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By Jeff Svoboda – June 21, 2026

Zach Werenski was named the winner of the Norris Trophy as the best defenseman in the NHL in 2025-26 on June 2, but his biggest personal accomplishment of the offseason was likely a month earlier.

On May 6, his wife, Odette, gave birth to their first child, a son named Hudson.

Werenski has been living a bit of a charmed life over the last 16 months – he represented his country three times in international play, winning gold medals at the World Championships and the Olympic Games; he's put together two of the best seasons in Blue Jackets history, culminating in the Norris honor; and he and Odette got married last summer.

But as any parent will tell you, nothing compares to the birth of a child, and on this Father's Day, Werenski gets to experience the holiday for the first time as a dad. As he has been going through his summer workouts in Detroit, Werenski also reflected on his new role as a dad when he won the Norris Trophy.

"It's been awesome," Werenski said. "It's definitely a surreal feeling just coming home from the gym or skating and whatever, just hanging out with my son all day. Obviously he pretty much sleeps and eats, but just being around him, it's life changing, and for the better."

Werenski said he's been lucky thus far when it comes to sleep, as Hudson has been able to make it through six hours most nights. When the little one is awake, he's slowly becoming acclimated to the world, spending more and more time observing his surroundings and interacting with family members.

"Those first few days and weeks, he's pretty much eyes closed, sleeping for the majority of it," Werenski said. "He had his eyes open maybe 10, 15, 20 minutes at a time, where now there's certain stretches of maybe an hour, two hours, looking around, trying to figure you out, starting to grab your hand more or your finger. Stuff like that is really cool to see."

"He's obviously filled out a lot more. The last month he's put on some weight. Just seeing the whole change of it all is really cool. It's the first time for us. Just trying to enjoy those little moments. Everyone says it goes quick, and it really does."

Werenski just finished his 10th season in the NHL, and it was his best based on the Norris voting. He'll turn 29 next month, still firmly in his prime as a player, and Hudson has given him even more reason to keep putting in work to be the best in the game.

"It makes you even more motivated," Werenski said. "I want to play for a long time, and I want to show him all these things. I want to be a better hockey player and a better person for my family. It's definitely more motivation to add to what I already have."

Hockey's Family Ties

It's becoming clear the goalie gene might run in the Merzlikins family.

Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins has introduced his oldest son, Knox, to the game of hockey, and the 4-year-old is spending a lot of his time trying to emulate his father.

The only problem? In the CBJ Learn to Play classes that Knox is in at this point, playing goalie is not an option.

“Every time we went to play a game, he goes in the net and he goes on his knees and he tries to save the puck,” Merzlikins said. “He’s really into it. Even at home, he wants to be all the time a goalie. It’s not that I am pushing him toward that. I don’t know, he really wants to try to be a goalie. Personally, I brought him out, I shot pucks at him, and he likes the feeling. That scares me because that’s exactly the same feeling what I had.”

It’s not that Merzlikins doesn’t want his son to put on the pads as his hockey journey continues; it’s just that as a dad, there’s the natural instinct of it’s a lot better being the one shooting the pucks than being hit by them.

But goalies are goalies, and it sounds like Knox may very well end up being just like his father. Or maybe he’ll end up going a different direction, which also would be fine with Merzlikins.

He’s one of three CBJ players during the 2025-26 season who had sons enrolled in the Learn to Play classes, which provide kids aged 4-10 ice time, skating lessons and instruction as well as a full set of gear to get them started on the ice.

For those dads, it’s not a means to an end; if their kids don’t make it to the NHL, that’s perfectly fine. At this point, it’s more about seeing their kids enjoy the sport they love and have grown up around.

“If my son wants to play hockey, I want him to reach the NHL, but first and foremost I want him to have fun,” said Mathieu Olivier, whose 4-year-old son Tristan has taken to the game. “It has to come from him.”

