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September 13-14, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / For Don Waddell, leading Blue Jackets through Johnny Gaudreau tragedy is an echo of the past

By Pierre LeBrun- September 14, 2024

In the hours after the Columbus Blue Jackets announced that star forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew had been killed, team president and general manager Don Waddell said he received 500 or so text messages.

One hit him even harder than the rest. It was from Graham and LuAnn Snyder.

On Sept. 29, 2003, the Snyders' son, Dan, was critically injured when a car driven by Atlanta Thrashers teammate Dany Heatley was involved in a single-vehicle crash. Snyder died six days later.

More than 20 years later, the family is still in touch with Waddell, who was the Thrashers' GM at the time. The message they sent on Aug. 30, the morning after a car struck and killed the Gaudreau brothers, wished the organization strength and had a simple message to Waddell: that there was no doubt he could lead the organization through this tragedy, just as he did the Thrashers.

"I think it's important in those moments that you feel some support or love from somewhere," Graham Snyder told The Athletic. "Because the emotions are just so high.

"When I woke up and first heard the news and saw the headline and started reading ... it took me about a minute and I said, 'Oh, my God. It's Don again.' I knew he had moved to Columbus.

"I thought, 'Oh jeez, Don, how are you going to get through this?'"

Once again, he must lead a grieving organization through so much pain. And yet also, at a time when hockey does not feel remotely important, he must somehow, someway, try to get it ready to play hockey again, too.

"Nobody wants that job, but he certainly helped us, and the organization did," Graham Snyder said. "I just felt we had to reach out to him. Because who can think about going through that twice in your life?"

The message hit home.

"When Graham and LuAnn reached out to me that Friday, it meant the world to me," Waddell told The Athletic. "Because the family went through it, losing one of their two sons, that's never easy for anybody. How they dealt with it and how we've stayed in touch over the years, it just meant the world to me to hear from them knowing that as parents who went through it, (they) felt we handled it as well as we could of and supported them.

"They're good people."

Graham Snyder has vivid memories of speaking to Thrashers players after his son's death in 2003 and wishing them the strength to carry on.

"I remember going into the Thrashers dressing room in Atlanta, and I don't know, there was some strength that came from somewhere," Snyder said. "Just a calm that came over me and I started talking to the team about what needed to happen and that we were there for them."

As Snyder remembers it, the support from people around the sport was so important.

“One of the things that kind of got us through it, and it’s what is happening right now in Columbus and around the hockey world, people are really, really coming together,” Snyder said. “I think it’s like no other sport. The hockey world is so connected and so tight.

“That’s how they’ll get through it now, with the support from others in the hockey world.”

The Jackets have felt that.

“Yes, 100 percent,” Waddell said. “It’s pretty evident by all the players that came out to the funeral — a lot of players that played with him but also a lot of players that didn’t play with him. This has had an impact not just on the Blue Jackets but the whole National Hockey League. And for that matter, the whole country. I’ve heard from so many people that didn’t know the Gaudreau family but saw all the stories and just wanted to be supportive and ask what they could do to help out. It was touching.”

The idea now is to honor Johnny Gaudreau’s memory by playing for him.

“If it’s anything like it was in Atlanta, the emotions will carry them through for a while,” Snyder said.

Right now, the Jackets are surely still in a fog of pain and shock. But they need to find the strength to move on.

“We’re all devastated for the Gaudreau families,” Waddell said. “You don’t ever think that parents should be burying their kids. There isn’t a moment that goes by that you’re not thinking about the families.

“From a team standpoint, we know it’s going to be hard. But we also listened to (Johnny’s wife) Meredith when she talked at the church. She knows that Johnny wants the best for us. I know guys have talked about it, that he would want us to go out and do what we’re capable of doing and try to win as many hockey games as we can.”

Getting the players as much help as they need is paramount.

“Everybody grieves and mourns differently,” Waddell said. “You don’t expect that people can get through this by themselves. The union (NHLPA) has been great. They’ve offered up multiple grief counselors.”

Waddell added that starting this week through Ohio Health, the Jackets also have people on-site who can speak with players.

It will be a difficult process in the days ahead.

“We have to try and figure out how to get through the healing process and continue to move forward,” Waddell said.

And as Waddell noted, the Blue Jackets just three years ago lost young goalie Matiss Kivlenieks to a tragic death as well, an event that still scars many in the organization.

It’s no easy path here. But just the hope that somehow everyone will find the strength.

“This was a senseless and cruel way for people to lose their life,” Waddell said.

It is a tragedy that will forever be with so many affected. But somehow, through that, the Jackets will honor the spirit of a player beloved by teammates. And within that, they will want to continue to help a grieving Gaudreau family in any way possible.

The Snyders felt that from the Thrashers 21 years ago.

“They were so much behind us and supportive,” Snyder said. “It was truly amazing and truly touching.”

[Bluejackets.com / Blue Jackets fall to Sabres at Prospects Challenge](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 14, 2024

The Blue Jackets played their first game as a squad during the 2024-25 season Friday night in Buffalo, as their youngsters dropped a 3-1 decision to the Sabres to kick off the Prospects Challenge.

Game in a Paragraph

Columbus was outshot 41-21 and never had the lead, but they did have their moments. The Blue Jackets had some excellent looks in transition, but Sabres goalie Scott Retzlaff made the stops he needed to preserve the win. Buffalo 2022 first-round pick Jiri Kulich had the opening and closing goals for the Sabres while Gavin Brindley scored for Columbus, which gave up a single goal in each period.

CBJ Standouts

- Nolan Lalonde had a standout performance in net, as the undrafted free agent signee stopped 38 of 41 shots against.
- Brindley's tally got the Jackets on the board for the night, while he was assisted by Luca Del Bel Belluz.

How It Happened

The Blue Jackets chased the play throughout the first period and found themselves down 1-0 – and outshot 16-4 – through the frame. Buffalo scored the opener at 10:44 as Vsevolod Komarov's shot from the right point was blocked in front, but Kulich gathered the puck and quickly fired past Lalonde. The Jackets' best chances included a breakaway shot by Brindley that hit the post and Tyler Peddle's between-the-legs attempt stopped by Retzlaff late in the frame.

In the second, Columbus got on the board with its first goal of the tournament just 3:41 into the frame with the teams skating 4-on-4. Brindley and Del Bel Belluz did good work to create a chance, and Brindley was able to take the ricochet of Nolan Collins' shot off the glass and quickly tuck it past Retzlaff. Buffalo countered to take a 2-1 lead just 1:42 later, though, as Olivier Nadeau backhanded a rebound past Lalonde on the power play. Sam Alfano and Luca Pinelli had good chances later in the frame to tie for the CBJ, but Retzlaff closed the door each time.

Buffalo put the nail in the coffin early in the third, as Kulich got his second of the night 2:30 into the frame to make it 3-1. It was a fantastic individual effort, as he took the puck at the blue line, got around a Blue Jackets defender and made a nice move to beat Lalonde on the forehand. CBJ forward Pano Fimis had a breakaway shortly thereafter that Retzlaff stopped, and Buffalo was able to bring the win home from there.

Notable

The Sabres were up 35-13 in shots on goal through two periods before the Blue Jackets had an 8-6 edge in the third. ... Buffalo scored on 1 of 4 power plays, while Columbus was 0-1. ... Free agent invites Nick DeAngelis and Mael Lavigne dropped the gloves in separate tilts in the third period. ...

Roster Report

With a quick matchup against Boston on deck for tomorrow afternoon, the Blue Jackets scratched forward James Malatesta and defenseman Denton Mateychuk.

Up Next

The Blue Jackets are right back on the ice Saturday afternoon at 3:30 p.m. to take on the Bruins in game two of three at the event.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets & their fans faced with daunting task of moving on

By Mark Scheig- September 14, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets and their fans knew that this time would eventually come. As hard as it's going to be, they all face the daunting task of moving on from the tragic passing of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

That process gets even more accelerated on Friday night when the Blue Jackets open play in the Buffalo Prospect's Tournament. In what will be their first game action of the new season, the team will have to find a way to overcome the challenge of emotions.

