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November 21, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets end road woes against Boston Bruins: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – November 21, 2024

Instead, the Blue Jackets boarded a postgame flight as a happy bunch after a 5-1 victory over the Boston Bruins on Monday night at TD Garden — where they hadn't won in regulation in eight years (Feb. 22, 2016).

Five Blue Jackets players scored goals, center Sean Monahan paced 10 players on the scoresheet with two assists for a two-point night and goalie Elvis Merzlikins helped steal a victory that ended the Jackets' seven-game road winless streak.

Here are three takeaways:

Elvis Merzlikins shines for Columbus Blue Jackets in Boston

The Blue Jackets hung their goalie out to dry in the first two periods, especially the first, but Merzlikins bailed them out. He finished with 28 saves, allowing only Charlie Coyle's power-play goal, but that doesn't fully depict how sharp Merzlikins was in this performance.

According to Natural Stat Trick's assessment, the Bruins used six power plays to help amass a 35-18 edge in scoring chances and even more impressive 17-8 margin in high-danger chances. During 5-on-5, the numbers were 26-14 in scoring chances, including 13-5 in the most dangerous areas of the ice.

"This is a great building," Merzlikins said. "I love it here. It's nice to be here and play, and they're a good team. Fast. Physical. It's a great win here. You have to be really focused and read the game a lot, because this is a really tough team to play against."

Throughout the game, Merzlikins made difficult key saves to prevent the Bruins from clawing back into the game. He also got help from his team's 21 blocked shots and Boston players missing the net 14 times.

"The chances (the Bruins) were getting in the first period were created by them but enhanced by what we did (turning pucks over)," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "So, 100% (Merzlikins) saved (us) in the first period and allowed us to gather our game."

Mathieu Olivier is on a mission for Columbus Blue Jackets

Mathieu Olivier had an eventful first period.

It included a fight, a short-handed goal and a roughing penalty against his opponent in the fight, Jeffrey Viel, who made his season debut for the Bruins. Olivier's goal moved him into a tie for the team lead with Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko at six apiece, putting the Blue Jackets up 2-0 with a strong carry to the net. How impressed is Evason with a guy who's quickly becoming a two-way power forward?

"Very impressed," he said. "I have been all year, not only (with) his physicality but his ability to lead by example, to do the right things, to get up the ice, to get pucks in deep behind them, and he's probably one of the more vocal guys in our locker room. So, with the people that we have out and leadership that is needed, he has stepped up in that role for sure."

Nov 18, 2024; Boston, Massachusetts, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Justin Danforth (17) celebrates his short-handed goal with his teammates during the third period against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden.

Columbus Blue Jackets get 'PK practice and two short-handed goals against Boston Bruins

If you're going to take 22 minutes in penalties on eight infractions during a game, like the Blue Jackets did in Boston, you'd better have a hot goalie and solid-to-strong penalty kill units. The Blue Jackets had both against the Bruins, and it paid off.

Olivier's goal was one of two short-handed tallies for the Jackets, who also got a key insurance goal from Justin Danforth while short-handed in the third period. Cole Sillinger stole the puck at the Bruins' blue line, skated it up ice into a 2-on-1 rush, spotted Danforth charging to the net and sent a perfect feed for the goal.

The Blue Jackets went 5-for-6 killing penalties against the Bruins, which raised their rate of success to 80.7% for the season. That ranks 14th among NHL teams.

[BlueJackets.com / Five years later, anthem singer excited to return to Nationwide Arena](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – November 21, 2024

A lot can happen in five years. Just ask Molly Oldham.

When she first took to the Nationwide Arena ice on Nov. 16, 2019, she was an 18-year-old whose life had been put temporarily on hold.

Diagnosed with cancer – anaplastic ependymoma, when a tennis-ball sized tumor was found on her brain after months of headaches and other symptoms – just three months earlier, Oldham brought down the house before that night’s Blue Jackets Hockey Fights Cancer game with a beautiful version of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Nearly half a decade to the day, she’ll return to perform the anthem again tomorrow night for this year’s Hockey Fights Cancer game, joining fellow cancer survivors and CBJ anthem performers Lila Urbanic and Aria Tarantine.

In the meantime, Oldham has experienced plenty of joy and pain – including a few health setbacks – but she’s more than happy to report things are now good from a health perspective. Still with a love of performing in her heart, she’s pursuing a career as an entertainer, but most importantly, Oldham has come out on the good side of a long cancer journey.

“It’s great,” she said. “My last two semesters of college and ever since has been really great. I have no seizures, which is really awesome, and my headaches have been pretty well managed. I’ve been feeling great, and it’s an exciting part of life because now I’m not constantly worried about it, which is something I haven’t experienced since before I got sick.”

And in many ways, the return to Nationwide Arena will symbolize just how full circle her life has come. Looking back at her original performance five years ago, it’s a great memory shaded by the reminder of some of the toughest parts of her journey, when she was still in recovery mode and wasn’t sure what the future would hold.

“With how sick I was, it was just an exciting thing to make cancer better,” she said. “It was an exciting experience that made having cancer a little bit more manageable. It was like, ‘OK, here I am. I’m fighting this battle, but I’m also doing something amazing with it. I’m not just sitting my room and watching the game on TV. I’m part of something now.’”

“Cancer really gave me that opportunity, and the Blue Jackets gave me that opportunity, and it was phenomenal.”

It will also be a return to a sport that in the ensuing time has given her so much. She grew up a hockey fan in Bath Township, Ohio, in the Akron area, attending Cleveland Monsters games and enjoying the sport. But her appearance at Nationwide Arena took her love of hockey to another level.

Through her performance at that Blue Jackets game, Oldham met then-CBJ assistant general manager Bill Zito, who would go on to become the GM of the Florida Panthers in September 2020. The two stayed in touch, and Zito invited her to continue to perform the National Anthem at Panthers games, something that became much easier when she moved to Florida after college.

And this summer, when the Panthers won the Stanley Cup, Oldham had the opportunity to see the Cup.

“I met Bill just on a whim, and then when he went to Florida, he was just like, ‘Hey, do you want to come sing for us?’” Oldham said. “I was like, ‘Heck yeah I do!’ I stayed in really good touch with Bill, and then I got to meet the Stanley Cup two different times.

“Singing for the Blue Jackets really started my love of hockey, so that was really cool. It’s just such an amazing experience to see the Stanley Cup in person. I’ve been such a fan for five years, which is not a lot compared to most people, but it changed my life. I watched hockey when I was in the hospital, so it was like a big celebration. It was really cool.”

Oldham also performed the anthem at a Cleveland Browns game earlier this year, and she said it’s probably the song she’s done the most in a public setting. It’s always an honor to do so, she said, but her dreams are much bigger.

While she’s lived in Florida since graduation from UNC Greensboro, she plans to soon move to New York to pursue a career in performing, whether it be with a touring group or on Broadway. She also loves acting, so anything that will provide her the opportunity to perform on stage is what she’s after.

“I definitely get a lot of adrenaline from it,” she said. “It’s always exciting, and I think the thing that makes me realize that I do want to do performing is that every time I get up there, it’s always exciting. It never feels like a drag. It always feels like something new. I’m sure it’s how hockey games feel for players.

“It’s like, ‘Wow, this is my life,’ and I get to get up and do something I love. Whether I’m performing the National Anthem, going to auditions, performing, singing, acting – whatever I’m doing, I’m like, ‘I have so much fun doing this.’”

While sometimes taking part in ceremonies like these can bring back memories of the toughest time in her life, Oldham also believes it’s an honor given the difficult circumstances faced by those fighting cancer. She’s also looking forward to meeting Urbanic and Tarantine because of the immediate bond that many share after going through such similar cancer fights.

“It’s just like an instant understanding with people,” Oldham said. “When you meet someone who has been through cancer and their own fight in their own different ways, it’s like an instant connection – ‘I understand the things that you’ve gone through in your own way. Obviously we don’t have the same experiences, but I understand a lot of the little things and different circumstances you’ve gone through that other people don’t really think about.’”

[BlueJackets.com / Recapping a busy day for the Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – November 21, 2024

Before Kent Johnson could return to the Blue Jackets lineup, the CBJ forward had to pass a major test. The Jared Boll test.

Johnson – who has been out since Oct. 17 with an upper body injury – returned to practice with the Blue Jackets last week, but he was held out of contact drills at first. It wasn't until Saturday in Montreal that Johnson fully tested his injury with the help of the CBJ enforcer turned assistant coach.

“Boller was running me with the pad there in Montreal,” Johnson said with a laugh. “I got a lot of contact there, so it feels really ready.”

Johnson still has to be activated from injured reserve, but he skated on the team's second line with Adam Fantilli and James van Riemsdyk on Wednesday, and head coach Dean Evason said the plan is for Johnson to return for Thursday night's game vs. Tampa Bay.

Considering that Johnson had shoulder surgery after an injury last February – and how bad things looked when he first hit the ice after tripping over teammate van Riemsdyk vs. Buffalo just over a month ago – a return after four weeks of action feels like a best-case scenario for Johnson.

“Right when it happened, I was just looking at the dates and the games, and I had some games, I was like, ‘Oh, this one maybe,’” he said of a potential return. “I think it's been quicker than that. It's been a good recovery. A lot of credit to the trainers and strength staff here, everyone helping me out and getting me right.”

The Blue Jackets will be happy to have Johnson back, as the No. 5 overall pick in the 2021 draft was showing his considerable offensive skills in the early going. The 21-year-old's start included two goals and three assists in the four games he played, and he had at least a point in every game as well as goals in each of the first two contests.

More than that, he was becoming a key part of the CBJ power play and penalty kill units, as Evason was happy with Johnson's all-around game.

“I was not only impressed with his skill set but his attention to detail – his penalty kill and his defensive game, his ability to carry the puck through the neutral zone,” Evason said. “In the short time that I've seen him, he's a well-rounded player that plays in all three zones extremely well. He's a rink rat – just loves the game.

“He's going to provide us with a good boost with his energy level as well.”

After playing just four games in the past nine months, Johnson said he's excited to return to the ice and get the reward of playing after all the work off the ice that he's put in.

“It makes it even more fun, more perspective and whatnot,” he said. “Even looking at the games played, we still have so many games. I feel pretty lucky. A lot of my friends are in college and they only play like 35 (games). I don't really want to be too mad about missing four weeks. I have a lot of games, a lot of hockey, hopefully, so just try to stay healthy now and keep going.”

Jiricek, Pyyhtia Sent to Cleveland

With Johnson likely coming off the injured list, the Blue Jackets had to open a roster spot for his return, but they opened up two Thursday by sending forward Mikael Pyyhtia and defenseman David Jiricek to AHL Cleveland.

The move involving Jiricek drew more attention, as the sixth overall pick in the 2022 draft and one of the team's top prospects had played just six of the first 18 games, posting one assist and averaging 11:12 of ice time. In his last three games, Jiricek played less than 10 minutes, and the Blue Jackets got to the point where they felt the talented 20-year-old blueliner needed ice time.

"I watched last year when I got the opportunity to come here in the playoffs in Cleveland, and I thought he played very, very well, not just defensively but offensively," general manager Don Waddell said. "For whatever reason, it hasn't gone as smoothly, the transition to the NHL, this year. He's played some games. I know he hasn't played the minutes that he wants to play.

"But his confidence, we can tell just watching him the other night, he's worried about making that mistake. He's 20 years old. He's gonna be 21 years old at the end of the month. He's very young. Playing in the NHL is a tough position to start, especially for a young player. We just made the decision we thought it was best to let him go play games in Cleveland, and we'll see how it goes."

There's no doubt Jiricek is a talented player, especially on the offensive end, where his booming shot and instincts with the puck on his stick can take over. He's used to playing an aggressive game defensively, using his size to shut down rushes before they start and hound opposing players, but so far this season he's appeared caught in between wanting to do that and being afraid of getting burned.

Evason said Blue Jackets coaches have been meeting with Jiricek to go over his game on a regular basis, and Jiricek has been receptive to the team's approach.

"The thing with Jiri is when the puck is on his tape, he's fantastic," Evason said. "When the puck is not on his tape, he needs to get some more detail in his game. And he understood it. He's worked his ass off when he hasn't played. He's been committed to trying to do the things that we're asking him to do to be a really great pro in this game.

"He's got an offensive upside that is elite, but to play defense in the National Hockey League, you have to defend, and he is learning. He's committed to doing it. So our belief is when he gets (to Cleveland), he's going to do it ... and he's going to develop to the point where he gets his butt back here and he helps us win."

The reality of the situation is there aren't many defensemen Jiricek's age in the NHL, let alone those that play at a high level. According to Hockey-Reference, there are just 14 blueliners who will be 21 or younger as of Feb. 1, 2025, who have played NHL minutes this year, and learning to go up against the best in the world is a process for all of them.

"This is a tough league," Evason said. "It's the best league in the world. The players are so elite. I can't imagine trying to play and have success in the league. It's incredible. And the athletes today – the speed, the strength, the size, it's all elite. So yeah, it's a difficult league to play, and so you need to work at it in order to get good at it, in order to have success."

Ironically, Evason noted the opposite part of the equation is true for Pyyhtia, as the 22-year-old wing has excelled at the defensive side of the game but struggled to find offensive confidence at the NHL level. Pyyhtia has a single goal in 17 games with the blue Jackets this year, and with Johnson coming back, they hope a player who was a scorer in the Finnish Liiga can rediscover some offensive upside in the AHL.

“We’re extremely happy with Tuna and the way that he’s conducted himself and he’s played,” Evason said. “He needs to go just play and hopefully score some goals and feel good about his game offensively because his defensive side is fantastic.”

Lindstrom Has Surgery

The other bit of news from Waddell on Wednesday was that the team’s first-round draft pick this summer, center Cayden Lindstrom, underwent a procedure yesterday on his back.

The No. 4 overall pick in the draft is yet to play a game this season, and Waddell noted that while rehab had gotten Lindstrom to about 90 percent, the surgery will allow him to get to 100 percent.

“He wanted to try to work through it, and the doctors were all good with that,” Waddell said. “The timetable initially wasn’t about right now. It’s about making sure we get this player prepared. He’s going to be an NHL player with us for a long time. We wanted to make sure we did the right things.

“We got to the point that he just couldn’t get to that 100 percent and felt this was necessary to do it.”

Lindstrom had 27 goals and 46 points in 32 games with Medicine Hat of the WHL last year but was knocked out of the lineup with a finger injury at midseason. The back injury followed, and while Lindstrom did return to skate in four playoff games with the Tigers in spring, the Blue Jackets have been cautious with someone who they expect to be a cornerstone of the franchise going forward.

Waddell said the procedure Wednesday was a microdiscectomy, which is used when a disc presses up against a nerve in the back, causing pain and discomfort. It’s a minimally invasive procedure, and Waddell said doctors are confident he’ll return to full health.

“It’s a very short procedure, and everything went well,” Waddell said. “They felt that what they saw is exactly what they thought they would see. His recovery will be back to 100 percent, and hopefully he can play hockey again this season.”

The general manager and president of hockey operations noted that Lindstrom will largely rest for the next 30 days, then continue his rehab in Columbus.

