who can also contribute 25-30 goals offensively for a tidy \$5.25 million AAV. He, too, missed significant time with injury.

Mats Zuccarello is still producing at a bona fide top-six level (54 points in 69 games) at 37, making just a hair over \$4.1 million.

Matt Boldy is a blossoming star who drives play and scores at a near point-per-game level. His \$7 million AAV is going to look like a steal with each year the cap rises.

Declan Chisholm is a serviceable depth defenseman, but the model overrates his contributions in sheltered usage.

#### Montreal Canadiens

Best contract in 2024-25: Nick Suzuki

It's understandable why the Canadiens didn't have many bargain contracts on this list.

Montreal had some of the most ELC help in the NHL thanks to Lane Hutson's Calder Trophy season and Kaiden Guhle's reliable top-four play, not to mention Emil Heineman and Jayden Struble chipping in as quality depth pieces on their first contracts. This exercise doesn't include goaltenders either, otherwise Sam Montembeault (\$3.15 million cap hit) would have been on this list as significantly outperforming his contract.

The last management regime also handed out bloated, inefficient contracts to several veterans such as Josh Anderson, Brendan Gallagher and Christian Dvorak.

Among non-ELC players, Nick Suzuki and Jake Evans' contracts stood out. Suzuki scored a career-high 89 points — he's officially arrived as premier No. 1 center and is locked up long-term under \$8 million annually. Evans thrived as a speedy middle-six center with high-end defensive acumen while also scoring 36 points at a team-friendly \$1.7 million AAV.

#### Nashville Predators

Best contract in 2024-25: Ryan O'Reilly

The Predators had a nightmare season, finishing 30th in the NHL standings, with several big-name players failing to live up to their contracts. Ryan O'Reilly was the lone bright spot, scoring 53 points and posting above-average defensive numbers on a modest \$4.5 million cap hit.

#### New Jersey Devils

Best contract in 2024-25: Johnathan Kovacevic

How many non-ELC defensemen are there in the NHL who can successfully handle top-four minutes on a playoff team for under \$1 million? Johnathan Kovacevic unquestionably struggled down the stretch when his usual partner, Jonas Siegenthaler, got hurt, but he provided top-four value for most of the season at a \$766,667 cap hit that was literally below the 2024-25 league minimum price. Kovacevic averaged nearly 20 minutes per game on the right side, with the Devils generating more shots, scoring chances and goals than they gave up during his five-on-five shifts.

The Devils' top-two center punch of Jack Hughes and Nico Hischier is excellent value, too. Hughes was on pace for 92 points before he got hurt, while Hischier scored 35 goals and drove stout defensive results at a tidy \$7.25 million cap hit.

Siegenthaler enjoyed a crucial bounce-back season. He played excellent, reliable defensive hockey in tough minutes.

Stefan Noesen was an effective net-front scorer, especially on the power play, scoring 22 goals at a bargain \$2.75 million AAV.

#### New York Islanders

Best contract in 2024-25: Simon Holmstrom

The Islanders had a trio of younger players who significantly outperformed their contracts, although all of them need new extensions this summer.

Simon Holmstrom signed a one-year, \$850,000 prove-it deal last summer. He developed into a solid second-line winger this season, scoring 20 goals and 45 points while also providing reliable defense and penalty killing.

Noah Dobson had a down year relative to 2023-24 when he played like a star No. 1 defenseman. Dobson's offense slipped to 39 points in 71 games, and his defensive play was shakier than his sterling numbers would indicate. With that said, he still provided surplus value as an effective top-pair contributor for only a \$4 million cap hit.

Alexander Romanov has become a rock-solid top-four presence for the Islanders. He can defend, hit and move the puck effectively.

#### New York Rangers

Best contract in 2024-25: Adam Fox

Nearly everything went wrong for the Rangers this season. Outside of Will Cuylle's ELC production, New York didn't have a single player who truly outperformed his contract by a significant margin.

Yes, Adam Fox was again by far the team's best defenseman, but he wasn't quite as elite this season as his analytics would suggest. He lived up to his \$9.5 million cap hit, but you'd have to squint and stretch to say he provided a ton of value beyond that.

Alexis Lafrenière outproduced the \$2.325 million AAV from his last bridge deal, but it's hard to celebrate that when his production fell by 11 goals this year. He needs to score a lot more than 17 goals and 45 points to live up to his \$7.45 million AAV extension, which kicks in next season.

#### Ottawa Senators

Best contract in 2024-25: Adam Gaudette

Adam Gaudette found success after being reunited with Travis Green, his first NHL head coach. He scored 19 goals at the league minimum of \$775,000, all while averaging fourth-line minutes. Gaudette was streaky during the regular season, but he stepped up in the playoffs with three points in six games.

Shane Pinto scored 21 goals in 70 games and was an above-average two-way driver at center for just a \$3.75 million AAV

Drake Batherson had a disappointing playoff, but he was second on the team with 68 points in the regular season despite making under \$5 million.