Olivier grew up in a similar situation, as the Quebec native was born in Mississippi when his father, Simon, was playing minor league hockey. Simon went on to a long pro career and still coaches, but he never pushed Mathieu, who instead chased the dream after growing up in pro locker rooms.

“I’m fortunate enough to be on the other side of the coin where I was a young kid just wanting to play hockey,” Mathieu said. “With my dad playing hockey as a pro and then coaching, it was always, I never felt any pressure. It was something I wanted to do, and I’m being the same way with my son. I’m in a great position to help you out, but it’s all about whatever you want to do and the love of the game.”

Erik Gudbranson’s 5-year-old son Bennett was the other CBJ kid to take part in Learn to Play this season, and Gudbranson spoke highly of how much fun he had watching his son learn the game. On the other hand, though, the negative was the realization Bennett may already be basing his style of play on the rugged CBJ defenseman and NHL veteran.

“He slashed me on the ankle so hard yesterday playing ministicks,” Gudbranson said in February. “It’s starting to come. He tried to hide it, too, which is very much like me.”

Garland’s Son May Follow, Too

Conor Garland always wanted to be a hockey player.

His father, Garry, played in college, and Conor quickly took to the game when he was born. Garry wanted to do whatever he could to help his son play the game, so when Conor was 5, his father built a backyard rink at their Massachusetts home.

Conor isn't quite at that point yet, as his son Quintin doesn't turn 2 until November. But it sounds like one of the newest members of the Blue Jackets may have a burgeoning hockey player on his hands already.

"From a young age, I loved the game," Garland said when he was acquired in March. "I love it to this day. There's nothing like it. I got my boy, he's like 15 months. He's the same way already. He walks around all day with a hockey stick and a ball, so he's brainwashed."

The Hockey Writers / 2026 Columbus Blue Jackets Draft Guide

By Mark S. – June 22, 2026

Welcome to the 2026 NHL Draft. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, it marks a pivotal time in their franchise history.

Starting with the draft and then going into the rest of the offseason, GM Don Waddell has a lot of things to accomplish in order to get the Blue Jackets to a place where they can finally get over the playoff hump. For now though, his focus is the draft and making the most out of it, even if it means potentially trading their first pick at 14th overall.

We will get you ready for everything Blue Jackets at the 2026 NHL Draft with this guide. We will talk top stories including what the offseason may look like. We will then look at potential prospects available for them at 14.

Keep one thing in mind when going through this guide. The Blue Jackets want to win. But how they try to accomplish that will be fascinating to watch. Let's begin with our top stories going into Friday night's first round.

What to Do With the 14th Overall Pick?

Recall back to our Q&A with Waddell. He said that he's willing to trade the 14th pick but it has to be for something good. He isn't just going to trade the pick just to make a trade.

The 14th pick has value. Teams below the Blue Jackets have called about this pick trying to trade up. Teams that want another pick or just want to get into the first round would be interested in this pick. Waddell will take calls up to the time the Blue Jackets are on the clock.

And yet, if it's like last year when the team took Jackson Smith, they may elect to keep the pick.

It's fair to say many Blue Jackets' fans don't want the team making the 14th pick. Instead, they want Waddell to flip the pick for significant now help. If the GM had his way, he would do just that. But he is going to have to evaluate all offers to see if anything makes sense.

If you look at the state of the Blue Jackets, they have talent in places. They're set down the middle with Adam Fantilli, Charlie Coyle and Sean Monahan leading the way. They have a Norris winner in Zach Werenski and an up and coming goalie in Jet Greaves who's looking to build off of last season.

What the Blue Jackets really need is another scoring winger to join the likes of Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and others.

A couple of names have been rumored linked to the Blue Jackets. Jake DeBrusk is one. On the free agency side, Jared McCann is potentially another.

However, if the Blue Jackets are going to trade the 14th pick, they need to aim higher if they can. While DeBrusk and McCann would help in the lineup, look at the gap between the Blue Jackets and the elite. It's a pretty wide margin.