“Knowing what we know and now what is confirmed yesterday, we feel very comfortable that this is just a one-time thing and that there won’t be any long-term effects from it,” Waddell said.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Final Straw in Bruins Firing Jim Montgomery

By Spencer Lazary – November 21, 2024

The Boston Bruins announced yesterday that they have fired their head coach, Jim Montgomery.

The news comes one day after the Columbus Blue Jackets handed the Bruins their third straight loss. The Bruins made a coaching move by relieving Montgomery of his duties and naming Joe Sacco interim head coach.

Montgomery coached the Bruins for 184 games; in that time he had only lost 41 times in regulation. His coaching record was 120-41-23, for a .715 points percentage.

In 2023, Montgomery, Lindy Ruff, and Dave Hakstol were all finalists for the Jack Adams (coach of the year). Since then, they all have been fired.

As for the Blue Jackets, they appeared to be the final straw after a great game against the Bruins. They will hope to carry that momentum forward and try to get another win against the Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday, Nov. 21.

The Hockey News / REPORT: David Jiříček Has Not Requested A Trade; Will Report To Cleveland

By Jason Newland – November 21, 2024

Aaron Portzline of The Athletic has cited sources that say 20-year-old Jackets defenseman David Jiříček has not requested a trade.

Portzline goes on to say, "Waddell is getting trade calls on Jiricek, but has so far resisted all overtures. It's hard for a GM to give up on a young, right-shot defenseman. Those are the types of moves you could spend the rest of your career regretting."

Jiříček has 11 points in 53 career NHL games.

The Czech defenseman has also been loaned to the Cleveland Monsters the club announced today. Jiříček has 57 points in 84 career AHL games.

Forward Mikael Pyyhtiä was also sent to Cleveland today. He had one point in 17 games with Columbus this season. He has 31 points in 67 AHL games.

The sending of Pyyhtiä to Cleveland should mean that Kent Johnson is ready to return to the lineup. He has been skating and traveling with the team and looks to be ready to bring his elite offensive skill back to the CBJ roster.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets are back home on Thursday to face the Tampa Bay Lightning.

[The Hockey News / Blue Jackets' Cayden Lindstrom Has Minor Back Procedure](#)

By Spencer Lazary – November 21, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell confirms to reporters that first-round draft pick Cayden Lindstrom underwent a back procedure.

Waddell said Lindstrom will be resting for a month while he recovers. The hope is that he can still return to playing this season for the Medicine Hat Tigers of the Western Hockey League (WHL).

The Blue Jackets drafted Lindstrom with the fourth pick in the 2024 NHL Draft.

Lindstrom has yet to play a game for the Tigers this season due to his injury. However, last season he had 27 goals, 19 assists for 46 points in 32 games.

The Hockey News / Full Rosters For 4 Nations Face-Off To Be Released On December 4th And How It May Affect The Columbus Blue Jackets

By Jason Newland – November 21, 2024

The NHL and NHLPA announced today that the full rosters for the 4 Nations Face-Off will be unveiled on Dec. 4, 2024.

Back in June, the USA released their first six players that will be on the roster. Adam Fox, Quinn Hughes, Charlie McAvoy, Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews, and Matthew Tkachuk were the first six Americans named to the roster.

This tournament is a big deal to the countries involved and there will be lots of players trying to make the teams.

So what does this have to do with the Columbus Blue Jackets? American defenseman Zach Werenski should be one of the last players chosen to make the team. Many experts have tagged Werenski as a player who should make the team.

Werenski has plenty of international experience, including playing in this past summer's World Championships alongside Johnny Gaudreau and Gavin Brindley.

He has a lot of international accolades which include:

- U17 WHC Gold Medal
- U20 WJC All-Star Team
- U20 WJC Best Defenseman
- U20 WJC Best Plus/Minus (+10)
- U20 WJC Bronze Medal
- U20 WJC Most Goals by Defenseman (2)
- U20 WJC Most Points by Defenseman (9)
- U20 WJC Top 3 Player on Team
- World Championship Top 3 Player on Team in 2024.

This season, Werenski is healthy and having a very good year. Through 18 games he has 4 goals and 14 points, which includes a pair of power play goals. He's on pace for around 60 points this season which would be his career-best for points in a season.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets are back home on Thursday to face the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Changes the Blue Jackets Can Make to Shake Up the Roster

By Jonathon Robson – November 21, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had quite the rollercoaster season so far. A strong start in October has quickly turned into a major slide in November, with the Blue Jackets currently sitting three points from the bottom of the league with 16 points. The games recently have been much more in line with what most people expected coming into this season with multiple blowout losses. The tight-checking team that was scoring at a franchise record-breaking rate has dried up and nothing has been particularly positive in their most recent stretch of play.

As is always the question when a team is having bad luck and bad outcomes, what do the Blue Jackets need to do to help get themselves back into their winning ways? The most obvious answer is lineup changes. There are multiple players that may be getting promoted or demoted, as well as a key injured player expected back soon. Here are some moves that could happen to help spark the Blue Jackets.

Kent Johnson Returns

Head coach Dean Evason stated on Monday that [Kent Johnson](#) needed a couple more practices before being cleared for games. Hopefully, that will allow him to return as soon as Thursday's matchup against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Johnson was off to a phenomenal start before being injured in just the fourth game of the season. He has two goals and three assists in those games while looking to have hit a new gear in his play. One area this team has been lacking is players who can carry the puck through traffic and help set the offense up. This need is especially true for the powerplay, which the Blue Jackets currently rank 24th in the NHL at powerplay goal percentage.

He would also be a welcome addition to the second line to help provide more talent around center Adam Fantilli. Fantilli has had a bit of a slow start this season, scoring just three goals and six assists in 18 games. While Fantilli's play has been pretty good on its own, his linemates haven't been able to do much to take the pressure off of him. With Johnson on his line, Fantilli would have a playmaker to help take pressure off of him, as well as potentially set him up for his excellent shot.

David Jiricek Will Be Sent Down

To say it has not been a good season for David Jiricek would be an understatement. He has only played in six games so far, has no goals and one assist, and is averaging 11:12 of time on ice per game. Between being healthy scratched most nights and barely utilized when he is in the lineup, it is glaringly obvious that this coaching staff has no faith in him currently. Evason has stated that everything must be earned, and clearly he doesn't feel like Jiricek has done enough to earn more ice time. He has still been prone to making poor decisions and being out of position. While he certainly isn't alone in some bad turnovers, Jiricek's inability to show enough positives has led him to be the odd man out most nights. By contrast, veteran defenseman Jack Johnson has played in 14 games so far. That's not a good sign for the Blue Jackets' top defensive prospect.

While it has been publicly speculated that general manager [Don Waddell may look to move Jiricek](#), that seems very unlikely at this point. He is still only 20 years old and was the sixth overall pick just three summers ago. His size and ability give him massive upside, and it would be a mistake to move on from him so soon. Defensemen typically take a little longer to develop, so no one should be surprised that he isn't quite ready to take on a full-time NHL role. With the return of Johnson soon, the Blue Jackets will

need to clear a roster spot, and it is hard to imagine that they will continue to keep Jiricek from getting playing time.

Jiricek will most likely be sent to the Cleveland Monsters to play top minutes and continue to work on his game. That seems like the best path for his development at the moment. The only caveat to this is if Jiricek has decided to move on. He voiced his displeasure last season after being sent back down to the Monsters, and many have speculated that he may request a trade instead of reporting to the AHL team. If that happens, it would force Waddell's hand most likely.

Denton Mateychuk Will Be Called Up

This might be more of a stretch on an already crowded blue line, but [Denton Mateychuk's](#) play may force the Blue Jackets to bring him up to the NHL soon. Through 15 games, he has six goals and ten assists, including two overtime game winners from this past weekend. He looked great during the preseason as well, and was probably the hardest cut for the Blue Jackets to make. Waddell has been a vocal proponent of young players playing in the AHL to learn and develop, and since Mateychuk doesn't need waivers to be sent down, it made sense that he would be sent to the Monsters this season. But if Evason really is committed to the idea that [players earn their ice time](#), it is becoming hard to dismiss Mateychuk's phenomenal play so far.

The biggest obstacle right now is that, without an injury, one of the other defensemen would need to clear waivers to be sent down. The Blue Jackets may be hesitant to do that, but given the continued struggles on defense, they may not have a choice. Mateychuk could give the Blue Jackets a boost on the backend, as he has proven both the ability to generate offense and effectively defend in his own end. Multiple players on this roster will most likely be moved before the trade deadline, such as Ivan Provorov. Will the Blue Jackets move him sooner to open up a spot for Mateychuk?

Shake-up Is Needed

Kent Johnson is coming back most likely this week, so that's a guaranteed change to the lineup, most likely at the expense of Jiricek getting sent down. But Mateychuk being called up could also help give this team a needed shake-up to reinvigorate the roster. Waddell has already stated that he doesn't plan on moving future assets to bring in current players right now, so the only lineup changes will have to come from within. Multiple players who have expiring contracts will be moved, but those will most likely be for middling picks and will happen right at the trade deadline. But if Johnson and Mateychuk can provide some added skill and scoring to this team, it might be exactly what the Blue Jackets need to get back on track this season.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' 2013 Draft Failure Was Result of Mismanagement

By William Espy – November 21, 2024

The 2013 NHL Entry Draft was an important one at the time for the Columbus Blue Jackets organization. New general manager Jarmo Kekalainen had just taken over the team alongside a relatively new President of Hockey Operations, John Davidson, who had been with the team since Oct. 2012. Kekalainen was the first European general manager in NHL history, and the duo had three first-round draft picks to make an impact early in their tenure.

Context of the 2013 Draft

The Blue Jackets had quite a few pieces already in place for what seemed to be the next core group of the organization, thanks to the previous management group. Ryan Johansen was the fourth overall pick in 2010, and they hoped he'd be their first-line center of the future. Ryan Murray was the second pick in the 2012 draft, and his teammates believed in his hype so much that he earned the nickname "Norris" around the locker room, as they believed one day he could win the James Norris Memorial Trophy as the top defenseman in the NHL. Although they didn't have a first-round pick in 2011, the Blue Jackets had selected a young forward nicknamed the "Jennerator" from the Oshawa Generals of the Ontario Hockey League in the second round who would later turn into the team's captain, Boone Jenner.

Three of Scott Howson's final moves before getting fired during the 2012-23 season would end up being of major importance for the franchise in the long run. On June 22, 2012, he traded some draft picks to the Philadelphia Flyers in exchange for a young goaltender named Sergei Bobrovsky. Just over a week later, on July 1, he traded defenseman Marc Methot to the Ottawa Senators and brought Nick Foligno to Columbus. Last but not least, he traded Columbus' long-time superstar Rick Nash to the New York Rangers on July 23, bringing in Brandon Dubinsky, Artem Anisimov, Tim Erixon, and a 2013 first-round pick back to the Blue Jackets. The Blue Jackets also received a first-round selection in the 2013 draft during the Jeff Carter trade to the Los Angeles Kings.

Overall, the new management team had quite a few key pieces already in place and just needed to supplement their current roster with some players that would be able to complement those that were already in place. They ended up missing the playoffs during the 2012-13 season but had no luck in the draft lottery. The Kings and Rangers both made the playoffs as well, so the Jackets ended up with the 14th, 19th, and 27th selections in the first round.

With the 14th Overall Pick, the Blue Jackets Selected Alexander Wennberg

Alexander Wennberg was drafted out of Djurgardens in the HockeyAllsvenskan, the second-highest tier of Swedish hockey. During the 2012-13 season, he had a decent showing with 14 goals and 18 assists in 46 games. The following season, Wennberg played in the Swedish Hockey League (SHL) for Frolunda HC, where his development took another step forward. He actually had more goals than assists in his only year in the SHL by a large margin, which undoubtedly sounds incorrect to Blue Jackets fans. Yet, it's the truth. He scored 16 goals and only had five assists through 50 games.

Wennberg made his NHL debut during the 2014-15 season, recording his first point, an assist, against the Buffalo Sabres on Oct. 9, 2014. During that season, head coach Todd Richards had an idea that would be pretty memorable for Blue Jackets fans. He played Wennberg with recent acquisition Scott Hartnell and fellow 2013 draft pick Marko Dano, who we'll talk about in a little while. This line became known as the "Kid Line," with Hartnell being included sarcastically. Although it was an entertaining line

to watch, and the personnel all made sense together, it was a short-lived line combination as it wouldn't return the following season.

During the 2015-16 season, the Blue Jackets lost their first seven games under Richards and decided to go a different direction behind the bench, bringing in the controversial John Tortorella. While Wennberg played some of his best hockey at the NHL level under Tortorella, it did come at a bit of a cost. His new coach often got frustrated with Wennberg's tendency to pass first. While it was frustrating for fans at the time as well, it was a key part of his game, but he kept being prodded to shoot more and more.

Of course, as we discussed earlier, Wennberg had shown some goal-scoring talent in the SHL, so that may be what inspired Tortorella to push him in that direction. During the first season under his new coach, Wennberg doubled his point total in only one more game. The following season, 2016-17, he played even better, notching a career-high in both goals and assists with 13 and 46, respectively. So far, things seemed to be trending in the right direction, but that wouldn't continue to be the case.

During the 2017-18 season, Wennberg's totals took a major step in the wrong direction. He was seemingly playing better defensively, but his offensive totals weren't there, and pressure from the fans began to mount, specifically because this was the first year of a new six-year contract that he signed during the summer. He had an average annual value of \$4.9 million against the salary cap, and the organization thought it would be a steal if he continued to develop at the pace we had seen from him previously. His numbers continued to drop until he was eventually bought out right before the start of the 2020-21 season.

What went wrong with Wennberg in Columbus? Well, overall, it was a few different things. Tortorella tried to change him into a player that he simply wasn't. He was never meant to be a 20-goal scorer at the NHL level, and that's fine. If they had spent more time focusing on turning him into a responsible two-way center who could put up 40-50 points per season, not only would it have helped the organization, but it would've been a much better route for the player as well. With that said, I want to be clear. Tortorella is a phenomenal coach, but only certain types of players truly thrive under his system, and Wennberg wasn't one of them.

Wennberg's high-scoring seasons were the result of a much higher shooting percentage, which wasn't necessarily the result of him shooting more but rather taking the right shots at the right time. It's difficult to say he would've succeeded under a different coach, but there could be an argument for it. He was the type of player who simply didn't fit what they needed at the time, but he still ended up being a quality NHL player. The struggling seasons after signing his new contract, though, likely did hinder his development pretty significantly.

19th Overall: Kerby Rychel

There's much less to say about Kerby Rychel than there was with Wennberg. The second-generation NHLer was coming off of a strong season with the Windsor Spitfires of the Ontario Hockey League. Out of the gate, he seemed like a prototypical power forward who was a low-risk, potentially high-reward pick. He was 6-foot-1, 200 pounds in his draft year, which was massive for an 18-year-old. However, as the Blue Jackets went on to learn, low risk doesn't mean no risk. Based on his size and play style, it seemed as if he would be, at the very least, a decent bottom-six forward as a worst-case scenario.

In his draft year, Rychel put up 87 points in 68 games, 40 of which were goals. During the 2013-14 season, he failed to take a major step forward. His father, Warren Rychel, who was the Spitfires' general manager at the time, traded his son to the Guelph Storm during the season. Between his two teams, Rychel recorded 89 points in 58 games, which was an improvement but not as impressive as the Blue

Jackets likely would've hoped for. He did have an impressive post-season, though, recording 32 points in 20 games.

