



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
September 27, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / Adam Fantilli shaking off rust in second camp with Columbus Blue Jackets

By Brian Hedger – September 27, 2024

The road to top form still has a few curves left for Adam Fantilli.

That was evident during his first preseason game Monday in Buffalo, when having a big individual game wasn't atop his personal goals in the Jackets' 6-1 loss to the NHL-heavy Sabres. After missing most of last season with a deep calf laceration, the 19-year old center's last game was in the spring during an exhibition with Canada before the men's world championships in Czechia.

"I was just having fun," Fantilli said of his first NHL action since the injury. "I just enjoyed being back on the ice. I missed it so much that my whole plan was just to get out there, work hard and have fun. I just wanted to enjoy it again. It was obviously not the outcome we wanted, but it was just the first preseason game and they had a full NHL roster over there. I thought we did our best."

The Blue Jackets got a better result Wednesday in a 3-0 victory over the St. Louis Blues, which was new coach Dean Evason's first taste of running the home bench at Nationwide Arena. Fantilli didn't dress for that one, but is eager for another preseason matchup to continue regaining his game legs and timing. The latter felt most off-kilter in Buffalo.

"Sometimes, I thought my hands were trying to catch up to what my brain wanted me to do," he said. "I was recognizing small things that I would usually do, and I just couldn't quite get it done or whatever it was. I made a couple tough decisions in bad areas, and it cost us, but, overall, I was happy with the first game back and just starting out the season."

Fantilli is most happy to escape another laceration to the same leg. He isn't sure when the new cut occurred, but it did require stitches. Luckily, it wasn't nearly as bad of a location as the gash to the back of his calf that ended his rookie season in January.

Fantilli now wears an extra layer of protective socks to guard against a full recurrence or worse.

"It's like two or three inches away (from the first cut)," Fantilli said. "I don't know if this is from a cut or just blocking a shot or whatever it was, but that's a good way to shake it off, right?"

The Blue Jackets are counting on Fantilli and other talented young forwards to make significant contributions this season. He's carrying a lot of confidence into his second NHL spin, aiming to reach that bar after finishing last season with 12 goals, 15 assists and 27 points in 49 games.

"Obviously, the expectations for our team from the outside looking in aren't very high, and I think we can surprise a lot of people with what we've got in our locker room," Fantilli said. "I'm super excited for the guys that all signed (new) contracts, what they're going to do this year, and personally I'm super excited. I think I can have a big year and contribute to this team, but the main goal is winning games."

Columbus Blue Jackets escape injury to defenseman Ivan Provorov

Midway through the first period Wednesday, a hard slapshot by Blues defenseman Justin Faulk sent Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov to the ice in a heap.

The stoutly built defender stayed down on the ice, writhing in pain, after goalie Elvis Merzlikins made a save and stopped play by freezing the puck. Provorov needed assistance getting back to the bench, but he stayed there instead of returning to the locker room and returned to the game before the period ended.

Provorov also finished the game, assisting on a goal by Kirill Marchenko and skating 24:10 to lead his team in ice time. Provorov, 27, is in the final year of his contract and heading into the season as the Blue Jackets' left point on the second defense pairing. He also kills penalties and can deftly quarterback a power-play unit. Losing him to a long-term injury in just the second exhibition game of the preseason would've been a tough pill to swallow.

[BlueJackets.com / Camp Q&A: Fantilli feels more comfortable in year two](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – September 27, 2024

The Blue Jackets are loaded with young players who could develop into standouts, but no one quite has the high-level potential of Adam Fantilli.

The No. 3 overall pick in the 2023 draft, Fantilli is tabbed as a major building block for the organization, a potential No. 1 pivot who could fill one of the most important spots on the ice as he continues to mature his game.

The University of Michigan product and Nobleton, Ontario, native got his first crack at the NHL a season ago, posting 12 goals and 27 points in 49 games before suffering a season-ending injury in late January at Seattle. Before that, the 19-year-old center won the Hobey Baker Award as the best freshman in college hockey with the Wolverines.

Fantilli met with BlueJackets.com on Saturday after CBJ practice. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Last training camp, everything had to be new to you. There was a lot going on, just trying to figure out the NHL. How much more prepared do you feel now than 365 days ago?

“A lot more. I feel comfortable with the guys. I feel more comfortable with my environment. Obviously management is new, coaches are new, a lot of new drills, a lot of new ways of doing things, but it’s still hockey. It’s still training camp. I’m just here to put my head down and work.”

You said the other day you felt you were starting to play good hockey in December and January before your injury. What did you see in your game and where did you start feeling more comfortable at that point in time?

“I don’t even remember. I just remember two months into the season, I was able to find my footing and realize what the expectations are every single night. Kind of, I don’t want to say being starstruck, but that went away and you realized you could be calm and play hockey. Once I realized that, I was able to just go out there and have fun and play hard.”

I don’t know how you do expectations going into a season, like if you think about certain numbers or just getting better in certain areas, but how are you approaching that going into a second season?

“I don’t have expectations for myself. I truly believe if I’m able to play the way I want to play and play my game and get comfortable in our systems and do everything properly, I can have a big impact on this team. That’s my plan. We have a lot of guys getting looked at for that. We have a lot of guys that are going to be stepping up this year with what we’ve lost. But I’m not thinking about that too much right now. I’m focused on training camp and when game one comes, game one comes.”

When you got drafted, you were excited to land in Columbus. What did you learn about the city in the past year that you couldn’t have when you were selected?

“People are great. Fans are great. The city is awesome. The restaurants are really good. The organization aside, I love the city. I’ve gone to Crew games. I’ve gone to a lot of events here. I haven’t gone to an OSU game yet, but we’ll see. I might be going to one soon, but the city has a lot to offer. It’s a diamond in the rough.”

As a Michigan guy, what would be mind-set going to an OSU game? Are you just going to fold up your arms and be upset if they score?

“Depends if Michigan is playing or not. (Laughs.)”

Were you in one place for most of this offseason or did you go all over?

“I was in Michigan for most of it. I feel like that (training) group there is the best that I’ve seen, going around to different places. It’s crazy. The guys you get on the ice there, it’s awesome. We push each other every single day. I was with (Zach) Werenski all summer. He goes very hard in the gym, very hard on the ice, and sets a good example. I just try to follow him and try to have that type of work ethic and come to the rink every day and realize how much you have to work to get to the point you have to get to, to have an impact in NHL hockey games. It’s tough. Watching Z every day, it definitely helps.”

Were there any vacations or anything that stood out this summer?

“(My family and I) went to Italy. We were there two years ago and went again this year. It’s great.”

What stood out over there?

“Everything. You start in Rome, you have the architecture, you have the history. Then you go down, you have the beaches. You go further north, you have the mountains. It’s awesome. Everything was sweet. Two years ago, we did the whole tour, the Colosseum and the Vatican and everything. That’s my favorite thing in Italy, but this time we didn’t really do that. My family is still there, so we go back and visit them as much as possible.”

[BlueJackets.com / What we've learned through one week of CBJ camp](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – September 27, 2024

There is a bit of irony in Dean Evason being the Blue Jackets head coach because, in a roundabout way, he's kind of responsible for a couple of the current players being on the roster.

Flash back to the spring of 2022 and a young CBJ team had a hard reality check in a pair of games against a bigger, more physical Minnesota squad coached by Evason.

First, on March 11 in Nationwide Arena, the end of a spirited affair between the squads was marked by a hit by Minnesota's Marcus Foligno on Jake Voracek, an open-ice, knee-on-knee collision in the final minute that sent the then-CBJ winger flying and then lying on the ice in pain.

Fifteen days later, the teams met again in Minnesota, and again the Wild tried to impose their physical nature against the Blue Jackets. Late in the first period of that contest, Minnesota defenseman Jacob Middleton leveled Zach Werenski as the CBJ defenseman followed through on a shot, causing Werenski to miss the rest of the game with a hit the Jackets' bench thought was high.

The Blue Jackets spent most of the 2021-22 season without a true heavyweight in the lineup – Vladislav Gavrikov and Sean Kuraly were the top CBJ players in terms of penalty minutes – but that would change in the ensuing offseason. Columbus went out and acquired forward Mathieu Olivier and Erik Gudbranson, giving the team some larger presences who made opposing teams think twice about taking liberties.

When Evason was informed by reporters during training camp of the impact his Wild team from three seasons ago had on the future of things in Columbus, he cracked a bit of a smile.

"Some people have called me a pugilist, but I don't believe it," Evason said. "It's just hard hockey. It's just intense. I want the guys to play hard every night. I like to think that I'm an intense person, and hopefully that translates to the group."

Indeed, Evason's pledge since his arrival is that the Blue Jackets may not win every game, but they won't be outworked. It's something every hockey coach is looking for, but Evason has a series of results to back it up, including playoff appearances in his three full seasons in Minnesota as well as the seventh-best points percentage of any coach in NHL history with at least 250 games behind the bench.

His hope is to instill an aggressive style that will pressure opponents into mistakes, and the Blue Jackets seem to have buy-in already for that.

"I think he just expects the team to play a certain way regardless of your role on the team," Olivier said. "We're going to be a much harder, more physical team all around. Even excluding me out of that – that's more of my game – just as a team we're going to be more leaning toward that kind of style of play. For a group like us, a young group like us, that's good. We're going to be able to showcase our skill, but also implement that in our overall game."

Evason also doesn't have any concern about his team's ability to play such a game, as he's been impressed by the compete level he's seen so far in camp.

"Everybody talks about our young skill – I see more bite in our game than people give us credit for," Evason said. "That doesn't mean we're running around and hitting people. It just means we're going to put pressure on teams."

“If you want to label what I do, I want high-intense hockey all over the hockey – playing with pressure, putting heat on people, and playing a fast, hard game.”

Bigger is Better

When discussing his team after Saturday’s practice, Evason’s mind turned toward one of his new players, Dmitri Voronkov, and excitement was clear in the head coach’s words.

“I didn’t realize how frickin’ big he is,” Evason said with wonder in his voice. “He’s massive! I’m very excited. You get goosebumps talking about that because he’s a big, big man and skates really well.”

Of course, there’s only one Dmitri Voronkov, but Evason still seems quite happy with one underrated area of his team – its size.

The Blue Jackets have become known for undersized players who have an outsized impact on the game over the years, from Cam Atkinson to Johnny Gaudreau to Justin Danforth to even someone like Nick Blankenburg. There are also some smaller prospects in the pipeline like Gavin Brindley and Jordan Dumais who hope to make an impact sooner rather than later.

But as Evason – who was listed at 5-foot-10 during his playing days – tries to implement that in-your-face, aggressive style, he’s happy as he looks around on the ice and sees some bigger players who can hold their own.

“I like the size of our team,” he said. “It’s also easy because they’re all bigger than me.”

When new general manager and president of hockey operations Don Waddell took over, that was one area of the team he wanted to focus on improving. You can see it in his offseason acquisitions, including the addition of such bigger players as Sean Monahan (6-2, 202), Jack Johnson (6-1, 227) and James van Riemsdyk (6-3, 207). That was also a target in the draft, starting with first-round pick Cayden Lindstrom (6-3, 214).

“When I looked at the roster – and I knew this roster well very well from the last few years – even when I got here, watching a lot of the video, some of our better players are not the biggest size,” Waddell said. “When you have that opportunity to add guys like Jack and Monahan and JVR, I think it just makes sense to add those type of players to your current roster.”

“Scoring off the rush is hard. You don’t get that many opportunities. You get maybe a few 2-on-1s every few games. Being able to get the puck and cycle down low, you need not only skill players but you need some big bodies, and I think we have those guys.”

Looking at the Lineup

There’s still more than a week left in camp, but it’s probably fair to say there’s not many spots on the opening night CBJ roster that are left up for grabs.

Columbus still has 47 players in training camp, but the line rushes the team has used so far in camp leads one to believe many of the roster spots are set.

Monahan has centered the top line throughout camp with Boone Jenner and Kirill Marchenko on either side, while van Riemsdyk, Voronkov, Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger and Yegor Chinakhov comprised the middle six. With Danforth rehabbing a wrist injury, Sean Kuraly and Mathieu Olivier have made up the fourth line, splitting time so far with Owen Sillinger and Dylan Gambrell.

On defense, there are seemingly four locks to make the team – Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Damon Severson and Erik Gudbranson – while David Jiricek and Jack Johnson have filled the other two spots in

the top six as Jake Christiansen, Jordan Harris and Denton Mateychuk also state their cases. In net, it's all but a lock the two goalies will be Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov to start the campaign.

Of course, none of this is written in stone – you could see young forwards like Brindley, Luca Del Bel Belluz and James Malatesta continue to push – but the reality appears to be there aren't a ton of position battles.

At the same time, things will continue to evolve as the season goes on, and Evason wants his players to know they have the chance to change things as the year goes on.

"We've talked to them right from the start," Evason said. "If you don't like your role, then change it."

Johnson's Good Start

In chatting with Kent Johnson over the weekend, one thing was obvious – the fifth overall draft pick in the 2021 draft was ready to go.

Last season wasn't what Johnson wanted in really any way – his numbers all went down across the board from 16-24-40 in 2022-23 to 6-10-16 in '23-24 – and he was limited to just 42 games by an AHL stint and a season-ending shoulder injury suffered in February.

So as he began camp and almost immediately started playing with pace, winning battles and filling up the net, Johnson was happy with his progress. But the big step for him came Wednesday, when he got an opportunity to be back in a game setting in the preseason contest vs. St. Louis.

"I feel great – definitely better than ever, and I feel pretty confident in all the work and all the people I had helping me this summer," Johnson said. "I feel good, feel faster, stronger, and just ready to go. It's been so long. It's exciting."

Johnson didn't disappoint, finishing with an empty-net goal, an assist, and a team-high-tying five shots on goal. He was noticeable on almost every shift, whether that was winning battles with his stick, setting up teammates with seeing-eye passes, or disrupting the opposing power-play unit.

There's still a lot of work to be done in camp, but it's fair to say the wing could be set for a breakout season.

"You guys saw it for the first time with all the lights tonight," Kuraly said. "We've been seeing that for a couple weeks here. He's been a dog on pucks. You can see his mentality. It's no secret – it's second effort on pucks, and even if he loses the first one, he's hunting the pucks. It's just the start, but he's off to a good start."

Power Play Practice

If you're a Blue Jackets fan, you don't need an explanation as far as how frustrating the team's flagging power play has been in recent seasons.

Columbus has finished in the bottom 10 of the NHL in power-play percentage in each of the past seven seasons, leaving goals on the board that could be the difference between a one-goal loss and a point or two in the standings.

It's been a common theme across the three head coaches in that span, and expecting things to change massively right off the bat under Evason might be too much. But fans would likely be happy to know the new head coach at least has made the power play a focus, already starting to drill the team on the basic fundamentals he and his staff would like to see.

The highlight was Sunday's power-play practice, in which the players most likely to be on the top power-play units spent a 45-minute session on the ice learning and practicing.

“I’ve always believed that it’s important,” Evason said. “If you’re gonna dial in your systems, you probably should dial in one of the two most important ones, right? They’re all important, but to actually work on it early, get our thought process – we don’t try to overload them with too much, but we get the basics of it and then we can teach through these eight games before we get to the regular season here.”

