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Columbus Dispatch / 5 things the Columbus Blue Jackets can improve to make the playoffs

By Brian Hedger- April 19, 2025

The Blue Jackets were supposed to be dreadful.

After the team traded Patrik Laine on Aug. 19, 2024, and lost Johnny Gaudreau to a tragedy 10 days later, hockey analysts universally wrote them off before the season began. The Athletic, using a predictive model, even projected them to finish with 69 points and vie for the No. 1 pick in the 2025 NHL Draft.

Instead, the Blue Jackets found their footing. After starting training camp in a somber mood just a couple weeks after Gaudreau's funeral, they forged strong bonds around their shared grief and turned it into a strong motivating force.

Combined with an impressive roster filled with talented players, they took the NHL by surprise and finished two points shy of making the playoffs. Looking forward to next season, here are five things that must improve for them make it to the postseason:

Columbus Blue Jackets must improve on the road

Even after rallying to win road games April 13 in Washington and April 15 in Philadelphia, the Blue Jackets finished with a 14-23-4 record away from Nationwide Arena. Among 16 teams that qualified for this year's field, only four have sub-par road records and none finished as far below the .500 points percentage line as the Jackets.

Winning road games is one of the biggest challenges for upstart teams due to the NHL's rules regarding line changes during stoppages. Coaches at home can put new forward lines and defensive pairings out last, which gives them the opportunity to get the most favorable matchups on the ice.

Teams with young centers tend to struggle on the road primarily for that reason. Getting unfavorable faceoff matchups can skew possession times and decide the outcomes of key situations such as power plays, penalty kills and 6-on-5 empty-net situations late in games. Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger are both well under 50% on draws in the early stages of their careers, which places added importance in veterans such as Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner and others to stay healthy.

Had the Blue Jackets finished closer to .500 on the road this season, they likely would've sewn up a playoff spot in early April.

Columbus Blue Jackets' record in back-to-backs is holding them back

Going hand-in-hand with improving road success is winning more sets of back-to-back games. Completing sweeps isn't necessarily a requirement, but avoiding sweeps and winning more back-to-back finales would help quite a bit.

The Blue Jackets went 6-4-2 in games that started back-to-backs this season but went 2-10-0 record in the finales. In 12 back-to-backs, they were swept in regulation four times, swept with an overtime loss followed by a regulation loss twice, split four sets and swept two.

Columbus is a team that usually sees double digits in back-to-back games on their schedule, so improving in them would go a long way toward qualifying for the postseason.

Columbus Blue Jackets must get better in goaltending

The elephant inside the Blue Jackets' locker room reared back on its hind legs and knocked over portable locker stalls with its trunk.

Jet Greaves' sterling performance as an emergency recall for an Elvis Merzlikins injury in the final week of the season put then put a spotlight directly on that raging elephant. The simplest way to put it is to say the Blue Jackets' goaltending, as a whole, wasn't good enough to get them into the playoffs.

Merzlikins, despite an impressive stretch of solid play and several outstanding outings to steal wins, finished with a 3.18 goals-against average and .892 save percentage. Among goalies who played 40-plus games, his GAA ranks 27th and the save percentage is 26th in the league.

Daniil Tarasov struggled even more in his 20 appearances, finishing with a 7-10-2 record, 3.54 GAA and .881 save percentage. Tarasov also failed to fully gain coach Dean Evason's trust, which led to Greaves' dazzling recall stint to close out the season.

Looking to next season, the Jackets need to improve their goaltending situation to give themselves a better shot at making the playoffs.

Columbus Blue Jackets' young core must take another step

Fantilli scored six goals in his last four games to finish his second NHL season – first full one – with 31 goals. He also stepped in admirably as Monahan's injury fill-in on the top line and showed multiple signs that he's the type of center the Blue Jackets lacked.

Even better news for the Blue Jackets is the core of talented youngsters who are rapidly developing into impact players along with Fantilli. Kirill Marchenko challenged Zach Werenski for the team's scoring lead with 31 goals, 43 assists and 74 points. Kent Johnson finished third in scoring with 24-33-57 despite missing 14 games with a shoulder injury.

Dmitri Voronkov finished with 23-24-47, Sillinger continued to develop into a solid two-way checking center in the mold of captain Boone Jenner, Denton Mateychuk earned a role on the second defense pairing and Greaves appears ready for at least a look at the NHL backup next season.

Jake Christiansen, Yegor Chinakhov, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Mikael Pyhtia and Jordan Harris also had impressive moments. Getting further development out of their young core will be imperative for the Jackets to become a playoff team.

Columbus Blue Jackets are due for better injury luck

Once again, the Blue Jackets topped 300 in man-games lost due to injuries by finishing with 324. Most of their injury woes the past three years were due to terrible luck, but a full look into potential causes is warranted anytime one team has the number of health issues as the Jackets.

The biggest losses this season were Jenner and Gudbranson to shoulder surgeries in October, Johnson and Voronkov to shoulder injuries in October and Monahan to wrist surgery in January. Imagine what the Jackets' point total might've looked like with that group healthy enough to play full seasons.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets blow out New York Islanders to finish emotional season: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- April 19, 2025

Dean Evason almost made it.

After keeping it together on the Blue Jackets' bench April 18 at Nationwide Arena amid "Johnny Hockey!" chants blended with a backbeat of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," Evason's eyes welled while standing behind a lectern at his postgame press conference.

Asked about an emotionally trying season that began with an offseason tragedy that took the lives of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew and ended just shy of the playoffs following a 6-1 romp over the New York Islanders, the Blue Jackets' head coach momentarily lost his stoicism.

"Yeah," he said, nearly melting into a puddle of tears. "It's a lot of stuff. Right? A lot of stuff. So, yeah ... It's just a lot of stuff that we'll go over here, but we're very proud of how this team played."

The Blue Jackets' faithful, otherwise known as "The 5th Line," agreed wholeheartedly.

After an emotional video montage about the season played during the final TV timeout, fans stood for an ovation as the final seconds of the season ticked away. A final cannon blast to celebrate the team's 40th win was followed by blue and red streamers and then chants of "Johnny Hockey!"

The Jackets skated over to wish Islanders veteran Matt Martin well going into retirement, and captain Boone Jenner thanked fans over the P.A. system for their continued support – vowing that next season wouldn't end so abruptly.

The Blue Jackets lingered on their home ice, taking it all in following a draining campaign.

"You almost don't want to leave the ice, to be honest," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "You just want to enjoy it and embrace it. It's obviously been an emotional year, but just having our fan support and having our team put it together ... has been super special. It'll be a season that I always remember and cherish. It's just been a lot of fun. I'm sad that it's over, but we're going to be hungrier than ever for next year."

Here are three takeaways:

Dean Evason says Johnny Gaudreau will remain 'a presence' in Columbus Blue Jackets' locker room

Evason was asked about his take on the way Gaudreau was celebrated by fans and players after the final horn, and he finished his postgame press conference with a declaration.

"We clearly wish that 'Johnny' chants would continue here this year, but I'll tell you this: He will not leave our dressing room, as long as I'm here," Evason said. "He will be in there and he will be a presence, and he will help us win hockey games and he'll hopefully get us to where we want to be ... and that's to win a Stanley Cup."

Gaudreau's presence was omnipresent with the Blue Jackets all season.

They wore helmet stickers with Johnny's No. 13 and Matthew's No. 21 at Boston College, kept Johnny's locker stall intact in their dressing room — including a pair of his gloves — and the postgame award handed out in the locker room switched from a blue Civil War kepi hat to a gray felt donkey cap with a No. 13 on the side.

That's an ode to Gaudreau's jovial personality and habit of calling his friends "a donkey," whenever they did or said something humorous.

The Blue Jackets also hung Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey in their locker room every game, home and road, and they concluded many practices with "The Johnny Skate" — in which a chosen shooter takes aim the empty net at the other end of the rink to determine how many conditioning laps the team skates.

Werenski finished with two points on a goal and assist against the Islanders, which gave him a scoring line for the season of 22 goals, 59 assists and 82 points in 81 games.

His assist and point totals tied for second-most in franchise history for a single season, pulling Werenski even with former Blue Jackets forward Artemi Panarin in each category. He also finished third in franchise history with 22 multi-point games, trailing only Rick Nash's 24 in 2008-09 and Panarin's 25 in 2018-19.

Werenski, who is likely to finish top three in voting for the Norris Trophy awarded to the NHL's best defenseman, also excelled defensively.

"He's one of the guys we're talking about, who's committed to playing both ends of the rink," Evason said. "Sure, it's wonderful he scores points. No question. We need points, we need goals, we need offense to win hockey games ... but you have to keep it out of your net too, and he's committed to doing that. He's been a big part of our team. He's been a leader and will be for a long time."

Greaves, Mateychuk are Cleveland Monsters again

After helping the Blue Jackets finish the season with six straight wins, all in regulation, rookie goalie Jet Greaves and rookie defenseman Denton Mateychuk were loaned back to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters to finish their season.

The Monsters are trying to clinch the final playoff spot in the AHL's North Division, so getting some high-end help on the defensive side of the ice should be a big boost.

Mateychuk played 45 NHL games after starting the season in Cleveland — cementing a regular role on the second defensive pairing — and Greaves starred for the Jackets in their final five games. In fact, his play against the Islanders prompted chants of "Jet! Jet! Jet!" on multiple occasions.

Mateychuk finished his first NHL season with four goals, nine assists and 13 points while providing a calm, steady presence in the defensive zone. Greaves earned the NHL's First Star of the Week honor April 14 for the first three wins in a 5-0-0 stretch that ended with a 0.80 goals-against average, .975 save percentage and two shutouts as an emergency recall from the Monsters.

Greaves nearly completed a third straight shutout before the Islanders' Hudson Fasching finally got a shot past him with 5:12 left to play. It ended a shutout streak of 173:38 for Greaves, who'd only allowed one goal in the prior two games by Alex Ovechkin, the NHL's new all-time leader in goals.

"It's been fun to watch him the last week or whatever it's been," Werenski said. "He's a special player and a special person, I think, just the way he approaches the game, the way he works. It's one of the best I've seen, so I'm super happy for him, and I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of Jet."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets end emotional season with powerful send-off win over the Islanders

By Aaron Portzline- April 19, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — With just under five minutes to play, the chants began in Nationwide Arena. There was the old standby — “CBJ! CBJ! CBJ!” — and a new one Columbus Blue Jackets fans might be letting rip for years to come: “Jet! Jet! Jet!”

But the one that pushed the scene over the edge for Blue Jackets coaches and players was the chant everybody knew was coming. Coach Dean Evason said it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

“John-ny Hock-ey! John-ny Hock-ey! John-ny Hock-ey!”

The Blue Jackets ended their season with a 6-1 win over the New York Islanders on Thursday before an over-capacity crowd of 18,874, an exclamation point on the highest-scoring season in franchise history and a celebratory send-off for a club that barely missed the playoffs despite every opportunity to be overwhelmed by its circumstance.

That’s what the “CBJ!” chants mean. The rapid-fire “Jet! Jet! Jet!” was a nod to goaltender Jet Greaves, who barely missed his third shutout in four games — the Islanders scored at 14:48 of the third period — but delivered another stellar performance, making 36 saves.

The Johnny Hockey serenade needs no explanation. Blue Jackets winger Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed three weeks before training camp, has been a motivating force behind the Blue Jackets, who surprised the entire NHL all season before getting eliminated from the playoff race on Wednesday.

As the Blue Jackets circled the ice and waved to the crowd after the final buzzer, the Chuck Berry song “Johnny B. Goode” blared.

“You almost don’t want to leave the ice, to be honest,” Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. “You want to enjoy it and embrace it.

“It’s obviously been an emotional year. Having our fans’ support, having our teammates bring it together ... it’s a season I’ll always remember and cherish. It’s been a lot of fun. Sad that it’s over, but we’re going to be hungrier than ever next year.”

Evason has been lauded for the way he stepped into the Blue Jackets dressing room without knowing any of the players — he was hired in late July — and helped steer them through tragedy into becoming a high-scoring, high-pressure club that took very few nights off.

His eyes welled and his voice broke when he was asked if it will be difficult to say goodbye to this season, this collection of players.

“Yeah, for sure,” Evason said. “There’s a lot of stuff, right? ... (pause) A lot of stuff.”

Then, after another extended pause: “We’re very proud of how this team played.”

Cole Sillinger, Dante Fabbro, Dmitri Voronkov, Sean Kuraly, Adam Fantilli and Werenski scored goals. Twelve players hit the scoresheet by generating at least one point, a metaphor for the season.

Werenski, with 23-59-82, finished tied for the second-highest single-season point total in franchise history, only five points short of Artemi Panarin’s record set in 2018-19. He set franchise records for goals, assists and points by a defenseman and had 22 multi-point games.

Fantilli's goal with 1:23 remaining was his 31st of the season, tying him with Kirill Marchenko for tops on the Blue Jackets. He's 20 years old.

"We played the right way," Evason said. "It would have been easy, or easier, for the team to just run and gun and get into a track meet and not worry about our defensive play. We didn't do that. We're proud and excited about how the guys played on that end of it."

Backstopping all of it was Greaves, who improved to 5-0 with a .975 save percentage and 0.80 goals-against average since he was called up exactly one week earlier.

When the Islanders scored late in the third, his shutout streak was ended at 173 minutes and 38 seconds, the fourth longest in franchise history. He stopped 156 of the 160 shots he faced during the stretch, including shutouts against the Washington Capitals and Philadelphia Flyers.

"It's been fun to watch him the last week or whatever it's been," Werenski said. "He's a special player and a special person, the way he approaches the game and the way he works. He's one of the best I've seen. We're super happy for him and I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of Jet."

Greaves was leaving right away to join AHL Cleveland on the road in Scranton, Pa. Defenseman Denton Mateychuk will join him, but both likely will be NHL mainstays next season and beyond.

This was Greaves' ninth recall from Cleveland this season, but never before has he been given such an NHL opportunity or left such a mark in Columbus.

"You never expect that," he said. "But I'm just so grateful to be in that type of situation. The fans have supported this team all year, with everything that's gone on. It's been so special to see that. I'm so grateful."

The word grateful was used frequently in the postgame dressing room. So was the word disappointed.

The Blue Jackets wanted desperately to make the postseason for the first time since 2020, but they fell, ultimately, one regulation win short. That's going to sting for the next little while, players said, before turning into motivation when the offseason workouts begin after a couple of weeks' rest.

"I felt disappointed waking up today," Werenski said. "But that send-off by the fans ... to come out and see the support, the standing 'o,' the 'Jet!' chants. We knew it'd be special tonight. Obviously it was a pretty emotional year in a lot of ways, but no better way to end it than in front of our fans."

The Blue Jackets will spend the next couple of days cleaning out their lockers. Those who don't live in Ohio year-round will start making their way back home.

There are six prominent unrestricted free agents on the roster — forwards James van Riemsdyk, Justin Danforth, and Kuraly, and defensemen Dante Fabbro, Jack Johnson and Ivan Provorov — who may have been playing their final game with Columbus.

GM Don Waddell likely will be active this summer, so whatever happens this offseason, this group — the players who endured the Gaudreau tragedy and still learned to find joy and success playing hockey — will never be fully intact again.

"We wish those Johnny chants would continue this year (with the playoffs)," Evason said. "But I'll tell you this: (Gaudreau) will not leave our dressing room. As long as I'm here, he will be in there and he'll be a presence and he'll help us win hockey games, and hopefully he'll get us where we want to be, and that's winning the Stanley Cup."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets head into offseason with a mixture of frustration and optimism

By Aaron Portzline- April 20, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — One message, but two different perspectives, because Don Waddell and Dean Evason have two different jobs.

On Friday, the day after the Columbus Blue Jackets ended a memorable and unique season with a 6-1 win over the New York Islanders in Nationwide Arena, Waddell, the general manager, and Evason, the coach, met with the media to discuss what happened and what's ahead.

Evason knows full well that the Blue Jackets, which came one win short of making the playoffs, have a strong foundation and a bright future, but the frustration and anger of falling short were making all of that cloudy.

Asked if the Jackets were "further ahead" than he could have expected when he was hired by Columbus last summer, Evason said:

"Well, we're not far enough, because we're not (still) playing. We're not preparing to play (in the Stanley Cup playoffs), so I want to make that clear. I know we're going to get some accolades and all that kind of stuff. But at the end of the day, we're not in the playoffs. That was our first step, and we didn't get there.

"Are we happy with the foundation we're continuing to build? Sure. We're extremely positive. But there's negativity, too, because we're not playing tomorrow."

Meanwhile, Waddell is required to have a bigger-picture view. He was as grumpy as anybody last Wednesday when the Montreal Canadiens' win over his previous club, the Carolina Hurricanes, eliminated the Blue Jackets from the postseason after 81 games.

The Blue Jackets were expected to spend the final months of the season tracking the NHL draft lottery odds, not doing playoff math. He highlighted the character of the veterans and other players in the room, saying, "This was one of the strongest teams I've ever been involved with."

He also noted that so many of the Blue Jackets' blue-chip young players bloomed this season, driving the offensive outburst that kept the Jackets in the hunt.

"Our goal is always to make the playoffs," Waddell said. "When you make the playoffs, you don't want it to be a one-and-done situation. You want to make the playoffs, and then in a few years, we'll stop talking about making the playoffs and it'll be about winning the Cup.

"I truly believe, after what I witnessed this year, that we have most of the pieces in that locker room. There are going to be changes (this summer). There are unrestricted free agents and needs that we need to address. We'll do everything in our power to address those needs."

This was an educational season for Waddell. He was impressed with the Blue Jackets' stable of young players — especially the dynamic forwards — but a full season and ground level, closely observing this group of players on the ice and off the ice, will inform the moves he makes this summer.

And there figures to be lots of moves, especially from the red line back.

The Blue Jackets set a franchise record with 267 goals this season, finishing eighth in the NHL. Most of the foundation up front is veterans in their prime or young players on the rise, so expect Waddell to, as he's said, "fill in around the edges" up front.

It's the defense and goaltending that could see the most changes. The Blue Jackets also allowed 267 goals, the eighth most in the league this season. Of the 16 clubs that qualified for the postseason, only one (Montreal, 261) allowed more than 240 goals.

The Blue Jackets have six prominent unrestricted free agents: forwards Justin Danforth, Sean Kuraly and James van Riemsdyk, and defensemen Dante Fabbro, Jack Johnson and Ivan Provorov. Waddell said contract talks with the players they want to keep were put on hold during the season's stretch drive.

"I'll sit with the coaches in the next couple of days," Waddell said. "There are a few obvious ones we'd like to have back. We've talked about Provorov and Fabbro. There are some other guys we'd like to have back, but we haven't made those determinations yet.

"Not making the playoffs, we have some time here. We can study the market and say, 'If we don't sign this player, we can replace him with player X or Z. All of that will happen over the next 4 to 6 weeks."

Among defensemen, Fabbro and Provorov played top-four roles for the Blue Jackets this season, so losing either would be a big loss. Up front, Danforth and Kuraly played significant roles on the third and fourth lines and as penalty killers, while van Riemsdyk moved all over the line and finished with 16 goals.

The roster spot that probably demands the most attention is goaltending.

Elvis Merzlikins showed improvement for much of the season, but his game dipped dramatically in the final month of the season, just as the Blue Jackets were hanging in the race. In his final eight outings, including seven starts, he had an .865 save percentage and 4.24 goals-against average. Worse, there were on-ice temper tantrums that NHL goaltenders cannot exude.

Meanwhile, backup Daniil Tarasov earned no confidence with the coaching staff, going long stretches without games.

It wasn't until the final week of the season, when Jet Greaves was recalled from AHL Cleveland, that goaltending became a position of strength. Greaves has a one-way NHL contract for next season, and his run of play would almost certainly give him a solid shot as the Blue Jackets' backup next season.

But there is much to sort out here.

Merzlikins has two years remaining on a contract that pays him \$5.4 million per season. Tarasov is a restricted free agent, meaning the Blue Jackets would need to extend a qualifying offer this summer to maintain his rights.

"If we don't examine every position and dissect everything that we've done this year, we're not doing our jobs," Waddell said. "The goaltending numbers are not as good as we hoped they'd be. I said a while ago that I thought Elvis won us a lot more games than he lost us. We know there's a lot of talent there, but we're looking for more of a consistency factor.

"To say we're just staying with the status quo ... maybe that's the way it ends up, but we have to examine this position like all of the positions and make decisions."

Waddell has all of the tools necessary to make significant upgrades via trades and free-agent signings.

According to PuckPedia, the Blue Jackets will have a projected \$41 million in salary cap space heading into the summer.

The Blue Jackets also have two first-round draft picks, including the Minnesota Wild's first-round pick acquired last November in the deal that sent David Jiricek to the Wild. As of today, those two picks are 13th and 20th heading into the June draft.

Waddell has shown a willingness to pursue other teams' restricted free agents via offer sheets, but they'd be slightly limited in what type of offer they could extend.

A restricted free agent lifted from another team's roster with an offer sheet requires draft-pick compensation, and the Blue Jackets do not own their second-round pick this coming draft. That was traded to the Philadelphia Flyers two summers ago for Provorov.

Waddell was asked if he had the flexibility to buy out contracts of highly paid, underperforming players. Two leap to mind: Merzlikins (\$5.4 million per season through 2026-27) and defenseman Damon Severson (\$6.25 million per season through 2030-31), who was a healthy scratch 10 times this season.

"That's not something we're looking at," Waddell said. "I can't say how the summer is going to play out, but, as of now, we haven't talked about it."

However, one thing is clear. Waddell says he didn't come to Columbus to oversee a roster rebuild. He wants to win immediately. The Blue Jackets don't need sweeping changes to become competitive. Expect Waddell to be aggressive in helping them take another big step forward.

"There will be some challenges, but every summer there are deals to be made. It's just a matter of what pieces you're willing to give up for it," he said.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: The good, bad and ugly of our 'bold' preseason predictions

By Aaron Portzline- April 21, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: 'Boldness' revisited

Before every season, we're encouraged to make bold predictions about the teams we cover. It's a chance to show readers how much we know and how closely we're paying attention, but, more than anything, it's an opportunity to embarrass ourselves thoroughly months later.

So here goes!

On Oct. 4, 2024, we

Published "Blue Jackets bold predictions: Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson ready to take off." OK, so far so good. Here's what we saw coming and where we hit and missed, graded on a four-point scale: 1. Victory Dance, 2. Round of Applause, 3. Meh and 4. Next Question.

1. Out of the cellar

The prediction: "Not only will (the Blue Jackets) not finish last overall, but they also won't finish last in the Eastern Conference. And now we're going to take it a step further: They won't finish last in the Metropolitan Division. I'm not saying who will finish last because I don't want hate mail from New York Islanders, Washington Capitals or Philadelphia Flyers fans. We're not predicting the playoffs. We're not saying the Blue Jackets don't have a long way to go. But we suspect they'll play over their heads — and way over expectations — this season."

The result: You're welcome. The Blue Jackets finished ahead of 12 other teams in the overall standings. They were ninth in the Eastern Conference and fourth in the Metro. They did, in fact, play "way over expectations" this season. If we'd only shut up before that second sentence. The Capitals were the best team in the East.

Grade: Round of Applause

2. Make March matter

The prediction: "I've been saying this for a while now, that a proper goal for this season is to still be within sniffing distance of a wild-card spot when the NHL Stadium Series game between the Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings is staged in Ohio Stadium on March 1. That's probably a bigger 'ask' than the first bold prediction. But my hunch is that the Blue Jackets-Red Wings game will have implications."

The result: Vegas, anyone? Part of what made that atmosphere so incredible was the fact Detroit and Columbus were tied in the standings and both in playoff spots when the puck dropped. The Blue Jackets, with the win, jumped the Red Wings into seventh place.

Grade: Victory Dance.

3. 'Adamo' Dynamo

The prediction: “It says here that Adamo “Adam” Fantilli, who will be the Blue Jackets’ second-line center — he’s skating with James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson — will lead the club in assists and points this season. He’s also playing a significant role on the power play.”

The result: Fantilli had 31-23-54 — a very good sophomore season, especially when you consider he missed half of his rookie year with an injury. But he was seventh on the club in assists and fifth in points. His 31 goals were tied with Marchenko for the team lead.

Grade: Next Question

4. Marchenko: 33 goals

The prediction: “So far in camp, Marchenko has skated on the right side of the No. 1 line, with Jenner now at left wing and Sean Monahan at center. That line should start with the puck and possess more than Blue Jackets fans are used to seeing, and Marchenko — a part of that, to be sure — can only benefit. The Jackets asked Marchenko to be harder on pucks and more reliable in his defensive zone. Considerable progress has been shown on both fronts.”

The result: So close, but the spirit of this prediction was bang-on. Marchenko stayed on the No. 1 line all season, but with a rotating cast to his left. He had 31 goals, but finished the season on a season-long nine-game goal-less streak. I’m taking that personally.

Grade: Meh

5. Won’t be denied

The prediction: “It’s impossible to watch the Blue Jackets over the past two weeks and conclude that Denton Mateychuk isn’t already one of the organization’s top six defensemen. He’s incredibly poised for a 20-year-old facing NHL competition for the first time. He’s rarely out of position and makes smart, quick passes, often short and subtle. The Blue Jackets do not want to rush their prospects, and (GM Don) Waddell is particularly averse to this. But there are exceptions to every rule, and Mateychuk might deserve to be the exception. We’re not saying he’s going to open the season in Columbus, though that’s not out of the question. But Mateychuk will play for a long time in the NHL, and he’ll get 40-plus games in Columbus this season.”

The result: (Pats self on back) Mateychuk did not start the season in Columbus, but, no, he would not be denied. After lighting up the AHL, Mateychuk was recalled in mid-December and stuck in the NHL the rest of the way, playing 45 games. He averaged 18:02 per game, too, which is quite impressive for a 20-year-old.

Grade: Victory Dance

6. Coach’s impression

The prediction: “(Dean) Evason isn’t as loquacious as (Ken) Hitchcock. He’s not as easily provoked as (John) Tortorella. But there’s a fire that burns below the surface, and there will be times when his passion bubbles to the surface. Fans can’t get enough of that. Mostly, though, his players will do the talking with their play for Evason, and that’s enough. There will likely be some explosive nights in Nationwide (Arena) this season.”

The result: If we missed here, we may have missed low. Fans quickly became attached to Evason, not just for his fiery attitude on the bench — poor Scott Ford — but also for his genuine emotion in helping navigate the Blue Jackets through the Johnny Gaudreau tragedy. As noted, this town loves coaches. Evason worked his way in quickly.

Grade: Round of Applause

7. PIMs on the way

The prediction: “Over the past three seasons, the Jackets have finished 27th (2021-22), 25th (2022-23) and 24th (2023-24) in penalty minutes. Evason’s Minnesota Wild teams, by contrast, were fourth, sixth and third, respectively. It hurt to play the Wild. I know, I know. PIMs are not a measure of greatness. But they can be a reflection of the style of play. The Blue Jackets, under Evason, will play with a different energy than you’ve seen in three or four seasons.”

The result: This wasn’t the most forthright prediction, but the spirit of the prognostication was clear. The Blue Jackets did pick up the pace and the physicality under Evason. They ranked 16th in the NHL with 676 PIMs, thanks largely to Mathieu Olivier, who led the league in fights and was second in the league in PIMs (139). In a general sense, though, if you watched these Blue Jackets, you know the pace was faster than anything we’ve seen since 2019-20.

Grade: Round of Applause

8. Johnson poised to break out

The prediction: “After a massive summer, (Kent) Johnson showed up at camp looking noticeably thicker and stronger. Once he stepped on the ice, you could see how he’s gotten a step quicker, too. He has been, simply put, the Blue Jackets’ best player through much of camp. The guy who had 16 goals, 24 assists and 40 points as a rookie two seasons ago looks ready to justify his No. 5 selection in 2021. If anyone challenges Fantilli for the assists lead, it will likely be Johnson.”

The result: The art of conversation, it is said, is to say a little less than you wish. The art of prediction, it seems, is to stop one sentence short. This is pretty much on target: Johnson did “justify” his draft spot with 24-33-57 in 68 games, career highs across the board. He was fourth on the club in assists.

Grade: Round of Applause

9. Active at the deadline

The prediction: “The Blue Jackets have several players heading into their final contract years with unrestricted free agency looming in the summer of 2025. I’m not saying Waddell will part ways with all of those players. He values veteran players in the dressing room, so some will probably stay. They might even sign extensions before the trade deadline. But surely some veterans will be on the move, especially if the younger players push the veterans for playing time, as the organization hopes.”

The result: Waddell not only kept all of his UFAs, he added two others — Luke Kunin and Christian Fischer — at the deadline. The Blue Jackets were in a playoff position when the trade deadline arrived in early March, and Waddell opted not to take any veterans out of the room. The only vet who signed an extension (so far) is Zachary Aston-Reese, who is signed through 2025-26.

Grade: Next Question

10. Sillinger siblings

The prediction: “Since the creation of the NHL in 1917, 47 sets of brothers have played on the same team in at least one game. At some point this season, we predict Cole Sillinger and his older brother, Owen, will make it 48. We’re not saying it’s going to happen by the Oct. 10 regular-season opener, although it could. But it’s going to happen at some point this season, and it’ll be a franchise first.”

