



## **Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips October 21-22, 2025**

### **Columbus Blue Jackets News**

- PAGE 2      The Athletic / Blue Jackets finally put it all together on special teams to clinch impressive road win
- PAGE 4      The Athletic / What we've seen in the Blue Jackets' first 5 games: Damon Severson, Charlie Coyle and more
- PAGE 7      The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets show maturity with impressive road win over Dallas Stars
- PAGE 9      The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets even record with 5-1 victory against Dallas Stars
- PAGE 10     The Hockey Writers / Merzlikins Shines in Blue Jackets' 5-1 Win Over Stars
- PAGE 11     The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Marchenko on the Verge of National Stardom

### **Cleveland Monsters / Prospects News**

#### **NHL News**

- PAGE 13     Sportsnet / The most interesting contract on every NHL team
- PAGE 21     The Athletic / How chirping became a 'lost art' in the NHL — and why not every player is a fan

#### **Multimedia**

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets finally put it all together on special teams to clinch impressive road win

**By Aaron Portzline – October 22, 2025**

Maybe it was relentless optimism or overconfidence, but the Columbus Blue Jackets insisted both ends of their special teams — power play and penalty kill — were better than the numbers might indicate. And the numbers weren't pretty.

The Blue Jackets had several strong performances Tuesday in a 5-1 win over the Dallas Stars before 18,532 at American Airlines Center, but it was the perfection of their special teams that stood as the best news coming out of a clutch road win.

Adam Fantilli, Boone Jenner and Kent Johnson each had a goal and an assist, and goaltender Elvis Merzlikins had 22 saves and was the game's first star as the Blue Jackets pulled away with three goals in the third period to move to .500 on the season.

Denton Mateychuk and Dmitri Voronkov also scored third-period goals.

Two of the Blue Jackets' goals — one by Jenner, one by Voronkov — came on the power play, which was tremendous news for an ailing unit. The Jackets (1-for-13 entering the game) had just gone 0-for-9 during a three-game homestand and came into the night ranked dead last in the league.

They were dead last in the penalty kill, too, which is a rarely seen two-pack of futility. But Tuesday, they killed both of the Stars' man advantages, one in the first period and one in the second. Part of the success, to be sure, was that the Blue Jackets were only short-handed twice.

"We talked about getting our chances on the power play, and how it just hasn't gone in," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Dallas. "We didn't score a lot early (in the season). The guys take pride in that, obviously. They probably read more of everybody's stuff (in the media) than we (coaches) do, but yeah, they take pride in that, and it was a concern for us. Obviously, it has to continue to be really good."

The Blue Jackets improved to 2-1 on the road, which is rather underwhelming unless you know their recent history. They didn't win their second road game last season until Nov. 18, and they finished 14-23-4 away from home — a big reason they missed the postseason by only 2 points.

Merzlikins continued his strong start to the season. He made 12 of his 23 saves in the second period when the Stars made a major push back from a 2-0 first-period deficit. Merzlikins didn't get his second road win last season until Dec. 1.

"That second period, he held us in the game, right?" Evason said. "I mean, we knew they were going to push. We had a good first, so we knew they were gonna come out. Yeah, he kept us in it. They got one. But he didn't let them tie it up and get, you know, energized and get the crowd into it. Yeah, he played extremely well."

With the lead intact, the Blue Jackets steadied in the third and got back to being the aggressive, forechecking, puck-possessing club they were in the first.

At 7:21 of the third, Mateychuk came into the offensive zone with speed and was greeted by a pass from Yegor Chinakhov. Mateychuk skated into the slot toward Stars defenseman Thomas Harley, who barely attempted to defend or block Mateychuk's path or shot.

Mateychuk scored his first of the season, a wrist shot that beat Stars goaltender Jake Oettinger to the near post.

"I didn't know what was behind me, but I didn't see anything in front of me," Mateychuk told FanDuel Sports Ohio after the game. "I had some runway. I walked in and I noticed the defender (Harley) was kind of frozen, so I pushed to the middle."

That turned out to be a big insurance goal for the Blue Jackets, who carried play the rest of the way.

At 14:26, and with the Jackets on a power play, Voronkov one-timed a pass from Sean Monahan that beat Oettinger from the high slot to make it 4-1. Johnson's empty net goal, from 120 feet away, capped the scoring with 3:00 remaining.

Just four days ago, the Blue Jackets were disappointed in their play against the Colorado Avalanche in an ugly road win. The coaches were angry, and the fans in Columbus were starting to worry whether last year's surprising success was just a blip.

Evason coached them hard Friday. They played much more engaged hockey in a 3-2 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning on Saturday in Nationwide Arena, but it wasn't a perfect game, and they had to grind their way to the buzzer. It was probably a bigger win than most would admit in the dressing room.

Tuesday's win was more impressive, though. The Blue Jackets played with the same pressure and energy, the same attention to detail. But they had all facets of their game working well against the Stars. It's a rare road game when the coach can roll all four lines in the third period.

Now they face a weekend back-to-back versus the Washington Capitals (Friday) and the Pittsburgh Penguins (on the road Saturday).

"It's trusting in our game and trusting in ourselves in the room," said Jenner, the Blue Jackets' captain. "Everyone knows what to expect from each other, and when we do that, we're a really good team and really hard to play against."

## The Athletic / What we've seen in the Blue Jackets' first 5 games: Damon Severson, Charlie Coyle and more

By Aaron Portzline – October 21, 2025

It's a dangerous business to take a small sample — say, the first five games of an NHL season — and extrapolate those numbers across an entire 82-game campaign.

Kirill Marchenko (five goals, five games) might finish among the league's top scorers, but he's not going to score 82 goals. The Columbus Blue Jackets' penalty kill might not be very good this season (eight goals allowed already), but it's not going to allow 131 power-play goals. (At least we don't *think* so.)

The start of the Blue Jackets' season has been informative, however. The results have been a mixed bag: solid wins over the Minnesota Wild and Tampa Bay Lightning, tough losses to the Nashville Predators and New Jersey Devils, and a humbling loss to the Colorado Avalanche. The Blue Jackets play Tuesday night in Dallas.

If you've watched closely, you've noticed ways in which the Jackets are playing differently this season, both as individuals and as a team. Here's a look at what we've observed so far, along with a comment on each subject from coach Dean Evason:

### **1. Is that Damon Severson?**

Severson ended last season with a string of healthy scratches. He's started this season as one of the Blue Jackets' top defensemen, not just making smart, quick reads and plays with the puck defensively, but also in joining the rush and contributing offensively.

Evason and his staff have put Severson in a position to excel, but credit to him for seizing it.

He was reunited on the right side of the second defensive pair with Ivan Provorov, which is where he played last season before his game started to suffer. He's played on the left half-wall when the Blue Jackets' second power-play unit is on the ice, a shooter's spot.