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Dean Evason Offering Players a Fresh Start

By Mark Scheig – September 27, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets opened the home portion of their preseason schedule with a good performance from start to finish. Elvis Merzlikins stopped all 19 shots he faced in two periods. Denton Mateychuk, Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson all scored on their way to a 3-0 win over the St. Louis Blues.

The Blue Jackets controlled most of the game from a shots and possession perspective. They were able to rise to the occasion when the moment called for it.

The Blues had an extended two-man advantage in the third period with Zach Sawchenko in net trying to protect a 2-0 lead. The penalty kill came up huge and killed a 4-on-3, 5-on-3 and 5-on-4 advantage on the same kill to maintain the shutout.

The one overarching theme to this game was some new looks the Blue Jackets were showing. This is where we are starting to see the impact of head coach Dean Evason and what he's bringing to the team.

Fresh Start With Purpose

Evason has made one thing clear during the early portion of training camp. It's a fresh start for everyone. He even took it one step further. He made a specific request of his coaching staff and those that have been on the team before.

"You go through preseason and I don't know a lot of these guys as far as what they've played in the past," Evason said. "I've asked the coaches to not tell me a lot about what guys have done and what their personalities (are). I want to try to figure it out myself and see what role they want to play. We talked to them right from the start. If you don't like your role, then change it."

Kent Johnson was a standout on Wednesday night. He looked faster and stronger. He also played in all situations, including top power play and penalty kill.

It's the penalty kill part that stands out. In Johnson's Blue Jackets' career, he's never played a major role in that part of the game. This puts perspective on the fresh start Evason said he's bringing.

"I heard prior to coming here what a rink rat he was and that he's just a hockey player. He just wants to be on the ice all the time," Evason said of Johnson. "I've seen that. What we've really liked about him this camp is the pace that he's playing the game at. He's got tremendous stick skills. Looks like he can stick out in a phone booth, but he's playing the game at a fast pace. That's not only offensively like we see him off the rush...but it's also a benefit when you are playing through the neutral zone and in the D-zone. That's the type of game that we want to play as a group, energy, aggressive fast pace. And he's going it in all three zones."

"Some guys want to play on the penalty kill. We're trying a lot of guys in a lot of those areas. Do you want to play on the penalty kill? Show us you want to play on the penalty kill. Show us you can do it at the end of the day and we'll pick hopefully the right guys to do it."

It's not just Johnson that's benefiting from the approach Evason is bringing to the Blue Jackets. It's everyone. He's combining teaching his systems with offering the flexibility for players to indicate what role they want to play within that system. What is that system?

"Our system, the Columbus Blue Jackets' system is aggressive," Evason said. "It's in your face. It's putting pressure on you in all areas of the ice...Fortunate thing is there's a lot of hockey games that we

can continue to teach each and every night and continue to get them to go forward with that aggressiveness.”

Sean Kuraly played the role of top-line center on a line with Yegor Chinakhov and Kirill Marchenko and was noticeable throughout. Denton Mateychuk looked calm and poised again while scoring the opening goal of the game. Throughout this preseason, there will be different looks. It’s all on purpose. Whether Evason wants to see something for himself or if a player asks to be in a certain role. This back-and-forth is a result of the fresh start everyone last.

What happened last year on the ice no longer matters. In the early going under Evason, all that matters is the here and now. It is truly a clean slate as he continues to get to know his team.

Side Dishes

- Here’s Merzlikins on Mateychuk: “He’s doing great. There’s nothing to add. He did great tonight. It’s not easy to get in like this. It was a great job.”
- And now Merzlikins on playing the first home game: “It’s been amazing. We have great fans. They’ve been there always for us. No matter good or bad, they never give up on us. That’s why this city is special. Everyone is here (and) stick together good or bad. They’re always here together. They’re never going to put the knife in your back.”
- Mateychuk on Kent Johnson: “He’s impressive. He looks strong on the puck. It’s hard to get it off him. He used that to his advantage tonight. He looked great.
- Kuraly on Johnson: “You guys probably see it for the first time with all the lights tonight. We’ve been seeing that for a couple weeks here. He’s been a dog on pucks and you can see his mentality. It’s no secret. It’s second effort on pucks and even if he loses the first one. He’s hunting these pucks. It’s just a start. He’s off to a good start.”
- The Blue Jackets are off Thursday. They’ll hold a morning skate and practice on Friday before the game group travels to Washington for their game against the Capitals. They host the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday night at Nationwide Arena. By the end of the weekend, half the preseason will be gone.

The Hockey News / Luca Pinelli Sent Back to Junior Team

By Jason Newland – September 27, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have announced that they have loaned forward Luca Pinelli back to his junior club, the Ottawa 67's.

Pinelli signed a 3-year contract with a cap hit of \$878,333 per season on April 23rd, 2024. His contract expires at the end of the 2026-27 season when Pinelli is 22 years old. His contract is slide-eligible, however.

Pinelli doesn't turn 20 until April of 2025 and has only played three seasons in the OHL, so his return was predictable. In three seasons for Ottawa, he has 181 points.

With this move, the roster now stands at 47 players.

The Hockey News / 19 Days Until Opening Night at Nationwide Arena: The History of Jersey #19

By Jason Newland – September 27, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had many players don the Union Blue in its history. The #19 has only been worn a handful of times though.

Who Wore It First?

- **Mathieu Darche** - Darche played 24 games for the CBJ over their first three seasons, totaling two points. He is now the Assistant General Manager and Director of Hockey Ops for the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Who Wore It Last?

- **Adam Fantilli** - Technically I'm breaking my own rules for this series. Fantilli wore #11 last season and switched to #19 for this season. But since there is absolutely zero chance he not wear the number, I included him. The soon-to-be second-year center played in 49 games last season before going down with a serious injury. He scored 12 goals and had 27 points. Check again in 3 or 4 years and Fantilli will be the best player to have worn #19.

Who Wore It Best?

- **Ryan Johansen** - Johansen was supposed to be the center of the future in Columbus, and he was until John Tortorella came to town. Johansen played 309 games for the Jackets and had 193 points, including back-to-back seasons with 63 and 71 points respectively. He was traded to the Nashville Predators for Seth Jones in 2016, where he played 533 games for the Preds. He was never able to replicate his 71-point season from 2014-15 and hit a 64-point high for the Preds in 2019. Johansen is currently embroiled in some drama with the Philadelphia Flyers. On August 20, 2024, He was placed on unconditional waivers following material breach of contract.

Others That Have Worn #19

- **Sean Pronger** - The brother of Hall of Famer Chris Pronger played 104 games in Columbus and had 17 points. He retired in 2005 after playing in Germany.
- **Brian Holzinger** - He played 13 games as a Jacket in 03-04 and had one point. The Parma, Ohio native was traded to Columbus in 2003 and never played another NHL game after that season. He retired in 2003.
- **Joe Motzko** - Motzko played 11 games with the Jackets over three seasons where he had one point. He left for Germany in 2009 and retired in 2014.
- **Alexandre Picard** - Picard was drafted 8th overall in 2004 by Columbus. He played 67 games over five seasons and had two points. He never played another NHL game after Columbus. After leaving for Europe, he returned to North America in 2019 to play in The Ligue Nord-Américaine de Hockey, a semi-professional ice hockey league based in Quebec, where he still plays today.
- **Michael Peca** - Peca played 136 games from 2007 to 2009 and had 56 points. After his time in Columbus, he never played another NHL game and retired in 2009.

- **Ethan Moreau** - Played 37 games for the CBJ in 2010-11 and had six points. The former Edmonton Oilers Captain and 08-09 King Clancy Memorial Trophy winner retired in 2012.
- **Ryan Dzingel** - The former Ohio State Buckeye played 21 games as a Blue Jacket in 2019 and had 12 points. He played in the AHL last season for Henderson and currently doesn't have a contract.
- **Liam Foudy** - Foudy played 90 games as a Jacket in five seasons, scoring 7 goals and totaling 19 points. He also had 35 points in 41 career games for Cleveland. He was put on waivers last season and picked up by Nashville.

1st Ohio Battery / Boom: Blue Jackets Dominate Blues In Preseason Home Opener

By Ed Francis – September 27, 2024

That was better.

It's the preseason, but if Wednesday night was any indication, the Columbus Blue Jackets could be a team on the rise in 2024-25.

After falling 6-1 in Monday's exhibition opener in Buffalo to the Sabres, the Blue Jackets were dominated from start to finish against the St. Louis Blues in the first home preseason game.

The reason for optimism goes beyond the score, though. Here are four takeaways from the 3-0 shutout win over the Blues:

- Kent Johnson has made Marathon-esque strides from last season. He was the best player on the ice Wednesday night — on either team. There was confidence, there was smart decision making, and there was a sense that he was in control of the ice with and without the puck. He had the primary assist on Denton Mateychuk's first-period goal (more on him in a moment), and the empty-net goal to seal the game was well-deserved. His condition was evident, too: 18:34 of ice time was the most he's seen since the 2022-23 season. As teammate Sean Kuraly put it: "You guys saw it for the first time with all the lights tonight. We've been seeing that for a couple weeks." This could be a breakout season for Johnson.
- The Blue Jackets are going to have a decision to make with Denton Mateychuk. Yes, he scored, but it's got nothing to do with that. The 20-year-old defender looks the part of a soon-to-be top pairing defenseman at the NHL level. Like Johnson, Mateychuk was playing with confidence and making the correct split-second decisions. He was a toss-up to make the opening night roster and it seemed like Cleveland would be his home base this fall, but he's making a case to be a kid you have to keep in the capital city.
- Props to Elvis Merzlikins; who stopped all 19 St. Louis shots in the first two periods before giving way to Zach Sawchenko for the third period (as was the plan). There's no point in rehashing what the last few years have been like for Elvis, but stopping every shot that was fired his way Wednesday night is a step (the first of several needed) in the right direction for the Columbus netminder.
- For the first time since John Tortorella, the Blue Jackets have a legitimate, experienced NHL coach in Dean Evason — and it shows. Johnson, Mateychuk, Merzlikins (and others) were playing with confidence that just didn't exist in the past. Evason has also overachieved as a coach, getting more out of his team's than expected —and the early returns are a hint that he could do that again this season.

CBS News / Columbus Blue Jackets honor Johnny Gaudreau before first home game since his death

By CBS Staff – September 27, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Nearly one month after Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew were killed, the Columbus Blue Jackets paid tribute to their star hockey player before the team's first home game since his death.

An emotional video tribute to Johnny Gaudreau and 13 seconds of silence — for his uniform number — opened the Blue Jackets' preseason game Wednesday night at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets went on to a 3-0 victory over the St. Louis Blues.

Gaudreau and brother Matthew were killed Aug. 29 near their boyhood home in Salem County, New Jersey when police said they were struck by a suspected drunken driver while they were riding bicycles on the eve of their sister Katie's wedding. The driver who police say struck them is charged with two counts of death by auto, along with reckless driving, possession of an open container and consuming alcohol in a motor vehicle.

Starting with preseason games, the Blue Jackets are wearing helmet stickers with "Gaudreau" printed between the images of two doves and the uniform numbers of the brothers, No. 13 for Johnny, No. 21 for Matthew, the number he wore as a player for Boston College.

"I think you put yourself in some of these situations where you'd have John around," Columbus forward Sean Kuraly said. "Thinking about him all day, obviously. Drive to the rink and a lot of times I'd pick him up on the way. So he's not there for that. I spent a lot of the day thinking about John. When he's not there with us, it's a tough day."

Columbus players will wear a commemorative patch beginning with the first regular-season game with Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13.

Traditional activities for the regular season home opener on Oct. 15 will be postponed so the night can be dedicated to paying tribute to the Gaudreau brothers. The home opener will be celebrated two nights later instead.

One of the worst teams in the NHL last season, the Blue Jackets must find a way to move forward with a new general manager, new coach, and with a huge void left on and off the ice by the death of 31-year-old "Johnny Hockey."

Gaudreau's jersey still hangs in his dressing stall in the Columbus locker room.

"The guys are close," new coach Dean Evason said. "And that doesn't just mean the guys that have been here in Columbus. It's everyone here in this camp. We've seen a real close-knit group."

This is the team's second training camp in recent years that follows the offseason death of a player. Goaltender Matiss Kivlenieks died in July 2021 of chest trauma from an errant fireworks mortar blast at the wedding of an assistant coach's daughter.

On Wednesday night, Denton Mateychuk and Kirill Marchenko scored for Columbus, with Kuraly picking up assists on both. Kent Johnson got an empty-net goal with 43 seconds left.

The Athletic / NHL Prospect Tiers: Connor Bedard leads projections of top 114 under-23 players for 2024-25

By Scott Wheeler – September 27, 2024

A few weeks ago, The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn reached out with a question. "Prospect Tiers?" he asked. Player Tiers, his massive undertaking with colleagues Shayna Goldman and Sean Gentile, was entering its fifth year and a companion piece projecting prospects into the same tiers felt like a natural evolution.

Out of that idea, this first installment of Prospect Tiers was born. This project differs significantly from my annual drafted prospects ranking. Where that is my own, this is built with the influence of NHL scouts and analysts and sorted into buckets rather than a definitive ranking. Though it started with me slotting ~115 under-23 skaters into different tiers (MVP, Franchise, All-Star, Star and Support), it finished with me sending the shell of my list to NHL scouts, who were encouraged to suggest adjustments and provide feedback in an effort to build something closer to a consensus view of the upside of the game's top young players.

It was a sprint to get it done, and as with all lists, there's never a true consensus, but we got to the finish line with the help of nearly two dozen industry sources who were granted anonymity in order to speak freely about the prospects.

Many had no notes, signaling a good starting point.

But the majority did have opinions, and prospects were moved up and down accordingly. The goal, to take a page from Player Tiers, was to make this "the best list of hockey's best (prospects)."

Here's where it landed, with commentary from sources throughout.

Note that among those not ranked but considered/debated were forwards Owen Beck (whom one scout argued he'd include), Filip Bystedt, David Goyette, Hendrix Lapierre, David Edstrom, Sacha Boisvert, Josh Doan, Joakim Kemell, Ivan Miroshnichenko, Alexander Holtz, Emil Hemming, Terik Parascak, Mackie Samoskevich, Fabian Lysell, Colby Barlow, Jackson Blake, Isaac Howard, Otto Stenberg, Chaz Lucius, Zachary L'Heureux, Zack Bolduc and Alex Laferriere, as well as D Ethan Del Mastro (whom one scout argued for), Hunter Brzustewicz, Theo Lindstein, Elias Salomonsson, Mikhail Gulyayev, Adam Jiricek, EJ Emery, Cole Hutson and Luca Cagnoni.

Note also that goalies were not included because of how difficult they are to project before they've built up an NHL sample size (even then!) and how few actual experts there are. There are eight consensus top young goalies in the sport, though. Here's where I'd loosely place them: Jesper Wallstedt (3C), Yaroslav Askarov (3C), Dustin Wolf (4A), Devon Levi (4A), Jacob Fowler (4A), Spencer Knight (4B), Sebastian Cossa (4C) and Trey Augustine (4C). Joel Hofer, Arturs Silovs, Lukas Dostal and Justus Annunen have also begun to establish themselves in the NHL but are probably considered Tier 5 talents.

A top 10 player. Someone who is very likely to get serious trophy consideration at season's end and whom championship-caliber teams are built around. The best player on almost any team in the league.

A top 30 player. Someone who is the best player on a contending team or second best on a championship-caliber team. An unquestionably elite player.

