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October 25, 2024**

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The Athletic / At Blue Jackets intermission, grab a hot dog and nachos — and a word with the GM

By Aaron Portzline – October 25, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Bob Buczek stood on the main concourse of Nationwide Arena with his 21-year-old son, Noah, on Saturday when he spotted a familiar face walking in his direction. It was Columbus Blue Jackets president and general manager Don Waddell.

After stopping to chat briefly with two fans just a few feet away, Waddell turned his attention to the Buczeks, first with a handshake and then a short but powerful conversation. Three days later, Buczek was still excited by the interaction, which took place during the second intermission of a game against Minnesota.

“I’m a Knicks fan,” Bob Buczek said. “I’m a Giants fan. I’m a Mets fan. Those GMs are untouchable.

“They’re not walking in the crowd, shaking hands and talking with fans. That just doesn’t happen. I can’t tell you how cool he was, either. Just really down-to-earth.”

Waddell, 66, was hired to run the Blue Jackets in May, and it’s already clear he plans on running the organization differently than his predecessors. Doug MacLean, Scott Howson and Jarmo Kekäläinen were always willing to stop and chat with fans who recognized them.

But Waddell goes a step further.

Rather than remain in his press-level booth during the first and second intermissions of Blue Jackets’ home games, Waddell instead roams the main and upper concourses, as well as the suite and club levels, meeting fans and stopping to chat if they’re so inclined.

“What else am I going to do between periods?” Waddell joked with The Athletic.

It’s nothing new, Waddell said. He started doing his intermission walks in 1999 when he was GM of the expansion Atlanta Thrashers and continued when he joined the Carolina Hurricanes in 2014, first as club president and later as GM.

So far, he’s been spotted during each intermission of the Blue Jackets’ three home games this season. The only time he doesn’t walk among the masses, he said, is when there is a pressing need within the club, like a pending trade, a serious injury, etc.

Waddell often ends the conversation by sharing his email address, he said, and many fans — probably 150 or so already in Columbus — have taken him up on his offer to stay in touch or share their questions or concerns about the club.

He’s an early riser, usually awake at approximately 5 a.m. each day. And his first task is to “clean out” his inbox, saying he “responds to every email.”

“I enjoy meeting the people,” Waddell said. “They’re so invested in the Blue Jackets. I’ve met so many people who are season-ticket holders from Day 1, and you go back and see how much money they’ve spent through the years, the passion they have ... we want them to feel a part of it.

“We’re all in this together. Everybody plays a part. The players play on the ice, the staff has to do their jobs, and the fans ... if they don’t come, the puzzle can’t ever be completed. They’re the ones who pay our salaries. If they stop coming, we’re in trouble.”

Sahil Shah, who came up through the NHL's learn-to-skate program and later played at Olentangy Orange High School in the Columbus suburbs, said he's seen Waddell on Blue Jackets fans' social media posts, including one of him relaxing at the world-famous R Bar Arena bar near Nationwide.

But Shah never expected to bump into Waddell on the main concourse during the second period of Tuesday's 6-2 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs. Sahil and his brother, Eshan, chatted briefly with Waddell, then posed for him with a selfie.

"I told him I really appreciated the way they handled the tribute to Johnny Gaudreau (in the first home game of the season), and I told him I was excited for the season," Sahil Shah said. "He thanked me and then he said something that stuck with me.

"He said, 'We may not be the most skilled team in the league this season, but we don't ever want to be outworked. That's something we can control.'"

For Shah, the founder and CEO of a software company that has a 65-person staff and customers in 50 different countries, the interaction struck him on another level, too.

"Lots of companies stress that everybody is part of the team," Shah said. "But for him, what's really cool is he's not taking that to mean only the internal team, but the whole fan base, too. He really wants to know what fans are thinking and what they want, and that's what we want from our leaders.

"They're going to make the decisions they make, sure, but at least listen to the fans and take some of what they say into account. That's what a good business does."

As chief financial officer at Double Eagle Club, the exclusive golf course owned by Blue Jackets majority owner John P. McConnell, Rick Mellen had already met Waddell a few times. But he was pleasantly surprised to do so on Tuesday with his wife, Kris.

"I sure didn't expect to see him on the main concourse, first intermission," Rick said with a chuckle. "You don't really see that a lot. Usually (sports executives) are up in the box, so I was surprised to see him. It's great that he has the vision to go out and talk to the people.

"From the first time I met him, he was interested in my thoughts, my views on the Blue Jackets, and the culture within the McConnell (businesses)."

Waddell was slightly uncomfortable with The Athletic joining him on his two strolls on Tuesday. He does it to meet fans and let them know they matter, he said. And he does it to stay in touch with what fans are thinking about the club.

It's a real live Yelp review. It's the internet comment section come to life. Waddell talked with so many fans during Tuesday's second intermission stroll that he actually missed the first few minutes of the third period.

So far, the interactions have all been positive, Waddell said. The Blue Jackets are 3-3-0 heading into Saturday's game in Nashville, but they've played with noticeably more pace and passion than seen for at least the past two seasons.

"I think they've seen a different approach and felt a different atmosphere around the players," Waddell said. "Obviously, (coach Dean Evason) has done a great job of building expectations within the players. I tell the fans, we're not going to win every night, but we're going to give you a product you can be proud of.

"The people who spend the money to come to games, and take three or four hours out of their day ... this is the least that I can do. But I really enjoy it, too."

Buczek said he and Waddell had a three-to-five minute conversation, and it struck him how matter-of-fact Waddell became as they parted ways.

“He was very forthright,” Buczek said. “He said, ‘Bob, we’re going to get this turned around. It might take some time, but we’re going to get it turned around. We will get this fixed. We will.’”

“And you know what? I believe him.”

[BlueJackets.com / Jack Johnson forging bonds with the young Blue Jackets](#)

By Garrison McDaniel – October 25, 2024

When Jack Johnson signed with Columbus in the offseason, the veteran defenseman was looking forward to getting to know his new teammates.

Especially the ones who share his alma mater.

Johnson is a graduate of the University of Michigan and has taken the Wolverine alumni on the team under his wing.

They use their time in Ann Arbor together as bonding in the locker room, on the team plane and at team dinners during away games.

“We definitely have fun with similar stories to share,” Johnson said. “Even though I was there a lot earlier than they were, we have a lot of similar stories.”

Fellow defensemen and Michigan alumnus Zach Werenski was one of the two current Blue Jackets that was teammates with Johnson during his first stint in Columbus.

He was mentored by Johnson when he first came into the league and was excited to get a player back in the CBJ locker room that is willing to help younger guys improve throughout the season.

“I was a young guy when Jack was here, and he was someone I looked up to when I was a young guy,” Werenski said. “I always say he was a Michigan guy, so it was easy for me to become close with him, and he took me under his wings.”

Johnson was a Blue Jacket for seven years from 2012-18, playing in 445 games for the club and amassing 154 points while being a minutes-eating defenseman. Since his first stint in Columbus, he played for four teams in six years and won the Stanley Cup with the Colorado Avalanche in 2022 before signing a one-year contract to return to his offseason home. So far this season, he's played in five of the team's six games

Along with helping players improve on the ice, Johnson has also been a great friend to Werenski even when he was playing for other NHL teams. Now that he is back, the two of them have rekindled that relationship and have kept each other company early in the season.

“I think in the (locker) room, we were always talking to each other about college football or NFL or whatever it is, we're always just hanging out,” Werenski said. “So I'm excited to get back on the road with them and screw around.”

Johnson has also started getting to work being a mentor to the younger players on the team. He sits next to Adam Fantilli on the team plane, and the two of them have formed an important bond to Fantilli in the short time they have been teammates.

“I hang out with him all the time in the meal room or I sit beside him on the plane. He just tells me a lot of stories,” Fantilli said. “When I need advice, I talk to him, and anytime I need an opinion on something, I'll go to him.”

He also enjoys talking with Johnson about their time in Ann Arbor, using it as a way to establish a connection with one another that transcends the ice.

“It's great,” Fantilli said. “(He was at Michigan) definitely a lot earlier than me, but a lot of the stuff is still the same, and we can banter about it, so it's fun.”

Johnson has plans to invite all the young guys on the team over to his house for dinner and to meet his family.

"I told those guys, I gotta have them over for dinner and just so they can have a home-cooked meal and all that," Johnson said.

He also said he planned on taking them out to dinner while the team is on the road, a promise he has already fulfilled when the team opened the season in Minnesota.

"He did take us out in Minnesota, so it was really nice of him," Fantilli said. "He didn't have to do that. But, yeah, he's been great."

[BlueJackets.com / Werenski has been everywhere for the Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 25, 2024

With his nearly ever-present smile and joie de vivre, Kirill Marchenko has drawn comparisons to the football-loving Danny Rojas from the show *Ted Lasso*.

But there's another Blue Jackets player – at least in style of play, not temperament – that could also draw a comparison to a player on the show.

“He's here, he's there, he's every ... where,” was the supporters' chant for do-it-all midfielder-turned-coach Roy Kent. (Viewers of the show know there's a certain word also in there that we can't publish on a family website.)

In the early throes of the 2024-25 season, that applies to Zach Werenski, the All-Star defenseman who it could fairly be said is playing the best hockey of his career to start the campaign.

It's not just in the statistics, though those are plenty impressive, as he has two goals and four assists plus 23 shots on goal – fourth among NHL blueliners – through six games. It's in the fact that, spurred on by a new system under head coach Dean Evason that preaches getting defensemen into the mix offensively, Werenski is free to go anywhere on the ice to make a play.

So far, he's taken full advantage of the opportunity.

“It feels really good,” Werenski said. “I think our system allows that obviously. He wants us to be aggressive. I think we've been really good defensively as a team. Myself, we've done well in our end, so it allows us to play offense. We've closed down plays quickly, we've broken the puck out really clean. That just allows you to jump and play offense. I think starting in the D-zone to the neutral zone to the offensive zone, it's going well right now, so it's easy for me.”

That was on full display in Tuesday night's victory against Toronto in which Werenski had a pair of assists, both by pushing the play. On Justin Danforth's goal in the first period, he intercepted a pass at his own blue line, immediately hit the jets and got into the offensive zone and then threaded a pass between three Maple Leafs defenders to set up the tally from the right circle.

In the second period, he helped the Blue Jackets increase their lead to 4-0, taking a pass from Damon Severson at his own blue line, cutting around a defender and hitting Kirill Marchenko in open ice. Marchenko then sped into the zone and fired a shot that ended with Sean Monahan putting the rebound into the back of the net.

On the season, with Werenski on the ice at 5-on-5, the Blue Jackets have controlled the puck, outshooting opponents 75-56 per Natural Stat Trick. For Werenski, the key to his ability to join the offense is the fact that he's been good in the defensive zone, breaking the puck out along with partner Ivan Provorov and not having to spend long periods of time defending.

While it may conjure memories of when Werenski was a so-called rover under head coach John Tortorella, he said the major difference is his play in the defensive zone.

“I'm definitely more responsible defensively right now,” Werenski said. “There's still stuff to clean up, but I feel like I'm way farther ahead defensively than I was even a year ago coming back from injury. I feel like I'm just seeing the ice a lot better. My reads are better.”

'It feels like (my early years) in a sense of like the offensive side, but I feel like I'm not letting it take away from my defense, and that's super important. I've worked at that for a while now, so hopefully I continue doing that all year.'