A popular question that's been raised in recent days is just how will the team and the fans move on? For the players, the season isn't going to stop. Training camp opens next Wednesday with medicals and fitness testing. Then less than a week later, they're on the ice for Preseason Game 1. Will they somehow be able to focus on the game?

For the fans, the normal level of excitement that comes with any new hockey season just isn't there for some. There will be a big, gaping hole knowing that number 13 won't be there.

Both the Blue Jackets and their fans are hurting in unimaginable ways as game action resumes. There are still many unanswered questions in regards to the business side of things. The team is expected to address those questions in the near future, perhaps as soon as Media Day which is on Wednesday.

A key question we will try to answer is what can the Blue Jackets and their fans do to help each other through this difficult time? One way to do that is through the power of togetherness.

Togetherness

Those that follow the Blue Jackets know how much this fanbase has been through. Whether it's been enduring many dark seasons or trying to find their way through tragedy, Blue Jackets fan knows what those emotions are like.

The fans have been able to overcome so much since the Blue Jackets have been in existence. The way they've done that is by their constant, overwhelming support of the team no matter what's going on. They have the team's back. They stand with them. They are together mourning with them over their massive loss of Johnny Gaudreau.

The key word here is together. Images of the vigil show just how together this fanbase stands with their team. The power of togetherness cannot be understated in a situation like this when there really isn't a playbook on how to handle these kind of things.

Along with togetherness comes unity. The Blue Jackets and their fans stand united together. It's that togetherness that's going to help each side start the painful process of moving on.

Imagine what the Blue Jackets' home opener could look like. The Stanley Cup Champion Florida Panthers will be in town. Nationwide Arena is expected to be a sellout especially given it would mark the first regular-season game since the tragedy. It's at a time like this that the players will need the fans in a big way.

Having over 18,000 screaming fans cheer the Blue Jackets on during introductions will prove to be a powerful moment of togetherness. At least for a little bit, there will be a feeling of normalcy in an

otherwise extremely unnormal circumstance. That extra boost will be the very thing to help the players to a certain degree.

For the fans, having hockey back will at least start the process of trying to heal from another painful memory. The team and their fans need each other more than ever now. By standing together in solidarity, they will help each other overcome the overwhelming challenge this situation presents.

Healing Won't Be Overnight

As the new season starts to ramp up for the Blue Jackets, just remember that everyone processes these kinds of things differently and at different speeds. While some may be ready for puck drop now, others are still hurting deeply. That pain could last for many years in some cases.

By standing together, the team and their fans know they will not be alone when facing this challenge. In talking with several fans over the course of the last couple of weeks, the word family kept coming up. In that sense, Blue Jackets' fans are family. They will be there for each other when called upon.

This process is going to take time to work itself out. The one thing you will be able to count on is the Blue Jackets and their fans will stand together throughout. It will make this extremely hard journey at least a little more manageable.

1st Ohio Battery / Denton Mateychuk eyes big prospect tournament, larger things on horizon

By Will Chase- September 14, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets will participate in their first-ever Prospects Challenge in Buffalo this week.

The dates for the tournament are set for Friday, Sept. 13-16.

In previous years, Blue Jackets prospects made 21 appearances in the Traverse City, Michigan event, winning the Matthew Wuest Memorial Cup on five occasions as tournament champions in 2005, 2006, 2014, 2015, and 2018.

Among those prospects looking to make their mark is 2022 draftee Denton Mateychuk, who was selected with the 12th overall pick.

Upon being drafted, the 20-year-old from Winnipeg has played for the WHL's Moose Jaw Warriors, whom he captained each of the last two years. Mateychuk scored 65 points (eight goals, 57 assists) in 63 games in 2022-23, and 75 points (17 goals, 58 assists) in 52 games in 2023-24.

In the playoffs last year for Moose Jaw, he scored 30 points (11 goals, 19 assists) in 20 games, leading in assists, and was second in points on his way to being named 2024 WHL Playoffs MVP.

Mateychuk debuted for the Cleveland Monsters in the playoffs last season, scoring three assists in four games. He also appeared in his first World Juniors, where he notched four assists in five games for Team Canada.

In last year's prospects tournament in Traverse City, Mateychuk had seven assists as the Blue Jackets finished in a three-way tie for first with the Dallas Stars and Toronto Maple Leafs (2-1), but Columbus had the goal differential at plus-4.

As Mateychuk eyes a spot on the Blue Jackets blue line this season, he'll look to join regular defensemen Zach Werenski, Damon Severson, Ivan Provorov, Erik Gudbranson, Jordan Harris, and Jack Johnson. Gone are Adam Boqvist and Jake Bean.

Jake Christiansen spent most of last season in Cleveland but has 44 career NHL games to his credit. David Jiricek was drafted just ahead of Mateychuk in the same 2022 draft and debuted two seasons ago, playing in 43 games last year and scoring 10 points (one goal, nine assists).

This will be a fun weekend to see how Mateychuk and the rest of the prospects play with the games starting for real in a month.

The Athletic / NHL monitoring teams' income-tax advantages, but 'there are no easy fixes'

By Michael Russo- September 13, 2024

LAS VEGAS — Four of the past five Stanley Cup championship teams have come from states that don't collect state income taxes — and seven of the past 10 finalists.

Those runs, by the Florida Panthers, Tampa Bay Lightning, Vegas Golden Knights and Dallas Stars, have understandably sparked a debate over whether the teams involved have an unfair advantage in signing players at below-market rates.

In many cases, players signing in those states — Florida, Tennessee, Texas, Nevada and Washington are among the states that deduct no further income tax than the federal taxes — would lose millions of dollars over the lives of their contracts if they played north of the border or in high-income-tax states such as California, New York, New Jersey and Minnesota.

The NHL is keeping an eye on the situation.

In a recent poll of fans by The Athletic, 84.6 percent of 14,066 respondents felt that teams in no-state-income-tax states have an advantage. Of that, 42.8 percent feel changes need to be made to even the playing field, 41.5 percent feel it's not a significant enough advantage to warrant complex changes and 14.7 percent feel the issue is overblown.

"It's an issue that comes up from time to time in our room at the board level and general managers level," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said last month at the NHL's European player media tour in Prague. "There are no easy fixes. It's not like we can just pick from Column A and fix the problem overnight. Players make decisions on where they want to play for a variety of reasons. Their bottom line is one of them, but the quality of life and the communities they live in is probably more important."

Daly echoed that sentiment Tuesday at the NHL's North American player media tour in Las Vegas. He said while it's too early to determine if this is something that may have to be addressed, he has talked to the NHL Players' Association about the subject and the mutual feeling is that leveling the playing field would be too complicated.

For instance, even if the league systematically adjusted the cap ceiling for teams in no-state-income-tax states, what would happen if a player was traded or sent to the minors? Also, if it was deemed that a player was willing to sign a "hometown discount" contract at lower than what he could have received elsewhere, how problematic would it be to try to determine how much of a discount they took?

The NHLPA, so far, doesn't see this as much of a problem. Executive director Marty Walsh met with the two dozen players who attended the media tour in Prague and explained this would be a complicated issue to fix. Plus, they don't see this being a debate in other leagues.

As Daly said, "This is not new. This has all existed over the course of time."

But some players do see a need for action.

"They have to find a way to tweak it, honestly," Ottawa Senators forward Shane Pinto said Tuesday. "If you look at all these free agents, you don't blame them for going down south. It's just what it is, and it's best for their families and taxes and lifestyle-wise. But I do think they have to find a way, especially for the Canadian teams. They've got to overpay guys to come to Canada every time, and that messes up with the cap. I think they do have to find a way to try to just even it out."