Waddell is going to have to get creative if he hopes to bring a difference maker to the Blue Jackets. He's already expressed confidence in being able to make a move. We'll see if that confidence can become reality. If so, expect the 14th pick to be part of that package.

Taking Care of Business

As we mentioned, the Blue Jackets have to take care of a lot of business in the next couple of weeks. Ultimately, they may have some key players from last season moving on.

While the door isn't entirely shut on them coming back, signs point to Boone Jenner, Mason Marchment and Erik Gudbranson going to the market. As Waddell told us in the Q&A, term is a potential issue. There would have to be a major chance in stance for any of the UFAs to return. This also includes Danton Heinen.

This would leave roster openings for next season. How will Waddell elect to fill them? He's stated he wanted to leave 1-2 spots open for competition. Beyond that, it's what can he do to make the roster stronger?

If Jenner does test free agency and leaves, that vacates the captaincy. We'll then see if they elect to fill it right away. Players like Werenski and Coyle would be ideal candidates for that role should it get there.

Then as for the RFAs, there isn't as much of an urgency for this. Fantilli, Greaves and Cole Sillinger are under team control. Barring something completely unforeseen, there shouldn't be an issue with getting these done. The question will be what the AAV comes in at for them.

New Draft Strategy

Also from the Waddell Q&A, the Blue Jackets now have a directive in later rounds to take players with more risk and more reward. It's a switch from the safer way they used to do things.

While the overall outlook of the 2026 NHL Draft points to it being a "down year", teams still have an opportunity to look for diamonds in the rough. Perhaps a player with skill but significant questions will get a longer look and perhaps be drafted when otherwise they would be passed over.

What will be interesting to see is how this strategy works in Buffalo. What kinds of players will they target later? Will they be able to develop a more successful track record over time?

For a market like Columbus, they have to nail the draft. That's one way they can stay competitive in an otherwise tough situation. We will hone in on the later picks to see if anything sticks out about those prospects.

Candidates for the 14th Pick

Now that we've set the table, let's get you ready for the 2026 NHL Draft for the Blue Jackets. For now, we will assume they keep the 14th pick. Who could be in play?

First, get ready for everything NHL Draft with our completely 100% free THW Draft Guide. It's got everything you could ever want and it won't cost you a dime to access it.

The guide has everything from over 150 prospect profiles to top-10 lists as well as team-specific articles, news stories and rankings. If you read every post within the guide, you may not even be done by Friday.

Now to the Blue Jackets. It's clear they need an infusion of talent and skill on the wings. Scoring was an issue down the stretch last season.

There are a handful of players in the 14 range that would be enticing for the Blue Jackets. Here are the players that we think have a realistic chance of being picked based on what we've heard since the NHL Combine. You can find their full profiles within our draft guide.

- Ethan Belchetz
- Nikita Klepov
- Oscar Hemming
- Oliver Suvanto
- JP Hurlbert
- Wyatt Cullen
- Adam Novotny
- Mathis Preston
- Tynan Lawrence (center)

Belchetz said at the Combine he had dinner with the Blue Jackets. In addition, the team took other prospects to dinner too. To this point, we haven't been able to pin down who else got to dine with the Blue Jackets.

The Blue Jackets met with many prospects at the Combine. Waddell sat in on the ones for prospects he called the "9-20 range."

The only prospect above not at the Combine was Klepov. He was part of the Gold Star Event this past weekend in Florida. The Blue Jackets did send representatives to the event like they did last year. Klepov is speaking on Thursday at the Top Prospects availability in Buffalo so we'll learn perhaps how much the team has talked with him then.

We expect Belchetz to be gone before 14. If he dropped to the Blue Jackets, we'd expect that to be the pick barring a trade. But any of the above wingers appear to fit the mold of what the team is looking for.

Keep in mind that teams have their own lists so it's entirely possible they target another player. After the middle part of the first round, we expect wide variety on draft lists between teams.

