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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets camp notes: Tough choices ahead with depth defensemen

By Brian Hedger- September 28, 2024

The hope for NHL general managers at the conclusion of training camp is to stare at their organizational depth chart while popping antacid tablets.

They hope to labor over “tough decisions” with each position group, and it’s starting to look like the Blue Jackets may have that scenario forming with a collection of depth defensemen. Once you get past the veteran NHL stalwarts — Zach Werenski, Damon Severson, Ivan Provorov, Erik Gudbranson and Jack Johnson — the Jackets’ depth chart has much less clarity.

David Jiricek, Jordan Harris, Jake Christiansen and rookie Denton Mateychuk all have reason to think they’re in the running for NHL spots at this point, though early signs in camp indicate Mateychuk is likely bound for AHL Cleveland.

“There’s always competition, so it’s nothing new,” Christiansen, 25, said. “It’s never going to be given to you. Everybody has to break into the league at some point, and to make the team, you’ve got to push that door down. It’s the same everywhere, and I believe in my abilities. I think I can push that door down and become a full-time NHLer.”

Harris, 24, is standing in his path.

Acquired in a trade that sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens, he's similar to Christiansen. They're about the same age, stand roughly the same size, shoot from the left side, use their mobility as puck-moving defenders and must pass through waivers for an AHL assignment.

The biggest differences are that Harris has one year left on a one-way contract and has logged 87 more NHL games the over the past two years after going straight from a collegiate career to Montreal without playing in the AHL.

He’s just as confident as Christiansen, if not more, in his ability to lock up an NHL role with the Blue Jackets.

“I take a lot of pride in the work I’ve put in, in the summer,” Harris said. “It’s just trusting in me and my preparation, and just being myself.”

Another advantage for Harris is that he has experienced playing either point in the NHL, while Christiansen has stayed primarily on the left side with the Jackets. That’s not to say Christiansen is opposed to flipping over to the right point if there's a need.

Jiricek is likely to play on the second NHL pairing with Provorov, but he’s still in the final year of an entry-level contract that doesn’t require waivers for AHL assignments. Should Waddell keep only seven NHL defensemen and not risk losing Christiansen or Harris to waivers, he could assign Jiricek to Cleveland, again along with Mateychuk.

Considering Jiricek recoiled each time that happened last season, that’s a decision that would likely ruffle some feathers again. Thus far in camp, Jiricek has worked exclusively with Provorov during practices on non-game days. More like, Waddell’s decision is expected to be keeping either eight NHL defensemen or going with seven while rolling the dice with waivers.

“I feel like I’m as ready as I’ve ever been,” Christiansen said. “I’m just really excited for the chance, again, to hopefully make the team.”

Columbus Blue Jackets trim preseason roster to NHL/AHL groups

Luca Pinelli, an undersized forward from the Blue Jackets' 2023 draft class, was loaned to the Ottawa 67s of the Ontario Hockey League on Thursday. That made center Cayden Lindstrom, this year's fourth overall pick, as the only junior player left in camp. Lindstrom is skating on his own while allowing a back injury to fully heal before returning to Medicine Hat of the Western Hockey League.

Otherwise, the vast majority left in camp will play in Columbus or Cleveland. Those players are divided into two groups now. The first is for those likely to play in the NHL and the second contains players likely to start in Cleveland.

Columbus Blue Jackets announce radio broadcast details

The Blue Jackets will again partner with 97.1 FM as their main station, while 93.3 FM, an iHeartRadio channel, is the team's new alternate station starting with a game Saturday against the Buffalo Sabres. Fans throughout Ohio and West Virginia can also catch broadcasts on one of 28 stations in the Blue Jackets Radio Network or via streaming on the team's app and web site.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets preseason: Sean Monahan sparks late surge against Buffalo Sabres

By Brian Hedger- September 29, 2024

Turnabout wasn't fair play until the third period for the Blue Jackets on Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

Despite dressing most of their projected NHL lineup against a Buffalo Sabres group comprised of AHL players and younger prospects, it took the Jackets most of the night to finally surge for a 6-3 victory that moved them to 3-1-0 in the preseason. It was the reverse of what happened Monday in Buffalo, when the Sabres iced their NHL lineup in a 6-1 victory at KeyBank Center against the prospect-laden Blue Jackets before traveling to Europe for the NHL's global series Oct. 4-5 against the New Jersey Devils.

"We were slow at the start, a little tentative, a little cute and Buffalo doesn't have a full (NHL) roster there," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It was a slow start, but what we enjoyed was how we gained momentum throughout the game ... and not just goals, but we played a way more intelligent game through the second and, obviously, in the third."

After falling behind 2-0 in the second period, Columbus scored the next five goals to take control.

James van Riemsdyk started the run with a power-play goal late in the second, cutting it to 2-1, and Sean Monahan scored back-to-back goals in the third for a 3-2 lead. Jake Christiansen and Adam Fantilli — who had a hat trick Friday in the Jackets' 8-4 road win against the Washington Capitals — scored the next two in a span of 53 seconds blow the game open with a 5-2 margin. Including Monahan's second goal, the Blue Jackets scored three times in a span of just 1:15 against goalie Felix Sandstrom, who allowed all five goals while splitting the game with Scott Ratzloff.

"It's nice to get in a game, getting some timing back and getting some action," Monahan said. "I don't think I played great, but you get some touches, timing and it's just nice to get out there and play."

Former Ohio State forward Mason Jobst cut the Jackets' lead to 5-3 with 6:14 left, but the Blue Jackets sealed it with 1:32 left on Cole Sillinger's second empty-net goal in as many days. Elvis Merzlikins started for the Blue Jackets and made 28 saves while playing the entire game.

Former Blue Jackets forward Josh Dunne and Zach Metsa scored the first two goals for the Sabres, whose NHL team is in Europe preparing to play the New Jersey Devils Oct. 4-5 in the NHL's global series, which will officially start the regular season.

The Blue Jackets will practice Sunday and host the Capitals on Monday in their fifth of eight preseason games.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets preseason: Fantilli, Olivier lead the way past Washington Capitals

By Brian Hedger- September 29, 2024

Adam Fantilli shook off a lot of rust in one delayed game.

After struggling with his timing in the Blue Jackets' preseason opener Monday in Buffalo, a 6-1 loss, the highly talented second-year center led the way to an 8-4 victory Friday with a hat trick against the Washington Capitals at Capital One Arena.

Mathieu Olivier added two more goals for the Blue Jackets (2-1-0), who were forced to sit on their charter plane in Columbus for three hours before traveling to a game that was twice delayed.

"That was a little weird, but we had a lot of fun with it," Fantilli said. "We all got in there and were like, 'When was the last time you dressed out of your bag for a game?' So, we had a lot of fun with it."

Olivier's goals were his second and third of the preseason (two game), while Cole Sillinger, James Malatesta and Mikael Pyyhtia scored the other three. Pyyhtia added an assist for a two-point night and rookie Gavin Brindley finished with two points on two assists.

Nine Blue Jackets finished with at least a point in a balanced offensive performance, while goalies Daniil Tarasov and Pavel Cajan combined to stop 22 of 26 shots. The game's start was delayed by the Blue Jackets' travel issues. The original start time was 7 p.m., but was first pushed back to 8:15 p.m. and then 8:39 p.m. before the puck finally dropped.

The Blue Jackets host the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday at Nationwide Arena in their fourth preseason game. The Sabres' NHL squad is in Europe for the NHL's global series, so the team that Buffalo brings will be comprised of prospects and AHL players.

The Capitals, who played NHL goalie Charlie Lindgren, iced a roster with eight NHL players. Alex Ovechkin was one of them, and scored 6:58 into the game to give Washington a 1-0 lead. That turned out to be the Capitals' only lead, and it didn't last long.

Fantilli scored the first of his three goals at 10:47 of the first to tie it 1-1 before James Malatesta put the Blue Jackets up 2-1 three minutes later. Jakub Vrana tied it 2-2 for the Capitals with 5:59 left in the opening period, but Olivier and Fantilli scored the next two on breakaways in the second for a 4-2 Columbus lead.

Dylan Strome and Pyyhtia exchanged goals in the second, giving the Blue Jackets a 5-3 lead before the Capitals pulled within 5-4 on Jakob Chychrun's tally midway into the third. Fantilli's third goal plus empty-netters from Sillinger and Olivier sealed the Jackets' victory.

The Athletic / 10 observations from the first week of Blue Jackets training camp

By Aaron Portzline- September 28,2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets, after one week of training camp, had an off day on Thursday. Deep breaths, everyone. The Jackets now play six preseason games over the next eight days, beginning with Friday's game in Washington.

There are 47 players still in training camp and just under two weeks from the Oct. 10 regular-season opener in Minnesota, which means the big decisions are still on the horizon. But here's what we've witnessed during the first week of camp:

Johnson looks different

This will be Kent Johnson's third NHL season. His rookie season went very well. His sophomore season? Not so much.

But Johnson showed up at camp not only fully recovered from the shoulder injury that ended his 2023-24 season, but noticeably thicker through the shoulders and neck. Yes, it was a preseason game, but Johnson was simply dazzling on Wednesday against St. Louis.

"You guys are probably seeing it for the first time," Blue Jackets center Sean Kuraly said. "But we've been seeing that for a couple of weeks here. He's been a dog on pucks. You can see his mentality. It's second effort on pucks, and even if he loses the first one, he's hunting the pucks. He's off to a good start."

Johnson will never be a power forward. But he looks more capable of protecting the puck, engaging in puck battles and going into the "hard areas" than he was in the past.

It's no secret that the Blue Jackets need their cadre of young, talented forwards to "pop" this season if they're going to have any measure of success. So far, Johnson looks like a good bet.

Great pace

New coach Dean Evason wants the Blue Jackets to play at a high pace this season. He wants them to play competitive, confrontational hockey. And you can see that in the way they've practiced.

The first preseason game was a mulligan. The Sabres had a loaded roster before they headed to Munich for a week in advance of the Global Series, but the Blue Jackets had an incredibly young, inexperienced lineup. Four players were seeing their first NHL action of any kind.

Game 2 was different. The Blue Jackets' and Blues' rosters were more balanced than in the game in Buffalo, but you could see a different approach, too.

Here's Evason on teaching an up-on-the-toes style: "They're picking it up very quickly. Game 1, we had so many clips of us being passive and pulling back and not pressuring in the defensive zone, not getting up in the neutral zone, not having a second forward on the forecheck.

"Our system — the Columbus Blue Jackets' system — is aggressive. It's in your face, it's putting pressure on you in all areas of the ice. They're picking that up. We're going to keep working through it."

Confrontational hockey

If you've noticed how the Minnesota Wild played in recent seasons under Evason, you've probably wondered if the Blue Jackets can possibly adopt that style, especially with all of their small forwards.

Two things:

The forwards are not so small anymore, not with Sean Monahan and James van Riemsdyk joining the ranks.

They have a collection of players who are naturally gifted to play with their ears pinned back.

The preseason game against the Blues was surprisingly spicy for an exhibition. Evason was delighted when Erik Gudbranson stuck up for teammate Jake Christiansen when he was low-bridged on a hit by St. Louis' Matthew Kessel. Gudbranson smashed him in the corner.

Asked point-blank if the Blue Jackets can play a style similar to the Wild, Evason said:

"Coming here, everybody talks about our young skill," Evason said. "I see more bite in our game than people give us credit for.

"That doesn't mean we're running around hitting people. We're going to put pressure on teams. If you want to label what I do, I want high-intensity hockey all over the ice. Playing with pressure, putting heat on people and playing a fast, hard game."

Fantilli looks powerful

For months, the Blue Jackets have said Adam Fantilli was back to 100 percent and would be ready for the start of training camp after suffering a lacerated calf coming out of a hit in late January. It's a big muscle that takes a long time to heal.

But it has been reassuring to see Fantilli skate with so much power in the early days of training camp. He looks bigger, stronger and still as quick as he was as a rookie.

Fantilli will carry a big role this season for the Blue Jackets, likely as the No. 2 center with van Riemsdyk or Johnson on one side of him, and Yegor Chinakhov or Dmitry Voronkov on the other. He'll also be a power-play stalwart.

The Blue Jackets felt incredibly fortunate Fantilli fell to them at No. 3 at the draft two years ago. Of all the young prospects, he's probably the one who has the most superstar-like attributes. It's going to be really interesting to see his development this season.

Mateychuk ... so smooth

The Blue Jackets' two practice groups — one for the likely NHL club, one for the AHL club — make it pretty clear the expectation is for defenseman Denton Mateychuk to start his career with AHL Cleveland.

There's no shame in that, of course, and that's not by any means a done deal. Write this down: Mateychuk will be a very difficult player to cut, and if it comes to that it will likely be due to GM Don Waddell's strong preference to have young players develop slowly.

It's not clear what Mateychuk's ceiling is, at least not to these eyes. Is he going to be a major goal-scorer and point producer, an NHL All-Star, etc? I wouldn't rule that out. But he's going to play in the NHL a long time and he's going to log heavy minutes.

You can tell that his mother, Keela, is a skating coach. There's no wasted energy in his stride. He makes so many short, quick, smart passes out of his own zone. There will be an adjustment to the size and speed of opponents in the NHL, but his game looks closer to ready already.

12th forward spot

The Blue Jackets are looking for a 12th and 13th forward in camp, especially if Justin Danforth (wrist) is not ready by opening night.

Waddell is still trying to add a player, and while the trade market might be cold, the waiver wire is just getting ready to roll. That's an obvious route for Waddell at some point over the next two weeks to add a little depth to his forward group.

The leading in-house candidates (our observation, not necessarily the club's) are Owen Sillinger, James Malatesta, Luca Del Bel Belluz and Dylan Gambrell, who has (by far) the most NHL experience of anybody in that group.

Sillinger would be a great story, of course. The older brother of Cole Sillinger has played his way from an AHL-only contract in Cleveland to a two-way deal. Imagine a third member of the Sillinger family suiting up for the Blue Jackets.

Smaller camp

The Blue Jackets had 73(!) players on their initial training-camp roster last season. They had 68 in 2022 and 67 in 2021. It required three dressing rooms, three groups and entire days at the rink during the first few days of training camp.