Artem Zub is an excellent shutdown defenseman and would be worth considerably more than his \$4.6 million cap hit if he could just stay healthy

#### Philadelphia Flyers

Best contract in 2024-25: Cam York

Cam York isn't a flashy player or a prolific point producer, but he defends well, moves the puck effectively and handles challenging top-four matchups relatively well. He accomplished all of that while in the final year of a bridge deal that paid him just \$1.6 million.

Bobby Brink broke out with 41 points in 79 games this season. Thirty-five of those points were at five-on-five, which ranked third-best among Flyers players behind only Travis Konecny and Matvei Michkov. The diminutive 23-year-old winger is a solid middle-six talent and has one year left at a bargain \$1.5 million AAV.

Nick Seeler is underrated outside of Philly. The hard-nosed veteran defender is a heart-and-soul player who drives quality defensive results and consistently wins his even-strength minutes.

Noah Cates isn't a flashy player, but he's a stout defensive matchup center who also contributed 16 goals and 37 points.

#### Pittsburgh Penguins

Best contract in 2024-25: Rickard Rakell

It's incredible how quickly the perception of a player's contract can flip. Last summer, Rakell's \$5 million cap hit seemed a bit steep after a down year, during which he slumped to just 15 goals and 37 points in 70 games. Now, that same \$5 million AAV looks like a bargain after exploding for 35 goals and 70 points. The dilemma now is whether they should sell high on Rakell this offseason, considering his shooting percentage was well above his career norms and could regress next season.

Sidney Crosby, at 37, remarkably finished 10th in league scoring with 91 points.

Pittsburgh will face a similar dilemma with Bryan Rust as they do with Rakell. Rust, 33, scored a career-high 31 goals and 65 points in 71 games. He has no trade protection as of July 1 — would the Penguins consider shipping him for a lucrative haul?

Matt Grzelcyk was closer to fair value than significantly outperforming his contract. He hit 40 points and was terrific on the power play, but his even-strength performance, especially defensively, was shaky.

#### San Jose Sharks

Best contract in 2024-25: N/A

Jake Walman (excellent top-pairing results for just \$3.4 million AAV), Mikael Granlund (45 points in 52 games for San Jose at \$5 million) and Fabian Zetterlund (17 goals in 64 games at \$1.45 million) provided excellent bang for the buck, but they were each sold for strong returns at the deadline, so they didn't qualify for this list.

Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund and Will Smith were key drivers for the Sharks' top six on their ELCs.

#### Seattle Kraken

Best contract in 2024-25: Jared McCann

The Kraken aren't receiving many efficient contributions from their non-ELC players. Jared McCann is the clear exception, as he led Seattle with 61 points despite only having the ninth-highest AAV on the team.

Kaapo Kakko was also a slick midseason acquisition — he found chemistry with Matty Beniers and scored 30 points in 49 games while on a \$2.4 million cap hit.

#### St. Louis Blues

Best contract in 2024-25: Dylan Holloway

Dylan Holloway wasn't just the top contract on the Blues; he was one of the best bang-for-buck performers in the entire NHL. He took off in late November with Jim Montgomery's arrival, scoring 22 goals and 55 points in his last 55 games. He was a terrific play driver due to his pace, energy, forechecking and improved playmaking as well. Holloway is a growing star with another year left at a steal of a \$2.29 million cap hit.

Philip Broberg, acquired from Edmonton in a corresponding offer sheet, enjoyed a massive breakout season, too. He was a two-way, top-four beast, with the Blues controlling 52 percent of expected goals and outscoring teams by 20 goals during his five-on-five shifts.

Robert Thomas is one of the most underrated first-line centers in the NHL, locked up for another six years at a \$8.125 million cap hit that is aging beautifully. Thomas ranked third among all players with 45 points in his final 30 games.

Colton Parayko is an elite shutdown defenseman but also had an offensive renaissance this season, scoring 16 goals and 36 points in 64 games. Cam Fowler, his partner after a midseason trade, was terrific value for his \$4 million AAV, too.

#### Tampa Bay Lightning

Best contract in 2024-25: Brandon Hagel

Everybody knows Brandon Hagel is a high-end player, but I don't think enough people are recognizing the superstar level that he played at this season.

Hagel was tied for 11th in NHL scoring with 90 points and played Selke-caliber defense on top of that. In a tough matchups role, Hagel drove a dominant 57 percent of scoring chances and a plus-22 goal differential at five-on-five. He was also one of the best penalty killers in the league. He accomplished all of that while making only \$6.5 million against the cap. His center, Anthony Cirelli, found a new offensive gear this season, too, scoring 27 goals and 59 points.

Nikita Kucherov and Victor Hedman are still bona fide stars at team-friendly rates.

#### Toronto Maple Leafs

Best contract in 2024-25: Jake McCabe

Jake McCabe and Chris Tanev were lights out together as the Leafs' de facto top pair. They absorbed very difficult matchups against top lines and tons of defensive zone starts, but still decisively won their minutes. The Leafs generated more scoring chances than they surrendered and outscored opponents by 12 goals during the McCabe/Tanev pair's five-on-five shifts, thanks to an incredible 1.83 goals-against-per-60 rate.