Because of that variance, it is hard to pinpoint what the Blue Jackets may be thinking. Here is the final rankings from NHL Central Scouting so you can have a better idea of the kind of players that may be available later in the draft.

Things We're Watching/Outstanding Questions

Here is a list of the questions we are watching for as draft week and beyond unfold.

- There will be Blue Jackets' trades. How many and how big remain to be seen. They need a third goalie with Ivan Fedotov leaving. What impact player can they acquire and which goalie can they

get to backup Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins? Yes, we expect Merzlikins to be on the Blue Jackets this season. No buyout is coming.

- Who will fill out the rest of Rick Bowness' staff on the bench? We know Trent Vogelhuber is coming. But which experienced coach will join them?
- Waddell alluded to signing a \$5 million player in our Q&A along while giving Greaves his raise. That put their cap spent around \$101 million in Waddell's mind. Who is that \$5 million player and will it be a trade or free agency?
- The Blue Jackets left side of defense is set if we consider Jackson Smith. Will they do anything to address the right side? As it stands, the only righties under contract for next season are Damon Severson and Dante Fabbro. Will they draft that player perhaps for the future?
- Lastly, which players in Cleveland are ready for a full-time role? Will this impact how they approach the offseason with signings and trades?

This week promises to be full of news league-wide. The Blue Jackets are under a lot of pressure to nail this offseason. We will see soon enough if they are up to the task at hand of improving their team enough to be in the playoff conversation in 2026-27 and beyond.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Can Address Needs by Trading for Jake DeBrusk This Offseason

By Wesley M. – June 19, 2026

The 2026 free agent market is not going to get the league-wide headlines that free agency so often brings, but the trade market holds all the value this summer. The Columbus Blue Jackets sit in a spot that almost forces them into action as either sellers or buyers. The Vancouver Canucks had the lowest point total in the league this season by a large margin, 14 points worse than the next closest, with only 58 points.

So, in a full-on rebuild, the Canucks spare roster talent in favor of gaining more draft capital. If Columbus were to offer their first round selection, number 14 overall, or their second round selection, number 43 overall, it would give the Canucks five selections inside of the top 50 picks. That is a lot of capital for a team that could be looking to fully turn over the roster.

The Athletic's Aaron Portzline recently wrote about five forwards that the Blue Jackets could look to add this summer, and among them was Jake DeBrusk (from 'Five forwards the Blue Jackets could target via trade as NHL offseason heats up,' *The Athletic*, June 17, 2026). He also added names like Matthew Knies, Mason McTavish, Blake Coleman, and Jordan Kyrou as other options for Columbus.

However, DeBrusk might be a viable option for the Blue Jackets because of the power-play excellence he has shown over the last two seasons, with 33 power-play goals. That number ties him for second best in the league over that stretch, trailing only Wyatt Johnston of the Dallas Stars with 38 goals.

Where Does DeBrusk Fit in Columbus?

DeBrusk makes sense to Columbus for more than a few options, but the biggest one might be his power-play presence. He would add a much-needed left-handed shooting threat to a Blue Jackets power play that doesn't have a lot of them, outside of Adam Fantilli and Zach Werenski.

Following the season Werenski just had and his Norris Trophy win, it puts a lot of pressure on general manager Don Waddell to add talent around him to capitalize on the prime of his career in Columbus. Otherwise, the unfortunate reality is that Werenski may request to leave.

DeBrusk would add a top-six forward, and could even rejoin his former Canucks teammate Conor Garland in Columbus. He would project on the second line, with Garland, likely centered by Sean Monahan.

He could also be a big element on the penalty kill. His presence as a two-way winger would give the Blue Jackets a more defensively responsible forward, something head coach Rick Bowness has looked for on his team.

DeBrusk's scoring ability is not to be undersold, with four of his last five seasons having at least 23 goals. That level of consistency is something the Blue Jackets are striving for, and haven't gotten enough of from their other forwards in the middle-six.

