



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips  
October 02, 2024**

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## Columbus Blue Jackets preseason: 4 takeaways from 3-2 loss to Washington Capitals

By Brian Hedger – October 2, 2024

Despite making a late push, the Blue Jackets dropped to 3-2-0 in exhibition games with a 3-2 loss to the Washington Capitals on Monday night at Nationwide Arena. Rookies Denton Mateychuk and Luca Del Bel Belluz scored goals for Columbus, which started goalie Daniil Tarasov (23 saves).

Washington's goals were scored by Nic Dowd, Tom Wilson and former Blue Jackets center Pierre-Luc Dubois, who capped a 5-on-3 power-play with the eventual winning goal less than a second before the second period ended. Mateychuk tied it 1-1 on his second goal of the preseason shortly after Dowd scored the game's first goal at 6:49 of the first.

Del Bel Belluz pulled the Blue Jackets within a goal late in the third on his first goal of the preseason. Columbus had multiple chances to tie it in the final minutes, pulling Tarasov for an extra skater with more than two minutes to play, but Capitals goalie Logan Thompson came up big.

"We definitely flipped the ice," Del Bel Belluz said. "We had the puck on our sticks. There were definitely chances for us to score. Sometimes the puck luck's not on your side, so it is what it is."

Here are four takeaways:

### **Denton Mateychuk isn't making things easy for Columbus Blue Jackets' GM Don Waddell**

Mateychuk is a rookie, has played only in NHL preseason games and his most likely destination is the Cleveland Monsters of the American Hockey League. That doesn't mean it's written in stone.

Mateychuk's goal was another laser from distance to beat a solid NHL goalie, and that's a skill that can't be overstocked. That said, it's probably not enough on its own to move Mateychuk ahead of more experienced options for defensive depth. The rest of Mateychuk's game has also stood out positively, which may help in his chase for an NHL spot.

"I feel like I'm playing good hockey," Mateychuk said. "I feel good out there. I'm just going out there to play my game and whatever happens, happens. You still bring that intensity and prepare for games, whether it's a junior game or the NHL preseason."

The Blue Jackets' main emphasis for Mateychuk this year is for him to play and learn at the professional level rather than watch as a healthy scratch. That's why it's more likely he'll start out in the AHL after Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell makes the final decision. For now, however, the possibility of Mateychuk grabbing an NHL defensive role remains open while he continues to impress.

"His calmness, his poise as a young player ... he doesn't panic in those situations," coach Dean Evason said. "You watch, even after he makes a mistake and turns the puck over, it's not a panic mode. He doesn't go chasing after it and then compound that one mistake. That's why you don't see that glaring error out of him."

Evason also cautioned against reading too much into Mateychuk's success in exhibition games.

"This is preseason, and the NHL is a great league," he said. "(It's) the best league in the world, and when the regular season starts there's a lot of heat and a lot of heat on defensemen ... and there's a lot of heat on young defensemen. So, we have to be careful what we do, and not get too far ahead of

ourselves. We like his progress, as we do with a lot of our players. If it works out that he's here, great. If it doesn't, great."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson is still killing penalties**

Kent Johnson's speed and quickness have improved after an offseason of working on leg strength, sprints and power skating. The boost has allowed his offensive skills to jump out during this preseason, from deft passes to winning more puck battles, but he's also getting a new opportunity to shine.

Welcome to the Kent Johnson penalty-killing era?

Evason said Johnson was "exceptional" while short-handed in his first taste of playing on the PK and will continue to get ice time in that situation if it continues.

"I've always loved to be on the PK," Johnson said. "I haven't done it too much. Obviously, not here, but when I was at Michigan I loved it and I was always trying to get coach to let me out there more. It's fun. There's a lot of reads for me to make, and I think I can do a decent job at it if I know the offensive guys at the other end and what they want to do. Hopefully, I can keep earning some of it."

Johnson wasn't anywhere near the top of short-handed forward options under former coaches Pascal Vincent and Brad Larsen the past couple years, but Waddell's trade of Alexandre Texier at the draft in June plus Justin Danforth's wrist injury created an opportunity.

Johnson has done the rest. He got another opportunity to kill penalties Monday and helped the Blue Jackets thwart two of the Capitals' three power plays. He wasn't on the ice for Dubois' 5-on-3 goal scored with 0.6 seconds left in the second.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson dealing with 'minor' lower-body injury**

Erik Gudbranson was busy at the end of the second period, but the veteran defenseman didn't play a minute in the third. Evason said Gudbranson probably could have played through an undisclosed lower-body injury, but it didn't make sense to risk it worsening during a preseason game.

Gudbranson will stay off the ice Tuesday and be re-evaluated before the Blue Jackets finish their preseason schedule with a game Thursday in Pittsburgh and a rematch Friday against the Penguins at Nationwide Arena.

### **Elvis Merzlikins' new mask includes tribute to Johnny Gaudreau**

Elvis Merzlikins backed up Tarasov because Jet Greaves, who was initially slated for backup duties, was ill. Greaves may start for the Blue Jackets on Tuesday night in St. Louis.

Merzlikins, meanwhile, debuted a new paint scheme for his mask during pregame warmups. The design includes a memorial to Johnny Gaudreau, including a large red heart on top with his former teammate's No. 13 painted on the chin. Gaudreau and his younger brother, Matthew, were killed Aug. 29 while riding bicycles in New Jersey.

Merzlikins also includes a tribute on his masks to Matiss Kivlenieks, a close friend and former Blue Jackets goalie who was killed in a fireworks incident July 4, 2021, at the home of Manny Legace, the team's former goaltending coach.

## Blue Jackets won't be required to hit NHL's salary floor by start of season

By Aaron Portzline – October 2, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The NHL informed the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday that they won't be required to reach the league's salary floor by the time rosters are set early next week, an allowance the league and the NHL Players' Association agreed to in the wake of the Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau tragedy.

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell told The Athletic the organization asked the league to go to the union last month to ask for this allowance. Now, the franchise has clarity on their salary cap situation heading into the final week of training camp.

### **There are two key points to the agreement:**

The Blue Jackets can apply the \$2 million signing bonus paid to Gaudreau in July, per the terms of his contract, to their salary-cap figure for this coming season.

They won't be required to have a payroll of at least \$65 million — this year's cap floor — by the Oct. 7 deadline, provided they achieve that expenditure within a "reasonable amount of additional time."

The league didn't specify how much time it felt would be "reasonable," but it won't take long for the Blue Jackets to clear the threshold.

Per Puckpedia, the Blue Jackets' projected 21-man roster — 12 forwards, seven defensemen and two goaltenders — carries a cap hit of \$64.4 million, roughly \$600,000 below the floor.

If Waddell is successful in his pursuit of an additional NHL forward, either via trade or waiver claim, the Blue Jackets would likely get there. The NHL's minimum salary this season is \$775,000.

When reached via text at the NHL's Board of Governors meetings in New York City, Waddell said the Blue Jackets were pleased with the ruling. It did not require approval of the Board of Governors, according to deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

The Gaudreau brothers were struck and killed by an SUV while riding bicycles on Aug. 29 near the family home in New Jersey.

## Breaking down the battle for the Blue Jackets' final roster spots

By Aaron Portzline – October 2, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — This is the most intense week of training camp for the Columbus Blue Jackets, not just because the difficult roster decisions are becoming clearer — that's true for every team in the league right now — but for the opportunities for clarity.

The Jackets play their final four preseason games in the span of five days, beginning with Monday's 3-2 loss to the Washington Capitals. That's a rich opportunity for the seven forwards and four defensemen who are still in the running (at least on paper) for the final roster spots.

