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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets shut out by Vegas Golden Knights in home return

**By Brian Hedger- March 14, 2025**

Things are getting a lot tougher for the Blue Jackets, who dropped a second straight game and their fourth in the past five Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Despite dominating the first period against the Vegas Golden Knights, the Jackets couldn't get a puck past goalie Adin Hill in a 4-0 loss that sent a sellout crowd of 18,823 home without hearing the cannon blast after a goal.

"I thought we needed to just get one tonight and maybe it would open up a bit more, but after that first they did a good job of limiting our chances and their goalie made some saves," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "It was just kind of a dud offensively from our team."

Hill made 27 saves for his fourth shutout of the season and the Golden Knights (39-19-7) built a 3-0 lead through the first two periods on timely goals by Nicholas Roy, Brandon Saad and Pavel Dorofeyev. Alex Pietrangolo scored the fourth Vegas goal into an empty net late in the third for insurance, as Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins (25 saves) watched from the bench.

The Blue Jackets went 0 for 3 on power plays, and all three were in the first period. Two were back-to-back late in the period on a double-minor assessed to Dorofeyev for high-sticking Denton Mateychuk in the mouth. Vegas only led 1-0 at the time, but the Blue Jackets couldn't tie it with four straight minutes of man-advantage time.

"Lately, (the power play) hasn't been clicking, obviously," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "We're trying. We're working on it. If we want to be a difference maker, we've got to be better. We know that, and this time of the year, it's crucial when you get that many chances, to bury one. It changes momentum of games, and it's on us to dig in there and be a difference-maker for our team, because we need to."

The Blue Jackets (31-26-8) are still clinging to the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference after failing to put any distance between themselves and a pack of four teams on their heels, all sitting within two points of them outside the postseason cutoff.

The New York Rangers, who are now tied with the Jackets at 70 points each following their win Thursday in Minnesota, are up next. They'll visit Columbus on Saturday in another big Metropolitan Division clash.

"We just needed something, and we'll need something good to happen to us early to probably give us a bump next game and get our swagger back and our feel," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We didn't change how we played tonight. We just didn't get the job done early, obviously, and it hurt us in the end."

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets playoff tracker: monitoring the push for a postseason spot

**By Brian Hedger- March 14, 2025**

Nobody outside of the Blue Jackets' locker room gave them a chance to compete for a playoff spot this season.

Back in October, for instance, The Athletic used a predictive stat-based model to project the Blue Jackets as having a 0.3% chance of qualifying for the playoffs and finishing with only 69 points — well, 68.6 to be exact, but who's counting?

Going into Thursday's game against the Vegas Golden Knights, the Jackets have 70 points with 18 games left to pull off an unthinkable trick of bringing playoff hockey to Columbus this season.

They're right in the thick of a playoff chase in the Eastern Conference despite losing star left wing Johnny Gaudreau to an offseason tragedy, trading Patrik Laine and starting anew in both the front office with Don Waddell and coach's office with Dean Evason.

While some analysts still view their surprisingly strong season with a heap of skepticism, the Blue Jackets just keep going over the boards with a proverbial chip affixed to each shoulder. As they continue to chase the postseason, the Dispatch will track the final leg of the race closely.

Here's how things stand going into the Jackets' game Thursday at Nationwide Arena:

Columbus Blue Jackets face difficult odds in Stanley Cup Playoffs chase

Despite being in the thick of a playoff race, NHL forecasters and oddsmakers still don't put much faith in the Blue Jackets.

DraftKings and BetMGM each list the Jackets' odds of qualifying for the postseason at +130 and -155 to miss the playoffs, and FanDuel has it +152 to make and -200 to miss. BetMGM also gives the Blue Jackets an underdog's shot at +135 of finishing with 90-plus points.

MoneyPuck uses percentages, and give Columbus a 24.2% chance of qualifying for the playoffs, including a 13.8% chance of earning the Eastern Conference's second-wild spot, 4.9% chance of landing the first wild card, 5.4% chance of finishing third in the Metropolitan Division, 0.1% chance of finishing second and 0% chance of winning the Metro.

MoneyPuck also assesses the Blue Jackets' odds of winning one round in the playoffs at 4.5%, winning two rounds at 1%, advancing to the Stanley Cup Final at 0.2% and hoisting the Cup as NHL champions at 0.1%.

So, they're telling us there's a chance.

Likewise, ESPN's NHL coverage cites stat service Stathead with the Blue Jackets holding a 42.1% chance to land the East's second wild card and Hockey-Reference gives Columbus a 54.6% chance of qualifying for the postseason.

How does the NHL determine its opening playoff field?

Conference standings: The top eight teams in the NHL's Eastern and Western conferences earn playoff spots. Going into a game Thursday against the Vegas Golden Knights, the Jackets are vying for one two wild-card spots in the East or a third-place finish in the Metropolitan Division that would guarantee a spot.

Playoff cutoff: The cutoff mark for the Blue Jackets is right where they're at with the East's second wild card at 70 points. On their heels is a pack of five teams all within five points, including the Montreal Canadiens at 69 after losing in overtime Wednesday in Seattle.

#### Columbus Blue Jackets vitals

Record: After falling 5-3 to the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night at Prudential Center, the Blue Jackets are 31-25-8 going into a game Thursday against the Vegas Golden Knights (38-19-7).

Standing in the Eastern Conference: The Blue Jackets are eighth in the Eastern Conference after the Montreal coughed up a late one-goal lead prior to falling in overtime Wednesday at Climate Pledge Arena.

Points: The Blue Jackets are ahead of Montreal by only a point, while the Canadiens are just outside playoff contention in ninth. Regardless, the Blue Jackets need to string together a few wins and/or points in overtimes or shootouts to keep pace.

#### Columbus Blue Jackets playoff outlook

Remaining Points Possible: The Blue Jackets can earn up to 36 more points in their remaining 18 games. Using their current .547 points percentage through 64 games, their season total would climb to 89 or 90 at the end of the NHL's 82-game season.

Is that enough? Not in most years, but there's still a logjam of teams chasing the East's two wild-card spots, so the eventual winner of the second wild card might finish close to 90 points. Getting to 95 would all but assure a playoff spot, but that would require the Blue Jackets to finish out with a blistering .694 points percentage.

Blue Jackets strengths: The Blue Jackets have learned how to defend within their own zone, forcing the bulk of opposing attempts and shots to come from medium or low danger areas.

They're also getting solid goaltending from Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov, and they're extremely dangerous counterattacking off turnovers.

Blue Jackets weaknesses: Opposing teams consistently ring up high shot totals against the Jackets while limiting shots and scoring opportunities for their own goalies at the same time. Columbus continues a years-long trend of getting pinned inside its own blue line too often and the Blue Jackets are turning pucks over too much against fierce defensive pressure in the neutral zone.

The Jackets' power play has also cratered since losing veteran center Sean Monahan to a wrist injury Jan. 7 in Pittsburgh. Monahan plays a critical role as the "bumper" in the middle of the Jackets' 1-3-1 power play setup and they've yet to find a replacement who can significantly mitigate his absence.

#### Here is how the Columbus Blue Jackets have fared recently

Last 10 Games: The Blue Jackets are 5-4-1 in their last 10 games, including regulation losses in three of four games during a road trip that concluded with a 5-3 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday at Prudential Center.

Notable wins/losses: Winning four straight games after the NHL's pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February was a high point of the Jackets' last 10 games, including a memorable 5-3 victory over the Detroit Red Wings in front of 94,751 people March 1 at Ohio Stadium in the 2025 NHL Stadium Series outdoors matchup.

The excitement from that victory, however, was quickly doused with consecutive losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers to open a four-game road trip.

The Blue Jackets have made slight progress over the course of the season by winning more road games, but they're still struggling quite a bit away from the comfort of Nationwide Arena. Their season splits between home and road games are striking:

Home Record: 20-6-4 (44 points)

Away Record: 11-19-4 (26 points)

Summary: Teams that typically make the playoffs in the NHL tend to break even in road games while making hay at home. The Blue Jackets have the home success part of it down but haven't shaken their road struggles. Good thing for them that only seven of their remaining 18 games are somewhere other than Columbus.

Columbus Blue Jackets key players

The top scoring leaders for the Blue Jackets are:

D Zach Werenski — 20 goals, 49 assists, 69 points

RW Kirill Marchenko — 25 goals, 37 assists, 62 points

F Kent Johnson — 21 goals, 24 assists, 45 points

C Adam Fantilli — 21 goals, 21 assists, 42 points

LW Dmitri Voronkov — 20 goals, 22 assists, 42 points

Breakdown: These five players are critical to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, especially with center Sean Monahan still sidelined with a wrist injury that occurred Jan. 7 in Pittsburgh. Since Monahan's injury, Fantilli has impressively filled the role of centering the top forward line with Voronkov and Marchenko as wingers. Going into games Thursday, the Blue Jackets are one of just four NHL teams with five players who've scored at least 20 goals.

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' top two goalies:

No. 1 starter — Elvis Merzlikins is 22-17-4 with a 3.04 goals against average (GAA) and .896 save percentage (SV%) with one shutout.

Backup — Danil Tarasov is 7-7-2 with a 3.54 GAA and .883 SV% with one shutout.

Breakdown: After struggling with consistency, Merzlikins has provided solid-to-great goaltending for the past two or three months. Tarasov has also rebounded from a terrible slump in the season's first half. Since losing five straight starts between early November and late December, he's gone 4-1-1 with a 2.44 GAA and .922 SV% in six appearances as Merzlikins' primary backup.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' struggling special teams let them down in shutout loss to Golden Knights

**By Aaron Portzline- March 14, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — No question, the Columbus Blue Jackets' best period Thursday against the Vegas Golden Knights was the first period, when they took the first 18 shot attempts and first eight shots on goal, completely carrying play out of the gate.

But here's how hockey goes sometimes: The Blue Jackets trailed 2-0 after the first 20 minutes, and there were two stretches on either end of the ice that highlighted their recent struggles on special teams, just as the games and margins are getting tighter.

Vegas mostly locked down play the rest of the way, beating the Blue Jackets 4-0 and quieting a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,823 in Nationwide Arena. Not much was worth cheering. The Jackets have lost four of their last five and been shut out in two of their last four.

"It was frustrating," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We just went over (the start in the coaches' room). It was 8-0 in shots; they get one shot, and it goes in the net. It was frustrating for everybody. The way we were playing didn't dictate that we should be down in this hockey game."

It's true that Vegas scored a power-play goal on its first shot of the game. It took 8:00 for the Golden Knights to put a puck on Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, and it found the net off Nicolas Roy's stick. It was 2-0 after former Jackets player Brandon Saad scored around traffic with 58.2 seconds left.

By the end of the first, the Blue Jackets had thrown 33 pucks (14 on goal) toward Vegas goaltender Adin Hill, whereas Vegas sent only nine pucks toward Merzlikins. Two of the six shots on goal found the net.

"When we have a period like that, you want to come out with something," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "It was probably our best period of the night. We just weren't able to find one."

The Blue Jackets were done in by more than bad luck, though.

Their special teams — especially the power play but also the penalty kill — are in a major funk at maybe the worst time of the season.

That 1-0 goal by Roy marked the sixth time in seven games that the Blue Jackets have allowed a power-play goal. In those seven games, the kill rate is an abysmal 72 percent.

Meanwhile, the "0" on the scoreboard looked even worse when you consider the Blue Jackets had six minutes of power-play time in the first, including a four-minute power play after rookie defenseman Denton Mateychuk was high-sticked by Vegas' Pavel Dorofeyev at 14:13.

The Blue Jackets had a couple of decent scoring chances but couldn't score. Over the last 24 games, Columbus is just 4-of-43 (9.3 percent) on the power play. Put another way: The power play has scored only one more goal (four) than it has allowed (three short-handed goals) since Jan. 8.

It's become a regular part of off-day practices. When the Jackets held their morning skate Thursday, it was clear that Evason wanted a new look on his top unit. So, Jenner was moved to net front, replaced by Dmitri Voronkov, who joined the second unit.

Evason was asked if the Blue Jackets' execution has dipped or if the rest of the league has caught up to their tendencies.

"It's probably a bit of both," Evason said. "(Other teams) have video, too. We've changed some personnel. We've talked about where to position people. At the end of the day, we had some looks that we just have to finish. It has to go in the net. It hasn't for a bit now, and it didn't tonight.

"That four-minute power play could have made a difference in the game."

Once Vegas took a two-goal lead, it put the clamps down on Columbus. The Golden Knights added two goals: one midway through the second period to make it 3-0, and an empty-netter with 4:22 remaining to cap the scoring. But they never let the Blue Jackets find an offensive flow or get to the net easily.

This is what it's going to be like in the final month of the season. The trade deadline is always a turning point on the NHL calendar. When the league's playoff hopefuls have their rosters set, the temperature of games goes up noticeably and every inch of ice becomes more difficult to claim.

"I love the character of our team," Evason said. "We needed something good to happen ... and we'll need something good early to give us a bump in our next game (Saturday versus the New York Rangers), to get our swagger back and our feel.

"Our group knows that we didn't change how we play tonight. We just didn't get the job done."

It's a minor miracle that the Blue Jackets were still holding on to the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference through Thursday's games. With such a traffic jam around eighth place in the standings, they can't take on water much longer.

The Blue Jackets are at 70 points with 17 games remaining. The Rangers, coming to Columbus on Saturday, also have 70 points, but the Blue Jackets get the tiebreaker, having played fewer games. Lurking right behind them are the Montreal Canadiens (69), Detroit Red Wings (68) and Boston Bruins (68).

"We have to stay positive in here," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We're in a race right now. It's not going to go our way every night, but we control our own destiny. We have to keep playing and keep learning and get ready for the next one.

"It's gonna be a battle to the finish. It's definitely ramped up here the last two games. I feel like we're aware of it. It hasn't gone as we'd hoped, but it's exciting. It's fun for our group to try to win these games. It's gonna be a battle to the end, but I think we're ready for it."

## BlueJackets.com / Golden Knights shut out Blue Jackets

By Craig Merz- March 14, 2025

COLUMBUS -- Adin Hill made 27 saves for his fourth shutout of the season, and the Vegas Golden Knights defeated the Columbus Blue Jackets 4-0 at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

Hill was sharp with 14 saves in the first period, enabling the Golden Knights to take a 2-0 lead despite the Blue Jackets leading in shot attempts (33-9) and shots on goal (14-6).

"‘Hiller’ played amazing for us. I think anytime he's going to shut the door like that, it gives you confidence, even when you don't have your legs as a team," Golden Knights forward Brandon Saad said. "We know how good they are at home. They've got a lot of talent. With ‘Hiller’ playing amazing, and then as a team, after the first, I thought we tightened it up and clogged the middle."

Saad and Nicolas Roy each had a goal and an assist, and Tomas Hertl had two assists for the Golden Knights (39-19-7), who had lost two straight (0-1-1).

Elvis Merzlikins made 25 saves for the Blue Jackets (31-26-8), who have lost four of five.

"We played really well in the first," Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski said. "Not ideal, the score's 2-0, but that stuff happens in hockey. I felt like we kept playing our game. Obviously, they had a push in the second period. Felt we just needed to get one tonight, and maybe it would open up for us a little bit more."

Roy gave the Golden Knights a 1-0 lead at 12:00 of the first period with a power-play goal on Vegas' first shot attempt of the game. He put a one-timer from the right post into an open net after a touch pass from Jack Eichel in the bumper position.

"It was frustrating. It's 8-0 in shots, they get a (power play) and they get one shot and it goes in the net," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It was frustrating for everybody because the way we were playing didn't dictate that we should be down in this hockey game. And even after that, the whole first period was pretty good."

The Blue Jackets failed to score on three power-play opportunities in the first period.

"Six minutes and weren't able to get one by," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "We had some looks but the end of the day we've got to bury one of those and give us some juice."

Saad extended the lead to 2-0 at 19:01 with a backhand from the edge of the crease after gathering the rebound of a shot by Reilly Smith. He has three goals in the past four games.

