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## [Cleveland.com / Will Dmitri Voronkov meet Don Waddell's offseason challenge?](#) [Blue Jackets season preview 2025-26](#)

**By Tim Bielik – October 9, 2025**

Following the 2024-25 season, Blue Jackets general manager and president Don Waddell sent a clear message to big Russian forward Dmitri Voronkov.

“We had a big meeting at the end of the season,” Waddell told Aaron Portzline of The Athletic in June. “We didn’t give him a target (weight), but a challenge that he’s not going to play (next season) until he’s in shape.”

There’s reason for Waddell to want more out of Voronkov heading into his third season with the Blue Jackets.

Voronkov, who signed a two-year extension worth \$4.175 million AAV later in the offseason, is the kind of player who can potentially tip playoff series because of his build at 6-5, 234 pounds.

But there’s a pretty clear reason why Waddell wants to see a different Voronkov this season.

In each of his two seasons, Voronkov’s production has dipped the deeper into the season he goes.

He has 41 goals and 81 points in 148 career games.

Here’s a breakdown of his production each month:

**October:** 1-1-2 in 3 games (0.67 ppg)

**November:** 8-11-19 in 28 games (0.68 ppg)

**December:** 11-11-22 in 30 games (0.73 ppg)

**January:** 10-6-16 in 26 games (0.62 ppg)

**February:** 5-5-10 in 16 games (0.63 ppg)

**March:** 2-2-4 in 28 games (0.14 ppg)

**April:** 4-4-8 in 17 games (0.47 ppg)

It’s clear there’s a trend when it comes to his production. Voronkov starts off seasons very well, although his 2024-25 didn’t start until Nov. 1 due to suffering an upper body injury in a preseason game vs. Pittsburgh.

Once the calendar turns, his numbers take a slight dip but nothing that’s too concerning.

But the lack of production in March was concerning, particularly last season when he had one goal and three points in a month when the Blue Jackets went just 4-8-1 and had a stretch of eight losses in nine games that ultimately cost them a playoff spot.

March is the time of the year when teams ramp up the intensity in pursuit of the postseason.

The young core of the Blue Jackets got their first taste of being in the mix in March and not only struggled to win, but at times struggled to score.

In a four-game stretch from March 13 to 20, the Blue Jackets scored only one goal.

When games get tight and physical, players with the size of Voronkov need to step up because of just the kind of mismatches they can create.

Size is clearly en vogue in the NHL right now. The Golden Knights and Panthers have combined to win the last three Stanley Cups, and they've all been built on size.

Even though the Blue Jackets have some size at forward in 6-2 Adam Fantilli and 6-3 Kirill Marchenko among others, Voronkov has rare size at 6-5 that makes him a tough player to match up against at his best.

That's likely a reason why Waddell challenged Voronkov this offseason.

Voronkov has better hands and skill than most 6-5, 220-plus-pound forwards should have. The problem in his two seasons, particularly last year, was he wasn't a difference maker in the games that mean the most.

As Waddell told Portzline, conditioning could play a big role in Voronkov reaching his ceiling.

The potential is tantalizing, and getting the best version of Voronkov deep into the season only gives the Blue Jackets a better chance to end a six-year playoff drought.

It's up to how well Voronkov meets his GM's challenge, and we likely won't know that answer for a few months.

## Cleveland.com / Former Blue Jackets star to announce his retirement, will be honored before Oct. 16 game vs. Avalanche

**By Tim Bielik – October 8, 2025**

One of the best players to wear a Columbus Blue Jackets jersey is about to call it a career.

The team announced on Wednesday that Cam Atkinson will sign a one-day contract on Oct. 16 that will allow him to retire as a Blue Jacket. They will also honor him prior to that night's game at home vs. the Colorado Avalanche.

Atkinson, who was a sixth-round pick of the Blue Jackets in the 2008 NHL Entry Draft at No. 157 overall, played in 809 career NHL games, including 627 with Columbus.

He is second in franchise history in goals (213) and points (402), trailing Rick Nash in both categories. Atkinson played 10 seasons for the Blue Jackets and had a career-high 41 goals and 69 points in 2018-19. He also had a 35-goal season in 2016-17, and he was an NHL All-Star in both seasons.

Atkinson was also a quality playoff performer for the Blue Jackets. He appeared in 35 playoff games and had 10 goals and 26 points in those games. In the 2018-19 postseason which included the franchise's first series win, a sweep of the President's Trophy winning Tampa Bay Lightning, Atkinson had two goals and eight points in 10 games.

He played his college hockey at Boston College and was a star in three seasons for the Eagles, scoring 68 goals and 124 points in 117 collegiate games.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets out to prove last season's surprise wasn't a fluke: 'We have everything'

**By Aaron Portzline – October 9, 2025**

It's quite something to see veteran center Sean Monahan smiling and completely at ease in the Columbus Blue Jackets' dressing room. Earlier this week, Monahan engaged with reporters and was positively beaming about his 16-month-old son, Leo, as he scrolled through his cellphone, sharing pictures.

A year ago, this couldn't have been possible. Monahan and the Blue Jackets existed under a pall following the tragedy that took the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, a sadness that threatened to overwhelm until they found a way to use the Gaudreaus' legacy and love of hockey to play with a higher purpose.

As the Blue Jackets prepare to open their 25th season Thursday in Nashville, some of the sadness has lifted. But the sense of purpose remains, players said.

"It's been burning all summer for guys," veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "Training camp is too damn long, but the fire never stopped building. We have that same belief we had last year, the same reasons, the same sense of purpose to accomplish the goal. I haven't been in the playoffs here yet, and it's my fourth year. Even the guys who have been here longer, they haven't been to the playoffs for a while, either."

The Blue Jackets haven't made the playoffs in five straight seasons, the second-longest streak in franchise history. But this year's team, virtually unchanged from one year ago, has already declared that anything short of a playoff berth next spring will be a "failure."

To do that, they'll have to prove the hockey world wrong once more.

Last season, they were expected to be among the dregs of the NHL, a sure-fire lottery pick. Instead, Columbus made a 23-point improvement, the largest in the league and the second-largest (among 82-game seasons) in franchise history.

Now it seems most of the world expects the Blue Jackets to regress. Most sports books have set the over/under between 83.5 and 85.5 points, so they aren't expecting a cratering from last season's 89. To be fair, questions about their goaltending and defense remain after an offseason of only subtle changes.

"I can see why people think that," said Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, who finished second in Norris Trophy voting last season. "Based on what was expected last year and how we actually played, I'm sure they expect regression out of some of the guys, and maybe some guys do have regression. As long as our team keeps moving forward, it doesn't really matter."

"It's not about what guys do individually, it's about us playing as a team, playing for each other and making the playoffs. The Metro is wide open. The East is wide open. We'll see what happens."

The Blue Jackets made it through training camp without any injuries, which already puts them ahead of last season. And the NHL schedule-makers have given them an opportunity to show early improvement in another area that was a problem one year ago.

In Nationwide Arena (and Ohio Stadium), the Blue Jackets were 26-10-5, tied for the eighth-best home record in the league. On the road, the Jackets went 14-23-4, the sixth-worst mark in the NHL.