And late in the games, when the Blue Jackets have needed goals, Severson has moved up in the lineup, playing additional minutes and even playing next to Zach Werenski on the No. 1 pair.

Severson has 1-1-2 and a plus-4 rating through five games. He's playing 19:50 per game, third most on the club. More than numbers, he looks like a confident player. If he sits in this groove for a while, the numbers will follow.

When the Blue Jackets coach and management met with Severson over the summer to discuss what happened last season and how to move forward, this would have been — so far — the optimal response.

Evason's take: "(Severson has been) very business-like, very straightforward, and very effective. (The meeting) wasn't us telling him what to do, it was him recognizing that this is how he has to play in order to have success and help the team win. So, yeah. He's doing all the right things."

## **2. Rotating goalies**

So far, Evason has gone back and forth between goaltenders Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins, with Greaves starting the season opener in Nashville and home opener against New Jersey. If that rhythm continues, Merzlikins would be starting Tuesday night against the Dallas Stars, but Evason wouldn't commit to that.

All he'll say is that the goaltending position is in good hands right now. Heading into Monday night's games across the NHL, the Greaves-Merzlikins combo had a .913 save percentage, good for eighth place in the league. That's a huge departure from the .891 the Jackets got from Merzlikins, Daniil Tarasov (now in Florida) and Greaves last season.

Evason has said all season that, with 15 back-to-back games on their schedule, the Blue Jackets will still need to rely on whoever becomes the backup.

After Greaves made 15 third-period saves to protect a 3-2 lead on Tampa Bay, Merzlikins was all smiles as he closed in for an on-ice bear hug, delighting the crowd in Nationwide Arena. This tandem, it would appear, is healthy in all ways so far this season.

It's true Merzlikins hasn't been challenged like this for ice time for the past three seasons. But he also has been coupled with another goaltender who could lighten his load.

Evason's take: "People always say it's a tough decision (picking a starter each night). It's not, though, right? You just flip (a coin) and see what happens. They both are playing extremely well ... feeding off each other and also competing with each other, and that's what we wanted, a healthy competition."

## **3. Light the fire**

The Blue Jackets made a few moves over the summer — acquiring forwards Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood and Isac Lundeström — but they didn't make any changes to their top two scoring lines or their defensive corps. It wasn't for a lack of trying by general manager Don Waddell.

At this point last season, the Blue Jackets lineup was wide open under the watchful eyes of a first-year coach, but Evason has had to find other ways to motivate this season.

Dmitri Voronkov was bounced from the top line for a game for Kent Johnson, who has already played on each of the first three lines. Cole Sillinger has bounced between the second and third lines.

Saturday, third-pairing defenseman Denton Mateychuk was elevated to the top defensive pair with Werenski, and Dante Fabbro, who worked so well next to Werenski last season, was dropped all the way to the third pairing (though he still played 16:51).

Strange as it might sound, Evason doesn't want his players to get comfortable. The Blue Jackets missed the playoffs last season. So though some guys are worthy of big roles and heavy minutes, there are no sacred cows in Columbus. It might be difficult to re-create the passion they played with last season, but Evason's job is to keep the pedal pushed.

Evason's take: "You can stay status quo as long as you're doing the same things, or as long as you're improving. When you play like we did in game four (the loss to the Avs), you don't stay status quo. You have to adjust and make some tweaks and push some buttons, hopefully ... to keep people hungry or to recognize that it's just not good enough. We've seen this team compete like a bunch of (expletives), so when they don't, it's very obvious."

#### **4. Charlie Coyle: Go-to guy**

Coyle was the Blue Jackets' biggest acquisition over the summer. From the moment they acquired him in trade from Colorado, they've tagged him as their third-line center. But he does far more than play a checking role.

Only three forwards — Sean Monahan (19:15), Marchenko (19:09) and Boone Jenner (17:55) — have drawn more ice time than Coyle (17:14 per game). Only Monahan (110) has taken more faceoffs than Coyle (79), who has been especially busy on the right side of the ice.

When the Blue Jackets are protecting a lead, Coyle has become one of Evason's go-to guys.

When Coyle was in his final season (2018-19) with the Wild, Evason was promoted from the AHL to become an assistant coach with the Wild. They spent only a few months together, though, as Coyle was traded to the Boston Bruins late that season.

Evason's take: "Charlie's just a way more mature player. I don't know how many years he had played in the league when I was there with him, but he just ... he understands the game. He understands his role. He's such a calm veteran presence, and, yeah, we trust him. I've seen a big difference in his maturity level. I don't just mean when you talk to him — obviously, he's mature. But his game has become extremely mature."

#### **5. Situational wrinkles**

Every coach makes in-game adjustments and seizes opportunities to take advantage of opponents. That's, ya know, kind of the job.

But Evason has vowed to mix and match during games, depending on situations, much more than he did last season. He knows his team better now, and so he knows what opportunities match their skills. He's looking for role players, almost like a baseball manager leans on his closer.

In the first game of the season, Evason moved Severson up to the top defenseman pair with Werenski when the Blue Jackets were scrambling for a tying goal in what became a 2-1 loss.

Saturday, when the Blue Jackets were trying to lock down a 3-2 win over Tampa Bay, Evason debuted a line we've never seen before: Monahan centering a line with Jenner and Coyle. Call it the uber-checking line ... three stout, defense-minded forwards who can win a faceoff and take the body.

Keep watching. Evason already has an idea of who could be used in different capacities, but he's said he'll also consider giving more minutes to "guys who are really going that night."

Evason's take: "You want to play on the penalty kill? You play real good defensive hockey and you get an opportunity. You start scoring goals or what have you, and you play on the power play. In those situations, if you're reliable, you'll be out there at the end of the game. If you're offensive and scoring goals, you'll be out there at the end of the game if we're down. Yeah, guys' roles can change all the time."

## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets show maturity with impressive road win over Dallas Stars

By Brian Hedger – October 22, 2025

The Blue Jackets are showing signs they're already an improved team after six games.

They're one of the NHL's best at 5-on-5, their goaltending tandem is solid with Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins alternating starts, and the Blue Jackets are having success on the road.

Each of those areas plus a strong night on special teams factored into the Blue Jackets' 5-1 victory over the Dallas Stars on Oct. 21 at American Airlines Center, where three straight goals scored by key young players turned a tight game into a rout.

Denton Mateychuk and Dmitri Voronkov scored 7:05 apart in the third to give Columbus breathing room at 4-1, Johnson sealed it with 3:00 left by scoring into an empty net and Merzlikins impressed with a victorious 22-save performance.

Are the Blue Jackets becoming a playoff team?