Pavel Dorofeyev made it 3-0 at 12:17 of the second period, taking a cross-ice pass from Hertl on the rush and beating Merzlikins with a wrist shot from the left circle.

Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy liked how the players responded in the second.

"We played better. We were on top of them more," he said. "We didn't allow them to come through the neutral zone. They've got really fluid defensemen, guys that are mobile and can skate. If you limit some part of their game, I think they got a little antsy, now they were behind and all sudden the rush game goes our way."

Alex Pietrangelo scored an empty-net goal for the 4-0 final at 15:38 of the third period.



NOTES: Eichel extended his point streak to seven games (one goal, nine assists) and has 79 points this season (20 goals, 59 assists), passing William Karlsson (78 in 2017-18) for the most in a single season in franchise history. ... Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen did not play after his eighth shift ended at 10:57 of the second period. Evason said he has an upper-body injury and won't play against the New York Rangers on Saturday.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Humbled at Home By Golden Knights

**By Mark Scheig- March 14, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets returned to Nationwide Arena for the first time in 16 days. They were unable to give the sellout crowd what they were looking for.

Adin Hill pitched his fourth shutout of the season making 27 saves while Nicolas Roy and Brandon Saad each recorded a goal and an assist to lift the Vegas Golden Knights to a 4-0 win over the Blue Jackets on Thursday night. Despite the loss, the Blue Jackets will remain in the second wildcard spot on account of games played.

The story of this game was the Blue Jackets' inability to score when they controlled play in the first period.

### Game Recap

The Blue Jackets held a massive advantage in both shots and attempts to start the game. After recent games giving up early goals, the Blue Jackets did everything but score in the first.

But then a power play for the Golden Knights turned into the first goal. Jack Eichel found Roy to make it 1-0. That was their first shot attempt of the game.

The Golden Knights were then able to extend it to 2-0 before the end of the first thanks to Saad. He won a battle in front of Elvis Merzlikins. He was able to lift the puck to the far side while fending off Ivan Provorov.

While that was a deflating goal, the Blue Jackets still felt good about the period given how well they started. But for the final 40 minutes, the Golden Knights showed why they were one of the best teams in the NHL. They tightened up and didn't allow much in the way of room for the rest of the night.

Pavel Dorofeyev scored his 26th of the season midway through the second to make it 3-0. That was all the Golden Knights needed to lock things down.

The Blue Jackets tried mixing the lines up in the third but to no avail. They were only able to muster six shots on Hill in the third while allowing the Golden Knights to get 14. They appeared out of sorts all night.

Postgame, Bonne Jenner said "We gotta be better. We know that. This time of year, it's crucial when you get that many chances to bury one."



Zach Werenski still likes the team's position despite the result. "It's not gonna go our way every night, but we control our own destiny here."

Elvis Merzlikins made 25 saves on the night but has now lost his last four starts since the Stadium Series. Hill's shutout was the first time the Blue Jackets have been shutout at home since October 2023.

The Blue Jackets will get ready for a Saturday night showdown with the New York Rangers. The Golden Knights now head to Buffalo for a Saturday afternoon showdown with the Sabres.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / VGK 4, CBJ 0: Blue Jackets Blanked On Home Ice For The First Time This Season

By Ed Francis- March 14, 2025

	1	2	3	F
	2	1	1	4
	0	0	0	0
CBJ GOALS: None				

For the first time this season, the Columbus Blue Jackets were shutout on home ice in a 4-0 defeat Thursday night at the hands of the Vegas Golden Knights.

Things looked bright early for the Blue Jackets: heading into the first television timeout of the night, with 11:28 left in the period, they had a 16-0 advantage in shot attempts and were up 6-0 in shots on goal.

Things began to turn when Vegas scored on their first shot of the game, a power-play goal for one of the NHL's best when up a man.

Less than four minutes later, the Blue Jackets would get a four-minute man-advantage opportunity after Denton Mateychuk took a high-stick from Vegas' Pavel Dorofeyev.

It was a chance to pull even after the Blue Jackets had already outplayed the Knights early, but Columbus came up empty on the opportunity and two of the three best opportunities on the power play came from the Golden Knights.

"It was frustrating for everybody because the way we were playing didn't dictate that we should be down in this hockey game," said head coach Dean Evason.

"We've gotta find a way to score on a four-minute power play," said Evason. "Special teams are a big factor obviously in this hockey game."

The Golden Knights would add to their lead late in the period to go into the first intermission up 2-0, then push the lead to 3-0 in the second period before adding an empty-netter in the closing minutes to seal the 4-0 win.

Defenseman Jake Christiansen left the game in the second period and did not return. After the game, Evason confirmed it was an upper-body injury and that he would not play Saturday.

Here's how the Blue Jackets were dealt a blow at home by Vegas:

1st Period:

(12:00 — VGK Goal): It takes the Golden Knights exactly 12 minutes to get their first shot attempt of the night — and it goes in. The league's second-ranked power play connects; Nicolas Roy with his 9th of the season to give Vegas a 1-0 lead.

(19:01 — VGK Goal): Vegas doubles their lead to 2-0 in the final minute of the first. The Knights win the faceoff and go to work, quickly getting the puck behind the net. Reilly Smith gets a clean shot off from the left dot which Elvis initially saves, but Brandon Saad gets the rebound and uses his backhand to score Vegas' second of the period.

2nd Period:

(12:17 — VGK Goal): Dorofeyev gets his 26th of the season to make it a 3-0 Vegas lead. The Knights easily enter the zone and no one sees Dorofeyev trailing into the zone. He gets one off from inside the left circle and beats Merzlikins.

3rd Period:

(15:38 — VGK Goal): Not that they needed it, but the Golden Knights get an empty-netter with just over four minutes left to make it a 4-0 game. Alex Pietrangelo's fourth of the season sends most of the remaining Nationwide Arena faithful for the exits.

VGK	GAME STATS	CBJ
29	SHOTS	27
41%	FACEOFFS	59%
1/3	POWER PLAY	0/3
3/3	PENALTY KILL	2/3
11	HITS	31`
7	GIVEAWAYS	22
5	TAKEAWAYS	3

VGK	GAME STATS	CBJ
21	BLOCKED SHOTS	7
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
3.50	EXPECTED GOALS	2.55
48	SHOT ATTEMPTS	62
26	SCORING CHANCES	19
13	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	6
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

#### Stat Chat:

- Sometimes, it's simple: the Blue Jackets had more than three times the number of giveaways as the Knights (22-7) and the Knights had three times the number of blocked shots as the Blue Jackets (21-7).
- Down 3-0 in the third period, the Blue Jackets managed just six shots on goal — the fewest they had in any period. Vegas, meanwhile, had a game high 14 in the final frame.
- In addition to it being the first shutout on home ice, it was also just the third game this season in which the Blue Jackets failed to score at least two goals. October 2023 was the last time Columbus was shutout at home.

#### Up Next:

The homestand continues Saturday night with the last of four meetings this season between the Blue Jackets and New York Rangers. Puck-drop is slated for 7 p.m.

## The Athletic / NHL rumblings: 84-game schedule being considered for 2026-27, and could league cancel '26 All-Star Game?

**By Pierre LeBrun- March 14, 2025**

It remains a work in progress, but as teams continue to talk to the NHL about next season, the schedule is beginning to take shape.

Tentatively, we are looking at an Oct. 7 regular season start and the Stanley Cup Final, if it goes the distance, ending around June 21-22 or so.

Because of the Olympic break, which will be longer than the 4 Nations break was, teams have already been warned to expect even more back-to-backs and sets of three games in four nights. It will be congested, and there's not much anyone can do about that, especially with an All-Star Game on top of the Olympics.

The schedule release is expected sometime in June, but might wait until July.

But where the makeup of the NHL schedule matrix gets really interesting is 2026-27, when there will be a new CBA extension. There are lots of ideas being thrown around right now, and there could be some major changes.

The NHL and NHL Players' Association could agree, as mentioned previously, to go to an 84-game season and shorten the preseason. One new idea being discussed is starting the regular season earlier — sometime in late September — and still ending the Stanley Cup Final around the same time in late June.

So in other words, they'd extend the calendar on the regular season to create a schedule that's not quite as jam-packed and also takes into account best-on-best hockey breaks every two seasons for the Olympics and World Cups, as well as accommodating 84 games.

The idea that was discussed by the league and NHLPA last year of ending the season two weeks earlier — around June 10 — appears to be dead (sad face from me). Looks like we're stuck with late June hockey going forward. Even with the regular season potentially starting in late September, the playoffs would still need to go into late June under this proposal. It's quite a change in terms of the overall calendar, that's for sure. If it happens.

Also on the table in discussions about the schedule matrix is whether to change the formula so that teams don't necessarily have to play at least one game in each NHL arena every season. There are some teams pushing for more divisional and rivalry games. Having said that, some teams won't want to go two years without seeing Connor McDavid in their building or a strong-drawing team like the New York Rangers or Toronto Maple Leafs or Montreal Canadiens, so, not surprisingly finding unanimity has not been easy in these discussions with teams, which has been an issue forever.

The bottom line is, while next season will be more of the same, it sure sounds like a lot of potential changes are being discussed for 2026-27.

Could the NHL cancel next year's All-Star Game?

This is another idea being discussed.

It is probably not very likely since the NHL already announced in February 2024 that the New York Islanders were hosting the All-Star Game in 2025-26, which would be held right before the Winter Olympics next February.

It would be the first time the NHL has held an All-Star game in a participating Olympic year since 2002, in Los Angeles ahead of the Salt Lake City Games. The NHL didn't have an All-Star Game ahead of the 2006, 2010 or 2014 Olympics, which NHL players participated in. And, well, that made sense.

The league thought All-Star '26 would be a nice send-off, if you will, for the game's top players before they played in the Milan Olympics.

However, after the tremendous success of last month's 4 Nations Face-Off, there have been talks behind the scenes about changing course. Some are concerned about holding an All-Star Game which would obviously look like a dog's breakfast compared to the best-on-best 4 Nations and Olympics. Should the league just scrap the All-Star festivities in Olympic years? (Answer from most every hockey fan alive: Yes!)

Again, it's probably too hard to do that now that the league has announced All-Star plans for next season and the Islanders are promoting the event with season-ticket holders. But all I can say is that it's a legitimate question being raised.

Do extensions get done for Palmieri, Donato?

Pending UFA forwards Ryan Donato and Kyle Palmieri were two prominent members of The Athletic's NHL trade board who ended up staying put on non-playoff teams.

Each team opened contract talks with the player that day. Things have progressed in the Islanders' talks with Palmieri over the past week, with the sides closing in on an extension while still quibbling over term. There's no rush to announce anything, but it sure sounds like Palmieri will eventually get extended.

As for Donato and the Chicago Blackhawks, while there was a lot of back and forth on deadline day on what an extension could look like, there hasn't been much talk since; They're taking a breather on it, and the expectation is they will pick it up again in the not too distant future. There is lots of time before July 1. But that one still has more ground to cover in terms of getting something done.

And finally ... the playoff format

I'm off to the NHL GMs meetings Sunday, which run Monday to Wednesday in Palm Beach, Florida.

One topic that will not be on the agenda at the GMs meeting? Playoff format. Why? Because that's a Board of Governors (owners) matter, not a GMs matter. But also because commissioner Gary Bettman has been against the idea of tweaking the playoff format every time I've asked him over the past several years.

But I will share this: It is remarkable how many people from around the hockey world reached out to me after my piece this week on a possible Colorado Avalanche-Dallas Stars first-round matchup, and they're essentially saying in unison: "This is proof yet again the playoff format needs to change!"

There are two things I would do: 1) Go back to the old 1-versus-8 conference-playoffs format. And 2) Add a play-in round.

I know that second one isn't appealing to a lot of hockey fans, but it very much is of interest to many NHL owners and executives. Let me be clear, I don't want to expand the 16-team playoff field, but I'm in favor of adding a best-of-three round involving 7 versus 10 and 8 versus 9 in each conference to get into the traditional 16-team field.

The league has gone from 21 teams to 32 teams over the past three decades. The chance to get into a play-in would draw more markets into it in the final quarter of the season, which is more exposure for the league.

A potential drawback is having fewer sellers at the trade deadline because more teams could feel they've got a shot at 10th place in their conference.

And I guess I would say this when it comes to actually convincing the commissioner to make any of these things: First, it would take U.S. rights-holders, ESPN and TNT, which carry a lot of sway, to tell the commissioner they're in favor of some of this.

Second, Bettman may be ready to step down at some point over the next few years, so perhaps the new boss would be more receptive to playoff format changes.



## The Athletic / Fallen caps, untucked jerseys and rain regulations – what are the weirdest rules in sport?

**By Dominic Fifield, Peter Carline- March 14, 2025**

It was close to midnight in Spain on Wednesday when Atletico Madrid's Julian Alvarez stepped forward to take a penalty in a Champions League shootout against rivals Real Madrid.

The Argentinian soccer player slipped at the end of his run-up but still managed to score high into the net. Yet his celebrations were short-lived: a minute or so later the Video Assistant Referee ruled that he had kicked the ball twice and therefore his effort was counted as missed. Atletico went on to lose the shootout 4-2.

The little-known rule immediately sparked intense debate concerning its fairness and has led to UEFA, European soccer's governing body, asking FIFA, its global counterpart, and the sport's lawmakers, IFAB, to review possible changes to it.

Yet this is by no means the only quirky rule in sport — or the only time a bizarre law has proved the difference between victory and defeat.

From a baseball cap being blown off by the wind, an untucked basketball jersey leading to a free-throw and a World Cup final being decided by a law almost nobody had ever heard of, our writers nominate the oddest rules in sport.

American football: The tuck rule

Foxboro. January 19, 2002. The NFL's first-ever Saturday night divisional round game was snow-covered and remains blanketed in controversy to this day.

With 1 minute and 50 seconds on the clock, the New England Patriots trailed the Oakland Raiders 13-10. Just outside field-goal range, second-year quarterback Tom Brady receives the snap, drops back and looks to his left to toss a backside slant.

He pumps and fails to see the blitzing Charles Woodson — a University of Michigan team-mate. Brady fumbles, the ball hits the ground and Raiders linebacker Greg Biekert falls on it. The Raiders celebrate. Game over.

But no.

After an instant replay, referee Walt Coleman cites the previously little-known Tuck Rule. "After reviewing the play, the quarterback's arm was going forward. It is an incomplete pass," Coleman offers as his on-field explanation.

With ice in his veins, kicker Adam Vinatieri made a phenomenal 45-yard field goal to level the scores. In overtime his 27-yarder sent the Patriots through. Three weeks later, they won Super Bowl XXXVI.

The Tuck Rule had been introduced in 1999 to protect quarterbacks and was abolished in 2013, but its most famous moment altered the history of the two franchises.

Brady sealed his spot as starter as the Patriots went on to win the first of six Super Bowls (Brady claimed a seventh with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for good measure), while the misfortune began the Raiders' slide into irrelevance.

"It was the worst call in the history of sports," Woodson told ESPN for the 30 for 30 documentary: The Call That Changed it All.

It took 20 years, but even Brady agreed. “The Tuck Rule game against the Raiders,” he said in 2022, sheepishly adding, “might have been a fumble”.

Peter Carline

Ice hockey: Disallowed goal stumps everybody

Despite being a relatively simple sport, ice hockey has one of the most bizarre and complicated rules in existence.

Law 78.5 of the game’s rulebook states that “a goal is disallowed when the puck has deflected directly into the net off an official”. However, directly doesn’t always mean directly.

In a 2018 match between the St. Louis Blues and Florida Panthers, Blues’ defenceman Robert Bortuzzo took such a wild shot at goal that it hit referee Tim Peel, who was standing in the right corner of the zone.

As Peel collapsed onto the ice in agony, the puck bounced all the way onto the skate of Panthers goaltender Roberto Luongo and into the net.