Waddell and Evason, both new to the organization this summer, wanted a much smaller group in camp for two main reasons.

First: "It's a lot easier for us, myself in particular, to get to know the guys," Evason said. "You want to touch on every guy. It's a little easier with 50-some than 70."

And second: It's hard to run drills at an NHL pace and skill level with — how to say this nicely? — players who just aren't able to keep the pace.

This year they invited only free-agent invites from the group that participated in the NHL prospects challenge in Buffalo. In the past, almost every player on that roster would stick around in Columbus for at least a few days.

After forward Luca Pinelli was loaned back to his junior club on Thursday, the Jackets have 47 players in camp.

Jiříček's opportunity

Since the start of training camp, defenseman David Jiříček has skated on the right side of veteran Ivan Provorov in practices, suggesting the Blue Jackets see him filling a top-four role this season. That must be music to Jiříček's ears after a frustrating 2023-24 season.

Nothing is guaranteed, of course, but Jiříček will play in his second preseason game on Friday in Washington, likely paired with Jordan Harris.

There are some who believe Mateychuk is a more developed player than Jiříček, but Jiříček has played 131 pro games (84 in the AHL, 47 in the NHL). Basically, it's time.

"He's still learning some of his decision-making, when to go and when not to go," said assistant coach Mike Haviland, who coached Jiříček the past two seasons with AHL Cleveland before joining the NHL staff this summer. "The reads are something that obviously have to be made at a quicker pace at this level, and he's got to continue to work on that. His instincts are there. It's just fitting that into a structure."

It used to be said of long-ago Jackets defenseman Rostislav Klesla that he "doesn't sniff danger." Jiříček seems to have the same affliction in his own zone.

But Haviland knows this, too:

“He’s a gamer,” he said. “I really believe that. We saw that last year in our playoff stretch in Cleveland. He played great.”

Elick leaves a mark

The Blue Jackets have already sent 2024 No. 36 pick Charlie Elick packing.

On Tuesday, Elick, a defenseman, was returned to the Brandon Wheat Kings of the Western Hockey League as one of the early cuts of camp. But you’ve not heard the last of him.

The Calgary native is 6-4, 205 pounds, and he doesn’t turn 19 until mid-January. But he looked up to the task in his first NHL camp, and he was a physical force in his first and only preseason game Monday in Buffalo.

Elick nearly ignited the Sabres early with an open-ice hit on center Tage Thompson, who is mammoth. And even as they chased him around the ice, Elick kept playing his style, finishing checks, clearing the net-front and so on.

“That’s just carried over from the rookie games,” Evason said. “They told us that that’s exactly how he played there. He just carried it over, and that’s why he was noticeable in his hockey game. He threw himself out there. He was aggressive.

“We talked to the group, that if you’re going to make mistakes, make aggressive ones. That’s how he plays. That’s why he showed really well.”

Dumais is not present

One of the Blue Jackets’ more anticipated prospects has been Jordan Dumais, who lit up the QMJHL last season before a lingering hip injury convinced him to stop playing and get it fixed so it wouldn’t interrupt the start of his pro career.

The Blue Jackets aren’t saying much. And neither is Dumais’ agent, Allain Roy. But Dumais hasn’t been present in Columbus during training camp and there’s no public ETA, either.

Waddell would only say that Dumais is in Montreal getting treatment.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Cole and Owen Sillinger may soon be NHL teammates

By Aaron Portzline- September 29, 2024

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

Item No. 1: The Brothers Sillinger

Before last season, Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger changed his sweater number from 34 to 4. This season, he may have to change his nameplate by adding a first initial.

Owen Sillinger, the eldest of three Sillinger sons, has never been closer to the NHL after signing a two-way contract with the Blue Jackets on July 1.

The 27-year-old is in a battle for the final roster spot among Blue Jackets forwards, and you could say he's earned an inside track to the job. Since the start of camp, including Saturday's preseason win over Buffalo, he's skated on the left side of the fourth line with veteran center Sean Kuraly and right winger Mathieu Olivier.

"This is my first camp on an NHL contract, and I've put a lot of hard work into this, especially with the year we had last year in (AHL) Cleveland," Owen said. "There's a lot there for me to build off, absolutely. I came into camp, and it's been exciting to see the opportunity. But things change all the time."

Nobody is more excited about this than Cole, who is six years younger than Owen. The two played together toward the end of the 2022-23 season after Cole was sent to the AHL while struggling in his sophomore NHL season.

"It's both of our dreams to play with each other at the highest level," Cole said. "But we're both just trying to stay in the moment and focus on what's in front of us."

"But my focus this camp, honestly, has been a little bit on (Owen), too. I want to see him do well, so it's 'How is he playing? How's he feeling?' We're living together, so after practices or games, we come home together and just kind of decompress and hang out together. It's been nice."

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has been keeping one eye on his club and the other on the rest of the league, still hoping to add a veteran forward through trade or on the waiver wire. The next 10 days or so will be crucial in that pursuit; with veteran Justin Danforth nursing a wrist injury, there are likely two roster spots available.

And if Owen doesn't make the roster out of camp, he'd be on the short list of call-ups as the season moves along, especially since Waddell insists on not rushing prospects to the NHL before they're ready. He has adequate speed, adequate size (5-foot-10, 183 pounds) and is defensively reliable.

"It'd be a good story," Waddell said. "You're 100 percent right, though, I love a good story, but they have to be stories that benefit our hockey team and help us win games."

"(Owen) did a good job killing penalties the other night. He's been fine. Put it this way: We haven't talked about him being one of the guys to go down to Cleveland yet."

While Cole Sillinger was playing as a top prospect in the Western Hockey League and United States Hockey League, Owen was grinding away for four seasons at Bemidji State in Bemidji, Minn., about a four-hour drive north of Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Owen signed an AHL-only deal with Cleveland after college, spending the last two-plus seasons just a 2 1/2-hour drive from his brother. He's been the model of consistency for the Monsters, with 11-25-36 in 2022-23 and 11-29-40 last season. Cleveland made it to the AHL's conference semifinals last spring.

"It's just confidence and maturity," he said. "I came from college playing 30-36 games a season and it's a big jump to pro."

There have been 47 sets of brothers who have played NHL games together on the same team, though it has yet to happen in Columbus.

During the 2011-12 season, Kris Russell and his twin brother, Ryan, played for the Blue Jackets, but Kris was traded to St. Louis in early November and Ryan made his NHL debut in January.

Item No. 2: Severson settles in

Even in a perfect scenario, last season would have been a challenging adjustment for veteran defenseman Damon Severson, who signed an eight-year, \$50 million contract in a sign-and-trade between the New Jersey Devils and Blue Jackets last summer.

But it wasn't a perfect scenario.

Four days before the start of training camp, the Blue Jackets fired coach Mike Babcock for coaxing players to share personal photos with him in an effort, he said, to get to know them. Then, three games into his Columbus career, Severson was benched by coach Pascal Vincent, an ominous sign for a player signed through 2030-31.

"I'd never been through it before, changing teams like that with a new contract and expectations," Severson said. "I was in New Jersey for a long time, and now it's a new world and it was a bit of a challenge at the start. That's nobody's fault, it's just natural.

"They paid you all this money, gave you all this team, and you try to fulfill it all in one day. In my head, I'm saying, 'That's not how it works, just be yourself.' But then, man, you end up really overdoing it. I caught myself a couple of times last season overdoing it, for sure."

Severson started to play much better as last season progressed, finishing with 9-19-28 in 67 games. He also drew rave reviews for his play for Team Canada this spring at the IIHF World Championship in Prague and Ostrava, Czechia.

Since the start of training camp, new Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason has played Severson on the right side of the top defensive pair next to Zach Werenski. It's a comfortable spot, Severson said.

"Z and I have spent a lot of time together on and off the ice over the last year," Severson said. "His fiancee and my wife are very tight now, so it all just kind of clicks. We live in the same area (New Albany) and we think the game similar. We both like to move our feet and move the puck."

In Saturday's 6-3 win over Buffalo, Severson played 22:36 and had an assist and a plus-2 rating. He also played the point on the second power-play unit. Werenski operates the top unit.

Severson is setting up to have a bounce-back season. He had a career-high 46 points (11-35-46) with the Devils just two years ago.

"It's a much more comfortable situation here for me a year later, absolutely," Severson said. "Not a great start last season, but I'm hoping it goes much better this time. And I think it will. I've felt really good throughout camp and in the preseason."

Item No. 3: Dumais awaits surgery

For the second time in less than nine months, Blue Jackets prospect forward Jordan Dumais is awaiting hernia surgery, which will likely keep him off the ice until at least mid-January.

Dumais had surgery on Jan. 19, 2024, in Columbus to fix a hernia, the Blue Jackets announced last winter. But Dumais complained of further discomfort this summer at the club's development camp in Nationwide Arena, where he was a limited participant.

"We sent him to see a specialist in New York, who confirmed it," Waddell said.

The surgery has been delayed because Dumais has been battling an illness, Waddell said. He declined to give any further specifics but said he believes it will be resolved soon, allowing for the surgery.

"They think it'll be a three-month recovery," Waddell said. "If he has (surgery) next week, it could be mid-January (before Dumais returns).

"He hasn't had too many good breaks lately."

Dumais said he tried to "tough it out" for Team Canada at the World Junior Championship last December and January, but that hip and abdominal injuries left him "barely able to skate." He had just one goal and one assist in five games, then had surgery about two weeks later.

The now 20-year-old hasn't played competitive hockey since.

He had been cleared to resume play last spring with his junior club, the Halifax Mooseheads of the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League, but was suspended five games by the club in March after he was charged with impaired driving.

He has pleaded not guilty and has a tentative trial date set for June 27, 2025.

Dumais, a third-round pick (No. 94) in 2022, had a dynamic junior career in Halifax, including a 2022-23 season in which he had 54-86-140 in only 64 games. The only player in major junior with more points that season was Connor Bedard, the future No. 1 pick by Chicago.

Waddell said Dumais is in Montreal, where he'll have the surgery and recover near family. When he's cleared to play, he'll join AHL Cleveland to make his pro debut.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- As of today, the Blue Jackets are down to 36 players in camp — 23 forwards, 10 defensemen, three goaltenders — with two back-to-backs on the preseason schedule this week: Monday (vs. Washington) and Tuesday (at St. Louis), and Thursday (vs. Pittsburgh) and Friday (at Pittsburgh). The roster cuts may continue, Evason noted, because players who have been sent to AHL Cleveland camp (which opens Monday) can be recalled to play preseason games. Two of those 23 forwards — Cayden Lindstrom (back) and Justin Danforth (wrist) — are not skating with the group.
- The NHL and NHL Players' Association will likely provide guidance to the Blue Jackets this week regarding what their salary-cap floor will be for the coming season, the league told The Athletic. The league and the union have been working toward a remedy after the tragic death of left winger Johnny Gaudreau last month left the Jackets below the league floor of \$65 million. Their current projected lineup would leave them at \$61.7 million, more than \$3 million below the floor.
- An unfortunate sight in Montreal on Saturday: Patrik Laine, gearing up for his first season in Montreal, had to be helped off the ice after suffering an apparent left knee injury in a collision with Toronto's Cedric Pare. Laine played in less than 60 percent of the Blue Jackets' games during his time in Columbus and now may start his time with the Canadiens on the shelf. Montreal coach Martin St. Louis did not provide an update after last night's game.

- Here's your Sunday Gathering trivia question for the week: Owen Sillinger, at 27, would be one of the older players to make his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets, but he wouldn't be the oldest. Not even close, actually. Can you name the oldest player to make his NHL debut with the Jackets?
- Friday's preseason game in Washington was nearly canceled due to the Blue Jackets' travel woes getting out of Columbus. First came mechanical problems with the charter flight, delaying the scheduled 2:30 p.m. takeoff. Then came the nasty winds and rain — the remnants of Hurricane Helene — that suspended traffic temporarily at John Glenn International. They finally took off around 5:30 p.m. and landed around 6:30 p.m., making it from Dulles International to Capital One Arena in about 40 minutes, a minor miracle given D.C.'s traffic. "They (the Caps) didn't want to start the game past 8:30 p.m.," Waddell said. "We got to the rink at 7:20. The equipment truck made it at 7:30. We took warmups at 8." The puck dropped at 8:39 p.m.
- So with that kind of trouble getting started, you had to wonder how the Blue Jackets might have played on Friday. An 8-4 win over Washington's mostly NHL lineup, including a hat trick from Adam Fantilli, was a pleasant surprise. "We were excited to play, especially the young guys," Waddell said. "On a day like that, you get to the rink and you play. You don't have to sit around for 2 1/2 hours. Forget the score. The score is the score. We were the better team, and let's face it, they probably had the better lineup."
- Waddell was asked what has stood out to him over the first week-plus of training camp, including the four preseason games. "Probably the atmosphere in the room," he said. "It's been very, very good. The energy that Dean wants ... he doesn't ask a lot, but you're out there for an hour or a little more than an hour for practice, he wants you to be a committed hockey player. We talked about it (Friday night) on the plane (home from Washington) and that's what we've had so far. That's been really good to see."
- Trivia answer: Goaltender Fredrik Norrena, at 32 years, 10 months and 16 days, is the oldest player to make his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets. On Oct. 14, 2006, he came on in relief of Pascal Leclaire in an eventual 5-0 loss to the Minnesota Wild.
- The Blue Jackets followed Friday's win in Washington with a 6-3 win over Buffalo at home on Saturday. Many of the players in the lineup didn't get home from D.C. until nearly 2 a.m. on Friday. You have to love Evason's response after Saturday's game when he was teed up with a great opportunity to laud his troops for their resilience and fortitude: "It's not that hard," he said. "They get a nap and they get a really great meal and they play hockey. It's awesome. The attitude that we want all of our guys to have is 'What else would I want to do tonight?'"

[BlueJackets.com / For Owen Sillinger, camp is the chance of a lifetime](#)

By Garrison McDaniel-September 30, 2024

The Blue Jackets' opening night roster is up to speculation at this point in training camp, and the fourth-line left wing spot is one of the more intriguing ones that is up for grabs.