Waddell would be wise to make a move for a top-six forward, and DeBrusk may have enough of those top qualities without breaking the bank with compensation going back to Vancouver. The Blue Jackets have already sent a third-round pick in the 2026 NHL Draft to the Canucks, in the deal for Garland, as well as a second-round pick in the 2028 NHL Draft.

Chemistry between the two organizations is there, though the Canucks have changed GMs since the previous trade, so maybe they strike a match again?

What Would the Compensation Be?

There has been a ton of chatter around Waddell being willing to deal the 14th overall pick, but I am not sure DeBrusk, by himself, is enough of a return for Waddell to part ways with his only first-rounder this season. A viable option, if Waddell could pull it off, would be to trade the 43rd pick instead.

However, the asking price for players around the league via trade is going to get pricey very quickly, with the free agent class being lower quality, talent-wise, than in previous years. There may certainly be some pressure on either side of the trade to get it done before the draft, or prior to other teams pushing the value one way or the other.

I think the Canucks would jump at the chance to get a first-round pick for DeBrusk. Not because he isn't a good player, but because they couldn't get that value at the deadline on a team that was so obviously selling. The Canucks can hold their ground, but at the end of the day, someone will need to meet the asking price, and at this time, it feels like the Blue Jackets are that team.

With the right compensation in a trade for DeBrusk, smart spending in free agency, and a good draft, the Blue Jackets could be well on their way to punching their ticket back into the playoffs next season. All the pieces, however, need to come together for all of that to make sense.

Right now, Waddell and his team just need to get better in any sense possible. When the heat gets turned up a little bit, we will see how both sides respond. For the sake of the Blue Jackets, a deal can hopefully happen before the start of free agency on July 1.

The Athletic / NHL free agency 2026: 10 players teams should avoid this offseason

By Dom Luszczyszyn – June 19, 2026

Every year, the biggest mistakes made by NHL teams are made on the first day of free agency. It's the nature of the free market, where bidding wars drive up prices to wild places and the last team standing is usually paying an uncomfortable amount.

Yesterday, we looked at 10 undervalued players who should avoid that. Today, we look at the opposite: The overvalued players to actively avoid. It's the players who very likely won't be worth what they'll be paid this summer.

Here's who I think are the players to avoid based on their projected contracts courtesy of AFP Analytics.

Jacob Trouba

Fresh off an \$8 million cap hit, it doesn't appear like the price tag for Jacob Trouba's services is going to go down dramatically. AFP Analytics is forecasting a four-year deal at \$6.4 million per season. I think Trouba is worth only half of that.

There's a lot to like about Trouba's game; he's a feared competitor with size and a right shot who has shown some aptitude for eating minutes. At this point in his career, he's still on the cusp of top-four caliber, mostly thanks to a bounce-back in his first full season with the Ducks.

But even that bounce-back had Trouba in just No. 4 territory and is one year removed from him looking almost completely washed with the Rangers. He looks better, sure, but he's still very far from clearing the bar necessary to be paid \$6.4 million per season and there's real risk with the wrong fit. At that price, teams are paying for a solid No. 3; at 32, I'm not convinced Trouba has that level in him anymore.

Trouba was still valued at that level in 2022-23 when he ate tough matchups to a near draw, but we're now four seasons removed from that. Even if Trouba clicks perfectly with his next team, is it a safe bet to expect that to continue in his mid-30s? I wouldn't count on it.

If a fortunate team can get Trouba for something much closer to third-pair money, he's worth it for the intangible elements he brings to the table. His expected price tag is much harder to justify.

