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Columbus Dispatch / Colorado Avalanche deal Columbus Blue Jackets a stinging 7-3 loss in playoff chase

By Brian Hedger- April 4, 2025

It didn't matter that Thursday's game at Nationwide Arena was the Colorado Avalanche's second in 22 hours or that they arrived from Chicago the same day due to weather issues.

The Blue Jackets, playing on full rest after downing the Nashville Predators on Tuesday, couldn't keep pace in a stinging 7-3 loss that might've severely damaged their teetering playoff chances with eight games remaining.

"We kind of did it to ourselves," Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan said. "We gave them looks they probably shouldn't have had, but I didn't think we played a terrible game. It's unfortunate and we've got to bounce back."

Combined with a regulation loss, the Blue Jackets (34-31-9) fell four points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. They've got one game-in-hand on Montreal, but the Canadiens (36-30-9, 81 points) extended their lead by downing the Boston Bruins.

They're not two points ahead of the New York Rangers (77 points) and four ahead of the Blue Jackets (75 points). Columbus now faces a difficult road back-to-back this weekend against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday and Ottawa Senators on Sunday.

"We have lots of belief in this group," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "That's exactly what we're going to do ... reset (Friday), and we have a huge back-to-back coming up, on the road. Huge points for us."

Nathan MacKinnon led four Colorado players with three points on one goal and two assists each. Miles Wood had two points on a goal and assist, while MacKenzie Blackwood earned the goaltending win with 28 saves on 31 shots.

Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner and Zach Aston-Reese scored for the Blue Jackets, who watched Merzlikins leave in the third period with a smashed stick after allowing a seventh goal on 28 shots. Merzlikins was replaced by Daniil Tarasov, which coach Dean Evason said was a decision based on both performance and frustration with his emotional reaction.

Despite weather-related travel issues and a tight turnaround leaving Chicago, the Avs scored first and led 2-1 at the first intermission.

MacKinnon gave the Avalanche a 1-0 lead 3:25 into the game with his 31st goal of the season and Brock Nelson's 24th of the year broke a 1-1 tie with 1:55 left in the first period, scoring by chipping in a friendly bounce off the end boards behind the Blue Jackets' net.

Prior to Nelson's goal, Monahan tied it 1-1 at 6:35 of the first on his 17th goal of the season. The Blue Jackets overcame the one-goal deficit with two goals in the first 7:56 of the second on goals from Aston-Reese and Jenner, but the Avalanche responded with three straight goals in the final 7:21 on goals by Charlie Coyle, Parker Kelly and Makar — who capped a power play on a one-timer with 38 seconds left.

It was a tough sequence for Merzlikins, who was beaten cleanly on three shots. Makar's one-timer was set up by MacKinnon's elite level curl and cross-ice feed during a power play, but Coyle and Kelly beat him on shots he saw while set up. Regardless of how they went into the net, the Avalanche surging to re-take the lead and then make it a two-goal cushion took a lot of energy out of the building.

The Avalanche pushed their lead to 7-3 early in the third on goals by Devon Toews and Wood, which chased Merzlikins.

"It happens to everyone," Monahan said. "He's a huge part of the team and he's a great goalie. We gave up some 'Grade As' right in front of him, and we've got to limit that."

Columbus Dispatch / What are the odds Alex Ovechkin breaks Wayne Gretzky's record vs Columbus Blue Jackets?

By Brian Hedger- April 4, 2025

A memorable season for the Blue Jackets continued Tuesday with their 8-4 romp over the Nashville Predators, but a more historic event could be looming in back-to-back games April 12-13 against the Washington Capitals.

As the Blue Jackets continue their surprising pursuit of a playoff spot while playing for Johnny Gaudreau during a season that brought their first outdoor game and win March 1 at Ohio Stadium, along come the Capitals with their history-chasing captain.

After scoring his 39th goal of the season in a 5-1 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday, Alex Ovechkin is two goals from tying Wayne Gretzky's NHL record of 894 and three from setting the new mark at 895. The Capitals have seven games left in the regular season, including two of the final four against the Blue Jackets on those consecutive days at Nationwide Arena and the following night at Capital One Arena in Washington.

What are the odds that Gretzky, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and an NHL traveling contingent of dignitaries will witness Ovechkin's massive moment during a Blue Jackets game?

According to oddsmakers, pretty good.

Columbus Blue Jackets still top betting odds to allow Alex Ovechkin's record-setting goal

According to odds listed Wednesday on FanDuel, the Blue Jackets have the best chance of being on the ice for Ovechkin's record-setting goal at +175 with their home/road back-to-back set against the Metropolitan Division's leader. That number was listed at +380 this past weekend.

The New York Islanders, with games April 6 and April 15 in Washington, are +320, which is a change from +550 this past weekend. The Pittsburgh Penguins, who close out the season April 17 in Washington, are now +900 after previously being listed at +850 and then +800 prior to his goal Wednesday. The Hurricanes, who play April 10 in Washington, are +550 now, which is a major shift toward likely witnessing history from their +1,300 last week, and the Chicago Blackhawks — who host the Capitals on Friday — are now +3,900 after their previous odds on FanDuel listed at +3,600 last week.

DraftKings gives the Blue Jackets +140 odds after listing at +175 this past weekend and +150 early Wednesday, followed by the Islanders staying at +230, Hurricanes moving from +550 last week to +425 Wednesday to +360 after his 39th goal. The Penguins are now +600 to see. Ovechkin's record-setter, after moving from +320 last week to +475 on Wednesday, and the Blackhawks are now at +3,000 after sitting at +1,700 last week.

Alex Ovechkin has scored 26 career goals against Columbus Blue Jackets

Ovechkin has scored 891 career goals. This season he's netted 38 in 58 games, including one Nov. 15 in the Capitals' 7-2 rout of the Blue Jackets in Washington. He's scored 26 goals in 49 career games against the Blue Jackets, including the first of his career on Oct. 5, 2005, in Washington.

That goal was scored against former Blue Jackets goalie Pascal Leclaire, and 20 years later you can place a prop bet on whether Elvis Merzlikins or backup Daniil Tarasov will be in the Columbus net for the goal that passes "The Great One's" mark.

Per FanDuel odds, Tarasov's odds to become the goalie Ovechkin carries into history have moved from +1,100 last week to +800 on Wednesday to +460 now, while Merzlikins' odds have shifted from +1,400 last week to +900 Wednesday to +430 now. New York Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin is +390 after holding +1,000 odds this past weekend, while Carolina's Frederik Andersen has gone from +2,300 to +1,100 to +600 on Thursday. Pittsburgh's Alex Nedeljkovic, who's from Cleveland, is +1,800 after having +2,500 odds last week.

During his goal-scoring journey, Ovechkin has notched a jaw-dropping 33 career hat tricks and scored against 182 different NHL goalies. Former Blue Jackets star Sergei Bobrovsky is among the goalies who've given up the most goals to Ovechkin, allowing 16 during his own standout career.

That ranks eighth highest on the list.

[BlueJackets.com / A Norris showdown? Werenski, Makar among the best of the best](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- April 4, 2025

Fans are in for a treat Thursday night at Nationwide Arena as two of the best defensemen in the world are set to showcase their skills.

On the visiting side, there's Cale Makar, Colorado's fleet-footed wunderkind who has been considered one of the elite blueliners in the world since he entered the league six seasons ago. Taking home ice will be Zach Werenski, the Columbus defenseman who has made multiple All-Star Game appearances but has taken his game to another level this season both for club and country.

There are other names that must be considered – Vancouver's Quinn Hughes heads that list – but many would consider Makar and Werenski the top contenders for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded annually to the top defenseman in the NHL as selected in a vote by the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

With that in mind, team writers Jeff Svoboda of BlueJackets.com and Coby Maeir of ColoradoAvalanche.com have collaborated to break down what stands out about each player. Both are fantastic players in their own right, so this is meant to highlight what they bring to the table rather than take anything away from the other.

Here's what each had to say.

What Makar and Werenski have brought to the table this season

Svoboda: First off, if you look at the statistics, there's no question Werenski deserves to be in the running for the Norris Trophy and maybe even the Hart Trophy. Werenski has tied his own CBJ single-season record among defensemen with 20 goals on the year, and his 54 assists and 74 points broke his own previous marks as well. He's tied for fifth all-time in scoring for a single season in CBJ history, and he's in the top three among all NHL defensemen in the major counting stats. Add in his NHL-best average ice time of 27:04 and you can argue he is the most integral piece of the puzzle for a talented CBJ team in the mix for a playoff spot. Off the ice, he's also emerged as a leader, going from a classic lead-by-example type from someone who isn't afraid to speak his mind when the situation calls for it.

Maeir: Makar is putting together another fantastic season in 2024-25. He leads all NHL defensemen in points (87), goals (29), assists (58), power-play goals (11) and power-play points (34). At even strength, he leads defensemen in points (50) and goals (16). Additionally, he's tied for first among defensemen in takeaways (55) and second among blueliners in time on ice per game (25:40). Among defensemen who have played at least 50 games this season, Makar is tied for the 15th-fewest penalty minutes (14). In each of the last four seasons, Makar has finished in the top three in Norris Trophy voting for the league's best defensemen, winning it in 2022. With the numbers he's posted this season, he could very well win the second Norris of his outstanding career.

What stands out about their offensive abilities?

Svoboda: Werenski has been one of the top offensive blueliners in the league since he arrived back in 2016-17, equally adept at scoring goals on his own – his 110 tallies since the 2016-17 season are sixth among NHL defensemen – and setting them up. His shot is a threat whether it's on the rush or from distance on the power play, and for a big man, he has a tremendous amount of speed that allows him to pull away from defenders when the situation calls for it. His skating isn't quite as dynamic as Makar's, but he's always in the right spot and uses his intelligence to know when to lead the rush.

Maeir: Whether it's the way he moves his hips at the blueline to create space or his pinpoint long-range wrist shots, Makar is a must-see player. He has the rare ability to make something out of nothing, especially from the blue line where he'll almost shuffle away from defenders. Makar is a one-man breakout, a quality that is increasingly valuable both at even strength and on the power play.

What stands out about their defensive abilities?