Even though the puck hadn’t gone directly off Peel, the goal was disallowed. The NHL later clarified that this is because if a puck deflects off an official, onto the goaltender and into the net, then it is still ruled out.

If it deflects off an official and onto a player other than the goaltender, though, it is allowed to stand.

Despite the controversy, the Blues managed to win the game 4-3, so all’s well that ends well in that case.

Kaya Kaynak

Cricket: Unknown rule decides World Cup final

The 2019 Cricket World Cup final was one of the sport’s greatest-ever games. Host nation England had thrillingly tied New Zealand’s first-innings total of 241, meaning a ‘super over’ (an extra six balls for each team) was needed to decide who would be crowned champions.

It was the first one-day international final in the sport’s history to be decided in such a way, and yet this was just the start of the drama.

Both teams scored 15 runs from their six balls, but England immediately started celebrating leaving many people watching confused. Surely there would be another super over to settle the match? This was the World Cup final, after all.

Yet England had won the tournament for the first time since they had scored more boundaries (hitting the ball past the rope that encircles the field) during the final than New Zealand.

New Zealand, led by captain Kane Williamson, were magnanimous in defeat, despite their justifiable frustration.

Three months later, the rule was changed so that if a super over is tied, it will be replayed until a winner is found.

Will Jeanes

Tennis: Baseball cap stops play

Wind the clock back to New York, on September 8, 2012. In hugely windy conditions, Andy Murray and Tomas Berdych were facing off in the U.S. Open semi-final, with plenty on the line.

So it wasn't surprising that Berdych was trying everything to win — but what happened next was unexpected.

Facing a break point early in the first set, Murray hit a drop-shot winner — but the Scot's baseball cap blew off in the wind at the decisive moment.

Berdych argued that the stray hat had hindered him, even though he was far from getting to the ball.

In tennis, rules dictate that if something blows onto the court — whether a hat, a towel or a feather, as has happened over the years — a point should be replayed. In an even stranger turn, that rule has a sliding scale. If a player's hat blows off once, or they drop a ball out of their pocket, it's a replayed point. But if it happens again, they lose the point being played.

In New York, umpire Pascal Maria duly called a let. Berdych won the replayed point, broke Murray and ended up winning the first set.

A furious Murray eventually won the match 5-7, 6-2, 6-1, 7-6 (9-7) in three hours and 58 minutes to reach his fifth Grand Slam final, where he beat Novak Djokovic for his first major title.

Max Mathews

Baseball: Pine tar on bat

One of Major League Baseball's most notorious instances of an obscure rule technicality affecting the outcome of a contest came in 1983, with what became known as the "Pine Tar Game."

Future Hall of Fame slugger George Brett cracked a two-run home run for the Kansas City Royals to put the visitors ahead of the New York Yankees, 5-4, in the top of the ninth inning.

However, controversial Yankees manager Billy Martin persuaded the umpires to inspect Brett's bat, complaining loudly that it was coated with an excessive amount of pine tar, a substance used to aid the batter's grip.

Following deliberations between the officials, it was adjudged that too much of the product had been used, Brett was called out, the home run was overturned, and the Yankees "won" the game, 4-3.

However, a Royals appeal to the league was successful and the game was restarted a month later, from the point immediately after Brett's big swing, which now counted toward the 5-4 scoreline. Kansas City would hold on to secure the win.

Martin Rogers

Basketball: Untucked jersey leads to free-throw

There is an NBA rule that punishes untucked jerseys, and in December 2019, it helped Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Minnesota Timberwolves.

Minnesota's Karl-Anthony Towns missed his first of two free throws, with just over a second left with the score at 121-119. Before taking his second, Minnesota subbed in Jordan Bell, and Chris Paul noticed something.

"That's a delay of game! That's a delay of game!" he said, reported The Athletic's Erik Hone.

This was because Bell walked on the court with his shirt untucked, one of nine reasons a player can be called for a delay of game. Rule No. 12 A., Section II a. (9) says, "A delay-of-game shall be called for a player entering the game when beckoned by an official with his shirt untucked."

A technical foul was given as it was Minnesota's second delay-of-game warning, leading to OKC receiving and making a free throw.

Towns then made his second free throw to bring the score to 122-120. OKC went on to make a game-tying layup at the buzzer to force overtime and won 139-127.

After Paul had pointed it out, it was hard for the officials not to make the call, but they tend to be lenient on the rule. Players often come to the scorer's table, where they are checked in the game, with their jersey untucked, and start tucking it in as they are stepping onto the court. It should be fully tucked in before a player enters the game.

Eduardo Tansley

Cricket: Weather changes entire scoring system

Cricket has never really found an adequate way to deal with the weather. The game can't really be played in the rain. The ball becomes soggy and harder to grip. The outfield becomes sodden. Batters slip in their stance.

The modern Duckworth-Lewis-Stern method is probably the fairest system (if ridiculously complicated), but it could hardly be worse than the 'rain rule' adopted back at the 1992 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

In the event of a weather interruption of a limited-over game, it was deemed that the previous system — averaging out the runs-per-over of the first innings and then deducting from their total for each over lost by the side batting second — disadvantaged the side who batted first. (Stay with me here.)

Instead, when rain interrupted the second innings of a game, they decided that reduction in the target had to be proportionate to the lowest scoring overs of the side batting first. That would be 'fairer' for the side chasing. Apparently.

Except it was also open to farce. In the semi-final at the Sydney Cricket Ground, England scored 252 for six in their 45 overs. South Africa's chase progressed through incessant drizzle and, with 13 balls left, they needed 22 to win. At which point, the rain became heavier, the conditions were deemed unfit and the umpires took the players from the field.

The total time lost was 12 minutes, so, under the tournament rules, two overs had to be deducted — the least productive from England's innings. South Africa had bowled two 'maiden' overs (overs without any runs scored), so the target was not reduced, but the two overs were still removed from the chase, leaving Kepler Wessels' side requiring 22 runs from one ball. In effect, they had been punished for bowling tightly.

To compound matters, the organisers failed to notice that England had actually scored a leg-bye in one of the maidens, meaning a run was taken off the chase: it became 21 runs required from one ball. Still impossible, but salt in South African wounds. A crowd of 35,000 reacted furiously as the nonsense played out on the big screen, throwing trash onto the outfield.

The single ball was bowled, South Africa took a single, and the batters stomped off the pitch in disgust and out of the tournament. Thankfully, the 'rain rule' went with them.

Dominic Fifield

American football: Overtime rule sparks confusion

The NFL altered its rules for overtime in the postseason following the 2021-2022 AFC Divisional Round game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Buffalo Bills. The rule change — initiated before the 2023

season — meant both teams would get possession of the ball in overtime in the postseason, differing from the regular season.

Previously, if the team that was awarded possession first scored a touchdown, they were declared winners, with the opposition not getting a chance to respond.

The Chiefs-Bills 2021-22 AFC divisional playoff game saw two masterful displays from the quarterbacks as Patrick Mahomes put up three touchdowns (including one on the ground) for the Chiefs in regulation, while Josh Allen recorded four scores in the air.

The final one minute and 54 seconds of regulation time saw the teams score a combined 25 points as the Chiefs came back from a three-point deficit with 13 seconds left to send the game to overtime.

Kansas City won the coin toss and took possession of the ball, with Mahomes finding tight-end Travis Kelce for a touchdown to end the contest.

The NFL received plenty of backlash after the game for the overtime rule, which was changed to its current form with the support of 29 of 32 teams in the league.

Super Bowl LVIII in February 2024, which saw the Chiefs beat the San Francisco 49ers 25-22, prompted conversations around the rule again. The game ended 19-19 at the end of regulation and San Francisco won the coin toss, opting to take the first possession, which was roundly criticised in the aftermath.

The 49ers settled for a field goal from fourth down before Mahomes found Mecole Hardman Jr. for the title-winning touchdown, bettering the field goal.

After the game, the 49ers' defensive lineman Arik Armstead and fullback Kyle Juszczyk remarked that they were unaware of the new overtime rules, with Juszczyk adding that the team had not spoken about it beforehand, while coach Kyle Shanahan attributed his decision to a lack of experience with the rule.

## The Athletic / NHL goalie tandem power rankings: Evaluating all 32 teams in net this season

By Jesse Granger- March 14, 2025

The NHL's trade deadline came and went last Friday without much movement in the crease. There were a few backup goaltenders moved to solidify depth, but no team upgraded its starter and there's a good chance at least one team will regret that decision come playoff time.

With the rosters locked, it feels like a good time to evaluate where all 32 teams stand in net by ranking each tandem. For this exercise, we're going to focus on the top two goalies for each team. We'll mention younger goalie prospects beyond that — especially for teams focused on the future — but for the purposes of ranking the tandems, we'll only use the top two.

This isn't a list of the teams in order of save percentage. Current statistics (entering Wednesday's games) are obviously heavily weighted — particularly goals saved above expected (from Evolving-Hockey), because that is the best goaltending metric currently available — but the stats aren't everything. The quality of play in front of the goalies is important, as is a goaltender's history. If a goalie is historically elite but is having a rough season — such as Nashville's Juuse Saros — we're not going to completely throw out the fact that we know he's a talented goalie.

Because this is a ranking of tandems and not just starters, the second goalie will be weighted in the ranking, but only to the extent that each team uses them. For example, Eric Comrie won't count toward Winnipeg's ranking as much as Charlie Lindgren will toward Washington's, because the Jets lean on Connor Hellebuyck much more than the Capitals do on Logan Thompson. The goal here is to rank the quality of goaltending each team is getting as a whole (the actual play not just the base statistics), and there are multiple strategies to achieve that.

Without further ado, the list:

### 1. Winnipeg Jets

Connor Hellebuyck

38-9-3

Hellebuyck has been brilliant. His 43.23 goals saved above expected are already the sixth-most in a single season over the last 18 years, and he's on his way to joining Martin Brodeur, Patrick Roy and Dominik Hasek as the only goalies to win the Vezina Trophy three times since the criteria for the award changed in 1981.

Eric Comrie has been a solid backup, posting a .914 save percentage in limited starts. His poor win-loss record has more to do with a lack of goal support than his own performance. The Jets have averaged only 2.71 goals in Comrie's starts, compared to 3.54 in Hellebuyck's.

In the end, Winnipeg claims the top spot because of Hellebuyck. He's a workhorse with the second-most starts in the NHL, and has been the league's best goalie by a considerable margin.

### 2. Anaheim Ducks

Lukáš Dostál

19-17-5

What Lukáš Dostál and John Gibson have done this season is remarkable. They've both maintained great numbers despite playing behind the team that has allowed the most high-danger chances in the NHL. Dostál's future looked promising prior to this season, but no one saw this rise to an elite level coming this early. He took over the starting duties early in the season when Gibson was out with an appendectomy, and never looked back.

Dostál's 27.13 GSAx ranks third in the league. His processing speed and play-reading ability are impressive for any goalie, let alone a 24-year-old in his first season as a starter. He projects as a top goalie. Gibson isn't the star he once was, but he's proving this season he still has plenty of good hockey left in the tank, and he's an elite second option.

### 3. New York Rangers

Igor Shesterkin

21-22-4

It has been an incredibly disappointing season for the Rangers, but not because of goaltending. Despite playing behind a defense that ranks in the bottom-five in nearly every metric, Igor Shesterkin has played admirably. He has stopped an impressive 26.53 goals above expected, which ranks fourth in the league, despite facing more high-danger shots than any goalie (386).

Jonathan Quick's play has dipped a bit from his first year in New York, but he's still played respectably in his 17 starts. His overall numbers are just below average, but his acrobatic style has given the Rangers a chance to win on enough nights to grade as a neutral backup. That, combined with Shesterkin's heroics, gives the Rangers a strong duo in net.

### 4. Washington Capitals

Logan Thompson

28-4-5

What a season it has been for Logan Thompson. The 28-year-old Calgary native has stopped the second-most goals above expected (28.3) and has the fourth-highest save percentage (.916) in the NHL. He was rewarded with a six-year, \$35.1 million extension in January, which will be an incredibly favorable deal for Washington if he maintains anything close to his current form.

The Capitals also signed Charlie Lindgren to a three-year, \$9 million contract extension on March 3, locking in this duo through the 2027-28 season. They've truly embraced the league-wide trend toward tandems in net, and should have one of the most evenly-balanced duos for the foreseeable future.

Lindgren hasn't been able to replicate last year's .911 save percentage, but has still been solid. That's kind of the point of this strategy with two strong netminders in rotation. You only need one to be in great form, and right now, Thompson has backstopped the Capitals to the league's best record.

The American duo of Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll have given the Maple Leafs the best goaltending they've had in some time. (Stephen R. Sylvania / Imagn Images)

### 5. Toronto Maple Leafs

Anthony Stolarz

13-6-3

Speaking of evenly-balanced tandems, the American duo of Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll have given the Maple Leafs the best goaltending they've had in some time. They join the Ducks as the only team with two goalies inside the top 20 in GSAx. Stolarz ranks eighth with 21.47, while Woll is 17th with 11.34.

It will be interesting to see how the Leafs handle the crease in the playoffs. Stolarz has the better numbers despite missing significant time with an injury. As a big, blocking goalie, he also has the style that tends to thrive in the postseason. He has the best save percentage in the NHL on long-distance shots, allowing only one goal on 151 shots from the point.

While this is Stolarz's first opportunity to play this many games, he consistently put up excellent numbers as a backup, suggesting this breakout campaign may be a sign of things to come, not an outlier. Woll is a cerebral young goalie who plays with composure and patience. This projects as a really strong tandem moving forward.

#### 6. Tampa Bay Lightning

Andrei Vasilevskiy

30-18-3

Andrei Vasilevskiy is back.

After a down 2023-24 following back surgery, the two-time Stanley Cup winner has returned to elite form this season. Vasilevskiy's .920 save percentage ranks third behind Hellebuyck and Stolarz, and he's faced the heaviest workload of any goalie.

The Big Cat leads the league in starts (51), shots faced (1,422) and saves (1,308). In fact, the only reason the Lightning aren't higher on this list is because of their lack of depth in net, which forces them to lean on Vasilevskiy as hard as they do.

Considering Vasilevskiy's talent and contract, it's hard to blame the Bolts for starting him this often. The only question is where his energy level will be for the playoffs. If there's anyone who can handle this workload, it's him, especially considering he's played a noticeably calmer style this year that's easier on the body, but it is worth noting that his two best playoff performances (2020 and 2021) happened following seasons with his fewest regular-season starts.

#### 7. Dallas Stars

Jake Oettinger

30-14-2

Signing Casey DeSmith to a three-year, \$3 million contract this past offseason was yet another shrewd move by two-time defending GM of the Year Jim Nill. DeSmith has played fantastic, with a .914 save percentage and 10.27 GSAx in 18 starts, and has been a great complement to Jake Oettinger.

Oettinger is having another strong season. Equally important, he's on pace to start fewer than 60 games, which should allow him to be fresh for what he hopes is another deep playoff run. Oettinger's 198 starts (regular season and playoffs) lead all goalies over the last three seasons.

DeSmith has allowed coach Pete DeBoer to give Oettinger a reasonable number of nights off this season, and the Stars are hoping to reap the rewards of that this spring.

#### 8. Florida Panthers

Sergei Bobrovsky

27-14-2



Statistically speaking, the Panthers have had league-average goaltending this season. Sergei Bobrovsky's .907 save percentage and 5.8 GSAX are fine, but nothing to be too excited about, and Florida traded Spencer Knight — who had been putting up better numbers — to Chicago at the deadline.

Still, I would bet there aren't many teams who feel better about their goaltending heading into the postseason than the Panthers do with Bobrovsky. Over the last two years, he leads all goalies with 19.44 GSAX in the playoffs. He's proven he can turn it on when the lights get bright, and his recent form is enough reason to believe he can do it again. He has a gear that few goalies possess, and while he hasn't been amazing this season, he has played well enough to believe that gear still exists.