During the 2014-15 season, Rychel made his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets and recorded three assists in five games but spent the majority of his time with the Springfield Falcons of the American Hockey League. In his first professional season, he did put up impressive numbers at the AHL level, recording 33 points in 51 games. Based on this season, he seemed like his development was on the right track. However, before the start of the 2015-16 season, the 21-year-old, at the time, forward felt he was being buried on the Blue Jackets' depth chart.

Rather than waiting for an opportunity to arise and working to succeed when it did come, at the recommendation of his father and agent, Rychel requested a trade. The Blue Jackets traded him to the Toronto Maple Leafs in exchange for Scott Harrington and a conditional fifth, which the conditions were never met. That ended Rychel's time in Columbus, and after two seasons with the Toronto Marlies in the AHL, his time in Toronto ended as well. After a couple more seasons as a journeyman, he hung up his skates at the end of the 2019-20 season. He likely could've had a successful run with the Blue Jackets, even if it was just as a bottom-six forward, but he opted instead to force a move, which was eventually his downfall.

There's not really much the Blue Jackets could've done differently in this situation. They felt he wasn't ready for the NHL, and his subsequent seasons seemed to prove them right. Unfortunately, this pick ended up being one of the worst in Blue Jackets' history and was included in the five worst draft picks in franchise history, written by our Nicholas Arnold.

27th Overall: Fan Favorite Marko Dano

Marko Dano's time with the Blue Jackets is a little hard to describe. There was a lot of hope around him, and fans loved him, but apparently, management thought they'd be better off moving him early, which ultimately led to the end of his North American career. Dano had a strong rookie season on the aforementioned "Kid Line" with Wennberg and Hartnell, putting up 21 points in his first 35 games. He was fairly successful during his run with the Springfield Falcons that season, putting up 19 points in 39 games at the AHL level. Overall, he seemed to be developing at a rapid pace, and his offense was taking a major step forward from what we had seen from him in the Kontinental Hockey League before getting drafted.

It's worth noting that at the time he was drafted, Dano was seen as a key piece of Slovak hockey's future. He represented his country at almost every tournament possible and generally seemed to be one of their biggest prospects in a while. However, on June 30, 2015, management saw an opportunity to acquire a key piece of the Chicago Blackhawks' Stanley Cup victories in both 2013 and 2015, Brandon Saad. Dano was a part of the return for the Blackhawks, who were struggling to fit under the salary cap at the time. Unfortunately, the young Slovak was never able to find his footing with Chicago and was traded less than a year later to the Winnipeg Jets.

After a couple of seasons with Winnipeg, Dano was claimed by the Colorado Avalanche off of waivers before getting claimed back by the Jets a month later. At the end of the 2018-19 season, Winnipeg decided not to submit a qualifying offer to Dano, and he became an unrestricted free agent. At this point, his career had come full circle, as he signed a one-year contract with the Blue Jackets for the 2019-20 season. With Columbus, he played the final three games of his NHL career but spent most of his time with the Blue Jackets' new AHL affiliate, the Cleveland Monsters. Since leaving North America, he's played with HC Ocelari Trinec in the top league of Czechia, the Tipsport Extraliga. He still occasionally represents his country in international competitions and has carved out a nice career for himself in European hockey.

Dano was the type of player everyone wanted to succeed, but the lack of stability in his career made it difficult to truly make an impact and develop properly. If Columbus had never moved him, things could've gone much differently for him. Unfortunately, we'll never know because the Blue Jackets wanted to bypass a proper rebuild with a quick fix that resulted in mediocrity.

The Blue Jackets' handling of the 2013 draft class could've been much better and could've led to more success than they were able to achieve. At the time, it was considered a learning experience for an inexperienced general manager. With that said, having three first-round picks and parting ways with them all less than a decade later is tough to ignore. While the Blue Jackets have had bad draft classes both before and after 2013, it's hard to imagine one ever being worse than that one.

Management tried to turn Wennberg into a player he simply wasn't rather than focusing on his strengths. Meanwhile, Dano never got a chance to flourish, and although he handled the situation incorrectly, neither did Rychel. If management allowed these players to develop and compete properly for roster spots rather than trying to create a quick fix, it could've been much better for both the players and the team as a whole.

The Athletic / NHL commish Gary Bettman says league hasn't discussed salary cap going above \$92.5 million

By Julian McKenzie – November 21, 2024

OTTAWA — NHL commissioner Gary Bettman says the league hasn't discussed increasing the 2025-26 salary cap. Bettman met with Ottawa media at the Canadian Tire Centre Tuesday evening ahead of the Ottawa Senators matchup against the Edmonton Oilers.

"I don't know where that came from," Bettman said. "The numbers that were being thrown around were not accurate and any change would require an agreement between us, the league and the Players Association in terms of how it's computed. We haven't had those discussions. So somebody, I think, floated something on a slow news day.

Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman first discussed "conversations" surrounding the cap potentially reaching \$95 or \$97 million on Hockey Night in Canada this past weekend, thanks to "strong" revenues since the league emerged COVID-19 pandemic. According to The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun, the NHLPA is actively speaking to players about the next collective bargaining agreement — the current one is set to expire in September 2026 — and the possibility that the salary cap will rise significantly.

The 2025-26 salary cap is estimated at \$92.5 million, but Bettman said that figure was "way preliminary" in October. The NHL's current salary cap is \$88 million.

"It's really too early for that to be a story," Bettman said in October.

Bettman met with Senators' owner Michael Andlauer and the Ottawa Board of Trade, as well as Ottawa mayor Mark Sutcliffe during his time in the Canadian nation's capital before attending the Oilers-Senators game at the Canadian Tire Centre. The NHL commissioner also visited the LeBreton Flats grounds, the site of the Senators' next arena, with members of the National Capital Commission. The Senators and the NCC reached an agreement in September to build a replacement venue for the Canadian Tire Centre.

"I know Michael Andlauer is committed to doing the right things and doing this in a way that people will feel good about," Bettman said. "In the final analysis, I think moving the team downtown will be great for fans."

The Athletic / NHL player poll: Injury transparency? Want Ovechkin to break Gretzky's record? Expand to 34 teams?

By The Athletic NHL Staff – November 21, 2024

Wayne Gretzky is about as revered as professional athletes get. Nobody's posted more goals, assists or points than him — in a career or a single season.

He owns the NHL's longest point streak, has the most 100-point seasons, claimed the most scoring titles, scored the most shorthanded goals, was the quickest to 50 goals, won the Hart Trophy the most times.

On top of all that, it seems like nobody's ever said a bad word about the guy.

But don't mistake respect for concern. Nobody's going to feel too bad for The Great One when The Great 8 inevitably breaks his once seemingly unbreakable career mark of 894 goals. Heck, the way Alex Ovechkin is going, it might even happen this season.

"Listen, Wayne's got plenty of records that nobody will touch, so I think he'll be OK giving that one up," one NHL player told The Athletic. "Even though I never thought that one would be touched."

In a sport in which fist fights are essentially legal, in a league built on rivalries and hatred, there are precious few topics that can approach near unanimity. After polling 161 NHL players, granting them anonymity so they could speak honestly, it's clear that Ovechkin's goal chase is one of them.

But what about expansion? What about gambling? What about the rulebook? There was plenty of disagreement to be found there.

Here are the results of our first player poll of the season, with a representative sampling of the best comments for each question.

Ninety-eight percent. Short of "would you like to have Leon Draisaitl's contract?" there might not be another question that garners that many yeses.

Ovechkin is 39 years old, and the average NHL player is 28 years old. Macklin Celebrini was born two months after Ovechkin completed his spectacular 52-goal rookie season. So much of the league grew up watching and idolizing Ovechkin. No shock that the word "cool" appeared 40 times in the players' responses.

"I think he's proven how he's probably the best goal scorer in history given the times. I think it would be cool to see. Nobody is ever going to get the other records, right? So if he breaks this one, I think that would be cool."

"Yes, because I could say that I played against the greatest goal scorer to ever play. My first goal was in Washington and he scored in that game, too. It would be cool to have our names on the same game sheet."

"It's going to be cool playing in the era where you can say you played against Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and the best goal scorer of all time."

"I wouldn't even mind being on the ice for the goal against — as long as he doesn't put it through my legs, go around me and go top corner."

"I think it's great for hockey, because it shows it's attainable."

Gretzky has made it clear he's pulling for Ovechkin. The Capitals star even told NHL.com last month that Gretzky texts him little pep talks when he's slumping.

"If Wayne is rooting him on, we should all be rooting him on, too."

"Do I think it takes away from Wayne Gretzky's greatness? No. Not in any way. But his record stood for so long and he's still so far above the pack, it's not even close. It's like Tom Brady and whether he's the greatest football player or quarterback. It's kind of undisputed. If (Patrick) Mahomes keeps his pace up for another 10 years, then he might catch him. Right now, if Ovi catches him, it doesn't take anything away from Wayne."

"I think he already would have broken it if it wasn't for COVID and lockouts. I think Gretzky has enough records."

"Played against him so many times and scored a lot of goals on me; I'll be a part of history because of that ... the wrong way," said Marc-Andre Fleury, agreeing to put his comment on the record after likely giving away his identity anyway. "But I think he's been around for so long, he's been such a good shooter for so many years — one-timer, on the power play — but he's also got such a great release on his wrist coming down the wing or through the defenseman's legs and stuff, so it would be cool."

So just about everyone is rooting for Ovechkin to break the record. Mostly with one caveat:

"Just not against us."

We all roll our eyes when a player skates off the ice with his left arm dangling and a stone-faced coach lies right to reporters' faces and says, "lower-body injury" in the postgame presser. Here's the thing: The players roll their eyes, too. But they insist it's for a reason: "It's not about leaving other people guessing. It's about protecting us."

It might not be the wild west of the 1970s anymore, but hockey players can still be utterly ruthless. Particularly in the playoffs.

"This anonymous? I mean, during the regular season, you're not going to target a guy's injury. But in the playoffs, you're going to."

"If you know a guy's got a banged-up knee, it's not hard for the other team to take a couple extra slashes or whack at that knee and actually hurt it even more."

"I know guys would get targeted. I'd target people and hit his foot from the crease. But in the season, I think they could be more transparent. Sometimes it's so stupid when they're vague. You see them hit in the head and they say 'upper body.'"

"As a player, I want less transparency. You don't want people to know what's wrong with you. I think it's the same thing with the way it works in the playoffs. If someone knows that you have a bad wrist, we're going to slash your wrist. Same thing you see in football. Last weekend or the week before, we all know Justin Herbert has a bad ankle, guys are rolling on it. We're competitive. It's violent out there. Everyone says they don't try and hurt or injure people, but we all know you do."

"Maybe they can do something where during the regular season it's transparent, but in the playoffs it's hush-hush."

The NFL has a daily injury report that includes specific injuries and a classification from probable to questionable to doubtful to out. Given how much money is spent on fantasy football and football betting, the league has no choice. Some players feel it's only a matter of time before the NHL reaches that point, too.

"I understand why they do it in the NFL, with fantasy and all of the money that goes into betting, but I don't want other teams knowing my business."

"If the betting market gets bigger in hockey, they're going to have to do that. Ours is so vague which is nice for players, but if gambling gets bigger in hockey, they'll have to do that because it wouldn't be fair."

"I don't think it should be quite to the level of the NFL, but I think we could be a little more transparent. And, at a minimum, consistent among all the teams. Fans deserve to know when their favorite player is going to be back playing."

Some players just want a little privacy.

"I don't think you have to specify what the injury is. Who cares? If it's upper body, it's upper body. If it's lower body, it's lower."

"I hate it. I don't think anyone should know unless you want them to know."

On the other hand ...

"I could see how on the flip side, if you're playing like s—, well, then people could understand that maybe there's something that's holding you back."

There are more than 1.6 million registered hockey players in the world. Only 736 of them can be in the NHL at once. So, no, NHL players are not going to say no to another 46 NHL roster spots, thank you very much.

"More jobs for players is better. We can play longer. From an NHLPA player standpoint, more money in the system. More teams, more money for players. I'm on board for that, but keep it at 82 games and get rid of preseason."

"Why not? That means more jobs."

"Yeah, it'll keep me in the league longer."

"If it brings in more money, I'm all for it."

"They're going to. Did you see those valuations?"

"As a fan, I would say no. As a player, I would say yes. More money, more jobs. I think that's good."

That said, plenty of players understand the argument against further expansion.

"We grinded to get to 32, and now all of a sudden we just want the buy-in money?"

"I kind of like where it's at now. I think it's perfect. Half the teams get in. So I'm a 'no.' The way the playoffs are, with half the teams getting in, I think it's perfect. So I wouldn't add just because of that."

But with the sport becoming more and more global, the talent pool just keeps getting deeper. As one player put it, there are fourth-liners in the NHL right now who would skate circles around almost anyone from the Original Six era.

"I was worried when they expanded the last few that it would maybe dilute the product. But I think we are still getting exciting hockey. We still have exciting players. It's worked. It's more jobs. I'm in favor of it."

So the obvious question then becomes where?

Arizona was the laughingstock of the sports world for years. But it was also seemingly every player's favorite road trip. So while you might be tired of commissioner Gary Bettman's endless experiment in the desert, there's still a lot of support for another franchise in the Valley among the rank and file.

"Every player will tell you we love going to Arizona. It's so nice there. If we could get a better owner in there this time and see what we can do, I think it would thrive there."

With more than 7 million people in the metropolitan area, Houston has long been a potential target for the league. And players are on board with the idea.

"I'm gung-ho on Houston. I don't want to see another Canadian team. I think Houston could be a really good spot."

"Tax-free state. Tax-free. Sunshine states."

"(Houston.) It's the (fourth) largest city in the U.S. and they don't have a team yet. We can't go to another Canadian market right now, not with how the Canadian dollar is. You can't go to Quebec City. The Canadian dollar is s—. You'd have to take the team out of Winnipeg."

Ah, Quebec City. Bringing back the Nordiques is always a hot topic.

"I'd love to see Quebec City because, being French-Canadian, the fight between Montreal and Quebec is so good. But from a business standpoint, I don't know if Quebec is the right call because it's a smaller market. But I know they will fill the rink with fans and stuff. I'm not a business guy, but the big sponsors and the people that buy the suites, I don't know if they could support. But I would love to see them back. People love hockey there."

"I understand the exchange rate and all the finances that come with that, but I think it'd be cool to have another Canadian team to make it eight."

"Get out of Canada, we need (hockey-related revenue). Houston. It's five million people. Quebec's a great city. I don't think it's big enough for an NHL team."

Then, of course, there's always a second Toronto team.

"It would do better than Atlanta or Houston or something."

"They'd probably win a Cup before the Leafs."

Some other thoughts:

"Definitely not Atlanta. We've already seen that one fail enough."

"If Green Bay could get a team, I would like to see that. They go crazy for the Packers. I've played there in junior and it was pretty fun. I'd like to see another team in that area. Honestly, I'll give Wisconsin a team. Whatever makes more sense numbers-wise and financially. It's a hockey hotbed."

"We played (in Austin, Texas) a bunch of times in the American League. Amazing city. Great hockey fans. They pack the barn every night. Great arena. Love it there."