Svoboda: Werenski has acknowledged his skills in the defensive zone needed improvement from when he first arrived in the NHL, but he's put in the work and now is a strong player in front of his own net. His biggest assets are his size and intelligence; at 6-2, 211, he is difficult to get around and can hold his own at the netfront, and he often anticipates plays and shuts them down before they begin. Werenski will never be a rugged, old-school defender known for his physicality, but he doesn't have to be.

Maeir: Because Makar has extraordinary offensive ability, his excellence on defense is often overlooked. There have been countless moments this season when the Avalanche are in a potentially vulnerable position in their defensive zone, but Makar will stickhandle through several players to alleviate the pressure on the Avs. This leads to a defensive-zone clearance and sometimes even an offensive rush the other way.

Name one of their iconic moments from the 2024-25 season.

Svoboda: For Werenski, I can't help but think back to the Blue Jackets' game Jan. 31 in Utah. Columbus was on the second half of a back-to-back and clearly didn't have its legs through two periods, but Werenski simply wouldn't let the Blue Jackets lose. He had a hand in a pair of third-period goals that allowed the team to overturn a 2-0 deficit, then made the overtime winner happen, forcing a turnover in the defensive zone to create a 2-on-0 and then finishing a back-and-forth with Cole Sillinger for the winner.

Maeir: Several moments from Makar's 2024-25 campaign stand out, but I'll go with his overtime winner against the Dallas Stars on March 16th. In what was an emotional day that included the celebration of Nathan MacKinnon's 1000th career point and Mikko Rantanen's return to Colorado, the two division rivals were tied at 3 at the end of regulation. After a neutral-zone faceoff, Makar picked up MacKinnon's drop pass in the neutral zone and skated down the left slot of the offensive zone before arriving at the right circle, where he scored via a wrist shot. The goal sent the Ball Arena crowd into a frenzy and was another example of what makes Makar a special player.

What does this season mean for their reputations?

Svoboda: Werenski has always been viewed as a talented defenseman, and his All-Star selections back that up. But his performances this season for both the Blue Jackets and on the big stage at the 4 Nations Face-Off, where he led the tournament in scoring, have lifted Werenski into the conversation as being among the best of the best. Some of it is experience, some of it is health, and some of it is preparation, but everything has come together to make him viewed as one of the elite players in the league.

Maeir: If Makar wins the Norris, he'll become the 14th defenseman in league history to win the award multiple times, and he'd do it in the first six regular seasons of his career. He'd add another Norris Trophy to a trophy case that includes a Stanley Cup, a Conn Smythe and a Calder Trophy. If he were to win the Norris Trophy, Makar would continue to solidify his case as one of the greatest defensemen in the history of the game.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets fall to Avs at Nationwide](#)

By Craig Merz- April 4, 2025

COLUMBUS – Cale Makar scored his 30th goal of the season and had two assists for the Colorado Avalanche, who clinched a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs with a 7-3 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

He became the ninth defenseman in NHL history to reach the mark and first since Mike Green had 31 for the Washington Capitals in 2008-09.

“It’s a great stat but definitely not getting there without these guys,” Makar said of his teammates. “It’s a lot of effort from them getting me the puck and getting my chances, a couple of them.”

Nathan MacKinnon, Charlie Coyle and Devon Toews each had a goal and two assists for the Avalanche (47-26-4), who are 6-1-1 in their past eight games, including a 3-2 shootout win against the Chicago Blackhawks on Wednesday. Mackenzie Blackwood made 27 saves.

“We’re obviously really happy that we secured that (playoff) spot,” Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said. “That’s the first step and the first goal that you kind of set in training camp, and it takes a long time to get here and a lot of hard work, but proud of our guys for accomplishing that and doing it in under tough circumstances, coming in here tonight on the back-to-back.”

Sean Monahan, Zach Aston-Reese and Boone Jenner scored for the Blue Jackets (34-31-9). Elvis Merzlikins allowed seven goals on 28 shots before he was replaced 5:49 into the third period by Daniil Tarasov, who made four saves.

Columbus is four points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card into the playoffs from the Eastern Conference with a game in hand.

The Blue Jackets led 3-2 in the second period before allowing five goals.

“We just can’t shoot ourselves in key situations,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said, “where the game’s still sitting there and we’re still in the spot and we do something kind of uncharacteristic and systematically that we don’t do, and it ends up in our net, or flips the momentum of the hockey game, and think that third goal probably did that.”

Coyle tied it 3-3 at 12:39 off the rush, and Parker Kelly scored from the high slot to make it 4-3 at 14:02.

Makar’s power-play goal, a one-timer from the left circle off a cross-ice pass from MacKinnon, pushed it to 5-3 at 19:22.

“It’s definitely nice to have him on your side instead of going against him,” Kelly said of Makar. “Just a special player, super humble. Just super happy for Cale and a really cool milestone to see in person.”

Toews made it 6-3 at 4:01 of the third period with a wrist shot from the left point through traffic, and Miles Wood scored a one-timer in front off a pass from Coyle below the goal line for the 7-3 final at 5:49.

“We put a lot of good minutes in their zone and felt like we’re going to get back into it,” Jenner said. “They were able to get two in the third before we could have a push.”

MacKinnon put Colorado ahead 1-0 at 3:25 of the first period when he skated across the slot and slipped a wrist shot between Merzlikins’ pads from the right circle.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Surrender Five Unanswered Goals in Loss to Avalanche

By Mark Scheig- April 4, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets were hoping to build momentum before their big trip to Canada over the weekend. But it was the Colorado Avalanche who found a win going away Thursday night.

Cale Makar, Nathan MacKinnon, Devon Toews and Charlie Coyle all posted 1-2-3 on the night to lift the Avalanche to a 7-3 win over the Blue Jackets. Coupled with Montreal's 4-1 win, the Blue Jackets now trail the Canadiens by four with eight games to go.

The story of the night ultimately became the Blue Jackets unraveling after building an early lead.

Game Recap

MacKinnon opened the scoring just 3:25 into the game. He went to the right and shot back to the left against the grain. That was his 31st goal of the season.

Sean Monahan tied the score about three minutes later. He found himself in front on Mackenzie Blackwood and scored on a rebound.

The Avalanche were able to retake the lead late in the first period. Brock Nelson, who was acquired at the deadline, got to a loose puck off the end boards to make it 2-1.

The Blue Jackets then started the second strong and were able to take the lead. Zach Aston-Reese scored his first goal in 57 games from the goal line. Then Boone Jenner scored just over three minutes later. Momentum felt on the Blue Jackets' side.

Then as Dean Evason admitted postgame, the 3-3 goal seemed to change the entire momentum of the game. Coyle received a pass on a 3-on-2 rush and beat Elvis Merzlikins. The Blue Jackets never recovered from that moment.

Parker Kelly scored what turned into the game-winning goal on a quick shot from the slot. Makar put an exclamation point on the second period by scoring a power-play goal to make it 5-3. He reached 30 goals with that score making him the first to get there since Mike Green 16 years ago.



Toews and Miles Wood scored a pair of quick goals in the third less than two minutes apart to get to the final score of 7-3. Blackwood made 27 saves on the night. Merzlikins stopped 21 of 28 before giving way to Daniil Tarasov.

Merzlikins slammed his stick on the post after the seventh goal. When Evason was asked if he pulled Merzlikins for performance or the stick slam, he said "a little of both."

The Blue Jackets will have Friday off as a travel day before their big set of games against the Maple Leafs on Saturday and the Senators on Sunday. The Avalanche with the win clinch a playoff berth. They now head to St. Louis for a showdown with the Blues on Saturday night.

1st Ohio Battery / COL 7, CBJ 3: Goaltending, Defense Cost Blue Jackets On Home Ice In Sound Defeat By Avalanche

By Ed Francis- April 4, 2025

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	1	2	0	3

CBJ GOALS:

Monahan (P1, 6:35)

Aston-Reese (P2, 4:16)

Jenner (P2, 7:56)

The Colorado Avalanche scored five unanswered goals Thursday night in a 7-3 victory over the Columbus Blue Jackets, putting a serious dent in Columbus' playoff hopes and calling the team's defense and goaltending into question.

Nathan MacKinnon gave the Avalanche an early lead, scoring his 31st of the season just 3:25 into the night. It was the 10th time in 11 games that the Blue Jackets gave up the first goal of the game.

The Blue Jackets answered just over three minutes later with Sean Monahan's third goal in his last two games. Colorado regained the lead in the final two minutes of the period, heading into intermission with a 2-1 lead.

Columbus tied the game just over four minutes into the second period with a seeing-eye goal from the corner by Zach Aston-Reese, ending a streak of 57 games without a goal for the bottom-six grinder. Less than four minutes later, the Blue Jackets would take their only lead of the night on Boone Jenner's sixth goal in his last five games.

From there, it quickly turned south for the home team.

The Avalanche scored three times in the final eight minutes of the second to turn the 3-2 deficit into a 5-3 lead.

"Their third goal is when we kind of felt it," said head coach Dean Evason, answering a question as to when they felt things start to cave in. "We just can't shoot ourselves in key situations where the game is still sitting there."

Colorado would make it 7-3 with two goals 1:48 apart early in the third.

Following the seventh goal, starting goaltender Elvis Merzlikins smashed his stick on the ice, shattering it. He skated to the bench for a new one but head coach Dean Evason instead directed him down the tunnel, bringing Daniil Tarasov into the game.

It was the first time this season that Evason pulled his starting goaltender, with the Blue Jackets becoming the last team in the NHL to do so.

When asked if it was the play of Merzlikins or the outburst that led to his benching, Evason said both factored into his decision to pull him.

"Little of both," said Evason. "I'm not going to elaborate on that, but yeah, a little of both."

Tarasov made four saves on four shots in relief.

The loss, coupled with a Montreal Canadiens win, put the Blue Jackets four points behind in the race for the second wild card spot.

"If we're going to lose hockey games, we don't deserve to be in the playoffs," said Zach Werenski.

"We're still not out of it, so we just have to win hockey games," said Werenski. "That's all we have to do."

Here's how the Blue Jackets came up short in a big way Thursday night:

1st Period:

(3:25 — COL Goal): MacKinnon takes the puck outside the circle and skates into the slot, briefly losing it but getting it back and getting a shot off that goes five-hole on Merzlikins and gives the Avalanche an early 1-0 lead.