#### 9. New Jersey Devils

Jacob Markström

22-12-5

Following last year's disappointing season, Devils general manager Tom Fitzgerald made an effort to improve his goaltending, and executed it well. Trading for Jacob Markström in the summer, combined with acquiring backup Jake Allen at last year's deadline, transformed New Jersey's goaltending from a weakness to a major strength.

Markström's overall numbers are good but not great. That falls in line with his style, which fits what the Devils need most. Very few goalies can make diving, desperation stops with the regularity that Markström does. He can singlehandedly shift the momentum of a game, and has done that plenty this year for the Devils.

When Markström missed significant time with an injury, Allen started nine of 11 games while posting an impressive 9.77 GSAX (second to only Vasilevskiy during that span). New Jersey could be in trouble after Jack Hughes' shoulder surgery, but the Devils no longer have issues in net.

#### 10. Colorado Avalanche

Mackenzie Blackwood

24-16-6

Goaltending might be the toughest position to upgrade in the middle of the season, so give Avalanche GM Chris MacFarland credit for this turnaround. Early in the season, Alexandar Georgiev struggled mightily, and MacFarland addressed the problem aggressively with two separate trades to acquire Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood.

It has worked out nicely for Colorado, as both have performed well. Blackwood is finally looking like the goalie many believed he'd be when the Devils drafted him in the second round in 2015. He's big, powerful and surprisingly acrobatic for a goalie his size. After two seasons of putting up relatively great numbers behind a poor Sharks defense, Blackwood transitioned to playing behind a contender seamlessly.

#### 11. New York Islanders

Ilya Sorokin

24-20-4

Ilya Sorokin ranks 21st in save percentage (.906) and 23rd in GSAX (9.91), but he has played better than those numbers indicate. The Islanders have continued their trend of allowing far too many high-danger chances, ranking in the bottom 10 of that stat for the third consecutive season. Sorokin has stood on his

head plenty of nights, and his talent is visibly evident, but it's tough to put up consistently elite numbers facing that kind of pressure.

When Semyon Varlamov is healthy, this is one of the most talented tandems in the league. He's as close to a perfect backup goalie as there is in the NHL, but he has missed nearly the entire season with a lower-body injury. Marcus Högborg has played well at times, but the level of trust clearly isn't the same as with Varlamov, and that has led to a heavy burden on Sorokin.

## 12. Montreal Canadiens

Sam Montembeault

23-21-4

It might surprise you to know that Sam Montembeault ranks fifth in the NHL with 57.42 GSAX over the last three seasons. Over that span, he trails only Hellebuyck, Shesterkin, Sorokin and Ullmark. Those are the last three Vezina Trophy winners and Sorokin, who finished as the runner-up to Ullmark in 2023.

That's pretty good company for Montembeault, especially considering he's played behind a last-place team in each of the last two seasons. He has quietly put up excellent numbers, and has continued to do so this year with 22.25 GSAX.

Behind him, Jakub Dobeš has been a pleasant surprise. The 23-year-old rookie has performed well in limited starts, while Cayden Primeau has dominated the AHL since being usurped as the Canadiens' backup. Throw in star prospect Jacob Fowler, who is having a spectacular sophomore season for Boston College, and the future is bright for Montreal in net.

## 13. Calgary Flames

Dustin Wolf

22-12-4

It was fair to wonder if Dustin Wolf was ready to take over as the clear starter after the Markström era finally ended in Calgary, but he's quickly proven the answer is a resounding "yes."

Wolf is having the best season by a goalie 23 or younger since Evolving-Hockey began tracking goals saved above expected 17 years ago. His 24.34 GSAX are already the second-most ever, trailing Gibson's 2016-17 season by only 0.04.

Wolf is quick, agile and reads the game so well that his perceived size disadvantage hasn't hurt him at the highest level. If not for Macklin Celebrini, he would be an easy choice for the Calder Trophy.

Dan Vladař's numbers are slightly below the league average, but he's a solid veteran backup. If the Flames needed him to elevate his game with Markström's departure, they would've been in trouble, but with Wolf's emergence as a clear starter, Vladař's relative struggles have been less impactful.

## 14. Vegas Golden Knights

Adin Hill

23-11-4

It has been a streaky season for Adin Hill in Vegas. He has had stretches when he plays like a top goalie, and other stretches where he gives up four goals on fewer than 30 shots too often. Overall, Hill ranks 28th in save percentage (.904) and 21st in GSAX (10.36), and the truth is he has fluctuated with the Golden Knights' defensive structure.

When Vegas is at the top of its game, it's one of the toughest teams in the league to score on, and Hill is a big part of that. He's a big goalie who understands angles well and gives shooters very little net to shoot at. When things break down in front of him, he can struggle with rebounds. He does have a high ceiling, though, shown by his .932 save percentage in 19 playoff games over the last two years.

Ilya Samsonov has been similarly inconsistent, with as many off nights as quality starts. He may not be a true starter the way the Maple Leafs used him at times, but he's a good backup goalie.

#### 15. Vancouver Canucks

Kevin Lankinen

22-12-7

1.12

With a fully-healthy Thatcher Demko, the Canucks would be a lot higher on this ranking, but that hasn't been the case very often recently. Coming off a career year in which he finished runner-up in Vezina Trophy voting, Demko has played only 17 games this season while fighting through several injuries.

When Vancouver signed Kevin Lankinen to a one-year deal in the offseason, the plan was for him to replace DeSmith as a solid veteran backup. It turns out, he's been much more than that. In his first season in Vancouver, Lankinen truly elevated his game and earned a five-year, \$22.5 million extension. That, along with Demko's long injury history, suggests he could be the starter moving forward.

#### 16. Ottawa Senators

Linus Ullmark

16-11-3

When the Senators traded for Linus Ullmark in June, the question was whether his success in Boston was a product of the Bruins' strong team game. Through three quarters of this season, Ullmark is putting up similar statistics with the Senators, who are five points ahead of Boston in the Atlantic Division standings and are fighting for a playoff berth for the first time in eight years.

Ullmark's only real concern has been staying healthy. He has missed quite a bit of time, but when he's on the ice he gives the Senators the calm, steadying presence they hoped for.

Behind him, Anton Forsberg has struggled with a sub-.900 save percentage for a second consecutive season. On the bright side, rookie Leevi Merilainen played brilliantly for a stretch in January.

#### 17. Los Angeles Kings

Darcy Kuemper

20-8-7

A reunion with Bill Ranford in Los Angeles has Darcy Kuemper playing like he's 27 again. After two underwhelming seasons in Washington following his Cup win in Colorado, Kuemper looks rejuvenated playing behind a strong Kings defense. It's a credit to Ranford — who was Los Angeles' goalie coach when Kuemper first played there in 2017 and has since moved to director of goaltending — and Kuemper for rediscovering his game as he approaches 35.

Kuemper is tied for the fifth-highest save percentage in the NHL at .915, but he's been very insulated playing behind a dominant defense. The true test will come in the postseason, but it's hard not to like what we've seen from Kuemper this year.

David Rittich's game has taken a step back after an impressive 2023-24, but he's been reliable enough for the Kings to not overwork Kuemper, which is valuable.

#### 18. Chicago Blackhawks

Spencer Knight

14-9-1

It feels like Chicago is building something great in the crease. Projecting goalie prospects can be difficult, so the Blackhawks are stocking up with multiple lotto tickets hoping one ends up being the franchise goalie when this rebuilding squad is ready to contend.

Adding Knight at the deadline obviously was a huge boost to that potential. The 2019 first-round pick is one of the top young netminders in the world, and has played like it since arriving in Chicago. Knight ranks 16th in the NHL with 13.62 GSAX in limited starts, and plays a technical game with very few flaws.

Behind him, Chicago still has Arvid Söderblom, who is still only 25 and having his best season yet, and prospect Drew Comness, who is showing well in his second season in the AHL. That's a lot of young talent in net.

#### 19. Carolina Hurricanes

Pyotr Kochetkov

24-11-3

Statistically, the Hurricanes' goalies should be ranked higher than this. Both Pyotr Kochetkov and Frederik Andersen have produced solid numbers, but Carolina's possession-dominant, goalie-friendly system has certainly played a role in that.

The Hurricanes haven't made things quite as easy on their netminders as in past years. After two consecutive seasons of allowing the fewest expected goals per 60 minutes, Carolina has dropped to 11th in that metric this season, and Kochetkov's numbers reflect that. His save percentage is actually the lowest it has been in his three NHL seasons, but he has more than doubled his goals saved above expected.

#### 20. Seattle Kraken

Joey Daccord

21-18-3

On his own merits, Joey Daccord deserves to be much higher on this list. Over the last two seasons, he ranks third in save percentage behind only Hellebuyck and Ullmark, and fifth in GSAX. Not only has he proven he has the talent to be a starter, but his fiery demeanor permeates to his teammates. He has been a revelation, and should be an incredible deal for the Kraken with a \$5 million cap hit for the next five seasons.

The reason Seattle comes in at No. 20 is that Philipp Grubauer's struggles have not only continued, they've gotten worse. His .870 save percentage ranks last among the 54 goalies with at least 20 games this season, and he still has two more seasons left on his deal with a \$5.9 million cap hit.

As good as Daccord has been, he isn't on the level of Hellebuyck or Vasilevskiy to take on a 60-game workload, so having a solid 1B goalie is important for Seattle. Finding that moving forward while navigating Grubauer's contract won't be easy.

#### 21. Minnesota Wild

Filip Gustavsson

25-14-3

This has been a tale of two seasons for Filip Gustavsson. He looked like a Vezina contender through the first few months of the season, with a .926 save percentage in 27 games up to Jan. 4. Since then he has a .898 save percentage in 16 starts, and the Wild have slowly slipped in the standings.

Even at 40, Marc-André Fleury has had some great individual performances in his farewell tour. Jesper Wallstedt is the future, although he is having a terrible sophomore season in the AHL. The question is, can Gustavsson be good enough to help Minnesota make a run in the playoffs? He's very good technically but needs to prove he can make big stops when the structure breaks down in front of him.

## 22. Nashville Predators

Juuse Saros

16-25-6

I still have a lot of confidence in Saros moving forward, but there's no sugar-coating how bad this season has been in Nashville. The Finn is on pace to finish with a save percentage below .900 and negative GSAA for the first time in his nine NHL seasons.

Saros actually started the season well. He was the only thing holding the Predators in games early on, but eventually broke down with the poor play around him. If there's a takeaway from his subpar season, it's that at 5-foot-11, he can't afford to be off his game even slightly.

This is a lost season for Saros and the Predators, but bet against him at your own peril moving forward.

## 23. Boston Bruins

Jeremy Swayman

20-21-6

The Bruins missed Ullmark more than anticipated, especially early in the season when Jeremy Swayman was finding his footing as a true starter for the first time in his career. After signing his eight-year, \$66 million contract this summer, Swayman stumbled out of the gates with a 9-10-2 record and .885 save percentage through the first two months.

Swayman eventually found his game, and has quietly had a solid season from the middle of December on, but it's still a disappointing campaign overall. Joonas Korpi has predictably bounced back with a minimized role in Boston, after a horrid year in Ottawa. He's an above-average backup goalie, but with a sizable \$3 million cap hit for the next three years.

## 24. Utah Hockey Club

Karel Vejmelka

17-16-6

For a while, it seemed Karel Vejmelka was one of the few potentially difference-making goalies who could be available at the trade deadline, but Utah shut that idea down by signing him to a five-year, \$23.75 million extension on March 6.

Vejmelka is having a stellar season, with the eighth-most goals saved above expected (20.75). He has alternated between good and poor seasons in his four years in the NHL, which makes projecting his

future tough. Even still, having Vejmelka and Connor Ingram locked up for next season with a total cap hit of only \$6.7 million seems like good value.

#### 25. Buffalo Sabres

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen

21-20-4

It's been a disappointing season for Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's development. Last season, he took a major step in his second full NHL season and looked well on his way to becoming a high-end starter. This season, he has regressed to a .892 save percentage and -2.75 GSAX. The play in front of him certainly hasn't helped, as the Sabres are bottom five or six in most defensive metrics, but unlike last season, Luukkonen hasn't been a bright spot in Buffalo.

The potential is still there. He has all the physical tools and quick reads and makes plenty of highlight saves, but Luukkonen is still searching for the desired consistency. James Reimer, whom Buffalo claimed off waivers, has been steady in limited starts. He is on an expiring contract and the hope is Devon Levi, 23, is ready to take the leap to the NHL next season.

#### 26. St. Louis Blues

Jordan Binnington

20-20-4

Jordan Binnington had a sensational 2023-24 season. He finished second behind Hellebuyck with 29.74 GSAX and probably should've been a Vezina finalist. This season hasn't gone as well, outside of his gold medal for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Joel Hofer is still only 24 years old, but with an .899 save percentage, he hasn't taken the step in development St. Louis was hoping for in his second NHL season. He's still a big, athletic goalie who plays the puck well and could be the future for the Blues.

#### 27. Edmonton Oilers

Stuart Skinner

22-16-4

Of all the fan bases hoping their team would upgrade in net before the deadline, Oilers fans might be the most disappointed by the lack of movement. Stuart Skinner was one win away from hoisting the Cup last June — and played well in Game 7 — but hasn't inspired a lot of confidence lately.

Overall, Skinner ranks 38th in save percentage (.896) and 42nd in GSAX (2.62). He's struggled even more lately, with a 4-7-1 record and .885 save percentage since Jan. 18, but Oilers GM Stan Bowman believes he will turn it around.

Part of the issue is the lack of a strong backup. Calvin Pickard had made only 19 NHL starts in five seasons prior to joining the Oilers, and has -3.28 GSAX in 41 starts over the last two years in Edmonton. This postseason is a big moment for Skinner to prove he's a goalie the Oilers can win it all with. He has risen to the occasion in the past.

#### 28. Detroit Red Wings

Cam Talbot

17-15-3

The Red Wings' strategy in goal has been confusing to say the least. Detroit began the season with three goalies on the roster, finally cut it to two after waiving and eventually trading Ville Husso to Anaheim to unload his contract. GM Steve Yzerman then traded for 33-year-old Petr Mrázek, who is under contract for another year with a \$4.25 million cap hit.

All of this while the Red Wings have fallen out of the playoff picture, on track to miss the postseason for the ninth consecutive season, and have two stud goalie prospects in Sebastian Cossa and Trey Augustine waiting in the wings.

Cam Talbot and Alex Lyon have each played well for stretches — as did Mrázek in Chicago — but all three are on the wrong side of 30, behind a team that clearly isn't inside its window for competing.

#### 29. San Jose Sharks

Alexandar Georgiev

12-22-1

The Sharks gutted their goaltending room this season, trading away Blackwood and Vítek Vaněček, who were playing relatively well behind a struggling team. It's all about the future for San Jose, and that looks bright with Yaroslav Askarov continuing to develop.

He has made only 12 starts this season, with mixed results, but has already shown plenty of flashes of what he could become down the road, which is a highly entertaining franchise goalie.

#### 30. Columbus Blue Jackets

Elvis Merzljikins

22-17-4

Columbus has been one of the most pleasant surprises in the NHL this season, but the Blue Jackets have done it mostly through a high-powered offense that's averaging the sixth-most goals per game. Elvis Merzljikins has improved from last season but is still on pace to finish with a sub-.900 save percentage for the third consecutive season.

Daniil Tarasov, 25, seems to have taken a bit of a step back with his lowest save percentage yet for Columbus (.883). Jet Greaves has once again played well in very limited opportunities, but can't seem to force his way into a bigger role than the third goalie who is called up in case of injury.

#### 31. Pittsburgh Penguins

Alex Nedeljkovic

Pittsburgh has played three different goalies at least 15 games this season, and none has a save percentage above .891.

Tristan Jarry has shown signs of improvement with a couple nice performances since returning from a stint in the AHL, which is good considering he still has three more years left on his contract with a \$5.375 million cap hit. Both he and Alex Nedeljkovic are under contract next season.