It's incredibly early, but there are already signs of it. Here are three takeaways from an impressive road win:

### **Elvis Merzlikins is strong again for Columbus Blue Jackets**

There isn't enough room on the visiting bench for a backup goalie, so Jet Greaves watched the game while seated in the stands in full uniform.

Merzlikins gave him a lot to cheer about.

According to the FanDuel Sports Network broadcast, Greaves cheered as Merzlikins made 22 saves in a game that featured several highlight-worthy stops. Merzlikins improved to 2-1-0 with a 2.69 goals-against average and .927 save percentage in his three outings, while Greaves is 1-2-0 with a 2.04 GAA and .928 save percentage in his three starts.

They're one of the NHL's best tandems thus far, alternating starts, and the Blue Jackets will gladly take it after having too many pucks elude their goalies the past few years. Merzlikins made vital saves to help thwart Dallas power plays in the first and second periods and came up with several big ones while the Blue Jackets clung to a 2-1 lead late in the second period.

"Second period, he held us in the game, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Dallas. "We knew they were going to push. We had a good first (period). We knew they were going to come out (strong) and he kept us in that game. They obviously got one, but he didn't allow them to get two to tie it up and get energized and get their crowd into it. He played extremely well."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner sparks dominant start**

The Blue Jackets overwhelmed the Stars in the first period with a 14-5 edge in shots while taking a 2-0 lead on goals by Adam Fantilli at 5-on-5 and Boone Jenner on a late power play.

Jenner, who assisted Fantilli's goal, helped the Blue Jackets kill a Stars power play shortly before hustling after a loose puck to draw an interference penalty on Mavrik Bourque. Jenner's two-point game

was the 82<sup>nd</sup> multi-point game of his NHL career, moving him past Cam Atkinson into second place on the franchise's all-time scoring list behind Rick Nash (137).

Jenner has increased scoring capacity with a scoring line of 2-4-6 in the season's first six games. Jenner's assist was off a pass to Fantilli for a wrist shot from the right wing, and his goal later in the period deflected into the net off his right skate after a pass from Charlie Coyle.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets special teams finally roar to life**

The Blue Jackets started the game ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> in the NHL, dead last, on power plays and penalty-killing. That's the last thing a team that kept its coaching staff together for Evason last spring, re-signing assistant Steve McCarthy, needed.

After going 2 for 2 on both power plays and penalty kills, the Jackets are now tied for 17<sup>th</sup> on power plays (3 for 15, 20%) and 31<sup>st</sup> in killing penalties (12 of 20, 60%). Combined with an impressive start at 5-on-5 and even strength, improving their special teams is critical for the playoff focused Blue Jackets.

Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov, power forwards who play in front of the net for each power play group, scored the Blue Jackets' power-play goals. At the other end, Merzlikins led the way to the Jackets' perfect night down a skater.



## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets even record with 5-1 victory against Dallas Stars

**By Brian Hedger – October 21, 2025**

The Blue Jackets are wasting no time making improvements on one of the biggest reasons they missed the playoffs last season.

After struggling on the road in 2024-25, they've started this season by winning two of their first three road games after downing the Dallas Stars 5-1 on Oct. 21 at American Airlines Center.

Clinging to a 2-1 lead starting the third period, the Blue Jackets (3-3-0) pulled away on goals by Denton Mateychuk and Dmitri Voronkov before Kent Johnson scored into an empty net to seal it with 3:00 left to play. Adam Fantilli and captain Boone Jenner scored the first two Columbus goals in the first period, including Jenner scoring the first of two power-play goals for the Blue Jackets.

Elvis Merzlikins (2-1-0) was outstanding in net for the Blue Jackets (3-3-0), making several great stops 22 saves. Jake Oettinger (24 saves) started for the Stars (3-3-0), whose goal was scored by Tyler Seguin.

Trailing 2-0 starting the second, the Stars pulled within a goal at 2-1 when a puck shot by Colin Blackwell deflected off Seguin and past Merzlikins with 8:02 left. It was the lone goal the Blue Jackets' goalie allowed in the second despite his team being outshot 13-6 while chasing the puck more than controlling it.

It was completely the opposite of how the game started.

In the first period, the Blue Jackets capitalized with Dallas missing key injured forwards Jamie Benn and Matt Duchene. Columbus dominated play in the opening frame, outshooting the Stars 14-5 to build a 2-0 lead on goals by Fantilli at 4:33 and Jenner with 1:18 left to cap a power play.

Jenner, who assisted Fantilli's goal, had two points at the first intermission. Merzlikins, meanwhile, made a dazzling stop among his five saves in the first to keep the Stars from scoring a tying goal on a power play.

## The Hockey Writers / Merzlikins Shines in Blue Jackets' 5-1 Win Over Stars

**By Marc Sautter – October 21, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets (3-3-0) beat the Dallas Stars (3-3-0) 5-1 at American Airlines Center on Tuesday night.

Adam Fantilli, Boone Jenner, Denton Mateychuk, and Dimitri Voronkov scored for the Blue Jackets. Elvis Merzlikins made 22 saves. While the save total might not reflect a terrific night, Merzlikins slammed the door shut in key moments throughout the game to give the Blue Jackets the opportunity to pull away in the third period.

Tyler Seguin scored for the Stars. Jake Oettinger made 24 saves.

### **Game Recap**

Fantilli and the Blue Jackets took advantage of a failed clearing attempt by the Stars and opened the scoring at 4:33 of the opening period. Kent Johnson fed the puck to Jenner in the right corner, and Jenner found Fantilli at the right faceoff dot. Fantilli snapped the puck over Oettinger's left shoulder, just inside the crossbar, for his second goal of the season.

The Blue Jackets struck again with 78 seconds left in the period, this time on the power play. Charlie Coyle found Jenner all by himself with a cross-crease pass. As Jenner swiped at the pass, the puck deflected off his right skate and into the wide-open net.

The Stars were outplayed in the first and were outshot by the Blue Jackets 14-5. In the second, Dallas turned the tables with 13 shots to Columbus's six.

Seguin finally broke through at 11:58 to bring the Stars to within one with a deflected shot from Colin Blackwell that got past Merzlikins for his second of the season.

Mateychuk restored the Blue Jackets' two-goal lead at 7:21 of the third period with a wrist shot in the mid-slot that beat Oettinger after the Stars could not control the loose puck in the defensive zone.

The Blue Jackets scored their second power-play goal of the night to take a 4-1 lead, this time on a Voronkov snapshot from the high slot.

Kent Johnson tacked on an empty netter for a 5-1 final.

The Blue Jackets outshot the Stars 29-23 and went 2-for-2 on the power play. The Stars went 0-for-2 with the man advantage.

### **Up Next**

Next up, the Stars will host the Los Angeles Kings on Thursday, while the Blue Jackets will host the Washington Capitals on Friday.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Marchenko on the Verge of National Stardom

**By William Espy – October 21, 2025**

Kirill Marchenko has taken a major step forward every season since joining the Columbus Blue Jackets for the 2022-23 season. Now, he seems on the verge of becoming a household name around the NHL.