(6:35 — CBJ Goal): Monahan's rebound goal ties the game at 1-1 as the Blue Jackets respond to Colorado's early goal. Marchenko enters the zone and does a great job to hang on to the puck and Voronkov uses the boards to wrap it around to Fabbro, who fires from the point. His shot is saved by Blackwood but rebound goes right to Monahan on the doorstep, who easily tucks it in the net to tie the game.

(18:05 — COL Goal): The Avalanche regain a lead late in the first after being the beneficiary of a good bounce. Makar's shot from the high slot is wide but bounces off the boards behind Merzlikins and right to Nelson, who is charging in and gets the ricochet past Elvis to make it 2-1 Colorado.

2nd Period:

(4:16 — CBJ Goal): Can't score if you don't shoot, or something like that, as Aston-Reese gets his first goal since Nov. 15th on a shot from the boards near the goal line. He fires it towards Blackwood and it somehow squeaks through to tie the game at 2-2.

(7:56 — CBJ Goal): Jenner starts the goal-scoring sequence alongside the boards when he finds Jack Johnson in the high slot. Johnson shoots into the glove of Blackwood but a seemingly easy catch is dropped and the puck trickles in front of him just enough for Jenner to get a stick on it first and snap it past him to give Columbus their first lead of the game at 3-2.

(12:39 — COL Goal): Colorado gets a 3-on-2 break after Mathieu Olivier gets caught out of position and it ends with Charlie Coyle's first goal as a member of the Avalanche. He takes a nice pass from Miles Wood and fires from the near the dot, beating Merzlikins on an average shot.

(14:02 — COL Goal): ...and 83 seconds after they tie it, the Avalanche take the lead on a Parker Kelly shot that Merzlikins just has to save. Columbus gives it away in their own zone and Jack Drury finds Kelly

skating into the high slot, beating Merzlikins glove-side on another average shot to make it 4-3 Colorado.

(19:22 — COL Goal): The Avalanche get their first two-goal lead of the night with Makar's power-play goal. Academic here: MacKinnon enters the zone, skates around and loses Luke Kunin. He has the option to shoot from the slot but instead gets it to his left and to Makar, who fires from the dot and makes it 5-3 Colorado.

3rd Period:

(4:01 — COL Goal): The Avalanche go up 6-3 on a nice shot from Devon Toews, who fires from a distance and through traffic to beat Merzlikins. This goal started to send some for the exits, along with plenty of audible boos from the sellout crowd.

(5:49 — COL Goal; Elvis Yanked): Miles Wood scores to extend Colorado's lead to 7-3. Elvis shatters his stick in anger and heads to the bench for a new one but instead heads down the tunnel at the direction of a red-faced Evason. Merzlikins returned to the bench a couple of minute later, sporting a ballcap.

COL	GAME STATS	CBJ
32	SHOTS	30
49%	FACEOFFS	51%
1/2	POWER PLAY	0/3
3/3	PENALTY KILL	1/2
15	HITS	22
18	GIVEAWAYS	11
3	TAKEAWAYS	4
20	BLOCKED SHOTS	9
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
3.02	EXPECTED GOALS	3.21

COL	GAME STATS	CBJ
63	SHOT ATTEMPTS	76
26	SCORING CHANCES	27
10	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	13
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- It's not often that a team is outscored by four goals and have more expected goals than the opponent, but that was the case in this one: Columbus' 3.21 bested the 3.02 put up by the Avalanche.
- Jenner has matched his career high with points in six consecutive games. He has six goals and three assists for nine points in that span.
- Merzlikins has allowed 25 goals in his last five starts, posting an .846 save percentage in those starts.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets head to Ontario for a weekend back-to-back: they'll face the Toronto Maple Leafs for a 7 p.m. faceoff Saturday night before a 5 p.m. puck-drop Sunday in Ottawa against the Senators.

The Athletic / The NHL's top 10 most underrated defensemen and why they're so valuable

By Harman Dayal- April 4, 2025

Who are the most underrated defensemen in the NHL?

It's a topic bound to create ferocious debate because of its subjective nature. We have to inherently assume how highly the hockey world/public sphere rates every defenseman and then determine which players deserve more recognition.

In an exercise like this, we have to be aware of the Aleksander Barkov effect, where if a player has been unanimously dubbed as underrated for many years, they're probably not underrated anymore. With that in mind, we're going to avoid names like Jaccob Slavin, Devon Toews, Miro Heiskanen and Shea Theodore.

I'd also argue that Chris Tanev has finally gotten his flowers as an elite shutdown defenseman after last year's tremendous playoff run with the Dallas Stars. Thomas Harley would have been perfect for a list like this, but I believe he turned heads and landed on the casual fan's radar with his impressive play subbing in for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

I debated whether MacKenzie Weegar has flown under the radar enough to be on this list, but fans voted him one of the game's most underrated players just a few years ago, and I saw lots of people clamoring for him to be brought in as an injury replacement for Team Canada at 4 Nations, so I leaned toward him being closer to being fairly rated now and left him off.

I haven't included Josh Morrissey or Rasmus Dahlin, either. You could argue both deserve more attention, but they're still generally recognized as bona fide stars.

Finally, I made a similar list a couple of years ago. I won't be repeating names from that story, which means no Mikey Anderson, Gustav Forsling, Jonas Brodin, Nick Jensen, Vince Dunn or Jake Walman, among others.

Here's my personal take on the 10 most underrated defensemen in the NHL, presented in no particular order.

Jackson LaCombe, Anaheim Ducks

LaCombe, a 6-foot-2 left-shot defenseman playing in his second NHL season, has blossomed as the Ducks' undisputed No. 1 defenseman.

The smooth-skating 24-year-old is averaging a team-leading 21:58 per game this season. He's a budding offensive star, ranking in the top 20 among all NHL defensemen with 14 goals and 43 points in 67 games (a 52-point pace prorated over 82 games).

It's extremely impressive that he's racked up those types of point totals considering how lackluster the Ducks are offensively and how abysmal their power play has been. LaCombe ranks sixth among all NHL blueliners in scoring 1.51 points per 60 at five-on-five (minimum 1000 minutes), behind only Quinn Hughes, Cale Makar, Zach Werenski, Rasmus Dahlin and Adam Fox.

LaCombe is a dynamic, elite puck transporter. With his confidence and poise rushing the puck, he singlehandedly drives controlled breakouts and offensive entries. His zone exit numbers are in the same neighborhood as the league's best puck-moving defensemen, according to Corey Sznajder's tracking project.

Here are two examples of him effortlessly beating heavy forecheck pressure to engineer breakouts with speed:

LaCombe's terrific play with the puck hasn't come at the expense of defensive warts, either. He breaks up plays defending the rush because of his ability to aggressively close gaps with his skating, he's positionally sound, and he logs major minutes on the penalty kill. Anaheim's two-way results in terms of controlling shots, scoring chances and actual goals significantly improve when LaCombe is on the ice.

He's breaking out as one of the league's premier top-pair puck-moving/offensive defensemen without much fanfare outside of SoCal.

Dylan Samberg, Winnipeg Jets

Samberg is enjoying a monster breakout season in which he's emerged as the Jets' clear-cut second-best defenseman.

The 26-year-old left shot is averaging 21:25 per game and has been trusted by the coaching staff to eat the toughest matchups against top forwards of all Winnipeg blueliners. The Jets have controlled nearly 55 percent of expected goals and outscored opponents by a whopping 20 goals during his five-on-five shifts.

Samberg is driving stellar short-handed results while averaging the most PK minutes per game on the team. He checks many boxes for a modern-day elite shutdown player: he's 6-foot-4 which gives him a massive reach/wingspan, he skates well which enables him to quickly gap up to eliminate time and space, his anticipation is impeccable and his active defensive stick is constantly breaking plays up.

Here's an example of him making a defensive stop on Aliaksei Protas, the Caps' monster 6-foot-6 power forward:

The amazing thing about Samberg is his passing and decision-making with the puck are very sharp and advanced for a player who's primarily focused on the defensive side of the game. You can always count on him to make poised, efficient decisions with the puck to connect plays in all three zones.

In fact, according to Sznajder's tracking, Samberg has created more zone exits with possession per hour this season compared to his usual defense partner Neal Pionk, despite the latter having the reputation for being more dynamic and offensively involved.

And as his confidence has grown, Samberg has become more ambitious with his playmaking. How many shutdown defensemen can join the rush and make a play like the one below, leading to a scoring chance?

Samberg is the indispensable two-way linchpin of the Jets' second pairing.

Vladislav Gavrikov, Los Angeles Kings

Gavrikov has long been a defensive dynamo, but he's putting together an especially outstanding campaign this season.

The 29-year-old Russian was a massive reason why the Kings' blue line held its own for 47 games without Drew Doughty. Gavrikov averaged 23:56 through late January, which led the Kings and ranked top 20 among all defensemen. Despite being forced to regularly play the right side as a left-shot defenseman, he decisively won his minutes on the top pair playing with Mikey Anderson.

With Doughty back, Gavrikov is now driving the second pair on his natural left side. He's still responsible, however, for absorbing the toughest defensive matchups against top competition, with Doughty's pair handling slightly easier assignments.

This season, Gavrikov is helping the Kings control nearly 56 percent of expected goals and has a plus-13 goal differential during his five-on-five minutes. Nearly all of that success comes from his elite defensive impact.

Evolving-Hockey RAPM chart

Gavrikov suffocates opponents' time and space offensively. He's a big body (6-foot-3 and 220 pounds) and leverages his massive wingspan and strong positional play to masterfully clog passing and shooting lanes on the inside. He also eats the most short-handed minutes on the Kings' top-10 penalty kill. Gavrikov is a below-average puck-mover, but the Kings have the right environment to insulate that.

Cam Fowler, St. Louis Blues

Fowler had been a great player in his prime but appeared to be rapidly declining when the Blues acquired him in mid-December at a reduced \$4 million cap hit. His underlying metrics were ugly, with virtually every public analytical model suggesting his defensive game had fallen off a cliff and that he shouldn't be counted on for high-end top-four results. Fowler's point production had cratered to just four points in 17 games at the time of the trade, too.

It's amazing, however, what a change in the on-ice environment can do to revitalize some defensemen.

Fowler has scored nine goals and 30 points in 45 games (a 54-point pace prorated over 82 games) since joining the Blues. Twenty-five of those 30 points have come at even strength, which ranks top five among all NHL defensemen since the trade.