A wrist injury suffered by Justin Danforth has opened up a spot on the fourth line, with Owen Sillinger and Dylan Gambrell lining up the most in training camp alongside veterans Sean Kuraly and Mathieu Olivier.

Sillinger is a familiar face, spending the last three seasons with team's top affiliate in Cleveland. Now, he has an opportunity to break through and join his brother, Cole, in the NHL.

Now 27 years old, Owen Sillinger signed his first contract with an NHL team during this offseason and said it was a big moment for him and his family.

"To sign that deal on July 1 here with Columbus is massive," he said. "I was very excited. My family is proud of myself, and I was proud of myself as well."

Going into this preseason, he was determined to do everything he could to stay in Columbus for the regular season.

"I'm just trying to do everything I can day by day. Soak in all the details, soak up all the knowledge," Sillinger said. "Lean on my peers, lean on my teammates and just do the best I can."

This includes him showcasing his versatility on the ice. In training camp, he has played in both the left wing spot and as a center. He said in recent years that was something he had to get used to with the Monsters.

"I'm comfortable in all three positions up front there," Sillinger said. "For the past three seasons I've been playing pro, I've been all over the map, as far as left wing, center, right wing. It doesn't really matter to me. I feel like I can play anywhere from the first line to the fourth line. Seriously, whatever the team needs me to do to win hockey games."

A season ago, Sillinger was a major contributor to the Monsters' Calder Cup playoff run as he helped lead them to Game 7 of the Eastern Conference final. He finished with three goals – including two game-winning tallies in the opening series win vs. Belleville – and three assists in 14 games.

Sillinger said that he learned a lot during the postseason and it helped further his game.

"It was just maturity, with puck decisions and what you can and can't get away with," he said. "Learning how to win hockey games, learning how to win games 2-1 and 1-0."

Sillinger certainly comes from a hockey family – in addition to Cole, his father, Mike, played 17 NHL seasons and his brother, Lukas, is a senior at Arizona State – but his road to an NHL contract was a long one. After three seasons with Penticton of the BCHL, he played four years of NCAA hockey at Bemidji State – two of them with Lukas – and was one of the top scorers in college as a senior with 47 points in 39 games.

He then signed with the Monsters and has been a mainstay in Cleveland since, scoring 11 goals with 40 points a season ago. He also brings a physical nature, tying for the CBJ lead in Saturday night's preseason game with five hits.

While he's had the opportunity to play preseason games with Cole before and the two were Monsters teammates in 2022-23, this year is his best chance to join Cole full-time in the NHL.

"It's obviously pretty special," Owen said. "Cole is my brother, my friend, and hopefully he's gonna be my teammate here pretty soon. We just kind of allow each other to make mistakes and learn from each other and learn from our teammates."

Cole Sillinger echoed his brother's thoughts about how he is excited for the day they get to share the ice for a regular season NHL game.

"It's what we've dreamed of to hopefully play together in the NHL one day," Cole said. "He's got a great opportunity for that. He's working extremely hard. He's a super focused and dedicated guy, so we'll see."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan Set to Make His Preseason Debut

By Mark Scheig- September 29, 2024

Coming off of a late night 8-4 win over the Washington Capitals, the Columbus Blue Jackets return home to play in their fourth of eight preseason games. A notable debut will be taking place.

For the first time since signing a 5-year, \$27.5 million contract with the Blue Jackets in the offseason, Sean Monahan will appear in a game. The team will be utilizing a mostly NHL roster against the Sabres.

Monahan will center a line with Boone Jenner on his left and Kirill Marchenko on his right. Here was how the lines looked at the morning skate.

- Boone Jenner-Sean Monahan-Kirill Marchenko
- James van Riemsdyk-Adam Fantilli-Dmitri Voronkov
- Yegor Chinakhov-Cole Sillinger-Kent Johnson
- Owen Sillinger-Sean Kuraly-Mathieu Olivier
- Zach Werenski-Damon Severson
- Ivan Provorov-David Jiricek
- Jake Christiansen-Erik Gudbranson
- Elvis Merzlikins in starter's crease. Jet Greaves backing up.

Monahan Excited to Play With His Linemates

Monahan has done nothing but put in practice since Training Camp started. From the outset, he's centered Jenner and Marchenko. He's excited to finally get his chance in a game.

"I'm excited to get some reps in," Monahan said. "I feel like it's been a lot of practices. I'm excited to play."

Monahan has spent the time in practice learning about his linemates and their style. They each bring a little something different to the table. With Jenner, there is some similarity in the way they play.

"He's a smart player," Monahan said of Jenner. "He's harder on the net and strong in the faceoff circle. He thinks the game at a high level and competes really hard."

On the other side is Marchenko, who brings energy and pace. Monahan believes he fits well on the line as someone who can create plays and finish.

"He brings energy. He can shoot the puck. He's skilled," Monahan said of Marchenko. "He wants the pucks and wants to make plays. So I think anytime you're playing with a guy like that, it brings a sense of energy and excitement every time you jump over the boards."

That excitement for Monahan carries over to the rest of the team. Now that he's had an up close look at his teammates especially the depth on center, he believes they will be capable of scoring goals.

"I think it's a lot of smart players. We've got enough offensive talent where I think we're going to be able to score goals. I think we got to push each other down the middle to be consistent every night and play both ends of the puck. When you're doing that, you have a good chance every night."

Monahan Brings Leadership to Room

Head coach Dean Evason has spent his time with the Blue Jackets getting to know his players. He came in with a fresh mindset not wanting to know too much about them. He wanted to learn on his own.

So far with Monahan, it's clear what Evason has seen in the veteran.

"Leadership," Evason said of Monahan. "Pro. Conducts himself with great maturity. (I'm) really looking forward to his game tonight. He's skated with Boone and (Marchenko) for all of camp. So looking forward to seeing that chemistry continue to grow."

On top of being on the top line Saturday night, Monahan will play on the first power play unit. He was joined by Jenner, Chinakhov, Johnson and Werenski. The second unit consisted of Voronkov, Marchenko, Fantilli, van Riemsdyk and a combination of Severson/Provorov.

Monahan has liked what has transpired in this training camp so far, echoing what many other players have already said about an Evason camp.

"It's been a lot of fun," Monahan said of Evason's camp and practices. "(There's) a lot of good energy and it's a great pace out there. First and foremost, he's a great person. He keep the rink a fun place to be at. It's good structure. I like the way he thinks the game so it's an exciting opportunity here for the group we have."

Evason said that they try to get players three preseason games. With that, Monahan should get two of the remaining four preseason games after Saturday. If the early going is any indication, he seems to be settling in by the day to Columbus and with the Blue Jackets.

Monahan will get his first taste of the Cannon on Saturday night and fans will get their first look at him in a Blue Jackets' sweater. As for the Cannon, "I haven't had that yet. Yes, I'm looking forward to that."

Side Dishes

- How late of a night was it for the Blue Jackets coming home from Washington? Per the team, they landed at 1:45 A.M. Multiple players including Fantilli, Olivier, Cole Sillinger, Voronkov and Jiricek are playing Saturday after playing Friday. All were part of the morning skate.
- Speaking of Jiricek, he had to leave the morning skate early. During a power play drill, he took a stick in the mouth. Evason said some stitches would be needed but will be good to go for Saturday night.
- Here's Evason on the mindset of determining who plays in the preseason. "We have to have eight veterans, right? So it was difficult to get eight hockey games with eight veterans without taxing too much. We've got a few back-to-backs like tonight. So we've tried to spread it out as much as we could...A lot goes into it, travel, different situations. But the bottom line is we try to get everybody to play in three hockey games for sure. And then I think the most anyone's playing is six. So it's a process to put it together, I'll tell you that."
- After Saturday, the preseason will be half over. Expect some roster moves to take place with the Cleveland Monsters set to open their camp in the coming week.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Blue Jackets Thoughts Halfway Through 2024 Preseason

By Mark Scheig- September 30, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have completed half of their 2024 preseason. Feels like Training Camp just started, doesn't it? What started as 55 players is now down to 36 as of Sunday morning.

The Blue Jackets have to make 13 more cuts between now and the Oct 7 deadline to have a compliant roster. They have a four-game week upcoming to help make those final determinations.

With four games played, we thought this would be a time to reflect on what we've seen so far. While the games themselves carry a certain weight, our focus will be on what I'm seeing throughout training camp, practices and talking with members of the team.

Gaudreau at the Forefront

Let's start here. Don't get it twisted now. The Blue Jackets might be playing hockey while preparing for the 2024-25 season. But hockey takes a back seat when it comes down to the heart of the matter.

The pain of missing Johnny Gaudreau in the locker room isn't going to go anywhere, not for a long time. His jersey hangs at his stall as they said it would.

No matter where the Blue Jackets go, Johnny will be with them. Johnny would want them playing hockey. In the early going, the team is doing everything they can to honor Gaudreau whether it's on the ice or the way they conduct themselves off the ice.

There are going to be several tests throughout the season. Good days and bad days are sure to come while trying to navigate a difficult situation.

The Blue Jackets will have to face emotional moments in different cities as rightfully, pregame ceremonies will be held to honor the legacy of Johnny and Matthew. They will have to endure this on multiple occasions only to try to play a hockey game afterwards.

Give the Blue Jackets credit so far. They're handling business as best they can on the ice so they are ready for the season. But on the inside, there are multiple levels of pain the team is trying to work through.

From our perspective in the media, we are not pressing the issue on emotions. Nor should we. The sensitivity of a topic such as this requires an extra level of care. If a player wishes to speak on it, we will give them the floor. If they don't, that's perfectly acceptable.

To take it a step further, if a question surrounding the situation might come up, I will ask the player before the interview if they are comfortable answering it. If they say no, end of discussion.

In saying that, there will be times in which the topic of Gaudreau will be at the forefront. Opening night at Nationwide Arena against the Florida Panthers comes to mind. That will be a difficult night for many as that is usually the night to celebrate the opening of a season.

As Boone Jenner said during camp, there is no playbook for anything like this. It truly is a one day at a time, one moment at a time approach.

Johnny Gaudreau will never be forgotten. His presence will always be at the forefront for these Blue Jackets. They're pushing forward in the way he would want them to. That's play hockey.

Therefore, we too will do the same. That's cover hockey. Care and respect will be at the center of what we do when it comes to Gaudreau. At the end of the day, everyone deserves that.

Different Feeling Around Blue Jackets

Looking at this from a hockey sense, I cannot help but say something feels different. I can't quite put my finger on what exactly it is. Perhaps it's several somethings. But there is a different feeling around these Blue Jackets now than in recent past seasons.

The first thing that sticks out is the effect of a veteran head coach. Dean Evason has come in and started to implement the way he wants to do things.

In talking to the players throughout camp, one theme has stood out. They have all expressed how much they have enjoyed the way camp is being run. It hasn't been easy. But it has been fun and effective.

This is a stark contrast to what was expressed last season. While players would say they liked practices, the tone this season is much different. There is a genuineness to what they're saying. Let me give you a couple of examples.

- "It's been really good. We've had some great practices going over a lot of stuff. I think the practices have been good, sharp and high pace. There's been some compete and come teaching stuff. I think everything's been done with purpose. Guys are focused. Guys are ready coming into this camp." -Boone Jenner
- "Good. Really, really good. Very impressed with the coaching staff and how they're approaching things and how they're going about it. I like getting the systems right away. I feel like all our guys came in good shape this year so that's always a bonus. I feel like we're moving the puck crisp out there. I really like the flow of it all and just excited to keep it going." -Zach Werenski
- "First of all, you can clearly tell what the emphasis is based on what's happening in the first few days. I think as a player, it's a comforting thought knowing that we wasted no time getting to those important things (special teams.)" -Sean Kuraly
- "It's been very good. It's been very good. We've been moving our feet quickly. The practices have been high tempo for the first half hour which is good. They've broken it down into some system stuff for the midpoint and then a few battle drills at the end. I've really enjoyed it. It's been a solid camp." -Erik Gudbranson

It's the Blue Jackets' team leaders that are saying these things. That tells you everything you need to know about how different it feels. The rest of the team is following their lead.

The past few seasons were led by first time head coaches. This camp has been led by an experienced head coach who has four straight over .600 points percentage seasons on his resume. Results might take time to realize. But the foundation is being worked on. There's a palpable excitement within that.

Offseason Work Noticed

You saw it said above by the leadership. Players are coming to camp in great shape ready to work. Gone are the days of using camp to get into shape. The offseason is used for that now.

Elvis Merzlikins said he came to camp in great shape. Kent Johnson is noticeably stronger. Guys up and down the lineup came to camp ready to go.

The practices during camp have been at a high pace from day one. The NHL group has met the challenge of keeping it at a high pace throughout while also bringing it in recent games.

The quality of training camp coincides with the quality of the offseason. For these Blue Jackets, the work they put in during the longer offseason prepared them for what camp would be like. They're off to a good start because of consistent hard work.

We'll see how it translates in season. But though the halfway mark of training camp, it's obvious how much bigger and stronger the players are. It's been noticed by those that have had the chance to see things firsthand.

1st Ohio Battery / New And Improved? Kent Johnson Looked Like the 'KJ' Of Old In First Game Since Torn Labrum Surgery

By Will Chase- September 28, 2024

Is Kent Johnson back?

If early returns are any indication, he just may be.

The Columbus Blue Jackets won their first preseason game with a 3-0 win at home over the St. Louis Blues on Wednesday at Nationwide Arena.

Johnson had a two-point night, sealing the victory with an empty-net goal at 19:20 of the third period, and he also had an assist on Denton Mateychuk's first-period goal at 18:59.

Wednesday's contest was Johnson's first game after a torn labrum ended his season back in February. Having had surgery in March, the injury typically comes with a six-month recovery, which originally pitted him for being able to resume play right around now.

By all accounts, he looked better than ever.

In addition to a two-point night, he was plus-two with five shots on net, the latter of which tied Yegor Chinakhov for the team lead.