And when he does have the puck, Werenski feels more confident than ever he can put it in the net. That's saying something for a defenseman who led the NHL with 20 goals from the blue line in 2019-20, but a change in sticks this offseason from an 85 flex to a 95 – which provides more stiffness – and a new curve has made a world of difference with his shot.

It could have been a big change, but after working out with Nashville defenseman Roman Josi – one of the NHL's top-scoring defensemen – Werenski made the switch and hasn't looked back.

"I didn't love my sticks last year," Werenski said. "For some reason last year, I couldn't find a grip on them. We tried a bunch of different sticks, and I just couldn't find it. The week before I came back (to Columbus), Josi came to Michigan to skate and I just liked the curve of his stick. I texted the CCM guy to see if I could try it. They sent me two Josi sticks, actually. I tried it once and I looked at (equipment managers Dustin Halstead and Jamie Healy) and said, 'I'm switching. That's it.' It took me one skate and I was certain.

"I was just done trying stuff over the summer. I was like, this is the stick I'm using. It felt right. I really like it. Josi is using it, (NHL leading goal scorer Auston) Matthews uses the same curve. If guys like that are using it and it's working for them, I feel like I could do it too."

There's one more component of Werenski's game that is also coming together, and that's from a leadership standpoint. He's always been a lead-by-example type of player, but Werenski has become more and more vocal in the CBJ room over the years.

That's taken on added importance this season with captain Boone Jenner and fellow alternate Erik Gudbranson on the shelf with long-term injuries.

"He's just a calm leader," head coach Dean Evason said. "He just works, goes about his business. Doesn't say a whole lot. He's very quiet in that regard, as far as verbalizing things. But you watch him when he walks through the room, he has a stature about him. Same as on the ice. He's the guy."

The Hockey News / Former Cleveland Monster Defenseman Jakub Zbořil Signs In His Home Country Of Czechia

By Jason Newland – October 25, 2024

Jakub Zbořil has signed with Czech Extraliga's HC Dynamo Pardubice per a club announcement.

Sports Director and former NHLer Petr Sýkora said in a statement, "We will significantly strengthen the defensive ranks. Zbořil has been on our list of potential signings for a long time. We know what it can offer us and we believe it will fit perfectly with us. He is an intelligent player with good character."

Zbořil was traded to Columbus last season from the Boston Bruins in exchange for defenseman Andrew Peeke. Zbořil didn't make an appearance for Columbus, instead playing the rest of the season in Cleveland for the Monsters. He had 4 points in 15 regular season games, and 4 points in 14 Calder Cup Playoff games.

Zbořil was left unsigned by new GM Don Waddell as he was a UFA. He signed a PTO with the New Jersey Devils in training camp but chose to return to his home country after not being signed. He signed a 5-year contract with HC Dynamo Pardubice.

The Athletic / Early NHL trade candidates: 10 players to watch ahead of the deadline this season

By Chris Johnston – October 25, 2024

If history is any indication, we may still be a month or more away from a trade of any consequence involving NHL players.

There were only two of those before U.S. Thanksgiving last season, and they happened on the same day with one team involved in both deals, when the Minnesota Wild sent Calen Addison to the San Jose Sharks while acquiring Zach Bogosian from the Tampa Bay Lightning on Nov. 8.

Generally speaking, it takes time for the needs and wants of competing organizations to align.

Still, even in these earliest days of the 2024-25 campaign, general managers have already started planning for the road ahead. Tire-kicking conversations are underway. Important contractual considerations loom in the background.

While it's too early to roll out a full-blown Trade Board, it's not too soon to start identifying some of the names that could play a role in the upcoming trading season.

Let's start with 10 players to watch.

1. Ivan Provorov, Columbus Blue Jackets

Age: 27

Position: LHD

Contract term: 2025 UFA

Cap hit: \$4.725 million

For a rebuilding Blue Jackets organization, Provorov represents the chip to play before the March 7 trade deadline. Still just 27 years old, the pending unrestricted-free-agent defenseman is already into his ninth NHL season and carries an attractive cap hit that was chopped down to \$4.725 million in the trade to Columbus. It can be further reduced, too. Provorov is an all-situations defender who is capable of playing both sides of the ice and profiles as the kind of asset who typically nets a first-round pick at the deadline. Given the stage Provorov is at in his career and where the Blue Jackets are in their competitive cycle, it's more a matter of when he's moved rather than a question of if he's moved.

2. Cam Fowler, Anaheim Ducks

Age: 32

Position: LHD

Contract term: 2026 UFA

Cap hit: \$6.5 million

A mainstay on the Anaheim blue line for 15 years and more than 1,000 games, Fowler is feeling the ground shift beneath his feet with five defensemen aged 25 or younger currently playing alongside him in the Ducks lineup. When you couple that with the fact he has one year beyond this one remaining on his contract at a \$6.5 million cap hit, the conditions may be ripe for him to move to a team in win-now mode. There were certainly trade discussions involving Fowler's name held over the summer. Any move

would essentially have to come with the support of the 32-year-old because his contract includes a four-team trade list that gives him a tremendous amount of say in a potential change of address. It's worth noting it's been nearly eight years since he last had a taste of playoff hockey, though.

3. Timothy Liljegren, Toronto Maple Leafs

Age: 25

Position: RHD

Contract term: 2026 UFA

Cap hit: \$3 million

As a well-paid healthy scratch for most of this season, Liljegren's tenure in Toronto appears to be nearing its end. The 25-year-old right-shot defenseman has only dressed for one game so far after being leapfrogged on the Maple Leafs depth chart by Conor Timmins, who is soaking up third-pairing minutes behind Chris Tanev and Jake McCabe at roughly a third of Liljegren's \$3 million cap hit. With Jani Hakanpää also in the mix for playing time on the right side in Toronto, Liljegren has become expendable. A deft skater and puck-mover, his game has been held back by questionable defensive decisions and inconsistency. There's no doubt he has the tools to be an effective NHL player, but after seven years in the Leafs organization, Liljegren still hasn't carved out a full-time role and will likely get another opportunity elsewhere.

4. Brock Nelson, New York Islanders

Age: 33

Position: C, LW

Contract term: 2025 UFA

Cap hit: \$6 million

Nelson is a big, sturdy forward who has scored at a 35-goal pace across the past three seasons. He can be slotted as a second-line center or slide into a wing spot on the top line while being trusted with special teams duty. As a pending unrestricted free agent, he's exactly the kind of difference-maker contending teams would be falling over themselves to get their hands on if — and it remains a massive if — the Islanders fade from the playoff picture and elect to move him before the trade deadline. That organization has a healthy track record of keeping its own, too, but it's certainly notable that Nelson is currently playing out the final year of his contract.

5. Kaapo Kakko, New York Rangers

Age: 23

Position: RW

Contract term: 2025 RFA

Cap hit: \$2.4 million

When the playoffs ended in the spring, the former No. 2 draft pick expressed a desire to remain in New York, quickly signing a one-year contract at the amount he would have been due on his qualifying offer — \$2.4 million — rather than pushing for more money and/or term. That provided cost certainty for the Rangers, but it didn't guarantee any added security for Kakko. He's had a productive start to this season with five points in six games while skating on the third line, which could boost his trade value if it continues while simultaneously making him a less desirable player for the Rangers to move. Still, it's a

win-at-all-costs season in New York. The Rangers have gauged the market on Kakko previously and could dangle him again as part of a package should they take an aggressive approach into the deadline.

6. Christian Dvorak, Montreal Canadiens

Age: 28

Position: C, LW

Contract term: 2025 UFA

Cap hit: \$4.45 million

The number of teams in need of a center usually outstrips the number of them available, which is what lands Dvorak on this list. The 28-year-old is a pending unrestricted free agent playing for a Habs team that's been a highly motivated seller at recent deadlines. While his offensive impacts are minimal, Dvorak has shown himself to be a strong faceoff man and penalty killer, and he'd be a natural bottom-six fit for contenders looking to bolster their depth. The X-factor here is the player's health as he's been sidelined by a number of different injuries in recent years.

7. Cody Ceci, San Jose Sharks

Age: 30

Position: RHD

Contract term: 2025 UFA

Cap hit: \$3.25 million

Traded from the Edmonton Oilers to the Sharks over the summer in a cap-clearing move, it's hard to imagine the veteran right-shot defenseman finishing the entire campaign with the cellar-dwelling Sharks. Not only is he a pending unrestricted free agent, but he's also shown himself capable of handling the rigors of playoff hockey during three runs with Edmonton. Most notably, he was an important part of the penalty kill that was a massive difference-maker for the Oilers last spring. While Ceci has his detractors, his blend of experience and defensive attributes should hold some appeal to teams looking for added depth before the playoffs.

8. Rasmus Ristolainen, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 29

Position: RHD

Contract term: 2027 UFA

Cap hit: \$5.1 million

The retooling Flyers are short on rental players to take to market in the leadup to the deadline, but they could probably be compelled to part with the big, physical defenseman if the right deal came along. Ristolainen carries a \$5.1 million cap charge on a contract that stretches two seasons beyond this one, so some salary retention might be needed here. The right-shooting Ristolainen showed improved on-ice results when healthy last season and is ideally slotted on a third pairing at this stage of his career.

9. John Gibson, Anaheim Ducks

Age: 31

Position: G

Contract term: 2027 UFA

Cap hit: \$6.4 million

Gibson has yet to appear in a game this season after undergoing emergency appendectomy surgery in late September, but he's well down the road to recovery. No stranger to our Big Board, the 31-year-old goaltender remains a player of interest with another year down on his contract — he's got this season, plus two more remaining — and successor Lukáš Dostál potentially ready to run with Anaheim's No. 1 job. Gibson's numbers in recent seasons don't jump off the page in a positive way, but they should be viewed with the understanding that he played behind some horrific defensive teams. How the veteran might perform under better conditions is unknown, but it's potentially a compelling enough possibility that someone might roll the dice.

10. Nikolaj Ehlers, Winnipeg Jets

Age: 28

Position: LW

Contract term: 2025 UFA

Cap hit: \$6 million

The Winnipeg Jets' scorching 6-0-0 start has been fueled by elite results from the Ehlers line, so his inclusion here may seem misplaced (if not totally off base). Hear me out: View it as a "situation to watch" involving a pending unrestricted free agent rather than a player being dangled as trade bait. There is still plenty of time for the Jets and Ehlers to come together on an in-season extension, and there's a case to be made on the merits of keeping him in the fold as an "own rental" even if that doesn't end up happening. The fact that it's up in the air is what makes the Ehlers case worth monitoring. The 28-year-old winger is an important asset for the Jets organization to manage and only has limited ability to dictate his potential trade market through a 10-team no-trade clause. Big decisions are on the horizon for both team and player here.

[The Athletic / NHL front-office rankings: Every quote from the 40 execs The Athletic surveyed](#)

By Arthur Staple, Chris Johnston, Michael Russo and Scott Powers – October 25, 2024

For most sports fans and even most hockey fans, Tuesday's NHL front-office rankings probably provided plenty of material.

But for anyone who wanted more, here's your chance at it.

Surveying 40 NHL executives about the league's top front offices (other than their own) — with anonymity granted for the sake of the execs being able to speak freely — The Athletic collected more than 3,700 words of opinions and insight into what general managers, assistant general managers, team presidents, senior advisers and scouting directors think of their peers.