"San Diego would be pretty cool. Get another team on the West Coast."

"I think the market (in Dubai) is great and it'd be cool to go there."

"Is Miami too close to Fort Lauderdale?"

After the Major League Baseball uniform fiasco this past season, there was a lot of skepticism that Fanatics was up to the challenge of taking over the NHL's jersey manufacturing. The jerseys are made in

the same Montreal factory with the same specifications as the old ones, but the shoulder dimples were removed and some extra fabric was used in the forearms, which are prone to board burn.

Some players didn't even notice. Some did. Some might have imagined some things.

"(A): I think they all look awesome. I'd say A. They look great. They did a good job."

"(A): I actually like them. I can't tell the difference. And I like our practice jerseys. I think they're cool."

"(C): I'm not a huge fan. I don't think they're that great. I find them a little uncomfortable and bulky."

"(B): I don't think they look as cool because the old ones had dimples on the shoulders."

"(B): They're a little smaller."

"(B): They feel a little longer."

"(B): They're a little heavier, a little stiffer."

"(B): The neck is a little bit different, but other than that they feel the same. I would still like Nike stuff."

"(C): Don't notice a difference but I prefer Adidas."

"(B): You notice the difference. It's not as thick, so it's not what it was. But I was expecting way worse, so that's a positive."

"(A): They feel the exact same to me."

Good luck making sense of all that, Fanatics quality-control team.

Some players were just relieved the jerseys didn't change colors when sweat-soaked and didn't have tiny letters on the back.

"(C): I thought they'd be worse after seeing the baseball ones. The baseball ones were see-through. I was like, 'These are the worst jerseys ever.' I don't know what the ones the fans are getting. But the ones we've gotten are good material."

"(B): They're not as good as they used to be, so I'll give them a B. Because if the old Adidas (jersey) was an A, then this is a B. I think, for me, it's the fit and the sizing. And also a little bit of the material on its own. You know sometimes when you grab a hold of an old tool or an old machine, and you know this is sturdy, it's never going to break? You don't get the same thing nowadays. But also they're made with different materials. You can just feel the difference."

And then, of course, there were plenty of players who greeted the question with a quizzical look.

"(B): I didn't actually know we were wearing Fanatics jerseys."

If you're sick of seeing people posting every little bet they make on social media, imagine being tagged in those posts. Or having those bettors demand you pay them back because you only had two shots on goal that night, when the over/under was 2.5.

"You get Venmo requests from fans," one player said. "They're demands, not requests. 'You owe me \$200 because you were on the ice when ...' and it's insane. It's really bad when you play against Toronto because it seems like everybody is betting on Leafs games. But that's Toronto for you."

We're going to dive more deeply into this phenomenon later in the week, but here's a quick sampling of responses:

“Yeah, that’s real. When you ruin a guy’s parlay or something? One hundred percent, that’s real. I got one last game where some guy bet on my number of shots or something and then he’s DM’ing me: ‘You f—ed my parlay!’ Pardon my language, but that’s what he said.”

“Oh, almost every day. Honestly, I’d say 75 percent of them are them being mad about something. ‘How did you let in that late goal? I had the under. Thanks a lot. You f—ing suck.’ Things like that constantly. I feel like, as a goalie, we’re a little bit more exposed to it, too.”

“Oh yeah. People on social media are way crazier now because they have more skin in the game. I think that’s for all sports.”

This is one instance in which it helps to be a fourth-liner or a third-pairing guy.

“I don’t think I’m the betting favorite.”

One rule change

We’ll dive deeper into this one later this week too, because when you ask 161 players an open-ended question like this, the answers are all over the hockey map. But there were some common answers.

“Continuous overtime; abolish the shootout.”

“Instead of shootouts, three-on-three, then two-on-two. ... It could be kind of fun. But then it would be tough with the stats because it could change things.”

“Ten-minute overtimes. I just think overtime’s the best for the fans. I think for the players, it’s fun too.”

An overtime shot clock wasn’t popular, but there was plenty of support for an over-and-back rule, prohibiting players from regrouping beyond the red line in overtime.

Another popular area of discussion was power plays, including “two-minute majors” and “jailbreaks.”

“Power plays shouldn’t end if a goal is scored.”

“The PWHL jailbreak: A shorthanded goal results in the player leaving the box.”

“If you score shorthanded, the power play ends. In Europe, if you’re on the power play and you get scored on (shorthanded), the power play’s over. I like that.”

Some players got really specific with faceoffs and line changes. One just wanted to be able to sit on top of the boards while waiting to change again. And some players got a little wacky, with one suggesting getting rid of the blue line entirely and making the red line the offside line.

Lots of discussion about challenges and reviews, with some wanting more and some wanting none.

One player wanted to open up the ways in which a player could score. Hey, man, it’s tough to score in this league. If the puck goes in, it goes in, right?

“Allow kicking and head-butting the puck in. You’re going to the gritty area. If you can get a skate on it, that should be a goal. I also think you should be able to ‘head’ the puck in. The Andrew Shaw rule. I don’t know, if you could head the puck in, that’s pretty impressive.”

[The Athletic / 2026 NHL Draft early rankings: Gavin McKenna, 12 other players who have already stood out](#)

By Corey Pronman – November 21, 2024

Today I take my first look at the 2026 NHL Draft class. This is an extremely preliminary look and a lot will change between now and June 2026. Most of my viewings of this class have been at international events like the World U17 Challenge. I haven't seen many players yet, but these are the 13 players who have stood out to me in my early viewings.

1. Gavin McKenna, LW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

McKenna is the much-too-early favorite to be the No. 1 pick in the 2026 NHL Draft. He's an exceptional offensive talent who has been a top WHL player the last 18 months. His puck skills and hockey sense are elite. He makes highly creative plays routinely and has one of the more special offensive minds I've seen in a prospect in recent years. His skill and playmaking remind me a bit of Trevor Zegras at the same age, except he's a way better skater who can make his skilled plays at a very quick pace. The only knock on him can be his off-puck play and at-times-average compete level.

2. Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor (OHL)

Belchetz, the No. 1 pick in his OHL Draft, has been excellent out of the gates. He's built like a truck; at 16 years old, he looks at least 6-foot-4, 220 pounds and he can overwhelm much older players with his physical play. Belchetz skates well for his size and has a ton of skill. I don't love using this argument, but Belchetz's advanced physical development is so unique that I do wonder if his age group will catch up to him in a few years.

3. Ryan Roobroeck, C, Niagara (OHL)

Roobroeck has been hyped for a long time, and it's easy to see why when you watch him. He's big, fast and has a ton of natural offensive gifts to his game. He's been a big reason why Niagara has turned around. Given his premium toolkit and position, I do wonder if he can push McKenna as we get deeper into his draft season.

4. Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, Victoria (WHL)

Verhoeff was a goaltender up until a few years ago, and now has a real shot to be the first defenseman picked in his age group. He's very athletic with a big 6-4 frame, strong mobility and some offense early on in his WHL tenure. He plays quite hard and ticks a lot of boxes NHL scouts will be looking for. I don't view him as a natural puck-mover who makes the best decisions, but a part of me wonders if that's just how raw he is.

5. Ivar Stenberg, LW, Frölunda (Sweden Jr.)

Stenberg is a smaller winger, but he's a truly dynamic offensive player who has been dominant in Sweden's junior level. He's extremely smart with the puck, makes a ton of plays, can score from range and beats defenses often with his skill. He could overcome his size issues because he moves very well but also works hard enough, which is how that player type needs to survive in the NHL.

6. Adam Novotný, LW, Mountfield (Czechia)

Novotny will have already played 1.5 seasons of pro hockey at the top level in Czechia before he enters his draft season. He's a well-rounded forward who has the skating, skill and compete that will appeal to NHL teams. I'm still trying to figure out if his puck play is very good or a difference-maker.

7. Ilya Morozov, LW, Tri-City (USHL)

Morozov jumped out at me in his first USHL games. A 6-3 winger who can skate and be a legit part of his team's offense at his age is immediately intriguing. I like how he can create in the high-percentage areas due to his size as well.

8. Simon Katolický, LW, Tappara (Finland Jr.)

I don't usually give players at the Finland U18 level this high a grade, but I was very impressed by Katolický at the U17s. He skates very well for a big man and has the soft skills and vision to make plays and score. He is a direct player who attacks the net and makes himself noticeable often. He is full of potential, and as he advances levels he has the toolkit to be successful versus men.

9. Viggo Björck, C, Djurgårdens (Sweden Jr.)

Björck has been excellent at the junior level in Sweden to start this season. He's quite undersized, but he is tremendous with the puck on his stick. He has the high-end IQ to hold onto pucks and make difficult plays and tilts the ice when he's out there due to his skill and vision. He competes and skates well, which could allow him to have success in the NHL at his size.

10. Tynan Lawrence, C, Muskegon (USHL)

Lawrence has a highly likable game. He's very intelligent at both ends of the ice. He's a great playmaker who can run a power play and a competitive center who wins battles and comes back on defense well. He plays with pace and creates a lot of offense. The only drawback of his game is he's closer to 5-11.

11. Luke Schairer, RHD, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

Schairer is the top 2026 prospect at the U.S. National Team Development Program going into next season. He's a tall, mobile defenseman who can move the puck well and has significant two-way potential as a pro. He's not a super flashy type, but he has some offensive touch in his game.

12. Mathis Preston, RW, Spokane (WHL)

Preston is one of the most natural scorers in his age group. He's a strong skater with very good puck skills and creativity who can drive play. He is a true finisher though who projects to have a lot of offense at higher levels.

13. Nikita Ovcharov, LW, CSKA (Russia Jr.)

Ovcharov impressed early on this season in Russia prior to being injured. He has a style of play that could translate to pro success. He has legit speed and is able to make highly skilled plays at quick tempos. He plays hard and takes pucks to the net to create chances while also having a decent-sized frame.

The Athletic / How a Hockey Hall of Famer turned Game 7 success into a teachable moment

By Jason Jones – November 21, 2024

Mark Messier played in nine Game 7s throughout his 25-year NHL career. He went 7-2 in those contests, and two of the games resulted in Stanley Cup-clinching victories. He's widely regarded as one of the best postseason performers in NHL history.

Making a habit of winning the most pivotal game of a postseason series made Messier a perfect candidate to serve as an executive producer for "Game 7," the five-part docuseries now available on Amazon Prime Video. The series revisits some of the more prominent playoff series in professional sports that went seven games — including Messier's memorable 1994 playoff run with the New York Rangers that featured Game 7 wins in both the Eastern Conference final against the New Jersey Devils and Stanley Cup Final against the Vancouver Canucks. (The Rangers and Canucks, coincidentally, face each other Tuesday evening.)

Messier believes there is a lot to be learned from the mindset of a Game 7, even away from athletic competition. It's helped him in life, and he wants to help others.

"Everybody in life can have a Game 7 moment," he told The Athletic. "You don't have to be an athlete to be faced with the decision where you have to perform and that performance changes the trajectory of your life one way or another. ... I think for our boys and girls watching, we are arming them with tools so they can make great decisions and are prepared for when that Game 7 moment comes around for them.

"I think that's an important thing that made this whole project very interesting for me personally: being able to use my own experiences to pay it forward."

Messier said he doesn't have a favorite Game 7, but the two 1994 wins garner a lot of conversation. In the Eastern Conference final, the Rangers needed to rally from a 3-2 deficit, and he famously guaranteed a win over the Devils to force a Game 7 at Madison Square Garden. The Rangers trailed 2-0 in Game 6 before scoring four unanswered goals to force the deciding game — and ultimately win that one in double overtime.

In the Stanley Cup Final, the Rangers led the Canucks 3-1 in the series but lost back-to-back games. Messier scored the Rangers' final goal in Game 7 as they clinched their first Stanley Cup after a 54-year drought.

Messier believes grasping momentum and having "unwavering confidence" are keys to success, particularly when discussing Game 7s.

"As great as we were (in 1994), there was a reality that we might not win," Messier said. "That brought in a lot of emotion, a lot of anticipation, a lot of anxiety. But you have to be able to overcome all of that to win a Game 7."

Former major league shortstop Buddy Biancalana coauthored the book "The 7 Secrets of World Class Athletes" with Steven Yellin. Biancalana won two Game 7s with the Kansas City Royals, who won the 1985 World Series. He's studied the science of being "in the zone" and uses what he's learned to advise athletes.

Biancalana said he wanted to view Game 7s like any other game, but it was difficult because of the different energy levels.

"I believe each player's experience leading up to the game and during the game differs, all because of how they process emotions and how well information moves through the brain to allow muscles to work in a synchronistic, harmonious manner," he said. "It can be very easy to allow emotions to affect brain functioning and cause a player to be unable to access their best ability.

"It's not enough to be great. A player must understand the subtle dynamics of the emotional, mental and physical components to not let the pressure of a big moment impede their ability to access their best self."

Biancalana agrees the characteristics needed to win a Game 7 carry over into other aspects of his life.

"Winning a Game 7 and performing well established a deep belief of myself that I have taken into all areas of my life," Biancalana said. "It's allowed me to be more resilient in moving through with more ease, the challenges that life can present. I feel I'm not as negatively affected by challenging moments as others may be.

"It's one factor why so many companies are trending towards hiring ex-athletes. The success-to-failure ratio for an athlete causes one to stay focused and get back up when life knocks you down. All companies and any relationship can benefit from such qualities."

David K. Butler, Ph.D., is CEO of the Vector Group, which specializes in organizational performance. He is accomplished in wrestling, judo and mixed martial arts, and he has worked with athletes and is a mental strength coach for those looking to succeed in areas of the military such as Navy SEALs. Butler said elite athletes master the ability to deal with high-pressure situations like a Game 7 with mindfulness and resilience.

He added that while some athletes possess the "innate personality traits" that equip them to deal with pressure situations, the grit needed to deal with those situations can be taught.

"The difference between a normal athlete and an elite athlete with a Game 7 mindset is the elite athlete understands that just surviving adversity is not enough," Butler said. "One must learn from the situation and emerge better. An elite Game 7 athlete actually thrives in high-pressure situations because they welcome the adversity. They know that it will build that vital attribute of resilience."

Messier believes the stories in the docuseries show a common self-belief among those who won their Game 7s. He hopes viewers can learn from it and implement the mindset.

"Oftentimes we listen to ourselves talk, and it is a little bit negative at times," Messier said. "If you did fail, instead of 'I can't do it,' well (it should be), 'I can do it. I've just got to figure out how to do it.' That's completely different messaging, a self-messaging: What are you going to do? What are you going to change in your own behavior?"

"Are you willing to make the changes necessary to change that narrative?"

ESPN / NHL Future Power Rankings: Prospect, cap, roster predictions

By Ryan S. Clark, Rachel Doerrie and Kristen Shilton – November 21, 2024

While the goal of every NHL general manager is to put together a roster that wins the Stanley Cup, the reality is that teams are on different timelines when it comes to their championship contention.

So which teams are in the best shape for the next three seasons? That's where the Future Power Rankings come in.