The result: So close. Owen Sillinger made his NHL debut on Jan. 9 vs. Seattle, but ironically went into the Blue Jackets lineup because Cole Sillinger was out with injury. A month later, Owen had season-ending knee surgery, and now he’s an unrestricted free agent. So, the chance that it happens again is murky.

They may have to settle for being the second set of brothers to play for the Blue Jackets. Kris and Ryan Russell both played for Columbus, but, like the Sillingers, never played in the same game.

Grade: Next Question

Item No. 2: Kuraly's future

Thursday's 6-1 win over the Islanders was the final game of the season, and quite possibly the end of Sean Kuraly's time with the Blue Jackets. He scored a goal, had a plus-2 rating, had a hit, blocked a shot and was credited with three takeaways.

Kuraly said he took some time to savor the evening, just in case he plays elsewhere next season. He's one of nine unrestricted free agents for the Blue Jackets, but stands out given he was raised (and still lives) in the Columbus suburb of Dublin.

"I just tried to go out there and enjoy it, soak it all in, maybe take a few more looks than you normally do," Kuraly said. "You never really know what's next, so how do you stay in the moment? I realize there is some reality to some of these things.

"It was a fun night to enjoy it with my teammates and the fans, and for the most part, we did that."

Kuraly signed a four-year, \$10 million deal with the Blue Jackets in the summer of 2021, a difficult time for the organization. Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky had left via free agency two years earlier; Nick Foligno, Seth Jones, Cam Atkinson and David Savard had all been traded; and the franchise's winningest coach, John Tortorella, had moved along.

One of the reasons Kuraly chose Columbus over numerous free-agent suitors, he said, was to help the organization stay afloat after the mass exodus of talent.

It was not an easy four years, but they ended with a crescendo. The Blue Jackets didn't make the playoffs, but they hung in the race all season, and the franchise seems to have finally found its footing. Kuraly said he could take pride in the progress.

"Not a lot of people get a chance to do what I did the last four years," Kuraly said. "What an incredible experience playing in front of so many family and friends, and this whole city. They really rally behind this team, and it's been super special.

"Like anything, you'd like the progress to be linear, increasingly better each year. But I've learned throughout not just my NHL career, but my hockey career and life, that's just not how it goes. It was a great single season for us, but also a culmination of efforts that we put together for a lot of years. The pieces came together for us this year better than they have in the last few years."

Kuraly's ice time plunged by almost two minutes per game under Evason, from 13:44 in 2023-24 to 11:45 this season. There was a long stretch of the season in which Kuraly was missing from the penalty kill, even as the Blue Jackets struggled to kill penalties.

Waddell mentioned UFA defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro as players the club is interested in re-signing, but said there were others as well. So, nobody can say for sure where things are headed with Kuraly.

The other UFAs are Justin Danforth, van Riemsdyk, Kevin Labanc, Fischer, Kunin and Jack Johnson.

Item No. 3: Snacks

- Blue Jackets assistant coaches Niklas Bäckström (goaltending), Jared Boll and Steve McCarthy have contracts that expire this summer, but there's no word yet about their futures. All three were holdovers from the previous staff when Evason was hired. Evason then brought in two of his own guys, hiring Ford,

who had been a longtime AHL assistant coach in the Nashville Predators organization, and promoting veteran coach Mike Haviland from AHL Cleveland.

- As of today, the Blue Jackets have the 13th and 20th picks in this summer's draft. We say "as of today" because both could change. The Jackets, as one of 16 non-playoff teams, have a chance to "win" the lottery, but they cannot win the No. 1 pick. The most a team can move up is 10 spots, so the best the Blue Jackets could do is pick No. 3. They have a 2 percent chance of "winning," but a 2.5 percent chance of sliding down one spot. That's the combined odds of the three non-playoff teams that finished ahead of them in the standings: Utah (1.5 percent), Vancouver (0.5) and Montreal via Calgary (0.5). The Wild's pick could fluctuate as the playoffs move along.
- Elvis Merzlikins acknowledged at his end-of-season media scrum that he suffered a concussion that knocked him out of the final five games. He was back with the Blue Jackets for the last day of the season, but dressed in a temporary locker stall in the middle of the dressing room because all other stalls were taken.
- One cool note: The Blue Jackets had rookie Jack Williams in a temporary locker stall paired with Merzlikins in the middle of the dressing room. But when Jack Johnson, a veteran of 1,228 NHL games, learned that Williams was making his NHL debut that night, he asked the training staff to put Williams in his stall and let him take the temporary, since he was a healthy scratch. He wanted Williams' first experience to be the real deal. Classy move.
- Expect news soon regarding which Blue Jackets players will take part in the IIHF World Championship, which runs May 9-25 in Stockholm, Sweden and Herning, Denmark. In recent seasons, Blue Jackets players would already have been invited and made their decisions clear, but staying in the playoff race so long delayed those conversations. Zach Werenski has already ruled out playing for Team USA, citing a busy summer that includes his wedding.
- Four Blue Jackets played in all 82 games this season: Fantilli, Kuraly, Olivier and Provorov. That last player should not be a surprise: Provorov has played 696 games without missing a game to injury. The only three games he's missed were in 2021-22 due to a positive COVID-19 test. This was Provorov's sixth 82-game season. Impressive. Only twice before have four Blue Jackets players dressed in every game of an 82-game season: 2018-19 — Josh Anderson, Pierre-Luc Dubois, Savard and Werenski; and 2016-17 — Atkinson, Boone Jenner, Jack Johnson and Brandon Saad.
- Speaking of Savard, raise a glass for the former Blue Jackets defenseman, who announced this week he'll be retiring after this season, or whenever the Montreal Canadiens' playoff run ends. Savard, 34, played in 597 games for the Blue Jackets, the fifth-most in franchise history and tops (for now) among defensemen. His 958 blocked shots are tops on the franchise list, and his 1,117 hits are fourth all-time, tops among blueliners. He scored 40 goals in the regular season for Columbus and only one in 37 playoff games, but it was a freakin' beauty, part of the Blue Jackets' come-from-behind win in Game 1 of their sweep over the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2019.
- Sunday Gathering trivia: The Blue Jackets (40-33-9, 89 points) made a 23-point improvement this season from their 2023-24 record (27-43-12, 66 points). That's the second-largest improvement from one season to the next in franchise history. In what season did they make their biggest climb?
- AHL Cleveland will play the Toronto Marlies in a best-of-three first-round series to open the AHL playoffs. Game 1 is Thursday in Cleveland, while Games 2 (Saturday) and 3 (Sunday, if necessary) are in Toronto. The winner advances to play the Laval Rocket, which finished with the AHL's best record under former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent.

- Luca Del Bel Belluz led the Cleveland Monsters with 27 goals, finishing 27-26-53 in 61 games. That's the third-highest goal total for a Monsters player since the franchise became affiliated with Columbus in 2015, trailing only Zac Dalpe (33, 2018-19) and Trey Fix-Wolansky (29, 2022-23). Pretty impressive totals, considering Del Bel Belluz spent a month (Jan. 9 to Feb. 8) with the Blue Jackets when they were crushed with injuries to centers Monahan and Cole Sillinger while Jenner was still recovering from shoulder surgery. Del Bel Belluz was a second-round pick (No. 44) in 2022.
- Goaltender Evan Gardner, the Blue Jackets' second-round pick (No. 60) last summer, made his pro debut for Cleveland on Saturday, stopping 16 of 19 in a 3-0 loss. Gardner signed an amateur tryout agreement with Cleveland earlier this month. He's still eligible to return to his junior club, the Saskatoon Blades of the Western Hockey League, for another junior season in 2025-26.
- For the third straight season, Fix-Wolansky was Cleveland's leading point-getter, totaling 26-34-60 in 65 games. The one difference this season: no NHL recalls for Fix-Wolansky, who will be a UFA this summer because of his age (25) and because he's played fewer than 80 NHL games (26). If he decides to move along, he will have made quite an impact in Cleveland. Fix-Wolansky is the franchise's all-time record-holder in goals (112), assists (147), points (259), power-play goals (34), game-winning goals (22) and single-season points (71, 2022-23). He's also third in games played (289).
- Trivia answer: In 2016-17, the Blue Jackets finished with a franchise-record 108 points (50-24-8), a 32-point improvement over the 2015-16 club, which had 76 points (34-40-8).

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets frustrated by season's end but encouraged by growth](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- April 19, 2025

Dean Evason made his usual walk to Nationwide Arena this morning, but things certainly felt different.

First off, it was warm enough in Columbus for the Blue Jackets head coach to wear shorts, a sign that spring is on the way in the capital city.

It also meant, though, that Evason wouldn't have a practice to run or a game to coach. The Blue Jackets' inspiring run to try to grab the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference fell two points short, one more victory being the difference between vying for the greatest trophy in all of sports and starting summer vacation.

So instead of preparing for the Washington Capitals on Friday, Evason, his coaching staff and the front office spent today conducting exit interviews with players.

"I walked through the door and it sucked, to be honest with you," Evason said. "We were here pretty early and the coaches are still grinding in the gym, but yeah, it sucks that I'm not wearing my tracksuit right now."

Among players, the feeling was mutual. The Blue Jackets made tremendous strides during this campaign, adding 13 wins and 23 points to their total from a season ago, rising from consecutive last-place finishes in the Metropolitan Division to fourth, and staying in the playoff race until the very last game despite preseason prognostications that they would be vying for the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.

By any measure, it was major progress, and in the weeks and months ahead, the Blue Jackets will likely be able to take some solace in the fact they have set themselves up for good things in the years ahead.

On this day, though, the emotions of falling just short of their goal remained very real.

"It hurts after all the time we put in this year with this group and how we grew together and the adversity we went through," captain Boone Jenner said. "It stings not to be able to get a chance to play in the playoffs and go for our ultimate goal."

"It's hard as a competitor to say it was successful when you're not playing in the playoffs," Zach Werenski added. "We're just short, but it's still short of it. In a sense, we made huge progress this year and took steps in the right direction, but I don't know if I'd use the word successful. It's still a process and still a long way to get to where we ultimately want to be."

Perhaps the hardest part was having to go their separate ways much earlier than the players and coaches had hoped. Throughout the season, members of the team spoke about how this was one of the most tight-knit groups they had ever been a part of, a bond that's been built through the growing pains of the previous seasons as well as the August passing of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew.

It was a tragedy that shocked the sports world and devastated the Blue Jackets, and the story of the 2024-25 team can't be told without mentioning both the heartbreak and inspiration that came from the brothers' deaths. As difficult a situation as it was to go through, there was also a bond that built between team members, who spent the entire season honoring and playing for their teammate.

"The one thing that really stood out for me is the character in that locker room," president of hockey operations and general manager Don Waddell said. "I'm so proud of these guys with what we faced at

the beginning of the year and throughout the year. There was no quit in these guys. I've been around teams for a long time, and this is one of the strongest locker rooms I've ever been involved in."

The Blue Jackets will hope to continue to build on that closeness going forward, and much of the core group will remain. Maybe the most exciting thing for the franchise is the fact many of the team's young players took major steps this season, with Kirill Marchenko (age 24; 31-43-74), Kent Johnson (22; 24-33-57), Adam Fantilli (20; 31-23-54) and Dmitri Voronkov (24; 23-24-47) all posting career highs in both goals and points.

Add in such pieces as 21-year-old center Cole Sillinger and 20-year-old defenseman Denton Mateychuk and the Blue Jackets feel like the future is bright as those players continue to mature and improve.

"You could see the maturity in their game rise quickly," center Sean Monahan said. "At times, they carried the load. It's a credit to the work that they put in. You look at the younger group on the team, they care so much about winning and getting better and care about their game and do everything they can to help the team win. It's a real good sign to see."

But as much as the progress made this year seems to suggest more is on the way, the stark reality of this season is that the Blue Jackets didn't make enough in their own mind. The 16-team race to the Stanley Cup begins tomorrow, and the Blue Jackets won't be a part of it for a fifth straight season.

"We're not far enough because we're not playing," Evason said. "We're not preparing to play. I want to make that clear. I know we're going to get some accolades and all that kind of stuff, but at the end of the day, we're not in the playoffs. That was our first step was to get in the playoffs. We didn't get there."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Fantilli Took Leaps Forward in 2024-25

By Nicholas Arnold- April 19, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets' season is over. They finished two points out of a playoff spot, when most had written them off completely in October. Talk about progress.

This campaign was certainly one of catharsis for the organization. Aside from Johnny Gaudreau's tragic death that rocked the hockey world last August, the Blue Jackets were in turmoil over the last several seasons. Needing a change at the top after previous hero general manager (GM) Jarmo Kekalainen lived long enough to see himself become the villain, three failed head coaching hires, star players wanting new homes, and more. It was time for some upheaval.

The new broom swept clean, brought in Don Waddell as GM and Dean Evason as head coach, and removed everyone not invested in the organization's long-term growth. There's been an aura of community, hope, and optimism surrounding the team since puck drop on opening night of the 2024-25 season. One of the biggest generators of that optimism has been the young upstart, Adam Fantilli. He was the beacon of optimism and everything about him sang "just happy to be here" in his 2023-24 rookie season, and that energy followed in 2024-25.

Fantilli's First Full Season a Success

Fantilli's rookie season was on track to put him in Calder Trophy consideration – with 27 points in 49 games, he was on pace to start his career with 20 goals and 45 points. A freak accident cut those plans short as he suffered a calf laceration in a game against the Seattle Kraken at the end of Jan. 2024. His season ended that day.

He brought his trademark combination of skill and positive vibes back to the lineup for the start of this season and has been an invaluable part of the forward corps. After playing most of last season on the wing, he's become a fixture down the middle and even stepped up as the interim number-one center when Sean Monahan was out with a wrist injury to help keep the team in playoff contention.

He plays a physical brand of hockey, dishing out 113 hits, and has been durable, as one of only four Blue Jackets to suit up for all 82 games. As any young player will have struggles, he twice went more than five or more games without a point. He did take a step in the right direction though, finding his way to the scoresheet in exactly half of the games he played (41 of 82) and had 10 multi-point efforts.

His production ratcheted up when the calendar flipped to 2025 with points in 28 of 43 games after Jan. 1. He also had 24 goals and 39 of his 54 points in those final 43 games. If he's able to hold that pace through a full season, he'd have 45 goals and 75 points. Since he actually hit 31 goals and 54 points and it was only his age-20 season, it's really not out of the question to believe he's capable of hitting that pace and maybe more.

Fantilli Is Proving to Be Capable of Becoming a Franchise Center

There's one thing the Blue Jackets have never had: a legitimate number-one center capable of leading the franchise into a period of success. The last time they were successful they built from the net out, with multi-Vezina Trophy winner Sergei Bobrovsky tending the twine, a myriad of excellent defenders capable of keeping the puck away from the net, and blue-collar forwards whose hard work generated goals. This next era has been built differently and Fantilli could be that first elite, number-one center.

Yes, he has some things to work on to continue his development in 2025-26. His consistency over a full season and his faceoff winning percentage – which was only 41.3% in 2024-25 – top the list. Those are

things totally normal of a young center with a very bright future ahead. The Blue Jackets should be very happy with their third overall selection in the 2023 NHL Entry Draft, because he took leaps forward in the 2024-25 season.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' James van Riemsdyk Was an Underrated Addition

By William Espy- April 20, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets signed James van Riemsdyk late in the offseason, as teams were gearing up for training camp and the preseason rookie tournaments league-wide were underway.

Although van Riemsdyk wasn't a top player for the Blue Jackets this season, he quietly lived up to expectations and performed well offensively. At 35 years of age, he was brought in to be a veteran presence in a locker room that desperately needed it. While the majority of the Blue Jackets' leadership group missed considerable time this season, van Riemsdyk was a regular part of the lineup and contributed both on and off the ice.

Van Riemsdyk's Offensive Production

Over the course of the season, van Riemsdyk's ice time was the lowest of his career. Playing just 12:24 per game, he was still able to put up the same offensive numbers as he had with the Boston Bruins and Philadelphia Flyers in the past couple of seasons.

Despite occasionally being a healthy scratch and playing limited ice time when he was in the lineup, van Riemsdyk scored 16 goals for the Blue Jackets and had 36 points in 71 games. For comparison, last season he had 38 points in 71 games for the Bruins, while averaging a little over a minute more of ice time per game.

While the defensive side of his game wasn't phenomenal, which is likely what led to him getting sat for four games by head coach Dean Evason over the past month, he's been a net positive for the Blue Jackets. Unsurprisingly, the Blue Jackets forward wasn't happy with the decision to be scratched earlier this month, telling *The Athletic*, "Over the course of this season, I think I've performed fairly well and done the things I want to be doing. I think I bring value when I'm in there," (from 'Veteran James van Riemsdyk feels the squeeze of Blue Jackets' roster glut,' *The Athletic*, April 1, 2025).

Add in the fact that he was only taking up \$900k of the salary cap, and it's hard to argue that he didn't bring value to the Blue Jackets organization. All things considered, he was an underrated addition by general manager Don Waddell.

An Important Leader

Evason also praised van Riemsdyk, telling *Daily Faceoff*, "He's provided us with offense, but he's also provided us with leadership and a veteran presence." The latter half of which was key, with Boone Jenner and Erik Gudbranson missing a considerable amount of time during a turbulent season for the organization.

One example of van Riemsdyk's leadership was during the holidays. When Thanksgiving came around, he hosted many of the Blue Jackets.

While van Riemsdyk's time as a member of the Blue Jackets has likely come to an end, considering he's an unrestricted free agent this coming summer, he was a valuable addition and helped the organization exceed expectations.

Considering van Riemsdyk made it clear he's open to returning to Columbus, if Waddell did opt to bring him back for another season, he would likely continue to be a valuable piece. With that being said, whether he'll be in the NHL at all next season remains to be seen, as age has started to catch up with

him. Considering the Blue Jackets didn't sign him until right before the start of training camp, there's always a chance he enters next season without a contract.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Going Out With A Bang, Jet! Jet! Jet! Numbers And Nuggets

By Will Chase- April 19, 2025

What a team, what a season.

Cole Sillinger and Zach Werenski each had a goal and an assist as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the New York Islanders 6-1 on Thursday at Nationwide Arena in the NHL regular season finale.

Going Out With A Bang

Even though the Blue Jackets knew their fate ahead of the last game of the season against the Islanders, the league's hottest team didn't go out with a dud.

Ending the season with six-straight wins to match a season high, the Blue Jackets had a five-goal second period en route to their dominating victory over New York.

Cole Sillinger started the scoring barrage with his 11th, unassisted, at 2:21 of the second period.

Dante Fabbro scored his ninth at 7:43 to make it 2-0, with Jordan Harris getting his fourth assist.

Dmitri Voronkov's 23rd made it 3-0 at 10:09. Zach Werenski's 59th is the new career high for assists on his ledger. Sillinger added his 22nd assist. Werenski ended the year on a six-game point streak (three goals, five assists).

Sean Kuraly's sixth gave the Jackets the 4-0 lead. Justin Danforth (12) and Erik Gudbranson (4) picked up the assists.

Werenski added his second point of the period, the 23rd goal of the season, to make it 5-0. Sean Monahan (38) and Kirill Marchenko (43) assisted on the play. Monahan ended the year on a six-game point streak (two goals, six assists).

In the third period, Adam Fantilli's 31st at 18:37 gave the Jackets their sixth goal of the night. James van Riemsdyk (20) picked up the assist. Fantilli finished on a four-game point streak (six goals, zero assists) with seven goals since April 8.

Jet! Jet! Jet!

Jet Greaves was nearly perfect for the Blue Jackets. Again.

Coming off his second career shutout since Saturday in Tuesday's 3-0 win at the Philadelphia Flyers, Greaves saw his shutout streak end at 14:48 of the third period when Hudson Fasching scored his second goal of the season. Casey Cizikas (10) added the assist.

Though the goal broke the shutout bid, the sellout crowd of 18,874 serenaded their goaltender with chants of "Jet!" in appreciation of what the young net minder has done since coming up to the team on emergency recall and never looking back.

Greaves finished the game with 36 saves on 37 shots. Marcus Hogberg made 20 saves on 26 shots. For the second straight game, Greaves was First Star of the Night.

Numbers And Nuggets

What can you say about this team and season?

The Blue Jackets defied odds from day one, overcoming tragedy to one of their own, to finish within two points of a playoff berth, despite preseason expectations of being at the bottom of the standings.

Even in just the last week of the season, eight points behind the Canadiens, the Jackets won their final six games to have a chance at the playoffs up until game 82 of the regular season.

Greaves stole the show with First Star of the Week honors, going 3-0-0 with his first career shutout. Then he shut out the Flyers on Tuesday. Through feast and famine moments, the offense winds up the best in franchise history.

The 2024-25 Jackets tied the franchise mark for points at home (57) with the 2016-17 club. The 26 wins are tied for the second-most in franchise history with the 2017-18 club.

Werenski finished with 82 points, 59 assists, and 23 goals. All career highs and franchise marks for a Blue Jackets defenseman. The 59 assists tie Artemi Panarin (2018-19) for the most in a single season in franchise history. Werenski's 26:45 time on ice per game played is the most in franchise history throughout a full season. Jack Johnson had the most (27:25) in 2011-12 between the Los Angeles Kings (61 games) and Blue Jackets (21 games).

Marchenko finished with career highs across points (74), goals (31), and assists (43). The 74 points are the seventh-best in franchise history for a single season, tied with Johnny Gadureau (2022-23), and are a 32-point jump from last season. Marchenko's plus-29 is the second-best in a single season behind David Savard's plus-33 in 2016-17. Fantilli has begun his transformation into a superstar, becoming the first player from his draft class to reach 25-plus goals. Finishing with 54 total points, Fantilli and Marchenko co-led the Blue Jackets with 31 goals.

And we'd be remiss if we didn't mention Jack Williams making his NHL debut.

The finale was a thundering success. Though the 2024-25 Blue Jackets won't end up in the playoffs, the resiliency they showed through tragedy and triumph puts this group at the very top in ways that can't be measured. Circumstances that most would never have to think about dealing with.

The offseason ahead promises to be a fun one. President and general manager Don Waddell goes to work with a full season in Columbus under his belt and a lot of cap space to contend with. Head coach Dean Evason's club is on the map.

Look out 2025-26.

1st Ohio Battery / Contract Status Of Every Blue Jacket UFA/RFA As Of The End Of The 2024-25 Season

By Ed Francis- April 21, 2025

After being eliminated from playoff contention on the penultimate night of the season, the Columbus Blue Jackets' attention now shifts to the offseason and improving the club.

One of the many decisions that President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell and his team will need to make will be on what pending free agents to bring back into the fold for the 2025-26 season.

A total of 23 rostered and non-rostered Blue Jacket players will have their contract come to an end when the NHL's season comes to its official conclusion June 30th.

Rostered players are those who are in Columbus' organization and receiving an NHL salary. Non-rostered players are those who are signed to the organization but not currently on the Blue Jackets roster.

Most of Columbus' upcoming non-roster free agents are currently playing with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters.

It is also worth noting that there is a difference in the type of free agencies these players have: Unrestricted free agents (UFA's) are players that will no longer be under contract with the Blue Jackets when July 1st arrives. In other words, they are a "true" free agent.

Restricted free agents (RFA's) are free agents in the sense that they can sign elsewhere, however, they still have their rights maintained by the Blue Jackets. Another team can attempt to sign these players via an offer sheet, which Columbus would then have the opportunity to match in both length and dollars. If they don't, the team that made the offer would owe the Blue Jackets draft pick compensation that would be determined on the value of the contract.

Here is a complete list of UFA's and RFA's in the Blue Jackets organization:

Unrestricted Free Agents

Rostered Forwards: Justin Danforth, Christian Fischer, Luke Kunin, Sean Kuraly, Kevin Labanc, James van Riemsdyk

Non-Roster Forwards: Dylan Gambrell, Trey Fix-Wolansky, Joseph Labate, Owen Sillinger

This is where the heaviest bulk of free agents are for Columbus. Speculation is that Kuraly has played his last game for the team, and given the limited play of late-season acquisitions Fischer and Kunin, it's a safe bet to assume they will not be with the organization next season. Labanc likely falls under that umbrella, too.

Two of the more intriguing decisions from this list will be the ones made on Justin Danforth and James van Riemsdyk. Danforth was an up-for-the-challenge, bottom-six utility player under head coach Dean Evason this season, and the veteran presence of JVR was valuable for the young team throughout.

Rostered Defensemen: Dante Fabbro, Jack Johnson, Ivan Provorov

Non-Roster Defensemen: None

The quantity may be within the forwards, but the quality when it comes to UFA's comes on the blue line. Johnson's tenure with the team is more than likely over, but Waddell has expressed significant interest in bringing back both Fabbro and Provorov. Both impressed all season long in top-four roles. The team has

made no secret that improving the defense is a top priority in the coming months, but to what extent they'll need to do that depends on what happens with these two.

Rostered Goaltenders: None

Non-Roster Goaltenders: Zach Sawchenko

Not a lot happening here, with Sawchenko being the only decision looming. He played 27 games with the Monsters this season, primarily in a backup role.

Restricted Free Agents

Rostered Forwards: Dmitri Voronkov

Non-Roster Forwards: Hunter McKown, Mikael Pyhtia

The Blue Jackets are going to have options with Voronkov, but none of them will involve letting him walk. Like a bulk of RFA's, he is arbitration eligible — though both sides should see that as a last resort.

As for what Voronkov may get in terms of dollars? There's an easy comp here.

Last offseason, fellow countryman Kirill Marchenko was in a similar position before signing a three-year, \$11.55 million dollar extension that carried an average annual value of \$3.85 million.

Marchenko was 23 years old and coming off a season in which he had 23 goals and 19 assists (42 points) in 78 games, while averaging 16:25 per game. That was coming off a 21-goal rookie season.

Voronkov enters his negotiation at 24 years old and coming off a season with 23 goals and 24 points (47 points) in 73 games, while averaging 16:47 per game. That was coming off an 18-goal rookie season.

The Big Boss, as Voronkov has been christened, will likely command a little more on average annual value: the salary cap is going up and contracts are on the rise every offseason. He'll also be one year closer to UFA eligibility than Marchenko was, given the one-year age difference.

Rostered Defensemen: Jordan Harris

Non-Roster Defensemen: Ole Julian Bjorgvik-Holm, Cole Clayton, Daemon Hunt, Samuel Knazko

Harris played so sparingly this season that it's fair to wonder if the Blue Jackets will not make a qualifying offer and let him walk as an unrestricted free agent. Hunt, acquired along with four draft picks in the David Jiricek trade, seems most likely to return of the non-roster defensemen.

Rostered Goaltenders: Daniil Tarasov

Non-Rostered Goaltenders: None

Jet Greaves is on a one-way contract starting with the 2025-26 season and between that and the way that he closed out this season, leaving him off the Columbus opening night roster is just not going to happen. That may, in part, spell the end for Tarasov with the Blue Jackets. He did play marginally better in the second half of the season, but it's certainly possible that the Blue Jackets won't make an offer and let him enter unrestricted free agency.

The Athletic / 2025 Stanley Cup odds: Avalanche, defending champion Panthers lead tight race for NHL's crown

By Dan Santaromita- April 19, 2025

Four different teams have lifted the Stanley Cup in the last four seasons, and this year's race appears to be wide open as well. NHL's postseason always has some level of unpredictability, but the odds board shows an incredibly tight field ahead of the start of playoff action on Saturday. The defending champion Florida Panthers and the 2022 winners, the Colorado Avalanche, are co-favorites on BetMGM with +750 odds, but seven teams have odds shorter than +1000 (10-to-1) odds.

The Carolina Hurricanes are a tick behind the Avs and Panthers at +800. Carolina has made it out of the first round each of the past four seasons, but fell short of 100 points this season. Part of Carolina's spot in the odds is due to the matchups. Carolina is the biggest favorite of the first round at -275 against the New Jersey Devils, who share the lowest point total of any playoff team with the Montreal Canadiens.

Meanwhile, the Panthers have to take on the Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round and start without home-ice advantage. The Panthers are a slight favorite to advance from the intrastate series at -115 (as opposed to the Lightning at -105). If Florida gets by the Bolts, the Panthers could emerge as a more clear-cut favorite to lift the Cup. The same goes for Tampa Bay in the middle pack of the odds board at +1100. But the Lightning should shoot near the top if they get past the defending champs. Florida knocked out Tampa in five games in the first round last year.

An interesting wrinkle among the two co-favorites is that both teams start on the road in the first round. The Avs and Panthers both finished third in their divisions. Colorado is -160 to get by the Dallas Stars. Connor McDavid's Edmonton Oilers are also a No. 3 seed favored in the first round with -120 odds against the Los Angeles Kings. McDavid has the shortest odds to win the Conn Smythe Trophy, but is still a relative longshot at +1300.

The Blues have the NHL's best record since the 4 Nations Face-Off. How did they turn their season around so completely?

The Dallas Stars (+850), Vegas Golden Knights (+850), Edmonton Oilers (+950) and Washington Capitals (+950) are also in the mix. There are eight teams with odds of 10-to-1 or shorter to win the Stanley Cup, which makes the NHL drastically different from the NBA, which has only four teams in that range and only five teams with odds shorter than 25-to-1 ahead of the start of its playoffs, also on Saturday. Of course, the NBA is largely more predictable and driven by favored teams, but this NHL postseason does appear to be there for the taking for almost any of the 16 teams.