Put another way: Six of those forwards and two of the defensemen were in the lineup against the Capitals.

"It's not a secret, we're pretty set," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "There's a few positions that are open. There's competition going on up front, but it's going on with defense, too. The guys who are competing are all going to get (preseason) games, still.

"As a group in the coaches' room, we feel real positive about our depth. Myself, coming in here, I didn't know the Columbus guys, forget about the Cleveland guys. But I've worked with them now, we've practiced, and I've seen them in the room, and I'm very impressed. I like what's been built here."

The Blue Jackets play tonight in St. Louis, then finish the preseason schedule with back-to-back games vs. Pittsburgh on Thursday (in Columbus) and Friday (at Pittsburgh).

There could be room for two forwards to survive final cuts, unless GM Don Waddell is successful in his attempts to land a veteran NHL forward, either through trade or the waiver wire. In that case, it would make only one spot available and it could change the type of player the Jackets decide to keep.

There's likely room for only one defenseman, but there are a lot of moving parts on the back end.

The goaltenders are pretty much set, with Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov expected to the Blue Jackets' 1-2 in some order.

NHL rosters must be set by Oct. 7.

Let's dive into this, shall we?

### **Forward**

Between Waddell whittling down some of the roster's fringe players this summer and Evason's well-structured training camp, there are surprisingly few questions among the Blue Jackets forwards.

Sean Monahan is centering the top line with Boone Jenner and Kirill Marchenko on his wings. Adam Fantilli is the No. 2 center, with James van Riemsdyk and either Dmitri Voronkov or Yegor Chinakhov on the wings, while Cole Sillinger anchors the third line with wingers Kent Johnson and either Voronkov or Chinakhov.

The only mystery, it would seem, is the fourth line.

Veteran Sean Kuraly is locked in at center, and Mathieu Olivier is the fixture at right wing. The question, then, is who will play on the left side of that line and who will serve as the extra forward when the Jackets have a busy schedule or a road trip.

Again, Waddell is trying to add a forward via trade or waiver wire. So, as you peruse this list, keep in mind that only one of these guys — or possibly none, if they don't open the season with a 13th forward — is going to make the cut.

The candidates:

Owen Sillinger: The first name Evason jotted down next to Kuraly at the start of training camp, and that's mostly where he's skated ever since. That has to count for something, right?

Sillinger, who just turned 27, has spent the past two seasons with AHL Cleveland, drawing rave reviews from coaches for his consistency and work ethic. We know Waddell is averse to bringing players to the NHL too quickly, but Sillinger has paid his dues.

One issue potentially working against him? He doesn't need waivers to be sent to the minor leagues.

James Malatesta: No question, Malatesta fits the profile of a fourth-line winger. He won't overwhelm with his size, but he's well put together and plenty competitive. There's a little offensive touch in there, too, which will likely emerge as his career moves on.

Malatesta did spend last season with AHL Cleveland, but it would make sense if Waddell believes he needs more time to percolate. He does not need waivers to go back, either.

Dylan Gambrell: There's a good argument to be made that Gambrell could be listed higher. He has more NHL experience than anybody else on this list (233 games with San Jose and Ottawa), so he requires waivers in order to head to Cleveland.

Here's something else to consider: Whereas Waddell may want to see Malatesta, Sillinger and others playing regularly in Cleveland — not sitting in Columbus — Gambrell could be the more reasonable choice as the Jackets' 13th forward should they keep two players on this list or should Waddell add a player from outside the organization.

Mikael Pyyhtiä: He's played four years of pro hockey if you count the three-plus seasons he played in Finland's Liiga before coming to North America. He also played 17 games last season for the Blue Jackets, with no goals and two assists.

Pyyhtiä's style of play doesn't exactly scream "fourth-liner," but he's become a capable AHL player.

Trey Fix-Wolansky: If the roster spots available in Columbus were higher in the lineup, Fix-Wolansky would absolutely be higher on this list. He's a proven AHL goal scorer, and while that hasn't quite translated to the NHL yet, he's not a fourth-line guy.

Fix-Wolansky will need to clear waivers to be sent to AHL Cleveland, where he's played 244 games — and scored 86 goals — since 2019-20.

Luca Del Bel Belluz: The second-round pick (No. 44) in 2022 is coming off a solid first pro season in AHL Cleveland and possesses some interesting tools — decent size, decent speed and a heck of a shot, as seen in his late goal on Wednesday.

But we're guessing Waddell and Evason think his development should continue under the coaching staff in Cleveland.

Gavin Brindley: He's a bona fide NHL prospect, with lots to admire in his game already, but Brindley is coming straight out of college hockey and is therefore a long shot.

Brindley, who played one NHL game last spring, should be an impact player in the AHL. Let the development continue.

## Defense

There may be half as many lineup spots on defense, but the Blue Jackets have more moving parts on this end of the ice.

When training camp broke, Evason had Zach Werenski and Damon Severson together as the top pair. The duo remains intact. It's the second pair, Ivan Provorov and David Jiricek, that has started to feel a little shaky with Jiricek's play.

If he's not ready, who slots in? It was interesting to see Erik Gudbranson in that spot for Monday's game, but if he moves up from the third pairing, who fills his old spot? It could be Jiricek, of course, but that would impact the left side of that third pair in multiple ways, too.

Lots of moving parts.

The candidates:

David Jiricek: Nobody needed a clean slate at the top of the organization more than Jiricek, who was none too pleased by his handling last season which included a demotion to AHL Cleveland. He believes he's NHL ready, so this is a situation that will be handled delicately.

There's so much to like about Jiricek's game, but there are still flaws to iron out — his decision-making with the puck, his capacity for risky reads, etc. That's hard to hide in a top-four spot, especially when the games start counting.

We're still giving Jiricek the edge here — and it should be noted he continues to skate with the NHL group, not the AHL group — but we're less confident he's going to make the club at the end of camp than we were two weeks ago.

He does not need waivers to go back to AHL Cleveland.

Denton Mateychuk: They don't want to do it. Waddell and Evason would really appreciate it if there were seven better defensemen in camp than Mateychuk, allowing them to send the 20-year-old to AHL Cleveland for at least a half-season of development.

But let's get real: Mateychuk absolutely looks like he's among the Blue Jackets' six best defensemen.

"He's young, so we'll see what shakes out here. We still have some games," Evason said after Monday's game. "But what he has shown ... clearly he's been that guy for a long time. He's going to be an NHL player for a long time.

"If he starts here, wonderful. If he doesn't, his development is going to continue steady because of what we've seen. He's gotten better and better, and his career is going to go like that as well."

Jordan Harris: The Blue Jackets were initially looking for a forward as part of the return for Patrik Laine, but Montreal's abundance of defense made Harris expendable. He's an intriguing player, though he has yet to really define himself in the NHL.

If the Blue Jackets keep Gudbranson on the right side of the third pair, either Harris or Mateychuk make sense as his partner.

If Harris doesn't claim a lineup spot initially, it might make sense to keep him as a seventh defenseman rather than expose him to waivers, which he'd need to clear to join AHL Cleveland.

Jake Christiansen: It helps that Christiansen can play on both sides of the ice, but it's hard to see him jumping over the first three guys on this list to claim a spot. He's an All-Star in the AHL, a major point producer and a power-play point man.

He'd need to clear waivers to return to AHL Cleveland.



## The Athletic / NHL rumblings: CBA talks, cap estimate, expansion, McDavid extension and more from Board of Governors

By Pierre LeBrun – October 2, 2024

NEW YORK — Labor peace in the NHL? It sure seems possible.