#### 32. Philadelphia Flyers

Samuel Ersson

Of the 90 goalies to appear in NHL games this season, Samuel Ersson ranks 90th with -12.89 GSAA, Ivan Fedotov ranks 83rd (-7.93) and Aleksei Kolosov ranks 84th (-8.33). The Flyers haven't just had the worst goaltending in the league; they are on their own planet.

It certainly hasn't all been on the goalies. Ersson is young and still projects to be a solid tandem goalie, but Fedotov's struggles since coming over from the KHL are worrisome.



## The Athletic / An NHL-NBA playoff vibe check, plus poll results and expensive hats

By Chris Branch- March 14, 2025

Good morning! The hats are still a thing.

Vibe Checks: Let's bring NHL, NBA back into focus

There is, pardon the pun, madness at this juncture of the sports calendar. NFL free agency and college basketball sop up the spotlight like bread and leftover sauce. Baseball lurks soon. And yet we have two major sports leagues — the NBA and NHL — barreling toward their postseason, yet hanging out on the metaphorical backburner.

I have turned the front Pulse burner on. Let's get caught up on both. Pucks first, because I cribbed this idea from Shayna Goldman's piece earlier this week:

### NHL

Dallas and Tampa Bay are going for it. The Stars swiped Mikko Rantanen from the Hurricanes at the deadline, while the Lightning picked up Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde to address weaknesses. Both are major threats to the overall-favorite Panthers.

Detroit and Boston are about done. The Red Wings started the year well, but a recent skid plus no major deals at the deadline have sunk their playoff chances to 5 percent per our odds. The Bruins, meanwhile, will likely miss the postseason for the first time in seven years after a strange season. I still don't believe Brad Marchand plays for someone else. Weird.

### NBA

The Cavaliers are still elite. The East leaders are on another 15-game winning streak right now, but a tough schedule looms ahead. Meanwhile, the Thunder continue to roll the West, though there is a palpable sentiment that Oklahoma City — despite employing the MVP front-runner! — must prove its playoff worth before we take the Thunder seriously. OKC did handle the defending champs last night.

I am still befuddled by the 76ers' season. One of the league's most expensive duos, Joel Embiid and Paul George, have combined for one of the franchise's worst seasons since the early Process era. Philly is five games out of the final Play-In spot. Add the Suns — also outside of the Play-In right now — to that mix. Woof. Also the Knicks are fighting.

Vibes have been checked. Carry on:

Wait, how much for the hat?

You ever know in a moment that you're excited to tell the story at a later date? I can't wait to remind everyone in a few years about MLB's "overlap" hats, which hit a new low yesterday. The league had to pull more possibly lewd hats off the MLB store, including the "Ashos" and "Anaels" lids. This comes after a Rangers' version sold for nearly \$1,000 on eBay yesterday. What a moment. Please send all vulgar hats to me.

Swanson out for NWSL opener

USWNT star Mallory Swanson will not play in the NWSL's season-opening match Friday night between her Chicago Stars and the Orlando Pride. Chicago has not disclosed more details about the forward's

absence since announcing in January she was sitting out of training camp for personal reasons. Coach Lorne Donaldson called the situation “a week-to-week thing.” Full report [here](#).

We have a majority ruling on West Virginia football’s TikTok dance ban: Most of you think this will fail. I agree. Two quick things:

I understand the notion, which is about focus more than anything else, I presume. Study the playbook more than choreograph a new dance for social media. Etc., etc.

Yet it feels a little out of touch. The Mountaineers are trying to turn back the clock with the Rodriguez re-hire, but why are they possibly alienating the generation they want to recruit? It’s heavy-handed, if anything.

If West Virginia wins 10 games this year, I will grovel. Thanks for voting.

Watch and Listen



NCAAM: Butler vs. St. John’s

Noon ET on Peacock

The Johnnies are the best story in college hoops right now, the top seed in the Big East tournament and ranked in the top 10 nationally. They officially start the postseason journey [here](#).

Time to see how the Luka-led Lakers settle in without LeBron James for a week or two. Milwaukee is a middling (and talented) crew of confusion for me. This should be a good game.

There is no one in sports media like Jon Rothstein. I simply urge you to read Justin Williams’ piece from yesterday. Jon is his true authentic self on social media, and I love it.

Don’t miss this story from CJ Moore on UC San Diego, the school in its first year of Division I play and already a juggernaut.

Helpful: our tracker of NCAA men’s basketball auto-bids. See the list [here](#) (and bookmark it).

Can Lewis Hamilton win at Ferrari ... now? Watch to find out.

The future will not believe us about Nikola Jokić, Marcus Thompson II writes. Incredible perspective [there](#).

There is such joy in making it to the major leagues. For the 2020 rookie class, no one was there to see it.

Hilarious angle [here](#) on that magical Paul Skenes card, which is still up for auction. Skenes himself might not be able to afford it right now.

Most-clicked in the newsletter yesterday: Keith Law’s list of MLB breakout candidates. It’s good.

## The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 Calder Trophy race: Ranking the top 5 rookies at the three-quarter mark

By Scott Wheeler and Harman Dayal- March 14, 2025

It's a three-horse race for the 2024-25 Calder Trophy, with no clear front-runner down the home stretch. At this point in the season, the NHL's top rookie has usually revealed itself. That's not the case this year, according to The Athletic's Scott Wheeler and Harman Dayal.

They've been submitting quarterly five-player ballots throughout the year, and neither have made up their mind in this final instalment. Here's where their cumulative top-five stands heading into the final weeks of the season.

1. Lane Hutson — LHD, 20, Montreal Canadiens

64

4

45

49

minus-14

72

22:22

Wheeler's ballot: 1st

Dayal's ballot: 2nd

Average: 1.5

Wheeler: I truly believe it's anybody's race to win and that Lane Hutson, Macklin Celebrini and Dustin Wolf each have compelling cases. What Hutson's doing — leading the rookie scoring race as a defenseman, joining a prestigious group of U21 D to ever break 50 points and potentially an unheard-of group to break 60, often playing 25-plus minutes, etc. — feels the rarest. No. 1-drafted forwards emerging as teenaged stars seems to be becoming more and more common in the NHL, as exceptional as that feat remains and as impressive as Celebrini specifically has been relative to some recent top picks. Dustin Wolf has been outstanding for the Flames and goalies take time, but it is still his third-year pro and he's soon to be 24. There aren't — and haven't been — many D who've started a season at 20 and finished it at 21 and had the kind of impact, particularly on driving offense, that Hutson has had. Some argue the Calder is just about the best season and shouldn't account for things like age. But the historical significance does feel like it should factor, and Hutson's 63-point pace on a team that ranks tied for 18th in the league in scoring is pretty remarkable any way you slice it.

Critics will point to his plus-minus but I'll keep reminding them that the Canadiens have significantly better goal differential results with him on the ice than off and that 12 of his minuses have come from being on the ice for goals against with the net empty.

Dayal: Hutson is on pace to become the first rookie defenseman to hit 60 points in a season since Nicklas Lidstrom in 1991-92. It's worth noting that both Cale Makar (50 points in 57 games) and Quinn Hughes

(53 points in 68 games) would have also cracked the 60-point mark as first-year players if not for the pandemic interrupting the 2019-20 season, but Hutson is still in extremely rarified air.

He even has a remote chance of breaking Brian Leetch and Larry Murphy's shared NHL record for most assists by a rookie defenseman (60).

Hutson is a one-man breakout machine. He's dynamic and electric in the offensive end, using his high-end agility, poise and puck skills to set up teammates for scoring chances at will. He logs huge minutes and hasn't had the most spectacular rotation of defense partners.

Hutson's defensive game has also come a long way since the start of the season. He isn't perfect in his own end, but he's cut down on some of the loud mistakes we occasionally saw during the first month or two. The Canadiens have been about break-even at controlling shots, scoring chances and expected goals during Hutson's five-on-five shifts, which is pretty solid considering the Canadiens are near the bottom of the league in most play-controlling metrics.

2. Dustin Wolf — G, 23, Calgary Flames

38

22

12

4

0.915

2.52

Wheeler's ballot: 3rd

Dayal's ballot: 1st

Average: 2.0

Wheeler: Early on in the season, when Wolf and Dan Vladar were playing an even split of the starts through the first quarter of the year, I worried the Flames wouldn't hand over the net fast enough to Wolf to give him the runway to play enough games to truly be in the conversation to win the Calder. Eventually, though, they did — and he has withstood the added workload and been their best player throughout. If the Flames make the playoffs, he'll be the single biggest reason why and their undisputed MVP. That, in and of itself, makes him worthy.

Dayal: Wolf deserves to be the Calder frontrunner because of how far he's singlehandedly dragging the Flames. Calgary was expected to be a bottom feeder and is the worst offensive team in the NHL this season (32nd in goals scored per game), yet the club is miraculously clinging onto a playoff spot.

Wolf isn't just shining relative to his rookie peers; you could make a case that he deserves to be a Vezina Trophy finalist behind Connor Hellebuyck and Logan Thompson. He has notched a .915 save percentage and saved 24.3 goals above expected, both marks that rank top five among all goalies this season. Calgary's played at a 103-point pace during Wolf's starts compared to a woeful 72-point pace in 25 games without Wolf.

It's not as if he's been insulated by a high-end defensive environment, either. Yes, the Flames are a relentless, hardworking group, but their expected goals and shots-against rates at five-on-five rank 16th and 25th, respectively. And besides MacKenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson, the Flames have been icing a pretty inexperienced, unproven blue line in front of Wolf.

A lack of games played doesn't hold up as a valid argument against Wolf the way it could have earlier in the season. Wolf has started 19 of the Flames' 26 games since Jan 1. If he maintains that pace down the stretch — which you'd expect given how tight the Western Conference playoff race is — he'll finish with 52 games played.

3. Macklin Celebrini — C, 18, San Jose Sharks

54

20

28

48

minus-26

188

19:46

Wheeler's ballot: 2nd

Dayal's ballot: 3rd

Average: 2.5

Wheeler: Celebrini has been phenomenal as a rookie. He's currently tied for the Sharks scoring lead despite missing 12 games due to injury. Had he not gotten hurt, he'd be playing at a 74-point pace as an 18-year-old. He passes the eye test with flying colours for not just his ability to make and finish plays or generate offense (he has generated far and away the most shots and individual scoring chances in this class) but in other star-making areas like transporting pucks and winning battles. He looks like he's going to be a superstar in the league and will be the best player from this rookie class. But the award isn't given to the best prospect or the biggest name, and I do think the missed time matters.

You can win it without playing the full season — Connor Bedard did last year — and if he were a point per game instead of 0.9 or were to comfortably win the rookie scoring race, it'd be his without much competition. But I'd argue Hutson and Wolf are having comparable or better seasons to the one Brock Faber had a year ago behind Bedard as well. It's not cut and dry, as great as he already is and will be, and as deserving as he is to win it (and probably will). Especially if Hutson plays all 82 games and breaks 60 points and Wolf plays 50 with a .915 save percentage to push the Flames into the playoffs.

Dayal: Celebrini wasn't No. 1 on either of our ballots, but he's still the favorite to win the Calder according to the betting markets. He's scored 0.91 points per game, which is the fifth-highest mark of any rookie within the last 15 years (minimum 50 games played). The four players in the last 15 years who eclipsed Celebrini's rookie production rate — Mathew Barzal, Artemi Panarin, Elias Pettersson and Kirill Kaprizov — all ended up winning the Calder.

An NHL front-office executive I spoke to last summer before the draft described Celebrini as a poor man's Sidney Crosby. The point this person made was that Celebrini is exceptionally well-rounded for his age, which we've seen this season. Celebrini displays oodles of flashy, dynamic, game-breaking skill, but what makes him special is that he pairs it with dogged, relentless puck pursuit and a mature defensive conscience. He's constantly hounding opponents, breaking plays up and winning puck battles, which you rarely see in an 18-year-old forward.

Celebrini is a franchise player, and in an ordinary year, he'd be running away with this race. The field this year, however, is stacked, so he's still fighting tooth and nail to pull away as the front-runner.

4. Matvei Michkov — RW, 20, Philadelphia Flyers

64

20

27

47

minus-15

151

16:11

Wheeler's ballot: 4th

Dayal's ballot: 4th

Average: 4.0

Wheeler: The inevitable odd scratch and benching that comes with being a 19- and 20-year-old all-offense winger playing for John Tortorella was always going to make it hard for Michkov to win the Calder. You have to play a lot to produce a lot and the forwards who win the Calder typically play the 19-20 minutes a night that Celebrini has and not the 16 minutes a night that Michkov has. Still, he's right there at the top of the rookie scoring race, he leads the rookie scoring race at even-strength, and he will finish as the Flyers' second-leading scorer behind Travis Konecny. I think Michkov's the clear No. 4 in the Calder race at the moment in that he's clearly behind the top three but also clearly ahead of the rest of the pack. In most years, he'd be a finalist. He's on pace for 60 points in 80 games despite the pair of scratches and I firmly believe he's going to be an 85-to-95-point winger in the NHL who has a chance to crack 100 someday with the right linemates and luck.

Dayal: Michkov has an elite offensive skill set between his creativity, deception and playmaking vision. He's become significantly more dangerous at even strength as the season has progressed — Michkov only had four five-on-five points in his first 22 games but now has more five-on-five points on the season than Celebrini and Hutson. He's been on a tear lately with six goals and 13 points in his last 10 games, but he's still firmly on the outside looking in on the Calder because of the historical rarity of his competitors' performances. Long term, I can't wait to see how his production explodes once he finally has a true high-end, top-six center to play with.

5. Logan Stankoven — RW/C, 22, Carolina Hurricanes

61

10

20

30

plus-4

152

15:08

Wheeler's ballot: 5th

Dayal's ballot: 5th

Average: 5.0

Wheeler: I think we'll see the top four rookies in this class on every — or almost every — PHWA ballot but I expect to see several different names at No. 5. Will Smith has played his way into the conversation. Cutter Gauthier has had a sneaky year on a bad Anaheim Ducks team. Jackson Blake is a good player on a good Hurricanes team. But I still lean Stankoven, who was good in third-line usage in Dallas, scored in his Canes debut and has a chance to have an impact there, might finish second to Celebrini in shots on goal by rookies (he's got a chance at 200 shots, which is a really strong benchmark for a first-year player), and just always seems to do a lot with what he has shift to shift and game to game.

Dayal: Stankoven is going to be a perfect fit in Carolina. He's a relentless ball of energy with the type of battle-winning chops and two-way reliability that will endear him to Rod Brind'Amour. Stankoven drives play, racks up a ton of shots and scoring chances and has plenty of offensive skill, too. He is slick and smooth with the puck and a smart, talented playmaker below the dots.

I know it's disappointing for the Canes that they weren't able to re-sign Mikko Rantanen, but landing Stankoven, two first-round picks and two third-round picks is a lucrative haul for what the Canes gave up in the original deal with the Colorado Avalanche.

## The Athletic / How the 'All Hockey Hair Team' became a Minnesota state tournament tradition

**By Peter Baugh- March 14, 2025**

A high school-aged Jake Oettinger raced to open YouTube. A friend had just texted him with news that he'd received one of the greatest honors for a Minnesota high school hockey player: a nod in the "All Hockey Hair Team" video.

Sure enough, there he was during the honorable mention section of the video, running his goalie glove through his long brown hair.

"That was pretty much all I talked about for a couple weeks after that," says Oettinger, now with the Dallas Stars.

The "All Hockey Hair Team" might not ring a bell to fans outside Minnesota. But in the state that its creator, John King, calls the "Land of 10,000 Locks," it's a part of the culture. King, a 50-year-old advertising professional, compiles the video after the high school state tournament, paying tribute to the top hairstyles at the event.

The more outlandish, the better.

Every year, players debut ridiculous cuts, dyed hair, perms, mustaches and more. Sometimes entire teams work together on a theme.

"There's a vibe around Minnesota when the state tournament comes," says Wyatt Kaiser, now a defenseman on the Chicago Blackhawks. "You're doing something to your hair. ... It just kind of feels right."