Colton Parayko also benefited enormously from Fowler's arrival; 40-year-old Ryan Suter was struggling as Parayko's partner early in the season, and the five-on-five results instantly flipped once Fowler took that role.

The Blues lost Parayko, their No. 1 defenseman, to injury in early March. Despite that, they've gone 11-1-1, with Fowler stepping up hugely in Parayko's absence. He's driven a commanding 58.1 percent of scoring chances and helped the Blues outscore opponents 14-7 during his five-on-five minutes since Parayko went down.

Adding Fowler has been one of the best bang-for-buck moves any team has made this season.

Ryan McDonagh, Tampa Bay Lightning

Everybody focuses on the Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei signings when discussing the Nashville Predators' surprisingly catastrophic 2024-25 season. The huge offseason change people rarely talk about — one that gutted the defensive solidity of Nashville's top four this season — is the loss of Ryan McDonagh. That, in a nutshell, perfectly captures McDonagh's underrated reputation: People have always known he's a good top-four player, but you don't realize exactly how valuable and irreplaceable he is until he's gone.

It's a lesson the Lightning experienced firsthand during the last two seasons without McDonagh, when the club's blue line and overall defensive structure suffered significantly in his absence.

Even at 35, McDonagh is one of the best shutdown defensemen in the NHL. The Lightning have controlled 58 percent of high-danger chances and surrendered just 1.85 goals against per 60 during his five-on-five shifts this season, which is one of the best marks in the league. Tampa Bay has outscored opponents by a whopping 23 goals when McDonagh is on the ice at five-on-five.

He's helped revitalize longtime partner Erik Cernak, whose game had regressed hard during the two years when the hard-nosed veteran was in Nashville. He's also the backbone of Tampa Bay's elite penalty kill.

Dom Luszczyzyn's player card

McDonagh is responsible for soaking up the hardest defensive matchups on Tampa Bay's blue line. His success in that daunting role has freed up Victor Hedman to spend about 20 percent fewer minutes against elite competition compared to last season, according to PuckIQ's data. And Hedman's two-way numbers have improved a ton now that he isn't carrying as large a defensive burden.

Michael Kesselring, Utah Hockey Club

Kesselring first caught my eye as a rookie last season. The 6-foot-5 right shot skated well, made poised decisions against heavy forechecking pressure on breakouts and had good puck skills for such a big body. He was relatively sheltered as a third-pair contributor and his game was still raw, but his physical attributes and skill hinted at intriguing upside.

With John Marino and Sean Durzi injured on the right side, Kesselring took on a much bigger role in the first half of the season and largely excelled in it. Kesselring averaged 19:04 of ice time through the first 48 games of the season. He was winning those matchups, with Utah controlling about 52 percent of high-danger chances and outscoring opponents 31-18 during his five-on-five shifts.

In the clip below, you can see an example of Kesselring's mobility, range and underrated offensive chops. He begins the play by making a nice pass, carries the puck through the neutral zone when he gets it back, dishes it out to a forward and then drives to the net where he creates a Grade-A chance.

Kesselring has faced challenges down the stretch since Marino and Durzi returned. The 25-year-old's ice time has been cut to the 15-to-16-minute range over the last couple of months, and he's made some defensive mistakes here and there.

None of that should be overly alarming, however. It's normal for sophomore defensemen to face bumps in the road as they gain experience. Most encouragingly, his play-driving metrics have been dominant in this reduced workload, with Utah controlling a team-high 57 percent of shot attempts and 66 percent of high-danger chances during his five-on-five minutes since late January.

Kesselring proved in the first half that he can succeed in a top-four role, yet he's mostly anonymous outside of Utah. He'll finish with just shy of 30 points this season, with 22 of those points coming at five-on-five, which ranks top 50 among all NHL defensemen.

Massive right-shot defenders who can skate well and make plays are pretty rare commodities. As he matures, improves his positioning and learns how to leverage his size to defend better, he could grow into a valuable, full-time top-four defenseman.

Jake McCabe, Toronto Maple Leafs

I know what you're probably thinking: How can a player in a market as enormous as Toronto be underrated? McCabe deserves more attention around the league, however, for how indispensable he's been as a top-four workhorse. His rugged, hard-to-play-against, stingy defensive game has replaced some of the critical traits the Leafs lost when Jake Muzzin's career was derailed by injuries.

McCabe's ability to munch big minutes (second among Leafs defensemen in average five-on-five ice-time) and win tough matchups (most minutes against "elite" competition of all Leafs defensemen, according to PuckIQ) has been especially critical this season because Morgan Rielly hasn't played like a top-pair-caliber defenseman.

Tanev and McCabe have been one of the best shutdown pairs in the NHL, helping the Leafs control nearly 57 percent of high-danger chances and 62.9 percent of goals in their shifts together. They've surrendered a minuscule 1.76 goals against per 60 despite defending against top lines.

Tanev is obviously a huge part of that pair's success, but while he's universally recognized as a top-flight player, McCabe's name is often overlooked. And for those who think McCabe is being carried by Tanev, keep in mind McCabe was still winning his top-four matchups last season when his primary partner was Simon Benoit, a fringe NHL player. Oh, and Toronto's record has taken a huge hit anytime McCabe has been out of the lineup.

Kulak has long been one of my favorite third-pair defensemen in the NHL.

The 31-year-old left shot is an effortless skater, breaks the puck out efficiently and is reliable defensively. Watch how he breaks a play up in the neutral zone and flips the puck ahead to his forwards, leading to a Grade-A chance.

Kulak can singlehandedly win his minutes further down the lineup — last year he was posting terrific results despite being saddled with Vincent Desharnais, a slow skater who's really limited with the puck. He's been a strong playoff performer, comfortably handling 16-17 minutes in high-leverage games, which matters because coaches often feel the need to shelter some of their bottom-four defensemen during the postseason.

This year, Kulak has been elevated to top-four usage and is averaging a career-high 20:08 per game. He hasn't skipped a beat in this higher-leverage role. The Oilers have driven nearly 54 percent of scoring chances in Kulak's five-on-five minutes this season. That's included impressive work playing his off side with Darnell Nurse at times.

Kulak is an underrated, versatile player whose puck-moving acumen allows him to thrive anywhere on a team's bottom four.

Brayden McNabb, Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas' blue line has long been considered one of the best in the NHL. It's a deep, well-rounded group that can move the puck, play a heavy defensive style and chip in with offense. Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore and Noah Hanifin get the majority of the spotlight on the back end, but McNabb's steady contributions as a defensive stopper often fly under the radar.

McNabb is leaned on as the clear No. 4 on the blue line. He's consistently averaged 20 minutes per game and is tasked with handling tougher-than-league-average matchups. The 6-foot-4 defender is a dying breed/style of player in a couple of ways. Firstly, he's a punishing, explosive open-ice hitter.

Secondly, and most importantly, he's found a way to drive effective defensive results despite being a really slow skater, which is impressive considering how fast and skilled the game is today. He protects the inside defensively with his smart reads, positioning, ability to clog passing and shooting lanes and the way he leverages his size to win battles down low and at the net front.

McNabb is driving 54.8 percent of scoring chances and a plus-23 goal differential during his five-on-five shifts this season. He's surrendered just 1.71 goals against per 60, which ranks top 10 among all defensemen who've played in a full-time top-four role this season.

Theodore is the perfect stylistic fit for McNabb as a partner because of his dynamic puck-moving and offensive talent. McNabb isn't just a Theodore merchant, however — he's played a ton of time away from him over the last three seasons because of Theodore's injuries, and his underlying numbers have still been pretty decent.

Making just \$2.85 million against the cap for 2024-25 (with a new extension kicking in next season), McNabb has one of the best defenseman contracts in the league.

Jalen Chatfield, Carolina Hurricanes

Chatfield has blossomed into a capable second-pair option on a contending team without any fanfare outside of Carolina.

Carolina lost Skjei and Brett Pesce in the summer. General manager Eric Tulsky signed Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere in free agency, but both have played together on the bottom pair. The Canes have weathered the top-four departures relatively well thanks to the success Dmitry Orlov and Chatfield have had stepping into a bigger role this season.

Chatfield's rise in Carolina is a terrific story. The scrappy, hard-nosed 28-year-old right shot went undrafted and originally signed as a free-agent prospect in Vancouver. The Canucks let him walk in 2021 after a mostly underwhelming NHL campaign. He signed with the Hurricanes and has since developed into a solid defensive-minded No. 4/5 defenseman.

Chatfield is ultra-reliable defensively. He's mobile and has a tenacious work rate, which allows him to aggressively kill plays and win battles. He defends the rush well, forcing dump-ins and breaking up entries at above-average rates according to Sznajder's tracking. He can make a clean first pass to drive quality zone exits, too. The Canes have controlled 56 percent of scoring chances and own a plus-10 goal differential during Chatfield's five-on-five minutes this season.

The big key this year is he's proving he can maintain that success in a higher-leverage role. He's averaging nearly 19 minutes per game and handling significantly harder matchups compared to last season.

The Athletic / What does the NHL-Rogers TV deal mean for 'Hockey Night in Canada', future of broadcasting?

By Julian McKenzie and Rob Rossi- April 4, 2025

At least, that was NHL commissioner Gary Bettman's stance during a televised news conference Wednesday, hours after the league announced a 12-year, \$11 billion CAD (\$7.7 billion USD) deal with its Canadian national broadcast partner, Rogers Communications.

"Sports content, live sports, is the most valuable content," Bettman said, speaking from a Rogers studio in Toronto. "There is nothing more valuable in this country than having the rights to the NHL."

The new contract will go into effect for the 2026-27 season, after the current one expires, more than doubling the previous price of \$5.2 billion CAD. It continues a partnership between Rogers and the NHL that has been in place since Nov. 2013, when the telecommunications giant first became the exclusive rights holder of the country's most popular sport.

The Athletic digs into what readers need to know about Rogers and the NHL's renewal:

How did the deal come together?

Neither side was looking to end the marriage.

Rogers Communications held a 60-day exclusive negotiation window that opened on New Year's Day. Talks went well enough that the parties agreed to extend that window into March.

"The toughest part was working through the economics of it and making sure it worked for everybody," Rogers president and CEO Tony Staffieri said Wednesday. "And we got there."

Staffieri and Bettman shared a wry grin after that comment.

As justification for more than doubling its current financial commitment for the new deal, Staffieri cited a 50 percent viewership increase over the last 10 years. But he did not flatly deny the suggestion that the spike in costs could be passed on to consumers when specifically pressed whether that would be the case.