After Wednesday's season opener in Nashville, the Blue Jackets will travel to St. Paul, Minn., to play the Minnesota Wild on Saturday.

"Nothing we can do about (the schedule) except play the games," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We talked about yesterday as a team, that it doesn't matter who, when, where, or what the situation is — you play the game where the puck is dropped.

"We should be excited to compete and get the other team's best. They'll be excited and jacked up, and so should we be."

Evason wouldn't say which goaltender, Jet Greaves or Elvis Merzlikins, would start the season opener. Merzlikins has started the last two openers and three of the past four, but Greaves — a full-time NHLer this season after four seasons in the American Hockey League — is a threat to his playing time. Whichever goaltender doesn't get the call Wednesday in Nashville will likely play in Minnesota on Saturday, Evason said.

The Blue Jackets went 2-5-0 and scored just 14 goals in the preseason. In previous seasons, that might have been a major concern. But players only scoffed at that notion the past two days, and Evason said he thought his players were "dialed in" structurally in a 2-1 loss to Washington last Saturday.

This week, he said he's liked the "seriousness of practice."

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell did not make major moves this summer, but added three bottom-six forwards. It is hoped that third-line center Charlie Coyle and fourth-liners Isac Lundestrom and Miles Wood will make the club more formidable up and down the lineup.

They join a roster with impressive young talent — 21-year-old center Adam Fantilli and 25-year-old right winger Kirill Marchenko had 31 goals last season — and a cluster of veteran players, like captain Boone Jenner, Werenski, Monahan, Gudbranson, Ivan Provorov, Mathieu Olivier and so on.

The Blue Jackets believe they have all the pieces to make the postseason for the first time since 2020. Last season began with overwhelming sadness and ended in disappointment, as they fell just short. This season is off to a much better start, and there's an air of confidence in the dressing room.

"We know we're a good team," Werenski said. "We still have a lot of room to get better and a lot to prove, of course, but we're absolutely capable of taking another big step this year.

"Our young guys aren't young anymore. We have everything. It's exciting."

## The Athletic / Cam Atkinson to sign one-day contract, retire with the Blue Jackets

**By Aaron Portzline – October 8, 2025**

Cam Atkinson, who overcame steep odds as an undersized player and a late-round draft pick to become a prolific scorer, will end his career just as it began: with the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Atkinson, 36, will sign a one-day contract with the Blue Jackets on Oct. 16 and simultaneously announce his retirement after a 13-season, 809-game career with Columbus, the Philadelphia Flyers and Tampa Bay Lightning, according to the Blue Jackets. The team will honor Atkinson before a game that night vs. the Colorado Avalanche in Nationwide Arena.

He's expected to join the Blue Jackets' front office eventually, but a role has not yet been identified.

"This is home," Atkinson told *The Athletic* early this summer. "I played here for 10 years, and all three of my kids were born here at Riverside (Methodist Hospital). It's the community here, the fans, that make it special. I come back in the summer and when I go to get a coffee, I'm always reminded of that. Best fans in the league. You say that everywhere you go, but there's something special here.

"I started my career here and I want to end my career here. That's been the goal from Day 1."

Atkinson had offers to sign training camp tryout agreements with NHL clubs this offseason, he said.

But by late last season, when he cleared waivers with the Lightning, Atkinson began thinking about his second career. It was confirmed late this summer when the passion to get back into hockey-playing mode wasn't as intense.

"My last regular-season game (April 17) was in Madison Square Garden," Atkinson said. "The (New York) Rangers were my favorite team growing up. My wife (Natalie) and kids and the entire family came to that game, because I deep-down knew that was it."

Atkinson has remained a resident of central Ohio even after his trade to Philadelphia. He is the owner of Battery Hockey Academy, a youth development facility in Plain City, Ohio. He also started the Force Network Fund, which provides financial aid and other support to military and first-responder families.

Atkinson quickly became a fan favorite when he debuted with Columbus during the 2011-12 season. He also became one of the franchise's offensive stars.

In the Blue Jackets' 24-year history, only Rick Nash (289-258-547) has more goals and points than Atkinson (213-189-402). He's also third in games played (627), third in power-play goals, first in short-handed goals (16), tied for third in overtime goals and second in game-winning goals (42).

Both Nash (2003-04) and Atkinson (2018-19) share the Blue Jackets' single-season goal record with 41. Atkinson also had a 35-goal season in 2016-17, the fifth-highest single-season total in franchise history.

The Blue Jackets traded Atkinson to the Philadelphia for Jakub Voracek on July 24, 2021. After two seasons with the Flyers, he signed a one-year contract with Tampa Bay last summer.

Atkinson was a sixth-round draft pick, No. 157 overall, in 2008. From that year's draft class, only Steven Stamkos (582), Jordan Eberle (308) and Adam Henrique (275) have scored more goals than Atkinson (253).

Only 12 players in NHL history, according to Hockey-Reference, have been drafted No. 157 overall or later and scored more goals: Luc Robitaille (668), Joe Pavelski (476), Theo Fleury (455), Dave Taylor (431), Henrik Zetterberg (337), Pavel Datsyuk (314), Pavol Demitra (304), Steve Sullivan (290), Radim Vrbata (284), Andrew Brunette (268), Patric Hörnqvist (264) and Donald Audette (260).

Despite a stellar career at Boston College, Atkinson wasn't drafted in 2007, his first year of eligibility. And he tumbled down the draft board the following year for one reason: his height.

Listed at 5-foot-8, Atkinson didn't shy away from taking on bigger players in puck battles or playing in traffic. Since 2000, when the Blue Jackets entered the NHL, the only players listed 5-8 or shorter who have scored more goals than Atkinson are Martin St. Louis (391) and Brian Gionta (291).

"I defied the odds," Atkinson said. "It was (former Blue Jackets scout) Rob Riley who had my back and took a chance on me. He vouched for me with (former Blue Jackets GM) Scott Howson and (assistant GM) Chris MacFarland to draft me.

"There are guys who paved the way for me: Martin St. Louis, Brian Gionta, Theo Fleury. You're doubted your whole career, but my mindset was, 'If they can do it, why can't I?' The doubters fueled my fire. I loved it. I embraced it. I loved being the underdog and hearing what I couldn't do."



## The Athletic / Yegor Chinakhov, after trade request, expected to be scratched from Blue Jackets' opener

**By Aaron Portzline – October 8, 2025**

This cannot make Yegor Chinakhov happy.

The Columbus Blue Jackets' 24-year-old winger, who requested a trade over the summer, citing a lack of opportunity under coach Dean Evason, is expected to open the season as a healthy scratch when the Blue Jackets play in Nashville on Thursday.

Evason did not officially confirm his lineup, but in recent practices, Chinakhov has been the extra forward — taking every other shift — on the Blue Jackets' fourth line with center Isac Lundestrom, Miles Wood and Zach Aston-Reese.

"We chatted after the second-to-last preseason game (Sept. 30 vs. Washington)," Evason said. "We sat down and talked to him. Anything can happen (with the lineup), but if it does end up that way, we want him to just do all the right things.

"I'll tell you this, that our 13 forwards here ... it's a difficult decision. They all can play. It's a decision that we have to make as a staff, and hopefully we make the right one. We expect whoever is sitting out to work, to be a great teammate, and to be ready if and when they get in."