That said, it does look like a tough road ahead for the Canadiens, which enter the postseason as the longest shot to win it all at +8000 (80-to-1). Sorry, Habs fans, at least you're back in the postseason for the first time since 2021.

2025 Stanley Cup winner odds

How about the Toronto Maple Leafs? Toronto won its division and had the second-most wins during the regular season (52, only topped by Winnipeg's 56). The Leafs no longer have a playoff series drought, having won a series two years ago, the first in 19 years. However, they experienced heartbreak last year in an overtime loss in Game 7 at Boston. Toronto fans may be wondering how the team can torture them this postseason, but at least for the first round, the Leafs are solid favorites to advance against the Ottawa Senators at -190.

The skepticism remains in the odds, though. Even as a clear first-round favorite, Toronto is only fifth in the odds to advance out of the Eastern Conference at +575. Florida (+340), Carolina (+350), Tampa Bay (+400) and Washington (+450) are ahead of Toronto.

In the Western Conference, Colorado is the favorite at +380. Interestingly, the Jets are only fifth in the odds, despite finishing with the league's best record (116 points). However, Dom Luszczyszyn's projections give the Jets (then Leafs) the best chance at winning the Cup. Winnipeg is a clear favorite to get by St. Louis, the league's hottest team, in the first round, but both potential second-round opponents (Colorado and Dallas) are well ahead of Winnipeg in BetMGM's ratings.

Even with Winnipeg and Toronto having strong regular seasons, it doesn't appear likely this will be the year Canada ends its 32-year Stanley Cup drought. BetMGM is giving Canadian teams +240 odds to lift the Cup, while an American winner is heavily expected at -300. Even with the Jets and Maple Leafs winning their divisions, it's a numbers game. Eleven of the 16 playoff teams are from the U.S., including the top five favorites.

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The Athletic / Which NHL team should you root for in the playoffs? The 2025 bandwagon-hopper's guide

By Sean McIndoe- April 19, 2025

It took a bit longer than expected — thanks for the suspense, Columbus — but we've got our 16 playoff teams. That means we've also got our 16 teams that missed, and those fan bases have a choice to make.

Stay neutral, and just root for the best playoff hockey possible? A very valid option. Root against your team's rivals, and hope they lose in a way that makes them sad? We've all been there. Sit on the sidelines and sulk, acting like you don't even care who wins? A bit unseemly, but understandable.

And then there's the most controversial option: Pick a new team, just for the postseason. Yes, it's the dreaded bandwagon pick, a path some fans find untenable. If that's you, feel free to check out now. But if you're open to at least considering a bandwagon pick, you want to at least take the right one. That's where this post comes in, as we'll rank the 16 playoff teams from worst to best in terms of bandwagonability.

We're looking for a fun team with good storylines and some rootable characters, ideally one with a realistic chance to win without feeling like a pure front-runner pick. It can be a tough needle to thread, but some teams do it better than others. Let's start from the bottom and work our way up to the best options.

16. Florida Panthers

Why you should get on board: They're a good team with a decent chance at winning it all, but not so dominant this year that you're just picking the consensus favorite. And there's lots of star power, so they're an entertaining team to watch.

Why you shouldn't: Come on. I wrote about these guys becoming the league's top villains last March, and since then they've won a championship, had a player suspended for PEDs and traded for Brad freaking Marchand. At this point, they've basically been designed in a lab to be the most hateable team in the league. So hate them! It will be fun.

And yes, I get that some of you are contrarians by heart and will be tempted to root for the team everyone else despises. But you don't have to do that. Even a contrarian can sometimes just come along for the ride with everyone else. The hockey gods want this for you.

Bottom line: When the puck finds your stick and the net is empty, don't overthink it. This is a tap-in.

15. Vegas Golden Knights

Why you should get on board: It will annoy the exact kind of people that it's morally right to annoy.

Why you shouldn't: They already won a few years ago, and their fan base has literally never had to deal with a bad season. And with Seattle and Utah now in the league, even the novelty factor isn't all that high anymore.

Also, they cheat. Or maybe they don't, but it's fun to cry about that constantly, and you can't do that if you're also cheering them on.

Bottom line: The Knights, to their credit, have unabashedly embraced the villain role in the NHL. Don't ruin it by hopping on their bandwagon.

14. Tampa Bay Lightning

Why you should get on board: They're playing the Panthers.

Why you shouldn't: Once they get past Round 1 — make that if they get past Round 1 — you'll be left trying to justify being on the bandwagon of a recent-ish repeat champion with a star-studded roster. In other words, you're going to get called a front-runner even as you back a team that may not even be the favorite in their opening-round series.

Bottom line: The Lightning are good, but it feels like there should be better options.

13. New Jersey Devils

Why you should get on board: Based on everyone's rankings and predictions, it seems like there should be plenty of room on the bandwagon.

Why you shouldn't: Their best player is hurt, their best defenseman is just coming back from injury and may not be 100 percent, and they're big underdogs in Round 1 against the Hurricanes. And while the Devils haven't won much in recent years, they're not all that far removed from those three pre-cap championships, so it's not even like you're rooting alongside some long-suffering fan base.

Bottom line: Also, you'll be signing up for the Sheldon Keefe playoff experience, so ... good luck with that.

12. Toronto Maple Leafs

Why you should get on board: If you can get past them being the Maple Leafs, there's a ton of bandwagon potential here. If they were ever to finally break through, it's going to be one hell of a ride.

Why you shouldn't: You cannot, in fact, get past them being the Maple Leafs. And let's be honest, at this point their constant playoff failures have become the NHL equivalent of Sideshow Bob stepping on the rakes. It was funny at first, then it was just repetitive and weird, but it kept going long enough that it's somehow funny again.

Bottom line: Did you know that the Leafs have finished exactly one game under .500 in seven straight playoff runs and counting? Yeah, don't do this to yourself.

11. Minnesota Wild

Why you should get on board: It would be kind of cool to be the first person in history to bandwagon the Minnesota Wild.

Why you shouldn't: While the roster certainly features some enjoyable players, and there's the potential here for a feisty underdog story to play out, it's very likely that you'll be looking for a new team after Round 1.

Bottom line: Between a (hopefully) healthy Kirill Kaprizov, the last run of Marc-Andre Fleury and newly minted OGWAC Marcus Foligno dragging them into the playoffs, there's some legitimate potential here. (Annual OGWAC rankings are coming next week, by the way.) As long as you're OK with a high-risk, high-reward pick, the Wild might be your team.

10. St. Louis Blues

Why you should get on board: They went from midseason also-ran to the hottest team in the league with a second-half surge that locked down an unexpected wild-card spot. Now, six years after a miracle run to a Stanley Cup that had its own soundtrack, they might just be gearing up for a sequel.

Why you shouldn't: They've cooled off since the win streak was snapped, so it's possible this is just a decent team that peaked a little too early.

Bottom line: If you missed out on the 2019 run, this could be your chance to make amends. Then again, maybe the past should stay in the past, and we don't need the warmed-over reboot years down the line.

9. Los Angeles Kings

Why you should get on board: Do you enjoy the comforting familiarity of seeing the same thing over and over again? Welcome to the L.A. Kings' first-round playoff experience.

Also, Quinton Byfield has apparently decided to start semi-regularly doing stuff like this.

Why you shouldn't: There's a good chance they lose to the Oilers for the fourth year in a row, although home-ice advantage might tip the scales this time around. Just be aware they're one of the lowest-scoring playoff teams and they give up fewer goals than anyone but the Jets, so they're not exactly the most exciting team you could sign up for.

Bottom line: Honestly, if you're starting to feel some of that anti-Oiler energy that's percolating out there, the Kings make for an interesting pick that could pay off early. Just know that they're a long shot to go deep.

8. Colorado Avalanche

Why you should get on board: They have a ton of talent, including the reigning MVP and this year's Norris shoo-in. But the big name is Gabriel Landeskog, the team captain who hasn't played in the NHL since 2022 due to injury but could be on the verge of an inspiring comeback. If he can return for the playoffs — and especially if he can contribute in any kind of meaningful way — it's going to be one of the best stories in recent memory, and you'll want to be rooting for it.

Why you shouldn't: Because of the NHL's cool playoff format that we all love so much, they have to go through Dallas to get out of the first round, at which point the Jets are probably next. To put it bluntly, it's been a while since we've seen a team this good with a playoff path as difficult.

Bottom line: That tough path works both ways, as it means you can bandwagon a very good team that still feels underdog-ish. No guts, no glory, in other words.

7. Edmonton Oilers

Why you should get on board: They came agonizingly close a year ago, almost pulling off a comeback for the ages before falling one game short, and the whole "this time we finish the job" narrative worked for the Panthers last season. With Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, they've got plenty of high-end firepower. But between a tough matchup with the Kings and some injury adversity, they're not so obvious a pick that you'll feel like you're front-running.

Why you shouldn't: They'll be missing their best defenseman, and have just seemed off almost all season. They feel like a case of a good team where it just isn't their year. Mix in the fact that you may not love the idea of cheering for some or all of Corey Perry, Evander Kane and Stan Bowman, and there are better options.

Bottom line: All that said, it's a lot of fun to root for Connor McDavid for a few days, as a bunch of us found out two months ago.

6. Montreal Canadiens

Why you should get on board: They're the ultimate underdog, a young team nobody thought was playoff-worthy that jumped into the race and then held just strong enough while so-called contenders ran out of gas. And now they get a first-round matchup with a top seed nobody seems to quite believe

in, meaning another 2021-style miracle run isn't completely out of the picture. Get in on the ground floor now, because this bandwagon might fill up quickly.

Why you shouldn't: The most likely outcome is still an early exit. Also, Montreal fans tend to be traditional, which means they may not be as welcoming of bandwagon fans as other markets. I don't think that's as much of a factor this year as it would be in a year where the Habs were consensus contenders, but keep it in mind.

Bottom line: Remember, don't go out and get so many Lane Hutson tattoos that you forget to save room for future Lane Hutson tattoos.

5. Dallas Stars

Why you should get on board: They're a very good team, but unlike similar contenders like the Avs, Knights and Panthers, they don't already have a recent Cup win. What they do have is Mikko Rantanen, meaning that if they were to win it all, the big lesson would be that going all in on a deadline blockbuster works. And Tyler Seguin is a nice comeback story.

Why you shouldn't: Uh, please don't ask how the last week or two of the season has been going.

Beyond that, they've been so-so since the 4 Nations break, their best defenseman is injured to start the postseason, and the path out of the Central is pretty brutal. And unlike recent years, when they dominated these rankings, they don't have the unstoppable OGWAC power of Joe Pavelski and Ryan Suter.

Bottom line: They're still a decent pick, but honestly, it will feel like you're pulling up to the party a season or two late.

4. Ottawa Senators

Why you should get on board: They're a young team that's waited eight years to get back into the playoffs, and of all the wild-card teams, they seem like the best chance to make a surprise run. And if they did, the Claude Giroux OGWAC vibe would be strong.

Why you shouldn't: Brady Tkachuk is going to do something weird, although we don't know yet if it will be cool-weird or infuriating-weird, so you're taking your chances.

Bottom line: Look, they're playing the Leafs, so you do the math.

3. Washington Capitals

Why you should get on board: Because it's not often you can find a conference one-seed with plenty of good bandwagon seats still available and some solid "nobody believes in us" cred. But here we are, with a team that's dominated the East pretty much start-to-finish and yet still feels like an underdog pick.

Why you shouldn't: From the outside, it could look like you're just picking the team that has the famous goals record guy.

Bottom line: They may be a long shot to go all the way, but there's a ton of potential here.

2. Carolina Hurricanes

Why you should get on board: They're a very good team that's flown a bit under the radar this year, at least on the ice. But they made some big moves to get to this point, including the Mikko Rantanen blockbuster and also, uh, the Mikko Rantanen blockbuster. Hey, it's a copycat league, and having a champion whose big lesson is "Make multiple jaw-dropping trades" would be cool, right?

There is also the Brent Burns OGWAC factor, the Frederik Andersen playoff redemption arc, and the fact that you'd rather have Rod Brind'Amour on your side if the apocalypse comes.

Why you shouldn't: Did you know that the Hurricanes haven't lost a first-round series in the cap era? That's weird. Spending six months getting all excited for the playoffs and then watching your team blow it in a matter of days is a rite of passage for hockey fans. Hey Carolina, do you think you're better than us?

Bottom line: They'll be strong favorites against the Devils and would be a popular pick against the Capitals, so if you're looking for a final four trip but don't want to pick a first-place team, this might be your best bet.

1. Winnipeg Jets

Why you should get on board: This is the best team that Winnipeg has had in its NHL history, which spans two different franchises and includes a 15-year gap where they didn't have a team. It's been a story of ups and downs, with more of the latter. But now it's finally all clicking into place, with a balanced team led by Connor Hellebuyck, who should be the MVP but will probably get robbed.

That should be enough to get you on board, but the stakes are even higher in Winnipeg. With recent attendance issues raising some uncomfortable questions about their long-term outlook, this could literally be a make-or-break year for the Jets — their best chance in a generation to not just win the team's first Stanley Cup but ensure the NHL's future in the city.

Also, Jets fans are awesome and the Whiteout is super cool. Get in on this.

Why you shouldn't: They did finish first overall, so you don't get cool underdog points for this pick. But even that's misleading, because everyone secretly thinks the Stars and/or Avalanche are the real Central powerhouse.

Bottom line: This feels like an appropriate time to snap Canada's 32-year Cup drought, and the Jets are the only team that could unite the nation in doing it. Prepare for takeoff.

The Athletic / NHL execs and coaches pick the playoffs' 3 monster first-round matchups

By Pierre LeBrun- April 19, 2025

Not all playoff series are created equal, and while one can't always predict with assurance which ones will end up being the most compelling, we've got three that jump off the page to open the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs.

The Battle of Florida, between the Florida Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning, and the Colorado Avalanche-Dallas Stars matchup feature four bona fide Stanley Cup contenders. Each series is conference-final level and will see a really, really good team go home early each way.

The Battle of Ontario, with the Ottawa Senators and Toronto Maple Leafs meeting for the first time in 21 years ... well, enough said.

What to expect? For an insider view, I reached out to coaches and front-office executives across the NHL to ask their predictions.

Enjoy.

(Note: Not every responder addressed all three series. Some responses are edited lightly for clarity.)

Lightning vs. Panthers

Exec 1: Tampa in 6. I see some mileage accumulating on the champs, and I think that Tampa has had the more cohesive and mostly healthy group this last stretch. Tampa gets the edge in net. Their big boys just seem to have their mojo and hunger back.

Exec 2: Pick Florida. Tampa is still talented and capable, but Florida is built for this and more in their window than Tampa. Seth Jones is a great replacement for Aaron Ekblad, and up front, I give the playoff edge to the Florida group. Goaltending — as always — could swing it one way or the other and will be a great factor to watch in this series.

Exec 3: Florida has had two deep runs in the playoffs, culminating with a Cup last year, while Tampa has had a bit of a resurgence with their play this year. I think Tampa is playing better hockey going into the playoffs, and have a feeling they will win the Battle of Florida this year. Either one of these teams has a chance to win it all. It's too bad they play each other in Round 1!

Exec 4: The Lightning appear to have their groove back after suffering a couple of years of mental and physical fatigue, following three consecutive trips to the Final (winning back-to-back Cups). Meanwhile, the Panthers have endured the typical malaise that Cup winners often experience while missing significant players down the stretch to injuries (Matthew Tkachuk) and suspension (Ekblad). They will have to jell quickly or this one could be over fast. In the end, Tampa will prevail. Lightning win 4-2.

Exec 5: Like the Dallas-Colorado series in the West, this is a conference finals caliber of series. It's so tight when you get two teams this skilled, this experienced and this just all-around good. Florida has played a lot of hockey the past two seasons, Ekblad will miss the first two games in Tampa and Tampa has home ice with the best goalie in the East. I'll say Tampa in seven.

Exec 6: Tampa Bay. Better health, better team speed and (Jake) Guentzel addition.

Exec 7: Florida if they are healthy.

Coach 1: I know there is a lot of noise to change the playoff format to a 1 vs. 8, 2 vs. 7, etc. I never really liked that, but this is the first year I have some time for it. It's a shame two of these teams will be out in the first round. I like Florida over Tampa even though Tampa is equipped for a long run. Florida is just too deep throughout their lineup. Now they know how to win also.

Coach 2: Two teams that know each other very well. Highly respected head coaches, championship pedigrees and a dislike for each other that runs deep. Tampa, as the fresher and healthier team, gets it done in 7.

Coach 3: Florida-Tampa will be a war as it has evolved into one of the best, if not the best, rivalry in hockey right now. If Florida gets a healthy Tkachuk back, they win the series. If not, it's Tampa.

Coach 4: Great series with a great rivalry and two teams with Stanley Cup experience. I think Florida in 7. Will be a battle.

Coach 5: Throw out the stats. These are two teams with a ton of swagger and championship experience. As the Panthers get back to a healthier lineup, I believe they will get to their heavy, pressure game, and that will be the difference. Florida in 7.

Coach 6: Tampa beats Florida. ... I like what (Lightning general manager) Julien Brisebois did with the team at the deadline, and Florida has to be tired.

Final tally: Lightning 7-5, with Coach 3's response discounted as not definitive.

Avalanche vs. Stars

Exec 1: Dallas in 7. I worry about Dallas' slow starts and overall play a bit heading into this series. But I just really like their team. Missing (Miro) Heiskanen for potentially this entire series is obviously a blow, but their depth and an edge in net should give them enough to get through, and when they get Heiskanen back, I think they have a team that can go the distance.

Exec 2: Pick Colorado. I have a lot of respect for the Dallas group and their consistent work in the playoffs over the years, but Colorado has the edge here with firepower up front, including great additions in Martin Necas, Brock Nelson and now Gabriel Landeskog. And it always helps to have the best defenseman in a series like this.

Exec 3: Colorado has done a tremendous job reshaping their roster from the goaltender out in the middle of the season, which is no easy task. Dallas is a terrific team, too, and it's a shame one of these Cup contenders will be out in two weeks, but with the best forward and best defenseman on the ice both being in an Avs jersey, I'll pick Colorado.

Exec 4: This shooting match between two Western Conference powerhouses might be the most entertaining series in the first round. While it could go either way, I believe that (Jake) Oettinger outduels (Mackenzie) Blackwood and propels Dallas to victory. Stars win 4-2.

Exec 6: Colorado. Makar, MacKinnon and added depth down the middle.

Exec 7: Colorado. Goalie needs to be solid, not great.

Coach 1: I like Colorado over Dallas. Not sold on Oettinger yet. He is going to be a star, but there is still some growth there. (Matt) Duchene as a second-line center just isn't deep enough for a playoff run. If Heiskanen is out, then it really tilts. I feel pretty good about the Toronto pick. The other two are a flip of the coin.

Coach 2: Two well-organized teams that addressed needs and loaded up at the trade deadline. They both have a ton of reasons why they can win this series and why they can win the Stanley Cup. But only one team can emerge, and it will be played on the ice. Colorado in 6.

Coach 3: All eyes will be on the Colorado-Dallas series. That series will have everything: speed, skill, goaltending and toughness. As most playoff series do, this will come down to two guys: Oettinger and Blackwood. Injuries will be a factor as both teams have guys coming back from injuries, so that will be an interesting piece to this series. Whoever wins the goaltending battle will win this series. Colorado wins.

Coach 4: Two of my top three picks to win the Cup. Should be a great series. Not much between these two teams. Colorado in 7.

Coach 5: Statistically, this is a close series. Goals for and against, special teams and goaltending. Both teams have game breakers. The absence of Heiskanen, at least early in this series, is a lot to overcome. Colorado's deadline deals to solidify themselves up the middle will pay off in a long series. Colorado in 6.

Coach 6: I think Colorado beats Dallas. I am not sure that Dallas can win the series without Heiskanen. I like what (Avs GM) Chris MacFarland did for his team.

Final tally: Avalanche 10-2.

The Stars aren't just a favorite in this series, they're a favorite to win the Cup. But don't count out the Avs' star power and spite.

Maple Leafs vs. Senators

Exec 1: Toronto in 6. The narratives are what they are, but this is a very good Leafs team with some dirt under its nails now. Ottawa is not going to be a pushover, but as a relatively young group making their first playoff appearance in a while, I think Toronto gets the job done.

Exec 2: Pick Toronto but should be a doozy. Ottawa will be ready to compete, and Brady (Tkachuk) will drag them into the fight. I might actually give the edge to Ottawa on D and possibly in goal as well, but Toronto is just too loaded up front and have a huge experience edge being in many of these tough first-round series.

Exec 3: This brings back some great memories from a couple of decades ago. I think this series is going to be one of the best to watch in the first round. Ottawa has had Toronto's number this year and I believe they will give the Leafs issues in the first round. Brady Tkachuk is built for the playoffs, so I'm excited to see him engage in this series and give the Leafs players fits. While I love the youth and enthusiasm from Ottawa, I think that this is the best team Toronto has had since those previous battles between these teams many years ago. Toronto is deeper on D and better in goal than they have been, which should pay dividends in this series. Toronto advances in a spirited series.

Exec 4: The Battle of Ontario could just as easily be called "David versus Goliath." The star-studded Leafs are an offensive juggernaut and have the best D corps they've had in years. However, they are contending with massive expectations and immense pressure ... particularly "the Core Four." After not making the playoffs for the previous seven seasons, the Sens, on the other hand, are playing with house money. They will give the Leafs a handful. After much nailbiting, the Leafs will prevail. Leafs win 4-3.

Exec 5: Although this is an exciting series for Canada, I think Toronto is the superior team in most aspects. Toronto is probably thrilled to play someone other than Boston, Florida or Tampa. I have Toronto in five because they are just better offensively due to their superstars up front and will outscore their issues in this series.

Exec 6: Toronto. Deeper offense and better D.

Exec 7: Could go 7. ... Think the Leafs sneak it out.

Coach 1: I like Toronto over Ottawa. I like Ottawa and their chances, but it's more about Toronto. I like the way they have played all year. Not giving up easy offense, and their team game. I also love the balance and depth of the forwards and defense, especially if they get everyone back. (Jake) McCabe, (Oliver Ekman-Larsson) and (David) Kämpf are important for that depth. (Linus) Ullmark, however, could steal that series.

Coach 2: Two teams at different life stages. Toronto's core has been together for years and has had multiple kicks at the can. Ottawa (is) just entering their playoff window after years of missing the playoffs. Toronto in 6.

Coach 3: Excited to see Ottawa make their first playoff appearance with this team. We played them a few weeks ago and were very impressed with their D core. They all defend hard, and (Jake) Sanderson is turning into a Norris trophy-caliber defenseman. He can do it all. Toronto doesn't get enough credit for how hard they defend, as most people focus on the skill of their top guys, which they should but they also play hard. That being said, I like Ottawa in this series. Tkachuk will drag them all to another level.

Coach 4: I think Toronto is ready to make a long run and will win in 6 games. Experience will pay off for them this year, playing solid hockey all year long, more competitive. Ottawa's a very good young team. Toronto's just too deep.

Coach 5: Both teams have been good at home. Toronto has been equally comfortable on the road. Their added depth and experience on the back end is a factor in handling matchups on the road. Toronto's goaltending will remain solid, Ottawa's will need to be the "difference" in the series. Toronto in 6.

Coach 6: Toronto beats Ottawa. Too much firepower in Toronto and (Leafs GM Brad Treliving) made the D better.

Final tally: Maple Leafs 12-1.

On paper, the Maple Leafs are a solid pick — but as we know, that's not where the games are played.

Takeaways

The Battle of Florida was a mixed response, as expected. The Panthers' fatigue factor was cited a number of times. This smells like seven games and overtime to me. Matthew Tkachuk with the Game 7 OT winner! I think Florida finds a way by a sliver. Best rivalry in the NHL right now?

As for the Stars, whether it's because of their late-season struggles or their injuries — especially the uncertainty around Heiskanen — it's pretty wild that such an overwhelming majority of execs and coaches took Colorado to win what is deemed a 50-50 matchup between Cup contenders. I still see the rematch of last spring's second-loss Dallas win as a coin toss, but the Heiskanen factor is huge either way. If he can appear in this series, that could swing things, and if he doesn't ... I like the Avs' chances. The way Avs GM Chris MacFarland aggressively reshaped his roster all season was something to behold.

And the Battle of Ontario. While only one responder picked the upset, it's noteworthy how many picking Toronto still felt the Leafs would get pushed hard by the underdog Senators. And I agree with that. I think the Leafs win a tough seven-game series, but ultimately this is the most playoff-ready Toronto team in the Auston Matthews-Mitch Marner era in my mind — both in roster construction and style of play. But if the Senators take Game 1 in Toronto, hold on to your hats. Then Toronto's playoff scars perhaps come into play.

Sit back and enjoy, everyone. The Stanley Cup playoffs are here!

The Athletic / NHL report cards: Grading every team's 2024-25 regular season

By The Athletic NHL Staff- April 19, 2025

Midway through the 2024-25 season, The Athletic's NHL staff broke out their red pens and handed out grades for every team's first half.

Now that the regular season is behind us and all 32 clubs get set for the playoffs or offseason, there's no better time to reflect on every team's season as a whole.

That's exactly what The Athletic did this week when it asked its NHL staff to assign a grade to every team's entire 2024-25 regular season with expectations in mind. You'll definitely be proud to show some of these to your parents (or general managers). Others ... maybe not so much.

Anaheim Ducks (35-37-10): B-

The Ducks were supposed to improve. A jump from 59 points last season to 80 does represent progress. But they didn't fare well in their first meaningful second-half games in years, and never squeezed into the wild-card race. Important young players such as Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish and Jackson LaCombe took necessary strides forward, while Cutter Gauthier had a good rookie season. Lukáš Dostál proved he's got the chops to be a No. 1 goalie. But they're still very leaky defensively and inconsistent from period to period and game to game under Greg Cronin, with special teams that were mostly brutal. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins (33-39-10): D-

It would have been one thing if the Bruins started the season with low expectations. They did not. They believed they'd contend for the playoffs. So it's a major whiff to finish as a bottom-five club. The only solace is how aggressively they acted at the deadline with futures and a high 2025 draft pick in mind. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres (36-39-7): F

It's tough to grade this season as anything higher than an F for the Sabres. They came into the season with playoff expectations and ended up regressing from their 84-point season a year ago. They spent more than three months of the season in last place in the Eastern Conference. A 13-game winless streak ruined their playoff chances before Jan. 1. It's not that the season was completely devoid of silver linings or glimmers of hope. But the overwhelming feeling about Buffalo's season will be disappointment as the Sabres watch the playoffs from home for a 14th straight season. — Matthew Fairburn

The Sabres are last in the Eastern Conference and will miss the playoffs for an NHL-record 14th straight season.

Calgary Flames (41-27-14): C-

The Flames punched above their weight and expectations thanks to their rookie goalie Dustin Wolf and key contributions from Jonathan Huberdeau and Nazem Kadri throughout the season. It nearly got them into the playoffs. They can get points for that. The downside is that the Flames will have to give up the best of three first-round draft picks to Montreal thanks to the Sean Monahan trade, and that their next two first-rounders will be middle of the pack. But that's still ample opportunity for them to move their rebuild/retool along. But game-breakers are still needed. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes (47-30-5): B+

It was a wild season in Raleigh: a mini roster overhaul, the blockbuster Mikko Rantanen trade, the shocking follow-up deal and now the arrival of long-awaited top prospect Alexander Nikishin. But in the end, the Hurricanes, despite having their doubters, still finished near the top of the Eastern Conference and are poised to make noise in the playoffs. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks (25-46-11): C

The Blackhawks weren't much better than they were last season, finishing in 31st place again, but it does feel like the rebuild took a step. Their roster looked a lot different and younger by the end of the season. Being able to trade Seth Jones was the biggest surprise of the year, and that opened present and future roster possibilities. Sam Rinzler and Frank Nazar opened eyes and look to have promising futures. Plenty of others also made their NHL debuts. It wasn't exactly the year general manager Kyle Davidson hoped for, but it does set the path for a more interesting 2025-26 season. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche (49-29-4): C

Colorado's aspirations were certainly higher than third place in the Central Division entering the season, but in the end, the Avalanche earned a ticket to the playoffs. General manager Chris MacFarland reworked the roster to a degree we rarely see from a contending team, swapping both of his goaltenders, moving on from Mikko Rantanen and adding to his center depth at the deadline. The result is a team that's good enough to go on a deep run, which is what the season will ultimately be judged by. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets (40-33-9): A-

Very few NHL teams should get an "A" grade after missing the playoffs, but the Blue Jackets are an exception. They played through the grief following the late-summer death of beloved teammate Johnny Gaudreau, and they overachieved perhaps more than any team in recent memory. A 4-11-1 slump that lasted all of March and into April sealed their fate, but the Blue Jackets had a number of really strong performances — Zach Werenski, Sean Monahan, Kirill Marchenko, Adam Fantilli and others — that bode well for their future. — Aaron Portzline

Columbus' late, dramatic push for the playoffs fell short, but the team will hold a special place in fans' hearts.