Ed Francis recapped the Blue Jackets' 3-0 win and provided the following on Johnson:

Kent Johnson has made Marathon-esque strides from last season. He was the best player on the ice Wednesday night — on either team. There was confidence, there was smart decision-making, and there was a sense that he was in control of the ice with and without the puck. He had the primary assist on Denton Mateychuk's first-period goal (more on him in a moment), and the empty-net goal to seal the game was well-deserved. His condition was evident, too: 18:34 of ice time was the most he'd seen since the 2022-23 season. As teammate Sean Kuraly put it: "You guys saw it for the first time with all the lights tonight. We've been seeing that for a couple weeks." This could be a breakout season for Johnson.

"I heard prior to coming here what a rink rat he was," Evason said about Johnson following Wednesday's win.

"What we really liked about him this camp is the pace that he's playing the game at. He's got tremendous stick skills obviously. He's playing the game at a fast pace. And that's not only offensively.

"That speed is very intimidating to defenseman but it's also a benefit when you're playing through the neutral zone and you're playing in the (defensive) zone so that's the type of game that we want to play as a group: Energy, aggressive, fast-paced, and he's doing it in all three zones."

The Blue Jackets continue their preseason leg in D.C. to take on the Washington Capitals on Friday night from Capital One Arena at 7:00 p.m. ET.

1st Ohio Battery / Fantilli Nets Hatty, Blue Jackets Look Sharp In 8-4 Preseason Victory Over Ovechkin, Capitals

By Ed Francis- September 29, 2024

Maybe a delayed start is a good luck charm?

Or maybe the Columbus Blue Jackets are turning a corner.

In a game that saw its start pushed back by more than an hour as a result of travel woes associated with the tropical system known as Helene, the Blue Jackets scored eight times en route to an 8-4 win over the Washington Capitals in the D.C. on Friday night.

Here are four takeaways from the Blue Jackets second straight preseason win:

- Just like after Columbus' 3-0 win over the St. Louis Blues on Wednesday night, it needs to be said again: preseason games don't count, but they do matter. This was the second straight game where the Blue Jackets seemed to show huge strides in new head coach Dean Evason's style. The Capitals had Alex Ovechkin on the ice (-3 plus/minus in 14:37 of ice time), they had their two best defenders in John Carlson and Jakob Chychrun (a combined -2 with each seeing more than 20 minutes of ice time), they had their starting goalie play the entire 60 minutes and give up six goals (the Blue Jackets had a pair of empty-netters) on 25 shots. It's not two points in the regular season standings, but don't kid yourself: the result matters.
- Adam Fantilli had a hat trick and is looking smooth, silky, comfortable, fluid, and whatever other adjective you want to use as a top-six center for the Blue Jackets. Three goals on four shots, a plus/minus of +4 as the top-line center against a veteran Capitals group, and looking every bit the role of a young leader for Columbus.
- Mathieu Olivier, who scored his second and third goals of the preseason, is the kind of player that Evason liked to utilize during his time as head coach of the Minnesota Wild. Now that he's showing a bit of a scoring touch, it may not be a lock that Olivier is a fourth-line guy anymore. He's showing third line potential and an expanded role this season looks more than possible.
- In Friday's look-ahead of the game, it was noted that the "game will also feature several forwards with a chance to make the final group, with Gavin Brindley, Dylan Gambrell, and Trey Fix-Wolansky, James Malatesta, and Mikael Pyyhtia all in the lineup." All but Dylan Gambrell made the boxscore. Gavin Brindley, who was playing on Fantilli's line, had a pair of assists. Mikael Pyyhtia had a power play goal in the second period and, like Brindley, had a multi-point night. He had an assist in the second period, as well. Trey Fix-Wolansky assisted on the power play tally from Pyyhtia, and James Malatesta had a first-period goal. None of these players are likely to be on the ice in game one of the regular season but are putting themselves in position to be the that first next-man-up when the inevitable injuries pop up.

1st Ohio Battery / Jackets Score Five Times In Third, Beat Sabres 6-3 In Preseason Contest

By Ed Francis- September 30, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets hot preseason continued at home Saturday night with a 6-3 win over the Buffalo Sabres.

Here are the takeaways from the Blue Jackets third straight preseason win:

- The big asterisk on this game was that the Sabres lineup consisted almost entirely of prospects and minor-leaguers. The main club arrived in Germany on Friday to take part in the NHL's Global Series.
- Despite the lineups — Columbus was going with a full NHL lineup — the Sabres lead the game 2-0 late into the second period. James van Riemsdyk scored with just over two minutes left in the middle period to make it 2-1, and the Blue Jackets scored four goals in a span of 4:24 in the third to take a 5-2 lead. After Buffalo made it 5-3, Cole Sillinger iced the game with an unassisted empty-netter.
- One of those four goals came from defenseman Jake Christiansen, who was jumping up into the play with frequency Saturday night and had six shots. The rest of the Columbus defense had seven combined. Christiansen is a borderline Columbus/Cleveland player, but has slowly progressed over his four years with the Blue Jackets organization and went from an undrafted prospect to someone whose NHL career still has days ahead of it.
- Van Riemsdyk and Sean Monahan combined for three goals, including a pair from Monahan in his preseason debut. The Blue Jackets will need all the scoring they can get this season, so seeing the Blue Jackets veteran offseason additions put the puck into the net was (of course) a positive.
- Adam Fantilli scored his fourth goal of the preseason and continues to show why the Blue Jackets were elated when he fell to them a third overall in the 2023 NHL Draft. He looks to be ready to have a breakout season in 2024-25.

The Athletic / Evolution of NHL goalie salaries, offer sheets and would Sidney Crosby make a great GM?

By Eric Duhatschek- September 28, 2024

As promised, today we're going to tackle a few leftover questions from last week's reader mailbag that I couldn't squeeze into either part 1 or part 2. Let's begin.

Note: Submitted questions may be edited for clarity and style.

Do you think Igor Shesterkin would take a hometown discount to stay with the Rangers? They offer him the bright lights of playing for an Original Six juggernaut that's the most popular team in the league.

In a word, no. That fact has been widely reported this week, including this offering from our Pierre LeBrun.

Goalie salaries are, and always have been, tricky to forecast. Considering their importance to a team's success, goalies tend to be undervalued. The two negotiations currently pending — Shesterkin's with the New York Rangers and Jeremy Swayman's with the Boston Bruins — could change that, in the same way that the \$4-million-a-year contract Patrick Roy got from Montreal in 1994 changed the compensation levels for goalies at the time.

That's an important historical context. If the Shesterkin camp is truly trying to reset the goalie market, they are hopefully aware that something similar happened three decades ago. Roy, who was a charismatic, in-his-prime star, jumped to \$4 million from \$1.6 million (back when Canadian teams still paid their players in Canadian dollars) and Glen Sather, who was still with the Edmonton Oilers at the time, had a funny sarcastic comment about that at the time: What happened to \$2 million or \$3 million; how did they skip past all the intermediate numbers in between to get to \$4 million?

So, back to the present ...

If you exclude Carey Price's \$10.5 contract and focus on active players, only four goalies are earning above \$6.5 million for the 2024-25 season: Sergei Bobrovsky is at \$10 million, Andrei Vasilevskiy is \$9.5 million, Connor Hellebuyck at \$8.5 million and Ilya Sorokin at \$8.25 million.

Juuse Saros' new contract with Nashville doesn't start until 2025-26. After a prolonged negotiation, that number came in at a \$7.74 million AAV for eight years. Bobrovsky got his payday in free agency; the others re-signed with their current teams. Hellebuyck's and Saros' contracts felt like hometown discounts; Vasilevskiy felt like a priced-right-for-the-market contract and Sorokin felt like an overpay, a bet on what he'll become rather than what he is.

Generally, you need to wade through what is said publicly and what is going on behind the scenes in any contract negotiation. You probably saw the quote from Shesterkin when first asked about his contract status a week ago: "I love the organization, I love the team, I love the fans," he said. "So of course it will be great to stay here, but you never know what can happen."

My instinct suggests you can take the first part of what Shesterkin said at face value: That he does love New York, the organization and the fans. You can reasonably conclude he wants to stay in New York for the long run in the same way Henrik Lundqvist did but isn't going to give away the leverage that he and his representatives have. That's the reason for "you never know what can happen."

Weirdly, hockey players seem to like to have some symmetry in their contracts — it's why all those Sidney Crosby negotiations settle exactly at \$8.7 million, a reflection of the number he wears on his

sweater. If I were mediating the Shesterkin negotiation, I would use that as a means of bringing the two sides together. If the Rangers offered to exactly double Shesterkin's current deal (\$5.666 million AAV) and make the AAV on his next one \$11.32 million, that would make him the highest-paid active goalie in the league, past Price and Bobrovsky. It would leave a little extra wiggle room for Rangers GM Chris Drury to negotiate all the other contracts eventually coming across his desk, which Peter Baugh nicely summarizes here.

With the rising cap, the marketplace is evolving fast. That's often when teams can make mistakes they'll eventually regret. If Shesterkin is prepared to go to market and leave New York to extract a few extra dollars out of another team, that's his right. Logically, though, there's a deal to be made here. If there's a willingness on both sides to negotiate a resolution — as there was with Saros in Nashville — common ground can usually be found.

The Blues' offer sheets for Edmonton's Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg remind us how rare offer sheets are in the NHL. But the rarity seems to be that the player signs them — only then does the offer sheet process become "real" and public. Is it known how often teams extend offer sheets that the RFAs don't sign?

Anecdotally, there's always been speculation about when a player ponders an offer sheet but ultimately decides it's in his best interest not to go down that path. In today's ultra-speculative media environment, where almost all gossip relating to contracts eventually leaks out, there's a reason why teams, agents and the players themselves keep these overtures as quiet as possible.

Think about how complicated and fraught the process really is — beginning with the player himself, who needs to go into the exercise with his eyes wide open. If he signs an offer sheet, he knows it can permanently fracture the relationship with his current team. He has to be fully prepared to move on, even if his current team matches. Since they usually do, he then has to deal with the consequences — of sending a signal that you were ready to leave for a better financial offer. Hockey's team-first culture can get in the way here.

It really does go case by case and individual by individual. I would suggest in the case of Broberg and Holloway, it was both money and opportunity that convinced them this was the way to go. And the sacrifice was their chances of winning a championship in 2025 are reduced. Edmonton is closer than St. Louis. Those are the decisions the players make with family and representatives. Most overtures die early because of the complexity of the process. Some get to the talking stages and then peter out. Once in a while, the player, the agent and the team trying to poach the player are aligned — and you get the scenario we saw unfold this summer with the Blues, Holloway and Broberg.

Now, the next question is, does this set a precedent? Offer sheets have rarely occurred in the past because of a general don't-rock-the-boat operating sentiment among NHL general managers. The fact that St. Louis, piloted by a veteran GM in Doug Armstrong, went against what had been the prevailing practice, seems to have opened the door, for a particular type of offer sheet, involving players where the draft-choice compensation isn't onerous.

If you look at the number of times a second- or a third-round pick actually hits as a legitimate NHL player and then compare that to the possible value Broberg and Holloway, a pair of former first-rounders, could potentially provide St. Louis, it seemed like a low-risk, high-reward play.

But it will only change NHL behavior patterns if it's a successful outcome for St. Louis.

If Broberg and Holloway thrive with the Blues, then the cost of draft choice compensation will be seen as minuscule. But there are no guarantees, either. If they settle in as average NHLers, it might be seen as much ado about nothing.

That's happened in Carolina when it signed Jesperi Kotkaniemi away from Montreal in a tit-for-tat move for the Aho signing — and you could argue that decision ultimately backfired on the Hurricanes because they overpaid for a player who has 99 points in 227 career games in Carolina.

To coax Kotkaniemi into signing, the Hurricanes wildly overpaid on a one-year deal. Officially, it came in at \$6.100,035 million. (Yeah, another oddly abstract figure.) Even though his performance in the first season was decidedly lackluster (29 points in 66 games), the Hurricanes doubled down on Kotkaniemi and subsequently signed him to an eight-year, \$38.56 million extension that carries a \$4.82 million AAV.

Since that contract didn't come close to reflecting his performance that year, it felt at the time as if there'd been an unwritten understanding that the Hurricanes would take care of him down the road if he agreed to join them. Carolina's position was defensible, too: Kotkaniemi was a high draft choice, No. 3 in 2018. Given that draft pedigree and the fact he was just turning 21 the summer he signed in Carolina, the expectation was that he would ultimately evolve into a high-end NHL player. Reasonable thinking at the time, though in point of fact, that has not happened.

Will Broberg and Holloway thrive with the Blues in ways that Kotkaniemi didn't (or hasn't yet) in Carolina? Or will there be some buyer's remorse ultimately if they don't? Only time will tell.

But here's the other factor that leads me to believe this situation was unique and probably won't be duplicated any time soon: In the end, Edmonton left itself vulnerable because of its offseason cap position. My best guess is that — in the future — any team that finds itself similarly at risk will be more careful in free agency and not leave itself as exposed as the Oilers did. Which suggests to me this was probably an aberration and not a genuine shift in how teams do business going forward.

Why did Calgary give up on Oliver Kylington and sign Jake Bean for more money and term? Is Bean that much better than Kylington?

My understanding is it had to do with both term and timing. Calgary wanted to sign Kylington to a one-year extension so that he could get a full NHL season under his belt and then both sides could evaluate the future at that juncture. Kylington was hoping to get a multi-year deal and decided to go to the market in pursuit of that.

Calgary didn't want to wait to see how that played and turned to Bean, who has had an up-and-down time career but starred for the local junior squad, the WHL's Hitmen, which is how he came to be a high first-round draft choice in the first place (No. 14 in 2016).

Calgary did have to go the extra year on Bean to secure his services and did so for an amount — \$1.75 million — that exceeded what they would have had to pay Kylington. It's a bet on Bean finding his NHL stride at the age of 26 in an organization that has a crying need for an offensive defenseman. Kylington ultimately couldn't find a team willing to go more than a year and thus took a \$1.05 million offer from Colorado, which also signed Erik Brannstrom to a one-year contract for just \$900,000. Maybe one and maybe both find a home with the perennial Cup challengers.