"The focus for us on this is growing the viewership," Staffieri said. "If we do that well, which is what we've done over the last 10 years — significantly expanding the audiences — then the revenues follow in terms of advertising and subscription."

What does it mean for viewers in Canada?

For the most part, things won't change. Sportsnet will retain national rights across all platforms for regular-season, postseason and Stanley Cup Final games, along with special events. This includes broadcasts in all languages.

But it's not as cut-and-dry as declaring that every NHL game belongs to Sportsnet.

As Staffieri said, the agreement allows for sublicensing content to continue "where it makes sense." Rogers sports & media president Colette Watson added that discussions will be held with the public broadcast network CBC, which airs "Hockey Night in Canada," about extending a deal beyond next season. And, as fans of Canadian teams know, Sportsnet and Bell Media's TSN share rights for regional games.

All games not featuring Canadian teams will be available on Sportsnet's platforms.

How about regional broadcasts specifically?

Sportsnet can increase its allotment of national coverage by converting the regional broadcasts of “up to 10 more games (for) certain teams,” Watson said. “That means fewer blackouts and more national opportunities.”

All of Sportsnet’s regional broadcasts for the Calgary Flames, Edmonton Oilers, and Vancouver Canucks can be converted into national games. The same applies for “a few extra games from the Winnipeg Jets and Ottawa Senators,” Watson said.

Regular-season games of the Toronto Maple Leafs, meanwhile, will still be evenly divided between Sportsnet and TSN, with Bell and Rogers jointly holding the regional rights. (Rogers also owns a 37.5 percent stake in Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, the team’s parent company.) And playoff games will still be entirely shown on Sportsnet, Watson added, going on to deliver a quote that might ring different to Toronto faithful when taken out of context.

“I can’t predict what the schedule will look like 10 years from now, eight years from now, and when the Leafs play on which night and whether that becomes one of the nights sublicensed,” Watson said. “But what you experience today as a Leafs fan is what you’ll experience for the next 13 years.”

And where does the CBC fall in all this?

Rogers currently has one year left on its current sublicensing agreement with CBC for “Hockey Night in Canada,” which started in 1952 and pioneered instant replay. On Wednesday, Watson expressed an openness for Rogers to renew the current arrangement — though she declined to detail specifics.

“We like our partnership with the CBC, and we value our partnership with the CBC,” Watson said. “And over the next 18 months we’ll look to see if there is a continued partnership there.”

Bettman may have applied some pressure by adding his two cents.

“From a league standpoint, we respect what the CBC had brought to the game,” Bettman said. “(‘Hockey Night in Canada’) is the longest-running program in the history of television in Canada. And I’m certain that our friends at Rogers will make the right decisions and have the right discussions with the people at the CBC.”

Will streaming services like Amazon Prime still be involved?

Staffieri was asked directly about sublicensing — hardly a new idea but an increasingly profitable practice — and emphatically said it would continue.

“We’ll look to it as a possibility and a strong possibility,” Staffieri said.

Amazon has demonstrated interest in continuing to air games in Canada, according to sources familiar with the platform’s approach to the NHL. Its “Monday Night Hockey” package has been well-received critically.

Surely the NHL will surely look for a bigger payday on its next American contract. The 4 Nations Face-Off was a commercial success, its Canada-U.S. final attracting a television audience of 9.3 million viewers in America and serving as the most-watched non-NFL game on ESPN+. Future international events such as the World Cup of Hockey are planned, and the NHL can always offer those to intrigued U.S. broadcasters and/or streaming services.

The NHL will also need to weigh the pros and cons of sticking with a broadcast deal that also includes streaming rights (ESPN+ in this case), or striking out on its own — as MLB is reportedly considering.

At Wednesday's press conference, Bettman said the U.S. and Canadian media markets are "not comparable in terms of the access to the number of outlets there are and the number of platforms there are." He was responding to a question about sublicensing to streaming services in Canada. But Bettman is not known for his subtlety — and he could very well have been hinting that he expects the NHL to have multiple options in considering its next U.S. deals.

So what can fans expect from future NHL broadcasts?

Advancements in technology, specifically artificial intelligence, render any predictions about broadcast innovations a fool's errand. Watson and Bettman conceded that point.

Still, Watson said, Canadian viewers can expect to see more on-ice cameras and the cable cam, similar to what was used for 4 Nations broadcasts. Bettman touted puck- and player-tracking technology, which the league has tapped to modernize the way statistics are cited on broadcasts.

The biggest difference between now and when the current deal was agreed to in 2013? Gambling. It's everywhere and a driver of the sporting audience. NHL broadcasts on Sportsnet and TSN feature gambling elements throughout shoulder programming and mid-period segments. It seems logical that Sportsnet would incorporate more gambling elements into its new exclusive deal.

The Athletic / ‘The summer of offer sheets’: NHL execs and agents on why a boom could be coming this offseason

By Michael Russo and Chris Johnston- April 4, 2025

The circumstances were perfect in August for the St. Louis Blues to shock the hockey world — and the Edmonton Oilers.

The Blues identified two young restricted free agents, Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg, whom the Oilers were struggling to re-sign — and ones they felt would fit into their core. They called their agents, convinced them to sign offer sheets and structured the contracts in a way that would make it difficult for the cap-strapped Oilers to match them. And they ensured, to the penny, that the offers would minimize the mandatory draft compensation they’d have to pay.

Broberg received a two-year deal worth \$4,580,917, meaning the Blues would need to give the Oilers a 2026 second-round pick if they didn’t match. One dollar more and it would have been a 2026 first and third. Holloway got a two-year deal worth \$2,290,457. One dollar more and the compensation would have increased from a third to a second.

In a league with a fraternity of general managers that has not historically considered offer sheets socially acceptable, the moves were bold, precise and creative — as well as labor-intensive, considering that to make them work, Blues GM Doug Armstrong had to reacquire the Blues’ 2025 second-round pick, which he had previously traded.

The Oilers were in a no-win position. As GM Stan Bowman, who had been on the job for less than a month when this went down, said on Hockey Night in Canada’s “After Hours” two Saturdays ago explaining his decision not to match, “We wouldn’t have been able to field a team if we matched either of those offer sheets.”

For the Blues, meanwhile, it’s been a win-win. More than seven months later, the 23-year-olds are huge parts of the success of a suddenly playoff-bound team riding a 10-game winning streak. Holloway has 26 goals and 63 points in 76 games, and Broberg is averaging 20:28 per game with eight goals and 27 points.

Around the league, the moves and their aftermath have put agents and GMs on notice.

“It was smart and probably an eye-opener,” New Jersey Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald said.

How much so, we’ll see soon.

Some around the NHL are predicting that more teams will attempt the same maneuver this summer and beyond.

“Doug Armstrong comes in last year, does two on the same day and says, ‘F— it, I’m trying to make my team better and this is a tool available to me,’” agent Allan Walsh said. “When he did that, if you’re talking to GMs like I am, there has been a notable change in the way that offer sheets have been perceived.

“Fast forward to this offseason — this coming offseason will be known as ‘the summer of offer sheets.’ It will be.”

It’s not just the Blues’ success that sets the stage.

Another factor is the rising salary cap and the fact that, for the first time, the NHL has set how it will increase for the next three years. It's projected to rise to \$95.5 million for next season, \$104 million for 2026-27 and \$113.5 million for 2027-28. It should skyrocket from there with new business, a just-announced 12-year, \$7.7 billion (USD) Canadian media rights deal with Rogers Communications, a new U.S. media rights deal when ESPN and TNT's deals expire after the 2027-28 season and further expansion on the horizon.

Forecasting the cap so far out gives teams the ability to plan out future payroll projections with certainty that wasn't possible in the past, when salary cap figures for the following season were often made official just before free agency.

Additionally, Walsh said, "The UFA market ain't that hot."

"There are not a lot of top-end players available as unrestricted free agents this year," Walsh said. "So many players are locked up on longer-term deals where they're not going to be available this year and they're not going to be available next year. But if you're looking to make your team better, some of the top available players happen to be RFAs, not UFAs.

"And would you rather devote \$6, \$7, \$8 million to a 31-year-old where you have to attach term to that deal? Or would you rather throw that money at a 23- or 24-year-old and have a guy that, if you're successful, you're getting him for the prime of his career? That's what will drive (the increase in offer sheets)."

Fitzgerald agreed: "You're betting on the upside and future with restricted free agents versus you're betting on the past with unrestricted free agents."

So who could be next? According to PuckPedia, 88 of 95 potential restricted free agents this offseason are offer sheet-eligible, prominently including the Minnesota Wild's Marco Rossi, Toronto Maple Leafs' Matthew Knies, Edmonton Oilers' Evan Bouchard, New York Rangers' K'Andre Miller and Will Cuyile, New York Islanders' Noah Dobson and Alexander Romanov and Buffalo Sabres' JJ Peterka and Bowen Byram.

Peterka will draw lots of trade interest this offseason if the Sabres can't get a new contract finalized. And if he's not re-signed by July 1, there's no doubt he would be an enticing offer-sheet candidate.

Walsh happens to be his agent, but out of respect for the Sabres, his client and the process, he wouldn't comment specifically about that situation.

"But I have talked to general managers generally about offer sheets this summer, and some general managers have said to me — one in particular (said), 'My goal this summer is to do an offer sheet,'" Walsh said.

It'll come as no surprise to Armstrong, though he pointed out that his goal was to add the players — not set a precedent or challenge established business practices.

"I would assume (offer sheets) will be (more prevalent)," he said. "I don't think you do it to drive the price up. I think you do it because you believe you can get the player. Personally, I think it's bad business to do it to harm someone. You do it to improve yourself."

Not that everyone agrees. At the recent GM meetings, The Athletic canvassed GMs on whether they think offer sheets will be more common. There wasn't a lot of certainty because while, yes, the rising cap will mean more money in the system for teams to sign players to offer sheets, it could also mean teams are in a better position to match.

"I think the majority, if not all, of the teams have an average of \$15 million to play with for unrestricted free agents and whatever they're going to do this summer," Fitzgerald said. "So I don't know how teams will get caught with their pants down. If they want to match, they should be able to match."

"I don't think the cap affects it," Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill said. "It might even make it harder. Since the cap's going up, are you gonna overpay so much to get a guy when you know that it's probably gonna get matched and you're just affecting the lay of the land?"