These rankings consider how teams are set up for success this season as well as the next three seasons. We had a panel of writers and editors rate each team in four categories -- roster (with an emphasis on players 26 and under); prospects; cap situation and contracts; and front office, ownership and coaching - using this scale:

100: A+ (elite)

90: A (great)

80: B (very good)

70: C (average)

60: D (very bad)

50: F (disastrous)

After averaging the results from the panelists, each of the four categories was weighted to create the overall score: roster (35%), prospects (25%), cap/contracts (20%) and owner/GM/coach (20%). The result is a comprehensive ranking based on how well each team is positioned for the future, plus insights on every team from Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton and Rachel Doerrie.

1. Carolina Hurricanes

Overall score: 86.2

Why they're here: Carolina is a perennial Stanley Cup contender for good reason. Coach Rod Brind'Amour constantly gets the most out of his roster, and it's a great one with enviable forward depth (led by Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and newcomer Jack Roslovic, having his best season in years) and a booming back end that stays stingy.

Where the Hurricanes constantly face issues is with goaltending (Frederik Andersen is out long term with an injury), although young Pyotr Kochetkov continues to show promise. Carolina is built to win now and so it does, sitting top five in offense (averaging four goals per game), top 10 in defense (giving up fewer than three goals per night) and boasting solid special teams. Even scarier? Carolina has a strong prospect pool -- think Alexander Nikishin, Bradly Nadeau and Jackson Blake, who could all make an NHL jump sooner than later.

Cause for concern: Fair or unfair, the largest (and only?) concern facing the Hurricanes is if they can win the Stanley Cup. They've built a farm system. They've acquired draft capital to get as many picks as possible to build that system. They've developed a farm-to-table approach that has created a pipeline. They've spent money in free agency. They even have what's thought to be one of the best coaching/GM/ownership setups. But what they don't have is a Stanley Cup, and that's the standard through which this iteration of the franchise will be judged.

Prospect pipeline: The most impactful players in their system are on defense, with Alexander Nikishin expected to be a top-pairing defenseman in the next few years, and the recently signed Scott Morrow projecting to be a solid, second-pair option. Dominik Badinka is another interesting defender who is further away from NHL-readiness but is projected to be a good depth defender.

The Canes have good depth up front, with Bradly Nadeau projected to be a second-line scorer while Jackson Blake and Gleb Trikozov are expected to play top-nine roles. With three prospects at each skating position expected to be impactful to varying degrees, and depth in the form of Felix Unger Sorum, Nikita Artamonov and Jayden Perron, the Canes' prospect pool remains strong.

2. New York Rangers

Overall score: 85.0

Why they're here: The Rangers have pushed their chips in to be a contender now -- and why not? New York's roster is bursting with talent, from established stars like Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Adam Fox to the continually improving Alexis Lafreniere, Kaapo Kakko, Will Cuyllle and (the injured) Filip Chytil. That the Rangers have been able to graduate so many young talents into NHL roles is huge for their present and future success -- which is good, since GM Chris Drury has been limited to just nine selections in the past two drafts to prepare New York for years ahead.

Braden Schneider and Zac Jones reached the NHL level to form the Rangers' third defensive pairing. Brennan Othmann could be back after an audition last season, and Brett Berard had a terrific rookie season in the AHL, too. New York's balance between being a contender now and having hope for the future is appropriately spot-on.

Cause for concern: You might have heard how Igor Shesterkin needs a new contract. So does K'Andre Miller. As does Kaapo Kakko, along with Ryan Lindgren. There's also a chance you might have heard about it coming at the expense of the Rangers parting ways with captain Jacob Trouba, considering he'll be entering the final year of a contract worth \$8 million annually going into the 2025-26 season.

Corralling all those moving parts while still ensuring the Rangers remain one of the NHL's front-runners for the Stanley Cup is one of two major challenges facing the club. As for the other? It's actually winning the Cup after two recent trips to the conference finals.

Prospect pipeline: The Rangers lack depth, but their top prospects are expected to be difference-makers. Gabe Perreault and Brennan Othmann are both projected to play offensive roles in the middle of the lineup.

Perreault had an incredible season with Boston College in the NCAA and should become a top-six player, with a decent chance to become a top-line scoring winger. He will be a key member of the Rangers' offensive scheme for years to come. Othmann isn't quite ready yet after a good first AHL season, and he projects to be a third-line player who plays both special teams.

EJ Emery is the key prospect on the blue line; he comfortably projects as a top-four defender. Other notable prospects include Bryce McConnell-Barker, Adam Edstrom, Adam Sykora, Brett Berard and Victor Mancini, who are expected to have solid seasons in the AHL.

3. Dallas Stars

Overall score: 84.7

Why they're here: The Stars earned a Western Conference finals berth in consecutive seasons because of how superb they already are. Even losing forward Joe Pavelski hasn't changed that. Dallas is deep up front thanks to young superstar talents like Jason Robertson, Roope Hintz and Wyatt Johnson, while

Miro Heiskanen remains a standout blueliner for the Stars (and Thomas Harley is coming along, too). Oh, and rookie Logan Stankoven is generating serious Calder Trophy buzz. Add goalie Jake Oettinger's consistent play to that mix, and Dallas is on pace to make another long postseason run.

The Stars are dialed in on winning now given how many of their top prospects have already graduated to the NHL, and there aren't many -- beyond Mavrik Bourque, Christian Kyrrou and Lian Bichsel -- waiting to step in. Right now, at least, Dallas' roster is all set. And the Stars have the right coach in Peter DeBoer -- supported by GM Jim Nill -- to keep the club fueled for another run.

Cause for concern: Building their team through the draft has allowed the Stars to become a perennial Stanley Cup contender that faces two major questions. Can they win a Stanley Cup, and how will they navigate the salary cap while maintaining their front-runner status? One of the ways the Stars reached their current destination was by maximizing the entry-level contracts of their young players and using those savings elsewhere. But now, Wyatt Johnston is in the final year of his entry-level contract, while Logan Stankoven has two more years at that low rate.

Prospect pipeline: The Stars have made it their modus operandi to extract value out of late first-rounders and middle-round picks. They lack depth in the prospect pool but have a few players who are expected to play major roles at the NHL level. The fall in the rankings (they were No. 18 in the spring) is directly related to the graduations of Logan Stankoven and Mavrik Bourque.

Lian Bichsel and Emil Hemming are the top names in the pool, and both are expected to play middle-of-the-lineup roles. Defensemen Christian Kyrrou and Aram Minnetian have chances to play meaningful games, but they have less confident projections.

Dallas might not have the highest prospect pipeline value, but if there is one team capable of developing future stars, it is the Stars.

4. Minnesota Wild

Overall score: 84.0

Why they're here: The Wild are off to a sensational start that has been one of the league's early surprises. Minnesota's roster has performed above average thanks to MVP-worthy Kirill Kaprizov; consistent scoring from a core including Matt Boldy, Mats Zuccarello and Marco Rossi up front; and Brock Faber continuing to shine on the back end. That Minnesota was able to see its best prospects in Rossi and Faber take hold of NHL opportunities has been key to its current success and should sustain the Wild well into their future.

GM Bill Guerin has been patient with his club while also not shying away from making a change behind the bench -- from Dean Evason to Jon Hynes -- and there's help on the way, too. Jesper Wallstedt is heir apparent to Marc-Andre Fleury in net, and Marat Khusnutdinov could have an immediate impact in the league, too.

Cause for concern: Can the Wild maximize their potential now that there are fewer stumbling blocks ahead of them? For the past few years, the albatross that was the \$14.743 million in buyouts for Zach Parise and Ryan Suter combined hindered what the Wild could do at the trade deadline or in free agency. But those buyouts dropping to just a \$1.66 million cap hit in 2025-26 creates the belief the Wild could be on the verge of something. Those savings plus having one of the most consistent farm-to-table setups in the NHL raise questions about whether the Wild can piece everything together to have a long-term winner.

Prospect pipeline: I'm not quite sure what magic potions director of amateur scouting Judd Brackett and his staff are using to consistently extract value out of the draft, but every year they snag two or three

players well past where they should be selected. Zeev Buium and Aron Kiviharju were those two players in 2024, and the Ryder Ritchie selection at No. 45 was a solid one, too. The Wild have signed the highest percentage of their draftees to entry-level contracts since 2020.

Jesper Wallstedt leads the way in this group, as he looks like Minnesota's goalie of the future after signing his new contract. Up front, the Wild have Danila Yurov, Marat Khusnutdinov, Riley Heidt, Charlie Stramel and Ritchie as projected top-nine players.

Buium is the jewel of the blue line, along with Carson Lambos and Daemon Hunt in the group. The three have confident projections as a top-pair, second-pair and No. 4/5 defenseman, respectively.

5. Florida Panthers

Overall score: 83.5

Why they're here: The reigning Cup champions still possess an elite roster despite unavoidable offseason changes following their victory. That success starts at the top in Florida, with savvy dealings by GM Bill Zito, bang-on coaching from Paul Maurice and a top-tier leadership group helmed by captain Aleksander Barkov and supported by Matthew Tkachuk, San Reinhart, Gustav Forsling and on down the list.

Zito has prepared the Panthers to keep winning with their current lineup for good reason -- there's not much available on Florida's farm. It's been three years since the Panthers made a first-round draft selection, and other than Mackie Samoskevich -- the club's 24th pick in 2021 -- making his way to the NHL, there's no one else sticking out with imminent potential to do the same. Florida can stay the course for now, though, and is right on pace to push its way into a possible third consecutive Cup Final this spring. -- Shilton

Cause for concern: This is the unquestioned golden age of the Panthers. They've won a Cup. They've shown they can become a perennial playoff team. They've also proved South Florida is an environment where new and venerable players alike can thrive. Many members of their core have more than two years remaining on their current deals, which only adds to the belief the Panthers could add another title.

If there is something that complicates those plans for a second title, it could be a farm system that's seen Spencer Knight and Anton Lundell as the only prospects drafted since 2015 to remain with the franchise. Eventually, that lack of development will have major negative results at the NHL level. -- Clark

Prospect pipeline: The Panthers won the Stanley Cup and therefore, there is a moratorium on their fans complaining about prospects for a couple seasons. Often, the price of winning includes trading away picks and prospects, and that's the case here too.

Mackie Samoskevich graduates to the big club this season, leaving a big hole in the pipeline. Justin Sourdif and Jack Devine are both projected to be serviceable, bottom-six players, and Gracyn Sawchyn has a less confident projection as a middle-six player. The development of Sandis Vilimanis and Marek Alscher last season present good depth options for Florida if they continue to progress in the AHL this season.

6. Winnipeg Jets

Overall score: 82.6

Why they're here: The Jets have just about everything going for them, for today and tomorrow. Winnipeg's historic start to the season under first year head coach Scott Arniel is impressive on its own. The team's core -- that's Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele, Nikolaj Ehlers and Josh Morrissey, plus Connor

Hellebuyck in goal -- is performing at an elite levels and powering Winnipeg to surpass its potential. And if GM Kevin Cheveldayoff wants to try adding to the lineup before the trade deadline, there's plenty of cap space there to leverage.

Cheveldayoff also made the most of a bad situation with Jets prospect Rutger McGroarty by trading the forward to Pittsburgh for Brayden Yager, who should move up to the NHL after another season in the WHL. Winnipeg also has Ville Heinola for the back end and Brad Lambert (the club's 30th pick in 2022) gunning for an eventual center slot.

Cause for concern: Can they get beyond the first round of the playoffs? Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has built a team with a steady flow of homegrown talents, while still retaining the necessary cap space to make a move if and when needed. This blueprint has allowed the Jets to reach the playoffs in six of the past seven years -- with the caveat they've made it out of the opening round just twice. Also of note: They have significant pending UFAs, including Nikolaj Ehlers, Alex Lafallo and Neal Pionk..

Prospect pipeline: The Jets have multiple forward prospects expected to be top-nine impact players. Colby Barlow, Chaz Lucius and Brayden Yager are projected to be middle-six players. Brad Lambert is a high-risk, high-reward player and projects to play in a secondary scoring role. Kevin He has some projectable NHL-caliber tools and is worth monitoring over the next few years.

Two Swedish defensemen, Elias Salomonsson and Alfons Freij, could play in depth roles for the Jets, with Freij having a fair chance at a second-pairing role with good development.

7. Detroit Red Wings

Overall score: 82.0

Why they're here: Detroit hasn't been a postseason participant since its league-high 25-season run ended in 2016. The Red Wings' rebuild hasn't yielded a playoff return in part because of how meticulous GM Steve Yzerman has been with his process, and because of a general lack of consistency from the current roster (particularly on the defensive side). Detroit does have the players, though, to get back there. The team's core of Dylan Larkin, Lucas Raymond, Moritz Seider and Alex DeBrincat is strong.

What's most exciting for Detroit, though, might be who is still pending. The Red Wings are stacked with promising prospects, from goaltending (with Sebastian Cossa), to forwards (Amadeus Lombardi, Carter Mazur and Elmer Söderblom) to defensemen (William Wallinder and Axel Sandin-Pellikka). It doesn't feel like Detroit is far off putting it all together -- and luckily for Yzerman there's some cap space available for more immediate changes that could be made.

Cause for concern: The Red Wings had a slow start to the 2024-25 season, with the reality that they remain right in the thick of the wild-card race. The Red Wings have 12 players with more than two years remaining on their contracts, while having a farm system that allows them to gradually incorporate their talent for the future. It leaves them in a hypothetical position to stake their claim in an Eastern Conference landscape that has five or six teams challenging for a wild-card spot.

Whether they'll actually deliver on all of that well-planned structure remains the unknown.

Prospect pipeline: Simon Edvinsson and Axel Sandin-Pelikka are both projected to be impactful top-four defenders in the next two years. William Willander and Shai Buium are two other candidates who could be depth defenders at the NHL level. Michael Brandsegg-Nygard and Nate Danielson should become middle-six players, with Marco Kasper making the leap to the NHL lineup.

Both Sebastian Cossa and Trey Augustine are solid options in goal and provide the Red Wings with depth at the position.

Five of the players in the Red Wings pool are projected to be impactful NHL players, and three more are projected to be serviceable NHL depth. There is a lot to like about Detroit's future with the level of prospects they have at each position.

8. Utah Hockey Club

Overall score: 82.0

Why they're here: Utah inherited its team from Arizona and made alterations from there. Where that takes the Hockey Club in their first season remains to be seen. To date, Utah has been middle of the road just about everywhere, a .500 club that is still establishing an identity in its new digs.

GM Bill Armstrong made one key trade already in grabbing Mikhail Sergachev from Tampa Bay in exchange for top prospect Conor Geekie. Armstrong went on to make 11 picks in last June's draft, in a class highlighted by top selections Tij Iginla and Cole Beaudoin. Josh Doan -- Arizona's second-round pick in 2021 -- is also preparing to step up as a full-time NHLer, and Utah has hope that its overseas prospects will eventually make a positive impact stateside, too. Any one of them could supplement a solid core helmed by Clayton Keller, Sergachev, Barrett Hayton and Matias Maccelli that has the Hockey Club plugging along for now.

Cause for concern: Can the Utah Hockey Club become a perennial playoff team now that there are no longer any off-ice distractions? Back when they were the Arizona Coyotes, there was always something happening: Do they have a future in Arizona? Where will they play? Do they have reliable ownership? Coming to Utah has seen a shift in narrative, and with it, a set of expectations that are rather contrasting. The discussion appears to have shifted toward if the UHC can maximize its potential and become a consistent playoff team, and furthermore, can it ensure its honeymoon period in Salt Lake City lasts even longer?