“I know it’s not easy because it’s been like that forever, but I think it’d be nice to have an even playing field.”

To be fair, few were complaining about the lack of state income taxes in Florida when the Tampa Bay Lightning were a doormat in the 1990s. Few brought this up when the Florida Panthers didn’t make the playoffs from 2000 to 2011 and didn’t advance past the first round from 1996 to 2022.

“I think every place certainly has its advantages, whether it’s (lifestyle), and taxes is certainly a part of it,” said Nashville Predators star Filip Forsberg, whose no-state-income-tax team had a banner summer by signing Juuse Saros to an eight-year extension and Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei to contracts totaling more than \$166 million. “At the end of the day, that does play quite a bit of difference on our salary. It’s a fair point. I’m not disagreeing with it.

“It’s above my pay grade whether to decide if it’s right or wrong.”

Defenseman MacKenzie Weegar signed an eight-year, \$50 million contract with the Calgary Flames in 2022. He previously played in Florida, acquired along with Jonathan Huberdeau in the Matthew Tkachuk blockbuster.

Alberta has a relatively low income-tax rate among Canadian provinces. Still, according to the Turbo Tax and Smart Asset websites, Weegar would be making approximately \$950,000 more on his current \$6.25 million a year contract if he were being paid in Florida.

He’s not bothered by that. But he does think it’d be nice if the league and players’ union could find a mechanism to even things out in the next collective bargaining agreement.

“You definitely feel like it might pull some other guys down south to those teams,” Weegar said Wednesday. “So there could be something in the next CBA to work something out. But ultimately, the Tampas, Florida, you look at Nashville, the teams are winning. That’s what really pulls people in. The New Yorks and Calgary, if we start winning, nobody really cares about taxes.

“The contracts are already big enough. You don’t really notice the tax too, too much. You still living pretty comfortably. So I’d say, start winning, you’ll get your guys to come in, and your free agents that want to play there.”

Like Stamkos and Marchessault going from Tampa Bay and Las Vegas, respectively, to Nashville, defenseman Brandon Montour went from no-state-income-tax state to no-state-income-tax state. A day after celebrating winning the Stanley Cup during a parade on A1A in Ft. Lauderdale, Montour signed a seven-year, \$50 million contract with the Seattle Kraken.

He said taxes were not the predominant reason in his decision.

“You can’t say money’s not a factor,” Montour said Wednesday. “But for me, that wasn’t what we were chasing. We had places that were the highest tax that we were considering, as well. I played in California. I played in New York. Obviously, the paychecks look a little nicer when you’re in Florida and Seattle. But it wasn’t a thing that we were focused on.

“It was trying to find something for our lifestyle and our family to set a spot and call home.”

Montour tried to grasp how the league and union could even address the situation.

“What do you do, like take a percentage off the cap?” he said. “Like if Florida signed somebody that was 10 million bucks, they’d take a percentage or 2 percent off the cap or something? I don’t really know what they would possibly be able to do.”

Montour said every player has different reasons to sign in different places, and there are many high-income-tax areas that are appealing. He thinks this is only a debate because these teams are in a cycle of winning.

“There are just too many variables to really control,” Daly said, “including the fact that there are some markets that are very highly desirable for players that have kind of the highest tax rates in the world. Yet there are other opportunities, other things, that make those markets attractive to players.

“So I just think there’s so much that goes into the equation of where a player wants to play, what he’s willing to take to play there. And a lot of that has to do with team chemistry and how teams are constructed and how the player sees himself fitting into the team in terms of their needs. And so to account for all those variables, I think it’ll be a very difficult exercise.

“Having said that, obviously there’s chatter out there, specifically in the Canadian media, that the Canadian franchises are disadvantaged. We take that chatter seriously and we always look for ways to make the system better. I just don’t have any obvious answers to it.”

Daly was asked if he could envision a scenario where teams in Florida, Vegas, Nashville, Dallas or Seattle have a lower cap ceiling than other teams. He said, “I don’t think we could ever have a different cap for different teams, even though we kind of do in some respects with respect to how the CBA works and bonus overages and the like. So I suppose maybe there’s a formula that you could think of that way.

“I have other ideas that I put ahead of that one.”

Asked if he’d share those, Daly laughed: “No.”

“Look, there are some crude ways you can try to make adjustments to account for it,” Daly said. “I don’t think this issue is the level of kind of trying to push something through, particularly without really giving it some advanced, thorough thought and running it through all the potential channels. I think sometimes when you rush to do something based on chatter, you kind of step into a hole sometimes and the unintended consequences kind of bear their heads.

“We’ll continue to monitor it. If we can make it better, we will. I mean, I could get proven wrong on that. If we have the next 10 years similar to the last five, then maybe it’s something that needs to be addressed. But at this stage, on the basis of a couple summers, I’m not really running to get there.”

That’s fine with Radko Gudas.

The Anaheim Ducks defenseman pays 13 percent in state income taxes in California, compared to zero percent when he played with the Panthers. Yet, Gudas said succinctly, “I don’t think the NHL should be stepping into tax problems.”

The Athletic / Draft bust or breakout candidate? 7 NHL players under 23 that need to step up

By Harman Dayal- September 13, 2024

September is the most optimistic time of year for NHL fans.

This is when fan bases will excitedly project how many points their team could get and where they'll finish in the standings. It's also the time to daydream about which promising young player on your team may finally put it together and reach their potential. Which blue-chip young talents are facing that pressure to step up in 2024-25? Today, we'll be focusing on first-round-selected players still under age 23 who need to prove themselves in the NHL this year. The older a player in this bracket is (meaning there's less runway left for development) and the higher their draft day expectations were, the more likely they are to end up on this list.

This is not meant to be a list of "disappointments" — and I wouldn't even go as far as to say that they're facing make-or-break seasons — but there are real expectations that need to be met. Those expectations don't have to mean immediately emerging as a top-six forward or top-four defenseman — it depends on their opportunity and the club's depth chart — but the point is that we need to see NHL progress. These situations are all different and individual — some players have significantly higher ceilings than others on the list or some are two years younger with much more development time left.

Shane Wright, C, Seattle Kraken

Drafted No. 4 in 2022

2023-24 stats (AHL): 59 GP, 22G-25A-47P

Wright's development has drawn more attention and scrutiny than your typical top-five pick. The 20-year-old right-shot center has been under a unique microscope for a few reasons. He was the projected No. 1 pick in 2022 but slipped to No. 4 and he bounced around the NHL, AHL and OHL in his first post-draft season. Last year, he was granted an exemption to bypass the CHL-NHL agreement and play in the AHL.

Juraj Slafkovský, Simon Nemeč and Logan Cooley — the three players drafted ahead of him — all established themselves as impact NHL players last season, so the spotlight will turn to Wright to become a meaningful contributor for the Kraken in 2024-25. All signs point to Wright being ready for that step.

Wright was excellent in the AHL, scoring 22 goals and 47 points in 59 games. It may be tempting for outside fans to believe he's progressed slowly or has fallen behind, but his statistical profile indicates otherwise. I went back and looked at every top-10 pick since 2010 who spent their draft-plus two season in the AHL. The overwhelming majority of players who produced at a similar rate as Wright (0.8 points per game) ended up becoming very good NHLers.

Nine of the 13 players on that list eventually became top-six NHL players. That includes some high-end names such as Filip Forsberg, Nazem Kadri, Sean Couturier and Timo Meier. William Eklund's development — he went from scoring at a near identical AHL rate as Wright in 2022-23 to breaking out with 45 points as a first-year NHLer last season — is the type of progression the Kraken would love to see from Wright this year. He was called up at the end of the season and scored four goals and an assist in five games, so he'll be entering training camp with confidence that he can produce at the big-league level.

Wright probably doesn't have a dynamic enough skill set to become a star, but he's a remarkably well-rounded pivot and still has a definite top-six upside.