"So I don't know. They're all situational-based. But it's a tool that we can all use."

Added Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell, who in 2021 as Carolina Hurricanes GM signed Jesperi Kotkaniemi to an offer sheet that the Montreal Canadiens didn't match, "I don't know that we'll see more. ... Probably why it was done before is because teams were up against the cap. So if you don't have that factor, if people want to keep their players, they'll be able to keep them."

And Armstrong: "I think with the cap rising that it would be less likely to get a player, but it also depends (on) what teams do on July 1 with the cap rising. You have to hedge your bets on your restricted free agents. That's the balance."

As for whether Armstrong's moves lifted any remaining taboo over offer sheets, GMs continue to debate whether one ever existed.

Unquestionably, though, offer sheets were frowned upon for decades.

In response to seeing Dustin Penner sign a five-year, \$21.5 million offer sheet with Edmonton in July 2007, then-Anaheim Ducks GM Brian Burke famously challenged Oilers counterpart Kevin Lowe to a fight. Burke went so far as to call Glen Sather — a mutual friend — to inform him that he would be renting a barn in Lake Placid, N.Y., during that summer's U.S. junior development camp and giving Lowe the choice of three dates and times that they could throw down.

Ultimately, it never came to that, though NHL commissioner Gary Bettman took the threat seriously enough to intervene.

What angered Burke about the Penner offer sheet was that he believed it would have an inflationary effect on the marketplace — and thought Lowe should have given him a warning that it was coming. He felt that Edmonton had broken an unwritten rule.

"It's not like it's forbidden," Nill said. "There's a rule that's there, and some teams use it to their advantage. Some teams it's worked for. Some it hasn't. But we're open to it. Hey, our job as GMs is to do the best for our organization, and that doesn't matter whether it's offer sheets or trades or whatever we're doing. If there's an opportunity to improve our team, that's our job to do it."

The Burke-Lowe war of words didn't eliminate the practice — the following summer, the Blues and Vancouver Canucks each signed a player off the other's roster to an offer sheet a week apart, with the Canucks signing David Backes and the Blues retaliating by signing Steve Bernier — but it did set off a period where teams viewed offer sheets as an ineffective way to procure talent.

That point was hammered home in July 2012, when the Nashville Predators' Shea Weber signed a 14-year, \$110 million offer sheet with the Philadelphia Flyers. Considered a penny-pinching team at the time, there was doubt about whether Predators ownership would willingly fork over the \$27 million the contract structure called for Weber to be paid in the first calendar year, especially since it covered a 2012-13 season that would be interrupted by a lockout.

But the Predators matched. That sent a message: If that offer sheet didn't work, what would?

“I don’t think it was ever considered taboo,” Fitzgerald said. “It was just, ‘Is it worth going through all the work with the team when a very high percentage match?’”

The Weber offer sheet came during a stretch in which six straight offer sheets were matched over 14 years between the Penner deal in 2007 and Kotkaniemi’s one-year, \$6.1 million contract in 2021, when the Hurricanes lured the former No. 3 pick away from the Canadiens as apparent retribution for a 2019 offer sheet Montreal signed with Sebastian Aho.

Asked if it was retaliation, Waddell insisted to The Athletic, “Not at all. We had him targeted. I tried to trade for him multiple times. Even that day, we were trying. We were talking about a trade that day, and then we couldn’t agree on it, and we made the decision.”

Several of Waddell’s brethren still believe it was retaliation nonetheless — and, indeed, believe that any offer sheet puts a GM at risk for payback.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald said, “Is Edmonton really now going to offer sheet a St. Louis player? I doubt it.”

Fitzgerald also pointed out that while the perception might be that a team is a bad guy for poaching a player, “the player is the one that wants to leave.”

To Fitzgerald’s point, look at Weber in 2012. Less than two weeks after Ryan Suter left Nashville via unrestricted free agency, signing a 13-year, \$98 million contract with the Wild, Weber’s offer sheet was designed to torpedo the Predators because he wanted to leave for Philly.

But after the Predators matched a contract that significantly impacted their cap situation, their fans continued to love Weber while booing Suter every time he returned.

Last summer, Fitzgerald admitted that he was worried about an offer sheet with Dawson Mercer, but he trusted agents’ word that Mercer didn’t want to play elsewhere.

“People forget a player has to sign the offer sheet, and it’s usually because he prefers to play somewhere else,” Fitzgerald said.

When the Stars got ahead of the game and recently extended Wyatt Johnston at the same time that they were trading for and re-signing Mikko Rantanen, many speculated that they were worried about Johnston being vulnerable to an offer sheet this summer. Nill said that wasn’t the case — that the sides talked early in the season and were getting closer with discussions during the 4 Nations Face-Off. The fact that agent Andy Scott represents both players allowed Nill to finalize the contracts at the same time.

“It’s one less thing to worry about in the summertime,” Nill said.

There’s one other barrier to consider when thinking about the potential for a “summer of offer sheets,” and as mentioned with the Blues, it’s the draft-pick compensation. A team must have its own picks to send the other way as compensation.

This mechanism has been there since the first offer sheet was tendered in 1986. The original intention was to make it more difficult for clubs to extend offer sheets because when restricted free agency was introduced, teams didn’t favor the ability for other teams to sign away their RFAs. The rule has stuck.

That’s why the Blues had to get their 2025 second-rounder back to offer-sheet Broberg.

PuckPedia has a tracker that shows which teams can sign players to offer sheets at different salaries based on which of their original draft picks they own. The current salary brackets are based on last year’s thresholds. New ones are announced in late June and are based on average salaries across the league.

For instance, take Minnesota: If the Wild wanted to sign a player to an offer sheet between \$2,290,458 and \$4,580,917 or between \$6,871,375 and \$9,161,834, they'd have to reacquire their second-round pick from the Predators because they traded it for Gustav Nyquist in February.

To this point, when The Athletic asked Bill Zito for his thoughts on offer sheets at last month's GM meetings, the Florida Panthers GM joked because he has traded so many draft picks that offer sheets weren't on his radar "unless they let us throw in used sticks or 2031 draft picks as compensation."

Zito did add that in his opinion, there's nothing wrong with offer sheets: "It shouldn't be taboo. You go to law school, you get trained as a lawyer and you think a certain way. There's a set of rules, and offer sheets are part of the rules."

Taboo or not, Walsh believes times are about to change in the NHL. This is a mechanism in the CBA — perhaps even a smarter one than spending a boatload of money on aging unrestricted free agents.

"I look at the NBA and how there was a time when offer sheets in the NBA were taboo, and now you don't blink an eye when you see one," Walsh said.

Whatever the future holds, Armstrong is content with what the Blues did.

"They both have played very well for us," he said of Holloway and Broberg. "They fit in. As much as their play has fit in ... we have a whack of players in that same age group, and they're starting to grow together. You see them spending time together. It's been a good fit for us.

"So I'm glad we did it. If I had to do it all over again, I would."

The Athletic / NHL goalies are better than ever. What are the best scorers doing to regain an edge?

By Jesse Granger- April 4, 2025

When it comes to stopping a scorer in a one-on-one situation, NHL goalies are better than they've ever been.

The league-wide save percentage has dipped in recent years — steadily declining from .910 in 2019-20 to .900 this season — as offensive strategies improve and shooters find ways to beat goalies with screens, deflections and backdoor plays. Beating a goaltender with a clean shot has become incredibly difficult.

Listen to the dressing room conversations after a team is shut out. You'll hear players and coaches parrot the same reasons for the lack of goals.

"We needed more bodies in front of the net."

"We didn't get in the goalie's eyes enough."

"Goalies are too good nowadays. If they see the shot, they stop it."

To an extent, these commonly-used phrases are true. Modern goalies are such good skaters that they're usually in excellent position, giving shooters very little net to shoot at. They've trained their entire lives, specializing in reading shots, so it takes something truly exceptional to get the puck past them when they have their feet set and clear vision of the shot.

In response, today's elite scorers are finding ways to use these goalies' reads against them. They pick up on the clues goalies are using to predict shot locations, and then give the netminder false information in an attempt to fool them. Being an elite scorer is becoming less about who can shoot the puck the hardest, or even the most accurately, and more about who can conceal their true intentions and mislead the opposition with deception.

We'll look at specific examples of these subtle acts of deception, and why they're so effective, by examining four of the league's craftiest goal-scorers: Sidney Crosby, Nikita Kucherov, William Nylander and Kyle Connor.

First, it's important to understand how goalies react to shots. The term "lightning-quick reflexes" is often overstated. Yes, these netminders have exceptional reaction time, but the human body has limitations. A study by Harvard University showed that the average human reaction time is 220 milliseconds, and the average recognition reaction time is 384 milliseconds.

An 80-mph shot from the point (55 feet away from the net) reaches the goalie in less than 470 milliseconds. A shot of the same speed from the middle of the slot (20 feet away from the net) reaches the goalie in 170 milliseconds.

That means on most shots from in close, a goalie doesn't have the time to actually see where the puck is being shot and then react to its flight. Most of the time, they are reading the shooter's body language and stick blade to predict where the shot is going. After seeing thousands and thousands of shots over their lifetimes, goalies become incredible at it, giving the illusion that they're actually reacting to the

puck. The truth is, if a shooter simulated a shot without an actual puck, the goalie would still know where the “shot” was heading in most instances.

On this goal Crosby scored on March 11, he took the way Vegas Golden Knights goalie Ilya Samsonov read the blade of his stick and used it to his advantage.

Crosby is as crafty as they come, and has plenty of time and space on this play. The deception is so subtle that it’s difficult to notice without slow motion, but watch how Crosby opens his stick blade wide just before releasing the shot. Everything about this release tells Samsonov that Crosby is likely shooting high to the blocker side, but with a quick flick of the wrist, Crosby turns down the toe of his stick blade at the last moment and rifles a low shot just inside Samsonov’s left skate.

If you look closely, you can even see Samsonov’s blocker flinch to his right, where he anticipated the shot would go. The minor weight transfer that a goalie makes when leaning into a blocker save means that his opposite leg will typically be slower getting to the ice, which is why Crosby shot to the short side. It’s a simple-looking goal with a lot happening beneath the surface.