Prospect pipeline: The pipeline is now headlined by Tij Iginla, Cole Beaudoin and Dmitry Simashev, who are all projected to be impactful NHL players. Julian Lutz and Daniil But are intriguing prospects but lack a confident offensive projection. On defense, Maveric Lamoureux has developed nicely and should fit in a depth role, and Michael Hrabal is projected to be an NHL goalie.

Utah has a stocked prospect cupboard that can be leveraged in trades to make the NHL roster better, and they are not far away from being a real problem in the Western Conference.

9. New Jersey Devils

Overall score: 81.7

Why they're here: The Devils failed to make the postseason last season after being league darlings the season before. That triggered a coaching change -- from Lindy Ruff to Travis Green and, eventually, Sheldon Keefe -- to put New Jersey back on the playoff path.

There's no doubt the Devils have a roster capable of getting there now. Jesper Bratt, Jack Hughes and Nico Hischier are all averaging a point per game or better this season, and they highlight a strong Devils core -- along with risers Luke Hughes and Simon Nemec -- that's taken years coming into its own. There's hope for New Jersey in the long term as well, with Seamus Casey (just 20 years old) getting an NHL look already this year and 18-year-old defenseman Anton Silayev (New Jersey's 10th choice in 2024) seasoning in the KHL.

GM Tom Fitzgerald found the Devils a consistent netminder in Jacob Markstrom too, which is making all the difference for New Jersey as it resumes contender status.

Cause for concern: Do the Devils have the formula to guarantee they are a long-term playoff team that can contend for the Stanley Cup in the near future? That was the thought during the 2022-23 season when they reached the second round -- only to come under question after they missed the playoffs in 2023-24. Since then, they hired a new coach in Sheldon Keefe, and traded for a goalie in Jacob Markstrom who has shown he can provide consistent performances for a team with playoff aspirations. How will those additions, added to a roster that has the majority of its core signed to long-term deals, help the Devils establish their place within the Stanley Cup landscape?

Prospect pipeline: The Devils continue to draft well, specifically in the early rounds. Seamus Casey started the season with the Devils but headed to the AHL. He is projected to be a No. 4 or No. 5 defenseman as soon as next season.

Anton Silayev, this year's first-rounder, is a great addition to the pool as a big, rangy defender who can balance out the team's soft skill on the blue line. Arseni Gritsyuk and Lenni Hameenaho have fair NHL projections as middle-of-the-lineup players.

The Devils are a young team with exciting players, and their fall in the rankings is more a function of graduations of players such as Simon Nemeč. They are set up for long-term success at all positions.

10. Columbus Blue Jackets

Overall score: 80.1

Why they're here: It's been a difficult few years for the Blue Jackets. The silver lining is they've been able to accumulate a number of high draft picks and stock their cupboards for future success. Columbus has made seven first-round picks in the past four drafts -- six coming in 12th or higher -- and the Blue Jackets have finally seen those faces matriculate at the next level. Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger, Kent Johnson, David Jiricek and Yegor Chinakhov are all making their way in the NHL (at various speeds) and that bodes well for Columbus' brighter future.

GM Don Waddell also has the luxury of flexible cap space to dole out in trades or use to advantage in free agency that will push Columbus further -- and perhaps faster -- toward getting back into playoff mode.

Cause for concern: Will the Don Waddell era prove different from Jarmo Kekäläinen's reign as GM? Kekäläinen brought talent to Columbus; the team just struggled to take the next step, which is why the Jackets made the postseason only five times in Kekäläinen's 11 years -- with only one second-round appearance. Moving on from Kekäläinen and replacing him with Waddell, who did create a long-term winner in Carolina, is a major step toward their desired destination.

The Blue Jackets once again have one of the NHL's best farm systems. But that comes with the caveat that the success Waddell had in Carolina isn't guaranteed in Columbus. -- Clark

Prospect pipeline: The Blue Jackets' prospect pool is loaded with skill and depth. The strength of the prospect pool is on the blue line, with blue-chip prospects in David Jiricek and Denton Mateychuk, who are confidently projected to be top-four defenders. Stanislav Svozil, Charlie Elick, Corson Ceulemans and Samuel Knazko project to be No. 4/5 defenders with reasonable confidence.

Up front, adding Cayden Lindstrom is a big boost. He and Adam Fantilli will be a strong duo down the middle for years to come. They've added quite a few skilled forwards to the pool in recent drafts by selecting Gavin Brindley, Jordan Dumais and Luca Del Bel Belluz, who have all developed well and are not far off from contributing in the middle of Columbus' NHL lineup.

When a prospect pool has three projected stars, four players projected to be impactful and depth behind them, that is a lot of value.

11. Colorado Avalanche

Overall score: 79.5

Why they're here: Colorado is anchored by NHL scoring leader Nathan MacKinnon, powered further up front by a stalwart top-10 scorer in Mikko Rantanen and has the league's best defenseman in Cale Makar. That's a jaw-dropping trio for any team to have leading the way -- and they are what's keeping Colorado afloat in a strangely off-kilter start to this season. This is when the Avalanche are meant to shine given the strength of their overall roster -- beyond just star power there's significant forward and defensive depth there, when everyone is healthy -- and how stable their coaching from Jared Bednar has been over the years.

Colorado doesn't have the salary cap wiggle room to make major changes, but it shouldn't need to. Valeri Nichushkin has returned, and if the Avalanche can get their goaltending figured out -- all three of their goalies are below .900 in save percentage this season -- they could fly right back up the standings.

Cause for concern: Put simply: Balancing the Stanley Cup contender label while having little cap space and few prospects. The chase for a second title since 2022 has been hamstrung with finding a supporting cast on cheap contracts to surround Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Mikko Rantanen. This forced the Avs' front office to get veterans at team-friendly terms or to tap into their farm system.

The results have been mixed: Despite much regular-season success, the Avs have been eliminated in the first two rounds since 2022, while having just seven prospects drafted beyond the first round since 2017 play for the club...

Prospect pipeline: Calum Ritchie is the lone exciting forward prospect, and he projects to be a middle-six play driver at the NHL level. Ritchie scored a highlight-reel goal in the preseason and has developed into a two-way threat in the middle of the lineup. He's starting the season with the NHL club but should be sent down barring an extraordinary performance. Sean Behrens and Mikhail Gulyayev are both noteworthy prospects, with Gulyayev projected to be an impact defender.

Two impact players are why Colorado is ahead of a few other teams who have more prospects, as those two are both expected to be cornerstone pieces of the future. Behrens, Oskar Olausson and Jean-Luc Foudy are expected to play NHL games, but their projections are less confident as their development plateaus.

12. Toronto Maple Leafs

Overall score: 78.9

Why they're here: More than 60% of the Leafs' cap space is wrapped up in five players. But, Toronto's core of Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander, John Tavares and Morgan Rielly has helped the Leafs to continual regular-season success (postseason outcomes have been notably less positive). The Leafs' present roster might be their most complete in recent years. The additions of Chris Tanev and Oliver Ekman-Larsson to the blue line have made for a noticeable upgrade to Toronto's overall defensive performance, and the Leafs are getting contributions from outstanding young skaters like Matthew Knies.

The Leafs also have Easton Cowan, Fraser Minten and Topi Niemela to look forward to seeing in the future. GM Brad Treliving will be relying on those prospects to make their way up as he ponders how to

use limited cap space on a potential Marner extension and continue supporting his core through these prime years of their careers.

Cause for concern: Trying to capitalize on their championship-caliber roster is the annual goal for the Leafs. As for how Mitch Marner, John Tavares and their combined \$21.9 million cap hit factor into that discussion? That's a question Treliving and his front office staff will seek to answer in the coming months. Both Marner and Tavares are pending unrestricted free agents.

Their respective futures along with the cap space they occupy are two of the most notable details that are expected to play a role in how the Leafs continue to compete in the coming years.

Prospect pipeline: Easton Cowan took a leap last season, to the point where quite a few in hockey circles opined he'd be a top-15 pick in a 2023 redraft after going No. 28 in the actual one. The Leafs have needed a player to match up against players like Brad Marchand and the Tkachuks in the Atlantic Division, and while Cowan is unlikely to hit that level, his play style is a rare commodity.

Artur Akhymov is a real possibility to be starting in goal for the Leafs in the next few years. Fraser Minten needs another big season to cement himself as a middle-six possibility, but the talent is there. Ben Danford and Topi Niemala are valuable defenders, and while Niemala might not fit under Toronto's new management, he has value around the league. Nikita Grebnyonkin caught the eyes of many in the preseason and is likely to be a depth player for the Leafs in the next year or so.

The Leafs have quality prospects at every position, something they will need if they are to have success given their current salary cap situation.

13. Vegas Golden Knights

Overall score: 78.6

Why they're here: The Golden Knights have used every trick in the book to stay ahead of their competition. GM Kelly McCrimmon has been fine trading away picks and prospects to stay in win-now mode. That has left Vegas with a strong NHL roster -- headed by Jack Eichel, Mark Stone, William Karlsson and Shea Theodore -- to keep the Golden Knights on pace to be playoff contenders again (and again).

The team's future depends on it. Vegas doesn't hold another first-round pick until 2027, and it just drafted Trevor Connelly -- a prospect with significant concerns but undeniable upside -- at No. 19 to put him as its brightest hope (or potential trade asset) on the horizon. Vegas has everything it needs -- from McCrimmon to coach Bruce Cassidy to the present lineup -- to push for more success now.

Cause for concern: What could their supporting cast look like in the years to come? There are two reasons why such a question exists for the Golden Knights. The first reason stems from what happened to them in the first-round exit last season, when 12 of their 16 goals were scored by five players. As for the second, most of the bottom-six forwards along with two of their top-six defensemen will need new contracts -- for a team that's used few prospects from its farm system to fill some of those roles.

Prospect pipeline: Given how the Golden Knights' habit of trading their prospects and picks, it is somewhat shocking that this group isn't ranked last. They traded David Edstrom to San Jose in the Tomas Hertl swap, and drafted Trevor Connelly to replace him in June. Connelly has tremendous talent; if he can mature on and off the ice, he's got a chance to be a real difference-maker.

Outside of that, forward Brendan Brisson and defenseman Lukas Cormier are the prospects with the best chances to become middle-of-the-lineup players at their respective positions. Matyas Sapovaliv projects as a middle-six winger with modest confidence, but is most likely a third-line player in the NHL.

Carl Lindbom is a noteworthy goaltending prospect, but there is not a lot in the nets in the Vegas pipeline.

Keeping with the organization's modus operandi, there's a greater chance most of these guys are traded than play 200 games in Vegas.

14. Edmonton Oilers

Overall score: 78.5

Why they're here: The Oilers enter every season laden with high expectations because of their current core -- that's Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Zach Hyman, Evan Bouchard and others -- who make Edmonton a dynamic contender to win right now. That's a good thing given their prospect situation. Edmonton did grab Matthew Savoie in an offseason trade with Buffalo to bolster that group, but losing Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg to St. Louis on offer sheets stings. Vasily Podkolzin -- a 23-year-old winger Edmonton acquired after losing the latter two skaters -- hasn't been lighting up the scoresheet, but Roby Järventie (an AHL standout) may have call-up potential.

Really though, Edmonton has enough in its lineup to be a top-tier contender -- when they get a full-team contribution (and don't entirely rely on those stars to carry the team).

Cause for concern: Do they have enough around Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid to win a Stanley Cup before time runs out? They're coming off what was the most successful season of the Draisaitl-McDavid era, having just fallen a victory short of winning a Stanley Cup.

But they now face the prospect of trying to replicate that while also navigating even more financial challenges. The Oilers have 14 players who are older than 30, while their homegrown candidate pool took a hit when they didn't have the cap space to retain Broberg and Holloway.

Prospect pipeline: The acquisition of Matthew Savoie and Roby Jarventie through trade and Sam O'Reilly in the draft added quality up front. Those three are young players who will need to step up on Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl's wings.

After Edmonton lost Philip Broberg to an offer sheet, Beau Akey is the player in the Oilers' pipeline with the best chance to play a top-four role in the NHL. There's more here than in previous seasons, and the Oilers are hoping their current superstars can elevate the play of those prospects as they filter into the lineup.

15. Buffalo Sabres

Overall score: 78.5

Why they're here: If Buffalo had a slogan, it would include the word "process." GM Kevyn Adams talks about that ad nauseam. The Sabres are nursing a historically bad postseason drought (13 seasons and counting since they made the playoffs, and 17 seasons since winning a series) and Buffalo doesn't appear any closer to snapping that skid despite a coaching change (back to Lindy Ruff) and high hopes for upstart goaltender Devon Levi (who's struggled this season, to say the least).

What Buffalo does have is cap space available to make trades, and some solid prospects. Jiri Kulich has seen some NHL playing time, and Isak Rosen is performing well in the AHL, too. But it's the Sabres' core that has to propel the team forward. Getting consistency from everyone -- Tage Thompson, Jack Quinn, Owen Power, Dylan Cozens, Zach Benson, JJ Peterka, etc. -- is what's going to move the needle, and define Buffalo's future.

Cause for concern: Four different general managers and eight different head-coach changes. That's how much turnover the Sabres have gone through since they last made the playoffs in 2011. In that time,

they've made several top-10 picks, while drafting 15 first-round picks total from 2013 through 2022. Building through the draft while acquiring additional young talent has created a roster that appears ready to capitalize on its promise.

Is it possible that the Sabres now have the coaching staff and the front office that turns that promise into tenable results?

Prospect pipeline: The Sabres use a distinct blend of analytical tools and scouting to approach the draft, and very clearly, approach every pick with the "best player available" mantra. As a result, they have a well-rounded pool that includes Devon Levi in goal, Maxim Strbak and Gavin McCarthy on defense, and a litany of high-value forwards in Jiri Kulich, Noah Ostlund and Konsta Helenius.

Trading Matthew Savoie to Edmonton drops them a tick, as does the graduation of Zach Benson. They have projectible NHL players at every position, four potential impact players and good depth to complement the talent on their NHL roster. Buffalo is set up for long-term success but needs to start translating the value into wins at the NHL level.

16. Nashville Predators

Overall score: 78.3

Why they're here: The Predators went all-in this offseason acquiring Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei to put them over the top in an ultra-competitive Central Division. Nashville has instead been one of the league's worst teams, with an underperforming roster (save perhaps for Filip Forsberg and Roman Josi) that GM Barry Trotz openly admits he's willing to rebuild if his club "doesn't get it going."

What does that mean for Nashville's future? Well, they have several long-term, expensive contracts on the books, giving Trotz little space to wield in a retooling effort. The Predators have decent prospects on the way -- including Joakim Kemell and Zach L'Heureux -- but will Trotz really want to waste the remaining good years that Stamkos, Ryan O'Reilly and other veterans have to offer?

Cause for concern: Was their free-agent spending spree too much, too fast? Even before their slow start, some form of that question shadowed the Predators. They went from being a team that gradually retooled their roster into one that forced its way into the discussion about their place in the Stanley Cup landscape.

It's possible those early questions could be wiped away with success later in the season. But what won't go away is the need to win now given the Predators have 10 players on their active roster who are older than 30.