Alexander Holtz, RW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 7 in 2020

2023-24 stats (NHL): 82 GP, 16G-12A-28P

The Vegas Golden Knights lost a lot of top-nine wingers this summer. Jonathan Marchessault's departure created the most headlines, but Chandler Stephenson, Michael Amadio and Anthony Mantha moved to new teams and have left behind roster holes as well. Vegas needs younger players to seize some of these prime lineup opportunities, and that's precisely why the club acquired Holtz from the Devils.

Holtz has a deadly release on his shot. He's able to get it off with lightning-quick speed before the goalie can get set if he's been fed a high-danger pass. Off the rush, even if the goalie is square and set, he can pick corners from mid-range. Fifteen of his 16 goals came at five-on-five, which is a solid number relative to the opportunity he was given.

The problem is that he's a one-dimensional player, offering very little outside of that skill set. Holtz doesn't drive play, isn't much of a playmaker, is a below-average skater and wasn't trusted defensively in New Jersey, averaging just 11:38 per game last season.

Vegas may be able to uniquely shelter him, though. Between Jack Eichel, Tomas Hertl, William Karlsson and Nicolas Roy, the Golden Knights have arguably the deepest center depth in the NHL. That means Holtz will have a quality two-way play-driving center to ride shotgun with, regardless of whether he's playing on the first line or the fourth line. Holtz will still need to work hard to round his game out to a passable level, but he may have more margin for error in Vegas.

It's unlikely that Holtz will ever live up to this No. 7 billing, but he still has the potential to become a complementary middle-six scorer.

Kent Johnson, RW, Columbus Blue Jackets

Drafted No. 5 in 2021

2023-24 stats (NHL): 42 GP, 6G-10A-16P

Johnson is one of the most gifted playmaking prospects I've seen over the last handful of years. His finesse, vision, puck skills and creativity are second to none — he has the pure offensive talent of a potential star. However, he's had an up-and-down journey since turning pro, and the pressure is ramping for him to get back on track.

Johnson excelled as a rookie in 2022-23, scoring 40 points in 79 games. The Blue Jackets were far deeper at forward last season because of Adam Fantilli, Dmitri Voronkov and Alexandre Texier's arrivals, though, and that made it much tougher for the slick playmaking winger to carve out a consistent role. He was sent down to the AHL for a 10-game stint and ultimately produced just 16 points in 42 games with Columbus. Johnson's power-play production, in particular, fell off a cliff as he went from 12 power-play points in 2022-23 to zero last season.

Development isn't linear and sophomore slumps happen, so none of this is a reason to panic yet. This year, he'll have less competition on right wing after the Patrik Laine trade and a new coach in Dean Evason. Owning a naturally thin, wiry frame, Johnson has to prove that he's strong enough to win battles, absorb contact and play on the inside against NHL competitors. This summer would have been a

terrific opportunity to bulk up, but he had surgery for a torn labrum in early March. Regardless, this is a critical season in which Johnson needs to re-establish himself as a valuable top-nine contributor.

Dylan Holloway, LW, St. Louis Blues

Drafted No. 14 in 2020

2023-24 stats (NHL): 38 GP, 6G-3A-9P

It's easy to see the untapped upside in Holloway because of his enticing athletic tools. He's an above-average skater, has a strong, broad frame and a relentless, energetic work rate. Holloway's playoff production (five goals and two assists in 25 games) doesn't jump off the page, but when you watched the games, you saw a player who looked like he was on the cusp of breaking out because of his pace, energy and flashes of skill.

I'm a believer in Holloway's skill set, but he has to prove that he's starting to put it all together this season. We're talking about a player who turns 23 this month and has 18 points in 89 career NHL games, after all. He should have more opportunities to play higher in the lineup in St. Louis compared to in Edmonton, where his role was likely going to be diminished after the Jeff Skinner and Viktor Arvidsson signings. The key to Holloway truly breaking out will be for him to seize a top-six role. If Holloway can find a home there (Jake Neighbours and Brandon Saad are the other left wingers who'll be vying for top-six minutes), he'll be surrounded by linemates with high-end skill. On the other hand, if he becomes a mainstay on the third line, he could end up playing with a center like Radek Faksa who's quite limited offensively.

Holloway has the potential to blossom into an uptempo middle-six winger — his fresh start in St. Louis is the perfect opportunity for him to start living up to that billing.

Jamie Drysdale, RD, Philadelphia Flyers

Drafted No. 6 in 2020

2023-24 stats (NHL): 34 GP, 3G-7A-10P

Drafted directly after Jake Sanderson and acquired by Philadelphia for blue-chip prospect Cutter Gauthier, Drysdale will face lofty expectations in his first full season with the Flyers. Injuries have slowed down the 22-year-old defender's development so far — he was limited to just eight games in 2022-23 because of a torn labrum and just 34 last season. You can't properly judge his up-and-down play from last year either, as he was playing through a sports hernia injury, one he had surgery for this offseason.

Despite these setbacks, Drysdale still has the pedigree and skill to become a top-four defenseman. He's a gifted, smooth skater who can dance on his edges, sharply change directions and effortlessly pick up steam on his crossovers. Here's an example of him beating Dylan Larkin, an elite skating forward, for a loose puck and making a play to give the Ducks clean possession.

Drysdale pairs that excellent skating ability with poise and high-level intelligence when the puck is on his stick. As a 19-year-old rookie in 2021-22, he was trusted to play on the top pair with Cam Fowler and he scored 32 points in 81 games. The current knocks on Drysdale (besides his ability to stay healthy) are that he's raw and inconsistent defensively, a tad undersized at 5-foot-11 and that his puck management could still become more polished.

Hopefully, he can string together a healthy, productive season to cement himself as a key piece of the Flyers' future.

Lukas Reichel, LW/C, Chicago Blackhawks

Drafted No. 17 in 2020

2023-24 stats (NHL): 65 GP, 5G-11A-16P

Expectations were high for Reichel last season and for good reason. He produced a second consecutive dominant AHL campaign in 2022-23, in addition to scoring 15 points in 23 games with the Blackhawks. He should have taken the leap as a productive, full-time top-six player for Chicago last season but it never materialized as he slumped to 16 points in 65 games plus a 10-game AHL demotion. Reichel is an excellent skater and puck-handler, but he was often restricted to the perimeter, didn't create as much offense off the rush and appeared to lose confidence when the points didn't come early in the season.

Heading into this season, it will be fascinating to see where Reichel slots in the Blackhawks' lineup. Chicago's forward group is significantly deeper than last year, meaning there'll be more competition for middle-six minutes. But the upside of a deeper, more talented group is that Reichel will have better linemates than last season (MacKenzie Entwistle was his most common five-on-five linemate in 2023-24 according to Natural Stat Trick), even if he plays in a third-line role. Positionally, he's probably a better fit on the wing than he is at center, although the Blackhawks experimented with using him down the middle during parts of last season.

Reichel is no longer waivers-exempt so it's time for him to sink or swim in the NHL. He has the dynamic offensive skill set to flourish, it's just a matter of finding the right fit to unlock his confidence.

Brendan Brisson, LW/RW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 29 in 2020

2023-24 stats (AHL): 52 GP, 19G-19A-38P

Between Brisson, Holtz and Pavel Dorofeyev, the Golden Knights have three young wingers who could each play key top-nine roles this season. Brisson is a talented shooter who can score in a variety of ways. He's got a deceptive release off the rush — he can pull and drag the puck to manipulate the angle of his shot — and he's got a hard, accurate one-timer. Brisson is poised with the puck in the offensive zone and has the vision to make intelligent passes, though he's certainly more of a scorer than a playmaker.

With a lethal shot and above-average hockey sense, Brisson definitely has the skill set to be a meaningful contributor to an NHL power play. The big question is whether he can be impactful enough at even strength to hold down a consistent middle-six role because his skating is a work in progress and he isn't much of a play-driver. Another concern is that while his AHL production was solid (38 points in 52 games), it wasn't elite for a 22-year-old. For a top prospect of that age, you're usually hoping for point-per-game type numbers.