For the main article, we cut that down to a few of the most relevant quotes for every top 10 team, along with analysis.

Here, we'll present the execs' quotes on each team, uncut.

Wondering just how many execs showed their respect for the Dallas Stars' Jim Nill? Or what justification was given for the Detroit Red Wings' 10th-place ranking?

Did not receive votes: Buffalo Sabres, Calgary Flames, Chicago Blackhawks, Columbus Blue Jackets, Los Angeles Kings, New York Islanders, Ottawa Senators, San Jose Sharks, Seattle Kraken

Anaheim Ducks

Second-place vote from a director of scouting: "Very stealthy and purposeful."

Fifth-place vote from an assistant GM: "I like how they've gone about their rebuild. If everything goes according to plan, they're going to be deep in every position."

Boston Bruins

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: "It's a longstanding thing. They probably don't get enough credit for what they've done with the market they're in."

Third-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: "Have done well to keep a strong core, signed solid contracts and even though they fired (ex-coach Bruce) Cassidy, (got a) solid replacement in (Jim) Montgomery. Big year for him behind the bench."

Fourth-place vote from a GM: "Always in the mix all the time. They've never had the high draft picks and always in the playoffs."

Fourth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: "Stable, demanding ownership. Only two GMs since 2006. Have arguably created the best team culture in the NHL over the past 15 seasons. Consistently competitive and well-managed. Made playoffs 15 of past 17 seasons (with) three Cup appearances and one win."

Fifth-place vote from an assistant GM: "Boston is sort of like the Atlanta Braves. They probably should have won more Stanley Cups than they did during that window, but they've always been competitive."

Carolina Hurricanes

First-place vote from a top-level exec: “They have an excellent understanding of the CBA and how to utilize it effectively and to their advantage. They’ve been successful at finding talent and signing players to contracts where the return for the most part exceeds the cost, resulting in a strong return on investment. They’ve embraced analytics and incorporated using data in all aspects of hockey ops decision-making.”

Third-place vote from an assistant GM: “I like how they go about their business.”

Fifth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Consistently good every year despite a meddling owner.”

Fifth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “They operate on the most frugal budget and their staff does a helluva job. I’ll be interested to see how Eric Tulsky does because Donnie Waddell’s the one person that I know that could handle Tom (Dundon). A guy like Mark Craig runs the pro side, and the pro side’s basically a part-time gig for most of those guys. That’s hard. ... When you consider some of the impediments that they have, it’s amazing. It also tells you just how good a coach Rod Brind’Amour is. His players play at their optimal level.

Colorado Avalanche

Third-place vote from a scouting director: “They continue to make really good decisions in the cap era.”

Fifth-place vote from a GM: “(GM Chris MacFarland) paid his dues as assistant GM for a long time and then got the opportunity. Very, very smart. Very intelligent. I go back at the end of every year and look at the trades they make, what they got, guys they signed as free agents. And he bats pretty close to a (thousand) every year on those things. Not a reactionary guy. He’s a guy that will think things through and usually come up with the right answer.”

Dallas Stars

First-place vote from a director of scouting: “In all, I think everything they’ve done has been really good. They’re drafted well and on a pro side. I think Jim Nill has done a really good job. I don’t think he gets enough credit.”

First-place vote from an assistant GM: “Just the way they do everything — the way they handle their business. They’re very professional. Jim Nill and (AGM) Scott White, they’re just very professional. The way they draft and go about their business.”

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “They’ve done a good job drafting and developing guys without top picks for the most part.”

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Everything they do is right and smart. And a lot is relationships because Jim may be the most respected GM in the league.”

First-place vote from an assistant GM: “They’re on to something. They have a nice mix in the front office of experience and knowledge.”

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Draft well, solid UFA signings (albeit no state income tax helps), solid farm team, and Jim Nill and AGM Scott White are two solid, respected hockey men.”

First-place vote from a director of scouting: “They have a couple bad contracts, but those are expiring soon. Lots of smart free-agent signings and excellent drafting.”

First-place vote from a GM: “Jim’s a quiet guy. Very rare do you read anything about him, but at the draft, I was looking at his table and I couldn’t believe all the people he’s surrounded himself with. Every one of them is good hockey people. You know, no one person can do this job. And if somebody tells you

that, then their ego's too big. Jim's got no ego. A gentleman. You need to surround yourself with people that can work hard and make good decisions, and I think Jim's done that."

Second-place vote from a GM: "Solid drafting, stable management, smart decisions in a non-tax state."

Third-place vote from an assistant GM: "Just consistency. Draft well. Trade well. They have good people throughout the organization, especially with Jimmy Nill and Scott White."

Third-place vote from a scouting director: "Just really consistent. A good minor-league system. Getting over the top is something for them, but they belong on the list."

Third-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: "Dallas has done a wonderful job. They really have. They've got a good base. They've put together a group of athletes who complement each other. They've got a lot of talent. Obviously, they got (Miro) Heiskanen with, what, a second pick (third in 2017)? He's a star. You've got a defenseman like that who can play those minutes as successfully as he can, then everything grows from there. But they've also drafted very well. I look at their roster and I see a lot of young players. They've made some significant trades."

Fourth-place vote from a team president: "Great draft organization."

Fifth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: "Arguably the best club in (the) NHL at drafting and developing. Excellent support staff surrounding one of the top GMs in the NHL. Jim Nill handles matters with class and professionalism."

Detroit Red Wings

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: "The way Steve (Yzerman) is going about his rebuild is smart and patient. They're unlucky not to have a No. 1 pick when they were supposed to. I like how they've gone about it."

Third-place vote from a scouting director: "Lots of experience, integrity, and they always have a plan."

Third-place vote from a GM: "I think they are tracking the right way. Yzerman took a lot of lumps when he got there, but I think they're tracking to be a very good team, and I think that's through his whole organization."

Edmonton Oilers

Third-place vote from an assistant GM: "I thought all the moves Jeff Jackson made this offseason were pretty savvy."

Fifth-place vote from a GM: "Managing superstars, tough market, trustworthy."

Fifth-place vote from a scouting director: "You can't ignore the success they've had, even with some turnover in the front office."

Florida Panthers

First-place vote from an assistant GM: "Just the balls they had to make all those moves. It's easy now to say those deals were great, but they took some balls at the time."

First-place vote from an assistant GM: "Won Stanley Cup and have made bold moves that work and get guys to stay at lesser value, changed culture quickly."

First-place vote from an assistant GM: "Bold and aggressive moves. They take advantage of the tax situation for lower AAVs. It went from a place that players avoided to a destination."

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “I look at what (Bill) Zito’s done. He’s put together a good team.”

First-place vote from a team president: “Winning a cup. Good personnel decisions for a number of years leading up to it.”

Second-place vote from a director of scouting: “They went for it with the run. They did a phenomenal job of bringing in undervalued players. That was Rick Dudley. As good as their GM is, Rick Dudley deserves a lot of credit, too. They had guts. They went for it. We’ll see what that means in the long term with fewer draft picks, but they won a Stanley Cup.”

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: “Not just because of what they did winning the Stanley Cup.”

Second-place vote from a director of scouting: “They were able to accomplish what they did by being aggressive. I don’t think their drafting is top-end, but you still like what they’ve done.”

Second-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “They went from almost giving up an unprotected first-round pick two years ago to going to the Final and now winning the Cup. This year should be a stiff test replacing several players.”

Third-place vote from a GM: “They just won and you’ve got to give them credit for what they’ve done down there.”

Third-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “It’s actually amazing how quickly Bill cleaned up a lot of problems, dealt with the (Joel) Quenneville situation, brought in Bruno (Andrew Brunette) and then still had the guts to change coaches after being No. 1 in the league.”

Third-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “A bit of recency bias here, but management has done an excellent job of finding undervalued talent off the scrap heap (Gustav Forsling, Carter Verhaeghe, Brandon Montour, Eetu Luostarinen, Oliver Ekman-Larsson, maybe Nate Schmidt, etc.) while also making aggressive trades. Overhauled the roster into a championship squad in a short period of time. Like Vegas, they eschew the draft-develop model for aggressive player acquisitions.”

Fourth-place vote from a GM: “He made some tough trades and made a tough decision with the coach there by losing Quenneville, hiring Brunette, winning the Presidents’ Trophy and still making the move with Paul (Maurice). Billy’s not afraid to make decisions. And he’s surrounding himself with some really good hockey people.”

Fourth-place vote from an assistant GM: “What I like about Florida is they’ve set a culture that five, six years ago I would have said was not possible in that market. It was a great place to live, but it seemed like a retirement place. It didn’t look like winning was a huge priority. That front office has come in there and said, ‘This is the type of person that you win with, this is the type of player that you win with,’ and they aggressively went out and got those players, and it paid off for them. That’s going to continue now. They’ve built their culture where guys are taking less to stay there. They love where they live. They like their coach. I think their GM is an awesome guy, too, by the sound of it. It’s all working for them.”

Fifth-place vote from a scouting director: “Only real negative is drafting. Smart free agency moves and trades.”

Minnesota Wild

Third-place vote from a GM: “Drafting, keeping a positive direction with albatross contracts, character and trust.”

Second-place vote from a director of scouting: “Some good draft picks, a willingness to trade to address deficiencies and really just one bad contract.”

Third-place vote from an assistant GM: “I love what New Jersey has done over the past couple years. I think they blend everything really well, and what has impressed me is they’ve identified some issues that they had this offseason that prevented them from making the playoffs, and they addressed it. Goaltending and depth on defense, and now they’ve addressed it to the degree that even with a big injury in either spot, they’re still going to be good — whereas last year, a big injury killed them (Dougie Hamilton). They had a good team. Things didn’t go well for them last year. They took advantage of the draft this year breaking their way and got a very good defenseman, as well. I think they draft well and got good free agents.”

Fourth-place vote from a GM: “Draft and development. Character. Trustworthy.”

New York Rangers

Third-place vote from a scouting director: “Good drafts, a solid core.”

Fourth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “They did some good stuff in their rebuild. I mean, they really did. And not everybody is draft picks. (Artemi) Panarin, (Mika) Zibanejad, those are pretty good adds, and then you put the goaltending in there, and that is a pretty good mix.”

Fifth-place vote from a GM: “Just very consistent and always in the mix.”

Fifth-place vote from an assistant GM: “Lots of pressure to deliver and no Cup, but consistently one of the top teams and contenders every year. Active when they can to make the team better.”

Fifth-place vote from an assistant GM: “They have something going on there. I like how they’ve drafted and developed.”

Philadelphia Flyers

Fourth-place vote from an assistant GM: “I think they’re on the right track.”

St. Louis Blues

Third-place vote from a GM: “Not afraid to take big swings. Going through a retool now after winning the Cup a few years ago.”

Fifth-place vote from a scouting director: “They just never go away.”

Fifth-place vote from an assistant GM: “They don’t have the tax or geographic advantages that some of the other teams have, and they’ve gone about building their team without tearing it down. Yeah, maybe they’re not a playoff-caliber team this year, but they’ve made a lot of first- and second-round picks recently. They’ve got more picks. They’ve got a fairly good cap situation moving forward. And I think I read in The Athletic that the owner doesn’t have an appetite for a full rebuild where you stink for a few years and try to come out the other end. I think that group (has) taken those marching orders and done what I think is a pretty good job.”