For their part, the Avalanche needed as many bargains as they could find at the bottom of their roster because, at some point, they may need to find the salary-cap space for Gabriel Landeskog (\$7 million AAV) and Valeri Nichushkin (\$6.125 million). Nichushkin is in stage 3 of the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program and currently serving a six-month suspension that ends in mid-November. Landeskog hasn't played in two years and is recovering from a knee cartilage transplant in 2023 but is also expected to play at some point early in the season. So, there'll be some hoops to jump through once the season gets underway — and in the meantime, finding serviceable players at or near the league minimum is essential in managing the cap as they work their way through the season.

Which NHL player currently playing in the league could you see being a great GM?

The first name that came to mind was Crosby's. But let's review what we're seeing in terms of NHL GM hires of late. Once upon a time, those jobs frequently went to ex-players. Nowadays, more and more often, you see teams consider GM candidates from elsewhere in the hockey world, and most notably, from the player-agent ranks: Bill Zito in Florida, Kent Hughes in Montreal, Jeff Jackson in Edmonton until he kicked himself upstairs and hired Stan Bowman.

So much of the job today is negotiating salaries — which agents do all the time — and figuring your way around the salary cap.

Some former players who became GMs were star players themselves: Ron Francis in Seattle, Steve Yzerman in Detroit, Rob Blake in Los Angeles. Most were decent players to journeymen who saw themselves as hockey lifers and were prepared to work their way up the ladder to become GMs: Danny Briere in Philadelphia, Mike Grier in San Jose, Tom Fitzgerald in New Jersey. Ultimately, it comes down to a post-career choice.

I asked Paul Kariya about this once because he's the sort of intelligent and thoughtful person who could do any job in hockey — commissioner, head of player safety, GM. His answer was if you take one of those jobs, you have to be all in because the jobs tend to be 24/7 pressure cookers. That wasn't for Kariya, at least not then.

So, Crosby ...

He just gets hockey. He lives and breathes the game. He's smart. He's canny. The learning curve likely wouldn't be too long. It's just a matter of what he wants to do when his playing career ends — stay in the game or distance himself from it. And if you stay in, do you do it on a part-time, consulting basis, which lets you keep a toe in the water without fully submerging yourself in it? Or go full-time, which is a lifestyle decision? If Crosby wanted to do the latter, I'm convinced he'd be a great manager in the same way he's been a sensational player.

The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal- September 29, 2024

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers every day. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

Saturday, Sept. 28

Grigori Denisenko, LW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 15 by Florida in 2018, Denisenko's initial transition to North American pro hockey was bumpy. The skilled but slightly undersized winger produced at a solid but unspectacular clip in the AHL through three seasons between 2020-21 and 2022-23 and struggled during his brief opportunities with the Panthers in the NHL. Vegas claimed him off waivers last fall.

Denisenko, 24, took a significant step in the AHL last year, producing 56 points in 65 games, although he still couldn't stick in the NHL, as he went pointless in six games for the Golden Knights. Denisenko is a crafty, slick offensive creator and the step forward he took last season could be a sign that he still has some untapped upside.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jonathan Aspirot (Flames), Clark Bishop (Flames), Keaton Middleton (Avalanche), Wyatt Aamodt (Avalanche), Kevin Mandolese (Avalanche), Maxime Lajoie (Kraken), Anthony Angello (Predators), Kevin Gravel (Predators), Jake Lucchini (Predators), Tyce Thompson (Islanders), Egor Sokolov (Utah), Callahan Burke (Golden Knights), Mason Geertsen (Golden Knights), Dysin Mayo (Golden Knights), Gage Quinney (Golden Knights), Robert Hagg (Golden Knights), Mason Morelli (Golden Knights), Ethen Frank (Capitals), Riley Sutter (Capitals), Alex Limoges (Capitals), Chase Priskie (Capitals), Hardy Häman Aktell (Capitals)

Friday, Sept. 27

Ronnie Attard, RHD, Philadelphia Flyers

Attard has played games in each of the last three NHL seasons but hasn't broken through yet as a full-time player. He's a big right-shot with good offensive skills and can play both ways due to his frame and compete. He isn't an amazing skater, though, and his decision making has given him issues over the years.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Louie Belpedio (Flyers), Rhett Gardner (Flyers), Hayden Hodgson (Senators), Cole Reinhardt (Senators), Jamieson Rees (Senators), Garrett Pilon (Senators), Nikolas Matinpalo (Senators), Maxence Guenette (Senators), Jeremy Davies (Senators), Luke Henman (Kraken), Nikolas Brouillard (Kraken), Zach Sawchenko (Blue Jackets), Jake Leschyshyn (Rangers), Ben Harpur (Rangers), Alex Belzile (Rangers)

The Athletic / Each NHL team's biggest breakout candidate for the 2024-25 season

By The Athletic NHL Staff- September 29, 2024

Plenty of players show up at NHL training camps every year thinking this is the year.

The year they make the team or become an everyday player or make it onto a scoring line. The year they make the leap.

With the regular season right around the corner, fantasy drafts scheduled and optimism booming, who are the players best positioned to make it happen in 2024-25?

The Athletic asked its NHL staff for their predictions: one breakout candidate for each team. Here are their answers.

Anaheim Ducks

Leo Carlsson, C: This feels like an easy call. In Year 1, the Ducks started out 19-year-old Carlsson with a game-management plan, and he sat out occasionally. There also were the trials of a knee sprain and a concussion that caused him to miss additional games. When he played, however, Carlsson showed the kind of skating, vision and playmaking that had Anaheim deploying him as a first-line center. He had 29 points in 55 games. Now with Cutter Gauthier beside him as a talented goal scorer and expected to play with other top Ducks offensive talent on the power play, Carlsson could easily double his production in Year 2 if he stays healthy. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Matt Poitras, C/RW: Poitras is rebooting after shoulder surgery cut short his 2023-24 — a season which he wasn't even expected to spend with the Bruins. Now at 20, eight pounds heavier, healed from his procedure and more confident after his pro season, Poitras is ready to take the next step. He is a natural center. But the Bruins will try him at No. 2 right wing behind David Pastrnak. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Jack Quinn, RW: Quinn was fifth in the NHL in points per 60 minutes at five-on-five last season. The problem was he only played in 27 games because of two significant injuries. Now fully healthy and with a spot on the top power play, Quinn is set to take a big step forward for the Sabres. Buffalo was a different team with Quinn in the lineup last season, and his absence is a major reason the offense regressed the way it did. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Connor Zary, LW: Zary began last season in the AHL, but when the Flames desperately needed youth and speed in their lineup, he was given a chance and made an instant impact. He's now the front-runner to start the season alongside Mikael Backlund and Blake Coleman, two of the Flames' most reliable and hardworking forwards. Zary's skill and pace could make up for the loss of Andrew Mangiapane's work as a secondary scorer. In a year where many fans will look for young players to progress, Zary's star has a chance at burning the brightest. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Pyotr Kochetkov, G: The time is now for Kochetkov, who is in the second year of a four-year extension that costs the Hurricanes just \$2 million against the cap. With Frederik Andersen in the final year of his

deal and Kochetkov entering his prime, Carolina needs to find out if he can be at the top of its goalie tandem for the next few years. The Hurricanes — under coach Rod Brind'Amour — have a history of making goalies look good and Kochetkov should be next in line for that bump. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Lukas Reichel, RW: Other than Connor Bedard, Reichel is the only other forward under 23 who probably sticks with the Blackhawks all season. Reichel failed to meet expectations last season. He and the Blackhawks are hopeful this season will be different. He's probably going to get a top-six opportunity out of the gate. We'll see what he does with it. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche

Justus Annunen, G: Annunen was excellent in 12 starts last season, and the 24-year-old should get an increased workload this year. Alexandar Georgiev has played 125 games over the last two seasons, second most in the NHL and only one behind the reigning Vezina winner Connor Hellebuyck. That's too many for Georgiev, and Annunen proved last season he's more than capable of taking more games. His .928 save percentage was second-highest in the league, albeit in a small sample, and his 13.37 goals saved above expected ranked 21st. Expect him to see more opportunities, and thrive. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

Adam Fantilli, C: Fantilli, the No. 3 draft pick in 2023, was just beginning to launch when he suffered a season-ending injury on Jan. 28. Fantilli's left calf was lacerated when he kicked awkwardly in the back of the leg coming out of a check along the wall. He totaled 12-15-27 through 49 games but had started to settle in as the second-line center. Look for Fantilli to play a similar role this season, and so far early in camp, he's played with wingers James van Riemsdyk and Yegor Chinakhov. He's also going to eat plenty of power-play minutes. The Blue Jackets' ability to simply compete in the NHL this season likely hinges on the development of their young talent, and Fantilli is a big part of that. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars

Mavrik Bourque, C: Two years ago, it was Wyatt Johnston who burst onto the scene as a 19-year-old. Last year, it was Logan Stankoven at age 21 and Thomas Harley at 22. Now it's Bourque's turn. The reigning AHL scoring champ (26 goals, 51 assists) only played two games with the Stars last season — one in the regular season, the other in Game 6 of the Western Conference final — but he'll likely find himself in the Stars' top nine following the departures of Joe Pavelski and Ty Dellandrea. Early in camp, he's found himself centering Jamie Benn and Stankoven, a tantalizing mix of youth, scoring and savvy. No franchise has put young players in a better position to succeed than the Stars, and Bourque will be the latest to take advantage. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings

Simon Edvinsson, D: Edvinsson came up late last season and made a positive impact for the Red Wings in a playoff chase that came up just short. Now, he's slated for a full-time role in the top four where he should be able to use his long reach and skating to help kill plays and evade trouble on the breakout. Edvinsson may not pile up big offensive numbers right away, without a clear power-play spot, but if he can help tilt the ice more in Detroit's favor he could be a major factor in its quest to turn the corner. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers

Ty Emberson, D: The Oilers are a Stanley Cup-contending team filled with established stars and players who've reached their ceilings. Options are limited. The obvious answer is Emberson because, well, it has

to be. The Oilers revamped the right side of their defense behind Evan Bouchard in the offseason, moving on from Cody Ceci, Philip Broberg and Vincent Desharnais in the process. They're now counting on Emberson, acquired from San Jose for Ceci, to play a pivotal position next to Darnell Nurse despite having just 30 games of NHL experience. Whether Emberson's up for the challenge is a big question, but he's the only person who fits the bill here. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers

Mackie Samoskevich, RW: The champs are a little short on options here, and that's not a coincidence. We know what most of their guys can do. Samoskevich, though, is interesting. He crushed it in the AHL as a 21-year-old last season (44 points in his final 45 games), and it's easy to imagine him adding a pop of offensive production to the vacant spot on Florida's third line. Keep an eye on his durability, though; he's a small player (5-foot-11, 183 pounds) who's already dealing with an upper-body injury. — Sean Gentile

Los Angeles Kings

Brandt Clarke, D: Quinton Byfield's move to center could have the 22-year-old in full flight as he drives his own line, but he did have a breakout of sorts last season. Looking at this year, the conditions are ripe for Clarke to have a breakout season. The ankle injury to Drew Doughty could have him getting more power-play time than what was initially planned. And the 21-year-old Clarke, who's penciled in for a third-pairing role, could draw additional five-on-five minutes during Doughty's absence. It's fair to put Jordan Spence in here as well if he flourishes while Doughty is out. Someone else to watch for is winger Alex Laferriere, who had 12 goals as a rookie and is starting on the top line with Anze Kopitar and Adrian Kempe. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Marco Rossi, C: The 23-year-old finished second amongst NHL rookies last season with 21 goals, but team president and general manager Bill Guerin isn't sold yet, and Rossi knows it. This is a big year if he wants to force the Wild to sign him long-term. Rossi was taken at No. 9 in 2020. Look at others in his draft class: Anton Lundell was taken at No. 12 and just signed a six-year, \$30 million extension. Seth Jarvis was taken at No. 13 and just signed an eight-year, \$63.2 million extension. Cole Perfetti's contract was up, but the No. 10 pick just got a \$3.25 million AAV on a two-year deal. Dylan Holloway was taken at No. 14 and signed a two-year offer sheet with St. Louis at more than \$2.29 million. Rossi is one confident, determined player, so if he lands a top-six role this season and can get more power-play time, it's a good bet he has a stronger season. — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens

Juraj Slafkovský, RW: Over the first 81 games of his NHL career, Slafkovský put up eight goals and 17 assists. Over his next 40 games to close out last season, Slafkovský put up 16 goals and 19 assists. Over that 40-game span, Slafkovský's points-per-game rate of 0.88 was equal to Jesper Bratt, Travis Konecny, Jordan Kyrou, William Karlsson and Vincent Trocheck. Just before last season ended, on March 30, he turned 20. Slafkovský begins this season with a top-line role, as a mainstay on the power play and an integral part of the Canadiens' attack. Those second-half numbers should grow organically as Slafkovský's game continues to improve. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Tommy Novak, C: There isn't a lot of room for breakout players on a team that is suddenly stocked with stars, but it looks like Novak will get every opportunity to take his game to another level — centering a line with Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault should be good for a player's production. He must,

of course, rise to the opportunity. A less-established possibility is forward Zachary L'Heureux, but he may need a bit more seasoning in Milwaukee. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Simon Nemec, D: Nemec was the No. 2 pick in 2022 and the Devils clearly believe in him, playing him in 60 games in 2023-24. Injuries forced him to play a bigger role than he was likely ready for, but that experience should help him heading into his second NHL season. The Devils also should have a stronger defensive core around him, even though Luke Hughes and possibly Brett Pesce are starting the year injured. Dougie Hamilton is back from injury and Pesce and Brenden Dillon were good adds in free agency. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Simon Holmstrom, LW: You pretty much know what you're getting with the bulk of this familiar roster. Holmstrom, the 23rd pick in the 2019 draft, is still scratching the surface. He scored 15 goals last season, the most he's scored at any level — AHL, Europe — in his career. If he can win the job as the second-line left wing alongside Brock Nelson and Kyle Palmieri, Holmstrom will have a chance to play big minutes and possibly achieve even better results than thought possible during his development years. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers

Braden Schneider, D: As a strong defensive defenseman, Schneider might not have a huge offensive output, but his responsibility has gone up each year he's been in the NHL. Now 23, the 2020 first-rounder has more than 200 games of NHL experience. Coach Peter Laviolette played him 17:32 per game this past postseason, up from 15:54 in the regular season. If Jacob Trouba moves down to the third pair, Schneider could get a chance in the top four this season. Even if he remains on the third pair, he likely should see an increase in both ice time and responsibility. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators

Shane Pinto, C: Pinto missed the first half of last season after being suspended for violating the NHL's gambling policy. He played every game after he was eligible to return and put up a solid 27 points in 41 games, which translated into a 0.66 points-per-game average, good for sixth on the team, just behind Vladimir Tarasenko. Tarasenko is no longer in Ottawa and Pinto is slotted into an attractive position, second-line center, probably between Drake Batherson and Josh Norris. Unlike last season, he's signed to a contract (two years, \$7.5 million) so the focus this year is just on hockey. A 60-point breakout season is well within his reach. — Eric Duhatschek

Philadelphia Flyers

Tyson Foerster, LW: Matvei Michkov may get the lion's share of attention when it comes to Flyers young players, especially early, but Foerster may be better equipped to truly emerge this season. Not only was Foerster the Flyers' leading goal scorer from Jan. 12 on, but he was trusted by Flyers coach John Tortorella to be on the ice in key situations late in games due to his proficient two-way play and ability to win board battles and willingness to go to the hard areas. Foerster will inevitably get big minutes in a top-six role from Day 1 this season. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

Cody Glass, RW: As of the second week of camp, veterans appear to have the confidence of coach Mike Sullivan more than prospects. Reasonable folks can agree to disagree on whether that is best for the Penguins, but it certainly positions Glass to get a chance at a career revitalization in Pittsburgh. Glass

scored 14 of his 29 career goals two seasons ago, and management views a similar season as possible in Sullivan's system. GM Kyle Dubas took a lottery ticket on Glass, a former No. 6 draft pick, hoping that Sullivan's system and being in an organization where offense is prioritized could help unlock untapped potential for Glass. Glass is likely to get a look on a third line at least to start the season. The Penguins plan to have a bigger-bodied third line that includes Glass and Kevin Hayes as the wingers. Drew O'Connor emerged from a bottom-six role to become a top-line winger by late last season. That might be a stretch for Glass, but he'll get a long look in the top nine if nothing else. — Rob Rossi

San Jose Sharks

Macklin Celebrini, C: Is it right to call someone who hasn't played an NHL regular-season game a "breakout" candidate? Sure. Is it cheating in this exercise? OK, fine. The fact is that Celebrini is in a position to have a significant impact on the Sharks in his rookie season. For starters, Logan Couture remains sidelined due to persistent inflammation in his groin and abdominal region but it's possible Celebrini could have started out as their No. 1 center anyway. Factor in the addition of Tyler Toffoli, a proven finisher whom the Sharks have put next to the 18-year-old. Add in how he simply has the "look" of an NHL center after dominating college hockey in his only season. His determined skating, anticipation and vision are instantly noticeable. It's preseason, of course, and he'll have his tough nights. But the conditions are ripe for Celebrini to make an immediate impact and sustain that as a leading Calder Trophy candidate. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

Shane Wright, C: It's Wright's time. It has to be for a Kraken team that needs blue-chip contributors. The 20-year-old center had a solid draft plus-two campaign in the American League last season, capping it off with a successful eight-game NHL cameo (in which he scored four goals) and a stellar point-per-game showing in the Calder Cup playoffs. Entering this season, Wright has an inside track on a full-time role in the NHL. And the Kraken have the collection of skilled, defensively reliable wingers to complement and insulate him as he gets his feet wet early in the year. There are different types of breakouts and Wright probably doesn't explode as a 60-point center in his first NHL campaign. Something close to Sam Bennett's first NHL season — 18 goals, and just shy of 40 points — would still represent significant progress for Wright, and would be an essential development for the Ron Francis-era Kraken. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Zack Bolduc, LW: Bolduc, 21, got Blues fans excited at the end of the 2023-24 season when he had three goals in the final five games. He got them more excited with his performance at the Tom Kurvers Prospect Showcase earlier this month. Now the question is: Will Bolduc continue to impress in 2024-25? He'll have to make the roster first. There's a lot of depth in camp, but Bolduc, a first-round draft pick in 2021, has the skill to play in the top six and appears ready to break out if afforded the opportunity. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

J.J. Moser, D: Without much young up-and-coming talent, the Lightning only have so many options here. But there is an opportunity for one defenseman to emerge as top-pair caliber — or at least, top-pair capable. If Moser can raise his game while playing his off side, the right, maybe he is a candidate for a breakout year. He wouldn't have to become the team's true No. 2, Ryan McDonagh checks that box, he would just have to keep up and complement Victor Hedman to solidify that top pair. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs

Matthew Knies, LW: Knies had a solid, if inconsistent, regular season as a rookie. Then came the playoffs and his game went to another level. Knies was among the Leafs' more impactful players against Boston in the first round, drawing more and more minutes as the seven-game series rolled along. Knies feels like a sure bet to score at least 20 goals this season, especially if his power-play opportunity increases as it appears it will. He is the likeliest candidate to play first-line minutes on Auston Matthews' left wing, meanwhile, and may play a more consistent role on the penalty kill too. The arrow is pointing firmly upward for the soon-to-be 22-year-old. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Hockey Club

Dylan Guenther, RW: Guenther might be the biggest no-brainer choice on this list. Sent to the AHL for the first half a year ago, Guenther very quickly adapted to the NHL pace upon a January recall, including finishing the season with an impressive 12 goals and 23 points over his final 23 games. His big shot and work ethic are going to mean he earns far more minutes this year as a 21-year-old, including on PP1. He's already one of the most dynamic young players in the league but soon 35 goals isn't going to be out of reach. — James Mirtle

Vancouver Canucks

Nils Högländer, LW: Högländer seems like an odd choice given that he had a breakout campaign as a goal scorer last season, scoring 24 goals with a surely unsustainable 20 percent shooting clip. Beneath the surface though, Högländer has a fair bit of room to carve out a bigger role and earn larger opportunities — enough to more than offset any shooting-percentage regression. Högländer, for example, was a healthy scratch for two games in the Stanley Cup playoffs despite last year's goal haul. He logged just 12 minutes per night, regularly playing on the fourth line. He hasn't scored a power-play goal since 2021-22. Now Vancouver enters the year with a ton of open slots in its top-six forward group. There's a job available with J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser on the top line, and another available with Elias Pettersson and Jake DeBrusk on the second line. Vancouver brought in a ton of free-agent wingers who will be in the mix for these spots — Danton Heinen, Daniel Sprong, Kiefer Sherwood — and 2022 first-round pick Jonathan Lekkerimäki could factor in here too. In handicapping who could win one of those jobs and hit a new level of production with an increased opportunity, why not the 23-year-old winger who scored 20-plus last season and has produced at a 19 goals-per-82-games-played clip in over 200 NHL games across his age 20-23 campaigns? — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

Pavel Dorofeyev, LW: Coming off his first full NHL season, Dorofeyev is slated to play on the Golden Knights' second line with Mark Stone and William Karlsson. He should see a significant bump in ice time from the 13 minutes he averaged as a rookie and will serve as the net-front presence on the line. Dorofeyev has a strong shot and a knack for finding the puck in dangerous areas of the ice. Those strengths, combined with his opportunity to play with two highly-skilled, pass-first forwards, set him up to have a big 2024-25 season. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Aliaksei Protas, RW/C: Protas' production didn't exactly pop (six goals, 23 assists) and he was stuck playing largely third-line minutes, but he still managed to finish third on the Caps in five-on-five points with 28 while showing a nice combo of playmaking ability and defensive work. We're also legally required to mention that he's an enormous man, at 6-6 and 225 pounds. If his shooting improves — he's an abysmal 5.7 percent in 169 career games — and he gets better minutes, a 15-goal season seems doable. — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets

Cole Perfetti, LW/C: He's healthy, he has a contract and most importantly, Perfetti has a head coach talking about him like he's a top-six forward well worthy of power-play time. It's normal for 22-year-old players to take big developmental leaps on their own. Perfetti has the opportunity to do that and to play close to an extra two minutes per game at five-on-five and will get an audition on Winnipeg's top power-play unit. Honorable mentions would include Nikolaj Ehlers, who received the first look at that open power-play job, and Brad Lambert, who is in tough to make the team but has game-breaking potential, but Perfetti has the biggest growth potential among the three. — Murat Ates

[Sportsnet.ca / THE NHL'S TOP 50 PLAYERS: 10-1](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- September 28, 2024

As a swell of talent, creativity, and jaw-dropping production, pushes hockey to new heights, who is leading the charge? We asked Sportsnet's Insiders to rank the best of the best.

Half a decade into a long-awaited offensive renaissance, the National Hockey League has entered something of a golden era.

Take a brief glimpse at what's playing out under the lights on a nightly basis and it's plain to see: the game is brimming with limitless skill, with dizzying speed. In the face of that swell of talent, creativity, and jaw-dropping production, we've asked the question: If today's game is truly pushing the sport to new ground, who is leading the charge? Who are the kings of this golden age?

We turned to our Sportsnet Insiders for an answer, asking them to untangle the whirlwind of sticks, skates, and bodies flying around the sheet, and rank the top 50 players in the NHL at this moment. Not just the best forwards or defenders, not just the best offensive-minded phenoms or shutdown talents, but the best — full-stop.

Fifty names, one list. Who comes out on top?

There was only one ground rule: This ranking is forward-looking. It doesn't factor in legacy or stature in the game — it considers only how the league's best are expected to perform in 2024-25. The overall ranking below is an amalgam of the Top 50 lists from Insiders across the network. For each Insider's list, players were assigned points based on how high they finished in that particular ranking — the higher they ranked on an Insider's list, the more points they accrued. Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all of the Insiders' lists.

With that, here is Sportsnet's ranking of the Top 50 Players in the NHL, concluding with the best of the best — Nos. 10-1.

What makes Mikko Rantanen so indomitable, so uncontainable, is the sheer breadth of his skillset. It's not just that he can walk in, square up, and wire pucks past the league's best like it's nothing. It's not only that he can just as easily play facilitator to one of the all-world teammates buzzing around him. It's not just the size and strength, the six-foot-four, 215-pound frame that makes him a chore to push off the puck. Nor is it the way he makes up for a lack of top-end speed with a deceptive grace that lets him fly right by the opposition all the same. It's all of it, all together, the versatility that's turned him into the stuff of defender's nightmares. Throw him on the left wing, or the right, or down the middle — regardless, Rantanen's proven able to get to his game and inflict his offensive will. And yet, plying his trade in the shadow of two superstars in Colorado, you could argue he's flown under the radar relative to what he's done in this league.

Since he debuted in Denver, the 27-year-old has grown into one of the most prolific scoring threats on the wing league-wide — over the course of his nine years in the big leagues, Rantanen's amassed the seventh-most points of any winger in the game. He's upped the ante even more of late, growing into peak form over the past two seasons with a pair of 100-point campaigns and 97 goals over that span, too. In that two-year stretch, only two wingers in the league have managed to outscore Rantanen, and only one's managed to rack up more goals than the Colorado stalwart. Now, entering the final year of his contract, all eyes will be on whether the Avs and the veteran Finn can agree on a deal that keeps him in Denver long-term.

That Sidney Crosby has managed to stay at this level for so long is a signature achievement in itself — one more in an absurdly long line of them.

In one sense, it's no surprise Sidney Crosby remains among the game's best, even after all these years. In another, it is a signature achievement, one more in an absurdly long line of them, that the Pittsburgh Penguins captain has managed to stay at this level for this long. No. 87 has made a habit of authoring resurgent campaigns just when the hockey world begins to write him off. It's what he did when injuries threatened to derail him early in his big-league tenure, Crosby eventually returning with a century season that earned him his second Art Ross. It's what he did in the half-decade after that, when his Penguins era seemed to have run its course, the captain turning trade chatter into back-to-back Stanley Cups, and back-to-back Conn Smythe trophies. And over the past two campaigns, it's what Crosby's done again, putting up a pair of 90-point seasons — and the third-best goal-scoring effort of his career — as he approaches his 40s.

Beyond the details of Crosby's game — the way he excels, like no one else in the sport, at the second-by-second minutiae of wreaking offensive havoc — it's his adaptability that makes No. 87 an all-time figure in the hockey world. That's been the case from the very beginning, as he came back season after season with some skill tweaked, some ability enhanced. Here, in the twilight of his career, he's still doing it, altering his game to keep up with a league that seems to be running a hundred miles-per-hour faster than it did when he was in his prime. Whether that's enough to pull the team around him back into playoff relevancy remains unclear. But coming off another summer of roster tweaks, with a new young linemate to mold into an ideal wingman, it would be foolish to count Crosby out.

Looking back now, Quinn Hughes's very first NHL point, in his very first game, might've told us all we needed to know about what he would eventually become in this league. Rewind to that 2018-19 campaign and there's Hughes, taking the ice for that first spin with all eyes on his much-anticipated debut, the weight of the Canucks faithful's expectations on his shoulders. It took just 35 minutes as an NHLer for him to put the league on notice — for him to corral the puck and cut down the wing, to swerve behind the net and bank it off the back of the cage to himself, before wheeling back in front to try beating a two-time Cup champion netminder. It was more than the move itself that announced his arrival, the skill required to carry out any part of that sequence. It was the gall to even try it — the confidence to know he could bob and weave and think his way out of trouble. Half a decade later, the league has yet to find a way to stymie him.

Hughes's debut season made clear he could be one of the game's premier offensive blue-liners. The next few years confirmed it. But the 2023-24 campaign pushed the 24-year-old into a different stratosphere, a 92-point outburst positioning him not only among the league's best rearguards, but among the best offensive practitioners full-stop. Captaining a Canucks team quickly becoming a force in the West, it's become a fool's errand trying to predict just how high Hughes can push his ceiling. He's done everything Vancouver has asked of him to this point. The next step: Bringing that dominance into the post-season and pulling the Canucks closer to banner-hanging territory.