Brisson, like Holtz, will benefit from the fact that Vegas is stacked with high-end two-way play-driving centers. He won't have to do too heavy lifting beyond flashing his offensive touch and finishing ability. He showed the potential to fill that type of role down the stretch last season where he produced eight points in 15 games for Vegas. Brisson is waivers-exempt for another season, plus the Golden Knights have another relatively one-dimensional sniper that they added in Victor Olofsson, so there will be competition for these coveted complementary scorer lineup spots in the top nine.

[Sportsnet.ca / One question facing each Pacific Division team in 2024-25](#)

By Rory Boylen- September 14, 2024

With an interesting mix of teams at the top and teams on the rise, the Pacific Division has a wide range of possible outcomes this season, and several different perspectives to view the season through.

In this division we're considering how big contracts will affect the sustainability of contenders, but also if some dynamic young players could begin to reshape the order of things. For now, the division is relatively settled, with a clear delineation between the top, middle and bottom teams. But slowly that line will blur.

To some degree, that could start to happen this coming season, depending on how things play out in various places. So, with training camps on tap next week, we look at one question each team in the Pacific Division is facing this season, and what it means for what comes next.

Anaheim Ducks: Will the climb up begin this season?

Trevor Zegras. Mason McTavish. Leo Carlsson. Cuter Gauthier. Olen Zellweger. Pavel Mintyukov. There are a lot of under-24 players on this Ducks roster and they keep coming every season. They also have a decent stable of productive, slightly older players, such as Frank Vatrano, Troy Terry and Cam Fowler. Now after seasons of 58 and 59 points, we have to start wondering when Anaheim will begin to climb out of the muck.

A sudden rise all the way into the playoffs seems unlikely, but can they push past Calgary, or closer to Seattle or even Los Angeles? Is something like a 20-point improvement a realistic possibility for this group yet, or are we still a year (or two) early? It's going to come one day, and the Ducks Breakout Watch begins now.

Calgary Flames: Will any players look to exit the rebuild?

Unlike the Blackhawks or Sharks, Calgary hasn't gone scorched earth in its rebuild (re-tool, whatever you want to call it) and has retained some good NHL players. Blake Coleman scored 30 goals last season and Yegor Sharangovich got 31. Nazem Kadri still approached a point per game season, and the defence duo of Mackenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson are still a great 1-2.

But there's no question this is a transition year for the Flames after they sold off some other key pieces last season and over the summer. The trade speculation may not be as hot around the team this season, but what will flare up? Does Kadri's contract still have too much term (five years) to speculate, or will the fact he's a centre attract interest?

One player we'd expect questions to be asked about is Andersson, who has two years left on his great-value of a contract (\$4.45 million AAV). Whether or not a poor start or season leads to him asking out behind the scenes, the Flames are going to have to weigh his future with the team against what they might be able to get if they traded him. As an organization, do you get out in front of that now, or wait until he's a rental for someone else?

Edmonton Oilers: With Draisaitl done, what will Evan Bouchard's extension look like?

Celebration over the Draisaitl extension soon turned to talk of what Connor McDavid's future bar-setting contract may look like, but we can't forget that Bouchard is the next big contract up. His breakout in 2023-24 saw a point total that more than doubled year over year, he finished fourth in regular season

scoring at his position, and with 32 points in 25 playoff games, scored twice as many playoff points than any other blueliner.

An RFA after this season and currently making \$3.9 million, Bouchard is in for a monster raise, especially if the Oilers go long-term. But how high will it go? Will he become the highest-paid blueliner on the team and surpass Darnell Nurse?

Los Angeles Kings: Do they have a path to improvement, or are they stuck?

For the past couple of years, Vegas and Edmonton have been the teams to beat in this division — one got its Stanley Cup, and the other lost in seven games in the final. Last season, the Vancouver Canucks took the division and, as we'll explore below, have possibly entered the upper crust of teams. The Kings, meanwhile, didn't make any big additions and in fact, sold off Pierre-Luc Dubois one year after paying a hefty price to get him from Winnipeg.

So if the Kings didn't improve, where do they fit into this division, and what's their path to competing with those teams at the top?

Quinton Byfield and Brandt Clarke are vitally important players to what comes next here, but the youth movement isn't so strong in LA. Anze Kopitar is 37 with two years left on his contract and so, at some point in the near future, the curtains will come down on his career. Drew Doughty showed last year he still has something left in the tank, but he'll turn 35 in December with three years left on his deal. Kevin Fiala is a great player who has finished between 29-33 goals and 73-85 points the last three seasons. At 28 years old, he's performing at his peak.

The Kings don't seem ripe to retreat from the playoff race, but as state rivals Anaheim and San Jose keep adding new talent, and the Kraken key in on the weaknesses holding them back, where will the Kings find improvement? Will they be able to hang at the top of this division and go on a playoff run, or are they mired in the middle? Another first-round exit against Edmonton or some other top Western contender will leave the Kings with tough off-season questions.

San Jose Sharks: How transformational will Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith be?

Look, it's a long road ahead for San Jose, but the light is finally starting to shine through. Two players in particular make this a team worth watching — or at least checking in on — again this season.

Macklin Celebrini arrives as the latest first-overall draft prospect, a product of the Jr. Sharks minor hockey program and the youngest-ever winner of the 2024 Hobey Baker Award. Ahead of this past summer's draft, our scout Jason Bukala noted that of the past four first-overall draft picks, Celebrini's potential eclipsed everyone's except Connor Bedard. Bukala also noted Celebrini was an ideal prospect to build a franchise around because "he leads by example with his 200-foot detail and effort, plays fast, brings consistently relentless compete and makes plays many prospects only dream of making."

The Calder Trophy race could be an interesting one around the league this season, but one of Celebrini's own teammates could give him a run for it. Will Smith, the fourth overall pick in 2023, was the only NCAA player to outscore Celebrini last season, finishing with 25 goals and 71 points in 41 games. Smith is a breathtaking, all-offence player who will make for a heck of a long-term duo with Celebrini.

Over the years, these two players figure to lead San Jose back to relevance. But in Year 1, how transformational can we reasonably expect them to be?

Seattle Kraken: Can Shane Wright have an NHL breakthrough?

A player to watch through Kraken's training camp is 2022's fourth overall pick after Wright settled for most of last season in the AHL and posted 47 points in 59 games. Now 20 years old, turning 21 in January, he'll have a shot to stick with the big team out of camp and stay on as a full-time NHL player.

Dan Bylsma is Seattle's new head coach and he's familiar with Wright from their time together in Coachella Valley last season. That should bring some degree of comfort to Wright as he faces this challenge. After we saw Juraj Slafkovsky take a big step in the back of last season, Simon Nemec get into 60 NHL games, and Logan Cooley get to 20 goals as a rookie, the three players taken ahead of Wright have all graduated to the top level. Now it could be Wright's turn.

Vancouver Canucks: Did last season launch a new contender?

The other day when we were ranking teams in the Pacific Division and taking a crack at how we saw them finishing up in April, we noted that the Canucks were a regression candidate. It came with the caveat that a step down didn't have to mean a step off a cliff.

The Canucks should be a playoff team again in 2025, and anything less would be a massive disappointment. They levelled up last season, no doubt, and have potential year-end award winners at forward, on defence and in the net. But where do they rank around the league as a whole?

What the Canucks are going to answer this season is if last year's breakout truly launched a new Stanley Cup contender out of the Pacific Division, or a solid team that's still a step or so below that, needing a tweak here or there yet.

Vegas Golden Knights: What's the surprise up the sleeve this time?

We're on to you, Vegas. Even when you think the Golden Knights have no cap space or assets to surprise us with a trade, they find a way to do just that.