Chinakhov has had stretches in each of the past two seasons in which he's looked like a bona fide top-six player, and he played three preseason games in top-six roles, including the last two games on the No. 1 line.

But he has not been able to unseat any of the Blue Jackets' established wingers for a spot on any of the top three lines. Given his skill set, he's an odd fit for the fourth line.

In July, Chinakhov acknowledged in an interview with the Russian outlet Sport-Express that he'd requested a trade with Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell before departing Columbus after the season.

Chinakhov arrived back in Columbus in August — he was one of the first players back in town ahead of the season — and soon had a meeting with Waddell and Evason which appeared to, at least temporarily, put the relationship on professional footing.

When Chinakhov fired his agent, Shumi Babaev, and moved to a different agency, many wondered if the trade request had been lifted. When asked about this while confirming the agent switch, Chinakhov declined to comment to *The Athletic*.

Chinakhov played in five of the Blue Jackets' seven preseason games and totaled one goal and two assists, with a minus-1 rating and eight shots on goal. In 30 games last season, he totaled 7-8-15 and a minus-6 rating, but that included a nine-game goal-scoring drought after he returned in early March from back surgery.

When the Blue Jackets played their way back into playoff contention late last season — they won six straight games to end the season, and missed the playoffs by two points — Chinakhov was a healthy scratch, prompting the offseason trade request.

And now, six months later, it seems nothing's changed.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Fabbro thankful for waivers whirlwind that sent him to the Columbus Blue Jackets

**By Brian Hedger – October 9, 2025**

Three shifts into his first game with the Blue Jackets, everything Dante Fabbro could still feel on his body hurt.

His legs burned. His lungs heaved. Turning to his new defensive partner, Zach Werenski, Fabbro told the NHL's leader in average ice time that, well, he might be cooked after sitting out as a healthy scratch for all but two games with the Nashville Predators in the preceding three weeks.

"I always joke with him about his first game in Seattle," Werenski said. "I knew he hadn't played for a while, and he looked at me on the second or third shift and was like, 'Man, my legs hurt.' I looked over (at the coaches) and I was like, 'He's not gonna make it.' I'm always joking with him about that because ... look how far we've come."

It's been quite a journey for Fabbro, who re-signed with the Blue Jackets this past summer to remain Werenski's partner on the right side of their top defensive pairing.

After playing the first seven years of his NHL career with the Predators, who selected him 17<sup>th</sup> overall in 2016, Fabbro was pushed outside of the Predators' main playing group last season. He played the first four games, sat for three, played two more — including one against the Blue Jackets — and sat back down four more times before being placed on waivers.

The Predators probably wanted to sneak him through for an AHL assignment, but the Jackets didn't let that happen.

They snapped Fabbro up Nov. 10, 2024, as a possible right-handed option to play with Werenski. It couldn't have worked out better, giving Werenski a steady partner for the first time in three years and Fabbro a new lease on his NHL career.

It's fitting that almost a full year later they'll hit the ice together in the Blue Jackets' opener Oct. 9 in Nashville.

"For a second there with Nashville, it wasn't looking good," Fabbro said. "I wasn't playing, and it seemed like my NHL days were starting to slim down a bit. Obviously, push comes to shove, I got put on waivers and Columbus took a chance on me."

It has certainly paid off.

Fabbro posted the best numbers of his NHL career in his first season playing with Werenski, who put together his own career-best effort to finish second in voting for the Norris Trophy awarded to the league's best defenseman.

"When I first got here, I couldn't believe how good (Werenski) was," Fabbro said. "It seemed like he'd step on the ice, and he'd have four points a night, and I just couldn't believe it. I was very fortunate to be put in that position, but I knew the kind of player I was, too, and how I wanted to go about my

business, coming in here and proving a point, and nothing changes this year. I still have a chip on my shoulder and want to play hard.”

He might have a chip on each shoulder against Nashville in his first return to Bridgestone Arena since getting a phone call telling him he’d been claimed by Columbus and had just a couple hours to pack for a flight to Seattle. It’s been a bit of a whirlwind ever since, but one that Fabbro’s eager to continue.

“It was a crazy few days there when everything kind of happened with Nashville and then going to Columbus,” he said. “But I’ve told people this lots of times. It was probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

## The Columbus Dispatch / Cam Atkinson to retire with Columbus Blue Jackets: 'I'm ready for the next chapter'

**By Brian Hedger – October 8, 2025**

There were cheers, high-fives and many hugs for Cam Atkinson when the Blue Jackets selected him in the sixth round, 157th overall, in the 2008 NHL Draft.

Atkinson, an undersized scoring winger from Avon Old Farms prep school in Connecticut, was thrilled to become an NHL prospect as he eyed a collegiate career at Boston College, but his four brothers quickly posed a question he couldn't answer: "Where the hell is Columbus, Ohio?"

Atkinson quickly learned the answer to that question, and he's become one of the city's biggest advocates after making Columbus his home for 13 years. Atkinson, 36, became an NHL star while playing 10 seasons for the Blue Jackets, and now he'll retire with his first of three NHL teams. After playing 13 years professionally, the undersized forward (5 feet 8, 178 pounds) from Riverside, Connecticut will get a fitting end to his career in the same place it began Oct. 7, 2011, at Nationwide Arena.

Atkinson will sign a one-day contract and retire as a Blue Jacket Oct. 16, when he'll be honored along with his family on the ice before the Blue Jackets host the Colorado Avalanche.

"I'm done playing," Atkinson said. "This summer was the first one I didn't have the desire to even put on my equipment. My kids have been in three different schools in the past three years, and signing another one-year deal doesn't move the needle for me."

Atkinson's career ends with 253 goals, 236 assists and 489 points over 809 games, including 213-189-402 in 627 games for the Blue Jackets over 10 seasons.

Despite his undersized build, Atkinson's scoring acumen still has him ranked at or near the top of multiple all-time franchise rankings, including first in short-handed goals (16), first in hat tricks (six), second in points (402), second in goals (213), second in game-winning goals (42), second in shots (1,883), third in games played (627), third in power-play goals (42), fifth in assists (189) and ninth in plus/minus (+17).

He is also tied with Rick Nash for first in most goals (41) during a single season (2018-19), and an affable personality still endears him to many fans.

"I'm ready for the next chapter, whatever that may be," Atkinson said. "I feel very thankful and fortunate just to get the opportunity to start my career here. It's no secret. My wife, Natalie, and I ... we fell in love with living here and everything the city has to offer outside of hockey and our friends that we still have here."

### **Cam Atkinson hopes to work with Columbus Blue Jackets at some point**

Atkinson would like to work for the Blue Jackets in some capacity in the future, but that's something that will wait until an opportunity arises. Meanwhile, he continues to improve The Battery Hockey Academy, a local training facility he co-founded in August 2018 while still playing for the Blue Jackets.

Natalie Atkinson is also involved with the Women's Wellness Center at Riverside Hospital, where she gave birth to the couple's three children.