A top 60 player. Someone who wouldn't be the best player on a contender, but would be an important part of any contending or championship core. A strong top-line forward, above average No. 1 defenseman, or borderline top five goalie.

A top 100 player. Someone who would be a strong piece within a contending or championship core, but not a go-to option. An average top-line forward, below average No. 1 defenseman, or top 10 goalie.

A top 150 player. Someone who would offer strong support to a contending or championship core, but wouldn't be an integral piece within it. A below-average top-line forward, a strong No. 2 defenseman, or an above average starter.

The Athletic / NHL offer sheets, free agents and Utah? Rating the West's offseason with the Bizarro-meter

By Sean McIndoe – September 27, 2024

Welcome to part two of the annual Bizarro-meter rankings, in which we rate each team's offseason to see which were the weirdest. As always, weird doesn't necessarily mean bad or good or anything in between; this isn't an evaluation so much as an opportunity to recognize the teams that kept things interesting over a long summer.

Yesterday we looked at the Eastern Conference, with the Capitals and Lightning leading the way. Can anyone from the West top their scores? Spoiler: Yes. But who? Let's find out.

Pacific Division

Calgary Flames

The offseason so far: The rebuild that isn't quite a rebuild churns on, with Jacob Markstrom the latest big name out the door.

But their strangest story was: As has been the case for most of Craig Conroy's deals, the return on Markstrom was fine but hardly spectacular. That may have been about managing expectations as much as anything, with some of the pre-trade rumors about what the Devils would be willing to give up getting a little silly. Still, it would be nice to see Conroy hit a home run on one of these deals.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.7/10. It was a mostly quiet summer for a team that figures to get worse before it can get better.

Anaheim Ducks

The offseason so far: It was extremely quiet. When Brian Dumoulin is the big incoming name, it's fair to say you didn't make many headlines. They did name Radko Gudas captain, though, so that's nice.

But their strangest story was: Not trading Trevor Zegras, one of those names that's been rumored to be on the block forever without ever moving.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.4/10. Bonus points for franchise icon Ryan Getzlaf joining the Department of Player Safety, which at some point will just be entirely former Ducks.

San Jose Sharks

The offseason so far: They drafted Macklin Celebrini at No. 1 and then traded for Yaroslav Askarov, cementing what might be the best core of young players and prospects in the league. Now it's time for the tough part.

But their strangest story was: Signing Tyler Toffoli, which made sense for the team but was still a surprise for those of us who expected the veteran to latch on with a contender.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.6/10. They also hired Ryan Warsofsky, who is way too young to be an NHL head coach and needs to grow a long gray beard or something so I don't feel quite so old.

Los Angeles Kings

The offseason so far: Pretty quiet, with highlights including a Joel Edmundson signing and a Tanner Jeannot trade, neither of which received rave reviews.

But their strangest story was: Managing to trade away Pierre-Luc Dubois for a contract that could arguably be even worse. Scientists said it couldn't be done, but Rob Blake at least tried. Cap issues aside, this still feels like addition by subtraction.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 4.7/10. So ... are the Kings OK with making the playoffs and scaring nobody year in and year out? It kind of seems like they might be.

Vancouver Canucks

The offseason so far: They landed Jake DeBrusk on one of those deals with a reasonable-seeming cap hit but too much term. It was the biggest addition of an offseason that saw last year's big-name rentals leave, as the front office navigates the salary cap and Elias Pettersson's new deal.

But their strangest story was: The ongoing Thatcher Demko injury concerns, which have been playing out with an air of uncertainty stretching back to last season and were compounded by reports of Artūrs Šilovs having a knee injury.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 5.6/10. Injuries are a part of life, but Kevin Lankinen showing up is rarely a good sign.

Seattle Kraken

The offseason so far: After naming Dan Bylsma coach, Ron Francis made waves on July 1 by signing two big-name UFAs, Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson.

But their strangest story was: Giving both guys seven-year deals, which felt like a stretch for Montour and an outright mistake for Stephenson.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 5.9/10. Hey, speaking of big-name UFAs, did you know the Kraken play in a state with no tax? Would you like to hear a fascinating theory about that, which nobody else ever mentions?

Vegas Golden Knights

The offseason so far: The most heartless organization in the league, if not all of pro sports, stayed in its lane by trading Logan Thompson while he was signing autographs at the draft they were hosting. They also let franchise stalwarts Alec Martinez and Chandler Stephenson walk, and we're still not completely sure what's up with the Robin Lehner contract.

But their strangest story was: Letting Jonathan Marchessault leave. Even for a team with a reputation for churning through players like a 12-year-old with an old copy of Hockey League Simulator, the departure of a franchise original and Conn Smythe winner felt unlikely. For other front offices, maybe it would have been.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.4/10. Also, they haven't acquired a superstar that the cap says they can't afford in a few months now, so that's probably right around the corner.

Edmonton Oilers

The offseason so far: After falling one game short of the Cup, the Oilers had little trouble bringing in cheap reinforcements as UFAs lined up to come play with a winner. Not cheap: Leon Draisaitl's extension, which managed to give him the highest cap hit in the league without seeming like an overpay. They did manage to lose multiple players to offer sheets, though.

But their strangest story was: Showing Ken Holland the door and replacing him with Stan Bowman. On the one hand, it makes perfect sense; Bowman's claim to fame was taking a Hawks team that was already mostly built and pushing them over the finish line to multiple championships, which is pretty much exactly the assignment in Edmonton. On the other, his track record as a GM was decidedly mixed

even before you factor in his handling of the Kyle Beach situation. The Oilers' job would have been one of the most desirable in the league, yet they seemed to have already made up their minds on Bowman before it was even open. We'll see if that was the right call.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 8.3/10. It's never boring in Edmonton.

Central Division

Colorado Avalanche

The offseason so far: There may not have been a team in the league that made fewer significant moves. The biggest addition might be captain Gabriel Landeskog, who could be on the way to a return after missing two full seasons.

But their strangest story was: Giving role-player Logan O'Connor a six-year extension with a \$2.5 million cap hit, if only because deals that are both long and cheap are exceedingly rare in the NHL.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.0/10. You can understand the lack of activity given how good the team should already be, but the Avs' summer looks like somebody accidentally clicked on the "sim entire offseason" button in mid-May.

Chicago Blackhawks

The offseason so far: They signed some old guys.

But their strangest story was: Wait, should they be signing old guys, given they're in the middle of a rebuild? Well, yeah, probably, since at some point you want Connor Bedard to experience a playoff race. And if that doesn't work out this year, the Hawks can always move some of their veterans at the deadline.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.5/10. I get why some have questioned the Hawks' approach, but I kind of like it, even though it's not going to make them a contender. If a veteran is blocking a younger player who's truly ready, that's a nice problem to have. Until then, you have to ice a team, and this one may have improved more than any.

Minnesota Wild

The offseason so far: There was an offseason?

But their strangest story was: Every year, there's one team that barely does anything during the summer. To some extent, you could argue the Wild have an excuse, since they're still running out the clock on their cap crunch. At least they got the Brock Faber deal done.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 3.9/10. Bonus points for heading into the season with three goalies, something we've long been assured was completely impossible because one of those over-padded weirdos will wander off into the parking lot as soon as drills start. Spoiler alert, it will be completely fine.

Dallas Stars

The offseason so far: They shuffled some pieces on the blue line, with Ryan Suter bought out and Chris Tanev leaving for a job where he'll have six extra weeks off in the spring. Matt Dumba is an interesting reclamation project, and they were able to get Thomas Harley signed to a reasonable bridge deal.

But their strangest story was: Joe Pavelski announcing his retirement every few weeks for the entire offseason.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 6.7/10. Seriously, the Pavelski thing was my favorite ongoing bit of the summer, and it wasn't close. The man had more retirements than Terry Funk. He's probably going to announce another one this afternoon, and I'm here for it.

Winnipeg Jets

The offseason so far: It was mostly a case of stay-the-course for a team that surprised the naysayers last year. They did extend Dylan DeMelo, and earlier this week they finally got a Cole Perfetti bridge deal done, just as fans were starting to wonder what the hold-up was.

Whatever happens, whether immediate or not, I can't help but feel like we'll look at the cap hit when all is said and done and wonder: "Why couldn't this have happened in July?"

Just thinking out loud.

Other than that ... it wasn't great.

But their strangest story was: The Rutger McGroarty situation, which eventually ended with him heading to the Penguins. We're still not sure why the top prospect wanted out, although there are various theories. That makes it tough to know whether this was a one-player blip or a sign of other issues in the organization.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 7.2/10. I added a point for Nikolaj Ehlers, at one point a sure thing to be traded who's still on the roster.

Nashville Predators

The offseason so far: They had more fun on July 1 than you did. The Predators signed Steven Stamkos, Marchessault and Brady Skjei to long-term deals, apparently signaling that they think they're legitimate Cup contenders for this year. Are they? I guess we're going to find out.

But their strangest story was: Extending goaltender Juuse Saros and then trading heir-apparent Askarov, a pair of decisions that were understandable but will be fascinating to track over the years to come.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 8.5/10. I continue to thoroughly enjoy the Barry Trotz era, and I like to imagine there's a "Remember, NHL GMs are scared cowards who don't do anything difficult" letter on his desk that he never got around to opening.

St. Louis Blues

The offseason so far: They kept busy, and became the answer to the stump-your-friends trivia question "Wait, which team signed Ryan Suter again?" They also announced a rare succession plan for the GM role, with Doug Armstrong giving way to Alexander Steen after two more seasons. The Blues are hardly the first team to pick their next GM before the current one leaves, but it's unusual to make the decision public, especially this far in advance.

But their strangest story was: An easy call: Offer sheets! More than one! And not only that, successful offer sheets! After years of smart people theorizing about the potential of targeting a team with dual offer sheets, the Blues actually did it to the Oilers, and it worked. Mix in the lingering whispers that this was some sort of Armstrong payback for the Oilers ditching golfing buddy Ken Holland, and the Bizarro-meter nearly took down the power grid trying to process it all.

Bizarro-meter ranking: 9.3/10. Time will tell if Armstrong's offer sheets actually spur a revolution among his colleagues, but you can't blame a guy for trying.

Utah Hockey Club

The offseason so far: They traded for Mikhail Sergachev and John Marino, a blue-line upgrade that might already be enough to get them into the playoff picture. Was there anything else? I feel like there was something else ...

But their strangest story was: Oh right, existing. I'm still not sure exactly what they exist as — seriously, do we know for sure whether they're inheriting any of the Coyotes' history now that Alex Meruelo is out of the picture? — but that's fine. There's a brand new hockey team in the NHL, and it's in a market that just about nobody seemed to be thinking about a year ago. That's more than enough to take this year's Bizarro crown. Scoring the first goal in franchise history into their own net was the icing on the cake, really.

The Athletic / Who are the NHL's top 10 regression candidates for 2024-25?

By Harman Dayal – September 27, 2024

A player's actual ability may not change much year over year, but their statistics and performance can fluctuate tremendously from one season to the next. It's a testament to how many factors influence scoring — there's ice time and overall opportunity, puck luck, linemate quality, team quality, systems and so much more.

Taking a deeper look at these contextual factors can give us a warning about who may not be able to repeat the heights they reached last season. That's what we're in search of today — 10 players at risk of regressing in 2024-25. This could be a star unlikely to repeat a career-best season, a player whose production could taper off because of a smaller role with fewer prime offensive opportunities or a breakout performer who will likely fall back to Earth.

It's vital to stress that a player isn't "bad" or declining in their actual abilities if they land on this list. Most of the players on this list are genuinely excellent — it's just that they're unlikely to replicate the offensive numbers they managed in the 2023-24 campaign.

Here are 10 players at risk of producing less than they did last season.

Sam Reinhart, Florida Panthers

Everything Reinhart touches has turned into gold over the last 12 months. He tallied a whopping 57 goals, scored the Stanley Cup-winning goal in Game 7, finished fourth in Selke Trophy voting and signed the most lucrative contract of his career.

Last season was the first time Reinhart played on Aleksander Barkov's line full-time, and riding shotgun with an elite center helps partially explain his massive uptick in scoring. Reinhart is a remarkable player and will continue piling up big goal and point totals on Barkov's wing, but it's unrealistic to expect him to score at a near 60-goal pace again.

Reinhart scored on 24.5 percent of his shots in 2023-24, which was by far the highest shooting percentage of all NHL skaters who played at least 50 games. It's practically impossible to sustain a nearly 25 percent shooting efficiency long-term. For reference, Leon Draisaitl is the NHL's most efficient finisher (among forwards with at least 2,500 minutes in that sample), sustaining a 19.9 percent shooting clip over the last three seasons.

Before last season, Reinhart's career high was 33 goals, so 57 goals is clearly a major outlier. It's true Reinhart generated shots and scoring chances at the best rate of his career last season — he absolutely played the best hockey of his life — but some good fortune also aided him. For context, if he had converted last season's shots at his 15.6 percent career average, he would have scored 36 goals instead of 57.

Expect Reinhart to be closer to the 40-goal range this year rather than contending for the Rocket Richard.

Gustav Nyquist, Nashville Predators

When a player has a career-best season at 34, they're usually at risk of regressing the following year. In Nyquist's case, there are multiple reasons to believe his production will slow down in 2024-25.

Nyquist scored 75 points in 81 games, which marked the first time in his career he's scored more than 60 points in a single season. That type of outlier production at an older age is an immediate red flag regardless of how well he performed on the club's top line.

However, the biggest risk to Nyquist's numbers is that he's likely in line for a smaller role this season. Nyquist was a staple on the Predators' first power-play unit and scored 24 points there. But with Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault arriving, he'll almost certainly be getting bumped down to the second unit. Dropping from PP1 to PP2 can be a huge blow to a player's point totals. He could also see his minutes reduced at even strength because of the players mentioned above, plus Luke Evangelista's expected growth as a sophomore.

Tack on the risk of natural age-related decline for Nyquist, who's now 35, and there's a very high chance he'll produce significantly less this season.

Michael Carcone, Utah Hockey Club

Carcone's underdog story is worth celebrating.

The 5-foot-9 left winger went undrafted and toiled away in the AHL for five seasons before he made his NHL debut for Arizona in 2021-22 as a 25-year-old. He was sent back to the AHL the following season and tore it up with a league-leading 85 points in 65 games. That dominant performance earned him a life-changing two-year, one-way contract extension last offseason. Carcone responded by breaking out not only as a full-time NHL player but as a meaningful scorer, registering 21 goals in 74 games for the Coyotes last season.

However, there are two main reasons Carcone is likely to take a step back in 2024-25. Firstly, the path for him to earn top-nine minutes in Utah looks daunting. He clearly hasn't earned André Tourigny's full trust as he averaged just 11:16 per game last year, plus the club looks deeper at wing now that Dylan Guenther will stick around for a full season and because of Josh Doan's late-year emergence.

Secondly, Carcone shot 18.9 percent last season. He's a talented sniper but the odds of him sustaining that type of finishing efficiency are slim.

Between the uphill battle to a consistent top-nine role and looming shooting percentage regression, Carcone will have a hard time hitting the 20-goal mark again.

Mikael Granlund, San Jose Sharks

Granlund was in the middle of a precipitous decline before arriving in San Jose.

He only notched 41 points in 79 games in 2022-23, his two-way play-driving metrics fell off a cliff and he had a completely lackluster cameo as the Penguins' third-line center. He was on an overpriced contract the Penguins sent to San Jose as part of the Erik Karlsson trade.