Kucherov uses a similar form of deception, especially on breakaways. This goal he scored against the Penguins on Jan. 12 is a great example of a move he often uses to beat goalies in one-on-one situations.

Kucherov fans his stick blade open, very similar to Crosby in the previous clip, and doesn’t close the toe until midway through the release. Because the change is so late, he regularly leaves goalies flashing their blocker way out to their side, only for Kucherov to curl the puck inside, underneath their armpit, like he does to Tristan Jarry on this play.

The initial deke to pull the puck outside of his body is crucial because it gets the goalie off-angle. When Kucherov had the puck directly in front of him, Jarry was perfectly on angle with the line from the puck to the center of the net running straight through the middle of his chest. That quickly changed when Kucherov pulled the puck outside, giving an edge to the shooter.

You can see how much room there is to the short side after Kucherov pulls the puck outside, and it’s probably why goalies throw their blocker out so aggressively when he shoots. They can sense that they’re off the angle and expect the puck to go between their blocker and the post. Instead of shooting at that opening, Kucherov anticipates the goalie’s next move and shoots where the next opening will be.

He’d pulled the same move the night before against Devils goalie Jacob Markstrom. Markstrom stabs his blocker out aggressively, only for Kucherov to tuck the puck inside it with his late toe curl.

Kucherov has mastered this trick to the point where it feels almost unfair to the goalie. It’s his go-to move on breakaways. Part of what makes it so effective is his speed. Few players approach these situations at the speed Kucherov does, which only makes it more difficult for the goalie to read him.

Here he is scoring on Columbus’ Elvis Merzlikins and Philadelphia’s Ivan Fedotov with the same move on March 4 and March 17. It’s no coincidence that every one of these goalies over-extends their blocker. Kucherov is baiting them into it with slight manipulation of his stick blade, combined with the fact that the deke gets the goalies off their angle.

There’s a reason Kucherov has outscored his expected goals metrics in nine of the last 10 seasons, according to Evolving-Hockey. Expected goals models are based on how often players score on a shot given the location and several other factors, but it doesn’t account for shooting skill, which Kucherov has in abundance.

Elite scorers use more than just the stick blade to mislead goalies. Maple Leafs star Nylander has been duping netminders with a kicking motion that he uses quite often. Here's an example of him using a high kick with his trail leg on this overtime winner against the Devils on Jan. 16.

This move isn't unique to Nylander. It's a standard off-leg shot with the left leg (in Nylander's case because he's right-handed) hiking into the air to gain leverage and add velocity to the snap shot. It's a technique mostly used when skating in stride, because it allows for a quicker release, and more often than not it's used on high shots, such as the one Nylander beat Markstrom with on this play.

Here's where it starts to get tricky. Nylander has realized that goalies are reading the off-leg snap shots, and is now starting to turn that against them. On this goal – which also happened to come against New Jersey – Nylander kicks the leg up, but shoots the puck along the ice.

You can see Devils goalie Jake Allen react as if the shot is going high-glove. Not only does Nylander kick his leg, his follow-through is mimicking a high shot. If Allen had correctly read that it was going to be a low shot, he would've driven his knees into the ice and sealed his butterfly. Instead, he reaches his glove out and his left pad is late to seal, and that's exactly where Nylander scores.

Up in Winnipeg, Connor is having another excellent season. He's one of the most under-appreciated scorers in the league, with at least 30 goals in all eight of his full NHL seasons (excluding the shortened 2020-21 season, when he still almost hit the mark).

Connor's biggest weapon is a ridiculously fast release that is tough for goalies to read. He uses a CCM Ribcor stick with a P92 "Sakic" curve, named after Avalanche Hall of Famer Joe Sakic. It's the most iconic stick curve and the most popular among NHL players, with a bit of an open toe to promote higher shots.

One of the biggest keys for Connor is the 85 flex in the stick shaft. It's not the flimsiest stick in the NHL, but it's on the more flexible side. That allows him to whip the puck at high velocity without putting a ton of weight or pressure into the stick. His upright shooting style gives goaltenders little warning that a shot is coming, and it regularly catches them off-guard.

He did it Monday night against Vancouver, casually zipping a shot by Canucks goalie Thatcher Demko in transition.

There's very little shoulder dip or forward body lean prior to the shot, which makes it difficult for Demko to anticipate. It's also a bit out of rhythm, which is a difficult concept to describe but makes a shot feel as though it's coming out of nowhere for the goalie. In this instance, Connor shoots off of his outside (right) leg, which is typically accompanied by a lowering of the upper body as the player jumps from his inside to outside leg, building energy and leverage.

Demko has some of the best footwork of any goalie in the NHL, and yet Connor still catches him between shuffles. Shooting the puck just a half beat before the goalie expects it can make all the difference.

Connor also uses more obvious forms of deception to maximize his quick release and catch goalies off guard, like this no-look shot that tricked San Jose goalie Alexandar Georgiev on Dec. 17.

Georgiev knows there are several passing threats on the backside of the play (both Cole Perfetti in the low slot and Mark Scheifele near the far post) so he's already hyper-aware of a cross-seam pass. When Connor glances to the middle of the ice as he loads his stick for the shot, it clearly throws the goalie off. Georgiev doesn't cheat positionally by flattening out along his goal line. He's still square to the puck, but he shifts his weight onto his left leg to prepare for a lateral explosion across the crease in the event of a pass.

Because of that, when Connor shoots high to the short side, Georgiev makes an awkward looking stab at the puck with his glove without even dropping into the butterfly. The reason the save attempt looks so strange is Georgiev's weight transfer is not where it would normally be due to the threat of the pass, amplified by Connor's head fake.

With the skill and intelligence of the modern goaltender, shooters are relying more and more on deception. The days of winding up and ripping shots past the goalie with sheer velocity are long gone. Lateral passing plays, deflections and screens will still be the most efficient way to score, but when a shooter faces a goalie mano a mano, deception is king.

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Latest on the Eastern wild-card chaos

By ESPN staff- April 4, 2025

Reactions

The final day of the regular season is exactly two weeks away, but the race for the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot remains open for five contenders.

Two of those teams are in action Thursday night. The Montreal Canadiens host the Boston Bruins (7 p.m. ET, ESPN+), and the Columbus Blue Jackets welcome the Colorado Avalanche (7:30 p.m. ET, ESPN+).

As play begins Thursday, the Canadiens hold the second wild card with 79 points and 25 regulation wins through 74 games; the New York Rangers are tied in standings points (and ahead in RW, with 32), but have played more games. The Blue Jackets are two behind in points, and one behind in regulation wins. The idle Detroit Red Wings (75 points, 26 RW) and New York Islanders (74 points, 25 RW) round out the quintet.

The Stathead projection model likes the Canadiens' chances to make the playoffs the most, at 42.1%, followed by the Blue Jackets (27.4%), Rangers (26.8%), Islanders (2.8%) and Red Wings (2.7%). How will this all shake out? Thursday's pair of games featuring these teams will provide our next set of clues.

With the regular season ending April 17, we'll help you track it all with the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races, along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are here. Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: The stories of the second half](#)

By Ryan Dixon- April 4, 2025

We're coming down to the wire.

With Wednesday night's games in the books, the only NHL club with more than eight games remaining on its schedule is the Columbus Blue Jackets, who have nine contests left to play in pursuit of a wild-card berth.

If you're looking back at the Jackets' entire season, there's not a huge variance in where the team was at the halfway point of the campaign versus where it sits now.

The official midway point of the 2024-25 NHL calendar was Jan. 9 and Columbus woke up that morning in the second wild-card spot — the same place it's currently just two points removed from with two weeks to go in the season.

Of course, the other Eastern Conference wild-card team at the halfway mark, the Boston Bruins, are a reminder of how much things can change in the season's second act. Today, the B's are well out of the playoff chase and, in truth, are probably getting a little excited about their lottery odds; only three clubs have a better shot at the No. 1 pick than the Bruins right now and Boston is definitely counting on a top-five selection that could add much-needed talent into the retooling organization.

For the Bruins, the story of the second half has been steering into the skid. And while not every club can say the entire trajectory of the franchise changed in the past three months, it's still worth rooting around to see what stands out.

With that in mind — and with the campaign winding down — we're using this week's edition of the power rankings to highlight the story of the season's second half for all 32 clubs.