Fifth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Done well to sign solid deals. Have a veteran, steady hand in Army (GM Doug Armstrong). And have been a solid organization for a number of years.While it’s been five years since their Cup win, it’s been a lot longer for many other teams.”

Tampa Bay Lightning

First-place vote from an assistant GM: “There’s an argument to be made that, relative to the era, they’re a dynasty to a certain extent.”

First-place vote from a director of scouting: “You respect what they’ve done for quite a while on all levels. They’ve found guys deep in the draft and developed them. Maybe they’re starting to fade a little bit, but it’s difficult to take them out of the top spot.”

First-place vote from an assistant GM: “They’ve been out ahead of the pack for so long and keep evolving. They aren’t afraid to make mistakes and try again. That’s why they haven’t lagged behind.”

First-place vote from an assistant GM: “They’re progressive. They use their geographical advantages to their advantage. They’re bold. And they’ve had success.”

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Tampa’s structure is such that (there isn’t much) guesswork. It’s pretty calculated, and they’ve been like that for a while. But their coach is brilliant. Their management has shown itself to be spot-on. Normally when they make a move, they add something they need. And it’s actually harder over the years to be dealing from a position where you’re in first place or one of the top teams in the league and trying to make moves. It’s a little tougher than it is when you’re at the bottom.”

First-place vote from a GM: “Gold standard. Drafting, free agents, trustworthiness.”

First-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Best owner in NHL. Only two GMs since 2010 and same head coach since 2013. Consistently make the tough but smart decisions. Strong cap management and aggressive traders. Made a smart decision to let (Steven) Stamkos walk and sign (Jake) Guentzel, deftly keeping their contention window open.”

First-place vote from a GM: “Winning Cups. That’s what we’re in the business for.”

Second-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Think outside the box and bold.”

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: “You’ve got to give (GM Julien BriseBois) credit for his boldness. It’s hard to win the Cup, and he made a bunch of moves in the past that put him in that position. Now, the team’s aging out a little bit. And obviously losing Stamkos and making the other trade (of Sergachev) to try to keep most (of) his team together hurts, but it’s hard decisions to make, and he’s made them and we’ll see how it all plays out for them. I think Julien is so underrated for how well he thinks the game. I love talking to Julien. ... Every time we talk about anything, he thinks everything through before he says anything and I always enjoy listening to it.”

Second-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “They’ve been consistently one of the best teams.”

Fourth-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Has been a top team for a number of years now, with solid signings and great ownership. And while you can see it starting to fray, should still be a team that is in the mix to go far assuming 88 (Andrei Vasilevskiy) stays healthy.”

Fourth-place vote from an assistant GM: “They have a clear-cut plan.”

Fifth-place vote from a GM: “Has been able to convince players to take less — bridge deals first, then long-term. Take good advantage of the no tax and favorable living.”

Utah Hockey Club

Second-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “I like what Billy’s doing in Arizona — well, not Arizona anymore. They’ve added a lot of talent. Lots of draft picks. Lots of prospects. He’s amassed a lot of talent and now the moves he has to make are a lot simpler. He has the ingredients to have a good team for a long, long time.”

First-place vote from a director of scouting: “They always have a quick response to fix their problems, and they will do anything to win.”

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: “I think they might take a step back now, but all they’ve done in Vegas over the last seven years is pretty unbelievable.”

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: “May not like the way they operate as a fan, but they make hard decisions and are aggressive.”

Second-place vote from an assistant GM: “They have the guts to say goodbye to very important players because they’ve found different ways they think will make their team better short-term and long-term. They gave up on 34-year-old guys to sign guys who are younger. And it’s worked for them.”

Second-place vote from a senior adviser to the GM: “Have seemingly done nearly everything right since entering the NHL. Best managed club since their inception. Two quality executives at the top who have put together a great staff under the eye of an aggressive owner. Constantly make bold and aggressive decisions. Blew up the established orthodoxy that expansion clubs have to patiently draft and develop to win.”

Second-place vote from a GM: “Love them or hate them, they’re all about winning. They’re an expansion team that found a different way to do it.”

Second-place vote from a team president: “Cup win. Aggressive personnel decisions.”

Third-place vote from an assistant GM: “Pretty consistent for a long time now. If they decide they want someone and (he) fits, they will pay (the) price if they think they can win. Proactive in their window.”

Third-place vote from a team president: “Good decisions, but sometimes tries to be too clever.”

Fourth-place vote from a scouting director: “Their willingness to pull the trigger and go for it is impressive. Despite that, they still have decent prospects.”

Fourth-place vote from a scouting director: “They’ve been able to have success by being aggressive. You can feel however you want about how they’ve done what they’ve done, but there’s no perfect way.”

ESPN / Ranking the top NHL prospects: Demidov, Levshunov lead list

By Rachel Doerrie – October 25, 2024

Reactions

The NHL prospect pipeline rankings for all 32 went out last week, which looked at each team's future from a broad perspective. This week, it's the top 50 team-affiliated prospects -- the best players outside the NHL, but who have been drafted by an NHL team.

As with the pipeline rankings, players who are rookies but are expected to play primarily in the NHL this season are excluded (that includes players like Macklin Celebrini, Matvei Michkov, and Conor Geekie). Some players listed here are currently with their NHL team, but are not expected to remain there throughout the 2024-25 campaign.

Not every team has a prospect on this list, though a handful of teams have multiple prospects in the top 50, including the Columbus Blue Jackets, Minnesota Wild and Chicago Blackhawks.

Here's the top 50 as it stands in October, 2024:

1. Ivan Demidov

RW/C, SKA St. Petersburg (KHL)

NHL team: Montreal Canadiens

Drafted: No. 5, 2024

Demidov is supremely talented, a true difference maker. His elite skill set gives him the highest probability of becoming a superstar in the NHL. There's a good chance he blossoms into an elite offensive talent, notching more than a point per game for a decade in the NHL.

The most talented player outside of the NHL, without a doubt.

2. Artyom Levshunov

D, Rockford IceHogs (AHL)

NHL team: Chicago Blackhawks

Drafted: No. 2, 2024

The ceiling is high with Levshunov, whose game is raw on both sides of the puck but who possesses the potential to be a two-way difference maker.

He is comfortably projected to be a top-pairing defenseman who dictates play. He's likely a year or two away from a big role on the Chicago blue line, but there is reason to believe the Blackhawks now have cornerstones at center (Connor Bedard) and on defense.

3. Alexander Nikishin

D, SKA St. Petersburg (KHL)

NHL team: Carolina Hurricanes

Drafted: No. 69, 2020

The margin between Nikishin and Levshunov is razor thin, with Levshunov getting the nod because he's younger and has longer to develop.

There is little doubt that Nikishin will be a towering presence on the Carolina blue line soon. He's comfortably the best defenseman in the KHL, and projects to be a top-pairing blueliner in the NHL. His two-way game is mature, and his physical makeup should allow him to thrive in Carolina.

4. Zayne Parekh, D

Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

NHL team: Calgary Flames

Drafted: No. 9, 2024

In terms of raw skill and talent, Parekh is second only to Demidov. He has the highest offensive ceiling of any defenseman outside of the NHL. There is a lot of development needed on the defensive side of the puck, but Parekh has true game-breaking offensive talent.

He's going to run the power play, facilitate offense from the back and activate in the rush. He'll be a highlight-reel regular for the Flames.

5. Zeev Buium, D, University of Denver (NCAA)

NHL team: Minnesota Wild

Drafted: No. 12, 2024

Considering he had one of the best college hockey seasons as a freshman in NCAA history, it is easy to understand why Buium is high on this list. There is every reason to believe he will continue to develop into an offensive staple on the blue line for the Wild. He will undoubtedly run a top power-play unit, make jaw-dropping plays regularly, and his skating should allow him to develop his transition defense.

A pairing of Buium and Brock Faber could be special in Minnesota.

6. Yaroslav Askarov

G, San Jose Barracuda (AHL)

NHL team: San Jose Sharks

Drafted: No. 11, 2020

The Sharks did right by Askarov, sending him to the AHL; they are nowhere near defensively sound enough to have a rookie goaltender in their net.

Given Askarov's talent, he has the makings of being the NHL's next great Russian goaltender. Askarov needs to be more efficient with his crease movements to avoid overactive play. His play has steadily improved, and he should be the Sharks' starter next season.

7. Gabe Perreault

RW, Boston College (NCAA)

NHL team: New York Rangers

Drafted: No. 23, 2023

The hype around Perreault is real and warranted. His ability to finish is second to none in college hockey, and the Rangers believe they have their next great goal scorer on the way.

His ability to release the puck surprises goalies and the pop makes it difficult to pick up off his stick. Perreault has a real knack for find the quiet areas and getting open, and projects to be a top-six scoring threat in the NHL.

8. Berkly Catton

C, Spokane Chiefs (WHL)

NHL team: Seattle Kraken

Drafted: No. 8, 2024

Arguably the best playmaking prospect, Catton is a small, highly skilled player. The Kraken have two solid two-way centers in Matty Beniers and Shane Wright, whereas Catton brings offensive firepower.

He's dynamic, and is more likely to be a top-line winger at the NHL level that facilitates offense, sets up teammates for tap-ins and gets fans out of their seats with his jaw-dropping skill.

9. Cayden Lindstrom

C, Medicine Hat Tigers (WHL)

NHL team: Columbus Blue Jackets

Drafted: No. 4, 2024

Lindstrom projects to fit perfectly behind Adam Fantilli in Columbus. He has a unique blend of skill, skating and size will make him difficult to handle in the NHL.

There are legitimate concerns about his health, but Lindstrom has top-line potential in the NHL. The Blue Jackets can and should be patient with Lindstrom, allowing him to build strength and develop his two-way game.

10. David Jiricek

D, Columbus Blue Jackets (NHL)

NHL team: Columbus Blue Jackets

Drafted: No. 6, 2022

The Blue Jackets have a loaded prospect cupboard, including Jiricek who projects to be a top-pairing defenseman. His development has been inconsistent, and is largely related to being sent back and forth from the AHL.

Jiricek is a physical specimen who has a cannon from the point. His blend of physicality and skating is a coveted package, and someone who will complement the skill sets of Zach Werenski and Denton Mateychuk on the Columbus blue line.

11. Ryan Leonard

C, Boston College (NCAA)

NHL team: Washington Capitals

Drafted: No. 8, 2023

The Capitals have a good one in Leonard, a natural finisher who is always in the middle of the everything. He is the type of player who will drag his team into the fight.

Leonard complements offensive players well, winning puck battles, getting to the net front and finishing plays. He's unlikely to drive a line at the NHL level, however he comfortably projects to be a top-six contributor.

Comparisons to a Zach Hyman style of play are accurate.

12. Sam Dickinson

D, London Knights (OHL)

NHL team: San Jose Sharks

Drafted: No. 11, 2024

The Sharks are built to be a problem in the future, with two prospects in the top 12, and that's without considering Celebrini and Will Smith who are already on the NHL roster.

Dickinson is their prized prospect on the blue line, and projects to be a No. 2/3 defenseman that impacts the game on both sides of the puck. The development of his decision-making will be the determining factor in whether Dickinson becomes a true standout, capable of dominating from the back end.