The state tournament is a big deal in Minnesota. Think high school football in Texas. On Saturday, the Class AA final drew 20,491 fans — more than any NHL game that day. Oettinger dreamed of playing in it growing up. He remembers missing school to go to games as a fan.

In the pomp and circumstance before the highly anticipated games, teams line up at the end boards of Xcel Energy Center, the Minnesota Wild's home rink. The public address announcer reads each player's name, and each player skates to the blue line. A camera broadcasts their introduction on 45TV.

If the game is their chance to show off their hockey skills, this moment is their chance to show off their flow.

This is where King enters the picture. He studies the footage, then creates a top 10 list, along with honorable mentions and plenty of analysis, puns and quippy comments.

"Once the tournament is over, you kind of wait for the video to come out and watch it and see if you agree or not," Kaiser says.

"It was always kind of the icing on the cake at the end," Oettinger adds.

King, who now runs a media company called Pulltab Sports, first made the hair team in 2005. Some of his buddies had an hour of late-night airtime on local TV, and King put together a two-minute video of hair to include.

He didn't do it again until 2011, when he uploaded it to YouTube. He sent it to a couple lists of parents, and before long, it had taken off. The annual videos now rake in thousands, if not millions, of views. His



record is 2.9 million on the 2015 team. The next year, Barry Melrose went to Minnesota to do an ESPN feature on both the “All Hockey Hair Team” and hockey hair in general.

These days, King’s videos are popular enough to raise money for the Hendrickson Foundation, which aims to make hockey more accessible to people with disabilities.

Forty-nine Minnesota-born hockey players have appeared in NHL games this year, so it’s no surprise that some inclusions in King’s “All Hockey Hair Team” videos now play professionally. Cade Fairchild, an inclusion on the 2005 team thanks to a mop of brown hair, went on to play five games with the St. Louis Blues in 2011-12. At least four active NHLers have appeared in the more recent videos: Oettinger, Kaiser, the Boston Bruins’ Casey Mittelstadt and the Winnipeg Jets’ Dylan Samberg were all either included in the honorable mention category or montages throughout the video.

What did King like about their hair in their younger years, and what does he think of it now? He breaks it down for The Athletic.

Jake Oettinger, Lakeville North

The 4 Nations Face-Off was not just a collection of many of the world’s top players. America’s top hockey hair expert was in attendance, too. King went to the U.S.-Sweden game, where he got to watch an “All Hockey Hair Team” alumnus in net. Oettinger made 21 saves that night for the Americans, and King liked what he saw, both on the ice and in terms of hair.

“If their goal song is ‘Free Bird,’ he’s living free for sure,” King says.

Some parents want their kids to keep their hair clean, but Oettinger’s mom, Kateri, was the opposite. She loved hockey hair and believed her son needed flow if he was going to play the sport. When he was a freshman at Lakeville North, his hair went well past his ears, nearly touching the goalie pads protruding from his jersey.

Oettinger didn’t dye his hair or style it in a unique way when he made the 2014 state tournament as a freshman, but he rose to the occasion of his player introduction. He skated to the camera faster than expected, and a few strands of hair fell out of place and onto his forehead. Then something magical happened. Oettinger used his glove to put it in place.

“Now that’s what I call a glove save,” King said in the video.

“I sort of expect him to be sleeping on my couch after playing Call of Duty all night,” King says.

Unfortunately for King, Oettinger cut his hair during the 4 Nations tournament, and he has since shaved his mustache. He goes through phases — “You never know what I’m going to throw at you,” Oettinger says — and the more unruly style is gone, at least temporarily.

To make matters worse for King, Oettinger often keeps his hair hidden.

“I wear a hat most of the time,” he says. “I’m married now, so I don’t really have to worry about my hair anymore.”

Casey Mittelstadt, Eden Prairie

Sometimes King makes an effort to include the state’s top players in his video. They might not get the prestigious honor of a top-10 ranking, but their skate up can make an appearance in the opening montage.

Mittelstadt had a whopping 64 points in 25 games his final year at Eden Prairie. King started his 2017 video with a poem — flowetry, he called it — and made early note of Mittelstadt.

“This year’s Double-A tourney looked to be quite the beast,” he narrated. “Mr. Mittelstadt’s unfinished business out west, and Hill-Murray from the east.”

But his hair did not rise to King’s usual standard. Mittelstadt wore it short and neat — not exactly King’s style.

“He looks a little bit like a soldier in high school,” King says. “Like he went to the mall and maybe talked to the Army guy for too long, he did a couple pull-ups by accident and maybe signed some papers.”

Mittelstadt, acquired by the Bruins in a deal with the Colorado Avalanche last week, has let his blond hair grow a bit more during his NHL career. At points in Colorado it poked out from his helmet, and the front was much longer than it was during the 2017 state tournament.

“The mountains are getting higher on top,” King says. “He looks like a guy who’s got a little John Denver in his life now. Good for him. He’s definitely going the right direction.”

Dylan Samberg, Hermantown

Samberg is from a Duluth suburb called Hermantown. That’s not what King calls it, though. He refers to it as Hairmantown.

Samberg actually appeared in King’s videos twice. During the opening montage of the 2015 video, King showed a clip of him “primping and pruning” while lined up with his teammates.

The 2017 video is where Samberg truly made his mark, though. King included him in his introduction, not long after Mittelstadt. Samberg didn’t have long hair at the time, but he sported a dark mustache, and when he skated to the camera for his player introduction, he did a finger dab dance move. King appreciated him showing some personality — in his eyes, the loosest teams play the best — and liked the facial hair.

“He had a legit mustache as a high schooler,” King says.

Samberg, it turns out, fooled King. He couldn’t effectively grow a mustache back then. He dyed the wisps of what he had black, just so they were visible. As for the dab, he says he thought of it on the fly.

Nowadays, Samberg has both long hair and a legitimate beard — no need for dyes. King says he looks like “a guy you want to have a beer with, probably.” Samberg, though, recently uttered words that would likely make King wince and potentially change his mind.

“I’ve got a haircut coming up.”

Wyatt Kaiser, Andover

Making the “All Hockey Hair Team” wasn’t Kaiser’s motivation in high school, even if he watched the videos when he was younger. He and most of his Andover teammates were just keeping up with the tradition of crazy hair styles. They broke out into small groups and each found a way to make their hair stand out.

“Then you kind of show up to school the next day and see what everybody’s got and laugh at each other,” he says.

The result was enough to catch King’s attention. He included Kaiser in the closing montage of the 2020 video.

“I had a perm, a mullet and frosted tips,” Kaiser says.

“That doesn’t look like a perm,” King adds. “That just looks like excellent hockey hair.”

These days, Kaiser keeps his hair pretty tame. His headshot makes King shudder. Too professional.

"It looks like he went from RinkedIn to LinkedIn," he says.

Kaiser, though, says his hair comes in cycles. It does grow, after all. He lets it get longer in the winter, and he's sported some facial hair recently. Perhaps there's room to win King back over.

"The perm and frosted tips, that's one-and-done," Kaiser says. "Ah, I don't know about done. You never know..."

## ESPN / What to expect from top NHL prospects traded at the deadline

By Rachel Doerrie- March 14, 2025

### Reactions

The 2025 NHL trade deadline featured some major players on the move and vaulted both the Florida Panthers and Dallas Stars to the top of the Stanley Cup contender conversation.

Close behind them are the Colorado Avalanche, Toronto Maple Leafs, Edmonton Oilers, Carolina Hurricanes and Winnipeg Jets. Many of those teams moved high-end prospects to bolster their lineup, meaning some less-competitive teams got key pieces for their future.

How will those prospects impact their new teams? When will they play meaningful minutes at the NHL level? Teams and their fans are asking all those questions. Here are scouting notes on eight of the most prominent, including Calum Ritchie, Fraser Minten and Brendan Brisson.

### Calum Ritchie

C, New York Islanders

The most notable prospect traded was Ritchie, acquired along with a first-round pick in the trade that sent Brock Nelson to Colorado. Islanders brass and their fan base should be thrilled with this acquisition.

Ritchie is likely to be a middle-six player next season on Long Island, with a ceiling of a scoring, second-line center. Given that the Islanders have Mathew Barzal and Bo Horvat, they can opt to shelter Ritchie in a third-line role as he learns to play center at the NHL level. The other two options are starting Ritchie on the wing in the top six or leaving Barzal on the wing and allowing Ritchie to play as the second-line center.

In my view, Ritchie is unlikely to be ready to step into the second-line center role next season, and it would be wise for the Isles to develop him in the third-line center spot to maximize his potential. He's averaging 1.6 points per game in the OHL this season, and he ranks in the top 15 in points per game. Ritchie possesses an excellent two-way game. His offensive development is trending towards him becoming a 65- to 70-point player at the NHL level, while playing a matchup role.

### Fraser Minten

C, Boston Bruins

Toronto fans weren't thrilled to lose Minten and rightfully so. He lacks the offensive firepower that is required to be a top-six scoring center in the current NHL landscape, but there is real potential for him to become a quality third-line pivot. Minten will be most dangerous offensively when he's playing alongside a shoot-first winger because of his puck distribution skill. He understands spacing and consistently draws defenders towards him before distributing the puck to a linemate in space.

Minten could play in the NHL today as an injury replacement but needs the rest of this season to develop. It is likely Minten can play a full-time role in the NHL next season on the Bruins' third line behind Elias Lindholm and Pavel Zacha.

With the addition of Casey Mittelstadt, the Bruins bought themselves time to leave Minten in AHL Providence for longer. If Minten is ready, then the team can move Mittelstadt to the wing in the top six, or play Minten on the wing to take advantage of his passing and vision with skilled players.

Fans on both sides of the rivalry can also expect that Minten will come back to haunt the Leafs because why would he not?

William Zellers

LW, Boston Bruins

The Bruins acquired Zellers in the deal for Charlie Coyle. While his draft status (76th overall in 2024) may not pop off the page, Zellers has been excellent in his first USHL season in Green Bay and is slated to attend the University of North Dakota next season.

Zellers is averaging nearly 1.4 points per game, a pace that leads all USHL players this season and is on pace to score 47 goals in 52 games. He's on the smaller side at 5-11, but he has managed to be one of the most productive players everywhere he plays. His ability to attack defenders, find space and score in tight places and from distance sets him apart from other players.

There is concern his game may not translate at the NHL level. But until Zellers proves he can't score at the next level, doubt him at your peril. He'll need at least two seasons of NCAA hockey and probably a season in the AHL before he's ready for full-time NHL minutes. Playing the long game with Zellers could see him develop into a middle-six scorer, perhaps the type that fits nicely next to Fraser Minten.

Marat Khusnutdinov

LW, Boston Bruins

This was a sneaky good pickup for the Bruins at the deadline, and he was certainly the most perplexing prospect traded. Khusnutdinov has been a favorite of mine for a few years, with quality two-way play and an untapped offensive ceiling. He can and should play NHL minutes in the bottom six for the Bruins right away, with the potential of becoming a Swiss Army knife player on Boston's third line.

Not only is there a lot to like about Khusnutdinov's potential, but he's also the prototypical Bruin. He's fast, he plays with a significant edge and he's not afraid to mix it up physically. He reads the play well, is tenacious on defense and can play quickly in transition.

There is no flash to his game, but when you combine his skating with the tenacity and smarts, the potential for a middle-six difference-maker is there. He'll have a better opportunity in Boston than Minnesota, and if the Bruins can unlock his offensive potential, a two-way scorer may emerge.

Victor Soderstrom

D, Chicago Blackhawks

The development path for Soderstrom has been a bumpy one, but everything has been bumpy in the now-defunct Arizona Coyotes organization, so it's hard to fault him for heading back to Sweden.

Chicago has a glut of young defensemen, and the 2019 11th overall pick certainly could benefit from some detailed development. He leads the SHL in scoring among under-25 defensemen and ranks third among all players under 25. He seems to have found his confidence and offensive step with Brynas and is worth the flier.

Chicago will likely try to bring him over to North America to take a more hands-on development approach. He remains a gifted skater with good vision and offensive prowess. He never put it together in North America (during time with the Coyotes and AHL's Tucson Roadrunners), but if Chicago can unlock that toolbox, he has the potential to be a solid No. 4/5 defenseman in the next year or two.

Zack Ostapchuk

C, San Jose Sharks

Ostapchuk was somewhat of a surprising inclusion at the deadline because of his versatility and style of play. Coaches love him because he can play anywhere in the lineup, in any situation and bring an edge that gets under the opponent's skin.

The 21-year-old has spent most of the season in Ottawa's NHL lineup and should slot nicely into San Jose's middle six to finish the season, or certainly to start next season. He brings some bite to the young Sharks lineup, a player willing to go to the dirty areas, be physical on the forecheck and win puck battles.

His ceiling isn't high in terms of skill, but given his tenacity and ability to win battles, it is likely that some of the more skilled Sharks would be keen on playing with him. Skill players love playing with guys who can retrieve pucks and keep the flies off, and Ostapchuk certainly has that capability. He has good hands, which makes him a good candidate to be a net-front presence to bang in rebounds while skilled players create the shots.

Nikita Grebenkin

LW, Philadelphia Flyers

When you picture a perfect bottom-six Philadelphia Flyer in today's NHL, Nikita Grebenkin is that guy. He's a complete menace every time he's on the ice. He'll dive to break up an odd-man rush and make every hit on the forecheck. His personality is going to drive opponents crazy. He is everything that old-school Flyers fans love about their team. He's not going to score 50 points, but he's going to be an effective checker and physical presence -- and the effort will never be questioned.

Grebenkin needs the rest of this season in the AHL to continue to round out his defensive game, but no one should be surprised if he plays a full-time, fourth line role for the Flyers next season. He's exactly the type of player you want in that role because he skates well and won't be a defensive liability.

He has the potential to be the ball of energy that turns the momentum in the Flyers' favor with a strong forechecking shift or big hit. He doesn't have a high ceiling, but there's a very strong possibility he becomes a long-term NHL player in the bottom six.

The trend of Vegas Golden Knights' first-round picks being traded continued this year, as Brisson and third-round pick were shipped to the Big Apple for Reilly Smith.

Brisson has struggled to find his scoring prowess at the professional level, and the Rangers aren't known for developing forwards, but Brisson's shot is of a superior quality. When he one-times the puck cleanly, it finds the back of the net. His production has taken a major step back this season in the AHL, which is concerning, but a guy who can score when the puck is put on a tee is going to get ample opportunity.

Brisson has immense offensive talent, with his shot and ability to dissect defensive schemes. The 23-year-old has the potential to be a middle-six, scoring winger and a power-play dynamo for the Rangers if he can find his range.

His defensive play has left many concerned, and he'll need to improve his off-puck play in general to earn the trust of an NHL coaching staff. Should the Rangers fall out of the playoff race, it is worth giving Brisson a shot to play with the likes of Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad to see if he benefits from playing with quality puck distributors. If Brisson can't stick, he'll likely top out as an AHL tweener, but this is worth the risk for the Rangers.

## ESPN / NHL Awards WATCH: Who's leading for Hart, Norris, Calder?

**By Greg Wyshynski- March 14, 2025**

While the Stanley Cup playoffs races remain tight and delightfully chaotic, the races for the NHL Awards have also seen some major shifts since last month: There's a new leader for MVP and for the league's best defenseman.

Welcome to the NHL Awards Watch for March. We've polled a wide selection of Professional Hockey Writers Association voters anonymously to get a sense of where the wind is blowing for the current leaders. We've made sure it's a cross section from the entire league, trying to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Bear in mind that the PHWA votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng finalists, broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams, and general managers handle the Vezina.

Nathan MacKinnon takes the MVP lead back from Connor Hellebuyck, who had a tenuous grasp on the top spot last month.