Moving to the Bay Area resurrected Granlund's offensive numbers last season as he piled up 60 points in 69 games. But he's going to have a tough time replicating that.

For starters, Granlund's production was mostly driven by a huge increase in ice time. The Sharks were miserable last year, so Granlund became the de facto No. 1 center and averaged a career-high 20:58 per game. Macklin Celebrini will immediately trump Granlund as the Sharks' 1C, which will mean fewer minutes for the veteran Finnish forward. Between Celebrini, Tyler Toffoli and Will Smith, San Jose has new robust offensive weapons. Granlund will still play an important role but the offense won't have to run through him like it did last season, which will likely have a detrimental impact on his individual offensive numbers.

He's also a candidate to get traded at the deadline because of his pending unrestricted free-agent status. If Granlund moves to a contender, he'll have even fewer offensive opportunities playing on a deeper team which would also hinder his production.

Granlund only reached the 60-point mark once in his last five seasons before 2023-24. Last year's production looks like an outlier and something that will be difficult to repeat during his age-32 season.

MacKenzie Weegar, Calgary Flames

Cale Makar, Roman Josi, Erik Karlsson and prime Brent Burns are the only defensemen who've posted multiple 20-goal seasons over the last decade.

Sure, there are other defenders who've hit the 20-goal mark once, but to do it twice in relatively quick succession? Only this generation's best offensive superstars from the back end have been able to accomplish that. With all due respect to Weegar — who's an excellent all-around top-four player — he's not an elite offensive contributor and will be exceptionally hard-pressed to repeat his 20-goal campaign from 2023-24.

Weegar had previously never hit the double-digit mark for goals in a single season, let alone 15 or 20. He scored 18 goals across 215 games if you combined his last three seasons before 2023-24. Weegar was handed roughly double the power-play minutes compared to 2022-23 — an increase in usage that should continue this season — but only three of his 20 goals came on the man advantage. In other words, the uptick in his power-play time can't really explain this scoring outburst.

Weegar rode an inflated 9.6 percent shooting clip last season. That will almost certainly come back down to Earth because Makar is the only defender in the league (minimum 150 games) who's sustained a nine percent or higher shooting clip over the last three years. If Weegar had converted last season's shots at his 5.7 percent career average, he would have scored 11-12 goals instead of 20.

There's a ton to like about Weegar as a two-way top-pair defender. He should comfortably hit 40-50 points, but I'd be surprised if he gets anywhere close to 20 goals again.

J.T. Miller, Vancouver Canucks

Miller has bounced back as an elite player since Rick Tocchet's hiring as Canucks coach. The fiery 31-year-old forward has gone from being oft-criticized defensively in the Bruce Boudreau era — to the point where his ability to play center was questioned — to winning matchup minutes against other stars defensively. On top of that, he erupted for a career-high 37 goals and 103 points last season.

Miller's glow-up under Tocchet is legitimate — he should continue performing like a bona fide first-line center — but his offensive numbers are likely to dip.

The first red flag is Miller's on-ice shooting percentage. On-ice shooting percentage looks at how often a team turns its shots into goals when a certain player is on the ice, regardless of whether that player is the one taking the shots or not. Research has proven high on-ice shooting percentages in the NHL are rarely repeated the following year.

This is noteworthy because Miller had the second-highest on-ice shooting percentage out of every NHL skater who played at least 700 five-on-five minutes last season. This means that yes, Miller played fantastic last year, but his entire line benefitted from some puck luck too. Miller's most common linemate, Brock Boeser, went from scoring 18 goals in 2022-23 to a career-high 40 goals last season. Boeser had previously never scored 30 goals and rode a red-hot shooting percentage — he's likely to score fewer goals this season. That would negatively affect Miller's point totals because he assisted on 25 of Boeser's 40 goals last season.

Individually, Miller also shot at an inflated 19.1 percent clip. Miller's an above-average shooter but he's very consistently been a 14-16 percent shooter during his time in Vancouver, so he's likely to score fewer goals himself too.

I'd expect Miller to produce in the 80-90 point range rather than crossing the 100-point mark this season.

Zach Hyman, Edmonton Oilers

Who thought Hyman would explode for 54 goals at 31 last season? The Oilers' gritty top-line winger has bucked aging curves by continuously improving in his late 20s and early 30s when most peers are declining. His ascension is a wonderful story, but moving forward he'll probably be closer to the 40-goal range.

History is working against Hyman. Eighteen NHL players have crossed the 50-goal mark in the 20 seasons between 2002-03 and 2022-23. Only three of those 18 players — Alex Ovechkin, Leon Draisaitl and Dany Heatley — eclipsed 50 goals again the following season.

Hyman generated shots and high-danger chances at the best rate of his career, so this wasn't a fluke offensive outburst. But on top of playing the best hockey of his career, he did benefit from an inflated 18.6 percent shooting clip. Many would argue Hyman should sustain an elite finishing efficiency because he's playing with Connor McDavid and often scoring backdoor tap-ins. That's a fair point, but in his first two seasons in Edmonton where he was also playing with McDavid, Hyman never topped 13 percent.

Hyman's 54-goal season reminds me a bit of Chris Kreider's 52-goal campaign in 2021-22. Both are elite net-front finishers who thrived playing alongside star players and a lethal first-unit power play. Neither was previously viewed as an elite goal scorer. Kreider's been closer to the 35-40 goal range over the last two seasons since then. I expect Hyman to have a bit of a higher ceiling than Kreider because of the McDavid factor, but I'd be surprised if he finishes in the top three in the Rocket Richard race again.

Philipp Kurashev, Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks' pool of top-six wingers will be more robust this season. Teuvo Teräväinen and Tyler Bertuzzi represent major upgrades. After missing all but 10 games last season because of injury, Taylor Hall is a new piece for all intents and purposes, too.

With all that extra forward competition, Kurashev likely won't get the prime offensive deployment that drove his production in 2023-24. Kurashev spent nearly 800 five-on-five minutes with Connor Bedard last season. He was also a fixture on the Blackhawks' top power-play unit. This year, he'll probably be bumped off Bedard's line and demoted to the second power-play unit.

Kurashev is still a handy player for the Blackhawks — he's shifted to center on a line with Teräväinen and Lukas Reichel — but odds are that we'll see a drop off from the 54 points he notched last season.

Blake Coleman, Calgary Flames

Coleman has built his stellar reputation on relentless speed and forechecking, strong defensive chops and an ability to score 15-20 goals per year. He was the perfect two-way checking line winger during Tampa Bay's back-to-back Stanley Cup wins. But for all the respect the hockey world has for Coleman, he's never been known for high-end production.

That changed last season. Coleman notched 30 goals and 54 points, finishing one goal back of Yegor Sharangovich for the Flames' scoring lead.

The catch is that his individual shot and scoring chance creation were nearly identical compared to the season prior. Coleman's scoring uptick was almost entirely driven by a spike in his finishing efficiency —

he scored on 15.4 percent of his shots compared to his 10.4 percent career rate. For context, if he had converted last season's shots at his career average, he would have scored 20 goals instead of 30. The odds are stacked against the veteran two-way winger to sustain this elevated shooting percentage and goal-scoring output.

Adam Henrique, Edmonton Oilers

In Anaheim, Henrique was gift-wrapped top-six minutes and a ton of power-play time. He produced 18 goals and 42 points in 60 games with the Ducks — a 24-goal, 57-point pace — before getting dealt to the Oilers at the trade deadline.

Henrique took a discount to re-sign in Edmonton this summer; he must be thrilled to play for a Cup contender. It was a terrific signing from the Oilers' perspective too. However, that leap in team quality will come at the price of a less prominent offensive role and smaller goal/point totals.

The 34-year-old forward is currently projected to center the Oilers' third line and only averaged 34 seconds per game with them on the power play last season. Henrique will be a key secondary piece for the club, but third-line centers with limited man-advantage time aren't going to produce big offensive numbers. He scored 16 points (10 goals and six assists) in 39 games with the Oilers combined between the regular season and playoffs. He dealt with an injury during that time, so that's useful context, but he's unlikely to get the top-six minutes and PP1 time necessary to replicate the 24 goals and 51 points he scored in the regular season last year.

ESPN / Bold predictions for every NHL team for the 2024-25 season

By Greg Wyshynski – September 27, 2024

The only predictable thing about the 2024-25 NHL season is unpredictability.

There are teams that could be Stanley Cup contenders or find themselves outside the playoff bubble. There are players who could boom or bust. The future is delightfully murky.

That established, here are bold predictions for the NHL's 32 teams in the 2024-25 season. These educated guesses range from statistical achievements to awards predictions to coach firings to Stanley Cup playoffs prognostications. Many of them will be proved correct, except for the ones that aren't. Enjoy, and welcome back, hockey!

How to watch the 2024-25 NHL season on ESPN networks -- including 100 exclusive games and the out-of-market package (over 1,050 games).

Atlantic Division

Boston Bruins

This is Jim Montgomery's final season in Boston

At his preseason news conference, Bruins GM Don Sweeney mentioned there have been talks between the team and head coach Jim Montgomery about a contract extension. Which is (A) different than signing one, and (B) not an indication of job safety even if he had signed one.

The Bruins have been eliminated in consecutive postseasons by the Panthers, losing in Game 7 of the first round in 2023 and Game 6 of the second round in 2024. There's been one surefire way for Boston coaches to keep their jobs, and that's playing for the Stanley Cup. Otherwise, ownership has been known to be quick with a hook behind the bench. It wouldn't be fair or warranted to Monty, but it would be an expected overreaction for the Bruins to move on from their coach if there are diminishing returns this season. Because it's not like they're in the business of firing general managers in Boston, having had five of them since 1972.

Buffalo Sabres

The playoff drought ends

The last time the Sabres made the playoffs, "Fast 5" was in theaters, a duet between Katy Perry and Kanye West was the No. 1 song in the U.S. and their coach was ... the same guy who's coaching them now? Wait, that can't be right, can it?

Yup. Lindy Ruff returns to the franchise where he coached 15 seasons and finds a Sabres team that hasn't made the postseason cut since 2011. He also finds a team with two pillars on defense (Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power); a collection of young standout forwards in their top six; and a revamped bottom six that brings speed this team lacked under Don Granato. While he doesn't have Dominik Hasek or Ryan Miller between the pipes, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was strong last season and Devon Levi's underlying numbers showed promise.

Look, there is a mountainous amount of stuff that needs to go right for the Sabres to make the playoffs. It starts with Ruff getting a young roster to commit defensively in ways it hasn't before -- something he had success with for a time during his last stop in New Jersey. It requires good health and core players continuing on their growth trajectories. Most of all, it requires a spot opening up for them in the

conference from the teams that qualified last season -- perhaps even two spots, if we assume the Devils are back in the playoff picture.

So let's call this an "educated prayer." Ultimately, I think enough breaks right for Buffalo for them to emerge from that pack of rebuilders in the Atlantic. The streak ends. The playoff tailgates in Buffalo begin.

Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings hit reverse in Motor City

Last season, the Red Wings pushed right to the end for a playoff spot, thanks to the NHL's ninth-best offense (3.35 goals per game) overcoming the ninth-worst defense (3.33).

Goaltending woes received some of the blame for the latter, and GM Steve Yzerman turned to 37-year-old Cam Talbot to help solidify that spot. He joins no fewer than five goaltenders trying to stake a claim on NHL playing time in training camp. I believe it was the great John Madden -- the football guy, not the former NHL center -- who was credited with saying, "If you have two quarterbacks, you actually have none."

But in reality, their goaltending (17th in save percentage) wasn't the problem that their 5-on-5 defense (22nd in expected goals against) was last season. The Red Wings have to prove they can defend well enough to earn a playoff spot. I'm not confident they will, nor am I confident that they're going to post another 12.1% shooting percentage.

Florida Panthers

Regression, thy name is Sam Reinhart

For great goal scorers, timing is everything. The timing for Reinhart in 2023-24 couldn't have been better for him: 57 goals in 82 games during a contract year ahead of unrestricted free agency, which netted him an eight-year, \$69 million extension; and in a season that saw the Panthers win their first Stanley Cup by getting another 10 goals from him the playoffs.

Reinhart deserved to secure the bag as one of the NHL's top scorers in the past seven seasons. He went four straight seasons with 20-plus goals and then the past three with 30-plus goals, culminating with that 57-goal apex. But he had a shooting percentage of 24.5% last season when his career shooting percentage is 15.6%. He also posted 27 of his goals on the power play, where the Panthers lost defensemen Brandon Montour (17 power-play points) and Oliver Ekman-Larsson (11) to free agency.

The good news for Florida is that a Reinhart regression probably just ebbs him back to 30 goals. Every team in the NHL would take that.

Montreal Canadiens

Lane Hutson is a Calder Trophy finalist

Sometimes, the finalists for the Calder Trophy are obvious: First-year players who led the rookie class in goals or points or wins, on the rare occasion when a goaltender sneaks into the top three.

It's a pretty thin season for blue-chip rookie defensemen, especially in comparison to recent crops, so the opportunity is there for Lane Hutson to lead all rookie blueliners in scoring -- but that alone might not get his ticket punched as a finalist. Luckily, Hutson can augment his statistical achievements by populating highlight reels and social media clips with his eye-popping offense, which is something he has already done in the preseason.

Please recall when Ducks winger Trevor Zegras was second in the Calder voting in 2021-22. Sure, he had a numbers argument, as did others. What set him apart was literally having a pass named after him when he flipped the puck over the net to Sonny Milano for a goal. Sometimes it's about those viral moments that a rookie creates. Hutson has that potential. And hockey fans love a short king, as Cole Caufield can attest.

All of this depends on his frame handling NHL physicality and coach Marty St. Louis ceding some power-play time to him, which isn't guaranteed given how well Mike Matheson ran things last season. But as several forwards cannibalize support from voters, the 20-year-old defenseman glides into the rookie of the year final three.

Ottawa Senators

Linus Ullmark is one-and-done in Ottawa

It's not often I hope to be incorrect on a bold prediction, but this qualifies.

Ullmark was acquired from the Bruins during the offseason. He's in the last year of his contract before unrestricted free agency, and the Senators are reportedly giving him time to get acclimated before trying to extend him. Ottawa has a strong goaltending tandem now with Ullmark and Anton Forsberg, another UFA next summer. Stability is paramount for this franchise. Here's hoping they can get Ullmark to commit to Ottawa so that this doesn't become Alex DeBrincat 2.0 for the Senators.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Jake Guentzel scores 40 goals or more

Some hockey fans would love nothing more than to experience the schadenfreude of watching the Lightning jettison Steven Stamkos for a younger model and then have Guentzel struggle to fill the former captain's skates.

Unfortunately for them, Guentzel has made a career of meshing with elite offensive talent, first with Sidney Crosby in Pittsburgh and then briefly with Sebastian Aho in Carolina, where Guentzel had 25 points in 17 games after the 2024 trade deadline.

He's slotting in with two of the best offensive players in the world in Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov, the latter of whom became the fifth player in NHL history to have 100 assists in a season, in 2023-24. While there's no replacing the years of familiarity those two had with Stamkos, it's hard to imagine a malleable talent like Guentzel not meshing with the Lightning stars to form perhaps the most explosive line in the NHL.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Mitch Marner re-signs

Watching the Toronto media cover the Maple Leafs from afar is like watching a predatory animal in captivity. Half the time you're in awe of an unending ferocity when there's fresh meat tossed their way; the rest of the time is spent observing subtle shifts in behavior that signal that conditions have changed.