Dallas Stars (50-26-6): A-

We're grading on a bit of a curve here, given how comically high expectations were and are in Dallas. Failing to win the division title and a mediocre power play keep this from being a full "A." But there's little to complain about. The Stars were a top-five team despite losing Tyler Seguin for more than 60 games and Miro Heiskanen for more than 30. They added a true star in Mikko Rantanen and locked him up long term, and the Mikael Granlund trade made the deepest team even deeper, which will pay off in the playoffs. If they can get past Colorado, they're still the team to beat in the West. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings (39-35-8): D+

The Red Wings hoped to push for the playoffs this season, and while a January surge under new head coach Todd McLellan put that goal in reach, it wasn't enough to overcome a disastrous start and another March collapse. Detroit did see some growth this year, but the failure of a ninth straight season outside the playoffs is the bottom line. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers (48-29-5): B-

The Oilers had designs on winning their division and maybe even the Presidents' Trophy. Instead, they won't even have home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs. Injuries hurt them down the

stretch, but too many players underachieved this season. The list of those meeting or exceeding expectations might be limited to Leon Draisaitl, Darnell Nurse, Brett Kulak, Corey Perry and Calvin Pickard. The result was only 36 regulation wins, good for just sixth in the Western Conference. That's three fewer than last season. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers (47-31-4): B

Could the regular-season portion of Florida's title defense have gone a little more smoothly? Sure. In a perfect world, they'd be preparing to play a wild-card team in Round 1. Injuries and inconsistency happen, though, so the defending champs (plus Seth Jones, Brad Marchand and with a rested Matthew Tkachuk on the way) have to worry about Tampa Bay. Try not to feel too bad for them. — Sean Gentile

Los Angeles Kings (48-25-9): A

Considering many expected the Kings to embark on a slow slide toward the mushy middle after a third straight first-round playoff exit, a season in which they tied the franchise record of 48 wins and 105 points deserves high marks. A division title or No. 1 seed would have pushed it to an A+. Their veterans continued to get the job done, their youngsters leveled up and all their additions since last spring have been key contributors. They've got to win in the playoffs, but the 82-game performance is a victory lap for coach Jim Hiller and much-maligned general manager Rob Blake. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild (45-30-7): B-

We're grading the Wild on a curve because they made the playoffs. If Joel Eriksson Ek didn't score with 22 seconds left in regulation to force overtime against Anaheim on Tuesday, though ... whoa, Nelly! Still, if we told you before the season that Kirill Kaprizov would miss 41 games, Eriksson Ek 36 and Jonas Brodin 32, nobody would have envisioned the Wild as a playoff participant. It came down to the very, very end, but reaching the postseason with the adversity they endured is an achievement. — Michael Russo

Minnesota earned the top wild card in the West and will face the Pacific champs. The series is expected to start Sunday in Las Vegas.

Montreal Canadiens (40-31-11): A

The Canadiens came out of the break for the 4 Nations Face-Off with a 2 percent chance of making the playoffs. It took all 82 games, but they made it. Along the way, the NHL's youngest team to make the tournament learned valuable lessons that will serve it well in the future, and those lessons will continue this spring. Coach Martin St. Louis said all season the priority was learning how to win, how to perform under pressure. It wasn't perfect, but mission accomplished. — Arpon Basu

What You Should Read Next

Canadiens clinch first NHL playoff berth since reaching Stanley Cup Final in 2021

Canadiens clinch first NHL playoff berth since reaching Stanley Cup Final in 2021

Montreal, led by its young core, completed a late-season push to the playoffs that bodes well for what the future might bring.

Nashville Predators (30-44-8): F

This was a complete disaster. There's no way to spin it. This was the most disappointing season in franchise history, in part because it was one of the most anticipated. General manager Barry Trotz's big signings didn't work. Coach Andrew Brunette couldn't elicit anything resembling consistency. And now

Juuse Saros is about to start the eight-year deal Trotz just gave him, coming off the worst season by far of his career. Things are bleak in Nashville. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils (42-33-7): C+

The Devils took an important step in getting back to the postseason, but with Jack Hughes out with a shoulder injury until next season, they don't seem like legitimate Stanley Cup contenders. The team got off to a good start but struggled when the calendar flipped to 2025, which hurts their grade a bit. Still, New Jersey had a good regular season that it can build on. Jesper Bratt and Nico Hischier had excellent seasons, and the offseason additions fit in enough to get this team back to the playoffs. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders (35-35-12): C-

Injuries did hamper them — Mathew Barzal played just 30 games this season — but this was a team that defined mediocre right from the start. The Islanders were never more than four games above or below .500 all season and finished right at .500, which means they didn't bottom out to grab a top draft prospect, nor did they compete for anything important. Lou Lamoriello did trade Brock Nelson for a good return at the deadline, but nothing else has changed. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers (39-36-7): F

There are no major redeeming points of this Rangers season. The team went from a Presidents' Trophy winner to a non-playoff club. There was off-ice drama with Chris Drury sending a memo to other clubs in November saying he'd be open to trading roster players, including Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba, and the team floundered after a 12-4-1 start. The Rangers looked lost defensively at times and repeatedly failed to respond well to adversity. It's going to be a long offseason for New York, during which Drury will continue trying to rework the roster. — Peter Baugh

The Rangers' 2024-25 season will end Thursday with a home game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Ottawa Senators (45-30-7): B+

The Senators are in the playoffs for the first time in eight years. This was the goal they set out to accomplish last summer. They improved on defense and in goal, thanks to Linus Ullmark, Anton Forsberg and season-saving performances from rookie goalie Leevi Meriläinen. Tim Stützle improved defensively, Jake Sanderson took a step, the Sens acquired a new center for their core in Dylan Cozens, and Brady Tkachuk is still himself. They'll enter the playoffs with nothing to really lose in the long run. But any blood they draw off the Maple Leafs will go a long way in terms of accumulating playoff experience. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers (33-39-10): D+

In many ways, the season went according to plan, with a number of notable subtractions and a lottery pick on the way. But there was a bit too much that went wrong to just give the Flyers a C average — specifically, the league-worst goaltending and the nearly league-worst power play, both of which are going to have to be addressed in the offseason. There was also the late-season unpleasantness of firing coach John Tortorella, who should have lasted at least through the season. There were some encouraging performances from young players such as Jamie Drysdale, Noah Cates and Matvei Michkov, but others, such as Owen Tippett and Cam York, disappointed. — Kevin Kurz

A high draft pick would ease the sting, but the Flyers have a long way to go.

Pittsburgh Penguins (34-36-12): D

Most didn't expect the Penguins to make the playoffs this season, but they still receive a poor grade because of the way they played. There can't possibly be a worse defensive team in the NHL. Sidney

Crosby remains so great, and the Penguins still provide a healthy amount of the offense. But they couldn't even challenge for a playoff spot in a bad Metropolitan Division because of their amateurish defensive play. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks (20-50-12): C+

Some might give the Sharks a better grade for being more competitive (and far more entertaining), yet still being in contention to get the No. 1 pick for the second straight year. Finishing with the NHL's worst record should never get a good mark. Saying that, Macklin Celebrini proved he's a star in the making and they weren't supposed to win very much. They've got terrific young talent and a pipeline full of good prospects. A bright future lies ahead. The present is still terrible. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken (35-41-6): C-

Under the surface, the Kraken showed some signs of progress this season. Brandon Montour was nothing short of brilliant in his first season, Shane Wright found his way as an impact center and Kaapo Kakko and Matty Beniers found immediate chemistry after Kakko was acquired from the Rangers. A lot of the reason the Kraken fell short was down to the performance of their backup goaltender. In games that Joey Daccord started, the Kraken had a record you'd expect from a playoff-bound team. That said, this team spent heavily in unrestricted free agency with short-term improvement in mind. Seattle didn't even come especially close to realizing it. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues (44-30-8): B+

It's about the ending, right? The Blues brought in Jim Montgomery as coach in November and when the shine wore off, they still struggled. But between Montgomery's persistence in preaching the details and the players' sacrifices for the good of the team, they pulled it together. While it took every bit of a franchise-record 12-game winning streak to make the playoffs, they did it, and the accomplishment does wonders in advancing the retool. — Jeremy Rutherford

The Blues finish the regular season with 96 points, taking the second wild-card slot in the Western Conference.

Tampa Bay Lightning (47-27-8): A

The Lightning had to show that their window of contention wasn't closing just yet, and they did exactly that. After some major changes in the offseason, such as moving on from Steven Stamkos and signing Jake Guentzel, their elite core proved to be a difference-maker. Andrei Vasilevskiy bounced back, and the supporting cast stepped up in a big way, giving management reason to bet on this team at the deadline. Tampa Bay looks like one of the most dangerous teams in the league again. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs (52-26-4): B+

The Leafs deserve a lot of credit for winning their first division title in 25 years, especially their efforts down the stretch to lock up the crown. Top-notch goaltending from Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll was the biggest separator for Toronto, because in a lot of ways, it was a middle-of-the-road team — at five-on-five especially, they weren't elite offensively or defensively. The other advantage: High-end talent that — in addition to goaltending — won them a lot of close games. — Jonas Siegel

The Leafs' first division title in an 82-game season since 2000 sets up a Battle of Ontario against the Ottawa Senators.

Utah Hockey Club (38-31-13): C+

After finishing in sixth last a year ago, a jump up to 19th with 89 points certainly does count as progress. It's also a better record than they had in Arizona over the past decade. While there was plenty of playoff

talk in the preseason, Utah entered the season with the fourth-youngest team in the league and key injuries on defense early on, so growing pains were to be expected. But it does feel as though terrific seasons from Clayton Keller and netminder Karel Vejmelka went a bit wasted given the underperformances elsewhere. There's plenty of upside for this group next season, however — especially if 2024 No. 6 pick Tij Iginla can step in right away. — James Mirtle

Vancouver Canucks (38-30-14): D

The Canucks were supposed to be a contender. Right from the get-go, however, the season went pear-shaped. Thatcher Demko didn't return from his complicated knee injury until December and then dealt with two additional extended absences. Dakota Joshua missed the first month and a bit recovering from surgery following a summer testicular cancer diagnosis. Filip Hronek, Elias Pettersson, Quinn Hughes and Brock Boeser all missed stretches for various reasons, too. To top it off, the vibe of the group was off from the jump. J.T. Miller took an unexplained 10-game absence in November and was ultimately traded a couple of months later, a necessity for team chemistry. This was a spoiled season for a core group that's quickly running out of chances to make the case that they're even a consistent playoff team. — Thomas Drance

The Canucks will face a series of gut-wrenching decisions as management must pick up the pieces and figure out how to move forward.

Vegas Golden Knights (50-22-10): A

The Golden Knights enter every season with the same expectation: winning the Stanley Cup. After losing several key pieces due to cap constraints last summer, it did seem like this would be a bit of a retooling year for Vegas, but the new pieces fit in seamlessly and the team won its fourth Pacific Division title in eight years. The biggest concern was scoring, but the Golden Knights got contributions from up and down the lineup and had their best power play yet. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals (51-22-9): A

They shuffled their feet at the end a bit and cost themselves an A+, but the Capitals' season has still been an unqualified success. Alex Ovechkin broke the all-time career goals record, the new guys made major impacts, young players took important steps and they went from a fringe playoff team to the No. 1 seed in the East. What more could you want? — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets (56-22-4): A+

I expected Winnipeg to be a playoff team, but last year's 110 points seemed tough to replicate with so many games against an improved Central Division. Now the Jets are first-time Presidents' Trophy winners, with a 56-22-4 record and 116 points. Winnipeg won its first-ever Central Division title. Connor Hellebuyck won his second straight Jennings Trophy, will probably win his second straight Vezina and may even win the Hart. Plus, Josh Morrissey was elite all over again and Dylan Samberg emerged as a top-four defenseman. The power play was way better, finishing first, which helped four of Winnipeg's top-six forwards set career highs in points. This was an A+ season and then some. — Murat Ates

The Jets have clinched the 2025 Presidents' Trophy, cementing their status as the top regular-season team in the league. What comes next?

Grades summary

Winnipeg Jets

A+

A+

Los Angeles Kings

A-

A

Montreal Canadiens

B+

A

Tampa Bay Lightning

B

A

Vegas Golden Knights

A+

A

Washington Capitals

A

A

Columbus Blue Jackets

B

A-

Dallas Stars

B-

A-

Carolina Hurricanes

B+

B+

Ottawa Senators

B

B+

St. Louis Blues

B-

B+

Toronto Maple Leafs

A-

B+

Florida Panthers

B

B

Anaheim Ducks

C+

B-

Edmonton Oilers

B+

B-

Minnesota Wild

B+

B-

New Jersey Devils

A-

C+

San Jose Sharks

B+

C+

Utah Hockey Club

C+

C+

Chicago Blackhawks

F

C

Colorado Avalanche

B+

C

Calgary Flames

B-

C-

New York Islanders

D+

C-

Seattle Kraken

C-

C-

Detroit Red Wings

D

D+

Philadelphia Flyers

C-

D+

Pittsburgh Penguins

C

D

Vancouver Canucks

C+

D

Boston Bruins

B-

D-

Buffalo Sabres

F

F

Nashville Predators

F

F

New York Rangers

F

F

The Athletic / NHL playoffs: The goaltending storylines to watch in the first round, including 'Bob' vs. 'Big Cat'

By Jesse Granger- April 19, 2025

The 2024-25 regular season gave us so many intriguing storylines in the crease.

Connor Hellebuyck had a season for the ages for the Winnipeg Jets, which should result in his third Vezina Trophy and earn him consideration for the Hart Trophy. Andrei Vasilevskiy returned to elite form in Tampa Bay, while Logan Thompson joined the Vezina conversation after a brilliant start to his season in Washington.

Dustin Wolf and Lukas Dostal staked their first claims to be among the best in the world, playing brilliantly in their first seasons as starters despite playing behind struggling teams.

The list could go on and on, but now it's time for the playoffs, where the real stories unfold. These are the games that goalies are remembered for. This is the time of year where saves become posters, T-shirts or even statues. With so many intriguing first-round matchups, there's no lack of drama set to transpire in net.

Let's go through the goaltending storyline we're looking forward to in each of the eight first-round series.

Tampa Bay Lightning vs. Florida Panthers

Yet another chapter in the career-long battle between two greats

There aren't many active goalies with more hardware than Vasilevskiy and Sergei Bobrovsky. The two Russian netminders combine for three Stanley Cup championships, five trips to the Cup Final and three Vezina Trophies. Whoever comes out on top of this series will be in prime position to add to that.

This will be the fifth postseason meeting between Vasilevskiy and Bobrovsky over the last seven years. They split the first four meetings 2-2, and both have played excellently. Here's how they've stacked up in head-to-head playoff matchups over their careers:

Head to Head Playoffs

Andrei Vasilevskiy

5

.915

495

Sergei Bobrovsky

9

.904

396

Vasilevskiy has the superior stats, but Bobrovsky's teams have had the edge more times than not. We've been treated to some classic series between these two, starting with Columbus' stunning first-round sweep over Tampa Bay in 2019. The other three meetings happened since Bobrovsky joined the Panthers. Vasilevskiy's Lightning eliminated Florida on their way to winning the Cup in 2021, then Bobrovsky's Panthers returned the favor during their title run last season.

These aren't just two of the best goalies in the world; they're two of the most athletic and entertaining to watch. They'll also be chasing each other in the all-time leaderboards to retire as Russia's top NHL goalie. Grab some popcorn, sit back and enjoy another chapter of Bob versus the Big Cat.

Winnipeg Jets vs. St. Louis Blues

Can Hellebuyck put the narrative of his playoff struggles to bed?

Hellebuyck's 2024-25 season wasn't just the best in the NHL; it was one of the best we've seen in a long time.

His 49.48 goals saved above expected are the third-most since Evolving-Hockey began tracking the stat in 2007. The gap of 18.28 GSAX between Hellebuyck and the next-closest goalie is the third-largest gap ever. He also had nine more wins than the next-closest goalie, and more wins than 21 NHL teams this season. Hellebuyck lapped the field by nearly every measure, but these incredible stats are usually met with a strong "prove it in the playoffs" rebuttal by most of the hockey world.

I'd like to start by saying that his postseason struggles are being drastically overstated due to the disaster of a first-round series against Colorado last spring. Outside of that, he has a .916 save percentage in 40 playoff games. His 8.72 GSAX in the postseason are the ninth-most by any goalie between 2017-18 and 2022-23. He hasn't been as brilliant as he has in the regular season, but Hellebuyck has not been a bad playoff goalie.

Still, he's a victim of his own success. His unmatched regular-season consistency has created an incredibly high bar for him to clear in the playoffs, and it's about time he vaulted over it. Perhaps the most compelling goaltending storyline of this postseason is whether or not Hellebuyck can parlay his best season yet into the deep playoff run we've all been waiting for.

It will have to start with him exacting revenge on Jordan Binnington. The Blues' netminder bested Hellebuyck for the gold medal at the 4 Nations Face-Off in February. Now they meet again with even more on the line.

Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Ottawa Senators

Is goaltending finally the answer to Toronto's playoff woes?

This is Toronto's ninth consecutive postseason appearance, but the Leafs have won only a single series during that stretch. We've seen a similar story from year to year, with a team led by a high-octane offense sputtering in the playoffs and falling short of expectations.

This year's Maple Leafs feel very different. Coach Craig Berube has the team playing a more direct style of hockey with a bigger emphasis on defense. In conjunction, Toronto has gotten better goaltending than it's had in quite some time. The Leafs ranked fourth in the NHL in team save percentage, the highest they've ranked in 30 years (since Félix Potvin was in net). Anthony Stolarz finished second in the league with 31.2 goals saved above expected, which is the most by a Toronto goalie in 17 years.

It's not that goaltending has always been the problem for the Maple Leafs in the playoffs. They've gotten plenty of good performances in net while losing series for other reasons, but this is the first time the team has entered the playoffs with goaltending as a major part of its identity. There's no guarantee that will result in a deep run, but it's a refreshing change in approach and will be fun to watch.

On the other side of this series, the Senators also have an intriguing storyline. After being traded by Boston, Linus Ullmark helped backstop Ottawa to its first playoff appearance in eight years. The Bruins will watch from home. That alone has to feel like a win for the 2023 Vezina winner. Leading the Senators to an upset in the first round would be icing on the cake.

Los Angeles Kings vs. Edmonton Oilers

Ranford has done it again

Bill Ranford was a heck of a goalie in his playing days, winning the Stanley Cup and a Conn Smythe Trophy over his 15-year NHL career. He's even better as a goaltending evaluator and coach, as he's proven for the Los Angeles Kings over the last two decades.

Ranford served as Los Angeles' goalie coach from 2006-23. He was promoted to director of goaltending in 2024 and has remained heavily involved over the last two seasons. Over all these years, it seems any goalie he works with is better off for it.

Jonathan Quick is the face of Kings' goaltending during that span, but Ranford also played a role in helping develop Martin Jones, Jack Campbell, Darcy Kuemper and others. In recent years, he's also helped get the most out of veterans Joonas Korpisalo, Cam Talbot and David Rittich. Whether it's Ranford's guidance, the Kings' defensive structure or (most likely) a combination of both, the Kings have made a habit of maximizing their goalies.

This season — seven years after his first stint with the Kings — Kuemper returned to Los Angeles, and the results were exemplary. The 34-year-old had one of the best seasons of his career, ranking third in the NHL in save percentage (.922) and fourth in GSAx (29.45). He has played with a renewed sense of confidence, patrolling the edge of his crease with a fiery, athletic style that has made him successful. He could be the edge the Kings need to finally slay the dragon that is the Edmonton Oilers in the first round.

Carolina Hurricanes vs. New Jersey Devils

Markström is back in the playoffs

Jacob Markström has played more than 500 NHL games over the last decade and a half, but he's played only 26 in the postseason — and none in the playoffs since 2022. He's one of the more overlooked goalies of this era, largely because he hasn't played nearly enough meaningful games.

Since he became a full-time starter in 2017-18 with the Vancouver Canucks, Markström has started the third-most games (behind only Hellebuyck and Vasilevskiy). He's won the fourth-most regular-season games and made the fifth-most saves during that span. But of the 10 goalies with at least 500 regular season games since 2012-13, Markström is tied with Anaheim's John Gibson for the fewest playoff starts. It's unfortunate.

New Jersey's injuries have taken a bit of the shine off of this opportunity for Markström, but it will still be fun to watch the big Swede play on the big stage. He's incredibly athletic for being 6-foot-6, 207 pounds, and his compete level on broken plays is second to none.

While we haven't seen as much of it as we'd like, Markström's playing style seems ideal for playoff hockey. He's advanced to at least the second round in both of his two appearances. At 35 years old, he may not get many more of these opportunities, so Markström will try to make the most of it.

Vegas Golden Knights vs. Minnesota Wild

Was Hill born for the playoffs?

Over his eight-year NHL career, Hill's regular-season statistics have been good but not great. His .909 save percentage is slightly above the league average, and his 18.83 GSAx rank 35th during that span. It all screams "better than average, but only just."

That has not been the case at all in the playoffs.

In the last two postseasons, Hill led all goalies with a .932 save percentage and ranked third behind only Bobrovsky and Igor Shesterkin with 16.6 GSAs. He has been an absolute menace in the crease for the Golden Knights in the playoffs, standing on his head with regularity. He had three shutouts in only 17 starts, and had a save percentage north of .930 in nearly half of them.

The problem is, it's an incredibly small sample size. With only 19 career playoff games, it's difficult to make any definitive conclusions. Another oddity surrounding this storyline is that Hill hasn't started Game 1 of the playoffs for the Golden Knights in either of the last two runs. Untimely injuries led to him beginning the playoffs on the bench before eventually taking over and dominating.

This year, after setting career highs in games played and wins and signing a long-term extension, Hill enters the playoffs as Vegas' franchise goalie. If he puts up similar numbers to the last two years, it will be clear he's simply built for playoff hockey. It would make sense. He's a big, blocking-style goalie who enjoys fighting for sight lines with forwards in and around his crease, and he has the athleticism to make game-changing saves when needed. We should learn a lot about Hill in this postseason.

Washington Capitals vs. Montreal Canadiens

Thompson versus the doubters

Some of the best storylines in the NHL this season have taken place in the nation's capital. Alex Ovechkin's chase to pass Wayne Gretzky as the all-time goals leader garnered the biggest spotlight — and deservedly so — but Logan Thompson's breakout season has been quite the story as well.

Thompson's career arc is incredibly unique. He went undrafted out of junior hockey and took a while to gain traction as a pro. He became the first goalie to play in the NHL after participating in U-Sports (Canadian university league) hockey since 1990. Then after establishing himself in the NHL, he shockingly asked for a trade from Vegas last summer, seeking more opportunity to become a team's true No. 1 goalie with Hill entrenched as the Golden Knights starter.

He took full advantage of the opportunity in Washington, racing out to a brilliant 22-2-3 start while leading the NHL with a .925 save percentage through the first three months of the season. That start earned Thompson a six-year contract extension with the Capitals worth \$35.1 million. That is a life-altering contract for a player who had never earned more than \$800,000 in a single season, and who took a winding path just to reach the NHL in the first place.

After he signed that deal, though, Thompson's numbers dipped dramatically. Prior to Jan. 27, he led the league in save percentage and was second only to Hellebuyck in goals saved above expected (26.11). Since then, Thompson has a .884 save percentage (37th in the league) and -1.2 GSAs (54th). The late-season slump has likely nerfed his chances of being a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, but it has still been an excellent season as a whole.

Thompson thrives on doubt. He's used it as fuel for his entire career. There's plenty of doubt surrounding him and around the Capitals as legitimate contenders, and he'll be looking to prove everyone wrong yet again. The upper-body injury he suffered on April 2 has his status for Game 1 in question, but coach Spencer Carbery is optimistic about his chances of playing. It's just one more reason to doubt the Capitals, and one more thing to fuel Thompson.

Dallas Stars vs. Colorado Avalanche

Blackwood's long-awaited playoff debut

When Mackenzie Blackwood's name was called by the New Jersey Devils early in the second round of the 2015 draft, no one would have predicted we'd have to wait a decade to see him on hockey's biggest stage.

With every physical tool you could possibly ask for, Blackwood was one of the most exciting goalie prospects at the time. After two strong seasons to begin his NHL career, it felt like he was on a path to stardom. That took an abrupt turn when he struggled for the next three years and was eventually traded to San Jose.

In the shadows, playing on a last-place Sharks squad, Blackwood found his game and developed into the goalie many believed he could be. After an early-season trade to Colorado — followed by a long-term extension — this once-promising prospect is finally seen as a franchise goalie for a contender.

Blackwood ranked ninth this season in save percentage (.912) and GSx (24.68), and showed he is good enough to win behind a strong team with high expectations. On Saturday night, he finally gets to show the hockey world what he can do under the brightest lights.

The Athletic / NHL playoff predictions 2025: First-round winners, dark horse and Stanley Cup champion

By Sean Gentile, Shayna Goldman, Jesse Granger, James Mirtle, Mark Lazerus and The Athletic NHL Staff- April 20, 2025

Can Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers make it back to the Stanley Cup Final and finish the job, or are they in danger of an early exit? Are the Florida Panthers in line to repeat, or will one of the other Atlantic Division heavyweights pick them off? What's in store for the regular-season beasts: the Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals?

With the postseason opening Saturday, The Athletic posed these questions and more to its NHL staff.

Here are their picks to win each first-round series, the Eastern and Western Conferences, the Conn Smythe and the Stanley Cup, as well as picks for the most overrated team and a playoff dark horse.

To analyze and critique the picks, we've brought in senior writers Sean Gentile, James Mirtle and Mark Lazerus, analytics know-it-all Shayna Goldman and goaltending expert Jesse Granger.

Figures are rounded.

Eastern Conference

Ottawa Senators (WC2) vs. Toronto Maple Leafs (1A)

4 games

0.0%

0.0%

5 games

0.0%

23.5%

6 games

8.8%

32.4%

7 games

14.7%

20.6%

Total

23.5%

76.5%

Gentile: As always, the only thing that gave me pause before picking the Maple Leafs is the fact that they're the Maple Leafs.

Goldman: Not surprised to see Toronto get votes for five or six games, but if this series goes seven, how do you not pick the Pesky Sens?

Granger: When have the Leafs ever done anything the easy way? I'm with the 20.6 percent who see the Battle for Ontario going seven games, but I think this version of the Maple Leafs — with a bigger emphasis on defense and strong goaltending — gets the win.

Lazerus: I picked Ottawa. Because, let's be honest, it would be very funny.

Mirtle: This will be the 11th Leafs series I've covered. They have won once. I'm picking them to win here, but Ottawa's been a top-10 team in the second half. It's not going to be a short, easy series.

Florida Panthers (3A) vs. Tampa Bay Lightning (2A)

4 games

0.0%

0.0%

5 games

2.9%

2.9%

6 games

0.0%

38.2%

7 games

14.7%

41.2%

Total

17.6%

82.3%

Gentile: I picked the Lightning too, but are we sure the pendulum hasn't swung just a liiiittle too far in the other direction? That's a big-time gap.

Goldman: This series should be a lot closer than our votes project. At least the majority of us think it will go the distance.

Granger: I thought I was going against the grain by pushing my chips all in on Tampa Bay. Turns out, everyone had the same idea. And while we almost all picked Tampa here, we almost all have it going to at least six games, which feels right.

Lazerus: Oddly enough, the Lightning have become the new Aleksander Barkov: the "underrated" choice that everybody makes. This feels like a trap.

Mirtle: Florida is pretty beat up and has been losing a lot lately. The Panthers look like a team that's played too much hockey the past two years, so we'll see.

Montreal Canadiens (WC2) vs. Washington Capitals (1M)

4 games

0.0%

8.8%

5 games

0.0%

14.7%

6 games

5.9%

41.2%

7 games

17.6%

11.8%

Total

23.5%

76.5%

Gentile: If the Caps' goaltending self-destructs, all bets are off. They were better down the stretch than their record suggests, though. Don't overthink this one.

Granger: Logan Thompson is exactly where he wants to be. He thrives on doubt, and with the way Washington ended the season and his status up in the air, I think we'll see him at his best.

Lazerus: I just hope we get more than two measly games at the Bell Centre in the playoffs. What a year that joint is having, between the 4 Nations and the playoff push. Montreal might not win the Cup, but Montrealers get the belt.

New Jersey Devils (3M) vs. Carolina Hurricanes (2M)

4 games

0.0%

2.9%

5 games

0.0%

38.2%

6 games

5.9%

44.1%

7 games

0.0%

8.8%

Total

5.9%

94.0%

Gentile: I just don't see how the Devils get enough goals to beat Carolina four times.

Goldman: This series would look a lot different with a healthy Jack Hughes and Jonas Siegenthaler.

Granger: These teams split the season series 2-2, but they haven't played since the turn of the calendar, and the Devils' injuries change things quite a bit.

Lazerus: The Devils without Jack Hughes are like a snow day with e-learning. Takes all the fun out of it.

Mirtle: Carolina might not have Mikko Rantanen, but Taylor Hall, Logan Stankoven and Mark Jankowski have given it some ridiculous depth up front. That'll be the differentiator.

Western Conference

St. Louis Blues (WC2) vs. Winnipeg Jets (1C)

4 games

0.0%

2.9%

5 games

0.0%

17.6%

6 games

11.8%

50.0%

7 games

8.8%

8.8%

Total

20.6%

79.3%

Gentile: Picking the Blues to take a game or two is the right call, but I do think this is where it ends for them.

Goldman: Of all of the potential wild-card upsets, I thought this one would have had a little more support.

Granger: Connor Hellebuyck's career .928 save percentage against St. Louis is his highest against any divisional opponent. I think he'll quiet the narrative around his playoff performance quickly in this series.