MacKinnon is trying to become the first back-to-back league MVP since Alex Ovechkin from 2007-08 to 2008-09. Since 1980, only three players have captured the Hart in consecutive seasons: Ovechkin, Dominik Hasek (1996-97, 1997-98) and Wayne Gretzky, who went on a run of eight straight league MVPs from 1979 through 1987. That's the level of feat MacKinnon is trying to accomplish here.

He's also trying to do something for the first time in his career: win the Art Ross Trophy as the NHL's leading points producer. He was second to Nikita Kucherov (144 points) last season despite a career-high 140 points. That MacKinnon is threatening the scoring lead after the Avalanche traded Mikko Rantanen in January has bolstered his MVP credentials. So has the fact that he has turned Martin Necas into a more than acceptable replacement.

"Incredibly consistent and so crucial to Colorado's success this season," one voter said.

"Colorado doesn't get enough credit for being where they are despite having brutal depth and terrible goaltending for the first eight weeks of the season," another voter explained.

MacKinnon had 33% of the first-place votes on the ballots we surveyed. It's not a runaway by any means.

Right behind him with around 26% of the first-place votes is Leon Draisaitl. The Edmonton star has had a comfortable lead in the NHL goal-scoring race all season -- while he led the NHL in points back in 2019-20, he has never won the Rocket Richard Trophy for goals. The season Draisaitl won the Art Ross is also the only time he captured the Hart Trophy, though that's understandable when Connor McDavid -- three-time MVP, six-time finalist -- is on your team.

"MacKinnon is on pace to win his second Hart Trophy in a row but Leon Draisaitl isn't far behind," a MacKinnon voter said.

"This award still seems very much up for grabs. I keep flip flopping here," a Draisaitl voter quipped.

What Draisaitl has going for him: a strong analytics case, leading the NHL in goals scored above replacement, per Evolving Hockey.

Hellebuyck, last month's leader, still has a ton of support, with 22% of the first-place votes. He has led the NHL in traditional goalie stats all season. Money Puck has him leading in goals saved above expected, while Stathletes has him in the top three.

The NHL hasn't had a goalie win MVP since Montreal's Carey Price in 2014-15.

"There is a zero percent chance Winnipeg is the best team in the league right now if not for Hellebuyck. That's undeniable," a Hellebuyck voter declared.

That's the top three, but there are two other players who received first-place votes as well.

One of them is Zach Werenski of the Columbus Blue Jackets, a team with perhaps the most uplifting story of the playoff race. He leads his team in scoring and has played nearly 27 minutes per game this season, doing everything to elevate the Jackets to an unlikely postseason push.

A defenseman hasn't won the Hart since Chris Pronger captured the MVP with the St. Louis Blues in 1999-2000.

The other player in the mix is Kucherov of the Tampa Bay Lightning, who has a points-per-game argument against MacKinnon's point totals this season. Kucherov also has a sizable lead in his own team's scoring race, with a gap that was recently more than 20 points ahead of Brandon Hagel and Brayden Point.

"There's enough racetrack left for Tampa's dark horse to give voters little choice but to at least consider him a legitimate race finalist," a Kucherov backer noted.

Norris Trophy (top defenseman)

Leader: Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets

Finalists: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks; Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

For the first time this season, Zach Werenski is the leader for the Norris Trophy. Quinn Hughes had been the established leader for the award throughout the season, earning 45% of the first-place votes last month. But Hughes has played only three games since Jan. 31, and his limited games played vs. the other Norris candidates has dropped him down the rankings.

"Hughes had it locked up before his injury," a voter concluded.

Werenski, meanwhile, is having his moment. Whether it's the Jackets' incredible story, the Stadium Series spotlight or his play in the 4 Nations Face-Off, Werenski's star is rising at the right time, and he has the stats to back up his case.

"I'm on the Zach Werenski train. He's a big, big reason for why the Blue Jackets are still in this thing," a voter noted

"The Blue Jackets? A playoff team? Not without Werenski playing the way he has," another voter said.

"Werenski has been incredible, but it's a three-horse race between him, Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar," another voter offered.

Werenski earned 48% of the first-place votes from the ballots we surveyed. This is easily the most awards buzz Werenski has gotten, as he has previously placed only as high as eighth in the Norris voting.

Someone who is used to awards buzz is Makar, who has been a Norris finalist four straight seasons and won the award in 2021-22. The Colorado blueliner snatched the scoring lead among defensemen and hasn't looked back, skating over 25 minutes per game. Makar had 41% of the first-place votes.

"Makar is as good as it gets on the blue line," a voter declared.

"Makar has been excellent all season," another voter offered.



That said, some Makar voters acknowledge there are mitigating circumstances here. "It's Makar, but only because injuries have hurt Quinn Hughes' season," a voter suggested.

Others are glancing over their shoulders at what Werenski is doing.

"A late push from Zach Werenski and the Blue Jackets could sway this voter," they said.

"Werenski is now No. 2 with a bullet for me," a Makar voter confirmed.

Hughes still has some true believers in his corner, earning the rest of the first-place votes. Before his injury, Hughes was building a case for the Hart Trophy as well as his second straight Norris Trophy.

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

Leader: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Finalists: Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens; Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames

The same top three as last month's Awards Watch, and with the same ranking: Macklin Celebrini leads, with Dustin Wolf next and Lane Hutson behind him. But the race continues to tighten.

Celebrini, 18, has seen his first-place vote share go from 90% to 60% to now 48% this month -- still a sizable advantage, but other rookies are clearly invited to the party. Celebrini has been around the rookie lead in goals and points, and has steadily led in points per game after having missed some time earlier this season.

"This is Macklin Celebrini's to lose and I don't think he will," a voter proposed.

"Celebrini's all-around impact on the game is undeniable. Every time I watch a Sharks game, I'm amazed by how polished his game is," another voter admitted. "He's a borderline elite NHL player at 18 years old."

"The race may be tightening, but I still lean toward the most dynamic presence playing on the worst team," another voter revealed.

Wolf has solidified his case as the best rookie goaltender -- there's not really anyone else in the conversation at this point -- but also as the MVP of the Flames' playoff push. His traditional stats are strong, and he's just outside the top 10 in goals saved above expected. The last rookie goalie to win the Calder was Steve Mason of the Columbus Blue Jackets in 2008-09.

"If the Flames make the playoffs, there's a legit chance," a voter noted.

"If we're talking about who has truly been the best performing rookie over the balance of the season, it has to be Dustin Wolf," another voter argued. "What he's done in Calgary is remarkable and he's the only rookie in the discussion who's been consistently at the top of his game all year."

Like Wolf with goalies, Hutson is lapping the field among rookie defensemen. He's also a serious threat to lead all rookies in scoring as a defenseman, something Quinn Hughes did in 2019-20 -- although he finished second in the Calder race to Makar that season.

Hutson has been a highlight-generating blueliner for the Canadiens. He earned 11% of the first-place votes.

"Hutson's just been an absolute force," a voter quipped.

"He's been a big part of Montreal's surprising season," another voter pointed out.

The rest of the first-place votes went to Matvei Michkov, who dropped out of the top three for the Calder last month. He's still very much in the race for most points and goals. But the "tough love" from

coach John Tortorella this season, which has included a healthy scratch and benchings, might have created the perception that there are holes in his game.

"I have time for all of these rookies. Michkov is a strong No. 4 guy," a voter offered.

Vezina Trophy (top goaltender)

Note: The NHL's general managers vote for this award.

Leader: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Finalists: Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals; Andrei Vasilevskiy, Tampa Bay Lightning

It's Connor Hellebuyck for the Vezina. It's unanimous (at least if the PHWA voted on this one).

Every voter we surveyed had Hellebuyck atop their ballots, citing his dominating statistical season and his importance to the Jets' push for the conference title. Hellebuyck won the Vezina for the second time in his career last season. The last goalie to win at least three Vezina trophies was Hall of Famer Martin Brodeur, who was also the last goalie to win back-to-back Vezinas.

"It's still Connor Hellebuyck's world and we're all just trying not to look silly attempting to score in it," a voter explained.

"Best goaltender in the world and I don't think it's particularly close," another voter declared.

Logan Thompson made the top three last month and even syphoned off support from Hellebuyck, earning 15% of the first-place votes. He has been outstanding for the Capitals, who have traded the league lead in points with Hellebuyck's Jets for most of the season. Thompson received the most down-ballot support, if not a first-place vote.

"Hellebuyck is the only option here. Thompson has been great, but he's just not in the same realm," a voter concluded.

Dustin Wolf was the third choice last month, but it's clear that Andrei Vasilevskiy has entered the chat. The Lightning goalie, who won the Vezina in 2018-19, has steadily gotten better as the season has gone on for Tampa Bay. He was 18-7-2 from December through February.

Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)

Leader: Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers

Finalists: Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs; Sam Reinhart, Florida Panthers

Right now, it appears that Aleksander Barkov will continue his Patrice Bergeron-like run as the best defensive forward in the NHL. The Panthers star earned 56% of the first-place votes, which was only slightly down from last month's 60%.

"Selke Sasha. I think we've found a new nickname for Barkov," one voter joked. "It's his award now, right?"

Barkov won the Selke for the second time last season. He has won the award twice in the past four seasons, broken up by Bergeron's back-to-back Selke wins from 2021-22 to 2022-23.

But he's not the only Panthers player in the mix for the Selke. Sam Reinhart has impressive underlying numbers, some better than teammate Barkov's.

"Reinhart has better on-ice impacts on expected goals and goals against rate. He was excellent when Barkov was out. He deserves the nod this year over his teammate," a voter explained.

Another Reinhart voter declared: "Give it to a winger!"

That's a worthy goal in Selke voting, provided there's a worthy candidate. Centers have won the Selke every season since 2002-03, when right wing Jere Lehtinen of the Dallas Stars captured the award. But Reinhart isn't the only winger with some support. Mitch Marner received the next-most first-place votes.

"I'm tempted to put Marner here," a Barkov voter revealed.

"He somehow manages to be underrated, outside of Toronto," a Marner voter noted.

The other three players to receive first-place votes were center Jordan Staal, the Carolina Hurricanes captain who has been searching for his first Selke win for 15 years and finished second for the award last season; Tampa Bay Lightning center Anthony Cirelli; and, somewhat surprisingly, Washington Capitals center Pierre-Luc Dubois.

"He's a sleeper that could get some votes. Really playing a shutdown, two-way game," a voter offered.

Also receiving some love down the ballots: New Jersey Devils center Nico Hischier, Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel and winger Mark Stone, and Flyers winger Noah Cates. Hischier was in the top three last month.

Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)

This is the part where I mention that the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play should be voted on by the league's on-ice officials or by the NHL Players' Association instead of the PHWA.

Traditionally, this award goes to a player with a top-20 point total and the lowest penalty minutes among those players.

Brayden Point of the Lightning had just two penalty minutes in his first 58 games of the season. Jack Eichel of the Golden Knights has a shot, having amassed only six penalty minutes through his first 61 games.

Jack Adams Award (best coach)

Note: The NHL Broadcasters' Association votes on this award.

Leader: Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals

Finalists: Scott Arniel, Winnipeg Jets; Dean Evason, Columbus Blue Jackets

The top three of last month's NHL Awards Watch remain the top three this month.

Spencer Carbery received 63% of the first-place votes, getting the majority of the credit for the Capitals' ascent from bubble team last season to top of the NHL this season.

"Carbery, and it's not even close," a voter concluded.

"Every time the Capitals hint at wobbling a bit, they quickly veer back on track," another voter explained. "Carbery deserves a great deal of credit for keeping his team focused on never losing their momentum from season's start."

"Carbery is having a masterful year and is pressing all the right buttons," another voter proposed.

"Washington has been able to sustain their play all season and Carbery's system has clearly brought the best out of many players," another voter offered.

But a handful of Carbery voters said that if there's one coach that could pass him in the Jack Adams race, it would be Dean Evason, who has led the Blue Jackets from the unthinkable tragedy of Johnny Gaudreau's death to a potential playoff berth.

"It feels like Dean Evason is Carbery's only competition," a voter noted.

"It's still difficult not to give the edge to Carbery, but at what point do we need to start acknowledging the job Dean Evason has done in Columbus?" another voter pondered. "Losing arguably their best player to a horrific tragedy before a season that was already viewed as a playoff longshot and look at them now."

Evason earned 15% of the first-place votes.

Ranking third was Scott Arniel. Like Evason, he's in his first season as head coach of his current team, although he had previous NHL experience. The Jets have been near the top of the NHL all season. While Hellebuyck deserves a lot of credit for that, the Jets' offense has also been tremendous.

Also receiving a first-place vote: Jon Cooper of the Lightning, who has never won the Jack Adams in his successful career in Tampa Bay. "I know Carbery is the likely front-runner here because Washington's success has been unexpected, but did anybody truly expect the Lightning to be one of the top defensive teams after how last year went?" one voter asked.

The home stretch is here for all of these awards contenders. There's still plenty of time for these races to shift.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 12 UFAs of 2025: Latest rumours, reports](#)

By Luke Fox- March 14, 2025

Former captains and current Cup champs. Top-pair defencemen and elite playmakers. All-world goalies and unique talents enjoying career years.

Yes, even with several franchise studs and key support players signing pocket-padding extensions way before deadline and avoiding the stress of free agency, the NHL's 2025 UFA class still sets up to be an intriguing one.

And with the salary cap guaranteed to rise by \$7.5 million — to \$95.5 million — those spendy general managers should have even more budget to splash the pot on the next Steven Stamkos or Jake Guentzel to test the open waters.

Trade deadline has passed, so free agency now looms large.

### 1. Mitch Marner

Age on July 1: 28

Position: Right wing

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$10.9 million

The latest: Once Mikko Rantanen got traded for a second time (and not for Marner) and signed his eight-year, \$96-million extension with Dallas, Marner shot to the top of the charts. And the rest of the pack lags behind the undisputedly most coveted pending UFA of 2025.

The Toronto Maple Leafs superstar, management, and agent Darren Ferris are all on the same page when it comes to handling what could be Marner's final tour with his hometown team: Silence is golden.

Marner had previously expressed a desire to re-sign, yet he has rebuffed the Leafs' attempts to negotiate in-season and has now positioned himself to take a run at not only becoming the NHL's highest-paid winger but highest-paid player.

If he tests the market.

"Growing up in this area, I've always been a Leafs fan. I've always wanted this team to succeed and to win just to see what that would feel like fanwise. Now being part of it is very special," Marner said at training camp.

"It's my home. It's the place I've grown up. I've got many, many memories watching this team play Saturday night hockey with my family. Sitting there for hours watching."

Marner came up clutch for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off and is on pace for his best and most productive campaign as a Leaf.

So, the onus falls on Treliving — who bought high on peak William Nylander last winter — to either extend Marner at the best rate possible or make some quick adjustments if he walks.

When the Carolina Hurricanes proposed a Rantanen-for-Marner trade at the deadline, Treliving brought the idea to Marner, who refused to waive his no-move clause.

So, here we are: A team unsure if its star winger wants to stay, and an in-demand talent who holds all the power over his future.

## 2. Nikolaj Ehlers

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Right wing / Left wing

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$6 million

The latest: Unlike the monster extensions for centre Mark Scheifele and goalie Connor Hellebuyck signed in 2023 just ahead of their walk years, all is quiet in Winnipeg on the Ehlers extension front.

A frequent subject of trade rumours, the speedy Dane was reportedly open to a change of scenery in the off-season, according to The Fourth Period.

The Jets are the toast of the Western Conference, and the point-per-game winger should have no issue posting his most productive campaign yet under new coach Scott Arniel.

GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has been noncommittal on the topic, often saying that he hopes his Jets win a Stanley Cup with Ehlers in June.

Ehlers himself says everything is business as usual.

If he has come this far, though, one must wonder if it's worth a peek behind the curtain.

Competing teams would surely try to outbid the Jets for Ehlers' services this summer in a market thin on 25-goal scorers.

## 3. Jakob Chychrun

Age on July 1: 27

Position: Defence

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$4.6 million

The latest: From his spotty injury history to wearing three sweaters by age 26, there's been so much commotion in Chychrun's career, you wonder if the well-rounded defenceman wouldn't leap at the chance for long-term security.