Gary Bettman advised NHL owners Tuesday that talks regarding a new collective bargaining agreement with the NHL Players' Association are set to begin in the new year.

The current CBA expires in September 2026 so this is very early for talks, based on past events, with the desire to have a new deal in place before the current deal expires if all goes well. And, well, to avoid a lockout.

We've learned by now never to predict how NHL-NHLPA labor talks go. Still ...

"I don't want to speculate, but if we had it done by my media avail at the Stanley Cup Final, everybody would be very happy," the NHL commissioner said. "But that's not a discussion in terms of a timetable that I've had with (NHLPA executive director) Marty Walsh so I don't want to put any unfair or undiscussed parameters on it."

And to be clear, Bettman means this season's Stanley Cup Final. Imagine a CBA extension reached by then, one year ahead of time?

The indication we're getting is that the NHLPA is just as eager as the league to commence that CBA extension dialogue (Walsh wasn't immediately available for comment Tuesday evening, as he was in Prague, but a request for comment was relayed to the NHLPA).

That's good news for hockey fans, especially those who lived through the 2004-05 lockout that canceled an entire season and the 2012-13 lockout that wiped out half a season.

Bettman had actually said recently that CBA talks could start even earlier.

"I've said that it could be as early as November, but I think everybody's still got some homework to do, and I know that the union is on their fall tour (speaking to players on each team), so no big deal, it's just that in terms of timing that's probably the most realistic," Bettman said of CBA talks beginning after Jan. 1.

"Which is still well, well in advance. And we think collectively, in terms of the relationship (with the NHLPA), we're in a good place."

I covered the 2004-05 and 2012-13 lockouts, so I will never count my chickens. But the tone early on is very promising here.

Other league items from Tuesday's Board of Governors meeting:

Early 2025-26 cap figures

Bettman provided owners with an early salary-cap estimate for next season.

"It is way, way, way, way preliminary," he cautioned. "So don't even take this anywhere with much meaning, but it is way, way, way preliminary, but probably \$92.5 million, give or take. But it's really too early for that to be a story."

This year's cap is \$88 million, so \$92.5 million would basically be the five percent increase that's built into the CBA memorandum of understanding. So this is no surprise, but it does signify that the league believes it will again see revenues grow at the anticipated levels.

### **Ownership stakes**

Bettman said the Board of Governors approved two franchise transactions, which haven't officially closed yet:

1. Senators owner Michael Andlauer (further) is buying 12 percent of the franchise from the Armoyan family, which will increase Andlauer's stake in ownership.
2. A change in control in three years with the sale of 50 percent of the Tampa Bay Lightning franchise to Doug Ostrover and Marc Lipschultz from Blue Owl.

Current Tampa owner Jeff Vinik, who has been one of the league's great owners, will still remain on board in three years as a minority stakeholder.

### **Expansion talk**

Despite constant speculation about expansion into places like Houston and Atlanta, among other markets, Bettman said there was no talk with the Board whatsoever Tuesday regarding the next round of expansion.

"The topic never came up today in any form," he said. "Not in any form."

So where does it sit?

"No different than the last time I answered the question," Bettman said. "There are a number of places that have expressed interest, that talk to us, some on a regular basis, but that's where we are."

Believe me when I say expansion is eventually coming to Atlanta and maybe Houston, and don't forget a return to Arizona one day, too. But not quite yet.

"You know, if something came in and checked all the boxes, and we felt that it might make sense, we might consider it," Bettman said. "We're not there right now. It seems like everybody is on the one hand pushing us to, 'Why don't you expand?'"

"And at the same time saying, 'Why would you expand?' So, it's just not a front-burner topic."

Not yet ...

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) October 1, 2024

### **Jackets' cap**

As the Blue Jackets continue to mourn Johnny Gaudreau (and his brother Matthew), the business of the game doesn't sit still. The organization got word Tuesday, ahead of the Board of Governors meeting, regarding its salary cap situation.

Specifically, that the league and NHLPA agreed that the \$2 million signing bonus paid to Gaudreau this summer could count against the team's cap this season, which will help the club get to the cap floor.

"Both sides are looking at it as a fairly good resolution," Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell said.

"We worked with the Players' Association for what made the most sense in terms of working with that situation," said NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly. "And we reached the agreement that we reached."

Part of the agreement also allowed “if needed, and only to the extent necessary, Columbus will also be provided with a reasonable amount of additional time following the opening of the regular season (as determined by the NHL and NHLPA) to come into full compliance with its CBA obligation to establish a roster and payroll exceeding the Lower Limit of the Team Payroll Range for the 2024/25 League Year,” a league statement read.

So some early season leeway on the floor if the Jackets need it.

In the meantime, the Jackets continue to explore the trade market to acquire a forward.

Part of that is hockey, to help the team on the ice. But part of it is also not wanting to stay too tight to the floor. The Jackets may try to build in a little more flexibility.

“The big thing for us is that we don’t want to be hovering right away all year right at the minimum in case you want to do something,” Waddell said. “So we’re talking to a lot of teams about different options, and I’m pretty confident that within the next few weeks we’ll be able to have a player that can not only help our hockey team but adds to our salary (payroll).”

Being realistic about a Jackets team that very likely won’t be in the playoff picture, Waddell wants to be able to move a player or two ahead of the March 7 trade deadline without going below the cap floor.

But also, adding another forward isn’t just about adding a contract. It’s about adding someone who can play.

“I’m not looking for LTI or anything like that,” Waddell said. “That just doesn’t make sense in our position. We need a player. So we’ll explore, which we have been. We’ve talked to many, many teams, and we’ll continue to talk to them.”

The Athletic: Blue Jackets won’t be required to hit NHL’s salary floor by start of season#CBJ  
<https://t.co/UDXYqtcdkG>

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) October 1, 2024

McDavid extension

Leon Draisaitl got done. Now, the biggest contract of all is on deck for next summer. That’s when Connor McDavid can sign an extension, a year out from his current deal expiring.

“Connor has spent his whole career in Edmonton, and he loves playing in the city and we have a good team,” Oilers CEO of hockey operations Jeff Jackson told The Athletic. “I know the most important thing for Connor is playing on a good team and winning and trying to compete for the Cup.

“I said this a year ago when I took this job, if we can have a team that’s in the mix at the end, you know, I’m very confident that he’ll want to stay,” added Jackson. “We’ll get through this year and then we’ve got another year before this deal is up.”

Jackson’s point is that, just as he said regarding Draisaitl, there isn’t a rush to get something done on July 1. People shouldn’t freak out if 97’s extension takes a bit longer.

“You have time to do it, and if you’re doing it properly, you don’t have to get it done by any particular date,” Jackson said.

So everyone take a chill pill July 1 if McDavid’s extension isn’t done. That’s probably what Jackson really wanted to say here, so I will say it for him.

And I’m reasonably confident the Oilers will get McDavid extended.

And Ullmark extension

The Senators are hoping to get Linus Ullmark signed to an extension at some point but have delayed that conversation with the pending unrestricted free agent because they just traded for the No. 1 goalie this summer and want him to settle into his new surroundings before starting those talks.

“The process is about making sure that Linus was comfortable in the environment that he’s in,” Andlauer told The Athletic. “We understand what his priorities are, being a family man and all and making sure that this was the right surroundings. There’s no sense negotiating something if your work environment is not conducive to what you want.

“We want our players to be happy, first and foremost. As I said last year at my opening news conference, I’m a player-first owner. So we’ll take it from there.”