Quinn Hughes's debut season made clear he could be one of the game's premier offensive blue-liners. The next few years confirmed it.

David Pastrnak seemed destined for greatness from the jump, making his presence known with a 35-goal campaign just three years into his NHL career. Halfway through his decade in Boston, he was already proving one of the most productive wingers in the game, a lock for 35 goals and 80 points, his trajectory appearing to arc sky-high — all this while dazzling the Bruins faithful with whirling displays of stickhandling wizardry each night. At 23, he took it one step further, winning the Rocket Richard with a 48-goal, 95-point outburst, and earning the first Hart Trophy votes of his career, too. Just a few years

after that, he was sniping 60 — joining one of the most exclusive goal-scoring clubs in the modern NHL — while topping 100 points for the first time and collecting his first Hart nomination. No, for Pastrnak, it was never a question of how high he might reach — it was simply whether his success was a product of his environment or whether that environment was a product of him.

Last season, Pastrnak gave us the answer. Returning to Boston for 2023-24 with the club's centre depth decimated — longtime leaders Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci retiring from the game — Pastrnak simply picked up where he left off, unfazed. The 27-year-old put up 110 points on the year — his second-straight season reaching that plateau — finishing as the fifth-highest scorer in the game, the third-highest-scoring winger. The message was clear: Put anyone you want beside the Bruins talisman, and he's going to do what he does. Pastrnak is the engine pushing the B's offence forward. That said, in 2024-25, he'll have elite help once again, the club's move to bring in Elias Lindholm giving him a chance to take yet another step next time out.

If there was confusion about who currently reigns as the greatest winger in the game, the five-year run that Nikita Kucherov's stitched together has cemented the answer. The Tampa Bay Lightning's resident MVP candidate is a different animal from the rest of the league's top scorers. The highlight reel doesn't quite pop like it does for the other names surrounding him on this list. But there is one consistent element in a Kucherov highlight: acres of open white ice around No. 86, earned not from the opposition's lack of focus but from the fine-tuning of Kucherov's own. The 31-year-old's stature as one of the sport's most prolific talents wasn't earned only through physical gifts — it was born of Kucherov out-thinking his opponents at every turn, anticipating their every move. Putting passes on a tee for teammates who haven't even arrived yet. Spying gaps on the sheet before they open up.

And for the past half-decade, that's turned Kucherov into a force to be reckoned with. Since his sterling 2018-19 campaign — a 128-point breakout that netted him an Art Ross Trophy, a Hart Trophy, and a Ted Lindsay Award — Kucherov's gone on to claim back-to-back Stanley Cups (leading the playoffs in scoring during both runs), two more 100-point campaigns, and another scoring title last season for a ridiculous 144-point effort. His game might not be quite as well-rounded, quite as dynamic or explosive, as the other all-world scorers on this list. But the veteran winger has managed to dominate regardless, and fresh off a career year at age 30, seems to only be getting more lethal.

Topping 100 points in five of the past six seasons — and managing three 50-goal campaigns in that span too — Leon Draisaitl feasts off a lethal balance of sniping and facilitating.

There's no separating Leon Draisaitl from the generational phenomenon he plays alongside in Edmonton. But to dismiss all that the German pivot has done in the game simply because he shares a roster with Connor McDavid would be as silly as suggesting the success he's found hasn't been influenced by No. 97 at all. In truth, it's the magic of their symbiosis that has allowed the Oilers to thrive, a partnership that has gelled into something near-unstoppable, launching both players into rarified air in the game. Look back over the game's all-time greats and here's what you won't find from the players who skated alongside them: a slew of 100-point campaigns, Hart Trophy nominations, and scoring titles. Though having the likes of McDavid and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins feeding him pucks has certainly helped some, it's the big-bodied centreman's unique brand of movement, decision-making, and daring that's allowed him to thrive as he has.

And No. 29 is most certainly thriving. Since making his name with a 50-goal, 105-point campaign back in 2018-19, no one outside of the Oilers locker room has bested the 643 points Draisaitl's amassed. The 28-year-old's produced at a 100-point clip every year since, and managed three 50-goal campaigns in that span too, feasting off a lethal balance of sniping and facilitating. In the fires of the post-season, he's been no less dangerous — over the past three years, as Edmonton's mounted a series of lengthy playoff runs,

Draisaitl has paced the league with 30 post-season goals, he and McDavid combining for a wild 176 points in that span. Now, he approaches a moment at centre stage, set to play the final year of his current deal before becoming the highest-paid player in the game courtesy of a \$112-million pact carrying a record-setting \$14-million cap hit, a price tag that's sure to ramp up the pressure.

That he'll begin the 2024-25 campaign with the 'C' stitched to his chest is a fitting turn in Auston Matthews' career, because there's no question the 27-year-old is the most prolific scorer to ever don a Maple Leafs sweater, and as lethal a shooter as there is in the game today. Even the whirlwind of hype spun up by a four-goal game in his NHL debut and a 40-goal rookie season didn't accurately predict the levels No. 34 would reach as a big-league sniper. The past four seasons have cemented Matthews' legacy as one of the best offensive talents in the league, and handed him the crown as the greatest pure goal-scorer in the sport today. The three Rocket Richard Trophies claimed in that four-year span make that argument for him, but it's the actual campaigns that clinch it. First came a takeover during the league's pandemic-shortened season, Matthews racking up 41 goals in just 52 games, scoring at a 60-goal pace. Then came the 60-goal effort he'd hinted at, the first one the league had seen in a decade. And then there was the flag he planted last season: after McDavid and Pastrnak elbowed their way alongside him into that 60-goal club, Matthews came out and raised the bar again, chasing 70 and finishing just one tally shy.

It's more than just the goals, though. They're there, in spades — since he debuted in the NHL in 2016, no one's potted more than Matthews' 368, and last year's 69-goal effort ranks as the highest single-season total in 30 years. But it's the totality of Matthews' game that allows him to score with such frequency — his size and speed, the way he can keep the puck on a string, the absurdly versatile offensive arsenal. And the defensive acumen that allows him to shift the game in that direction — more impressive than the third Rocket Richard in 2023-24 might've been the Selke Trophy nomination that came with it. Still, now, after a season that brought the best he's yet showed at both ends of the rink, Year 1 as captain will ask him to give even more.

In the past four seasons, Auston Matthews has secured the crown as the greatest pure goal-scorer in hockey today.

What a luxury it is for Colorado that Cale Makar chose to play defence. In truth, you could drop the smooth-skating rearguard into any spot on the ice and he would excel. Like the other elite, young blue-liners who've lit up the league over the past few seasons, it took only one night under the bright lights of the NHL for the hockey world to see that Makar was something special. He was quick and rangy and daring right from the start, scoring his first goal in his first game, in the post-season no less. In the half-decade since, he's collected the second-most points in the league from the blue line, Roman Josi earning a pair more, albeit in far more games. On paper, it may be difficult to pull apart why exactly Makar stands out from the other new-school rovers in the league, the Hugheses and the Foxes. But you can see it when he's gliding through the neutral zone with the puck on his stick, when he darts into the offensive zone and dances around the opposition, a whirling dervish of deception and offensive instincts. He simply seems to possess another gear, of dynamism, of strength, of savvy.

He also seems to have a knack for unleashing the full weight of that extra gear when it matters most. Perhaps it was because he began his NHL career in the post-season that Makar feels so at home in the grind of the playoffs. Whatever it is, it's worked wonders for his club — in the five years since he debuted during the 2019 playoffs, Makar's amassed 20 goals and 74 points in 62 post-season appearances, more than any other defender in the game. Rewind back to that moment of Stanley Cup glory in 2022, and it wasn't one of the all-world Avs forwards getting the Conn Smythe nod — it was Makar, cleaning up after pacing all blue-liners in post-season scoring, and all playoff skaters not named McDavid or Draisaitl. The terrible news for the rest of the league is he seems to only be getting better. Just 25 years old, fresh off a

career 21-goal, 90-point season, the question isn't whether Makar can maintain his current level — it's how much higher he'll have raised it when all is said and done.

Nathan MacKinnon's big-league career has progressed much the same way the man himself moves out on the ice — pushing on with fervor, picking up into a gallop, gaining steam, until you look up and he's rolling toward you like a tidal wave, all power and unstoppable momentum. It took a moment for the Colorado Avalanche standout at the very beginning, MacKinnon wading through a few early years trying to find his footing in the league. Then it caught, and he pushed off, a 97-point breakout season at age 22 bringing him his first Hart nomination. He never looked back, reeling off four more campaigns at or above that 90-point pace — the last of those bringing a true cementing of his legacy and place in the game, as Colorado lifted the Stanley Cup with MacKinnon pacing the league in goals. In the two years since that championship, MacKinnon's graduated to another level, still. After a first turn with the century scorers in 2022-23, the 29-year-old ascended to peak form last season, running roughshod over the rest of the league with a 51-goal, 140-point effort. The outburst clinched him the first Hart Trophy nod of his career — after three turns as a nominee — and his first Ted Lindsay Award, too.

It's a fitting path for the Nova Scotian phenom, this bulldozing approach to achieving greatness, this dogged hunt for glory. Because this is how MacKinnon plays the game. When he comes over the boards, his club desperate for that last-second winner, that tying goal, there is no calm — there is only chaos, harnessed and directed at whoever stands in his way. We talk of 'dominance' often in this sport, but no one who will step onto NHL ice in 2024-25 embodies that term more fully than No. 29. While the only man ranked above him on this list blends all-world speed with grace and finesse, MacKinnon pairs it with flat-out power. Still in his prime, he seems to be picking up more momentum as the seasons wear on.

If you're surprised to see Connor McDavid at No. 1, you might be overthinking things.

If you envisioned another name at No. 1, you might be overthinking this. The sheer weight of Connor McDavid's presence every time he touches NHL ice should be proof enough of where he ranks among the game's very best. If it isn't, here's something more concrete: Since No. 97 debuted in the big leagues in 2015, no player has amassed more points than his 982, the next-highest scorer sitting 141 below him. No player has collected more silverware, the Oilers captain claiming — in nine years — five scoring titles, three Hart trophies, four MVP nods from his fellow players, one Rocket Richard Trophy and one Conn Smythe. He's been a point-per-game producer every season he's been in the league, pushing that average closer to a ridiculous 1.80 points-per-game clip over the latter half of his career. He's reached the 100-point plateau in seven of nine seasons, missing it once because he finished with 97 points in just 64 games, and once because his rookie season was cut short by injury after just 45 tilts. He has four 30-goal seasons to his name, three 40-goal seasons, and is one of only five players in the past 20 years to have potted 60 goals in one campaign. And then there's the more recent run — 100 points in 50 games, the 123-point season, the 153-point season. Sixty goals, 100 assists. If the regular season's a write-off, how about the post-season? McDavid's amassed 95 playoff points over the past three years alone, far and away the league leader. Twice, his Oilers have mounted deep post-season runs, including the 2024 Cup Final march that finished just one win shy of a championship banner — both times, McDavid led the league in post-season scoring, both times producing at better than a 1.60 points-per-game clip.

But it isn't really about the numbers, is it? They're the quantifiable result of what makes McDavid great, but they aren't the thing itself. Because what truly makes No. 97 the best in the world — at this moment, and for a while now — isn't quantifiable. It isn't found on the scoresheet, or in the record books, or in his trophy case. It's in the moments he authors out on the sheet, the brilliance that reshapes what you believed was possible with the ingredients of ice, sticks, and skates. Watch No. 97 pick up steam in his own zone with the puck on his blade, watch him slice through the opposing team so quickly and with such grace you wonder how his hands and brain can keep up with his feet, and then name another who

could do it better. At this moment, on the doorstep of 2024-25, Connor McDavid is the sport's undeniable best. Rewind further than that, as far back as you want to go, and he'd still remain up there among the very best to ever do it.

The NHL's Top 50 Players 2024-25:

- 1 Connor McDavid, C, EDM
2. Nathan MacKinnon, C, COL
3. Cale Makar, D, COL
4. Auston Matthews, C, TOR
5. Leon Draisaitl, C/LW, EDM
6. Nikita Kucherov, RW, TBL
7. David Pastrnak, RW, BOS
8. Quinn Hughes, D, VAN
9. Sidney Crosby, C, PIT
10. Mikko Rantanen, RW, COL
11. Aleksander Barkov, C, FLA
12. Brayden Point, C, TBL
13. Roman Josi, D, NSH
14. Jack Hughes, C/LW, NJD
15. Matthew Tkachuk, LW/RW, FLA
16. Kirill Kaprizov, LW, MIN
17. Artemi Panarin, LW, NYR
18. Adam Fox, D, NYR
19. Igor Shesterkin, G, NYR
20. Mitch Marner, RW, TOR
- (Read Nos. 11-20)
21. Miro Heiskanen, D, DAL
22. Connor Hellebuyck, G, WPG
23. J.T. Miller, C/RW, VAN
24. Victor Hedman, D, TBL
25. Elias Pettersson, C/LW, VAN
26. Jack Eichel, C, VGK
27. William Nylander, RW, TOR
28. Sebastian Aho, C, CAR
29. Filip Forsberg, LW, NSH

30. Brady Tkachuk, C/LW, OTT

(Read Nos. 21-30)

31. Connor Bedard, C, CHI

32. Zach Hyman, LW/RW, EDM

33. Sam Reinhart, C/RW, FLA

34. Evan Bouchard, D, EDM

35. Jason Robertson, LW, DAL

36. Charlie McAvoy, D, BOS

37. Rasmus Dahlin, D, BUF

38. Nico Hischier, C, NJD

39. Andrei Vasilevskiy, G, TBL

40. Noah Dobson, D, NYI

(Read Nos. 31-40)

41. Brad Marchand, LW, BOS

42. Roope Hintz, C, DAL

43. Sergei Bobrovsky, G, FLA

44. Mathew Barzal, C/RW, NYI

45. Jeremy Swayman, G, BOS

46. Jaccob Slavin, D, CAR

47. Nick Suzuki, C, MTL

48. Jake Guentzel, LW, TBL

49. Juuse Saros, G, NSH

50. Tim Stutzle, C, OTT

(Read Nos. 41-50)

[TSN.CA / Centres of Attention: McDavid, MacKinnon and Matthews top TSN's Top 50 NHL Player list](#)

By Steve Dryden- September 28, 2024

There's a new Great 8 in the National Hockey League.