Andrew Peeke

Few defensemen have been consistently outscored as badly as Andrew Peeke has over the last few years. On Boston's sheltered third pair, he doesn't even have the excuse of playing tough minutes as he did in Columbus either. Earning 43 percent of actual goals and 44 percent of expected goals in soft minutes should be a very tough sell for most teams and Peeke's tracked data looks even worse. He's a no-show in the offensive zone, and his ability to break pucks out and defend his blue line from entries looks rough, too. Being 6-foot-3 shouldn't matter if a player can't play and Peeke's minus-10.7 Net Rating last year was essentially replacement level.

And yet AFP Analytics has him projected for a \$4.1 million AAV on a four-year deal. That's more than twice as much as he should be getting and would be a day-one albatross. Size isn't everything and in Peeke's case, it's all he's got.

Brett Kulak

I hesitate to have Brett Kulak on this list because of how strong he was in the playoffs. He was defensively stout and delivered a 54 percent xG rate for the Avalanche playing top-four minutes. But during the regular season, his numbers tanked for three separate teams, culminating in a 47 percent xG and just a 45 percent goal rate. Relative to teammates, only four defensemen were worse than Kulak on the xG front.

That drops Kulak's projected value way down heading into the 2026-27 season, where he now looks closer to a low-end third-pair option rather than the No. 4/5 he was for a while in Edmonton. That's not unheard-of for a 32-year-old defenseman, but I'd be very wary of paying Kulak for what he was a year ago rather than what he is now. Kulak is projected to net \$4 million annually over a three-year deal; he's not that guy anymore.

Logan Stanley

Logan Stanley's potential deal doesn't look completely awful based on what AFP Analytics is projecting: A two-year deal at \$3 million per year. That's probably too much for a replacement-level option whom the Sabres opted to scratch in Game 7, but it's not end-of-the-world bad.

The problem is the sinking feeling that it will, in fact, be a lot worse. For teams that covet size, Stanley's wingspan may be the only measurable they care about. Who cares about a consistent 45-to-47 percent xG when a player is 6-foot-7 and 230 pounds, right? Relative to teammates, only 20 defensemen have a worse impact on xG than Stanley over the last three years. Anything over \$2 million is probably an overpay and it wouldn't be a shock at all to see Stanley get double that.

Mario Ferraro

I have a lot of time for Mario Ferraro and feel like he can be a decent fit in the right role. I just don't think that role is one that commands the \$5.1 million ticket AFP Analytics projects over a four-year deal; I have Ferraro closer to \$3.5 million.

That's still a decent player and Ferraro is coming off one of his best seasons, where he showed a decent amount of defensive upside for a Sharks team mostly devoid of it. But his puck skills and offensive ability leave him seriously wanting in a top-four role. Based on his All Three Zones tracking profile, Ferraro grades out fairly weak at exiting his zone and creating offense in his opponent's zone.

As a No. 5, Ferraro can work well. But even in a rising-cap world, that's a luxury at Ferraro's expected price tag, and expecting him to slide into the top four might be asking for trouble.

Jason Dickinson

Until now, we've only talked about defensemen and it's been a fairly specific archetype of bigger guys being paid for their role rather than their aptitude. Now we move on to some forwards, specifically two centers who are going to be paid far too much to be depth contributors.

Jason Dickinson is the first and is a genuinely fantastic defensive presence. His projected Defensive Rating has been right around plus-two in each of the last three seasons and he's done a marvelous job limiting chances in tough minutes for a bad Chicago Blackhawks team. During that time, Dickinson has allowed 0.32 fewer xGA/60 relative to teammates, a top-10 mark in hockey. He is a perfect checking-line center.

What he won't offer, though, is a shred of capable offense. That nullifies a lot of what he offers defensively, and at 30 that's fine for now, but on a four-year deal it won't be long until Dickinson slides into a 4C role. That's where pricing comes into play. A \$5 million cap hit, as AFP Analytics is projecting, is going to be third-line money for the life of Dickinson's potential deal, but he looks likely to slip below that level sooner rather than later. That leaves his expected value closer to \$2.5 million.

For a team with space that has the right pieces above, Dickinson might be worth the premium in a weak center market. But his trajectory points to his price tag being a luxury most teams shouldn't splurge on.