"We're really starting to sink our teeth into everything the city has to offer, and, honestly, we're just getting started," Atkinson said. "This is really the first time in my life, living here, that I'm not playing hockey. I'm trying to transition and figure out what I really want to do, and that's really being a part of the Blue Jackets organization in some capacity and growing the game throughout central Ohio with The Battery and giving these kids the best opportunity to make it to the next level."

Getting started on those goals was more important than signing another one-year contract for a depth spot or auditioning for a deal via professional tryout offer. Atkinson played just 39 games last season with the Tampa Bay Lightning, a Stanley Cup contender, after playing the previous two years with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Atkinson was part of a surprising trade July 24, 2021, that sent him to the Flyers for Jake Voracek, who returned to his NHL roots in the swap. Neck surgery in 2022 forced Atkinson to miss the entire 2022-23 season, but he returned to play 70 games in 2023-24 in the final year of his contract.

That led to signing a one-year contract July 2, 2024, with Tampa.

During those stops, Atkinson stayed connected to Columbus despite a stinging exit.

The night before he was traded, he attended a watch party at Nationwide Arena to welcome the addition of three first-round picks: Kent Johnson (fifth overall), Cole Sillinger (12<sup>th</sup> overall) and Corson Ceulemans (25th overall).

The next day, his oldest son, Declan, had a birthday party that was supposed to include an appearance by the Blue Jackets' mascot, Stinger. It was shocking to Atkinson and his family, but any hard feelings have subsided.

The Atkinsons' love for Columbus never dropped, and now they're back on a full-time basis. Officially ending his playing career by wearing the Blue Jackets' crest is a fitting segue for a player whose jersey still populates crowds at Nationwide Arena.

"That was the goal all along, that whenever I was done playing, we were going to be here full time," Atkinson said. "At the end of the day, I'm just excited about that."

## ESPN / Predicting where every NHL team finishes in 2025-26

By Greg Wyshynski – October 8, 2025

The Colorado Avalanche are going to win the 2026 Stanley Cup.

I made the declaration about a month ago when pressed for a Cup pick. At the time, I thought I was being a Brooklyn hipster going against a wave of sentiment behind the Edmonton Oilers, who have lost consecutive Stanley Cup Finals; the Dallas Stars, who have lost three straight Western Conference finals; and the Vegas Golden Knights, who added Mitch Marner in the offseason.

Imagine my surprise when I looked at the ESPN hockey family's season predictions and saw the Avalanche were in fact the chalk of a very crowded field. A hipster picker's nightmare, indeed.

As is tradition, I revealed my Stanley Cup selection to a member of that team while at the player media tour in Las Vegas:

Me: I wanted to inform you that I'm picking you guys to win the Stanley Cup.

Avalanche star Cale Makar: I appreciate that.

Me: I also wanted to inform you that I'm not good at making Stanley Cup predictions.

Makar: Well, we'll prove that wrong, hopefully.

I have the Avalanche winning the Cup over the Carolina Hurricanes, who are in at least their sixth attempt to break through in the Eastern Conference under coach Rod Brind'amour. I explain why below in my full 2025-26 NHL season standings predictions.

Here's my division-by-division breakdown. Playoff teams are bolded. Good luck to all 32 teams. Hope everyone has fun out there.

### **ATLANTIC DIVISION**

Tampa Bay Lightning

Ottawa Senators

Toronto Maple Leafs

Florida Panthers

Buffalo Sabres

Montreal Canadiens

Detroit Red Wings

Boston Bruins

There's probably no greater example of the constant power rebalancing in the Atlantic than the fact that the Lightning haven't finished atop the division since 2018-19. That's despite having Nikita Kucherov,

second only to Connor McDavid in points (378) over the past three seasons; Andrei Vasilevskiy, third in save percentage (.913) in that span; Victor Hedman, seventh in points among defensemen (191) and a defensive rock on which to build; and the rest of a cast that includes Brayden Point, Anthony Cirelli, Brandon Hagel and Jake Guentzel.

Oh, and behind the bench a guy named Jon Cooper, considered by everyone except Jack Adams Award voters to be the best coach in the league.

The Lightning will win the Atlantic this season handily. Kucherov's line with Point and Guentzel averaged over four goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. The duo of Cirelli and Hagel produced a 61% expected goals percentage together last season. Ryan McDonagh, a true glue guy, returned to the scene of his two Stanley Cup wins and had one of the most underappreciated seasons by a defenseman in 2024-25. Tampa Bay gets full seasons of Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde, and 24-year-old Gage Goncalves has another gear to hit. The Bolts will have at least one new banner to raise in the rafters after this season.

One of the bottom-feeders in the Atlantic was eventually going to be full enough to rise into contention, and that ended up being the Senators, who made the playoffs last spring for the first time since 2017. They'll continue to ascend provided the forward group cooperates.

Brady Tkachuk, growing into one of the NHL's greatest captains, needs to get back to the mid-30s in goals -- and having linemate Tim Stützle return to the 90-point plateau is key in that. Dylan Cozens already showed he's going to be the next in the grand tradition of Buffalo Sabres' transactional regrets after last year's trade deadline pickup. But this season hinges on players such as Shane Pinto, Ridly Greig and Fabian Zetterlund, a trade deadline dud whom Ottawa still extended for three seasons.

The forwards being make-or-break means I'm fairly confident in the Sens' back end. Jake Sanderson established himself as an elite top-pairing guy, which has allowed Thomas Chabot to thrive on a second pairing with Nick Jensen. Jordan Spence comes over from the Kings to significantly upgrade what Travis Hamonic gave the Sens last season. Linus Ullmark was awesome from December on last season. His crease-mate, Leevi Merilainen, could be a sneaky Calder Trophy candidate. There's a lot to like here for coach Travis Green, who made major strides in giving this team some defensive structure last season. The Senators are adding while others in the Atlantic are subtracting.

Losing Mitch Marner means losing points in the standings for the Maple Leafs. He's a 100-point winger who led the team in power-play points and was their best penalty-killing forward. Did that transfer over to the postseason? Absolutely not, which is why Marner deserved criticism, though perhaps not to pariah levels. But no one had a higher wins above replacement on the Leafs last regular season than Marner (2.8). I'm sure that will be celebrated when he returns to Toronto with Vegas on Jan. 23 for a game that'll make John Tavares' return to Long Island as a Leaf look like a concert by The Wiggles by comparison.

The "Core Four" lost one but might have gained another. Replacing Mitch Marner with Matthew Knies appears a bit like the Ninja Turtles swapping Leonardo for Casey Jones, but Knies is primed to pop after a 29-goal campaign. The Leafs know what they have in William Nylander, who is eighth in goals scored (125) over the past three seasons, and they have him next to Tavares, who at 35 is half the player he used to be and is paid as such. If we're going by his career cadence, Auston Matthews should score over



60 goals this season. The Leafs would probably settle for seeing the former MVP's dangerous dominance after injuries diminished him last season. So would Team USA in the Olympic Games in February.

The Leafs imported Matias Maccelli from Utah to help replace Marner's points, and it still seems like a weird decision to add a guy who had six hits in 55 games to a Craig Berube team. Because everywhere you look on this roster, you're starting to see a Craig Berube team: Nicolas Roy, acquired from Vegas in Marner's departure, is a very solid 3C. A full season of Brandon Carlo adds to a blue line full of size and punishment in front of the goaltenders Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz, who made me a believer last year despite their constant injury concerns. There's a sturdiness here that would normally lead to playoff success. The Maple Leafs' undoing might be not having enough superstar offensive skill around it.