## The Athletic / One emo or punk song for every NHL team: (Mostly) regionally accurate picks for 2024-25

**Arthur Staple – Oct 1, 2024**

It's time.

Time for a new NHL season and a new season preview that channels all your angst, rage and worry into a single track that could describe your team's 2024-25 season chances, your feelings about that team or all of the above.

I've added a couple of wrinkles in this third annual Emo Preview (here are the 2023 and 2022 previews). By request, I've tried to find a band from the same region as the team; with a couple of exceptions, I think it was mostly successful. There's a wide range of emo, punk, post-punk and screamo, and it goes from back to the early days of punk up to recent releases — something for everyone to be mad about.

And there is a reason for the order of the teams — it runs from most emo ("Man, we're screwed!") to most punk ("Screw you, man!"). So the teams at the top of the list are probably in the most trouble heading into the season, and the teams at the end will be vying for the Stanley Cup. When they don't win, you can listen to this playlist while you throw things.

So here we go.

### **Anaheim Ducks**

'California' by Wax

This Ducks team sure is ... something. Intrigued by all of the young talent (Cutter Gauthier, Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Pavel Mintyukov, Olen Zellweger) while also being less than intrigued by the cast of veterans, several of whom are either reportedly on the way out or could be at the trade deadline. Low-key pick for worst team in the NHL this season, this mid-'90s pop-punk classic about regretting a move to SoCal seems just right.

"Why did I move to Southern California?

Smog isn't blue, someone shoulda warned you"

### **Calgary Flames**

'Expendables' by Fake Names

We might all be sleeping on how bad the Flames will be this season. After the Jacob Markström trade, they're inexperienced in net, their defense is two solid guys and a whole lot of "huh?", and they're old and not that deep up front. We had to go off the map here — maybe some Flames fans can give their favorite local emo/punk acts in the comments. Fake Names is a newish punk supergroup from some old-head bands (Minor Threat, Refused, Girls Against Boys), and they can still bring it. They do not have a lot in common with this Flames team.

"We're nothing but expendables"

### **Chicago Blackhawks**

'October' by Knuckle Puck

The Connor Bedard Show enters year two, and it's a fun one to watch, even if the cast around him somehow gets weirder. Teuvo Teräväinen? Yeah, OK! Tyler Bertuzzi? Sure. T.J. Brodie and Alec

Martinez? Uh ... yeah, I guess. ... Pat Maroon and Craig Smith? C'mon now. Even the Sharks might have more Guys than this. Knuckle Puck is quality Chicago emo, and this track describes how, outside of Bedard, there can't be that much thrill around this season out there. The real fear is that Bedard himself begins to dread October in Chicago if the Hawks don't find a decent supporting cast soon.

"Would you save me as we slide into October?"

### **San Jose Sharks**

'Salvation' by Rancid

The Sharks will be bad. Macklin Celebrini will be good. These two opposing facts can coexist in San Jose this season, but it won't be too pretty when Celebrini isn't on the ice. The Sharks did import some Actual NHL Guys (Barclay Goodrow, Tyler Toffoli, Alex Wennberg), and if Yaroslav Askarov catches fire in net, maybe it won't be so bad. This track from the Bay Area's preeminent punks covers Sharks fans' feelings nicely.

"Come on baby won't you show me what you got

I want your salvation"

### **Montreal Canadiens**

'I'd Do Anything' by Simple Plan

Trading for Patrik Laine probably qualifies as doing anything. The Habs have some great young pieces, but do they have anything else worth mentioning? It feels like there have been multiple years of growing pains and they don't seem to be dissipating yet, hence the Hail Mary move to acquire Laine and his entire \$8.7 million cap hit. It's hard to see how they can crack the big four of the Atlantic Division. The Canadiens have never missed the playoffs four years in a row in their 107-year history. Better do anything to fix that.

"This could be the one last chance to make you understand"

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

'Alone at St. Luke's' by Aaron West and The Roaring Twenties

Sidney Crosby is not alone, of course. It just feels that way. The greatest player of this generation is probably going to finish out his incredible career in Pittsburgh with a bunch of missed playoffs — or worse, he could bolt for a good team and leave the Pens completely bereft. Using this track from Wonder Years leader Dan Campbell's current side project feels like salt in Yinzers' wounds, what with Campbell being the ultimate Philly emo guy. This era of Pittsburgh hockey stings.

"We've been thinking

As long as we're still here

We might as well be drinking"

### **Seattle Kraken**

'In Circles' by Sunny Day Real Estate

SDRE was one of those '90s emo bands you couldn't really get but were still fascinated by. That's the Kraken experience entering year four: I like it but I am confused. Dan Bylsma might bring a little more juice behind the bench than Dave Hakstol, but this team still doesn't seem to have much of an identity.

Matty Beniers is a good player, and I'm interested to see what Shane Wright can do. Outside of those two, does this team have any young players to get excited about?

"In circles (I'm running down)"

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

'Numb, But I Still Feel It' by Title Fight

Yes, yes, I know all about the Matvei Michkov hype. I hope it's real. Even if it is, Philly's prognosis isn't very good this season, and that would extend an ugly streak — it's been 14 years since the Flyers won a non-bubble playoff round. So by all means, get excited about Michkov. Get some life back into what used to be one of the best, scariest buildings in the league. The league could use a Flyers team people care about. Title Fight isn't from Philly, but repping Northeast Pa. is good enough. This team has to earn a track from the city.

"Everything's so uncertain

Can't find the right direction"

### **Minnesota Wild**

'Be Good' by Off With Their Heads

This feels like the last year the Wild have to hibernate. The Zach Parise/Ryan Suter buyout pain ends after 2024-25, presumably Minny can reset in goal after this year, and, most importantly, Kirill Kaprizov will be entering his walk year in 2025-26. So this OWTB screamer could be seen as a way to blow off some steam of a couple of irrelevant years or a plea — be good, Wild, or else.

"Be good

Be loud

Hands up

To the sky and shout"

### **Buffalo Sabres**

'Bored of Being Sad' by Microwave

Again, I had to go off the map to grab this one from a really good new emo band from Atlanta, but this feels like it was written for Sabres fans. I could have Buffalo at the "most emo" end of the preview every year, but this one feels different. Maybe the Sabres' media cheerleaders have finally given up after 13 years of hoping the team really makes it happen; maybe Buffalo fans just don't get their hopes up anymore. So, without any unfounded hype, could this be the year? Eh, probably not, but no expectations are better than whatever's been happening the last few years.

"And I'm so bored of being sad

It's not cool anymore

It's old and I'm bored"

### **Washington Capitals**

'I Against I' by Bad Brains

The main story is Alex Ovechkin's pursuit of Wayne Gretzky's goal-scoring record. After a summer of whirlwind moves, the main Caps story is ... still Ovechkin. I applaud Caps management for trying to

change things up, but this is still a team made up of some strange parts that is also spending less than \$2 million on its goaltending. Let's reach back to the birth of the D.C. punk scene for a classic Bad Brains track about the only question worth answering this season: Will Ovechkin do it? Asking any other question — like, is this team better? — only invites problems.

"The same old story, no factual glory

I against I against I against I against"

### **Detroit Red Wings**

'Keep On Knocking' by Death

The Wings' big turnaround always seems to be a year away. General manager Steve Yzerman spent his summer grinding every dollar in talks with Detroit's most important young forward, Lucas Raymond, and its most important young defenseman, Moritz Seider — Yzerman also spent making salary-dump moves to sign Vladimir Tarasenko and bring back Patrick Kane. There's a ton coming in their pipeline, but this year doesn't look promising. The greatest decade in the Detroit punk scene was the 1970s, and Death was one of the best punk bands out there all those years ago. It's not lost on me that the 1970s was the worst era of Wings hockey and the current playoff drought, eight seasons and counting, is slowly starting to match those bad old days.