13. Tij Iginla

LW, Kelowna Rockets (WHL)

NHL team: Utah Hockey Club

Drafted: No. 6, 2024

Jarome Iginla's son is Utah's best prospect, and gives fans every reason to be excited. Adding Iginla to a group that already has Clayton Keller, Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther at the NHL level is going to make Utah a dynamic offensive threat.

He's projected to become a top-six winger capable of consistently scoring 30-plus goals. When he's not scoring, he's physically engaged and has shown an innate ability to turn the tide for his team.

The competitive fire gene runs in the family, and if Tij can develop his ability to elevate his teammates, he'll be a dangerous player for years to come.

14. Beckett Sennecke

RW, Oshawa Generals (OHL)

NHL team: Anaheim Ducks

Drafted: No. 3, 2024

Much to his own surprise, the Ducks took Sennecke very early in the draft. He steadily improved throughout his draft season, and possesses immense talent. His puck handling and playmaking ability are top-tier, and will complement the likes of Leo Carlsson and Mason McTavish very well.

He projects to be a middle-six contributor with a fair chance of becoming a top-six regular. There is growth and development to come, but the raw talent is there.

15. Carter Yakemchuk

D, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)

NHL team: Ottawa Senators

Drafted: No. 7, 2024

A right-handed, big, playmaking D who impressed in the preseason, and raised quite a few eyebrows. The Sens have a potential stalwart on the back end to join Jake Sanderson.

Yakemchuk can hammer the puck, and showed off his quality playmaking ability and skill throughout training camp. Like Dickinson, his decision-making will dictate his ceiling.

If Yakemchuk can translate his offensive skill to the NHL while being reliable on the defensive side of the puck, he will have the physical package and the tools to become a top-four defenseman.

17. Denton Mateychuk

D, Cleveland Monsters (AHL)

NHL team: Columbus Blue Jackets

Drafted: No. 12, 2022

The second Columbus defenseman in the top 20, who has consistently been a top player in every league in which he's played. At 5-11, he defends well and has grown into a two-way transition defender. His offensive instincts are high-end -- capable of facilitating offense from the back end.

In time, he should become a second-pairing defenseman and offensive producer.

18. Konsta Helenius

C/RW, Rochester Americans (AHL)

NHL team: Buffalo Sabres

Drafted: No. 14, 2024

Buffalo has a good one in Helenius, widely regarded for his cerebral play. He lacks elite offensive skill, but there is every reason to believe he will slot in on a second line, drive play and shut down the opponent's best players.

The Sabres have a few skilled young players in their system and in the NHL lineup, making Helenius a perfect fit. He will elevate his line and create space for his linemates to take advantage of their skill.

There's a fair comparison to be made to Roope Hintz and Nick Suzuki, with slightly less offensive firepower.

19. Kevin Korchiński

D, Rockford IceHogs (AHL)

NHL team: Chicago Blackhawks

Drafted: No. 7, 2022

The second Chicago blueliner to appear on this list, Korchiński got a taste of the NHL last season. His package of skill, size and offensive gifts give him a real chance to be a No. 2/3 defenseman in the NHL.

Korchiński showed flashes of his offensive game in his rookie season, but his defensive game needs maturity -- as is the case for most 19-year-olds. Allowing him to develop that in the AHL is the right decision, and there is little doubt he will blossom into a key player for Chicago on the blue line.

20. Danila Yurov

RW/C, Metallurg Magnitogorsk (KHL)

NHL team: Minnesota Wild

Drafted: No. 24, 2022

Yurov took off when he moved to center in the KHL last season, quadrupling his production. That type of offensive development did not go unnoticed, particularly in a more valuable position as a young player. He answered a lot of questions about NHL potential, and his track suggests he is most likely to become a second-line player.

His skating and puck protection skill will only improve as he physically matures and understands how to use his body. Two years from now, he should be a key piece of the Wild lineup.

21. Cole Eiserman

LW, Boston University (NCAA)

NHL team: New York Islanders

Drafted: No. 20, 2024

There are two consensus options with Eiserman: 35-40 goal scorer in the NHL or bust. Given his track record, I'll trust that the talent and instincts lead Eiserman to becoming a top-end goal scorer in the NHL.

His knack for arriving at the right time and finishing the play is a rare and coveted commodity, one the Isles sorely need. He will be a power-play triggerman and draw attention from defensive coverage on a nightly basis.

He's a year or two away from making the jump, with valid concerns about his consistency away from the play and ability to develop a well-rounded game.

22. Anton Silayev

D, Torpedo Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)

NHL team: New Jersey Devils

Drafted: No. 10, 2024

Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald loves big defensemen, and the Devils' prospect pipeline lacked a difference-maker who fit that bill. The Devils are loaded with skill on the blue line, and Silayev is a great balance of size and excellent mobility to complement all of that skill.

Silayev's ceiling is sky high because there is offensive development that could see him become a unicorn, but those projections are less confident. Regardless, he is most likely to be a mean, minutes-munching defenseman that shuts opposing players down and imposes his will on the game.

23. Axel Sandin-Pellikka

D, Skelleftea AIK (SHL)

NHL team: Detroit Red Wings

Drafted: No. 17, 2023

With Simon Edvinsson making the jump and Moritz Seider signed to a new deal, Sandin-Pellikka is now Detroit's top defensive prospect. At 5-11, he's not towering over anyone, but there is real offensive potential to his game. He's the type of talent that can run an effective power play, facilitate offensive chances and move the puck in transition.

The Red Wings have plenty of defenders, but they lack a true offensive dynamo on the back end. Sandin-Pellikka represents their best chance at that.

24. Trevor Connelly

LW, Providence College (NCAA)

NHL team: Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted: No. 19, 2024

The supremely skilled Connelly fell in the draft after legitimate concerns were raised about his off-ice conduct. He's got the highest ceiling of any player in this range, and his willingness to compete on the puck, play within a system and work well with teammates will determine his success.

He's a real boom-or-bust type of player: if he hits, he's a top-line potential superstar; if he doesn't, he's unlikely to find himself on an NHL roster. He needs a lot of maturing on and off the ice, but the raw talent is clearly there.

25. Easton Cowan

C/W, London Knights (OHL)

NHL team: Toronto Maple Leafs

Drafted: No. 28, 2023

The Maple Leafs have a history of getting "punked" because they lack a skilled player who can mix it up. Cowan is not a Tkachuk brother or Brad Marchand, but he's of that ilk. He plays in all situations, plays his best when the lights are the brightest and is exactly what the Leafs need to complement the current NHL roster.

The combination of speed, skill and willingness to mix it up will undoubtedly make him a fan favorite in the middle of Toronto's lineup.

26. Dmitri Simashev

D, Lokomotiv Yaroslavl (KHL)

NHL team: Utah Hockey Club

Drafted: No. 6, 2023

The mammoth defenseman is viewed as a potential minutes-eating matchup defenseman that every team covets. He doesn't have the offensive capabilities of some below him on this list, but Utah has plenty of offense on their blue line.

Adding a true shutdown defenseman to their lineup could be a difference-maker for UHC. Simashev's ability to dictate the game and drive play without creating offense makes him more of a throwback type. That type of defenseman is valuable, a Chris Tanev-esque type in a bigger frame.

27. David Reinbacher

D, Laval Rocket (AHL)

NHL team: Montreal Canadiens

Drafted: No. 5, 2023

Reinbacher would be higher up this list if there were not warranted concerns about his development being hampered by various circumstances, including injury.

Reinbacher projects to be a middle-pairing defender, capable of playing in all situations and tilting the ice in his team's favor. If he can take a leap forward in his development this season, he could see minutes in the NHL, but it is more reasonable to expect him to be a full-timer NHLer next season.

28. Jimmy Snuggerud

RW, University of Minnesota (NCAA)

NHL team: St. Louis Blues

Drafted: No. 23, 2022

Snuggerud raised some eyebrows when he didn't sign after his sophomore season, but he's expected to sign at the end of this college season and step right into the Blues lineup.

He's a middle-six scorer that has the potential to be a top power-play scorer and second-line player.

29. Frank Nazar

C/RW, Rockford IceHogs (AHL)

NHL team: Chicago Blackhawks

Drafted: No. 13, 2022

He's got speed to burn, skill for days and the flare required to become a star in Chicago. He's more likely to be a winger at the NHL level given Chicago has a few options at center, and if that is the route, he could fit very well with Bedard.

There's some risk to his game that will need development, but his skill makes him a candidate to be a point producer at even strength and on the power play.

30. Jonathan Lekkerimaki

RW, Abbotsford Canucks (AHL)

NHL team: Vancouver Canucks

Drafted: No. 15, 2022

One of the best shooters in his draft class, Lekkerimaki suffered from the sickness and injury bug, hampering his development. Back on track now, Lekkerimaki has real potential to become a top-six scorer, something the Canucks need, as they've lacked winger depth for quite a few years outside of Brock Boeser.

His knack finding open space coupled with a heavy release could see him become a 30-plus goal scorer in the NHL.

31. Jiri Kulich

C/W, Buffalo Sabres (NHL)

NHL team: Buffalo Sabres

Drafted: No. 28, 2022

Speaking of scorers, the Sabres have a good one in Kulich. There's an argument that Kulich owns the best one-timer outside of the NHL. His ability to fire with power and accuracy makes him a threat to score from anywhere in the offensive zone.

Combine that with good puck protection and willingness to get to the dirty areas, Kulich will be a good complementary player in the top six for the Sabres.

32. Matthew Savoie

C/W, Bakersfield Condors (AHL)

NHL team: Edmonton Oilers

Drafted: No. 9, 2022

The Oilers' top prospect has speed and skill to spare. A smaller player, Savoie is ultra-competitive on the puck and given the Oilers talent up the middle, projects to be a winger.

He's got the hockey sense and talent to mesh well with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, should become a key cog on the Oilers' power play and provide some much-needed secondary scoring.

33. Jett Luchanko

C, Philadelphia Flyers (NHL)

NHL team: Philadelphia Flyers

Drafted: No. 13, 2024

Luchanko made the team out of camp, but many agree it is best for him to spend another year in junior. He needs to develop his offense a bit more, something Flyers coach John Tortorella pointed out.

Luchanko is a good two-way player with all the tools to become a reliable, middle-six center for a long time. Developing his offensive production could be the difference between being a career 2C or 3C.

34. Oliver Moore

C, University of Minnesota (NCAA)

NHL team: Chicago Blackhawks

Drafted: No. 19, 2023

Moore's separating skill is his speed -- he is the fastest, most active player in every game in which he plays. He never stops moving his feet, and is a nightmare to play against.

For that reason, his floor as a third-line center is reason enough to be excited. If he continues to develop his offensive toolbox, there's a chance he becomes the second-line center in Chicago (for obvious reasons, he will not be the top-line guy).

34. Liam Ohgren

LW, Minnesota Wild (NHL)

NHL team: Minnesota Wild

Drafted: No. 19, 2022

Minnesota being in the playoff mix while also having one of the best prospect pipelines is a testament to their scouting department, as Ohgren is one of four players in the top 50.

Ohgren is not far off from being a regular middle-six option. He's got an NHL-quality shot, good skill, and the physical package to play a versatile game. While he lacks in eye-popping qualities, he makes up for with excellent puck details -- the type of player every coach wants on the roster.