Speaking of talent subtractions: Can the Panthers survive without Matthew Tkachuk until at least December and without Aleksander Barkov until at least April? The answer is "in this conference, probably." But it brings me no joy to report that the Panthers' three-peat attempt could end with them missing the playoffs entirely, especially given how much I've grown to love the beach vistas and fried fish in covering their past three runs to the Stanley Cup Final.

The Panthers' most important player this season is Sam Reinhart, full stop. Over the past two seasons playing without Barkov on his line (593:21 in 5-on-5 ice time), the Panthers had 0.75 fewer goals per 60 minutes with Reinhart on the ice while breaking even in what they scored and gave up. Coach Paul Maurice seems to favor bumping Brad Marchand up with Sam Bennett while Eetu Luostarinen and Anton "Baby Barkov" Lundell play with Reinhart during Tkachuk's absence. When Tkachuk comes back, Reinhart, who has scored 160 goals in 321 games since joining the Panthers, will still have to drive his line in Barkov's absence, which isn't a given.

There's probably something freeing for a two-time defending champ to enter a season with the pressure somewhat diminished by these injuries. The Panthers already had a "just get in" mindset for the playoffs. Now, they can hunker down, and rely on a defensive structure fortified by arguably the best top four in the conference -- Aaron Ekblad and Gus Forsling, Seth Jones and Niko Mikkola -- in front of Sergei Bobrovsky. GM Bill Zito kept this band together to try to become the NHL's first dynasty with three consecutive Cups since the 1980s Islanders. With a healthy Tkachuk and Barkov, the three-peat could be within reach. But getting an invite to that playoff party will be harder than it has been since Maurice arrived in Sunrise.

The Sabres are easily the most confounding team in the Atlantic this season. They've regressed in the standings in consecutive seasons. Health seems to always be a concern, never more so than when Josh Norris is being relied upon as a critical center. The goaltending is more "fingers crossed" than Vezina Trophy-worthy. There are some givens -- Tage Thompson's offensive rampage to ensure an Olympic roster spot, Rasmus Dahlin potentially being the Norris Trophy flavor of the season -- but the incremental improvements GM Kevyn Adams has made to this roster don't seem to answer its many questions.

That established, the hockey analytics community loves the Sabres this season more than data scraping in Python. Most fancy stats analysts I read have them finishing with over 90 points, with my friends at Evolving Hockey going as high as 99 points. As Jack "JFresh" Fraser writes in his season preview: "Ryan McLeod, Owen Power, Zach Benson, Alex Tuch, Josh Doan, Jason Zucker, Michael Kesselring, Conor

Timmins -- all pretty good to great players. This is a team that's had abundant weak links for years and seems, maybe, to have patched them up for a change. Add in Dahlin and Thompson, who both profile like superstars, and there you go. Would I put money on it? Hell no. But it's something to watch for."

The Canadiens also broke out last season to qualify for the playoffs, losing to the Washington Capitals in five games. I think this talented young team takes a step back this season before an eventual leap forward. The Canadiens can't defend. They're a playoff team whose expected goals against last season at even strength (2.87, 31st) ranked behind the San Jose Sharks, who were disinterested in playing defense at all. They were fourth from the bottom in scoring chances allowed. I don't think they've done much to remedy that. In fact, it might have gotten worse, despite all that Noah Dobson and Ivan Demidov can bring plenty to the team offensively. There's only so much that Sam Montembeault can paper over with goaltending that saw him save 25 goals above expected last season.

The latest amendment to GM Steve Yzerman's "Yzerplan," which the Red Wings have executed since 2019: Finally getting John Gibson out of Anaheim for the last two years of his contract. Detroit used four goalies last season, and Cam Talbot was the only keeper. This new goalie battery on a Todd McLellan-coached team gave me pause, but not as much as Gibson's inability to stay in the lineup does. Otherwise, it's another season with some young bright spots -- Moritz Seider, Simon Edvinsson, Lucas Raymond and hopefully Marco Kasper, or else Detroit's in real trouble this season. The Wings don't have the talent to make the playoffs but have enough of it to limit their lottery odds. Which is unfortunately the most palpable result of the Yzerplan.

I might be low on the Bruins here. If the defense corps is healthy in front of Jeremy Swayman, who had a proper training camp this time, they could grind out some wins for first-year coach Marco Sturm. And by "defense corps" we essentially mean Charlie McAvoy, who was limited to 50 games last season while posting his lowest points-per-60 minutes average in six seasons. But even a return to Norris contention for Charlie Mac isn't going to turn the tide for Boston, whose overall depth is that of a team which went on a selling spree at last season's trade deadline. David Pastrnak is now Ilya Kovalchuk on the Atlanta Thrashers: someone who's good for 50 goals and a 100-point pace no matter who surrounds him, but in service of a basement dweller.

## **METROPOLITAN DIVISION**

Carolina Hurricanes

New Jersey Devils

Washington Capitals

New York Rangers

Columbus Blue Jackets

New York Islanders

Pittsburgh Penguins

Philadelphia Flyers

Whereas the Atlantic Division has some upwardly mobile teams below the contenders, the Metro feels like four teams with strong playoff chances and then four teams those top four will mine for points -- with one exception.

The Hurricanes are tied with the Oilers and Golden Knights for the best odds to make the playoffs on ESPN BET, which says as much about the relative strengths of the Metro and Pacific as it does about these teams. I infamously picked the Hurricanes to miss the playoffs in last year's column, and hey, it's not like they made it all the way to the conference finals to make me look like a total idiot. Picking them to win the Metro and the entire Eastern Conference is not an act of contrition but a tacit admission that Carolina has hit that sweet spot of veteran impact players comingling with outstanding young stars in the most consistently effective coaching system in the NHL.

What a long, strange trip it's been for GM Eric Tulsky. He landed Jake Guentzel at the 2024 trade deadline, only to bow out in the second round and watch him leave for Tampa Bay. Still seeking that playoff scoring solution, Tulsky last season landed Taylor Hall from Chicago and Mikko Rantanen from Colorado for Martin Necas, but traded Rantanen after just 13 games because he wouldn't commit long-term in Raleigh.

That resulted in Carolina getting Logan Stankoven, an outstanding 22-year-old forward, and a bunch of picks from Dallas. And after searching the free agent options for top-line left wing help, the Hurricanes went down a tier and signed Nikolaj Ehlers from the Jets, a play-driving winger with some injury history who's nonetheless well suited for what they do. The money they didn't spend on Rantanen went to Ehlers and defenseman K'Andre Miller, a pending restricted free agent acquired from the Rangers partially through one of the first-rounders they received from Dallas. He joins a deep defense corps bolstered by one of the NHL's best rookies in Alexander Nikishin.

There are some points of concern with the Canes, starting with second-line center. Jesperi Kotkaniemi hasn't been the answer. They've been using Stankoven there and might still try Seth Jarvis as an internal solution. This might be where Tulsky tries to use his cap space and draft capital to improve the team before the deadline. Or perhaps that'll be in goal, where Frederik Andersen remains dominant but a constant injury concern, with Pyotr Kochetkov yet to show he's anything but a downgrade.