### **Goal Scorer Right Out of the Gate**

Marchenko's rookie season highlighted his goal scoring ability right out of the gate, as he scored 21 goals in 59 games. The following season, that number grew to 23 in 78 games, but importantly, his assists grew from four to 19.

Finally, during the 2024-25 season, Marchenko scored 31 goals, eclipsing the 30-goal mark for the first time in his career. He also recorded a near point-per-game pace for the first time at the NHL level, as he had 74 points through 79 games. That campaign showed that Marchenko was on the verge of stardom after just three seasons in the NHL, and his start to the 2025-26 season has only proven that point even further.

### **Marchenko's Hot Start**

This season, Marchenko seems like a man on a mission. He's taken his play to a level we've never seen from him before, and despite the small sample size, he shows no signs of slowing down any time soon.

In five games, Marchenko has scored five goals, three of which came when he scored a hat trick on the road against the Minnesota Wild. The only game he has failed to record a point in this season so far was the Blue Jackets' season opener against the Nashville Predators. It certainly wasn't for a lack of trying, though, as he registered eight shots on goal in the losing effort.

The Colorado Avalanche were able to hold Marchenko without a shot, yet he still registered the lone assist on Ivan Provorov's goal. That also remains Marchenko's only assist so far in the 2025-26 season.

It goes without saying that Marchenko leads the Blue Jackets in both goals and points; however, that's not where the impressive display ends. He's currently tied for sixth in the NHL in goals, alongside names such as Jack Eichel, Dylan Larkin, and Cole Caufield, all of whom are highly regarded stars.

Of course, it's safe to say that Marchenko will cool off at some point, as it would be quite astonishing if he maintained a goal-per-game pace, which hasn't been accomplished across a full season since Brett Hull during the 1990-91 season. With that being said, there is the possibility that he achieves more than anyone expected from him heading into the 2025-26 season.

For the first time in his career, the 40-goal plateau seems achievable for Marchenko, even if his pace slows tremendously for a while. 50 goals would be much less likely, considering Leon Draisaitl led the league with 52 last season, but not impossible, as four players reached that threshold during the 2023-24 season.

Marchenko has already set a franchise record by scoring five goals in five games to start the season, as the previous record was four set by four different players throughout the organization's history. As a

result, it seems entirely possible that Marchenko could be gunning for another record by the time spring comes around.

Currently, Rick Nash and Cam Atkinson hold the joint record for most goals in a season in Blue Jackets history with 41. Marchenko has already established himself on the all-time leaderboard, as his 31 goals entered him into a five-way tie for tenth all-time. If he's able to maintain a hot hand, it's reasonable to predict that he'll take the top spot in six months time.

Regardless of what happens moving forward, Marchenko has shown that he's capable of big things in the NHL, and his hot start this season is only solidifying that fact. Now, we just have to wait and see how high his ceiling truly is, but it seems like he's on the verge of becoming a star on a league-wide level.

## **Sportsnet / The most interesting contract on every NHL team**

**By Rory Boylen – October 21, 2025**

The NHL contract landscape is changing quickly and in ways we don't fully know the extent of yet. As the cap approaches — and surpasses — \$120 million in the next three years or so, how high will individual salaries creep? Superstars will get theirs, but how will that trickle down to other tiers of players?

And how will individual teams approach this? It's not far-fetched to believe we could eventually return to a time where not everyone is willing to spend to the cap, while others will always aggressively look to do so and get back a big-market advantage they haven't had in this era.

Every new contract signed begins to set the tone for these uncharted waters, so we're taking a look at every team's most interesting contract to monitor.

### **Anaheim Ducks: Leo Carlsson**

We were reminded how tough a negotiator GM Pat Verbeek is when it comes to his RFAs, as Mason McTavish's negotiation carried into late September. Next summer, he'll have four more centrepieces of the rebuild coming off their entry-level deals — defencemen Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger, and forwards Cutter Gauthier and Leo Carlsson.

Carlsson, Anaheim's top-line centre, may have the best case for the highest AAV on his next contract, coming off a 20-goal, 45-point season with the potential for a breakout campaign in 2025-26 (he leads the team in scoring today). Three Anaheim forwards — including McTavish — make \$7 million, but if Carlsson does step up and contribute to the Ducks jumping up the standings, he may have a case for more in the current cap climate.

### **Boston Bruins: Pavel Zacha**

There are two years remaining on Zacha's contract, but what's interesting is how movable it is. Zacha makes just \$4.75 million against the cap, is capable of playing centre or wing, produces enough to be a second-line contributor or excellent third liner, plays in all situations, and is still in his prime at 28 years old. If the Bruins recover and hang in the playoff race, Boston is more likely to keep him, but if they are sinking to the bottom of the Atlantic again, GM Don Sweeney may seek out future assets from a contending team that would find plenty of value in Zacha.

### **Buffalo Sabres: Alex Tuch**

As the class of 2026 UFAs begins re-signing, a new market is being set. Though Tuch is a step or two below the superstar tier of players who've already signed, he's part of a strong group that includes Martin Necas and Adrian Kempe. Who will be the first to sign from that tier and how will it set the market for the rest of them?

A local guy, Tuch has had his best seasons in Buffalo since being traded from Vegas, scoring over 30 goals twice and hitting a career-high with 79 points three years ago. He has leverage in that the Sabres had to trade away a top scorer (JJ Peterka) last summer and need to *create* momentum to get to the playoffs. But Tuch will also turn 30 next spring. This could go two ways: either Tuch signs a contract that likely makes him the highest-paid forward on the team, or the Sabres are forced to entertain trade offers for him by March. For now, contract talks have been put on hold.

### **Calgary Flames: Nazem Kadri**

We know that pending UFA Rasmus Andersson is likely to be traded, and that a re-signing would be a surprise. That's not as interesting as Kadri's deal, how it may age, and if it will conclude in Calgary. Making \$7 million against the cap, the 35-year-old is signed for another four years and is still running strong — he potted 35 goals last season and is the team's No. 1 centre. Heck, he has hopes that with a strong showing he can still get some consideration for Team Canada. The Flames were feisty and punched above their weight last season, but a 1-6-0 start in 2025-26 has them in a tough spot. Can they even recover to be a Cup contender over Kadri's remaining four years?

Currently with a no-move clause, Kadri's deal shifts to a partial no-trade next season, and the window will more broadly open to trade questions being asked. It's a possibility already being casually kicked around.