To wit: Stories about potential trade destinations for Marner, their star winger -- in the last year of his contract, possessing a full no-movement clause -- have given way to stories about how he's willing to negotiate a contract extension during the season, and whether it's in Toronto's best interests to do so. Marner's been unwavering in wanting to remain with the Maple Leafs. He has also been saddled with every playoff failure that's happened during his tenure.

His teammates love him. His team is probably afraid they'll spend the next few years of Auston Matthews' contract looking for another player like Marner. Mitch Marner, Leaf for life. Nature finds a way.

Metropolitan Division

Carolina Hurricanes

Canes miss the playoffs

The Hurricanes couldn't retain the services of Jake Guentzel, Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei or Teuvo Teravainen during the offseason. They have other question marks, too, like whether Jesperi Kotkaniemi can hold down second-line center in their lineup. But they still have a dynamic top line; two capable goaltenders in Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov; and a sturdy system that has produced results for coach Rod Brind'Amour in his previous six seasons with the Hurricanes.

Brind'Amour has coached the Canes to the playoffs in each of those six seasons. They've played to a 100-point pace in each of the past four seasons. The notion that they'd miss the playoffs is, admittedly, difficult to grok. But this feels like a transition year for the Hurricanes. They lost a lot of talent. They're waiting on the next wave of players like defensemen Alexander Nikishin and Scott Morrow and forwards such as Bradly Nadeau. It's going to be a brief step back before a leap forward under new GM Eric Tulsky.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Adam Fantilli has his breakout year

The No. 3 pick in 2023 had the kind of season one expects from a 19-year-old in the NHL: OK offensive stats (27 points in 49 games) offset by being a defensive liability on a terrible team. The best news for Fantilli this offseason was the arrival of Sean Monahan as a free agent -- not only as a mentor at center, but as someone who can allow Fantilli to face friendlier defensive matchups.

Fantilli is projected for 54 points in an 82-game campaign. I think he eclipses that with a bump in power-play points, where he had just one goal and two assists last season.

New Jersey Devils

New Jersey wins the Eastern Conference

If it was the goaltending, that's been addressed with Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen. If it was the lack of stability on defense, that's been addressed with Brett Pesce, Brenden Dillon and a healthy Dougie Hamilton. If it was the role players, that's been addressed with Stefan Noesen, Paul Cotter and old friend Tomas Tatar. If it was the coaching, that was addressed with Sheldon Keefe being hired to bring defensive responsibility and general accountability back to the Devils' roster.

Which is to say that GM Tom Fitzgerald has plugged every leak and built a team that looks like championship material on paper, as long as key players stay healthy and they pass the chemistry test.

If they don't make the playoffs, the Devils are the league's biggest disaster for two years running. If they do, they have the talent to go all the way.

New York Islanders

Mathew Barzal sets a new career scoring mark

The Islanders star finally got his offense back on track last season with 80 points in 80 games, his first point-per-game campaign since his 85 points in 82 games back in 2017-18, when he won the Calder

Trophy. New York was an improved offensive team under coach Patrick Roy after he replaced Lane Lambert.

If Barzal suits up with Bo Horvat and Anthony Duclair as his linemates, that might be the most talented group with whom he has ever skated. If he plays 80 games, I think he establishes a new career best in goals and points.

New York Rangers

Igor Shesterkin gets a new deal

Everything being said about the contract talks between the Rangers and their star goaltender is not all that encouraging for a resolution. Shesterkin's camp reportedly wants upwards of \$12 million in average annual value. The Rangers would rather that settle down to around the \$10.5 million AAV that Carey Price had on his then-blockbuster contract, signed back in 2017. There have been reports of an opening night "deadline" or else Shesterkin won't engage in talks until after the season. GM Chris Drury probably isn't fazed by that.

All of this has led to some preseason drama regarding the Rangers and their franchise goaltender. Honestly, Shesterkin has more to lose if this thing lingers into the regular season. A great season reinforces his already astronomical asking price, but doesn't likely raise it. An average season only brings it down. The two should find common ground soon, to the tune of somewhere around \$11 million AAV if we had to guesstimate.

Philadelphia Flyers

Jamie Drysdale stays healthy, breaks out

Drysdale, the 22-year-old defenseman the Flyers acquired from the Ducks in the Cutter Gauthier trade, has had only one really impactful season in the NHL: 2021-22, when he played 81 games and amassed 32 points.

By all accounts, he's come into Flyers camp in great shape. Drysdale is expected to play alongside defensive defenseman Nick Seeler, who was a great complement to Sean Walker last season, and will do the same for Drysdale. If he's healthy, Drysdale sets new career bests in goals and points while threatening Travis Sanheim for the team scoring lead for defensemen.

Again, that's if he's healthy, which has always been the catch with Drysdale.

Pittsburgh Penguins

The power play finishes in the top 10

Despite having elite, Hall of Fame-level offensive talent, the Penguins' power play hasn't always clicked. From 2019-20 to 2022-23, it ranked 13th overall at a 21.2% conversion rate. But last season was a disaster for the Penguins' power play, converting at 15.3% to rank 30th in the NHL despite having Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang, Erik Karlsson and Jake Guentzel for most of the season.

Enter David Quinn. The former head coach of the Rangers and Sharks -- and Penguins coach Mike Sullivan's friend and doppelgänger -- will coach the Pittsburgh defense and its power play. He brings a fresh set of eyes and new ideas to a unit that needed them. He also coached Karlsson to that 101-point season in 2022-23, and the Penguins are obviously hoping this reunion yields some better results for the star defenseman than last season did.

Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin passes Wayne Gretzky

My colleague John Buccigross was famously the first true believer that Alex Ovechkin could one day eclipse Wayne Gretzky's career goals record of 894, making that call back in 2010. He even mapped out what Ovechkin's production would need to realistically be over the next 15 seasons in order to shatter the mark. He had Ovechkin down for 32 goals last season. The Capitals star scored 31.

According to Bucci-domus, Ovechkin will score 28 goals this season and break the record in 2025-26. But I'm putting my foot on the accelerator. The Capitals are an improved offense team. Ovechkin shot 11.4% on 272 shots on goal last season -- both untypically low numbers for him.

It's true: He's 39 now and looked like he was skating in oatmeal during the Capitals' brief playoff appearance last season. But he's 42 goals away. The prize is in his eyes. What better way to cap off Washington's 50th anniversary season than having D.C.'s greatest sports icon become the greatest goal scorer of all-time in the record books?

Central Division

Chicago Blackhawks

Seth Jones is traded

The rapidly rising NHL salary cap is going to quickly reform our thoughts on a lot of contracts. Set at \$88 million for the 2024-25 season, it'll clear \$100 million in the next few seasons. When it does, Seth Jones is still going to have that \$9.5 million AAV on his current contract, which runs through 2029-30 with the Blackhawks. But the higher the cap goes, the higher the possibility grows that someone would want to take on that contract for a top-pairing defenseman.

There's no getting around the reputation hit that Jones has taken since he signed a massive contract extension, right as the Blackhawks' dynasty crumbled on and off the ice. In 217 games, he has 25 goals and 119 points, skating to a minus-90 in that span, which was second worst in the NHL.

These were terrible teams by design. Jones wasn't good on them, but he wasn't terrible. His underlying numbers were better than those of his teammates in shot generation and expected goals at 5-on-5. While Jones had his detractors before the trade from Columbus, it's reasonable to ask what his numbers would look like if pulled out of the Chicago abyss.

The NHL isn't populated with 29-year-old defensemen who can skate top-pairing minutes (25:29 per game on average for Jones last season). His contract looks less elephantine with each passing season. This could be the season where Jones gets moved if the right situation presents itself to GM Kyle Davidson, who is not the GM who traded for and signed Jones to that contract.

Funny enough, the general manager who did is now running the Edmonton Oilers, a team that has a much maligned 26-year-old defenseman making \$9.25 million against the cap through 2029-30. Seth Jones-Stan Bowman reunion, when?

Colorado Avalanche

Gabriel Landeskog wins the Masterton Trophy

The Avalanche captain last played on June 26, 2022, when he hoisted the Stanley Cup with his teammates. Knee surgery followed by cartilage transplant surgery have kept him out of the Colorado lineup for two seasons.

Landeskog is working his way back to the team and seems closer than ever to returning. As he said during the summer: "I feel like a hockey player again."

If Landeskog steps back on the ice for the Avs, one assumes the Masterton Trophy for dedication to the game of hockey will be his -- a tribute to the feel-good story of the season.

Dallas Stars

Dallas wins the Western Conference

There has been so much attention paid to the Oilers having lost the Stanley Cup by a whisker, beefing up their roster and preparing for another run at Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl's first championship. But there's another bridesmaid in the Western Conference also primed to get their names etched on the chalice: The Dallas Stars, who have lost in the conference finals in consecutive seasons.

Any team with Jake Oettinger in goal and Miro Heiskanen logging minutes as the No. 1 defenseman has a strong foundation. But the reason I'm a believer in Dallas is that they strike such a formidable balance of offense and defense, physicality and finesse, and experience and youth. This parfait of talent they have -- established veterans, in-their-prime stars and a next wave led by Wyatt Johnston -- might be the sweetest thing in the West. They finally break through to the Cup Final this season.

Minnesota Wild

Jesper Wallstedt takes Filip Gustavsson's job

The Wild have one of the top goaltending prospects in hockey with Jesper Wallstedt, the 21-year-old Swede who was drafted 20th in 2021. He had a three-game cameo in the NHL last season while spending most of his time in AHL Iowa. He'll spend more time among the cornstalks this season, while also shuffling up to the NHL as a third goaltending option behind Marc-Andre Fleury (in his victory lap season) and Filip Gustavsson.

Minnesota explored trading Gustavsson last summer, but nothing materialized. If he's more like the goalie he was last season (.899 save percentage, 20-18-4) than he was in 2022-23 (22-9-7, .931 save percentage), perhaps the Wild look to move him before he earns limited trade protection next summer - opening the door for Wallstedt to earn NHL experience and learn from Fleury on a daily basis.

Nashville Predators

Roman Josi wins the Norris Trophy

Josi was second to Quinn Hughes for the Norris last season, although he finished seven points behind him and five points behind Cale Makar in the scoring race for defensemen. It was the second time in three seasons he finished second after winning the award in 2019-20.

Therein lies the rub: Josi is a previous winner, and the Norris loves a first-time honoree. One could easily see it being "the turn" for Charlie McAvoy or Miro Heiskanen or Evan Bouchard to win his first trophy in 2024-25. But given the way the Predators play and the additions they've made offensively -- Steven Stamkos! -- there's every chance Josi leads all NHL defensemen in scoring and, in turn, secures his second Norris Trophy.

St. Louis Blues

Doug Armstrong wins both offer sheet signings

GM Doug Armstrong caused a stir in the NHL when he tendered offer sheets to Oilers defenseman Philip Broberg and forward Dylan Holloway. Armstrong super-swears this decision had nothing to do with tweaking old Chicago rival Stan Bowman as he settled into his new job in Edmonton.

"That's the furthest thing from the truth. Quite honestly, I'd do it to my mother if she was managing the Oilers," Armstrong told reporters afterward.

Both signings are going to become hits this season. Holloway seems like he's made in a lab for the St. Louis Blues: a speedy forechecker with some hockey sense and some offensive upside. He'll obliterate his career high in points (nine). Broberg hasn't skated more than 14:00 per game on average during three NHL seasons. By the end of his fourth tour in the NHL, one imagines he might supplant Nick Leddy on the team's top pairing with Colton Parayko.

Perhaps this will encourage more general managers to aggressively tender offer sheets to young restricted free agents on cap-strapped teams! But probably not.

Utah Hockey Club

We'll just start calling them the 'Yetis'

The rushed nature of the Coyotes' relocation from Arizona to Salt Lake City led to the NHL's newest team being called "Utah Hockey Club" this season. Smith Entertainment Group held an online vote for the team's permanent name in June. The full branding won't be in place until the 2025-26 season ... but everyone around the NHL assumes it is the Yetis.

Clayton Keller might have slipped up at the NHL/NHLPA Player Media Tour. Utah HC president Chris Armstrong recently spoke about the name being "the popular choice" and having to go through "a complicated process from a legal, trademarking and intellectual property perspective." Which, again, would seem to indicate they're working through sharing a name with other prominent brands. (Maybe that's why I've heard they'll be the "Yetis" instead of "Yeti.")

In any case, fans will have seen enough indicators to just start calling them Yeti(s) by season's end, no matter what the name in the standings says. Now, will they chant it at games?

Winnipeg Jets

Connor Hellebuyck leads the U.S. to 4 Nations Face-Off victory

The 2024-25 NHL season is pausing in February for the 4 Nations Face-Off, in which the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Finland battle it out for hockey supremacy while Leon Draisaitl and David Pastrnak look on and sigh deeply. Hellebuyck is projected by Rachel Doerrie to be the starter for the U.S. national team, despite some other talented netminders on the American depth chart.

The 4 Nations Face-Off is meant to be an appetizer for the main course of the 2026 Winter Olympics. The Americans have been waiting since the Sochi Games to have this generation of players get a crack at a best-on-best tournament. That goes for Hellebuyck, too, who went 9-1-0 in two stints with Team USA at the IIHF world championships.

The U.S. wins the NHL/NHLPA midseason classic thanks to their star goaltender, much to the chagrin of Hellebuyck's fans back in Winnipeg.

Pacific Division

Anaheim Ducks

Cam Fowler is traded now, Trevor Zegras later

Zegras trade rumors became a cottage industry last season, and why not? Rare is the dynamic offensive talent in his early 20s who might be made available. The problem is that Zegras had a remedial offensive season after a protracted contract negotiation during the preseason: 15 points in 31 games, his season interrupted by a broken ankle. GM Pat Verbeek wasn't going to trade Zegras with his value bottomed out, so he's back with the Ducks this season, potentially on a line with Troy Terry and Mason McTavish.

Perhaps the Ducks see enough to keep him as part of the core. Perhaps his stats are inflated enough to entice trade partners to really up their antes. Either way, the guess here is that he's moved in the offseason, with one year left before restricted free agency.

Fowler, on the other hand, has two seasons left on his contract before unrestricted free agency. He makes \$6.5 million against the salary cap and has limited trade protection. Verbeek and the 32-year-old Ducks defensive stalwart have had discussions about his future. Expect him to move, and probably well before the deadline.

Calgary Flames

The front office stubbornly refuses to tank

Every season there's a team that should be all-in on a tank job that plays just well enough to exist in that purgatory between the playoff bubble and the bottom of the division. This season, that team will be the Calgary Flames.

GM Craig Conroy has been peeling off parts of this team in trades and free agency in preparation of a rebuild. They have over \$19 million in cap space because they did little to replace that talent. But they have decent goaltending, even in the absence of Jacob Markstrom, and a roster full of forwards who will compete no matter what the expectations are. Coach Ryan Huska did a good job leading the team through a "transition" season in 2023-24.

There's always a chance Conroy goes scorched earth and continues the talent purge by shipping out players like Mikael Backlund, Blake Coleman and Nazem Kadri to increase their draft lottery odds. But as it stands, the Flames aren't as good as the division's top three, and are clearly better than the bottom two. But that probably doesn't get you James Hagens in the draft.