Lazerus: An .870 save percentage last year and an .886 save percentage the year before that. That's not a narrative, Jesse, that's cold, hard math. Hellebuyck should win the Hart Trophy this year, but he has an awful lot to prove in this series.

Mirtle: I know Winnipeg won the Presidents' Trophy, but since when does that ever pan out!? Should be an interesting rematch of 4 Nations goaltenders, though.

Colorado Avalanche (3C) vs. Dallas Stars (2C)

4 games

2.9%

0.0%

5 games

2.9%

0.0%

6 games

41.2%

8.8%

7 games

20.6%

23.5%

Total

67.6%

32.3%

Gentile: We'll see how this one plays out, but injuries have stolen what seemed to be an all-timer.

Goldman: If the Stars have a chance in this series, it's going to be in six or seven — the longer this series goes, the better chance of Heiskanen returning.

Granger: Dallas' key injuries obviously swung things in Colorado's favor, but don't count out the Stars. They have one of the deepest rosters in the league, and Pete DeBoer could have a coaching edge. He's 3-0 against Jared Bednar in the playoffs and has bested him with three teams.

Lazerus: The Avalanche addressed some of their needs at the deadline, for sure. But they still can't match Dallas' depth, even without Jason Robertson. I'm still leaning Stars — Rantanen, Wyatt Johnston and Jamie Benn are currently their third line — but it's a toss-up.

Minnesota Wild (WC1) vs. Vegas Golden Knights (1P)

4 games

0.0%

17.6%

5 games

2.9%

44.1%

6 games

0.0%

23.5%

7 games

5.9%

5.9%

Total

8.8%

91.1%

Gentile: Only the Devils-Hurricanes series had a bigger split than this one, which isn't surprising. Minnesota is outmatched, even with Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek back in the picture.

Goldman: It's hard to see how the Golden Knights lose in Round 1 in two straight years. The Wild know a thing or two about that.

Granger: Vegas' center depth should be a major matchup problem in this series. Jack Eichel is having a career year, and Tomas Hertl, William Karlsson, Nicolas Roy and Brett Howden complete a formidable group.

Lazerus: Poor Wild fans. Every year, such hope. Every year, such mediocrity.

Edmonton Oilers (3P) vs. Los Angeles Kings (2P)

4 games

0.0%

2.9%

5 games

0.0%

2.9%

6 games

20.6%

23.5%

7 games

14.7%

35.3%

Total

35.3%

64.6%

Gentile: And here I thought I was being a rebel.

Goldman: If the Kings are going to get past their demons in Edmonton, this is the year to do it.

Granger: The Oilers seem more vulnerable than in years past with all the late-season injuries. More importantly, this is the best the Kings have looked in years. The step Quinton Byfield took in his game this season makes this team feel so much more dangerous.

Lazerus: This feels a little like Tampa, where maybe we're all leaning too hard in the contrarian direction. But it's really hard to feel good about Edmonton's goaltending situation.

Mirtle: If regular-season Darcy Kuemper was the real deal, that's a massive advantage here. L.A. was so strong defensively all year, too, so we'll see if that holds up against Edmonton's two-headed monster that is McDavid and Draisaitl.

Dark horse to win the Cup

Note: Must have +2,000 or worse odds to win Cup, with odds per BetMGM.

Kings +2,000

70.6%

Blues +4,000

14.7%

Wild +4,000

5.9%

Senators +3,500

5.9%

Devils +4,000

2.9%

Gentile: Easiest call on the board. Still wouldn't put actual money on any of them, though.

Goldman: The Blues are a fun pick, with all the similarities to their 2019 turnaround. Wouldn't that be something if history repeated itself?

Granger: Continuing what I wrote above, I love the Kings' makeup. Their center strength and defensive structure and Kuemper's recent form make them an easy choice for me.

Lazerus: None of these teams is going to win the Stanley Cup. But I'm sure our friends at BetMGM will be happy to have your money.

Mirtle: Don't listen to Old Man Laz — St. Louis is worth it given those odds and how wide open the league is this year.

Favorite that will be the biggest disappointment

Note: Must have +1,000 or better odds to win the Cup, with odds per BetMGM.

Stars +850

35.3%

Oilers +950

26.5%

Panthers +750

23.5%

Capitals +950

11.8%

Hurricanes +800

2.9%

Gentile: Second-easiest call on the board. Dallas, minus Heiskanen and Robertson, is impossible to pick.

Goldman: All of this Oilers doubt could unlock another level of playoff McDavid.

Lazerus: DIG THE (BLEEP) IN. RIGHT THE (BLEEP) NOW. I'll never doubt Draisaitl after what he did a few years ago on one leg, and I'll never doubt McDavid after what he did last year. Bet against those guys at your own peril.

Granger: The Panthers are the most likely team to lose in the first round, but that's purely based on opponent.

Mirtle: I went with Edmonton, but none of these outside of Carolina would surprise me this year.

Eastern Conference champion

Lightning

58.8%

Maple Leafs

23.5%

Capitals

5.9%

Hurricanes

5.9%

Panthers

5.9%

Gentile: Guess everyone loves Andrei Vasilevskiy and hates the Metro Division.

Lazerus: More like the Meh-tro, amirite?

Granger: I fit both of these categories. Well, I don't hate the Metro, but I expect the Eastern champ to come out of the Atlantic.

Goldman: These picks are going to age well when the Senators upset the Leafs in Round 1. Just kidding. Kind of.

Mirtle: I guess the staff have been into the model's Leafs Kool-Aid a bit.

Western Conference champion

Avalanche

38.2%

Golden Knights

26.5%

Jets

14.7%

Stars

14.7%

Kings

2.9%

Oilers

2.9%

Goldman: The Robertson injury plus a playoff start without Heiskanen has crushed a lot of confidence in the Stars and likely sent votes to Colorado and Vegas instead. Maybe we're all sleeping on Winnipeg a bit, but its path would take it through the Avs.

Lazerus: I might look foolish in a few days (it's my natural state), but I think everyone's still sleeping too hard on the Stars. Jake Oettinger vs. Mackenzie Blackwood, who's never played in a playoff game? Come on, guys. Don't overthink this.

Gentile: I went Vegas here, but you could easily sell me on any of the top three. There's no way Winnipeg should have the same odds as Dallas.

Granger: We're not giving enough respect to the team that's clearly been the best team in the West all season: Winnipeg.

Stanley Cup champion

Lightning

29.4%

Avalanche

20.6%

Golden Knights

17.6%

Jets

8.8%

Maple Leafs

8.8%

Stars

8.8%

Oilers

2.9%

Panthers

2.9%

Goldman: As someone who picked a Colorado-Tampa Bay Final early in the season, it's nice to see everyone has a similar vision. Naturally, it's a matchup of two teams that have an early best-on-best in Round 1. What could go wrong?

Gentile: In October, I went with the Stars. Oops! But yeah, I like Vegas here, too. No glaring holes.

Lazerus: Still picking the Stars. I've picked them for 147 consecutive years, and I'm going to be right eventually.

Granger: Tampa Bay has looked like such a complete team, and Vasilevskiy is back to his elite form. It's so hard to pick against that combination right now.

Mirtle: My Lightning-Avs final appears wholly unoriginal. Is it too late to make changes, editor?

Conn Smythe winner

Nikita Kucherov

17.6%

Jack Eichel

14.7%

Cale Makar

11.8%

Connor Hellebuyck

8.8%

Nathan MacKinnon

8.8%

Jake Oettinger

8.8%

Andrei Vasilevskiy

5.9%

Auston Matthews

5.9%

Brayden Point

2.9%

Connor McDavid

2.9%

Jake Guentzel

2.9%

Mitch Marner

2.9%

Sam Reinhart

2.9%

Shea Theodore

2.9%

Gentile: Last year's McDavid-related hiccup aside, the leading scorer for the Cup champion tends to take the Conn Smythe. For me, that's Eichel.

Goldman: Just a group of MVP-caliber players at the top of this list who know how to amp it up in the playoffs. Boring answer, but any of those names would make a lot of sense.

Granger: I love seeing three goalies getting votes in this poll, and I agree with the three names as the most likely to win a Conn Smythe.

Lazerus: Respect for the Sam Reinhart pick. He's a real one.

Mirtle: Respect for the Mitch Marner pick. (It wasn't me!) Goodbye, narratives ... hello, free agency.

The Athletic / What did it cost to be an NHL fan during the 2024-25 regular season?

By Rebecca Tauber and Mark Puleo- April 20, 2025

How much does it cost to be a hockey fan?

It's complicated.

Of course, you can be a fan on a budget. You can eat and drink at home while watching just the games aired on broadcast TV or while listening to the radio. You can score a secondhand jersey. It's still free to spew hot takes about which manager should be fired, which player is bound for the Hall of Fame and whether this year will finally be your year.

But what does it cost to be a casual NHL fan — the type who goes to one game per year and watches most of a team's games via a streaming service?

The price varies widely across cities. To find out, we took into account average ticket price, the cost of a streaming package for the season, the approximate cost of parking and the cheapest beer and hot dog we could find at each respective arena.

According to our math, that answer is somewhere between \$123 and \$460.42 in the United States and \$257.30 and \$443.57 in Canada.

Not all teams are created equal. As of April 2, StubHub data says the average ticket sold this season to a New York Rangers game cost \$210 USD, while the average ticket to an Anaheim Ducks game cost \$73. In Canada, the average ticket sold to a Toronto Maple Leafs game cost \$260.39 CAD, while the average ticket sold to an Ottawa Senators game cost \$75.83.

Some fans, such as in-market supporters of the Ducks or Dallas Stars, can snag a free streaming subscription through Victory+. Others, such as Buffalo Sabres fans, are out \$29.99 USD per month to stream, or \$209.93 for all seven months of the NHL regular season. Food ranges as well; a beer and hot dog at a Washington Capitals game will put you out \$30.47 USD, while the same at a Detroit Red Wings game will cost \$12.48.

In a historic year in which all four U.S. Original Six teams — the Boston Bruins, Rangers, Chicago Blackhawks and Red Wings — missed the playoffs for the first time since the mid-1920s, to see each of them among the priciest teams for their hurting fans has to sting extra this season.

While Detroit fans can at least appreciate some of the lowest beer prices in the league, they paid around \$100 for tickets, per StubHub, to see their team miss the playoffs for the ninth straight season. But at least they're not Rangers fans, who paid the priciest tickets with some of the most expensive beers just to watch the team go 18-19-3 at Madison Square Garden, the worst home record in the Eastern Conference.

Canada's two Original Six teams — the Montreal Canadiens and the Maple Leafs — are also hitting their fans' wallets painfully as the two most expensive in Canada, though at least Toronto fans have one of the top clubs in the East to support and the Canadiens are back in the playoffs for the first time since 2021.

In Ontario, not only did the Senators finally make the postseason after an eight-year drought, they fared well in fan affordability this season thanks to the league's least expensive average ticket (after conversion to USD) and some of the most affordable hot dogs, parking spots and streaming options.

Of course, adapt these prices as you wish; maybe you swap out parking for public transit or are more of a soft pretzel person than a hot dog person. Jerseys are sold at a flat rate — \$175 USD or \$250 CAD — so add that on top for any fans in the market for authentic merch.

Some notes on our methodology: Food and drink prices come from a mix of teams, venues and our reporters on the ground, and may not necessarily reflect the absolute cheapest price on a given day. Parking costs come from arena parking when available; where no venue parking exists, the lowest suggested nearby rate on a game day is used and could fluctuate based on the day.

When it comes to streaming, the sports world in 2025 is a fragmented, complicated mess. To watch every one of your team's games, you likely need multiple streaming services. For simplicity's sake, we chose the one streaming service that lets you watch a majority of your team's games. For the Philadelphia Flyers and San Jose Sharks, we're citing prices to watch their games through Peacock, even though the service launched only a month ago and wasn't available when the NHL season began.

And, of course, the American dollar is worth more than the Canadian dollar, which results in some Canadian markets coming in at a lower cost than American markets when we convert the currency. Because of this, we've split our data into two charts below: one in USD for the American teams, the other in CAD for the Canadian teams.

As the NHL playoffs are set to begin, here's how the 32 different markets measured up in terms of price during the regular season. As for the emotional cost? Fans will have to calculate that themselves.

The Athletic / Why, more than ever, any NHL team can win the Stanley Cup

By James Mirtle- April 20, 2025

The NHL's great flattening has been happening for a while, but it was especially evident in free agency last summer.

Of the top 40 UFAs who changed teams, the vast majority were from teams that had made the playoffs that year. And nearly 60 percent of them ultimately signed with teams lower in the standings, with the Seattle Kraken, Chicago Blackhawks, San Jose Sharks and Nashville Predators snapping up a lot of the overpriced talent.

Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei to Nashville. Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson to Seattle. Teuvo Teravainen, Tyler Bertuzzi and Alec Martinez (among others) to Chicago. Tyler Toffoli and Alex Wennberg to San Jose. Sean Monahan to Columbus. You get the idea.

They weren't the best players on their previous teams, but they were key contributors, depth-wise — the types of 25-goal scorers who boost second lines and top four defensemen who separate contending teams from the pack.

Then you can add in two quality young players (Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway) from the ninth-place Edmonton Oilers signing offer sheets with the 16th-place St. Louis Blues. And 27th-ranked Utah HC pulling in two quality defensemen in Mikhail Sergachev and John Marino from Tampa Bay and New Jersey. And the Senators solved their goaltending woes, pulling in 2023 Vezina winner Linus Ullmark from Boston.

Bit by bit, talent was sucked from the top of the league and redistributed, going to teams that were flush with cap space and hoping to improve. The impact of the NHL having just \$8.5 million in salary-cap growth spread over six seasons due to the pandemic was punishing to a lot of teams' depth.

Did it always work out for the teams on the bottom, overpaying for free agents? Hardly. In fact, most of the teams that spent big last summer ended up back at the bottom of the table, with only a worse cap sheet to show for it. But St. Louis improved and returned to the postseason. So did Ottawa, after a long absence.

These days, the NHL's parity isn't evenly distributed, as we're seeing plenty of teams — hello, Buffalo — lose year after year due primarily to managerial incompetence. But what all this annual rebalancing has done is bunch the contenders closer together, increasing the level of parity at the top of the league to the point that the playoffs this year will be more closely matched than ever.

The standard deviation of the NHL's 16 playoff-bound teams' points percentage is the lowest it has ever been (0.045) in the salary-cap era.

By our model's calculations, as shown in the graphic below, 10 teams have a 6 percent or better chance of winning the Stanley Cup — including nine who sit in a narrow band between 10 and 6 percent. That's a higher degree of parity at the top than we've had in our pre-playoff probabilities at The Athletic before, according to our stats man Dom Luszczyszyn.

What does that all mean?

Well, for one, good luck picking a favorite in this field. The Jets seem to have the best Stanley Cup odds going in thanks to Connor Hellebuyck, but they also have an extremely difficult path, with their first-

round opponent — the Blues — posting the NHL's best record (19-4-3) since the 4 Nations Face-Off break in mid-February.

Similarly, the Canadiens are the league's fourth-best team in that stretch (15-5-6) and the Senators are seventh (16-7-3). Even the supposed pushover teams are coming in hot, in other words, and likely to be a handful for the top teams.

The postseason this year will likely be murder on your playoff brackets and fantasy pools, but it'll be fantastic theater. There are going to be major upsets, and there are going to be long overtime games and long series.

If you're watching as a neutral party, enjoy the chaos.

There have been debates in hockey circles ever since the salary cap came back in 2005 about whether the NHL has gone too far in terms of competitive balance. That, I think, depends on your perspective, as there were certainly competitiveness problems the other way for small-market teams given how the cap-less league functioned in the Dead Puck Era.

The thing, too, is this sport is always going to have an extreme element of luck to it, with goalies getting hot, low-scoring games and random bounces deciding series. That's never going away.

But what's undeniable is there's nothing resembling a super team in the league anymore, with no roster particularly close to what the Blackhawks, Kings, Penguins and Lightning teams that strung together multiple Cups in earlier cap-era postseasons rolled out.

Every roster this season has obvious holes and flaws. And even the game's superstars are often saddled with less than super linemates.

MVP frontrunner Leon Draisaitl's most frequent linemate this season, for example, has been Vasily Podkolzin, who had all of eight goals and 24 points in 82 games for the Oilers. Our top-ranked powerhouse Winnipeg has 11-goal, 38-point man Vladislav Namestnikov as its second-line center.

The Maple Leafs have a group of bottom-six forwards that have hardly scored this season and are set to lean heavily on a goalie in Anthony Stolarz who, at age 31, has never started a playoff game. The Lightning's third-highest minute defenseman is J.J. Moser, who most hockey fans wouldn't be able to name, let alone pick out of a lineup.

The Hurricanes only had two players hit the 50-point mark and no one with more than 74. Florida is understandably beat up and diminished after two consecutive runs to the finals, with Matthew Tkachuk unlikely to be at full strength.

Dallas, too, is likely to be significantly hampered by injuries to two of its best players, Miro Heiskanen and Jason Robertson. The Avalanche traded one of their top players, Mikko Rantanen, in midseason to avoid losing him for nothing in free agency and have struggled to get enough from their depth this season.

And those eight clubs are the very best teams in the league.

Don't mistake those various weaknesses as an indictment of the NHL's mediocrity, however. Most of the worst that the league has to offer has been weeded out after 1,312 regular-season games. The playoffs will feature most of the top players in the league going head-to-head, with a higher skill level than ever, and will be well worth watching.

Just don't expect to be able to easily separate the contenders from the pretenders among the final 16 because basically anyone that's made it this far has a chance. Even the experts are guessing when we make our picks.

This is one year to take a chance on the underdogs.
They've never had a better shot.

The Athletic / Players in Stanley Cup playoffs may be called to testify in Hockey Canada trial

By Chris Johnston, Michael Russo and Katie Strang- April 21, 2025

Members of the 2018 Canadian World Juniors team currently playing for NHL teams in the Stanley Cup playoffs could be called as witnesses during a sexual assault trial that is slated to begin next week in London, Ont.

Teams have yet to be notified if the players will be required to travel to London to take the stand or if they may participate virtually, league sources told The Athletic.

“It’s not finalized but we were told players in the playoffs would have to be accommodated,” said an agent for one of the players. “That must mean video.” The agent added that while he didn’t expect his client to be required to travel to London during the playoffs, a criminal lawyer advised him that the decision would depend on the “mood of the court.”

One general manager of a playoff team with a potential witness on its roster added: “My thoughts would be that it would be virtual. That’s what I expect.”

There are other players who could be called to testify who no longer play in the NHL or are on teams that did not qualify for the playoffs.

An NHL official told The Athletic that “everyone who has been asked to participate has indicated a willingness to do it, as far as I know.” That official believes that the players will be “participating in various ways depending on circumstance.”

The trial is expected to last approximately eight weeks, meaning it could extend into the Stanley Cup Final.

Five players from that 2018 World Juniors team — Michael McLeod, Alex Formenton, Carter Hart, Dillon Dube and Cal Foote — will stand trial on sexual assault charges stemming from a June 2018 incident in which a 20-year-old woman alleged she was assaulted over several hours in a London hotel room.

The alleged sexual assault took place following a Hockey Canada gala celebrating the group’s championship. In the woman’s original statement of claim, filed in Ontario Superior Court in April 2022, she said there were eight players in the room when she was allegedly assaulted.

Nineteen of the 22 members of the Canadian World Juniors team attended the festivities in London. Of those 19, five were charged with assault. (McLeod is the only one of the five facing two charges; he was also charged “for being a party to the offense.”)

Seven players currently in the playoffs were in London the weekend the alleged incident occurred: Brett Howden (Vegas Golden Knights), Drake Batherson (Ottawa Senators), Taylor Raddysh (Washington Capitals), Sam Steel (Dallas Stars), Cale Makar (Colorado Avalanche), Jonah Gadjovich (Florida Panthers) and Robert Thomas (St. Louis Blues).

Another seven are no longer in the NHL or are on teams that did not make the playoffs: Colton Point (last played in ECHL), Dante Fabbro (Columbus Blue Jackets), Conor Timmins (Pittsburgh Penguins), Jake Bean (Calgary Flames), Tyler Steenbergen (last played in Europe), Maxime Comtois (KHL) and Boris Katchouk (AHL).

None of those 14 players have been charged with a crime.

Jordan Kyrrou, Victor Mete and Kale Clague were on the 2018 championship team but were not in London the weekend of the alleged incident.

ESPN / 2025 NHL playoffs: Stanley Cup cases, X factors, predictions

By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton- April 19, 2025

Reactions

The 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs are here! Unlike in some recent years, the bracket was known a few days in advance, as the Montreal Canadiens clinched the final spot -- and a first-round matchup against Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals. Meanwhile, the Atlantic Division lined up for the Battle of Ontario (Toronto Maple Leafs-Ottawa Senators) and Battle of Florida (Tampa Bay Lightning-Florida Panthers).

In the West, the Presidents' Trophy-winning Winnipeg Jets open against the resurgent St. Louis Blues, while Mikko Rantanen and the Dallas Stars face his former team, the Colorado Avalanche. And for the fourth straight postseason, the Los Angeles Kings and Edmonton Oilers square off in Round 1.

We've got all the angles covered to get you ready for the playoffs as ESPN hockey reporters Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton take a look at each of the 16 postseason teams, offering the reasons each team could win it all, along with the biggest X factor, players to watch and a bold prediction for every team.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metropolitan playoff brackets were written by Shilton, while Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific clubs. Also note that wild-card teams are listed according to the playoff bracket in which they're playing (so the Canadiens are in the Metro, and the Minnesota Wild are in the Pacific).

Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey.

Full schedule

Bracket, schedule

Contender flaws

Atlantic Division

Toronto Maple Leafs

Record: 52-26-4, 108 points

First-round opponent: Senators

Case for a Stanley Cup run: If not now ... when? The Maple Leafs are arguably the deepest, most complete team they've been in the Core Four (Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, John Tavares and William Nylander) era. First-year coach Craig Berube's north-south style took some getting used to, but the Leafs have thrived in it. Toronto is top 10 in league scoring without being top-heavy. The stars (especially Marner and Tavares) are pumping in goals, but the Leafs get solid contributions throughout the lineup.

Defensively, Toronto has buckled down, allowing fewer than three goals per game and their top-four rotation is stronger than ever. And the Leafs' goaltending? Locked in, with Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll both pulling their weight as a tandem of No. 1s with a collective .916 save percentage.

X factor: The Leafs have serious postseason demons to overcome. How much does Toronto's history of first-round failure hang over the team going into another playoffs? The Leafs have basically been through

it all the past decade -- they've earned series leads and blown them, come back from the brink (and still fallen short) and experienced every high and low in between.

The belief that Toronto can not only get through one round, but many rounds, has to start with the players. And for some reason, that swaggering confidence the Leafs have in the regular season dies out like a candle in the wind by playoffs. How Toronto manages its emotions and allows this season to be its own adventure -- without influence from past failings -- could determine just how many days or weeks this postseason lasts.

Player to WATCH: Marner. The Leafs' top winger has had a sensational regular season, pacing his club with 26 goals and 99 points. Marner must translate that success to the postseason and in a timely fashion. Marner has 11 goals and 50 points in 58 postseason tilts to date, but what's often been lacking are timely contributions, those big-time plays at critical moments. The Leafs have seen opportunity slip away when their best players like Marner (and Matthews) can't produce. This is a contract year for Marner, too. An impactful playoff performance could add some serious dollars onto his next deal.

Bold prediction: The Leafs sweep their way to a first-round series win and don't look back. Toronto bullies the competition en route to a Stanley Cup Final appearance.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Record: 47-27-8, 102 points

First-round opponent: Panthers

Case for a Stanley Cup run: It's easy to cite Tampa Bay's recent success as the reason it could add another banner to the rafters. But this Lightning team is built differently. Tampa Bay is not just relying on its elite goal scorers (ahem, Nikita Kucherov) to carry the day. The Lightning are well established defensively, and that's been a driver of their success the second half of this season. Since Feb. 1, Tampa has allowed the sixth-fewest goals in the league (2.40), with an impressive top-10 penalty kill (80.3%).

Andrei Vasilevskiy has been terrific in the crease, collecting the second-most wins among league starters (37) with a .921 save percentage and 2.20 goals-against average. Oh, and Kucherov? He only leads the league in scoring with 37 goals and 121 points. With Jon Cooper -- fresh off guiding Canada to victory at the 4 Nations Face-Off -- managing this lineup, the sky's the limit for Tampa Bay.

X factor: The Lightning have enviable scoring talent in Kucherov, Jake Guentzel (40 goals), Brayden Point (41 goals) and Brandon Hagel (35). But does Tampa have the depth to compete when offense is at a premium? In the past it's been unsung heroes like Nick Paul who come through when the Lightning's best skaters are neutralized.

This season, most of Tampa Bay's output is coming from a handful of exceptional players. The Lightning's ability to tap into the power of their bottom six will be critical. That doesn't negate how strong Tampa Bay's defense has been or the benefit in having Vasilevskiy back there guarding the cage. It's just a reality in the postseason that star contributions dwindle and have to be supplemented from somewhere else.

Player to WATCH: Victor Hedman. The Lightning's top blueliner took over his team's captaincy when Steven Stamkos left in free agency. Keeping Tampa Bay even-keeled in the postseason will fall on him. Hedman plays more than 23 minutes per game in every situation and it often feels like where he goes, the Lightning follow. Setting that example again and ensuring Tampa Bay doesn't lose track of its freshly ingrained defensive mindset will give the Lightning their best chance of a long spring.

Bold prediction: Tampa Bay's scoring stars are silenced early in the first round. Every game is decided by a single goal and ultimately the Lightning fall in six to face a swift summer break.

Florida Panthers

Record: 47-31-4, 98 points

First-round opponent: Lightning

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Who wants to bet against the reigning Stanley Cup champions? Especially when it's a Florida team that reached the final the year before finally earning the franchise's first title.

The Panthers are seasoned winners. They know what it takes to navigate the physical and emotional toll of a long playoff run. That's not easy. But Florida's potential to repeat goes beyond what they've shown in the past. This season's Panthers are stingy (giving up just 2.72 goals per game), striking (particularly with their 12th-ranked power play) and seemingly deep as ever (with five 20-plus goal scorers).

Considering Florida will also have Aaron Ekblad back from a 20-game suspension and Matthew Tkachuk returning from injury by the postseason? Watch out.

X factor: Will fatigue become a factor for Florida after two straight short summers? The Panthers did weather some injury issues down the stretch of this season, but their record over the past month (at just 10-10-1) and downturn in scoring production (32nd with only 2.19 goals per game) suggests the Panthers could be feeling the effects of limited downtime. They wouldn't be the first champions to go through it, either. What will play a role in Florida's success -- or failure -- is how it manages the inevitable wear and tear of this season with any lingering weariness.

Player to WATCH: Seth Jones. The Panthers won't have Ekblad back until Game 3 of their first-round series. That puts additional pressure on Jones -- along with the Panthers' entire back end -- to keep stepping up in his absence. Jones has already taken on a larger role than Florida likely anticipated when trading for him because of Ekblad's suspension; he paces the team in ice time at nearly 25 minutes per game. But Jones is short on postseason experience -- he hasn't skated in the playoffs since 2020 -- and he will be counted upon to have a significant impact from the back end. Florida will find out fast if he's up to the task.

Bold prediction: The Panthers rely on physicality and defensive effort to get past the first round, but without enough scoring, they're swept out of the second round into an early offseason.

Ottawa Senators

Record: 45-30-7, 97 points

First-round opponent: Maple Leafs

Case for a Stanley Cup run: The Senators have been underrated for too much of this season. It's in the playoffs that they can prove why. Ottawa's defense is vastly improved -- allowing just 2.80 goals per game -- and it gives up fewer than 30 shots per game. First-year starter Linus Ullmark has been sensational for the Senators in net (with a .911 SV% and 2.67 GAA) and deserves ample credit for where Ottawa is, but it's the full team buy-in that's made a true difference.

The Senators are stacked with scoring talents -- headlined by Tim Stutzle and Brady Tkachuk -- and deep on the back end, where a terrific Jake Sanderson is having his own unheralded campaign. The Senators have endured enough frustration in recent seasons to be slightly hardened, too. There's a belief that this is their moment and the time has come to show it.

X factor: How will Ottawa leverage its special teams in the playoffs, especially in the first round? The Senators have a solid power play (23.5%) and decent penalty kill (77.9%). Will they make the most of those units? This is the first postseason experience for all of Ottawa's most important skaters, and it would be natural to try to do too much to have an impact.

The Senators know (logically) to avoid that going in. Easier said than done. Even-strength scoring dries up quickly in the postseason. Ottawa's key openings could be with the extra man -- and its power play has been particularly good in recent weeks (compared to their first-round opponent's penalty kill, which has not). The Senators must own the special teams battle as best they can.

Player to WATCH: Tkachuk. The captain has been sidelined since March 30 with an upper-body injury, but he is expected to be back at full strength for the postseason. Will that be the case? It's tough enough stepping back in from an ailment at any time of year; rust is inevitable after sitting out 11 games. But the Senators need Tkachuk's contributions out of the gate to match up with the star power Toronto will wield. Tkachuk led the Senators with 29 goals this season and he's the spark plug on their power play. No doubt all eyes in Canada's capital will be watching to see if Tkachuk's injury will impact what he can do straight away.