1. Dallas Stars (49-21-4): The Stars have the best points percentage (.729) in the league in the second half. Dallas made a franchise-defining move to land Mikko Rantanen at the trade deadline and are all in — and then some — in pursuit of their first Cup since 1999.
2. Winnipeg Jets (51-20-4): Cole Perfetti has really emerged as a top-six forward, with 10 goals and 22 points in his past 26 games.
3. Washington Capitals (48-18-9): The Caps locked up all of their potential UFAs in the past couple months, inking Logan Thompson, Charlie Lindgren and Jakob Chychrun to extensions.
4. Carolina Hurricanes (46-24-4): The Rantanen saga was obviously a huge, league-wide story. Increasingly, though, it looks like Carolina struck gold with the guy who originally landed alongside Rantanen, Taylor Hall. The first overall pick from 2010 has seven goals and 13 points in his past dozen outings.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (45-21-8): Somewhat surprisingly, Vegas endured a 27-game stretch starting right at the midway point where it was only 11-11-5. But after an eerily quiet trade deadline in the desert, the Knights took hold of the Pacific by winning six of their past seven games.
6. Toronto Maple Leafs (46-25-4): After years of cycling through different defence partners, Toronto may have found the right fit beside Morgan Rielly in the form of deadline acquisition Brandon Carlo. John Tavares is also scoring like that kid who used to tear up the OHL — he's got 14 goals in his past 16 outings.
7. Tampa Bay Lightning (44-25-5): In late January, the Bolts were sloshing around with a bunch of other teams in the Eastern Conference wild-card chase. However, thanks in large part to a pair of its biggest stars, Tampa is 17-5-1 since Feb. 4. Andrei Vasilevskiy has the best save percentage (.929) of any goalie in the second half and Nikita Kucherov leads the NHL in scoring with 55 points in 34 games.
8. Colorado Avalanche (45-26-4): In the first half of the year, the Avs completely changed their goalie battery. In the second half, Colorado went to work on its forward group, adding a handful of new players. There are nights where the Avs run three new centres — Brock Nelson, Charlie Coyle and Jack Drury — out after top man Nathan MacKinnon.
9. St. Louis Blues (41-28-7): Ride the wave! Remember that loose chatter about St. Louis possibly selling ahead of the deadline? Now that Jim Montgomery — hired in late November — has the Blues playing just as he wants, St. Louis is the hottest team in the league, having won 10 straight contests. Neither Winnipeg nor Vegas can be thrilled about the idea of seeing this wild-card team in Round 1.
10. Los Angeles Kings (42-23-9): Only Andrei Vasilevskiy (.929) and Connor Hellebuyck (.922) have a better second-half save percentage than Darcy Kuemper's .919.
11. Edmonton Oilers (43-26-5): The story of the Oilers' second half is how many players have spent time on the shelf. That includes guys at the top like Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Mattias Ekholm, goalie Stuart Skinner and deadline acquisition Trent Frederic, who may make his debut in the next couple games. What does this team look like with all those guys, plus Evander Kane, in the lineup for Game 1?
12. Florida Panthers (44-27-4): Matthew Tkachuk has not played since injuring himself at the 4 Nations Face-Off and Aaron Ekblad was hit with a 20-game suspension for violating the NHL and NHLPA's policy on performance-enhancing drugs. That's contributed to the defending champs flatlining a bit down the stretch and they could open the playoffs on the road now. That won't matter one bit to the Cats, though, if Tkachuk comes back at full strength and joins a lineup that now features Brad Marchand and Seth Jones after the deadline.
13. New Jersey Devils (40-29-7): The Devils, who were decimated by injuries last season, once again got shellacked in the second half of the year. Jack Hughes is done for the season, Dougie Hamilton may not play again in the regular season and Jacob Markstrom was shelved for six weeks.
14. Minnesota Wild (41-28-7): With Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek out of the lineup for long stretches, there's been a predictable slide for the Wild, who are 15-17-1 since Jan. 9. That said, Minny is still poised to grab a playoff spot few had them earmarked for when the season began.
15. Ottawa Senators (39-29-6): The Sens were life and death to make the post-season at the midway point and, with eight games to go on their sked, they've all but sewn up a spot. For a team that hasn't made the post-season since 2017, that's all that matters.
16. Montreal Canadiens (35-30-9): Nick Suzuki has been the man since the end of the 4 Nations — his 27 points in 18 games is topped by only three NHLers and that's been a huge factor in Montreal competing for a playoff spot nobody thought the Canadiens were a threat for in October.

17. Calgary Flames (35-27-12): If the Blues hadn't gone absolutely bonkers in March, Calgary would very conceivably still be in a playoff spot. For a team whose first-half success was often dismissed as smoke and mirrors, it's a credit to the Flames they hung tough through the second half.
18. Utah Hockey Club (34-29-12): By signing Karel Vejmelka, Alex Kerfoot, Ian Cole and Olli Maatta to extensions just ahead of the deadline, UHC showed how eager it is to build a playoff team as soon as possible.
19. Vancouver Canucks (34-28-13): While one storyline found a resolution in the second half when J.T. Miller was traded to the Rangers, in some ways it feels like big questions in Vancouver got even larger in the second half; can Elias Pettersson ever be an elite force for this team again and will coach Rick Tocchet's next contract be with this team?
20. New York Rangers (36-32-7): After his 28-goal showing last year, Alexis Lafreniere has 16 this season with just five in 35 outings since Jan. 9.
21. Columbus Blue Jackets (43-30-9): The Jackets were without top-line centre Sean Monahan for a big chunk of the second half, but they're still right in the thick of the playoff chase with nine games to go. Adam Fantilli has played at a 72-point pace since the season's midpoint.
22. Anaheim Ducks (33-33-8): Mason McTavish has really hit his offensive stride in the back half of Year 3; the third-overall pick from 2021 has 29 points in his past 28 games.
23. Buffalo Sabres (32-36-6): Will the story ultimately be that the Sabres traded another player who quickly became a fixture on his new club when they sent Dylan Cozens to their division rivals in Ottawa?
24. Detroit Red Wings (34-33-7): The Wings have been defined by streakiness in the second half. They passed the midway point on a seven-game winning run and had another seven-gamer in late January and early February. Detroit also had a six-game losing skid to open March and hasn't posted back-to-back victories since Feb. 25.
25. New York Islanders (32-32-10): The Isles ultimately decided to sell at the deadline and the enduring event from the first couple months of 2025 on Long Island may be acquiring prospect Calum Ritchie from the Avs for Brock Nelson.
26. Pittsburgh Penguins (30-34-11): Pittsburgh was essentially a wild-card team at the halfway point of the year, but the Pens' .439 points percentage in the back half is worse than all but four teams in the NHL and torpedoed any chance they had at returning to the playoffs.
27. Seattle Kraken (32-38-6): The offence actually made a bit of a leap in the second half, going from 22nd in the league (2.85 goals per game) in the first half to 11th (3.17) in the second. Still, the power play remained a bottom-third unit and the penalty kill got worse.
28. Philadelphia Flyers (31-36-9): The Flyers fell apart, winning just six times in a 25-game run from late January to late March. Philly fans better hope the story doesn't become the club ruining its lottery odds by running the three-game winning streak the Flyers are riding since firing John Tortorella to a six- or seven-game surge.
29. Nashville Predators (27-40-8): There's a lot of blame to go around in Nashville, but the Preds' .887 save percentage at five-on-five is the worst second-half mark in the entire league.
30. Boston Bruins (30-36-9): Trading captain Brad Marchand — a move that would have seemed unthinkable not that long ago — put a fine point on the big organizational transition the Bruins have undergone in the back half of this campaign.

31. San Jose Sharks (20-44-10): Since Jan. 9, Will Smith has 23 points in 31 games. That's just two fewer than the 25 posted by rookie-of-the-year candidate Macklin Celebrini. Smith's jump is a wonderful development for the Sharks.

32. Chicago Blackhawks (21-44-10): We saw Connor Bedard's frustration boil over in mid-March when he was assessed misconducts in consecutive games. The constant losing has taken a toll on everyone in Chicago and cannot continue in the first half of 2025-26.

Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 12 UFAs of 2025: Latest rumours, reports

By Luke Fox- April 4, 2025

Former captains and current Cup champs. Top-pair defencemen and elite playmakers.

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.

Here's a rundown and ranking of hockey's best impending unrestricted free agents, plus the latest buzz circulating about their future.

Trade deadline has long passed, so free agency now looms large as the next window to remake your favourite team's roster.

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 what is undisputedly the 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 handle 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 has been Toronto's most valuable player this season.

So, the onus falls on Brad Treliving — who bought high on peak William Nylander last winter — to either extend Marner at the best rate possible or make 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.

Flip a coin.

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 (roughly) point-per-game winger is tracking career highs in assists and points under new coach Scott Arniel.

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.

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 quit.

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. "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 at point-per-game pace.

As the best centre available, a \$7 million AAV wouldn't be too much to ask for on the open market. But Tavares would rather not pack his bags. How much of a hometown discount will he take?

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 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.

Bennett and Zito restarted contract negotiations, Elliotte Friedman reported on March 15. Weeks later, Panthers fans are still scrolling for an announcement.

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 said 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."

A rocky winter in Vancouver could lead to a beloved sniper walking away in summer.

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 says.

"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 taking performance-enhancing drugs.

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

Or does Jakob Chychrun's eight-year, \$72-million windfall in Washington leave Ekblad as the most desirable defence option for teams looking to bolster their blueline?

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 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?

"I'm not worried about next year at all," Marchand said on April 1. "In this game, in this league, you need to take every day and enjoy it. You never know when you're going to get an opportunity to be on a team like this again."

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 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 Rantanen, GM Chris MacFarland has the cap space to extend Nelson if he makes for a smart fit.

"I think he's got more yet that he can give us," Jared Bednar told reporters on April 1. "All of his defensive metrics look really good.... But I think his growth is going to come on the offensive side of it. I don't think we've seen what he can do on the offensive side of it just yet. We've seen it in flashes."

The Minnesota native 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."

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 40 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 playoffs run their course.

Just because the sides appear to be playing this situation out, that 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 blue-liner'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."

Pionk is currently working his way back from a lower-body injury and is expected to help the Jets come post-season.

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 Pavelski years: short term, reasonable money, stick with a Cup contender.

As thin as the 2025 UFA market is on bona fide centremen, 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.

That said, he's one of the best centres still unsigned. So, the resourceful rumour mill is digging up the interest expressed in the Montreal Canadiens back in 2019 and wondering about a revisit now that the Habs look legit.

11. Mikael Granlund

Age on July 1: 33

Position: Centre

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$5 million

The latest: Dealt from lottery-bound San Jose to contending Dallas at the deadline, the 2010 top-10 pick is gearing up for his first taste of playoff action in three years.

Nearing 900 games of action, the veteran Granlund has made the transition seamlessly, scoring five goals and 17 points in his first 23 games as a Star, and looking every bit like another smart rental for GM Jim Nill.

Nill plans to meet with both of his ex-Sharks on expiring deals (defenceman Cody Ceci was part of the same trade) and talk extension.

"He is a very efficient player," said Nill, who noted Granlund's connection with Duchene in Nashville.

"Very versatile, can play any forward position, centre, wing. Very effective on the power play. He's a very good penalty killer, and he takes draws. He can play up and down the lineup. Great connection with the players here, that was another big part of it."

12. Ryan Donato

Age on July 1: 29

Position: Left wing

2023-24 salary cap hit: \$2 million

The latest: We thought Donato would be a goner for sure.

With the cellar-dwelling Chicago Blackhawks entrenched in a lengthy rebuild and the veteran winger enjoying a breakout campaign — threatening 30 goals and 60 points after previous highs of 16 and 31 — Donato was a fixture on deadline trade boards.

Why not trade such a useful expiring asset at peak value — in a seller's market no less?

"Our plan was, we were going to set a high price because we value Ryan," Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson explained when March 7 passed without a deal. "We love what he brings."

Reportedly, Davidson's asking price was a first-round draft pick.

Well, if the executive decided to keep the forward to skate out the string, he might as well try to make an extension work.

The Hawks need as many legitimate everyday NHLers as possible, and cap space is no issue. Whether it's extending Donato or big-game hunting for, say, Marner, Chicago will be active on July 1.

Donato, who picked the perfect time for his offensive breakout, has earned himself a sizable raise.

Davidson said in March that he already has "exchanged some ideas" with Donato's agent, Matt Kreator.