Edmonton Oilers

Evander Kane gets the LTIR special

Kane underwent abdominal surgery on Sept. 20, which is a bit late in the offseason to be having surgery. The team has said that "recovery from the procedure is expected to take a minimum of five to six months."

Six months would put Kane's return around March or one month before the Stanley Cup playoffs begin. Evander Kane has an AAV of \$5.125 million for a team right up against the cap. Until the CBA is amended, teams are allowed to have a player on long-term injured reserve for Game 82 of the regular season, and then return to their lineup for Game 1 of the playoffs. New Oilers GM Stan Bowman was scrutinized nine years ago for having Patrick Kane go from LTIR to playoff-ready, one of the first cases of this CBA "loophole."

So, in summary: Good luck in your (lengthy, we assume) rehab, Evander Kane.

Los Angeles Kings

Quinton Byfield breaks 70 points

One of the biggest moves of the offseason for the Kings was a positional one: Shifting Byfield from the wing to his natural spot at center, now that Pierre-Luc Dubois is no longer clogging the pipeline.

Byfield had his best season in the NHL in 2023-24 with 20 goals and 55 points, playing in a defensive system that didn't foster all that much creativity. The Kings are apparently not playing the 1-3-1 this season, which is welcome news both systematically and aesthetically. Byfield should be paired up with

winger Kevin Fiala on their second line, likely with Warren Foegele, who hung on Leon Draisaitl's wing in Edmonton.

All of that bodes well for Byfield, who is going to turn last year's jump in production into a giant leap forward for the 6-foot-5 standout.

San Jose Sharks

Macklin Celebrini wins the Calder Trophy

It's not automatic that the No. 1 overall pick in the preceding NHL draft wins rookie of the year, although it might feel that way after the last 20 years when Alex Ovechkin, Patrick Kane, Nathan MacKinnon, Aaron Ekblad, Auston Matthews and most recently Connor Bedard all took home the Calder. Overall, it's happened only 12 times since 1963.

Celebrini will add his name to that list. The charismatic center is going to put up points with the Sharks; and much like Bedard last season with the Blackhawks, he's not going to be burned with too much defensive responsibility on a lousy hockey team. GM Mike Grier also set him up to thrive by signing veteran winger Tyler Toffoli, who is an ideal complement to a burgeoning young offensive talent.

The Sharks are going to be bad, but they'll be fun-bad thanks to Celebrini.

Seattle Kraken

Shane Wright quiets the critics

The 20-year-old Kraken center doesn't need a "breakout season" yet. That's not what the hockey intelligentsia is looking for. What they want to see is some scintilla of "proof of concept" that the methodical development of the fourth pick in 2022 is paying off.

Wright is set up to provide that proof this season. He'll likely play with Jordan Eberle, with whom he clicked in limited NHL time last season. He'll also have Dan Bylsma behind the Kraken bench, who coached Wright to his best pro campaign (47 points in 59 games) at AHL Coachella Valley last season. The rest will be up to Wright.

Vancouver Canucks

Elias Pettersson bounces back big

Last season, the Canucks' star center saw his point production drop from 102 points down to 89 points -- which, it should be said, still made him a better than a point-per-game player for Vancouver. Pettersson had a bit of tendonitis in his knee, a rotating cast of wingers and some jitters about his contract negotiations.

While he's reportedly still dealing with tendonitis, Pettersson signed an eight-year extension in March and appears to have a steady linemate in former Bruins scorer Jake DeBrusk. Petey is primed for a return to form and a monster season for the Canucks.

Vegas Golden Knights

They win at least one playoff round

The Knights sandwiched their Stanley Cup championship between a postseason miss in 2022 and a first-round exit to the Dallas Stars last season. As is tradition for GM Kelly McCrimmon, unfeeling personnel decisions were made after that elimination, as longtime Knights Jonathan Marchessault, Alec Martinez, Chandler Stephenson and William Carrier were left to sign with other teams.

Some have looked at the roster and wondered if it's time to fade the Knights, given how they might have the thinnest collection of wingers among assumed conference contenders. Sorry haters: Vegas will not only make the playoff cut, but win a first-round series.

The Knights will use their strength at center, an impressively deep defense corps and goaltending supported by coach Bruce Cassidy's system to make the playoffs and advance past the first round. Especially if wingers such as Pavel Dorofeyev, who was second in individual expected goals on the Knights at 5-on-5 last season, and Jack Eichel's old Sabres buddy Victor Olofsson pop off on the wings.

Plus, you know the Knights are eventually going to add to the roster with trade deadline shockers facilitated by creative accounting. That's Vegas, baby.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet Insiders rank the NHL's top 50 players: 20-11](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – September 27, 2024

In just two weeks, a new NHL campaign will begin.

The bright lights of hallowed arenas around the league will illuminate the ice. The game's best will take their places, side-by-side on the blue line, as the anthems ring out around them. They'll pause, perhaps taking a moment to reflect on the year to come, that 82-game grind that stands between them and their shot at glory. And then, the drop of the puck, a clash of sticks, skates, bodies, and we're away.

Before that journey begins, we're taking stock of the league's best as they head into this new season. Amid a golden era for the game, full of boundless creativity and untameable skill, we've asked the question: Who are the leaders of this new high-flying normal? Who are the best of the best at this very moment?

We turned to our Sportsnet Insiders for an answer, asking them to rank the top 50 players in the NHL heading into 2024-25.

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

Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all of the Insiders' lists.

With that, here is the next installment of Sportsnet's ranking of the Top 50 Players in the NHL — a look at Nos. 20-11:

There might not be another player in the NHL who will face the same maelstrom of pressure and expectation that awaits Mitch Marner in 2024-25. It's a testament to the tumultuous nature of playing in a fishbowl market like Toronto that the winger finds himself in that spot. Rewind back through the Markham, Ont. product's tenure with the Maple Leafs, and it seems like a Hollywood winner: the young phenom who donned the historic sweater of his boyhood club and turned promise into dominance. After glimpses of brilliance through his first half-decade in Toronto, the past three seasons have seen Marner seemingly graduate to join the league's very best, scoring at a 100-point clip all three years, twice finishing just a stone's throw from that century plateau. Growth came on the other side of the puck too, the 27-year-old collecting Selke Trophy votes in each of the past six seasons, earning an official nomination two years back.

But the third act of his homecoming tale has taken a turn. A near-decade of playoff disappointment has soured the story, the whole affair seemingly reaching a breaking point this summer as questions lingered about how these Maple Leafs move forward. Despite the record of elite regular-season production, despite leading his club in playoff scoring a year ago, an underwhelming 2024 post-season seemed to be the match that lit the debate about whether No. 16 was the odd man out in Toronto, whether it was time for a change. And yet, after it all, the new season approaches and Marner remains, set to play out the final year of his contract with myriad unanswered questions about what happens after that. The only certainty? That all eyes will be on how he performs during what is a pivotal moment in his career.

For a moment, three years ago, Igor Shesterkin seemed flat-out transcendent in the cage. Forget best in the league, that seemed a lock. Amid a 2021-22 campaign that saw him post a franchise-record .935 save percentage — including an absurd run through January and February wherein he pushed that average to .952 — the sky seemed the limit. The year's end brought the first Vezina Trophy of his career, a nomination for the Hart Trophy, and an open runway to take over the throne as the game's top tender. In the two seasons since, the 28-year-old has come back to earth some. The otherworldly save percentage fell to .916, and then .912. The near-historic .935 was bested by Linus Ullmark's .938 the very next year. Still, even with the mild humbling, there's no question Shesterkin remains one of the very best goaltenders in the world.

But the question he and the New York Rangers must find common ground on is whether he truly is the clear-cut top goalie in the NHL, whether he truly is an all-time talent. Because the Rangers' perspective on that question will determine Shesterkin's future with the club — heading into the final season of his current contract, the veteran is expected to become the highest-paid goalie in league history when he eventually puts pen to paper on an extension, eclipsing the \$10.5 million-per-year deal Carey Price signed in 2017. The Rangers faithful will be watching closely to see if a deal can get done before the season begins — regardless, the pressure will be on Shesterkin to prove he's worth the benchmark-setting payday.

The decision to take his big-league career into his own hands couldn't have worked out better for Adam Fox. Enemies may have been made along the way among the Calgary Flames and Carolina Hurricanes faithful, who surely still lament what could've been. But five years after the Harvard product outwaited the Flames and Canes en route to signing with his boyhood club, the New York Rangers defenceman has not only established himself as the Blueshirts' top option on the back end, he's put himself in the conversation about the top defenceman in the game, full stop. Year 1 in a Rangers sweater proved the young rearguard was a rare talent, but it was in Year 2 that Fox put the league on notice, amassing 47 points in 55 games as a 22-year-old, winning the Norris Trophy and collecting some Hart votes, too. He's reached even higher in the years since, topping 70 points in each of the past three seasons — only three defencemen in the league have racked up more than the 219 points Fox has in that span.

But while Fox fits the mold of an elite offensive defenceman, the Rangers star is far from a one-trick pony. He can stack points with the best of them, sure, but the 25-year-old has also proven to be an elite defensive presence, his well-rounded game a fitting blueprint for the modern NHL defender. It's no coincidence that the fortunes of his franchise have taken a turn for the better as he's reached that elite form, New York finishing in the top three of the Metropolitan Division in each of the past three seasons — after finishing in the bottom half for the half-decade prior — and mounting two three-round post-season runs. With his Rangers firmly in contender mode, the task ahead for Fox in 2024-25 is simple: continue to raise his own ceiling and pull his club up along with him.

Given the absurd campaigns authored by some of the other elite offensive practitioners around the league last season, you could argue Artemi Panarin's career year flew under the radar. The New York Rangers winger is far from an unknown commodity, and the swell in his numbers comes as the league as a whole sees an offensive uptick, still, here's some context for the 2023-24 season Panarin put together: Rewind back through the list of all-time scorers who've pulled on a Rangers sweater, the Gretzkys, the Messiers, the Jagrs — only one player, in one season, bested the 49 goals and 120 points Panarin amassed last season (Jagr, in 2005-06, by only a handful). Here's some more: In the past two decades of NHL hockey, Panarin's 120-point total has only been bested nine times, by anyone. The 32-year-old is a worthy torchbearer for this era of NHL hockey as a whole, all poise and dynamism and boundless creativity with the puck. If there were knocks on just how far that could take him, or his club, he

answered most of them last season, with a near-MVP calibre effort and a New York-bound Presidents' Trophy.

That said, if there's a final piece of the puzzle still to fit into place, it's in the post-season. After all but disappearing in the playoffs two years ago — managing only a pair of assists as New York fell in a seven-game first-round upset to the rival New Jersey Devils — Panarin followed up his sterling 2023-24 with a near-point-per-game clip in his most recent post-season, helping push the Rangers back to the third round. But the expectations for a club housing as much talent as the Rangers are greater than a Conference Final appearance. It's banner-hanging time for Panarin's club, and the winger finding a way to dominate in the playoffs at the level he does in the regular season will be a key brick in the path that takes them there.

Kirill Kaprizov has been box-office gold in Minnesota since he was first dropped into the heart of the Wild's lineup. A near point-per-game rookie year put the league's best on notice that he was knocking on the door. But it was the 47-goal, 108-point follow-up as a sophomore that all but kicked it down. While injuries have held him back some over the past two campaigns, the 27-year-old's continued to be money when he's in the lineup, racking up 86 goals and 171 points through 142 games over the past two years. It's where those digits fit in the context of his career that hint at Kaprizov's true potential for greatness, though. Squarely in his prime, the dynamic winger is only four years into his big-league career and already rolling over the opposition — or, more accurately, cutting through them like a hot knife through butter.

Over the past three seasons — 40-goal efforts, all — Kaprizov's amassed the sixth-most goals of anyone in the game, and the 12th-most points. It's not just the fact of what Kaprizov is doing in the league, it's that there was no acclimation required. No seasoning, no adjusting, no getting the lay of the land. He arrived as a fully formed offensive machine, and each additional year he's had in the league has been less a matter of upgrading and more a matter of continuing to unleash his will upon the opposition. The next step is simply getting enough injury luck to be able to do it for all 82 games, and enough playoff games to make some real noise.

Few NHL careers feel as linear as Matthew Tkachuk's, as straightforward a progression. From the moment Tkachuk arrived on the hockey world's radar, he's been a showman, ever aware of the cameras and the lights and the adoring fans feeding off every bit of on-ice drama. In the beginning, it seemed like that might be what Tkachuk was, a talented complementary piece, who could elbow and nudge his way to the centre of the spotlight. But then came that growth, and soon, the production: a 20-goal season, then 30, then 40 — and then it just got silly, Tkachuk offering up a 100-point outburst that flipped the script entirely. It was a nightmare proposition for Panthers' opponents: How do you handle someone who excels at the game's dark arts — who can needle you, get under your skin, goad you into an ill-timed trip to the box — and can also hang a highlight-reel, between-the-legs game-winner on you while you're in there?

The young Panthers leader has become a unicorn in the league, able to thrive in any type of game, against any type of opponent, excelling at seemingly everything. There was a time when questions lingered about how far the young winger's antagonistic approach could take him, when veteran teammates had to pull him aside and talk him down. Since moving to South Florida, Tkachuk's silenced the naysayers, bending the game to his will instead — Year 1 as a Panther brought a Hart Trophy nomination and a trip to the Stanley Cup Final; Year 2 saw the 26-year-old go out and hang a championship banner. Heading into Year 3 in Florida, what else could possibly be asked of him? Perhaps simply to keep that career trajectory pointing upwards.

The first half-decade of Jack Hughes's big-league career has been a painful one. Through five seasons in New Jersey, the 2019 No. 1 pick has seen his NHL tenure run on twin tracks. On one side, the growing momentum of his offensive brilliance, unleashed with more regularity each year. On the other, the stop-and-start frustration of trying to navigate the league's physicality as a somewhat-undersized talent, Hughes's career already dotted with ligament sprains, shoulder injuries, and all manner of other ailments that have held him out of the lineup. What has been clear, though, is that when No. 86 does suit up, get the puck on his stick, and start heading downhill, he can create magic like few in the sport. Off the rush, Hughes is a dizzying presence, bobbing and weaving and whipping pucks on net with deadly precision.

To this point, he's only had one campaign in which he's been able to show the full weight of that potential — and he made good on that opportunity, coming up with 43 goals and 99 points to announce his arrival on the big stage. The next year, though, it was more time on the shelf, 20 games lost to injury, his Devils sliding back down the standings without him to lead the charge. Still, even amid the injury trouble, the growing pains, the rollercoaster of a Devils squad that vacillates between rebuilding and contending, Hughes has produced at a point-per-game clip in each of the past three seasons. Just 23 years old, he's yet to even reach his prime. All he needs is a hefty run of games, some luck on the injury front, and the American pivot will have all he needs to make the climb to the game's highest echelon.

It was as if Roman Josi granted the game's best defenders permission, as if he opened a door to prolific scoring from the back end that had long been boarded up. In the 20 years before the 2021-22 season, no defenceman in the NHL had topped 90 points — not since the days of Ray Bourque, Phil Housley, and Brian Leetch had blue-liners stacked totals quite that high. Then came Josi, an unlikely throwback at 31 years old, obliterating his career-best with a 96-point campaign that lit the league on fire. The next year, there was Erik Karlsson topping 100; the year after that, it was Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar joining in. While Josi may not be long for the sport's highest level at 34 years old, he has found himself in a late-career renaissance as one of the best blue-line scorers in the game. After collecting the only Norris Trophy of his career in 2020, the past three years have seen the Swiss standout earn two more nominations while racking up the second-most goals and second-most points of any NHL defender.