### **Carolina Hurricanes: K'Andre Miller**

Miller was the centrepiece of one of the summer's bigger trades, being sent from New York to Carolina for first- and second-round picks and prospect Scott Morrow. The Canes were exploring an offer sheet with Miller, who was going to be an RFA in the summer, and the Rangers were cautious to give him a big contract after a so-so season. Miller was New York's team leader in average even-strength ice time and he was tasked with facing tough opponents in those minutes, but his offensive numbers shrank from a career-high of 43 points in 2022-23.

However, the Canes are betting on the upside of this huge, 25-year-old blueliner who can skate well, is physical and has shown offensive chops. Can they optimize his upside? Can they help him reduce defensive lapses? With this new contract, now the expectations and pressure are real. The Canes signed Miller for eight years, at a \$7.5 million AAV, and that makes him their highest-paid defenceman. Will the bet pay off?

### **Chicago Blackhawks: Connor Bedard**

The player the entire rebuild is relying on, Bedard has not delivered 'generational talent' offence yet, but how much of that has been due to not having a supporting cast whatsoever? While his total points rose year over year from 61 to 67, his points per game rate dropped from .90 to .82 and he hasn't cracked 25 goals yet. What's in store for this season?

Bedard's anticipated AAV is in an undefined area. There's no doubt he's the most important part of this team, but what if he doesn't break out more clearly from his first two seasons? This contract is not interesting because it's uncertain if he'll re-sign, or if the Hawks will have a change of heart — rather, it's just not clear what shape that extension will take yet. The early returns are very positive in 2025-26, with Bedard scoring seven points in seven games, skating quicker, and making himself an intriguing player to watch on Team Canada's radar.

### **Colorado Avalanche: Martin Necas**

It's Mikko Rantanen-lite, as the key player they got in return for the back-to-back 100-point player is now in a contract year himself and the eventual number on an extension is bound to induce sticker shock. We shouldn't be surprised if \$10 million is the minimum number. After arriving from Carolina and riding shotgun with Nathan MacKinnon on the top line last season, Necas scored 28 points in 30 games.

This season, Necas has started on a six-game point streak and is tied with MacKinnon for the team lead at 10 points. Is Colorado going to be comfortable paying such a big number to Necas, or will this become something similar to Rantanen, where they trade a perfectly productive player for another?

#### **Columbus Blue Jackets: Zach Werenski**

Werenski was a massive reason why the Blue Jackets had one of the most surprising seasons last year, leading the team with 82 points and finishing second (a distant second) in Norris Trophy voting. Still in his prime, the 28-year-old is making \$9.583 million for another three seasons yet and would be on track to hit UFA ahead of his age-31 season.

That's a long way off, but the timing of it is highly interesting, especially if he keeps delivering seasons like the one he just had. Werenski is on track for a new contract at the same time as Auston Matthews and Connor McDavid, and one year after Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes are expected to reset the high-bar market for defencemen. We don't yet know what the salary cap will be in 2028-29, but \$120 million or higher is not too wild to consider. Werenski's cap hit percentage when his current deal began was 11.62, and if you assume that same rate against a \$120 million cap, we're looking at \$13.94 million. If he's still challenging for a Norris around then, it might be higher.

#### **Dallas Stars: Thomas Harley**

There are going to be a lot of rumours around Jason Robertson this season, set to be an arbitration-eligible RFA next summer and just one year away from unrestricted free agency. His production will dictate how high that contract will go, and trade talk will inevitably follow.

But how about Thomas Harley, a Team Canada 4 Nations defenceman and likely Olympian, who led all Dallas blueliners in scoring last season and was second on the team in playoff scoring? AFP Analytics projects a \$9.8 million AAV on a long-term extension for Harley, which would go well past Miro Heiskanen on his own team. Entering his 24-year-old season, Harley has just two full NHL seasons under his belt and that number, while high at first glance, could easily end up being a steal in the long run. Harley has six points in his first five games, but is averaging two fewer minutes per game than Heiskanen.

#### **Detroit Red Wings: Simon Edvinsson**

The sixth overall pick in the 2021 NHL Draft, Edvinsson scored 31 points in his first full NHL season, averaged 19:11 of ice time per game, and was trusted with penalty kill opportunities. Turning 23 in February, if Edvinsson improves from there, puts up 10 more points, and the Red Wings benefit from that in the standings, his new AAV could get shockingly high. GM Steve Yzerman could keep that lower by going the bridge deal route, but that would bring its own dangers in a few years when the cap is considerably higher. A seven-year deal now still could bring him in around Moritz Seider's \$8.55 million AAV that he just signed in 2024 — and Edvinsson has a shot to go even higher.

#### **Edmonton Oilers: Stuart Skinner**

Even with back-to-back Stanley Cup Final appearances, questions linger about Edmonton's goalies and whether the starter is good enough to finish the job. Through four starts in 2025-26 so far, Skinner has one shutout and three games in which he allowed three goals. More notable slow starts ([ahem, Evan Bouchard](#)) have taken attention elsewhere, but inevitably, attention will turn back to the crease.

Skinner is in the final season of his contract, making just \$2.6 million, and after that, anything is on the table. Connor Ingram, another pending UFA, was picked up for free via trade, and though he's starting the season in the minors, we're already wondering if and when he'll be a factor in this year's crease. On one hand, Skinner is still having to prove himself and earn a new contract. On the other, the goalie market is thinner than any other position — if the answer isn't Skinner or long shot Ingram, where is it coming from?

#### **Florida Panthers: Sergei Bobrovsky**

When Bobrovsky initially signed a seven-year, \$70 million deal, it was scoffed at as an overpay that could pin down the Panthers. It was a wildly high AAV for a goalie — only Carey Price made more at \$10.5 million, and less than a month later, Andrei Vasilevskiy re-signed for \$9.5 million. And while, yes, Bobrovsky had won two Vezina Trophies by then, his playoff experience was 34 games in which he was more inconsistent than dominant. And then in his first year with Florida, he ended with a .900 save percentage and 3.23 GAA in 50 games.

Now, of course, he's a back-to-back Stanley Cup winner and future no-doubt Hall of Famer. But he's also 37 years old and his next contract may be his last in the NHL. We shouldn't doubt Florida's ability to re-sign him and keep the band together, but what will that number be now? Is he going to give them a discount, chase the same rate, or push for a raise?

#### **Los Angeles Kings: Adrian Kempe**

Much like Tuch, Kempe falls into the tier of pending UFAs somewhere below the Eichels, McDavids and Kaprizovs who have already signed, but will also benefit from the rising cap. Kempe should come in higher than Tuch does in Buffalo, as he's led the Kings in scoring two years in a row now and will wind up the highest-paid forward on the team. Perhaps Kyle Connor's \$12 million sets a market for Kempe, who surely will pull in \$10 million annually. Will he challenge Drew Doughty at \$11 million for the highest-paid player in Los Angeles? Can the Kings afford not to get a deal done?