"You know we tried

Baby, we just missed

Keep on knockin', keep on knockin' on the door"

### **Ottawa Senators**

'Breakout' by Thunder Queens

Is this the year for the Senators? It sure feels like the bottom half of the Atlantic, where teams have missed the playoffs for 13, eight, seven and three straight seasons, is not going to jump above the cut line. The Sens are poised to be this year's top contender of the bottom-dwellers, what with a legitimate goalie in Linus Ullmark and their cast of good young talent. We've all been burned before by that hope, though, so temper your expectations.

"No need to cry

No need to pout

No need to fight

'Cause we gotta breakout"

### **St. Louis Blues**

'The Problem Is Me' by The Get Up Kids

The Blues are not without their charms — decently young core, some good prospects on the horizon, high-level goalie — but I'm not exactly sure where this team is going. The transitional GM arrangement is interesting, with Alexander Steen the boss-in-waiting for the next two years. The offer-sheet gambits this summer were a nice jolt for a very staid league, but are you shooting your shots on a middle-six winger and a second-pair (at best) defenseman? The Blues are the most mid team in the league, not good enough to be elite and not bad enough to need an overhaul. It isn't where you want to be. We do at least get a track from Missouri's finest (only?) emo purveyors, though.



“Could it be  
Maybe the problem is me  
Am I doomed to always repeat  
Over and over again”

### **Utah Hockey Club**

‘Dream Big’ by Bob Vylan

Things are finally looking up for this “new” team after it escaped the clutches of suburban Phoenix. New owner, new city, new arena (soon). The former ‘Yotes are in a better place, and they actually weren’t all that terrible a season ago. The roster isn’t totally bereft of talent, the Mikhail Sergachev move gives them an anchor D-man, and the Hockey Club isn’t exactly in a powerhouse division. Playoffs? Hey, why not? I had to go across the pond to find this track, a grime-punk mashup from a duo whose members both go by Bob Vylan (one is Bobby, the other is Bobbie, of course). Like the new Utah team, it’s different.

“New shoes, new coat, old hat  
I did it all and I won’t go back  
Nah I been there, yeah I done that”

### **Los Angeles Kings**

‘Thought You Were Waving’ by Militarie Gun

I made this list and still managed to surprise myself with how far down the “most emo” rankings I had the Kings. This is not a great situation: Still relying on two terrific but aging star players in Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty, a couple of nice young players (Quinton Byfield, Brandt Clarke) and a whole lot of not good enough. Joel Edmundson and Warren Foegele are your big July 1 multi-year free agency additions? Yikes. This team sends out the most mixed signals of any in the NHL, so this new track from L.A.’s Militarie Gun seems just right.

“I thought you were waving  
Turns out you were drowning  
Really wish I could read your mind”

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

‘All Downhill From Here’ by New Found Glory

Predicting a top team’s demise is usually bad business, mostly because teams like the Lightning have the right people in place to prevent that from happening. As much respect as we all have for Julien BriseBois and Jon Cooper, though, it’s hard to see how Tampa isn’t sliding away from the elite. Dealing Sergachev and replacing him with a well-worn Ryan McDonagh is certainly a choice. So is Jake Guentzel for Steven Stamkos, though I kind of like that choice. BriseBois has been pretty fearless in trying to keep this team at the top, but we’ll see if I’m correct in my choice of always-great Floridians New Found Glory this year.

“Catalyst, you insist to pull me down  
You contradict the fact that you still want me around  
And it’s all downhill from here”

## **New York Islanders**

'S'old' by Taking Back Sunday

Now, I'm not making any jokes about a soon-to-be 82-year-old GM with this track choice. As a rapidly aging dude myself, that wouldn't be wise. And Lou Lamoriello's Islanders did get a bit younger this summer, shedding longtime favorites like Cal Clutterbuck and (maybe) Matt Martin for 20-somethings. But this is still a place for the 30-and-up crowd, and it's still a team that isn't a Cup contender. The Long Island emo/hardcore scene is so good, though, there was lots to choose from. TBS still reigns supreme.

"You're going to get s'old

You're going to get so old

You're going to get so old either way"

## **Vegas Golden Knights**

'I Will Survive' by Me First and The Gimme Gimmes

It's hard to believe this is only year eight of the Golden Knights experience. It feels like they've cycled through about 26 different versions of themselves. They are always aggressive with personnel, which may not win them many friends, but it sure has won them a lot of games. And now, they're going into 2024-25 with two pending unrestricted free-agent goalies, no salary cap space and a surprisingly young roster. I wonder what's coming next. Me First is a supergroup of some old punk heads that plays only covers. If that doesn't scream Vegas to you, what does?

"I will survive

Oh as long as I know how to love

I know I'll stay alive"

## **Winnipeg Jets**

'Reconstruction Site' by The Weakerthans

Everything's just OK in the 'Peg — nice roster, nice coach, nice prospects. The Jets pulled back from the brink a couple of summers ago when it felt like every decent player there wanted out, and, on paper, they look like a solid playoff team. But this team feels like the bottom is always lurking around the corner, waiting to drop out from underneath them. Maybe it's this year, maybe next, maybe never. But it's always there. Like a Weakerthans song. Hail to only the first Winnipeg band to make our playlist this year!

"If I'm more

Then it means less

Last call for happiness

I'm your dress near the back of your knees

And your slip is showing"

## **Nashville Predators**

'For A Pessimist, I'm Pretty Optimistic' by Paramore

The Preds and GM Barry Trotz won the offseason with some seriously bold moves. Winning the offseason means precisely squat now and, with \$ 11.8 million in dead cap space, Nashville is an injury or

two away from being in real roster trouble this season. But the vibes are superb, and Nashville is no longer just a fun place for visiting teams. It's been a minute since the Preds were real contenders, so we'll have to see on that front, but for now, things are on the up. And we get to hear from the best emo band to open for Taylor Swift, even if this Paramore track gives off more of a "what if it doesn't work?" feel.

"I never wanted to say this

You never wanted to stay

I put my faith in you, so much faith

And then you just threw it away"

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

'So Yeah, So' by Free Throw

The Canes are still a good team. We can agree on that. But their status as hockey Twitter darlings took a pretty serious blow this summer. New GM Eric Tulsky couldn't persuade Guentzel to stay, let Brady Skjei, Teräväinen and Stefan Noesen walk, barely persuaded Martin Nečas to stick around, signed a bunch of replacement-level guys (\$2.8 million for Jack Roslovic?) and still didn't fix the main reason why they haven't won anything yet, which is goaltending. They'll win plenty of games this season because they still have Rod Brind'Amour behind the bench and a core of guys that thrive under his style. But are they better than the top four teams in the East?

"Why does it feel like I'm working on a puzzle with the lights off?

In a windowless room

I'm feeling for the edges of the pieces"

### **New Jersey Devils**

'Through Being Cool' by Saves The Day

Speaking of internet darlings, the Devils have been a viral meme waiting to happen for a few years now. And it's gotten them nowhere. After a strong summer in which they added a top-flight goalie in Markström, a well-regarded coach in Sheldon Keefe and some solid support pieces (Brett Pesce, Brenden Dillon, Noesen), the Devils are poised to go from internet sensation to actual sensation. Another Hughes brother is on the shelf to start, but they can overcome injuries now. Saves The Day doesn't have many tracks that inspire, but this one about just getting mad and getting stuff done sounds right for the 2024-25 Devils.