But the context of Josi's performance is crucial. The 13-year vet has roughly a decade of additional wear on his body compared to the Hugheses and Makars and Foxes. And while his Predators have steadily improved, and have talent up front, Josi's breakout came without the type of help his counterparts had in Vancouver, Denver, or Manhattan. For Josi, it was less facilitating greatness and more embodying it, putting the Predators on his back and willing them forward. Now, with some marquee additions joining the fray in 2024-25, he'll get his chance to show his best with a deeper supporting cast.

Brayden Point is the draft-day dream, the best-case scenario. He's what every general manager in the league hopes they'll stumble upon when they take a flyer on a plucky late-round talent sitting just beyond the rest of the hockey world's radar. Back in 2014, that's exactly where the Calgary product found himself — an undersized WHL pivot, tabbed 79th overall, who seemed far from a sure thing. Then he arrived in the NHL. By Year 2 in Tampa Bay, Point was already earning Selke votes. By Year 3, it was Hart votes, a 22-year-old Point racking up 41 goals and 92 points for the Lightning — eclipsing any total he ever put up for WHL Moose Jaw. But fast-forward half a decade and that quick ascent seems no surprise, because if there's one foundational quality about No. 21, it's his ability to thrive when the stakes are highest, to raise his game when the lights are brightest. For proof, you need look no further than the 28-year-old's two Stanley Cup rings, won in back-to-back campaigns with the Bolts — with Point pacing the league in playoff goal-scoring both years. In the regular season, he's no less reliable when a win is on the line — since he debuted in the NHL eight years ago, Point's amassed the fourth-

most game-winning goals of anyone in the league. He's fresh off leading the league in that regard, with 12 game-winners in 2023-24.

It's the balance in his skillset that allows him to continue coming up clutch — the explosive skating, the crafty hands, and enough on-ice genius to stitch it all together. And yet, somehow, he's only just now coming into his best run of form. Fresh off back-to-back seasons of 90 points and 40-50 goals, the only NHLers who've fluttered the twine more than Point over the past two seasons are Auston Matthews and David Pastrnak. The Bolts standout has had help, surely, but make no mistake: There is no dynastic run from the Lightning without Brayden Point. Among a cast of all-stars who often shine brighter, No. 21 is the quiet engine pulling the whole thing forward.

Perhaps now, with a Stanley Cup ring on his finger, we can finally rate Aleksander Barkov appropriately. The game's longest-serving Most Underrated Player has finally been pushed into the spotlight by a two-year run of post-season magic. But even before the Panthers got there, even before the squad around Barkov steadily improved and turned into an Eastern Conference juggernaut, the Finnish standout has been the picture of consistency in South Florida. A two-time Selke Trophy winner — and the reigning two-way king after claiming the 2024 title — Barkov has earned votes for the award every year since his rookie season, a full decade of out-thinking the greatest minds in the game, of foregoing stacking points on the board in pursuit of keeping his opponents off it. What sets Barkov apart from the rest of the Selke greats, though, is that it truly is a choice.

The Panthers captain didn't lean into his two-way game because it was the route that allowed him to have the greatest impact at the NHL level — watch him wire a spinning backhand into the top corner from the slot, or flip pucks to himself over opposing twigs, or shrug off defenders as he cuts in close, freezing 'tenders with a stutter-step at the netfront, and it all comes into perspective. If he so chooses, Barkov has the hands, the size, the shot, and the playmaking savvy to be one of the most prolific scorers in the game. He showcased as much once, midway through his career, when he racked up 96 points as a 23-year-old, presumably just to show he could. But Barkov doesn't need the glory. He just needs to win. And after the run he and his teammates have been on of late, it's hard to argue with his logic. Now, after a pair of trips to the Cup Final, and one banner hung, the only question is how many more he can get.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet Insiders rank the NHL's top 50 players: 30-21](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – September 27, 2024

In a league where success must be untangled from a chaotic whirlwind of sticks, skates, and bodies flying around the sheet at breakneck speed, how do you parse the historic from the great, the great from the merely very good? How does an out-and-out elite centreman stack up against a perennial Norris Trophy-calibre blue-liner or a steady, smothering netminder?

Any attempt at picking out the leaders spurring the NHL's current era forward must first navigate these questions. That is the task we put to our Sportsnet Insiders, asking them to rank the top 50 players in the NHL at this moment. Not the best forwards or the best defenders, not the best offensive-minded phenoms or the best shutdown talents, but the best — full stop.

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

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

Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all of the Insiders' lists.

With that, here is the next installment of Sportsnet's ranking of the Top 50 Players in the NHL — a look at Nos. 30-21:

The youngest member of a big-league family that's already produced two of the greatest American NHLers in history, Brady Tkachuk is hunting for the type of legacy his father and brother have already authored. But the younger Tkachuk is a different animal than his Cup-winning sibling. The Ottawa Senators captain has bulldozed through three straight career years in the nation's capital — reaching a personal-best 83 points two seasons ago and netting a career-high 37 goals last season — but that production didn't come from the type of silky-smooth finessing brother Matthew has leaned on. It came through sheer force of will, through a relentless determination to turn himself into an elite scorer in the big leagues — and a willingness to square off against anyone who stands in his way. But now that he's there, the pressure doesn't figure to let up. Entering 2024-25 with an improved squad around him and a new coach behind the bench, the onus will be on the 25-year-old captain to lead the young Sens to a bit of long-awaited progress.

Filip Forsberg's ability to make magic with the puck on his stick has never been in doubt. From the jump, the talented Swede has been perennial highlight-reel material, capable of steady production for Predators squads that were starving for dynamic skill like his. But over the past three seasons, he's taken his game to a level of consistent dominance few thought it could reach. The breakout came in 2021-22, when Forsberg collected 42 goals and 84 points through 69 games. After concussion issues cut short his follow-up attempt the next year, the 30-year-old got back on track last season and once again delivered a gem of an offensive effort, amassing career bests of 48 goals (a top-10 finish, league-wide) and 94 points (a top-15 finish). But it's how he lifted those totals that tells the true story of Forsberg's ascent. Of his 48 tallies, 35 came at even-strength, the fifth-most across the league. Eleven of them were game-winners, second-most in the league, and three of those winners clinched games in overtime, where Forsberg tied for the league lead in goals. Simply put, he was a force for Nashville — and that was before

the club added the star duo of Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, who are sure to help raise Forsberg's level even higher in 2024-25.

Outside of the generational century scorers, if you had to construct a centreman to lead your organization, you could do worse than Sebastian Aho as the blueprint. The Carolina Hurricanes leader might not rack up scoring titles and MVP nods, but he brings something undeniably valuable to the table: unwavering consistency. Case in point: While Aho's never won a Rocket Richard Trophy or reached the 40-goal plateau in his eight NHL seasons, he's amassed the ninth-most goals of anyone in the game in that span, sitting level with Sidney Crosby. Make no mistake, the Finnish standout can put up numbers and make defenders look silly, but that isn't the focal point of his game. Aho can give you 35 goals and 80 points, but he can log the hard minutes, too, lining up against the best the opposition has to offer. He's first out for the Canes' power play, but he's no less deadly on the penalty kill, his 17 career short-handed goals ranking as the most league-wide since he debuted. It's that consistency that earned Aho a weighty eight-year, \$78-million extension that kicks in this year. And it's that extension that ramps up the pressure on the 27-year-old in 2024-25, with questions continuing to linger about whether his ever-contending Canes can finally push their way through the playoff gauntlet to the promised land.

He's been one of the most polarizing players in the NHL for the better part of the past decade, a supremely talented scorer who's waded through seemingly endless criticism of the other aspects of his game for his entire Maple Leafs career. For the first six years of William Nylander's NHL tenure, those arguments held a little more weight, the winger brimming with explosive, dynamic skill, but finishing campaigns with good-but-not-great impact. Three years ago, though, the pieces seemed to fall into place, the Swedish phenom coming up with a career-best 34 goals, a benchmark 80 points. The next year, the ceiling was pushed higher still, Nylander hitting the 40-goal plateau and flirting with 90 points. But it was last season that the 2014 eighth-overall pick truly delivered the type of all-world season his supporters had been waiting for — a 40-goal, 98-point gem that lifted Nylander into a different stratosphere among the game's best (his point total ranking as the 10th-highest in the league), and earned him a monster eight-year, \$92-million extension. That said, it seems the career year only intensifies the pressure on Nylander heading into 2024-25, with all those who've questioned and criticized him now watching closely to see whether he can do it all again with his payday already secured.

A change of scenery has brought nothing but career-best numbers and championship celebrations for Jack Eichel. Injuries threatened to derail the centreman's career all together at the end of his time with the Buffalo Sabres. But after a move to the desert, and half a season to get his feet back under him, the 2015 No. 2 pick managed a near point-per-game regular-season campaign before leading the Golden Knights to a championship, his 26 playoff points pacing the team as they won their young franchise's first title. Through three seasons in the desert, Eichel's yet to play out a full campaign wearing Golden Knights colours, injuries limiting him to fewer than 70 games time and time again. Still, he's produced at above a point-per-game clip over the past two regular seasons (putting up 134 points through 130 games), and has done the same in the post-season (collecting 33 points through 29 playoff tilts). Health will be the greatest potential obstacle in 2024-25 — for him and his club as a whole — but Eichel's proven he can be an impact piece whenever he suits up.

The Vancouver Canucks' star centreman finds himself on the doorstep of a pivotal moment in his career. Two seasons ago, Pettersson was lighting up the league to the tune of 39 goals and 102 points, hitting that century mark for the first time, and finishing among the league's top 10 scorers — all while also finishing seventh in Selke voting for his work on the other end of the sheet. That run of form largely continued through 2023-24, as Pettersson amassed 34 goals and 89 points, and, in between, inked a \$92-million extension. It was cloud nine for Vancouver and its franchise centre, whose sky-high skill

seemed to have matured into something more indomitable over the past two seasons. Then came the playoffs, the stakes as high as they could be, and the expectations even higher after the best Canucks' season in more than a decade. It wound up a 13-game stretch to forget for Pettersson, the 25-year-old held to just one goal and six points as his club bowed out in the second round. He'll get the blank slate of a new season to regain his footing, and a new linemate to work with in Jake DeBrusk, but there's no question the pressure will be piled high on the young Swede's shoulders in 2024-25 given how it all ended in May — especially in Year 1 of that new deal, which comes with an \$11.6-million cap hit that makes Pettersson the fifth-highest-paid player in the league.

Track the trajectory of Victor Hedman growing into his prime against the Lightning growing into a true contender, and you'll understand the impact the 33-year-old defenceman's had in Tampa Bay. While the first half-decade of the Swedish standout's career with the Bolts brought its fair share of memorable moments, it's more recently that Hedman's gone from a promising talent to an all-time one. Six times in the past eight seasons, the towering rearguard's finished as a finalist for the Norris (claiming it once, in 2018). Three times in that span, his Bolts have reached the Stanley Cup Final, and they've won it twice, in 2020 and 2021, Hedman claiming the Conn Smythe for the first of those two titles. There were others who helped guide the club towards its spell as a perennial contender, of course — like the star trio up front, Steven Stamkos, Brayden Point, and Nikita Kucherov — but watch one game of Lightning hockey and it's clear how essential Hedman is to the Bolts' project. The franchise's new captain does it all for Tampa Bay, chipping in offensively (he enters 2024-25 coming off a 76-point effort last season) and stymying opposing scorers with the best of them. With no signs of slowing down — not after logging the eighth-most minutes per night league-wide last season — and with the 'C' now stitched to his chest, expect another ageless campaign from the future Hall of Famer.

After three straight years, it's time to accept that this is truly just what J.T. Miller is — an elite scorer who can hang points on the board with the best in the game. The doubt was fair after Year 1 of his late-career evolution, maybe even Year 2, because if you rewind to Miller's New York days, he seemed like a talented depth forward, a 20-goal, 50-point complementary piece. His run in Tampa Bay didn't change much on that front, but Miller's first campaign under the Rogers Arena lights hinted at a seismic shift, the then-26-year-old potting a career-high 27 goals and 72 points through his first 69 games as a Canuck. Fast forward to 2024-25, and the veteran enters the new season fresh off reaching the 100-point plateau for the first time in his career, while finishing just shy of 40 goals, too. In all, over the past three years, Miller's amassed the 10th-most points of anyone in the game, his 284 just a shade behind the likes of Auston Matthews and David Pastrnak. The arrival of head coach Rick Tocchet has improved his play on the other side of the puck, too, Miller earning Selke votes in each of those three years of elite scoring. There's no question he's been a pivotal part of the Canucks' turnaround, and as they hope to build on their sterling 2023-24 season, all eyes will be on Miller to build on his own, too.

It was a tale of two seasons for Connor Hellebuyck in 2023-24. Between Games 1 and 82, the American netminder looked flat-out dominant, winning the second Vezina Trophy of his career for his regular-season prowess and finishing as high as sixth in Hart Trophy voting for his big-picture impact on the Jets' fortunes. It was just as impressive a campaign for the club as a whole, Winnipeg coming up with their best season in half a decade, finishing as the second-best club in the West. But past Game 82, it all went south. Drawing the high-flying Colorado Avalanche in the first round of the playoffs, Winnipeg found itself absolutely buried, Hellebuyck allowing a staggering 24 goals through five games before his campaign came to an end. It was a crushing conclusion to a resurgent year for the veteran, but perhaps a poignant reminder of the situation Hellebuyck finds himself in — regardless of the regular-season success and the awards, playoff progress for these Jets will come only if Hellebuyck can perform. For now, the calendar has been flipped, the slate wiped clean, and the Jets return to camp to take aim at

another strong season after their 2023-24 bounceback. But the true test of Hellebuyck and his club will come when 82 games are in the books, and the real test begins.

Think of Miro Heiskanen, and you picture the stride. Through six years in Dallas, the talented Finn has reached the highest echelon of NHL defenders, due in no small part to how he floats across the ice, weaving through the opposition like a ghost haunting the sheet. It's carried him to lofty heights already, Heiskanen coming off a pair of seasons that saw him amass 127 total points, proving he's not too far off the Hugheses and the Makars when it comes to driving offence from the blue line. There's no question what's appreciated most by the Stars faithful is the fact that their young back-end gem tends to save his best for the games that matter most — in 85 playoff tilts, Heiskanen's posted 61 points for the Stars, highlighted by a wild, 26-point surge during Dallas's 27-game Cup Final run in 2020. He was no less pivotal in the Stars' most recent three-round playoff march, the young rearguard tying for the team lead in points over that stretch. Since Dallas's run to the Final, there's been a sense these Stars are one piece of brilliance away from taking the next step, from finally trading 'contender' for 'champion.' For Heiskanen, already a leader for the club, and destined to have his name engraved on the Norris Trophy one day, a new season brings with it a new opportunity to prove he can provide that needed spark, that he can be the answer.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet Insiders rank the NHL's top 50 players: 40-31](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – September 27, 2024

The familiar sounds of training camp have ushered in a new NHL campaign — skates carving up ice, pucks ricocheting off glass, the din of voices and sticks and bodies colliding. After an off-season that saw veteran stars swap sweaters, young phenoms prepare for their first run, and Cup finalists shake up their lineups, we've arrived on the cusp of 2024-25.