Rod Brind'Amour has led the Hurricanes to a .604 points percentage or better in six of his seven seasons as head coach. He has led them to the conference finals three times without ever playing for the Stanley Cup. The Canes will kick that wall down this season with a tenacious, talented group that has room for improvement.

Are the Devils keeping their powder dry for a run at Quinn Hughes? They'd be silly not to if there's even a small chance that Vancouver trades him to "play with his brothers" before his 2027 unrestricted free agency. But the reason the Devils tinkered with the roster instead of taking big swings is likely because they like what they have already and want to see what it looks like with a healthy Jack Hughes.

They were 33-23-6 with Hughes in the lineup until his injury on March 2, creating a points cushion that enabled them to still make the playoffs despite losing 12 of their final 21 games of the season. He has been over 3.2 points per 60 minutes in each of his past four seasons. Hughes is everything for the Devils, from being their offensive engine to being the reason they just paid a 22-year-old defenseman \$63 million for services yet rendered. If Luke Hughes is happy, Jack's hopefully happy.

New Jersey has a deeply talented blue line and the goaltending tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen, who took their team save percentage from 30th to 11th. GM Tom Fitzgerald had a nice signing in former Oiler Connor Brown and has anointed Cody Glass as the third-line center to start the season. If the bottom six is better and the team has better injury luck, the Devils are poised to make noise this season. Or, failing that, just trade for Quinn, I guess.

The Capitals don't know what the future holds for 40-year-old Alex Ovechkin, who is now the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer at 897 and in the last year of his contract. But Capitals coach Spencer Carbery told ESPN's "The Drop" that he's relieved there isn't another overriding Ovechkin story that his team is experiencing every night on the road, with "Ovi's last season" replacing The Great Chase.

"Definitely. No doubt. If that was the case then every building you go into, especially the Western teams, it'll be the last time definitely that he goes into those arenas," he said.

Instead, the Capitals can remain focused on repeating their incredible 111-point campaign from last season, which saw them advance to the second round of the playoffs. GM Chris Patrick won almost every bet he made last offseason, such as with Pierre-Luc Dubois, Jakob Chychrun and Logan Thompson. Provided there's little to no regression there, and young players such as Aliaksei Protas and Ryan Leonard progress, they'll keep Ovechkin in contention in what could be his final NHL season.

The Rangers were messy last season, but regime change generally is. GM Chris Drury played hardball with veterans who had trade protection, resulting in captain Jacob Trouba and franchise pillar Chris Kreider flying to Anaheim and former Ranger J.T. Miller returning from Vancouver to say, "I'm the captain now." Coach Peter Laviolette paid with his job for the Rangers' descent from the conference finals to outside the postseason. Enter Mike Sullivan, another former Ranger (as assistant coach from 2009 to 2013), who escaped the rebuilding Penguins.

The Rangers have enough talent in the right places to overcome significant lineup holes and earn a playoff spot this season. Miller's arrival helped pull Mika Zibanejad out of a nightmarish season. Will Cuylle is burgeoning star who'll take over most of what Kreider was doing in the lineup. The line of Alexis Lafrenière, Artemi Panarin and Vincent Trocheck is a dependable force -- and Panarin is in a contract year, too.

The Rangers need Adam Fox to recapture the magic of his Norris Trophy form, and importing Kings defenseman Vladislav Gavrikov as a free agent should do the trick. Provided Igor Shesterkin bounces back with a better structure in front of him -- and he had 21.6 goals saved above expected -- the Rangers should be the fourth Metro playoff team, if not much more than that.

It doesn't get more inspiring than what the Blue Jackets did last season, finishing two points out of a playoff spot while playing through unfathomable grief. I love what they're building in Columbus, and a wild-card spot isn't out of the question.

It's conceivable that Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko all take another huge leap forward surrounded by an improved supporting cast -- I love the Charlie Coyle addition. It's possible that Denton Mateychuk has a breakout season on a blue line that needs more skill. But the season probably rests on the shoulder pads of 24-year-old Jet Greaves, and whether he's good enough to wrest the crease from Elvis Merzlikins. Because someone needs to.

The combination of a CBA-mandated relaxed dress code and the post-Lou Lamoriello lift on facial hair restrictions could have the Islanders' dressing room looking like Bonnaroo. Frankly, it's about time this organization had an infusion of personality, and it arrives in the form of 18-year-old Matthew Schaefer. The No. 1 pick has boundless enthusiasm and charisma to spare. This is largely the same roster that Lamoriello created, which finished with 82 points last season. A full season of Mathew Barzal probably gets the Islanders slightly more than that, but not much more.

There's no point in assessing the playoff potential of the Penguins, whose roster is like a random name generator surrounding a core of six veterans stuck in hockey purgatory under new head coach Dan Muse. The entire conversation about this team will be about what happens to that core by the trade deadline, most specifically the fates of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

Everyone around Sid wants the legend to remove himself from this narrative, join a Stanley Cup contender and thrive in the postseason spotlight again. But he has steadfastly dedicated himself to seeing things through in Pittsburgh as a Shein version of the Capitals' retool around Ovechkin. I'm still optimistic that he'll change his mind. I'm even more convinced that Malkin will move this season, especially after he cast an appreciative eye toward the fun Brad Marchand was having last season. You know, with the Florida Panthers, the team near one of Malkin's homes in Miami and that currently has an opening for a veteran No. 1 center. Just sayin'.

The most that the Flyers can hope for this season is the continued progress of its young players as new coach Rick Tocchet power-drills fundamentals into them. They're going to be a tough out and fun to watch, depending on how much time Trevor Zegras and Matvei Michkov are given to create content. But the Flyers aren't likely to grab too many headlines in Philadelphia this season. The Jalen Hurts discourse can continue, uninterrupted.

## **CENTRAL DIVISION**

Colorado Avalanche

Dallas Stars

Utah Mammoth

Winnipeg Jets

Minnesota Wild

St. Louis Blues

Nashville Predators

Chicago Blackhawks

The simplest justification for why I think the Avalanche will win the Stanley Cup is that they again have the essential building blocks for a championship team. Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar are top-five NHL players overall and one Connor McDavid away from both being the best at what they do. The Avs have their No. 2 center in Brock Nelson after years of post-Nazem Kadri searching. They have a goalie in Mackenzie Blackwood who has at least the potential to be the guy who might not win you a series but won't lose it for you either.

(Results are pending on that last one.)

Can Martin Necas give them 75% of what Mikko Rantanen did, as was the gamble in trading their star winger last season? Can Samuel Girard and Josh Manson be the rock-solid second pairing behind the ridiculously good Makar and Devon Toews? Can Gabriel Landeskog, one of last season's most heartwarming stories that lacked a storybook ending, become Gabriel Landeskog again?

I'm saying yes to all of this. I'm also putting my faith in an aggressive front office to once again bolster this lineup before the postseason if necessary, whether incrementally or with a big swing. Say, did you hear Nathan MacKinnon grew up in Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia? I wonder if that's relevant to any other current events in the NHL ...