The left shot has fit in seamlessly with the Washington Capitals — a pre-season dark horse that has leaped to Presidents' Trophy contention — and it falls on GM Chris Patrick to keep Chychrun in the fold.

"Hopefully (I'm) here for a long time," Chychrun told reporters in late February. "The sky's the limit for us."

The productive Chychrun and the Capitals have been an excellent fit, and there is a growing feeling on both sides that the relationship should continue beyond one season.

That said, Chychrun — who has already touched career highs in goals, points, and plus/minus — now wants all focus to be on a deep playoff run before extension talks intensify.

Until this magical season, the 500-game veteran has appeared in just nine post-season games.

## 4. John Tavares

Age on July 1: 34

Position: Centre

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$11 million

The latest: Already top 70 on the NHL's all-time scoring list, the still-productive Tavares is not entertaining any notions of quitting.

While his captaincy was removed by the new GM and his ice time chopped by the new coach, the proud Toronto Maple Leaf is still a force in the face-off dot, a threat on the power-play and below the hash marks, and the consummate professional.

Armed with a full no-move clause and understanding he's up for a pay cut, Tavares has already shown a willingness to sacrifice a little me for the sake of the we.

His agent, Pat Brisson, and Treliving did begin some preliminary extension talks in September — and it's clear that Tavares wants to stay.

The Maple Leafs, however, are letting things play out. As much as Tavares would like to put pen to paper yesterday, Toronto has other priorities.

Tavares and wife Aryne are raising three young children in the city. He is close to the necessary support of extended family. He has benefitted from multiple outside endorsement deals. And he did score the clinching goal of the one series the Leafs have won since ex-GM Kyle Dubas backed up the Brink's truck with \$77 million.

"I love playing here. It's a remarkable place to play," Tavares said last May. "And when I committed here six years ago, obviously I saw a tremendous amount of talent and an amazing hockey market and organization that's fully committed to winning and doing whatever it can — and I still feel that way."

Critics will point to Tavares's age. Defenders will argue that he slid seamlessly into the No. 1 centre role when Auston Matthews got injured and is still producing near a point-per-game pace.

## 5. Sam Bennett

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Centre

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$4.4 million

The latest: When Florida Panthers GM Bill Zito identifies a core piece of his championship roster worth retaining, he usually finds a way to keep his man — with an assist from his state's tax laws, of course.

Zito prioritized locking up Gustav Forsling, then Sam Reinhart, then Carter Verhaeghe. All re-upped for fair rates.

Now, Zito is grinding away with Bennett, that rare middle-six centre who can score, defend, and truck over an opponent.

That Verhaeghe came in at a reasonable \$7 million AAV helps with the Bennett budget.

Leverage rests here with player agent Darren Ferris, who has a reputation for stressing deadlines and knows his client would be coveted leaguewide because of his unique skill-set and the dearth of under-30 centre options.

Ultimately it boils down to this: If Bennett likes the South Florida life, a deal will be made. If he wants top dollar, he'll find that elsewhere.

No doubt, the Team Canada fourth-liner could spark a bidding war — presumably landing somewhere between \$6 million and \$7 million per season, depending on term — if he reaches July 1.

## 6. Brock Boeser

Age on July 1: 28

Position: Right wing

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$6.65 million

The latest: Boeser has stumbled after his first 40-goal season, making Vancouver Canucks fans wonder if he'll be moving to a second team this summer.

GM Patrik Allvin stated publicly that he wanted to decide on Boeser's future prior to the trade deadline. Then he tried — and failed — to deal the sniper for a decent return. The Hurricanes are one club with some measure of interest.

"If I told you what I was offered for Brock Boeser, I think I would have to run out of here because you would not believe me," Allvin told reporters on March 7, when asked why he had hung on to the expiring asset.

At that point, Boeser had 18 goals and 38 points through his first 55 games.

The eight-year veteran is aware of Allvin's comments — which are hardly flattering — but said he hasn't processed the implications.

"I'm trying not to really think about that," Boeser told reporters post-deadline. "I honestly have no idea what's going to happen.

"Anytime you have uncertainty, it's scary. You know, the unknown is scary, so it's obviously a little bit of stress involved in that. It's not a great situation.... I'm still here. I'm still on the Canucks, and that's my main worry right now."

## 7. Aaron Ekblad

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Defence

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$7.5 million

The latest: An occasional subject of trade rumours, the second-longest-serving Florida Panther played an integral role in the franchise's two trips to the fourth round and is finally entering the eighth year of his max-term contract.

Neither Ekblad nor management have projected concern here, despite the uncertainty. But the deadline trade for another righty, Seth Jones, does raise an eyebrow.

Jones comes with retained salary and five more seasons of term. In short, he can serve as Ekblad insurance should the latter walk.

Ekblad already has \$62.775 million (state tax free!) in career earnings, but he is one of the few top-pair defencemen under age 30 who could go to market in a summer where the cap spikes.

How is the second-longest-tenured Cat dealing with contract pressure?

"I mean, it's one of those things. It's always going to linger around," Ekblad said. "But at the end of the day, I'm well taken care of. I'm able to go out and play pretty free on a nightly basis and not have to worry about something like that. It's going to come when it comes. And if it doesn't, it doesn't. And life goes on."

Life, however, is on hold for Ekblad — who got slapped with a 20-game suspension in March for violating the NHL/NHLPA's performance enhancing substances program.



His ban stretches into Round 1. Does it sour an appetite for an extension?

#### 8. Brad Marchand

Age on July 1: 37

Position: Left wing

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$6.125 million

The latest: The former Boston Bruins captain's ability to produce deep into his 30s and elevate his impact in important moments has made his previous contract look like a bargain.

While it has been difficult for fans to watch Marchand pulling a Florida Panthers sweater over his head, it has been equally difficult for the player to move south and for Bruins GM Don Sweeney to wave the white flag and detonate a chunk of his core.

Marchand met with the Bruins' brass prior to his last-minute stunning trade with an appeal to negotiate an extension, reportedly through three years.

The money didn't work, Sweeney decided to get younger, and the sides agreed to send the loyal veteran to a contender he'd like.

"Just had a gap," the GM said.

The Bruins were prepared to pay Marchand no less than his current \$6.125-million AAV, according to Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman, but he could fetch more on the open market.

And so, as crazy as it seems, a banged-up and disappointed Marchand will try to win a second Cup with Florida, previously a bitter rival.

"I suspect that it's going to be a rather seamless transition," Zito said.

Much like the Cats' rental of long-serving Flyers captain Claude Giroux in '22, this one feels like a wait-and-see.

How does Marchand fit? And how far can Florida's repeat bid go?

#### 9. Adin Hill

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Goaltender

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$4.9 million

The latest: Even backstopping the Vegas Golden Knights to the franchise's lone Stanley Cup only earned Hill a two-year bridge contract.

GM Kelly McCrimmon runs a tight ship and has never been afraid to let his pending UFAs twist in the wind. Hill was chosen to be The Guy in Vegas over backup Logan Thompson, who has already signed his long-term extension in Washington.

While a list of other pending free-agent goaltenders — Igor Shesterkin, Linus Ullmark, Joey Daccord, Mackenzie Blackwood, Karel Vejmelka, Kevin Lankinen, Charlie Lindgren, Jonathan Quick, et al. — have gotten locked up in-season, Hill's future remains uncertain.

The six-foot-six Team Canada backup has already set career highs in starts and wins this season. Surely, he is gunning for term this time around, and Vegas has significant interest in extending.

Five years seems like the proper wheelhouse, term-wise, for a goaltender who has elevated his game in the playoffs but has also battled injuries in his season.

If Vegas doesn't double down on Hill, he will be the most coveted goalie on the open market — by a sizable margin.

#### 10. Brock Nelson

Age on July 1: 33

Position: Centre

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$6 million

The latest: A late-career surge has Nelson riding a three-season streak of 35-plus goals into his last best chance for another pay day.

With a dearth of legit centremen on the rental market, Nelson fetched a tidy return for GM Lou Lamoriello and the aging New York Islanders at the deadline: blue-chip prospect Callum Ritchie, a first-round pick plus a conditional third.

Leaving the only franchise he's known, Nelson slides into the 2C role in Colorado between a couple of quality scoring wingers in Jonathan Drouin and Valeri Nichushkin.

Lamoriello did right by the player by trading him to his most desired destination. And with the Avalanche waving goodbye to Mikko Rantanen, GM Chris MacFarland has the cap space to extend Nelson if he makes for a smart fit.

The player holds all leverage, of course, but a deep playoff run could keep this relatively new relationship alive.

Last time the Avalanche had a second-line pivot of Nelson's pedigree, they won the Cup but lost Nazem Kadri (2022).

"A lot of excitement," Nelson said after the trade. "I'm jacked up."

#### 11. Neal Pionk

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Defence

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$5.88 million

The latest: Funny. When researching the Winnipeg Jets' top-four defenceman, we stumbled across a column titled "Jets Should Buy Out Neal Pionk..." That piece was written in May and has aged like a banana in the sun.

Pionk has been worth every penny of his salary in his contract season, ranking second in ice time (22-plus minutes) and among the team leaders in plus/minus while taking a run at 50 points.

With Winnipeg surging into legitimate contender status, the right shot became an easy "own rental" — at minimum.

Much like the case of Ehlers, there is no sense that the player nor GM Cheveldayoff is rushing to extend before the playoffs run their course.

Just because the sides appear to be playing this situation out doesn't mean they can't come to an agreement eventually. (Last season, Cheveldayoff waited on Dylan DeMelo but got a deal done.)

Pionk's uptick in performance is simultaneously boosting the Jets' place in the standings and the blueliner's market value.

"The newsflash is, we probably won't get all of these guys signed, from a UFA standpoint," Cheveldayoff warned during a late-January address.

"We've got, obviously, some RFAs that are performing very well and are in various different stages of their years before unrestricted free agency. We'll tend to that."

12. Matt Duchene

Age on July 1: 34

Position: Centre

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$3 million

The latest: Cast away by Nashville, Duchene has not only found a niche but thrived with his former city's greatest rival.

The veteran has already linked consecutive 25-goal, 65-point seasons since getting rocked by 2023's summer buyout and is tracking his two best plus/minus seasons of his 1,120-game career.

While younger star teammates Wyatt Johnson and Mikko Rantanen strike multi-year, eight-figure extensions, Duchene and his family have reached the stage where happiness and winning are king.

In short, Duchene seems to be slipping into his Joe Pavelski years: short term, reasonable money, stick with a Cup contender.

As thin as the 2025 UFA market is on bona fide centreman, there should be an appetite on both sides to continue this relationship for another state-tax-free run in '26.

Duchene still has a hunger for the game. So much so, he'd love to play his way onto Canada's Olympic squad.

## Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: A catchy limerick for all 32 teams

By Ryan Dixon- March 14, 2025

Every NHL team is chasing some kind of pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

For several clubs, simply being in the playoff chase with St. Patrick's Day right around the corner on Monday is an accomplishment. For others, only the Stanley Cup will do. And still more squads are hoping the draft lottery in May breaks their way and invigorates a rebuild.

Of course, whether you're top o' the standings or feeling green in the basement, lord knows every club could use a little luck of the Irish to get where it yearns to be.

So, with St. Paddy's just a few fiddle strokes away, we thought — for the second straight March — we'd, uh, honour the great tradition of Irish poets by using this edition of the power rankings to drop a limerick for all 32 NHL teams.

1. Washington Capitals (43-14-8) Caps fans, what a delightful, unexpected double for you/There's both a goal record and a Stanley Cup to pursue.
2. Winnipeg Jets (45-17-4) It's no leprechaun trick, we're not pulling your leg/This could be the spring a title comes to the 'Peg.
3. Dallas Stars (42-20-2) Forget the Irish, Dallas is the land of the Finns/Now c'mon Suomi South and deliver those playoff wins.
4. Vegas Golden Knights (38-19-7) It's a touch unsettling to see Vegas have a deadline so quiet/Mind you, another trade heist for this team and the whole league might riot.
5. Colorado Avalanche (39-24-3) The Avs have added so much around the tandem of MacKinnon and Makar/With this supporting cast, Colorado can go very far.
6. Carolina Hurricanes (39-22-4) You make your own luck, so Carolina always acts bold/But will the Rantanen saga end with them out in the post-season cold?
7. Florida Panthers (40-22-3) More mischievous than a leprechaun is Brad Marchand/These cheeky Cats always lay down a winning hand.
8. Toronto Maple Leafs (39-22-3) Is this the final stand of the Buds' Core Four?/Will it end the same as always, or will there finally be more?
9. Los Angeles Kings (34-20-9) They'll go nowhere until confronting a Round 1 demon/Another loss to the Oilers and Kings fans will be screamin'!
10. Tampa Bay Lightning (37-23-4) Is there one more title run in this talented gang?/Kuch scores, Vasy saves and the Bolts go bang!
11. Edmonton Oilers (37-23-4) Last spring they made it all the way to playoff win No. 15/But if the Oilers can't get that final victory, what does any of it mean?
12. Ottawa Senators (34-25-5) The Brady Bunch is chugging toward the second season/And the party doesn't have to stop there for any good reason.
13. Minnesota Wild (37-24-4) Over and over, let's give Marc-Andre Fleury his flowers/It's hard to believe this one-of-one is in his final NHL hours.

14. New Jersey Devils (35-25-6) It feels as though the hockey gods have snatched out the rug/How can this team keep getting decimated by the injury bug?
15. Columbus Blue Jackets (31-25-8) Everyone can have a soft spot for this overachieving squad/And with the young talent in 'Lumbus, don't call them a fraud.
16. St. Louis Blues (31-27-7) A late push could land them back in the big dance/And we've all seen what Jordan Binnington can do if you give him a chance.
17. Calgary Flames (30-23-11) Forget that rebuild talk, the Flames are in the mix/There's very little a goalie like Dustin Wolf can't fix.
18. Montreal Canadiens (31-27-7) Habs in the playoffs? It's starting to sound sane/What a season for Cole, Nick and a boy called Lane.
19. Utah Hockey Club (29-25-11) What a joy to know some franchise stability/And what a treat to discover this roster's ability.
20. Vancouver Canucks (30-24-11) It has seemed bleak, it has seemed dark/But the Canucks still have 17 games left to show more bite than bark.
21. New York Rangers (31-28-6) If they can't get it together, missing the playoffs will hurt/What a miserable year to be a Blueshirt.
22. Boston Bruins (30-28-8) All of a sudden we've landed in a new era for the B's/Retools can work, but rarely happen with ease.
23. Detroit Red Wings (31-28-6) Another playoff miss would be devastating for the Wings/Changes at the top? Detroit would have to consider such things.
24. New York Islanders (29-28-7) Will a new suit come in and get this team going after Lou?/It's something you must contemplate when a GM is 82.
25. Anaheim Ducks (28-30-7) The young talent is there, but when will it all come together?/Seven years outside the playoffs is a lot to weather.
26. Nashville Predators (25-32-7) Oh for the days of simply being competitive and good/This is quite a mess when you look under the hood.
27. Seattle Kraken (28-34-4) Life's a little tough right now up on the Pacific Coast/ And it's going to be a minute in Seattle before there's anything to toast.
28. Pittsburgh Penguins (26-31-10) Drafting very high will be a nice change of pace/But it could be a long, long time before this club is back in a real playoff chase.
29. Philadelphia Flyers (27-31-8) It's been 50 years since Philadelphia drafted in the top spot/The Flyers deserve a little luck to improve what they've already got.
30. Buffalo Sabres (25-33-6) It feels like somebody here needs to fall on a sword/ Fourteen years outside the playoffs? Good lord.
31. Chicago Blackhawks (20-36-9) No doubt, it's getting hard for Hawks fans to cope/But the early play of Spencer Knight is providing at least a little hope.
32. San Jose Sharks (17-40-9) Wins are tough to come by right now in the California north/But this organization has collected the talent to one day push forth.