Bold prediction: Ottawa gives its all in the first round, but an avalanche of rookie mistakes prove too costly to overcome. The Senators can't score when it counts and are swept from the first round.

Metropolitan Division

Washington Capitals

Record: 51-22-9, 111 points

First-round opponent: Canadiens

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Washington was the first team this season to clinch a playoff spot. And the Capitals could easily be the last one standing, too. They're dynamic offensively (averaging the second most goals in the league), play a tight defensive game (giving up fewer than three goals per night), have a lights-out goaltender in Logan Thompson (owner of a .910 SV% and 2.49 GAA) and have the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer Alex Ovechkin hanging out in his office. What more could the Capitals possibly need to push their way toward a championship?

Spencer Carbery has rightfully earned Jack Adams chatter for the way he's built this Washington team into a true contender. There aren't many flaws to pick at when you've shown the type of consistency this crew has. Washington's skids have been few and far between, and it has rarely lost two in a row. That regular-season success should segue nicely into what's next.

X factor: It's true Washington has a reliable No. 1 in Thompson -- but he may not be available to start the postseason while rehabbing an upper-body injury. The Capitals have leaned on Charlie Lindgren in Thompson's stead and project to keep doing so until Thompson is healthy.

Will Lindgren be able to stand tall early in the first round? Lindgren (.896 SV%, 2.73 GAA) hasn't produced the same numbers as Thompson (.910 SV%, 2.49 GAA). Suddenly, goaltending becomes a serious potential roadblock for Washington. If the Capitals want to see their season extended for weeks - and not days -- they'll have to support Lindgren even more than they would Thompson with a defense-first mindset. Because even with the likes of Ovechkin up front, it's nearly impossible to outscore your own defensive woes come the playoffs.

Player to WATCH: Tom Wilson. There's something about Wilson and the postseason. He's always been the Capitals' heavy, but there's an extra pep in Wilson's step when the playoffs roll around. He's going to make the other team uncomfortable, getting under guys' skin and generally causing the sort of chaos that can throw things off. Washington needs that energy. The Capitals have plenty of finesse elsewhere, and while Wilson can score with the best of them -- he has 33 goals this season, after all -- it's the extra punch (sometimes literally) Wilson can provide that makes him a standout this time of year.

Bold prediction: Washington's offense is slowed in the first round when Ovechkin fails to score a single goal. Its heated second-round series ends in frustration when Washington's defense can't hold up and it is sent packing.

Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 47-30-5, 99 points

First-round opponent: Devils

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Carolina has its identity and sticks to it. The Hurricanes are a perennial contender because they're elite at 5-on-5, consistently stifle their opponents (by allowing the fewest shots in the league), while simultaneously making the competition uncomfortable (by peppering in the second-most shots on goal this season). Carolina has improved its play off the rush and remains as stout as ever on defense. It has received strong goaltending from Frederik Andersen (.907 SV%, 2.29 GAA) and has the league's best penalty kill.

It has been Carolina's defensive details that set it apart, and those are never more valuable than in the playoffs. The Hurricanes have also leaned on a breakout offensive performance from Seth Jarvis. (He has a team-leading 32 goals.) Carolina has done the work to set itself up for success.

X factor: Is Carolina deep enough to actually go deep in the playoffs? The Hurricanes do an excellent job offensively of generating opportunities, but too often aren't cashing in on them from enough players throughout the lineup. If Carolina can rely only on Jarvis and Sebastian Aho to consistently light the lamp then they become an easier team to pick off (especially considering their power play is 26th in the league, at 18.6%).

And what about the goaltending depth? Andersen has been good since coming back from injury, but his young partner Pyotr Kochetkov has struggled (.898 SV%, 2.59 GAA). Andersen is always at risk of getting hurt and Carolina would be in lesser hands with Kochetkov taking over the crease. How the Hurricanes respond to potential adversities -- and who can fill in the gaps -- is key.

Player to WATCH: Logan Stankoven. Carolina may not have Mikko Rantanen anymore, but it does have a player who came on board when Rantanen was traded to Dallas. Stankoven, a rookie, has been an impressive fit for the Hurricanes, with five goals and eight points in 17 games. And it feels like he's hitting a stride at the right time. Stankoven can create chances for himself and teammates with an underrated playmaking ability and he's an energy guy, too. That can go a long way in the close, tense games that Carolina projects to find itself in soon enough.

Bold prediction: Despite Carolina's decided edge in the first round, it falters too many times to recover. The Hurricanes fail to advance for the first time since 2020 and for just the second time under coach Rod Brind'Amour.

New Jersey Devils

Record: 42-33-7, 91 points

First-round opponent: Hurricanes

Case for a Stanley Cup run: New Jersey has the ingredients to be a surprise success story in the postseason. The Devils' special teams are among the league's best, with a third-ranked power play (28%) and second-ranked penalty kill (82.4%). New Jersey is tough to crack all around though, allowing the fifth-fewest goals this season (2.65) and sixth-fewest shots (26.3).

The Devils' solid goalie tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen should leave them feeling confident that whoever is back there will be steering enough pucks aside. And if New Jersey can make life hard on

the opponent and wear them down with a strong defensive effort, then it will take some of the sting out of not having top scorer Jack Hughes available due to injury.

X factor: All of that said, Hughes isn't easily replaceable (as we've seen in New Jersey's struggles since Hughes underwent surgery in March). The Devils are 30th in 5-on-5 scoring without Hughes, and replacing his contributions in the playoffs is critical to how far they can advance. Nico Hischier and Jesper Bratt are averaging over a point per game following Hughes' departure, and having Dougie Hamilton back for the playoffs should help generate more scoring opportunities from the back end.

The first round will pit New Jersey against a sturdy defensive club in Carolina. It'll take all the firepower these Devils can muster to make up for Hughes' absence and every single opportunity to use that vaunted power play can't be taken for granted.

Player to WATCH: Hischier. It's easy for Hischier to fly under the radar when Hughes is around. Now, consider Hischier in the spotlight. His ability as a two-way center will carry the Devils' top-heavy attack, but Hischier will also have a target on his back. Ultimately, slowing him down will make New Jersey that much more one-dimensional. How Hischier handles the hurricane ahead will decide whether the Devils sink or swim.

Bold prediction: New Jersey plays fast and loose and it pays off against a stiff Carolina team in the first round. The Devils glide through the second round as one of the playoffs' best offensive teams and wind up another Cinderella story (this time, playoff edition).

Montreal Canadiens

Record: 40-31-11, 91 points

First-round opponent: Capitals

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Montreal found its mojo at the right moment. Who would have thought as the Canadiens endured a five-game slide through the end of March that they'd follow it up with six straight wins to put a playoff berth back on the table?

The postseason is all about momentum and confidence. The Canadiens may have needed a few extra games to ultimately secure their spot but what does Montreal have to lose, really? While other clubs are saddled with pressure to win now, the Canadiens can truly be happy just having their seat at the party. And that's a good thing.

Montreal stepped up in the second half of this season, averaging over three goals per game since late February while allowing fewer than three across the line. Nick Suzuki has averaged over a point per game, and Cole Caufield has collected an impressive 37 goals. Rookie defenseman Lane Hutson is having a Calder Trophy-worthy season, and the Canadiens have continuously shown they have sound depth. Montreal has made it this far. There's reason to believe it can keep the good times rolling.

X factor: The Canadiens will be taking on a high-flying Washington team out of the gate. Can Montreal's goaltending keep things from getting out of hand? Sam Montembeault was great during that five-game stretch to put the Canadiens in playoff position, and he, like the rest of the team, was better in the season's second half. Now, Montreal just needs Montembeault to hold the Capitals' elite offense at bay long enough for the Canadiens' own snipers to get on the board. Montembeault has carried a heavy load already for Montreal this year (with 60 starts) and his stats are good (.901 SV% and 2.83 GAA). The Canadiens will need greatness from their goaltenders if they expect to move on.

Player to WATCH: Ivan Demidov. Name the last player who arrived in Montreal to Demidov-level fanfare? (We'll wait). Turns out, though, the hype was real. Demidov stepped into his first NHL game last week

and was on the scoresheet with a goal and an assist. Montreal may have lost that night to Chicago, but Demidov was an undeniable boost for the group as they searched for that eventual clinching victory. And considering how unfazed Demidov appears at the NHL level, it'll be fascinating to see what he can provide for Montreal in the postseason.

Bold prediction: Montreal takes Game 1 to win their first playoff game in four years and put some doubt into the Capitals. The Canadiens hold off Ovechkin the entire way in a six-game series they eventually lose.

Central Division

Winnipeg Jets

Record: 56-22-4, 116 points

First-round opponent: Blues

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Few teams are as complete as the Jets have been this season, one in which they won the Presidents' Trophy for the league's best record. They took a step forward in their evolution in the first season under Scott Arniel, who was an associate coach with the Jets for the past two campaigns.

They get consistent offensive contributions from their forward lines, while also getting scoring from defensemen. Their defensive structure is among the best in the league at limiting scoring chances, while they have what might be a future Hall of Famer in Connor Hellebuyck in net.

X factor: Can their regular-season continuity translate to playoff success? This is, once again, the biggest question facing the Jets heading into the postseason. They won 52 games last season, faced the Avalanche in the first round -- and were eliminated in five games for a second consecutive postseason.

Fast forward to this year. They've won more than 50 games for a second straight season, while having personnel who look as if they can be trusted in every situation. Does it lead to them getting out of the first round? Or will it be a third straight early exit?

Player to WATCH: Hellebuyck. He's in line to win a second consecutive Vezina Trophy, which would be his third overall. That would place Hellebuyck among Hall of Famers Martin Brodeur, Dominik Hasek and Patrick Roy. But any time there's a discussion about Hellebuyck's status among all-time greats, it includes his relative lack of success in the postseason. That came up last season, when he had a personal-low .870 save percentage in the Jets' five-game series loss. On the whole, he's 18-27 with a 2.85 goals-against average and a .910 save percentage in his postseason career. Is this the year he turns it around?

Bold prediction: Gabriel Vilardi, who has only two goals in 12 career playoff games, will lead the Jets in goals this postseason.

Dallas Stars

Record: 50-26-6, 106 points

First-round opponent: Avalanche

Case for a Stanley Cup run: The Stars are certainly in a championship window, having advanced to three Western Conference finals in the past five years. But there's more to it than that. The core of those teams remains in place. They've found ways to add to that core, and newcomers assimilate quickly.

Despite already having one of the most talented teams in the NHL, the Stars traded for one of the game's best players in Mikko Rantanen, who has won a Stanley Cup. Adding Rantanen only heightens the expectations this could be the year for the Stars.

X factor: Can they be stopped in a Game 7? You may have heard that Stars coach Peter DeBoer is quite adept at Game 7s. His teams are 8-0, which is not only the best all-time record for Game 7s in NHL history, but it's the best mark of any coach in North American men's pro sports history.

While he's been with the Stars for only two seasons, each postseason has seen the Stars tap into what has made DeBoer so crucial in those winner-take-all games. And with a first-round date against the Avalanche? It's possible DeBoer's Game 7 tactics could come into play again.

Player to WATCH: Rantanen. There's the theatrical aspect -- watching a player who never thought he was going to leave the franchise that drafted him play a role in eliminating them months after being traded. But what's greater than the drama is the Stars altered their entire team-building philosophy by dealing draft picks and a rookie roster player to get him, because they believe someone who has 101 points in 81 career playoff games can lead to them winning the second title in franchise history.

Bold prediction: Rantanen will either score or set up two of the game-winning goals in the first round against the Avalanche.

Colorado Avalanche

Record: 49-29-4, 102 points

First-round opponent: Stars

Case for a Stanley Cup run: What's essentially doomed the Avs since they won the Stanley Cup back in 2022 is a lack of consistent secondary and tertiary scoring. It's something they've tried to fix on multiple occasions, only to end up course correcting. But, the trades they've made this season have given them not only their strongest roster since they won the Cup, but a group that has the potential to be just as good as that title-winning team. That group will be put to the test quickly in the first round against the Stars.

X factor: Their supporting cast. Relying on their role players was crucial to why they averaged more than four goals per game en route to knocking out the Jets in five games in the opening round last spring. But that changed against the Stars in Round 2. A lack of consistent secondary scoring, among other items, resulted in the Avs notching six total goals in the four games they lost to the Stars in the second round.

Player to WATCH: Gabriel Landeskog. The Avalanche captain played his first professional game in nearly three years for the Avs' AHL affiliate this past weekend. After logging 15 minutes in his first game, he scored a goal and had an assist in his second game, while his surgically repaired knee didn't give him any issues. It sets the stage for Landeskog returning this postseason, and not only providing the Avs with a two-way net front presence who plays a responsible game, but someone who provides a calming influence in difficult situations.

Bold prediction: Landeskog will score three goals in the first round against the Stars.

St. Louis Blues

Record: 44-30-8, 96 points

First-round opponent: Jets

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Since they hired Jim Montgomery in November, the Blues have talked about the adjustments they could make, and it led to an openness that led to contributions throughout their lineup. That became evident during a 12-game win streak across March and April that saw them catapult from wild-card hopeful to being in control of the wild-card race.

Oh, and an in-season coaching change followed by a strong run to the playoffs and then a Stanley Cup for St. Louis? Yeah, we've seen that before.

X factor: How far will their defensive structure take them? One of the biggest challenges facing the Blues before they hired Montgomery was the need for defensive consistency. They hired assistant Mike Weber to focus on defense, and added two-way forwards to help address the problem.

Following Montgomery's arrival, the Blues have steadily improved to the point where they're among the best in the NHL in allowing high-danger chances per 60 minutes, while being in the top 13 in fewest shots allowed per 60 and scoring chances per 60.

Player to WATCH: Jordan Binnington. For months ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off, much was made about Canada's relative weakness in goal. The team turned to Binnington, who was instrumental in helping Canada win February's best-on-best tournament. His exploits since have translated into success for the Blues. Given the changes under Montgomery coupled with what Binnington has done, could it lead to the Blues going on a run this postseason?

Bold prediction: Despite the Jets having the NHL's top power play, the Blues will limit them to only two goals with the extra-skater advantage.

Pacific Division

Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 50-22-10, 110 points

First-round opponent: Wild

Case for a Stanley Cup run: By Vegas standards, this team has been quiet -- but it has also been rather productive.

Jack Eichel is no longer just an offensive threat. He's developed into a complete, two-way forward who can be used in any situation. They've empowered Pavel Dorofeyev into becoming a 30-goal scorer. Goaltender Adin Hill went from being in a tandem to making more than 50 starts for the first time in his career. Those individual exploits are part of a collective that once again has the Golden Knights in a position to challenge for a second Stanley Cup in three years.

X factor: Their strength in numbers. Winning that title in 2023 was largely made possible by the Golden Knights' depth. That's what made last offseason so jarring, because quite a bit of that depth left in free agency. The response? Eleven players finished 2024-25 with 10 or more goals. That group includes Dorofeyev but also Brett Howden, who went from 39 career goals in 351 career games entering this season to 23 goals in 2024-25.

Player to WATCH: Tomas Hertl. Hertl had a difficult time after coming over via trade at the tail end of last season, as he was coming back from injury. That extended into the postseason, in which he finished with one point in seven games. But in his first full season with the club, Hertl has looked the part of a legitimate top-six forward, reaching the 30-goal mark for the third time in his career. Getting that version of Hertl means the Golden Knights could also get "Playoff Hertl," who scored 16 goals and had 24 points in 29 games during his final two postseason campaigns with the San Jose Sharks.

Bold prediction: Not only will Dorofeyev lead the Golden Knights in goals after the first round, but he will lead the Western Conference in goals.

Los Angeles Kings

Record: 48-25-9, 105 points

First-round opponent: Oilers

Case for a Stanley Cup run: The Kings have gone through a few iterations over the past four years once their rebuild was complete. They've made big trades, spent quite a bit of money in free agency, shuffled through goaltenders, and fired and hired coaches only for it to all end in the same place the past three seasons: getting knocked out by the Oilers in the first round.

This season, they've attained a level of consistency -- both with their structure under Jim Hiller and in having roster continuity -- that could make this spring end differently. And it helps that the goalie on whom they finally landed has shown up in a big way -- even earning some Vezina consideration.

X factor: Can their identity be the difference? A former assistant coach who went from interim coach to head coach this season, Hiller has developed the Kings into one of the more consistent teams in the NHL. Their underlying offensive metrics have them in the top 10 or just outside the top 10 in most shots per 60 minutes, goals per 60, scoring chances per 60 and high-danger chances per 60.

Defensively, they're in the top three in fewest opportunities allowed in those same categories, while also being top three in team save percentage.

Player to WATCH: Darcy Kuemper. All the changes the Kings have made in net have come with the intention of getting to the second round. So far, none of those adjustments has worked, which led them to get Kuemper. In only 34 career playoff games, he's done quite a bit: helping the Arizona Coyotes win a round in the Edmonton bubble in 2020 and backstopping the Avs to a Stanley Cup in 2022. Does he add getting the Kings (finally) past the first round and the Oilers to his list of achievements?

Bold prediction: Warren Foegele, who scored three playoff goals for the Oilers last season, will have a hat trick in the first round against his old team.

Edmonton Oilers

Record: 48-29-5, 101 points

First-round opponent: Kings

Case for a Stanley Cup run: The Oilers were a game away from winning the Stanley Cup last year after falling into a three-game series hole against the Panthers. The entirety of their run reinforced the notion that they were more than just Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid. That they had the support cast who could be counted upon in critical sequences, while coach Kris Knoblauch and his staff seemingly had an adjustment for every situation.

Even though the Oilers enter the playoffs facing a long list of injuries, they're in a championship window - and have shown they can figure it out when needed.

X factor: Can they fix the disconnect with their defense and goaltending? Everything about the Oilers' underlying metrics suggests they're one of the stronger defensive teams in the NHL this season. They're in the top 10 in fewest scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes and the fewest high-danger scoring chances allowed per 60. They're also 11th in shots allowed per 60.

And yet, they are in the bottom 10 in team save percentage. How is it that the Oilers have been consistent with their structure but inconsistent in net? Answering that question could play a role in an early exit versus a protracted one.

Player to WATCH: Stuart Skinner. Not that a team's playoff fate hinges entirely on the actions of one player, but there's attention on Skinner for a reason (in addition to everything in the previous section). The benching during last year's playoffs seemed to be a wake-up call; thereafter, he was a consistent presence that played a significant role in the Oilers' Cup Final run.

But this season has arguably been his most difficult since becoming the Oilers' No. 1. His .894 save percentage is his lowest in that time, while Skinner's minus-10.34 goals saved above expected (per Natural Stat Trick) is the worst of any goalie who could potentially start for a playoff team.

Bold prediction: Should the Oilers get past the Kings in the first round, they'll return to the Stanley Cup Final.

Minnesota Wild

Record: 45-30-7, 97 points

First-round opponent: Golden Knights

Case for a Stanley Cup run: Just look at what they've been through this season. Kirill Kaprizov was having the best season of his career before he sustained a long-term injury, limiting him to 41 games. The Wild also had to navigate injuries to Joel Eriksson Ek, Jared Spurgeon and Jonas Brodin. They were in the bottom 10 of goals per game, shots per 60 minutes, scoring chances per 60 and high-danger chances per 60.

If they made it this far in a season in which they've played many tight games, shouldn't playing those games now provide a sense of normalcy -- especially with all of those players back in the lineup?

X factor: Comfort in one-goal games. Yes, playoff games are different because one mistake can make the difference between winning a game or losing a series. But as noted above, the Wild know that concept all too well this season. They've played in 28 one-goal games and have won 18 of them. There was even one stretch in which they won four consecutive one-goal games.

And for a team that was the worst in goals per game among Western Conference playoff teams? Those one-goal games could be crucial toward their aspirations.

Player to WATCH: Zeev Buium. Although the Wild have a number of players who could be in this space, what makes Buium the pick here is the intrigue. From the moment they drafted him last summer, it created an expectation that he and Brock Faber could usher the Wild's blue line into a new era. But above all, it gave the Wild another young, puck-moving defenseman who could play heavy minutes -- and important minutes -- when the time came. Buium has already filled that role with the University of Denver and the two-time gold-medal winning U.S. team at the World Juniors. He could be the next young blueliner who is asked to do the same in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Bold prediction: Marc-Andre Fleury will get at least one win against the Golden Knights, and if so, it will come at T-Mobile Arena.

ESPN / Lapsed fan's guide to the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs

By Greg Wyshynski- April 19, 2025

As a service to fans who have a general interest in the National Hockey League but have no idea what has happened since the Florida Panthers raised the Stanley Cup by defeating the Edmonton Oilers last June, we're happy to provide this FAQ as a guide to the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs.

And for you die-hard puckheads: Here is your official refresher before the games begin Saturday. Enjoy!

Where did all the usual suspects go?

History was made in the NHL this season, but not the kind that its most storied U.S. franchises wanted. The 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs mark the first time that the Boston Bruins, Chicago Blackhawks, Detroit Red Wings and New York Rangers have all missed the cut in the same postseason:

Chicago's in a rebuild

Detroit was supposed to finally emerge from one but missed the playoffs for the ninth straight season, despite an in-season coaching change -- the sixth season without a postseason berth under GM Steve Yzerman

The Bruins fired their coach 20 games into the season, only to eventually ship out a number of veteran players at the trade deadline while missing the playoffs for the first time in nine seasons

The Rangers went from the league's best record to finishing eight points out of the playoffs, and could see major changes in the offseason

The New York Islanders, Nashville Predators and Vancouver Canucks were all 2024 playoff teams that didn't make it back this season. Sidney Crosby and the Pittsburgh Penguins missed the playoffs for the third straight season.

So the 2025 postseason won't have a number of glamour franchises and superstar players. But that just creates room in the spotlight for others to emerge.

Can the Panthers repeat?

The Stanley Cup champion Panthers finished third in the Atlantic Division with 98 points, down significantly from their 110-point season a year ago. Injuries were a factor: Captain Aleksander Barkov was limited to 67 games, and spiritual leader Matthew Tkachuk played only 52 games and hasn't been in a game since the 4 Nations Face-Off in February. Top defenseman Aaron Ekblad was also limited to 56 games after being suspended 20 games for violating the terms of the NHL/NHLPA performance-enhancing substances program. The earliest he can return is Game 3 of the Panthers' Battle of Florida first-round series against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

All of this is to say that we haven't really seen what this version of the Panthers is going to look like with all systems go. There are some constants from last year's Cup-winning roster: Sam Reinhart was brilliant again, with 81 points in 79 games and could win the Selke Trophy as the league's best defensive forward. Clutch playoff performers Carter Verhaeghe and Sam Bennett, as well as defensive rock Gustav Forsling, are back for another run.

But it's a different supporting cast. Defensemen Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson, and forwards Vladimir Tarasenko and Kevin Stenlund moved on after last season. Florida made two

blockbuster additions to bolster their group before the trade deadline, acquiring defenseman Seth Jones from the Blackhawks and Bruins captain Brad Marchand.

The Panthers certainly have the players for a third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final and a repeat as champions. It's just a matter of whether they all fit as snugly as they have previously under head coach Paul Maurice. If nothing else, the first round should give us our first look at Marchand and Tkachuk both yapping on the same team. Humanity might never be the same.

If they win the Battle of Florida, can the Lightning win the Cup?

The Lightning finished second in the Atlantic with around the same record as last season, but they feel like a much more dangerous team.

Tampa Bay led the NHL in goals per game, powered by winger Nikita Kucherov, who was the league's top point scorer this season (121) while setting up Brayden Point (42 goals) and Jake Guentzel (41 goals) for dominant seasons. Winger Brandon Hagel had 90 points in 81 games, and was one of the NHL's best all-around players; ditto center Anthony Cirelli (27 goals), who's in the conversation for the league's top defensive center this season.

On the blue line, former Norris Trophy winner Victor Hedman led his teammates in average ice time by nearly two minutes.

But it's the reemergence of star goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy that has bolstered the Bolts' Stanley Cup chances. He had his best season since 2020-21, and was recently named the league's top goalie in a survey of his peers. If Vasilevskiy can carry that over to the postseason, where he always has been at his best, the Lightning could be in business.

Tampa Bay hasn't escaped the first round since losing in the 2022 Stanley Cup Final to Colorado, which followed consecutive Cup wins for the Lightning. Perhaps seeking to recapture that magic, GM Julien BriseBois reacquired two players from their title reign: defenseman Ryan McDonagh, who has been outstanding this season after being traded from Nashville; and center Yanni Gourde, a trade-deadline pickup from Seattle who has fit right back in with the Lightning.

If they can get past their archrivals -- admittedly, a big "if" -- the potential for another boat parade in the bay isn't out of the question.

What can we expect from the Battle of Ontario?

The NHL wild-card format exists to maximize the potential for rivals to meet in the postseason, and it worked like a charm in the Eastern Conference: Not only is there another Battle of Florida, but the Battle of Ontario has been reignited between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators, the latter of whom finished in the first wild-card spot to end a seven-year playoff drought.

These rivals met four times between 2000 and 2004, with Toronto winning each time. We don't want to say Senators fans are salivating at the chance to take down the Atlantic Division-leading Leafs, but the streets of Ottawa are currently flooded.

The Maple Leafs are still on their quixotic mission to win the Stanley Cup for the first time since 1967. As usual, there are reasons to believe. Winger Mitch Marner, an unrestricted free agent this summer, had 100 points in 80 games. Forwards William Nylander (45 goals) and Auston Matthews (77 points in 66 games) were dominant, while pending free agent John Tavares regained his point-per-game form.

Toronto's hopes rest on the pads of goalies Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz, who led the Leafs to the fourth-best team save percentage in the NHL in the regular season. But questions about their lack of playoff experience (a combined eight games) and ability to remain healthy linger.

The Senators' playoff berth marks the first time Brady Tkachuk has participated in an NHL postseason -- other than being a spectator at his brother's games. He's the driving force behind an Ottawa team with strong young talents in forward Tim Stutzle (76 points) and defenseman Jake Sanderson (55 points).

But the key is goaltender Linus Ullmark, acquired from the Bruins last summer. He had a solid regular season but has a career postseason record of 3-6 with a .887 save percentage, all with Boston. He has something to prove.

Alex Ovechkin broke Wayne Gretzky's goals record. Could another Stanley Cup be his next accomplishment?

When Ovechkin re-signed with the Capitals, there was a promise made by Washington to remain a playoff contender around him as he chased down Gretzky so Ovechkin wasn't just compiling goals in meaningless games. No one could have predicted the Capitals would retool to the point where they finished atop the Eastern Conference.

The Capitals were the second-best team offensively and finished in the top 10 defensively this season. Offseason bets on players such as forward Pierre-Luc Dubois, defenseman Jakob Chychrun and goalie Logan Thompson paid off, while homegrown talents Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael thrived -- as did star defenseman John Carlson, who had his best season in years.

But the Capitals are a mystery in the playoffs. When they play coach Spencer Carbery's system to perfection, they can beat anyone in the league. But beyond Ovechkin, there isn't another established star difference-maker in the lineup. That has made some observers skeptical that their regular-season success could transfer over the playoffs. But what an incredible cap to an all-time season it would be if Ovechkin raised his second Stanley Cup -- and his first as the NHL's goal-scoring GOAT.

Alex Ovechkin joins "The Pat McAfee Show" to discuss his achievement of surpassing Wayne Gretzky as the all-time goals leader and the impact on the game.

Are the Devils toast without Jack Hughes?

New Jersey was well on its way to returning to the playoffs when it lost leading scorer and No. 1 center Hughes to a shoulder injury, which is expected to keep him out until next season's training camp.

Hughes had 70 points in 62 games. Since Hughes went out, the Devils are 9-10-1 for a .475 points percentage, 23rd in the NHL in that span. They were also without top defenseman Dougie Hamilton, who was injured one game after Hughes went out. Hamilton returned to the lineup in their regular-season finale.

It's hard to conceive that the Devils could win the conference without Hughes, but players such as center Nico Hischier and winger Jesper Bratt stepped up significantly in his absence. Whether the Devils make any noise in the playoffs comes down to their goaltending, and specifically Jacob Markstrom, who has the ability to steal games but hasn't consistently shown this season -- much like the team in front of him.

Is this the year Carolina breaks through for a championship run?

For years, the Hurricanes have fallen just short in the playoffs, losing in the conference finals twice and the second round three times under coach Rod Brind'amour. Usually the culprit has been their inability to get a key goal at a key time in a series.

Last season, they traded for Jake Guentzel, a proven playoff performer, but Carolina stalled out in the second round and Guentzel walked as a free agent. This season, they made a blockbuster trade with Colorado that saw the Hurricanes ship leading scorer Martin Necas to the Avs for Mikko Rantanen ... only to then trade Rantanen to Dallas before the deadline, after the star winger declined to sign a contract

extension in Raleigh. Carolina acquired 21-year-old forward Logan Stankoven in the deal, a talented scorer but not one yet on the level of Rantanen or Guentzel.

So the Hurricanes are right back where they've been: a grinding, aggressive puck possession team with an offense and defense both in the top 10 and the best penalty kill in the league. They have some offensive pop from players such as Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis, but it's saying something that Necas is still their third-leading scorer. They also have goaltenders in Pyotr Kochetkov and Frederik Andersen that led the Canes to finishing 23rd in team save percentage (.889).

Yet a bounce here, a break there and a key goal in a key moment, and no one would be surprised to see Brind'Amour's team break through in the East. It just seems a little less possible after the Rantanen revolving door.