"Cause I'm through being cool"

### **Boston Bruins**

'That's How I Escaped My Certain Fate' by Mission of Burma

I can't keep track of how many years we've all been waiting for the B's to crumble. This year we've got: Hard-balling their best goalie, captain coming off three surgeries at age 36 and not much depth up front. And they're still going to post 100-plus points and host a playoff series or two. Credit to GM Don Sweeney and coach Jim Montgomery. They're not serious Cup contenders, but I give up predicting their demise.

"Can I count on you

If I fall apart?

If I fall a

If I fall apart

That's how I escaped my certain fate"

### **Vancouver Canucks**

'Hungry' by White Lung

Now, I could have gone a safer route with the Canucks track — Japandroids aren't exactly punk, but they would have worked just fine. The Canucks could have gone a safe route, too, this offseason once they knew that Thatcher Demko wouldn't be ready for the start of the season, but front-office execs Jim Rutherford and Patrik Allvin are gambling a bit. So did I. White Lung isn't for everyone, but they do have a few rippers. The Canucks have some high-end scoring, some of the most talented players in the West ... and if they don't have Demko, does any of it matter? Still expect to see them near the top of the Pacific this season.

"And we're all hungry for it"

### **Edmonton Oilers**

'Dear Coach's Corner' by Propagandhi

Everyone, it seems, wants to see Connor McDavid hoist the Stanley Cup. He came as close as a player and team could get last spring and, especially now that Leon Draisaitl has re-upped, the McDavid stans are still out in full force. Except there's one small hitch: The Oilers hired Stan Bowman after the NHL reinstated him from exile for his handling of allegations of sexual assault while Bowman was Blackhawks GM. No one asked for this, and yet, here we are. Propagandhi calls Winnipeg home, but this track references the Alberta roots of lead singer Chris Hannah and his disappointment back in the late 2000s over Don Cherry's pro-military antics on Coach's Corner.

We're probably not going to get an updated version about the Bowman hire from these Canadian punk legends, but the sentiment is the same — why on earth does hockey have to keep doing this?

"We may not be the same but it's not like we're from different planets

We both love this game so much we can hardly f— stand it"

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

'The Barbed Wire Fence Around Happiness' by Chastity

This is the third installment of our emo preview, and with each one, I find about 750 tracks that could apply to the Leafs, historically the most emo team in the league. Now, I have them toward the end of the list here because they will a) again be very good and b) probably not be good enough. Chastity takes you back to the mid-'90s, grungy emo era — think Hum or Swervedriver — but they're from Ontario, so they must be inspired by the Leafs. This track, about the frustrating inability to be truly happy, should come with a Mats Sundin poster.

"Held in the fringes of happiness"

### **New York Rangers**

'Something Higher' by Taking Meds

The Rangers are going to be good again, but is that enough? That Metro Division looks awfully weak, so the true measuring stick for this team is the playoffs and whether the Rangers can get to a Final and compete once there. It's hard to believe they've been to five conference finals in the last 11 seasons, and that includes a four-season rebuild. The mandate is always winning, and a Presidents' Trophy or other accolades just aren't enough.

"There's something higher but I don't know what it is

I know it's there 'cause I can taste it"

### **Florida Panthers**

'King of Everything' by Meet Me @ The Altar

The reigning champs should be the kings of everything, but there's a catch in the quest to repeat: Their 36-year-old goaltender has made 151 appearances over the last two years. Even if you believe in Sergei Bobrovsky's yoga routine, that's a lot of down-and-ups. The Panthers will be good again. They might even make a third straight Stanley Cup Final. But my faith in The Bob is wavering, just like the snarky tone of positivity in this track by a really solid new pop-punk band from Florida.

"I'd be fine, I'd be fine

I'd start over in a blink

I'd feel like, I'd feel like

I'm the king of everything"

### **Colorado Avalanche**

'So Stoked' by Teenage Bottlerocket

I can't help but be upbeat about the Avs, who have stumbled the last couple years but still reside comfortably among the NHL's elite. Of course, I can't imagine Nathan MacKinnon would love anyone being upbeat about his team — you've got to put the work in. Still, the Avs will be there at the end, or close to it. Fans should be stoked! And Teenage Bottlerocket is truly the only punk band from Wyoming.

"Woke up this morning to a great day without hassle

I was so happy I was grinning like an a—

It seems like everything is going as expected

And now for once I feel like all my s—'s collected"

### **Dallas Stars**

'No Wolf Like the Present' by At The Drive-In

They're great. They should be bigger than they are. Are we talking about the Stars or ATDI? Dallas is the best team not to win in the last decade, and the Stars should be there again this season. But will they be there at the end? Are they better than Edmonton or Colorado? I can't say. But it's time to forget the past and push forward.

"There's no wolf like the present

They own your history

Scrap it for parts"

## **Columbus Blue Jackets**

'Hold On Hope' by Guided By Voices

No more snark, no more bite. The Gaudreau brothers' tragic deaths will stay with all of us for a long, long time. Fans of the other 31 teams will get back to rising and falling with every game; Blue Jackets fans will just need all of our support this season. So, here's the most beautiful track from Ohio's favorite musical sons.

"Everybody's gotta hold on hope

It's the last thing that's holding me"

The Athletic LOADED: 10.02.2024

## [ESPN / 2024-25 NHL breakout predictions: Lafreniere, Fantilli, more – ESPN](#)

Greg Wyshynski – October 2, 2024

Lucas Raymond had that breakout player aura last season.

The Detroit Red Wings winger had a strong rookie season in 2021-22, followed by a dip in production. He entered last season primed to break out, thanks in part to improved linemates, and break out he did: 31 goals and 72 points that resulted in an eight-year, \$64.6 million contract extension this offseason.

There are plenty of players this season who have a similar aura. Some are familiar names placed in advantageous situations; some are rookie sensations; and some could be the next Lucas Raymond, who go from young standouts to NHL stars.

Here are 36 players who could be breakouts in 2024-25, organized into tiers.

### ***Tier 1: New scenery***

These players switched teams and could see their stock rise with new scenery.

#### **Viktor Arvidsson, LW and Jeff Skinner, LW**

##### **Edmonton Oilers**

Both of these players have seen their stock climb rather high during their lengthy NHL careers. But neither of them has had this kind of opportunity to pile on the points playing alongside one of the best offensive players on the planet: Oilers center Leon Draisaitl. With Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zach Hyman cemented on Connor McDavid's line, both of these wingers could slide onto Leon's wings.

If Arvidsson can stay healthy, topping his career high in points (61) is within reason if he sees time with Draisaitl. Skinner had an 82-point season in 2022-23 before dipping back to 46 last season in Buffalo. Playing alongside Draisaitl will get that roller coaster climbing again.

#### **Tyler Bertuzzi (LW) and Teuvo Teravainen (LW),**

##### **Chicago Blackhawks**

The Blackhawks also imported a pair of veteran free agent wingers to potentially sandwich around Calder Trophy winner Connor Bedard on their top line. They've skated with the phenom in the preseason, and the trio makes a lot of sense for coach Luke Richardson.

Bertuzzi is a terrific passer who has played with high-end talent before and has some sandpaper to his game. Teravainen started his career in Chicago, winning a Stanley Cup in 2015. He's a play driver and a "glue guy" who could get back to the 60-point mark as Bedard continues to develop into a superstar.

#### **Philip Broberg (D) and Dylan Holloway (LW),**

##### **St. Louis Blues**

Broberg and Holloway made waves in the offseason when they signed offer sheets with the Blues and the Oilers opted not to match them. Both could have a big impact in their first seasons wearing the Note.