#### **Minnesota Wild: Zeev Buium**

One year has been burned off Buium's entry-level contract, but coming into 2025-26, he had only played four playoff games for the Wild. A second-pair defenceman at even strength, Buium is Minnesota's only defenceman on the top PP unit and all five of his points have come with the man advantage so far.

Want an under-the-radar Calder Trophy pick? Buium is your guy. If he gets anything close to that consideration in Year 1, and builds on it in Year 2, then getting a contract comparable to Luke Hughes (\$9 million) — while accounting for two more years of cap inflation — is very much in play. That could be a monster contract in an off-season when other blue line monster contracts will go out to Quinn Hughes and Makar.

#### **Montreal Canadiens: Mike Matheson**

Montreal's front office has been busy locking up the "marquee" young players on the team to long-term deals, but now the focus turns to 31-year-old Mike Matheson. Going from a much more offensive player (62 points in 82 games) two years ago, to Montreal's shutdown and top PK defender, Matheson has changed his game to fit what the Canadiens need and has been wildly successful in that role. His current pairing, with offensively-inclined Noah Dobson, has an expected goals percentage of 63.9 — the ninth-



best mark of any pairing that has played at least 40 minutes together so far. Matheson makes \$4.875 million this season and is UFA eligible come July.

#### **Nashville Predators: Juuse Saros**

Not only does Saros make \$7.74 million against the salary cap through the 2032-33 season, his re-signing was also a signal that the Predators were going all-in on the now. Yaroslav Askarov hasn't exactly shone since being traded to San Jose, but Saros and the Predators haven't thrived either — last year's team collapse is well known, but Saros has been statistically sour for two years now. In 2023-24, Saros finished with a Goals Saved Above Expected of -3.0, ranking 46th of 65 goalies with a minimum of 20 games played. Last season, he finished with a GSAE of -7.4, ranking 47th of 61 goalies, and his save percentage dropped below .900 for the first time.

To say the Predators need a Saros bounce back for the team to stand a chance is an understatement, especially given he'll be 37 years old when this contract expires. These might be his best years of the entire contract. So far, so good in 2025-26 — Saros has started with a .919 save percentage in five games and is eighth in GSAE with a 4.5. But Nashville is still just 25th in offence.

#### **New Jersey Devils: Jacob Markstrom**

The Devils turned a corner as a team when they upgraded their goalie situation and found a No. 1 by bringing Markstrom in via trade. But, statistically, Jake Allen had the better season in 2024-25 — .908 save percentage to .900, 18.4 GSAE to 3.4. The very early returns in 2025-26 were the same, and with Markstrom sidelined with an injury, Allen has been undefeated.

Markstrom will turn 36 in January (Allen turns 36 next summer) and is now a pending UFA. Goalies are needed in so many places that a market for Markstrom will surely be there, and with the cap what it is, it's hard to measure what a fair contract is. For now, Markstrom makes only \$4.125 million against New Jersey's cap, but his full AAV is \$6 million, with Calgary retaining the difference.

#### **NY Islanders: Anders Lee**

A career Islander from a sixth-round pick in 2009 to today, the previous front office regime was highly loyal to its players, but the new one seems more open to change. Lee is a big-body top-six winger who scored 29 times last season, but is on his way to being a UFA next summer. If the Islanders struggle to stay in the playoff race, is it possible they'll explore attaining some futures assets for one of their longest-tenured players?

#### **NY Rangers: Artemi Panarin**

The Rangers are making history for all the wrong reasons and aren't delivering results that are inspiring a season of improvement. However, we have to caution how early it is, and how some of their underlying 5-on-5 numbers aren't that bad (sixth in expected goals for percentage). Still, we have to ask: what are the Rangers?

Someone who might want an answer to that question is Panarin, who was made the highest-paid winger the last time he hit unrestricted free agency and could go to market again in 2026. The UFA conditions are highly interesting for everyone right now, and it'll take some figuring out what a soon-to-be 34-year-old Panarin is worth when his expiring deal already came with an \$11.642 million AAV. He was still an 89-point player last season and has seven in eight games this season. Will he get a raise and, if so, by how much? Could he leave?

### **Ottawa Senators: Linus Ullmark**

The most games Ullmark has ever played in an NHL season is 49, which he reached in 2022-23 and won the Vezina Trophy. Last season, the first year of his contract with Ottawa, making \$8.25 million against the cap, Ullmark played 44 times, which demanded more from the Senators' backups — and maybe helped them find something in Leevi Merilainen (we'll see). But when a goalie makes that much money, the expectation is that he plays more often than half the games and then can steal some in the playoffs.

Curiously, Ullmark still has to prove he can be a No. 1 and that he will live up to his salary. In 15 career playoff starts he has an .885 save percentage, and so far this season, he has an .848 save percentage and in only one of his five starts has he allowed less than three goals. Will he prove worth this contract by the time it expires in 2029?

### **Philadelphia Flyers: Trevor Zegras**

The Flyers bought low on a Zegras trade over the summer and he's now effectively in a one-year show-me season. When Zegras signed his current bridge deal he was coming off a 65-point season, but scored just 47 points total in the following two years, and so a \$5.75 million AAV is a bit rich at the moment. So far in Philadelphia, he's been used at both centre and wing, been between the second and third lines, and the first and second power-play units. The result has been five assists in six games. Can he earn an extension? Can he earn a raise? If improvement doesn't come over the long term, will the Flyers still want to qualify him at \$5.75 million?

### **Pittsburgh Penguins: Sidney Crosby**

Will he or won't he? As we struggle to see any way the Penguins return to contender status in the near future, everyone is wondering whether their captain will eventually seek his way to a new destination to finish his career and get into playoff games again. Crosby still has another year left on his contract, so the options are to either seek a trade between now and its conclusion, or sign another contract (when he's about to turn 40 years old) elsewhere. Whenever Crosby is asked about it, he shuts down any speculation, and since he's won three Stanley Cups already, his motivation may be to play his entire career with one team. We'll find out within the next year or so.

### **San Jose Sharks: Macklin Celebrini**

Celebrini hit the ground running in the NHL last season with 63 points in 70 games, and another strong year might put him on the radar for Team Canada at the Olympics. On June 13 next summer, Celebrini will turn 20 years old, and 18 days later, he'll be eligible to sign an extension coming off his entry-level contract. The centrepiece of San Jose's rebuild, there's little question Celebrini will become their highest-paid active player, but how high could that AAV go on a maximum term extension if he breaks out further and cracks Team Canada?

### **Seattle Kraken: Vince Dunn**

A bit of an underrated offensive defenceman, from 2022-23 through last season, Dunn was tied for 11th in even-strength points among all defencemen — two fewer points than Roman Josi in the same amount of games played. In that same time span, 128 NHL defencemen played at least 3,000 minutes at 5-on-5 and Dunn was 10th in goals for percentage, on the ice for 212 goals for and 154 against. Making \$7.35 million against the cap now, this soon-to-be 29-year-old will be eligible to extend next summer and will

be mixed up in the vastly changing contract landscape. He missed 43 games over the previous two seasons, so staying healthy would go a long way to frame his asking price.