Absolutely no one saw the Tomas Hertl trade coming last season, and yet it ended up being the biggest move at the deadline. This year the team will be near the cap again and with even fewer assets to move — their top pick from 2023 is gone, and they don't have a first-rounder in either 2025 or 2026 already.

But still, we won't get fooled again. Vegas has been hovering in trade speculation at times over the summer around Mitch Marner who would be the biggest name on the market if the Leafs decided to go that route. Whenever — and wherever apparently, after the rival Sharks made a swap with them — a big-ticket player comes to the market, the Golden Knights will surely be in the mix. Who will that player be this season, and how could Vegas make it work? Time will tell.

[Sportsnet.ca / One question facing each Atlantic Division team in 2024-25](#)

By Emily Sadler- September 14, 2024

Training camps are just around the corner, and as players hit the ice in preparation for another season there are plenty of storylines to watch and questions to be answered.

While many of these questions won't truly be resolved until the 2024-25 season is well underway, the next few weeks deliver our first glimpses of what we might expect from the year ahead.

Look around the heavyweight Atlantic Division, and there are blue lines being renovated and rebuilt, job openings to be filled, and some questions in the crease and behind the bench, too.

Let's dig in.

(Teams are listed in order of last year's standings.)

Florida Panthers: Who's suiting up on the second pair?

After hoisting the Stanley Cup for the first time in franchise history, the Panthers took a bit of a hit in the off-season as the cap crunch came calling. While the roster remains largely intact up front, the departures of Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson open up an interesting opportunity for some new faces to step in and make an impact. The first pairing of Aaron Ekblad and Gustav Forsling remains, but who comes after?

Adam Boqvist is a popular pick to be GM Bill Zito's latest reclamation project after being bought out in Columbus and signing a show-me deal with the champs, while Niko Mikkola could take another step forward after playing a supporting role in the club's Cup run last year. Nate Schmidt is a Panther now, too. It'll be particularly hard to replace the offensive contributions Montour brought from the back end — remember how clutch he was in the playoffs? — but someone's going to step in and try. Camp will give us our first look at who that might be.

Boston Bruins: How does the Swayman standoff end?

For the second straight year, Jeremy Swayman is owed a new deal. And for the second straight year, it hasn't been an easy process to sign on the dotted line. The departure of Linus Ullmark in June declared Swayman the de facto No. 1, but what does it mean to be paid like one? As solid as the 25-year-old netminder has been for the Bruins over the past three seasons since joining Boston's regular rotation, he's only once started more than 40 games as the team mastered the tandem approach.

Last season saw Swayman take on his heaviest workload, starting 43 contests and posting strong numbers including a 2.53 goals-against average and .916 save percentage. Maybe the larger question should be how exactly the Bruins plan to deploy him this year. The return for Ullmark included Joonas Korpisalo, who's coming off a down year with Ottawa and could benefit from a tandem approach to regain form.

Toronto Maple Leafs: How does Craig Berube shape the Maple Leafs' culture?

The Maple Leafs enter the 2024-25 season with more than a few pressing questions up and down the roster. In the blue paint, the No. 1 job belongs to Joseph Woll now, but can he stay healthy enough to seize the opportunity and run with it? Then there's the blue line in front of him, which features an influx of big veterans long coveted by GM Brad Treliving, and top-six job openings at left wing with a list of applicants that features Matthew Knies, Nick Robertson, and PTO signee Max Pacioretty. All eyes will be on Mitch Marner, who spent part of the summer skating alongside the likes of Sidney Crosby and

Nathan MacKinnon as he prepares for the most pivotal of seasons and stares down the possibility of free agency next summer.

Amid all the camp battles and intriguing storylines in Toronto, the biggest question might just be centred around the man behind the bench and how he approaches all of it. Training camp will bring our first glimpse of Craig Berube running the show in Toronto. How he establishes the culture should tell us a lot about this expectation-heavy season to come.

Tampa Bay Lightning: Can Conor Geekie crack the roster out of camp?

The Lightning's all-in approach to winning for the past half-decade earned them three straight trips to the Stanley Cup Final and a pair of championship rings. It hasn't exactly yielded a lot of top draft picks with which to fill their prospect pool, though, and that's something Julien BriseBois addressed earlier this summer when he dealt star defenceman Mikhail Sergachev to Utah in exchange for forward prospect Conor Geekie.

Arizona's 11th overall pick in 2022 instantly became Tampa Bay's top prospect upon landing with the Lightning, and now as the club reports to camp all eyes will be on the 20-year-old to see if he can make the jump to the pros. Fresh off a 99-point WHL campaign, it's easy to see why BriseBois so coveted the skilled centreman — and with the club getting a little younger following the GM's decision to let Steven Stamkos walk and sign Jake Guentzel as the club's new top-line forward, the time could be right to bring in another new guy to help keep that window of contention open.

Detroit Red Wings: Can Yzerman get his young core signed in time for camp?

The biggest topic at the beginning of Detroit's off-season remains the most talked-about storyline as the Red Wings approach training camp. While the Red Wings' RFAs aren't the only high-profile skaters still unsigned as camps loom, it's easy to understand why there's some concern around the status of Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider.

The forward and defenceman are franchise cornerstones whose respective roles cannot be understated. Raymond was the team's leader in assists (41) and points (72) last season while Seider's offensive gifts were on full display on the blue line with 42 points. Forward Jonatan Berggren, too, has yet to sign a new pact. We've seen more and more RFA contract stalemates bleed through camp and come dangerously close to game time... will these be the same? As pricey as these contracts could be, can the Red Wings afford to keep waiting?

Buffalo Sabres: Can Byram break out in Buffalo?

Look around the league, and you'll be hard pressed to find a top four brimming with as much potential as the one in Buffalo right now. Already boasting a pair of top picks in Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power, the Sabres brought in Bowen Byram via last spring's deadline trade that saw Casey Middlestadt sent to Colorado. We got a glimpse of the team's new triple threat down the stretch, but training camp brings the trio the luxury of time to really build up chemistry and piece together the puzzle of pairings.

Byram is an interesting player to watch not just because he could be the key to unlocking this blue line's full potential, but because he himself is due for a true breakout season. The rearguard has had a difficult start to his NHL career, dealing with the lingering effects of concussions early on. Last season saw him play a career-high 73 matchups, posting personal bests in goals (11), assists (18) and total points (29). With health on his side, a strong supporting cast around him, and Lindy Ruff tasked with prioritizing his blue line, Byram is a strong breakout candidate.

Ottawa Senators: Will Josh Norris be ready to go?

If the Senators are to finally emerge from their long-haul rebuild, they'll need all their young stars at full health — and that's something they simply haven't had the past few years. Top of mind is the status of centre Josh Norris, who is in many ways the face of this rebuild considering he was one of the biggest pieces in the trade return for Erik Karlsson. The 24-year-old is rippling with breakout potential but has been unable to reach it due to a string of shoulder injuries that have hampered him throughout his young career so far.

Norris' breakout season came in 2021-22 when he tallied 35 goals and 55 points in 66 games and after being sidelined all but eight games in the season that followed was enjoying a similar run of success last year with 30 points through 55 games before being shut down in February. He underwent shoulder surgery in March— his third such procedure on that same left shoulder. His projected recovery time put him on track to be ready for training camp and the latest word from general manager Steve Staios is positive:

Montreal Canadiens: How will this young blue line shake out?

The youth movement has arrived in Montreal, and it's about to get a little crowded. The club boasts a ton of young talent on the blue line, and how general manager Kent Hughes and head coach Martin St. Louis navigates this group will be a major storyline to watch over the next few weeks. David Reinbacher, the team's fifth overall selection in 2023, is a top candidate to break into the lineup but he's not alone. Other prominent young players in the mix include fellow top prospects Lane Hutson and Logan Mailloux and third-year d-men Arber Xhekaj and Kaiden Guhle. Where they all fit in around veterans Mike Matheson and David Savard will be a subject of much interest.