Broberg, 23, has just 81 games of regular-season experience, but he played well in 10 postseason games during Edmonton's run last postseason (skating 15:48 per game). The Blues are high on him, with GM

Doug Armstrong theorizing he could have "a good 10-year career here in St. Louis." Broberg is expected to play alongside veteran Justin Faulk to start. Could he eventually move up as Colton Parayko's partner?

Holloway's speed and tenacity make him a prototypical forward in today's NHL. The Blues have played him with offseason pickup Radek Faksa, formerly of the Dallas Stars and a solid veteran from whom Holloway can learn. Holloway has actually yet to break double digits in points during his two NHL seasons. He should double his career totals in his first season in St. Louis.

### **Anthony Mantha**

#### **RW, Calgary Flames**

This is more of a "re-breakout" possibility. Mantha's first breakout happened back in 2018-19, when he scored 25 goals in 67 games for the Detroit Red Wings. Mantha, and the teams that have employed him, have been trying to recapture that magic for years. His stock hasn't been lower than in last season's playoffs with Vegas, who made him a healthy scratch.

He arrives in Calgary and is expected to play alongside Jonathan Huberdeau, another player looking to reverse his fortunes. This could be a symbiotic statistical relationship.

### **J.J. Moser**

#### **D, Tampa Bay Lightning**

The 24-year-old defenseman spent the past three seasons with the Arizona Coyotes. But before he could suit up for the Utah Hockey Club, Moser was traded to the Lightning in that stunning Mikhail Sergachev deal. The expectation is that Moser is going to be Victor Hedman's partner to start the season, which is a pretty great place to be for a defenseman with some upside.

### **Reilly Smith**

#### **RW, New York Rangers**

Smith is entering the 14th season of his NHL career, one that was defined by his six seasons as an original "Golden Misfit" with the Vegas Golden Knights. He has been lucky since leaving Vegas when it comes to linemates: After skating with Evgeni Malkin in Pittsburgh last season, he was traded to the Rangers, where he's expected to be the next right wing to skate with Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad.

"I think their body of work over their careers speaks for itself," he said. "I'm going to try to do my best to complement their games."

#### ***Tier 2: New sidekicks***

These players could thrive with new linemates.

### **Quinton Byfield**

#### **C, Los Angeles Kings**

Byfield had a stellar 2023-24 with 20 goals and 55 points in 80 games -- but that was as a winger. Now, the No. 2 pick in 2020 will move to his natural position at center on the Kings' second line. They've set him up to succeed with wingers Kevin Fiala (29 goals, 73 points) and free-agent addition Warren Foegele, who learned a thing or two about playing with dynamic offensive centers while with the Edmonton Oilers.

Byfield showed he could produce in the NHL last season. Now it's time to show he can make it in the middle.



## **Leo Carlsson**

### **C, Anaheim Ducks**

The Ducks made the decision to manage Carlsson's action as a 19-year-old rookie. He played 55 games and posted 29 points. He's expected to see an increase in playing time in Year 2, and with a new face on his line alongside veteran winger Alex Killorn: Cutter Gauthier, the rookie scorer acquired from the Flyers last season.

Carlsson had impact on games that went beyond the stat line. This reconfigured line could be a dynamic one for Anaheim.

## **Jamie Drysdale**

### **D, Philadelphia Flyers**

The words "if he's in the lineup" might be permanently attached to everything said about Drysdale's potential. His last season playing more than 35 games was 2021-22, when he tallied 32 points for the Ducks. In his first full season with the Flyers following a trade last season, Drysdale should also get a full run with defensive defenseman Nick Seeler after spending some time with him in 2023-24.

With Seeler doing the blue-collar work on the back end, Drysdale could be freed to finally hit the offensive heights that have been expected from him for years.

## **Wyatt Johnston**

### **C, Dallas Stars**

For years, the line of Joe Pavelski, Roope Hintz and Jason Robertson was considered perhaps the best in the NHL. Pavelski's retirement left a hole on that line that the 21-year-old Johnston will attempt to fill.

If anyone on the Stars can do it, and potentially even push them to greater heights, it's Johnston -- and not just because he spent two years living with Pavelski's family.

The Toronto native has 106 points in 164 career games, breaking out with 32 goals and 33 assists last season. They put up ridiculous numbers together on a line during a brief run last season: 4.93 goals for, 0.51 goals against per 60 minutes. This is going to be fun.

## **Niko Mikkola**

### **D, Florida Panthers**

Mikkola was an endearing part of the Panthers' championship run, both as a low-key goofball in interviews and as an unexpected goal-scorer in the Stanley Cup Final. He lost his primary defensive partner last season in Brandon Montour, who left as a free agent for Seattle. So did Dmitry Kulikov, who played with Oliver Ekman-Larsson before the latter signed in Toronto.

Since they both need new dance partners, the Panthers might matchmake Kulikov and Mikkola. But Mikkola could also be paired up with former Blue Jacket Adam Boqvist, who signed a one-year deal in the summer. No matter with whom he plays, the 6-foot-4 Mikkola should see an increase in both role and attention in his sixth NHL season.

## **Tommy Novak**

### **C, Nashville Predators**

Novak is coming off his second straight productive offensive season for the Predators. With due respect to linemates like Luke Evangelista and Juuso Parssinen, they are not Steven Stamkos, whom Novak is

expected to play with this season after the superstar signed as a free agent in Nashville. Stamkos is still an elite playmaker, and Novak should obliterate his career best in goals (18).

Novak's line could also include another free agent coup in Jonathan Marchessault. How many "thank you" notes has he sent to GM Barry Trotz since the summer?

### ***Tier 3: Young star to superstar***

You might already know these names. Get ready to hear them a lot more.

#### **Adam Fantilli**

##### **C, Columbus Blue Jackets**

Fantilli had 27 points in 49 games as a 19-year-old rookie last season in Columbus, averaging 15:43 in ice time per game. He averaged 8.4 shots per 60 minutes, which is a promising rate for a rookie (please note that Jack Eichel averaged nine shots per 60 minutes as a 19-year-old in Buffalo).

Fantilli should see increased ice time this season for the Jackets. If he gets anything on the power play, where he notched just three points last season, it could be a statistical breakout for the 2023 No. 3 draft pick.

#### **Luke Hughes**

##### **D, New Jersey Devils**

It's a testament to Hughes' offensive spark that he was a Calder Trophy finalist last season. He had 47 points in 82 games, tied for the rookie defenseman lead with Brock Faber of the Wild. That was enough for voters to overlook a defensive game that had some glaring issues in his first NHL season.

In fairness to Hughes, he was thrown into a prominent role on the Devils' blue line because of injuries to players like Dougie Hamilton. It was a "thrown into the fire" learning experience for a young, talented defenseman. The Devils will have to wait and see whether that will benefit him in the long run, as Hughes recovers from a shoulder injury at the start of the season.

#### **Pyotr Kochetkov**

##### **G, Carolina Hurricanes**

The Canes goaltender played 42 games last season as Frederik Andersen was limited to 16 games due to injury. Andersen turns 35 this week. Antti Raanta is playing in Europe. While Spencer Martin may also get playing time, it's possible Kochetkov owns the crease for Carolina by the end of the season, something that has been a long time coming.

#### **Alexis Lafreniere**

##### **LW, New York Rangers**

Last season was proof of concept for the Rangers, who waited patiently for Lafrenière to mature into a dependable NHL scorer. They were rewarded with a 28-goal, 57-point season for the No. 1 pick in 2020.