Scott Laughton

In a similar vein, Scott Laughton is a good center that many teams would be lucky to have ... just not at the price he's expected to net. AFP Analytics has him at \$4.1 million and he's probably worth closer to \$2.4 million.

The center premium is real and it's understandable why teams overpay to get decent ones; they're hard to find. Laughton, by all accounts, is a great locker room presence and that plays a role here, too.

But he was already being used in a fourth-line role in Toronto and seems likely to drift further in that direction the further he goes into his 30s. Laughton may have been an excellent third-line option in his late 20s, but at 32 it's unlikely that's his path forward. A \$4 million ticket for a 4C is tough to justify.

One other thing to note: Laughton's xG numbers may look passable, but his results have been routinely worse than expected for five years running. During that stretch, he has a 48 percent xG rate, while earning just 42 percent of actual goals.

Beck Malenstyn

Traits are very tough to ignore. Beck Malenstyn is big, tenacious and fast — a tantalizing combo of traits that will likely have GMs salivating this summer. Malenstyn has the looks of the perfect fourth-liner.

The question is how much should the potentially perfect fourth-liner cost? That number is probably in the ballpark of where AFP Analytics projects, right around \$2.5 million. Personally, I have a reservation regarding whether Malenstyn actually fits the description. Getting outscored and out-chanced in a sheltered role isn't exactly impressive enough to pay a premium.

Some will point to Malenstyn's strong ability to reduce chances against, and while he does project to have a positive Defensive Rating, it's only barely so. It's important to grade fourth-line defense on a curve relative to their competition where the pace is innately slower; Malenstyn's defensive game isn't nearly as strong as his relative xGA/60 may indicate.

The bigger issue is offense, where Malenstyn has produced under one point per 60 in each of the last two seasons. While a fourth-liner doesn't need to produce much, he should still produce something and

Malenstyn ranking 357th out of 371 forwards the last two seasons doesn't scream premium pricing either.

Maybe it doesn't matter with the cap going up. But teams would be better served finding the next Malenstyn than overpaying for speed and size without the actual utility \$2.5 million should procure.

Evander Kane

It's difficult to truly judge any player from last year's train wreck in Vancouver, but even with that in mind, it's hard to see Evander Kane providing much bang for buck. His archetype generally comes at a salary premium and while Kane was arguably worth it once, that's no longer the case at age 34.

The main problem with Kane is that while he's always been a defensive liability, he usually had the production to make up for it. His offensive game and the edge he played with made the miscues worth it. That's no longer the case; Kane's projected Defensive Rating currently sits at minus-3.5. That's among the weakest in the class.

Maybe there's room for Kane in a sheltered role, it's just probably not worth the elevated salary it might take to acquire him. AFP Analytics has him at \$3.5 million; I think he's closer to the low twos.

Sergei Bobrovsky

Goalies are tricky beasts. One year, they can look like the GOAT; the next year, they can look like actual goats.

Sergei Bobrovsky obviously fits that bill. For three years, he was one of the main reasons the Panthers went to back-to-back-to-back Stanley Cup Finals, winning twice. But he was also the primary reason the team didn't make it all this past season; he was that poor. Only three goalies had a worse GSAX than Bobrovsky's minus-17.6.

And yet, AFP Analytics has the 37-year-old pencilled in at \$5.6 million on a two-year deal. At Bobrovsky's age, that's a hard pass after the year he just had.

There's a chance Bobrovsky bounces back, but even his 2024-25 campaign saw his GSAX at just minus-1.0. That's two seasons of subpar play that make it difficult to invest even medium dollars in his services.

With the Hurricanes winning the Cup on the back of Frederik Andersen and Brandon Bussi, the decision to invest big between the pipes should be met with increased scrutiny. Questionable goaltending makes sense if it's cheap; Bobrovsky won't be, and that's a tough sell even in a thin goalie market.