[Sportsnet.ca / One question facing each Central Division team in 2024-25](#)

By Rory Boylen- September 14, 2024

Already this week we've explored one player who needs to deliver this season for each team in the Central Division, and have also taken a crack at predicting how the standings would play out. Today we look a little closer and explore a question facing each of the teams in this tightly packed division.

With training camps opening midway through next week, we'll start getting answers to some of these questions, while others will take some time to play out. In one of the NHL's more interesting groupings, here's what we're wondering about the Central.

Colorado Avalanche: How will Gabriel Landeskog and Valeri Nichushkin factor into this season?

Suspended until November, we know Nichushkin won't start the season with the Avs. Captain Landeskog hasn't played at all since the 2022 Stanley Cup win because of a knee injury, but there's finally optimism he'll be back. When last season ended Landeskog said he was aiming to come back in 2024 and just last month Colorado coach Jared Bednar said there was hope he'd be back "sometime near the start of the season."

So while neither will be in the lineup for Game 1 in October, both figure to have a major impact on the team's fortunes for one reason or another this season. When Landeskog returns, how much of his former self will he be? When Nichushkin is eligible to return from suspension, will the Avs welcome him back? There was some question if they'd look to terminate his contract, something the team downplayed though acknowledged that trust needed to be rebuilt with the player. With 28 goals in 54 games last season, and then another nine in eight playoff games, the 29-year-old is a very important piece of this lineup.

Chicago Blackhawks: Who will play with Connor Bedard and how high can the super sophomore's point totals go?

Last season's Calder Trophy winner delivered as much as could have been expected as a rookie, scoring 22 goals and 61 points in 68 games on a roster that lacked any support at all. Now in Year 2, with a slightly upgraded roster, we wonder where Bedard goes from here.

While Taylor Hall was to be his linemate last season, and was before a season-ending injury, others will push to play alongside him in 2024-25. Along with Hall, UFA signings Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen will vie for playing time next to the franchise player. Whoever gets those spots out of camp, will they hold them all season? And how much will improved linemates help Bedard produce?

While it's not exactly fair to compare Bedard to Connor McDavid, there will be high expectations for 2023's first overall pick. He was nearly a point-per-game player in Year 1, in which he played 68 games because of a mid-year injury. McDavid reached 100 points as a sophomore -- can Bedard get to 90 if healthy?

Dallas Stars: Will the blue line be deep and good enough to hang with the West's best?

The Stars have made back-to-back Western Conference finals and have a lot of strengths on the roster. But when we look at the defence, we're left with some questions.

Past Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley (still unsigned, by the way), it quickly starts to thin out. Veterans Ilya Lyubushkin, Matt Dumba and Brendan Smith have all been journeymen for the past few years, and each were minus players in 2023-24. Nils Lundkvist is there for depth but hardly got any

playing time in the playoffs. If Lian Bichsel makes the team out of camp and contributes right away it would certainly go a long way here, but it's a lot to ask a 20-year-old defenceman to be something of an X-Factor in his first season in North America.

The Stars traded for Chris Tanev last season for a reason -- they needed his steady defensive hand. He was of course a great fit and a key player, but he wasn't directly replaced. That loss will be felt. The Stars still have the makings of a Stanley Cup contender, but their defensive depth was challenged against the best team in the playoffs last season. Entering 2024-25 the blue line may be even more susceptible against the highest tier of teams in the league.

Minnesota Wild: Can Marco Rossi take another step and lock in as a long-term part of the core?

The Wild are still going through punishing cap penalties, being charged \$14.743 million this season for the bought out Ryan Suter and Zach Parise contracts. But if you squint, you can see a potentially bright and prosperous future coming.

Starting next season, that penalty decreases to only \$1.66 million for three more years, far more manageable especially with the cap anticipated to rise to \$92 million, and beyond.

Also, consider that the Wild have already begun to lock in a young core for the long term. Matt Boldy is locked in at a \$7 million cap hit through 2030; Joel Eriksson Ek at \$5.25 million through 2029; and Calder finalist Brock Faber is in for \$8.5 million through 2033. Older players Jonas Brodin (\$6 million), Jacob Middleton (\$2.45 million), Yakov Trenin (\$3.5 million), Frederick Gaudreau (\$2.1 million) and Marcus Foligno (\$4 million) are all also locked in through at least another four years.

As the cap rises, those deals will become more and more of a bargain, especially the first grouping of young players who will be at the centre of it all. Now Marco Rossi, a 22-year-old centre and ninth overall pick in 2020 who blossomed with 21 goals and 40 points in his rookie season, is entering his contract year. While trade rumours did follow him into the summer, a new opportunity could present itself this season. What if Rossi earns, and sticks on as, the top-line centre job between Kirill Kaprizov and Mats Zuccarello? His production would surely spike and leave the Wild considering his place in the plan. If Rossi becomes that elusive No. 1 centre and also signs long-term at a reasonable rate, the Wild's hand may only get stronger.

Kaprizov's own complicated extension will come up soon enough, with an expiring contract in 2026. And if Rossi signs long-term, it complicates centre Danila Yurov's path to the team. But those are problems for another day. For this season, we're curious to see what Rossi can do and if he locks himself into this core over the long haul.

Nashville Predators: How much more offence will head coach Andrew Brunette squeeze out of this team?

In his first year behind the bench in Nashville, Andrew Brunette's team finished with a top 10 offence. Averaging 3.24 goals per game, it was a jump of over half a goal from 2022-23 when the Preds were 28th in NHL scoring. It's the style Brunette wants to play and was successful finding first with the Panthers. When Brunette took over behind Florida's bench for 75 games in 2021-22, they were a chaotic bunch in a good way, scoring over four goals per game and finishing as one of the best play-from-behind comeback teams in the history of the league.

In Year 2 with Nashville, Brunette has some new weapons. Up front he gets two 40-goal men in Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, who will also have chips on their shoulders after being discarded by former teams they wanted to stay with. The Predators finished with the 17th-most goals at 5-on-5 last season, and Marchessault had the seventh-most even-strength goals of any NHL forward. New

defenceman Brady Skjei had 31 points at even strength last season and was one of Carolina's best offensive contributors from the blue line.

If there's a specific area on offence the Predators could improve, it's on the power play. They ranked 16th in the league with a 21.6 per cent success rate in the regular season, then converted on just two of their 22 playoff opportunities. Stamkos ranked near the top of the league -- third overall -- in power-play goals with 19 last season (granted he did it next to Nikita Kucherov).

St. Louis Blues: Can Jordan Binnington secure his hold on Canada's goaltending job and elevate the Blues in the process?

For a few years Jordan Binnington's numbers were taking a hit, with save percentages going from .912 to .910 to .901 and .894 over a four-year run. It wasn't looking as certain that he'd be a lock to play in a Team Canada crease for any best-on-best event — though with how thin the depth chart was, he was never far from the conversation (and because his NHL GM also runs the Canadian men's Olympic operation).

But last season was a bounce back for Binnington, a .913 save percentage, 2.84 GAA and finishing as a top-five goalie in the league in Goals Saved Above Expected. He wasn't in the Vezina conversation and the Blues didn't make the playoffs, but Binnington was trending up again at 30 years of age.

As far as Team Canada's crease goes, first up is the 4 Nations next February and Binnington has competition. Stuart Skinner is coming on and just reached the Stanley Cup Final, while Adin Hill won the Cup in 2023. Connor Ingram is something of a dark horse in the discussion.

With that also to play for this season, will Binnington equal or improve on last season's performance to lock up the No. 1 job for Canada? And if he shows that well, will he elevate the Blues into a playoff spot, perhaps even making them a tough out once there?

Utah Hockey Club: How will they introduce themselves to a new market?

Earlier this week we highlighted the fact that Utah has completely rebuilt and improved their blue line. It's the same management team headed by Bill Armstrong, but under new ownership this organization's entire approach has shifted to a new gear. On paper, the team is improved and the future is now certain. Becoming more of a buyer now, Utah is in a position to upgrade itself into a more competitive place.