Both defensemen were excellent value for their contracts, but McCabe's tiny \$2 million cap hit (which was reduced because the Blackhawks retained half of his cap hit when traded) netted a bit more surplus value.

Bobby McMann's 20 goals were a nice bonus for the Leafs at \$1.35 million, although his scoring completely dried up in the playoffs. Pontus Holmberg and Steven Lorentz were useful, defensively oriented depth contributors at dirt-cheap prices.

#### Utah Mammoth

Best contract in 2024-25: Michael Kesselring

Utah's right-side defense was hammered in the first half by injuries to Sean Durzi and John Marino. That forced sophomore defenseman Michael Kesselring into an elevated top-four role. Kesselring excelled, with the Mammoth controlling 54 percent of scoring chances and 56 percent of goals during his five-on-five shifts this season. He struggled at times in the second half defensively, but he displayed clear top-four potential for most of the year, which is highly valuable at a \$1.4 million cap hit.

Barrett Hayton scored a career-high 20 goals and 46 points, in addition to boasting very good defensive metrics, at a bargain \$2.65 million AAV.

Clayton Keller exploded for 90 points but isn't paid like a bona fide superstar.

#### Vancouver Canucks

Best contract in 2024-25: Quinn Hughes

Quinn Hughes was a one-man show, carrying a weak supporting cast all season. Hughes led the Canucks in scoring by a whopping 26 points as a defenseman, despite missing 14 games because of injuries. Hughes is a bona fide superstar making less than \$8 million against the cap for two more seasons.

Pius Suter scored 25 goals and 46 points as a key middle-six center. He also defended at an above-average level and was a first-unit fixture on Vancouver's elite penalty kill. He provided that all-around value for just a \$1.6 million AAV — he may triple that cap hit in free agency this summer.

Kiefer Sherwood broke out with 19 goals and 40 points. Nearly all of that production was at even strength, with Sherwood leading all Vancouver forwards in five-on-five points. He was also a wrecking ball on the forecheck, breaking the NHL's record for most hits in a single season. He was worth more than double the \$1.5 million cap hit he carried this season.

In the final year of his \$1.1 million contract, Nils Högländer still managed to deliver surplus value despite an up-and-down campaign. Högländer had a nightmare first half but was one of Vancouver's best wingers from January onward, especially from a play-driving perspective.

Tyler Myers has his flaws, but he was mostly solid again in a second-pair role, outperforming the modest \$3 million cap hit he's on

#### Vegas Golden Knights

Best contract in 2024-25: Brayden McNabb

Brayden McNabb was one of the league's best shutdown defensemen in the regular season at only a \$2.85 million cap hit. McNabb impressively suppressed opponents' ability to generate shots and scoring chances despite playing difficult matchup minutes, with the Golden Knights surrendering just 1.79 goals against per 60 during his five-on-five shifts.

Victor Olofsson injected crucial secondary scoring (15 goals in 56 games) at a dirt-cheap \$1.075 million rate.

Shea Theodore is a star — he scored a career-high 57 points in 67 games in the final year of a sweetheart contract that cost \$5.2 million against the cap.

Ivan Barbashev is streaky and didn't produce enough in the playoffs, but he scored a 27-goal, 60-point pace in the regular season. He was a mostly effective top-line winger for Jack Eichel, making a reasonable \$5 million.

Brett Howden broke out with 23 goals for \$1.9 million.

#### Washington Capitals

Best contract in 2024-25: Aliaksei Protas

Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael's breakouts helped revitalize the Capitals' top-six forward group. Protas went from not even cracking 10 goals in 2023-24 to scoring 30 in 76 games this season. He also significantly boosted the Caps' ability to control two-way play. With another four years left at a \$3.375 million cap hit, Protas is on one of the best contracts in the NHL.

McMichael, meanwhile, was a game-breaking offensive driver with his speed and skill. He piled up 26 goals and 57 points despite not even playing on the Caps' top power-play unit, at a steal of a \$2.1 million AAV.

Tom Wilson turned back the clock, scoring 33 goals and 65 points while also driving strong defensive results in a tough matchups role.

Nic Dowd is one of the most underrated bottom-six centers in the NHL. He's elite defensively and on the penalty kill and chipped in with 14 goals.

Jakob Chychrun also narrowly missed the cut for this list. He was a home-run acquisition, scoring 20 goals from the blue line at a bargain \$4.6 million cap hit.

#### Winnipeg Jets

##### Best contract in 2024-25: Dylan Samberg

The Jets had a near-endless supply of surplus value contracts. Dylan Samberg led the way; he broke out as a top-four star on Winnipeg's blue line. He drove elite defensive results, crushed it on the penalty kill and displayed enough puck-moving and secondary offensive skill to profile like a legitimate No. 2 defenseman on a contending team. Samberg accomplished all of that for just \$1.4 million against the cap.

Josh Morrissey finished fourth in Norris Trophy voting. He still has three years left at a bargain \$6.25 million AAV.

Up front, Kyle Connor, Gabriel Vilardi and Nikolaj Ehlers represented a trio of terrific contracts in Winnipeg's top six. Connor, in particular, stood out by scoring 97 points at a hair over \$7.1 million.