Prospect pipeline: The Predators skyrocketed up prospect rankings lists when Barry Trotz stated his team would draft players with star potential -- and followed that up by taking Matthew Wood and Tanner Molendyk in 2023. However, the trade of Yaroslav Askarov, who is arguably the best goaltending prospect in the game, is a big loss to the pool value.

Outside of Wood and Molendyk, who have solid NHL projections toward the top of the lineup, the Preds have good depth. Adding Egor Surin and Teddy Stiga to Fedor Svechkov, Zachary L'Heureux and Joakim Kemell gives the Predators more than a few darts at the board when it comes to the middle of their lineup. Losing Askarov is a calculated risk, but the Preds are well set up to score goals for quite some time.

17. Vancouver Canucks

Overall score: 77.1

Why they're here: The Canucks were a powerhouse last season who haven't quite shown the same promise to start this season. But that's not to say Vancouver doesn't have the ability to rise. Quinn Hughes leads a team stocked with veteran talents including J.T. Miller, Brock Boeser, Elias Pettersson and free agent signing Jake DeBrusk.

An injury to Boeser and struggles for Pettersson have undoubtedly impacted the Canucks and their win-now mindset, but there's plenty of season left. And fortunately GM Patrik Allvin is seeing improvements in the Canucks' farm system. Jonathan Lekkerimäki had a terrific season in the SHL (grabbing Rookie of the Year honors) and both Aatu Rätty and Arshdeep Bains are ready to reach the NHL ranks in full-time spots. How they make that transition could determine the way Allvin wields Vancouver's cap space to move the needle further on their future.

Cause for concern: What does their long-term place within the Western Conference hierarchy look like? Last season suggested the Canucks were ready to join the Avs, Golden Knights, Oilers and Stars in the conference power clubhouse. But those four teams have earned that status over time -- and that appears to be the biggest question facing the Canucks.

Then there are the questions about what a new Boeser contract would look like for a franchise that already has eight players with more than three years remaining on their current deals.

Prospect pipeline: Tom Willander and Jonathan Lekkerimäki are the prized prospects of the pool, with Lekkerimäki representing the best shot for a true impact player in the top six. Willander didn't have the season the Canucks had hoped for in 2023-24, but he is comfortably projected to become a reliable second-pairing option and should take a major step forward this season. Both players carry tremendous value at their respective positions, and are more likely to be impact players than not.

Elias Pettersson (the defenseman) and Kirill Kudryavtsev have fair shots to be depth defenders, providing good value for the selections.

18. Anaheim Ducks

Overall score: 77.0

Why they're here: It's been seven years since Anaheim last made an appearance in the postseason. In the interim, the club's focus is on building toward a brighter future -- and they actually have one.

Anaheim is stocked with intriguing prospects, including Olen Zellweger (a standout with the AHL's San Diego Gulls), Cutter Gauthier (the fifth overall pick in 2022) and Beckett Sennecke (selected third overall in 2024). The Ducks also boast an impressive rookie goaltender in Lukas Dostal to go along with a young core that includes Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Pavel Mintyukov and Trevor Zegras. If and when GM Pat Verbeek wants to continue making upgrades, there will be ample cap space available, too. Anaheim is in prime position to be a contender down the road.

Cause for concern: Rebuilds can go in one of two directions. Either all of the moving parts work in alignment to manifest long-term success, or there's a systematic disconnect that begins to eat away at what was once thought to be a strong future. So often the difference between those two paths can come down to what's done by the coaching staff, front office and ownership. Given the young talent on the roster and in the system, the Ducks are now at that crossroads. Which path will they tread into the future?

Prospect pipeline: The Ducks have been a top drafting team for over a decade, so there is no surprise they now have a top-5 prospect pool. The Ducks have prospects at every position that are high end, with 2024 No. 3 pick Beckett Sennecke headlining the pipeline. With Sennecke and Olen Zellweger adding to

a young NHL core that includes Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Cutter Gauthier, Pavel Mintyukov and Lukas Dostal, the Ducks are primed for years of success.

On the back end, Stian Solberg joins Tristan Luneau, Tyson Hinds and Noah Warren as defenders who are projected to fit in bottom-two pairings. Nathan Gaucher and Sasha Pastujov could be good depth pieces up front, with Calle Clang and Tomas Suchanek as reasonable depth options in goal.

The value of the Ducks' pool is on defense, with five players expected to make the NHL in varying roles.

19. Seattle Kraken

Overall score: 77.0

Why they're here: The Kraken are not Vegas 2.0. Seattle's expansion into the NHL has been a slower burn under GM Ron Francis as he's attempted to set the Kraken up for sustainable, long-term success.

In the short term, that means making one coaching change (to Dan Bylsma) and primarily sticking with a core that has had one memorable playoff run in three seasons. Seattle is again an average club eyeing steady improvements into the future. The Kraken's first draft selections -- Calder Trophy winner Matty Beniers and Ryker Evans --- have already landed NHL roles, and there is more young talent poised to do the same. Berkley Catton -- taken 17th in 2024 -- dominated the WHL in 2023-24 with a 116-point season, and Carson Rehkopf and Lukas Dragicevic have had similar success at the junior level. When Seattle can bring them up to speed in the NHL it'll shape the next chapter for the Kraken as a potential yearly contender.

Cause for concern: They've been a lottery team. They've been a playoff team that was a win away from the Western Conference finals. They've also been a team that missed the playoffs because of inconsistency. In that time, Kraken GM Ron Francis has overseen the construction of one of the NHL's stronger farm systems. Francis has also spent quite a bit in free agency in an attempt to supplement the roster. Yet the Kraken still face the same questions: When will everything align? And if it does, will it lead to them establishing an identity?

Prospect pipeline: The Kraken have quite a few interesting prospects that are expected to be impactful at the NHL level, led by Berkly Catton, a skilled center who piles up points. Beyond Catton, the Kraken have Eduard Sale, Jagger Firkus, Carson Rehkopf, David Goyette and Jani Nyman, all of whom have fair NHL projections in middle-six roles.

The back end is loaded with prospects, with Ryker Evans, Lukas Dragicevic and Caden Price projected to play consistently in the NHL. Niklas Kokko is a good prospect in goal with a reasonable NHL projection.

The Kraken have built themselves quite the prospect pipeline, with lots of players who should make an impact in the NHL in the next two to three seasons.

T-20. Chicago Blackhawks

Overall score: 76.9

Why they're here: The Blackhawks' rebuild was immediately expedited by drafting Connor Bedard first overall in 2023, but one player alone won't change Chicago's fortunes. Fortunately, there are prospects on the way to help Chicago reload in seasons ahead. Beyond Bedard, the Blackhawks have Alex Vlasic and Lukas Reichel in their NHL ranks now, with Frank Nazar and Kevin Korchiński looking to come back into the mix.

And there's a strong pipeline from there, with more possibilities for GM Kyle Davidson to continue developing or trade. Chicago's cap space is enviable as well, and should be a tool for Davidson to use in

making the Blackhawks better in time -- and soon, given they won't want to waste any of Bedard's prime on being less than contenders.

Cause for concern: Other than the fact that quite a few people in Chicagoland can't watch the Blackhawks on local TV? In terms of the on-ice component, it's a matter of seeing how the front office continues to build around Connor Bedard. The excitement that comes with having a generational talent also comes with a countdown for when that generational talent goes from being the future to being a present for a fan base. The Blackhawks are no different, and what they do now could either help Bedard & Co. win -- or force them to pay later should any mistakes arise.

Prospect pipeline: It's usually helpful when you have back-to-back high lottery picks, and that description fits Chicago. Artyom Levshunov -- the No. 2 pick this summer -- has all the makings of a top-pairing defender, joining Kevin Korchiński as another impact defender in the pipeline. Oliver Moore and Frank Nazar are head and shoulders above the other forward prospects, with both projected to be top-six offensive contributors.

Beyond Levshunov and Korchiński on the blue line, Sam Rinzler and Nolan Allan are projected to become depth NHL players. Chicago's prospect pool gets a boost in goal with Adam Gajan and Drew Comesso, who have a fair chance of becoming NHL goaltenders.

They have potential impact players at every position in the pipeline, with good depth when Sacha Boisvert, Marek Vanacker, Ryder Rolston, AJ Spellacy, Ethan Del Mastro and Wyatt Kaiser are considered.

T-20. Washington Capitals

Overall score: 76.9

Why they're here: The Capitals were a surprise addition to the playoff field last season. They won't be this season. Washington is off to a hot start powered by Dylan Strome, Alexander Ovechkin and John Carlson, and the new addition of goaltender Logan Thompson (by equally new GM Chris Patrick) has been a bona fide game changer.

That's given Washington more juice in the short term than maybe they expected. Second-year head coach Spencer Carbery has found his rhythm and passed it onto the current roster to help them thrive in unexpected ways. That all bodes well for today. Looking ahead to tomorrow and it's all about Ryan Leonard -- Washington's eighth overall pick in 2023 who is dominating at Boston College -- who is poised to join Connor McMichael, Alexei Protas and Hendrix Lapierre as the next wave. -- Shilton

Cause for concern: Perhaps the place to start with the Capitals is that they're slated to have more than \$25 million available entering free agency next season. Nearly \$15 million of that will come from getting Nicklas Backstrom and T.J. Oshie's contracts off the books.

Still, it leaves the Caps needing to make some decisions about players such as pending UFAs Jakob Chychrun and Andrew Mangiapane, while figuring out what to do in net as both Charlie Lindgren and Logan Thompson are set to hit the open market -- and need significant raises from their current cap hits.

Prospect pipeline: The Caps' pipeline lacks depth but has a few gems. Ryan Leonard is one of the best prospects outside of the NHL and projects to be a long-term player in the top six who impacts the game at both ends of the ice. He's not Tom Wilson 2.0, but he certainly fits the mold of a skilled player who drives opponents nuts.

Ivan Miroshnichenko and Hendrix Lapierre have shown they can make an impact at the NHL level, and both come out of the pipeline given their expected NHL roles this season. Andrew Cristall is a high-risk,

high-reward player whose projection is less confident, but his ceiling is as a top-six playmaker. The recent addition of Terik Parascak gives the Caps another skilled forward with top-six potential. Jake Karabela has tools to become a bottom-six NHL player if he continues to develop at the current pace.

The Caps have two defensemen projected to play consistently at the NHL in Ryan Chesley and Vincent Iorio, but they lack a true blue-chip defender in the pipeline.

22. San Jose Sharks

Overall score: 76.3

Why they're here: The Sharks are excelling at their rebuild. San Jose's roster -- admittedly short on top-end skaters -- is (mostly) place-holding for all the talent still on its way. The Sharks selected Macklin Celebrini first overall in June, and he has burst his way into the NHL immediately, to complement San Jose's other highly prized prospect in Will Smith.

GM Mike Grier, with a wealth of cap space, also grabbed elite goaltending prospect Yaroslav Askarov in a trade with Nashville. Plus, there are a handful of skaters in the AHL -- think Thomas Bordeleau, Shakir Mukhamadullin and Filip Bystedt -- who are seasoning nicely with an eye toward filling spots for San Jose in the near future.

Cause for concern: Finishing with the NHL's worst record last season means there's a need to find an upward trajectory, which can be more challenging than outsiders might assume. That's why the decision to hire a first-time NHL head coach in Ryan Warsofsky was so crucial. He spent the past two seasons with the Sharks as an assistant but had won in the ECHL and AHL before making the jump to the NHL.

Winning while developing was an obstacle Warsofsky navigated in the ECHL and AHL. It's something the Sharks believe he can replicate as their rebuild now features Celebrini and Smith.

Prospect pipeline: The Sharks' prospect pool got a big boost with the drafting of defenseman Sam Dickinson and acquisition of goaltender Yaroslav Askarov. Add Quentin Musty and Mattias Havelid to the group and the Sharks have plenty of talent with which to surround Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith. Every player mentioned has the potential to be a difference maker at the NHL level.

Outside of that, the value of the pool is buoyed by the presence of Luca Cagnoni on the back end, and several potential middle-six players in Filip Bystedt, Daniil Gushchin and Thomas Bordeleau. The strength of the Sharks' prospect pool is in the forwards, but the addition of Askarov and Dickinson will make the Sharks a formidable opponent in the next few years.

23. Calgary Flames

Overall score: 75.5

Why they're here: The Flames' 5-0-1 start to this season was unexpected -- and proved unsustainable. Calgary has regressed since to sit as the middle-of-the-pack team they projected to be. What the Flames do have is an excellent goaltending duo headlined by rising star Dustin Wolf -- a serious Calder Trophy candidate -- and significant cap space to use in the next few years.

Whatever those additions might be will complement a fascinating group of prospects highlighted by Zayne Parekh, Matvei Griden, and Andrew Basha. There's also Connor Zary, already playing at the NHL level and showing potential even to take over a center job. GM Craig Conroy has enough players in the pipeline to be optimistic about Calgary's chances in the years to come. -- Shilton

Cause for concern: Stability has been an issue in Calgary the last few years. And while there appears to be more stability this season, there are questions about what path the Flames take in order to challenge for a playoff spot both now and in the future. They've been in a retool following a mass exodus from

their most recent rebuild. But their average first-round draft position since 2019 has been 19th -- and they missed the playoffs in three of those seasons. How do the Flames get back to being a perennial postseason contender?

Prospect pipeline: Zayne Parekh leads the way and buoys the Flames' prospect pool value in a significant way. He's projected to be a top-pairing offensive dynamo in the NHL.

Samuel Honzek, Andrew Basha and Matvei Gridin all have fairly confident second-line projections. Luke Misa and Aydar Suniev have top-nine NHL projections with variance.

Outside of Parekh, the blue line has a few notable prospects in Hunter Brzustewicz, Henry Mews and Jeremie Poirier all having NHL potential. Brzustewicz and Poirier have the strongest NHL projections, as both are projected to play No. 4 or No. 5 roles at the NHL level with continued development.

24. Tampa Bay Lightning

Overall score: 75.3

Why they're here: The Lightning refuse to let their contention window close. All credit to GM Julien BriseBois for staying aggressive on that front. BriseBois is willing to make tough decisions -- like signing Jake Guentzel over former Tampa Bay captain Steven Stamkos -- if it means sustaining the Lightning's long run of success for another season.

It's working so far, with the Lightning a top-10 offensive team again, with a solid back end (anchored by Victor Hedman) and goaltending (from Andrei Vasilevskiy). That's good, because their win-now approach has mortgaged much of the club's future. BriseBois has made just two first-round selections since 2018, and the only reason they have an elite prospect in Conor Geekie is that BriseBois traded Mikhail Sergachev to Utah for him. For a cap-strapped team like Tampa Bay it's all about leveraging their current roster and seeing how long they can run it back.

Cause for concern: Winning two Stanley Cups comes with a cost -- and the Lightning's current situation is emblematic of that reality. Having nine players with more than three years remaining on their contracts provides stability. But it also means the Lightning have one of the tightest cap dynamics in the NHL.

That's another reason why they've gone through what's become an annual parting with players who helped them win those titles. And the farm system that once gave them a near endless supply of homegrown talent is also facing its own challenges.

Prospect pipeline: The Lightning haven't drafted much in the past five seasons, and it shows. The acquisition of Conor Geekie in the offseason via the Mikhail Sergachev trade gives Tampa Bay a prospect expected to play a middle-six scoring role in the NHL. Meanwhile, Isaac Howard and Ethan Gauthier are expected to become NHL regulars, with Howard expected to fit in a secondary scoring role.