Connor McDavid is the NHL's No. 1 player for an eighth consecutive season in TSN's annual pre-season poll.

Voters were asked to project the Top 50 players in the league for the 2024-25 season. McDavid was the No. 1 choice on 20 of 20 ballots in TSN tabulations.

As it happens, there is room for only one Great 8 on the list. Alex Ovechkin, the original, fell out of the Top 50 for the first time since voting began in 2010.

That just may be added motivation for Ovechkin in his quest to surpass Wayne Gretzky as the NHL's all-time leading goal-scorer. With 853 career goals, Ovechkin enters this season 41 shy of Gretzky's mark of 894 goals.

Meanwhile, any doubts about McDavid that arose during a goal-challenged 2023-24 regular season were eroded by 100 assists and erased by a record-setting 34 more in the playoffs – earning him the Conn Smythe Trophy.

McDavid scored 32 goals during the regular season, half as many as a career-high 64 in 2022-23.

As McDavid reaches what is likely the mid-range of his career – he is on the threshold of his 10th NHL season – the numbers are piling up.

First up for McDavid in 2024-25 is reaching 1,000 career regular-season points. He enters the season with 982 in 645 games.

If he can tally 18 in fewer than 11 games, McDavid will surpass Mike Bossy (656) and reach the millennium mark in the third fewest games behind Wayne Gretzky (424) and Mario Lemieux (513).

Just as McDavid is the definitive choice for No. 1 this season, Colorado captain Nathan MacKinnon is the virtually uncontested pick for No. 2. He was listed second on 19 of 20 ballots.

That gives Canada the ultimate one-two strength down the middle in February's 4 Nations Face-Off.

MacKinnon won the Hart Trophy as NHL MVP and the Ted Lindsay Award as the players' choice for most outstanding player last season. He recorded career highs in goals (51), assists (89) and points (140), in finishing second to Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov in the Art Ross race.

MacKinnon has had seven point-per-game seasons after what, in hindsight, was a curious start to his career. The Av averaged 0.69 points per game the first 300 games and has doubled that, 1.41, over the past nearly 500 games (491).

No. 3 on the list is Auston Matthews, who with 69 goals last season came within a whisker of becoming the NHL's first 70-goal scorer since 1992-93. Matthews is more than a one-trick pony. His plus-122 over the past five seasons is best among NHL forwards, ever so slightly ahead of MacKinnon's plus-121.

No. 4 Leon Draisaitl scored at a 100-point pace for the sixth straight season in 2023-24 but the Edmonton Oiler's most impactful work came in the off-season when he reset the salary bar – signing for a record-high \$14 million AAV, starting in 2025-26.

Rounding out the top five is Kucherov, who won the 2023-24 scoring title on 44 goals and 100 assists, joining McDavid as the first triple-digit playmakers in 33 years. Kucherov's second career Art Ross was aided and abetted by an all-time single-season high 14 empty-net points.

The remainder of the top 10:

No. 6 Cale Makar (Colorado) is off to one of the more decorated careers in NHL history – winning the Calder Trophy in his rookie season and making the 1st or 2nd all-star team four straight seasons since then.

No. 7 David Pastrnak (Boston) flipped the script, going from 61 goals in 2022-23 to 63 assists in 2023-24. Which Pasta will be served up this season?

No. 8 Norris Trophy-winning Quinn Hughes (Vancouver) starts his sixth NHL season a mere 77 points away from becoming the highest-scoring defenceman in Canucks' history.

No. 9 Artemi Panarin (Rangers) has never had a minus season in nine NHL years and accumulated a career-high 49 goals and 120 points at age 32 last season.

No. 10 Mikko Rantanen (Colorado) is nothing if not consistent. He scored at a 100-point pace for the fifth straight regular season and a point-per-game pace for the sixth straight postseason.

The top-ranked goalie is No. 17 Igor Shesterkin of the Rangers – one of three Russian puck stoppers on the list. The others are Stanley Cup winners No. 39 Sergei Bobrovsky and No. 42 Andrei Vasilevskiy. Americans Connor Hellebuyck (No. 22) and Jeremy Swayman (No. 37) round out the group of five netminders. Canada has not had a goalie on the list since Carey Price in 2022.

Canada is represented by 17 players in the Top 50, three more than second-place USA (14). Sweden and Finland, the other 4 Nations Face-Off teams, are repped by five and four players, respectively. Russia has six players on the list.

Tampa Bay has a league-leading five players on the list: Kucherov, No. 18 Brayden Point, No. 24 Victor Hedman, No. 38 Jake Guentzel and Vasilevskiy. Eleven teams have no representation, including Calgary and Montreal.

Player	Pos	2023-24 RK	GP	G	A	PTS	
1. Connor McDavid, Edm	C		1	76	32	100	132
2. Nathan MacKinnon, Col	C		3	82	51	89	140
3. Auston Matthews, Tor	C		5	81	69	38	107
4. Leon Draisaitl, Edm	C	2	81	41	65	106	
5. Nikita Kucherov, TB	RW	8	81	44	100	144	
6. Cale Makar, Col	RD	4	77	21	69	90	
7. David Pastrnak, Bos	RW	7	82	47	63	110	
8. Quinn Hughes, Van	LD	34	82	17	75	92	
9. Artemi Panarin, NYR	LW	30	82	49	71	120	
10. Mikko Rantanen, Col	RW	10	80	42	62	104	
11. Aleksander Barkov, Fla	C	22	73	23	57	80	
12. Jack Hughes, NJ	C	9	62	27	47	74	

13. Matthew Tkachuk, Fla	LW	6	80	26	62	88
14. Sidney Crosby, Pit	C	13	82	42	52	94
15. Kirill Kaprizov, Min	LW	12	75	46	50	96
16. Roman Josi, Nsh	LD	29	82	23	62	85
17. Igor Shesterkin, NYR	G	20	55	2.58	.912	4
18. Brayden Point, TB	C	17	81	46	44	90
19. Adam Fox, NYR	RD	16	72	17	56	73
20. William Nylander, Tor	LW	40	82	40	58	98
21. J.T. Miller, Van	C	-	81	37	66	103
22. Connor Hellebuyck, Wpg	G	43	60	2.39	.921	5
23. Mitch Marner, Tor	RW	14	69	26	59	85
24. Victor Hedman, TB	LD	23	78	13	63	76
25. Miro Heiskanen, Dal	LD	27	71	9	45	54
26. Sam Reinhart, Fla	RW	-	82	57	37	94
27. Elias Pettersson, Van	C	15	82	34	55	89
28. Filip Forsberg, Nsh	LW	-	82	48	46	94
29. Sebastian Aho, Car	C	35	78	36	53	89
30. Evan Bouchard, Edm	RD	-	81	18	64	82
31. Brady Tkachuk, Ott	LW	31	81	37	37	74
32. Jack Eichel, VGK	C	28	82	31	37	68
33. Jason Robertson, Dal	LW	11	82	29	51	80
34. Connor Bedard, Chi	C	48	68	22	39	61
35. Zach Hyman, Edm	LW	-	80	54	23	77
36. Rasmus Dahlin, Buf	LD	-	81	20	39	59
37. Jeremy Swayman, Bos	G	-	44	2.53	.916	3
38. Jake Guentzel, TB	LW/C	-	67	30	47	77
39. Sergei Bobrovsky, Fla	G	-	58	2.37	.915	6
40. Noah Dobson, NYI	RD	-	79	10	60	70
41. Charlie McAvoy, Bos	RD	32	74	12	35	47
42. Andrei Vasilevskiy, TB	G	19	52	2.9	0.9	2
43. Steven Stamkos, Nsh	C	41	79	40	41	81
44. Josh Morrissey, Wpg	LD	46	81	10	59	69
45. Brad Marchand, Bos	LW	38	82	29	38	67

46. Tim Stutzle, Ott	C	24	75	18	52	70
47. Kyle Connor, Wpg	LW	44	65	34	27	61
48. Robert Thomas, StL	C	-	82	26	60	86
49. Mat Barzal, NYI	C	-	80	23	57	80
50. Wyatt Johnston, Dal	C	-	82	32	33	65

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL players who could make next year's top 50 rankings](#)

By Jason Bukala- September 29, 2024

Over the course of the past week, our team at Sportsnet revealed our NHL top 50 players list.

I can guarantee my colleagues and I were splitting hairs on players throughout the list-building process. It's not an exact science after all. And it's increasingly difficult not to have a bias towards a certain style of players in all positions.

The end result will certainly be debated, so I thought I might as well add fuel to the fire and present 10 more names that could have been included in the top 50 and will most certainly be included in future lists.

As you settle into your Saturday, here are 10 more names for consideration in the NHL top 50 list:

Jake Oettinger — Goalie — Dallas Stars

I'm already debating internally about how we didn't include Oettinger on our list. The Dallas Stars are a Stanley Cup-contending outfit and have a true No. 1 puck stopper in Oettinger. He posted a 2.72 goals-against average and a .905 save percentage in 54 games. Oettinger is only 25 years young with plenty of career ahead of him.

Wyatt Johnston — Forward — Dallas Stars

I might as well keep it in "Big D" by recognizing Johnston as a no-doubt top 50 NHL player in the near future. Johnston is a complete player. He averaged exactly 17:00 TOI last season, was deployed in all situations, and finished plus-14 defensively. He's turning into an elite goal scorer. Johnston scored 32 goals. Most impressive was the fact 26 of his tucks came at even strength.

Brock Faber — Defenceman — Minnesota Wild

Faber has been one of my favourite defence prospects for several years. His hockey sense is off the charts. He impacts the game positively in every zone. Faber averaged an incredible 24:58 TOI last season with the Wild. He's only 21 years old but already looking like a 10-year veteran with the way he manages the game on and off the puck. He will someday be named captain of the Wild.

Robert Thomas — Forward — St. Louis Blues

The Blues bet on Thomas early in his NHL development and are reaping the rewards. Thomas is another complete player who's used in all situations. Thomas can match up against top six forwards without losing pace offensively. In many ways, his game is similar to a player like Aleksander Barkov in Florida. Thomas averaged 21:00 TOI and ended last season with an impressive stat line (26 goals, 60 assists, plus-9). How fortunate are the Blues to have Thomas under contract for \$8.125 million per year until the end of 2031!

Clayton Keller — Forward — Utah Hockey Club

Utah is on the verge of taking a significant step forward as a team and Keller is a dynamic forward who has flown under the radar a bit as Arizona was working through its distractions in the past. Keller is an electric player offensively. He's been hovering around a point per game offensively for the past three seasons and could be on the verge of a 90-plus point year. Keller's contract will age very well as he gains momentum and heads into the prime of his career. The 26-year-old is signed to a deal that only counts \$7.15 million through 2027-28.

Tage Thompson — Forward — Buffalo Sabres

Thompson took a bit of a step back last year after posting impressive numbers the previous two seasons (68 and 94 points respectively). The bulk of his offence comes by way of goal-scoring. He's an elite shooter from the weakside flank on the power play. Thompson will need to bounce back to form, after potting only 29 goals and 27 assists last year, but there's no doubting his established upside. The Sabres will be relying on him to play to his identity and contribute timely offence as they continue to chase the playoff spot that has eluded them for an NHL record thirteen years.

Quinton Byfield — Forward — Los Angeles Kings

It takes power forwards, like defencemen, longer to develop at the NHL level and play to their identity. Byfield is on the cusp of taking his game to another level. He averaged only 16:29 TOI last season. All of his ice time came at even strength and the power play. Byfield contributed 20 goals and 35 assists offensively. I recognize the statistical category of plus/minus can be debated, but it's still impressive that Byfield led the Kings forward group with a plus-19 rating.

Juraj Slafkovsky — Forward — Montreal Canadiens

"Slaf" took a huge step forward with his game last season. He contributed 20 goals and 30 assists and ended the year with 152 hits and 71 shot blocks. Slafkovsky is adjusting to how the NHL game is played and using his gigantic frame (six-foot-four, 229 pounds) to his advantage. He's only 20 years young with an exciting future ahead of him. It's only a matter of time before he eclipses the 30-goal threshold. The Habs have a bright future and big "Slaf" is a part of their core for years to come.

Devon Toews — Defenceman — Colorado Avalanche

Toews is 29 years old. I'm throwing a bit of a changeup including him on this list. But I truly believe Toews is part of the reason Cale Makar is comfortable playing the game the way he does. Makar is an all-world talent, but having a partner like Toews you can trust is a massive security blanket for Makar and the Avs as a team. Toews averaged 23:25 TOI last year and was deployed in all situations. He does everything very well. He contributed 12 goals and 38 assists and finished with plus-28 defensively. I see him playing at a high level for the next several years.

Josh Morrissey — Defenceman — Winnipeg Jets

I couldn't end my piece without including Morrissey. The 28-year-old could have easily landed in the top 50. If not for Connor Hellebuyck, Morrissey would be the most valuable player on the Jets roster. He logged an average of 24:10 TOI last season and contributed 10 goals and 59 assists offensively. Morrissey matches up against top lines every shift, but he still managed a fantastic plus-34 rating defensively. He sneaks up on opponents physically and competes to the best of his ability every night.

Closing thoughts

I debated adding Steven Stamkos to this list. I suppose an argument could have been made for Alex Ovechkin as well. But the task given to our insiders at Sportsnet was to identify the top 50 players now and heading into the future.

Stamkos could go off and score 40 goals this year in Nashville. I guarantee he's motivated to show he has lots left in the tank. Stamkos did produce 40 goals and 41 assists in his last year in a Lightning uniform after all. But half of his goals came on the power play and he finished minus-21 defensively. Stamkos will land in the Hockey Hall of Fame someday, but I didn't see his game going to another level like the other names I presented on this list.

As far as "Ovie" goes, he too will land in the Hockey Hall of Fame someday, but his best years are behind him. He's attempting to surpass Wayne Gretzky as the all-time leading goal scorer in NHL history and it could happen. But he's going to have to maximize what's left of his career to track down Gretzky's record.