#### **St. Louis Blues: Dylan Holloway**

A two-year, \$2.29 million AAV is the offer sheet it took to get Holloway from Edmonton and he immediately paid off with a 26-goal, 63-point season. Through five games this season, the production hasn't come yet — Holloway has one goal, no assists and is a minus-4 so far — but the opportunity is there. The 24-year-old is averaging 19:15 of ice time per game (most among Blues forwards) and has 12 shots on goal. At that rate, eventually the numbers should come, and this is a contract year for the player, who will be moving off what was a bridge deal and looking to cash in on his breakout.

#### **Tampa Bay Lightning: Nikita Kucherov**

Earlier in this list we mentioned Artemi Panarin of the NY Rangers, who is a pending UFA with some question about his worth. Kucherov isn't at all there yet — he did score 121 points just last season — but when he heads into the final year of his contract next season, Kucherov will be 33, just as old as Panarin is now. It's hard to imagine Kucherov leaving Tampa Bay, and the Lightning have had no trouble keeping the players they want at reasonable rates, but what will a reasonable rate look like for Kucherov just before the cap jumps to \$113 million or more? The Lightning are 1-3-2 so far this season, but what if there's anything sticky to that slow start?

#### **Toronto Maple Leafs: Nick Robertson**

For the first time in a while, one of the more interesting contracts on the Leafs isn't a "core" player. Auston Matthews is still signed for another two seasons, William Nylander has another six and John Tavares just re-signed at a discount. So how about Robertson, who has never scored more than 15 goals, hasn't been able to earn a permanent spot in this lineup, and yet the team can't quit him? Robertson will once again be an arbitration-eligible RFA next summer and between now and then, will be a trade/waiver candidate. The fear in Toronto is that they let go of this shooter and he knocks in 20 or more with a better opportunity elsewhere. But will they be able to bring out his best or at least acquire a useful piece if they move him?

#### **Utah Mammoth: Logan Cooley**

The true breakout season has maybe not come yet for Cooley, who was re-ranked as the top prospect from the 2022 class by Jason Bukala just under a year after he was chosen third overall. While he did finish as the second-highest scorer on Utah last season, it was a 65-point year and the hope is that, at his best, Cooley will deliver more. This season is the final one of his entry-level contract, and though eligible to sign at any time, a report just before the start of the season said he turned down a long-term, big-money offer already. Betting on himself to have a huge year, Cooley has two goals and one assist in six games.

#### **Vancouver Canucks: Elias Pettersson**

Armed with a full no-movement clause and supposedly in great shape, ready for a rebound season, the beginnings of 2025-26 have largely seemed very similar to the disastrous 2024-25 campaign for Pettersson. But the Canucks need their \$11.6 million centre, because what's the alternative? A trade would certainly demand retention, and given that the team would be selling low, it's hard to envision how Quinn Hughes re-signs in another year if things have gone that badly. And now, with Filip Chytil out,

Vancouver's lack of centre depth is brutally obvious, putting more pressure on Pettersson to produce. He is the X-Factor player on this team in so many ways, and that cap hit is on the books until 2032.

**Vegas Golden Knights: Pavel Dorofeyev**

One of the NHL's three goal-scoring leaders seven games into the season, Dorofeyev shouldn't be catching us by surprise after scoring 35 times last season. Lately, he's been playing even-strength minutes opposite Mitch Marner, but four of his seven goals have come on Vegas' devastating power play. Dorofeyev is not a particularly young player quickly coming out of his shell — he'll turn 25 years old on Sunday — so while he will be an RFA next summer, he would be UFA eligible in 2027, so he will hold some degree of leverage.

**Washington Capitals: Alex Ovechkin**

The all-time NHL goals record is his, and he's won a Stanley Cup, so what will Ovechkin do when this contract expires in the summer? He's still scoring at a high level (44 last season!) and the Capitals hope to contend for a Cup again with this group, so will that be enough to keep him around? Would it change his motivation if they won it all this season?

Another 40-goal season would put him within 60 or so of 1,000 all-time NHL goals — does that milestone entice him at all? Or is this the final NHL season for Ovechkin, and will his next contract be with a KHL team at 41 years of age?

**Winnipeg Jets: Cole Perfetti**

Winnipeg's second line is something of a question this season and Perfetti figures to be an important piece of it after a 50-point season a year ago. But he and the Jets are hoping for more from the 23-year-old player. Unfortunately, an ankle injury at the end of the pre-season has him sidelined week-to-week, so we have to wait and see what he'll deliver, and when. Perfetti is making \$3.25 million a season on an expiring bridge deal and what he accomplishes this season will greatly influence where his next number goes.

## The Athletic / How chirping became a 'lost art' in the NHL — and why not every player is a fan

By Julian McKenzie – October 21, 2025

Standing behind NHL benches for nearly 30 years, Florida Panthers coach Paul Maurice has heard players sling all types of trash talk on the ice. Or, as the practice is known in proper hockey parlance, chirping.

The verbal back-and-forth is viewed in the sport as an essential element of gamesmanship, an opportunity to gain a psychological edge through taunting, dissing, mocking, heckling or any other form of warbling that gets under an opponent's skin. As the league has changed over time, though, Maurice believes the quality of its chirps have too and the practice has become a "lost art" in the NHL.

"They used to be really, really funny," the two-time Stanley Cup winner told *The Athletic*. "Some of the chirps (today) are so bad. They're so sad."

Chirping was once so widespread throughout the NHL that its use wasn't restricted to players. Veteran Montreal Canadiens forward Brendan Gallagher fondly recalled former coaches and even team trainers lobbing in-game smack earlier in his career. But today's landscape looks — and sounds — much different.

As a rookie in the mid-2010s, Ottawa Senators forward Nick Cousins received a disparaging welcome to the league when enforcer Shawn Thornton approached him during a stoppage and chirped, "Next shift, just leave your stick on the bench because you don't need it." Over the decade-plus since, Cousins lamented, some players have become "too nice" to each other.

And he is far from alone in this observation.

"In the older era, it was a little more ruthless than it is now," Calgary Flames forward Nazem Kadri said.

"There's very little, if any, in the league now (compared to) when I first came in," Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk said.

Added Tkachuk's teammate Brad Marchand: "Guys are way more sensitive now."

Rob Ray accumulated more than 3,200 penalty minutes in his NHL career as an enforcer with the Buffalo Sabres and Senators in the 1990s and early 2000s. He also dished and received his fair share of chirps back when they were especially "vicious" and habitually went out of bounds.