If Gabriel Szturc and Dylan Duke can continue to develop with Syracuse, they could be reliable bottom-six options in the future.

25. Los Angeles Kings

Overall score: 75.2

Why they're here: The Kings have fallen into that midrange category in recent years after a stunning run of success that earned them a pair of Cup titles in 2012 and 2014. What hasn't changed is how much L.A. relies on its heavyweights -- Anze Kopitar, Adrian Kempe, Kevin Fiala and Drew Doughty -- to keep them on track. And that's after the Pierre-Luc Dubois experiment crashed and burned after a single season.

The Kings made a coaching change last season from Todd McLellan to Jim Hiller in an effort to gain traction now and they're working on that. The Kings were able to graduate their top prospect Brandt Clarke to the NHL, but there's more expected out of Quinton Byfield than what he's shown in a slow start. And goaltender Erik Portillo -- a rising figure in the AHL -- should provide competition at that position sooner than later.

Cause for concern: This iteration of the Kings has become a cautionary tale. It wasn't that long ago when GM Rob Blake was able to retain franchise icons Drew Doughty and Anze Kopitar, while building a farm system that was one of the NHL's most promising at its peak. From there, the Kings supplemented their roster by making the sort of free agent signings and trades that created intrigue.

While they've been a consistent playoff team, they've yet to advance past the first round, and that once-vaunted prospect cupboard now looks a bit bare.

Prospect pipeline: The Kings' pipeline has taken a bit of a hit because of the graduations of Alex Laferriere, Alex Turcotte and Brandt Clarke.

Liam Greentree is a good addition to the prospect pool, and represents Los Angeles' best chance at an impact player. The Kings have projectable depth players in Koehn Zimmer, Francesco Pinelli, Kenny Connors and Samuel Helenius. Zimmer is the best of that bunch and should fill a third-line role in the next few years.

But for the first time in recent memory, the Kings lack a true top-tier prospect and will need to rely on developing the current stable to fill the lineup.

26. St. Louis Blues

Overall score: 74.8

Why they're here: The Blues are an interesting case study. Their current lineup includes terrific talents such as Jordan Kyrou, Robert Thomas, Pavel Buchnevich and Colton Parayko, and GM Doug Armstrong has made efforts to improve St. Louis now even further by acquiring Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg on offer sheets from Edmonton. Yet the Blues are a below-average team struggling to score and with abysmal special teams.

Based on Armstrong's aggressive move with the Oilers it doesn't seem like St. Louis is interested in a re-tooling process, perhaps based on the lack of cap space available to make significant alterations right now. That could have the Blues facing a third straight season outside the playoff picture. Their farm system does have a few names worth mentioning, including Zachary Bolduc, Zac Dean and Tanner Dickinson. And Jimmy Snuggerud -- the Blues' first-round pick in 2022 now at the University of Minnesota -- could be next to break the NHL barrier.

Cause for concern: Teams faced with tight cap constraints are typically either in the midst of -- or about to exit -- a championship window. The Blues are not in either of those situations. They've missed the playoffs for two straight campaigns. Missing for a third consecutive season would tie the longest drought in franchise history.

They have eight players with more than three years left on their contracts, while nine have some variation of a no-trade clause. Consistently making the playoffs could play a role in somewhat softening their cap reality in the coming years, while missing the playoffs again further amplifies those concerns. -- Clark

Prospect pipeline: The Blues are loaded with NHL forward talent, and drafted Adam Jiricek this summer, a player with incredible potential on the blue line.

Dalibor Dvorsky, Jimmy Snuggerud, Zach Dean and Zachary Bolduc are all expected to contribute offensively at the NHL level. The combination of those four players brings a blend on scoring, dynamic transition play, playmaking and forechecking. Add Otto Stenberg, a two-way player who controls the pace of game, and Adam Jecho, a player with skill and size, and the Blues have six players projected to be impactful in top-nine roles.

The Blues lack that level of talent on the blue line aside from Jiricek, with Theo Lindstein representing the best chance at developing into a middle-pairing defenseman. The value is clearly with the forward group, one that could be really good for years to come.

27. Montreal Canadiens

Overall score: 73.4

Why they're here: The Canadiens own one of the league's premier prospect pools. That's what Montreal will be pulling from as it continues working through a lagging rebuild. While Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield, Juraj Slafkovský and Kaiden Guhle (among others) are providing what energy they can to the lineup now, Montreal will take larger steps ahead in the future if their other talents keep developing. Lane Hutson -- Montreal's second-round pick in 2022 -- has been an NHL regular this season, and Joshua Roy (averaging a point per game in the AHL) could be right behind him.

Ivan Demidov and David Reinbacher -- Montreal's most recent first-round choices -- will also make their way into the mix eventually. That's exciting for what's to come in Montreal. And so is the eventual return of a healthy Patrik Laine, who could be the midseason boost these Canadiens need to power through another down campaign.

Cause for concern: Striking a balance between gradual progress and letting prospects develop has been the Canadiens' plan the last few years. Yet what appears to be one of the major challenges facing Habs GM Kent Hughes is how the franchise will make the successful transition from what they are now into what they hope to become.

Getting to that final destination could require deft asset management; the Canadiens have a chance to offload cap space in 2024-25 knowing they must make some significant investments in their young talent in the years ahead.

Prospect pipeline: Montreal passed on Matvei Michkov in the 2023 draft, but it wasn't going to pass on Ivan Demidov. Adding Demidov to a pipeline that has Lane Hutson and David Reinbacher on the blue line is tidy work. Demidov is projected to be a star at the NHL level, and will be a key piece of Montreal's scoring.

Hutson looks as if he's going to be a difference maker offensively at even strength and running the power play. Reinbacher's development is a concern given his injuries, but he has the talent to become a solid top-four defender.

Michael Hage is off to a good start with Michigan, and has a good chance to be a middle-six offensive contributor. Filip Mesar, Owen Beck and Joshua Roy all project as reliable bottom-six contributors. Jacob Fowler's development has been outstanding and while goaltenders are harder to project, he could be Montreal's goalie of the future if he continues on his current trajectory.

28. Ottawa Senators

Overall score: 71.9

Why they're here: The Senators have pushed to be a playoff team again since last making a postseason run in 2016-17. That seven-year drought has yet to be punctuated despite Ottawa wielding an

impressive core of Tim Stutzle, Brady Tkachuk, Drake Batherson and Josh Norris. The offseason addition of Linus Ullmark in net has helped, and Ottawa is off to a better start.

They have to hope those skaters -- among others -- keep tracking upward, because there are few prospects prepared to take NHL slots at the moment. Carter Yakemchuk -- the seventh overall pick in 2024 -- could be in their top four down the road, and Xavier Bourgault may matriculate sooner to add offensively. And there's Mads Søgaard holding up the Senators' potential future in net. For now the Senators are still finding their footing and how well they do could determine what GM Steve Staios does with limited cap space at the deadline and into the coming summer.

Cause for concern: Can all the changes made within the past year help the Senators figure out their place in the Eastern Conference landscape? They got a new owner in Michael Andlauer who then promoted a new GM in Staios who eventually hired a new coach in Travis Green. Having that many sweeping organizational changes has led to several questions being asked of the Senators. Perhaps the most notable: Can this lead to the Sens eventually returning to the playoffs for the first time since 2016-17? Or is more work needed?

Prospect pipeline: Carter Yakemchuk is far and away the best prospect in the pool; he's the only prospect expected to be a true difference-maker in this pipeline. Outside of Yakemchuk, who looks like a blue-chip defender, Zack Ostapchuk projects to be a reliable bottom-six player. Tyler Boucher continues to be perplexing and is likely to top out in a bottom-six role as a physical, forechecking presence.

Tomas Hamara and Xavier Bourgault have NHL projections as depth players, and could improve their stock with continued development in Belleville this season.

29. Philadelphia Flyers

Overall score: 71.8

Why they're here: The Flyers' future arrived in a significant way with Matvei Michkov -- the seventh overall pick in 2023 -- making landfall in the NHL this season. He's already the club's second-leading scorer, which says plenty about the state of Philadelphia's current roster.

The Flyers' are 29th in goals against, 21st in scoring and their goaltending is woefully inconsistent despite high expectations for the now-injured Samuel Ersson this season. Coach John Tortorella has been his usual explosive self, trying to guide Philadelphia away from the standings basement, even making Michkov a healthy scratch to send a message. But Michkov is key to the Flyers' future, as is its core of prospects-turned-players like Bobby Brink, Tyson Foerster and Cam York to complement Owen Tippett, Morgan Frost and others. There are promising names for back-end support in Emil Andrae and Ronnie Attard. That's something for the Flyers to cling to for the future.

Cause for concern: Roster flexibility, or a lack thereof, appears to be the biggest challenge facing the Flyers in the future. They have eight players who are under contract for more than two years, with half of them having deals longer than four. It's what makes the need for players such as captain Sean Couturier, Travis Konecny, Travis Sanheim and Owen Tippett to have strong seasons even more vital.

They must also find success with players on their ELCs to help ease their cap limitations. The Flyers have \$11.446 million in dead cap space, though that figure decreases to \$5.329 million ahead of next season.

Prospect pipeline: Jett Luchanko -- who began the season with Philly -- is back with his junior club. Oliver Bonk and Emil Andrae represent a bright future on the Flyers' blue line. The Flyers have three potential middle-six players in Denver Barkey, Elliot Desnoyers and Massimo Rizzo, with all three projected to contribute in the next two or three years. In goal, the Flyers have two intriguing prospects in Alexei Kolosov and Carson Bjarnason.

The Flyers have quite a bit of talent in the pipeline at each position, with much of the attributed value at the goaltending position.

30. New York Islanders

Overall score: 71.5

Why they're here: The Islanders continually run it back with a similar roster while angling for different (i.e., better) results. GM Lou Lamoriello has been in place since 2018 and made four coaching changes in that span -- right up to current bench boss Patrick Roy -- but what remains the same is New York's scoring troubles without enough high-powered forwards.

There's some hope on the horizon given the strong start Cole Eiserman -- New York's 20th overall pick in 2024 -- is having at Boston University, and William Dufour is a power forward in the system on his way up. Samuel Bolduc also has a chance of taking an NHL slot soon, while New York's defense already has a vital rising star in Noah Dobson going. In the present, these Islanders are relying on the same combination of Kyle Palmieri, Anders Lee, Bo Horvat and Brock Nelson to win the day -- and that'll be their story, it seems, until the next wave of skaters are ready.

Cause for concern: They have a roster with 11 players who are older than 30. They have a farm system that was hindered by not having a first-round pick for four straight years, while only four of their draft picks since 2016 have become full-time NHL players that have played in more than 140 NHL games.

As of now, the Islanders are a team that will push for a playoff spot. They've done it in five of the past six seasons. But with an aging roster and a farm system that's struggled to replenish their roster? It does raise questions about the Isles' long-term aspirations.

Prospect pipeline: The Islanders' prospect pipeline lacked an impact player until Cole Eiserman fell into their laps at the draft in June. He is projected to be a true scoring threat in the NHL, something this system has lacked for years.

Jesse Pulkkinen was a solid selection at No. 54, and projects to be a top-four, all-situations defender. Calle Odellius and Danny Nelson project to be reliable middle-of-the-lineup players who should fit well in Patrick Roy's offensive system. William Dufour, Matthew Maggio and Alex Jefferies are potential depth options, but are likely to be bubble players.

The Islanders' prospect pool improved with the additions of Eiserman and Pulkkinen, and they will need both to play meaningful roles in the near future.

31. Boston Bruins

Overall score: 71.2

Why they're here: The Bruins' roster is starting to look (and possibly feel) its age, with a mediocre .500 start to this season and a head-scratching minus-16 goal differential (third worst in the Eastern Conference). It was inevitable that Boston would eventually experience a downturn while the next wave of Bruins gets settled into NHL roles -- and Boston does have some young talent to sustain them in years ahead.

Morgan Geekie -- currently skating on the Bruins' top line -- is finding his way, along with Trent Frederic and John Beecher. In the wings are Fabian Lysell and Matthew Poitras (both now in the AHL). But Boston's core -- headlined by Brad Marchand, David Pastrnak and Charlie McAvoy -- needs reinforcements now. Their lack of available cap space makes that tough to do, so improvements are required from within.

Cause for concern: Could the years of trying to win in the present eventually catch up to the Bruins? Since drafting superstar right winger David Pastrnak in 2014, the Bruins have had a mixed history with first-round picks. They've held onto homegrown talents such as Charlie McAvoy, John Beecher and Fabian Lysell. But they've either traded first-round picks (2018, 2020, 2022 and 2023) or watched some of those players leave.

That's been further compounded by the fact that since 2018 the Bruins have had just three players they drafted after the first round reach the NHL.

Prospect pipeline: The Bruins find themselves at the bottom of the pipeline rankings, specifically after Matthew Poitras and Mason Lohrei graduated last season. The Bruins were able to add Dean Letourneau in the draft, and he joins Fabian Lysell as the only two forwards projected to play in more than 200 games in a meaningful capacity.

Outside of that, the Bruins lack prospects who are expected to reach the 200-game threshold in the NHL, a consequence of sustained success over the past two decades.

32. Pittsburgh Penguins

Overall score: 70.3

Why they're here: The Penguins aren't what they once were -- and that's an understatement. Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang remain, but Pittsburgh is a shadow of the Cup contender they used to be with that trio leading the charge. GM Kyle Dubas came in spouting a strong belief in those same players to see the Penguins through more successful seasons and it's not happening -- Pittsburgh has missed the postseason in consecutive years (a first in the Crosby era); based on their start, it'll be three straight this spring.

The worse news for Dubas is the club's limited cap space and dwindling prospect pool. Dubas attempted to fix that issue by acquiring Rutger McGroarty from Winnipeg, but he quickly slid back to the AHL after a brief NHL stint. Samuel Poulin -- Pittsburgh's 21st overall pick in 2019 -- has found his way into a role, while others -- including 2022 21st pick Owen Pickering -- are further off. Dubas has his work cut out to revamp these Penguins, and whether coach Mike Sullivan is part of that process is only one of many questions still to be answered.

Cause for concern: What was initially intended to be just a one-year playoff hiatus for Crosby, Malkin and Letang soon turned into a two-year postseason absence. Now there's a possibility the Penguins could miss the playoffs for a third straight season given their slow start.

Regardless of what happens this season, the Penguins still face questions about how to best prolong their window with Crosby, Malkin and Letang, while managing what their future could look like without them. What makes it even more complicated is that they've held on to their first-round pick just four times since 2013, and the majority of the players they've drafted since 2014 are playing elsewhere. -- Clark

Prospect pipeline: The Penguins haven't had a strong prospect pool in two decades, probably because they've won a few Stanley Cups and have had three first-ballot Hall of Famers on their roster for the duration of that time.

Owen Pickering is projected to play NHL games, but he is going to need to take some major development steps to be the impact defender the Penguins projected when they drafted him in 2022. Tristan Broz is on his way to becoming a middle-six offensive contributor, and he will look to find his groove in the AHL after leaving Denver. Ville Koivunen provides a boost to the pipeline and has a shot to

be a bottom-six player. Joel Blomqvist offers a good option in goal, and has seen extended action in the NHL this season.