Since winning the Stanley Cup in 2022, the Avalanche have been eliminated in the first round to Seattle, the second round to Dallas and the first round to Dallas again. That last seven-game loss to the Stars left MacKinnon "shocked" and unsure how to process it. That's exactly what you want to hear as an Avalanche fan. Palpable disgust is what fueled MacKinnon's first Cup win. The tank's nearly full again.

The first question that needs to be asked about the Stars is whether they made three straight Western Conference finals because they were coached by Pete DeBoer or because they were a three-time conference finalist that he happened to coach. We'll find out now that DeBoer is somewhere muttering things about Jake Oettinger under his breath while Glen Gulutzan, an Oilers assistant who coached the Stars from 2011 to 2013, takes over.

The Stars are still in the sweet spot for NHL teams: productive veterans and outstanding young players and a franchise goalie combining for a Cup-worthy team. Last season saw them add a superstar in Mikko Rantanen, and anyone who watched the playoffs understands his postseason impact.

Yet Dallas has room for improvement. Teams of scientists are still trying to determine what happened to Wyatt Johnston in the 2025 playoffs, mustering four goals in 18 games with a minus-16. The Matt Duchene regression seems inevitable. They're going to have to replace what they lost in Mikael Granlund, Mason Marchment and Evgenii Dadonov. The young standouts such as Thomas Harley, Lian Bichsel and Mavrik Bourque must continue to level up.

Again: The Dallas Stars can win the Stanley Cup this season if the mix is right and the path is friendly. One just hopes that DeBoer didn't take their window to win with him, and that the legacy of his group is as the Western Conference's annual bridesmaid.

The Mammoth will make the playoffs. I'm a believer that the core they've built there -- Clayton Keller, Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley -- is trending to be the type of elite trio that powers a team to the postseason. Keller and Nick Schmaltz anchor one line. Cooley, whose ceiling increasingly looks to be a Jack Hughes-adjacent player, is in the middle of Guenther and JJ Peterka, their big offseason acquisition from the Buffalo Sabres.

It gets a wee thinner at forward after that, with more role players (Lawson Crouse, Brandon Tanev) than impact players. But that's fine. The Mammoth don't need to be the Florida Panthers. They just need their top two lines to be their motor.

Speaking of the Panthers, the delightful Nate Schmidt joins a Mammoth back end that was besieged by injuries last season. A full season of Sean Durzi and John Marino is essential to Utah's success. I'm also

interested in seeing if and when rookie Maveric Lamoureux, a really talented 6-foot-6 shutdown defender, makes his mark. Fingers crossed that Karel Vejmelka gives the Mammoth another strong season with a more dependable backup in Vitek Vanecek. If the back end holds up, the first Stanley Cup playoff games played in Salt Lake City await.

The Wild, Blues and Jets are all going to be in the mix for the wild cards, with maybe one team from the Pacific Division contending against them. The Central has boasted five playoff teams twice in the past four seasons.

The Jets are easily the best team of these three, and they're my pick to make the playoffs again on the strength of Connor Hellebuyck, who rightfully won the Hart and the Vezina last season. His side quest to the Olympics means some extra physical and mental strain, but he's going to give the Jets at least 60 games of the league's best goaltending. He's on that McDavid and MacKinnon level of being able to will a team into the postseason on his own.

He'll have to be great because the team in front of him is diminished after Nikolaj Ehlers left in free agency. Maybe that would be further diminished: The Jets were 20th in 5-on-5 scoring chances last season and 13th in expected goals. Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele combined for 80 goals last season. Without Ehlers, they need continued support from Gabriel Vilardi, and more of it from Cole Perfetti. (What Jonathan Toews gives them as a No. 2 center at this stage of his career is anyone's guess.)

In the end, they're solid enough defensively in front of the league's best goaltender that this offense can get them into the playoffs, but it's going to be a precipitous drop from last season's 116-point campaign.

The Blues were one shot away from eliminating the Jets in Game 7 of the first round before losing in double overtime, and this is the first time I realized how ironic that must have been for Jordan Binnington after the 4 Nations Face-Off.

There's a lot that I like about the Blues, beginning with coach Jim Montgomery. They went 35-18-7 after he abruptly took over from Drew Bannister just 22 games into the season. He got them to hunker down defensively in front of Binnington, as the Blues were fourth in NHL in goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. Jimmy Snuggerud is going to be a rookie sensation and will give this team valuable secondary scoring behind the usual suspects like Robert Thomas and Jordan Kyrou. I'm not in love with the aging curve of the Blues' top three defensemen, but there's no question that Colton Parayko played himself back onto everyone's radar and the team hit a new gear once GM Doug Armstrong rescued Cam Fowler from the Ducks.

I have St. Louis right on the cusp of the playoff bubble. If the Blues make it, no surprise. If they barely miss it, no surprise. Heck, if they finish second in the division, no surprise because Montgomery gets that out of teams. But Monty's teams can also sometimes underwhelm you offensively without stars doing star things -- see David Pastrnak during the coach's time with the Bruins. The Blues don't have that guy, and they ended up 27th in expected goals per 60 minutes last season at 5-on-5. I think they barely miss.

The Wild will spend \$136 million to keep Kirill Kaprizov through 2033-34. Bold prediction: At some point during that run, the Wild will have built a Stanley Cup contender around him. You can see the broad strokes of it now. Brock Faber and Zeev Buium anchoring the defense. Jesper Wallstedt as the franchise

goalie. Offense up front from Matt Boldy, Danila Yurov and ... uh ... is Marco Rossi officially not going to be traded?

Point being that this feels like a transition year for the Wild. I'm not a huge fan of their offensive depth beyond Kaprizov, assuming he remains healthy. Which he better be, because with him limited to 41 games last season, the Wild were the worst 5-on-5 team offensively in the NHL, with expected goals percentage 29th. That was the reason they finished minus-11 in goal differential last season, second worst among all playoff teams.

The Predators held on to coach Andrew Brunette, not only because GM Barry Trotz believes in the offensive game he preaches, but also because the team would probably be paying him not to coach until at least 2027. He was part of those offseason additions a year ago that had us all convinced the Predators were going to be a force in the Western Conference, until it became apparent that the Lightning guessed right on Steven Stamkos' decline, Brady Skjei was a product of the Hurricanes' system and Jonathan Marchessault's game is much better when surrounded by contender-level talent. Factor in Juuse Saros playing to below replacement level, and Nashville was cooked like Hattie B's.

Are the Predators going to be better than 68 points this season? Undoubtedly yes if Saros has an average season and the team isn't out of the playoff race by early December like it was last season, when it went 7-16-6 in its first 29 games. But that won't be good enough to make the playoffs in the Central. Does Trotz need to have some tough conversations with players who have term and trade protection about the direction of this team? Or is there any way the team's next wave -- such as Matthew Wood, Fedor Svechikov and eventually Brady Martin -- breaks out in time to maximize the years left on those veterans' contracts?

Finally, some reasons to watch the Blackhawks beyond Connor Bedard, who might not spend the next seven months feeling dejected and competitively lonely. Frank Nazar is legit, although he's going to have the same "center who should really be a winger" discourse surrounding him that Bedard does. I want to see what Sam Rinzel does as a 6-foot-4 power-play point man. The Blackhawks are going to be terrible -- hopefully less so under new coach Jeff Blashill -- but at least we can tune in for glimpses of the future rather than a bunch of veteran placeholders orbiting Bedard for 82 games.