35. Rutger McGroarty

C/W, Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL)

NHL team: Pittsburgh Penguins

Drafted: No. 14, 2022

McGroarty was not included in the pipeline rankings because the consensus was that he would play in Pittsburgh this season. Like many young players, especially those that lack a dynamic skill, McGroarty needs AHL development time.

He projects as a middle-six winger that will drag the team into the fight, be physically engaged and make a key play at a critical time. His footwork and speed need work if he is to be more than a checker at the NHL level.

36. Michael Brandsegg-Nygaard

RW/LW, Skelleftea AIK (SHL)

NHL team: Detroit Red Wings

Drafted: No. 15, 2024

The projections for Brandsegg-Nygaard vary, but the consensus is that he will become a middle-of-the-lineup, Swiss army knife option in Detroit.

Dylan Larkin, Nate Danielson and Marco Kasper represent Detroit's future up the middle. MBN is a stylistic fit with Kasper or Larkin, where his well-rounded skill set and tenacity will allow him to be an all-situations player.

37. Oliver Bonk

D, London Knights (OHL)

NHL team: Philadelphia Flyers

Drafted: No. 22, 2023

Bonk's development took a major step forward in his post-draft season, elevating his projection from a bottom-pair defenseman to a second-pairing type. His skating noticeably improved over the course of the season, and his decision-making is mature.

If he continues this trajectory, there's a path to becoming an impactful No. 3/4 for the Flyers. He will need AHL time, but there's reason to believe he can play meaningful minutes at even strength and on the penalty kill.

38. Dalibor Dvorsky

C/RW, Springfield Thunderbirds (AHL)

NHL team: St. Louis Blues

Drafted: No. 10, 2023

Dvorsky is a fun blend of high-end skill and reliable two-way ability. He needs space to utilize his skill, and there are concerns that he will not have that outside of the power play at the NHL level.

Dvorsky is confidently projected to be a middle-of-the-lineup, two-way player than can contribute offensively, but needs to demonstrate the ability to execute skill plays in tight areas at the next level to be a true threat.

39. Nate Danielson

C, Grand Rapids Griffins (AHL)

NHL team: Detroit Red Wings

Drafted: No. 9, 2023

Projected to be a middle-six center, Danielson will be a reliable secondary scoring threat. He's the type of player every coach wants because he's good in all three zones, doesn't cheat for offense and is competitive on the puck.

He doesn't have the dynamic skill you want to see in a top-six center, but there's a chance he gets there because of his well-rounded skill set.

40. Calum Ritchie

C, Colorado Avalanche (NHL)

NHL team: Colorado Avalanche

Drafted: No. 27, 2023

Ritchie is a coach's dream. He's versatile in that he plays every forward position and plays a well-rounded, two-way game, and plays hard no matter how high or low in the lineup you put him.

He's got the talent to be a secondary scoring threat, as evidenced by his beautiful, breakaway goal in the preseason. He's also a reliable checker with speed and tenacity. A solid fit in the middle six for the Avalanche, who will need exactly that to remain in the league's upper echelon.

41. Tanner Molendyk

D, Saskatoon Blades (WHL)

NHL team: Nashville Predators

Drafted: No. 24, 2023

Count me as a big fan of Tanner Molendyk and his well-rounded game. The Predators have a knack for churning out quality NHL defensemen and Molendyk fits the bill. He's one of the most agile defensive prospects, with excellent four-way mobility that should allow him to become a strong transition player.

He's a driver from the back end that tilts the ice in his team's favor. There's real upside for Molendyk as an impactful, second-pairing defender.

42. Seamus Casey

D, Utica Comets (AHL)

NHL team: New Jersey Devils

Drafted: No. 46, 2022

Devils fans got a small taste of Casey to start the season, and there is a lot to like. He's small and some scouts believed he'd never play an NHL game -- that was obviously incorrect. Casey is a good skater with quality offensive talent. He facilitates the breakout with ease and jumps into the play.

As Devils coach Sheldon Keefe said, Casey needs to work on his defensive game -- in transition and in the defensive zone -- to become a reliable NHL player. Given the start, there is every reason to believe Casey will find his way and become a solid two-way defenseman in the NHL.

43. Brayden Yager

C, Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)

NHL team: Winnipeg Jets

Drafted: No. 14, 2023

Yager may be much higher on this list by this time next year, because his ceiling is high, albeit with a less confident projection. He should comfortably become a middle-six scoring threat with a well-rounded offensive package of skating, shooting and ability to read the game.

If he can play off his linemates and develop a more dynamic trait, there's a chance he become a top-six player. He'll likely need two more years before he's ready to make the jump to the NHL lineup.

44. Bradly Nadeau

W/C, Chicago Wolves (AHL)

NHL team: Carolina Hurricanes

Drafted: No. 30, 2023

After opting to leave college and forego a sophomore season, Nadeau is a tweener between a middle-six, secondary scoring threat and a top-six, potential 70-point threat.

His package of skill and playmaking is undeniable, and gives the Canes options to fill their lineup with three scoring lines in the next couple of years.

45. Quentin Musty

LW, Sudbury Wolves (OHL)

NHL team: San Jose Sharks

Drafted: No. 26, 2023

He's got more skill than anyone in this area of the ranking, but he's a boom-or-bust type. Right now, he's not playing games, following a trade request. It is a poor development choice, and one with which the Sharks are growing impatient.

Musty has an eye-popping skill set that could see him become a top-six winger beside one of Celebrini or Smith, but it remains to be seen how much of his skill is translatable to the NHL level.

46. Matthew Wood

LW/C, University of Minnesota (NCAA)

NHL team: Nashville Predators

Drafted: No. 15, 2023

After two great seasons at Connecticut, Wood transferred to the University of Minnesota where he is expected to play a starring role. The big winger has the skill and scoring touch to be a real problem at the NHL level.

He's comfortably projected to become a middle-six scorer, with a chance at second-line upside if his skating and engagement in the play improve.

47. Carson Rehkopf

C/LW, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

NHL team: Seattle Kraken

Drafted: No. 50, 2023

The Kraken have a versatile creator in Rehkopf, someone who can threaten the moment he enters the offensive zone. He's very talented offensively -- able to beat defenders and score off the rush.

He's projected to be a middle-of-the-lineup, secondary scorer with an outside chance at second-line upside in a couple of years.

48. Riley Heidt

C/LW, Prince George Cougars (WHL)

NHL team: Minnesota Wild

Drafted: No. 64, 2023

After an offensive explosion in his post-draft season, Heidt comfortably projects to be an impactful, middle-six player. His offensive toolkit is overflowing with vision and creativity, consistently making his linemates a threat.

If he can execute the plays at the NHL level, he's got a chance to become a 60-point player for the Wild.

49. Andrew Cristall

LW, Kelowna Rockets (WHL)

NHL team: Washington Capitals

Drafted: No. 40, 2023

One of the most polarizing players in the 2024 draft class, Cristall is supremely skilled and could find himself higher on this list next time around. He's on the smaller size and his skating is a concern, but his puck skill and offensive toolbox is very impressive.

He shouldn't be able to produce at the level he does when you watch him, which makes his projection a difficult one. If he hits, there's star potential; if he doesn't, he's likely a star in a European league.

50. Brad Lambert

C/RW, Manitoba Moose (AHL)

NHL team: Winnipeg Jets

Drafted: No. 30, 2022

Another polarizing player, Lambert's game has developed nicely over the last 18 months. His one-dimensional play is a thing of the past, as he is becoming more involved in all three zones, has a willingness to drive the middle of the ice and shown real potential at the center position.

He's got upside as a second-line scorer in the NHL as soon as next season.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: How each team's newcomers are fitting in](#)

By Ryan Dixon – October 25, 2024

Two weeks is hardly enough time to expect a player to settle into a new NHL situation. You've got new systems to learn and chemistry to build with new teammates, to say nothing of figuring out a new best place to grab a pre-game coffee on the way to the rink.

Everyone understands it takes some time to get acclimated.

OK, that last part referencing patience isn't true, mostly because — in some cases — fans had an entire summer to get excited about a big, new acquisition and let's just say they'd like to see results well before Christmas songs are in heavy rotation.

With that in mind, we decided to make this week's power ranking a sort of blink test in terms of how the new arrivals are blending in. (By the way, we're excluding rookies from this list. We'll do a full freshman check later this season). From instant connections to awkward fits and everything in between, here's a glimpse at how all 32 teams are finding flow with the new blood.

- 1. Winnipeg Jets (6-0-0)** Everyone is off to a good start in Winnipeg, including the one real newcomer, Eric Comrie. And, of course, Comrie still has the added benefit of already having had one go in Manitoba previously. Regardless, his one start was a stellar 39-save performance in a Jets win.
- 2. New York Rangers (5-0-1)** Reilly Smith has been a perfect fit on the top line so far, netting six points in six outings — including four in his past two games. Did we mention Pittsburgh is eating 25 per cent of his salary?
- 3. Dallas Stars (5-2-0)** Never-flashy Ilya Lyubushkin is starting nearly 80 per cent of his shifts in the defensive zone and holding his own while playing nearly 17:50 a night. The other right-shot defender Dallas picked up in the summer, Matt Dumba, was injured in his second game with the Stars but returned on Tuesday night. Backup goalie Casey DeSmith has been awesome, posting a .941 save percentage in two starts.
- 4. Minnesota Wild (4-0-2)** Yakov Trenin is a trenches player and his 13.41 hits-per-60 is second on the Wild behind only Marcus Foligno (14.40). He's giving the Wild a gritty 13 minutes a night and, along with Foligno, making the third line a pain to play against.
- 5. Calgary Flames (5-0-1)** Anthony Mantha had a hot start, but he's now pointless in three contests, while Justin Kirkland continues to be a wonderful fourth-line surprise. Big Kevin Bahl is playing 20 minutes a night beside Rasmus Andersson on the top pair.
- 6. Washington Capitals (5-1-0)** Pierre-Luc Dubois had the best night of his short Caps career on Wednesday, picking up his first goal with the squad and adding two apples. He's now got five points in a half-dozen outings. The points have been coming for defenceman Jakob Chychrun, too, as he's got two goals and four points while averaging over 21 minutes of ice time per night. Unfortunately, defenceman Matt Roy was hurt in his first game as a Cap and has not returned to the lineup since.
- 7. Tampa Bay Lightning (4-2-0)** Jake Guentzel was the biggest UFA signing of the summer and he's delivering so far with seven points in six outings. The 29-year-old has been held off the scoresheet just once during his fledgling Bolts tenure.
- 8. Florida Panthers (4-3-1)** Nate Schmidt is trying to get his career back on track as a support player with the Panthers. He was a scratch in the season-opener but has played every game since and saw a season-

high 16:14 of ice in his most recent outing. Adam Boqvist, meanwhile, is still trying to tap into the tools that got him drafted seventh overall in 2018. However, through seven games with Florida he's got just a single assist and is minus-5. That said, it still has to be cool to be playing with his brother, Jesper, who joined Florida from Boston in the summer and is playing centre on the third line.

9. Vancouver Canucks (3-1-2) Hello, Kevin Lankinen. Signed off the scrapheap as a hedge against Thatcher Demko's injured knee, the Finn has not endured a 60-minute loss in four starts with the Canucks and is sporting a .941 save percentage.

10. Toronto Maple Leafs (4-3-0) Have we commissioned an Anthony Stolarz statue yet? My goodness, the big man has been spectacular in the Buds crease so far.