"If you knew anything about an individual that most people wouldn't know or was real personal," said Ray, now the Sabres' television color analyst. "(If) you knew he was going through something, there were no limits. You just let him have it."

The league's unwritten code has since added certain rules, namely that significant others and other family members are considered too personal of subjects for chirping. However, criticizing a player's skills or appearance has always been fair game. Gallagher still remembers the line he dropped on one of the NHL's premier trash-talkers, Marchand, then with the Boston Bruins, during a 2012-13 preseason tilt: "Oh, my God, your nose is even bigger in person than it is on TV."

Other chirps tap hockey-specific slang for an assist, such as when Edmonton Oilers defenseman Darnell Nurse insulted then-Vancouver Canucks forward Adam Gaudette during the latter's NHL debut in 2018.

"He yelled out at me — he's like, 'All right, you f—ing Schmelt, bring it,'" said Gaudette, now with the San Jose Sharks, recounting Nurse's use of a term for a hated rookie popularized by "Letterkenny," a Canadian show. "I was like 'Oh, s—', and I think I fired the puck off his ankle or something."

Or when then-Philadelphia Flyers forward Claude Giroux once famously cooed like a pigeon — a literal chirp, with "pigeon" signifying a talentless, disrespected player — to slight the Toronto Maple Leafs' James van Riemsdyk. In the case of Giroux, now with the Senators, the chatter often extended to his teammates during games.

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"He never stopped talking," said retired forward Wayne Simmonds, who played with Giroux in Philadelphia. "I don't think he's stopped talking yet. I can still hear him talking in my brain right now."

Some players are blunter, taking their cues from Los Angeles Kings defenseman Drew Doughty's viral chirp against then-Anaheim Ducks enforcer Pat Maroon during a 2014 outdoor game: "Buddy, you suck at hockey. You've been in the minors for how long?"

Speaking to *The Athletic*, Maroon commended Doughty for "always" having some good chirps in his arsenal.

"Being chirped is fun," said Maroon, who retired from the NHL in March with three Stanley Cup championships. "And chirping back is funny."

Other players, such as Seattle Kraken defenseman Brandon Montour, can take that recurring chirp in stride.

"(It's) just an easy one that you know guys don't obviously take serious because everyone in our league is pretty damn good at hockey," Montour said.

But as New York Islanders forward Matthew Highmore noted, even this basic barb — *Buddy, you suck* — can sting.

"I don't think a lot of guys like to use it because it does cut deep," Highmore said. "I mean, sometimes it can be pretty ruthless. And that one, sometimes it rolls off your shoulders, and sometimes it hits you pretty hard."

However, given the number of players approached for this story who opted to "keep it PG" in sharing specific chirps or declined to discuss the topic outright, two things are clear. First, that they likely get away with harsher in-game language than, say, NBA players, if only because of the muffling barrier of tempered glass panels that encase every rink. And second, that whatever is said between the boards generally stays there.

"The actions, the things that are said, your emotions, it's one of the coolest things about hockey," Marchand said. "A lot of people that don't know the game or haven't played would never understand."

"You definitely cannot repeat the things that are said on ice."

If the NHL has indeed entered an era of excessively nice chirping, to paraphrase Cousins, several factors can help explain the shift, players said.

Omnipresent television and cellphone cameras at arenas, not to mention wireless microphones often worn for capturing league-sponsored content, have made them more cautious about what comes out of their mouths.

"I just keep it light," Montour said.

"The last thing anybody wants is for something to go viral and get in trouble, for something that could be taken out of context," Marchand said.

There's also greater consideration of a younger generation of hockey fans.

"(Players are) like, 'Oh, s—, I hope my kids don't hear that,'" Utah Mammoth defenseman Nate Schmidt said. "That's a big one."

For the Panthers' Tkachuk, the evolving archetypes of modern NHL players help explain the current state of chirping. When he entered the league with the Calgary Flames in 2016, he regularly faced "bigger, scarier" opponents with admirable gifts of gab. But as talent levels around the league have dramatically risen, with fewer places on rosters for enforcers, the caliber of trash talk has fallen off.

"As guys grow up and they're the best players on their team and they're built in a hockey lab, I think that there's not as much game-within-the-game growing up anymore," Tkachuk said. "I just think that players are different on how they make it. It's all, majority, skill (players)."

If any haven for chirping still exists, it is the Stanley Cup playoffs. According to TSN's James Duthie, last season's Stanley Cup Final rematch between Tkachuk's Panthers and the Oilers was defined by instances of "pure verbal hate" in which "everything (was) on the table."

"In the playoffs, it's like no-holds-barred," former Islanders, Sabres and Panthers forward Kyle Okposo said. "It doesn't matter. You're just doing everything, anything, that you can to win, to get under anybody's skin."

Especially during the regular season, though, the preferred methods for entering opponents' heads have changed. And some of the chirps you do hear, as Gallagher said, are "generic."

"I think guys are a little bit more careful and a bit more focused on the game," the Senators' Giroux said.

But some players still seek to use chirping as a way to throw opponents off their game — as evidenced in a recent back-and-forth in which Senators captain Brady Tkachuk called Nashville Predators forward Michael McCarron a "fat f—." Months earlier, Marchand even called an unnamed Sens player "so f—ing fat."

"If it's something about how they look or how they're playing, something like that that irritates them, it's still going to be effective without crossing any personal lines," Kraken forward Tye Kartye said.

And for a select few, the practice helps improve their focus on the ice.

"Sometimes there's nights where I don't feel like engaging and guys come after me," Marchand said. "And it drags (me) into the game. I think that's one of the things that I get from it. It gets you mentally engaged in the game and allows me to focus more sometimes. But that could work against you, too, if you don't keep your mind in the right spot."

Thanks to the likes of Marchand, Gallagher, the Tkachuks and others carrying on the supposedly dying art, it seems unlikely that chirping will ever disappear altogether, no matter how little is heard at some NHL games these days. Even so, there is no denying the shifting cultural winds. Just ask Ray.

Ray was once en route to an NHL alumni event when he ran into a pair of ex-opponents, Darcy Tucker and Shayne Corson. Seeing his fellow retired players, Ray was instantly transported back to when his on-ice chirps toward them had, in hindsight, gone too far.

During a January 2001 game in Toronto, Ray reportedly delivered an insult you wouldn't "repeat in public" about Corson in the midst of a fight with Tucker, Corson's teammate and brother-in-law. Even after Ray and Tucker were thrown out of the game, Tucker tried to chirp back at Ray outside the Sabres' dressing room and was eventually restrained by teammates and security.

So, when Ray encountered both men, his heart sank. *"Ahhh, son of a b—,"* he thought. He could've ducked Tucker and Corson. Or, perhaps, he could've doubled down and insulted them again.

Instead, he approached them and apologized.