So how will this get started on the ice? How will the new arrivals impact the roster, but also, how will the relocated players settle in their new surroundings? How will the fan base be not only in ticket sales but also with their character at the arena? How will the team's in-game presentation go and is anything unique going to be offered? Can the franchise introduce a team that can contend for a playoff spot and provide interesting hockey at least into April right away, or will it still end up being a slog through the middle part of the season?

Winnipeg Jets: How will Nikolaj Ehlers' future play out?

One of the most steady players on the team for nearly a decade, Ehlers is coming to a critical juncture in his career. Turning 29 in February, he's set to become a UFA next summer and is certain to get a raise on his current \$6 million AAV. Will that fit with the Jets? Ehlers' ice time is an every-year talking point as he's usually in the 15-16:30 per game range, but regularly at or near the top of the team in points per 60 minutes played.

After losing some veteran players in the summer and not finding replacements, it's a wonder how much of a contender the Jets really are, or if they're a step or two below that. If faced with the prospect of

losing Ehlers as well next summer, what could they get for him on the trade market as a rental? Would they look at him as an own-rental for their own playoff push? Or will this contract get resolved before then and keep him in place?

The Jets have an even bigger contract to figure out next season when Kyle Connor will walk into his free agent season. After re-signing both Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck last year, GM Kevin Cheveldayoff still has some important work to do.

[Sportsnet.ca](https://www.sportsnet.ca) / [One question facing each Metropolitan Division team in 2024-25](#)

By **Sonny Sachdeva**- September 14, 2024

For a division that houses two of the game's all-time greats, a couple of the league's most mercurial contenders, and more than a few of the sport's most dynamic offensive practitioners, there are bound to be questions.

How will the Metro's best navigate roster turnover while trying to find the next level? Who among the middle-of-the-pack has played their off-season well enough to break through? When does rebuilding give way to resurgence?

Ahead of the 2024-25 campaign, we're taking a closer look at the journey ahead for each of the NHL's four divisions. Here's a closer look at the most pressing questions for each team in the Metro with Game 1 around the corner.

Note: In the wake of the tragic loss of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, the focus in Columbus at this moment is not on hockey. Out of respect for their time of healing, the Blue Jackets have not been included in this series.

Carolina Hurricanes: How do the Canes navigate their significant roster shake-up?

After a string of division titles and an all-in approach at the deadline last season, the Canes head into 2024-25 with some new faces to integrate, and some marquee performers to replace. The blue line figures to have the most question marks heading into camp — gone is Brady Skjei, who ate up 21 minutes a night for the Canes last season, while joining the fray are Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere, both coming off quality campaigns. Up front, the biggest unknown is how the Canes' top six deals with the loss of 40-goal sniper Jake Guentzel. The onus seems to be on the club's long-time core to raise their level in 2024-25. How far will that take them, and how long will it take the blue line to gel together and aid in that journey?

New Jersey Devils: Can Sheldon Keefe get the promising Devils back on track?

It's been a rollercoaster pair of seasons for the Devils. Two years ago, they seemed on track to become the class of the East, with Jack Hughes establishing himself among the very best in the game courtesy of a 43-goal, 99-point effort. Then came 2023-24, injuries to Hughes and other key pieces, and a tumble down the standings from second in the division to a familiar seventh. After taking down the Rangers in a seven-game Round 1 thriller a year prior, the Devils missed out on the dance altogether in 2024. Now, they have a new coach to guide their comeback. Fresh off leading the Toronto Maple Leafs to five straight top-three finishes in the Atlantic, how far can Keefe take a young, healthy Devils team that showed so much potential so recently? What approach does this new-look Devils squad take out of camp and into the start of the new campaign?

New York Islanders: Can Anthony Duclair breathe some life into the Isles' top six?

If the Islanders are to replicate the third-place finish they came up with in 2024, the club's offensive leaders taking another step in 2025 is a must. The class of the Metro simply are too strong, and the rest of the middle-of-the-pack have improved this off-season. Still, the Isles found their game late last season once Patrick Roy took the reins and urged them on towards a faster brand of hockey.

The key question going into 2024-25 is how much Roy can get out of this club over the span of a full season. Another is how much of an impact newly signed Anthony Duclair could have for the Isles, given the role and system he'll be taking on. While the 29-year-old's bounced around some over the course of

his career, his skill has been clear from the jump — over his past two full, healthy seasons he's put up a combined 55 goals and 100 points. Where does Roy slot in the quick-footed Duclair at camp? If it's up top, alongside a couple talented scorers in Bo Horvat and Mathew Barzal, can Duclair add a new dimension to the Isles' top six in 2025?

New York Rangers: How does Reilly Smith fit into the Blueshirts' offence?

The Rangers find themselves in much the same place they have for the past few years. On paper, they have everything they need to contend with the best in the game. The question is simply what tweaks are needed to take them just that slight step further. Twice in the past three years, the Blueshirts have gotten to the Conference Final and found themselves ousted by a true contender. This season, they bring back largely the same squad, aside from one intriguing acquisition up front: Reilly Smith. It didn't work out for the 33-year-old in Pittsburgh, but just a season ago Smith was flirting with 30 goals and 60 points for the high-flying Vegas Golden Knights, and helping them hang a championship banner. How does the former Knight slot in alongside the likes of Mika Zibanejad, Chris Kreider, Vincent Trochek and Artemi Panarin at camp — and what can his Cup-winning experience add to a Rangers squad that's been knocking at the door?

Pittsburgh Penguins: Can Rutger McGroarty bring some energy to the ageing Pens?

For the second straight off-season, Pens president and GM Kyle Dubas has rolled the dice on a potential spark for his new squad. Year 1's attempt came up short, with Erik Karlsson's arrival not enough to pull Pittsburgh back into the playoff dance. In Year 2, Dubas has gone in the other direction, acquiring top prospect Rutger McGroarty to inject some youth and energy into the Pens' ageing lineup. It's worked before, of course, with young guns Jake Guentzel, Bryan Rust and Conor Sheary once serving as the fresh legs to keep Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang running at full speed. The Pens still have an uphill battle, with limited depth and a Guentzel-sized hole in their top six to contend with. Can McGroarty find a place on Crosby's wing at camp, and help Pittsburgh turn back the clock?

Philadelphia Flyers: How big of an impact can rookie Matvei Michkov have in Year 1?

Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, it's a different version of the same story. The Flyers find themselves mired in rebuild mode, four years removed from a taste of playoff hockey, with a lineup that doesn't suggest much will change in 2024-25. There is one key difference though: the arrival of rookie Matvei Michkov. Tabbed seventh-overall by Philly in 2023, the 19-year-old is ready to begin his NHL career after a KHL campaign that saw him collect 19 goals and 41 points through 47 games for Sochi. All eyes will surely be on the young winger when camp gets underway, with questions of how exactly the Flyers will utilize him in his first go-round. But Calder hype aside, given the state of the roster around him, just how far can Michkov truly take the club in Year 1?

Washington Capitals: Can Pierre-Luc Dubois prove he's an impact player?

After how the Caps finished 2024, it's fair to wonder how exactly they view their chances in 2025. A wild, late scramble in the Metro threw the standings into a blender at the tail end of 2023-24 — when the dust settled, there were the Caps in the final wild-card spot. Of course, they reached the post-season with the lowest goal differential of any fellow playoff participant, before being promptly swept by the Rangers. But the Caps don't seem content to hope it all falls their way once again. A few marquee acquisitions make that clear, with Pierre-Luc Dubois, Andrew Mangiapane and Jakob Chychrun standing out among the new faces in D.C. How will the new pieces mesh with the vets? The biggest question mark will surely be Dubois. After a humbling spell in L.A., can he prove he is the impact player he's long been expected to be?