The key was an explosion in his shot totals. With over two minutes more in average ice time last season, Lafrenière saw his shot attempts increase by 161 and his shots on goals by 82. Another giant leap in production is in the cards, but probably requires more power-play output (six points last season).

#### **Cole Perfetti**

##### **C, Winnipeg Jets**

The 22-year-old signed a two-year, \$6.5 million bridge contract with the Jets this month that ended a brief stalemate between the sides. That means it's time for Perfetti to get to work on his case for a longer extension.

His third NHL season was his best numbers-wise (19 goals, 38 points in 71 games) despite limited early minutes and a putrid slump in the second half that saw him register one assist in 20 games. Those numbers should jump this season, especially if he sees significant time with Nikolaj Ehlers.

### **Jake Sanderson**

#### **D, Ottawa Senators**

The 22-year-old defenseman built on a strong rookie season in 2022-23 with new highs in goals (10) and points (38) as his ice time increased to 23:13 per game. His shot attempts rose by 76 year-over-year.

Sanderson has talked about shooting at an even higher clip, citing players like Roman Josi as an inspiration for scoring goals from the blue line. One of the better young defensemen in the NHL is ready for the spotlight.

### **Juraj Slafkovsky**

#### **LW, Montreal Canadiens**

If there was a preseason poll for consensus breakout player, Slafkovsky would probably top the ranking.

The first overall pick in 2022 tore up the NHL with 19 points in his last 19 games last season, finally finding his stride offensively in Year 2 after a middling rookie campaign. The reason many assume he'll build on that performance: His chemistry with Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki on the Canadiens' top line.

#### ***Tier 4: The wait is over***

Players we've been waiting to see break out who finally will.

### **Zach Benson (LW) and Jack Quinn (RW),**

#### **Buffalo Sabres**

Both of these forwards are expected to contribute in a big way to the Sabres' second line with center Dylan Cozens.

Quinn, 23, is looking for the breakout season he was supposed to have in 2023-24, when he was limited to 27 games because of an Achilles tendon injury before the season and a lower-body injury that cost him almost all of February and March. He still managed 19 points in 27 games.

Benson had a promising rookie season (30 points in 71 games), showing great hockey sense and an effective two-way game. If the Sabres are going to take the leap to playoff contention, they'll need players like this to leap first.

### **Brandt Clarke**

#### **D, Los Angeles Kings**

The Kings took a serious hit in the preseason when star defenseman Drew Doughty was lost to a broken ankle. After surgery, Doughty is "month to month," according to the team.

Clarke was already expected to have a bigger role on the Kings' blue line after two seasons of limited action. He's slotted to play with veteran Joel Edmundson, whom the team signed as a free agent. But he's also expected to have a bigger-than-anticipated role on special teams, perhaps even taking on Doughty's top-unit power-play duties.

## **Pavel Dorofeyev**

### **LW, Vegas Golden Knights**

The Golden Knights are fairly thin on the wings this season in terms of scoring power. Enter Dorofeyev, who had 13 goals and 24 points in 47 games last season, averaging 13:17 per game. He's a player whom coach Bruce Cassidy has praised for his ability to take the puck to the net and create offense in tough areas of the ice.

He's had a productive preseason and could see time in the Knights' top six during the 2024-25 campaign.

## **Simon Edvinsson**

### **D, Detroit Red Wings**

Edvinsson has always had the vertical, at 6-foot-6. In the offseason, he decided to address the horizontal by adding some muscle to his frame for his first full NHL season. The secret to his bulk? "It was just a lot of avocados," he said.

Edvinsson saw time with veteran Jeff Petry last season, and he should again in 2024-25. Fans have waited a bit to see the 2021 No. 6 pick make his impact. This could be the time.

## **Dylan Guenther**

### **RW, Utah Hockey Club**

While Utah owner Ryan Smith would have preferred an expansion team over the relocated Coyotes, one of the advantages of the latter was having some foundational young players already on the roster. Chief among them was Guenther, who signed an eight-year contract extension worth \$57.14 million in the offseason.

He had 18 goals in 45 games last season, his ice time jumping by more than three minutes per game. Expect him to line up across from standout Logan Cooley to create one of the best young duos in the West.

## **Matthew Knies**

### **LW, Toronto Maple Leafs**

Knies boasted during training camp that he's a better player than Auston Matthews ... in tennis. "I kind of smoke him a little bit," he said. Upon hearing that, Matthews called him a liar. Clearly, this needs to be settled on the court with the soundtrack from "Challengers" blaring from the speakers.

On the ice, Knies spent the majority of his rookie season on a line with Matthews, scoring 15 goals and 35 points in 80 games. He has put more muscle on his 6-2 frame and could push closer to 50 points in his second full season.

### ***Tier 5: Rookie sensations***

First-year players who aren't waiting for their breakout.

## **Macklin Celebrini**

### **C, San Jose Sharks**

The No. 1 pick in the 2024 draft has had a tantalizing preseason for the Sharks. On the ice, he showed off the offensive skill that made him a coveted prospect. Off the ice, he impressed veteran teammates with his work ethic, which was also his calling card at Boston University.

The new face of the franchise looks good already.

### **Cutter Gauthier**

#### **LW, Anaheim Ducks**

The 20-year-old former Boston College star is expected to play in the Ducks' top six. He plays a power forward game, with good puck protection and hockey sense.

He'll be a young player to watch ... especially on Jan. 11, when he makes his first visit to Philadelphia after declining to play for the Flyers, the team that originally drafted him.

### **Lane Hutson**

#### **D, Montreal Canadiens**

The diminutive (listed at 5-9) defenseman is an offensive dynamo. He's got great wheels, playmaking ability and vision on the ice. He's great at breaking out of his own zone, either with a pass or by skating the puck himself.

As is the case for any young NHL blueliner, there will be a learning curve defensively. But the hype applied to Hutson by Habs fans should be rewarded.

### **Rutger McGroarty**

#### **RW, Pittsburgh Penguins**

If McGroarty is going to make an impact for the Penguins, it'll likely be later in the season. The 20-year-old former University of Michigan standout was acquired by Pittsburgh after he refused to sign with the Jets, who drafted him. The Penguins traded top prospect Brayden Yager to acquire McGroarty, which signaled how high they are on him.

All of that said, he hasn't played a minute of pro hockey yet, so it wouldn't be a surprise to see him get AHL reps early in the season. But he's talented enough to make an impact for the parent club before too long.

### **Matvei Michkov**

#### **RW, Philadelphia Flyers**

The rock star of the rookie class. Michkov is a dazzling offensive talent, with off-the-charts hockey instincts, creativity and goal-scoring prowess. GM Daniel Briere is trying to keep expectations low for Michkov's rookie season, specifically saying that he will have to learn to handle the physicality in the NHL.

But the buzz is undeniable that the young Russian could challenge for the Calder Trophy this season. Provided, of course, that he gets on OK with coach John Tortorella. Briere admitted he expects "some fireworks" between the two.

### **Will Smith**

#### **C, San Jose Sharks**

Smith is now roommates with Macklin Celebrini, as two college rivals become NHL besties. Given the state of the Sharks, Smith should get significant playing time and the opportunity to flash his considerable offensive skills.

He played one season at Boston College, with 71 points in 41 games.

**Logan Stankoven****C, Dallas Stars**

The 21-year-old center kept his rookie status by one game last season, scoring 14 points in 24 games for Dallas. He played 19 more in the playoffs, tallying eight points.

Stankoven should play with Stars captain Jamie Benn this season and will be a critical young player the Cup contenders will count on to get them over the Western Conference hump.