Is Dallas vs. Colorado peak postseason drama?

With due respect to the geographic rivalry series in the Eastern Conference, no series has more compelling storylines than the Stars vs. the Avalanche in a matchup of Central Division rivals.

Consider that the Stars were picked by many to win the Stanley Cup this season, while the Avalanche have aggressively retooled their team from the crease out after losing to Dallas in the second round last season, seeking another Cup win after raising it in 2022.

Consider that the Avalanche decided Rantanen was not in their long-term plans, traded him to Carolina and then watched as the Hurricanes traded him to Dallas, where he signed an eight-year, \$96 million deal. Rantanen has forged a reputation as one of the NHL's top postseason scorers. He'd like nothing more than to remind the Avalanche why that is.

Consider that the Stars are taking on one of the best teams in the NHL with two major injury concerns. Top defenseman Miro Heiskanen hasn't played since Jan. 28 because of a knee injury. There has been speculation out of Dallas that he could sit out this series, but GM Jim Nill seemed to indicate recently that there was a chance he could return in the first round. Meanwhile, star winger Jason Robertson sustained a lower-body injury in the Stars' regular-season finale. His status was unclear for the Avalanche series. According to Betalytics, Colorado's chances to win the series increase by over two percentage points if Robertson can't play;

Finally, consider that Colorado captain Gabriel Landeskog is in the midst of one of the NHL's greatest comebacks in recent memory. His most recent game in the league was June 26, 2022, when he and the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup. He sat out the following season after right knee surgery. He underwent cartilage transplant surgery and sat out 2023-24 and most of this season. Landeskog had been skating with the Avalanche and then returned to competitive play with the AHL Colorado Eagles. This incredible comeback journey could see him return to NHL action in Game 1 against Dallas.

This matchup has enough storylines for 10 series. It's also a battle that could easily produce this season's eventual Stanley Cup winner.

Besides Rantanen, who are the other familiar faces in new places who could affect the playoffs?

As mentioned, the Avalanche aggressively added to their group all season, including a total makeover of their goaltending that saw former Sharks goalie Mackenzie Blackwood take over the crease. They also added forwards Brock Nelson (Islanders) and Charlie Coyle (Bruins), as well as defensemen Ryan Lindgren (Rangers) and former Avalanche player Erik Johnson (Flyers) before the trade deadline.

In addition to trading Coyle and Marchand, the Bruins also sent veteran defenseman Brandon Carlo to the Maple Leafs.

Ottawa bolstered its team for now and in the future by acquiring center Dylan Cozens from Buffalo. Tampa Bay added forward Oliver Bjorkstrand in the trade with Seattle that also got them Gourde.

Which rookies could make an impact in the playoffs?

If the Montreal Canadiens are going to upset the Washington Capitals, two rookies are going to have to make a major impact. Defenseman Lane Hutson is the favorite to win the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year after 66 points in 82 games, leading all first-year players. Forward Ivan Demidov, a dynamic offensive star in the KHL, signed with Montreal late in the season and made an immediate impact. He's one to watch.

Among the other rookies who'll be counted on in the playoffs are Stankoven, who had 37 points in 77 games with Dallas and Carolina; forward Zack Bolduc (36 points) of the St. Louis Blues; forward Jackson Blake (34 points) of the Hurricanes; forward Mackie Samoskevich (31 points) of the Panthers; and center Mavrik Bourque (25 points) of the Stars.

Can Winnipeg break the Presidents' Trophy curse?

The Jets finished with 116 points to earn the No. 1 overall seed in the NHL and with it the Presidents' Trophy. Congratulations, and we're sorry.

The Presidents' Trophy curse is well-known hockey lore among players and fans. There have been 39 winners of the hardware since it was introduced in 1985-86. Only eight teams that finished first overall went on to win the Stanley Cup. For context, seven Presidents' Trophy winners lost in the opening round. It has only gotten worse since the NHL moved to a wild-card format in 2013-14: No Presidents' Trophy winner has gone on to play for the Stanley Cup, let alone win it, while two teams (Tampa Bay in 2019 and Boston in 2023) lost in the opening round.

The Jets are on a mission after two straight seasons of losing in the first round in five games. They talked down regular-season accomplishment all season, with a focus on the postseason. Winnipeg had the fourth-best offense in the NHL, powered by the league's best power play. More importantly, they had the NHL's best goaltender in Connor Hellebuyck, last year's Vezina Trophy winner who finished atop the league in both traditional stats and analytics. Like the rest of his team, Hellebuyck wants to flip the script on his own underwhelming numbers from last postseason.

The Jets face a Blues team that made the playoffs after a torrid 12-game winning streak in March, as part of an 18-3-0 run. The Blues fired coach Drew Bannister after 22 games, when Jim Montgomery became available after Boston fired him. After the 4 Nations Face-Off, St. Louis finally found its stride under Montgomery: first in 5-on-5 offense and second in defense during the winning streak.

St. Louis won't be an easy out for Winnipeg. As Blues goalie Jordan Binnington showed at 4 Nations for Canada, he can rise to meet the moment.

Is the fourth time the charm for the Los Angeles Kings?

The Kings had an outstanding regular season under new coach Jim Hiller, who guided L.A. to a .648 points percentage, the second highest in franchise history. They found a goalie in Darcy Kuemper, who had some of the best numbers of his career in back of the second-best defensive team in the NHL.

And what did all of this earn the Kings? A fourth straight first-round matchup against Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

The Kings lost in seven games in 2022, six games in 2023 and five games last season. Obviously, L.A. fans would like that trend to end. If the Kings finally get past the Oilers, their combination of defensive

dominance and offensively opportunistic veterans such as Adrian Kempe (35 goals), Anze Kopitar (67 points) and Kevin Fiala (35 goals) could be a force in the West.

Will Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl finish the story?

The Edmonton Oilers came within one victory from hoisting the Stanley Cup last season, rallying from a 3-0 deficit to force a Game 7 before losing to the Panthers.

This season has had its challenges for Edmonton. Evander Kane sat out the regular season because of knee injury. McDavid and Draisaitl both sat out because of injuries, but Draisaitl was the league's top goal scorer with 52 in 71 games. Steady defenseman Mattias Ekholm will sit out the Kings series because of an injury. The Oilers played inconsistent defense in front of goaltending that ranked 16th in team save percentage.

If the Oilers are going to get back to the Stanley Cup Final, they'll need their stars to carry them, their supporting cast to step up and goalies Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard to play well enough not to cost Edmonton a series. A lot broke the Oilers' way last season. The road's even tougher in the West this postseason.

Which team is the X factor in the 2025 playoffs?

The Vegas Golden Knights' ceiling might be the Stanley Cup, which they won for the first and only time in 2023. But it has been difficult to get a handle on how good they can be given some of their lineup absences: Only five Vegas players played over 80 games this season. But the Knights made it work: They finished third in team defense, fifth in offense and first in the Pacific Division.

There are difference-makers all over the lineup. Jack Eichel had a career season, with 93 points in 77 games. Pavel Dorofeyev had a breakout with 35 goals, with Tomas Hertl -- always a postseason standout -- right behind him, with 32 goals. Mark Stone played 66 games but had 67 points in them. Vegas has as solid a defense corps as you'll find in the West, in front of goalie Adin Hill, who overcame a slow start to have a solid season.

The Knights draw a Minnesota team in the first round that clinched a playoff spot in their last game of the season, and are riding some good vibes now that Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek are both healthy. There's always a chance that Marc-Andre Fleury helps author an upset against his former team in the last playoff run of his career. But more likely, it'll be Vegas moving on -- it's just a question of how long their run will last.

So who wins the Cup?

There's no juggernaut ready to slice through the playoffs to the Cup Final. A handful of teams have a rightful claim to the throne and none would be surprising should they ascend to it.

According to ESPN BET, the Avalanche are the favorites to win it all, followed by the Panthers, Hurricanes, Golden Knights, Oilers and Jets.

The Leafs have the longest Stanley Cup drought, having not won since 1967. The Oilers actually have the second longest, having last won the Cup in 1990.

There are 10 current NHL teams that have yet to win the Stanley Cup. Three of them are in this playoff bracket: Wild, Senators and Jets.

Will it be a team that has never hoisted the Cup before? Will it be a team that has been on the precipice of a championship like Carolina and Dallas? Will it be a recent winner, cycling back to another title? Your guess is as good as ours.

Enjoy the Stanley Cup playoffs, everyone -- the best postseason in sports.

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Reactions

The 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs begin Saturday after a riveting playoff race in both conferences. How lucky we are to have the Battle of Ontario, the Battle of Florida, the Mikko Rantanen Bowl and Round 4 of Kings-Oilers in the first round.

Many years, the initial round of the playoffs seems to produce the highest quality of series, since it is before teams lose players to injury. This year, there are real rivalries and intrigue right off the hop.

Every team has a chance to win it all, but not every team is a true contender. Then, there are the teams who are contenders on paper but have a habit of folding in the playoffs -- looking at you, Toronto and Winnipeg.

The common denominator is that every team has a fatal flaw -- an issue that could be its undoing. The positive? The team that best mitigates its fatal flaw and gets some luck is likely to lift the Stanley Cup in June. Here's a look at those major flaws for the 12 top contenders.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Washington Capitals

Seed: Metro No. 1

The Capitals surprised many by finishing atop the Eastern Conference, backed by quality goaltending; excellent seasons from Dylan Strome, Pierre-Luc Dubois and Jakob Chychrun; and breakouts from Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael. (And the record-breaking season from Alex Ovechkin.)

The Caps had the best 5-on-5 shooting percentage this season, converting on 10.69% of their shots. That would explain the significant increase in production by quite a few of their offensive players. Looking deeper, the Caps scored slightly more per game (2.71) than they gave up (2.50) at 5-on-5.

According to Sportlogiq, Washington gained many of its standing points impact through finishing and goaltending. History shows that those two things are the most volatile in the playoffs. Neither Logan Thompson nor Charlie Lindgren has significant playoff experience, and while it should be enough to see them through the first round, the Capitals' fatal flaw is that their shooting luck can dry up at the worst possible time, and their goaltenders have been inconsistent of late.

The Caps are a good team, but their underlying numbers suggest they may not be good enough to withstand a shooting regression in the later rounds.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Seed: Atlantic No. 1

The Maple Leafs are in the contender category because they finished atop the Atlantic Division, not because they've had any recent playoff success. (They haven't.) On paper, the Leafs have excellent goaltending and strong defense and play a system that is more conducive to playoff success. The Leafs won their division with (relatively) down seasons from Auston Matthews and Morgan Rielly, but more staunch defending as a group.

None of that matters when the playoffs get underway. The Leafs' fatal flaw has been the same for nearly a decade: the demons. For more than a few seasons, the Leafs have been the better team heading into their first-round matchup, and then their offense dries up, their goaltenders get outplayed and the end-of-season news conference happens before May.

The Leafs play a more boring brand of hockey with Craig Berube behind the bench: better defending, tighter checking and an offense structured around net-front play. But now they must also battle the demons within. Their best players are some of the best in the world. When those players perform at their peak, they are Toronto's greatest strength. When they get outperformed, they are Toronto's biggest flaw.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Seed: Atlantic No. 2

Every year we think the Lightning are going to take a step back, and then Jon Cooper's team proves us wrong. Many wondered what the impact of saying goodbye to Steven Stamkos would be; Tampa Bay heads into the playoffs with another Hart Trophy nominee-worthy performance from Nikita Kucherov, an excellent season from Andrei Vasilevskiy in goal and other standout performances from Brayden Point, Brandon Hagel and Victor Hedman.

The Lightning remain a quality hockey club, and they have one thing that many other teams don't: They know how to get it done in the playoffs.

Tampa Bay's fatal flaw is their luck running out. They have the highest 5-on-5 goal differential above expected, according to MoneyPuck, finishing fifth in goals scored above expected and fourth in goals saved above expected, and they own the highest PDO -- meaning they've had quite a bit of puck luck already.

Furthermore, Vasilevskiy has faltered in the past two playoff runs, finishing with a save percentage under .900 in each series. The Lightning need Vasilevskiy to outplay Sergei Bobrovsky in the first round if they are going to get by the defending Cup champions. Ultimately, the Lightning's undoing might be their best players losing the war of attrition due to their age.

Carolina Hurricanes

Seed: Metro No. 2

The Hurricanes have been a fun team to root for over the past few years, and their fatal flaw has been the opposite of Tampa Bay's regular season: a lack of offensive output and faulty goaltending.

Their system is predicated on puck possession and control, not necessarily direct offense and high-danger scoring chances. Carolina is a soundly built team, with depth at forward and quality on defense, and the addition of Alexander Nikishin only adds to that. The Hurricanes are a well-rounded team that plays with speed and generates scoring chances.

Carolina's goaltending is its fatal flaw this season, with only Frederik Andersen posting a save percentage above .900. Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov are going to have to stop enough pucks to allow Carolina to get by winning games 2-1 or 3-2, because the shooting percentage and goal differential above expected rank in the bottom half of the league. The Hurricanes do not make their own luck, and while they are one of the best secondary scoring teams, they need their goaltending to step up to avoid another premature playoff exit.

Florida Panthers

Seed: Atlantic No. 3

The defending Cup champions placing third in their division is a testament to how brutal the Atlantic is. Tampa Bay, Toronto and Florida all have a legitimate case to be a Cup finalist on paper.

The Panthers' biggest flaw is their revolving-door lineup. Florida was decimated with injuries to key players down the stretch, and while those players are going to be available for the playoffs, it is unlikely they will be completely healthy.

Florida needs Aleksander Barkov to compete with other teams in the division, and it needs Matthew Tkachuk for his scoring and general roughhousing. There is no shortage of that on the roster with Sam Bennett and Brad Marchand, but can the Panthers stay disciplined enough to remain effective? How will Aaron Ekblad play after returning from his extended performance-enhancing substance suspension?

The playoffs are about feel, and there is a real chance that important players missing significant time hurts the continuity of the roster. Of all the problems to have, this is the best one. When healthy and firing on all cylinders, Florida is the best team in the East. There isn't a weak spot in the lineup. If the Panthers can find their groove and endure, they might find themselves playing in June for the third straight year.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Winnipeg Jets

Seed: Central No. 1

The Jets won the Presidents' Trophy, which is in itself a potential flaw considering the much discussed "Presidents' Trophy Curse." However, that is not their biggest flaw.

Unfortunately, Winnipeg's major flaw is the same as it has been for a few years now: its Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender come playoff time. Connor Hellebuyck is going to win his second consecutive Vezina, but there is a reason the NHLPA poll did not have him ranked as the league's top goaltender. The players ranked Vasilevskiy and Igor Shesterkin ahead of Hellebuyck, which is likely a result of their past success in the playoffs.

Hellebuyck recorded just two playoff wins in the past two seasons, has a save percentage of .874 and allowed 9.8 more goals than expected in that span. He isn't the only reason the Jets lost in the first round in consecutive seasons, but he was a significant part of the problem. When Hellebuyck is at his best, he is nearly unbeatable. The problem is, his best comes in the regular season, not in the playoffs.

The Jets have multiple players who have had career seasons: Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor up front, and Josh Morrissey in the Norris Trophy conversation on defense. Combined with Hellebuyck, the Jets should be a Cup favorite. If the Jets are going to make the Western Conference finals, they need two things to be true: Hellebuyck must play at Vezina level, and their depth must be able to match up against teams with more offensive talent at the center position.

Vegas Golden Knights

Seed: Pacific No. 1

The Golden Knights are atop the Pacific, and for the first time in years, no one is hollering about long-term injured reserve shenanigans.

Jack Eichel has been superb for the Golden Knights this season; he was in the Hart Trophy conversation, and might also be nominated for the Lady Byng. Outside of Eichel, the Golden Knights get key offensive production from Tomas Hertl, Mark Stone, Pavel Dorofeyev and Ivan Barbashev. They are one of the deepest teams in the NHL at forward and on defense.

Outside of remaining healthy, which has been an issue for Vegas, the team's fatal flaw is the penalty kill. Minnesota will be a tough test for Vegas with a healthy Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek, as well as Brock Faber and the newly signed Zeev Buium, in the mix. The Golden Knights rank 26th on the penalty kill this season, with only the Wild and St. Louis Blues below them among playoff teams.

It is vital that the Golden Knights lock down their penalty kill, because if they get by Minnesota, teams in the West have some elite power-play talent (Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Cale Makar, Nathan MacKinnon, Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, etc.) that could be a key difference-maker in a series.

Dallas Stars

Seed: Central No. 2

The Stars are a fun hockey team, but they have the most glaring flaw of all the contenders. The absence of Miro Heiskanen due to injury is going to leave an enormous hole, and makes Colorado the favorite in the series.

With Heiskanen, the Stars can ice two defenders in the Norris conversation, Thomas Harley being the other. Without him, they are going to have issues managing Colorado's depth.

Their forward depth is among the best in the league, but the trickle-down effect of not having Heiskanen might be enough to undo them in the first round. Should Heiskanen return at any point, Dallas immediately leaps to the top of the Western Conference contender pile. Heiskanen is a true needle mover, and Dallas needs him to take a run at the Cup. Unfortunately for the Stars, their fatal flaw is not a systematic fix and is entirely out of their control.

Los Angeles Kings

Seed: Pacific No. 2

The Kings are a well-rounded team benefiting from excellent goaltending and balanced offensive production. Anze Kopitar remains one of the best two-way centers in the NHL, and the Kings do not have a single point-per-game player. Through a balanced offensive lineup and depth on defense, the Kings are 17-4 with a plus-41 goal differential and 56.2% expected goal percentage since the trade deadline. They have been one of the best teams in the NHL over that span and are peaking at the right time.

Their major flaw is the power play. Power-play opportunities don't come around often in the playoffs, and the Kings will need to score on more than 15% of their opportunities to have playoff success. Their 5-on-5 play is among the best in the NHL and will allow them to dictate pace of play and control the game. Facing off against some of the top power plays in the West, the Kings must find a way to produce with the man advantage to avoid another first-round exit.

Colorado Avalanche

Seed: Central No. 3

The Avalanche may have finished third in the Central, but many believe they are the best team in the West. Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar are having seasons that will earn them Hart Trophy votes. The addition of Mackenzie Blackwood has stabilized the goaltending, and allows Colorado to confidently compete with the Stars (Jake Oettinger) and Jets (Connor Hellebuyck).

Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle have contributed admirably after coming over in trade, and give Colorado some of the best center depth in the NHL. More importantly, the Avs are expected to get Gabriel Landeskog back after a three-year absence. Not only will that boost the middle of the lineup, but it will also significantly boost the vibes in the locker room.

On paper, the Avs don't have a fatal flaw, which is crazy to say given they traded their second-best forward Mikko Rantanen earlier this season (and will see him in the first round).

The sneaky undoing for the Avs may be Dallas Stars coach Peter DeBoer. The Avs struggled to score against Dallas in the playoffs last year, and DeBoer has beaten the Avs in the playoffs with three different teams. He knows how to scheme against this team, and sometimes, it comes down to coaching. Jared Bednar is an excellent coach, but if the Avs have a fatal flaw outside of Blackwood's lack of playoff experience, it may be that Bednar gets outcoached.

Edmonton Oilers

Seed: Pacific No. 3

Coming off a Game 7 loss in the Stanley Cup Final, the Oilers are in a more precarious position this year. Already thin on defense, they should be the underdog in their matchup with the Kings because of their fatal flaw: a lack of depth.

Losing Mattias Ekholm to injury is a major blow to the Oilers, like the Stars losing Heiskanen. Ekholm is not Heiskanen by any stretch, but given the Oilers' blue line he is irreplaceable.

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl missed time toward the end of the season with injuries, and it does not require a Ph.D. to realize that without both players playing at a Hart Trophy level, the Oilers are cooked. The lack of depth was even more noticeable with the departures of Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg in the offseason, but has been an issue in recent seasons. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zach Hyman regressed to their career play after extraordinary 2023-24 seasons, and the Oilers' goaltending has been questionable at best.

There are so many ways things can come undone for the Oilers, and it all boils down to their lack of depth at every position. Their goaltenders need to perform well, and their superstars must activate Avengers mode, because the rest of the roster does not have the feel of a true contender.

St. Louis Blues

Seed: West wild card No. 2

The Blues find themselves here not because they are necessarily a top Stanley Cup contender like the rest of the teams listed, but because we've seen them do this before.

Play "Gloria," anyone?

Since Jim Montgomery was hired on Nov. 24, the Blues have been outstanding. They set a franchise-record 12-game winning streak that saw them go from a 3.5% chance to make the playoffs to qualifying.

There is historical precedent for this franchise making an in-season coaching change before a long playoff run. Craig Berube took over the Blues in January 2019, and the Blues went on a magical run backed by Jordan Binnington's outstanding play in goal to win the Stanley Cup. Is that likely to happen again? No. Could the Blues upset the Jets? Yes.

St. Louis is the Cinderella team of this year's playoffs. No one knows when the clock will strike midnight, because there are many flaws to the roster. But the Blues are riding a confidence tsunami, and that is worth something in the playoffs.

ESPN / Predicting the entire 2025 Stanley Cup playoff bracket

By Greg Wyshynski- April 20, 2025

I fully admit that most of my 2024-25 NHL preseason predictions were a waste of pixels: a collection of bad calls, faulty logic and the bold prediction that the Buffalo Sabres would make the playoffs -- which should qualify me for some sort of cognitive examination.

But I got something right: The two teams I predicted would battle in the Stanley Cup Final are part of the 2025 NHL postseason bracket. However, after 82 games of data, results and analysis, I've decided to punt on one of those picks while remaining ride-or-die on the other one -- most likely to my detriment, given their current predicament.

Here is how the Stanley Cup playoffs will play out, from the opening round through the last game of the Final. I apologize in advance for spoiling the next two months for you, as obviously all of this is going to happen exactly to script and none of these picks will be incorrect.

Let's all enjoy the best postseason in sports together, no matter how it goes.

Eastern Conference first round

A1 Toronto

Maple Leafs

vs.

WC1 Ottawa

Senators

I remember talking to Brady Tkachuk before the 4 Nations Face-Off about the prospect of Ottawa facing Toronto in the playoffs for the first time since 2004, when the Maple Leafs won the Battle of Ontario for the fourth time in four playoff meetings between the franchises.

"I think it'd be fun and awesome," he told me. "It doesn't really matter who you play; it's just about getting there and it's about the process of getting there."

I could tell Brady was holding back a bit to keep the focus on a playoff berth the Senators were still chasing. But you could feel the enthusiasm, especially when we discussed how much Ottawa fans relish the chance to finally get one over on their Original Six neighbors.

Anyone who watched the 4 Nations Face-Off understands that Brady Tkachuk will meet the moment, with his stick or with his fists. This is the first time he'll attend a Stanley Cup playoff game as something more than a spectator for his brother's games, and his sheer willpower is going to make a difference in this series. But he can't do it alone, and the overall offensive weaponry on this Senators team isn't enough to really scare the Leafs -- Ottawa was 22nd in expected goals per 60 minutes since the 4 Nations break.

To beat Toronto, an opponent needs to put some fear and doubt in the Leafs. That was easy for a team like Boston, who basically just had to step on the ice to get in their heads. But the Maple Leafs inherently know that the Senators are not on their level. They don't have goal scorers like William Nylander (45) or Auston Matthews (33), or many point producers on the level of Mitch Marner (102 points) or John Tavares (74 in 75 games). Toronto should be fairly confident that its back end, bolstered at the deadline

with the addition of Boston defender Brandon Carlo, will be able to withstand Ottawa's attack, so long as goalies Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll hold up their end of the bargain.

No, there's only one person who can make the Leafs start seeing ghosts of playoff disasters past, and that's Linus Ullmark.

Ullmark does not have what you'd call a stellar playoff track record: 3-6 record and .887 save percentage, all with the Bruins. But Leafs fans can quote chapter and verse the times an opposing goalie has shattered their playoff dreams, most recently Florida's Sergei Bobrovsky playing to a Vezina-winning form in 2023. The probability that Ullmark can be that guy is slim based on his playoff history ... but it's the Leafs in the playoffs. Every conceivable disappointment is on the table.

Although not necessarily in this round.

Winner: The Maple Leafs eliminate the Senators in five games.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

vs.

A3 Florida

Panthers

I did Stanley Cup playoff watchability rankings on our postseason preview edition of "The Drop." The Dallas vs. Colorado series topped the rankings, because it's hard to compete with soap operatic storylines such as the Mikko Rantanen revenge tour and Gabriel Landeskog's years-long injury comeback. But right behind it was the Battle of Florida. It's the most compelling series in the Eastern Conference, a meeting of established rivals and -- potentially -- the launch pad for a Stanley Cup finalist.

I acknowledge that we've yet to see this version of the Panthers at full capacity, which means we have yet to see the kind of havoc a line of Brad Marchand, Sam Bennett and Matthew Tkachuk can wreak on opponents. (One word, Bolts players: earplugs.) Florida hasn't had Aaron Ekblad since he was suspended 20 games for violating the terms of the NHL/NHLPA performance-enhancing substances program. The earliest he can return is Game 3 against Tampa Bay.

What the Panthers have shown us in making the Stanley Cup Final in consecutive seasons is that their core is built for the postseason. Their best players have the attributes that teams are constantly seeking at the trade deadline annually -- they're clutch, defensively responsible, nasty and constantly meeting the moment. They beat the Lightning in five games last season. But I think the Panthers' supporting cast has gotten a little thinner, especially on the blue line, while the Lightning have bolstered theirs year over year.

Was there a more low-key outstanding offseason addition than the Lightning reacquiring Ryan McDonagh? His veteran presence at 5-on-5 helped turn what coach Jon Cooper called a "mediocre" defensive team into fourth best in the NHL this season. Running it back with center Yanni Gourde -- a key player in the Bolts' Stanley Cup winners, acquired from Seattle in trade -- was also smart.

Besides those two, there are two other points of demarcation from the last Battle of Florida. One is Jake Guentzel, who scored 41 goals on a line with Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov. He has 67 points in his last 69 playoff games, which is absurd. The other is Andrei Vasilevskiy, who is back to playing like a Vezina Trophy winner. He was below replacement level in the past two postseasons. He seems ready to reclaim the mantle as the best playoff goalie since Martin Brodeur.

"Battle" is probably an understatement when it comes to this series. Two potential Stanley Cup winners. Two heated rivals, stacked with talent. The Panthers winning would not surprise me in the least. But I'm going with the Bolts here. As Cooper said recently, there have been plenty of people claiming their time as a championship contender has passed. This series is the start of their second act.

Winner: The Lightning eliminate the Panthers in seven games.

M1 Washington

Capitals

vs.

WC2 Montreal

Canadiens

I covered the 2010 Canadiens' upset of the Capitals, whose legacy has been evoked a lot since this matchup was set. There are some interesting similarities: The Capitals at the top of the conference, the Canadiens as the lowest seed. Montreal even added a dynamic, invigorating rookie late in both seasons: P.K. Subban then, Ivan Demidov now.

Neither Canadiens team was given much of a chance against the mighty Capitals. Both teams entered the postseason with a negative goal differential and few expectations. The latter point should scare the Capitals a bit in this series: A team with boundless enthusiasm and zero expectations that is too young to feel the crush of playoff pressure can be a recipe for an upset.

But the Capitals aren't that team from 2010, either. Those Caps were emotionally fragile, playing in an arena where the tension was palpable any time postseason adversity hit. Questions about their roster and manner of play manifested in a crisis of conscience in the franchise when Montreal upset them in Game 7. It would take years for Washington to find its swagger again.

These Capitals take their cue from coach Spencer Carbery, a shrewd and stabilizing presence behind the bench; and Alex Ovechkin on the other end of the emotional spectrum, who can still rally his team with one snipe from the Ovi spot.

There's a lot of disrespect toward the Capitals despite their record, from the lack of star depth behind Ovechkin to some questions about how good this team really is when you look under the hood. But assuming they continue to get solid goaltending -- and hopefully Logan Thompson is healthy enough to make a difference there -- Washington is a fundamentally better hockey team than Montreal and will win this series. But congratulations to the Canadiens for the valuable experience they'll gain and for not stumbling over their own skates into the abyss like every other Eastern Conference wild-card contender eventually did.

Winner: The Capitals eliminate the Canadiens in five games.

M2 Carolina

Hurricanes

vs.

M3 New Jersey

Devils

The Hurricanes are vulnerable here.

Their 5-on-5 goaltending since the 4 Nations Face-Off ranks 23rd in the NHL, while their expected goals against per 60 minutes ranked 14th. There are still hallmarks of Rod Brind'Amour's previous Carolina contenders on this squad: the puck possession, the grinding game and a penalty kill that ranked first overall in the NHL.

This group also generates chances at a pretty good clip, leading the league in expected goals since 4 Nations. That they're only ninth in that span in actual 5-on-5 goals per 60 minutes underscores how the Canes have trouble finishing their chances. Which, come to think of it, is why Carolina traded for Jake Guentzel last season and had Mikko Rantanen for a bit this season before shipping him off to sign an eight-year deal in Dallas.

Brind'Amour's teams are perpetually seeking that one key goal in a key spot to turn the tide in a series, and then not getting it. There's a reason Carolina's ceiling has been the conference finals under this coach. Management tried to solve that problem twice in two seasons. But the Hurricanes enter this postseason without that veteran goal-scoring answer.