But before we get there, it's worth stopping to take stock. We're half a decade into an offensive renaissance around the league, the NHL's overall offensive output lifting to levels not seen since the '90s, the game's best outdoing themselves on the scoresheet season after season. So, facing that swell of talent, creativity and production, we've asked the question: Who are the leaders of this new era? Who are the best of the best?

We turned to our Sportsnet Insiders for an answer, asking them to rank the top 50 players in the NHL at this moment — all positions, all skillsets, one list.

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

Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all the Insiders' lists.

With that, here is the next installment of Sportsnet's ranking of the Top 50 Players in the NHL — a look at Nos. 40-31:

After years of promise and potential, the 2023-24 campaign saw Noah Dobson take the next step as a clear-cut No. 1 defender. The career performance lifted the rangy rearguard into rarified air among the game's elite offensive-minded blue-liners — Dobson's 70 points winding up as the seventh-most posted from the back end, just a handful off the likes of Adam Fox and Victor Hedman. There's no question he's thriving as the leader of the Isles' blue line, pacing the defence corps in minutes during his first campaign in the role and earning Norris Trophy consideration for the first time in his career. Now comes 2024-25 and a chance for the 24-year-old to prove he can not only reach those heights, but stay there.

Long the picture of consistent greatness in an NHL cage, Andrei Vasilevskiy is coming off a season of tumult. First came back surgery and a delayed debut. Then came the rollercoaster, signature starts alternating with nights that saw the former Vezina and Conn Smythe winner look uncharacteristically human. In the end, the campaign finished as a largely forgettable one for the 30-year-old. Still, at his best, there's little mystery where Vasilevskiy stands among the game's top netminders. Just look to how his fellow NHLers view him — four years in a row, players around the league have been asked who they would want in net for a single must-win game, and four years in a row, Vasilevskiy's name came up first. With last year's back issues hopefully behind him, the veteran takes aim at recovering that elite form in 2024-25.

It took a half-decade for Nico Hischier, but after years of navigating the expectations that came with his draft position, the Devils captain seemed to find something during a sterling campaign in 2022-23. Career marks on the offensive front, dominant form in the other half of the rink, and by the year's end, the second-most Selke Trophy votes of any two-way practitioner in the league — losing out to the man

who's won the thing more times than anyone else in history. Then came the slide, the Swiss pivot's 2023-24 going much the way it did for the rest of his club's leaders — a disappointing step backwards after that flag-planting breakout. A new season brings a chance to right the ship in New Jersey, with a new coach and an improved roster set to aid in that effort. For Hirschier himself, it brings an opportunity to prove it was the middling effort last year that was the aberration, not the impressive one a year prior.

Entering the league as a much-hyped blue-line phenom, stepping into an organization not short on chaos, Rasmus Dahlin simply put his head down and pushed forward, chipping away at his steady pursuit of the league's upper echelon. Over the past two years, he seems to have arrived there. In that span, among all NHL defenders, Dahlin's collected the fourth-most goals (35), seventh-most points (132), and third-most shots (493), all while logging the second-most minutes per night (25:36). Amid a disappointing Sabres campaign in 2023-24 — the latest in a string of them — Dahlin remained a bright spot, a workhorse for a club whose young core is still finding its footing. Still only 23 years old, the trajectory of his career seems pointed sharply upwards, Dahlin looking every bit the next great blue-liner produced by the Tre Kronor.

At 26, Charlie McAvoy's only played two seasons in a Bruins sweater that didn't end with him earning Norris votes. But the nature of the American rearguard's game has largely kept him out of the conversation about the sport's best blue-liner. He can produce offensively, but he's no world-beater on the scoresheet. He can shut down the opposition, but he's not an out-and-out smothering presence. What separates McAvoy from the rest of the game's best defencemen, though, is the balance he brings between those two roles — and the bruising, unyielding approach he takes to achieving it. A new top-pairing partner in Nikita Zadorov should help him hone his game further in 2024-25, the big-bodied newcomer sure to shoulder some of that physicality, while allowing McAvoy to lean harder into his offensive instincts.

After the trio of elite campaigns he's strung together in Dallas, you could be forgiven for forgetting just how young Jason Robertson is. One year after he finished second in Calder Trophy voting in a solid, pandemic-shortened rookie season, the Stars phenom was already earning Hart Trophy votes, putting up a 40-spot in the goals department as a sophomore. In Year 3, he blossomed into one of the game's brightest young talents, pushing his totals to 46 goals (seventh-most league-wide) and 109 points (sixth-most), while finishing fourth in Hart voting (just behind Connor McDavid, David Pastrnak and Matthew Tkachuk; just ahead of Nathan MacKinnon). The all-world production took a hit in 2023-24 as Dallas brought more balance to its offensive approach. Still, Robertson found other ways to impact the success of one of the West's best squads, growing as a defensive presence and earning Selke votes for the second straight year. He's proven he can excel offensively and hold his own on the other end of the puck — now, the task is fine-tuning the balance between those two, and reasserting himself among the game's very best goal-scorers.

For those wondering what changed in Edmonton last season, what allowed them to finally break through in the post-season and get within one win of hanging a banner at Rogers Place, here's the answer: Evan Bouchard. The gap between the glimpses of potential Bouchard showed through his first few seasons in Edmonton and what he became in 2023-24 is seismic. The 24-year-old flat out dominated from the back end during his fifth year in an Oilers sweater, stacking 18 goals and 82 points over the course of the campaign — both totals more than doubling what he collected a year previous. Crucially, he was no less prolific in the post-season, amassing 32 points over Edmonton's 25-game Cup Final run, second only league-wide to Connor McDavid himself, and the third-most for a blue-liner in the history of the playoffs. Having No. 97 running rampant over the league in front of you certainly helps boost the numbers — and yet, plenty of talented defenders have worn that Oilers crest during McDavid's time in Edmonton and none have managed to match Bouchard. The young blue-liner proved during the club's

2024 run that he could perform on both ends of the sheet, that he could hang when the stakes were highest. Now, he just needs to prove he can do it all again.

The Florida sunshine has done wonders for Sam Reinhart, it seems. Rewind back to the 28-year-old's pre-Panthers days, when he was part of a young Buffalo Sabres core struggling to find its way, and this late-career resurgence seemed far from a sure thing. There was promise, but not dominance. Then came the move south and everything shifted. Year 1 in Panthers threads brought a career season; Year 2, a second run of Selke votes. And in Year 3? He had the campaign of his life — 57 goals (the second-most league-wide), 94 points (12th most league-wide), and, most importantly, a Stanley Cup championship. More impressive still, that flourishing offensive performance didn't come at the expense of the defensive acumen he showed over the two years prior — instead, Reinhart managed an uptick there too, finishing fourth in Selke voting by the year's end. The late-blooming breakout came at a perfect time for the versatile forward, earning him a hefty eight-year, \$69-million extension to remain in Florida long-term. Now comes the pressure to live up to that price tag, and prove it wasn't the sole motivation for the career-best campaign.

Even the most staunch Zach Hyman supporters couldn't have seen it going quite this well when the plucky winger left Toronto and headed west. A steady, hard-working complementary piece on Auston Matthews' wing during his Maple Leafs years, Hyman has blossomed into something entirely different on McDavid's. After a couple 20-goal efforts out east, the top-line winger has amassed 117 goals over three seasons in Edmonton — highlighted by a career-altering 54 this past season. The grind of the post-season, of a 25-game run to the Final, did little to slow him down, Hyman pacing the league with 16 goals during Edmonton's playoff march. Much has been made of how the 32-year-old's hockey career began, and who he's gotten to line up with during his time in the big leagues. But you don't simply fall into a 50-goal season. Playing with No. 97 is a gift to the numbers, no doubt, but the ability to work off of and alongside that level of on-ice genius is a skill in its own right — one Hyman's shown he has in spades. All eyes will be on the winger to prove he can continue lighting the lamp at that pace. But in truth, the goals were never the foundation of Hyman's game. It's the simple, detailed approach that earned him what he's found in the league so far, and it's that approach that should set him up for success again in 2024-25.

The game's newest generational phenom had no shortage of obstacles thrown in his path during Year 1 as a big-leaguer — injuries sidelining one of the few other game-changers on the roster, off-ice chaos upending the lineup further, injuries of his own holding Bedard off the sheet for a spell, and of course, the hurricane of hype that blew in with him as his career began. But from the start, there was one thing that remained undeniable about the young pivot — his all-world skill with the puck on his stick. Undersized, 18 years old, with a supporting cast that left much to be desired, Bedard still managed 22 goals and 61 points through 68 games in a fine rookie campaign, earning a Calder Trophy for his troubles. More importantly, he answered the biggest question asked of him: whether his game-breaking shot could beat netminders at the highest level. He beat them, and danced around the defenders in front of them, and he's only getting started. With a year of seasoning under his belt, and a noticeably improved forward corps around him — Taylor Hall has returned from injury, while Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen join Chicago's top six — a next-level sophomore effort seems on the horizon for young Bedard.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet Insiders rank the NHL's top 50 players: 50-41](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – September 27, 2024

It's been called a golden era, this age of seemingly limitless skill and dizzying speed the National Hockey League is enjoying.

Records that stood for decades have crumbled. Benchmarks that signified greatness have begun to look commonplace. So, amid this new normal, it must be asked: If today's game is truly pushing the sport to new ground, who's leading the charge?

Who are the kings of the golden era?

We turned to our Sportsnet Insiders for an answer, asking them to rank the top 50 players in the NHL at this moment. If you take the young guns and the vets, the elite scorers and the Selke regulars, the high-flying defenders and the ever-reliable netminders, and stack them all up together, who comes out on top?

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

Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all of the Insiders' lists.

A half-decade into his big-league career, one thing is clear: Tim Stutzle is the talisman the Ottawa Senators have been waiting for. The dynamic pivot enters 2024-25 as the most prolific scorer of his draft class to this point. And only beginning to approach his prime, the 22-year-old has already flirted with greatness, putting the league on notice with a 39-goal, 90-point effort a year ago. A step backwards last season suggests there are still some growing pains to work through, but numbers aside, there's no denying Stutzle has something every organization craves: the ability to make magic out on the ice, to pull fans out of their seats.

Nashville went all-in on Juuse Saros this summer, inking the 29-year-old to a deal that will take him to the cusp of his 40s and choosing the vet over young Yaroslav Askarov — the 2020 11th-overall pick who the Predators shipped to San Jose. You can trace Barry Trotz's decision to a late-season run that pulled the Preds back into the 2024 playoff picture, including a 14-game stretch that saw Saros go 12-0-2 with a .932 save percentage. Now, the standout Finn has a chance to build off that strong finish, while playing behind a noticeably improved squad in 2024-25.

After eight years that saw him go from Sidney Crosby's understudy to the captain's most trusted accomplice to the gem of Pittsburgh's offence, Jake Guentzel has struck out on his own. With a brief spell in Carolina behind him, the 29-year-old will begin a campaign dressed in something other than black-and-gold for the first time in his career. But heading into his first season in Tampa Bay, where he'll don the crest of an Eastern Conference powerhouse for the third time in his career, little figures to change for the 40-goal threat in terms of the calibre of talent around him. He'll have a Steven Stamkos-shaped hole to fill in the offence, but Guentzel has enough high-end hockey sense to give the Bolts what they expect of him.

The arc of Nick Suzuki's career in Montreal has mirrored his club's trajectory as a whole over the past five years — slow and steady progress, incremental growth, pointing towards something promising. The young Habs captain has upped his offensive production each year he's been in the league. But in Year 5, he seemed to truly turn a corner and show some crucial growth, building off his dynamic skill by squaring off with the best opposing clubs have to offer, shutting down All-Stars, and winning the tough minutes out on the sheet — earning some Selke Trophy votes for the first time in his career. A new season brings a new opportunity to raise his level again, and to continue establishing himself among the game's premier two-way talents.

There are two versions of the ideal defenceman. One is the type we see dominating the Norris Trophy debate each year: the high-flying, highlight-reel rovers, who stack points with the best of them. The other is Jacob Slavin. Considered one of the game's most underrated players for so long it started to feel like an inside joke, the veteran rearguard has made his name as one of the all-time shutdown defenders. He can put up points too, but what makes Slavin elite isn't found on the scoresheet — it's in what he keeps off it. The rangy defenceman is a wet blanket for the game's most prolific scorers, spoiling the fun like few others can.

Fresh off what seemed to be a breakthrough moment, Jeremy Swayman sits on the doorstep of what could be the most important campaign of his career. After serving as one half of the game's most dominant netminding tandem for the past few years, Swayman went out and wrestled away the No. 1 role for himself during the post-season. So convincing was the 25-year-old, the B's shipped 2023 Vezina Trophy winner Linus Ullmark off to Ottawa. Now, with the fate of the Bruins' net resting squarely on his shoulders, and a contract dispute dragging on longer than expected, the pressure will be on Boston's unequivocal starter to prove he can lead.

For years, Mathew Barzal has seemed just a few steps from putting it all together — the breakneck speed, the limitless skill — and pushing himself into the league's highest echelon. But plying his trade on a squad built squarely around responsible team defence, the breakout never fully came... until last year, when Patrick Roy arrived in town, turned the dial up to 11, and helped spur Barzal on to his first point-per-game campaign since he was a rookie. With a full season under the guidance of a bench boss intent on unleashing his lead horse in a high-tempo, high-energy system — and with a new offensively gifted linemate to work with — Barzal enters 2024-25 primed for another step towards greatness.

Sergei Bobrovsky finally slayed the dragon. It took a decade-and-a-half of tumult, stretches of brilliance between the pipes dotted with head-scratching blunders, but then came the past two campaigns — twin trips backstopping his Panthers to the Stanley Cup Final. To man the cage en route to a championship is one thing. To do so with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl firing everything they have at you? That's entirely another. There's no question Father Time is going to come calling soon, but for now, the 36-year-old is playing his best hockey in years.

Roope Hintz can only fly under the radar for so long. And after the past few campaigns he's strung together, the talented Finn seems on a collision course with the spotlight. Twice in the past three seasons, Hintz has finished a stone's throw from the 40-goal plateau. A year ago, he proved to be built for the post-season, pacing Dallas with a 24-point, 19-game outburst that truly put his name up in lights. And then came last season, when Hintz planted his flag among the game's best two-way practitioners and earned a respectable collection of Selke votes as a result. Though he seems to be approaching Aleksander Barkov levels of perennial-underrated-status, Hintz heads into 2024-25 squarely in his prime, pushing a dangerous Stars team forward.

Few stars of Brad Marchand's ilk have undergone the type of on-ice transformation the Bruins veteran has over the course of his career — from irksome pugilist to century scorer, from controversy courtier to

veteran captain. After a late-career renaissance that saw a 30-year-old Marchand seemingly reach his final form — an agitator who could stack 100 points between calls from the Department of Player Safety — the past two seasons have seen the longtime Bruin slow down some. Still, his skill remains undeniable, and a 67-point effort at age 35 shows he’s got plenty left to give. Heading into the final season of his current deal, and inching closer to his 40s, the last remaining leader of this Bruins era’s old guard surely has his sights set on hanging another banner before all is said and done.