11. New Jersey Devils (5-3-1) Two guys who never flashed much — if any — offence previously have been early-season revelations for Jersey. Paul Cotter has five goals in nine outings in a third-line role, while Jonathan Kovacevic has five points in nine games while playing an important 21:34 on the right side of the second pair. The newcomer New Jersey is really counting on, goalie Jacob Markstrom, is still getting settled in.

12. Vegas Golden Knights (4-2-1) New goalie Ilya Samsonov has a .943 save percentage in three outings, while incumbent starter Adin Hill is struggling with an .851 mark in four games. And while he's technically not a newcomer after playing seven games with Vegas last year, let's point out that Tomas Hertl's first full season with the club is off to a splendid start. Hertl has seven points in seven contests, thanks largely to a big 2-2-4 showing versus the Kings on Tuesday.

13. Carolina Hurricanes (3-2-0) Shayne Gostisbehere is soaring in his return to Carolina, where he played 23 games with the Canes in 2022-23. The offence-first blue-liner has found the back of the net in four straight games, which actually puts him halfway to the NHL record of eight straight outings with a goal for a defenceman, set by Mike Green in 2008-09.

14. Ottawa Senators (4-2-0) Linus Ullmark has been sidelined by what coach Travis Green called a "strain" since the first couple games of the season. Ottawa is on a western roadie right now and the hope is he'll be back in the fold very soon. Nick Jensen is off to a great start on the blue line, notching four assists through a half-dozen games.

15. Boston Bruins (3-3-1) Cole Koepke is your favourite new hockey name, and the 26-year-old has certainly curried good favour with his new team, posting six points in seven contests after playing a total of 26 NHL games in his career prior to this year, all with Tampa Bay. As for the big-ticket guys, Elias Lindholm is setting in just fine with five points and Nikita Zadorov is playing almost 19 minutes a night on the second pair.

16. Utah Hockey Club (4-2-1) John Marino was one of Utah's big off-season acquisitions, so it's a real bummer for the player and club that he's sidelined three to four months after having back surgery to repair an injury sustained in training camp. The biggest fish Utah landed in the summer, though, was Mikhail Sergachev and UHC is certainly leaning into his new No. 1 D-man status. Through seven games, Sergachev is playing 26:13 per night, tied with Roman Josi for the most minutes per night in the NHL. And, with Marino and Sean Durzi both sidelined on the blue line long-term, how about 24-year-old Michael Kesselring stepping up with four points this year and nearly 20 minutes per night?

17. Edmonton Oilers (2-4-1) Nothing in Edmonton has gone smoothly so far, including the triple-goose egg statline posted by pointless Viktor Arvidsson. Jeff Skinner has two tallies in seven games. Let's just say everybody needs to pick it up in Northern Alberta.

- 18. Colorado Avalanche (3-4-0)** We're cheating again because Casey Mittelstadt joined the Avs at the deadline last year, but his first full year as 2C in Denver is going well with four goals in seven games.
- 19. Anaheim Ducks (3-2-1)** Veteran Brian Dumoulin is logging valuable minutes on the back end for Anaheim and has pitched in a couple assists in six games.
- 20. St. Louis Blues (4-3-0)** Thus far, Philip Broberg looks every bit the top-4 D-man St. Louis believed he could be when they pried him from Edmonton with an offer sheet. Their other RFA play, Dylan Holloway, has not hit his offensive stride yet. Every Blues forward will need to pick it up now that Robert Thomas is out long-term with a fractured ankle.
- 21. Seattle Kraken (4-3-0)** Brandon Montour has four points in seven games as a Kraken and, at 24:14, is playing nearly three full minutes per night more than any other Seattle skater. Chandler Stephenson — the other guy who inked a monster seven-year deal with the club in the summer — is playing 20:01 per night, two-and-a-half minutes more than the next-busiest Seattle forward.
- 22. Los Angeles Kings (3-2-2)** Darcy Kuemper was the dice roll in the crease, and he made it three games before adding to his extensive injury history. He's back practising with the Kings, who have not played a home game yet. Maybe some California home cooking will help Kuemper and the Kings settle in.
- 23. Buffalo Sabres (3-4-1)** Ryan McLeod has been a dream third-line fit in Buffalo so far. He's found the net in four straight games.
- 24. Detroit Red Wings (3-3-0)** Vladimir Tarasenko has a couple goals, but is seeing under 14 minutes per night. Offence-oriented blue-liner Erik Gustafsson has been scratched a couple times already.
- 25. Columbus Blue Jackets (3-3-0)** Sean Monahan is off to an awesome start as Columbus' No. 1 pivot, notching seven points in six outings.
- 26. New York Islanders (2-2-2)** Anthony Duclair had two goals in five contests before sustaining an injury that will sideline him for four to six weeks. That's extra painful for a club that's been blanked in three of its six outings.
- 27. Pittsburgh Penguins (3-4-1)** Kevin Hayes does have three goals, but he's played 10:09 or less in each of his past six games.
- 28. Chicago Blackhawks (2-4-1)** Chicago brought in all kinds of new faces this off-season and one of them, Teuvo Teravainen, is tied for the team scoring with seven points in the same number of contests.
- 29. Montreal Canadiens (2-4-1)** This was supposed to be the part where we talked about how Patrik Laine looks like a nice fit on a young squad. Instead, he sustained a long-term knee injury in a pre-season game, and we can say that the Habs really don't have a new face in the lineup. Who knows, maybe a few more losses could change that.
- 30. Nashville Predators (1-5-0)** The Preds have one win, and Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos have one goal apiece. Ugh.
- 31. Philadelphia Flyers (1-5-1)** Jamie Drysdale got a 24-game dry run with Philly last year. At long last, he's fully healthy and is trying to show his worth as an NHL defenceman. The offence wasn't there through six games, but he picked up a pair of power-play helpers in a loss to Washington on Wednesday. Let's see if he can keep it rolling.
- 32. San Jose Sharks (0-5-2)** This team has yet to win this year, but Tyler Toffoli is doing his part with four goals and seven points in seven games.

[Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Jason Bukala's early first-round draft list](#)

By Jason Bukala – October 25, 2024

After spending most of my career in the scouting industry I was a creature of habit. I rarely felt comfortable creating draft lists too early in the season because I wanted to have a couple of viewings under my belt before I started slotting and recommending prospects.

But scouting has changed a great deal over the years. The pandemic made it nearly impossible to travel and view live games. Scouting prospects over video became a necessity. The tools available from companies like SportContract and Sportlogic have provided scouts an opportunity to better understand the potential upside of NHL prospects.

However, there will never be a replacement for live scouting. Video is generally limited to following the puck, and play, up and down the ice. In-person viewings provide a more complete assessment of players at every level.

Part of the reason I'm comfortable providing the following draft list early in the season is that, on top of video scouting, I have been fortunate to view most of these players in person. I scouted several of them at the Hlinka/Gretzky tournament in the summer, and some others at the junior ranks in the CHL and USHL.

I say this every year and it's true again for this crop of prospects: Every draft class has potential for some chaos.

Some years it's about which Russian players could be targeted early in the draft, and whether or not they will arrive in North America in the short term. Sometimes we wonder if a goalie or two could become worthy of being drafted inside the top 32, or if there is a true competition as to who could be the first player taken overall.

This class has an interesting mix of players. Some are big, others are relatively small. Some are pure snipers and, yes, we even have a couple elite goaltenders.

Here's a look at my first ranking for the 2025 NHL Draft, an initial list of 32 players that will expand as the season goes on.

No. 1: James Hagens, C, 5-foot-11, 176 pounds, Boston College (NCAA)

Hagens is off to a fantastic start to his freshman season at Boston College. He's averaging over 19 minutes of ice time per game with most of it coming at even strength and the power play. Hagens did spend some time on the penalty kill this past weekend in BC's game versus American International, but I don't see him in that role on a regular basis.

Hagens is already adjusting to the pace of the college game. He's reading how plays are developing and executing with the puck on his stick. Through his first three games Hagens has produced 1G-3A and he's a plus-5.

What stands out for me is how well Hagens tracks the play that is developing around him. He corrals the puck in the slot, cycles to the top of the zone and takes his time distributing to Dallas Stars prospect Aram Minnetian, who scores from distance.

No. 2: Michael Misa, LW, 6-foot-1, 185 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

Misa has impressed me in the early stages of the season. He's playing centre in Saginaw and taking advantage of the extra freedom in all three zones, using the full width and length of the ice sheet. His 200-foot game is reliable and his speed off the rush is leading to a massive uptick in goal scoring. Misa has produced 15 goals and seven assists in his first 11 games.

No. 3: Matthew Schaefer, D, 6-foot-1, 175 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)

Unfortunately for Schaefer and the Otters, he has missed the start of the season battling mononucleosis, but is apparently inching closer to being medically cleared to play. When he does enter Erie's lineup scouts will be prioritizing Schaefer as a player to closely monitor the rest of the season.

He is a complete player. He was outstanding at the Hlinka/Gretzky tournament in the summer, captaining Team Canada to a gold medal. Schaefer logged over 25 minutes per game and was deployed in all situations. He's a two-way/transitional defenceman who has top pairing upside at the NHL level.

No. 4: Porter Martone, C, 6-foot-3, 196 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

Martone is captaining the Steelheads this season and playing to his identity. He's already produced 10G-10A in only nine games played. Martone requires very little time and space to rip pucks on net. He leans shooter more than distributor, in my opinion, and he's exceptionally difficult to defend in the trenches.

No. 5: Anton Frondell, C, 6-feet, 196 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)

I'm expecting Frondell to suit up for Sweden at the world juniors in Ottawa over the Christmas holidays. He's splitting time between Djurgardens' J20 and pro team in Sweden's second division, the Allsvenskan. Frondell loves to shoot the puck and is at his best ripping it on net from the weak side on the power play.

No. 6: Roger McQueen, C, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)

McQueen is currently out with an injury and it's not clear when he will return to the Wheat Kings' lineup. He was off to a nice start to the season, though, producing 8G-3A in his first eight games. He's a massive forward who shoots the puck with authority and is extremely difficult to defend around the crease. More impressive for me is McQueen's skating stride, especially on straight lines. He's very efficient for his size.

No. 7: Ivan Ryabkin, C, 6-feet, 170 pounds, Dynamo Moscow (MHL)

Ryabkin will be monitored very closely this season and there's speculation he will be joining the Muskegon Lumberjacks in the USHL. His season got off to an uneven start. Ryabkin has been playing in the Russian junior league, the MHL, where he scored 58 points in 44 games last season. However, he's only registered eight assists in his first nine games this season.

Ryabkin's best shifts are, hopefully, still to come. His combination of skill and will are attractive attributes that create scoring chances for himself and his linemates.

Here's a sample of what Ryabkin can provide in the offensive zone. He works off the half wall, retrieves the puck, and attracts two defenders before sliding a pass through an open seam. He then heads to the net looking for a tip or rebound.

No. 8: Victor Eklund, LW, 5-foot-11, 161 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)

Eklund is light. He will need to add more strength and weight as he matures, but he's a quick strike offensive threat who plays a darting style and has a fantastic release. Off the rush, Eklund provides deception and has an ability to adjust his shooting angle that leads to goals.