Carolina being vulnerable does not mean that the Devils can necessarily take advantage. It shouldn't be asking a lot for a playoff-qualifying team to be able to put together four good games in a seven-game stretch, but New Jersey hasn't really been able to do that since December. Even before they lost Jack Hughes to injury for the season, the Devils didn't have a winning streak of more than three straight games. After Hughes went out with a shoulder injury on March 2, the Devils had two three-game winning streaks and three three-game losing streaks. The only thing consistent about them has been their inconsistency.

Could they pull an upset? Sure. Dougie Hamilton is healthy. Nico Hischier, Timo Meier and especially Jesper Bratt have stepped up in Hughes' absence, keeping one of the league's best power plays cranked up. If Jacob Markstrom is above-average and can put together four good games, they can win the series. Unfortunately, too often he has been a goalie who puts together two good games and then gives up seven in his next start.

This matchup is more of a toss-up than anyone's giving it credit for being, but ultimately, the Devils will be left to wonder how high they could have climbed with a healthy Jack Hughes.

Winner: The Hurricanes eliminate the Devils in six games.

Eastern Conference second round

A1 Toronto

Maple Leafs

vs.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

As previously mentioned, the only way one can defeat the Maple Leafs in the postseason is to create enough doubt and frustration so they defeat themselves.

The Lightning are 1-1 in recent series against the Leafs. Andrei Vasilevskiy didn't have a save percentage over .900 in either of them. He'll be the difference here in putting Tampa Bay back into the conference finals for the first time since 2022 while making Leafs fans go from stressing about the playoffs to stressing about Mitch Marner's pending free agency again.

Winner: Lightning eliminate the Leafs in six games.

M1 Washington

Capitals

vs.

M2 Carolina

Hurricanes

The Hurricanes stall out in the conference semifinals, once again unable to find that extra bit of offense as the Capitals push through thanks to their advantage in goal and underrated supporting cast. Home-ice advantage ends up being the difference in a tightly played battle of a series that ends with Washington finally getting its flowers as part of the final four teams.

Winner: Capitals eliminate the Hurricanes in seven games.

Eastern Conference finals

M1 Washington

Capitals

vs.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

Can a coaching battle be the marquee matchup in a playoff series? Spencer Carbery vs. Jon Cooper is as good as it gets, with two great unorthodox hockey minds trying to outwit each other.

In the end, the Capitals can't contain the strength of the Lightning's top two lines and fall one step short of sending Alex Ovechkin back to the Stanley Cup Final. Hopefully he can find solace in that whole "becoming the greatest goal scorer in hockey history" thing from earlier this season.

Winner: Lightning eliminate Capitals in six games.

Western Conference first round

C1 Winnipeg

Jets

vs.

WC2 St. Louis

Blues

Look, the Presidents' Trophy Curse is real. Heavy is the head that wears the regular-season crown. Since the trophy's introduction in 1985-86, only eight teams that finished first overall have won the Stanley Cup. Seven teams lost in the first round. The wild-card format has only amplified the bad juju: Since 2013-14, no Presidents' Trophy-winning team has even made the Stanley Cup Final, let alone won it.

That's why I've loved Winnipeg's mindset this season. Please recall the Jets' start, becoming the first NHL team to win 15 of its first 16 games. But they've come to understand that regular-season accomplishment means nothing if it doesn't ultimately help a team thrive in the postseason. The Jets rode into the past two postseasons feeling that success was assumed based on what they did in the

previous 82 games. Against Vegas in 2023 and Colorado in 2024, they were flushed from the playoffs after five games.

"It's why we're not over the top, living the high life right now, because we know what happened last year," said Scott Arniel, who has played psychologist in his first season as head coach. "I don't think the Stanley Cup's ever been handed out in November."

Because of the Curse and the Jets' recent playoff stumbles, I expect a good portion of the hockey punditry to pick the Blues in an upset here. That's a reasonable take, given that unbeatable 12-game stretch for St. Louis after the 4 Nations Face-Off that propelled them into the playoffs. The Blues were the second-best offensive and defensive team at 5-on-5 during the streak. We've seen plenty of teams that caught fire late in the season roll to first-round underdog wins.

I just don't see it here.

The Jets have two advantages here that could determine the series. The first is their power play, which ranked first in the league this season (28.9%). The Blues had the 28th-ranked penalty kill (74.2%). Cam Charron, now a data analyst for the Pittsburgh Penguins, noted in a 2023 article that "there are at least 0.4 power plays per game more than expected in the first four games of the first round." While Winnipeg will miss Nikolaj Ehlers, who is their fifth-leading power play scorer and currently "week to week" with an injury, their special teams advantage here is still palpable.

The other advantage is Connor Hellebuyck, who should win his second straight Vezina Trophy this season. That's no slight to the Blues' Jordan Binnington, who showed how he answers the bell in pressure situations for Team Canada at 4 Nations, and had a .910 save percentage in 17 games after that tournament. But he's not Hellebuyck. No one is.

The Jets goalie led the NHL in every traditional stat (min. 35 games) and also ended up leading the NHL in goals saved above expected, per StatHletes. His numbers in the last two playoff eliminations were embarrassing. As we saw in 4 Nations, Hellebuyck is as locked in as ever and ready to prove his "best in the world" status goes beyond the accolades he has earned.

According to Betalytics, the Jets have a 59% chance of winning this series. If Hellebuyck plays like he did last postseason, that drops to 50.8% in favor of St. Louis. That's how important he is to the Jets and this series.

Respect to the Blues for streaking their way into the playoffs with the Calgary Flames and others on their heels. But in their last 25 games, they shot 12.5% at 5-on-5. The rest of the season, they shot 8.8%. St. Louis scored 3.19 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 during the streak against an expected goals per game of 2.28, which was 27th during that span. Maybe that heater continues. I'm guessing it wanes. Give me the goalie, the power play and the fear of further postseason embarrassment.

Winner: The Jets eliminate the Blues in five games.

C2 Dallas

Stars

vs.

C3 Colorado

Avalanche

I picked the Stars to win the Stanley Cup before the season. I'm ride-or-die with that choice. Am I confident about this pick at the moment? Not in the least.

The Stars are missing their top defenseman Miro Heiskanen against a team with Nathan MacKinnon on it. That's not ideal. It was expected he might miss the entire first round with a knee injury that's kept him out since Jan. 28, but there have been some rumblings out of Dallas that he could return to face the Avalanche some point. Or so Stars fans hope.

They're also missing Jason Robertson, who injured his knee in game No. 82. The Stars' second-leading scorer will miss at least the start of this series. Again, not ideal!

Luckily, Dallas might be able to overcome these losses because the Stars absolutely rolled into the playoffs ... wait, what was that? Dallas was winless in seven games and outscored 34-18. Very much not ideal!

So I remain on the Stars with my heart and not my head, because unless they get healthy fast and receive some series thievery from Jake Oettinger, they could be in trouble here. Unless, of course, this is the Mikko Rantanen Revenge Series.

Please recall the Avalanche opting not to meet his asking price on a new contract and then shocking Rantanen with a trade to the Hurricanes. They didn't want to hand him the elephantine contract he was asking for, in part because they felt they could find another player who could post great offensive numbers next to MacKinnon for a much lower cost. To that end: Martin Necas, acquired from Carolina for Rantanen, had 28 points in 30 games at a fraction of the cost.

Rantanen was eventually traded by the Hurricanes to the Stars when it became apparent that he wouldn't sign an extension in Carolina. He immediately inked one with Dallas (eight years, \$96 million) and, as playoff formats would have it, Rantanen now has the opportunity to rub it in his former team's face that it made a colossal error in letting him go.

This would easily be the most soap operatic storyline of the series ... were it not for Colorado captain Gabriel Landeskog returning to competitive play for the first time since hoisting the Cup on June 26, 2022. The star forward worked his way back from injuries and surgery to officially become an option for coach Jared Bednar against Dallas. The emotional lift the Avalanche will get if and when he returns to the lineup can't be quantified.

Few teams have been as aggressive as Colorado in remaking their lineup this season. It started when GM Chris MacFarland nuked his goaltending, sending Alexandar Georgiev to the San Jose Sharks for Mackenzie Blackwood, who's been outstanding. Along with Necas, the Avalanche added Islanders jack-of-all-trades Brock Nelson, Rangers defensive defenseman Ryan Lindgren and Boston Bruins center Charlie Coyle before the deadline. They surround MacKinnon and Norris Trophy favorite Cale Makar, as good a nucleus as you'll find in the NHL.

It's entirely possible the team that wins this series eventually wins the Stanley Cup. And since I have Dallas winning the Stanley Cup, well ...

Again, I'm not entirely thrilled with the trajectory of things at the moment. Fade this stubborn, illogical pick. I'm begging you.

Winner: The Stars eliminate the Avalanche in seven games.

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

vs.

WC1 Minnesota

Wild

I recently asked someone who knows this Wild team pretty well if they believed there was a chance for Minnesota to upset the Golden Knights. Their deep, nuanced response was "LOL."

There was a part of me that thought Minnesota might have a shot here. It is finally healthy again after getting star forward Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek back. The vibes are great after the Wild clinched a playoff berth in their last game of the season. Heck, we might even get Marc-Andre Fleury against the Golden Knights in the playoffs, provided he's finally extracted that sword from his back.

The Wild were 29-17-4 when Kaprizov went out. They briefly threatened Winnipeg for the conference points lead. They'd at least have a shot against Vegas, right?

Here's the thing: The Golden Knights are really, really good. Sixth in the NHL in expected goals percentage at 5-on-5 (52.51%). They're fifth in average offense and third in average defense. They've done all of this with a collection of injuries to key players all season. But in true Golden Knights fashion, they'll all be ready for Game 1 of the postseason, from Jack Eichel -- having a career year -- to Alex Pietrangolo. They have a collection of game breakers up front with proven playoff pedigrees. They might have the deepest defense corps in the NHL in front of goalie Adin Hill, who found his game after an early-season struggle.

So, in summary: Congrats to the Wild on qualifying for one round of playoff action.

Winner: Vegas eliminates Minnesota in five games.

P2 Los Angeles

Kings

vs.

P3 Edmonton

Oilers

Beating the same team four times in a short span isn't commonplace. At some point, a bounce or a break goes the other way. At some point, the team on the losing end will have a roster combination that finally overcomes their tormentors, who are bound to fall off at some point.

The Buffalo Bills were probably telling themselves this before facing the Kansas City Chiefs for the fourth time in five seasons during the AFC playoffs -- and getting eliminated by Kansas City again. Blame the coaches, blame the refs, blame whomever -- the simple fact is that one team has Patrick Mahomes, one does not, and the team that does was undefeated in those four playoff games.

The Kings have lost to the Oilers in three straight opening-round series, and now face them in a fourth straight. Edmonton is a slim favorite in the series, although many pundits believe the Kings are best positioned to overcome the Oilers in this matchup thanks to home-ice advantage and being a dominant defensive team that was second in the NHL in goals-against average (2.48). Goalie Darcy Kuemper might be the best L.A. netminder Edmonton will have faced in four meetings.

But the simple fact is that, in the same way the 0-4 Bills do not have Patrick Mahomes, the soon-to-be 0-4 Kings do not have Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

It's true that McDavid hasn't been himself this season: His 1.49 points-per-game average is tied for sixth best of his career, established in a 67-game season marred by injury. Draisaitl led the NHL with 52 goals, but he enters the postseason after missing time with a lower-body injury.

But in 18 playoff games against Los Angeles, McDavid is averaging two points per game. Draisaitl scored 17 goals in those 18 games against the Kings. This isn't two star players performing well against the same playoff opponent on an annual basis. This is Sauron clearing the battlefield with one swipe of his mace.

It's hard to beat the same team four straight times. The Kings aren't a pushover -- not with that defense, scorers like Adrian Kempe and Kevin Fiala, and playoff-tested veterans such as Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty. The Oilers are clearly diminished from last season's version that went to the Cup Final, from the attrition in their supporting cast to the injured Mattias Ekholm missing the first round to their always questionable goaltending.

But they have Connor. And they have Leon. And that's going to be enough for a fourth straight first-round win.

Winner: The Oilers eliminate the Kings in six games.

Western Conference second round

C1 Winnipeg

Jets

vs.

C2 Dallas

Stars

I just want state for the record that I think there's a reality in the multiverse in which the Jets play the Maple Leafs for the Stanley Cup in an all-Canadian team banger of a final round. The ceiling for the Jets is hoisting the Cup. They're that good.

But if the Stars, through sheer luck or perhaps a magical amulet, get past the Avalanche in the first round, they're going to really get rolling with a healthier squad. Dallas advances to the conference finals for the third straight season.

Winner: Stars eliminate the Jets in six games.

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

vs.

P3 Edmonton

Oilers

The only playoff meeting between these teams was a delightfully nasty series back in 2023 that the Knights won in six games en route to winning their first Stanley Cup.

Unless the Oilers find another gear after advancing past the Kings, Edmonton is too inconsistent defensively and doesn't match the depth that Vegas brings to the table. Vegas wins, and the Oilers' quest for the Cup goes bust.

Winner: Golden Knights eliminate the Oilers in six games.

Western Conference finals

P1 Vegas

Golden Knights

vs.

C2 Dallas

Stars

This will be the fourth meeting between these franchises, with Dallas having won in the 2020 conference finals and the first round last season, while the Knights eliminated the Stars in the 2023 conference finals before eventually winning the Cup.

This series is going to be an absolute slobber-knocker between two deep and talented teams. Can the Stars' blue line handle the physicality of the Golden Knights' forwards? Dallas is going to need the swift-skating Thomas Harley to make up for what it lacks in sandpaper on defense -- and then hope that Oettinger is the best goalie in the series.

Winner: Stars eliminate the Golden Knights in six games.

Stanley Cup Final

C2 Dallas

Stars

vs.

A2 Tampa Bay

Lightning

The Stars get healthy, stay healthy and use their combination of veteran players starved for a Stanley Cup (Jamie Benn, Matt Duchene) and young dynamic difference-makers like Harley and Wyatt Johnston to finish the championship story they've been authoring for three seasons.

After a resurgent season, the Lightning have to settle for more runner-up honors in the Stanley Cup Final.

It'll be an outstanding series with stars on both sides. Oettinger takes home the Conn Smythe for having kept Tampa Bay's stars off the board as best he can. It'll be an epic party in Big D after Game 7, as Dallas wins the Cup for the first time since 1999 and flips the script from the 2020 Stanley Cup Final, when the Bolts defeated the Stars for the championship.

Winner: Stars win in seven games over the Lightning.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Can Jets meet the moment?](#)

By Ryan Dixon- April 19, 2025

The NHL's second season is second to none — especially the first two weeks.

With all 82 in the books, 16 teams are chasing the 16 wins it takes to lift the Stanley Cup. With our first post-whistle scrum, first controversy and first f-words on the immediate horizon, we're doing a bonus playoff edition of the power rankings on the eve of the post-season.

Note, these teams are not ranked according to championship odds; if they were, you'd be tempted to put two or three Eastern Conference clubs at the top simply because the path out of that group appears far less daunting. Heck, the Presidents' Trophy-winning Winnipeg Jets are about to face a first-round opponent that recently wrapped up a 12-game winning streak and one of Colorado and Dallas — two teams with well-founded championship designs — will be golfing in two weeks.

The Western Conference is going to be a bloodbath.

Regardless of which side of the draw your team falls on — or if they made the playoffs at all — the first round is a special, frenetic kind of fun. With puck-drop now just 24 hours away, here's our power ranking of every squad in the derby.

1. Winnipeg Jets (56-22-4) It's hard to put a 116-point squad anywhere but the top. The Jets have a lethal power play and can grind teams down with depth scoring. There's no getting around the fact Connor Hellebuyck has an .875 save percentage in his past 10 playoff games and Winnipeg has a 2-8 mark in those contests. Something has to change there. If it does, though, and we see a more recognizable version of the goalie who is about to win his second straight Vezina, the Jets will be heard from.

2. Vegas Golden Knights (50-22-10) By their standards, it was a quiet year for the Knights. Usually, with this club, we're talking about the potential impact a huge deadline acquisition or two ahead of the playoffs. This season, though, it's just all about consistent excellence. Vegas ranks fifth in the NHL in goals-per-game (3.34) and third in goals-against (2.61). Jack Eichel is coming off the best regular season of his career, one in which he established himself as an elite two-way player. There's championship know-how on this club from the 2023 title and starving-dog hunger after getting bounced by Dallas in Round 1 — after taking a 2-0 series lead, no less — last spring.

3. Toronto Maple Leafs (52-26-4) Honestly, if you stripped away the team names, all the baggage that's baked into the blue-and-white uniform come playoff time and just read bios for 16 playoff clubs labelled Hockey Club X or Y, I think a lot of people would say, "I kind of like this team with all kinds of talent that's playing tighter this year and may finally have the best goalie in a series." The path is there for Toronto; can the Leafs finally traverse it?

4. Colorado Avalanche (49-29-4) Essentially, Colorado removed a high-end piece in Mikko Rantanen in the name of filling holes. But those were some important holes. Colorado has had neither the goaltending nor the centre depth to succeed in the playoffs since puckstopper Darcy Kuemper and middleman Nazem Kadri left as free agents after the 2022 title. That changed this year when the goaltending was remade on the fly in-season and Rantanen was deleted from the lineup, but centres Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle were added. This complete version of the Avs feels like it could go a long way.

5. Washington Capitals (51-22-9) We hear all the smoke-and-mirror talk and, to a degree, we understand. At first blush, it's just hard to wrap your brain around a team that was first-round roadkill last year being a Cup favourite this time out. You can't fake your way to 111 points, though, and Washington has a lot going for it, including a mean forecheck game that could be tailor-made for the second season. That said, it's a bit unsettling that goalie Logan Thompson's injury status is uncertain ahead of Game 1 and the top six will look less imposing with six-foot-six Aliaksei Protas listed as week-to-week.
6. Tampa Bay Lightning (47-27-8) Tampa's mini reset could not have gone better, with Jake Guentzel joining the forward crew and Ryan McDonagh being re-incorporated into the blueline. Andrei Vasilevskiy is playing like his old self and Tampa has the second-best goal-differential (plus-75) in the league behind the Jets (plus-86).
7. Los Angeles Kings (48-24-9) Time to slay the dragon. Los Angeles has lost three consecutive first-round series to the Edmonton Oilers, but the Kings do hold home-ice advantage for the upcoming fourth clash and probably feel better about their goaltending today than in any of the previous series with Edmonton thanks to Kuemper's strong second half.
8. Dallas Stars (50-26-6) Dallas would shoot up this power ranking if stud defenceman Miro Heiskanen was healthy and ready to go for Game 1. Throw in Jason Robertson's lower-body injury in the final game of the year and it's impossible not to ding this otherwise-fantastic Stars club. If Dallas can manage to overthrow Colorado in Round 1 and get healthy ahead of the second round, it could suddenly become the Cup favourite of the remaining eight teams.
9. Carolina Hurricanes (47-30-5) As always, the questions about Carolina come down to whether the goaltending can hold up and if the Canes can squeeze out enough scoring when it matters most. Still, don't overlook the fact this is a relentless squad that comes at you in waves. It will be fun to keep an eye on incoming Russian defenceman Alexander Nikishin, who just might have the ability to impact games right away.
10. Florida Panthers (47-31-4) The Panthers are the champs until somebody takes that chalice from them, and this is most definitely a situation where you'll have to pry it from their cold, dead paws. Playing in back-to-back finals takes an enormous toll, but nobody has more fight than the Cats. Can Matthew Tkachuk return to the lineup and play like his usual, unpleasant self? Like Dallas, if Florida can emerge from its first-round match with Tampa, we'll suddenly be on Cup watch again.
11. Edmonton Oilers (48-29-5) From questionable goaltending to the absence of shutdown D-man Mattias Ekholm, there are justifiable reasons to doubt this team's potential. The reasons to believe in it are the same as always; Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.
12. St. Louis Blues (44-30-8) Is any team feeling better heading into the big dance? Pick a category and the Blues are probably at or near the top of it since the 4 Nations Face-Off.
13. Ottawa Senators (45-30-7) The wait is over and, most of all, Brady Tkachuk is ready. Ottawa is making its first post-season appearance since 2017 and will be more than a little keyed up for the "Battle of Ontario." The Sens have good centre depth, some chippy players, an emerging blueline superstar in Jake Sanderson and Vezina-winning goalie in Linus Ullmark. This should, indeed, be a battle.
14. Minnesota Wild (45-30-7) The Wild returned their two most important forwards — Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek — to the lineup right at the end of the regular season. They might not be a contender, but Minny is no pushover, either.

15. New Jersey Devils (42-33-7) The Devils lost their best offensive player in Jack Hughes in February and it feels like they've been trending first-round exit for two months. If New Jersey is to surprise us, Jacob Markstrom will have to come up big in the crease and Nico Hischier will have to play like a Conn Smythe candidate right out of the gate.

16. Montreal Canadiens (40-31-11) Really, the Canadiens have already played their most important contests, clinching a playoff spot that felt as though it might be slipping away in their final contest of the season. The Habs now shift from bearing the weight of the world to a completely weightless existence as they compete free and easy in playoff games that are all gravy for this rebuilding club.

Sportsnet.ca / Breaking down which teams can pull off Round 1 upset in Stanley Cup Playoffs

By David Morassutti- April 20, 2025

For most teams heading into the Stanley Cup Playoffs, there is always renewed optimism, with some subscribing to the "just get in and anything can happen" theory.

The optimism can be seen as shortsighted, but history shows that the belief is justified in some cases.

When the NHL implemented the new division realignment in 2013, Round 1 has seen some great matchups. However, the lower seed has been on the wrong side of the matchup in this format, which is to be expected.

Since 2013, the lower seed owns a 36-60 record against the higher seed and the last three seasons haven't been too kind to the underdog. In that time, those teams posted a 7-19 record.

So while the likelihood of seeing a Round 1 upset is not too high, it's not impossible either.

With that being said, let's take a look at the matchups involving each wild-card team and the division winners in Round 1, and determine which teams are most likely to provide us with some early drama.

All playoff odds referenced are courtesy of MoneyPuck.

Will the Presidents' Trophy curse hurt the Jets?

The Winnipeg Jets had their best season in franchise history and are the first Canadian team to win the Presidents' Trophy since the 2011-12 Vancouver Canucks.

Just don't ask the Canucks how that worked out for them.

Winning the Presidents' Trophy is a prestigious honour, but with it comes a cautionary tale.

Since the trophy was first awarded in the 1985-86 season, eight winners have lost in the first round; the same number have gone on to win the Cup. The last team that finished at the top of the league standings and won the Stanley Cup was the Chicago Blackhawks in 2012-13.

Guaranteeing home-ice advantage throughout the post-season is a nice perk for Winnipeg, but the team is looking to overcome some unfortunate post-season luck.

After back-to-back years ending in first-round exits, the Jets don't have an easy road in their pursuit of a Cup—well, no team really does.

Unfortunately for the Jets, the reward for finishing in first place is a meeting with the St. Louis Blues, the hottest team in the NHL.

Since the NHL returned from the 4 Nations Face-Off break, no team has earned more wins than the Blues, who went 19-4-3 over the final 26 games. A 12-game winning streak helped propel the team into a position to clinch the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

St. Louis became just the 10th team in NHL history to qualify for the playoffs after being eight or more points out with 26 or fewer regular-season games to go.

The Jets broke the Blues' 12-game winning streak and are 3-1 against their Central Division rival this season.

One thing the Blues will be hoping for is a reclamation of their 2019 Cinderella run to the Stanley Cup Final. Eight of the five players on the roster were a part of the 2019 Cup-winning team, so the team does have experience to pull off a run.

The real question is, where can the Blues find an edge over the Jets?

In most areas, Winnipeg has the advantage over St. Louis, but one area where there will be questions is in goal.

There is no doubt that Connor Hellebuyck will be the favourite to lock down another Vezina Trophy after posting a 46-12-3 record with a 2.02 goals-against average and a .924 save percentage.

Those numbers haven't translated over for Hellebuyck in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, especially the last two seasons. The 31-year-old is 2-8 with a 4.28 goals-against average over his last 10 post-season starts.

His counterpart, Jordan Binnington, knows what it takes to win on the big stage, and the Blues will need him to be at his best in this series. The 31-year-old has a 20-20 record in 41 career playoff games with a goals against average of 2.73 and a save percentage of .910.

Binnington also got the edge over Hellebuyck in the final of the 4 Nations Face-Off, so the Blues goaltender can hold that over him.

MoneyPuck.com has the Jets at a 69.2 per cent chance to advance to Round 2, the third-best odds of all the playoff teams, but the Blues have proven that they are capable of beating the odds.

Canadiens looking for repeat of 2010

The Montreal Canadiens were the final team to qualify for the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and will now prepare for a tough matchup against the Washington Capitals.

It's just the second time these two teams have met in the post-season, and it's hard not to draw comparisons from the first time they went toe-to-toe.

Back in 2010, the Canadiens entered the Stanley Cup Playoffs as the eighth seed in the Eastern Conference with 88 points, which led to a first-round matchup against the Capitals.

Washington was the top team in the league, winning the Presidents' Trophy with 121 points. With 33 points separating the Capitals and Canadiens, the odds were certainly against Montreal, which at one point was trailing 3-1 in the series.

However, Jaroslav Halak played hero for the Canadiens, helping the team win the next three games, allowing just three goals in that stretch to pull off the massive upset.

Fast forward to this year, and while it's not a 33-point difference in the standings, the Canadiens do come into the series as a serious underdog.

Getting to the post-season was not guaranteed for this Canadiens team as they sat 31st in the league on Dec. 1, but started to hit their stride in their return from the 4 Nations Face-Off. The Canadiens went 15-5-6 — the fifth-best record in the NHL during that stretch — to secure their spot.

The Capitals went 2-0-1 against Montreal in the season series but now face some question marks heading into the post-season. Both starting goaltender Logan Thompson and emerging forward Aliaksei Protas are injured heading into the playoffs.

Would their absence be enough to help the Canadiens close the competitive gap? Unfortunately for the Canadiens, there is still a lot of talent on this Capitals team that makes this a difficult matchup.

Yes, the Canadiens have enjoyed career-best seasons from Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield and Calder Trophy candidate Lane Hutson, but they will need more players to step up their game.

Can Sam Montembeault provide his team with his own Halak-esque effort? The Canadiens will need improvement from Montembeault, who has a 2-3 record, a 3.49 goals-against average and a .893 save percentage against Washington.

With a 30.1 per cent chance to make it to Round 2, according to MoneyPuck.com, the Canadiens will need to find a way to put some doubt into the minds of the Capitals.

Wild getting healthy at right time, but is it enough?

Another team that went down to the wire to clinch a playoff spot, the Minnesota Wild, are a team that has been tough to gauge.

Injuries to top forwards Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek put Minnesota in danger of missing the playoffs. The team's identity is built on its defensive game and strong goaltending led by Filip Gustavsson.

However, the Vegas Golden Knights have had the Wild's number this season, winning all three games in the season series and outscoring Minnesota 12-4.

There aren't many holes on this Golden Knights roster led by Jack Eichel, who had a career-best 94 points this season. This is also a roster that has 17 players from the 2023 Cup-winning team, so experience will be on Vegas's side.

Currently, MoneyPuck.com has given the Wild the worst odds to move on to Round 2 at 27 per cent, and it's tough to argue with that assessment based on how this matchup looks on paper.

Senators ready to add to Leafs' playoff misery?

The Battle of Ontario is back, and it has taken 21 years for the Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators rivalry to return to the post-season stage.

In this series, we have a Leafs squad that is under immense pressure to go on a deep playoff run after seven first-round exits over its last eight appearances. The Senators are back in the post-season for the first time since 2017 and will be looking to continue their run of success against Toronto this season.

A 3-0 record against the Leafs this season certainly has the Senators feeling confident in their ability to continue that success in the playoffs.

The formula for the Senators to pull off the first-round upset will need to be simple. Find a way to suppress the Leafs' firepower, and hope that Brady Tkachuk is ready to carry the torch in the playoffs, especially on offence.

Ottawa also spent a pretty penny on Linus Ullmark to be a difference-maker for them this season, and he got them to the playoffs. Ullmark recorded a shutout against the Leafs in their first meeting this season and allowed two goals on 23 shots in the second meeting.

However, the Leafs did record a win against Ullmark in the playoffs last season, scoring three goals on 33 shots. During his time with the Boston Bruins, Ullmark didn't have a stellar playoff record, going 3-6 with a 3.59 goals against average and a .887 save percentage in 10 appearances.

Another player who will need to come through in this matchup for Ottawa is Shane Pinto going up against Auston Matthews. In the two games Matthews played against Ottawa, Pinto went head-to-head against him 23:28 at five-on-five, limiting the star forward to just three shots on goal and one high-danger chance.

In those minutes, Matthews also saw a lot of the Senators' top pairing of Jake Sanderson and Artem Zub. The Leafs will certainly try to get Matthews away from that matchup if they can.

Considering the Senators' struggle to score, ranking 21st in the league in total offence and 30th in shooting percentage at five-on-five, they have to find a way to limit the Leafs' star players, and Pinto will likely play a big part in trying to shut down their top forwards.

Of course, the longer this series goes, the more confidence Ottawa will gain, but they have just a 40 per cent chance to move on to Round 2. However, being the favourite hasn't always worked out for Toronto. So while an upset will be tough to pull off for the Senators, they are certainly capable of it.