## **PACIFIC DIVISION**

Edmonton Oilers

Vegas Golden Knights

Los Angeles Kings

Vancouver Canucks

Anaheim Ducks

Calgary Flames

Seattle Kraken

San Jose Sharks



For all the fanfare about Connor McDavid forgoing free agency to re-sign with the Oilers, the fact remains that he heard their plans, looked at their roster and decided that he's spending only the next three seasons chasing a Stanley Cup with them. Although that doesn't inspire much confidence about the long-term prospects of the Oilers, it does mean McDavid believes there's enough here to win in the short term.

(And hey, cheer up, Leon Draisaitl, even though McDavid might bolt in summer 2028 and you're signed through 2032-33. Remember: Mark Messier won the Cup after Wayne Gretzky left!)

In many ways, this is the same team that came up short against the Panthers (again) in the Stanley Cup Final, albeit one that should have a healthy Zach Hyman at some point in the next few months. GM Stan Bowman made some additions by subtraction (such as Evander Kane) and is hoping a combination of veteran additions like Andrew Mangiapane and an infusion of youth in players like Matthew Savoie can provide the secondary scoring the team needs behind Connor and Leon.

Edmonton's top six defensemen are pretty terrific, especially with the emergence of Jake Walman. The goaltending is ... well, the kind of thing that probably makes McDavid want to sign only a two-year extension. Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard, last seen being the evil of two lessers before a Stanley Cup Final elimination game, are back, and the Oilers hope former Utah goalie Connor Ingraham might be able to contribute at some point as well.

Kris Knoblauch has coached this team to a .656 points percentage in 151 regular-season games. There's no reason to believe the Oilers can't repeat that feat this season. On paper, this doesn't look like a team destined for a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final, but it would be foolhardy to bet against McDavid and Draisaitl finding a way to get back there. And if they fall short ... one down, two to go before Connor Watch begins again.

It's a bit surprising to see the Golden Knights get so much support as a Stanley Cup favorite given that Alex Pietrangolo, their most important defenseman, will miss the season with a hip issue. But with Shea Theodore, Noah Hanifin, Brayden McNabb and Zach Whitecloud, they still have a stout top four on defense in front of Adin Hill and whoever will end up sharing the crease with him.

But the reason the Golden Knights have inspired this kind of buzz can be summed up in two words: Mitch and Marner. Imagine the feeling of being extracted from the Toronto pressure cooker to end up on Jack Eichel's wing -- and imagine being Jack Eichel, lining up with a 100-point, 200-foot player who could elevate your game to unforeseen heights. Their line with Ivan Barbashev could reach juggernaut status. The same could be said for the Knights' checking line: Reilly Smith and Mark Stone flanking William Karlsson. As the Panthers have shown in the past two seasons, it's almost unfair to have a third line that good. (And that's with no slight to the Knights' second line, anchored by Tomas Hertl.)

The Western Conference is better when the Knights are swaggering villains. Landing Marner, the offseason's top free agent prize, who has his share of detractors, has helped restock the bile reserves for Vegas.

I love Kings captain Anze Kopitar proclaiming that this season will be his last. Not only does it mean the NHL writ large can celebrate the legacy of one of the best two-way centers and best Slovenian player in league history -- with apologies to Jan Mursak -- but it means the Kings are going to be extra aggressive in trying to maximize their last year with him.

The Kings have enough offensive weaponry around Kopitar (10th in expected goals for at 5-on-5 last season) to thrive. Adrian Kempe and Kevin Fiala are both coming off 35-goal seasons, and Quinton Byfield has more to give. Imagine where their offense would have been with something better than the 27th-best power play in the NHL last season.

My concerns, beyond Jim Hiller's atrocious decision-making in the playoffs: that the depth on their defense, including Cody Ceci and Joel Edmundson, is too ineffective and slow; that goalie Darcy Kuemper regresses from his Vezina-nominated season; and that GM Ken Holland's peculiar first offseason as Kings GM negatively impacts the roster. But hey, he did sign Corey Perry, which obviously means the Kings will play for the Stanley Cup.

I have the Canucks in the playoffs because I'm taking the completely naïve approach that everything will work itself out. That Elias Pettersson can regain his 100-point form after a healthy offseason and with the toxins drained out of the Canucks' locker room now that J.T. Miller is on the Rangers. That the Canucks have the good sense to pair Pettersson with a returning Brock Boeser. That Filip Chytil remains healthy enough. That Thatcher Demko remains healthy enough. That Quinn Hughes remains healthy enough and is a Norris finalist while -- and this is the crucial part -- wearing a Vancouver jersey this season instead of one with devil horns.

If all of these things happen, the Canucks are a playoff team. If half of them happen ... well, maybe the Central gets five teams in the playoffs again this season.

In my bold predictions for the 2025-26 season, I said the Ducks would be in the playoff hunt until the last week of the race. I'm sticking to that. For better or worse, Joel Quenneville is back behind an NHL bench, and I'm confident he's going to unlock something in players such as Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish and Jackson LaCombe that Greg Cronin failed to unleash. It's a heavy lift for the Ducks to go from hapless defensive sieve to playoff bubble contender, and I'm putting a lot of faith in that influx of veteran talent -- Chris Kreider and Mikael Granlund included -- to get this group of ducklings waddling in the right direction. Well, that and goalie Lukas Dostal continuing to progress toward franchise goaltender status.

The Flames shocked the league last season with a 96-point campaign that was a tiebreaker away from postseason qualification. They can thank Gilroy, California's own Dustin Wolf for that, backstopping them to 29 wins in 53 games with a .910 save percentage, and finishing second in the voting for NHL rookie for the year. I'm still trying to figure out this magic trick, considering how utterly average the Flames were at 5-on-5 last season.

As has been the case since Matthew Tkachuk was traded, they're a supporting cast in search of a star. Now they're caught in a purgatory as some of their top names are aging out (Nazem Kadri, Mikael Backlund) while the next wave -- like brilliant 19-year-old defenseman Zayne Parekh -- needs some time to ripen. This could be a double-digit points decline, but the future is bright for the Flames.

I've seen projections that have the Kraken anywhere from 72 points to 84 points under new head coach Lane Lambert. I'll take the lower end of that scale. I didn't love the Kraken's underlying offensive numbers last season (28th in expected goals for, 30th in scoring chances per 60 minutes at 5-on-5), and the Islanders were middle of the pack at best during his time as their head coach. It's a middling team in need of a new direction under GM Jason Botterill. A robust trade deadline sale under a rising salary cap would be a good start.

Much like Macklin Celebrini had he remained at Boston University, the Sharks are entering their junior year of college. It's still a party, it's still a team that can be bad but fun, and we find it charming. Players such as Celebrini, Will Smith, William Eklund and Michael Misa can flaunt gaudy offensive stats without being overly concerned with their plus/minus deficit. They can spend one more year in the draft lottery - and wouldn't Gavin McKenna look great on Celebrini's wing? -- before it's time to graduate to something resembling playoff contention next season.