No. 9: William Moore, C, 6-foot-2, 161 pounds, USNTDP (USHL)

Moore is very intriguing. In time I will get more comfortable projecting his offensive upside as either a shooter or playmaker, but for now I describe him as a combination of both. Moore is tall and lean, but he's added weight and strength in the off-season and finds himself being deployed in all situations with the USNTDP U18 squad. He's a strong skater and his length extends plays in traffic.

No. 10: Logan Hensler, D, 6-foot-2, 196 pounds, Wisconsin (NCAA)

Hensler is a mobile, right shot defenceman with some understated offensive upside. He's averaging just over 18 minutes per game at Wisconsin to start his freshman season and is being deployed in all situations. Hensler is an excellent skater and his mobility opens up lanes on the offensive blue line to distribute or direct pucks on net from range. Like most freshmen defenders at the NCAA level he is learning how to settle things down in his zone and take appropriate routes to kill plays on defence.

No. 11: Caleb Desnoyers, C, 6-feet, 178 pounds, Moncton Wildcats (QMJHL)

Through his first seven games Desnoyers has posted 3G-7A and is a plus-7. I appreciate the range in his game. He's crafty with the puck on his stick and provides above average commitment defensively. Players who provide an 'A' game and back it up with a 'B' game when they aren't scoring are attractive prospects to monitor.

No. 12: Jake O'Brien, C, 6-foot-2, 170 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)

O'Brien is coming off an OHL Rookie of the Year campaign last season and he's flipped the switch early on in this one. Last year he was counted on for more of a playmaking/distributor role and shooter on the power play. So far this season he is scoring more goals than assists, posting 5G-2A in his first nine games. I appreciate his vision and awareness. He reads how plays are developing and pounces on his opportunities. His defensive game ranges at times.

No. 13: Malcolm Spence, LW, 6-foot-2, 201 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)

When Spence is at his best, he plays fast, creates turnovers, pursues opponents and cashes in on his offensive looks with high end compete. He has the skill set to be used in a variety of roles and the weight and strength to push back physically.

No. 14: Radim Mrtka, D, 6-foot-6, 200 pounds, Trinec (Extraliga)

Mrtka is a giant. The right-shot defenceman is deployed in all situations when playing with his age group in league play and internationally. He's a capable distributor who's agile enough to open up space with his skating. His stature and length are obvious assets defensively.

No. 15: Cole Reschny, LW, 5-foot-9, 161 pounds, Victoria Royals (WHL)

Reschny is taller and stronger than he was last season and that increase in strength will further assist his style of play. Reschny is always in motion. He tracks how plays are developing and reacts accordingly in all three zones. He has solid leverage along the boards and is a very strong skater. Reschny provides a combination of goal scoring and playmaking. Pucks are on and off his stick in a hurry.

No. 16: Charlie Trethewey, D, 6-foot-1, 190 pounds, USNTDP (USHL)

Trethewey has the hockey sense and skating ability to be deployed in all situations. However, he isn't going to provide high-end offence or quarterback a power play at the NHL level. The two-way defenceman manages the game efficiently and is reliable. Trethewey complements a more active defence partner and matches up well to shut down top-six forwards.

No. 17: Jackson Smith, D, 6-foot-3, 190 pounds, Tri-City Americans (WHL)

Smith is a player who could rise in my rankings as the season progresses. His offensive contribution is on the rise (1G-7A in his first nine games) and his defensive detail has improved. He's big, strong, physically engaged and doesn't give away any free ice in his own zone. Smith has a presence about him. I appreciate his approach and compete.

No. 18: Braeden Cootes, C, 6-feet, 183 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)

Cootes is a rash to play against and always seems to be around the play. He's another prospect who provides a combination of "skill and will." He's a relentless competitor who never passes up an opportunity to finish his check, which leads to turnovers and scoring chances for his group.

No. 19: Kashawn Aitcheson, D, 6-foot-1, 198 pounds, Barrie Colts (OHL)

Aitcheson is a two-way defenceman who might provide some depth offence at the pro level. He's plenty strong, moves well, and is always engaged physically. Aitcheson is being deployed in a variety of roles for the Colts and averaging over 22 minutes of ice time per game.

No. 20: Sascha Boumedienne, D, 6-foot-2, 182 pounds, Boston University (NCAA)

So far, Boumedienne is being deployed at even strength and the penalty kill for the Terriers. He's one of the most agile defencemen in the draft class. His ability to move laterally to kill entries into his zone, or pressure the puck carrier into turnovers, is an attractive asset. His puck play ranges at times, though. In my opinion, he's at his best when he keeps things simple and uses his speed and compete to his advantage.

No. 21: Blake Fiddler, D, 6-foot-4, 207 pounds, Edmonton Oil Kings (WHL)

Fiddler captained Team USA at the Hlinka/Gretzky Cup in the summer and led by example. He's a big body defender who has an ability to hit the rush with the puck on his stick and create secondary offence. Defensively he takes away time and space with his stature and length. I like the "growl" Fiddler brings at times as well. He's at his best when he's in the face of his opponents and battling.

No. 22: Brady Martin, C, 6-feet, 175 pounds, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds (OHL)

Martin plays bigger than his listed size and is another player who leads by example. Martin can be deployed up and down the lineup. He has top-six skill, power, and an approach that creates turnovers. Martin has produced 4G-7A in his first 11 games this season.

No. 23: Joshua Ravensbergen, G, 6-foot-5, 192 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)

Ravensbergen is a big, athletic, butterfly style goalie who catches with his right hand. He has excellent feet and great quickness moving side to side. He's very competitive. Ravensbergen reads how plays are developing and never quits on a puck. One thing I'm monitoring is how tall he sits when down in his butterfly. Tall goalies lose their size advantage when sitting on the heels of their skates in the butterfly.

No. 24: Adam Benak, C, 5-foot-7, 161 pounds, Youngstown Phantoms (USHL)

Benak is to forward prospects what Lane Hutson (Montreal Canadiens) was to defence prospects in his draft year: He's fun to watch, crafty, undersized, and a skilled player who always seems to have the puck on his stick. He's hard to defend. Benak has the puck skill to make plays in a phone booth and leave defenders staring down at their feet looking for it.

No. 25: Cameron Schmidt, RW, 5-foot-8, 152 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)

Schmidt isn't as dynamic as Cole Caufield (Montreal Canadiens) but he could easily be described as "Caufield light." Schmidt is an intriguing, undersized shooter who has historically scored more goals than assists. He takes advantage of time and space to rip pucks on net. Schmidt isn't always a threat off the

rush with his skating, but he's plenty quick enough and has an extra gear on occasion. He's off to a fantastic start with 12G-7A in his first 11 regular season games.

No. 26: Jan Chovan, C, 6-foot-3, 181 pounds, Tappara (J20)

Chovan is an intriguing prospect. The Slovakian is playing for Tappara's J20 squad in Finland. His combination of size, skill, vision and above average skating ability are attractive attributes. I'd like to see him produce more than the 5G-5A he has so far in his first 15 league games. Chovan did contribute 1G-5A at the Hlinka/Gretzky in August.

No. 27: Justin Carbonneau, RW, 6-foot-1, 190 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)

Carbonneau is another player from the QMJHL who is gaining momentum. He's a solid skater, especially in straight lines heading north with the puck on his stick, and craves offence. Carbonneau has some cheat in his game defensively, but his skill wins out for me at this stage of his development. He's produced 7G-9A in his first 11 games this season.

No. 28: Emile Guite, LW, 6-foot-1, 174 pounds, Chicoutimi Saguenens (QMJHL)

Guite loves to score goals. He's a bit of an opportunist at times, but there's no doubt he can finish his chances. Guite is a solid skater with room for more power and strength. His defensive detail can range at times. He definitely has room to be more engaged along the wall and in his zone, but his offensive upside is too strong to overlook at this stage. Guite contributed 25G-32A last season and was part of Team Canada's Hlinka/Gretzky team in the summer where he contributed 3G-4A in seven games.

No. 29: Milton Gastrin, LW, 6-foot-1, 183 pounds, MODO (J20)

Gastrin scores in streaks. He's a solid skater who displays an extra gear through the neutral zone and has an ability to make plays from the flank. Gastrin is being deployed in all situations at the J20 level in Sweden. He's equal parts shooter/distributor and a prospect I'm monitoring closely.

No. 30: Viktor Klingsell, LW, 5-foot-10, 183 pounds, Skelleftea (J20)

Klingsell can be a bit polarizing at times. There's no doubt he can produce offence. He's built like a fire hydrant and programmed to make plays from the flank on the power play. He is equal parts shooter and playmaker. Defensively his commitment ranges wildly. Klingsell produced 4G-8A in only five games at the Hlinka/Gretzky tournament, and though he's averaging a point per game in Sweden's J20 league, he's also minus-8.

No. 31: Reese Hamilton, D, 6-feet, 172 pounds, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)

Hamilton impressed me at the Hlinka/Gretzky. He's not a dynamic offensive defenceman, but he's an excellent skater and very efficient distributor. Hamilton, in my opinion, is a new breed of NHL style prospect. He arrives ahead of opponents and moves pucks up ice quickly. I do believe there's some understated offensive upside in his game on the horizon as well.

No. 32: Jack Ivankovic, G, 6-feet, 179 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

The conversation will come down to size when Ivankovic is in the final stages of evaluation. But similar to Dustin Wolf (Calgary Flames), Ivankovic stops the puck and that's all that really matters. He has fantastic feet. His lateral push is on time and he tracks from side to side quickly. Additionally, Ivankovic has a great glove. He relies on his athletic ability, compete and reflexes to be a difference maker.

Sports Illustrated / Multiple Teams Eyeing Blue Jackets Veteran Defenseman

By Nick Horwat – October 25, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets could be a very active team when the talks of trades around the NHL begin to pick up. Deals this early in the season are rare, but the Blue Jackets may have someone worth keeping an eye on.

According to the Fourth Period, multiple teams have sniffed around Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov. TSN's Pierre LeBrun took things a step further and said the Utah Hockey Club is one of the teams that has called.

With multiple defenseman suffering long-term injuries, Utah has holes to fill on their blue line.

"I'm told that Bill Armstrong certainly is calling around," LeBrun said. "One of the players, I'm told, he's checked on is Ivan Provorov."

The 27-year-old defenseman is in the final year of his contract that earns him an affordable \$4.725 million against the salary cap.

It appears as though Provorov will be one of the top names to watch when trade talks ramp up and speculation rises closer to the trade deadline in early March.

"Provorov is going to be in high demand closer to March 7," LeBrun said. "My sense, though, is that the Blue Jackets may not be ready at this point to deal him."

LeBrun noted that the Blue Jackets don't want to start pulling pieces away from their roster while the season is still young. Their expectations are low, but if they aren't anywhere near a playoff team as March gets closer, it wouldn't be surprising to see a few pieces get dealt out of Columbus.

"If the Blue Jackets go with the kind of predictions most people have for their season," LeBrun said. "Provorov will be among the rental players moved."

Provorov is in his ninth NHL season and has 620 career games under his belt. Before the Blue Jackets, he spent seven years with the Philadelphia Flyers. Over the course of his career, Provorov has scored 70 goals and 181 assists for 251 total points.

As a steady left-shot defenseman, Provorov can be a useful rental for any team looking to make a run at the Stanley Cup. With early reports already indicating interest, there's a shot he becomes the most talked-about player around the deadline.